

PEOPLE WHO FACE DEATH: FIREMEN.

BY A. E. BONSER, AUTHOR OF "THE QUEER PASSENGER'S STORY," ETC. ETC.

I.—THE STORY OF A FIRE IN OLD STREET, AS TOLD BY ENGINEER JOHN FORWOOD DANE, OF THE FIRE-STATION, WHITECROSS STREET.



ENGINEER J. F. DANE.

"It was on the 10th January, 1891, that I had a summons from the District Office to attend at a fire in Old Street, St. Luke's. I jumped out of bed, and was dressed and downstairs, and so were my men, before the signal,

which sounds for twenty seconds, had ceased. In another minute the horses were harnessed to the manual engine, and we were off at a gallop. The fire had got a pretty good hold, as you may imagine, for we could see the big glare from it in the sky half a mile off. This, I should tell you, was at three o'clock in the morning; the streets were slippery with frost, and it was bitterly cold and snowing fast.

"The scene of the fire was a fried fish shop opposite to the police-station; the shop itself was on fire, the flames coming half-way across the street, and all the back was well alight. When the alarm was first raised a carrier's van happened to be passing, so the driver stopped and backed his vehicle on to the place, and it reached about up to the first-floor window. By this means several people had been rescued.

"When I got there a fire-escape was against the house front, and some policemen were on the ladder, helping to get a man and a woman out of the second-floor window. A couple of firemen had got through a trap-door in the roof, and handed a man and woman through the window to the policemen on the escape.

"This, as I said, was just as I came up, and the first question I asked was—

"'Is there anyone else in the house?'

"'Yes,' they said; 'a child is believed to be in a room on the second-floor.'

"By this time the fire was beginning to blaze out the upper part of the front, and so it was not very likely that there was anyone alive in the place. I directed a ladder to be placed against a first-floor window, and another ladder against a second-floor window, and there was a man with a hose on each, to try to keep off the flames. Then a first-floor ladder was placed against the window of the burning house, and I ran up and scrambled into the room through the window.

"At first I was almost driven back by the smoke and heat, but managed to get down on my hands and knees, and crawled along the floor. Though the flames were bursting through the door of the room, I could see little for the blinding smoke. Groping about, however, I came at last upon what looked like a parcel in a lounging-chair in one of the corners. Putting out my hand, I touched the legs of the child, and they felt like melting wax, which will give you some idea of the heat! The little creature had flung herself down in



C. J. STANLAND

"I CARRIED IT IN MY ARMS TO THE WINDOW" (p. 601).

her fright, and had thrown the shawl over her face to shut out the sight of the fire.

"Wrapping the body more closely, I carried it in my arms to the window, and getting out, called for a shell. However, as I came down the ladder I had a sort of feeling that the child was still alive. So I nipped across to the police-station, and laid her down on the hearth before the fire. I bathed her poor little legs with oil, sponged the black from her mouth, and forced some warm milk between her teeth. And I'm blest if by-and-by she didn't come round !

"You see, the wrap she had thrown over her face had got wetted with the water and had evidently *acted as a sort of respirator*.

"Well, I took her across to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and there she stayed eight weeks, and after that I sent her myself to the seaside for another four ; for, you see, she was what you might call a 'nobody's child.' She was all right when she came back.

"The story has occupied a long time in the telling, but the whole affair didn't take five minutes."

2.—THE STORY OF THE "BAY TREE" TAVERN FIRE, AS TOLD BY SERGEANT STRONG, OF THE CITY POLICE FORCE.

"It was on the 12th day of May, 1888, that I was suddenly awakened, about two o'clock in the morning, by a policeman's rattle and loud shouts from the street. I said to my wife—

"'Good heavens ! that's a fire !' and hastily slipping into my clothes, I ran to the window, threw it open and looked out.

"The policeman below was banging at the doors and shouting—

"'Fire ! fire !'

"I called to him—

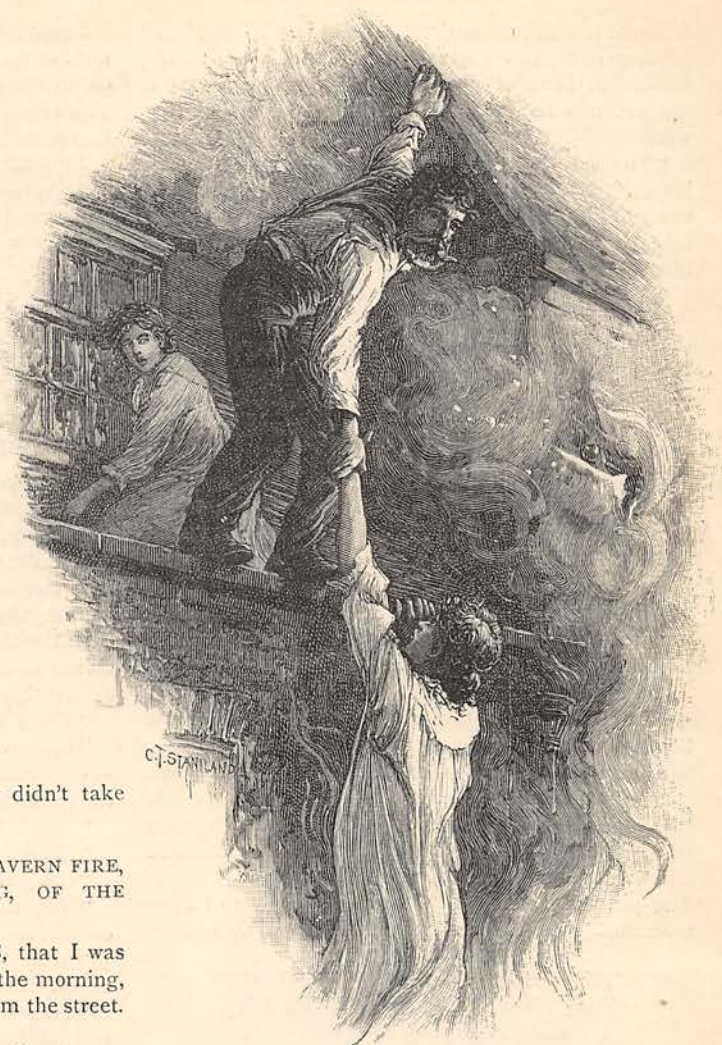
"'Where is it ?'

"'The "Bay Tree" Tavern,' he said.

"Now, the 'Bay Tree' fronted St. Swithin's Lane, and at the time I was caretaker of a house at the back, just below, looking on Sherborne Lane, and occupied the top rooms.

"I climbed on to the roof, which overlooked the 'Bay Tree,' and then I heard the most piercing screams, and saw the flames and smoke shooting up into the sky.

"The lower part of the house was used as a tavern ; the rooms above were occupied by a billiard-table maker, who, with his widowed mother and servant, lived on a part of the premises divided off from the rest. Their entrance was by a private staircase communicating with a narrow passage that separated the



"SEIZING HER BY THE ARMS MANAGED TO DRAG HER UP."

'Bay Tree' from the next house southward. The top rooms on the King William Street side were occupied by three women who were employed at the tavern, and their bedroom windows opened on to the top front wall, a narrow space about nine inches—it may be—wide.

"I jumped across the passage, made my way over the roof and dropped down to the coping. There I found one of the three women and a servant in their night-clothes—for they had had no time to put anything on ; and the servant, I think it was, from sheer fright had dropped down the front, and was hanging by her hands over St. Swithin's Lane.

"I called to her to hold on, and, seizing her by the arms, managed to drag her up,* and helped her across the parapet I mentioned—which at this end was partly covered over—and on to the flat roof of the next house ; then I helped the other one across, and

* Fancy doing so on a ledge only nine inches wide, and with little or nothing to hold to !

followed myself just in time. I heard a 'Wish!' and looking back, saw the flames streaming through the window in front of which we had been standing a few seconds before! I can tell you it was sharp work.

"You see, the 'Bay Tree' had a hollow way up inside, with a domed top, which made a splendid draught for the flames. It was like a shaft full of fire, and the place was so old that the dry wood burned like tinder.

"You may think that I had my hands full conveying the women over the roofs to a place of safety, so at the time I saw nothing of what was going on in the street below, but I knew that the widow and her son made their escape by the private staircase without much trouble."

Thus far the sergeant.

Meanwhile, on the King William Street side of the "Bay Tree," there remained two women on the parapet whose peril momentarily increased. The engines had arrived, however, and the sight of the brass helmets below inspired them with fresh hope. A fire-escape was brought into the lane, but it was too short; it was the old-fashioned lever sort (not the modern telescope), and it had to be taken into King William Street to be lengthened.

It was run in again and backed into George Street, a small alley opposite the "Bay Tree"; there was no room otherwise, as St. Swithin's Lane is here but ten paces wide. Then it was slanted across to the corner of the life assurance building, which stands partly in the lane, but fronts King William Street. One side only of the fire-escape was thus supported.

A possible rescue had become a question of a few moments. The women—now buoyed up with hope,



SERGEANT STRONG.

now despairing—stood in their white garments on that narrow ledge, their figures weirdly illuminated by the background of leaping flames. In front it was at least forty feet sheer perpendicular to the flags below.

Several firemen ran up the ladder, which swayed for want of full support, and the foremost man, climbing on to the coping, handed first one and then the other poor creature to his comrade on the escape, by whom they were passed down to the street.

By dint of great exertion the fire was prevented from spreading—a danger greatly to be apprehended, on account of the confined space and the fact that the house was situated in the very heart of the big city. For their gallant conduct eight of the firemen received special commendation and an illuminated memorial. Sergeant Strong, too, was rewarded for his bravery. As to the tavern, it was completely burned out, but the origin of the disaster remains to this day a mystery.

3.—THE STORY OF WILLIAM GODFREY JACOBS.

Cr-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r! sounded the alarm gong at the Wandsworth Fire Brigade Station on the 12th of September, 1889.

The manual engine was at once horsed, the five men clambered to their places, and they were off at a furious gallop through the deserted streets.

At the clatter of their progress, and their warning shouts as they dashed round the corners, windows were hastily thrown up and heads looked out.

"Fire! Fire!"

The cry was taken up and soon the mob that gathers—who can say how or whence?—came tearing after the engines.

"Fire! Fire!"

"Where is it—do you know?"

"Somewheres along Bell Lane."

"Yes, that's it. Bell Lane; Burroughs and Welcomes, so my mate 'ere says!"

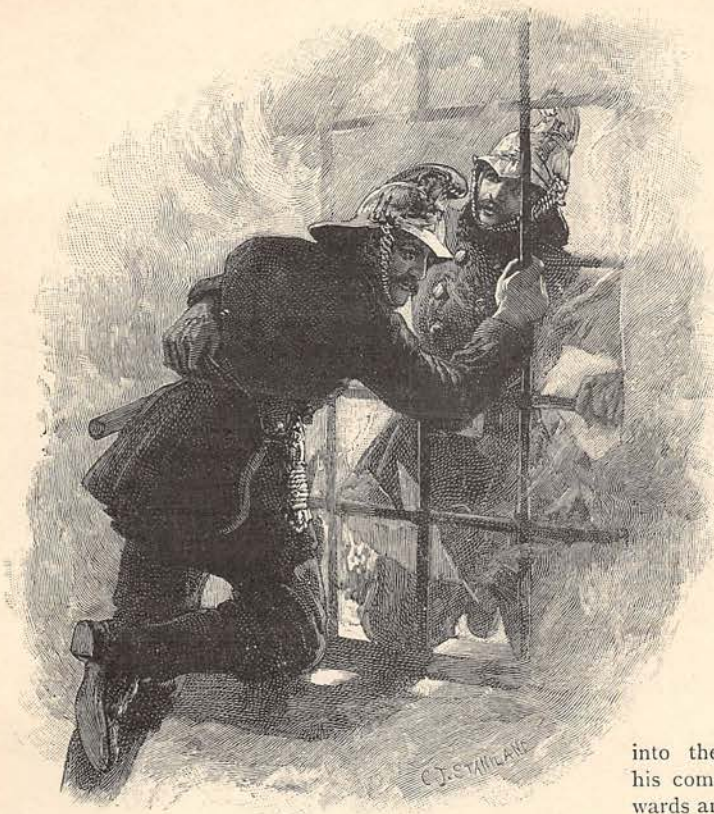
"Why, that's the chemical factory. Won't it just blaze! Come on. Fire! Fire!"

But, some time before the hurrying footsteps, the manual had arrived at the place, and without a moment's delay got to work, being quickly followed by the Battersea steam fire engine.

The crowd, correct in its information as to locality, was right also in its prognostications of a big blaze. Gazers afar off could mark the rapid progress of the fire by the reflection in the sky as the smoke pall above it trembled and quivered with lurid light, whilst lookers-on—as close by as the cordon of police permitted—could hear the sharp crackling of the flames and their ever-increasing roar. The building was a large one of three storeys, full of highly combustible material, and it was the top floor that was blazing.

From the standpipe a branch hose was carried upstairs by two men—Jacobs and Ashby—to the seat of the fire, where they began to play upon it. The streams of water hissed and sputtered where they fell, raising an immense volume of steam; but whether the men were gaining on the fire or the fire was gaining on the building was as yet doubtful.

Suddenly a fearful explosion was heard, and, to the horror of the spectators, roof, rafters, and miscellaneous débris were hurled into the air! The falling shower of sparks lighted up the entire front of the factory in all



"JACOBS HELPING FROM BEHIND TO PUSH HIM THROUGH."

its details ; the firemen in their brass helmets, the faces of the waiting crowd.

There was a portentous pause, as if the awful forces were resting from the work of destruction, only, however, to break out again with renewed energy. During that brief respite it was discovered that from the staircase—their only means of escape—the two men were completely cut off by the flames. But though nothing could be seen of them, they might not have perished. Oh ! if there be yet time ! "Help ! help !"

Quick as thought four lengths of scaling-ladders were fastened together, but on trial it was found that they were not nearly long enough. After a hurried search hither and thither, two builder's ladders were obtained, they were tightly lashed together, and the firemen—assisted by the willing crowd—raised them at the end of the building. *They were too short by some five feet !*

The windows of the room in which the two poor fellows were imprisoned swung in massive iron frames, and at this moment, just when the excitement had reached fever pitch—Ashby was seen through bursts of smoke making desperate efforts to struggle through the swing sash, and Jacobs helping from behind to push him through.

Without a moment's hesitation a fireman named Francis rushed up the ladders, and balancing himself on the top, at the imminent risk of falling, reached over and upward, and managed to catch his struggling comrade by the legs. Then—partly guiding, partly pulling—he got him with great difficulty on to the trembling ladder, and brought him down from the giddy height—half fainting, cruelly burned, grimy with smoke, but still living.

"Hurrah ! hurrah ! We'll yet save them both."

Again all eyes were directed to the third floor, and the cheers were succeeded by a thrill of horror, for Jacobs, after frantic attempts to break the heavy iron window-frame with his axe, was seen to fall backwards.

Once more the daring Francis ascended the ladders amidst breathless excitement. The peril had greatly increased, but still he persisted, and by a desperate effort reached the window. He called his comrade's name. Alas ! the only answer was the roar of the exultant flames, for, overcome by the suffocating smoke and heat, William Godfrey Jacobs had gone down into the burning fiery furnace ! He had saved his comrade's life at the cost of his own, and afterwards among the ruins of the completely demolished building his charred remains were discovered, the axe beside him.



FIREMAN W. G. JACOBS.

What shall we say to deeds of heroism such as these ? We may, at least, be very sure that these brave souls who have faced death in their efforts to save life, and in the noble discharge of their duty, will hear the words of commendation from the Great Exemplar of sacrifice—

"Well done, good and faithful servant ; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."