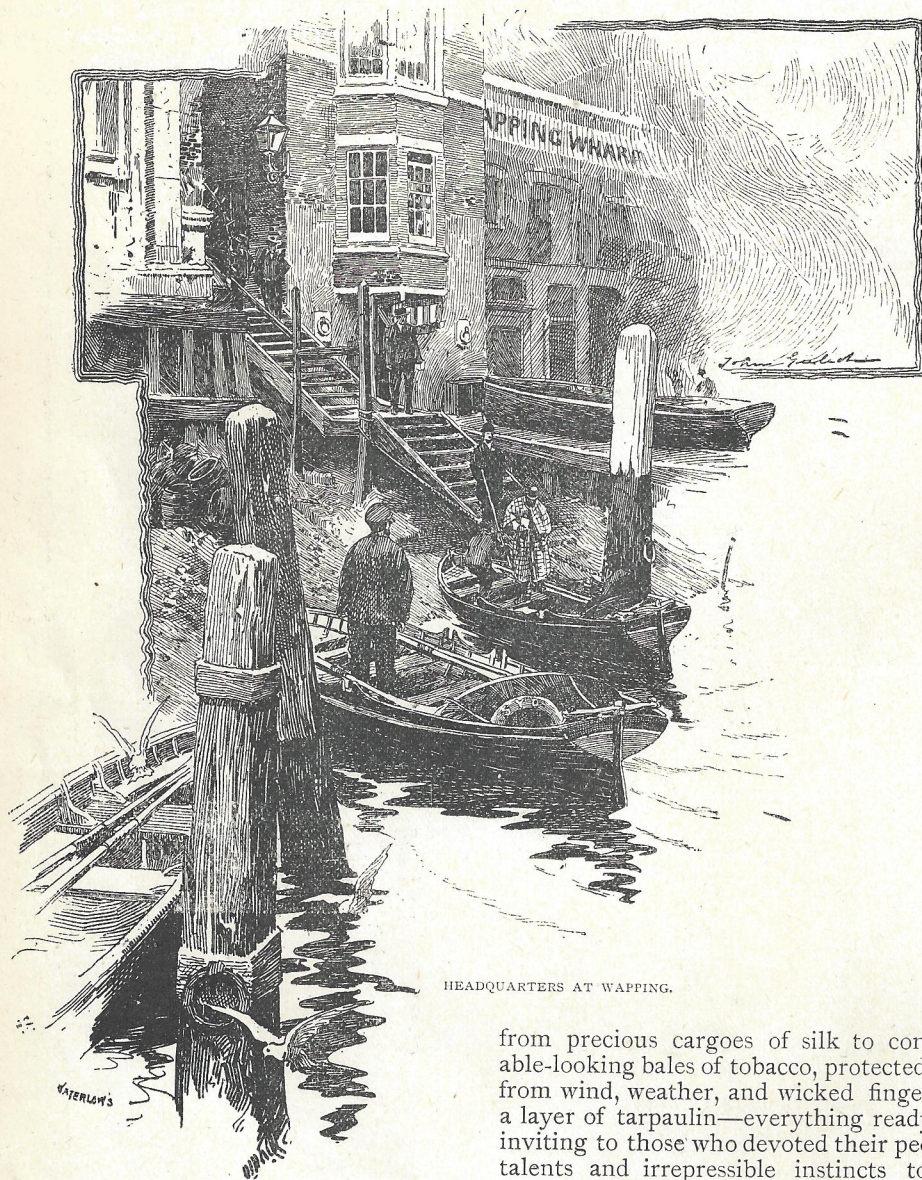


*A Night with the Thames Police.*



HEADQUARTERS AT WAPPING.



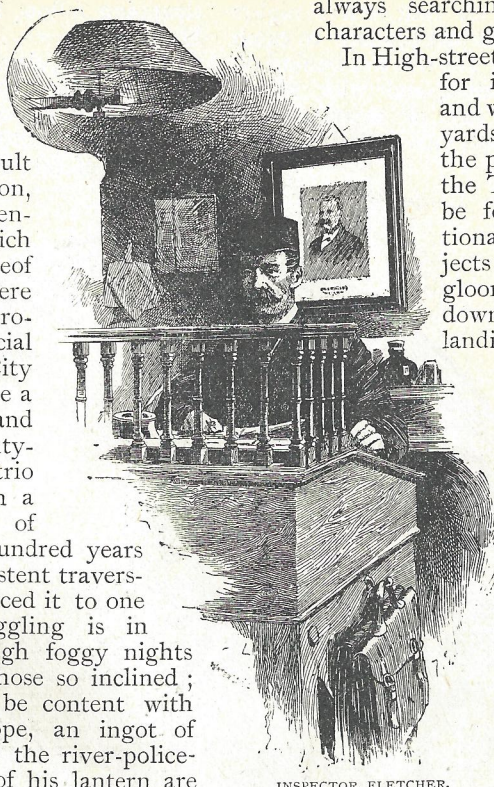
HERE was a time when the owners of craft on the Thames practically left their back-doors open and invited the river-thieves to enter, help themselves, and leave unmolested and content. The barges lay in the river holding everything most coveted,

from precious cargoes of silk to comfortable-looking bales of tobacco, protected only from wind, weather, and wicked fingers by a layer of tarpaulin—everything ready and inviting to those who devoted their peculiar talents and irrepressible instincts to the water. Goods to the value of a million sterling were being neatly appropriated every year. The City merchants were at their wits' end. Some of the more courageous and determined of them ventured out themselves at night; but the thieves—never at a loss in conceiving an ingenious and ready means of escape—slipped, so to speak, out of their would-be captors' hands by going



semi-clothed about their work, greasing their flesh and garments until they were as difficult to catch as eels.

So the merchants held solemn conclave, the result of which was the formation, in 1792, of "The Preventative Service," a title which clung to the members thereof until 1839, when they were embodied with the Metropolitan Police with the special privilege of posing as City constables. Now they are a body of two hundred and two strong, possessing twenty-eight police galleys and a trio of steam launches. From a million pounds' worth of property stolen yearly a hundred years ago, they have, by a persistent traversing of a watery beat, reduced it to one hundred pounds. Smuggling is in reality played out, though foggy nights are still fascinating to those so inclined; but now they have to be content with a coil or two of old rope, an ingot of lead, or a few fish. Still the river-policeman's eye and the light of his lantern are



INSPECTOR FLETCHER.

always searching for suspicious characters and guilty-looking craft.

In High-street, Wapping, famous for its river romances, and within five hundred yards of the Old Stairs, the principal station of the Thames Police is to be found. The traditional blue lamp projects over a somewhat gloomy passage leading down to the river-side landing stage. To us, on the night appointed for our expedition, it is a welcome beacon as to the whereabouts of law and order, for only a few minutes previously half a dozen worthy gentlemen standing at the top of some neighbouring steps, wearing slouched hats and anything but a comforting expression on their faces

gruffly demanded, "Do you want a boat?" Fortunately we did not. These estimable individuals had only just left the dock of the police station, where they had been charged on suspicion, but eventually discharged.

It is a quarter to six o'clock. At six we are to start for our journey up the river as far as Waterloo and back again to Greenwich; but there is time to take a hasty survey of the interior of the station, where accommodation is provided for sixteen single men, with a library, reading-room, and billiard-room at their disposal.

"Fine night, sir; rather cold, though," says a hardy-looking fellow dressed in a reefer and a brightly glazed old-time man-o'-war's hat. He is one of the two oldest men in the force, and could tell how he lost his wife and all his family, save one lad, when the *Princess Alice* went down in 1878. He searched for ten days and ten nights, but they were lost to him. Another of these river guardians has a never-to-be-forgotten reminiscence of that terrible disaster, when the men of the Thames



IN THE CELLS.



police were on duty for four or five nights at a stretch. He was just too late to catch the ill-fated vessel! He was left behind on the pier at Sheerness, and with regret watched it leave, full of merrymakers. What must have been his thoughts when he heard the news?

strapping fellow, buttoning up his coat to his neck.

"Aye, aye, skipper," we shout, becoming for the moment quite nautical.

Inside the station-house you turn sharply to the right, and there is the charge-room. Portraits of Sir Charles Warren and other



A NIGHT CHARGE.

You may pick out any of these thick-set fellows standing about. They have one and all roamed the seas over. Many are old colonials, others middle-aged veterans from the navy and merchant service—every one of them as hard as a rock, capable of rowing for six or eight hours at a stretch without resting on the oar.

"Don't be long inside, sir," shouts a

police authorities are picturesquely arranged on the walls. In front of the desk, with its innumerable little wooden rails, where sits the inspector in charge, is the prisoners' dock, from the ground of which rises the military measurement in inches against which the culprit testifies as to his height. The hands of the clock above are slowly going their rounds. In a corner, near the



stout steel rails of the dock, lie a couple of bargemen's peak caps. They are labelled with a half-sheet of notepaper. Their history? They have been picked up in the river, but the poor fellows who owned them are—missing! It will be part of our duties to assist in the search for them to-night.

Just in a crevice by the window are the telegraph instruments. A clicking noise is heard, and the inspector hurriedly takes down on a slate a strange but suggestive message.

"Information received of a prize-fight for £2 a side, supposed to take place between Highgate and Hampstead."

What has Highgate or Hampstead to do with the neighbourhood of Wapping, or how does a prize-fight affect the members of the Thames police, who are anything but pugilistically inclined? In our innocence we learn that it is customary to telegraph such information to all the principal stations throughout London. The steady routine of the force is to be admired.

There are countless coats, capes, and caps hanging in a room through which we

and a drinking cup. Heat is supplied through hot-water pipes; a pillow and rug are provided for the women; and, like "desirable villa residences," the apartments are fitted with electric bells.

Here the occupier is lodged for the time being, allowed food at each meal to the value of fourpence, and eventually tried at the Thames Police-court. Look at the doors. They bear countless dents from the boot-tips of young men endeavouring to perform the clever acrobatic feat of kicking out the iron grating over the door through which the gas-jet gives them light. Those of a musical nature ring the electric bell for half an hour at a time, imagining that they are disturbing the peace of the officer in a distant room. But our smart constable, after satisfying himself that all is well, disconnects the current, and sits smiling at his ease. Some of the inmates, too, amuse themselves by manufacturing streamers out of the blankets. They never do it a second time.

Now we are on our way to the riverside.



GOING ON DUTY.

pass on our way to the cells—cosy, clean, and convenient apartments, and decidedly cheap to the temporary tenant. There are two of them, one being specially retained for women. They are painted yellow, provided with a wash-basin, towel, a supply of soap,

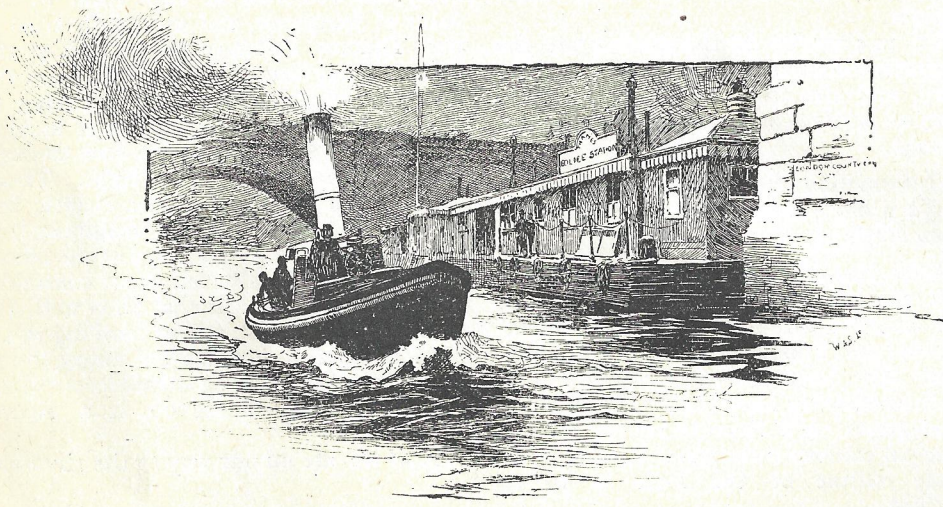
We descend the wooden steps, soaked through with the water which only a few hours previously has been washing the stairs. Our boat is in waiting, manned by three sturdy fellows, under the charge of an inspector. It is a glorious night; the moon



seems to have come out just to throw a light upon our artist's note-book, and to provide a picture of the station standing out in strong relief. The carpenter—for they repair their own boats here—looks out from his shop door, and shouts a cheery "Good-

of ingenuity was rewarded with ten years' penal servitude.

Our little craft has a lively time amongst the fire-floats—for fires are just as likely to occur on the river as on the land, and accordingly small launches are dotted about here



POLICE LAUNCH "ALERT."

night." Our galley receives a gentle push into the water, and we start on a long beat of seven and a half miles.

Save for the warning of a passing tug, the river is as a place of the dead. How still and solemn! But a sudden "Yo-ho" from the inspector breaks the quietude.

It is the method of greeting as one police galley passes another.

"Yo-ho!" replies the man in charge of the other boat.

"All right. Good-night."

These river police know every man who has any business on the water at night. If the occupant of a boat was questioned, and his "Yo-ho" did not sound familiar, he would be "towed" to the station.

A simple "Yo-ho" once brought about a smart capture. The rower was mystified at the magic word, got mixed in his replies, and accordingly was accommodated with a private room at the station for the night. It transpired that this river purloiner had stolen the boat, and, being of a communicative disposition, was in the habit of getting on friendly terms with the watchmen of the steamers, and so contrived to gain an entrance to the cabins, from which money and watches disappeared. This piece

and there, fulfilling the same duties as the more formidable-looking engines on *terra firma*. A red light signifies their whereabouts, and they usually lie alongside the piers, so as to be able to telephone quickly should a fire occur. If the police saw flames, they would act exactly as their comrades do on land, and hurry to the nearest float to give the alarm.

It blows cold as we spin past Traitor's Gate at the Tower, but our men become weather-beaten on the Thames, and their hands never lose the grip of the oar. They need a hardy frame, a robust constitution, for no matter what the weather, blinding snow or driving rain, these water guardians come out—the foggiest night detains them not; they have to get through the fog and their allotted six hours. At the time of the Fenian scare at the House of Correction, thirty-six hours at a stretch was considered nothing out of the way.

Now the lights of Billingsgate shine out, and we experience a good deal of dodging outside the Custom House. The wind is getting up, and the diminutive sprat-boats are taking advantage of the breeze to return home. Some are being towed along. And as the oars of our little craft touch the water, every man's eyes are fixed in order



to catch sight of anything like the appearance of a missing person. A record of the missing, as well as the found, is kept at the station we have just left a mile or two down the river. Ten poor creatures remain yet to be discovered. What stories, thrilling and heartrending, we have to listen to! Yet even in such pitiful occurrences as these, much that is grimly humorous often surrounds them. Many are the sad recognitions on the part of those "found drowned." Experience has taught the police to stand quietly behind those who must needs go through such a terrible ordeal, and who often swoon at the first sight. Where is a more touching story than that of the little girl who tramped all the way from Camden Town to Wapping, for the purpose of identifying her father, who had been picked up near the Old Stairs? She was a brave little lass, and looked up into the policeman's face as he took her by the hand and walked with her towards the mortuary. As they reached the door and opened it, the bravery of the child went to the man's heart. He was used to this sort of thing, but, when he thought of the orphan, the tears came to his eyes; he turned away for a moment, lest his charge should see them and lose what strength her tiny frame possessed. He hesitated before he let her go in.

"You're not frightened, are you, policeman?" she asked innocently.

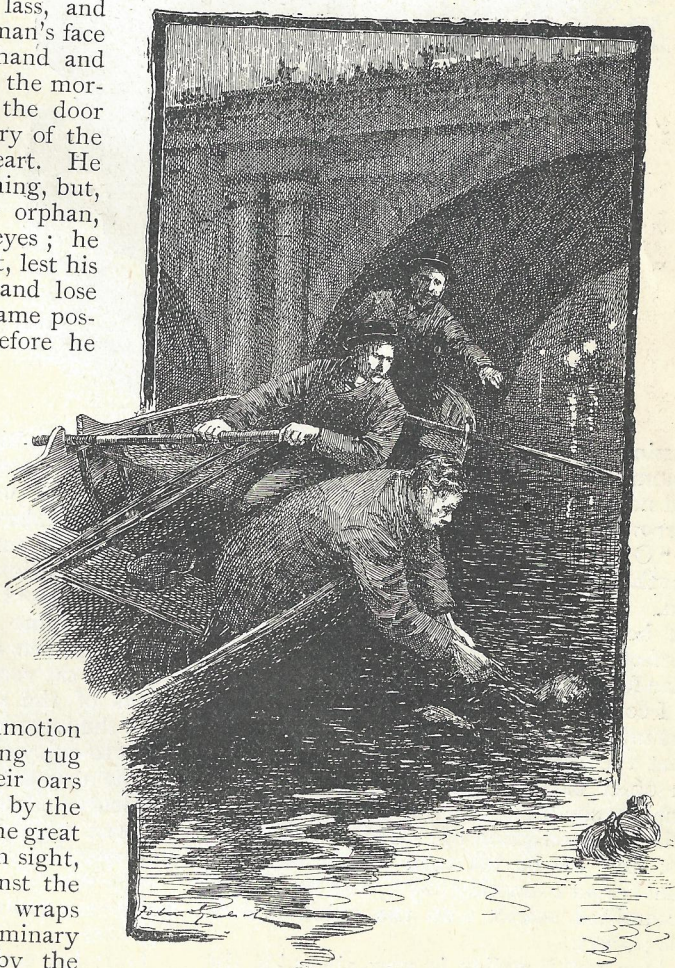
He could not move, and she went in alone. When the constable followed, he found the child with her arms round her dead father's neck, covering his face with tears and kisses.

We shoot beneath London Bridge, and the commotion brought about by a passing tug causes our men to rest their oars as we are lifted like a cork by the disturbed waves. And as the great dome of St. Paul's appears in sight, standing out solemnly against the black night, we pull our wraps around us, as a little preliminary to a story volunteered by the captain of our crew. The river

police could tell of many a remarkable clue to identification—a piece of lace, or the button of a man's trousers. But the inspector has a curious story of a watch to relate—true every word of it.

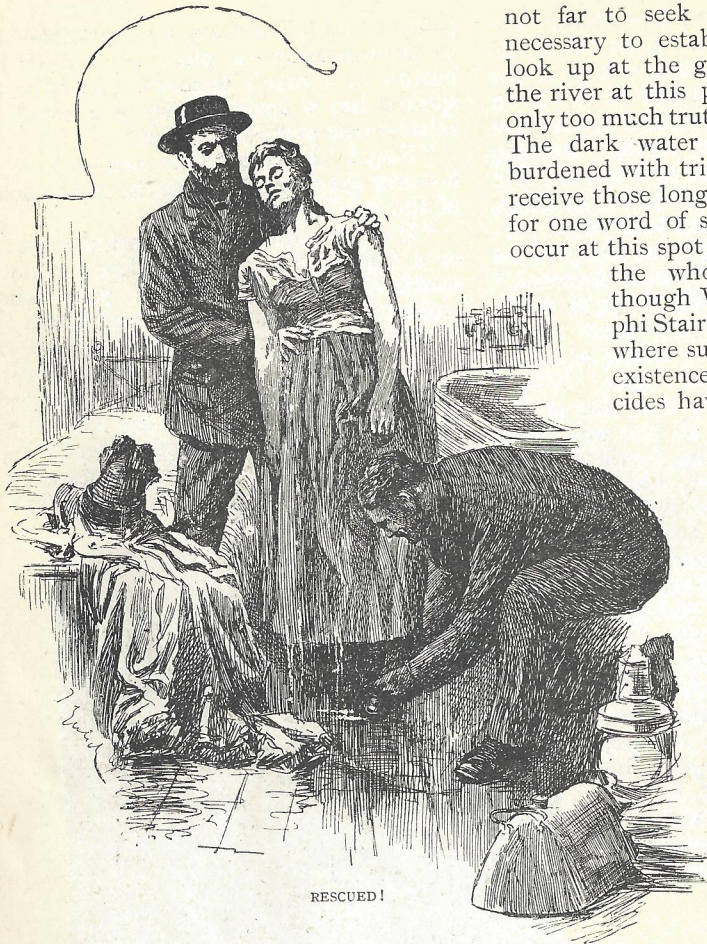
"Easy!" he cries to his men—"look to it—now get along," and to the steady swing of the oars he commences.

"It all turned on the inscription engraved on a watch," he says. "When I came to search the clothing of the poor fellow picked up, the timekeeper was found in his pocket. It was a gold one, and on the case was engraved an inscription, setting forth that it had been given to a sergeant in the Marines. Here was the clue sought after—the drowned man had evidently been in the army. The following morning I was on my way to Spring Gardens, when in



THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS.





RESCUED!

passing down the Strand I saw a marine, whom I was half inclined to question. I did not, however, do so, but hurried on my sorrowful mission.

"On my arrival, I asked if they knew anything of Sergeant —. Yes, they did. I must have passed him in the Strand, for he had gone to Coutts' Bank! I was perfectly bewildered. Here was the very man found drowned, still alive!

I could only wait until his return. Then the mystery was soon explained. It seemed that the sergeant had sold his gold watch in order to get a more substantial silver one, on condition that the purchaser should take the inscription off. This he failed to do, and he in his turn parted with the timekeeper to another buyer, who had finally committed suicide with the watch still in his pocket.

Our police galley is now alongside the station, just below Waterloo Bridge. It is

not far to seek why it has been found necessary to establish a depôt here. We look up at the great bridge which spans the river at this point, named alas! with only too much truth, "The Bridge of Sighs." The dark water looks inviting to those burdened with trial and trouble, a place to receive those longing for rest and yearning for one word of sympathy. More suicides occur at this spot than at any other along the whole length of the river, though Whitehall Stairs and Adelphi Stairs are both notorious places, where such poor creatures end their existence. Some twenty-one suicides have been attempted at this point during the past year, and twenty-five bodies found.

As we step on the timber station the sensation is extremely curious to those used to the firm footing of the pavement. But Inspector Gibbons—a genial member of the river force—assures us that one soon becomes accustomed to the incessant rocking. Waterloo Police Station—familiar to all river pedestrians during the summer months, owing to the picturesque appearance it presents with its pots of geraniums and climbing

fuchsias—is a highly interesting corner.

Just peep into the Inspector's room, and make friends with "Dick," the cat, upon whose shoulders rests the weight of four years and a round dozen pounds. Dick is a capital swimmer, and has been in the water scores of times. Moreover, he is a veritable feline policeman, and woe betide any trespassers of his own race and breed. When a cat ventures within the sacred precincts of the station, Dick makes friends with the intruder for the moment, and, in order to enjoy the breeze, quietly edges him to the extreme end of the platform, and suddenly pushes him overboard. "Another cat last night," is a common expression amongst the men here.

The Waterloo Police Station on occasion becomes a temporary hospital and a home together.

Only half an hour previous to our arrival there had been an attempted suicide, and in



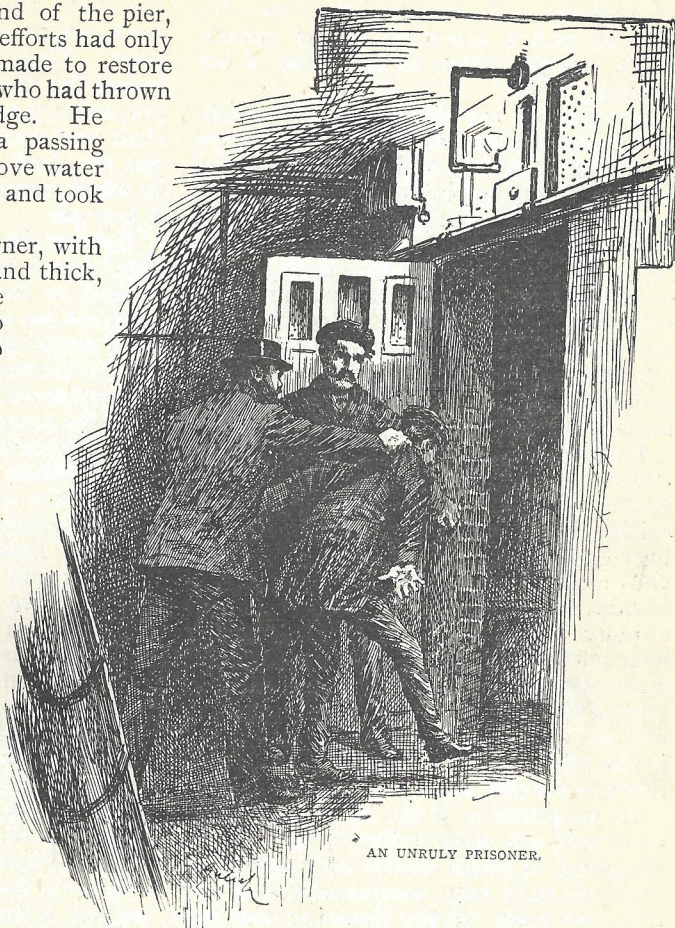
a little room, at the far end of the pier, there was every sign that efforts had only recently been successfully made to restore animation to a young fellow who had thrown himself off Blackfriars Bridge. He had been picked up by a passing skiff, and his head held above water until a steamboat passed by and took him on board.

Here is a bed in the corner, with comfortable-looking pillow and thick, warm blankets, where the unfortunate one is put to bed for a period, previous to being sent to the Infirmary, and afterwards charged. Close at hand is a little medicine chest, containing numerous medicine phials, a flask of stimulants, and a smelling-bottle. A dozen or so of tins, of all shapes and sizes, are handy. These are filled with hot water and placed in contact with the body of the person rescued from the river.

It is often an hour before anything approaching animation makes itself visible, and even four hours have elapsed before any sign has been apparent. The rescued one is laid upon a wooden board, below which is a bath, and rubbed by ready hands

according to Dr. Sylvester's method, whose instructions are prominently displayed upon the wall, and are understood by all the police.

It will be noticed in the picture that two men are apparently about to undress the hapless creature who has attempted her own life. The first thought that will occur to the reader on looking at the illustration is, that a member of her own sex ought to do this work. It must be remembered, however, that weeks may elapse without any such event, and there is no place at Waterloo Bridge where a woman could be kept constantly in waiting. Still, it is clearly not right that the men should do this duty, and we think they might be enabled to go to some house in the neighbourhood, in which arrangements had been made for the services of a woman in cases of emergency. We do not forget that great promptness is required at such times in order to resuscitate the body. But, when we remember that every branch in the



AN UNRULY PRISONER.

police system on the Thames is so perfect, it seems a pity that some means cannot be devised.

Many remarkable things might be told about people who have been in this room. One poor fellow was once an inmate who was humorous to the last. When he was brought in, a pair of dumb-bells were found in his pocket, and a piece of paper on which was scrawled in charcoal the following:—

"Dear Bob,—I am going to drown myself. You will find me somewhere near Somerset House. I can't part with my old friends, Bob, so I'm going to take them with me. Good-bye."

The man was evidently an athlete, and the "old friends" referred to were the weighty dumb-bells.

Many have been picked up with their pockets full of granite stones or a piece of lead. One was found with the hands tied together with a silk handkerchief—a love-token which the forsaken one had used



so pitifully. A woman, too, was discovered with a summons in her pocket, which was put down as the cause of her untimely end.

Remarkable are the escapes of would-be suicides. In one instance a woman threw herself off one of the bridges, and instead of falling into the water, jumped into a passing barge. She had a child in her arms. The little one died at Guy's Hospital, but the mother recovered. Some time ago a woman jumped off Westminster Bridge, and floated safely down to the Temple Stairs, where she was picked up. She had gone off the bridge feet first, the wind had caught her clothes, and by this means her head was kept up, and she was saved.

Perhaps, however, the strangest case and one of the most romantic, was that of Alice Blanche Oswald. Previous to committing suicide she wrote letters to herself, purporting to come from wealthy people in America, and setting forth a most heartrending history. Her death aroused a vast amount of public sympathy. A monument to her memory was suggested, and subscriptions were already coming in, when inquiries proved that her supposed friends in America did not exist, and that the story contained in the missives was a far from truthful one. She was nothing more than an adventuress.

As we glance in at the solitary cell, built on exactly the same principle as those at Wapping, in which eleven enterprising individuals have been accommodated at one time, we learn of the thousand and one odds and ends that are washed up—revolvers and rifles, housebreaking instruments which thoughtful burglars have got rid of; the plant of a process for manufacturing counterfeit bank-notes, with some of the flimsy pieces of paper still intact. A plated cup was once picked up at Waterloo, which turned out to be the proceeds of a burglary at Eton College; it is probable the cup floated all the way from the Thames at Windsor to Waterloo.

Forty-eight men are always on duty at this station, including four single men, whose quarters are both novel and decidedly cosy. This quartet of bachelors sleep in bunks, two above the others. The watch of

one of the occupants is ticking away in one berth, whilst a clock is vieing with it next door. These men have each a separate locker for their clothes, boot-brushes, teapot, coffee-pot, food, &c. The men do all their own cleaning and cooking; if you will, you may look into a kitchen in the corner, in which every pot and pan is as bright as a new pin.

But our time is up; the chiming of "Big Ben" causes the genial inspector gently to remind us that we must be off, and once more we are seated in the boat, and, cutting right across the river, move slowly on our way to Greenwich, where the old *Royalist* is transformed into a station, a familiar institution some sixteen or seventeen years ago at Waterloo.

The whole scene is wonderfully impressive—not a sound is to be heard but the distant rumbling of the vehicles over London Bridge. Our men pause for a moment and rest their oars. The great wharves are deserted, the steamers and barges appear immovable as they lie alongside—there is no life anywhere or any sign of it. Again we get along, halting for a moment to look up at the old man-o'-war, the famous *Discovery*, which ventured out to the Arctic regions under Captain Nares. The old three-mast schooner—for the vessel is nothing more now, being used as a river carrier of the stores from the Victualling Yard at Deptford to the various dockyards—had on board when she went to colder regions a future member of the Thames Police: hence he was called "Arctic Jack" by his companions, a near relation to "Father Neptune," a cognomen bestowed upon another representative of the force, owing to the wealth of white beard which he possessed.

Past Deptford Cattle Market, the red lamps on the jetties light up the water; a good pull and we are at Greenwich Steps, near to which is "The Ship," ever associated with the name of "whitebait." Our beat is ended, and a hearty "Good-night" is re-echoed by the men as we stand watching them on the river steps whilst they pull the first few strokes on their way home to Wapping.

