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## HEROES WHO FIGHT FIRE.

BY JACOB A. RIIS,

Author of "How the Other Half Lives," etc.

WITH PICTURES BY JAY HAMBIDGE.

THIRTEEN years have passed since, but it is all to me as if it had happened yesterday—the clanging of the fire-bells, the hoarse shouts of the firemen, the wild rush and terror of the streets; then the great hush that fell upon the crowd; the sea of upturned faces, with the fire-glow upon it; and up there, against the background of black smoke that poured from roof and attic, the boy clinging to the narrow ledge, so far up that it seemed humanly impossible that help could ever come.

But even then it was coming. Up from the street, while the crew of the truck-company were laboring with the heavy extension-ladder that at its longest stretch was many feet too short, crept four men upon long, slender poles with cross-bars iron-hooked at the end. Standing in one window, they reached up and thrust the hook through the next one above, then mounted a story higher. Again the crash of glass, and again the dizzy ascent. Straight up the wall they crept, looking like human flies on the ceiling, and clinging as close, never resting, reaching one recess only to set out for the next; nearer and nearer in the race for life, until but a single span separated the foremost from the boy. And now the iron hook fell at his feet, and the

fireman stood upon the step with the rescued lad in his arms, just as the pent-up flame burst lurid from the attic window, reaching with impotent fury for its prey. The next moment they were safe upon the great ladder waiting to receive them below.

Then such a shout went up! Men fell on each other's necks, and cried and laughed at once. Strangers slapped one another on the back, with glistening faces, shook hands, and behaved generally like men gone suddenly mad. Women wept in the street. The driver of a car stalled in the crowd, who had stood through it all speechless, clutching the reins, whipped his horses into a gallop, and drove away yelling like a Comanche, to relieve his feelings. The boy and his rescuer were carried across the street without any one knowing how. Policemen forgot their dignity, and shouted with the rest. Fire, peril, terror and loss were alike forgotten in the one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin.

Fireman John Binns was made captain of his crew, and the Bennett medal was pinned on his coat on the next parade-day. The burning of the St. George Flats was the first opportunity New York had of witnessing a rescue with the scaling-ladders that form such an essential part of the equipment of the fire-



fighters to-day. Since then there have been many such. In the company in which John Binns was a private of the second grade, two others to-day bear the medal for brave deeds: the foreman, Daniel J. Meagher, and Private Martin M. Coleman, whose name has been seven times inscribed on the roll of honor for twice that number of rescues, any one of which stamped him as a man among men, a real hero. And Hook and Ladder No. 3 is not specially distinguished among the fire-crews of the metropolis for daring and courage. New-Yorkers are justly proud of their firemen. Take it all in all, there is not, I think, to be found anywhere a body of men as fearless, as brave, and as efficient as the Fire Brigade of New York. I have known it well for twenty years, and I speak from a personal acquaintance with very many of its men, and from a professional knowledge of more daring feats, more hairbreadth escapes, and more brilliant work, than could well be recorded between the covers of this magazine.

Indeed, it is hard, in recording any, to make a choice, and to avoid giving the impression that recklessness is a chief quality in the fireman's make-up. That would not be true. His life is too full of real peril for him to expose it recklessly—that is to say, needlessly. From the time when he leaves his quarters in answer to an alarm until he returns, he takes a risk that may at any moment set him face to face with death in its most cruel form. He needs nothing so much as a clear head; and nothing is prized so highly, nothing puts him so surely in the line of promotion; for as he advances in rank and responsibility, the lives of others, as well as his own, come to depend on his judgment. The act of conspicuous daring which the world applauds is oftenest to the fireman a matter of simple duty that had to be done in that way because there was no other. Nor is it always, or even usually, the hardest duty, as he sees it. It came easy to him because he is an athlete trained to do just such things, and because once for all it is easier to risk one's life in the open, in the sight of one's fellows, than to face death alone, caught like a rat in a trap. That is the real peril which he knows too well; but of that the public hears only when he has fought his last fight, and lost.

How literally our every-day security—of which we think, if we think of it at all, as a mere matter of course—is built upon the supreme sacrifice of these devoted men, we

realize at long intervals, when a disaster occurs such as the one in which Chief Bresnan and Foreman Rooney<sup>1</sup> lost their lives three years ago. They were crushed to death under the great water-tank in a Twenty-fourth street factory that was on fire. Its supports had been burned away. An examination that was then made of the water-tanks in the city discovered eight thousand that were either wholly unsupported, except by the roof-beams, or propped on timbers, and therefore a direct menace, not only to the firemen when they were called there, but daily to those living under them. It is not pleasant to add that the department's just demand for a law that should compel landlords either to build tanks on the wall or on iron supports has not been heeded yet: but that is, unhappily, an old story.

Seventeen years ago the collapse of a Broadway building during a fire convinced the community that stone pillars were unsafe as supports. The fire was in the basement, and the firemen had turned the hose on. When the water struck the hot granite columns, they cracked and fell, and the building fell with them. There were upon the roof at the time a dozen men of the crew of Truck Company No. 1, chopping holes for smoke-vents. The majority clung to the parapet, and hung there till rescued. Two went down into the furnace from which the flames shot up twenty feet when the roof broke. One, Fireman Thomas J. Dougherty, was a wearer of the Bennett medal, too. His foreman answers on parade-day, when his name is called, that he "died on the field of duty." These, at all events, did not die in vain. Stone columns are not now used as supports for buildings in New York.

So one might go on quoting the perils of the firemen as so many steps forward for the better protection of the rest of us. It was the burning of the St. George Flats, and more recently of the Manhattan Bank, in which a dozen men were disabled, that stamped the average fire-proof construction as faulty and largely delusive. One might even go further, and say that the fireman's risk increases in the ratio of our progress or convenience. The water-tanks came with the very high buildings, which in themselves offer problems to the fire-fighters that have not yet been solved. The very air-shafts that were hailed as the first advance in tenement-house building added enormously to the fireman's work and

<sup>1</sup> Rooney wore the Bennett medal for saving the life of a woman at the disastrous fire in the old "World" building, on January 31, 1882. The ladder upon which

he stood was too short. Riding upon the topmost rung, he bade the woman jump, and caught and held her as she fell.



risk, as well as to the risk of every one dwelling under their roofs, by acting as so many huge chimneys that carried the fire to the windows opening upon them in every story. More than half of all the fires in New York occur in tenement-houses. When the Tenement-House Commission of 1894 sat in this city, considering means of making them safer and better, it received the most practical help and advice from the firemen, especially from Chief Bresnan, whose death occurred only a few days after he had testified as a witness. The recommendations upon which he insisted are now part of the general tenement-house law.

Chief Bresnan died leading his men against the enemy. In the Fire Department the battalion chief leads; he does not direct operations from a safe position in the rear. Perhaps this is one of the secrets of the indomitable spirit of his men. Whatever hardships they have to endure, his is the first and the biggest share. Next in line comes the captain, or foreman, as he is called. Of the six who were caught in the fatal trap of the water-tank, four hewed their way out with axes through an intervening partition. They were of the ranks. The two who were killed were the chief and Assistant Foreman John L. Rooney, who was that day in charge of his company, Foreman Shaw having

just been promoted to Bresnan's rank. It was less than a year after that Chief Shaw was killed in a fire in Mercer street. I think I could reckon up as many as five or six battalion chiefs who have died in that way, leading their men. They would not deserve the name if they did not follow such leaders, no matter where the road led.

In the chief's quarters of the Fourteenth Battalion up in Wakefield there sits to-day a man, still young in years, who in his maimed body but unbroken spirit bears such testimony to the quality of New York's fire-fighters as the brave Bresnan and his comrade did in their death. Thomas J. Ahearn led his company as captain to a fire in the Consolidated Gas Works on the East Side. He found one of the buildings ablaze. Far toward the rear, at the end of a narrow lane, around which the fire swirled and arched itself, white and wicked, lay the body of a man—dead, said the panic-stricken crowd. His sufferings had been brief. A worse fate threatened all unless the fire was quickly put out. There were underground reservoirs of naphtha—the ground was honeycombed with them—that might explode at any moment with the fire



THE FIRST USE OF SCALING-LADDERS.

raging overhead. The peril was instant and great. Captain Ahearn looked at the body, and saw it stir. The watch-chain upon the



man's vest rose and fell as if he were breathing.

«He is not dead,» he said. «I am going to get that man out.» And he crept down the lane of fire, unmindful of the hidden dangers, seeing only the man who was perishing. The flames scorched him; they blocked his way; but he came through alive, and brought out his man, so badly hurt, however, that he died in the hospital that day. The Board of Fire Commissioners gave Ahearn the medal for bravery, and made him chief. Within a year he all but lost his life in a gallant attempt to save the life of a child that was supposed to be penned in a burning Rivington street tenement. Chief Ahearn's quarters were near by, and he was first on the ground.

A desperate man confronted him in the hallway. «My child! my child!» he cried, and wrung his hands. «Save him! He is in there.» He pointed to the back room. It was black with smoke. In the front room the fire was raging. Crawling on hands and feet, the chief made his way into the room the man had pointed out. He groped under the bed, and in it, but found no child there. Satisfied that it had escaped, he started to return. The smoke had grown so thick that breathing was no longer possible, even at the floor. The chief drew his coat over his head, and made a dash for the hall door. He reached it only to find that the spring-lock had snapped shut. The door-knob burned his hand. The fire burst through from the front room, and seared his face. With a last effort, he kicked the lower panel out of the door, and put his head through. And then he knew no more.

His men found him lying so when they came looking for him. The coat was burned off his back, and of his hat only the wire rim remained. He lay ten months in the hospital, and came out deaf and wrecked physically. At the age of forty-five the board retired him to the quiet of the country district, with this formal resolution, that did the board more credit than it could do him. It is the only one of its kind upon the department books:

*Resolved.* That in assigning Battalion Chief Thomas J. Ahearn to command the Fourteenth Battalion, in the newly annexed district, the Board deems it proper to express the sense of obligation felt by the Board and all good citizens for the brilliant and meritorious services of Chief Ahearn in the discharge of duty which will always serve as an example and an inspiration to our uniformed force, and to express the hope that his future years of service at a less arduous post may be as comfortable and pleasant as his former years have been brilliant and honorable.

Firemen are athletes as a matter of course. They have to be, or they could not hold their places for a week, even if they could get into them at all. The mere handling of the scaling-ladders, which, light though they seem, weigh from sixteen to forty pounds, requires unusual strength. No particular skill is needed.

A man need only have steady nerve, and the strength to raise the long pole by its narrow end, and jam the iron hook through a window which he cannot see but knows is there. Once through, the teeth in the hook and the man's weight upon the ladder hold it safe, and there is no real danger unless he loses his head.

Against that possibility the severe drill in the school of instruction is the barrier. Any one to whom climbing at dizzy heights, or doing the hundred and one things of peril to ordinary men which firemen are constantly called upon to do, causes the least discomfort, is rejected as unfit. About five per cent. of all appointees are eliminated by the ladder test, and never get beyond their probation service. A certain smaller percentage takes itself out through loss of «nerve» generally. The first experience of a room full of smothering smoke, with the fire roaring overhead, is generally sufficient to convince the timid that the service is not for him. No cowards are dismissed from the department, for the reason that none get into it.

The notion that there is a life-saving corps apart from the general body of firemen rests upon a mistake. They are one. Every fireman nowadays must pass muster at life-saving drill, must climb to the top of any building on his scaling-ladder, slide down with a res-



FROM PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDERSON.  
BATTALION CHIEF  
BRESNAN.





THE DEATH OF CHIEF BRESNAN.



cued comrade, or jump without hesitation from the third story into the life-net spread below. By such training the men are fitted for their work, and the occasion comes soon that puts them to the test. It came to Daniel J. Meagher, of whom I spoke as foreman of Hook and Ladder Company No. 3, when, in the midnight hour, a woman hung from the fifth-story window of a burning building, and the longest ladder at hand fell short ten or a dozen feet of reaching her. The boldest man in the crew had vainly attempted to reach her, and in the effort had sprained his foot. There were no scaling-ladders then. Meagher ordered the rest to plant the ladder on the stoop and hold it out from the building so that he might reach the very topmost step. Balanced thus where the slightest tremor might have caused ladder and all to crash to the ground, he bade the woman drop, and receiving her in his arms, carried her down safe.

No one but an athlete with muscles and nerves of steel could have performed such a feat, or that which made Dennis Ryer, of the crew of Engine No. 36, famous three years ago. That was on Seventh Avenue at One Hundred and Thirty-fourth street. A flat was on fire, and the tenants had fled; but one, a woman, bethought herself of her parrot, and went back for it, to find escape by the stairs cut off when she again attempted to reach the street. With the parrot-cage, she appeared at the top-floor window, framed in smoke, calling for help. Again there was no ladder to reach. There were neighbors on the roof with a rope, but the woman was too frightened to use it herself. Dennis Ryer made it fast about his own waist, and bade the others let him down, and hold on for life. He drew the woman out, but she was heavy, and it was all they could do above to hold them. To pull them over the cornice was out of the question. Upon the highest step of the ladder, many feet below, stood Ryer's father, himself a fireman of another company, and saw his boy's peril.

«Hold fast, Dennis!» he shouted. «If you fall I will catch you.» Had they let go, all three would have been killed. The young fireman saw the danger, and the one door of escape, with a glance. The window before which he swung, half smothered by the smoke that belched from it, was the last in the

house. Just beyond, in the window of the adjoining house, was safety, if he could but reach it. Putting out a foot, he kicked the wall, and made himself swing toward it, once, twice, bending his body to add to the motion. The third time he all but passed it, and took a mighty grip on the affrighted woman, shouting into her ear to loose her own hold at the same time. As they passed the window on the fourth trip, he thrust her through sash and all with a supreme effort, and himself followed on the next rebound, while the street, that was black with a surging multitude, rang with a mighty cheer. Old Washington Ryer, on his ladder, threw his cap in the air, and cheered louder than all the rest. But the parrot was dead—frightened to death, very likely, or smothered.

I once asked Fireman Martin M. Coleman, after one of those exhibitions of coolness and courage that thrust him constantly upon the notice of the newspaper man, what he thought of when he stood upon the ladder, with this thing before him to do that might mean life or death the next moment. He looked at me in some perplexity.

«Think?» he said slowly. «Why, I don't think. There ain't any time to. If I'd stopped to think, them five people would 'a' been burnt. No; I don't think of danger. If it is anything, it is that—up there—I am boss. The rest are not in it. Only I wish,» he added, rubbing his arm

ruefully at the recollection, «that she had n't fainted. It's hard when they faint. They're just so much dead weight. We get no help at all from them heavy women.»

And that was all I could get out of him. I never had much better luck with Chief Benjamin A. Gicquel, who is the oldest wearer of the Bennett medal, just as Coleman is the youngest, or the one who received it last. He was willing enough to talk about the science of putting out fires; of Department Chief Bonner, the «man of few words,» who he thinks has mastered the art beyond any man living; of the back-draft, and almost anything else pertaining to the business: but when I insisted upon his telling me the story of the rescue of the Schaefer family of five from a burning tenement down in Cherry street, in which he earned his rank and reward, he laughed a good-humored little laugh, and said that it was «the old man»—meaning



BATTALION CHIEF  
AHEARN.





FOREMAN AHEARN RESCUING THE INJURED PUMPER DEVOE OVER TANKS OF NAPHTHA.

Schaefer—who should have had the medal. «It was a grand thing in him to let the little ones come out first.» I have sometimes wished that firemen were not so modest. It would be much easier, if not so satisfactory, to record their gallant deeds. But I am not sure that it is, after all, modesty so much as a wholly different point of view. It is business with them, the work of their lives. The one feeling that is allowed to rise beyond this is the feeling of exultation in the face of peril conquered by courage, which Coleman expressed. On the ladder he was boss! It was the fancy of a masterful man, and none but a masterful man would have got upon the ladder at all.

Doubtless there is something in the spectacular side of it that attracts. It would be strange if there were not. There is every-

thing in a fireman's existence to encourage it. Day and night he leads a kind of hair-trigger life, that feeds naturally upon excitement, even if only as a relief from the irksome idling in quarters. Try as they may to give him enough to do there, the time hangs heavily upon his hands, keyed up as he is, and need be, to adventurous deeds at shortest notice. He falls to grumbling and quarreling, and the necessity becomes imperative of holding him to the strictest discipline, under which he chafes impatiently. «They nag like a lot of old women,» said Department Chief Bonner to me once; «and the best at a fire are often the worst in the house.» In the midst of it all the gong strikes a familiar signal. The horses' hoofs thunder on the planks; with a leap the men go down the shining



pole to the main floor, all else forgotten; and with crash and clatter and bang, the heavy engine swings into the street, and races away on a wild gallop, leaving a trail of fire behind.

Presently the crowd sees rubber-coated, helmeted men with pipe and hose go through a window from which such dense smoke pours forth that it seems incredible that a human being could breathe it for a second and live. The hose is dragged squirming over the sill, where shortly a red-eyed face with disheveled hair appears, to shout something hoarsely to those below, which they understand. Then, unless some emergency arise, the spectacular part is over. Could the citizen whose heart beat as he watched them enter, see them now, he would see grimy shapes, very unlike the fine-looking men who but just now had roused his admiration, crawling on hands and knees, with their noses close to the floor if the smoke be very dense, ever pointing the "pipe" in the direction where the enemy is expected to appear. The fire is the enemy; but he can fight that, once he reaches it, with something of a chance. The smoke kills without giving him a show to fight back. Long practice toughens him against it, until he learns the trick of "eating the smoke." He can breathe where a candle goes out for want of oxygen. By holding his mouth close to the nozzle, he gets what little the stream of water brings with it and sets free; and within a few inches of the floor there is nearly always a current of air. In the last emergency, there is the hose that he can follow out. The smoke always is his worst enemy. It lays ambushes for him which he can suspect, but not ward off. He tries to by opening vents in the roof as soon as the pipe-men are in place and ready; but in spite of all precautions, he is often surprised by the dreaded back-draft.

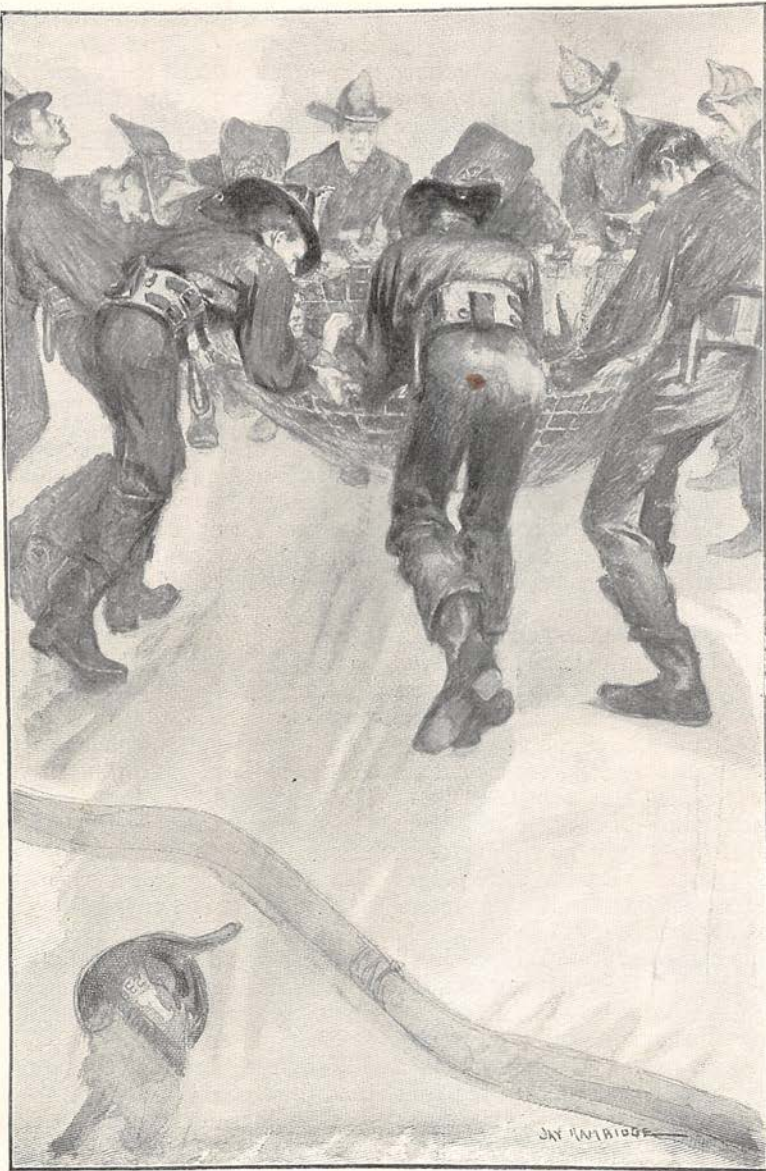
I remember standing in front of a burning Broadway store, one night, when the back-draft blew out the whole front without warning. It is simply an explosion of gases generated by the heat, which must have vent, and go upon the line of least resistance, up, or down, or in a circle—it does not much matter, so that they go. It swept shutters, windows, and all, across Broadway, in this instance, like so much chaff, littering the street with heavy rolls of cloth. The crash was like a fearful clap of thunder. Men were knocked down on the opposite sidewalk, and two teams of engine horses, used to almost any kind of happening at a fire, ran away in a wild panic. It was a blast of that kind that threw down and severely

injured Battalion Chief M'Gill, one of the oldest and most experienced of firemen, at a fire on Broadway in March, 1890; and it has cost more brave men's lives than the fiercest fire that ever raged. The "puff," as the firemen call it, comes suddenly, and from the corner where it is least expected. It is dread of that, and of getting overcome by the smoke generally, which makes firemen go always in couples or more together. They never lose sight of each other for an instant, if they can help it. If they do, they go at once in search of the lost. The delay of a moment may prove fatal to him.

Lieutenant Samuel Banta of the Franklin street company, discovering the pipe that had just been held by Fireman Quinn at a Park Place fire thrashing aimlessly about, looked about him, and saw Quinn floating on his face in the cellar, which was running full of water. He had been overcome, had tumbled in, and was then drowning, with the fire raging above and alongside. Banta jumped in after him, and endeavored to get his head above water. While thus occupied, he glanced up, and saw the preliminary puff of the back-draft bearing down upon him. The lieutenant dived at once, and tried to pull his unhappy pipe-man with him; but he struggled and worked himself loose. From under the water Banta held up a hand, and it was burned. He held up the other, and knew that the puff had passed when it came back unsinged. Then he brought Quinn out with him; but it was too late. Caught between flood and fire, he had no chance. When I asked the lieutenant about it, he replied simply: "The man in charge of the hose fell into the cellar. I got him out; that was all." "But how?" I persisted. "Why, I went down through the cellar," said the lieutenant, smiling, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

It was this same Banta who, when Fireman David H. Soden had been buried under the falling walls of a Pell street house, crept through a gap in the basement wall, in among the fallen timbers, and, in imminent peril of his own life, worked there with a hand-saw two long hours to free his comrade, while the firemen held the severed timbers up with ropes to give him a chance. Repeatedly, while he was at work, his clothes caught fire, and it was necessary to keep playing the hose upon him. But he brought out his man safe and sound, and, for the twentieth time perhaps, had his name recorded on the roll of merit. His comrades tell of how, at one of the twenty, the fall of a building in Hall





THE BONNER LIFE-NET.

Place had left a workman lying on a shaky piece of wall, helpless, with a broken leg. It could not bear the weight of a ladder, and it seemed certain death to attempt to reach him, when Banta, running up a slanting beam that still hung to its fastening with one end, leaped from perch to perch upon the wall, where hardly a goat could have found footing, reached his man, and brought him down slung over his shoulder, and swearing at him like a trooper lest the peril of the descent cause him to lose his nerve and with it the lives of both.

Firemen dread cellar fires more than any other kind, and with reason. It is difficult to make a vent for the smoke, and the danger of drowning is added to that of being smothered when they get fairly to work. If a man is lost to sight or touch of his fellows there for ever so brief a while, there are five chances to one that he will not again be seen alive. Then there ensues such a fight as the city witnessed only last May at the burning of a Chambers street paper-warehouse. It was fought out deep underground, with fire and flood, freezing



cold and poisonous gases, leagued against Chief Bonner's forces. Next door was a cold-storage house, whence the cold. Something that was burning—I do not know that it was ever found out just what—gave forth the smothering fumes before which the firemen went down in squads. File after file staggered out into the street, blackened and gasping, to drop there. The near engine-house was made into a hospital, where the senseless men were laid on straw hastily spread. Ambulance surgeons worked over them. As fast as they were brought to, they went back to bear a hand in the work of rescue. In delirium they fought to return. Down in the depths one of their number was lying helpless.

There is nothing finer in the records of glorious war than the story of the struggle these brave fellows kept up for hours against tremendous odds for the rescue of their comrade. Time after time they went down into the pit of deadly smoke, only to fail. Lieutenant Banta tried twice and failed. Fireman King was pulled up senseless, and having been brought round, went down once more. Fireman Sheridan returned empty-handed, more dead than alive. John O'Connell, of Truck No. 1, at length succeeded in reaching his comrade and tying a rope about him, while from above they drenched both with water to keep them from roasting. They drew up a dying man; but John G. Reinhardt dead is more potent than a whole crew of firemen alive. The story of the fight for his life will long be told in the engine-houses of New York, and will nerve the Kings and the Sheridans and the O'Connells of another day to like deeds.

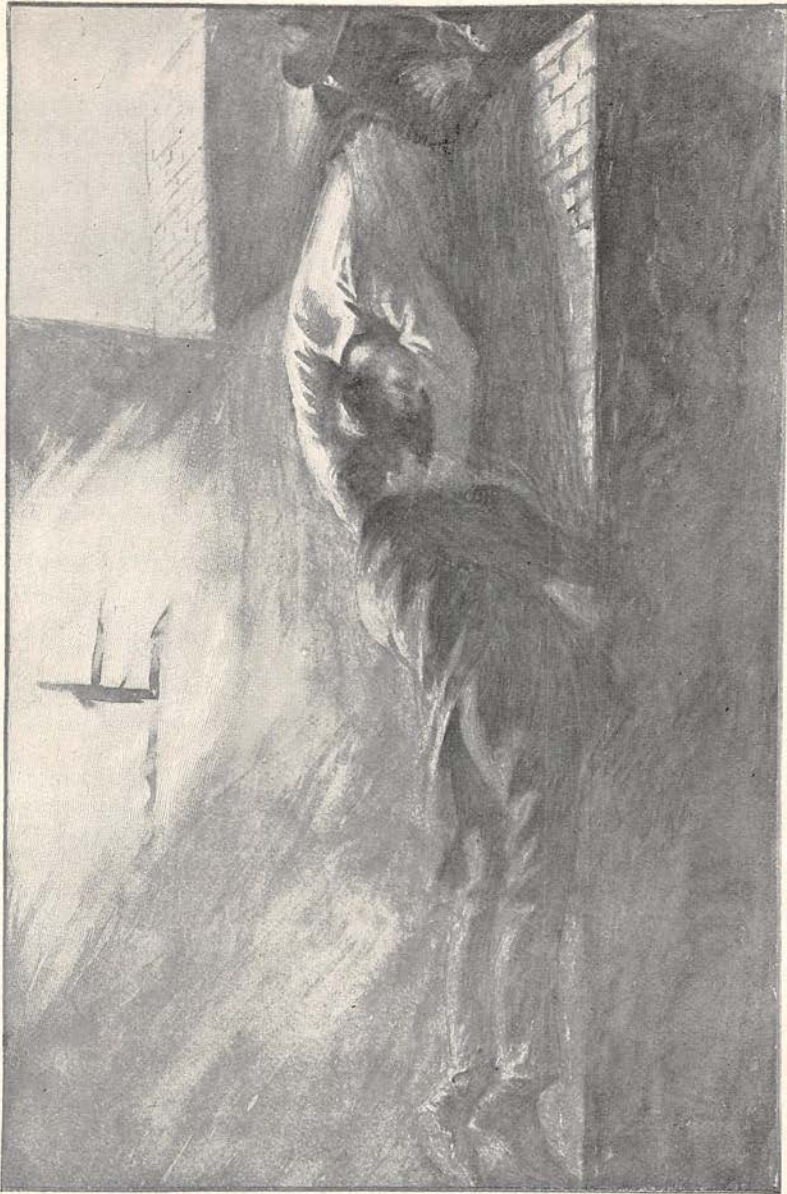
How firemen manage to hear in their sleep the right signal, while they sleep right through any number that concern the next company, not them, is one of the mysteries that will probably always remain unsolved. «I don't know,» said Department Chief Bonner, when I asked him once. «I guess it is the same way with everybody. You hear what you have to hear. There is a gong right over my bed at home, and I hear every stroke of it, but I don't hear the baby. My wife hears the baby if it as much as stirs in its crib, but not the gong.» Very likely he is right. The fact that the fireman can hear and count correctly the strokes of the gong in his sleep has meant life to many hundreds, and no end of property saved; for it is in the early moments of a fire that it can be dealt with summarily. I recall one instance in which the failure to interpret a signal properly, or the accident of taking a wrong

road to the fire, cost a life, and, singularly enough, that of the wife of one of the firemen who answered the alarm. It was all so pitiful, so tragic, that it has left an indelible impression on my mind. It was the fire at which Patrick F. Lucas earned the medal for that year by snatching five persons out of the very jaws of death in a Dominick street tenement. The alarm-signal rang in the hook-and-ladder company's quarters in North Moore street, but was either misunderstood or they made a wrong start. Instead of turning east to West Broadway, the truck turned west, and went galloping toward Greenwich street. It was only a few seconds, the time that was lost, but it was enough. Fireman Murphy's heart went up in his throat when, from his seat on the truck as it flew toward the fire, he saw that it was his own home that was burning. Up on the fifth floor he found his wife penned in. She died in his arms as he carried her to the fire-escape. The fire, for once, had won in the race for a life.

While I am writing this, the morning paper that is left at my door tells the story of a fireman who, laid up with a broken ankle in an up-town hospital, jumped out of bed, forgetting his injury, when the alarm-gong rang his signal, and tried to go to the fire. The fire-alarms are rung in the hospitals for the information of the ambulance corps. The crippled fireman heard the signal at the dead of night, and, only half awake, jumped out of bed, groped about for the sliding-pole, and, getting hold of the bedpost, tried to slide down that. The plaster cast about his ankle was broken, the old injury reopened, and he was seriously hurt.

New York firemen have a proud saying that they «fight fire from the inside.» It means unhesitating courage, prompt sacrifice, and victory gained, all in one. The saving of life that gets into the newspapers and wins applause is done, of necessity, largely from the outside, but is none the less perilous for that. Sometimes, though rarely, it has in its intense gravity almost a comic tinge, as at one of the infrequent fires in the Mulberry Bend some years ago. The Italians believe, with reason, that there is bad luck in fire, therefore do not insure, and have few fires. Of this one the Romolo family shrine was the cause. The lamp upon it exploded, and the tenement was ablaze when the firemen came. The policeman on the beat had tried to save Mrs. Romolo; but she clung to the bedpost, and refused to go without the rest of the family. So he seized the baby,





SERGEANT VAUGHAN RESCUING A MAN FROM A FIFTH-STORY WINDOW AT THE HOTEL ROYAL FIRE.

and rolled down the burning stairs with it, his beard and coat afire. The only way out was shut off when the engines arrived. The Romolos shrieked at the top-floor window, threatening to throw themselves out. There was not a moment to be lost. Lying flat on the roof, with their heads over the cornice, the firemen fished the two children out of the window with their hooks. The ladders were run up in time for the father and mother.

The readiness of resource no less than the intrepid courage and athletic skill of the rescuers evoke enthusiastic admiration. Two instances stand out in my recollection

among many. Of one Fireman Howe, who had on more than one occasion signally distinguished himself, was the hero. It happened on the morning of January 2, 1896, when the Geneva Club on Lexington Avenue was burned out. Fireman Howe drove Hook and Ladder No. 7 to the fire that morning, to find two boarders at the third-story window, hemmed in by flames which already showed behind them. Followed by Fireman Pearl, he ran up in the adjoining building, and presently appeared at a window on the third floor, separated from the one occupied by the two men by a blank wall-space of perhaps



four or five feet. It offered no other footing than a rusty hook, but it was enough. Astride of the window-sill, with one foot upon the hook, the other anchored inside by his comrade, his body stretched at full length along the wall, Howe was able to reach the two, and to swing them, one after the other, through his own window to safety. As the second went through, the crew in the street below set up a cheer that raised the sleeping echoes of the street. Howe looked down, nodded, and took a firmer grip; and that instant came his great peril.

A third face had appeared at the window just as the fire swept through. Howe shut his eyes to shield them, and braced himself on the hook for a last effort. It broke; and the man, frightened out of his wits, threw himself headlong from the window upon Howe's neck.

The fireman's form bent and swayed. His comrade within felt the strain, and dug his heels into the boards. He was almost dragged out of the window, but held on with a supreme effort. Just as he thought the end had come, he felt the strain ease up. The ladder had reached Howe in the very nick of time, and given him support. But in his desperate effort to save himself and the other, he slammed his burden back over his shoulder with such force that he went crashing through, carrying sash and all, and fell, cut and bruised, but safe, upon Fireman Pearl, who groveled upon the floor, prostrate and panting.

The other case New York remembers yet with a shudder. It was known long in the department for the bravest act ever done by a fireman—an act that earned for Foreman William Quirk the medal for 1888. He was next in command of Engine No. 22 when, on a March morning, the Elberon Flats in East Eighty-fifth street were burned. The Westlake family, mother, daughter, and two sons, were in the fifth story, helpless and hopeless. Quirk ran up on the scaling-ladder to the fourth floor, hung it on the sill above, and got the boys and their sister down. But the flames burst from the floor below, cutting off their retreat. Quirk's captain had seen the danger, and shouted to him to turn back while it was yet time. But Quirk had no intention of turning back. He measured the distance and the risk with a look, saw the crowd tugging frantically at the life-net under the window, and bade them jump, one by one. They jumped, and were saved. Last of all, he jumped himself, after a vain effort to save the mother. She was already dead. He caught her gown, but the body slipped

from his grasp and fell crashing to the street fifty feet below. He himself was hurt in his jump. The volunteers who held the net looked up, and were frightened; they let go their grip, and the plucky fireman broke a leg and hurt his back in the fall.

«Like a cry of fire in the night» appeals to the dullest imagination with a sense of sudden fear. There have been nights in this city when the cry swelled into such a clamor of terror and despair as to make the stoutest heart quake—when it seemed to those who had to do with putting out fires as if the end of all things was at hand. Such a night was that of the burning of «Cohnfeld's Folly,» in Bleecker street, March 17, 1891. The burning of the big store involved the destruction, wholly or in part, of ten surrounding buildings, and called out nearly one third of the city's Fire Department. While the fire raged as yet unchecked,—while walls were falling with shock and crash of thunder, the streets full of galloping engines and ambulances carrying injured firemen, with clangor of urgent gongs; while insurance patrolmen were being smothered in buildings a block away by the smoke that hung like a pall over the city,—another disastrous fire broke out in the dry-goods district, and three alarm-calls came from West Seventeenth street. Nine other fires were signaled, and before morning all the crews that were left were summoned to Allen street, where four persons were burned to death in a tenement. Those are the wild nights that try firemen's souls, and never yet found them wanting. During the great blizzard, when the streets were impassable and the system crippled, the fires in the city averaged nine a day,—forty-five for the five days from March 12 to 16,—and not one of them got beyond control. The fire commissioners put on record their pride in the achievement, as well they might. It was something to be proud of, indeed.

Such a night promised to be the one when the Manhattan Bank and the State Bank across the street on the other Broadway corner, with three or four other buildings, were burned, and when the ominous «two nines» were rung, calling nine tenths of the whole force below Central Park to the threatened quarter. But, happily, the promise was not fully kept. The supposed fire-proof bank was crumbling in the withering blast like so much paper; the cry went up that whole companies of firemen were perishing within it; and the alarm had reached Police Headquarters in the next block, where they were counting the election returns.



Thirteen firemen, including the deputy department chief, a battalion chief, and two captains, limped or were carried from the burning bank, more or less injured. The stone steps of the fire-proof stairs had fallen with them or upon them. Their imperiled comrades, whose escape was cut off, slid down hose and scaling-ladders. The last, the crew of Engine Company No. 3, had reached the street, and all were thought to be out, when the assistant foreman, Daniel Fitzmaurice, appeared at a fifth-story window. The fire beating against it drove him away, but he found footing at another, next adjoining the building on the north. To reach him from below, with the whole building ablaze, was impossible. Other escape there was none, save a cornice ledge extending half-way to his window; but it was too narrow to afford foothold.

Then an extraordinary scene was enacted in the sight of thousands. In the other building were a number of fire-insurance patrolmen, covering goods to protect them against water damage. One of these—Patrolman John Rush—stepped out on the ledge, and edged his way toward a spur of stone that projected from the bank building. Behind followed Patrolman Barnett, steadying him and pressing him close against the wall. Behind him was another, with still another holding on within the room, where the living chain was anchored by all the rest. Rush, at the end of the ledge, leaned over and gave Fitzmaurice his hand. The fireman grasped it, and edged out upon the spur. Barnett, holding his rescuer fast, gave him what he needed—something to cling to. Once he was on the ledge, the chain wound itself up as it had unwound itself. Slowly, inch by inch, it crept back, each man pushing the next flat against the wall with might and main, while the multitudes in the street held their breath, and the very engines stopped panting, until all were safe.

John Rush is a fireman to-day, a member of "Thirty-three's" crew in Great Jones street. He was an insurance patrolman then. The organization is unofficial. Its main purpose is to save property; but in the face of the emergency firemen and patrolmen become one body, obeying one head.

That the spirit which has made New York's Fire Department great equally animates its commercial brother has been shown more than once, but never better than at the memorable fire in the Hotel Royal, which cost so many lives. No account of heroic life-saving at fires, even as fragmentary as

this, could pass by the marvelous feat, or feats, of Sergeant (now Captain) John R. Vaughan on that February morning six years ago. The alarm rang in patrol station No. 3 at 3:20 o'clock on Sunday morning. Sergeant Vaughan, hastening to the fire with his men, found the whole five-story hotel ablaze from roof to cellar. The fire had shot up the elevator shaft, round which the stairs ran, and from the first had made escape impossible. Men and women were jumping and hanging from windows. One, falling from a great height, came within an inch of killing the sergeant as he tried to enter the building. Darting up into the next house, and leaning out of the window with his whole body, while one of the crew hung on to one leg,—as Fireman Pearl did to Howe's in the splendid rescue at the Geneva Club,—he took a half-hitch with the other in some electric-light wires that ran up the wall, trusting to his rubber boots to protect him from the current, and made of his body a living bridge for the safe passage from the last window of the burning hotel of three men and a woman whom death stared in the face, steadying them as they went with his free hand. As the last passed over, ladders were being thrown up against the wall, and what could be done there was done.

Sergeant Vaughan went up on the roof. The smoke was so dense there that he could see little, but through it he heard a cry for help, and made out the shape of a man standing upon a window-sill in the fifth story, overlooking the courtyard of the hotel. The yard was between them. Bidding his men follow,—they were five, all told,—he ran down and around in the next street to the roof of the house that formed an angle with the hotel wing. There stood the man below him, only a jump away, but a jump which no mortal might take and live. His face and hands were black with smoke. Vaughan, looking down, thought him a negro. He was perfectly calm.

"It is no use," he said, glancing up. "Don't try. You can't do it."

The sergeant looked wistfully about him. Not a stick or a piece of rope was in sight. Every shred was used below. There was absolutely nothing. "But I could n't let him," he said to me, months after, when he had come out of the hospital a whole man again, and was back at work,—"I just could n't, standing there so quiet and brave." To the man he said sharply:

"I want you to do exactly as I tell you, now. Don't grab me, but let me get the first





SERGEANT VAUGHAN MAKING A BRIDGE OF HIS BODY AT THE HOTEL ROYAL FIRE.

grab.» He had noticed that the man wore a heavy overcoat, and had already laid his plan.

«Don't try,» urged the man. «You cannot save me. I will stay here till it gets too hot; then I will jump.»

«No, you won't,» from the sergeant, as he lay at full length on the roof, looking over. «It is a pretty hard yard down there. I will get you, or go dead myself.»

The four sat on the sergeant's legs as he swung free down to the waist; so he was almost able to reach the man on the window with outstretched hands.

«Now jump—quick!» he commanded; and the man jumped. He caught him by both wrists as directed, and the sergeant got a grip on the collar of his coat.

«Hoist!» he shouted to the four on the roof; and they tugged with their might. The



sergeant's body did not move. Bending over till the back creaked, it hung over the edge, a weight of two hundred and three pounds suspended from and holding it down. The cold sweat started upon his men's foreheads as they tried and tried again, without gaining an inch. Blood dripped from Sergeant Vaughan's nostrils and ears. Sixty feet below was the paved courtyard; over against him the window, behind which he saw the back-draft coming, gathering headway with lurid, swirling smoke. Now it burst through, burning the hair and the coats of the two. For an instant he thought all hope was gone.

But in a flash it came back to him. To relieve the terrible dead weight that wrenched and tore at his muscles, he was swinging the man to and fro like a pendulum, head touching head. He could *swing him up!* A smothered shout warned his men. They crept nearer the edge without letting go their grip on him, and watched with staring eyes the human pendulum swing wider and wider, farther and farther, until now, with a mighty effort, it swung within their reach. They caught the skirt of the coat, held on, pulled in, and in a moment lifted him over the edge.

They lay upon the roof, all six, breathless, sightless, their faces turned to the winter sky. The tumult of the street came up as a faint echo; the spray of a score of engines pumping below fell upon them, froze, and covered them with ice. The very roar of the fire seemed far off. The sergeant was the first to recover. He carried down the man he had saved, and saw him sent off to the hospital. Then first he noticed that he was not a negro; the smut had been rubbed off his face. Monday had dawned before he came to, and days passed before he knew his rescuer. Sergeant Vaughan was laid up himself then. He had returned to his work, and finished it; but what he had gone through was too much for human strength. It was spring before he returned to his quarters, to find himself promoted, petted, and made much of.

From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a little step. Among the many who journeyed to the insurance patrol station to see the hero of the great fire, there came, one day, a woman. She was young and pretty, the sweetheart of the man on the window-sill. He was a lawyer, since a State senator of Pennsylvania. She wished the sergeant to repeat exactly the words he spoke to him in that awful moment when he bade him jump—to life or death. She had heard them, and

she wanted the sergeant to repeat them to her, that she might know for sure he was the man who did it. He stammered and hitched—tried subterfuges. She waited, inexorable. Finally, in desperation, blushing fiery red, he blurted out «a lot of cuss-words.» «You know,» he said apologetically, in telling of it, «when I am in a place like that I can't help it.»

When she heard the words which her fiancé had already told her, straightway she fell upon the fireman's neck. The sergeant stood dumfounded. «Women are queer,» he said.

Thus a fireman's life. That the very horses that are their friends in quarters, their comrades at the fire, sharing with them what comes of good and evil, catch the spirit of it, is not strange. It would be strange if they did not. With human intelligence, and more than human affection, the splendid animals follow the fortunes of their masters, doing their share in whatever is demanded of them. In the final showing that in thirty years, while with the growing population the number of fires has steadily increased, the average loss per fire has as steadily decreased, they have their full share, also, of the credit. In 1866 there were 796 fires in New York, with an average loss of \$8075.38 per fire. In 1876, with 1382 fires, the loss was but \$2786.70 at each. In 1896, 3890 fires averaged only \$878.81. It means that every year more fires are headed off than run down—smothered at the start, as a fire should be. When to the verdict of «faithful unto death» that record is added, nothing remains to be said. The firemen know how much of that is the doing of their four-legged comrades. It is the one blot on the fair picture that the city which owes these horses so much has not seen fit, in gratitude, to provide comfort for their worn old age. When a fireman grows old, he is retired on half-pay for the rest of his days. When a horse that has run with the heavy engines to fires by night and by day for perhaps ten or fifteen years is worn out, it is—sold, to a huckster, perhaps, or a contractor, to slave for him until it is fit only for the bone-yard! The city receives a paltry two or three thousand dollars a year for this rank treachery, and pockets the blood-money without a protest. There is room next, in New York, for a movement that shall secure to the fireman's faithful friend the grateful reward of a quiet farm, a full crib, and a green pasture to the end of its days, when it is no longer young enough and strong enough to «run with the machine.»



great war. As it happens, his hair is still dark, and he can look the part to singular perfection. We can see the fire and determination in his eye as he addresses the assembled company; we can see him as he urges «the boys» to stand by the flag, and «honest old Abe,» and the imperiled Union. And these grizzle-beards about him, do they partake of the illusion? Though, most of them, so much older, is it not as easy for them as for him to throw off, in their minds, the accidents of age, and again, with breathless frenzy, «up and at them» through storm of whistling bullets and howling shells?

Of one thing we may be sure: that most people who are called old feel younger, and therefore may be said to be younger, than they are called. And one reason why most people feel younger in their middle and old age than others regard them is that the first impression is the deepest, and our first impression of ourselves is that we are young. Not that every one does not have at various times a strong sense of age; but this sense may come upon one with as great force in youth as in advanced years. A friend, not young, once told us that he had never had the realization of advancing age thrust upon him with more powerful effect than when, over thirty years before, he entered a barber-shop, and with fear and shame offered his virgin mustache to the remorseless blade. It seemed as if «youth, the dream,» had indeed departed. The same self-observant psychologist remembered another sobering and disillusioning plunge into something like old age. His salary had been raised; he was no longer to be the struggling, and therefore perhaps somewhat interesting, young economist that he had believed himself destined always to be. Our friend said that it was singular, in this case, how soon the melancholy of accomplishment and of age-in-youth disappeared under the growing conviction that his unexpectedly large income was in reality not half large enough to meet his absolutely necessary expenses.

The attitude of Mr. Bellamy's young people toward the old is well-nigh universal in the Occidental world, whatever may be the feeling in the Orient; and perhaps we do not fully understand the psychology of the Orient. It is impossible for an old person to argue away the feeling of a young person toward an old person. It is an attitude of affection, of respect, of awe, of all sorts of sentiments, according to individuality; but in relation to the one quality of age, the younger gives «the look from above downward,» just as the grandmother in Mr. Bellamy's story suspected. The young person may not be fully aware of this attitude on his own part; and the older person may be philosophical about it, and think little of it, as he should; but, as a rule, it is there.

What good would it do for the old person to say: «My young friend, you take a very unphilosophical position with regard to my age. I am merely myself, which includes all that youth which you now have, and a good deal more besides. I simply have succeeded in keeping alive. You know what Tennyson says about (the glory of going on, and still to be.) Well, unless you are deprived of this glory, you will soon have passed through that brief experience of youth with which every life begins. And, besides, I may be a good deal younger than you suppose. For age is relative. Men and women nominally of the same age are by no means truly so. Every life is a clock, wound up to go so many hours, and

then to stop, so far as this world is concerned. One human machine is wound up to run, barring accident, say fifty years; another seventy years; another ninety or a hundred years. Suppose that three men were born on the same day, and you asked each of them, forty years after birth, how old he was; would forty years old be the correct answer in each case? Of course not; and it is the injustice of such calculations that makes most women and many men sensitive on the subject of their age. Popular arithmetic is deficient in this particular. You need not smile. Go and ask some biologist if I am not right. It is the amount of initial vitality that counts. You think you are twenty years younger than I am, and you look down upon me from your altitude of youth. As a matter of scientific fact—in the strict measurement of vitalities—you may be six months older than I am. There is enough that is tragic about age without complicating the subject with conventional inaccuracies. Yes; perhaps I am hovering about the seventies. There is nothing in that to frighten any but the plenary inspirationist and strict constructionist; for sanitary science, medicine, and surgery long ago antiquated the psalmist's baleful (threescore years and ten.) Any actuary can tell you that human longevity is increasing. And, besides, as the commander said to his troops in the thick of the battle, does a man want (to live forever?)»

#### One of the «Heroes who Fight Fire.»

THE mention by Mr. Riis, in his article on «Heroes who Fight Fire,» of the heroic death of Battalion Chief Bresnan, in December of 1894, brings to mind the career of a typical New York fireman of our day. In the days before the establishment of the new Fire Department there were «heroes who fought fire»; but these heroes had a singular tendency not only to fight fire, but to fight anything in sight. Those were the days when a fire was dreaded by the community, not merely for the destruction of property by fire and water, but on account of the lively rivalry sometimes engendered. In fact, it is said that the fire sometimes had to wait for proper attention while the companies were giving their minds and fists to the decision of the more important question of precedence.

The old volunteer system became as unbearable as it was exciting and interesting, and the paid and disciplined department took its place. There were good and capable men in the old department, for all its faults. In the new department arose to authority men like the present able Chief Hugh Bonner, like Battalion Chief Ahearn, mentioned by Mr. Riis, and like the late Battalion Chief John J. Bresnan. It has long been, as a whole, a department of which our city is right to be proud. It has often been studied and imitated by other cities, though the recent experience of London seems to show that all it is capable of teaching as to organization, management, and methods has not been taken sufficiently to heart there.

Bresnan had two characteristics in his profession: he was scientific and minute in his interest in and knowledge of detail, and he was a quick and utterly fearless leader when it came to a direct attack upon the fire enemy. He knew all about all parts of the apparatus for fire-extinguishment—he had, indeed, made several useful inventions of details in this line. He knew a fire as a botanist knows a flower—seed and



stalk, bud and blossom. And when it came to putting his knowledge into practice he was almost reckless in his courage.

The laws on fire-proof construction, and the other laws for the prevention of fires in tenements, which the Tenement-House Commission of 1894 were instrumental in placing upon the statute-book, were partly the result of his suggestions, both privately and publicly made; and on his tragic death, the Commission passed resolutions heartily acknowledging his services.

So much for his position as an expert. A few words about him as a man. Bresnan was born in Ireland, and was brought to New York when two years of age. He had little school education, but a head full of learning not taught in schools. He knew his city better than most people in any walk of life, and the city's recent history. His language was racy, with a phraseology strange to scholastic ears, but full of pith and marrow. All heroes are not modest. Bresnan added to heroism the charm of modesty. You might have known him for years without learning from him that he had saved a single life; yet he had saved many. As Father van Rensselaer, his close friend, said at his funeral: «He never made mention of himself in his report when he did a brave deed. He was always in the background when his own praise was concerned, but always in front when discharging his duty.» The priest eulogized him, too, for his tender-heartedness, and declared that he was «not only one of the finest and bravest firemen in the city, but also a noble man.»

Along with all this he had great personal attraction. He was a fine fellow in every way, quiet, kindly, forcible. One felt that one had been in «good society» after an hour with Bresnan. There are no men in the service in New York just like him; but there are firemen here, and in all our cities, equally brave, and equally unpretentious in their bravery—men with whom heroic deeds come naturally and without self-applause, sometimes without notice from any source, «all in the day's work.»

#### Letters or Business.

It was recently stated in the gossip of the press that a certain son of a millionaire had abandoned his chosen career in the «field of letters,» after the publication of a single book of travels, and was about to enter his father's business firm.

Upon this change of purpose the gratified parent is reported to have made the following comment: «A million men can write books, but few have the opportunity my son enjoys to become great in the business world. A book is read by few. A large commercial or manufacturing enterprise, well conducted, is a blessing to the world at large.»

Whether accurately repeated or not, these words are charged with a wisdom worthy of the founder of a large and useful mercantile business. Anybody of average mental capacity may cumber the shelves of book-stores with printed and bound paper arranged to look like books. Anybody, as well, with an orderly mind and a habit of industry, may live a useful life in the walks of commerce. But it is only the heirs of ruling princes, and of great merchants of independent fortune, who are given a great part to play in human affairs for the mere taking. To accept such a rôle is more a matter of duty than of inclination, and especially in the boundless field of business; for, as the sagacious father justly says, a well-conducted commercial enterprise «is a blessing to the world at large.»

No doubt a great book is in equal, if not wider measure, a blessing to mankind, but great books are not the outcome of a deliberate purpose to pursue the «career of letters.» Literary genius, in various conditions and walks of life, has exhibited a sporadic or continuous activity which in the final estimate may be loosely described as a «career»; but in the deliberate practice of writing for publication we have merely the pursuit of a profession, in which the rewards are distinctive or commonplace, under the same conditions as in the so-called learned professions. In these various walks the parent who has gained distinction in them is able to pass along only a very intangible professional «good will» to his son, and the literary father none at all. He who enters the field of literary competition does so as an orphan without heritage. Let the man with a worthy business career born to him pause before he throws it away for the hollow honors of average literary success.

Among the men and women who have achieved literary fame are a goodly number of sons and daughters of great and wealthy merchants. They were writers from necessity just as truly as the literary geniuses who have written in poverty when the pursuit of a practical career might have given them a comfortable living. But in general only harm comes to letters from the amateurish efforts of young men who have inherited, or are to inherit, wealth acquired in commerce, and who desert the splendid opportunity for usefulness built up by a lifetime of parental toil. Some of them seek the notoriety, excitement, or power that is supposed to come from the control of periodicals, monthly, weekly, or daily, and, with their wealth for a backing, have been known to force the methods of the press in ways distinctly not resulting in «a blessing to the world at large»; and others among them look to the affectation of letters as a graceful excuse for a life of ease, forgetting that, like all the other walks of artistic effort, the «career of letters» entails unending drudgery and devotion, and yields intangible and uncertain rewards.