ROBERT MICHAEL BALLANTYNE

POST HASTE

Robert Michael Ballantyne

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Ballantyne R.

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Содержание

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Preface

This tale is founded chiefly on facts furnished by the Postmaster-General's Annual Reports, and gathered, during personal intercourse and investigation, at the General Post-Office of London and its Branches.

It is intended to illustrate—not by any means to exhaust—the subject of postal work, communication, and incident throughout the Kingdom.

I have to render my grateful acknowledgments to ***Sir Arthur Blackwood***; his private secretary, ***Charles Eden, Esquire***; and those other officers of the various Departments who have most kindly afforded me every facility for investigation, and assisted me to much of the information used in the construction of the tale.

If it does not greatly enlighten, I hope that it will at all events interest and amuse the reader.

R.M. Ballantyne .

Chapter One.
A Hero and His Worshipper

Once upon a time—only once, observe, she did not do it twice—a widow of the name of Maylands went, in a fit of moderate insanity, and took up her abode in a lonely, tumble-down cottage in the west of Ireland.

Mrs Maylands was very poor. She was the widow of an English clergyman, who had left her with a small family and the smallest income that was compatible with that family's maintenance. Hence the migration to Ireland, where she had been born, and where she hoped to live economically.

The tumble-down cottage was near the sea, not far from a little bay named Howlin Cove. Though little it was a tremendous bay, with mighty cliffs landward, and jutting ledges on either side, and forbidding rocks at the entrance, which waged continual warfare with the great Atlantic billows that rolled into it. The whole place suggested shipwreck and smugglers.

The small family of Mrs Maylands consisted of three babes—so their mother styled them. The eldest babe, Mary—better known as May—was seventeen years of age, and dwelt in London, to which great city she had been tempted by an elderly English cousin, Miss Sarah Lillycrop, who held out as baits a possible situation and a hearty welcome.

The second babe, Philip, was verging on fifteen. Having kicked, crashed, and smashed his way though an uproarious infancy and a stormy childhood, he had become a sedate, earnest, energetic boy, with a slight dash of humour in his spirit, and more than a dash of determination.

The third babe was still a baby. As it plays little or no part in our tale we dismiss it with the remark that it was of the male sex, and was at once the hope, fear, joy and anxiety of its distracted mother. So, too, we may dismiss Miss Madge Stevens, a poor relation, who was worth her weight in gold to the widow, inasmuch as she acted the part of general servant, nurse, mender of the household garments, and recipient of joys and sorrows, all of which duties she fulfilled for love, and for just shelter and sustenance sufficient to keep her affectionate spirit within her rather thin but well-favoured body.

Phil Maylands was a hero-worshipper. At the time when our tale opens he worshipped a youth —the son of a retired naval officer,—who possessed at least some of the qualities that are occasionally found in a hero. George Aspel was daring, genial, enthusiastic, tall, broad-shouldered, active, and young—about twenty. But George had a tendency to dissipation.

His father, who had recently died, had been addicted to what he styled good-fellowship and grog. Knowing his so-called weakness, Captain Aspel had sent his boy to be brought up in the family of the Reverend James Maylands, but some time before the death of that gentleman he had called him home to help to manage the small farm with which he amused his declining years. George and his father amused themselves with it to such an extent that they became bankrupt about the time of the father's death, and thus the son was left with the world before him and nothing whatever in his pocket except a tobacco-pipe and a corkscrew.

One day Phil met George Aspel taking a ramble and joined him. These two lived near to each other. Indeed, Mrs Maylands had been partly influenced in her choice of a residence by her desire to be near George.

It was a bitterly cold December afternoon. As the friends reached the summit of the grey cliffs, a squall, fresh from the Arctic regions, came sweeping over the angry sea, cutting the foam in flecks from the waves, and whistling, as if in baffled fury, among the opposing crags.

"Isn't it a grand sight?" said Phil, as they sought shelter under the lee of a projecting rock.

"Glorious! I never look upon that sight," said Aspel, with flashing eyes, "without wishing that I had lived in the days of the old Vikings."

The youth traced his descent from the sea-kings of Norway—those tremendous fellows who were wont in days of yore to ravage the shores of the known and unknown world, east and west, north and south, leaving their indelible mark alike on the hot sands of Africa and the icebound rocks of Greenland. As Phil Maylands knew nothing of his own lineage further back than his grandfather, he was free to admire the immense antiquity of his friend's genealogical tree. Phil was not, however, so completely under the fascination of his hero as to be utterly blind to his faults; but he loved him, and that sufficed to cover them up.

"Sure, they were a wild lot, after all?" he said in a questioning tone, as he looked up at the glowing countenance of his friend, who, with his bold mien, bulky frame, blue eyes, and fair curls, would have made a very creditable Viking indeed, had he lived in the tenth century.

"Of course they were, Phil," he replied, looking down at his admirer with a smile. "Men could not well be otherwise than wild and warlike in those days; but it was not all ravage and plunder with them. Why, it is to them and to their wise laws that we owe much of the freedom, coupled with the order, that prevails in our happy land; and didn't they cross the Atlantic Ocean in things little better than herring-boats, without chart or compass, and discover America long before Columbus was born?"

"You don't mean that?" said Phil, with increased admiration; for the boy was not only smitten by his friend's physical powers, but by his supposed intellectual attainments.

"Yes, I do mean that," returned Aspel. "If the Norsemen of old did mischief, as no one can deny, they were undoubtedly grand old scoundrels, and it is certain that they did much good to the world, whether they meant it or not."

Phil Maylands made no reply, but continued to look meditatively at his friend, until the latter laughed, and asked what he was thinking about.

"It's thinking I am, what I wouldn't give if my legs were only as long as yours, George."

"That they will soon be," returned George, "if they go on at the rate they've been growing of late."

"That's a true word, anyhow; but as men's legs don't go on growing at the same rate for ever, it's not much hope I have of mine. No, George, it's kind of you to encourage me, but the Maylands have ever been a short-legged and long-bodied race. So it's said. However, it's some comfort to know that short men are often long-headed, and that many of them get on in the world pretty well."

"Of course they do," returned Aspel, "and though they can't grow long, they never stop short in the race of life. Why, look at Nelson—he was short; and Wellington wasn't long, and Bonny himself was small in every way except in his intellect—who's that coming up the hill?"

"It's Mike Kenny, the postman, I think. I wonder if he has brought a letter from sister May. Mother expects one, I know."

The man who had attracted their attention was ascending towards them with the slow, steady gait of a practised mountaineer. He was the post-runner of the district. Being a thinly-peopled and remote region, the "runner's walk" was a pretty extensive one, embracing many a mile of moorland, vale and mountain. He had completed most of his walk at that time, having only one mountain shoulder now between him and the little village of Howlin Cove, where his labours were to terminate for that day.

"Good-evening, Mike," said George Aspel, as the man approached. "Any letters for me to-night?"

"No, sur, not wan," answered Mike, with something of a twinkle in his eye; "but I've left wan at Rocky Cottage," he added, turning to Philip Maylands.

"Was it May's handwriting?" asked the boy eagerly.

"Sure I don't know for sartin whose hand it is i' the inside, but it's not Miss May's on the cover. Niver a wan in these parts could write like her—copperplate, no less."

"Come, George, let's go back," said Phil, quickly, "we've been looking out for a letter for some days past."

"It's not exactly a letter, Master Phil," said the post-runner slowly.

"Ah, then, she'd never put us off with a newspaper," said Phil.

"No, it's a telegram," returned Mike.

Phil Maylands looked thoughtfully at the ground. "A telegram," he said, "that's strange. Are ye sure, Mike?"

"Troth am I."

Without another word the boy started off at a quick walk, followed by his friend and the post-runner. The latter had to diverge at that place to leave a letter at the house of a man named Patrick Grady. Hence, for a short distance, they followed the same road.

Young Maylands would have passed the house, but as Grady was an intimate friend of George Aspel, he agreed to stop just to shake hands.

Patrick Grady was the soul of hospitality. He was not to be put off with a mere shake of the hand, not he—telegrams meant nothing now-a-days, he said, everybody sent them. No cause for alarm. They must stop and have a glass of mountain dew.

Aspel was resolute, however; he would not sit down, though he had no objection to the mountain dew. Accordingly, the bottle was produced, and a full glass was poured out for Aspel, who quaffed off the pure spirit with a free-and-easy toss and smack of the lips, that might have rendered one of the beery old sea-kings envious.

"No, sur, I thank ye," said Mike, when a similar glass was offered to him.

"What! ye haven't taken the pledge, have ye?" said Grady.

"No, sur; but I've had three glasses already on me walk, an' that's as much as I can rightly carry."

"Nonsense, Mike. You've a stiff climb before you—here, take it off."

The facile postman did take it off without further remonstrance.

"Have a dhrop, Phil?"

"No, thank ee," said Phil, firmly, but without giving a reason for declining.

Being a boy, he was not pressed to drink, and the party left the house. A short distance farther on the road forked, and here the post-runner turned off to the right, taking the path which led towards the hill whose rugged shoulder he had yet to scale.

Mike Kenny breasted it not only with the energy of youth and strength, but with the additional and artificial energy infused by the spirits, so that, much to his own surprise, his powers began to fail prematurely. Just then a storm of wind and sleet came down from the heights above, and broke with bitter fury in his face. He struggled against it vigorously for a time till he gained a point whence he saw the dark blue sea lashing on the cliffs below. He looked up at the pass which was almost hid by the driving sleet. A feeling of regret and self-condemnation at having so readily given in to Grady was mingled with a strong sense of the duty that he had to discharge as he once more breasted the steep. The bitter cold began to tell on his exhausted frame. In such circumstances a small matter causes a man to stumble. Kenny's foot caught on something—a root it might be—and he fell headlong into a ditch and was stunned. The cold did its work, and from that ditch he never rose again.

Meanwhile Mr Grady looked out from the window of his cottage upon the gathering storm, expressed some satisfaction that it did not fall to his lot to climb hills on such a day, and comforted himself—though he did not appear to stand in need of special comfort—with another glass of whisky.

George Aspel and Philip Maylands, with their backs to the storm, hurried homewards; the former exulting in the grand—though somewhat disconnected—thoughts infused into his fiery soul by the fire-water he had imbibed, and dreaming of what he would have dared and done had he only been a sea-king of the olden time; the latter meditating somewhat anxiously on the probable nature of his sister's telegram.

Chapter Two.
Tells of Woman's Work and some of Woman's Ways

Many, and varied, and strange, are the duties which woman has to perform in this life—especially in that wonderful and gigantic phase of this life which is comprehended in the word London.

One chill December afternoon there sat in front of a strange-looking instrument a woman—at least she was as nearly a woman as is compatible with the age of seventeen. She was also pretty—not beautiful, observe, but pretty—sparklingly pretty; dark, dimpled, demure and delightful in every way; with a turn-up nose, a laughing eye, and a kindly look.

Her chief duty, from morning to night, consisted in playing with her pretty little fingers on three white pianoforte keys. There were no other keys—black or white—in connection with these three. They stood alone and had no music whatever in them—nothing but a click. Nevertheless this young woman, whose name was May Maylands, played on them with a constancy and a deft rapidity worthy of a great, if not a musical, cause. From dawn to dusk, and day by day, did she keep those three keys clicking and clittering, as if her life depended on the result; and so in truth it did, to some extent, for her bread and butter depended on her performances on that very meagre piano.

Although an artless and innocent young girl, fresh from the western shores of Erin, May had a peculiar, and, in one of her age and sex, almost pert way of putting questions, to which she often received quaint and curious replies.

For instance one afternoon she addressed to a learned doctor the following query:—

"Can you send copy last prescription? Lost it. Face red as a carrot. In agonies! What shall I do? Help!"

To which the learned doctor gave the matter-of-fact but inelegant reply:—

"Stick your feet in hot water. Go to bed at once. Prescription sent by post. Take it every hour."

But May Maylands did not stick her feet in hot water; neither did she go to bed, or take any physic. Indeed there was no occasion to do so, for a clear complexion and pink cheeks told of robust health.

On another occasion she asked an Irish farmer if he could send her twenty casks of finest butter to cost not more than 6 pence per pound.

To which the farmer was rude enough to answer— "Not by no manner of means."

In short May's conduct was such that we must hasten to free her from premature condemnation by explaining that she was a female telegraphist in what we may call the literary lungs of London—the General Post-Office at St. Martin's-le-Grand.

On that chill December afternoon, during a brief lull in her portion of the telegraphic communication of the kingdom, May leaned her little head on her hand, and sent her mind to the little cottage by the sea, already described as lying on the west coast of Ireland, with greater speed than ever she flashed those electric sparks which it was her business to scatter broadcast over the land. The hamlet, near which the cottage stood, nestled under the shelter of a cliff as if in expectation and dread of being riven from its foundations by the howling winds, or whelmed in the surging waves. The cottage itself was on the outskirts of the hamlet, farther to the south. The mind of May entered through its closed door,—for mind, like electricity, laughs at bolts and bars.

There was a buzz of subdued sound from more than twelve hundred telegraphists, male and female, in that mighty telegraph-hall of Saint Martin's-le-Grand, but May heard it not. Dozens upon dozens of tables, each with its busy occupants—tables to right of her, tables to left of her, tables in rear of her, tables in front of her,—swept away from her in bewildering perspective, but May saw them not. The clicking of six or seven hundred instruments broke upon her ear as they flashed the news of the world over the length and breadth of the land, pulsating joy and sorrow, surprise, fear,

hope, despair, and gladness to thousands of anxious hearts, but May regarded it not. She heard only the booming of the great sea, and saw her mother seated by the fire darning socks, with Madge engaged in household work, and Phil tumbling with baby-brother on the floor, making new holes and rents for fresh darns and patches.

Mrs Maylands was a student and lover of the Bible. Her children, though a good deal wilder, were sweet-tempered like herself. It is needless to add that in spite of adverse circumstances they were all moderately happy. The fair telegraphist smiled, almost laughed, as her mind hovered over the home circle.

From the contemplation of this pleasant and romantic picture she was roused by a familiar rustle at her elbow. Recalling her mind from the west of Ireland, she fixed it on a mass of telegrams which had just arrived from various parts of the city.

They had been sucked through several pneumatic tubes—varying from a few yards to two miles in length—had been checked, assorted, registered, and distributed by boys to the various telegraphists to whose lot they fell. May Maylands chanced, by a strange coincidence, to command the instrument in direct connection with Cork. The telegrams just laid beside her were those destined for that city, and the regions to which it was a centre of redistribution. Among others her own village was in connection with it, and many a time had she yearned to touch her keys with a message of love to her mother, but the rules of the office sternly forbade this. The communicative touch which she dispensed so freely to others was forbidden to herself. If she, or any other telegraphist in St. Martin's-le-Grand, wished to send a private message, it became necessary to step out of the office, go to the appointed place, pay her shilling, and become one of the public for the occasion. Every one can see the necessity for such a rule in the circumstances.

May's three-keyed machine, by the way, did not actually send forth the electricity. It only punched holes in a long tape of white paper, which holes, according to their relative arrangement, represented the alphabet. Having punched a message by playing on the keys, she transferred her tape to the electric machine at her elbow and passed it through. This transmitting machine was automatic or self acting. It required only to be fed with perforated tapes. In Ireland the receiving-machine presented its messages in the form of dots and dashes, which, according to arrangement, became alphabetic. You don't understand this, reader, eh? It would be surprising if you did! A treatise on electric telegraphy would be required to make it clear—supposing you to have a mechanical turn of mind. Suffice it to say that the Wheatstone telegraph instrument tapes off its messages at the rate of 100 words a minute.

But to return—

With a sigh May Maylands cast her eyes on the uppermost telegram. It ran thus:—

"Buy the horse at any price. He's a spanker. Let the pigs go for what they'll fetch."

This was enough. Romance, domesticity, and home disappeared, probably with the message along the wire, and the spirit of business descended on the little woman as she applied herself once more to the matter-of-fact manipulation of the keys.

That evening as May left the Post-Office and turned sharply into the dark street she came into collision with a letter-carrier.

"Oh! Miss," he exclaimed with polite anxiety, "I beg your pardon. The sleet drivin' in my face prevented my seeing you. You're not hurt I hope."

"No, Mr Flint, you haven't hurt me," said May, laughing, as she recognised the voice of her own landlord.

"Why, it's you, Miss May! Now isn't that good luck, my turnin' up just in the nick o' time to see you home? Here, catch hold of my arm. The wind's fit to tear the lamp-posts up by the roots."

"But this is not the way home," objected the girl.

"That's true, Miss May, it ain't, but I'm only goin' round a bit by St. Paul's Churchyard. There's a shop there where they sell the sausages my old 'ooman's so fond of. It don't add more than a few yards to the road home."

The old 'ooman to whom Solomon Flint referred was his grandmother. Flint himself had spent the greater part of his life in the service of the Post-Office, and was now a widower, well stricken in years. His grandmother was one of those almost indestructible specimens of humanity who live on until the visage becomes deeply corrugated, contemporaries have become extinct, and age has become a matter of uncertainty. Flint had always been a good grandson, but when his wife died the love he had borne to her seemed to have been transferred with additional vehemence to the "old 'ooman."

"There's a present for you, old 'ooman," said Flint, placing the paper of sausages on the table on entering his humble abode, and proceeding to divest himself of his waterproof cape; "just let me catch hold of a fryin'-pan and I'll give you to understand what a blow-out means."

"You're a good laddie, Sol," said the old woman, rousing herself and speaking in a voice that sounded as if it had begun its career far back in the previous century.

Mrs Flint was Scotch, and, although she had lived from early womanhood in London, had retained something of the tone and much of the pronunciation of the land o' cakes.

"Ye'll be wat, lassie," she said to May, who was putting off her bonnet and shawl in a corner. "No, Grannie," returned the girl, using a term which the old woman had begged her to adopt, "I'm not wet, only a little damp."

"Change your feet, lassie, direc'ly, or you'll tak' cauld," said Mrs Flint in a peremptory tone.

May laughed gently and retired to her private boudoir to change her shoes. The boudoir was not more than eight feet by ten in size, and very poorly furnished, but its neat, methodical arrangements betokened in its owner a refined and orderly mind. There were a few books in a stand on the table, and a flower-pot on the window-sill. Among the pegs and garments on the walls was a square piece of cardboard, on which was emblazoned in scarlet silk, the text, "God is love." This hung at the foot of the bed, so as to be the first object to greet the girl's eyes on awaking each morning. Below it hung a row of photographs, embracing the late Reverend James Maylands, his widow, his son Philip, his distant relative Madge, and the baby. These were so arranged as to catch the faint gleam of light that penetrated the window; but as there was a twenty-foot brick wall in front of the window at a distance of two yards, the gleam, even on a summer noon, was not intense. In winter it was barely sufficient to render darkness visible.

Poor May Maylands! It was a tremendous change to her from the free air and green fields of Ireland to a small back street in the heart of London; but necessity had required the change. Her mother's income could not comfortably support the family. Her own salary, besides supporting herself, was devoted to the enlargement of that income, and as it amounted to only 50 pounds a year, there was not much left to pay for lodgings, etcetera. It is true Miss Lillycrop would have gladly furnished May with board and lodging free, but her house was in the neighbourhood of Pimlico, and May's duties made it necessary that she should live within a short distance of the General Post-Office. Miss Lillycrop had heard of the Flints as being good-hearted and trusty people, and advised her cousin to board with them, at least until some better arrangement could be made for her. Meanwhile May was to go and spend part of every Sunday with Miss Lillycrop at Number 9 Purr Street.

"Well, Grannie," said May, returning to the front room, where the sausages were already hissing deliciously, "what news have you for me to-night?"

She sat down beside the old woman, took her hand and spoke in that cheery, cosy, confidential way which renders some women so attractive.

"Deed, May, there's little but the auld story—Mercies, mornin', noon, and night. But, oo ay, I was maist forgettin'; Miss Lillycrap was here, an left ye a message o' some sort."

"And what was the message, Grannie?"

"She's gone and forgot it," said Solomon Flint, putting the sausages on the table, which had already been spread for supper by a stout little girl who was the sole domestic of the house and attendant on Mrs Flint. "You've no chance of getting it now, Miss May, for I've noticed that when the old 'ooman once forgets a thing it don't come back to her—except, p'r'aps, a week or two afterwards. Come now, draw in and go to work. But, p'r'aps, Dollops may have heard the message. Hallo! Dollops! come here, and bring the kettle with you."

Dollops—the little girl above referred to—was particularly small and shy, ineffably stupid, and remarkably fat. It was the last quality which induced Solomon to call her Dollops. Her hair and garments stuck out from her in wild dishevelment, but she was not dirty. Nothing belonging to Mrs Flint was allowed to become dirty.

"Did you see Miss Lillycrop, Dollops?" asked Solomon, as the child emerged from some sort of back kitchen.

"Yes, sir, I did; I saw'd 'er a-goin' hout."

"Did you hear her leave a message?"

"Yes, sir, I did. I 'eard 'er say to missis, 'Be sure that you give May Maylands my love, an tell 'er wotever she do to keep 'er feet dry, an' don't forgit the message, an' say I'm so glad about it, though it's not much to speak of arter all!'"

"What was she so glad about?" demanded Solomon.

"I dun know, sir. She said no more in my 'earin' than that. I only comed in w'en she was a-goin' hout. P'r'aps it was about the findin' of 'er gloves in 'er pocket w'en she was a talkin' to missis, which she thought she'd lost, though they wasn't wuth pickin' up out of the—"

"Pooh! be off to your pots an' pans, child," said Flint, turning to his grandmother, who sat staring at the sausages with a blank expression. "You can't remember it, I s'pose, eh?"

Mrs Flint shook her head and began to eat.

"That's right, old 'ooman," said her grandson, patting her shoulder; "heap up the coals, mayhap it'll revive the memory."

But Mrs Flint's memory was not so easily revived. She became more abstracted than usual in her efforts to recover it. Supper passed and was cleared away. The old woman was placed in her easy chair in front of the fire with the cat—her chief evening amusement—on her knee; the letter-carrier went out for his evening walk; Dollops proceeded miscellaneously to clean up and smash the crockery, and May sat down to indite an epistle to the inmates of Rocky Cottage.

Suddenly Mrs Flint uttered an exclamation.

"May!" she cried, and hit the cat an involuntary slap on the face which sent it with a caterwaul of indignant surprise from her knee, "it wasn't a message, it was a letter!"

Having thus unburdened her mind the old woman relapsed into the previous century, from which she could not be recalled. May, therefore, made a diligent search for the letter, and found it at last under a cracked teapot on the mantelpiece, where Mrs Flint had told Miss Lillycrop to place it for safety.

It was short but satisfactory, and ran thus:—

"***Dearest May***,—I've been to see my friend 'in power,' and he says it's 'all right,' that you've only to get your brother over as soon as possible, and he'll see to getting him a situation. The enclosed paper is for his and your guidance. Excuse haste.—Your affectionate coz, ***Sarah Lillycrop***."

It need hardly be said that May Maylands finished her letter with increased satisfaction, and posted it that night.

Next morning she wrote out a telegram as follows:– "Let Phil come here *at once*. The application has been successful. Never mind clothes. Everything arranged. Best love to all."

The last clause was added in order to get the full value for her money. She naturally underscored the words "at once," forgetting for the moment that, in telegraphy, a word underlined counts as two words. She was therefore compelled to forego the emphasis.

This message she did not transmit through her own professional instrument, but gave it in at the nearest district office. It was at once shot bodily, with a bundle of other telegrams, through a pneumatic tube, and thus reached St. Martin's-le-Grand in one minute thirty-five seconds, or about twenty minutes before herself. Chancing to be the uppermost message, it was flashed off without delay, crossed the Irish Channel, and entered the office at Cork in about six minutes. Here there was a short delay of half-an-hour, owing to other telegrams which had prior claim to attention. Then it was flashed to the west coast, which it reached long before the letter posted on the previous night, and not long after May had seated herself at her own three-keyed instrument. But there, telegraphic speed was thwarted by unavoidable circumstances, the post-runner having already started on his morning rounds, and it was afternoon before the telegram was delivered at Rocky Cottage.

This was the telegram which had caused Philip Maylands so much anxiety. He read it at last with great relief, and at the same time with some degree of sadness, when he thought of leaving his mother "unprotected" in her lonely cottage by the sea.

Chapter Three.
Brilliant Prospects

Madge—whose proper name was Marjory Stevens—was absent when May's letter arrived the following day. On her return to the cottage she was taken into the committee which sat upon the subject of Phil's appointment.

"It's not a very grand appointment," said Mrs Maylands, with a sigh.

"Sure it's not an appointment at all yet, mother," returned Phil, who held in his hand the paper of instructions enclosed in May's letter. "Beggars, you know, mustn't be choosers; an' if I'm not a beggar, it's next thing to it I am. Besides, if the position of a boy-telegraph-messenger isn't very exalted in itself, it's the first step to better things. Isn't the first round of a ladder connected with the top round?"

"That's true, Phil," said Madge; "there's nothing to prevent your becoming Postmaster-General in course of time."

"Nothing whatever, that I know of," returned Phil.

"Perhaps somebody else knows of something that may prevent it," said his mother with an amused smile.

"Perhaps!" exclaimed the boy, with a twinkle in his eye; "don't talk to me of perhapses, I'm not to be damped by such things. Now, just consider this," he continued, looking over the paper in his hand, "here we have it all in print. I must apply for the situation in writin' no less. Well, I can do it in copperplate, if they please. Then my age must be not less than fourteen, and not more than fifteen."

"That suits to a T," said Madge.

"Yes; and, but hallo! what have we here?" said Phil, with a look of dismay.

"What is it?" asked his mother and Madge in the same breath, with looks of real anxiety.

"Well, well, it's too bad," said Phil slowly, "it says here that I'm to have 'no claim on the superannuation fund.' Isn't that hard?"

A smile from Mrs Maylands, and a laugh from Madge, greeted this. It was also received with an appalling yell from the baby, which caused mother and nurse to leap to the rescue. That sprout of mischief, in the course of an experimental tour of the premises, had climbed upon a side-table, had twisted his right foot into the loop of the window-curtains, had fallen back, and hung, head downwards, howling.

Having been comforted with bread and treacle, and put to bed, the committee meeting was resumed.

"Well, then," said Phil, consulting his paper again, "I give up the superannuation advantages. Then, as to wages, seven shillings a week, rising to eight shillings after one year's service. Why, it's a fortune! Any man at my age can live on sixpence a day easy—that's three-and-six, leaving three-and-six a week clear for you, mother. Then there's a uniform; just think o' that!"

"I wonder what sort of uniform it is," said Madge.

"A red coat, Madge, and blue trousers with silver lace and a brass helmet, for certain—"

"Don't talk nonsense, boy," interrupted Mrs Maylands, "but go on with the paper."

"Oh! there's nothing more worth mentioning," said Phil, folding the paper, "except that boy-messengers, if they behave themselves, have a chance of promotion to boy-sorterships, indoor-telegraph-messengerships, junior sorterships, and letter-carrierships, on their reaching the age of seventeen, and, I suppose, secretaryships, and postmaster-generalships, with a baronetcy, on their attaining the age of Methuselah. It's the very thing for me, mother, so I'll be off to-morrow if—"

Phil was cut short by the bursting open of the door and the sudden entrance of his friend George Aspel.

"Come, Phil," he cried, blazing with excitement, "there's a wreck in the bay. Quick! there's no time to lose."

The boy leaped up at once, and dashed out after his friend.

It was evening. The gale, which had blown for two days was only beginning to abate. Dark clouds were split in the western sky by gleams of fiery light as the sun declined towards its troubled ocean-bed.

Hurrying over the fields, and bending low to the furious blast, Aspel and Philip made their way to the neighbouring cliffs. But before we follow them, reader, to the wave-lashed shore, it is necessary, for the satisfactory elucidation of our tale, that we should go backward a short way in time, and bound forward a long way into space.

Chapter Four.
The Royal Mail Steamer

Out, far out on the mighty sea, a large vessel makes her way gallantly over the billows—homeward bound.

She is a Royal Mail steamer from the southern hemisphere—the *Trident*—and a right royal vessel she looks with her towering iron hull, and her taper masts, and her two thick funnels, and her trim rigging, and her clean decks—for she has an awning spread over them, to guard from smoke as well as from sun.

There is a large family on board of the *Trident*, and, like all other large families, its members display marked diversities of character. They also exhibit, like not a few large families, remarkable diversities of temper. Among them there are several human magnets with positive and negative poles, which naturally draw together. There are also human flints and steels which cannot come into contact without striking fire.

When the *Trident* got up steam, and bade adieu to the Southern Cross, there was no evidence whatever of the varied explosives and combustibles which she carried in her after-cabin. The fifty or sixty passengers who waved kerchiefs, wiped their eyes, and blew their noses, at friends on the receding shore, were unknown to each other; they were intent on their own affairs. When obliged to jostle each other they were all politeness and urbanity.

After the land had sunk on the horizon the intro-circumvolutions of a large family, or rather a little world, began. There was a birth on board, an engagement, ay, and a death; yet neither the interest of the first, nor the romance of the second, nor the solemnity of the last, could check for more than a few hours the steady development of the family characteristics of love, modesty, hate, frivolity, wisdom, and silliness.

A proportion of the passengers were, of course, nobodies, who aspired to nothing greater than to live and let live, and who went on the even tenor of their way, without much change, from first to last. Some of them were somebodies who, after a short time, began to expect the recognition of that fact. There were ambitious bodies who, in some cases, aimed too high, and there were unpretending-bodies who frequently aimed too low. There were also selfish-bodies who, of course, thought only of themselves—with, perhaps, a slight passing reference to those among the after-cabin passengers who could give them pleasure, and there were self-forgetting-bodies who turned their thoughts frequently on the ship, the crew, the sea, the solar system, the Maker of the universe. These also thought of their fellow-passengers in the fore-cabin, who of course had a little family or world of their own, with its similar joys, and sins, and sorrows, before the mast; and there were uproarious-bodies who kept the little world lively—sometimes a little too lively.

As the Royal Mail steamer rushed out to sea and was tossed on the ocean's breast, these human elements began to mix and effervesce and amalgamate, or fizz, burst, and go off, like squibs and crackers.

There was a Mrs Pods with three little girls, and a Mrs Tods with two little boys, whose first casual glance at each other was transmuted into a glare of undying and unreasoning hate. These ladies were exceptions to the rule of general urbanity before mentioned. Both had fiery faces, and each read the other through and through at a glance. There was a Miss Bluestocking who charmed some people, irritated others, frightened a few, and caused many to sneer. Her chief friend among the males was a young man named Mr Weakeyes, who had a small opinion of himself and a very receptive mind. Miss Troolove, among the ladies, was her chief friend. The strange misnomers which one meets with in society were also found in the little world in that steamer—that Royal Mail steamer we should say

—for, while we turn aside for a brief period to condescend upon these particulars, we would not have the reader forget that they have an indirect bearing on the main thread of our tale.

One misnamed lady was a Miss Mist, who, instead of being light, airy, and ethereal, as she ought to have been, weighed at least twelve stone six. But she sang divinely, was a great favourite with the young people on board, and would have been very much missed indeed if she had not been there. There was also a Mr Stout, who was the tallest and thinnest man in the ship.

On the other hand there were some whose names had been obviously the result of a sense of propriety in some one. Among the men who were rabidly set on distinguishing themselves in one way or another was a Major Beak. Now, why was it that this Major's nose was an aquiline of the most outrageous dimensions? Surely no one would argue that the nose grew to accommodate the name. Is it not more probable—nay, certain—that the name grew to accommodate the nose? Of course when Major Beak was born he was a minor, and his nose must have been no better than a badly-shaped button or piece of putty; but the Major's father had owned a tremendous aquiline nose, which at birth had also been a button, and so on we can proceed backwards until we drive the Beaks into that remote antiquity where historical fact begins and mythological theory terminates—that period when men were wont, it is supposed, to name each other intelligently with reference to personal characteristic or occupation.

So, too, Mr Bright—a hearty good-natured fellow, who drew powerfully to Major Beak and hated Miss Bluestocking—possessed the vigorous frame, animated air, and intelligent look which must have originated his name. But why go on? Every reader must be well acquainted with the characters of Mr Fiery and Mr Stiff, and Mrs Dashington, and her niece Miss Squeaker, and Colonel Blare who played the cornet, and Lieutenant Limp who sang tenor, and Dr Bassoon who roared bass, and Mrs Silky, who was all things to all men, besides being everything by turns and nothing long; and Lady Tower and Miss Gentle, and Mr Blurt and Miss Dumbbelle.

Suffice it to say that after a week or two the effervescing began to systematise, and the family became a living and complex electrical machine, whose sympathetic poles drew and stuck together, while the antagonistic poles kept up a steady discharge of sparks.

Then there arose a gale which quieted the machine a little, and checked the sparkling flow of wit and humour. When, during the course of the gale, a toppling billow overbalanced itself and fell inboard with a crash that nearly split the deck open, sweeping two of the quarterboats away, Mr Blurt, sitting in the saloon, was heard to exclaim:—

"'Pon my word, it's a terrible gale—enough almost to make a fellow think of his sins."

To which Mrs Tods, who sat beside him, replied, with a serious shake of her head, that it was indeed a very solemn occasion, and cast a look, not of undying hate but of gentle appeal at Mrs Pods, who sat opposite to her. And that lady, so far from resenting the look as an affront, met her in a liberal spirit; not only admitted that what Mrs Tods had said was equally just and true, but even turned her eyes upward with a look of resignation.

Well was it for Mrs Pods that she did so, for her resigned eyes beheld the globe of the cabin lamp pitched off its perch by a violent lurch and coming straight at her. Thus she had time to bow to circumstances, and allow the missile to pass over her head into the bosom of Lady Tower, where it was broken to atoms. The effect of mutual concession was so strong on Mrs Pods and Mrs Tods, that the former secretly repented having wished that one of Mrs Tods' little sons might fall down the hatchway and get maimed for life, while the latter silently regretted having hoped that one of Mrs Pods' little girls might fall overboard and be half-drowned.

But the storm passed away and the effervescence returned—though not, it is pleasing to add, with so much pungency as before. Thus, night and day, the steamer sped on over the southern seas, across the mystic line, and into the northern hemisphere, with the written records, hopes, commands, and wishes of a continent in the mail-bags in her hold, and leaving a beautiful milky-way behind her.

But there were more than letters and papers in these mail-bags. There were diamonds! Not indeed those polished and glittering gems whose proper resting-place is the brow of beauty, but those uncut pebbles that are turned up at the mines, which the ignorant would fling away or give to their children as playthings, but for which merchants and experts would give hundreds and thousands of pounds. A splendid prize that Royal Mail steamer would have been for the buccaneers of the olden time, but happily there are no buccaneers in these days—at least not in civilised waters. A famous pirate had, however, set his heart on those diamonds—even old Neptune himself.

This is how it happened.

Chapter Five.
Wreck and Rescue

One evening Miss Gentle and rotund little Mr Blurt were seated on two camp-stools near the stern, conversing occasionally and gazing in a dreamy frame of mind at the milky-way over which they appeared to travel.

"I wonder much, Miss Gentle," said Mr Blurt, "that you were not more afraid during that gale we had just before crossing the line?"

"I was a good deal afraid, though perhaps I did not show it. Your remark," she added, with an arch glance at her companion, "induces me to express some surprise that you seemed so much afraid."

"Afraid!" echoed Mr Blurt, with a smile; "why, I wasn't afraid—eh! was I?"

"I beg pardon," hastily explained Miss Gentle, "I don't mean frightened, of course; perhaps I should have said alarmed, or agitated—"

"Agitated!" cried Mr Blurt, pulling off his hat, and rubbing his bald head—he was prematurely bald, being only forty, though he looked like fifty—"agitated! Well, Miss Gentle, if you had diamonds —"

He stopped short, and looked at his companion with a confused smile.

"Diamonds, Mr Blurt," said Miss Gentle, slightly surprised; "what do you mean?"

"Well—ha! hem!" said the other, rubbing his forehead; "I see no reason why I should make a mystery of it. Since I have mentioned the thing, I may as well say that a man who happens to have a packet of diamonds in the mail-bags worth about twenty thousand pounds, may well be excused showing some little agitation lest the ship containing them should go to the bottom."

"I don't quite see that," returned Miss Gentle. "If the owner is on board, and goes to the bottom with his diamonds, it does not matter to *him*, does it?"

"Ah!" said Mr Blurt, "it is the inconsiderateness of youth which prompts that speech. (Miss Gentle looked about twenty, though she was in reality twenty-seven!) Do you think I have no anxiety for any one but myself? Suppose I have a wife and family in England who are dependent on these diamonds."

"Ah! that did not occur to me," returned the lady.

"Have you any objection to become a confidante?" asked Mr Blurt.

"None whatever," replied Miss Gentle, laughing.

"Well, then, to let you understand my feelings, I shall explain. I have a brother—a dear little fellow like mys— ah, excuse me; I did not mean *dear* like myself, but *little*. Well, he is a naturalist. He lives in London, and is not a very successful naturalist; indeed, I may say that he is an unfortunate and poor naturalist. Last year he failed. I sent him a small sum of money. He failed again. I sent him more money. Being a successful diamond-merchant, you see, I could afford to do so. We are both bachelors; my brother being much older than I am. At last I resolved to send home my whole fortune, and return to live with him, after winding up my affairs. I did so: made up my diamonds into a parcel, and sent it by mail as being the most secure method. Just after doing this, I got a letter informing me of my brother being dangerously ill, and begging me to come to England without delay. I packed up at once, left my partner to wind up the business, and so, here I am, on board the very steamer that carries my diamonds to England."

"How curious—and how interesting," said the sympathetic Miss Gentle.

Whatever more she intended to say was checked by a large parti-coloured ball hitting her on the cheek, and falling into her lap. It was followed up and captured with a shriek by the two little Todses and the three little Podses. At the same moment the gong sounded for tea. Thus the conversation came to a close.

The voyage of the *Trident*—with the exception of the gale before referred to—was prosperous until her arrival in the waters of the northern hemisphere. By that time the passengers had crystallised into groups, the nobodies and self-forgetting-bodies fraternised, and became more and more friendly as time went on. The uproarious-bodies got up concerts and charades. The hatred of Pods for Tods intensified. The arrogance of Major Beak, and the good-natured modesty of Mr Bright, increased. The noise of Dr Bassoon made the manner of Mr Silky quite agreeable by contrast, while the pride of Lady Tower and Mr Stiff formed a fine, deep-shade to the neutral tint of Miss Gentle, and the high-light of Miss Squeaker.

Gradually, however, feelings began to modify. The squalls and breezes that ruffled the human breasts on board the *Trident* moderated in exact proportion as that vessel penetrated and experienced the storms of what should have been named the *in*-temperate zone.

At last they drew near to the shores of Old England, and then there burst upon them a nor-wester, so violent that within the first hour the close-reefed topsails were blown to ribbons, and the foretopmast, with the jib-boom, was carried away. Of course this was a comparatively small matter in a steamer, but when it was afterwards discovered that the vessel had sprung a leak, things began to look more serious.

"It's only a trifle, Miss Gentle; don't alarm yourself. We can put that to rights in a few minutes," said Major Beak, with the confident air of a man whose nautical education had begun with Noah, and continued uninterruptedly down to the present time.

"He's a hooked-nosed humbug, Miss Gentle, an' knows nothing about it," growled the captain.

"Water rising rapidly in the hold, sir," said the carpenter, coming aft and touching his cap.

"Rig the pumps," said the captain, and the pumps were rigged. What is more to the purpose, they were wrought with a will by the crew; but in spite of their efforts the water continued to rise.

It might have done a student of human nature good to have observed the effect of this information on the passengers. Regarded as a whole the little world became perceptibly paler in the cheeks, and strikingly moderate in tone of voice and manner. Major Beak, in particular, began to talk low, and made no reference whatever to nautical matters, while Mrs Pods looked amiably—almost affectionately—at Mrs Tods.

Of course the passengers observed with breathless interest the action of the captain at this crisis. That important personage did his best to stop the leak, but only succeeded in checking it, and it required the constant exertions of the crew night and day at the pumps to reduce the water in the hold even by an inch. In these circumstances the young men among the passengers readily volunteered their services to assist the crew.

The gale continued and steadily increased. At night the ladies, and such of the passengers as were not employed at the pumps, retired to the cabin. Some of those who did not realise the danger of the situation went to bed. Others sat up in the saloon and consoled each other as best they might.

Morning came, but with it came no abatement of the storm. Water and sky seemed mingled together, and were of one uniform tone. It was obvious that the men at the pumps were utterly exhausted, and worst of all the water was beginning to gain slowly on them. The elderly men were now called on to help. It became necessary that all should work for their lives. Miss Bluestocking, who was muscular as well as masculine, rose to the occasion, and suggested that the ladies, so to speak, should man the pumps. Her suggestion was not acted on.

At this point Mr Bright, who had been toiling night and day like an inexhaustible giant, suggested that music might be called in to aid their flagging powers. It was well known that fatigued soldiers on a march are greatly re-invigorated by the band. Major Beak, soaking from head to foot with salt water, almost blind with fatigue and want of sleep, and with the perspiration dropping from the point of his enormous nose, plucked up heart to raise himself and assert that that was true. He further suggested that Colonel Blare might play to them on the cornet. But Colonel Blare was incapable by that time of playing even on a penny trumpet. Dr Bassoon was reduced so low as to be obliged to

half whisper his incapacity to sing bass, and as for the great tenor, Lieutenant Limp—a piece of tape was stiffer than his backbone.

"Let the ladies sing to us," sighed Mr Fiery, who was mere milk and water by that time. "I'm sure that Mrs Tods and Mrs Pods would be—"

A united shriek of protest from those ladies checked him.

"Or Miss Troolove," suggested Mr Blurt, on whose stout person the labour told severely.

The lady appealed to, after a little hesitation, began a hymn, but the time was found to be too slow, while the voice, although sweet and true, was too weak.

"Come, let us have one of the 'Christy Minstrels'," cried Mr Bright in a lively tone. "I'm certain Miss Mist can sing one."

Poor Miss Mist was almost hysterical with fear and prolonged anxiety, but she was an obliging creature. On being assured that the other ladies would support her, she struck up the "Land of Dixey," and was joined in the chorus with so much spirit that those who laboured at the pumps felt like giants refreshed. Explain it how we may, there can be no question that lively music has a wonderful power of sustaining the energies of mankind. With the return of cheerful sensations there revived in some of them the sense of the ludicrous, and it was all that they could do to refrain from laughter as they looked at the forlorn females huddled together, wrapped in rugs and cloaks, drenched to the skin, almost blown from their seats, ghastly with watching and fear, solemn-visaged in the last degree, and yet singing "Pop goes the weasel," and similar ditties, with all the energy of despair.

We paint no fanciful picture. We describe facts, and there is no saying how far the effect of that music might have helped in the saving of the ship, had not an event occurred which rendered further efforts unnecessary.

The captain, who had either lost his reckoning or his head, or both, was seen to apply himself too frequently to a case-bottle in the cabin, and much anxiety began to be felt as to his capacity to manage the vessel. Owing, also, to the length of time that thick weather had prevailed, no reliable observation had been obtained for several days. While the anxiety was at its height, there came a sudden and terrible shock, which caused the good ship to tremble. Then, for the first time, the roar of breakers was heard above the howling of the storm. As if to increase the horror of the scene, the fog lifted and revealed towering cliffs close ahead of them.

The transition from a comparatively hopeful state to one of absolute despair was overwhelming. The wild waves lifted the great hull of the vessel and let it down on the rocks with another crash, sending the masts over the side, while the passengers could only shriek in agony and cling to the wreck. Fortunately, in taking the ground, the vessel had kept straight, so that the forepart formed a comparative shelter from the waves that were fast breaking up the stern.

In the midst of all this confusion the first mate and Mr Bright seemed to keep quite cool. Between them they loaded and fired the bow signal-guns several times, by which means they brought a few fishermen and coastguard-men to the scene of disaster. And among these, as we have seen, were our heroes, Philip Maylands and George Aspel.

On arriving, these two found that the rocket apparatus was being set up on the beach.

"Phil," said Aspel in a quick low voice, "they'll want the lifeboat, and the wind carries the sound of their guns in the wrong direction. Run round, lad, and give the alarm. There's not a moment to lose."

The boy turned to run without a word of reply, but he could not help observing, as he turned, the compressed lips, the expanding nostrils, and the blazing eyes of his friend, who almost quivered with suppressed excitement.

For some time George Aspel stood beside the men of the coastguard while they set up their apparatus and fired the rocket. To offer assistance, he knew, would only retard them. The first rocket was carried to the right of the vessel, which was now clearly visible. The second went to the other side. There was a reef of rocks on that side which lay a few yards farther out from the beach than the

wreck. Over this reef the rocket-line fell and got entangled. Part of the shore-end of the apparatus also broke down. While the men were quickly repairing it Aspel said in a hurried manner:– "I'll clear the rocket-line," and away he darted like a greyhound.

"Hold ha-a-rd! foolish fellow, you'll be drownded," roared one of the men.

But Aspel heeded him not. Another minute and he was far away on the ledge of rock jutting out from a high cape—the point of which formed the outlying reef above referred to. He was soon at the extremity of the ledge beyond which nearly a hundred yards of seething foam heaved between him and the reef. In he plunged without a moment's halt. Going with the rush of the waves through the channel he struck diagonally across, and landed on the reef. Every billow swept over it, but not with sufficient force to prevent his struggling towards the rocket-line, which he eventually reached and cleared.

"Wasn't that nately done!" cried an enthusiastic young fisherman on the beach; "but, och! what is he up to now?"

A few seconds sufficed to give an answer to his question. Instead of letting go the line and returning, young Aspel tied it round his waist, and ran or waded to the extreme edge of the reef which was nearest to the wreck. The vessel lay partially to leeward of him now, with not much space between, but that space was a very whirlpool of tormented waves. Aspel gave no moment to thought. In his then state of mind he would have jumped down the throat of a cannon. Next instant he was battling with the billows, and soon reached the ship; but now his danger was greatest, for the curling waves threw him so violently against the side of the wreck that he almost lost consciousness and missed the lifebuoy which, with a rope attached, had been thrown to him by the anxious crew.

A great cry of anxiety arose at this, but Mr Bright had anticipated it, and the first mate was ready to aid him. Leaping into the sea with a rope round his waist, Mr Bright caught Aspel as he struggled past. The mate's powerful hands held them both fast. Some of the crew lent a ready hand, and in a few seconds George Aspel was hauled on board. He had quite recovered by that time, and replied with a smile to the ringing cheer that greeted him. The cheer was echoed again and again by the men on shore. Major Beak attempted to grasp his hand, but failed. Mr Blurt, feeling an irresistible impulse, tried to embrace him, but was thrust aside, fell, and rolled into the lee-scuppers.

Scattering the people aside Aspel sprang on the bulwarks at the bow, and, snatching Mr Stiff's travelling-cap from his head, held it up as a signal to the men on shore.

Well did the youth know what to do in the circumstances, for many a time had he talked it over with the men of the coastguard in former days. On receiving an answering signal from the shore he began to haul on the rocket-line. The men in charge had fastened to it a block, or pulley, with two tails to it; a line was rove through this block. The instant the block reached his hands Aspel sprang with it to the stump of the foremast, and looking round cried, "Who'll lend a—"

"Here you are," said Mr Bright, embracing the mast with both arms and stooping,—for Mr Bright also knew well what to do.

George Aspel leaped on his shoulders and stood up. Mr Bright then raised himself steadily, and thus the former was enabled to tie the block by its two tails to the mast at a height of about eleven feet. The line rove through the block was the "whip," which was to be manipulated by those on shore. It was a double, and, of course, an endless line.

Again the signal was given as before, and the line began to run. Very soon a stout hawser or cable was seen coming out to the wreck. Aspel fastened the end of this to the mast several feet below the pulley.

A third time the signal was given.

"Now then, ladies, stand by to go ashore, and let's have no hesitation. It's life or death with us all," said the mate in a voice so stern that the crowd of anxious and somewhat surprised females prepared to obey.

Presently a ring-shaped lifebuoy, with something like a pair of short breeches dangling from it, came out from the shore, suspended to a block which traversed on the cable, and was hauled out by means of the whip.

A seaman was ordered to get into it. Mrs Tods, who stood beside the mate, eyeing the process somewhat curiously, felt herself firmly but gently seized.

"Come, Mrs Tods, step into it. He'll take care of you—no fear."

"Never! never! without my two darlings," shrieked Mrs Tods.

But Mrs Tods was tenderly lifted over the side and placed in the powerful arms of the sailor. Her sons instantly set up a howl and rushed towards her. But Mr Bright had anticipated this also, and, with the aid of a seaman, arrested them. Meanwhile, the signal having been given, the men on the land pulled in the cradle, and Mrs Tods went shrieking over the hissing billows to the shore. A few minutes more and out came the cradle again.

"Now, then, for the two 'darlings'," growled the mate.

They were forcibly put over the side and sent howling to their mother.

After them went Mrs Pods, who, profiting by the experience of her friend, made no resistance. This however, was more than counterbalanced by the struggles of *her* three treasures, who immediately followed.

But the shades of evening were now falling, and it was with an anxious feeling at his heart that the mate surveyed the cluster of human beings who had yet to be saved, while each roaring wave that struck the wreck seemed about to break it up.

Suddenly there arose a cry of joy, and, looking seaward, the bright white and blue form of the lifeboat was seen coming in like an angel of light on the crests of the foaming seas.

We may not stay to describe what followed in detail. The lifeboat's anchor was let go to windward of the wreck, and the cable paid out until the boat forged under the vessel's lee, where it heaved on the boiling foam so violently that it was difficult to prevent it being stove in, and still more difficult to get the women and children passed on board. Soon the lifeboat was full—as full as she could hold—and many passengers yet remained to be rescued.

The officer in charge of the mail-bags had got them up under the shelter of the companion-hatch ready to be put into the boat, but human life was of more value than letters—ay, even than diamonds.

"Now, then, one other lady. Only room for one," roared the mate, who stood with pistol in hand near the gangway.

Miss Gentle tried to get to the front, but Lady Tower stepped in before her.

"Never mind, little woman," said Mr Bright, encouragingly, "the rocket apparatus is still at work, and the wreck seems hard and fast on the reef. You'll get off next trip."

"But I can't bear to think of going by that awful thing," said Miss Gentle, shuddering and sheltering herself from the blinding spray under the lee of Bright's large and powerful body.

"Well, then," he returned, cheerfully, "the lifeboat will soon return; you'll go ashore with the mails."

Mr Bright was right about the speedy return of the lifeboat with her gallant crew, who seemed to rejoice in danger as if in the presence of a familiar friend, but he was wrong about the wreck being hard and fast. The rising tide shifted her a little, and drove her a few feet farther in. When the other women and children were got into the boat, Mr Bright, who stood near the mail-bags looking anxiously at them, left his position for a moment to assist Miss Gentle to the gangway. She had just been safely lowered when a tremendous wave lifted the wreck and hurled it so far over the reef that the fore part of the vessel was submerged in a pool of deep water lying between it and the shore.

Mr Bright looked back and saw the hatchway disappearing. He made a desperate bound towards it, but was met by the rush of the crew, who now broke through the discipline that was no longer needed, and jumped confusedly into the lifeboat on the sea, carrying Bright along with them. On

recovering his feet he saw the ship make a final plunge forward and sink to the bottom, so that nothing was left above water but part of the two funnels. The splendid lifeboat was partly drawn down, but not upset. She rose again like a cork, and in a few seconds freed herself from water through the discharging tubes in her bottom. The men struggling in the water were quickly rescued, and the boat, having finished her noble work, made for the shore amid cheers of triumph and joy.

Among all the passengers in that lifeboat there was only one whose visage expressed nothing but unutterable woe.

"Why, Mr Bright," said Miss Gentle, who clung to one of the thwarts beside him, and was struck by his appearance, "you seem to have broken down all at once. What has happened?"

"The mail-bags!" groaned Mr Bright.

"Why do you take so deep an interest in the mails?" asked Miss Gentle.

"Because I happen to be connected with the post-office; and though I have no charge of them, I can't bear to see them lost," said Mr Bright with another groan, as he turned his eyes wistfully—not to the shore, at which all on board were eagerly gazing—but towards the wreck of the Royal Mail steamer *Trident*, the top of whose funnels rose black and defiant in the midst of the raging waves.

Chapter Six.
Treats of Poverty, Pride, and Fidelity

Behind a very fashionable square in a very unfashionable little street, in the west end of London, dwelt Miss Sarah Lillycrop.

That lady's portion in this life was a scanty wardrobe, a small apartment, a remarkably limited income, and a tender, religious spirit. From this it will be seen that she was rich as well as poor.

Her age was, by a curious coincidence, exactly proportioned to her income—the one being forty pounds, and the other forty years. She added to the former, with difficulty, by teaching, and to the latter, unavoidably, by living.

By means of a well-known quality styled economy, she more than doubled her income, and by uniting prayer with practice and a gracious mien she did good, as it were, at the rate of five hundred, or five thousand, a year.

It could not be said, however, that Miss Lillycrop lived well in the ordinary sense of that expression.

To those who knew her most intimately it seemed a species of standing miracle that she contrived to exist at all, for she fed chiefly on toast and tea. Her dietary resulted in an attenuated frame and a thread-paper constitution. Occasionally she indulged in an egg, sometimes even in a sausage. But, morally speaking, Miss Lillycrop lived well, because she lived for others. Of course we do not mean to imply that she had no regard for herself at all. On the contrary, she rejoiced in creature comforts when she had the chance, and laid in daily "one ha'p'orth of milk" all for herself. She paid for it, too, which is more than can be said of every one. She also indulged herself to some extent in the luxury of brown sugar at twopence-halfpenny a pound, and was absolutely extravagant in hot water, which she not only imbibed in the form of weak tea and *eau sucrée* hot, but actually took to bed with her every night in an india-rubber bottle. But with the exception of these excusable touches of selfishness, Miss Lillycrop ignored herself systematically, and devoted her time, talents, and means, to the welfare of mankind.

Beside a trim little tea-table set for three, she sat one evening with her hands folded on her lap, and her eyes fixed on the door as if she expected it to make a sudden and unprovoked assault on her. In a few minutes her expectations were almost realised, for the door burst open and a boy burst into the room with— "Here we are, Cousin Lillycrop."

"Phil, darling, at last!" exclaimed Cousin Lillycrop, rising in haste.

Philip Maylands offered both hands, but Cousin Lillycrop declined them, seized him round the neck, kissed him on both cheeks, and thrust him down into an easy chair. Then she retired into her own easy chair and gloated over him.

"How much you've grown—and so handsome, dear boy," murmured the little lady.

"Ah! then, cousin, it's the blarney stone you've been kissing since I saw you last!"

"No, Phil, I've kissed nothing but the cat since I saw you last. I kiss that delicious creature every night on the forehead before going to bed, but the undemonstrative thing does not seem to reciprocate. However, I cannot help that."

Miss Lillycrop was right, she could not help it. She was overflowing with the milk of human kindness, and, rather than let any of that valuable liquid go to waste, she poured some of it, not inappropriately, on the thankless cat.

"I'm glad you arrived before your sister, Phil," said Miss Lillycrop. "Of course I asked her here to meet you. I am *so* sorry the dear girl cannot live with me: I had fully meant that she should, but my little rooms are so far from the Post-Office, where her work is, you know, that it could not be

managed. However, we see each other as often as possible, and she visits sometimes with me in my district. What has made you so late, Phil?"

"I expected to have been here sooner, cousin," replied Phil, as he took off his greatcoat, "but was delayed by my friend, George Aspel, who has come to London with me to look after a situation that has been promised him by Sir James Clubley, M.P. for I forget where. He's coming here to-night."

"Who, Sir James Clubley?"

"No," returned the boy, laughing, "George Aspel. He went with Mr Blurt to a hotel to see after a bed, and promised to come here to tea. I asked him, knowing that you'd be glad to receive any intimate friend of mine. Won't you, Coz?"

Miss Lillycrop expressed and felt great delight at the prospect of meeting Phil's friend, but the smallest possible shade of anxiety was mingled with the feeling as she glanced at her very small and not too heavily-loaded table.

"Besides," continued Phil, "George is such a splendid fellow, and, as maybe you remember, lived with us long ago. May will be glad to meet him; and he saved Mr Blurt's life, so you see—"

"Saved Mr Blurt's life!" interrupted Miss Lillycrop.

"Yes, and he saved ever so many more people at the same time, who would likely have been all lost if he hadn't swum off to 'em with the rocket-line, and while he was doing that I ran off to call out the lifeboat, an' didn't they get her out and launch her with a will—for you see I had to run three miles, and though I went like the wind they couldn't call out the men and launch her in a minute, you know; but there was no delay. We were in good time, and saved the whole of 'em—passengers and crew."

"So, then, *you* had a hand in the saving of them," said Miss Lillycrop.

"Sure I had," said Phil with a flush of pleasure at the remembrance of his share in the good work; "but I'd never have thought of the lifeboat, I was so excited with what was going on, if George hadn't sent me off. He was bursting with big thoughts, and as cool as a cucumber all the time. I do hope he'll get a good situation here. It's in a large East India house, I believe, with which Sir James Clubley is connected, and Sir James was an old friend of George's father, and was very kind to him in his last days, but they say he's a proud and touchy old fellow."

As Phil spoke, the door, which had a tendency to burst that evening, opened quickly, though not so violently as before, and May Maylands stood before them, radiant with a glow of expectation.

Phil sprang to meet her. After the first effusions were over, the brother and sister sat down to chat of home in the Irish far-west, while Miss Lillycrop retired to a small kitchen, there to hold solemn converse with the smallest domestic that ever handled broom or scrubbing-brush.

"Now, Tottie, you must run round to the baker directly, and fetch another loaf."

"What! a whole one, ma'am?" asked the small domestic—in comparison with whom Dollops was a giantess.

"Yes, a whole one. You see there's a young gentleman coming to tea whom I did not expect—a grand tall gentleman too, and a hero, who has saved people from wrecks, and swims in the sea in storms like a duck, and all that sort of thing, so he's sure to have a tremendous appetite. You will also buy another pennyworth of brown sugar, and two more pats of butter."

Tottie opened her large blue eyes in amazement at the extent of what she deemed a reckless order, but went off instantly to execute it, wondering that any hero, however regardless of the sea or storms, could induce her poor mistress to go in for such extravagance, after having already provided a luxurious meal for three.

It might have seemed unfair to send such a child even to bed without an attendant. To send her into the crowded streets alone in the dusk of evening, burdened with a vast commission, and weighted with coppers, appeared little short of inhumanity. Nevertheless Miss Lillycrop did it with an air of perfect confidence, and the result proved that her trust was not misplaced.

Tottie had been gone only a few seconds when George Aspel appeared at the door and was admitted by Miss Lillycrop, who apologised for the absence of her maid.

Great was the surprise and not slight the embarrassment of May Maylands when young Aspel was ushered into the little room, for Phil had not recovered sufficiently from the first greetings to mention him. Perhaps greater was the surprise of Miss Lillycrop when these two, whom she had expected to meet as old playmates, shook hands rather stiffly.

"Sure, I forgot, May, to tell you that George was coming—"

"I am very glad to see him," interrupted May, recovering herself, "though I confess to some surprise that he should have forsaken Ireland so soon, after saying to me that it was a perfect paradise."

Aspel, whose curly flaxen hair almost brushed the ceiling, brought himself down to a lower region by taking a chair, while he said with a meaning smile—

"Ah! Miss Maylands, the circumstances are entirely altered now—besides," he added with a sudden change of tone and manner, "that inexorable man-made demon, Business, calls me to London."

"I hope Business intends to keep you here," said Miss Lillycrop, busying herself at the tea-table.

"That remains to be seen," returned Aspel. "If I find that—"

"The loaf and butter, ma'am," said Tottie, announcing these articles at the door as if they were visitors.

"Hush, child; leave them in the kitchen till I ask for them," said Miss Lillycrop with a quiet laugh. "My little maid is *such* an original, Mr Aspel."

"She's a very beautiful, though perhaps somewhat dishevelled, original," returned Aspel, "of which one might be thankful to possess even an inferior copy."

"Indeed you are right," rejoined Miss Lillycrop with enthusiasm; "she's a perfect little angel—come, draw in your chairs; closer this way, Phil, so—a perfect little angel—you take sugar I think? Yes. Well, as I was saying, the strange thing about her was that she was born and bred—thus far—in one of the worst of the back slums of London, and her father is an idle drunkard. I fear, also, a criminal."

"How strange and sad," said Aspel, whose heart was easily touched and sympathies roused by tales of sorrow. "But how comes it that she has escaped contamination?"

"Because she has a good—by which I mean a Christian—mother. Ah! Mr Aspel, you have no idea how many unknown and unnoticed gems there are half smothered in the moral mud and filth of London. It is a wonderful—a tremendous city;—tremendous because of the mighty influences for good as well as evil which are constantly at work in it. There is an army of moral navvies labouring here, who are continually unearthing these gems, and there are others who polish them. I have the honour to be a member of this army. Dear little Tottie is one of the gems, and I mean, with God's blessing, to polish her. Of course, I can't get her all to myself," continued Miss Lillycrop with a sigh, "for her mother, who is a washer-woman, won't part with her, but she has agreed to come and work for me every morning for a few hours, and I can get her now and then of an evening. My chief regret is that the poor thing has a long long way to walk from her miserable home to reach me. I don't know how she will stand it. She has been only a few days in my service."

As the unpolished diamond entered at this moment with a large plate of buttered toast, Miss Lillycrop changed the subject abruptly by expressing a hope that May Maylands had not to go on late duty that evening.

"Oh, no; it's not my turn for a week yet," said May.

"It seems to me very hard that they should work you night and day," said Phil, who had been quietly drinking in new ideas with his tea while his cousin discoursed.

"But they don't work us night and day, Phil," returned May, "it is only the telegraphs that do that. We of the female staff work in relays. If we commence at 8 a.m. we work till 4 p.m. If we begin at nine we work till five, and so on—eight p.m. being our latest hour. Night duty is performed by men, who are divided into two sections, and it is so arranged that each man has an alternate long and short duty—working three hours one night and thirteen hours the next. We are allowed half-an-hour

for dinner, which we eat in a dining-hall in the place. Of course we dine in relays also, as there are above twelve hundred of us, male and female."

"How many?" asked George Aspel in surprise.

"Above twelve hundred."

"Why, that would make two pretty fair regiments of soldiers," said Aspel.

"No, George," said Phil, "it's two regiments of pretty fair soldiers that they'd make."

"Can't you hold your tongue, man, an' let May talk?" retorted Aspel.

"So, you see," continued May, "that amongst us we manage to have the telegraphic communication of the kingdom well attended to."

"But tell me, May," said Phil, "do they really suck messages through tubes two miles long?"

"Indeed they do, Phil. You see, the General Post-Office in London is in direct communication with all the chief centres of the kingdom, such as Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, Cork, etcetera, so that all messages sent from London must pass through the great hall at St. Martin's-le-Grand. But there are many offices in London for receiving telegrams besides the General Post-Office. Suppose that one of these offices in the city receives numerous telegrams every hour all day long,—instead of transmitting these by wire to the General Post-Office, to be re-distributed to their various destinations, they are collected and put bodily into cylindrical leather cases, which are inserted into pneumatic metal tubes. These extend to our central office, and through them the telegrams are sucked just as they are written. The longest tube, from the West Strand, is about two miles, and each bundle or cylinder of telegrams takes about three minutes to travel. There are upwards of thirty such tubes, and the suction business is done by two enormous fifty-horse-power steam-engines in the basement of our splendid building. There is a third engine, which is kept ready to work in case of a break-down, or while one of the others is being repaired."

"Ah! May, wouldn't there be the grand blow-up if you were to burst your boilers in the basement?" said Phil.

"No doubt there would. But steam is not the only terrible agent at work in that same basement. If you only saw the electric batteries there that generate the electricity which enables us up-stairs to send our messages flying from London to the Land's End or John o' Groat's, or the heart of Ireland! You must know that a far stronger battery is required to send messages a long way than a short. Our Battery Inspector told me the other day that he could not tell exactly the power of all the batteries united, but he had no doubt it was sufficient to blow the entire building into the middle of next week. Now you know, Phil, it would require a pretty severe shock to do that, wouldn't it? Fortunately the accidental union of all the batteries is impossible. But you'll see it for yourself soon. And it will make you open your eyes when you see a room with three miles of shelving, on which are ranged twenty-two thousand battery-jars."

"My dear," said Miss Lillycrop, with a mild smile, "you will no doubt wonder at my ignorance, but I don't understand what you mean by a battery-jar."

"It is a jar, cousin, which contains the substances which produce electricity."

"Well, well," rejoined Miss Lillycrop, dipping the sugar-spoon into the slop-bowl in her abstraction, "this world and its affairs is to me a standing miracle. Of course I must believe that what you say is true, yet I can no more understand how electricity is made in a jar and sent flying along a wire for some hundreds of miles with messages to our friends than I can comprehend how a fly walks on the ceiling without tumbling off."

"I'm afraid," returned May, "that you would require to study a treatise on Telegraphy to comprehend that, but no doubt Phil will soon get it so clearly into his head as to be able to communicate it to you.—You'll go to the office with me on Monday, won't you, Phil?"

"Of course I will—only too glad to begin at once."

"My poor boy," said May, putting her hand on her brother's arm, "it's not a very great beginning of life to become a telegraph-messenger."

"Ah! now, May, that's not like yourself," said Phil, who unconsciously dropped—perhaps we should say rose—to a more decided brogue when he became tender or facetious. "Is it rousin' the pride of me you'd be afther? Don't they say that any ould fiddle is good enough to learn upon? Mustn't I put my foot on the first round o' the ladder if I want to go up higher? If I'm to be Postmaster-General mustn't I get a general knowledge of the post from the bottom to the top by goin' through it? It's only men like George there that can go slap over everything at a bound."

"Come, Phil, don't be impertinent," said George, "it's a bad sign in one so young. Will you convoy me a short way? I must go now."

He rose as he spoke and bade Miss Lillycrop good-evening. That lady expressed an earnest hope that he would come to see her frequently, and he promised to do so as often as he could find time. He also bade May good-evening because she was to spend the night with her cousin, but May parted from him with the same touch of reserve that marked their meeting. He resented this by drawing himself up and turning away somewhat coldly.

"Now, Phil," he said, almost sternly, on reaching the street, "here's a letter to Sir James Clubley which I want to read to you.—Listen."

By the light of a lamp he read:—

> "***Dear Sir***,—I appreciate your kindness in offering me the situation mentioned in your letter of the 4th, and especially your remarks in reference to my late father, who was indeed worthy of esteem. I shall have pleasure in calling on you on hearing that you are satisfied with the testimonials herewith enclosed.—I am, etcetera."

"Now, Phil, will that do?"

"Do? of course it will. Nothing could be better. Only—"

"Well, what?"

"Don't you think that you might call without waiting to hear his opinion of your testimonials?"

"No, Phil, I don't," replied the other in a slightly petulant tone; "I don't feel quite sure of the spirit in which he referred to my dear father. Of course it was kind and all that, but it was slightly patronising, and my father was an infinitely superior man to himself."

"Well, I don't know," said Phil; "if you're going to accept a favour of him you had better try to feel and act in a friendly way, but of course it would never do to encourage him in pride."

"Well then, I'll send it," said Aspel, closing the letter; "do you know where I can post it?"

"Not I. Never was here before. I've only a vague idea of how I got here, and mustn't go far with you lest I lose myself."

At that moment Miss Lillycrop's door opened and little Tottie issued forth.

"Ah! she will help us.—D'you know where the Post-Office is, Tottie?"

"Yes, sir, it's at the corner of the street, Miss Lillycrop says."

"Which direction?"

"That one, I think."

"Here, I'm going the other way: will you post this letter for me?"

"Yes, sir," said Tottie.

"That's a good girl; here's a penny for you."

"Please, sir, that's not a penny," said the child, holding out the half-crown which Aspel had put in her hand.

"Never mind; keep it."

Tottie stood bereft of speech at the youth's munificence, as he turned away from her with a laugh.

Now, when Tottie Bones said that she knew where the post was, she did so because her mistress had told her, among other pieces of local information, that the pillar letter-box stood at the corner of the street and was painted red; but as no occasion had occurred since her arrival for the posting

of a letter, she had not yet seen the pillar with her own eyes. The corner of the street, however, was so plain a direction that no one except an idiot could fail to find it. Accordingly Tottie started off to execute her mission.

Unfortunately—or the reverse, as the case may be—streets have usually two corners. The child went, almost as a matter of course, to the wrong one, and there she found no pillar. But she was a faithful messenger, and not to be easily balked. She sought diligently at that corner until she really did find a pillar, in a retired angle. Living, as she did, chiefly in the back slums of London, where literary correspondence is not much in vogue, Tottie had never seen a pillar letter-box, or, if she had, had not realised its nature. Miss Lillycrop had told her it was red, with a slit in it. The pillar she had found was red to some extent with rust, and it unquestionably had a slit in it where, in days gone by, a handle had projected. It also had a spout in front. Tottie had some vague idea that this letter-box must have been made in imitation of a pump, and that the spout was a convenient step to enable small people like herself to reach the slit. Only, she thought it queer that they should not have put the spout in front of the pillar under the slit, instead of behind it. She was still more impressed with this when, after having twice got on the spout, she twice fell off in futile efforts to reach round the pump with her small arms.

Baffled, but not defeated, Tottie waited till some one should pass who could put the letter in for her, but in that retired angle no one passed. Suddenly her sharp eyes espied a brickbat. She set it up on end beside the pump, mounted it, stood on tip-toe, and, stretching her little body to the very uttermost, tipped the letter safely in. The brickbat tipped over at the same instant and sent her headlong to the ground. But this was no novelty to Tottie. Regardless of the fall, she gathered herself up, and, with the light heart of one who has gained a victory in the performance of duty, ran off to her miserable home in the back slums.

Chapter Seven.
Phil Begins Life, and Makes a Friend

Some time after the small tea-party described in our last chapter, Philip Maylands was invested with all the dignity, privileges, and emoluments of an "Out-door Boy Telegraph Messenger" in the General Post-Office. He rejoiced in the conscious independence of one who earns his own livelihood, is a burden to nobody, and has something to spare. He enjoyed the privilege of wearing a grey uniform, of sitting in a comfortable room with a huge fire in the basement of the office, and of walking over a portion of London as the bearer of urgent and no doubt all-important news. He also enjoyed a salary of seven shillings sterling a week, and was further buoyed up with the hope of an increase to eight shillings at the end of a year. His duties, as a rule, began at eight each morning, and averaged nine hours.

We have said that out of his vast income he had something to spare. This, of course, was not much, but owing to the very moderate charge for lodging made by Solomon Flint—with whom and his sister he took up his abode—the sum was sufficient to enable him, after a few months, to send home part of his first year's earnings to his mother. He did this by means of that most valuable institution of modern days a Post-Office order, which enables one to send small sums of money, at a moderate charge, and with perfect security, not only all over the kingdom, but over the greater part of the known world.

It would have been interesting, had it been possible, to have entered into Phil's feelings on the occasion of his transacting this first piece of financial business. Being a country-bred boy, he was as bashful about it as if he had been only ten years old. He doubted, first, whether the clerk would believe him in earnest when he should demand the order. Then, when he received the form to fill up, he had considerable hesitation lest he should fill in the blanks erroneously, and when the clerk scanned the slip and frowned, he felt convinced that he had done so.

"You've put only Mrs Maylands," said the clerk.

"*Only* Mrs Maylands!" thought Phil; "does the man want me to add 'widow of the Reverend James Maylands, and mother of all the little Maylands?'" but he only said, "Sure, sir, it's to her I want to send the money."

"Put down her Christian name;" said the clerk; "order can't be drawn without it."

Phil put down the required name, handed over the money, received back the change, inserted the order into a previously prepared letter, posted the same, and walked away from that office as tall as his friend George Aspel—if not taller—in sensation.

Let us now follow our hero to the boy-messengers' room in the basement of St. Martin's-le-Grand.

Entering one morning after the delivery of a telegram which had cost him a pretty long walk, Phil proceeded to the boys' hall, and took his seat at the end of the row of boys who were awaiting their turn to be called for mercurial duty. Observing a very small telegraph-boy in a scullery off the hall, engaged in some mysterious operations with a large saucepan, from which volumes of steam proceeded, he went towards him. By that time Phil had become pretty well acquainted with the faces of his comrades, but this boy he had not previously met with. The lad was stooping over a sink, and carefully holding in the contents of the pan with its lid, while he strained off the boiling water.

"Sure I've not seen *you* before?" remarked Phil.

The boy turned up a sharp-featured, but handsome and remarkably intelligent face, and, with a quick glance at Phil, said, "Well, now, any man might know you for an Irishman by your impudence, even if you hadn't the brogue."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Phil, with an amused smile.

"Mean!" echoed the boy, with the most refined extract of insolence on his pretty little face; "I mean that small though I am, surely I'm big enough to be *seen*."

"Well," returned Phil, with a laugh, "you know what I mean—that I haven't seen you before to-day."

"Then w'y don't you say what you mean? How d'you suppose a man can understand you unless you speak in plain terms? You won't do for the GPO if you can't speak the Queen's English. We want sharp fellows here, we do. So you'd better go back to Owld Ireland, avic cushla mavourneen—there, put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Whether it was the distraction of the boy's mind, or the potent working of his impertinence, we know not, but certain it is that his left hand slipped somehow, and a round ball, with a delicious smell, fell out of the pot. The boy half caught it, and wildly yet cleverly balanced it on the lid, but it would have rolled next moment into the sink, if Phil had not made a dart forward, caught it like a football, and bowled it back into the pot.

"Well done! splendidly done!" cried the boy, setting down his pot. "Arrah! Pat," he added, mocking Phil's brogue, and holding out his hand, "you're a man after my own heart; give me your flipper, and let us swear eternal friendship over this precious goblet."

Of course Phil cheerfully complied, and the friendship thus auspiciously begun afterwards became strong and lasting. So it is all through the course of life. At every turn we are liable to meet with those who shall thenceforth exercise a powerful influence on our characters, lives, and affections, and on whom our influence shall be strong for good or evil.

"What's your name?" asked Phil; "mine is Philip Maylands."

"Mine's Peter Pax," answered the small boy, returning to his goblet; "but I've no end of *aliases*—such as Mouse, Monkey, Spider, Snipe, Imp, and Little 'un. Call me what you please, it's all one to me, so as you don't call me too late for dinner."

"And what have you got there, Pax?" asked Phil, referring to the pot.

"A plum-pudding."

"Do two or three of you share it?"

"Certainly not," replied the boy.

"What! you don't mean to say you can eat it all yourself for dinner?"

"The extent of my ability in the disposal of wittles," answered Pax, "I have never fairly tested. I think I could eat this at one meal, though I ain't sure, but it's meant to serve me all day. You see I find a good, solid, well-made plum-pudding, with not too much suet, and a moderate allowance of currants and raisins, an admirable squencher of appetite. It's portable too, and keeps well. Besides, if I can't get through with it at supper, it fries up next mornin' splendidly.—Come, I'll let you taste a bit, an' that's a favour w'ich I wouldn't grant to every one."

"No, thank 'ee, Pax. I'm already loaded and primed for the forenoon, but I'll sit by you while you eat, and chat."

"You're welcome," returned Pax, "only don't be cheeky, Philip, as I can't meet you on an equal footing w'en I'm at grub."

"I'll be careful, Pax; but don't call me Philip—call me Phil."

"I will, Phil; come along, Phil; 'Come fill up my cup, come fill up my can'—that sort o' thing you understand, Phil, me darlint?"

There was such a superhuman amount of knowing presumption in the look and air of Pax, as he poked Phil in the ribs and winked, that the latter burst into laughter, in which however he was not joined by his companion, who with the goblet in one hand and the other thrust into his pocket, stood regarding his new friend with a pitiful expression till he recovered, and then led him off to a confabulation which deepened their mutual esteem.

That same evening a gentleman called at the Post-Office, desiring to see Philip Maylands. It turned out to be George Aspel.

"Why, George, what brings you here?" said Phil in surprise.

"I chanced to be in the neighbourhood," answered Aspel, "and came to ask the address of that little creature who posted my letter the other night. I want to see her. She does not go to your cousin's, I know, till morning, and I must see her to-night, to make sure that she *did* post the letter, for, d'you know, I've had no reply from Sir James, and I can't rest until I ascertain whether my letter was posted. Can you tell me where she lives, Phil?"

At that moment Phil was summoned for duty. Giving his friend the address hastily, he left him.

George Aspel passed the front of the General Post-Office on his way to visit Tottie Bones, and, observing a considerable bustle going on there, he stopped to gaze, for George had an inquiring mind. Being fresh from the country, his progress through the streets of London, as may be well understood, was slow. It was also harassing to himself and the public, for when not actually standing entranced in front of shop-windows his irresistible tendency to look in while walking resulted in many collisions and numerous apologies. At the General Post-Office he avoided the stream of human beings by getting under the lee of one of the pillars of the colonnade, whence he could look on undisturbed.

Up to six o'clock letters are received in the letter-box at St. Martin's-le-Grand for the mails which leave London at eight each evening. The place for receiving book-parcels and newspapers, however, closes half-an-hour sooner. Before five a brass slit in the wall suffices for the public, but within a few minutes of the half-hour the steady run of men and boys towards it is so great that the slit becomes inadequate. A trap-door is therefore opened in the pavement, and a yawning abyss displayed which communicates by an inclined plane with the newspaper regions below. Into this abyss everything is hurled.

When Aspel took up his position people were hurrying towards the hole, some with single book-parcels, or a few newspapers, others with armfuls, and many with sackfuls. In a few minutes the rapid walk became a run. Men, boys, and girls sprang up the steps—occasionally tumbled up, —jostled each other in their eager haste, and tossed, dropped, hurled, or poured their contributions into the receptacle, which was at last fed so hastily that it choked once or twice, and a policeman, assisted by an official, stuffed the literary matter down its throat—with difficulty, however, owing to the ever-increasing stream of contributors to the feast. The trap-door, when open, formed a barrier to the hole, which prevented the too eager public from being posted headlong with their papers. One youth staggered up the steps under a sack so large that he could scarcely lift it over the edge of the barrier without the policeman's aid. Him Aspel questioned, as he was leaving with the empty sack, and found that he was the porter of one of the large publishing firms of the city.

Others he found came from advertising agents with sacks of circulars, etcetera.

Soon the minutes were reduced to seconds, and the work became proportionally fast and furious; sacks, baskets, hampers, trays of material were emptied violently into that insatiable maw, and in some cases the sacks went in along with their contents. But owners' names being on these, they were recoverable elsewhere.

Suddenly, yet slowly, the opening closed. The monster was satisfied for that time; it would not swallow another morsel, and one or two unfortunates who came late with large bags of newspapers and circulars had to resort to the comparatively slow process of cramming their contents through the narrow slit above, with the comforting certainty that they had missed that post.

Turning from this point George Aspel observed that the box for letters—closing, as we have said, half an hour later than that for books and papers—was beginning to show symptoms of activity. At a quarter to six the long metal slit suddenly opened up like a gaping mouth, into which a harlequin could have leaped easily. Through it Aspel could look—over the heads of the public—and see the officials inside dragging away great baskets full of letters to be manipulated in the mysterious realms inside. At five minutes to six the rush towards this mouth was incessant, and the operations at the newspaper-tomb were pretty much repeated, though, of course, the contents of bags and baskets were not quite so ponderous. At one side of the mouth stood an official in a red coat, at the other a

policeman. These assisted the public to empty their baskets and trays, gave information, sometimes advice, and kept people moving on. Little boys there, as elsewhere, had a strong tendency to skylark and gaze at the busy officials inside, to the obstruction of the way. The policeman checked their propensities. A stout elderly female panted towards the mouth with a letter in one hand and a paper in the other. She had full two minutes and a half to spare, but felt convinced she was too late. The red-coated official posted her letter, and pointed out the proper place for the newspaper. At two minutes to six anxious people began to run while yet in the street. Cool personages, seeing the clock, and feeling safe, affected an easy nonchalance, but did not loiter. One minute to six—eager looks were on the faces of those who, from all sides, converged towards the great receiving-box. The active sprang up the wide stairs at a bound, heaved in their bundles, or packets, or single missives, and heaved sighs of relief after them; the timid stumbled on the stairs and blundered up to the mouth; while the hasty almost plunged into it bodily. Even at this critical moment there were lulls in the rush. Once there was almost a dead pause, and at that moment an exquisite sauntered towards the mouth, dropped a solitary little letter down the slope where whole cataracts had been flowing, and turned away. He was almost carried off his legs by two youths from a lawyer's office, who rushed up just as the first stroke of six o'clock rang out on the night air. Slowly and grandly it tolled from St. Paul's, whose mighty dome was visible above the house-tops from the colonnade. During these fleeting moments a few dozens of late ones posted some hundreds of letters. With kindly consideration the authorities of St. Martin's-le-Grand have set their timepieces one minute slow. Aware of this, a clerk, gasping and with a pen behind his ear, leaped up the steps at the last stroke, and hurled in a bundle of letters. Next moment, like inexorable fate, the mouth closed, and nothing short of the demolition of the British Constitution could have induced that mouth to convey another letter to the eight o'clock mails.

Hope, however, was not utterly removed. Those who chose to place an additional penny stamp on their letters could, by posting them in a separate box, have them taken in for that mail up to seven. Twopence secured their acceptance up to 7:15. Threepence up to 7:30, and sixpence up to 7:45, but all letters posted after six without the late fees were detained for the following mail.

"Sharp practice!" observed George Aspel to the red-coated official, who, after shutting the mouth, placed a ticket above it which told all corners that they were too late.

"Yes, sir, and pretty sharp work is needful when you consider that the mails we've got to send out daily from this office consist of over 5800 bags, weighing forty-three tons, while the mails received number more than 5500 bags. Speaks to a deal of correspondence that, don't it, sir?"

"What!—every day?" exclaimed Aspel in surprise.

"Every day," replied the official, with a good-humoured smile and an emphatic nod. "Why, sir," he continued, in a leisurely way, "we're some what of a literary nation, we are. How many letters, now, d'you think, pass through the Post-Office altogether—counting England, Scotland, and Ireland?"

"Haven't the remotest idea."

"Well, sir," continued the red-coated man, with impressive solemnity, "we passes through our hands in one year about one thousand and fifty-seven million odd."

"I know enough of figures," said Aspel, with a laugh, "to be aware that I cannot realise such a number."

"Nevertheless, sir," continued the official, with a patronising air, "you can realise something *about* such a number. For instance, that sum gives thirty-two letters per head to the population in the year; and, of course, as thousands of us can't write, and thousands more don't write, it follows that the real correspondents of the kingdom do some pretty stiff work in the writing way. But these are only the *letters*. If you include somewhere about four hundred and twenty million post-cards, newspapers, book-packets, and circulars, you have a sum total of fourteen hundred and seventy-seven million odd passing through our hands. Put that down in figures, sir, w'en you git home—1,477,000,000—an p'r'aps it'll open your eyes a bit. If you want 'em opened still wider, just try to find out how long it would take you to count that sum, at the rate of sixty to the minute, beginning one, two, three, and

so on, workin' eight hours a day without takin' time for meals, but givin' you off sixty-five days each year for Sundays and holidays to recruit your wasted energies."

"How long *would* it take?" asked Aspel, with an amused but interested look.

"W'y, sir, it would take you just a little over one hundred and seventy years. The calculation ain't difficult; you can try it for yourself if you don't believe it.—Good-night, sir," added the red-coated official, with a pleasant nod, as he turned and entered the great building, where a huge proportion of this amazing work was being at that moment actively manipulated.

Chapter Eight.
Downward—Deeper and Deeper

As the great bell of St. Paul's struck the half-hour, George Aspel was reminded of the main object of his visit to that part of the City. Descending to the street, and pondering in silent wonder on the vast literary correspondence of the kingdom, he strode rapidly onward, his long legs enabling him to pass ahead of the stream of life that flowed with him, and causing him to jostle not a few members of the stream that opposed him.

"Hallo, sir!" "Look out!" "Mind your eye, stoopid!" "Now, then, you lamp-post, w'ere are you a-goin' to?" "Wot asylum 'ave *you* escaped from?" were among the mildest remarks with which he was greeted.

But Aspel heeded them not. The vendors of penny marvels failed to attract him. Even the print-shop windows had lost their influence for a time; and as for monkeys, barrel-organs, and trained birds, they were as the dust under his feet, although at other times they formed a perpetual feast to his unsophisticated soul. "Letters, letters, letters!"

He could think of nothing else. "Fourteen hundred and seventy-seven millions of letters, etcetera, through the Post-Office in one year!" kept ringing through his brain; only varied in its monotony by "that gives thirty-two letters per head to the entire population, and as lots of 'em can't write, of course it's much more for those who can! Take a man one hundred and seventy years to count 'em!"

At this point the brilliant glare of a gin-palace reminded him that he had walked far and long, and had for some time felt thirsty. Entering, he called for a pot of beer. It was not a huge draught for a man of his size. As he drained it the memory of grand old jovial sea-kings crossed his mind, and he called for another pot. As he was about to apply it to his lips, and shook back his flaxen curls, the remembrance of, a Norse drinking-cup in his possession—an heirloom, which could not stand on its bottom, and had therefore to be emptied before being set down,—induced him to chuckle quietly before quaffing his beer.

On setting down the empty pot he observed a poor miserable-looking woman, with a black eye and a black bottle, gazing at him in undisguised admiration. Instantly he called for a third pot of beer. Being supplied by the wondering shop-boy, he handed it to the woman; but she shook her head, and drew back with an air of decision.

"No, sir," she said, "but thank you kindly all the same, sir."

"Very well," returned the youth, putting the pot and a half-crown on the counter, "you may drink it or leave it as you please. I pay for it, and you may take the change—or leave that too if you like," he added, as he went out, somewhat displeased that his feeling of generosity had been snubbed.

After wandering a short distance he was involved in labyrinths of brick and mortar, and suddenly became convinced that he was lost. This was however a small matter. To find one's way by asking it is not difficult, even in London, if one possesses average intelligence.

The first man he stopped was a Scot. With characteristic caution that worthy cleared his throat, and with national deliberation repeated Aspel's query, after which, in a marked tone of regret, he said slowly, "Weel, sir, I really div not ken."

Aspel thanked him with a sarcastic smile and passed on. His next effort was with a countryman, who replied, "Troth, sur, that's more nor I can tell 'ee," and looked after his questioner kindly as he walked away. A policeman appearing was tried next. "First to the right, sir, third to the left, and ask again," was the sharp reply of that limb of the Executive, as he passed slowly on, stiff as a post, and stately as a law of fate.

Having taken the required turns our wanderer found himself in a peculiarly low, dirty, and disagreeable locality. The population was in keeping with it—so much so that Aspel looked round inquiringly before proceeding to "ask again." He had not quite made up his mind which of the tawdry, half-drunken creatures around him he would address, when a middle-aged man of respectable appearance, dressed in black, issued from one of the surrounding dens.

"A city missionary," thought George Aspel, as he approached, and asked for direction to the abode of a man named Abel Bones.

The missionary pointed out the entrance to the desired abode, and looked at his questioner with a glance which arrested the youth's attention.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but the man you name has a very bad character."

"Well, what then?" demanded Aspel sharply.

"Oh! nothing. I only meant to warn you, for he is a dangerous man."

The missionary was a thin but muscular man, with stern black eyes and a powerful nose, which might have rendered his face harsh if it had not been more than redeemed by a large firm mouth, round which played lines that told unmistakably of the milk of human kindness. He smiled as he spoke, and Aspel was disarmed.

"Thank you," he said; "I am well able to take care of myself."

Evidently the missionary thought so too, for, with a quiet bow, he turned and went his way.

At the end of a remarkably dark passage George Aspel ran his head against a beam and his knee against a door with considerable violence.

"Come in," said a very weak but sweet little voice, as though doors in that region were usually rapped at in that fashion.

Lifting the latch and entering, Aspel found himself confronted by Tottie Bones in her native home.

It was a very small, desolate, and dirty home, and barely rendered visible by a thin "dip" stuck into an empty pint-bottle.

Tottie opened her large eyes wide with astonishment, then laid one of her dirty little fingers on her rosy lips and looked imploringly at her visitor. Thus admonished, he spoke, without knowing why in a subdued voice.

"You are surprised to see me, Tottie?"

"I'm surprised at nothink, sir. 'Taint possible to surprise me with anythink in *this* life."

"D'you expect to be surprised by anything in any other life, Tottie?" asked Aspel, more amused by the air of the child than by her answer.

"P'r'aps. Don't much know, and don't much care," said Tottie.

"Well, I've come to ask something," said the youth, sitting down on a low box for the convenience of conversation, "and I hope, Tottie, that you'll tell me the truth. Here's a half-crown for you. The truth, mind, whether you think it will please me or not; I don't want to be pleased—I want the truth."

"I'd tell you the truth without *that*," said Tottie, eyeing the half-crown which Aspel still held between his fingers, "but hand it over. We want a good many o' these things here, bein' pretty hard up at times."

She spun the piece deftly in the air, caught it cleverly, and put it in her pocket.

"Well, tell me, now, did you post the letter I gave you the night I took tea with Miss Lillycrop?"

"Yes, I did," answered the child, with a nod of decision.

"You're telling the truth?"

"Yes; as sure as death."

Poor Tottie had made her strongest asseveration, but it did not convey to Aspel nearly so much assurance as did the earnest gaze of her bright and truthful eyes.

"You put it in the pillar?" he continued.

"Yes."

"At the end of the street?"

"Yes, at the end of the street; and oh, you've no idea what an awful time I was about it; the slit was so high, an' I come down sitch a cropper w'en it was done!"

"But it went in all right?"

"Yes, all right."

George Aspel sat for some moments in gloomy silence. He now felt convinced of that which at first he had only suspected—namely, that his intending patron was offended because he had not at once called in person to thank him, instead of doing so by letter. Probably, also, he had been hurt by the expressions in the letter to which Philip Maylands had objected when it was read to him.

"Well, well," he exclaimed, suddenly giving a severe slap to his unoffending thigh, "I'll have nothing to do with him. If he's so touchy—as that comes to, the less that he and I have to say to each other the better."

"Oh! *please*, sir, hush!" exclaimed Tottie, pointing with a look of alarm to a bundle which lay in a dark corner, "you'll wake 'im."

"Wake who?"

"Father," whispered the child.

The visitor rose, took up the pint-bottle, and by the aid of its flaring candle beheld something that resembled a large man huddled together in a heap on a straw mattress, as he had last fallen down. His position, together with his torn and disarranged garments, had destroyed all semblance to human form save where a great limb protruded. His visage was terribly disfigured by the effects of drink, besides being partly concealed by his matted hair.

"What a wretched spectacle!" exclaimed the young man, touching the heap with his foot as he turned away in disgust.

Just then a woman with a black eye entered the room with a black bottle in her hand. She was the woman who had refused the beer from Aspel.

"Mother," said Tottie, running up to her, "here's the gent who—"

"'Av-'ee-go'-th'-gin?" growled a deep voice from the dark corner.

"Yes, Abel—"

"'Ave 'ee got th' gin, I say, Molly?" roared the voice in rising wrath.

"Yes, yes, Abel, here it is," exclaimed the woman, hastening towards the corner.

The savage who lay there was so eager to obtain the bottle that he made a snatch at it and let it slip on the stone floor, where it was broken to pieces.

"O don't, Abel dear, don't! I'll get another," pleaded the poor woman; but Abel's disappointment was too great for endurance; he managed to rise, and made a wild blow at the woman,—missed her, and staggered into the middle of the room. Here he encountered the stern glance of George Aspel. Being a dark, stern man himself, with a bulky powerful frame, he rather rejoiced in the sight of a man who seemed a worthy foe.

"What d'ee wan' here, you long-legged—hah! would you?" he added, on observing Aspel's face flush and his fists close, "Take that!"

He struck out at his adversary's face with tremendous violence. Aspel parried the blow and returned it with such good-will that Abel Bones went headlong into the dark corner whence he had risen,—and lay there.

"I'm *very* sorry," said the instantly-repentant George, turning to Mrs Bones, "but I couldn't help it; really, I—"

"There, there; go away, sir, and thank you kindly," said the unfortunate woman, urging—almost pushing—her visitor towards the door. "It'll do 'im good, p'r'aps. He don't get that every day, an' it won't 'urt 'im."

Aspel found himself suddenly in the dark passage, and heard the door slammed. His first impulse was to turn, dash in the door with his foot, and take vengeance on Abel Bones, his next to burst into a sardonic laugh. Thereafter he frowned fiercely, and strode away. In doing so he drew himself up with sea-king-like dignity and assaulted a beam, which all but crushed his hat over his eyes. This did not improve his temper, but the beer had not yet robbed him of all self-control; he stooped to conquer and emerged into the street.

Well was it for George Aspel that his blow had been such an effective one, for if a riot with Bones had followed the blow, there were numerous kindred spirits there who would have been only too glad to aid their chum, and the intruder would have fared badly among them, despite his physical powers. As it was, he soon regained a respectable thoroughfare, and hastened away in the direction of his lodgings.

But a dark frown clouded his brow, for as he went along his thoughts were busy with what he believed to be the insolent pride of Sir James Clubley. He also thought of May Maylands, and the resolution with which she so firmly yet so gently repelled him. The latter thought wounded his pride as well as his feelings deeply. While in this mood the spirit of the sea-kings arose within him once again. He entered a public-house and had another pot of beer. It was very refreshing—remarkably so! True, the tall and stalwart young frame of George Aspel needed no refreshment at the time, and he would have scorned the insinuation that he *required* anything to support him—but—but—it was decidedly refreshing! There could be no doubt whatever about that, and it induced him to take a more amiable view of men in general—of "poor Abel Bones" in particular. He even felt less savagely disposed towards Sir James, though he by no means forgave him, but made up his mind finally to have nothing more to do with him, while as to May—hope told him flattering tales.

At this point in his walk he was attracted by one of those traps to catch the unwary, which are so numerous in London—a music-hall. George knew not what it was, and cared not. It was a place of public entertainment: that was enough for him. He wanted entertainment, and in he went.

It is not our purpose to describe this place. Enough is told when we have said that there were dazzling lights and gorgeous scenes, and much music, and many other things to amuse. There were also many gentlemen, but—no ladies. There was also much smoking and drinking.

Aspel soon observed that he was expected either to drink or smoke. He did not wish to do either, but, disliking singularity, ordered a cigar and a glass of brandy-and-water. These were followed by another cigar and another glass. Towards midnight he had reached that condition when drink stimulates the desire for more drink. Being aware, from former experience, of the danger of this condition, and being, as we have said, a man of some strength of will, he rose to go.

At the moment a half-tipsy man at the little table next him carelessly flung the end of his cigar away. It alighted, probably by accident, on the top of Aspel's head.

"Hallo, sir!" shouted the enraged youth, starting up and seizing the man by his collar.

"Hallo, sir!" echoed the man, who had reached his pugnacious cups, "let go."

He struck out at the same moment. Aspel would have parried the blow, but his arm had been seized by one of the bystanders, and it took effect on his nose, which instantly sent a red stream over his mouth and down the front of his shirt.

Good-humour and kindliness usually served Aspel in the place of principle. Remove these qualities temporarily, and he became an unguarded savage—sometimes a roaring lion.

With a shout that suspended the entertainments and drew the attention of the whole house, he seized his adversary, lifted him in the air, and would infallibly have dashed him on the floor if he had not been caught in the arms of the crowd. As it was, the offender went down, carrying half-a-dozen friends and a couple of tables with their glasses along with him.

Aspel was prevented from doing more mischief by three powerful policemen, who seized him from behind and led him into the passage. There a noisy explanation took place, which gave the offender time to cool and reflect on his madness. On his talking quietly to the policemen, and readily

paying for the damage he had done, he was allowed to go free. Descending the stair to the street, where the glare of the entrance-lamps fell full upon him, he felt a sudden sensation of faintness, caused by the combination of cold air, excitement, drink, and smoke. Seizing the railings with one hand, he stood for a moment with his eyes shut.

Re-opening them, and gazing stupidly before him, he encountered the horrified gaze of May Maylands! She had been spending the evening with Miss Lillycrop, and was on her way home, escorted by Solomon Flint.

"Come along, Miss May," said Solomon, "don't be afraid of 'im. He can't 'urt you—too far gone for that, bless you. Come on."

May yielded, and was out of sight in a moment.

Filled with horror, despair, madness, and self-contempt, George Aspel stood holding on to the railings and glaring into vacuity. Recovering himself he staggered home and went to bed.

Chapter Nine.
Mr Blurt and George Aspel in Peculiar Circumstances

When a man finds himself in a false position, out of which he sees no way of escape, he is apt to feel a depression of spirits which reveals itself in the expression of his countenance.

One morning Mr Enoch Blurt sat on a high stool in his brother's shop, with his elbows on a screened desk, his chin in his hands, and a grim smile on his lips.

The shop was a peculiar one. It had somewhat the aspect of an old curiosity shop, but the predominance of stuffed birds gave it a distinctly ornithological flavour. Other stuffed creatures were there, however, such as lizards, frogs, monkeys, etcetera, all of which straddled in attitudes more or less unlike nature, while a few wore expressions of astonishment quite in keeping with their circumstances.

"Here am I," soliloquised Mr Blurt with a touch of bitterness, "in the position of a shop-boy, in possession of a shop towards which I entertain feelings of repugnance, seeing that it has twice ruined my poor brother, and in regard to the details of which I know absolutely nothing. I had fancied I had reached the lowest depths of misfortune when I became a ruined diamond-merchant, but this is a profounder deep."

"Here's the doctor a-comin' down-stairs, sir," said an elderly female, protruding her head from the back shop, and speaking in a stage-whisper.

"Very well, Mrs Murridge, let him come," said Mr Blurt recklessly.

He descended from the stool, as the doctor entered the shop looking very grave. Every expression, save that of deep anxiety, vanished from Mr Blurt's face.

"My brother is worse?" he said quickly.

"Not worse," replied the doctor, "but his case is critical. Everything will depend on his mind being kept at ease. He has taken it into his head that his business is going to wreck while he lies there unable to attend to it, and asked me earnestly if the shop had been opened. I told him I'd step down and inquire."

"Poor Fred!" murmured his brother sadly; "he has too good reason to fancy his business is going to wreck, with or without his attendance, for I find that very little is doing, and you can see that the entire stock isn't worth fifty pounds—if so much. The worst of it is that his boy, who used to assist him, absconded yesterday with the contents of the till, and there is no one now to look after it."

"That's awkward. We must open the shop how ever, for it is all-important that his mind should be kept quiet. Do you know how to open it, Mr Blurt?"

Poor Mr Blurt looked helplessly at the closed shutters, through a hole in one of which the morning sun was streaming. Turning round he encountered the deeply solemn gaze of an owl which stood on a shelf at his elbow.

"No, doctor, I know no more how to open it than that idiot there," he said, pointing to the owl, "but I'll make inquiries of Mrs Murridge."

The domestic fortunately knew the mysterious operations relative to the opening of a shop. With her assistance Mr Blurt took off the shutters, stowed them away in their proper niche, and threw open the door to the public with an air of invitation, if not hospitality, which deserved a better return than it received. With this news the doctor went back to the sick man.

"Mrs Murridge," said Mr Blurt, when the doctor had gone, "would you be so good as mind the shop for a few minutes, while I go up-stairs? If any one should come in, just go to the foot of the stair and give two coughs. I shall hear you."

On entering his brother's room, he found him raised on one elbow, with his eyes fixed wildly on the door.

"Dear Fred," he said tenderly, hurrying forward; "you must not give way to anxiety, there's a dear fellow. Lie down. The doctor says you'll get well if you only keep quiet."

"Ay, but I can't keep quiet," replied the poor old man tremulously, while he passed his hand over the few straggling white hairs that lay on but failed to cover his head. "How can you expect me to keep quiet, Enoch, when my business is all going to the dogs for want of attention? And that boy of mine is such a stupid fellow; he loses or mislays the letters somehow—I can't understand how. There's confusion too somewhere, because I have written several times of late to people who owe me money, and sometimes have got no answers, at other times been told that they *had* replied, and enclosed cheques, and—"

"Come now, dear Fred," said Enoch soothingly, while he arranged the pillows, "do give up thinking about these things just for a little while till you are better, and in the meantime I will look after—"

"And he's such a lazy boy too," interrupted the invalid,—"never gets up in time unless I rouse him.—Has the shop been opened, Enoch?"

"Yes, didn't the doctor tell you? I always open it myself;" returned Enoch, speaking rapidly to prevent his brother, if possible, from asking after the boy, about whose unfaithfulness he was still ignorant. "And now, Fred, I insist on your handing the whole business over to me for a week or two, just as it stands; if you don't I'll go back to Africa. Why, you've no idea what a splendid shopman I shall make. You seem to forget that I have been a successful diamond-merchant."

"I don't see the connection, Enoch," returned the other, with a faint smile.

"That's because you've never been out of London, and can't believe in anybody who hasn't been borne or at least bred, within the sound of Bow Bells. Don't you know that diamond-merchants sometimes keep stores, and that stores mean buying and selling, and corresponding, and all that sort of thing? Come, dear Fred, trust me a little—only a little—for a day or two, or rather, I should say, trust God, and try to sleep. There's a dear fellow—come."

The sick man heaved a deep sigh, turned over on his side, and dropped into a quiet slumber—whether under the influence of a more trustful spirit or of exhaustion we cannot say—probably both.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.