

# ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

PERSONAL  
REMINISCENCES IN BOOK  
MAKING, AND SOME  
SHORT STORIES

Robert Michael Ballantyne

**Personal Reminiscences in Book  
Making, and Some Short Stories**

«Public Domain»

**Ballantyne R.**

Personal Reminiscences in Book Making, and Some Short Stories /  
R. Ballantyne — «Public Domain»,

## Содержание

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three	18
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

# **R. M. Ballantyne**

## **Personal Reminiscences in Book Making, and Some Short Stories**

### **Chapter One**

#### **Incidents in Book Making—Introductory**

Book making is mixed up, more or less, with difficulties. It is sometimes disappointing; often amusing; occasionally lucrative; frequently expensive, and always interesting—at least to the maker.

Of course I do not refer to that sort of book making which is connected with the too prevalent and disgraceful practice of gambling, but to the making of literary books—especially story-books for the young.

For over eight-and-thirty years I have had the pleasure of making such books and of gathering the material for them in many and distant lands.

During that period a considerable number of the juvenile public have accepted me as one of their guides in the world of Fiction, and through many scenes in the wildest and most out-of-the-way regions of our wonderful world.

Surely, then, it is not presumptuous in me to suppose—at least to hope—that a rambling account of some of the curious incidents which have occurred, now and then, in connection with my book making, will interest the young people of the present day. Indeed I entertain a hope that some even of the old boys and girls who condescended to follow me in the days gone by may perchance derive some amusement, if not profit, from a perusal of these reminiscences.

The shadows of life are lengthening, and, for me, that night, “in which no man can work,” may not be far off. Before it is too late, and while yet the flame of the lamp burns with sufficient clearness, I would fain have a personal chat with those for whom, by God’s blessing, I have been permitted to cater so long.

But fear not, dear reader, that I shall inflict on you a complete autobiography. It is only the great ones of the earth who are entitled to claim attention to the record of birth and parentage and school-days, etcetera. To trace my ancestry back through “the Conquerors” to Adam, would be presumptuous as well as impossible. Nevertheless, for the sake of aspirants to literary fame, it may be worth while to tell here how one of the rank and file of the moderately successful Brotherhood was led to Authorship as a profession and how he followed it out.

I say “led” advisedly, because I made no effort whatever to adopt this line of life, and never even dreamed of it as a possibility until I was over twenty-eight years of age.

Let me commence, then, by at once taking a header into the middle of that period when God—all unknown to, and unrecognised by, myself—was furnishing me with some of the material and weapons for the future battle of life.

One day my dear father was reading in the newspapers some account of the discoveries of Dease and Simpson in the neighbourhood of the famous North-west Passage. Looking at me over his spectacles with the perplexed air of a man who has an idle son of sixteen to start in the race of life, he said—

“How would you like to go into the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company and discover the North-west Passage?”—or words to that effect.

“All right, father,” said I—or something of that sort.

I was at that age, and in that frame of mind, which regards difficulties with consummate presumption and profound inexperience. If the discovery of the North-pole had been suggested, or

the South-pole, or any other terrestrial pole that happened to exist at the time, I was quite ready to “rush in” where even a Franklin might “fear to tread!”

This incident was but a slight one, yet it was the little hinge on which turned my future career.

We had a relation—I won’t say what, because distant relationships, especially if complicated, are utterly beyond my mental grasp—who was high up in the service of the Hudson’s Bay Fur Company. Through Iain I became a clerk in the service with a salary of 20 pounds for the first year. Having been born without a silver spoon in my mouth, I regarded this as an adequate, though not a princely, provision.

In due time I found myself in the heart of that vast North American wilderness which is variously known as Rupert’s Land, the Territories of the Hudson’s Bay Company, and the Great Nor’west, many hundreds of miles north of the outmost verge of Canadian civilisation.

I am not learned in the matter of statistics, but if a rough guess may be allowed, I should say that the population of some of the regions in which I and my few fellow-clerks vegetated might have been about fifty to the hundred square miles—with uninhabited regions around. Of course we had no libraries, magazines, or newspapers out there. Indeed we had almost no books at all, only a stray file or two of American newspapers, one of which made me acquainted with some of the works of Dickens and of Lever. While in those northern wilds I also met—as with dear old friends—some stray copies of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, and the *Penny Magazine*.

We had a mail twice in the year—once by the Hudson’s Bay ship in summer, and once through the trackless wilderness by sledge and snow-shoe in winter. It will easily be understood that surroundings of such a nature did not suggest or encourage a literary career. My comrades and I spent the greater part of our time in fur-trading with the Red Indians; doing a little office-work, and in much canoeing, boating, fishing, shooting, wishing, and skylarking. It was a “jolly” life, no doubt, while it lasted, but not elevating!

We did not drink. Happily there was nothing alcoholic to be had out there for love or money. But we smoked, more or less consumedly, morning, noon, and night. Before breakfast the smoking began; after supper it went on; far into the night it continued. Some of us even went to sleep with the pipes in our mouths and dropped them on our pillows. Being of such an immature age, I laboured under the not uncommon delusion that to smoke looked manly, and therefore did my best to accommodate myself to my surroundings, but I failed signally, having been gifted with a blessed incapacity for tobacco-smoking. This afflicted me somewhat at the time, but ever since I have been unmistakably thankful.

But this is wandering. To return.

With a winter of eight months’ duration and temperature sometimes at 50 below zero of Fahrenheit, little to do and nothing particular to think of, time occasionally hung heavy on our hands. With a view to lighten it a little, I began to write long and elaborate letters to a loving mother whom I had left behind me in Scotland. The fact that these letters could be despatched only twice in the year was immaterial. Whenever I felt a touch of home-sickness, and at frequent intervals, I got out my sheet of the largest-sized narrow-ruled imperial paper—I think it was called “imperial”—and entered into spiritual intercourse with “Home.” To this long-letter writing I attribute whatever small amount of facility in composition I may have acquired. Yet not the faintest idea of story-writing crossed the clear sky of my unliterary imagination. I am not conscious of having had, at that time, a love for writing in any form—very much the reverse!

Of course I passed through a highly romantic period of life—most youths do so—and while in that condition I made a desperate attempt to tackle a poem. Most youths do that also! The first two lines ran thus:—

“Close by the shores of Hudson’s Bay,  
Where Arctic winters—stern and grey—”

I must have gloated long over this couplet, for it was indelibly stamped upon my memory, and is as fresh to-day as when the lines were penned. This my first literary effort was carried to somewhere about the middle of the first canto. It stuck there—I am thankful to say—and, like the smoking, never went further.

Rupert's Land, at that time, was little known and very seldom visited by outsiders. During several years I wandered to and fro in it, meeting with a few savages, fewer white men—servants of the Company—and becoming acquainted with modes of life and thought in what has been aptly styled “The Great Lone Land.” Hearing so seldom from or of the outside world, things pertaining to it grew dim and shadowy, and began to lose interest. In these circumstances, if it had not been that I knew full well my mother's soul was ready to receive any amount of out-pourings of which I was capable, I should have almost forgotten how to use the pen.

It was in circumstances such as I have described that I began my first book, but it was not a story-book, and I had no idea that it would ever become a printed book at all. It was merely a free-and-easy record of personal adventure and every-day life, written, like all else that I penned, solely for the uncritical eye of that long-suffering and too indulgent mother!

I had reached the advanced age of twenty-two at the time, and had been sent to take charge of an outpost, on the uninhabited northern shores of the gulf of Saint Lawrence, named Seven Islands. It was a dreary, desolate, little-known spot, at that time. The gulf, just opposite the establishment, was about fifty miles broad. The ships which passed up and down it were invisible, not only on account of distance, but because of seven islands at the mouth of the bay coming between them and the outpost. My next neighbour, in command of a similar post up the gulf, was, if I remember rightly, about seventy miles distant. The nearest house down the gulf was about eighty miles off, and behind us lay the virgin forests, with swamps, lakes, prairies, and mountains, stretching away without break right across the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

The outpost—which, in virtue of a ship's carronade and a flagstaff, was occasionally styled a “fort”—consisted of four wooden buildings. One of these—the largest, with a verandah—was the Residency. There was an offshoot in rear which served as a kitchen. The other houses were a store for goods wherewith to carry on trade with the Indians, a stable, and a workshop. The whole population of the establishment—indeed of the surrounding district—consisted of myself and one man—also a horse! The horse occupied the stable, I dwelt in the Residency, the rest of the population lived in the kitchen.

There were, indeed, other five men belonging to the establishment, but these did not affect its desolation, for they were away netting salmon at a river about twenty miles distant at the time I write of.

My “Friday”—who was a French-Canadian—being cook, as well as man-of-all-work, found a little occupation in attending to the duties of his office, but the unfortunate Governor had nothing whatever to do except await the arrival of Indians, who were not due at that time. The horse was a bad one, without a saddle, and in possession of a pronounced backbone. My “Friday” was not sociable. I had no books, no newspapers, no magazines or literature of any kind, no game to shoot, no boat wherewith to prosecute fishing in the bay, and no prospect of seeing any one to speak to for weeks, if not months, to come. But I had pen and ink, and, by great good fortune, was in possession of a blank paper book fully an inch thick.

When, two or three years after, a printer-cousin, seeing the manuscript, offered to print it, and the well-known Blackwood, of Edinburgh, seeing the book, offered to publish it—and did publish it—my ambition was still so absolutely asleep that I did not again put pen to paper in *that* way for eight years thereafter, although I might have been encouraged thereto by the fact that this first book—named *Hudson's Bay*—besides being a commercial success, received favourable notice from the press.

It was not until the year 1854 that my literary path was opened up. At that time I was a partner in the late publishing firm of Thomas Constable and Company of Edinburgh. Happening one day to meet with the late William Nelson, publisher, I was asked by him how I should like the idea of taking to literature as a profession. My answer I forget. It must have been vague, for I had never thought of the subject at all.

“Well,” said he, “what would you think of trying to write a story?”

Somewhat amused, I replied that I did not know what to think, but I would try if he wished me to do so.

“Do so,” said he, “and go to work at once,”—or words to that effect.

I went to work at once, and wrote my first story, or work of fiction. It was published in 1855 under the name of *Snowflakes and Sunbeams; or, The Young Fur-traders*. Afterwards the first part of the title was dropped, and the book is now known as *The Young Fur-traders*. From that day to this I have lived by making story-books for young folk.

From what I have said it will be seen that I have never aimed at the achieving of this position, and I hope that it is not presumptuous in me to think—and to derive much comfort from the thought—that God led me into the particular path along which I have walked for so many years.

The scene of my first story was naturally laid in those backwoods with which I was familiar, and the story itself was founded on the adventures and experiences of my companions and myself. When a second book was required of me, I stuck to the same regions, but changed the locality. While casting about in my mind for a suitable subject, I happened to meet with an old, retired “Nor’wester” who had spent an adventurous life in Rupert’s Land. Among other duties he had been sent to establish an outpost of the Hudson’s Bay Company at Ungava Bay, one of the most dreary parts of a desolate region. On hearing what I wanted, he sat down and wrote a long narrative of his proceedings there, which he placed at my disposal, and thus furnished me with the foundation of *Ungava, a tale of Eskimo-Land*.

But now I had reached the end of my tether, and when a third story was wanted I was compelled to seek new fields of adventure in the books of travellers. Regarding the Southern seas as the most romantic part of the world—after the backwoods!—I mentally and spiritually plunged into those warm waters, and the dive resulted in *The Coral Island*.

It now began to be borne in upon me that there was something not quite satisfactory in describing, expatiating on, and energising in, regions which one has never seen. For one thing, it was needful to be always carefully on the watch to avoid falling into mistakes geographical, topographical, natural-historical, and otherwise.

For instance, despite the utmost care of which I was capable, while studying up for *The Coral Island*, I fell into a blunder through ignorance in regard to a familiar fruit. I was under the impression that cocoa-nuts grew on their trees in the same form as that in which they are usually presented to us in grocers’ windows—namely, about the size of a large fist with three spots, suggestive of a monkey’s face, at one end. Learning from trustworthy books that at a certain stage of development the nut contains a delicious beverage like lemonade, I sent one of my heroes up a tree for a nut, through the shell of which he bored a hole with a penknife and drank the “lemonade”! It was not till long after the story was published that my own brother—who had voyaged in Southern seas—wrote to draw my attention to the fact that the cocoa-nut is nearly as large as a man’s head, and its outer husk over an inch thick, so that no ordinary penknife could bore to its interior! Of course I should have known this, and, perhaps, should be ashamed of my ignorance—but, somehow, I’m not!

I admit that this was a slip, but such, and other slips, hardly justify the remark that some people have not hesitated to make, namely, that I have a tendency to draw the long bow. I feel almost sensitive on this point, for I have always laboured to be true to fact, and to nature, even in my wildest flights of fancy.



This reminds me of the remark made to myself once by a lady in reference to this same *Coral Island*. “There is one thing, Mr Ballantyne,” she said, “which I really find it hard to believe. You make one of your three boys dive into a clear pool, go to the bottom, and then, turning on his back, look up and wink and laugh at the other two.”

“No, no, Peterkin did not ‘*laugh*,’” said I remonstratively.

“Well, then, you make him smile.”

“Ah, that is true, but there is a vast difference between laughing and smiling under water. But is it not singular that you should doubt the only incident in the story which I personally verified? I happened to be in lodgings at the seaside while writing that story, and, after penning the passage you refer to, I went down to the shore, pulled off my clothes, dived to the bottom, turned on my back, and, looking up, I smiled and winked.”

The lady laughed, but I have never been quite sure, from the tone of that laugh, whether it was a laugh of conviction or of unbelief. It is not improbable that my fair friend’s mental constitution may have been somewhat similar to that of the old woman who declined to believe her sailor-grandson when he told her he had seen flying-fish, but at once recognised his veracity when he said he had seen the remains of Pharaoh’s chariot-wheels on the shores of the Red Sea.

Recognising, then, the difficulties of my position, I formed the resolution always to visit—when possible—the scenes in which my stories were laid, converse with the people who, under modification, were to form the *dramatis personae* of the tales, and, generally, to obtain information in each case, as far as lay in my power, from the fountain-head.

Thus, when about to begin *The Lifeboat*, I went to Ramsgate, and, for some time, was hand and glove with Jarman, the heroic coxswain of the Ramsgate boat, a lion-like as well as lion-hearted man, who rescued hundreds of lives from the fatal Goodwin Sands during his career. In like manner, when getting up information for *The Lighthouse*, I obtained permission from the Commissioners of Northern Lights to visit the Bell Rock Lighthouse, where I hobnobbed with the three keepers of that celebrated pillar-in-the-sea for three weeks, and read Stevenson’s graphic account of the building of the structure in the library, or visitor’s room, just under the lantern. I was absolutely a prisoner there during those three weeks, for boats seldom visited the rock, and it need scarcely be said that ships kept well out of our way. By good fortune there came on a pretty stiff gale at the time, and Stevenson’s thrilling narrative was read to the tune of whistling winds and roaring seas, many of which sent the spray right up to the lantern and caused the building, more than once, to quiver to its foundation.

In order to do justice to *Fighting the Flames* I careered through the streets of London on fire-engines, clad in a pea-jacket and a black leather helmet of the Salvage Corps;—this, to enable me to pass the cordon of police without question—though not without recognition, as was made apparent to me on one occasion at a fire by a fireman whispering confidentially, “I know what *you* are, sir, you’re a hamitoor!”

“Right you are,” said I, and moved away in order to change the subject.

It was a glorious experience, by the way, this galloping on fire-engines through the crowded streets. It had in it much of the excitement of the chase—possibly that of war—with the noble end in view of saving, instead of destroying, life! Such tearing along at headlong speed; such wild roaring of the firemen to clear the way; such frantic dashing aside of cabs, carts, ’buses, and pedestrians; such reckless courage on the part of the men, and volcanic spoutings on the part of the fires! But I must not linger. The memory of it is too enticing. *Deep Down* took me to Cornwall, where, over two hundred fathoms beneath the green turf, and more than half-a-mile out under the bed of the sea, I saw the sturdy miners at work winning copper and tin from the solid rock, and acquired some knowledge of their life, sufferings, and toils.

In the land of the Vikings I shot ptarmigan, caught salmon, and gathered material for *Erling the Bold*. A winter in Algiers made me familiar with the *Pirate City*. I enjoyed a fortnight with the hearty inhabitants of the Gull Lightship off the Goodwin Sands, from which resulted *The Floating*

*Light*; and went to the Cape of Good Hope, and up into the interior of the Colony, to spy out the land and hold intercourse with *The Settler and the Savage*—although I am bound to confess that, with regard to the latter, I talked to him only with mine eyes. I also went afloat for a short time with the fishermen of the North Sea, in order to be able to do justice to *The Young Trawler*.

To arrive still closer at the truth, and to avoid errors, I have always endeavoured to submit my proof-sheets, when possible, to experts and men who knew the subject well. Thus, Captain Shaw, late Chief of the London Fire Brigade, kindly read the proofs of *Fighting the Flames*, and prevented my getting off the rails in matters of detail, and Sir Arthur Blackwood, financial secretary to the General Post Office, obligingly did me the same favour in regard to *Post Haste*.

In conclusion, there are some things that I shrink from flaunting in the eyes of the public. Personal religion is one of these. Nevertheless, there are a few words which I feel constrained to write before closing this chapter.

During all the six years that I spent in Rupert's Land I was "without God." He was around me and within me, guarding me, bestowing upon me the physical and mental health by which alone I could fully enjoy a life in the wilderness, and furnishing me with much of the material that was to serve as my stock-in-trade during my subsequent career; yet—I confess it with shame—I did not recognise or think of, or care for, Him. It was not until after I had returned home that He opened my eyes to see myself a lost soul, and Jesus Christ—"God with us"—an all-sufficient Redeemer, able and willing to save me from sin, as He is to save all sinners—even the chief.

More than this I will not say. Less I could not say, without being unfaithful to my Creator.

## Chapter Two

### Life in the Bell Rock Lighthouse

One of my most interesting experiences in hunting up materials for books was at the Bell Rock Lighthouse; interesting because of the novelty of the situation, the pleasant intercourse with the keepers, and the grandeur of the subjects brought under my observation.

The lighthouses of this kingdom present, in their construction, a remarkable evidence of the capacity of man to overcome almost insurmountable difficulties, and his marvellous power of adapting means to ends. They also stand forth as a grand army of sentinels, who, with unobtrusive regularity, open their brilliant eyes on the great deep, night after night—from year to year—from age to age, and gaze—Argus-like—all around our shores, to guard our shipping from the dangers of the sea, perhaps I should rather say from the dangers of the coast, for it must be well-known to most people that the sailor regards “blue water” as his safe and native home, and that it is only when he enters the green and shallow waters of the coast that a measure of anxiety overclouds his free-and-easy spirit.

It is when he draws near to port that the chief dangers of his career surround him, and it is then that the lighthouse is watched for anxiously, and hailed with satisfaction.

These observations scarce need confirmatory proof. Of all the vessels, great and small, that annually seek and leave our ports, a large proportion meet their doom, and, despite all our lighthouses, beacons, and buoys, lay their timbers and cargoes in fragments, on our shores. This is a significant fact, for if those lost ships be—as they are—a mere fraction of our commerce, how great must be the fleet, how vast the wealth, that our lighthouses guide safely into port every year? If all our coast-lights were to be extinguished for only a single night, the loss of property and life would be terrible beyond conception. But such an event can never happen, for our coast-lights arise each evening at sunset with the regularity of the sun himself. Like the stars, they burst out when darkness begins to brood upon land and sea like them, too, their action and aspect are varied. Some, at great heights, in exposed places, blaze bright and steady like stars of the first magnitude. Others, in the form of revolving lights, twinkle like the lesser stars—now veiling, now flashing forth their beams.

One set of lights shine ruby-red like Mars; another set are white, like Venus; while those on our pier-heads and at our harbour mouths are green; and, in one or two instances, if not more, they shine, (by means of reflecting prisms), with borrowed light like the moon; but all—whether revolving or fixed, large or small, red or white or green—beam forth, like good angels, offering welcome and guidance to the mariner approaching from beyond seas; with God-like impartiality shedding their radiance on friend and foe, and encircling—as with a chaplet of living diamonds, rubies, and emeralds—our highly favoured little islands of the sea.

Lighthouses may be divided into *two* classes, namely, those which stand on cliffs, and elsewhere, somewhat above the influence of the waves, and those built on outlying rocks which are barely visible at high tide, or invisible altogether except at low-water. The North and South Foreland lights in Kent, the Girdleness in Aberdeenshire, and Inchkeith in the Forth, are examples of the former. The Eddystone, Bell Rock, and Skerryvore, are well-known examples of the latter, also the Wolf Rock off the Land’s End.

In one of the latter—namely the Bell Rock—I obtained permission, a good many years ago, from the Commissioners of Northern Lights, to spend a fortnight for literary purposes—to be imprisoned, in fact, for that period.

This lighthouse combines within itself more or less of the elements of all lighthouses. The principles on which it was built are much the same with those of Skerryvore. It is founded on a tidal rock, is exposed to the full “fetch” and fury of an open sea, and it has stood for the greater part of a

century exposed to inconceivable and constantly recurring violence of wind and wave—not, indeed, unshaken, but altogether undamaged.

The Bell Rock lies on the east of Scotland, off the mouths of the Forth and Tay, 12 miles from the Forfarshire coast, which is the nearest land. Its foundation is always under water except for an hour or two at low-tide. At high tides there are about 12 or 16 feet of water above the highest ledge of the Bell Rock, which consists of a series of sandstone ridges. These, at ordinary low-tides, are uncovered to the extent of between 100 and 200 yards. At neap tides the rock shows only a few black teeth with sea-weed gums above the surface.

There is a boat which attends upon this lighthouse. On the occasion of my visit I left Arbroath in it one morning before daybreak and reached the Rock about dawn. We cast anchor on arriving—not being able to land, for as yet there *was* no land! The lighthouse rose out of the sea like a bulrush out of a pond! No foundation rock was visible, and the water played about the tower in a fashion that would have knocked our boat to pieces had we ventured to approach the entrance-door.

In a short time the crest of the rock began to show above the foam. There was little or no wind, but the ordinary swell of the calm ocean rolled in upon these rocks, and burst upon them in such a way that the tower seemed to rise out of a caldron of boiling milk. At last we saw the three keepers moving amid the surges. They walked on an iron platform, which, being light and open, and only a few feet above the waves, was nearly invisible.

When the tide was near its lowest ebb, so that there was a piece of smooth water under the lee of the rock, we hoisted out our little “twin” boat. This was a curious contrivance, being simply a small boat cut across amidships, so as to form two parts which fitted into each other like saucers, and were thus rendered small enough to be easily carried in the larger boat. When about to be used, the twins are put into the water and their sterns brought together and screwed tight. Thus one little boat, sharp at each end, is formed.

Embarking in this we rowed between tangle-covered ridges up to the wrought-iron landing-place. The keepers looked surprised as we drew near. It was evident that visitors were not “common objects of the shore” out there!

There were three keepers. One, the chief, was very tall, dark, and thin; of grave temperament and sedate mien. Another was a florid, hearty young fellow, full of fire and energy. The third was a stout, short, thick-set man, with placidity and good-humour enthroned on his fat countenance. He was a first-rate man. I shall call him Stout; his comrade, Young. The chief may appropriately be named Long.

There was no time for more than a hurried introduction at first, for the fresh water-casks and fortnightly allowance of fresh provisions had to be hoisted into the tower, the empty casks got out, and the boat reloaded and despatched, before the tide—already rising—should transform the little harbour into a wild whirlpool. In little more than an hour the boat was gone, and I proceeded to make myself at home with my new friends.

Probably every one knows that the Bell Rock is the Inch Cape Rock, immortalised by Southey in his poem of “Sir Ralph the Rover,” in which he tells how that, in the olden time—

“The Abbot of Aberbrothock  
Had placed a bell on the Inch Cape Rock.  
On a buoy in the storm it floated and swung  
And over the waves its warning rung.”

A pirate named “Sir Ralph the Rover” came there one day and cut away the bell in a wicked frolic. Long years after, returning with a rich cargo of ill-gotten wealth, retributive justice overtook Sir Ralph, caused his vessel to strike on the Inch Cape Rock—for want of the warning bell which he had cut away—and sent him and his belongings to the bottom.

Whether this legend be true or not, there is no doubt that the Rock had been so dangerous to shipping, that seamen often avoided the firths of Forth and Tay in bad weather for fear of it, and many captains, in their anxiety to keep clear of it, ran their vessels in the neighbouring coasts and perished.

Another proof that numerous wrecks took place there lay in the fact that the fishermen were wont to visit the rock after every gale, for the purpose of gathering wreckage. It was resolved, therefore, about the beginning of this century, to erect a lighthouse on the Inchcape Rock, and to Mr Robert Stevenson, Engineer at that time to the Board of Northern Lights, was assigned the task of building it. He began the work in August 1807, and finished it in February 1811.

I began my sojourn in the Bell Rock Lighthouse with breakfast. On ascending to the kitchen I found Stout preparing it. Mr Long, the chief, offered, with delicate hospitality, to carry my meals up to the library, so that I might feast in dignified solitude, but I declined the honour, preferring to fraternise with the men in the kitchen. Breakfast over, they showed me through the tower—pointed out and explained everything—especially the lantern and the library—in which last I afterwards read Mr Stevenson’s interesting volume on the building of the Bell Rock; a book which has been most appropriately styled the *Robinson Crusoe* of Engineering literature.

On returning to the entrance-door, I found that there was now *no land*! The tide had risen. The lighthouse was a mere pillar in the sea. “Water, water everywhere”—nothing else visible save the distant coast of Forfarshire like a faint blue line on the horizon. But in the evening the tide again fell, and, the moment the rock was uncovered, we descended. Then Mr Long showed me the various points of interest about the rock, and Stout volunteered anecdotes connected with these, and Young corroborated and expounded everything with intense enthusiasm. Evidently Young rejoiced in the rare opportunity my visit afforded him of breaking the monotony of life on the Bell Rock. He was like a caged bird, and on one occasion expressed his sentiments very forcibly by saying to me, “Oh, sir, I sometimes wish I could jump up and never come down!” As for Long and Stout, they had got used to lighthouses and monotony. The placid countenance of each was a sure index of the profound tranquillity within!

Small though it was, the rock was a very world in itself to the residents—crowded with “ports,” and “wharves” and “ledges,” which had reference to the building-time. There were “Sir Ralph the Rover’s ledge,” and “the Abbot’s ledge,” and “the Engineer’s ledge,” and “Cunningham’s ledge,” and “the Smith’s ledge,” etcetera. Then there were “Port Stevenson,” and “Port Boyle,” and “Port Hamilton,” and many others—each port being a mere hole capable of holding a boat or two. Besides which there were “tracks,” leading to these ports—such as “Wilson’s track,” and “Macurich’s track,” and “Gloag’s track.” And then there were “Hope’s Wharf,” and “Rae’s Wharf,” and “Watt’s Reach,” and “Scoresby Point,” while, among numerous outlying groups of rocklets, there were the “Royal Burghs,” the “Crown Lawyers,” and the “Maritime Sheriffs”—each and all teeming with interesting associations to those who know the Story of the Rock,—*all* comprehended within an area of a few hundred yards—the whole affair being wiped entirely and regularly off the face of nature by every rising tide.

Close beside Rae’s Wharf, on which we stood, Mr Long showed me the holes in which had been fixed the ends of the great beams of the beacon. The beacon was a point of considerable interest to me. If you had seen the rock as I saw it, reader, in a storm, with the water boiling all over and round it for more than a mile, like seething milk—and if you had reflected that the *first* beacon built there was carried away in a gale, you would have entertained very exalted ideas of the courage of the men who built the Bell Rock lighthouse.

While the tower was building, Mr Stevenson and his men were exposed for many days and nights in this beacon—this erection of timber-beams, with a mere pigeon-house on the top of it for a dwelling. Before the beacon was built, the men lived in the *Pharos* floating light; a vessel which was moored not far from the Rock. Every day—weather permitting—they rowed to the rock, landed, and worked for *one, two, or three* hours, when they were drowned out, so to speak, and obliged to return to

their floating home. Sometimes the landing was easy. More frequently it was difficult. Occasionally it was impossible. When a landing was accomplished, they used to set to work without delay. There was no time to lose. Some bored holes in the rock for hold-fasts; others, with pick and chisel, cut out the foundation-pit. Then the courses began to be laid. On each occasion of landing the smith had to set up his bellows, light his fire, and work in hot haste; because his whole shop, except the anvil, had to be taken down, and carried away every tide! Frequently, in fine weather, this enterprising son of Vulcan might have been seen toiling with his head enveloped in volumes of smoke and sparks, and his feet in the water, which gradually rose to his ankles and knees until, with a sudden “hiss,” it extinguished his fire and ended his labours for the day. Then he was forced to pack up his bellows and tools, and decamp with the rest of the men.

Sometimes they wrought in calm, sometimes in storm; always, more or less, in water. Three hours was considered a fair day’s work. When they had the good fortune to work “double tides” in a day, they made five, or five-and-a-half, hours; but this was of rare occurrence.

“You see that mark there, sir, on Smith’s Ledge?” said Mr Long to me one day, “that was the place where the forge stood; and the ledge beyond, with the old bit of iron on it, is the ‘*Last Hope*,’ where Mr Stevenson and his men were so nearly lost.” Then he went on to tell me the following incident, as illustrating one of the many narrow escapes made by the builders.

One day, soon after the men had commenced work, it began to blow hard, and the crew of the boat belonging to the attending vessel, named the “Smeaton,” fearing that her moorings might be insufficient, went off to examine them. This was wrong. The workmen on the rock were sufficiently numerous to completely fill three boats. For one of these to leave the rock was to run a great risk, as the event proved. Almost as soon as they reached the “Smeaton,” her cables parted and she went adrift, carrying the boat with her away to leeward, and although sail was instantly made, they found it impossible to regain the rock against wind and tide. Mr Stevenson observed this with the deepest anxiety, but the men, (busy as bees about the rock), were not aware of it at first.

The situation was terrible. There were thirty-two men left on a rock which would in a short time be overflowed to a depth of twelve or fifteen feet by a stormy sea, and only two boats in which to remove them. These two boats, if loaded to the gunwales, could have held only a few more than the half of them.

While the sound of the numerous hammers and the ring of the anvil were heard, the situation did not appear so hopeless; but soon the men at the lowest part of the foundation were driven from work by the rising tide; then the forge-fire was extinguished, and the men generally began to make towards their respective boats for their jackets and dry socks. When it was discovered that one of the three boats was gone not a word was uttered, but the men looked at each other in evident perplexity. They seemed to realise their position at once.

In a few minutes some of that band must inevitably be left to perish, for the absent boat and vessel were seen drifting farther and farther away to leeward. Mr Stevenson knew that in such a case, where life and death were in the balance, a desperate struggle among the men for precedence would be certain. Indeed he afterwards learned that the pickmen had resolved to stick by their boat against all hazards. While they were thus gazing in silence at each other and at the distant vessel, their enterprising leader had been casting about in his mind as to the best method of at least attempting the deliverance of his men, and he finally turned round to propose, as a forlorn hope, that all hands should strip off their upper clothing, that every unnecessary article should be removed from the boats, that a specified number should get into each, and that the remainder should hang on by the gunwales, and thus be dragged through the water while they were rowed cautiously towards the “Smeaton”! But when he tried to speak his mouth was so parched that his tongue refused utterance! and then he discovered, (as he says himself), “that saliva is as necessary to speech as the tongue itself!” Turning to a pool, he moistened his lips with sea-water, and found immediate relief. He was again about to speak when some one shouted “a boat! a boat!” and, sure enough, a large boat was seen through the

haze making towards the rock. This timely visitor was James Spink, the Bell Rock pilot, who had come off express from Arbroath with letters. His visit was altogether an unusual one, and his truly providential appearance unquestionably prevented loss of life on that critical occasion. This is one specimen—selected from innumerable instances of danger and risk—which may give one some idea of what is encountered by those who build such lighthouses as the Bell Rock.

Our rambles on the rock were necessarily of short duration. We used to stand in the doorway watching the retreating waves, and, the moment the rails were uncovered, we hurried down the ladder—all of us bent on getting as much exercise as possible on land! We marched in single file, up and down the narrow rails, until the rock was uncovered—then we rambled over the slippery ledges.

Sometimes we had one hour—sometimes two, or even three hours, according to the state of the tides. Then the returning waves drove us gradually from the rocks to the rails, from the rails to the ladder—and so back into the lighthouse.

Among other things that impressed me deeply was the grandeur of the waves at the Bell Rock.

One enjoys an opportunity there of studying the form and colour of ocean billows which cannot be obtained on any ordinary shore, because, the water being deep alongside the Rock, these waves come up to it in all their unbroken magnificence. I tried to paint them, but found it difficult, owing to the fact that, like refractory children, they would not stand still to be painted! It was not only in stormy weather that these waves arose. I have seen them during a dead calm, when the sea was like undulating glass. No doubt the cause of them was a gale in some distant part of the sea—inducing a heavy ground-swell; but, be the cause what it might, these majestic rollers often came in without a breath of air to help them, and with the sun glittering on their light-green crystal sides. Their advance seemed slow and solemn amid the deep silence, which made them all the more impressive. The rise of each wave was so gradual that you could not tell where it began in the distant sea. As it drew near, it took definite form and swelled upwards, and at last came on like a wall of glass—probably ten or twelve feet high—so high, at all events, that I felt as if looking up at it from my position on the low rock. When close at hand its green edge lipped over and became fringed with white—then it bent forward with a profound obeisance to the Bell Rock and broke the silence with a grand reverberating roar, as it fell in a ruin of foam and rushed up to my very feet!

When those waves began to paint the canvas with their own spray and change the oil into a water-colour, I was constrained to retire to the lighthouse, where Mr Long, (a deeply interested student), watched me as I continued my studies from the doorway.

Mr Long had an inquiring mind and closely observed all that went on around him. Among other things, he introduced me to a friend of his, a species of fish which he called a “*Paddle*.”

Stout called it a sucker, in virtue of an arrangement on its breast whereby it could fasten itself to a rock and hold on. This fish dwelt in Port Hamilton, near Sir Ralph the Rover’s ledge, and could be visited at low-tide. He happened to be engaged at that time in watching his wife’s spawn, and could not be induced to let go his hold of the rock on any account! Mr Long pulled at him pretty forcibly once or twice, but with no effect, and the fish did not seem in the least alarmed! While Mr Paddle did duty in the nursery, Mrs Paddle roamed the sea at large. Apparently women’s rights have made some progress in that quarter! It was supposed by Stout that she took the night-watches. Mr Young inclined to the opinion that she attended to the commissariat—was out marketing in fact, and brought food to her husband. All that I can say on the matter is, that I visited the family frequently, and always saw the father “on duty,” but only once found Mrs Paddle at home! The tameness of this kind of fish is very remarkable. One day I saw a large one in a pool which actually allowed me to put my hand under him and lift him gently out! Suddenly it occurred to me that I might paint him! The palette chanced to be at hand, so I began at once. In about two minutes the paddle gave a flop of discomfort as he lay on the rock; I therefore put him into a small pool for a minute or so to let him, breathe, then took him out and had a second sitting, after which he had another rest and a little refreshment in the pool. Thus in about ten minutes, I had his portrait, and put him back into his native element.

I am inclined to think that this is the only fish in the sea that has had his portrait taken and returned to tell the tale to his admiring, perhaps unbelieving, friends!

Of course one of the most interesting points in the lighthouse was the lantern. I frequently sat in it at night with the man on duty, who expounded the lighting apparatus to me, or “spun yarns.”

The fifth day of my sojourn on the Bell Rock was marked by an event of great interest,—the arrival of a fishing-boat with letters and newspapers. I had begun by that time to feel some degree of longing to hear something about the outer world, though I had not felt lonely by any means—my companions were too pleasant to admit of that. Our little world contained a large amount of talent! Mr Long had a magnificent bass voice and made good use of it. Then, Young played the violin, (not so badly), and sang tenor—not quite so well; besides which he played the accordion. His instrument, however, was not perfect. One of the bass notes would not sound, and one of the treble notes could not by any means be silenced! Between the two, some damage was done to the harmony; but we were not particular. As to Stout—he could neither sing nor play, but he was a *splendid* listener! and the sight of his good-humoured face, smiling through clouds of tobacco smoke as he sat by the kitchen fire, was of itself sufficient to encourage us.

But Stout could do more than listen and admire. He was cook to the establishment during my visit. The men took this duty by turns—each for a fortnight—and Stout excelled the others. It was he who knew how to extract sweet music from the tea-kettle and the frying-pan! But Stout’s forte was buttered toast! He was quite an adept at the formation of this luxury. If I remember rightly, it was an entire loaf that Stout cut up and toasted each morning for breakfast. He knew nothing of delicate treatment. Every slice was an inch thick at the least! It was quite a study to see him go to work. He never sawed with the knife. Having a powerful hand and arm, one sweep of the blade sufficed for one slice, and he cut up the whole loaf before beginning to toast. Then, he always had the fire well prepared. You never saw alternate stripes of black and white on Stout’s toast; and he laid on the butter as he might have laid tar on the side of a ship, thick and heavy. He never scraped it off one part to put it on another—and he never picked the lumps out of the holes. Truly, Stout was quite a genius in this matter.

The fisherman who brought off our letters could not have landed if the weather had not been fine. Poor fellow! after I left, he lost his boat in consequence of being on too familiar terms with the Bell Rock. He was in the habit of fishing near the rock, and occasionally ran in at low-water to smoke a pipe with the keepers. One morning he stayed too long. The large green billows which had been falling with solemn boom on the outlying rocks began to lip over into the pool where his boat lay—Port Stevenson. Embarking in haste with his comrade he pushed off. Just then there came a tremendous wave, the crest of which toppled over Smith’s Ledge, fell into the boat, and sank it like a stone. The men were saved by the keepers, but their boat was totally destroyed. They never saw a fragment of it again. What a commentary this was on the innumerable wrecks that have taken place on the Inch Cape Rock in days gone by!

Sometimes, on a dark stormy night, I used to try to realise something of this. Turning my back on the lighthouse I tried to forget it, and imagine what must have been the feelings of those who had actually stood there and been driven inch by inch to the higher ledges, with the certain knowledge that their doom was fixed, and without the comfort and assurance that, behind them, stood a strong tower of refuge from the storm!

I was fortunate, during my stay, in having experience of every variety of weather—from a dead calm to a regular gale. It was towards the end of my visit that the gale came on, and it lasted two days. No language can convey an adequate idea of the sublimity of the scene and the sense of power in the seething waves that waged furious war over the Rock during the height of that gale. The spray rose above the kitchen windows, (70 feet on the tower), in such solid masses as to darken the room in passing, and twice during the storm we were struck by waves with such force as to shake the tower to its foundation.



This storm delayed the “Relief boat” a day. Next day, however, it succeeded in getting alongside—and at length, after a most agreeable and interesting sojourn of two weeks, I parted from the hospitable keepers with sincere regret and bade adieu to a lighthouse which is not only a monument of engineering skill, but a source of safety to the shipping, and of confidence to the mariners frequenting these waters.

In former days men shunned the dreaded neighbourhood of the Inch Cape Rock with anxious care. Now, they look out for that:—

“Ruddy gem of changeful light  
Bound on the dusky brow of night,—”

And *make for it* with perfect safety. In time past human lives, and noble ships, and costly merchandise were lost on the Bell Rock every year. Now, disaster to shipping there is not even dreamed of; and one of the most notable proofs of the value of the lighthouse, (and, indirectly, of all other lighthouses), lies in the fact, that not a single wreck has occurred on the Bell Rock since that auspicious evening in 1811 when the sturdy pillar opened its eyes for the first time, and threw its bright beams far and wide over the North Sea.

## Chapter Three

### Nights with the Fire Brigade

There are few lives, we should think, more trying or more full of curious adventure and thrilling incident than that of a London fireman.

He must always be on the alert. No hour of the day or night can he ever count on as being his own, unless on those occasions when he obtains leave of absence, which I suppose are not frequent. If he does not absolutely sleep in his clothes, he sleeps beside them—arranged in such a way that he can jump into them at a moment's notice.

When the summons comes there must be no preliminary yawning; no soft transition from the land of dreams to the world of reality. He jumps into his boots which stand invitingly ready, pulls on his trousers, buttons his braces while descending to the street, and must be brass-helmeted on the engine and away like a fiery dragon-gone-mad within three minutes of "the call," or thereabouts, if he is to escape a fine.

Moreover, the London fireman must be prepared to face death at any moment. When the call comes he never knows whether he is turning out to something not much more serious than "a chimney," or to one of those devastating conflagrations on the river-side in which many thousand pounds worth of property are swept away, and his life may go along with them. Far more frequently than the soldier or sailor is he liable to be ordered on a duty which shall turn out to be a forlorn hope, and not less pluckily does he obey.

There is no respite for him. The field which the London Brigade covers is so vast that the liability to be sent into action is continuous—chiefly, of course, at night. At one moment he may be calmly polishing up the "brasses" of his engine, or skylarking with his comrades, or sedately reading a book, or snoozing in bed, and the next he may be battling fiercely with the flames. Unlike the lifeboat heroes, who may sleep when the world of waters is calm, he must be ever on the watch; for his enemy is a lurking foe—like the Red Indian who pounces on you when you least expect him, and does not utter his warwhoop until he deems his victory secure. The little spark smoulders while the fireman on guard, booted and belted, keeps watch at his station. It creeps while he waits, and not until its energies have gained considerable force does it burst forth with a grand roar and bid him fierce defiance.

Even when conquered in one quarter it often leaps up in another, so that the fireman sometimes returns from the field twice or thrice in the same night to find that the enemy is in force elsewhere and that the fight must be resumed.

In the spring of 1867 I went to London to gather material for my book *Fighting the Flames*, and was kindly permitted by Captain Shaw—then Chief of the Fire Brigade—to spend a couple of weeks at one of the principal west-end stations, and accompany the men to fires.

My first experience was somewhat stirring.

My plan was to go to the station late in the evening and remain up all night with the men on guard waiting for fires.

One day, in the afternoon, when it was growing dusk, and before I had made my first visit to the station, a broad-shouldered jovial-looking fellow in blue coat, belted, and with a sailor's cap, called on me and asked if I should like to "see a 'ouse as 'ad bin blowed up with gas."

Of course I was only too glad to follow him. He conducted me to an elegant mansion in Bayswater, and chatted pleasantly as we went along in somewhat nautical tones, for he had been a man-of-war's man. His name was Flaxmore.

I may remark here that the men of the London brigade were, and still are, I believe, chosen from among seamen.

“You see, sir,” said Flaxmore, in explanation of this fact, “sailors are found to be most suitable for the brigade because they’re accustomed to strict discipline,—to turn out suddenly at all hours, in all weathers, and to climbing in dangerous circumstances.”

Arrived at the mansion, we found that the outside looked all right except that most of the windows were broken. The interior, however, presented a sad and curious appearance. The house had been recently done up in the most expensive style, and its gilded cornices, painted pilasters and other ornaments, with the lath and plaster of walls and ceilings had been blown into the rooms in dire confusion.

“Bin a pretty considerable smash here, sir,” said Flaxmore, with a genial smile on his broad countenance. I admitted the fact, and asked how it happened.

“Well, sir, you see,” said he, “there was an ’orrid smell of gas in the ’ouse, an’ the missus she sent for a gas man to find out where it was, and, *would you believe it*, sir, they went to look for it *with a candle*! Sure enough they found it too, in a small cupboard. The gas had been escapin’, it had, but couldn’t git out o’ that there cupboard, ’cause the door was a tight fit, so it had made its way all over the ’ouse between the lath and plaster and the walls. As soon as ever it caught light, sir, it blowed the whole place into smash—as you see. It blowed the gas man flat on his back; (an’ sarved him right!) it blowed the missus through the doorway, an’ it blowed the cook—(as was on the landin’ outside)—right down the kitchen stairs, it did;—but there was none of ’em much hurt, sir, they wasn’t, beyond a bruise or two!”

After examining this house, Flaxmore proposed that I should go and see his engine. He was proud of his engine, evidently, and spoke of it as a man might speak of his wife!

On our way to the station the driver of a passing ’bus called out—

“Fireman, there’s a fire in New Bond Street.”

One word Flaxmore exchanged with the driver, and then, turning to me, said, “Come on, sir, I’ll give you a ride!”

Off we went at a run, and burst into the station. “Get her out, Jim,” cried Flaxmore, (*her* being the engine). Jim, the man on duty, put on his helmet without saying a word, and hauled out the fire-engine, while a comrade ran for the horses, and another called up the men. In five minutes more I was seated beside seven men in blue uniforms and brass helmets, dashing through the streets of London at full gallop!

Now, those who have never seen a London fire-engine go to a fire have no conception of what it is—much less have they any conception of what it is to ride on the engine! To those accustomed to it, no doubt, it may be tame enough—I cannot tell; but to those who mount an engine for the first time and dash through the crowded thoroughfares at a wild tearing gallop; it is probably the most exciting drive conceivable. It beats steeplechasing! It feels like driving to destruction—so desperate and 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, for when it gets the mastery and bursts into flames it flashes to its work, and completes it quickly. At such times one moment wasted may involve the loss of thousands of pounds, ay, and of human lives also. 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; but, when occasion requires it, 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 and swept into the Edgeware Road at full speed.

Here the noise of our progress began, for the great thoroughfare was crowded with vehicles and pedestrians.

To pass through such a crowd without coming into collision with anything required not only dexterous driving, but rendered it necessary that two of the men on the engine should stand up and shout incessantly as we whirled along, clearing everything out of our way.

The men 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 100 yards or so lay before us; then their voices rose like the roaring of the gale as a stupid or deaf cabman got in our way, or a plethoric 'bus threatened to interrupt our furious career. The cross streets were the points where the chief difficulties met us. There 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 lanterns casting a glare of light before, and the helmets of the stern charioteers flashing back the rays from street-lamps and windows. At the corner of one of the streets the crowd of vehicles was so great that the driver of the engine began to tighten his reins, while Flaxmore and his comrades raised a furious roar. Cabs, 'buses, and pedestrians scattered right and left in a marvellous manner; the driver slackened his reins, cracked his whip, and the horses stretched out again.

"There, it shows a light," observed Flaxmore, as we tore along Oxford Street. At that moment a stupid cabman blocked up the way. There was a terrific shout from all the firemen, at once! but the man did not hear. Our driver attempted both to pull up and to turn aside; the first was impossible, the latter he did so effectively that he not only cleared the cab but made straight at a lamp-post on the other side! A crash seemed inevitable, but Flaxmore, observing the danger, seized the rein next to him and swung the horses round. We flew past, just shaving the lamp-post, and in three minutes more pulled up at a house which was blazing in the upper floors. Three engines were already at work on it. Flaxmore and his men at once entered the burning house, which by that time was nearly gutted. I stood outside looking on, but soon became anxious to know what was doing inside, and attempted to enter. A policeman stopped me, but at that moment Flaxmore came out like a half-drowned rat, his face streaked with brick-dust and charcoal. Seeing what I wanted he led me into the house, and immediately I found myself in a hot shower-bath which did not improve my coat or hat! At the same time I stepped up to the ankles in hot water! Tons of water were being poured on the house by three powerful engines, and this, in passing through so much heated material had become comfortably warm. The first thing I saw on entering was a foaming cataract! This was the staircase, down which the water rushed, breaking over masses of fallen brickwork and débris, with a noise like a goodly Highland burn! Up this we waded, but could get no further than the room above, as the upper stair had fallen in. I was about to descend in order to try to reach the roof by some other way, when a fireman caught me by the collar, exclaiming—"Hold on, sir!" He thought the staircase was about to fall. "Bolt now, sir," he added, releasing me. I bolted, and was out in the street in a moment, where I found that some of the firemen who had first arrived, and were much exhausted, were being served with a glass of brandy. If there were any case in which a teetotaller might be justified in taking spirits, it would be, I think, when exhausted by toiling for hours amid the heat and smoke and danger of a fire—nevertheless I found that several of the firemen there were teetotallers.

There was a shout of laughter at this moment, occasioned by one of the firemen having accidentally turned the *branch* or delivery pipe full on the faces of the crowd and drenched some of them. This was followed by a loud cheer when another fireman was seen to have clambered to the roof whence he could apply the water with better effect. At last their efforts were crowned with success. Before midnight the fire was extinguished, and we drove back to the Paddington Station at a more leisurely pace. Thus ended my first experience of a London fire.

Accidents, as may be easily believed, are of frequent occurrence.

Accidents.

There were between forty to fifty a year. In 1865 they were as follows:—

Cuts and Lacerated Wounds	12
Contusions	15
Fractures	2
Sprains	9
Burns and Scalds	3
Injury to Eyes	5
	46

My friend Flaxmore himself met with an accident not long afterwards. He slipped off the roof of a house and fell on his back from a height of about fifteen feet. Being a heavy man, the fall told severely on him.

For about two weeks I went almost every evening to the Regent Street Station and spent the night with the men, in the hope of accompanying them to fires. The “lobby”—as the watch room of the station was named—was a small one, round the walls of which the brass helmets and hatchets of the men were hung. Here, each night, two men slept on two trestle-beds. They were fully equipped, with the exception of their helmets. Their comrades slept at their own homes, which were within a few yards of the station. The furniture of the “lobby” was scanty—a desk, a bookcase, two chairs, a clock, an alarm-bell, and four telegraphic instruments comprised it all. These last formed part of a network of telegraphs which extended from the central station to nearly all the other stations in London. By means of the telegraph a “call” is given—i.e. a fire is announced to the firemen all over London, if need be, in a very few minutes. Those who are nearest to the scene of conflagration hasten to it at once with their engines, while each outlying or distant station sends forward a man on foot. These men, coming up one by one, relieve those who have first hastened to the fire.

“Calls,” however, are not always sent by telegraph. Sometimes a furious ring comes to the alarm-bell, and a man or a boy rushes in shouting “*fire!*” with all his might. People are generally much excited in such circumstances,—sometimes half mad. In one case a man came with a “call” in such perturbation of mind that he could not tell where the fire was at all for nearly five minutes! On another occasion two men rushed in with a call at the same moment, and both were stutterers. My own opinion is that one stuttered by nature and the other from agitation. Be that as it may, they were both half mad with excitement.

“F-f-f-fire!” roared one.

“F-f-f-fire!” yelled the other.

“Where away?” asked a fireman as he quietly buckled his belt and put on his helmet.

“B-B-Brompton!”—“B-B-Bayswater!” burst from them both at the same moment. Then one cried, “I—I s-s-say Brompton,” and the other shouted, “I—I s-say Bayswater.”

“What street?” asked the fireman.

“W-W-Walton Street,” cried one.

“N—No—P—P—orchester Terrace,” roared the other, and at the word the Walton Street man hit the Porchester Terrace man between the eyes and knocked him down. A regular scuffle ensued, in the midst of which the firemen got out two engines—and, before the stutterers were separated, went off full swing, one to Brompton, the other to Bayswater, and found that, as they had guessed, there were in reality two fires!

One night’s experience in the “lobby” will give a specimen of the fireman’s work. I had spent the greater part of the night there without anything turning up. About three in the morning the two men on duty lay down on their trestle-beds to sleep, and I sat at the desk reading the reports of recent fires. The place was very quiet—the sounds of the great city were hushed—the night was calm, and nothing was heard but the soft breathing of the sleepers and the ticking of the clock as I sat there waiting for a fire. I often looked at the telegraph needles and, (I am half ashamed to say it), longed for them to move and give us “a call.” At last, when I had begun to despair, the sharp little telegraph bell rang. Up I started in some excitement—up started one of the sleepers too, quite as quickly as I did, but without any excitement whatever—he was accustomed to alarms! Reading the telegraph with sleepy eyes he said, with a yawn, “it’s only a stop for a chimbley.” He lay down again to sleep, and I sat down again to read and wait. Soon after the foreman came down-stairs to have a smoke and a chat. Among the many anecdotes which he told me was one which had a little of the horrible in it. He said he was once called to a fire in a cemetery, where workmen had been employed in filling some of the vaults with sawdust and closing them up. They had been smoking down there and had set fire to the sawdust, which set light to the coffins, and when the firemen arrived these were burning fiercely, and the stench and smoke were almost overpowering—nevertheless one of the men ran down the stair of the vaults, but slipped his foot and fell. Next moment he rushed up with a face like a ghost, having fallen, he said, between two coffins! Quickly recovering from his fright he again descended with his comrades, and they soon managed to extinguish the fire.

The foreman went off to bed after relating this pleasant little incident and left me to meditate on it. Presently a sound of distant wheels struck my ear. On they came at a rattling pace. In a few minutes a cab dashed round the corner and drew up sharply at the door, which was severely kicked, while the bell was rung furiously. Up jumped the sleepers again and in rushed a cabman, backed by a policeman, with the usual shout of “fire.” Then followed “question brief and quick reply”—“a fire in Great Portland Street close at hand.”

“Get her out, Bill,” was the order. Bill darted to the engine-shed and knocked up the driver in passing. He got out the horses while the other man ran from house to house of the neighbouring firemen giving a *double* ring to their bells. Before the engine was horsed one and another and another of the men darted into the station, donned his helmet, and buckled on his axe; then they all sprang to their places, the whip cracked, and off we went at full gallop only eight minutes after the alarm-bell rang. We spun through the streets like a rocket with a tail of sparks behind us, for the fire of the engine had been lighted before starting.

On reaching the fire it was found to be only smouldering in the basement of the house, and the men of another engine were swarming through the place searching for the seat of it. I went in with our men, and the first thing I saw was a coffin lying ready for use! The foreman led me down into a vaulted cellar, and here, strange to say, I found myself in the midst of coffins! It seemed like the realisation of the story I had just heard. There were not fewer than thirty of them on the floor and ranged round the walls. Happily, however, they were not tenanted. In fact the fire had occurred in an undertaker’s workshop, and, in looking through the premises, I came upon several coffins laid out ready for immediate use. Two of these impressed me much. They lay side by side. One was of plain black wood—a pauper’s coffin evidently. The other was covered with fine cloth and gilt ornaments, and lined with padded white satin! I was making some moral reflections on the curious difference between the last resting-place of the rich man and the poor, when I was interrupted by the firemen who had discovered the fire and put it out, so we jumped on the engine once more, and galloped

back to the station. Most of the men went off immediately to bed; the engine was housed; the horses were stabled; the men on guard hung up their helmets and lay down again on their trestle-beds; the foreman bade me “good-night,” and I was left once more in a silence that was broken only by the deep breathing of the sleepers and the ticking of the clock—scarcely able to believe that the stirring events of the previous hour were other than a vivid dream.

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