ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

FIGHTING THE FLAMES

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Содержание

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Chapter One
How the Fight Began

One's own fireside is, to all well-regulated minds, a pleasant subject of contemplation when one is absent, and a source of deep gratification when present.

Especially may this be said to be the case in a cold, raw night in November, when mankind has a tendency to become chronically cross out of doors, and nature, generally, looks lugubrious; for, just in proportion as the exterior world grows miserably chill, the world "at home," with its blazing gas, its drawn curtains, its crackling fires, and its beaming smiles, becomes doubly comfortable and cosy.

Even James Auberly, pompous, stern, and ungenial though he was, appeared to entertain some such thoughts, as he sat by his own fireside, one such night, in his elegant mansion in Beverly Square, Euston Road, London; and smiled grimly over the top of the *Times* newspaper at the fire.

Mr Auberly always smiled—when he condescended to smile—grimly. He seldom laughed; when he did so he did it grimly

too. In fact, he was a grim man altogether; a gaunt, cadaverous, tall, careworn, middle-aged man—also a great one. There could be no question as to that; for, besides being possessed of wealth, which, in the opinion of some minds, constitutes greatness, he was chairman of a railway company, and might have changed situations with the charwoman who attended the head office of the same without much difference being felt. He was also a director of several other companies, which, fortunately for them, did not appear to require much direction in the conduct of their affairs.

Mr Auberly was also leader of the fashion, in his own circle, and an oracle among his own parasites; but, strange to say, he was nobody whatever in any other sphere. Cabmen, it is true, appeared to have an immense respect for him on first acquaintance, for his gold rings and chains bespoke wealth, and he was a man of commanding presence, but their respect never outlived a first engagement. Cabmen seldom touched their hats to Mr Auberly on receiving their fare; they often parted from him with a smile as grim as his own, and once a peculiarly daring member of the fraternity was heard blandly to request him to step again into the cab, and he would drive him the "nine hundred and ninety-ninth part of an inch that was still doo on the odd sixpence." That generous man even went further, and, when his fare walked away without making a reply, he shouted after him that "if he'd only do 'im the honour to come back, he'd throw in a inch an' a half extra for nothink." But Mr Auberly was inexorable.

"Louisa, dear," said Mr Auberly, recovering from the grim smile which had indicated his appreciation of his own fireside, "pour me out another cup of coffee, and then you had better run away to bed. It is getting late."

"Yes, papa," replied a little dark-eyed, dark-haired girl, laying down her book and jumping up to obey the command.

It may be added that she was also dark-dressed, for Mr Auberly had become a widower and his child motherless only six months before.

While Louisa was pouring out the coffee, her father rose and turned his back to the fire.

It was really interesting, almost awe-inspiring, to behold Mr Auberly rise; he was so very tall, and so exceedingly straight. So remarkably perpendicular was he, so rigidly upright, that a hearty but somewhat rude sea-captain, with whom he once had business transactions, said to his mate on one occasion that he believed Mr Auberly must have been born with a handspike lashed to his backbone. Yes, he was wonderfully upright, and it would have been downright madness to have doubted the uprightness of the spirit which dwelt in such a body; so nobody did doubt it, of course, except a few jaundiced and sceptical folk, who never could be got to believe anything.

"Good-night, my love," said Mr Auberly, as the child placed the coffee beside his chair, and then advanced, somewhat timidly, and held up her cheek to be kissed.

The upright man stooped, and there was a shade less of

grimness in his smile as his lips touched his daughter's pale cheek.

Louisa, or, to use the name by which she was better known in the house, Loo, had clasped her hands tightly together while she was in the act of receiving this tribute of parental affection, as if she were struggling to crush down some feeling, but the feeling, whatever it was, would not be crushed down; it rose up and asserted itself by causing Loo to burst into a passionate flood of tears, throw her arms round her father's neck, and hold him tight there while she kissed his cheek all over.

"Tut, tut, child!" exclaimed Mr Auberly, endeavouring to re-arrange the stiff collar and cravat, which had been sadly disordered; "you must really try to get over these—there, don't be cast down," he added, in a kinder tone, patting Loo's head. "Good-night, dear; run away to bed now, and be a good girl."

Loo smiled faintly through her tears as she looked up at her father, who had again become upright, said "Good-night," and ran from the room with a degree of energy that might have been the result of exuberant spirits, though possibly it was caused by some other feeling.

Mr Auberly sat for some time, dividing his attentions pretty equally between the paper, the fire, and the coffee, until he recollected having received a letter that day which he had forgotten to answer, whereupon he rose and sat down before his writing-table to reply.

The letter was from a poor widow, a sister-in-law of his own,

who had disgraced herself for ever—at least in Mr Auberly's eyes—by having married a waterman. Mr Auberly shut his eyes obstinately to the fact that the said waterman had, by the sheer force of intelligence, good conduct, courage, and perseverance, raised himself to the command of an East Indiaman. It is astonishing how firmly some people can shut their eyes—sew them up, as it were, and plaster them over—to some things, and how easily they can open them to others! Mr Auberly's eyes were open only to the fact that his sister-in-law had married a waterman, and that that was an unpardonable sin, for which she was for ever banished from the sunshine of his presence.

The widow's letter set forth that since her husband's death she had been in somewhat poor circumstances—though not in absolute poverty—for which she expressed herself thankful; that she did not write to ask for money, but that she had a young son—a boy of about twelve—whom she was very anxious to get into a mercantile house of some sort, and, knowing his great influence, etcetera, etcetera, she hoped that, forgetting, if not forgiving, the past, now that her husband was dead, he would kindly do what he could, etcetera, etcetera.

To this Mr Auberly replied that it was impossible to forgive the past, but he would do his best to forget it, and also to procure a situation for her son (though *certainly* not in his own office), on one consideration, namely, that she, the widow, should forget the past also—including his own, Mr Auberly's, existence (as she had once before promised to do), and that she should never inform

her son, or any other member of her family—if there happened to be any others members of it—of the relationship existing between them, nor apply to him by visit or by letter for any further favours. In the event of her agreeing to this arrangement, she might send her son to his residence in Beverly Square, on Thursday next, between eleven and twelve.

Just as he concluded this letter a footman entered softly and laid a three-cornered note on the table.

"Stay, Hopkins, I want you," said Mr Auberly, as he opened the note and ran his eye over it.

Hopkins, who was clad in blue velvet and white stockings, stood like a mute beside his master's chair. He was very tall and very thin, and very red in the nose.

"Is the young woman waiting, Hopkins?"

"Yes, sir; she's in the lobby."

"Send her up."

In a few seconds Hopkins reopened the door, and looked down with majestic condescension on a smart young girl whom he ushered into the room.

"That will do; you may go—stay, post this letter. Come here, young woman."

The young woman, who was evidently a respectable servant-girl, approached with some timidity.

"Your name is Matty Merryon, I understand (yes, sir), at least so your late mistress, Miss Tippet, informs me. Pray, what does Matty stand for?"

"Martha, sir."

"Well, Martha, Miss Tippet gives you a very good character—which is well, because I intend you to be servant to my child—her maid; but Miss Tippet qualifies her remarks by saying that you are a little careless in *some* things. What things are you careless in?"

"La! sir—"

"You must not say 'La!' my girl," interrupted Mr Auberly with a frown, "nor use exclamations of any kind in my presence; what are the 'some things' referred to?"

"Sure I don't know, sir," said the abashed Matty. "I s'pose there's a-many things I ain't very good at; but, please, sir, I don't mean to do nothin' wrong, sir, I don't indeed; an' I'll try to serve you well, sir, if it wor only to plaaze my missis, as I'm leavin' against my will, for I love my—"

"There, that will do," said Mr Auberly somewhat sternly, as the girl appeared to be getting excited.

"Ring that bell; now, go downstairs and Hopkins will introduce you to my housekeeper, who will explain your duties to you."

Hopkins entered and solemnly marched Martha Merryon to the regions below.

Mr Auberly locked away his papers, pulled out his watch, wound it up, and then, lighting a bedroom candle, proceeded with much gravity upstairs.

He was a very stately-looking man, and strikingly dignified

as he walked upstairs to his bedroom—slowly and deliberately, as though he were marching at his own funeral to the tune of something even deader than the "Dead March in Saul."

It is almost a violation of propriety to *think* of Mr Auberly doing such a very undignified thing as "going to bed!" Yet truth requires us to tell that he did it; that he undressed himself as other mortals do; that he clothed himself in the wonted ghostly garment; and that, when his head was last seen—in the act of closing the curtains around him—there was a conical white cap on it, tied with a string below the chin, and ornamented on the top with a little tassel, which waggled as though it were bidding a triumphant and final adieu to human dignity!

Half an hour later, Mrs Rose, the housekeeper, a matronly, good-looking woman, with very red cheeks, was busy in the study explaining to Matty Merryon her duties. She had already shown her all over the house, and was now at the concluding lesson.

"Look here now, Merryon," began the housekeeper.

"Oh, please don't call me Merryon—I ain't used to it. Call me Matty, *do* now!"

"Very well, Matty," continued Mrs Rose, with a smile, "I've no objection; you Irish are a strange race! Now, look here. This is master's study, and mind, he's very partikler, dreadful partikler."

She paused and looked at her pupil, as if desirous of impressing this point deeply on her memory.

"He don't like his papers or books touched; not even dusted! So you'll be careful not to dust 'em, nor to touch 'em even so

much as with your little finger, for he likes to find 'em in the mornin' just as he left 'em at night."

"Yes, Mrs Rose," said Matty, who was evidently giving up her whole soul to the instruction that was being imparted.

"Now," continued the housekeeper, "the arranging of this room will be your last piece of work at night. You'll just come in, rake out the grate, carry off the ashes, lay the noo fire, put the matches handy on the chimney-piece, look round to see that all's right, and then turn off the gas. The master is a early riser, and lights the fire his-self of a mornin'."

"Yes, 'm," said Matty, with a courtesy.

"Now, go and do it," said Mrs Rose, "that I may see you understand it. Begin with the grate an' the ashes."

Matty, who was in truth an experienced maid-of-all-work, began with alacrity to discharge the duties of her new station. She carried off the ashes, and returned with the materials for next day's fire in a shovel. Here she gave a slight indication of her so-called carelessness (awkwardness would have been more appropriate) by letting two or three pieces of stick and a bit of coal fall on the carpet, in her passage across the room.

"Be careful, Matty," said Mrs Rose gently. "It's all owin' to haste. Take your time, an' you won't do such things."

Matty apologised, picked up the materials, and laid the fire. Then she took her apron and approached the writing-table, evidently with the intention of taking the dust off the corners, but not by any means intending to touch the books or papers.

"Stop!" cried Mrs Rose sternly.

Matty stopped with a guilty look.

"Not a touch," said Mrs Rose.

"Not even the edges, nor the legs?" inquired the pupil.

"Neither edges nor legs," said the instructor.

"Sure it could do no harm."

"Matty," said Mrs Rose solemnly, "the great thing that your countrywomen have to learn is *obedience*."

"Thank 'ee, 'm," said Matty, who, being overawed by the housekeeper's solemnity, felt confused, and was uncertain whether the reference to her countrywomen was complimentary or the reverse.

"Now," continued Mrs Rose, "the matches."

Matty placed the box of matches on the chimney-piece.

"Very well; now you've got to look round to see that all's right."

Matty looked round on the dark portraits that covered the walls (supposed to be ancestors), on the shelves of books, great and small, new and old (supposed to be read); on the vases, statuettes, chairs, tables, desks, curtains, papers, etcetera, etcetera, and, being utterly ignorant of what constituted right and what wrong in reference to such things, finally turned her eyes on Mrs Rose with an innocent smile.

"Don't you see that the shutters are neither shut nor barred, Matty?"

She had *not* seen this, but she at once went and closed and barred them, in which operation she learned, first, that the bars

refused to receive their respective "catches," with unyielding obstinacy for some time; and, second, that they suddenly gave in without rhyme or reason and pinched her fingers severely.

"Now then, what next?" inquired Mrs Rose.

"Put out the gas," suggested Matty.

"And leave yourself in the dark," said the housekeeper, in a tone of playful irony.

"Ah! sure, didn't I forgit the candle!"

In order to rectify this oversight, Matty laid the unlighted candle which she had brought with her to the room on the writing-table, and going to the chimney-piece, returned with the match-box.

"Be careful now, Matty," said Mrs Rose earnestly. "There's nothink I've such a fear of as fire. You can't be too careful."

This remark made Matty, who was of an anxious temperament, extremely nervous. She struck the match hesitatingly, and lighted the candle shakily. Of course it would not light (candles never do on such occasions), and a long red-hot end of burnt wood projected from the point of the match.

"Don't let the burnt end drop into the wastepaper basket!" exclaimed Mrs Rose, in an unfortunate moment.

"Where?" exclaimed Matty with a start that sent the red-hot end into the centre of a mass of papers.

"There, just at your feet; don't be so nervous, girl!" cried Mrs Rose.

Matty, in her anxiety not to drop the match, at once dropped it

into the waste-paper basket, which was instantly alight. A stamp of the foot might have extinguished it, but this did not occur to either of the domestics. The housekeeper, who was a courageous woman, seized the basket in both hands and rushed with it to the fireplace, thereby fanning the flame into a blaze and endangering her dress and curls. She succeeded, however, in cramming the basket and its contents into the grate; then the two, with the aid of poker, tongs, and shovel, crushed and beat out the fire.

"There! I said you'd do it," gasped Mrs Rose, as she flung herself, panting, into Mr Auberly's easy-chair; "this comes of bein' in a hurry."

"I was always unfort'nit," sighed Matty, still holding the shovel and keeping her eye on the grate, as if ready to make a furious attack on the smallest spark that should venture to show itself.

"Come, now, we'll go to bed," said Mrs Rose, rising, "but first look well round to see that all is safe."

A thorough and most careful investigation was made of the basket, the grate, and the carpet surrounding the fireplace, but nothing beyond the smell of the burnt papers could be discovered, so the instructor and pupil put out the gas, shut the door, and retired to the servants'-hall, where Hopkins, the cook, the housemaid, and a small maid-of-all-work awaited their arrival—supper being already on the table.

Here Mrs Rose entertained the company with a graphic—not to say exaggerated—account of the "small fire" in the study, and wound up with an eloquent appeal to all to "beware of fire," and

an assurance that there was nothing on the face of the whole earth that she had a greater horror of.

Meanwhile the "little spark" among the papers—forgotten in the excitement of the succeeding blaze of the waste-paper basket—continued to do its slow but certain work. Having fallen on the cloth between two bundles, it smouldered until it reached a cotton pen-wiper, which received it rather greedily in its embrace. This pen-wiper lay in contact with some old letters which were dry and tindery in their nature, and, being piled closely together in a heap, afforded enlarged accommodation, for the "spark," which in about half an hour became quite worthy of being termed a "swell."

After that things went on like—"like a house on fire"—if we may venture to use that too often misapplied expression, in reference to the elegant mansion in Beverly Square on that raw November night.

Chapter Two
Another Little "Spark."

Whistling is a fine, free, manly description of music, which costs little and expresses much.

In all its phases, whistling is an interesting subject of study; whether we regard its aptitude for expressing personal independence, recklessness, and jollity; its antiquity—having begun no doubt with Adam—or its modes of production; as, when created grandly by the whistling gale, or exasperatingly by the locomotive, or gushingly by the lark, or sweetly by the little birds that "warble in the flowering thorn."

The peculiar phase of this time-honoured music to which we wish to draw the reader's attention at present, is that which was exemplified one November night (the same November night of which mention has been made in the previous chapter) by a small boy who, in his progress through the streets of London, was arrested suddenly under the shadow of St. Paul's by the bright glare and the tempting fare of a pastry-cook's window.

Being hungry, the small boy, thrusting his cold hands deep into his empty trouser-pockets, turned his fat little face and round blue eyes full on the window, and stared at the tarts and pies like a famishing owl. Being poor—so poor that he possessed not the smallest coin of the realm—he stared in vain; and, being light of

heart as well as stout of limb, he relieved his feelings by whistling at the food with inexpressible energy.

The air selected by the young musician was Jim Crow—a sable melody high in public favour at that time—the familiar strains of which he delivered with shrill and tuneful precision, which intensified as he continued to gaze, until they rose above the din of cabs, vans, and 'busses; above the house-tops, above the walls of the great cathedral, and finally awakened the echoes of its roof, which, coming out, from the crevices and cornices where they usually slept, went dancing upwards on the dome, and played around the golden cross that glimmered like a ghost in the dark wintry sky.

The music also awakened the interest of a tall policeman whose beat that night chanced to be St. Paul's Churchyard. That sedate guardian of the night, observing that the small boy slightly impeded the thoroughfare, sauntered up to him, and just as he reached that point in the chorus where Mr Crow is supposed to wheel and turn himself about, spun him round and gave him a gentle rap on the head with his knuckles, at the same time advising him to move on.

"Oh!" exclaimed the small boy, looking up with an expression of deep concern on his countenance, as he backed off the pavement, "I *hope* I didn't hurt you, bobby; I *really* didn't mean to; but accidents will happen, you know, an' if you won't keep your knuckles out of a feller's way, why—"

"Come," muttered the policeman, "shut up your potato-trap

for fear you catch cold. Your mother wants you; she's got some pap ready for you."

"Ha!" exclaimed the small boy, with his head a little on one side, as though he were critically inspecting the portrait of some curious animal, "a prophet it is—a blue-coated prophet in brass buttons, all but choked with a leather stock—if not conceit. A horacle, six fut two in its stockin's. I say, bobby, whoever brought you up carried you up much too high, both in body and notions. Wot *wouldn't* they give for 'im in the Guards, or the hoss-marines, if he was only eight inches wider across the shoulders!"

Seeing that the policeman passed slowly and gravely on without condescending to take further notice of him, the small boy bade him an affectionate farewell; said that he would not forget to mention him favourably at head-quarters, and then continued his progress through the crowded streets at a smart pace, whistling Jim Crow at the top of his shrill pipe.

The small boy had a long walk before him; but neither his limbs, spirits, nor lips grew weary by the way. Indeed, his energies seemed to increase with every step, if one might judge from the easy swagger of his gait, and the various little touches of pleasantry in which he indulged from time to time; such as pulling the caps over the eyes of boys smaller than himself, winking at those who were bigger, uttering Indian war-whoops down alleys and lanes that looked as if they could echo, and chaffing all who appeared to be worthy of his attentions. Those eccentricities of humour, however, did not divert his active mind

from the frequent and earnest study of the industrial arts, as these were exhibited and exemplified in shop-windows.

"Jolly stuff that, ain't it?" observed another small boy, in a coat much too long for him, as they met and stopped in front of a chocolate-shop at the top of Holborn Hill, where a steam-engine was perpetually grinding up such quantities of rich brown chocolate, that it seemed quite unreasonable, selfish, and dog-in-the-manger-ish of the young man behind the counter to stand there, and neither eat it himself, nor let anyone else touch it.

"Yes, it's very jolly stuff," replied the first small boy, regarding his questioner sternly. "I know you'd like some, wouldn't you? Go in now an' buy two pen'orth, and I'll buy the half from you w'en you come out."

"*Walker*!" replied the boy in the long coat.

"Just so; and I'd advise you to become a walker too," retorted the other; "run away now, your master's bin askin' after you for half an hour, *I* know, and more."

Without waiting for a reply, the small boy (our small boy) swaggered away whistling louder than ever.

Passing along Holborn, he continued his way into Oxford Street, where the print-shop windows proved irresistibly attractive. They seemed also to have the effect of stimulating his intellectual and conceptive faculties, insomuch that he struck out several new, and, to himself, highly entertaining pieces of pleasantry, one of which consisted of asking a taciturn cabman, in the meekest of voices:

"Please, sir, you couldn't tell me wot's o'clock, could you?"

The cabman observed a twinkle in the boy's eye; saw through him; in a metaphorical sense, and treated him with silent contempt.

"Oh, I beg pardon, sir," continued the small boy, in the same meek tone, as he turned to move humbly away; "I forgot to remember that cabbies don't carry no watches, no, nor *change* neither, they're much too wide awake for that!"

A sudden motion of the taciturn cabman caused the small boy to dart suddenly to the other side of the crowded street, where he resumed his easy independent air, and his interrupted tune.

"Can you direct me to Nottin' Hill Gate, missus?" he inquired of an applewoman, on reaching the neighbourhood of Tottenham Court Road.

"Straight on as you go, boy," answered the woman, who was busying herself about her stall.

"Very good indeed," said the small boy, with a patronising air; "quite correctly answered. You've learnt geography, I see."

"What say?" inquired the woman, who was apparently a little deaf.

"I was askin' the price o' your oranges, missus."

"One penny apiece," said the woman, taking up one.

"They ain't biled to make 'em puff out, are they?"

To this the woman vouchsafed no reply.

"Come, missus, don't be cross; wot's the price o' yer apples now?"

"D'you want one?" asked the woman testily.

"Of course I does."

"Well, then, they're two a penny."

"Two a penny!" cried the small boy, with a look of surprise; "why, I'd 'a said they was a penny apiece. Good evenin', missus; I never buys cheap fruit—cheap and nasty—no, no; good evenin'."

It seemed as if the current of the small boy's thoughts had been diverted by this conversation, for he walked for some time with his eyes cast on the ground, and without whistling, but whatever the feelings were that might have been working in his mind, they were speedily put to flight by a facetious butcher, who pulled his hat over his eyes as he passed him.

"Now then, pig-sticker, what d'ye mean by that?" he shouted, but as the butcher walked on without deigning to reply, he let off his indignation by yelling in at the open door of a tobacco-shop and making off at a brisk run.

From this point in his progress, he became still more hilarious and daring in his freaks, and turned aside once or twice into narrow streets, where sounds of shouting or of music promised him fresh excitement.

On turning the corner of one of those streets, he passed a wide doorway, by the side of which was a knob with the word FIRE in conspicuous letters above it, and the word BELL below it. The small boy paused, caught his breath as if a sudden thought had struck him, and glanced round. The street was comparatively quiet; his heart beat high; he seized the bell with both hands,

pulled it full out, and bolted!

Now it chanced that one of the firemen of the station happened to be standing close to the door, inside, at the time. He, guessing the meaning of the ring at once, darted out and gave chase.

The small boy fled on the wings of terror, with his blue eyes starting from their sockets. The fireman was tall and heavy, but he was also strong and in his prime, so that a short run brought him up with the fugitive, whom he seized with a grip of iron.

"Now, then, young bottle-imp, what did you mean by that?"

"Oh! please, sir," gasped the small boy, with a beseeching look, "I *couldn't* help it."

There was such a tone of truthfulness in this "*couldn't*" that it tickled the fireman. His mouth relaxed in a quiet smile, and, releasing his intended victim, he returned to the station, while the small boy darted away in the direction of Oxford Street.

He had scarcely reached the end of the street, however, when a man turned the corner at full speed and ran him down—ran him down so completely that he sent him head-over-heels into the kennel, and, passing on, darted at the fire-bell of the station, which he began to pull violently.

The man was tall and dishevelled, partially clad in blue velvet, with stockings which had once been white, but were now covered from garter to toe with mud. One shoe clung to his left foot, the other was fixed by the heel in a grating over a cellar-window in Tottenham Court Road. Without hat or coat, with his

shirt-sleeves torn by those unfortunates into whose arms he had wildly rushed, with his hair streaming backwards, his eyes blood-shot, his face pale as marble, and perspiration running down his cheeks, not even his own most intimate friends would have recognised Hopkins—the staid, softspoken, polite, and gentle Hopkins—had they seen him that night pulling like a maniac at the fire-bell.

And, without doubt, Hopkins *was* a maniac that night—at least he was afflicted with temporary insanity!

Chapter Three
Fire!!!

"Hallo, that'll do, man!" cried the same stalwart fireman who had seized the small boy, stepping out and laying his hand on Hopkins's shoulder, whereabouts is it?

Hopkins heard him not. One idea had burnt itself into the poor man's brain, and that was the duty that lay on him to ring the alarm-bell! Seeing this, the fireman seized him, and dragged him forcibly—almost lifted him—into the station, round the door of which an eager crowd had already begun to collect.

"Calm yourself," said the stalwart fireman quietly, as he thrust Hopkins down into a chair. "Consider now. You'll make us too late if you don't speak. Where is it?"

"B–B–Fire!" yelled Hopkins, gasping, and glaring round him on the men, who were quietly putting on their helmets.

Hopkins suddenly burst from the grasp of his captor, and, rushing out, seized the bell-handle, which he began to pull more furiously than ever.

"Get her out, Jim," said the fireman in a low tone to one of his comrades ("her" being the engine); at the same time he went to the door, and again seizing Hopkins, brought him back and forced him into a chair, while he said firmly:

"Now, then, out with it, man; where's the fire?"

"Yes, yes," screamed Hopkins, "fire! fire that's it! B–! B–Beverly!—blazes!—square!—number—Fire!"

"That'll do," said the fireman, at once releasing the temporary maniac, and going to a book where he calmly made an entry of the name of the square, the hour of the night, and the nature of the call. Two lines sufficed. Then he rose, put on his helmet, and thrust a small hatchet into his belt, just as the engine was dragged to the door of the station.

There was something absolutely magnificent in this scene which no pen can describe, because more than half its force was conveyed only by the eye and the ear. The strong contrast between human excitement and madness coupled with imbecility, and human calmness and self-possession coupled with vigorous promptitude, was perfect.

Just before poor Hopkins rang his first note of alarm the station had been wrapt in profound silence—the small boy's interruption having been but a momentary affair. George Dale, the fireman in charge, was seated at a desk in the watch-room (known among firemen as the "lobby"), making an entry in a diary. All the other men—about thirteen in number—had gone to their respective homes and beds in the immediate neighbourhood, with the exception of the two whose turn it was to remain on duty all night. These two (named Baxmore and Corney), with their coats, belts, boots, and caps on, had just lain down on two low tressel couches, and were courting sleep. The helmets of their comrades hung on the walls round the room,

with belts and hatchets underneath them. Several pairs of boots also graced the walls, and a small clock, whose gentle tick was the only sound that broke the silence of the night. In an outer room the dim form of a spare engine could be seen through the doorway.

The instant that the bell rang, however, this state of quietude was put to flight. The two men rose from their couches, and Dale stepped to the door. There was no starting up, no haste in their movements, yet there was prompt rapidity. The men, having been sailors, had been trained in the midst of alarms. The questions which were put to Hopkins, as above described, were rapidly uttered. Before they were answered the two men were ready, and at Dale's order, "Get her out!" they both vanished.

One ran round the corner to the engine-house and "knocked up" the driver in passing. The other ran from door to door of the firemen's abodes, which were close at hand, and with a loud double-ring summoned the sleepers. Before he got back to help the first with the engine, one and another and another door opened, and a man darted out, buttoning braces or coat as he ran. Each went into the station, seized his helmet, belt, and axe, from his own peg, and in another moment all were armed *cap-à-pie*. At the same instant that the engine appeared at the door a pair of horses were trotted up. Two men held them; two others fastened the traces; the driver sprang to his seat; the others leaped to their respective places. Each knew what to do, and did it at once. There was no hurry, no loss of time, no excitement; some of the

men, even while acting with the utmost vigour and promptitude, were yawning away their drowsiness; and in less than ten minutes from the moment the bell first rang the whip cracked and the fire-engine dashed away from the station amid the cheers of the crowd.

It may be as well to remark here in passing, that the London Fire Brigade had, at the time of which we write, reached a high state of efficiency, although it could not stand comparison with the perfection of system and unity of plan which mark the organisation and conduct of the Brigade of the present day.

Mr Braidwood, the able Superintendent, had for many years been training his men on a system, the original of which he had begun and proved in Edinburgh. Modifying his system to suit the peculiarities of the larger field to which he had been translated, he had brought the "Fire Engine Establishment," (which belonged at that time to several insurance companies) to a state of efficiency which rendered it a model and a training-school for the rest of the world; and although he had not the advantage of the telegraph or the powerful aid of the land steam fire-engine of the present day, he had men of the same metal as those which compose the force now.

The "Metropolitan Fire Brigade," as it then existed under the control of the Metropolitan Board of Works, had been carried by its chief, Captain Eyre Massey Shaw, to a condition of efficiency little if at all short of perfection, its only fault being (if we may humbly venture a remark) that it was too small both in numbers

of engines and men.

Now, good reader, if you have never seen a London fire-engine go to a fire, you have no conception of what it is; and even if you have seen it, but have not gone with it, still you have no idea of what it is.

To those accustomed to it, no doubt, it may be tame enough—we cannot tell; but to those who mount an engine for the first time and drive through the crowded thoroughfares of London at a wild tearing gallop, it is probably the most exciting drive conceivable. It beats steeple-chasing. It feels like driving to destruction—so wild and so reckless is it. And yet it is not reckless in the strict sense of that word; for there is a stern *need-be* in the case. Every *moment* (not to mention minutes or hours) is of the utmost importance in the progress of a fire. Fire smoulders and creeps at first, it may be, but when it has got the mastery, and bursts into flames, it flashes to its work and completes it quickly. At such times, one moment of time lost may involve thousands of pounds—ay, and many human lives! This is well known to those whose profession it is to fight the flames. Hence the union of apparent mad desperation, with cool, quiet self-possession in their proceedings. When firemen can work in silence they do so. No unnecessary word is uttered, no voice is needlessly raised. Like the movements of some beautiful steam-engine, which, with oiled pistons, cranks, and levers, does its unobtrusive work in its own little chamber in comparative stillness, yet with a power that would tear and rend to pieces buildings and machinery, so

the firemen sometimes bend to their work quietly, though with mind and muscles strung to the utmost point of tension. At other times, like the roaring locomotive crashing through a tunnel or past a station, their course is a tumultuous rush, amid a storm of shouting and gesticulation.

So was it on the present occasion. Had the fire been distant, they would have had to commence their gallop somewhat leisurely, for fear of breaking down the horses; but it was not far off—not much more than a couple of miles—so they dashed round the corner of their own street at a brisk trot, and swept into Oxford Street. Here they broke into a gallop, and here the noise of their progress began, for the great thoroughfare was crowded with vehicles and pedestrians, many of whom were retiring from the theatres and music-halls, and other places of entertainment.

To pass through such a crowd without coming into collision with anything required not only the most dexterous driving, but rendered it necessary that some of the men on the engine should stand up and shout, or rather roar incessantly, as they whirled along, clearing everything out of their way, and narrowly escaping innumerable crashes by a mere hairbreadth.

The men, as we said before, having been sailors, seemed to shout with the memory of the boatswain strong upon them, for their tones were pitched in the deepest and gruffest bass-key. Sometimes there was a lull for a moment, as a comparatively clear space of a hundred yards or so lay before them; then their voices rose like the roaring of the gale as a stupid or deaf cabman

got in their way, or a plethoric 'bus threatened to interrupt their furious passage.

The cross streets were the points where the chief difficulties met them. There the cab and van drivers turned into or crossed the great thoroughfare, all ignorant of the thunderbolt that was rushing on like a fiery meteor, with its lamps casting a glare of light before, and the helmets of its stern charioteers flashing back the rays of street-lamps and windows; for, late though the hour was, all the gin-palaces, and tobacconists' shops, and many of the restaurants were still open and brightly illuminated.

At the corner of Wells Street, the crowd of cabs and other vehicles was so great that the driver of the engine began to tighten his reins, and Jim Baxmore and Joe Corney raised their voices to a fierce shout. Cabs, 'busses, and pedestrians scattered right and left in a marvellous manner; the driver slackened his reins, cracked his whip, and the horses stretched out again.

In passing Berners Street, a hansom cab swept round the corner, its dashing driver smoking a cigar in sublime self-satisfaction, and looking carelessly right and left for a "fare." This exquisite almost ran into the engine! There was a terrific howl from all the firemen; the cabby turned his smart horse with a bound to one side, and lost his cigar in the act—in reference to which misfortune he was heartily congratulated by a small member of the Shoe-black Brigade,—while the engine went steadily and sternly on its way.

"There, it shows a light," observed one of the firemen to Dale,

as he pointed to a luminous appearance in the sky away to the north-east.

Dale was already looking in that direction, and made no reply.

As they reached Tottenham Court Road the driver again checked the pace a little; yet even at the reduced speed they passed everything like a whirlwind. The traffic here was so great that it behoved them to be more cautious. Of course, the more need that there was for caution, the more necessity was there for shouting; and the duty of Baxmore and Corney—standing as they did in front of their comrades beside the driver—became severe, but they had good lungs both of them!

At the point where Tottenham Court Road cuts Oxford Street, the accumulation of vehicles of all sorts, from a hand-barrow to a furniture-van, is usually very great. To one unaccustomed to the powers of London drivers, it would have seemed nothing short of madness to drive full tilt into the mass that blocked the streets at this point. But the firemen did it. They reined up a little, it is true, just as a hunter does in gathering his horse together for a rush at a stone wall, but there was nothing like an approach to stopping.

"Hi! Hi!! Hi!!!" roared the firemen, Baxmore and Corney high above the rest. A 'bus lumbered to the left just in time; a hansom sprang to the right, not a moment too soon; a luggage-van bolted into Crown Street; the pedestrians scattered right and left, and the way was clear—no, not quite clear! The engine had to turn at a right angle here into Tottenham Court Road. Round it went on the two off-wheels, and came full swing on a

market-gardener and a hot-coffee woman, who were wheeling their respective barrows leisurely side by side, and chatting as they went.

The roar that burst from the firemen was terrific. The driver attempted both to pull up and to turn aside. The market-gardener dropt his barrow and fled. The hot-coffee woman, being of a resolute nature, thrust her barrow by main force on the footpath, and so saved her goods and herself by a hairbreadth, while the barrow of her friend was knocked in pieces. But the effort of the engine-driver to avoid this had well-nigh resulted in serious consequences. In endeavouring to clear the market-gardener he drew so near to the footpath that in another moment a lamp-post would have been carried away, and the wheels of the engine, in all probability, knocked off, had not Joe Corney observed the danger.

With a truly Irish yell Joe seized the rein next him, and pulled the horses round almost at a right angle. The nave of the hind-wheel just shaved the post as it flew by. The whole thing passed so swiftly that before the market-gardener recovered from his consternation the engine was only discernible in the distance by the sparks that flew from its wheels as it held on in its furious way.

All along its course a momentary disturbance of London equanimity was created. Families not yet abed rushed to their front windows, and, looking out, exclaimed, “Ha! the firemen.” Tipplers in gin-palaces ran to the doors and said,

"There they go," "That's your sort," "Hurrah, my hearties!" or, "Go it, ye cripples!" according to the different stages of inebriation at which they had arrived; and belated men of business stopped to gaze, and then resumed their way with thoughts and speculations on fire and fire insurance, more or less deep and serious according to temperament. But the disturbance was only temporary. The families retired to their suppers or beds, the tipplers returned to their tipple, the belated speculators to their dreams, and in a few minutes (no doubt) forgot what they had seen, and forgot; perchance, that they had any personal interest in fire raising, or fire extinction, or fire prevention, or fire in any dangerous shape or form whatever, or indulged in the comforting belief, mayhap, that whatever disasters might attend the rest of the London community, they and their houses being endued with the properties of the salamander, nothing in the shape of fire might, could, would, or should kindle upon them. So true is it that, "all men think all men mortal but themselves!"

Do you doubt this, reader? If so, go poll your acquaintance, and tell us how many of them have got rope-ladders, or even ropes, to escape from their houses should they take fire; how many of them have got hand-pumps, or even buckets, placed so as to be handy in case of fire; and how many of them have got their houses and furniture insured against fire.

Meanwhile, the fire-engine held on its way, until it turned into Beverly Square, and pulled short up in front of the blazing mansion of James Auberly, Esquire.

Another engine was already at work there. It had come from a nearer station, of the existence of which Hopkins had been ignorant when he set out on his wild race for help. The men of this engine were already doing their work quietly, but with perceptible effect, pouring incessant streams of water in at the blazing windows, and watching for the slightest lull in the ferocity of the smoke and flame to attack the enemy at closer quarters.

Chapter Four
A Fierce Fight With The Flames

When the small boy—whose name, it may be as well to mention, was William (*alias* Willie) Willders—saw the fire-engine start, as has been already described, his whole soul yearned to follow it, for, in the course of his short life, he had never succeeded in being at the beginning of a fire, although he had often been at the middle and end of one—not a very difficult thing in London, by the way, seeing that there are, on the average, between four and five fires every twenty-four hours!

Willie Willders was of an enquiring disposition. He wanted to know how things were managed at a fire, from the beginning to the end, and he found that the course of true inquiry, like another course we wot of, never did run smooth.

Poor Willie's heart was with that engine, but his legs were not. They did their best, but they failed, strong and active though they were, to keep up with the horses. So Willie heaved a bursting sigh and slackened his speed—as he had often done before in similar circumstances—resolving to keep it in sight as long as he could, and trust to his eyesight and to the flames "showing a light" for the rest.

Just as he came to this magnanimous resolve, a strapping young gentleman called a passing cab, leaped in, ordered the

driver to follow the engine, and offered double fare if he should keep it in view up to the fire.

Willie, being sharp as a needle, at once stepped forward and made as though he would open the door for the gentleman. The youth was already in and the door shut, but he smiled as he shouted to the driver, "All right!" and tossed a copper to Willie, with the remark, "There, you scamp!" The copper fell in the mud, and there Willie left it, as he doubled nimbly behind the vehicle, and laid hold of it.

The cabman did his best to earn his double fare, and thus it came to pass that Willie was in time to see the firemen commencing work.

As the young man leaped from the cab he uttered a cry of surprise and alarm, and rushed towards the crowd of firemen nearest to the burning house without paying his fare. Willie was a little astonished at this, but losing sight of the youth in the crowd, and seeing nothing more of him at that time, he became engrossed in other matters.

There were so many men on the ground, however—for just then a third engine dashed up to the scene of conflagration—that it was difficult for the excited boy to appreciate fully what he saw. He got as close to the engine, however, as the policemen would allow him, and observed that a fire-plug had been already opened, and over it had been placed a canvas cistern of about a yard long by eighteen inches broad, stretched on an iron frame. The cistern was filled with water to overflowing, and the first

engine had placed its suction-pipe in it, while from the front of the engine extended the leathern hose that conveyed the water to the burning house.

Willie was deeply interested in this, and was endeavouring to solve certain knotty points in his own mind, when they were suddenly solved for him by a communicative dustman who stood in the crowd close by, and thus expounded the matter to his inquisitive son.

"You see, Tommy, the use o' the cistern is hobvious. See, here's 'ow it lies. If an ingin comes up an screwges its suction on to the plug, all the other ingins as comes after it has to stan' by an' do nuffin. But by puttin' the cistern over the plug an' lettin' it fill, another ingin or mabbe two more, can ram in its suction and drink away till it's fit to burst, d'ye see."

Willie drank in the information with avidity, and then turned his attention to the front of the engine, to which several lengths of hose, each forty feet long, had been attached. Baxmore and Corney were at the extreme end, screwing on the "branch" or nozzle by which the stream of water is directed, and Dale was tumbling a half-drunk and riotous navvy head-over-heels into the crowd, in order to convince him that his services to pump were not wanted—a sufficient number having been procured. A couple of policemen walked this navvy quietly from the scene, as Dale called out:

"Down with her, boys!"

"Pump away, lads!" said one of the firemen, interpreting.

The volunteers bent their backs, and the white clouds of steam that issued from the burning house showed that the second engine was doing its work well.

Immediately after, Dale and his men, with the exception of those required to attend the engine and the "branch," were ordered to get out the ladders.

He who gave this order was a tall, sinewy man, middle-aged apparently, and of grave demeanour. His dress was similar to that of the other firemen, but there was an air of quiet unobtrusive authority about him, which showed that he was a leader.

"We might get on the roof now, Mr Braidwood," suggested Dale, touching his helmet as he addressed the well-known chief of the London Fire-Engine Establishment.

"Not yet, Dale, not yet," said Braidwood; "get inside and see if you can touch the fire through the drawing-room floor. It's just fallen in."

Dale and his men at once entered the front door of the building, dragging the branch and hose along with them, and were lost in smoke.

Previous to the arrival of the fire-engines, however, a scene had been enacted which Willie Willders had not witnessed. A fire-escape was first to reach the burning house. This was then, and still is, usually the case, owing to the fact that escapes are far more numerous in London than engines, so that the former, being always close at hand, often accomplish their great work of saving life before the engines make their appearance.

The escape in the immediate neighbourhood of Beverly Square was under the charge of Conductor Samuel Forest, a man who, although young, had already saved many lives, in the service of the Society for the Protection of Life from Fire.

When Forest reached the field of action, Mr James Auberly was seen at an upper window in a state of undignified *dishabille*, shouting for help, and half suffocated with smoke, with Mrs Rose hanging round his neck on one side and Matty Merryon at the other. Poor Auberly, having tried the staircase on the first alarm, was driven back by smoke, and rushed wildly to the window, where the two domestics, descending in terror from their attic, clung to him and rendered him powerless.

Forest at once pitched his escape—which was just a huge scientifically-constructed ladder, set on wheels. The head of it reached to the windows of the second floor. By pulling a rope attached to a lever, he raised a second ladder of smaller size, which was fitted to the head of the large one. The top of this second ladder was nearly sixty feet from the ground, and it reached the window at which Mr Auberly was still shouting. Forest at once sprang up.

"Leave me; save the women," gasped Auberly, as a man entered the room, but the dense smoke overpowered him as he spoke, and he fell forward. The women also sank to the ground.

Forest instantly seized Mrs Rose in his powerful arms, and hurrying down the ladder to the top of the escape, put her into the canvas trough or sack which was suspended below the ladder

all the way. Down this she slid somewhat violently but safely to the ground, while Forest ran up again and rescued Matty in the same way. Mr Auberly was more difficult to manage, being a heavy man, and his rescuer was almost overpowered by the thick smoke in the midst of which all this was done. He succeeded, however, but fainted on reaching the ground.

It was at this point that the first engine arrived, and only a few minutes elapsed when the second made its appearance, followed by the cab from which the young man leapt with the exclamation of surprise and alarm that had astonished Willie Willders.

Pushing his way to the place where Mr Auberly and the others lay, the youth fell on his knees. "My father!" he exclaimed wildly.

"He's all right, lad," said Mr Braidwood, coming up at that moment, and laying his hand kindly on the youth's shoulder; "he's only choked with smoke, and will be better in a minute. Any more in the house?" he added quickly.

Young Auberly leaped up with a shout.

"My sister! is she not saved? Are *all* here?"

He waited not for a reply, but in another moment was on the fire-escape.

"After him, two of you," said Braidwood, turning to his men.

Two at once obeyed. In fact, they had leaped forward almost before the brief command was uttered. One of these firemen was conspicuous for his height and strength. He was first up the ladder. Close upon him followed Baxmore with a lantern.

Nothing but smoke had yet reached the room into which

young Auberly entered, so that he instantly found himself in impenetrable darkness, and was almost choked as well as blinded.

"Have a care, Frank; the floor must be about gone by this time," said Baxmore, as he ran after his tall comrade.

The man whom he called Frank knew this. He also knew that it was not likely any one had been left in the room from which the master of the house had been rescued, and he thought it probable that his daughter would occupy a room on the same floor with her father. Acting on this supposition, and taking for granted that the room they were about to enter was Mr Auberly's bedroom, the tall fireman dashed at once through the smoke, and tumbled over the prostrate form of young Auberly.

"Look after him, Baxmore," he gasped, as he seized the lamp from his comrade's hand, and darted across the room and out into the passage, where he went crash against a door and burst it open. Here the smoke was not so dense, so that he could breathe, though with difficulty.

One glance showed him where the bed was. He felt it. A female form was lying on it. The light weight and the long hair which swept across his face as he raised it gently but swiftly on his shoulder, told him that it was that of a girl.

At that moment he heard a loud shout from the crowd, which was followed by a crash. Dashing once more across the passage, he saw that a lurid flame was piercing the smoke in the other room. The staircase he knew was impassable; probably gone by

that time; but he had not time to think, so he drew the blanket over the girl's head and bounded towards the window. There was a feeling of softness under his feet, as if the floor were made of pasteboard. He felt it sinking beneath him. Down it went, just as he laid hold of the head of the fire-escape, from which he hung suspended in the midst of the smoke and sparks that rose from the falling ruin.

Strong though the young fireman was, he could not raise himself by one arm, while the other was twined round Louisa Auberly. At that moment, Baxmore, having carried young Auberly down in safety, again ascended and appeared at the window. He seized Frank by the hair of the head.

"Let go my hair, and catch the girl!" shouted Frank.

"All right," said Baxmore, seizing Loo and lifting her over the window sill.

Frank being thus relieved, swung himself easily on the sill, and grasping Loo once more, descended to the street, where he was met by Mr Auberly, who had recovered from his state of partial suffocation, and who seized his child and hurried with her into a neighbouring house. Thither he was followed by Mrs Rose and Matty, who had also recovered.

During these episodes, the firemen had continued at their work with cool and undistracted attention. And here the value of organisation was strikingly and beautifully brought out; for, while the crowd swayed to and fro, now breathless with anxiety lest the efforts of the bold conductor of the fire-escape should fail;

anon wild with excitement and loud in cheers when he succeeded, each fireman paid devoted and exclusive attention to his own prescribed piece of duty, as if nothing else were going on around him, and did it with all his might—well knowing that every other piece of work was done, or point of danger guarded, by a comrade, while the eagle eyes of Mr Braidwood and his not less watchful foremen superintended all, observed and guided, as it were, the field of battle.

And truly, good generalship was required, for the foe was fierce and furious. The "devouring element" rushed onward like a torrent. The house was large and filled with rich furniture, which was luxurious food for the flames as they swept over the walls, twined round the balustrades, swallowed the paintings, devoured the woodwork, and melted the metal in their dread progress. But the foe that met them was, on this occasion, more than a match for the flames. It was a hand-to-hand encounter. The men followed them foot by foot, inch by inch—sometimes almost singeing their beards or being well-nigh choked and blinded by dense volumes of smoke, but, if driven back, always returning to the charge. The heat at times beat on their helmets so fiercely that they were forced to turn their faces aside and half-turn their backs on the foe, but they *always* kept their weapons—the "branches"—to the front, and continued to discharge upon him tons and tons of aqueous artillery.

"Get up to the windows now; use the escape," said Mr Braidwood; and as he said this he passed through the doorway

of the burning house.

Some of the men rushed up the escape and let down a line, to which one of the branches was made fast.

"Avast pumpin', number two!" shouted Baxmore from the midst of clouds of smoke that were bursting out from the window.

Number two engine was stopped. Its branch was pulled up and pointed inside *straight at the fire*; the signal given, "Down with number two!" and a hiss was followed by volumes of steam.

The work of extinction had at last begun in real earnest. As long as they could only stand in the street and throw water in through the windows at haphazard, they might or might not hit the fire—and at all events they could not attack its strong points; but now, Baxmore at one window, and one of the men of the first engine at another, played point-blank into the flames, and, wherever the water hit, they were extinguished. Presently they got inside and began to be able to see through the smoke; a blue glimmer became visible, the branch was pointed, and it was gone. By this time the second floor had partly given way, and fire was creeping down the rafters to the eaves of the house. Baxmore observed this; and pointed the branch straight up. The fire at that part was put out, and a heavy shower of water fell back on the fireman, drenching him to the skin.

The attack had now become general. The firemen swarmed in at the doors and windows the moment that it was possible for a human being to breathe the smoke and live. One of the

engines attached two additional lengths of hose, dragged the branch through the first floor to the back of the house, got upon an outhouse, in at a back window, and attacked the foe in rear. On the roof, Frank and Dale were plying their hatchets, their tall figures sharply defined against the wintry sky, and looking more gigantic than usual. The enemy saved them the trouble of cutting through, however, for it suddenly burst upwards, and part of the roof fell in. It would certainly have taken Frank prisoner had not Dale caught him by the collar, and dragged him out of danger. Instantly a branch was pointed downwards, and the foe was beaten back; from above, below, before, and behind, it was now met with deluges of water, which fell on the shoulders of the men in the lower floor in a continuous hot shower, while they stood ankle-deep in hot water.

In ten minutes after this the fire was effectually subdued, the lower floor having been saved, although its contents were severely damaged by water.

It was only necessary now, that one of the engines should remain for a time, to make good the victory. The others rolled up their hose, and prepared to depart. The King Street engine was the first to quit the field of battle. While the men were getting ready, Mr Auberly, muffled in a long cloak, stepped from the crowd and touched Frank, the tall fireman, on the shoulder.

"Sir," said he in a low voice, "you saved my child. I would show my sense of gratitude. Will you accept of this purse?"

Frank shook his head and a smile played on his smoke-

begrimed countenance as he said:

"No, Mr Auberly. I am obliged to you, but I cannot accept of it. I do not want it, and besides, the men of the brigade are not allowed to take money."

"But you will let me do something for you?" urged Mr Auberly. "Is there nothing that I can do?"

"Nothing, sir," said Frank. He paused for a moment, and then resumed—"Well, there *is* something that perhaps you could do, sir. I have a little brother out of employment; if you could get him a situation, sir."

"I will," said Mr Auberly with emotion. "Send him to me on Thursday forenoon. He will find me living next door to my—to my late home. I shall stay with a friend there for some time. Good-night."

"Men of King Street engine get up," cried Dale. "Stay—what is your name?" said Mr Auberly turning round.

But Frank was gone. He had leaped to his place on the engine and was off at a rattling pace through the now silent and deserted streets of the sleeping city.

Although they drove on at great speed there was no shouting now, for neither 'bus, cab, nor foot-passenger blocked up the way, and the men, begrimed with smoke and charcoal, wet, and weary with two hours of almost uninterrupted labour of a severe as well as dangerous character, sat or stood in their places in perfect silence.

On reaching the fire-station they leaped to the ground, and

all went quickly and silently to their neighbouring homes and beds, except the two men on duty. These, changing their coats and boots, lay down on the trestles, and at once fell fast asleep—the engine and horses having been previously housed—and then Dale sat down to make an entry of the event in his day-book.

The whole thing might have been only a vivid dream, so silent was the room and so devoid of any evidence of recent excitement, while the reigning tranquillity was enhanced rather than decreased by the soft breathing of the sleepers, the ticking of the clock, and the scratching of Dale's pen as he briefly recorded the facts of the fire that night in Beverly Square.

Chapter Five
Willie Willders in Difficulties

During the progress of the fire, small Willie Willders was in a state of the wildest, we might almost say hilarious, excitement; he regarded not the loss of property; the fire never struck him in *that* light. His little body and big spirit rejoiced in the whole affair as a magnificent display of fireworks and heroism.

When the fire burst through the library windows he shouted; when Sam Forest, the conductor of the fire-escape, saved Mr Auberly and the women, he hurrahed; when the tall fireman and Baxmore rescued Louisa Auberly he cheered and cheered again until his shrill voice rose high above the shouting of the crowd. When the floors gave way he screamed with delight, and when the roof fell in he shrieked with ecstasy.

Sundry and persevering were the efforts he made to break through the police by fair means and foul; but, in his energy, he over-reached himself, for he made himself so conspicuous that the police paid special attention to him, and wherever he appeared he was snubbed and thrust back, so that his great desire to get close to the men while they were at work was frustrated.

Willie had a brother who was a fireman, and he wished earnestly that he might recognise him, if present; but he knew that, being attached to the southern district of the City, he was

not likely to be there, and even if he were, the men were all so much alike in their uniform, that it was impossible at a distance to distinguish one from another. True it is that his brother was uncommonly tall, and very strong; but as the London firemen were all picked men, many of them were very tall, and all of them were strong.

Not until the last engine left the ground, did Willie Willders think it advisable to tear himself away, and hasten to his home in Notting Hill, where he found his mother sitting up for him in a state of considerable anxiety. She forebore to question him that night, however.

When Willie appeared next morning—or rather, the same morning, for it was nearly four o'clock when he went to bed—he found his mother sitting by the fire knitting a sock.

Mrs Willders was a widow, and was usually to be found seated by the fire, knitting a sock, or darning one, or mending some portion of male attire.

"So you were at a fire last night, Willie?" said the widow.

"Yes, I was," replied the boy, going up to his mother, and giving her what he styled a "roystering" kiss, which she appeared to like, although she was scarcely able to bear it, being thin and delicately formed, and somewhat weak from bad health.

"No lives lost, I hope, Willie?"

"No; there ain't often lives lost when Sam Forest, the fire-escape-man, is there. You know Forest, mother, the man that we've heard so much of? Ah, it *was* sitch fun! You've no notion!

It would have made you split your sides wi' laughin' if you'd seen Sam come out o' the smoke carryin' the master o' the house on his shoulder in his shirt and drawers, with only one sock on, an' his nightcap tied so tight under his chin that they had to cut it off —him in a swound, too, hangin' as limp as a dead eel on Sam's shoulder, with his head down one side, an' his legs down the other. Oh, it *was* a lark!"

The boy recalled "the lark" to his own mind so vividly, that he had to stop at this point, in order to give vent to an uproarious fit of laughter.

"Was Frank there?" inquired the widow, when the fit subsided.

"Not that I know of, mother; I looked hard for him, but didn't see him. There was lots o' men big enough to be him; but I couldn't get near enough to see for the bobbies. I wonder what them bobbies were made for!" continued Willie, with a look of indignation, as he seated himself at the table, and began to eat a hearty breakfast; "the long lamp-posts! that are always in the way when nobody wants 'em. I do believe they was invented for nothin' else than to aggravate small boys and snub their inquiring minds."

"Where was the fire, Willie?"

"In Beverly Square. I say, mother, if that there grocer don't send us better stuff than this here bacon in future, I'll—I'll have to give him up."

"I can't afford to get better, dear," said the widow meekly.

"I know that, mother; but *he* could afford to *give* better. However, it's down now, so it don't much matter."

"Did you hear whose house was burned, Willie?"

"A Mr Oberly, or somethin' like that."

"Auberly!" exclaimed the widow, with a start.

"Well, p'raps it is Auberly; but whichever it is, he's got a pretty kettle o' fish to look after this mornin'. You seem to have heard of him before, mother?"

"Yes, Willie, I—I know him a— at least I have met with him often. You see I was better off once, and used to mingle with — but I need not trouble you with that. On the strength of our former acquaintance, I thought I would write and ask him to get you a situation in an office, and I have got a letter from him, just before you came down to breakfast, saying that he will do what he can, and bidding me send you to him between eleven and twelve to-morrow."

"Whew!" whistled Willie, "an' he burnt out o' house and home, without a coat to his back or a shoe to his foot. It strikes me I'll have to try to get *him* a situation."

"He won't be found at the house, now, I dare say, my son, so we'll have to wait a little; but the burning of his house and furniture won't affect him much, for he's rich."

"Humph! p'raps not," said Willie; "but the burnin' of his little girl might have—"

"You said that *no* lives were lost," cried Mrs Willders, turning pale.

"No more there was, mother; but if it hadn't bin for one o' the firemen that jumped in at a blazin' winder an' brought her out through fire an' smoke, she'd have bin a cinder by this time, an' money wouldn't have bought the rich man another daughter, *I* know."

"True, my son," observed Mrs Willders, resting her forehead on her hand; then, as if suddenly recollecting something, she looked up and said, "Willie, I want you to go down to the City with these socks to Frank. This is his birthday, and I sat late last night on purpose to get them finished. His station is a long way *off*, I know, but you've nothing else to do, so—"

"Nothin' else to do, mother!" exclaimed Willie; with an offended look. "Haven't I got to converse in a friendly way with all the crossin'-sweepers an' shoeblacks an' stall-women as I go along, an' chaff the cabbies, an' look in at all the shop-windows, and insult the bobbies? I *always* insult the bobbies. It does me good. I hurt 'em, mentally, as much as I can, an' I'd hurt 'em bodily if I could. But every dog has his day. When I grow up *won't* I pitch into 'em!"

He struck the table with his fist, and, shaking back his curly hair, lifted his blue eyes to his mother's face with a stern expression, which gradually relaxed into a smile.

"Ah, you needn't grin, mother, an' tell me that the '*policemen*' are a fine set of men, and quite as brave and useful in their way as the firemen. I know all you respectable sort of people think that; but *I* don't. They're my natural enemies, and I hate 'em. Come,

mother, give me the socks and let me be off."

Soon the vigorous urchin was on his way to the City, whistling, as usual, with all his might. As he passed the corner of the British Museum a hand touched him on the shoulder, and its owner said:

"How much are ye paid a week, lad, for kicking up such a row?"

Willie looked round, and his eyes encountered the brass buckle of the waist-belt of a tall, strapping fellow in a blue uniform. Glancing upwards, he beheld the handsome countenance of his brother Frank looking down at him with a quiet smile. He wore no helmet, for except when attending a fire the firemen wear a sailor-like blue cloth cap.

"Hallo, Blazes! is that you?" cried the boy.

"Just so, Willie; goin' down to Watling Street to attend drill."

Willie (who had styled his brother "Blazes" ever since he joined the fire brigade) observed that he happened to be going in the same direction to deliver a message from his mother to a relation, which he would not speak about, however, just then, as he wished to tell him of a fire he had been at last night.

"A fire, lad; was it a big one?"

"Ay, that it was; a case o' burnin'-out almost; *and there were lives saved*," said the boy with a look of triumph; "and that's more than you can say you've seen, though you *are* a fireman."

"Well, you know I have not been long in the brigade, Willie, and as the escapes often do their work before the engines come up, I've not had much chance yet of seeing lives saved. How was

it done?"

With glowing eyes and flushed cheeks Willie at once launched out into a vivid description of the scene he had so recently witnessed, and dwelt particularly on the brave deeds of Conductor Forest and the tall fireman. Suddenly he looked up at his brother.

"Why, what are you chucklin' at, Blazes?"

"Nothing, lad. Was the fireman *very* tall?"

"That he certainly was—uncommon tall."

"Something like *me*?" said Frank.

A gleam of intelligence shot across the boy's face as he stopped and caught his brother by the sleeve, saying earnestly:

"It wasn't *you*, Frank, *was* it?"

"It was, Willie, and right glad am I to have been in such good luck as to save Miss Auberly."

Willie grasped his brother's hand and shook it heartily.

"You're a brick, Blazes," said he, "and this is your birthday, an' I wish you luck an' long life, my boy. You'll do me credit yet, if you go on as you've begun. Now, I'll go right away back an' tell mother. Won't she be fit to bu'st?"

"But what about your message to the relation in the City?" inquired Frank.

"That relation is yourself, and here's the message, in the shape of a pair o' socks from mother; knitted with her own hands; and, by the way, that reminds me—how came you to be at the fire last night? It's a long way from your station."

"I've been changed recently," said Frank; "poor Grove was badly hurt about the loins at a fire in New Bond Street last week, and I have been sent to take his place, so I'm at the King Street station now. But I have something more to tell you before you go, lad, so walk with me a bit farther."

Willie consented, and Frank related to him his conversation with Mr Auberly in reference to himself.

"I thought of asking leave and running out this afternoon to tell you, so it's as well we have met, as it will—Why, what are *you* chuckling at, Willie?"

This question was put in consequence of the boy's eyes twinkling and his cheeks reddening with suppressed merriment.

"Never mind, Blazes. I haven't time to tell you just now. I'll tell you some other time. So old Auberly wants to see me to-morrow forenoon?"

"That's what he said to me," returned Frank.

"Very good; I'll go. Adoo, Blazes—farewell."

So saying, Willie Willders turned round and went off at a run, chuckling violently. He attempted to whistle once or twice, but his mouth refused to retain the necessary formation, so he contented himself with chuckling instead. And it is worthy of record that that small boy was so much engrossed with his own thoughts on this particular occasion that he did not make one observation, bad, good, or indifferent, to any one during his walk home. He even received a question from a boy smaller than himself as to whether "his mother knew he was out," without

making any reply, and passed innumerable policemen without even a thought of vengeance!

"Let me see," said he, muttering to himself as he paused beside the Marble Arch at Hyde Park, and leaned his head against the railings of that structure; "Mr Auberly has been an' ordered two boys to be sent to him to-morrow forenoon—ha! he! sk!" (the chuckling got the better of him here)—"very good. An' my mother has ordered one o' the boys to go, while a tall fireman has ordered the other. Now, the question is, which o' the two boys am I—the *one* or the *t'other*—ha! sk! ho! Well, of course, *both* o' the boys will go; they can't help it, there's no gittin' over that; but, then, which of 'em will git the situation? There's a scruncher for you, Mr Auberly. You'll have to fill your house with tar an' turpentine an' set fire to it over again 'afore you'll throw light on *that* pint. S'pose I should go in for *both* situations! It *might* be managed. The first boy could take a well-paid situation as a clerk, an the second boy might go in for night-watchman at a bank." (Chuckling again interrupted the flow of thought.) "P'raps the two situations might be got in the same place o' business; that would be handy! Oh! if one o' the boys could only be a girl, *what* a lark that would—sk! ha! ha!"

He was interrupted at this point by a shoe-black, who remarked to his companion:

"I say, Bob, 'ere's a lark. 'Ere's a feller bin an got out o' Bedlam, a larfin' at nothink fit to burst hisself!"

So Willie resumed his walk with a chuckle that fully

confirmed the member of the black brigade in his opinion.

He went home chuckling and went to bed chuckling, without informing his mother of the cause of his mirth. Chuckling he arose on the following morning, and, chuckling still, went at noon to Beverly Square, where he discovered Mr Auberly standing, gaunt and forlorn, in the midst of the ruins of his once elegant mansion.

Chapter Six
"When one is another who is which?"

"Well, boy, what do you want? Have you anything to say to me?"

Mr Auberly turned sharp round on Willie, whose gaze had gone beyond the length of simple curiosity. In fact, he was awe-struck at the sight of such a very tall and very dignified man standing so grimly in the midst of such dreadful devastation.

"Please, sir, I was sent to you, sir, by—"

"Oh, you're the boy, the son of—that is to say, you were sent to me by your mother," said Mr Auberly with a frown.

"Well, sir," replied Willie, hesitating, "I—I—was sent by—by—"

"Ah, I see," interrupted Mr Auberly with a smile that was meant to be gracious, "you were sent by a fireman; you are not the—the—I mean you're the *other* boy."

Poor Willie, being of a powerfully risible nature, found it hard to contain himself on hearing his own words of the previous evening re-echoed thus unexpectedly. His face became red, and he took refuge in blowing his nose, during which process—having observed the smile on Mr Auberly's face—he resolved to be "the other boy."

"Yes, sir," he said, looking up modestly, "I was sent by a

fireman; I *am* the other boy."

Mr Auberly smiled again grimly, and said that the fireman was a brave fellow, and that he had saved his daughter's life, and that he was very glad to do anything that lay in his power for him, and that he understood that Willie was the fireman's brother; to which the boy replied that he was.

"Well, then, come this way," continued Mr Auberly, leading Willie into the library of the adjoining house, which his friend had put at his disposal, and seating himself at a writing-table. "You want a situation of some sort—a clerkship, I suppose?"

Willie admitted that his ambition soared to that tremendous height.

"Let me see," muttered Mr Auberly, taking up a pen and beginning to write; "yes, she will be able to help me. What is your name, boy?"

"Willie, sir."

"Just so, William; and your surname—your other name?"

"Willders, sir."

Mr Auberly started, and looked Willie full in the eyes. Willie, feeling that he was playing a sort of double part without being able to avoid it, grew red in the face.

"What did you say, boy?"

"Willders," replied Willie stoutly.

"Then you're *not* the other boy," said Mr Auberly, laying down his pen, and regarding Willie with a frown.

"Please, sir," replied Willie, with a look of meekness which

was mingled with a feeling of desperation, for his desire to laugh was strong upon him, "please, sir, I don't rightly know *which* boy I am."

Mr Auberly paused for a moment.

"Boy, you're a fool!"

"Thank 'ee, sir," said Willie.

This reply went a long way in Mr Auberly's mind to prove the truth of his assertion.

"Answer me, boy," said Mr Auberly with an impressive look and tone; "were you sent here by a fireman?"

"Yes, sir," replied Willie.

"What is his name?"

"Same as mine, sir—Willders."

"Of course, of course," said Mr Auberly, a little confused at having put such an unnecessary question. "Does your *mother* know you're here?"

This brought the slang phrase, "Does your mother know you're out?" so forcibly to the boy's mind, that he felt himself swell internally, and had recourse again to his pocket-handkerchief as a safety-valve.

"Yes, sir," said he, on recovering his composure; "arter I saw Blazes—Frank, I mean, that's my brother, sir—I goes right away home to bed. I stops with my mother, sir, an' she saw me come off here this mornin', sir. She knows I was comin' here."

"Of course; yes, yes, I see," muttered Mr Auberly, again taking up his pen. "I see; yes, yes; same name—strange

coincidence, though; but, after all, there are many of that name in London. I suppose the *other* boy will be here shortly. Very odd, very odd indeed."

"Please, sir," observed Willie, in a gentle tone, "you said *I* was the other boy, sir."

Mr Auberly seemed a little annoyed at his muttered words being thus replied to, yet he condescended to explain that there was another boy of the same name whom he expected to see that morning.

"Oh, then there's *another* other boy, sir?" said Willie with a look of interest.

"Hold your tongue!" said Mr Auberly in a sharp voice; "you're a fool, and you're much too fond of speaking. I advise you to keep your tongue quieter if you wish to get on in life."

Willie once more sought relief in his pocket-handkerchief, while his patron indited and sealed an epistle, which he addressed to "Miss Tippet, Number 6, Poorthing Lane, Beverly Square."

"Here, boy, take this to the lady to whom it is addressed—the lane is at the opposite corner of the square—and wait an answer."

"Am I to bring the answer back to you, sir?" asked Willie with much humility.

"No; the answer is for yourself," said Mr Auberly testily; "and hark 'ee, boy, you need not trouble me again. That note will get you all you desire."

"Thank you, sir," said Willie, making a bow, and preparing to retire; "but please, sir, I don't very well know, that is to say

—ahem!"

"Well, boy?" said the patron sternly.

"Excuse me, sir; I can't help it, you know; but please, sir, I wish to explain about that other boy—no, that's me, but the *other* other boy, you know—"

"Begone, boy!" cried Mr Auberly in a voice so stern that Willie found himself next moment in the street, along which he ran chuckling worse than ever.

A little reflection might have opened Mr Auberly's eyes to the truth in regard to Willie, but a poor relation was to him a disagreeable subject of contemplation, and he possessed the faculty, in an eminent degree, of dismissing it altogether from his mind. Having care enough on his mind at that time, poor man, he deliberately cast the confusion of the two boys out of his thoughts, and gave himself up to matters more interesting and personal.

We may add here that Mrs Willders was faithful to her promise, and never more addressed her brother-in-law by word or letter. When Willie afterwards told her and Frank of the absurdity of his interview, and of the violent manner in which Mr Auberly had dismissed him when he was going to explain about the "other" boy, his mother thought it best to let things rest as they stood, yet she often wondered in her own quiet way what Mr Auberly would think of her and of the non-appearance of the "other" boy; and she felt convinced that if he only put things together he *must* come to understand that Willie and Frank were

her sons. But Mrs Willders did not know of the before-mentioned happy facility which her kinsman possessed of forgetting poor relations; so, after wondering on for a time, she ceased to wonder or to think about it at all.

Chapter Seven
Thoughts in regard to Men

Miss Emelina Tippet was a maiden lady of pleasing countenance and exceedingly uncertain age.

She was a poor member of a poor branch of an aristocratic family, and feeling an unconquerable desire to breathe, if not the pure unadulterated atmosphere of Beverly Square, at least as much of it as was compatible with a very moderate income, she rented a small house in a very dark and dismal lane leading out of that great centre of refinement.

It is true that Beverly Square was not exactly the "West End," but there are many degrees of West-endiness, so to speak, in the western neighbourhood of London, and this square was, in the opinion of Miss Tippet, the West-endiest place she knew, because there dwelt in it, not only a very genteel and uncommonly rich portion of the community, but several of her own aristocratic, though distant, relations, among whom was Mr Auberly.

The precise distance of the relationship between them had never been defined, and all records bearing on it having been lost in the mists of antiquity, it could not now be ascertained; but Miss Tippet laid claim to the relationship, and as she was an obliging, good-humoured, chatty, and musical lady, Mr Auberly

admitted the claim.

Miss Tippet's only weakness—for she was indeed a most estimable woman—was a tendency to allow rank and position to weigh too much in her esteem. She had also a sensitive abhorrence of everything "low and vulgar," which would have been, of course, a very proper feeling had she not fallen into the mistake of considering humble birth lowness, and want of polish vulgarity—a mistake which is often (sometimes even wilfully) made by persons who consider themselves much wiser than Miss Tippet, but who are not wise enough to see a distinct shade of true vulgarity in their own sentiments.

The dark, dismal lane, named Poorthing Lane, besides forming an asylum for decayed and would-be aristocrats, and a vestibule, as it were, to Beverly Square, was a convenient retreat for sundry green-grocers and public-house keepers and small trades-people, who supplied the densely-peopled surrounding district, and even some of the inhabitants of Beverly Square itself, with the necessaries of life. It was also a thoroughfare for the gay equipages of the square, which passed through it daily on their way to and from the adjoining stables, thereby endangering the lives of precocious babies who could crawl, but could not walk away from home, as well as affording food for criticism and scandal, not to mention the leaving behind of a species of secondhand odour of gentility such as coachmen and footmen can give forth.

Miss Tippet's means being small, she rented a proportionately

small residence, consisting of two floors, which were the upper portion of a house, whose ground floor was a toy-shop. The owner of the toy-shop, David Boone, was Miss Tippet's landlord; but not the owner of the tenement. He rented the whole, and sublet the upper portion. Miss Tippet's parlour windows commanded a near view of the lodging opposite, into every corner and crevice of which she could have seen, had not the windows been encrusted with impenetrable dirt. Her own domestic arrangements were concealed from view by small green venetian blinds, which rose from below, and met the large venetians which descended from above. The good lady's bedroom windows in the upper floor commanded a near view —much too near—of a stack of chimneys, between which and another stack, farther over, she had a glimpse of part of the gable end of a house, and the topmost bough of a tree in Beverly Square. It was this prospect into paradise, terrestrially speaking, that influenced Miss Tippet in the choice of her abode.

When William Willders reached the small door of Number 6, Poorthing Lane, and raised his hand to knock, the said door opened as if it had been trained to admit visitors of its own accord, and Miss Matty Merryon issued forth, followed by a bright blue-eyed girl of about twelve years of age.

"Well, boy, was ye comin' here?" inquired Matty, as the lad stepped aside to let them pass.

"Yes, I was. Does Miss Tippet live here?"

"She does, boy, what d'ye want with her?"

"I want to see her, young 'ooman, so you'd better cut away up an' tell her a gen'lm'n requests a few words private conversation with her."

The little girl laughed at this speech, and Matty, addressing Willie as a "dirty spalpeen," said he had better go with her to a shop first, and she'd then take him back and introduce him to Miss Tippet.

"You see I can't let ye in all be yer lone, cushla; for what would the neighbours say, you know! I'm only goin' to the toy-shop, an' won't kape ye a minit, for Miss Emma don't take long to her bargains."

Willie might probably have demurred to this delay; but on hearing that the blue-eyed girl wanted to make purchases, he at once agreed to the proposal, and followed them into the toy-shop.

David Boone, who stepped out of the back-shop to serve them, was, if we may say so, very unlike his trade. A grave, tall, long-legged, long-nosed, raw-boned, melancholy-looking creature such as he, might have been an undertaker, or a mute, or a sexton, or a policeman, or a horse-guardsman, or even a lawyer; but it was the height of impropriety to have made him a toy-shopman, and whoever did it had no notion whatever of the fitness of things. One could not resist the idea that his clumsy legs would certainly upset the slender wooden toys with which the floor and counters were covered, and his fingers seemed made to break things. The figure of Punch which hung from the ceiling appeared inclined to hit him as he passed to and fro, and the

pretty little dolls with the sweet pink faces, and very flaxen hair and cerulean eyes were evidently laughing at him.

Nevertheless, David Boone was a kind-hearted man, very fond of children, and extremely unlike, in some respects, what people imagined him at first sight to be.

"Well, Miss Ward, what can I supply you with to-day?" said he blandly.

"Please, Mr Boone, I want a slate and a piece of slate-pencil." Emma looked up with a sweet smile at the tall shopman, who looked down upon her with grave benignity, as he produced the articles required.

"D'you kape turpentine?" said Matty, as they were about to quit the shop.

Boone started, and said almost testily, "No, I *don't*. Why do you ask?"

"Sure, there's no sin in askin'," replied Matty in surprise at the man's changed manner.

"Of course—of course not," rejoined Boone with a slight look of confusion, as he made a sudden assault with his pocket-handkerchief on the cat, which was sleeping innocently in the window; "git out o' that, you brute; you're always agoin' in the winder, capsizin' things. There! you've been an' sat on the face o' that 'ere wax doll till you've a'most melted it. Out o' that with you! No, Miss Merryon," he added, turning to the girl with his wonted urbanity, "I don't keep turpentine, and I was only surprised you should ask for it in a toy-shop; but you'll get it of Mr White next

door. I don't believe there's anythink in the world as he can't supply to his customers."

David Boone bowed them out, and then re-entered the back-shop, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"I don't like it—I don't even like to think of it, Gorman," he said to a big low-browed man who sat smoking his pipe beside the little fireplace, the fire in which was so small that its smoke scarcely equalled in volume that of the pipe he smoked: "No, I *don't* like it, and I *won't do it*."

"Well, well, you can please yourself," said Gorman, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, and placing it in his vest pocket as he rose and buttoned his thick pea-jacket up to the chin; "but I'll tell you what it is, if you *are* a descendant of the hunter of the far west that you boast so much about, it's precious little of his pluck that you've got; an' so I tell 'ee to your face, David Boone. All I've got to say is, that you'd better be wise and take my advice, and think better of it."

So saying, Gorman went out, and slammed the door after him.

Meanwhile, Miss Matty Merryon, having purchased a small phial of turpentine, returned to Number 6, and ushered Willie Willders into the presence of her mistress.

Miss Emelina Tippet was neither tall nor stiff, nor angular nor bony; on the contrary, she was little and plump, and not bad-looking. And people often wondered why Miss Tippet *was* Miss Tippet and was not Mrs Somebody-else. Whatever the reason was, Miss Tippet never divulged it, so we won't speculate about

it here.

"A note, boy, from Mr Auberly?" exclaimed Miss Tippet, with a beaming smile; "give it me—thank you."

She opened it and read attentively, while Master Willie glanced round the parlour and took mental notes. Miss Emma Ward sat down on a stool in the window, ostensibly to "do sums," but really to draw faces, all of which bore a strong caricatured resemblance to Willie, at whom she glanced slyly over the top of her slate.

Matty remained standing at the door to hear what the note was about. She did not pretend to busy herself about anything. There was no subterfuge in Matty. She had been Miss Tippet's confidential servant before entering the service of Mr Auberly, and her extremely short stay in Beverly Square had not altered that condition. She had come to feel that she had a right to know all Miss Tippet's affairs, and so waited for information.

"Ah!" exclaimed Miss Tippet, still reading, "yes; 'get him a situation in your brother's office,' (oh, certainly, I'll be sure to get that); 'he seems smart, I might almost say impu—' Ahem! Yes, well—."

"Boy," said Miss Tippet, turning suddenly to Willie, "your name is William Willders, I believe?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, William, Mr Auberly, my relative, asks me to get you into my brother's—my brother's, what's 'is name—office. Of course, I shall be happy to try. I am always extremely happy to do

anything for—yes, I suppose of course you can write, and, what d'ye call it—count—you can do arithmetic?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Willie.

"And you can spell—eh? I hope you can *spell*, Edward, a—I mean Thomas—is it, or William?"

Miss Tippet looked at Willie so earnestly and put this question in tones so solemn that he was much impressed, and felt as if all his earthly hopes hung on his reply, so he admitted that he could spell.

"Good," continued Miss Tippet. "You are, I suppose, in rather poor circumstances. Is your father poor?"

"He's dead, ma'am; was drowned."

"Oh! shocking, that's very sad. Was your mother drowned, too?"

"No, ma'am, she's alive and well—at least she's well for *her*, but she an't over strong. That's why I want to get work, that I may help her; and she wants me to be a clerk in a office, but I'd rather be a fireman. You couldn't make me a fireman, could you, ma'am?"

At this point Willie caught Miss Ward gazing intently at him over the top of her slate, so he threw her into violent confusion by winking at her.

"No, boy, I can't make you a fireman. Strange wish—why d'you want to be one?"

"'Cause it's such jolly fun," replied Willie; with real enthusiasm, "reg'lar bangin' crashin' sort o' work—as good as

fightin' any day! An' my brother Frank's a fireman. Such a one, too, you've no notion; six fut four he is, an' as strong as—oh, why, ma'am, he could take you up in one hand, ma'am, an' twirl you round his head like an old hat! He was at the fire in Beverly Square last night."

This speech was delivered with such vehemence, contained so many objectionable sentiments, and involved such a dreadful supposition in regard to the treatment of Miss Tippet's person, that the worthy lady was shocked beyond all expression. The concluding sentence, however, diverted her thoughts.

"Ah! was he indeed at that sad fire, and did he help to put it out?"

"Sure, an' he did more than that," exclaimed Matty, regarding the boy with sudden interest. "If that was yer brother that saved Miss Loo he's a ra'al man—"

"Saved Loo!" cried Miss Tippet; "was it *your* brother that saved Loo?"

"Yes, ma'am, it was."

"Bless him; he is a noble fellow, and I have great pleasure in taking you by the hand for his sake."

Miss Tippet suited the action to the word, and seized Willie's hand, which she squeezed warmly. Matty Merryon, with tears in her eyes, embraced him, and said that she only wished she had the chance of embracing his brother, too. Then they all said he must stay to lunch, as it was about lunchtime, and Miss Tippet added that he deserved to have been born in a higher position in life—at

least his brother did, which was the same thing, for he was a true what's-'is-name, who ought to be crowned with thingumyjigs.

Emma, who had latterly been looking at Willie with deepening respect, immediately crowned him with laurels on the slate, and then Matty rushed away for the lunch-tray—rejoicing in the fire, that had sent her back so soon to the old mistress whom she never wanted to leave; that had afforded scope for the display of such heroism, and had brought about altogether such an agreeable state of unwonted excitation.

Just as the party were on the point of sitting down to luncheon, the street-door knocker was applied to the door with an extremely firm touch.

"Miss Deemas!" exclaimed Miss Tippet. "Oh! I'm *so* glad. Rush, Matty."

Matty rushed, and immediately there was a sound on the wooden passage as of a gentleman with heavy boots. A moment later, and Matty ushered in a very tall, broad-shouldered, strapping lady; if we may venture to use that expression in reference to one of the fair sex.

Miss Deemas was a sort of human eagle. She had an eagle eye, an aquiline nose, an eagle flounce, and an eagle heart. Going up to Miss Tippet, she put a hand on each of her shoulders, and stooping down, pecked her, so to speak, on each cheek.

"How are you, my dear?" said Miss Deemas, not by any means tenderly; but much in the tone in which one would expect to have one's money or one's life demanded.

"Quite well, dear Julia, and *so* glad to see you. It is *so* good of you to take me by surprise this way; just at lunch-time, too. Another plate and knife, Matty. This is a little boy—a friend—not exactly a friend, but a—a thingumy, you know."

"No, I *don't* know, Emelina, what is the precise 'thingumy' you refer to this time," said the uncompromising and matter-of-fact Miss Deemas.

"You're *so* particular, dear Julia," replied Miss Tippet with a little sigh; "a what's-'is-n–, a *protégé*, you know."

"Indeed," said Miss Deemas, regarding Willie with a severe frown, as if in her estimation all *protégés* were necessarily villains.

"Yes, dear Julia, and, would you believe it, that this boy's brother-in-law—"

"Brother, ma'am," interrupted Willie.

"Yes, brother, actually saved my darling's life last night, at the —the thing in Beverly Square."

"What 'darling's life,' and what 'thing' in Beverly Square?" demanded Miss Deemas.

"What! have you not heard of the fire last night in Beverly Square—my relative, James Auberly—living there with his family—all burnt to ashes—and my sweet Loo, too? A what's-'is-name was brought, and a brave fireman went up it, through fire and water and smoke. Young Auberly went up before him and fell—heat and suffocation—and saved her in his arms, and his name is Frank, and he's this boy's brother-in-law!"

To this brief summary, given with much excitement, Miss Deemas listened with quiet composure, and then said with grim sarcasm, and very slowly:

"Let me see; there was a fire in Beverly Square last night, and James Auberly, living there with his family, were all burned to ashes."

Miss Tippet here interrupted with, "No, no;" but her stern friend imposing silence, with an eagle look, continued:

"All burned to ashes, and also your sweet Loo. A 'what's-his-name' having been brought, a brave fireman goes up it, and apparently never comes down again (burned to ashes also, I fancy); but young Auberly, who went up before him, and fell—heat and suffocation being the result—saved some one named 'her' in his arms; his name being Frank (owing no doubt to his having been re-baptised, for ever since I knew him he has been named Frederick), and he is this boy's brother-in-law!"

By way of putting an extremely fine point on her sarcasm, Miss Deemas turned to Willie, with a very condescending air, and said:

"Pray, when did your sister marry Mr Frederick Auberly?"

Willie, with a face of meekness, that can only be likened to that of a young turtle-dove, replied:

"Please, ma'am, it isn't my sister as has married Mr Auberly; but it's my brother, Frank Willders, as hopes to marry Miss Loo Auberly, on account o' havin' saved her life, w'en she comes of age, ma'am."

Miss Deemas stood aghast, or rather sat aghast, on receiving this reply, and scanned Willie's face with one of her most eagle glances; but that small piece of impudence wore an expression of weak good-nature, and winked its eyes with the humility of a subdued pup, while Miss Tippet looked half-horrified and half-amused; Matty grinned, and Emma squeaked through her nose.

"Boy," said Miss Deemas severely, "your looks belie you."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Willie, "my mother always said I wasn't half so bad as I looked; and she's aware that I'm absent from home."

At this point Willie allowed a gleam of intelligence to shoot across his face, and he winked to Emma, who thereupon went into private convulsions in her handkerchief.

"Emelina," said Miss Deemas solemnly, "let me warn you against that boy. He is a bad specimen of a bad sex. He is a precocious type of that base, domineering, proud and perfidious creature that calls itself 'lord of creation,' and which, in virtue of its superior physical power, takes up every position in life worth having," ("except that of wife and mother," meekly suggested Miss Tippet), "*worth having*" (repeated the eagle sternly, as if the position of wife and mother were *not* worth having), "worth having, and leaves nothing for poor weak-bodied, though not weak-minded woman to do, except sew and teach brats. Bah! I hate men, and they hate *me*, I know it, and I would not have it otherwise. I wish they had never been made. I wish there had been none in the world but women. What a blessed world it would

have been *then*!"

Miss Deemas hit the table with her hand, in a masculine manner, so forcibly, that the plates and glasses rattled, then she resumed, for she was now on a favourite theme, and was delivering a lecture to a select audience.

"But, mark you, *I'm* not going to be put down by men. I mean to fight 'em with their own weapons. I mean to—"

She paused suddenly at this point, and, descending from her platform, advised Miss Tippet to dismiss the boy at once.

Poor Miss Tippet prepared to do so. She was completely under the power of Miss Deemas, whom, strange to say, she loved dearly. She really believed that they agreed with each other on most points, although it was quite evident that they were utterly opposed to each other in everything. Wherein the bond lay no philosopher could discover. Possibly it lay in the fact that they were absolute extremes, and, in verification of the proverb, had met.

Be this as it may, a note was quickly written to her brother, Thomas Tippet, Esquire, which was delivered to Willie, with orders to take it the following evening to London Bridge, in the neighbourhood of which Mr Tippet dwelt and carried on his business.

Chapter Eight
A Hidden Fire

In the afternoon of the following day Willie set off to the City in quest of Mr Thomas Tippet. Having to pass the King Street fire station, he resolved to look in on his brother.

The folding-doors of the engine-house were wide open, and the engine itself, clean and business-like, with its brass-work polished bright, stood ready for instant action. Two of the firemen were conversing at the open door, while several others could be seen lounging about inside. In one of the former Willie recognised the strong man who had collared him on a well-remembered occasion.

"Please, sir," said Willie, going up to him, "is Frank Willders inside?"

"Why, youngster," said Dale, laying his hand on Willie's head, "ain't you the boy that pulled our bell for a lark the other night?"

"Yes, sir, I am; but you let me off, you know, so I hope you won't bear me ill-will *now*."

"That depends on how you behave in future," said Dale with a laugh; "but what d'you want with Frank Willders?"

"I want to see him. He's my brother."

"Oh, indeed! You'll find him inside."

Willie entered the place with feelings of interest, for his

respect for firemen had increased greatly since he had witnessed their recent doings at the Beverly Square fire.

He found his brother writing at the little desk that stood in the window, while five or six of his comrades were chatting by the fire, and a group in a corner were playing draughts, and spinning yarns of their old experiences. All assisted in loading the air with tobacco-smoke.

The round cloth caps worn by the men gave them a much more sailor-like and much less fireman-like appearance than the helmets, which, with their respective hatchets, hung on the walls, rendering the apartment somewhat like a cavalry guard-room. This change in the head-piece, and the removal of the hatchet, was the only alteration in their costume in what may be styled "times of peace." In other respects they were at all times accoutred, and in readiness to commence instant battle with the flames.

"Hallo, Blazes! how are ye?" said Willie, touching his brother on the shoulder.

"That you, Willie?" said Frank, without looking up from his work. "Where away now?"

"Come to tell ye there's a *fire*," said Willie, with a serious look.

"Eh? what d'ye mean?" asked Frank, looking at his brother, as if he half believed he was in earnest.

"I mean what I say—a fire here," said Willie, solemnly striking his breast with his clenched fist, "here in Heart Street, Buzzum Square, ragin' like fury, and all the ingins o' the fire

brigade, includin' the float, couldn't put it out, no, nor even so much as squeanch it!"

"Then it's of no use our turning out, I suppose?" said Frank with a smile, as he wiped his pen; "what set it alight, lad?"

"A wax doll with flaxen hair and blue eyes," answered Willie; "them's the things as has all along done for me. When I was a boy I falled in love with a noo wax doll every other day. Not that I ever owned one myself; I only took a squint at 'em in toy-shop winders, and they always had flaxen hair and blue peepers. Now that I've become a man, I've bin an' falled in love with a livin' wax doll, an' she's got flaxen hair an' blue eyes; moreover, she draws."

"Draws—boy! what does she draw—corks?" inquires Frank.

"*No*!" replied Willie, with a look of supreme contempt; "nothin' so low; she draws faces an' pictures like—like—a schoolmaster, and," added Willie, with a sigh, "she's bin an' drawed all the spirit out o' this here buzzum."

"She must have left a good lot o' combustible matter behind, however, if there's such a fire raging in it. Who may this pretty fire-raiser be?"

"Her name is Emma Ward, and she b'longs to a Miss Tippet, to whom she's related somehow, but I don't know where she got her, nor who's her parents. This same Miss Tippet is some sort of a relation o' Mr Auberly, who sent me to her with a note, and she has sent me with another note to her brother near London Bridge, who, I s'pose, will send me with another note to somebody else, so I'm on my way down to see him. I thought I'd look in to ask

after you in passin', and cheer you on to dooty."

A violent fit of somewhat noisy coughing from one of the men at the fireplace attracted Willie's attention at this point in the conversation.

"Wot a noisy feller you are, Corney," remarked one of the men.

"Faix," retorted Corney, "it's noisy you'd be too av ye had the cowld in yer chist that I have. Sure, if ye had bin out five times in wan night as I wos on Widsenday last, wid the branch to howld in a smoke as 'ud choke Baxmore hisself (an' it's well known *he* can stand a'most anything), not to spake o' the hose bu'stin' right betune me two feet."

"Come, come, Paddy," said Dale, interrupting; "don't try to choke us, now; you know very well that one of the fires was only a cut-away affair; two were chimneys, and one was a false alarm."

"True for ye!" cried Corney, who had a tendency to become irascible in argument, or while defending himself; "true for ye, Mister Dale, but they *was* alarms for all that, false or thrue, was they not now? Anyhow they alarmed me out o' me bed five times in a night as cowld as the polar ragions, and the last time was a raale case o' two flats burnt out, an' four hours' work in iced wather."

There was a general laugh at this point, followed by several coughs and sneezes, for the men were all more or less afflicted with colds, owing to the severity of the weather and the frequency of the fires that had occurred at that time.

"There's some of us can sing chorus to Corney," observed one of the group. "I never saw such weather; and it seems to me that the worse the weather the more the fires, as if they got 'em up a purpose to kill us."

"Bill Moxey!" cried another, "you're *always* givin' out some truism with a face like Solomon."

"Well, Jack Williams," retorted Moxey, "it's more than I can say of you, for you never say anything worth listenin' to, and you couldn't look like Solomon if you was to try ever so much.—You're too stoopid for that."

"I say, lads," cried Frank Willders, "what d'ye say to send along to the doctor for another bottle o' cough mixture, same as the first?"

This proposal was received with a general laugh.

"He'll not send us more o' *that* tipple, you may depend," said Williams.

"No, not av we wos dyin'," said Corney, with a grin.

"What was it?" asked Williams.

"Didn't you hear about it?" inquired Moxey. "Oh, to be sure not; you were in hospital after you got run over by the Baker Street engine. Tell him about it, Corney. It was you that asked the doctor, wasn't it, for another bottle?"

Corney was about to speak, when a young fireman entered the room with his helmet hanging on his arm.

"Is it go on?" he inquired, looking round.

"No, it's go back, young Rags," replied Baxmore, as he refilled

his pipe; "it was only a chimney, so you're not wanted."

"Can any o' you fellers lend me a bit o' baccy?" asked Rags. "I've forgot to fetch mine."

"Here you are," said Dale, offering him a piece of twist.

"Han't ye got a bit o' hard baccy for the tooth?" said Rags.

"Will that do?" asked Frank Willders, cutting off a piece from a plug of cavendish.

"Thank'ee. Good afternoon."

Young Rags put the quid in his cheek, and went away humming a tune.

In explanation of the above incident, it is necessary to tell the reader that when a fire occurred in any part of London at the time of which we write, the fire-station nearest to it at once sent out its engines and men, and telegraphed to the then head or centre station at Watling Street. London was divided into four districts, each district containing several fire stations, and being presided over by a foreman. From Watling Street the news was telegraphed to the foremen's stations, whence it was transmitted to the stations of their respective districts, so that in a few minutes after the breaking out of a fire the fact was known to the firemen *all over London*.

As we have said, the stations nearest to the scene of conflagration turned out engines and men; but the other stations furnished a man each. Thus machinery was set in motion which moved, as it were, the whole metropolis; and while the engines were going to the fire at full speed, single men were setting out

from every point of the compass to walk to it, with their sailors' caps on their heads and their helmets on their arms.

And this took place in the case of every alarm of fire, because fire is an element that will not brook delay, and it does not do to wait to ascertain whether it is worth while to turn out such a force of men for it or not.

In order, however, to prevent this unnecessary assembling of men when the fire was found to be trifling, or when, as was sometimes the case, it was a false alarm, the fireman in charge of the engine that arrived first, at once sent a man back to the station with a "stop," that is, with an order to telegraph to the central station that the fire turns out to be only a chimney or a false alarm, and that all hands who have started from the distant stations may be "stopped." The "stop" was at once telegraphed to the foremen, from whom it was passed (just as the "call" had been) to the outlying stations, and this second telegram might arrive within quarter of an hour of the first.

Of course the man from each station had set out before that time, and the "stop" was too late for *him*, but it was his duty to call at the various fire stations he happened to pass on the way, where he soon found out whether he was to "go on" or to "go back."

If no telegram had been received, he went on to the fire; sometimes walking four or five miles to it, "at not less than four miles an hour." On coming up to the scene of conflagration, he put on his helmet, thrust his cap into the breast of his coat, and

reported himself to the chief of the fire brigade (who was usually on the spot), or to the foreman in command, and found, probably, that he had arrived just in time to be of great service in the way of relieving the men who first attacked the flames.

If, on the other hand, he found that the "stop" had been telegraphed, he turned back before having gone much more than a mile from his own station, and so went quietly home to bed. In the days of which we write the effective and beautiful system of telegraphy which now exists had not been applied to the fire stations of London, and the system of "stops" and "calls," although in operation, was carried out much less promptly and effectively by means of messengers.

Some time before the entrance of Willie Willders into the King Street station the engine had been turned out to a fire close at hand, which proved to be only a chimney on fire, and which was put out by means of a hand-pump and a bucket of water, while Moxey was sent back with the "stop" to the station. The affair was over and almost forgotten, and the men had resumed their pipes, as we have seen, when young Rags entered and was told to go back.

Apologising for this necessary digression, we return to Joe Corney.

"The fact was," said he, "that we had had a fearful time of it that winter—blowin' great guns an' snow nearly every night, an' what wi' heat at the fires an' cowld i' the streets, an' hot wather pourin' on us at wan minnit an' freezin' on us the nixt, a'most

every man Jack of us was coughin' an' sneezin', and watherin' so bad at our eyes an' noses, that I do belave if we'd held 'em over the suction-pipes we might ha' filled the ingins without throublin' the mains at all. So the doctor he said, says he, 'Lads, I'll send ye a bottle o' stuff as'll put ye right.' An' sure enough down comes the bottle that night when we was smokin' our pipes just afther roll-call. It turned out to be the best midcine ever was. 'Musha!' says I, 'here's the top o' the marnin' to ye, boys!' Baxmore he smacks his lips when he tastes it, opens his eyes, tosses off the glass, and holds it out for another. 'Howld on; fair play!' cried Jack Williams, so we all had a glass round. It was just like lemonade or ginger-beer, it was. So we sat down an' smoked our pipes over it, an' spun yarns an' sung songs; in fact we made a jollification of it, an' when we got up to turn in there warn't a dhrop left i' the bottle.

"'You'd better go to the doctor for another bottle,' says Moxey, as he wint out.

"'I will,' says I; 'I'll go i' the marnin'.'

"Sure enough away I goes i' the marnin' to Doctor Offley. 'Doctor,' says I, howldin' out the bottle, 'we all think our colds are much the better o' this here midcine, an' I comed, av ye plaze, for another o' the same.'

"Musha! but ye should ha' seen the rage he goes off into. 'Finished it all?' says he. 'Ivery dhrop, doctor,' says I, 'at wan sittin'.' At that he stamped an' swore at me, an' ordered me away as if I'd bin a poor relation; an' says he, 'I'll sind ye a bottle to-

night as'll cure ye!' Sure so he did. The second bottle would have poison'd a rat. It lasted us all six months, an' I do belave ye'll find the most of it in the cupboard at this minnit av ye look."

"Come, Willie," said Frank, while the men were laughing at the remembrance of this incident. "I'm going down your way and will give you a convoy. We can take a look in at the gymnastics as we pass, if you choose."

"All right, Blazes, come along." So saying they left the station, and set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the City.

Chapter Nine
Auctions and Gymnastics

As the brothers drew near to the busy region of the City which lies to the north of London Bridge; Frank turned aside into one of the narrow streets that diverge from the main thoroughfare.

"Where are ye goin'?" inquired Willie.

"There was a fire here last night," said Frank; "I want to have a look at the damage."

"A fire!" exclaimed Willie. "Why, Blazes, it strikes me there's bin more fires than usual last night in London."

"Only two, lad."

"*Only* two! How many would you have?" asked Willie with a laugh.

"Don't you know," said Frank, "that we have about four fires *every* night? Sometimes more, sometimes fewer. Of course, we don't *all* of us turn out to them; but some of the brigade turn out to that number, on an average, every night of the year."

"Are ye jokin', Frank?"

"Indeed I am not. I wish with all my heart I could say that I was joking. It's a fact, boy. You know I have not been long in the force, yet I've gone to as many as six fires in one night, and we *often* go to two or three. The one we are going to see the remains of just now was too far from us for our engine to turn out; but

we got the call to send a man on, and I was sent. When I arrived and reported myself to Mr Braidwood, the two top floors were burnt out, and the fire was nearly got under. There were three engines, and the men were up on the window-sills of the second-floor with the branches, playin' on the last of the flames, while the men of the salvage-corps were getting the furniture out of the first floor. Conductor Brown was there with his escape, and had saved a whole family from the top floor, just before I arrived. He had been changed from his old station at the West End that very day. He's a wonderful fellow, that conductor! Many a life he has saved; but, indeed, the same may be said of most of the men in the force, especially the old hands. Here we are, lad. This is the house."

Frank stopped, as he spoke, in front of a ruined tenement, or rather, in front of the gap which was now strewn with the charred and blackened *débris* of what had once been a house. The street in which it stood was a narrow, mean one, inhabited by a poor, and, to judge from appearance, a dissipated class. The remains of the house were guarded by policemen, while a gang of men were engaged in digging among the ruins, which still smoked a little here and there.

"What are they diggin' for?" asked Willie.

"I fear they are looking for dead bodies. The house was let out to lodgers, and swarmed with people. At first it was thought that all were saved; but just before I was ordered home after the fire was got under, some one said that an old man and his grandchild

were missing. I suppose they're looking for them now."

On inquiring of a policeman, however, Frank learned that the remains of the old man and his grandchild had already been found, and that they were searching for the bodies of others who were missing. A little beyond the spot where the fire had occurred, a crowd was gathered round a man who stood on a chair haranguing them, with apparently considerable effect, for ever and anon his observations were received with cries of "Hear, hear," and laughter. Going along the middle of the narrow street, in order to avoid the smell of the old-clothes'-shops and pawnbrokers, as well as the risk of contact with their wares, Frank and Willie elbowed their way through the crowd to within a few yards of the speaker.

"What is he?" inquired Frank of a rather dissipated elderly woman.

"He's a clown or a hacrobat, or somethink of that sort, in one of the theatres or music-'alls. He's bin burnt out o' his 'ome last night, an's a-sellin' off all he's been able to save, by hauction."

"Come; now, ladies an' gents," cried the clown, taking up a rather seedy-looking great-coat, which he held aloft with one hand, and pointed to it with the other, "Who's agoin' to bid for this 'ere garment—a hextra superfine, double-drilled, kershimere great-coat, fresh from the looms o' Tuskany—at least it was fresh from 'em ten years ago (that was when my grandfather was made Lord Mayor of London), an' its bin renewing its youth (the coat, not the Lord Mayor) ever since. It's

more glossy, I do assure you, ladies and gents, than w'en it fust comed from the looms, by reason of the pile havin' worn off; and you'll obsarve that the glossiness is most beautiful and brightest about the elbows an' the seams o' the back. Who bids for this 'ere venerable garment? Six bob? Come now, don't all bid at once. Who said six bob?"

No reply being made to this, except a laugh, the clown (who, by the way, wore a similarly glossy great-coat, with a hat to match) protested that his ears must have deceived him, or his imagination had been whispering hopeful things—which was not unlikely, for his imagination was a very powerful one—when he noticed Frank's tall figure among the crowd.

"Come now, fireman, this is the wery harticle you wants. You comed out to buy it, I know, an' 'ere it is, by a strange coincidence, ready-made to hand. What d'ye bid? Six bob? Or say five. I know you've got a wife an' a large family o' young firemen to keep, so I'll let it go cheap. P'raps it's too small for you; but that's easy put right. You've only got to slit it up behind to the neck, which is a' infallible cure for a tight fit, an' you can let down the cuffs, which is double, an' if it's short you can cut off the collar, an' sew it on to the skirts. It's water-proof, too, and fire-proof, patent asbestos. W'en it's dirty you've got nothin' to do but walk into the fire, an' it'll come out noo. W'en it's thoroughly wet on the houtside, turn it hinside hout, an' there you are, to all appearance as dry as bone. What! you won't have it at no price? Well, now, I'll tempt you. I'll make it *two* bob."

"Say one," cried a baker, who had been listening to this, with a broad grin on his floury countenance.

"Ladies and gents," cried the clown, drawing himself up with dignity; "there's an individual in this crowd—I beg parden, this assemblage—as asks me to say 'one.' I *do* say 'one,' an' I say it with melancholy feelin's as to the liberality of my species. One bob! A feller-man as has bin burnt hout of 'is 'ome an' needs ready money to keep 'im from starvation, offers his best great-coat—a hextra superfine, double-drilled (or milled, I forget w'ich) kershimere, from the looms o' Tuskany—for one bob!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.