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LIFE IN THE RED BRIGADE:
LONDON FIRE BRIGADE

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R. M. Ballantyne

Life in the Red Brigade: London Fire Brigade

Chapter One

Wet, worn and weary—with water squeaking in his boots, and a mixture of charcoal and water streaking his face to such an extent that, as a comrade asserted, his own mother would not have known him—a stout young man walked smartly one morning through the streets of London towards his own home.

He was tall and good-looking, as well as stout, and, although wet and weary, had a spring in his step which proved beyond all question that he was not worn-out. As the comrade above referred to would have said, “there was plenty of go in him still.” His blue and belted coat, sailor’s cap, and small hatchet, with the brass helmet swinging by its chin strap on his left arm, betokened him a member of “The Red Brigade,”—a London fireman—one of those dare-anything characters who appear to hold their lives remarkably cheap, for they carry these lives in their hands, as the saying goes, night and day; who seem to be able to live in smoke as if it were their native element; who face the flames as if their bodies were made of cast iron; and whose apparent delight in fire is such that one is led to suspect they must be all more or less distantly connected with the family of Salamander.

The young man’s expression of countenance, as far as it could be discerned through the charcoal and water, was hearty, and his name—Dashwood—was in keeping with his profession. The comrade, whose opinion we have already quoted, was wont to say that he ought to change it to Dashwater, that being his chief occupation in life. We need scarcely say that this comrade was rather fond of his joke.

Arrived at a small street, not far from the Regent Circus, young Dashwood entered a fire-station there, and found the comrade above referred to in the act of disposing himself on a narrow tressel-bed, on which there was no bedding save one blanket. The comrade happened to be on duty that night. It was his duty to repose on the tressel-bedstead, booted and belted, ready at a moment’s notice to respond to “calls.” Another fireman lay sleeping at his side, on another tressel-bed, similarly clothed, for there were always two men on duty all night at that station. The guard-room, or, as it was styled, the “lobby,” in which they lay, was a very small room, with a bright fire in the grate, for it was winter; a plain wooden desk near the window; a plain deal table near the door, on which stood four telegraphic instruments; and having the walls ornamented with a row of Wellington boots on one side, and a row of bright brass helmets on the other, each helmet having a small hatchet suspended by a belt below it.

The comrade, who looked very sleepy, glanced at a small clock, whose tick was the only sound that fell upon the ear, and whose hands indicated the hour of half-past two.

On hearing the door open, the comrade, whose name was Bob Clazie, raised himself on one elbow.

“Ah, Joe,—that you?” he said, with a somewhat violent yawn.

“All that’s left of me, anyhow,” replied Joe Dashwood, as he hung up his helmet and axe on his own particular peg. “Bin much doin’, Bob?”

“Not much,” growled Bob; “but they don’t give a poor fellow much chance of a sleep with them telegraphs. Roused me four times already within the last hour—stops for chimbleys.”

“Ha! very inconsiderate of ’em,” said Dashwood, turning towards the door. “It’s time I had a snooze now, so I’ll bid ’ee good night, Bob.”

Just as he spoke, one of the sharp little telegraphic bells rang viciously. He waited to ascertain the result while Clazie rose—quickly but not hurriedly—and went to read the instrument with sleepy eyes.

“Another stop for a chimbley,” he muttered, with a remonstrative growl. By this he meant that the head office in Watling Street had telegraphed that a chimney had gone on fire in some part of London; that it was being looked after, and that he and his comrades were to *stop* where they were and pay no attention to it, even although some one should rush into the office like a maniac shouting that there was a fire in that particular place. This use of the telegraph in thus *stopping* the men of the Brigade from going out in force to trifling fires, is of the greatest service, because it not only prevents them from being harassed, the engines from being horsed, and steam got up needlessly, but it prevents rascals from running from station to station, and getting several shillings, instead of the one shilling which is due to the first intimator of any fire.

Having acknowledged the message, Bob Clazie lay down once more, gave another expostulatory grunt, and drew his blanket over him; while Joe Dashwood went home.

Joe’s home consisted of a small apartment round the corner of the street, within a few seconds’ run of the station. Off the small apartment there was a large closet. The small apartment was Dashwood’s drawing-room, dining-room, and kitchen; the large closet was his bed-room.

Dashwood had a wife, “as tight a little craft, with as pretty a figurehead,” he was wont to say, “as you could find in a day’s walk through London.” That was saying a good deal, but there was some truth in it. When Joe entered, intending to go to bed for the night, he found that Mary had just got up for the day. It was “washing-day,” or something of that sort, with Mary, which accounted for her getting up at about three in the morning.

“Hallo, lass, up already!” exclaimed the strapping fireman as he entered the room, which was a perfect marvel of tidiness, despite washing-day.

“Yes, Joe, there’s plenty to do, an’ little May don’t give me much time to do it,” replied Mary, glancing at a crib where little May, their first-born, lay coiled up in sheets like a rosebud in snow.

Joe, having rubbed the water and charcoal from his face with a huge jack-towel, went to the wash-tub, and imprinted a hearty kiss on Mary’s rosy lips, which she considerably held up for the purpose of being saluted. He was about to do the same to the rosebud, when Mary stopped him with an energetic “Don’t!”

“W’y not, Molly?” asked the obedient man.

“Cause you’ll wake her up.”

Thus put down, Joe seated himself humbly on a sea-chest, and began to pull off his wet boots.

“It’s bin a bad fire, I think,” said Mary, glancing at her husband.

“Rather. A beer-shop in Whitechapel. House of five rooms burnt out, and the roof off.”

“You look tired, Joe,” said Mary.

“I *am* a bit tired, but an hour’s rest will put me all to rights. That’s the third fire I’ve bin called to to-night; not that I think much about that, but the last one has bin a stiff one, an’ I got a fall or two that nigh shook the wind out o’ me.”

“Have something to eat, Joe,” said Mary, in a sympathetic tone.

“No thankee, lass; I need sleep more than meat just now.”

“A glass of beer, then,” urged Mary, sweeping the soap suds off her pretty arms and hands, and taking up a towel.

The fireman shook his head, as he divested himself of his coat and neckcloth.

“Do, Joe,” entreated Mary; “I’m sure it will do you good, and no one could say that you broke through your principles, considerin’ the condition you’re in.”

Foolish Mary! she was young and inexperienced, and knew not the danger of tempting her husband to drink. She only knew that hundreds of first-rate, sober, good, trustworthy men took a glass of beer now and then without any evil result following, and did not think that her Joe ran the slightest risk in doing the same. But Joe knew his danger. His father had died a drunkard. He had listened to earnest men while they told of the bitter curse that drinking had been to thousands, that to some extent the tendency to drink was hereditary, and that, however safe some natures might be

while moderately indulging, there were other natures to which moderate drinking was equivalent to getting on those rails which, running down a slight incline at first—almost a level—gradually pass over a steep descent, where brakes become powerless, and end at last in total destruction.

“I don’t require beer, Molly,” said Dashwood with a smile, as he retired into the large closet; “at my time o’ life a man must be a miserable, half-alive sort o’ critter, if he can’t git along without Dutch courage. The sight o’ your face and May’s there, is better than a stiff glass o’ grog to me any day. It makes me feel stronger than the stoutest man in the brigade. Good night, lass, or good mornin’. I must make the most o’ my time. There’s no sayin’ how soon the next call may come. Seems to me as if people was settin’ their houses alight on purpose to worry us.”

The tones in which the last sentences were uttered, and the creaking of the bedstead indicated that the fireman was composing his massive limbs to rest, and scarcely had Mrs Dashwood resumed her washing, when his regular heavy breathing proclaimed him to be already in the land of Nod.

Quietly but steadily did Mrs Dashwood pursue her work. Neat little under-garments, and fairy-like little socks, and indescribable little articles of Lilliputian clothing of various kinds, all telling of the little rosebud in the crib, passed rapidly through Mary’s nimble fingers, and came out of the tub fair as the driven snow. Soon the front of the fire-place became like a ship dressed with flags, with this difference, that the flags instead of being gay and parti-coloured, were white and suggestive of infancy and innocence. The gentle noise of washing, and the soft breathing of the sleepers, and the tiny ticking of the clock over the chimney-piece, were the only audible sounds, for London had reached its deadest hour, four o’clock. Rioters had exhausted their spirits, natural and artificial, and early risers had not begun to move.

Presently to these sounds were added another very distant sound which induced Mary to stop and listen. “A late cab,” she whispered to herself. The rumbling of the late cab became more distinct, and soon proved it to be a hurried cab. To Mary’s accustomed ear this raised some disagreeable idea. She cast a look of anxiety into the closet, wiped her hands quickly, and taking up a pair of dry boots which had been standing near the fire, placed them beside her husband’s coat. This was barely accomplished when the hurried cab was heard to pull up at the neighbouring fire-station. Only a few seconds elapsed when racing footsteps were heard outside. Mary seized her husband’s arm—

“Up, Joe, up,” she cried and darted across the room, leaped on a chair, and laid violent hands on the tongue of the door-bell, thereby preventing a furious double ring from disturbing the rosebud!

At the first word “up,” the bed in the closet groaned and creaked as the fireman bounded from it, and the house shook as he alighted on the floor. Next moment he appeared buttoning his braces, and winking like an owl in sunshine. One moment sufficed to pull on the right boot, another moment affixed the left. Catching up his half-dried coat with one hand, and flinging on his sailor’s cap with the other, he darted from the house, thrust himself into his coat as he ran along and appeared at the station just as four of his comrades drew the fire-engine up to the door, while two others appeared with three horses, which they harnessed thereto—two abreast, one in front—with marvellous rapidity. The whole affair, from the “Up, Joe, up,” of Mrs Dashwood, to the harnessing of the steeds, was accomplished in less than five minutes. By that time Joe and several of his mates stood ready belted, and armed with brass helmets on their heads, which flashed back the rays of the neighbouring street lamp and the engine lanterns.

There was wonderfully little noise or fuss, although there was so much display of promptitude and energy; the reason being that all the men were thoroughly drilled, and each had his particular duty to perform; there was, therefore, no room for orders, counter-orders, or confusion.

The moment the call was given, Bob Clazie, having received no telegraphic “stop,” had at once run to ring up the men, who, like Dashwood, had been sleeping close at hand. He rang up the driver of the engine first. At the same moment his comrade on duty had run round to the stable, where the horses stood ready harnessed, and brought them out. Thus the thing was done without a moment’s delay. The driver, when roused, flung on his coat and helmet, and ran to the engine. It was a steam

fire-engine; that is, the pumps were worked by steam instead of by hand. The firing was ready laid, and the water kept nearly at the boiling point by means of a jet of gas. He had scarcely applied a light to the fire and turned off the gas, when four comrades ran into the shed, seized the red-painted engine, and dragged her out, as we have seen.

Much shorter time did it take to do all this than is required to describe it.

When the driver mounted his box, the others sprang on the engine. Crack! went the whip, fire flew from the paving-stones, fire poured from the furnace, the spirited steeds tore round the corner into Regent Street, and off they went to the fire, in the dark winter morning, like a monster rocket or a vision of Roman gladiators whirled away by a red fiery dragon!

Mrs Dashwood heard them go, and turned with a little sigh to her washing-tub. She was very proud of Joe, and she had good reason to be, for he was one of the best men in the Red Brigade, and, what was of more importance to her, he was one of the best husbands in the world. Perhaps this was largely owing to the fact that she was one of the best of wives! His career as a fireman had been short, but he had already become known as one of the daring men, to whom their Chief looked when some desperate service had to be performed. On several occasions he had, while in charge of the fire-escape, been the means of saving life. Upon the whole, therefore, it is not surprising that Mary was proud of her husband—almost as proud of him as she was of the little rosebud; but in regard to this she was never quite sure of the exact state of her mind.

Meditating on Joe, and giving an occasional glance at May, whose sweet upturned face seemed nothing short of angelic, Mrs Dashwood continued energetically to scrub the fairy-like habiliments, and make the soapsuds fly.

Meanwhile, the red engine whirled along its fiery course at full gallop, like a horrible meteor, clattering loudly in the deserted streets of the great city. So it would have sped in its wild career even if it had been broad day, for the loss of a single moment in reaching a fire is important; but in this case the men, instead of sitting like brazen-headed statues, would have stood up and increased the din of their progress by shouting continuously to clear the crowded thoroughfares. As it was, they had it all to themselves. Sometimes the corner of a window-blind was hastily lifted, showing that some wakeful one had curiosity enough to leap out of bed to see them pass. Here and there a policeman paused, and followed them with his eye as long as the tail of sparks from the furnace was visible. Occasionally a belated toper stopped in his staggering progress to gaze at them, with an idiotical assumption of seriousness and demand, “Wash ey maki’n sh’ a ’orrible row for?” Now and then a cat, with exploratory tendencies, put up its back and greeted them with a glare and a fuff, or a shut-out cur gave them a yelping salute; but the great mass of the London population let them go by without notice, as they would have treated any other passing thunderbolt with which they had nothing to do.

And yet they *had* something to do with that engine, or, rather, it had to do with them. But for it, and the rest of the Red Brigade, London would have long ago been in ashes. It is only by unremitting vigilance and incessant action that the London fires can be kept within bounds. There are nearly two thousand fires in the year in the metropolis, and the heroic little army which keeps these in check numbers only three hundred and seventy-eight men. That this force is much too small for the work to be done is proved by the fact, that the same men have sometimes to turn out three, four or five times in a night, to work of the most trying and dangerous nature. There is no occupation in which the lives of the men employed are so frequently risked, and their physical endurance so severely tried, as that of a London fireman. As there are, on the average, five fires every night all the year round, it follows that he is liable to be called out several times every night; and, in point of fact, this actually takes place very often. Sometimes he has barely returned from a fire, and put off his drenched garments, when he receives another “call,” and is obliged to put them on again, and go forth weary—it may be fasting—to engage in another skirmish with the flames. In all weathers and at all seasons—hot or cold, wet or dry—he must turn out at a moment’s notice, to find himself, almost before he is well awake, in the midst of stifling smoke, obliged to face and to endure the power

of roasting flames, to stand under cataracts of water, beside tottering walls and gables, or to plunge through smoke and flames, in order to rescue human lives. Liability to be called *occasionally* to the exercise of such courage and endurance is severe enough; it is what every soldier is liable to in time of war, and the lifeboat-man in times of storm; but to be liable to such calls several times every day and night all round the year is hard indeed, and proves that the Red Brigade, although almost perfect in its organisation and heroic in its elements, is far too small. Paris has about seven hundred fires a year; New York somewhere about three hundred; yet these cities have a far larger body of firemen than London, which with little short of two thousand fires a year, does her work of extinction with only three hundred and seventy-eight men!

She succeeds because every man in the little army is a hero, not one whit behind the Spartans of old. The London fireman, Ford, who, in 1871, at one great fire rescued six lives from the flames, and perished in accomplishing the noble deed, is a sample of the rest. All the men of the Brigade are picked men—picked from among the strapping and youthful tars of the navy, because such men are accustomed to strict discipline; to being “turned out” at all hours and in all weathers, and to climb with cool heads in trying circumstances, besides being, as a class, pre-eminently noted for daring anything and sticking at nothing. Such men are sure to do their work well, however hard; to do it without complaining, and to die, if need be, in the doing of it. But ought they to be asked to sacrifice so much? Surely Londoners would do well to make that complaint, which the men will *never* make, and insist on the force being increased, not only for the sake of the men, but also for the sake of themselves; for, although there *are* three hundred and seventy-eight heroes who hold the fiery foe so well in check, there are limits to heroic powers of action, and it stands to reason that double the number would do it better.

But we are wandering from our point. The engine has been tearing all this time at racing speed along the Bayswater Road. It turns sharp round a corner near Notting Hill Gate—so sharp that the feat is performed on the two off wheels, and draws from Bob Clazie the quiet remark, “Pretty nigh on our beam-ends that time, Joe.” A light is now seen glaring in the sky over the house-tops; another moment, and the engine dashes into Ladbroke Square, where a splendid mansion is in a blaze, with the flames spouting from the windows of the second floor.

The engine pulls up with a crash; the reeking horses are removed and led aside. “Look alive, lads!” is the only word uttered, and the helmeted heroes, knowing their work well, go into action with that cool promptitude which is more than half the battle in attacking the most desperate odds or the fiercest foe.

Chapter Two

The house on fire was, as we have said, an elegant mansion—one of those imposing edifices, with fresh paint outside, and splendid furniture within, which impress the beholder with the idea of a family in luxurious circumstances.

No one could tell how the fire originated. In the daily “report” of fires, made next day by the chief of the Red Brigade, wherein nine fires were set down as having occurred within the twenty-four hours, the cause of this fire in Ladbroke Square was reported “unknown.” Of the other eight, the supposed causes were, in one case, “escape of gas,” in another, “paraffin-lamp upset,” in another “intoxication,” in another, “spark from fire,” in another, “candle,” in another, “children playing with matches,” and so on; but in this mansion none of these causes were deemed probable. The master of the house turned off the gas regularly every night before going to bed, therefore it could not have been caused by escape of gas. Paraffin-lamps were not used in the house. Candles were; but they were always carefully handled and guarded. As to intoxication, the most suspicious of mortals could not have dreamed of such a cause in so highly respectable a family. The fires were invariably put out at night, and guards put on in every room, therefore, no spark could have been so audacious as to have leaped into being and on to the floor. There were, indeed, “matches” in the house, but there were no children, except one old lady, who, having reached her second childhood, might perhaps have been regarded as a child. It is true there was a certain Betty, a housemaid, whose fingers were reported by the cook to be “all thumbs,” and who had an awkward and incurable tendency to spill, and break, and drop, and fall over things, on whom suspicion fastened very keenly at first; but Betty, who was young and rather pretty, asserted so earnestly that she had been unusually happy that night in having done nothing whatever of a condemnable nature, and backed her asseverations with such floods of tears, that she was exonerated, and, as we have said, the cause was reported “unknown.”

It was not, however, so completely unknown as was at first supposed. There was a certain grave, retiring, modest individual who knew the gentleman of the house and his doings a little more thoroughly than was agreeable to the said gentleman, and who had become aware, in some unaccountable way, which it is impossible to explain, that he, the said gentleman, had very recently furnished the house in a sumptuous style, and had insured it much beyond its value. The said individual’s knowledge ultimately resulted in the said gentleman being convicted and transported for arson!

But with all this we have nothing to do. Whatever the uncertainty that afterwards arose as to the cause of the fire, there could be no uncertainty as to the fire itself at the time. It blazed and roared so furiously, that the inside of the house resembled a white-hot furnace. Flames spouted from the windows and chimneys, glaring fiercely on the spectators, who assembled rapidly from all quarters, as if defying them all, and daring the firemen to do their worst. Sparks enough to have shamed all the Roman candles ever made in or out of Rome were vomited forth continuously, and whirled away with volumes of dense black smoke into the wintry sky.

“It’s well alight,” observed a chimney-sweep to a policeman.

The policeman made no reply, although it did seem as if it would have been quite safe, even for a policeman, to admit that the sweep was thoroughly correct. It *was* “well alight,” so well, that it seemed absolutely ridiculous to suppose that the firemen could make any impression on it at all.

But the firemen did not appear to think the attempt ridiculous. “Never give in” was, or might have been, their motto. It was their maxim to attack the enemy with promptitude and vigour, no matter what his strength might be. When he crept out like a sneaking burglar from under a hearth-stone, or through an over-heated flue, they would “have at him” with the hand-pumps and quench him at once. When he came forth like a dashing party of skirmishers, to devastate a wood-yard, or light up a music-hall with unusual brilliancy, they sent an engine or two against him without delay, and

put him down in an hour or two. When he attacked “in force,” they despatched engine after engine—manuals and steamers—to the front, until he was quelled, and if the prey already seized could not be wrenched from his grasp, they, at all events, killed him before he could destroy more. When he boldly and openly declared war, attacking the great combustible warehouses of Tooley Street, threatening a descent on the shipping, and almost setting the Thames on fire, they sent out the whole available army from every quarter of the metropolis with all their engines of war—manuals, steamers, and floating batteries, or spouteries, and fought him tooth and nail, till he gave in. They might be terribly over-matched—as in the case of the great fire when the gallant Braidwood fell—they might lose men, and might have to fight day and night for weeks, but they would “never say die,” until the enemy had died and left them, tired and torn, but still tough and triumphant victors on the field of battle.

Before the engine from Regent Street came on the ground, two manual engines from Kensington and Notting Hill had arrived, and opened water on the foe. At first their shot fell harmlessly on the roaring furnace; but by the time the “steamer” had got ready for action, some little effect was beginning to be produced. When this great gun, so to speak, began to play, and sent a thick continuous stream through the windows, like an inexhaustible water mitrailleuse, clouds of white steam mingled with the black smoke, and varied the aspect of the fire, but did not appear to lessen its fury in any degree. Just then another manual engine dashed into the square at full gallop, and formed up. Before it had well taken a position, another “steamer,” with three horses, came swinging round the corner, and fell into the ranks. The panting steeds were unharnessed, the bold charioteers leaped down, the suction-pipe was dipped into the water-trough, and the hose attached. As two engines cannot “drink” at the same plug, a canvas trough with an iron frame is put over the plug, having a hole in its bottom, which fits tightly round the plug. It quietly fills, and thus two or more engines may do their work convivially—dip in their suction-pipes, and “drink” simultaneously at the same fountain.

“Down with her!” shouted the man who held the “branch,” or nozzle, at the end of the hose.

A steam whistle gives a shrill, short reply; the engine quivers under the power of man’s greatest servant, and another battery opens on the foe.

But London firemen are not content to play at long bowls. While the artillery goes thus vigorously into action, the helmets of the men are seen gleaming and glancing everywhere amid the smoke, searching for weak points, turning the enemy’s flanks, and taking him in rear. Hose are dragged through neighbouring houses, trailing their black coils like horrid water snakes, through places where such things were never meant to be. If too short, additional lengths are added, again and again, till the men who hold the branches gain points of vantage on adjoining roofs or outhouses, until, at last from below, above, in front, and behind, cataracts of water dash into the glowing furnace.

The fire-escape had been first to reach the ground after the alarm was given, this being the instrument nearest to the scene of conflagration. It happened that night to be in charge of David Clazie, a brother of Comrade Bob. Being a smart young fellow, David, had—with the assistance of two early risers who chanced to be at hand, and the policeman on the beat—run up his escape, and put it in position before the fire had gained its full force. The gentleman of the house had already got out, and fled in his night garments; but the fire had rendered the staircase impassable, so that the cook, the many-thumbed Betty, and the old lady, who was the gentleman’s mother, were imprisoned in the upper floor.

David Clazie did not learn this from the gentleman, however. That amiable character had received such a fright, that he had taken himself off, no one—except the individual aforementioned—knew whither. Fortunately, Betty announced the fact of her existence by rushing to a window and shrieking. David ran his escape towards the window, mounted the ladder, carried the damsel down, bore her, kicking, into a neighbouring house, and left her in fits. Meanwhile the cook rushed to the same window, shrieked, and fell back half-suffocated with the smoke which just then surrounded her. A policeman gallantly ran up the escape, jumped into the room, gathered up the cook with great

difficulty—for she was unusually fat and the smoke very suffocating—carried her down, bore her to the same house where Betty lay, and left her there in violent hysterics.

As neither of them could answer questions, it could not be ascertained whether there were any more people in the burning house. David therefore explored it as far as was possible in the circumstances, and much more than was safe for himself, but found no one. After nearly choking himself, therefore, he drew aside the escape to prevent its being burned.

When the engines came up, however, it was again brought into play, to enable the firemen to get up with their “branches” to the upper windows.

“Try that window, Dashwood,” said the officer of the station to which Joe belonged, pointing to a window on the second floor. “There ain’t much smoke coming out.”

Before he had done speaking, Joe and a comrade had pushed the escape towards the window in question. He ascended and leaped into the room, but could scarcely see for the smoke. Knowing that the air in a burning house is clearer near the floor, he stooped as low as possible, and went round the room guiding himself by the walls. Coming to a door he seized the handle and tried to open it, but found it locked, and the handle so hot that he was forced to let go abruptly. He seized a chair, tried to burst it open with a blow, and shivered the chair to atoms, but did not force the door. A powerful effort with his foot also failed. Rushing to the window he got out on the escape, and shouted:—

“The axe, lads, look sharp and pass up the hose. We’ll get at it here.”

A large heavy axe was handed up by one fireman, while another let down a rope, to which the end of the hose was attached and hauled up.

Joe seized the axe, returned to the door, and, with one blow, dashed it open.

Flames leaped upon him, as if they had been eagerly awaiting the opportunity, licked hungrily round his legs, and kissed his whiskers—of which, by the way, he was rather proud; and with good reason, for they were very handsome whiskers. But Joe cared no more for them at that moment than he did for his boots. He was forced to retreat, however, to the window, where Bob Clazie had already presented his branch and commenced a telling discharge on the fire.

“That’s the way to do it,” muttered Bob, as he directed the branch and turned aside his head to avoid, as much as possible, the full volume of the smoke.

“Let’s get a breath o’ fresh air,” gasped Joe Dashwood, endeavouring to squeeze past his comrade through the window.

At that moment a faint cry was heard. It appeared to come from an inner room.

“Some one there, Joe,” said Bob Clazie in a grave tone, but without diverting his attention for an instant from the duty in which he was engaged.

Joe made no reply, but at once leaped back into the room, and, a second time, felt his way round the walls. He came on another door. One blow of the ponderous axe dashed it in, and revealed a bedroom not quite so densely filled with smoke as the outer room. Observing a bed looming through the smoke, he ran towards it, and struck his head against one of the posts so violently that he staggered. Recovering he made a grasp at the clothes, and felt that there was a human being wrapped tightly up in them like a bundle. A female shriek followed. Joe Dashwood was not the man to stand on ceremony in such circumstances. He seized the bundle, straightened it out a little, so as to make it more portable, and throwing it over his shoulder, made a rush towards the window by which he had entered. All this the young fireman did with considerable energy and haste, because the density of the smoke was increasing, and his retreat might be cut off by the flames at any moment.

“Clear the way there!” he gasped, on reaching the window.

“All right,” replied Bob Clazie, who was still presenting his branch with untiring energy at the flames.

Joe passed out, got on the head of the escape, and, holding the bundle on his shoulder with one hand, grasped the rounds of the ladder with the other. He descended amid the cheers of the vast multitude, which had by this time assembled to witness the fire.

As Joe hurried towards the open door of the nearest house, Betty, with the thumbs, rushed frantically out, screaming, “Missis! oh! my! she’ll be burnt alive! gracious! help! fire! back room! first floor! oh, my!”

“Be easy, lass,” cried Joe, catching the flying domestic firmly by the arm, and detaining her despite her struggles.

“Let me go; missis! I forgot her!”

“Here she is,” cried Joe, interrupting, “all safe. You come and attend to her.”

The reaction on poor Betty’s feelings was so great that she went into fits a second time, and was carried with her mistress into the house, where the cook still lay in violent hysterics.

Joe laid the bundle gently on the bed, and looked quickly at the bystanders. Observing several cool and collected females among them, he pointed to the bundle, which had begun to exhibit symptoms of life, and said briefly, “She’s all right, look after her,” and vanished like a wreath of that smoke into which in another moment he plunged.

He was not a moment too soon, for he found Bob Clazie, despite his fortitude and resolution, on the point of abandoning the window, where the smoke had increased to such a degree as to render suffocation imminent.

“Can’t stand it,” gasped Bob, scrambling a few paces down the ladder.

“Give us the branch, Bob, I saw where it was in fetchin’ out the old woman,” said Joe in a stifled voice.

He grasped the copper tube from which the water spouted with such force as to cause it to quiver and recoil like a living thing, so that, being difficult to hold, it slipped aside and nearly fell. The misdirected water-spout went straight at the helmet of a policeman, which it knocked off with the apparent force of a cannon shot; plunged into the bosom of a stout collier, whom it washed whiter than he had ever been since the days of infancy, and scattered the multitude like chaff before the wind. Seeing this, the foreman ordered “Number 3” engine, (which supplied the particular branch in question), to cease pumping.

Joe recovered the erratic branch in a moment, and dragged it up the escape, Bob, who was now in a breatheable atmosphere, helping to pass up the hose. The foreman, who seemed to have acquired the power of being in several places at one and the same moment of time, and whose watchful eye was apparently everywhere, ordered Bob’s brother David and another man named Ned Crashington, to go up and look after Joe Dashwood.

Meanwhile Joe shouted, “Down with Number 3;” by which he meant, “up with as much water as possible from Number 3, and as fast as you can!” and sprang into the room from which he had just rescued the old woman. In passing out with her he had observed a glimmer of flame through the door which he had first broken open, and which, he reflected while descending the escape, was just out of range of Bob Clazie’s branch. It was the thought of this that had induced him to hurry back so promptly; in time, as we have seen, to relieve his comrade. He now pointed the branch at the precise spot, and hit that part of the fire right in its heart. The result was that clouds of steam mingled with the smoke. But Joe was human after all. The atmosphere, or, rather, the want of atmosphere, was too much for him. He was on the point of dropping the branch, and rushing to the window for his life, when Ned Crashington, feeling his way into the room, tumbled over him.

Speech was not required in the circumstances. Ned knew exactly what to do, and Joe knew that he had been sent to relieve him. He therefore delivered the branch to Ned, and at once sprang out on the escape, where he encountered David Clazie.

“Go in, Davy, he can’t stand it long,” gasped Joe.

“No fears of ’im,” replied Davy, with a smile, as he prepared to enter the window; “Ned can stand hanythink a’most. But, I say, send up some more ’ands. It takes two on us to ’old *that* ’ere branch, you know.”

The brass helmets of more hands coming up the escape were observed as he spoke, for the foreman saw that this was a point of danger, and, like a wise general, had his reserves up in time.

David Clazie found Ned standing manfully to the branch. Ned was noted in the Red Brigade as a man who could “stand a’most anything,” and who appeared to cherish a martyr-like desire to die by roasting or suffocation. This was the more surprising that he was not a boastful or excitable fellow, but a silent, melancholy, and stern man, who, except when in action, usually seemed to wish to avoid observation. Most of his comrades were puzzled by this compound of character, but some of them hinted that Crashington’s wife could have thrown some light on the subject. Be this as it may, whenever the chief or the foreman of the Brigade wanted a man for any desperate work, they invariably turned to Ned Crashington. Not that Ned was one whit more courageous or willing to risk his life than any of the other men, *all* of whom, it must be remembered, were picked for courage and capacity for their special work; but he combined the greatest amount of coolness with the utmost possible recklessness, besides being unusually powerful, so that he could be depended on for wise as well as desperate action. Joe Dashwood was thought to be almost equal to Ned—indeed, in personal activity he was superior; but there was nothing desperate in Joe’s character. He was ever ready to dare anything with a sort of jovial alacrity, but he did not appear, like Ned, to court martyrdom.

While Ned and David subdued the flames above, Joe descended the escape, and being by that time almost exhausted, sat down to rest with several comrades who had endured the first shock of battle, while fresh men were sent to continue the fight.

“Have a glass, Joe?” said one of the firemen, coming round with a bottle of brandy.

“No, thank ’ee,” said Joe, “I don’t require it.”

“Hand it here,” said a man who stood leaning against the rails beside him, “my constitution is good, like the British one, but it’s none the worse for a drop o’ brandy after such tough work.”

There was probably truth in what the man said. Desperate work sometimes necessitates a stimulant; nevertheless, there were men in the Red Brigade who did their desperate work on nothing stronger than water, and Joe was one of these.

In three hours the fire was subdued, and before noon of that day it was extinguished. The “report” of it, as published by the chief of the Fire-Brigade next morning, recorded that a house in Ladbrooke Square, occupied by Mr Blank, a gentleman whose business was “private”—in other words, unknown—had been set on fire by some “unknown cause,” that the whole tenement had been “burnt out” and “the roof off,” and that the contents of the building were “insured in the Phoenix.”

Some of the firemen were sent home about daybreak, when the flames first began to be mastered.

Joe was among these. He found Mary ready with a cup of hot coffee, and the rosebud, who had just awakened, ready with a kiss. Joe accepted the second, swallowed the first, stretched his huge frame with a sigh of weariness, remarked to Mary that he would turn in, and in five minutes thereafter was snoring profoundly.

Chapter Three

One pleasant afternoon in spring David Clazie and Ned Crashington sat smoking together in front of the fire in the lobby of the station, chatting of hair-breadth escapes by flood and fire.

“It’s cold enough yet to make a fire a very pleasant comrade—w’en ’e’s inside the bars,” observed David.

“H’m,” replied Crashington.

As this was not a satisfactory reply, David said so, and remarked, further, that Ned seemed to be in the blues.

“Wotever can be the matter wi’ you, Ned,” said David, looking at his companion with a perplexed air; “you’re a young, smart, ’ealthy fellar, in a business quite to your mind, an’ with a good-lookin’ young wife at ’ome, not to mention a babby. W’y wot more would you ’ave, Ned? You didn’t ought for to look blue.”

“Pr’aps not,” replied Ned, re-lighting his pipe, and puffing between sentences, “but a man may be in a business quite to his mind and have a good-looking wife, and a babby, and health to boot, without bein’ exactly safe from an attack of the blues now and then, d’ye see? ‘It ain’t all gold that glitters.’ You’ve heard o’ that proverb, no doubt?”

“Well, yes,” replied Clazie.

“Ah. Then there’s another sayin’ which mayhap you’ve heard of too: ‘every man’s got a skeleton in the cupboard.’”

“I’ve heard o’ that likewise,” said Clazie, “but it ain’t true; leastways, *I* have got no skeleton in none o’ my cupboards, an’, wot’s more, if I ’ad, I’d pitch him overboard.”

“But what if he was too strong for you?” suggested Ned.

“Why, then—I don’t know,” said Clazie, shaking his head.

Before this knotty point could be settled in a satisfactory manner, the comrades were interrupted by the entrance of a man. He was a thick-set, ill-favoured fellow, with garments of a disreputable appearance, and had a slouch that induced honest men to avoid his company. Nevertheless, Ned Crashington gave him a hearty “good afternoon,” and shook hands.

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