

# THE PRIZE STORY.

NO. 24.

One lady or gentleman's Fine Solid Gold Watch is offered every week as a prize for the best story, original or selected, sent to us by competitors under the following conditions:—1st. The story need not be the work of the sender, but may be selected from any newspaper, magazine, book or pamphlet wherever found, and may be either written or printed matter, as long as it is legible. 2nd. The sender must be a subscriber for *Truth* for at least one month, and must, therefore, send one dollar along with the story, together with the name and address clearly given. Present subscribers will have their term extended for the dollar sent. If two stories happen to send in the same story the first one received at *Truth* office will have the preference. The publisher reserves the right to publish at any time any story, original or selected, which may fall to claim a prize. The sum of three dollars (\$3) will be paid for such story when used. Address.—Editor's Prize Story, "Truth" Office, Toronto, Canada.

The following attractive and well written story has been chosen as our prize story for the present week. The sender can obtain the Watch offered as the prize, by forwarding twenty-five cents for postage and registration.

## PETHERICK'S PERIL.

SENT BY LAURA M. JAMES, HAMILTON, ONT.

Each story of the Shelton Cotton Factory is fifteen feet between floors; there are seven such over the basement, and this rises six feet above the ground. The brick walls narrow to eight inches as they ascend, and form a parapet rising above the roof. One of the time-keepers of the factory, Jack Hardy, a young man about my own age, often runs along the brick-work, the practice giving him a singular delight that has seemed to increase with his proficiency in it. Having been a clerk in the works from the beginning, I have frequently used the parapet for a foot-path, and although there was a shere fall of one hundred feet to the ground, have done it with ease and without dizziness. Occasionally Hardy and I have run races, on the opposite walls, an exercise in which I was invariably beaten, because I became timid with increase of pace.

Hopelessly distanced last Wednesday, while the men were off at noon, I gave up midway, and looking down, observed the upturned face of an old man, gazing at me with parted lips, wide eyes, and an expression of horror so startling that I involuntarily stepped down to the bricklayers' platform inside. I then saw that the apparently frightened spectator was Mr. Petherick, who has been for some weeks paymaster and factotum for the contractors.

"What's the matter, Petherick?" I called down. He made no answer, but walking off rapidly, disappeared round the mill. Curious about his demeanor, I descended, and, after some little seeking, found him smoking alone.

"You quite frightened me just now, Petherick," said I, "Did you think I was a ghost?"

"Not just that," he replied sententially. "Did you expect me to fall, then?" I inquired.

"Not just that either," said he. The old man was clearly disinclined to talk, and apparently much agitated. I began to joke him about his lugubrious expression, when the one o'clock bell rang, and he shuffled off hastily to another quarter.

Though I puzzled awhile over the incident, it soon passed as entirely from my mind that I was surprised when, passing Petherick in the afternoon, intending to go aloft, he said, as I went by:

"Don't do it again, Mr. Fraser!"

"What?" I stopped.

"That!" he retorted.

"Oh! You mean running on the wall," said I.

"I mean going on it at all!" he exclaimed. His earnestness was so marked that I conceived a strong interest in its cause.

"I'll make a bargain with you, Mr. Petherick. If you will tell me why you advise me, I'll give the thing up!"

"Done!" said he. "Come to my cottage this evening, and I'll tell you a strange adventure of my own, though perhaps you'll only laugh that it's the reason why it sickens me to see you fooling up there."

Petherick was ready to talk when Jack and I sat down on his doorstep that evening, and immediately launched into the following narrative:

"I was born and grew to manhood near the high cliffs on the coast of Cornwall. Millions of sea-fowls made their nests along the face of those wave-worn precipices. My companions and I used to get much excitement, and sometimes a good deal of pocket-money, by taking their eggs. One of us, placing his feet in a loop at the end of a rope and taking a good grip with his hands,

would be lowered by the others to the nest.

"When he had his basket full, they'd haul him up, and another would go down. Well, one afternoon, I thus went dangling off. They paid out about a hundred feet of rope before I touched the ledge and let go."

"What ledge?" asked Jack.

"Oh!" said Petherick, after a pause. "I see it will be troublesome to make you understand the situation." Then, after reflecting for some moments:

"You must know that most of the cliffs along that coast overhang the sea. At many points one could drop six hundred feet into the sea, and then be forty or fifty feet from the base of the rock he left. The coast is scooped under by the waves. But in some places the cliff wall is as though it had been eaten away by seas once running in on higher levels. There will be an overhanging coping, then some hundred feet down, a ledge sticking out farther than that of the top; under that ledge all will be scooped away. In places there are three or four such ledges, each projecting farther than those above. These ledges used to fall away occasionally, as they do yet, I am told, for the ocean is gradually devouring that coast. Where they did not project farther than the upper coping, one would swing like a pendulum on the rope, and get on the rock, if not too far in, then put a rock on the loop to hold it till his return. When a ledge did project so that one could drop straight into it, he hauled down some slack and left the rope hanging."

"Did the wind never blow it off?" asked Jack.

"Seldom, and never out of reach," said the old man. "Well, the ledge I reached was like this," illustrating with his hands. "It was some ten feet wide; it stuck out maybe six feet farther than the cliff top; the rock wall went up pretty near perpendicular, till near the coping at the ground, but below the ledge the cliff's face was so scooped away that the sea, five hundred feet below, ran in under it nigh fifty feet."

"As I went down, thousands of birds rose from the jagged places of the precipice, circling round me with harsh screams. Soon touching the ledge, I stepped from the loop, and drawing down a little slack, walked off briskly. For fully a quarter of a mile the ledge ran along the cliff's face almost as level and even in width as that sidewalk. I remember fancying that it sloped outward more than usual, but instantly dismissed the notion, though Gaffer Pentreath, the oldest man in that countryside, used to tell us that we should not get the use of that ledge always. It had been as steady in our time as in his grandfather's time, and we only laughed at his prophecies. Yet the place of an old filled fissure was marked by a line of grass, by tufts of weeds and small bushes, stretching almost as far as the ledge itself, and within a foot or so of the cliff's face."

"Eggs were not so many as usual, and I went a long piece from my rope before turning back. Then I noticed the very strange conduct of the sea-fowls below. Usually there were hundreds, but now there were millions on the wing, and instead of darting forth in playful motions, they seemed to be wildly excited, screaming shrilly, rushing out as in terror, and returning in masses as though to alight, only to wheel in dread, and keep the air in vast clouds."

"The weather was beautiful, the sea like glass. At no great distance two large brigs, and nearer a small yacht, lay becalmed,

heaving on the long billows. I could look down her cabin stairway almost, and it seemed scarcely more than a long leap to her deck.

"Puzzled by the singular conduct of the sea-birds, I soon stopped and set my back against the cliff, to rest while watching them. The day was deadly still and very warm."

"I remember taking off my cap and wiping the sweat from my face and forehead with my sleeve. While doing this, I looked down involuntarily through the fissure at my feet. Instantly my blood almost froze with horror! There was a distinct crack between the inner edge of the fissure and the hard-packed, root-threaded soil with which it was filled! Forcibly I pressed back, and in a flash looked along the edge. The fissure was widening under my eyes, the rock before me seemed sinking outward, and with a shudder and a groan and roar, the whole long platform fell crashing to the sea below! I stood on a margin of rock scarce a foot wide, at my back a perpendicular cliff, and five hundred feet below the ocean, now almost hidden by the vast concourse of wheeling and alighted birds."

"Can you believe that my first sensation was one of relief? I stood safe! Even a feeling of interest held me for some moments. Almost coolly I observed a long mighty wave roll out from beneath. It went forth with a high, curling crest—a solid wall of water! It struck the yacht stern on, plunged down on her deck, smashed through her swell of sail, and swept her out of sight forever."

"Not till 'an did my thoughts dwell entirely on my own position; not till then did I comprehend its hopelessness! Now my eyes closed convulsively, to shut out the abyss down which my glance had fallen: shuddering, I pressed hard against the solid wall at my back; an appalling cold slowly crept through me! My reason struggled against a wild desire to leap; all the demons of despair whispered to me to make an instant end. In imagination I had leaped! I felt the swooning helplessness of falling and the cold, upward rush of air!"

"Still I pressed my back against the wall of rock, and through nearly faint with terror, never forgot for an instant the death at my feet, nor the utter danger of the slightest motion. How long this weakness lasted I know not; I only know that the unspeakable horror of that first period has come to me in waking dreams many and many a day since; that I have long nights of that deadly fear; that to think of the past is to stand again on that narrow foot-hold, and to look around on the earth is often to cry out with joy that it widens away from my feet!"

The old man paused long. Glancing sideways at Jack, I saw that his face was pallid. I myself had shuddered and grown cold—so strongly had my imagination realized the awful experience that Petherick described.

"Suddenly," said the old man, "these words flashed to my brain: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? And one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. Fear not, therefore; ye are of more value than many sparrows.' My faculties so strained, I seemed to hear the words. Indeed, often yet I think I did truly hear a voice utter them very near me."

"Instantly hope arose, consciously desperate indeed, but I became calm, resourceful, capable, and feeling unaccountably aided. Careful not to look down, I opened my eyes and gazed far away over the bright sea. The rippled billows told that a light outward breeze had sprung up. Slowly, and somewhat more distant, the two brigs moved toward the horizon. Turning my head, I could trace the narrow stone of my footing to where my rope dangled, perhaps three hundred yards distant."

"It seemed to hang within easy reach of the cliff's face, and instantly I resolved and as instantly proceeded to work toward it. No time remained for hesitation. Night was coming on. I reasoned that my comrades thought me killed. They had probably gone to view the new condition of the precipice from a lower station, and on their return would haul up and carry off the rope. I made a move toward it. Try to think of that journey!"

I nodded to him silently.

"Shuffling sideways very carefully, I had not made five yards before I knew that I could not continue to look over that abyss without glancing down, and that I could not glance down without losing my senses. You have the brick line to keep eyes on as you walk along the factory wall; do you

think you could move along it erect, looking down as you would have to? Yet it is only one hundred feet high. Imagine five more such walls on top of that, and you trying to move sideways—in capable of closing your eyes, forced to look down, from end to end, yet, three times farther! Imagine you've got to go on or jump off! Would you not, in an ecstasy of nervous agitation, fall to your knees, get down face-first at full length, clutch by your hands and with shut eyes feel your way? I longed to lie down and hold, but of course that was impossible."

"Still there was a wall at your back," observed Jack.

"That made it worse! The cliff seemed to press outward against me. It did, in fact, incline very slightly outward. It seemed to be thrusting me off. Oh, the horror of that sensation! Your toes on the edge of a precipice, and the implacable, calm mountain apparently weighting you slowly forward."

Beads of sweat broke out over his white face at the horror he had called before him. Wiping his lips nervously with the back of his hand, and looking askant, as at the narrow pathway, he paused long. I saw its cruel edge and the dark gleams of its abyssal water.

"I knew," he resumed, "that with my back to the wall I could never reach the rope. I could not face towards it and step forward, so narrow was the ledge. Motion was perhaps barely possible that way, but the breadth of my shoulders would have forced me to lean somewhat more outward, and this I dared not and could not do. Also, to see a solid surface before me became an irresistible desire. I resolved to turn round before resuming the desperate journey. To do this I had to nerve myself for one steady look at my footing."

"In the depths below the myriad sea-fowl then rested on the black water, which, though swelling more with the rising wind, had yet an unbroken surface at some little distance from the precipice, while farther out it had begun to jump to white caps, and in beneath me, where I could not see, it dashed and churned with a faint, pervading roar that I could barely distinguish. Before the descending sun a heavy bank of cloud had risen. The ocean's surface bore that appearance of intense and angry gloom that often heralds a storm, but, save the deep murmur going out from far beneath my perch, all to my hearing was deadly still."

"Cautiously I swung my right foot before the other and carefully edged around. For an instant as my shoulder rubbed against the rock, I felt that I must fall. I did stagger, in fact, but the next moment stood firm, face to the beetling cliff, my heels on the very edge, and the new sensation of the abyss behind me no less horrible than that from which I had with such difficulty escaped. I stood quaking. A delirious horror thrilled every nerve. The skin about my ears and neck, suddenly cold, shrank convulsively."

"Wild with fear, I thrust forward my head against the rock and rested in agony. A whirl and wind of sudden wings made me conscious of outward things again. Then a mad eagerness to climb swept away other feelings, and my hands attempted in vain to clutch the rock. Not daring to cast my head backwards, I drew it tortoise-like between my raised shoulders and chin against the precipice, and gazed upward with straining of vision from under my eye-brows."

"Far above the dead wall stretched. Sidewise glances gave me glimpses of the projecting summit coping. There was no hope in that direction. But the distraction of scanning the cliff side had given my strained nerves some relief; to my memory again returned the promise of the 'miraculous' and the consciousness of his regard. Once more my muscles became firm as steel."

"A cautious step sideways made me know how much I had gained in ease and security of motion by the change of front. I made progress that seemed almost rapid for some rods, and even had exultation in my quick approach to the rope. Hence came freedom to think how I should act on reaching it, and speculation as to how soon my comrades would haul me up."

"Then the idea rushed through me that they might even yet draw it away too soon, that while almost in my clutch it might slip from my hands. Instantly all the terrors of my position returned with tenfold force; an outward thrust of the precipice seemed to grow distinct, my trembling