

“HOSE boat?”

“It’s all right, sir.”

“What, is that Allardyce?”

“Yes, sir.”

A flash of light was turned on the speaker, and a youth was seen bailing a boat in the darkness of the night. The inspector

was satisfied, and the police boat passed on, threading its way among the barges and lighters and other craft by the river bank in a most dexterous manner.

“You knew the lad by his voice?”

“Ay; we get to know pretty well all on the river in our district, and we can mostly tell ‘em by their voice. Easy, Charlie!”

The boat slowed, and again the bright beam flashed forth, this time on some mud left by the ebb tide.

“On’y an old basket,” was the contemptuous verdict; and the light was closed, and the boat resumed its easy pace. In and out among the barges and the stately ships we glide, peering up the dim stairs leading down to the river and watching the craft that go by.

“River thieves mostly steal from barges, I suppose?”

“And from lighters—a lighter we reckon bein’ a big open barge. The thief creeps up alongside, shoves back the tarpaulin, heaves

out a box o’ salmon or a bag o’ coffee, or whatever it may be, and is off in a jiffy. There’s hundreds o’ thousands o’ pounds’ worth o’ property lying about the Thames in craft quite unpertected ‘cept for the river police.”

“Waiting for the Red Cross,” interrupts a young man standing at the end of a causeway running down to the water’s edge. “I think I can see her light now.”

And he raises himself a-tiptoe, hands in pockets, and glances over the tops of barges and vessels lying about.

“No, it’s the Navy!” exclaims one of the constables in the boat; “and there’s the friends o’ the passengers waitin’ on the wharf on the other side.”

To the river police everything on the Thames seems as easy to read as a book, even in the darkness of the night. They know the ships and the wharves as well as the town policemen know the houses.

“There go the bascules! There are the green lights! See the lights change!”

The noise of the paddles of an approaching steamer can distinctly be heard. In the dim, dusky light on the water, the constable had seen the bascules of the Tower Bridge slowly rise, and when quite open for the vessel to pass, the red light of danger had changed to the green signal of safety, and in a minute the steamer was through. He was quite right; the vessel was one of the General Steam Navigation Company’s boats—or, in river phrase, the Navy—going to land her passengers at the wharf by London Bridge.

We are on the other side, in the whirling eddies about the southernmost piers. “Hi! hi!” shouts the inspector—a shout which is faintly answered. “There is a watchman



there," says he, "and we generally gives him a chy-ike as we pass."

But otherwise the boat creeps along, silent almost as the grave, the lantern darkened, ever ready to the inspector's hand, as he dettly steers his little craft along the shore. Two constables row the boat, and, of course, face one way, while the inspector faces the other.

"I saw a man jump off that bridge once," said he as we are gliding along by Bankside, Southwark. "He came down off there just by that lamp. The tide was running pretty strong and washed him against one of the piers. We got up as quick as we could, and dragged him into the boat, and I had to kneel on him to prevent his getting out again."

"He was so determined on suicide?"

"Yes; and I found he'd tied his neck down to his trouser buttons, so as to keep it bent."

"That he might drown the easier?"

"Ay; and I whipped out my knife and cut the cord at once. We took him to Guy's Hospital, and the last I heard of him was that a gentleman connected with the Church Army took charge of him. He was an old soldier, I think, and was hard up, and he'd got the idea that there was always people follering him about."

"Suffered from illusions, then. But did he take a clear dive off the bridge?"

"No; he come down all of a lump, as you may say."

"The ingratitude o' some people you

rescues is awful," says another member of the force. "I saw a man fall off a wharf, and we rowed up to him sharp, and pulled him out. No, he wouldn't go to no hospital, he said; and when we landed him, and someone told him he ought to be thankful to the police, he mumbled out that we were only doing our duty."

"So saving life, as well as protection of property, is quite a part of your work?"

"And the rescue of dead bodies. We have sometimes nine or ten a month."

Everywhere the river police tell you the same thing—at Waterloo, the western station; at Blackwall, the eastern; or at Wapping, the central—this, the most ghastly, is also one of the most important parts of their work. And Superintendent Chisholm would tell you that he does not remember any year when so many have been found as the year 1894.

What is the cause of it? Apparently it is usually poverty.

"I was concerned in one only on Saturday morning last," continues the inspector. "I saw something floating along, and we rowed up to it and took hold of the clothes with a boat-hook, and passed a line under the arms and towed it to the nearest stairs. Dead bodies are always taken to the mortuaries of the parishes in whose district they are found."

"And do they look large, floating on the water?"

"Often not; sometimes you see a speck, as it were, like the top of that lantern, or it may be an elbow sticking up."

"Yes," said another, "I have found a body upright in the water, as though he was walking. It was the body of a man, and just the top of his head was showing."

"But sometimes more can be seen; anyhow, there's something seems to tell you it's a body. There's no buoyancy about it. It don't come floating along like a basket."

"The superintendent tells me he has had seven letters already about the body you found on Saturday?"

"Yes; a description is sent round to all the police stations by telegraph, and the newspapers publish accounts, and so a lot o' people get to hear of it."

"And if the body is not identified at once, it is photographed?"



A DREDGER.



"Ay, they photographs 'em, and sometimes they are recognised by their photographs long after they are buried."

I had seen that book of gruesome photographs at the Wapping station, and it was one of the most ghastly of sights—all those hundreds of drowned faces, men, women, and children, one after the other, page after page.

There is a rush and a roar. It is a steam-tug tearing along the silent highway to meet an incoming vessel at the Nore. Yet another rattle and roar, and a flaring light. Coals are being unloaded out of a big steamer so that she may be ready for departure at the next tide. Again some distance, and there sounds the whirl of machinery at some lead mills. Once more, further down the stream, and a big fish-carrier comes speeding through the night with a thousand boxes of fish from the North Sea fleets for the early morning market at Billingsgate. Spells of silence come over us on the river, yet they are soon broken, as if to show that life on the Thames never wholly sleeps.

"Easy, Charlie; we'll inspect these barges."

They are clustering about the entrance to one of the docks. The flash of the lantern reveals piles of empty barrels; and, again, a thin line of smoke is seen issuing from another craft. On to this one c'limbs the constable, flashing his light hither and thither. As he suspected, the smoke is from a fire in the stove to cheer the watchman during his night vigil. This barge contains a valuable cargo of tea, and the owners have placed a watchman on board to guard it. A few words pass, and then onward again glides the police boat.

The shores of the river are full of craft containing more or less valuable cargo going to or from the docks and wharves.

"Easy a minute! There's some barges o' tallow up there, and we'll see that there's no boys liftin' a pound or two to sell at the marine store dealer's round the corner."

"The corner" was in a street near one of the numerous flights of stairs leading down to the water's edge in these reaches of the Thames; and to reach the stairs we cross the mud at low tides by causeways of stone, more or less ancient in appearance, and re-



IN TIME.

mindings us of the length of days that London has been a port. But no boys to-night are "lifting" grease, and we continue our watery beat.

"There's a dredger!" exclaims the inspector, as we creep by a dim object on the bank. You can see nothing but the dark outline of a boat. Yet, as you row near and flash a light on the craft, there is seen to be something like a trawl-net within, and, more curious still, some pieces of discoloured coal.

"The man gets his livin' dredgin' up coal from the river," explains the policeman. "There's lots of 'em do it, and they sell it shillin' a hundredweight, summer and winter, in the streets o' Greenwich."

"Do they find enough to make a living out of it?"

"Sometimes. I expects when nobody's looking some of 'em will throw their dredger over a coal barge and add to their takings that way."

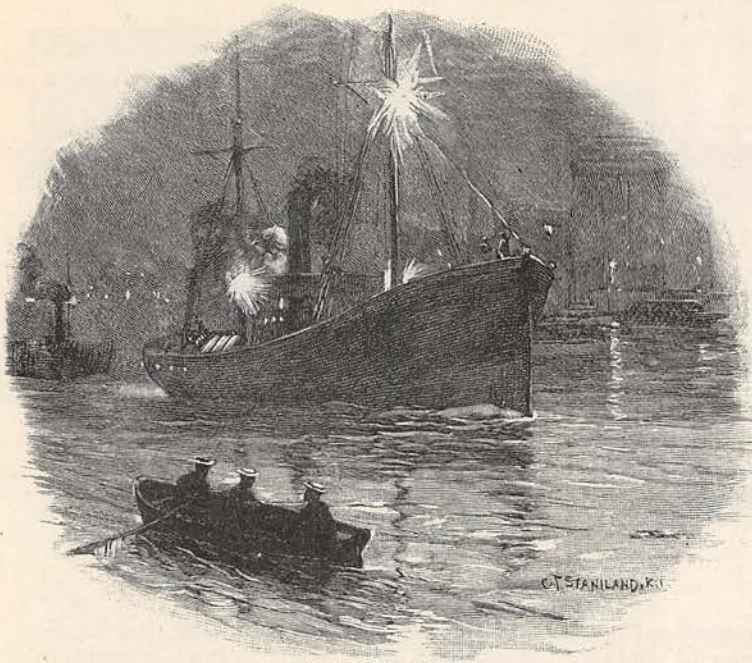
"Steal it, in fact?"

"Ay, and they'll dip the coal in the water to make it all wet, as tho' they'd dredged it up. Anybody may dredge things up from the Thames, and when we sees a man with a dredger and a lot o' wet coal in his boat, how are we to tell that he hasn't come by it honest?"

Not being able to answer this conundrum, you reply, "Just so."

"No; it is very difficult to prove before a magistrate, unless we have actually seen a man take the coal out of a barge. Dredgers get to know where they are likely to find the most coal—where ships are unloaded, and so on; and, of course, when a barge gets sunk,





A FISH CARRIER.

why, they looks on that coal as quite a wind-fall. So they go cruisin' about."

The dredger, as we inspect it by the police lamp, resembles a small and light trawl-net, with an iron rod to keep its capacious mouth open as it skims the bottom of the river.

"They pick up a boat cheap," continues our policeman; "perhaps buys it at the Queen's Tobacco Ground for a few shillings. Any boat that is found wanderin' about without an owner is taken there, and if it is not claimed it is sold by auction."

"The Queen's Tobacco Ground! That is where contraband goods are stored, I suppose?"

"Used to be, sir; but all wreckage is taken there now, and one o' these dredgin' men can pick up a boat there very cheap sometimes."

We have been patrolling below our proper district. The length of river patrolled from Wapping extends from Blackfriars Bridge on the west to Surrey docks entrance on the east, and is again divided into "beats," called the upper and lower, east and west of Wapping police station.

In like manner, the river is patrolled from Waterloo police station, which is a pier moored by the Embankment near to Charing Cross, the "Waterloo" district extending from Blackfriars westward to Fulham; again, on the other side of the Wapping district, the widening Thames is watched by the river police from Blackwall, or, more strictly speaking, East

Greenwich station—which used to be an old navy ship on the shore—from the Surrey Dock entrance right down to Dartford Creek, by Erith.

Morning, noon, and night, the boats go out, at intervals of two hours, all through the day and night. Each boat remains out for six hours at a time. Thus, every two hours a boat puts out and comes in at each station, and with the supervision boats a dozen police boats, in round numbers, are usually patrolling the Thames.

"And when you've got to turn out on a winter's mornin' for your two or four o'clock watch, you wants a good linin'!" exclaimed the policeman; and he spoke with the intensity born of experience.

"There's the Forty Thieves there," remarked another constable as we pass by a low, shelving slope of shore on the southern side, by Deptford.

"Why! it seems gravelly and shingly—a strange thing for the Thames."

"Shingle and mud; it is a right o' way to the water, and, o' course, folks may put their boats there and land goods free o' charge—it is what we call a public draw-dock."

"It looks like a bit o' the seashore popped down among the wharves."

"Well, o' course, being free, a lot o' people resort here, and it is the head-centre of a lot o' roguery, no doubt. Fellows hang about and steal anything. We had information once that four casks o' butter had been stolen out of a barge; so down we came here and searched all the lighters and barges about, and found the casks at last. They were tucked up in another barge ready to be rowed away; but we could not bring it home to the thieves. We gen'rally get out of our boat and explore this place."

And in another minute the dim form of the inspector could be seen on the crunching gravel, disappearing among the boats on the Lower Watergate.

"Well, well," says he, returning presently and resuming his seat, "nothing to-night; the great thing is when there are no complaints; we think, then, we are keepin' the thievin' down."



"Sometimes you get unfounded complaints. One of your officials was telling me you had information one day that ten bottles of quick-silver had been stolen."

"Funny thing for folks to steal!"

"Yes; so your people thought. But they inquired into the matter, and the lightermen declared their counting was correct; so the river police continued their examination. They found the iron bottles at last at the place whence they ought to have been removed, covered up with a lot of other stuff."

"So they had been lost sight of?"

"Yes, that was it. Ah, here comes the rain!"

The cloudy night had burst into a storm at last, and down pelted the heavy shower. If anyone would like to know how sharply rain can fall, let them face it in an open boat in the middle of the Thames below bridge, at the dead of night. There is not a shred of shelter. They would be satisfied that the police need all the oil-skins the service allows them.

But rain is not the worst enemy for the Thames police. Fog, the dark demon, is the greatest aversion.

"How do you manage to find your way in the fog?"

"The boat somehow seems to find her own way. O' course, we knows the shore very well, and every now and then we see a gleam of light from some building that tells us where we are—Ah! whose boat?"

A dim shadow darts across a line of light that fell from the shore.

"It is the supervision boat," said one of the men, and the inspector looking closely, was satisfied, and we passed on.

"That is where we have to look for them you see, sir, cutting the light from lamps on the ships, or the shore; and any suspicious

boat we hail. This was the police supervision boat, that is, another craft that visits us, as it were, on our beats."

A few minutes more and the watch of six hours will be over, and you will land at the old-fashioned waterside-looking house, used as the Wapping police-station.

The Thames police are a branch of the Metropolitan Police, and are under the Chief Commissioner, their immediate superintendent being Mr. Colin Chisholm.

Legally, he tells you, the Thames is a highway, just like any thoroughfare in London, and the police have jurisdiction over it in a somewhat similar manner, within the bounds of the Metropolitan Police district.

The river force, numbering some two hundred men, is drawn from various classes and handicrafts, but mostly from watermen, sailors, navy reserve men, and so on. They have to pass two slight examinations, one in swimming and rowing, and the other of a more scholastic description.

"We had a man once," said the superintendent, "who offered himself as a candidate, and when we took him down to the Thames to see how he could row, he exclaimed—

"'Tain't no use your putting me in a boat. I never rowed in my life.'"

Needless to say, his fate was sealed at once. But what a sign of thoughtless effort, to offer himself for the Thames Police! Their duty is in the boat. The highway they patrol is the flowing highway of the Thames.

And so from dark to dawn, and from dawn to dark again, the watchers of the river keep their ceaseless vigil. Unnoticed and unknown perchance to thousands in the mighty city, their boats yet glide continuously in and out of the crowded shipping, and keep watch and ward with sleepless care. F. M. HOLMES.



WATER THIEVES.