

The Two Vanrevels

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(CONTINUED.)

Thus it happened that when the water came again and Vanrevel let it fall in a grateful cascade upon Cralley and himself three manly voices were heard, singing as three men tolled through the billows of rosy gray below the beleaguered pair:

"Oh, the noble Duke of York,
He had ten thousand men;
He marched them up the side of a house
And marched them down again!"

A head appeared above the eaves, and Marsh, then Eugene, then Cummings, came crawling over the cornice in turn to join their comrades. They were a gallant band, those young gentlemen of Rouen, and they came with the ironical song on their lips and, looking at one another, ragged and scarified, burst into hoarse but indomitable laughter.

Two others made an attempt to follow and would not be restrained. It was noticed that parts of the lower ladder had been charring, and the ladder men were preparing to remove it to a less dangerous point when old General Trumble and young Jefferson Barend made a rush to mount it and were well upon their upward way before the ladder, weakened at the middle, sagged, splintered and broke, Trumble and Barend falling with it. And there was the grappling ladder dangling forty feet above the ground, and there were the five upon the roof.

The department had no other ladder of more than half the length of the shattered one. Not only the department, but every soul in Rouen, knew that, and there rose the thick, low sigh of a multitude, a sound frightful to hear. It became a groan, then swelled into a deep cry of alarm and lamentation.

And now almost simultaneously the west wall of the building and the south wall and all the southwestern portions of the roof covered themselves with voluminous mantles of flame, which increased so hugely and with such savage rapidity that the one stream on the roof was seen to be but a ridiculous and useless opposition.

Everybody began to shout advice to his neighbor, and nobody listened even to himself. The firemen were in as great a turmoil as was the crowd, while women covered their eyes. Young Frank Chenoweth was sobbing curses upon the bruised and shaking Trumble and Jefferson Barend, who could only stand remorseful, impotently groaning, and made no answer.

The walls of the southernmost warehouse followed the roof, crashing in one after the other, a sacrifice pyre with its purpose consummated, and in the seeth and flare of its passing Tom Vanrevel again shaded his eyes with his hand and looked down across the upturned faces. The pedestal with the grotesque carvings was still there, but the crowning figure had disappeared—the young goddess was gone. For she, of all that throng, had an idea in her head, and, after screaming it to every man within reach, only to discover the impossibility of making herself understood in that babel, she was struggling to make her way toward the second warehouse, through the swaying jam of people. It was a difficult task, as the farther in she managed to go the denser became the press and the more tightly she found the people wedged, until she received involuntary aid from the firemen. In turning their second stream to play ineffectually upon the lower strata of flame they accidentally deflected it toward the crowd, who separated wildly, leaving a big gap, of which Miss Bett, took instant advantage. She darted across, and the next moment, unnoticed, had entered the building through the door which Cralley Gray had opened.

The five young men on the roof were well aware that there was little to do but to wait, and soon they would see which was to win, they or the fire, so they shifted their line of hose to the eastern front of the building, out of harm's way for a time at least, and held the muzzle steady, watching its work. And in truth it was not long before they understood which would conquer. The southern and western portions of the building had flung out great flames that flattered and flared on the breeze like titanic flags, and steadily, slowly at first, then faster as the seconds flew, the five were driven backward, up the low slope of the roof toward the gable ridge. Tom Vanrevel held the first joint of the nozzle, and he retreated with a sulky face, lifting his foot grudgingly at each step. They were all silent now, and no one spoke until Will Cummings faltered:

"Surely they'll get a rope up to us some way?"

Will knew as well as did the others that there was no way, but his speech

struck the sullen heart of the chief with remorse. He turned. "I hope you'll all forgive me for getting you up here." A sound, half sob, half giggle, came from the parched lips of Eugene Madrillon as he patted Tom on the shoulder without speaking, and Cralley nodded quietly, then left the group and went to the eastern edge of the roof and looked out upon the crowd. Cummings dropped the line and sat down, burying his hot face in his arms, for they all saw that Vanrevel thought "it was no use," but a question of a few minutes, and they would retreat across the gable and either jump or go down with the roof.

Since the world began idle and industrious philosophers have speculated much upon the thoughts of men about to die, yet it cannot be too ingenious to believe that such thoughts vary as the men, their characters and conditions of life vary. Nevertheless, pursuant with the traditions of minstrelsy and romance, it is conceivable that young unmarried men called upon to face desperate situations might, at the crucial moment, rush to a common experience of summoning the vision, each of his heart's desire, and to meet, each his doom, with her name upon his lips.

An extraordinary thing occurred in the present instance, for, by means of some fragmentary remarks let fall at the time and afterward recalled, such as Tappingham Marsh's gasping, "At least it will be on her father's roof!" and from other things later overheard, an inevitable deduction has been reached that four of the five gentlemen in the perilous case herein described were occupied with the vision of the same person, to wit, Miss Elizabeth Carewe, "the last, the prettiest, to come to town!"

Cralley Gray, alone, spoke not at all, but why did he strain and strain his eyes toward that empty pedestal with the grotesque carvings? Did he seek Fanchon there, or was Miss Carewe the last sweet apparition in the fancies of all five of the unhappy young men?

The coincidence of the actual appearance of the lady among them therefore seemed the more miraculous when, wan and hopeless, staggering desperately backward to the gable ridge, they heard a clear contralto voice behind them:

"H hadn't you better all come down now?" it said. "The stairway will be on fire before long."

Only one thing could have been more shockingly unexpected to the five than that there should be a sixth person on the roof, and this was that the sixth person should be Miss Betty Carewe.

They turned, aghast, agape, choppfallen with astonishment, stunned and incredulous.

She stood just behind the gable ridge, smiling amiably, a most incon-



"H hadn't you better all come down now?" gruous little pink fan in her hand, the smoke wreaths partly obscuring her and curling between the five and her white dress, like mists floating across the new moon.

Was it but a kindly phantasm of the brain? Was it the incarnation of the last vision of the lost volunteers? Was it a Valkyrie assuming that lovely likeness to perch upon this eryie, waiting to bear their heroic souls to Valhalla, or was it Miss Betty Carewe?

To the chief she spoke—all of them agreed to that afterward—but it was Cralley who answered, while Tom could only stare and stand wagging his head at the lovely phantom like a mandarin on a shelf.

"My mother in heaven!" gasped Cralley. "How did you come up here?"

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"There's a trap in the roof," she said, and she began to fan herself with the pink fan. "A stairway runs all the way down—old Nelson showed me through these buildings yesterday—and that side isn't on fire yet. I'm so sorry I didn't think of it until a moment ago, because you could have brought the water up that way. But don't you think you'd better come down now?"

CHAPTER VII.

NOT savage Hun nor "barbarous Vandyke" nor demon Apache could wish to dwell upon the state of mind of the chief of the Rouen volunteer fire department; therefore let the curtain of mercy descend. Without a word he turned and dragged the nozzle to the eastern eaves, whence, after a warning gesture to those below, he dropped it to the ground, and, out of compassion, it should be little more than hinted that the gesture of warning was very slight.

When the rescued band reached the foot of the last flight of stairs they beheld the open doorway as a frame for a great press of intent and contorted faces, every eye still strained to watch the roof, none of the harrowed spectators comprehending the appearance of the girl's figure there, nor able to see whither she had led the five young men, until Tappingham Marsh raised a shout as he leaped out of the door and danced upon the solid earth again.

Then, indeed, there was a mighty uproar. Cheer after cheer ascended to the red vault of heaven. Women wept, men whooped and the people rushed for the heroes with wide open, welcoming arms. Jefferson Barend and Frank Chenoweth and General Trumble dashed at Tom Vanrevel with incoherent cries of thanksgiving, shaking his hands and beating him hysterically upon the back. He greeted them with bitter laughter.

"Help get the water into the next warehouse. This one is beyond control, but we can save the other two. Take the lines in—through the door!" He brushed the rejoicing friends off abruptly, and went on in a queer, hollow voice: "There are stairs—and I'm so sorry I didn't think of it until a moment ago, because you could have brought the water up that way!"

A remarkable case of desertion had occurred the previous instant under his eyes. As the party emerged from the warehouse into the street Tom heard Cralley say hurriedly to Miss Carewe: "Let me get you away—come quickly!" saw him suddenly seize her hand and, eluding the onrushing crowd, run with her round the corner of the building. And somehow, through what inspiration or through what knowledge of his partner's "temperament," heaven knows, the prophetic soul of the chief was unhappily assured that Cralley would offer himself as escort to her home and find acceptance. But why not? Was it Cralley who had publicly called his fellow man fool, idiot, imbecile, at the top of his lungs only to find himself the proven numskull of the universe? Tom stood for a moment staring after the vanishing pair, while over his face stole the strangest expression that ever man saw there; then, with meekly bowed shoulders, he turned again to his work.

At the corner of the warehouse Miss Carewe detached her hand from Cralley's, yet still followed him as he made a quick detour round the next building. A minute or two later they found themselves, undetected, upon Main street in the rear of the crowd. There Cralley paused.

"Forgive me," he said breathlessly, "for taking your hand. I thought you would like to get away."

She regarded him gravely, so that he found it difficult to read her look, except that it was seriously questioning, but whether the interrogation was addressed to him or to herself he could not determine. After a silence she said:

"I don't know why I followed you. I believe it must have been because you didn't give me time to think."

This, of course, made him even quicker with her than before. "It's all over," he said briskly. "The first warehouse is gone, the second will go, but they'll save the others easily enough now that you have pointed out that the lines may be utilized otherwise than as adjuncts of performances on the high trapeze." They were standing by a picket fence, and he leaned against it, overcome by mirth in which she did not join. Her gravity reacted upon him at once, and his laughter was stopped short. "Will you not accept me as an escort to your home?" he said formally.

"I do not know," she returned simply, the sort of honest trouble in her glance that is seen only in very young eyes.

"What reason in the world?" he returned, with a crafty sharpness of astonishment.

She continued to gaze upon him thoughtfully, while he tried to look into her eyes, but was baffled because the radiant beams from the lady's orbs, as the elder Chenoweth might have said, rested somewhere dangerously near his chin, which worried him, for, though his chin made no retreat and was far from ill looking, it was nevertheless that feature which he most distrusted. "Won't you tell me why not?" he repeated uneasily.

"Because," she answered at last, speaking hesitatingly—"because it isn't so easy a matter for me as you seem to think. You have not been introduced to me, and I know you never will be, and that what you told me was true."

"Which part of what I told you?" The question escaped from him instantly.

"That the others might come when they liked, but that you could not."

"Oh, yes, yes." His expression altered to a sincere dejection, his shoulders drooped and his voice indicated supreme annoyance. "I might have known some one would tell you. Who was it? Did they say why I?"

"On account of your quarrel with my father."

"My quarrel with your father!" he exclaimed, and his face lit with an elated surprise. His shoulders straightened. He took a step nearer her and asked eagerly, "Who told you that?"

"My father himself. He spoke of a Mr. Vanrevel whom he disliked and whom I must not meet, and, remembering what you had said, of course I knew that you were he."

"Oh!" Cralley's lips began to form a smile of such appealing and inimitable sweetness that Voltaire would have

trusted him, a smile altogether rose leaves. "Then I lose you," he said, "for my only chance to know you was in keeping it hidden from you. And now you understand."

"No," she answered gravely, "I don't understand. That is what troubles me. If I did and believed you had the right of the difference I could believe it no sin that you should speak to me, should take me home now. I think it is wrong not to act from your own understanding of things."

The young man set his expression as one indomitably fixed upon the course of honor, cost what it might, and in the very action his lurking pleasure in doing it hopped out in the flicker of a twinkle in his eyes and as instantly sought cover again—the flea in the rose jar.

"Then you must ask some other," he said firmly. "A disinterested person should tell you. The difference was political in the beginning, but became personal afterward, and it is now a quarrel which can never be patched up, though, for my part, I wish that it could be. I can say no more, because a party to it should not speak."

She met his level look squarely at last, and no man ever had a more truthful pair of eyes than Cralley Gray, for it was his great accomplishment that he could adjust his emotion, his reason and something that might be called his faith to fit any situation in any character.

"You may take me home," she answered. "I may be wrong and even disloyal, but I do not feel it so now. You did a very brave thing tonight to save him from loss, and I think that what you have said was just what you should have said."

So they went down the street, the hubbub and confusion of the fire growing more and more indistinct behind them. They walked slowly, and for a time neither spoke, yet the silence was of a kind which the adept rejoiced to have produced thus soon—their second meeting. He waited until they passed into the shadows of the deserted Carewe street before he spoke. There he stopped abruptly, at which she turned, astonished.

"Now that you have saved my life," he said in a low, tremulous tone, "what are you going to do with it?"

Her eyes opened almost as widely as they had at her first sight of him in her garden. There was a long pause before she replied, and when she did it was to his considerable surprise.

"I have never seen a play except the funny little ones we acted at the convent," she said. "But isn't that the way they speak on the stage?"

Cralley realized that his judgment of the silence had been mistaken, and yet it was with a thrill of delight that he recognized her clear reading of him. He had been too florid again.

"Let us go." His voice was soft with restrained forgiveness. "You mocked me once before."

"Mocked you?" she repeated as they went on.

"Mocked me," he said firmly. "Mocked me for seeming theatrical, and yet you have learned that what I said was true, as you will again."

She mused upon this, then, as in whimsical indulgence to an importunate child:

(To be Continued)