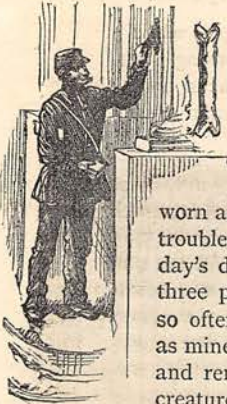


## MEN WHO FACE DEATH.

## THE POSTMAN.



SOMETIMES almost wish that I had never married Kitty.

That's a strange thing to say; and I can't get beyond "almost," which is, after all, a long way from "quite;" but when I look at her thin face, and mark how worn and old it begins to look when she's troubled to know how we shall get a Sunday's dinner, and yet pay for the two or three pairs of little new boots that are so often being wanted—almost as often as mine want mending—when I note this and remember what a fresh, bright, rosy creature she was when we were married,

and what I meant to do to keep her from fearing that wolf that's been at the door ever since—and how I've never been able to do it—I get low-spirited, and she has to cheer me up, instead of my cheering her up as I ought to do, and—there, somehow it all seems wrong, and men are a pack of lop-sided idiots, always knocking at the wrong doors, and reading the directions upside-down and backwards; and women have to bear in patience, and without complaining, with all this as well as their share of the trouble at home.

The fact is, people said long ago that I'd no business to marry; that no man has or ever had any business to take a wife while he was only a postman, even though the lass might be able to turn a trifle by shoe-binding, or needlework, or some light business. Perhaps this is right enough, and if I hadn't been a selfish young fool I should have known better than to look forward to rising from a supernumerary to a regular letter-carrier, that I might get some sort of a home together.

It wasn't much of one, though we contrived to have a few little bits of furniture, and Kitty's friends started us with fifteen pound, which, added to twenty that I'd saved by little and little, was enough to see us well through the first year, even though my earnings hadn't mounted to five-and-twenty shillings a week, and the coat and cap that made the uniform on duty.

It was the second year, when the first baby had to be nursed, and I was down with a cold that nearly turned to something worse, and couldn't even so much as get to the hospital or the dispensary for medicine, that I began to feel how the government of the Post Office makes no calculation about men like us having wives and children. We've no more right to them than sailors or soldiers have—not so much right as policemen, who may perhaps look forward to superannuation if they live long enough. When I first met Kitty I had given up a light porter's place, because my friends thought that a letter-carrier's berth was "such a certainty"—as good as a pension almost—and there

was a chance for me to take a district where the work was too much for one man, and a supernumerary without the uniform was appointed at fourteen shillings a week. I got the appointment, and tried to live on it—tried precious hard, because it was such a certainty. At last, when I got regularly installed as a full-fledged postman, at five-and-twenty shillings and the uniform aforesaid, my family began to think my fortune was made; and perhaps I might have begun to try to think it was, only I knew from experience what I had to do for my money—how I was out in all weathers, in wet and cold and darkness, and driving wind and sleet, with not too much food, and a long weary way to walk when my work was done. I couldn't help calculating, too, that twenty-five wasn't twice fourteen, and that even twenty-eight shillings would only be four shillings a day for two people the week round, and rent and fring and clothes to pay for, before there was a loaf or a bit of food of any sort to be reckoned. As to a poor woman's earnings, we most of us know what sort of pay women's work fetches, even when it's the work that men couldn't do if they tried, and especially when women have to pay women. There's very few married women of the poorer class who can do more than enough to buy bare victuals for two or three children, and keep home tidy as well.

Goodness knows if I and a good many of my mates could get anything like such wages as we hear of among trades-unions of working men in other callings, we'd manage to do without setting our wives to work at all, except they were so minded, and had no young children to attend to, and the family washing and mending and cooking.

Now, this sounds like grumbling, and I won't deny that I've been looking at the dark side of things, for I'm on the sick list; and thinking of men that face death, I don't see but what we might be added to the list. We have to face temptation, a good many of us, and it's bitter to think that some men brought up to be honest have yielded to it, and had nothing to plead against the sentence of the law, except that they had wives and children, and perhaps sickness and want, at home, and so disgraced themselves, and brought discredit upon a great department of the State.

I think of a good many things as I sit here, waiting for Kitty to come back with the lotion; for I sprained my ankle through slipping in the wet on the worn step of that old house where they always shut the rusty gate of the front garden, and won't put a letter-box in the street-door—the house where the servants won't answer the knocker till the old gentleman comes and takes in his own letters, and asks me if I want to bang the place about his ears. How one's thoughts run on when one has nothing else to carry! I was going to say, as I sit here I can call to mind a good many examples that we do in a way face death in more senses than one. It isn't only the soldier and the



sailor, the miner and the engine-driver, that go about with their lives in their hands. We've just come to learn, for instance, that the bargeman, with a cargo of gunpowder and benzoline, may be in as great danger as any of them, without thinking much about it; and maybe, if we care to think of it, there are others that are in hourly peril, not of sudden death perhaps, but of setting out on the dark road, and going pretty quickly to the end of it.

I remember poor old James used to say we postmen ran greater dangers from exposure to cold and wet, and accidents on dark nights, and over-fatigue, and, as the poor old fellow used to add, with a sigh, from anxiety and poverty, than most of them who lead what are called heroic lives. "Duty, my boy, duty—dull, plodding duty—to stick to that as long as you don't know of any call to something heroic, is the true heroism after all."

Poor old James. He was a vegetarian and a teetotaler, and had six children. The Post Office hadn't become quite a State department in his time, and the letter-carriers could take it a little easier; but the pay was calculated on the basis of celibacy, as he used to remark, with a rather sickly smile, as he sorted the pieces of string, and clean bits of waste-paper, that he contrived to collect on his rounds in the quiet neighbourhood where he had a beat. He made a few halfpence a week that way; and I think he tried to sell packets of tea or baking-powder, or something, on commission; but he looked so white and thin, and so much like a weak bird that had been lost out of a cage and couldn't find its way home, that nobody could be got to believe in his having to do with anything good to eat or drink.

He faced death in his own way—faced death at the bedside of his eldest girl, who was my Kitty's classmate at the Sunday school; but death was a radiant angel to her; and her father turned away from looking on the still, smiling face, with his poor weak white hands clasped, and a strange waiting look in his eyes. He didn't wait very long; and his wife had gone before the year was out. One or other of the poor little children went to friends here and there; for there was not one single charity for the sick or the destitute, or the orphans of postmen, in those days. There is an orphanage now; and if those who so gladly welcome us, as we give our rat-tat at their doors, would but think how impossible it is for us to spare many shillings out of the wages we receive to give to the fatherless little ones of our fellows, they might come to believe that there are worse pleas for charity than that of the Post Office Orphanage.

Perhaps it is through looking at my own three young rascals "waiting for mother" in the window there—or thinking of Bob, who will be in presently for his

dinner. He carries out medicines for the chemist, Bob does, and so reaches to the luxury of three meat-days a week, one of them being stew, with wonderful meaty flavours in it, considering how much there is of haricot beans and other mealy things, that make the room smell like a bran-mash, and a very nice smell too. Perhaps, I say, it's through looking at the children that I began to think of us postmen as among the men that face death. I was just picturing myself to myself when I go out on my rounds again next week, and the nights are foggy and steamy with mist, and the long row of lamps look miles off in that dreary new road, with broken gaps here and there, and uneven pathways, and bits of ragged fence, and loose bricks to stumble over, and deep quagmires of water and slush in the road, and the houses all lying in the shadow of gardens like wells—with steep flights of steps at the front doors, and the numbers all wrong, because every four houses form a different "terrace," or "villas," or "cottages," and sometimes the road leaves off to go over the way just as you think you've got to the right place.

I picture this place to myself, and all the little wilderness in the same suburb—the roads, and terraces, and streets of houses where you have to feel for the knocker, and wait till a neighbour tells you there's nobody at home, or the last tenants went away yesterday. I fancy how often I've felt the driving rain begin to find its way through my knees and down my neck, and have plucked up fresh courage by remembering that Kitty was at home waiting for me with a little bit of something, even if it was ever so humble and so little: with a bright spark of fire, and a big mug of hot coffee, and some warm, dry clothes, and what was brighter and better than all—brighter even than the bull's-eye lantern that we are now provided with by the latest regulations for night deliveries of letters—with a cheerful, loving, hopeful, contented smile, that, when I think of it, seems to be very little short of a reproach to my selfish, ungrateful thoughts. Why that smile comes back to me at this moment it's easy to guess, for the woman that owns it, and owns me, is on the stair; and here comes Bob too, with an appetite that can hardly keep itself from savaging up the big make-weight that he balances a-top of the quartern loaf he has brought in from the baker's. Never mind, my boy—come, Kitty—one may look death in the face without dying before one's time, so let us say grace and remember—what is it, Bob, my boy—"Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith." "Ah, but it ain't herbs," says Bob—"is it, mother?—it's part herbs, and part roots, and part grain, and there's part stalled ox, because we went to buy the pieces off the stall ourselves—didn't we, mother?—and stalled sheep too—and it's prime, and ain't I hungry, that's all!"

