

## MEN WHO FACE DEATH.

## THE BARGEMAN.



“A-HOY-EE! A-hoy-ee-o!”

Lor', I shouldn't wonder if a good many people—ladies and gents, maybe—as have heard one of us a-hollerin' out this of a fine summer's night, just as we was coming along in sight of the lock, has thought—being at the time sentimental, like what

they calls the serious songs in the “Little Warbler,” as my pardner, Joe, sings a stave out of at odd times—I shouldn't wonder, I say, if they thinks to themselves, how pleasant it must be for to live on a barge, and go voyagin' up and down this 'ere sunlighted and moon-lighted river, with the trees a-rustlin' on the banks, and the water a-shining and rippling all round.

There's no partick'ler harm in thinking of it so, except that it ain't the whole truth, and nothink but the truth, as the coroner's clerk says when he's puttin' you to your oath respectin' a “dead body found,” or else a soocicide as you prevents, maybe, through bein' a-layin'-to ashore amongst the mud, and watchin' against high-tide for to float you off, when perhaps you hears a scream right up by the parrypit of the bridge, and then a kind of a awful splash and a flutter, and a shriek as makes your blood run back from your fingers' ends, and all up to the roots of your hair; and then you goes out on the timbers, and looks as hard as you can down to the dark deep shadow as lays under the arch; and then you, and perhaps a wharf watchman, or a waterman as may be about, shoves off a boat, or lays out on the timber; and just as you sees a sort of a shape come drifting towards you in the light that's always to be seen on the surface, you make a clutch at it, and there's a gurgling and a struggling, and you haul it in, and it's a tangle of ribbon and clothes and long wet hair; and then there's a white *livin'* face, and tremblin' live flesh and blood; and then all the blood goes down from your head agin, and sets your heart a-thumpin', perhaps, and you feel ready to give the wretched creetur a shakin' for to bring her to her senses, and to wake her up to what she's nearly done by drawin' her feller-man into what's often lookin' death in the face for him as well as for her, if he's tempted, as well he might be, for to go into the river and let her get hold of him out of shoal-water.

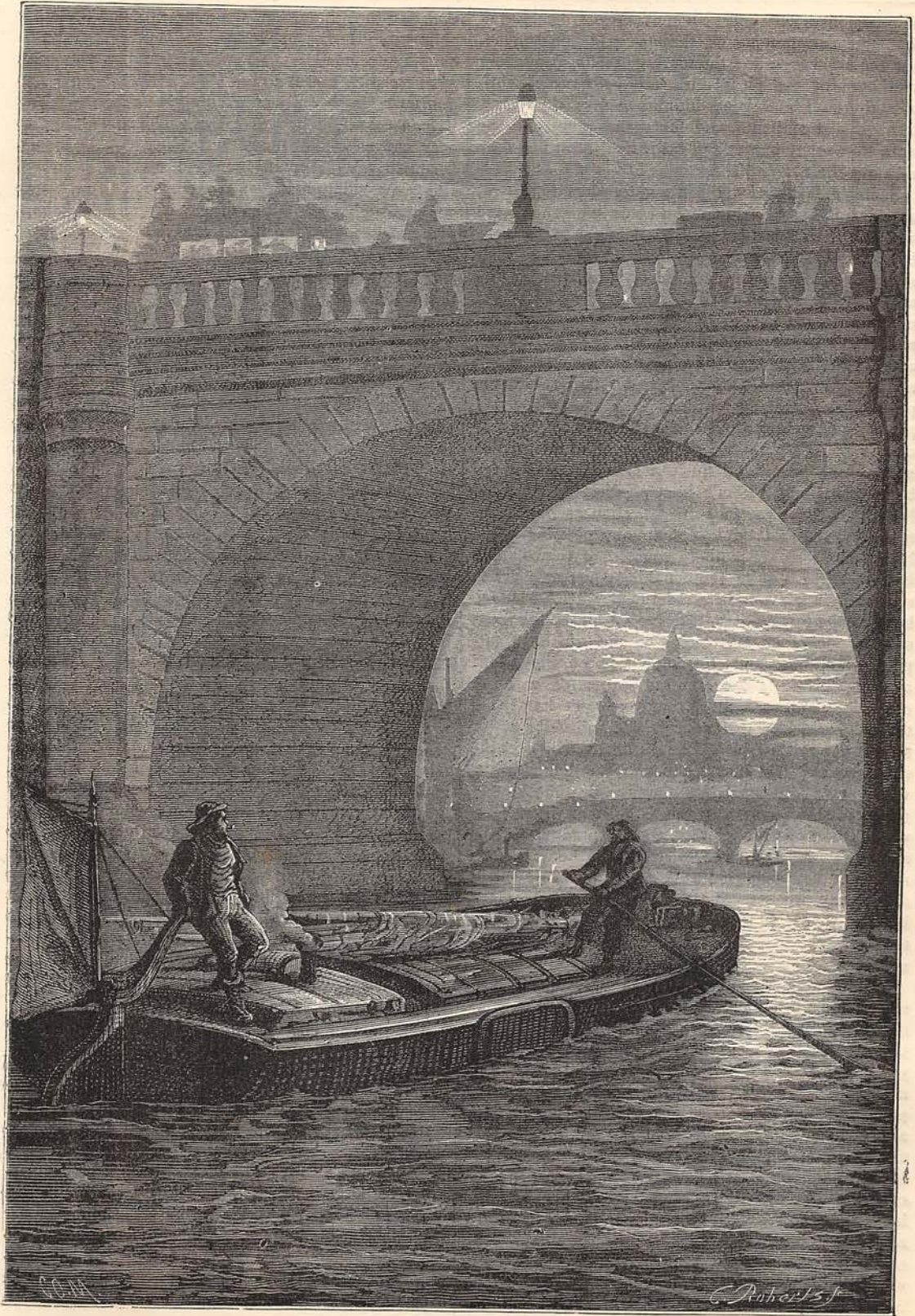
But I'm a-ramblin' on right away from the subject, as is the way, I think, with men that lives on the

water. They can keep a steady hand on the tiller, or get a regular heavy pull on the long sweeps when they're in the stream, but their thoughts goes a-wanderin' all the same while their eyes is wide open, while, of course, such summer days as I've mentioned, when the tow-ropes is on, and they're going quite smooth down between the regular locks, and smokin' a afternoon's pipe, listening drowsy-like to the soft thud of the horse's feet ahead, and the ripple of the water astarn, they must be poor chaps if they don't go off into all sorts o' dreams. I don't say as I ever tried to make po'try myself, but it wouldn't be a wonder but what some of our chaps had tried it afore now; not as there's much of readin' and writin' among us at present, any more maybe than making a kind of list of cargo with a bit o' chalk, or signing a delivery-sheet; but then there's much to be done even with a bit o' chalk and a memory, if you've got the knack of makin' up things, as my pardner has more than once added a verse or so to the “Little Warbler” when he's been sociable inclined, and we've been settin' comfortable at our tea, with maybe a bloater as a sort of extray inducement for him to come out strong.

It's at such times that the ladies and gents afore-said, when they sits in their own boats and sings, “Flow on, thou shining river,” and such like, or when they're on one of the banks of the Thames, a-fishing or courting in a punt—or perhaps on the Lea river, down there by the white bridge at Horse-shoe Point, forgets for a moment all about the many that's faced death in the water by the way of the bridges, or a sudden leap in the dark—forgets all about the inquest, and the workus shell, and the funeral—forgets even about the reskies of them that is pulled out by such as us, and has to go up before the magistrate, and be sent to prison till they come to their senses. I don't wonder at it, for one, not when I'm a-settin' in the sun, and going easy with the tow-rope; for the barge that me and Joe works is pretty enough, and all clean painted, and the cargo, whether it's gunpowder, or new-mown hay, or general things, as we may call merchandise, is no detriment to the look of the *Pretty Jane*.

I mention gunpowder, don't I, because I'm going to talk about the dangers we undergo when we carry such, as was proved only the other day when, as the newspapers said, half of London might ha' been blowed to ruins but for the three barges and the steam-tug being just where they was? But I don't mean to say a word about that. Men have been facing death that way for years and years, and nobody the wiser; and when the fright's blowed over, and the houses down by Regent's Park is rebuilt, they'll most likely have to face it the same way again, except perhaps that they'll be cut off their bacca for a time, and no cookin'-stoves will be allowed aboard if known





THE BARGEMAN.



of. But, bless you, there's more facing of death than that every day among us, through cold and hunger, and the night fogs, and the morning mists, and falling overboard in the pitch dark, and—what the sentimental ladies and gents thinks of less than all—through dirt and filth, and fever and ague, and the state that many barges and boats get into when they ain't like the *Pretty Jane*.

Summer days and autumn nights, when the barge, all painted gay, goes rippling on between green wooded banks, where the fields beyond is all fresh and beautiful, and the cattle stands and looks at us out of their sleepy eyes, and the corn-fields lays mellerin' in the sun, and the lark sings overhead, till the grey of the evening comes down, and the light gets more of gold and less of burning heat in it—all these is one thing; and the *Pretty Jane*, and her neat brass-bound cabin, and the shiny stove, and our best tea-things, and the painted tray, and my pardner Joe's violon, and the parrot, is one thing; but coal barges out on the tide of a winter's night, and guano barges, and loads of manure that might be smelt a mile off; and cargo boats with cabins that's like pigsties, and human beings stowed away in such a fashion as no farmer now-a-days would think of doing by pigs, let alone horses as is so much more counted of than human beings—these is quite another thing; just as a pretty run down in fair weather, and the boy at the horse's head on the towing-path, and Joe or me at the tiller, or else one of us a-dreaming in the sun on a tarpaulin—and me and Joe alongside of the wharf a-taking in or a-delivering of cargo of a bitter cold night, and such a fog that you can't hardly see the gangway, and the lanterns like will-o'-the-wisps, so that you're likely every hand's turn to slip over the side between the barge and the iron-bound piles, where you'd be jammed to a mummy—is quite another thing. I don't take the missis with us now. Joe, which is the missis's brother, and my pardner, he and me go together; but the missis has a home ashore, and a bit of a shop that we'd saved up for—I might a'most say we starved and pinched ourselves for, but that we did it by giving up the drink. We never took the children aboard after little Benjy died—never!

Talking about fair weather, and the silver ripple on the river, and the song-birds, and the golden evening time, makes me think how my poor missis—her name being Jenny, but not named after the barge, though you might think so—how she laid out little Benjy on a clean white pillow, with a holland sheet, on the poop, and how we stopped to go ashore on the lock and get some green boughs, and a few flowers that the lock-keeper pulled from his garden, to put round him, and made a sort of a tent with a square of sail-cloth; and how Jenny sat down by it with her face in her hands, and I went to the tiller, and Joe stayed ashore by the horse's head, and we went through the country as still as if it was a funeral, which indeed it was, because we meant to bury him next day in the little churchyard on the hill, where Jenny goes still once a year to see the grave, as is green and pretty

even yet, though this was ten year ago, and the other children's growing up, and two of 'em old enough to be put to something. You'll excuse me, this ain't what I rightly meant to say; but concerning of them that faces death daily and nightly, of other men and women as might be us, and of children perhaps as dear and as well-favoured and pretty as little Benjy. Why, there's over ten thousand men, women, and children actually living on board of boats and barges day and night!—on board of barges where the cabins, many of 'em, aren't so big as ours in the *Pretty Jane*, and where whole families has to eat and drink, and wash, and sleep, and live, in a way that a stable's a palace to, and a pigsty in a dairy-farm a parlour in comparison. Children are born in these places; need I go fur to say that they die there? Over ten thousand, when last the Government took the senses of the people—census, is it? Well, never mind, let's say when they was last counted—which, mind you, was more notice than might have been expected of the Government, and hasn't been followed up by anything that I ever heard on. Over ten thousand living on board as stated, out of pretty nigh thirty thousand as gets a living by barges and boats in the carrying trade. There's them that knows as well as the Government that this don't nigh come up to the true number now. More children have been born and reared since then in the stifling cabins; more women have toiled at men's work as well as their own, and took their share of danger and of drink in a hard life; more men have faced death, along with them that's maybe as dear to 'em in their way as some of the sentimental ones aforesaid is to them, though perhaps a queer and a rough way of showing of it. The kalkilation now is that taking not fur off five thousand miles of waterway of rivers and canals in England, and taking of an average which I hold, with my pardner Joe, is four boats to a mile (such is the growth of the business), and reckoning only a man and wife and two children to each barge—as is below what anybody can prove for themselves by visiting the cabins, where oftentimes there is three or four, and even five, and sometimes two families—we comes to this point, namely, that something like forty thousand at least, and nearer ninety thousand in my opinion, is to be totalled up before you can say, "All told."

I've heard from seafarin' men, and them that has been to China, that there's what's called floatin' villages of junks—as is the name they give their boats out there—and that the people there live on a very little, and their morals ain't up to much. We might as well perhaps look at home; not as to morals we won't say, but as to the ways of living where common decency ain't very easy, and health ain't hardly possible, let alone what might be called manners; and especially as there hasn't been as yet a schoolmaster sent by Government as would even go so far as to teach writing with a bit of chalk on the back of a tea-tray, such as I might execute myself, or to read with a proper sentiment out of the "Little Warbler," which Joe has learnt how to come uncommon.