

The Two Vanrevels

By BOOTH TARKINGTON,

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(CONTINUED.)

That it was her father's property which was imperiled attested to the justification of Miss Betty in running to a fire, and as she followed the crowd into Main street she felt a not unpleasant proprietary interest in the spectacle. Very opposite sensations animated the breast of the man with the trumpet, who was more acutely conscious than any other that these were Robert Carewe's possessions which were burning so handsomely. Nor was he the only one among the firemen who ground his teeth over the folly of the uniforms, for now they could plainly see the ruin being wrought, the devastation threatened. The two upper stories of the southernmost warehouse had swathed themselves in one great flame, the building next on the north, also of frame, was smoking heavily, and there was a wind from the southwest which, continuing with the fire unchecked, threatened the town itself. There was work for the volunteer brigade that night.

They came down Main street with a rush, the figure of their chief swaying over them on his high perch, while their shouting was drowned in the louder roar of greeting from the crowd into which they plunged as a diver into the water, swirls and eddies of people marking the wake. A moment later a section of the roof of the burning warehouse fell in with a sonorous and reverberating crash.

The engine company ran the force pump out to the end of one of the lower wharfs, two lines of pipe were attached, two rows of men mounted the planks for the pumpers and at the word of command began the up and down of the hand machine with admirable vim. Nothing happened; the water did not come; something appeared to be wrong with the mechanism. As every one felt the crucial need of haste, nothing could have been more natural than that all the members of the engine company should simultaneously endeavor to repair the defect. Therefore ensued upon the spot a species of riot which put the engine out of its sphere of usefulness.

In the meantime fifty or sixty men and boys who ran with the machines, but who had no place in their operation, being the bucket brigade, had formed a line and were throwing large pails of water in the general direction of the southernmost warehouse, which it was now impossible to save, while the gentlemen of the hook and ladder company, abandoning their wagons and armed with axes, heroically assaulted the big door of the granary, the second building, whence they were driven by the exasperated chief, who informed them that the only way to save the wheat was to save the building. Cralley Gray, one of the berated axmen, remained by the shattered door after the others had gone and, struck by a sudden thought, set his hand upon the iron latch and opened the door by this simple process. It was not locked, Cralley leaned against the casement and laughed with his whole soul and body.

Meanwhile, by dint of shouting in men's ears when near them, through the trumpet when distant, tearing axes from their hands, imperiously gesticulating to subordinate commanders and lingering in no one spot for more than a second, Mr. Vanrevel reduced his forces to a semblance of order in a remarkably short time, considering the confusion into which they had fallen.

The space between the burning warehouse and that next to it was not more than fifty feet in width, but fifty feet so hot no one took thought of entering there, an area as discomfiting in appearance as it was beautiful with the thick rain of sparks and firebrands that fell upon it. But the chief had decided that this space must be occupied and, more, must be held, since it was the only point of defense for the second warehouse. The roof of this building would burn, which would mean the destruction of the warehouse, unless it could be mounted, because the streams of water could not play upon it from the ground nor from the ladders do much more than wet the projecting eaves. It was a gable roof, the eaves twenty feet lower on the south side than on the north, where the ladders could not hope to reach. Vanrevel swung his line of bucketeers round to throw water not upon the flames, but upon the ladder men.

Miss Carewe stood in the crowd upon the opposite side of the broad street. Even there her cheeks were uncomfortably hot, and sometimes she had to brush a spark from her shoulder, though she was too much excited to

mind this. She was watching the beautiful fiery furnace between the north wall of the burning warehouse and the south wall of its neighbor, the fifty feet brilliant and misty with vaporous rose color, dotted with the myriad red stars, her eyes shining with the reflection of their fierce beauty. She saw how the vapors moved there, like men walking in fire, and she was vaguely recalling Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, when over the silhouetted heads of the crowd before her a long black ladder rose, wobbled, tilted crazily, then lamely advanced and ranged itself against the south wall of the second warehouse, its top rung striking ten feet short of the eaves. She hoped that no one had any notion of mounting that ladder.

A figure appeared upon it immediately, that of a gentleman, bareheaded and in evening dress, with a brass trumpet swinging from a cord about his shoulders. The noise grew less, the shouting died away, and the crowd became almost silent as the figure, climbing slowly, drew up above their heads.

Two or three rungs beneath came a second, a man in helmet and uniform. The clothes of both men, drenched by the bucketeers, clung to them, steaming. As the second figure mounted a third appeared, but this was the last, for the ladder was frail and sagged toward the smoking wall with the weight of the three.

The chief, three-fourths of the way to the top, shouted down a stifled command, and a short grappling ladder, fitted at one end with a pair of spiked iron hooks, was passed to him. Then he toiled upward until his feet rested on the third rung from the top. Here he turned, setting his back to the wall, lifted the grappling ladder high over his head so that it rested against the eaves above him and brought it down sharply, fastening the spiked hooks in the roof. As the eaves projected fully three feet, this left the grappling ladder hanging that distance out from the wall, its lowest rung a little above the level of the chief's shoulders.

Miss Betty drew in her breath with a little choked cry. There was a small terraced hill of piled up packing boxes near her, possession of which had been taken by a company of raggamuffin boys, and she found herself standing on the highest box and sharing the summit with these questionable youths, almost without noting her action in mounting thither, so strained was the concentration of her attention upon the figure high up in the rose glow against the warehouse wall. The man, surely, surely, was not going to trust himself to that bit of wooden web hanging from the roof! Where was Miss Carewe that she permitted it? Ah, if Betty had been Fanchon, and mad woman enough to have accepted this madman, she would have compelled him to come down at once, and thereafter would lock him up in the house whenever the bells rang!

But the roof was to be mounted or Robert Carewe's property lost. Already little flames were dancing up from the shingles, where firebrands had fallen, their number increasing with each second. So Vanrevel raised his arms, took a hard grip upon the lowest rung of the grappling ladder and tried it with his weight. The iron hooks bit deeper into the roof; they held. He swung himself out into the air, with nothing beneath him, caught the rung under his knee, and for a moment hung there, while the crowd withheld from breathing. Then a cloud of smoke swirling that way made him the mere ghostly nucleus of itself, blotted him out altogether, and, as it rose slowly upward, showed the ladder free and empty, so that at first there was an instant when they thought that he had fallen, but, as the smoke cleared, there was the tall figure on the roof.

It was an agile and a daring thing to do, and the man who did it was mightily applauded. The cheering bothered him, however, for he was trying to make them understand below what would happen to the engine company in case the water was not sent through the lines directly, and what he said should be done to the engineers included things that would have blanched the cheek of the most inventive Spanish inquisitor that ever lived.

Miss Betty made a gesture as if to a person within whispering distance. "Your coat is on fire," she said in an ordinary conversational tone without knowing she had spoken aloud, and Mr. Vanrevel, more than a hundred feet away, seemed particularly conscious of the pertinence of her remark. He removed the garment with alacrity, and for the lack of the tardy water began to use it as a stall upon the fire-

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brands and little flames about him, the sheer desperate best of a man in a rage doing what he could when other failed him. Showers of sparks fell upon him. The smoke was rising everywhere from the roof and the walls below and, growing denser and denser, shrouded him in heavy veils, so that as he ran hither and thither, now visible, now unseen, stamping and beating and sweeping away the brands that fell, he seemed but the red and ghostly caricature of a Xerxes ineffectually lashing the sea. They were calling to him imploringly to come down, in heaven's name to come down!

The second man had followed to the top of the ladder against the wall, and there he paused, waiting to pass up the line of hose when the word should come that the force pump had been repaired, but the people thought that he waited because he was afraid to trust himself



He swung himself out into the air

to the grappling ladder. He was afraid, exceedingly afraid, though that was not why he waited, and he was still chuckling over the assault of the axes.

His situation had not much the advantage of that of the chief. His red shirt might have been set with orange jewels, so studded it was with the flying sparks, and, a large brand dropping upon his helmet, he threw up his hand to dislodge it and lost the helmet. The great light fell upon his fair hair and smiling face, and it was then that Miss Betty recognized the incredible of her garden.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was an investigating negro child of tender years who, possessed of a petty sense of cause and effect, brought an illuminative simplicity to bear upon the problem of the force pump, and a multitudinous agitation greeted his discovery that the engineers had forgotten to connect their pipes with the river.

This naive omission was fatal to the second warehouse. The wall burst into flame below Cralley Gray, who clung to the top of the ladder, choking, stifled and dizzily fighting the sparks that covered him, yet still clutching the nozzle of the hose line they had passed to him.

When the stream at last leaped forth, making the nozzle light in his grasp, he sent it straight up into the air and let the cataract fall back upon himself and upon the two men beneath him on the ladder.

There came a moment of blessed relief, and he looked out over the broad rosy blur of faces in the street, where no one wondered more than he how the water was to reach the roof. Suddenly he started, wiped his eyes with his wet sleeve and peered intently down from under the shading arm. His roving glance crossed the smoke and flame to rest upon a tall, white figure that stood full length above the heads of the people upon a pedestal wrought with the grotesque images of boys; a girl's figure, still as noon, enrapt, like the statue of some young goddess for whom were made these sacrificial pyres. Mr. Gray recognized his opportunity.

A blackened and unrecognizable face peered down from the eaves, and the voice belonging to it said angrily:

"Why didn't they send up that line before they put the water through it?" "Never mind, Tom," answered Cralley cheerfully, "I'll bring it up."

"You can't. I'll come down for it. Don't be every kind of a fool!"

"You want a monopoly, do you?" And Cralley, calling to Tappingham Marsh, next below him, to come higher, left the writhing nozzle in the latter's possession, swung himself out upon the grappling ladder, imitating the chief's gymnastics, and immediately, one hand grasping the second rung, one knee crooked over the lowest, leaned head down and took the nozzle from Marsh. It was a heavy weight, and, though Marsh supported the line beneath it, the great stream hurtling forth made it a difficult thing to manage, for it wriggled, recoiled and struggled as if it had been alive. Cralley made three attempts to draw himself up, but the strain was too much for his grip, and on the third attempt his fingers melted from the rung, and he swung down fearfully, hanging by his knee, but still clinging to the nozzle.

"Give it up, Cralley. It isn't worth it," Vanrevel called from overhead, not daring the weight of both on the light grappling ladder.

But though Cralley cared no more for the saving of Robert Carewe's property than for a butterfly's wing in China, he could not give up now, any more than as a lad he could have forborne to turn somersaults when the prettiest little girl looked out of the schoolhouse window. He passed the nozzle to Tappingham, caught the second rung with his left hand, and, once more dangling head downward, seized the nozzle; then, with his knee hooked tight, as the gushing water described a huge semicircle upon the smoke and hot vapor, he made a mad lurch through the air, while women shrieked, but he landed upright, half sitting on the lowest rung. He climbed the grappling ladder swiftly, in spite of the weight and contortions of the unmanageable beast he carried with him. Tom leaned far down and took it from him, and Cralley, passing the eaves, fell exhausted upon the roof. Just as he reached this temporary security a lady was borne, fainting, out of the acclaiming crowd. Fanchon was there.

Word had been passed to the gentlemen of the engine company to shut off the water in order to allow the line to

be carried up the ladder, and they received the command at the moment Tom lifted the nozzle, so that the stream dried up in his hands. This was the last straw, and the blackened, slinged and scarred chief, setting the trumpet to his lips, gave himself entirely to wrath.

It struck Cralley, even as he lay coughing and weeping with smoke, that there was something splendid and large in the other's rage. Vanrevel was ordinarily so steady and cool that this was worth seeing, this berserker gesture; worth hearing, this wonderful profanity, like Washington's one fit of cursing, and Cralley, knowing Tom, knew, too, that it had not come upon him because Carewe had a daughter into whose eyes Tom had looked; nor did he rage because he believed that Cralley's life and his were in the greater hazard for the lack of every drop of water that should have issued from the empty nozzle.

Their lungs were burdened with smoke, while the intolerable smarting of throat, eyes and nostrils was like the inclusion of a thousand needles in the membranes. Their clothes were luminous with glowing circles where the sparks were eating. The blaze widened on the wall beneath them, and Marsh was shouting hoarsely that he could no longer hold his position on the ladder, yet Cralley knew that none of this was in Tom's mind as he stood, scorched, blistered and haggard, on the edge of the roof, shaking his fist at the world. It was because his chance of saving the property of a man he despised was being endangered.

Cralley stretched forth a hand and touched his friend's knee. "Your side of the conversation is a trifle loud, Tom," he said. "Miss Carewe is down there across the street on a pile of boxes."

Tom stopped in the middle of a word, for which he may have received but half a black stroke from the recording angel. He wheeled toward the street and, shielding his inflamed eyes with his hand, gazed downward in a stricken silence. From that moment Mr. Vanrevel's instructions to his followers were of a decorum at which not the meekest Sunday school scholar dare have caviled.

The three men now on the long ladder—Marsh, Eugene Madrilion and Will Cummings—found their position untenable, for the flames, reaching all along the wall, were licking at the ladder it-

self between Marsh and Eugene. "I can't stand this any longer," gasped Tappingham, "but I can't leave those two up there either."

"Not alone," shouted Cummings from beneath Madrilion. "Let's go up."

(To be Continued)

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