

The Firemen of New York.



FIRE—it descended from Heaven upon the offering of Abel; it came down upon the victims laid upon the altar by Aaron; it was borne before the Asiatic monarchs in their great processions; it appeared to the Israelites in a pillar that preceded them in their long travel

through the wilderness; it was guarded as a thing sacred by the Vestal Virgins, it burns perpetually over the spot where the saviour of mankind is said to have been entombed; it was a symbol of majesty among the Romans; it is the great means of universal comfort—it has been sung by Poets, it consoles in the homestead hearth, it cooks the food of

man, it is spoken of as the element in which the wicked shall be punished, and on the last day it will be the Agent of the End. Then, all hail to Fire!

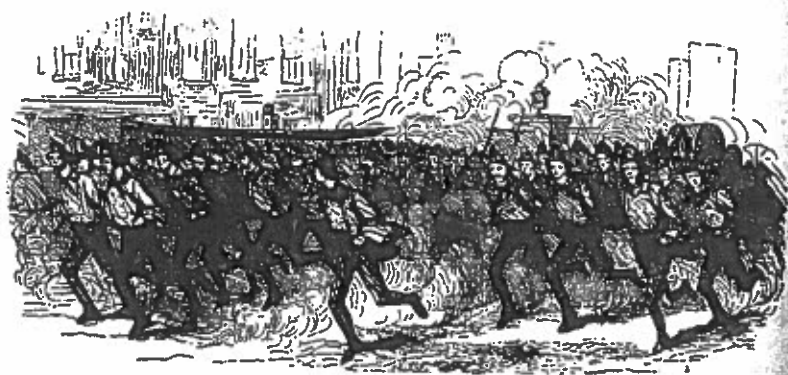
Two boys are sleeping in the same room in one of the thickly populated districts of New York. A sound dull and heavy awakens them at midnight. One of the boys puts out his hand and feels the wall. If it is hot he gets up, concluding that the bell which has awakened him will bring a crowd around the fire that has broken out in his neighborhood, and that the house in which he is, will soon be wrapped in flames. If the wall is cool, he contents himself with the idea that all is safe for the night, and so he turns over and is speedily asleep. That boy has no genius for fire in him. The other boy hears the alarm, puts his leg from out the bed clothes, gropes about for a match, lights his lamp, dresses himself rapidly, his eyes glistening with excitement, cares not whether the wall of his room be warm or not, creeps down stairs, turns the bolt, has no night key, needs none, cares for none, and as swift as he can, he runs, whither hundreds by this time are running, to the fire. This boy has a taste for conflagrations, and may rise to be a chief of the department, and win an honorable name among the martyrs of Fire.

Night is down with its pall upon the metropolis. Cold is the wind, piercing cold; whistling and howling around the corners and swinging its great wings furiously through the streets; silence, for the omnibus has ceased its roll, and nothing stirs but the reveler getting home or getting lost; the wonderful policeman, who paces his beat, he out of a dozen that are elsewhere more comfortable, hanging round bars or servant maidens—a pleasant occupation, but not profitable to the city government.

Let the wind blow, let the cold pervade, there is one man who watches the black curtain of the night, and will not let a spark fly upward from a chimney top without his eye following its course.

Suddenly a sound breaks the muteness of the midnight. Ponderous and potential it slaps

the tempest in the chops, and gaining strength at every stroke, it peals throughout the awakened town the dreadful tidings of a bonfire. The long-sighted watcher in the bell-tower, whose shaft soars heavenward and guardward, has caught the first sight of flame, and with his sturdy arm pulls the brazen tongue of the monster bell, and strikes the alarm to those who, hearing, must obey its summons. Then the hoarse call of the trumpet can be heard, and that indelible uproar which is only audible when crowds of men speak earnestly, in the open air. The pavement resounds with the rattle of the machine, drawn by its gallant company. Ahead the foreman, in his red shirt and brass, marshals his cohorts, and with words that the uninitiated cannot understand, directs and con-



FIREMEN, WITH ENGINES, GOING TO THE FIRE.

trols the movements of the apparently confused band. Let the wind blow as it blew when Lear defied the tempest, there is no thought of dallying in those brave hearts that, beneath crimson shirts, beat as gloriously as did those of the Old Guard beneath the badges of honor on the field of Wagram.

At midnight of the 20th of September, 1776, a fire happened in New-York. Then the city was held by the troops of George III. For six days had it been in their possession, when a "broad arrow of flame" rose in the midst of the captured town. Where Whitehall slip now is, a wharf had been built, and on the wharf was a low building, half grogshop and half something worse. From that den arose the fire. The wind blew from the south-west. Few others but soldiers and sailors were in the city, except the refuse of the population, that tarried with the British, hopeful of gain and wickedness. The flames traveled rapidly and unchecked, and all the buildings between Whitehall and Broad street, up to Beaver, were destroyed, when the wind,

turning in its caprice, bore the red hot flames toward Broadway; then through Beaver to the Bowling Green, above which it crossed Broadway, and stormed and burnt all that came before it, as far as Exchange street. Market street to Partition (Fulton) yielded up its buildings, and in the ruins, conspicuous was the old Church of Trinity—our chaste Trinity now stands upon the spot—and on toward the Hudson River, burning at its pleasure, sped the conflagration. The houses on Broadway street (then Mortkill) were in flames, and the fire swept as far as Murray street, endangering the King's (Columbia) College. Four hundred and ninety three buildings were consumed, out of four thousand, the census then of the houses standing within the city limits at that time.

Dunlap says, and he walked over the spot at the close of the war, "The ruins on the south-east of the town were converted into dwelling places by using the chimneys and parts of walls which were firm, and building pieces of spars and old canvas from the ships,

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TURNING ON THE CROTON.

forming hovels, part hut and part tent. This was called Canvas-town, and there the vilest of the army and tory refugees congregated. The Tories and British writers of the day attempted to fix the crime of incendiarism upon the Whigs, but could not. It was well known that the fire had an accidental origin, yet the British historian continues to reproduce the libel."

What libel, may we ask? Has it ever been considered in Russia a libel upon the inhabitants of Moscow to say that they burnt the imperial city when Napoleon and his grand army of invasion were in possession?

We believe not, nor can we see any force in an attempt to refute the accusation that Whigs burnt New York while the enemy held it.

The next great fire of which New York holds the dark record, occurred the third of December, 1835, when it was impossible, on account of the intense cold, to use the water that was frozen at every point. The footprints of the Revolutionary conflagration were pretty well followed upon this occasion, and some idea may be conceived of the immensity of the destruction, when we state that the loss amounted to upward of twenty millions of dollars. For weeks afterward, smoke issued from the dull burning timbers, and for a long time the scene of the desolation was called the "Burnt District." But, however huge the loss in dollars and cents, and however much it spread terror and ruin among

the merchants and men of business who had their stores and offices in the fated section, the fire was a God-send; for it taught the all-important lesson that no city should tolerate within its limits those ever-ready elements of desolation and food for fire, buildings made of wood, combustible as tinder, and almost as dangerous as magazines of powder.

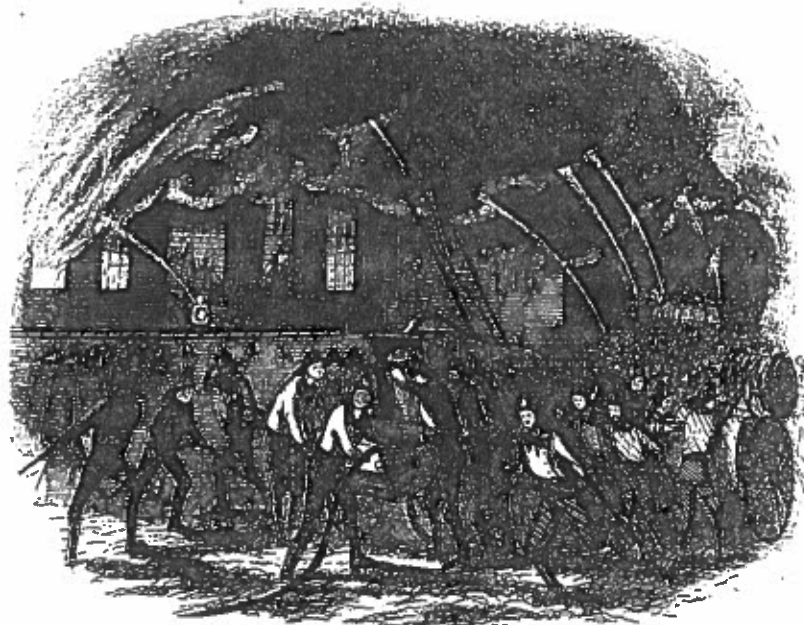
A few paragraphs back, and we heard the bell from the watch-tower peal its alarm; and we also saw the firemen rushing to the rescue. It is impossible to depict in appropriate language all the accessories of a great fire in New York. In the first place, there are the inmates of the dwelling, or the owners, who toil in them by day and sleep in their private houses, farther removed from the mart of trade. Then there are the insurance offices and their agents, looking for some loop-hole through which to introduce a pretext to avoid payment of policy, or eyeing a hole by which an incendiary may endeavor to make his escape in the midst of the confusion. Then come the neighbors, with their wives and servants, young ladies in loose wrappers, and Irish "helps," done up like brown-paper parcels. Boys, too, are around in excited gangs, studying the science of hydraulics, and slipping in and out of the mass of working red shirts, offering assistance everywhere, and greedily waiting for the time when No. 11 or No. 42 shall play the highest stream that ever was seen. Small fights by little boys and big fights by big men for-

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BATTLE BETWEEN FIRE AND WATER

erly, and sometimes even now, adorn the scene; and rogues, ready to pick a pocket or plunder the portable effects, loiter around stealthily, watching a chance.

The rap of the hose-engine, as the sturdy men of muscle sway its handles, sounds rapidly amid the crackling volumes of fire, and the trumpet blows the order of the foreman hoarsely in the wild confusion. All along the streets, long snake-like hoses pulse with the all-potent enemy of the furious element, and here and there, where a hole has been left unstopped, a fine column of water breaks from the leather serpent, and spatters its feeble force in fruitless fizzling. Where the opportune hydrant has been erected for such emergencies upon the side-walk, a sturdy youth is seen loosening the great volumes of the Croton-flood; and no soldier, placed on a post of imminent hazard, feels more than he the importance of his duty.

At this point we unite with Mr. Henry Howard, Chief Engineer of the Fire-Department, one of the most active and distinguished of the firemen, in his suggestions relative to the fire hydrants.

"The objection," he urges, "to the fire hydrants now in use consists principally in the waste, which, even when in perfect order, leaves from four to six inches of water above the valve liable to freeze, and renders the hy-

drant useless." The redress of this radical defect is to be found in Hyde's patent.

Among other important improvements, such as the bringing out of the lower part of the rod and the addition of a hollow branch, by which a syphon is constructed, which, when the hydrant is closed, completely empties it, and consequently leaving no water to be frozen, there is the great advantage gained by the simple manner in which the hydrant can be repaired. This is done by taking off the upper part of the case in which it is enclosed, the head plate removed, and the whole apparatus taken out, thus doing away with the necessity of digging up the streets for the purpose of repairs. Mr. Howard presses that the Croton Aqueduct Company be compelled to use this simple and efficient patent in all hydrants they may hereafter be called upon to lay down in the city.

There are eight fire districts in the city of New York. The fire signals, as sounded by the City Hall alarm bell, are as follows:

For the 1st District one stroke of the bell.

" 2nd	" 2	" "	" "
" 3rd	" 3	" "	" "
" 4th	" 4	" "	" "
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The Fire Department consists of fourteen engineers, eighteen hundred and fifty members of engine companies, twelve hundred and fifty-seven members of hose companies, and four hundred and fifty-two members of hook and ladder companies, making a sum total of three thousand five hundred and fifty-nine men. The foregoing are divided into forty-eight engine companies, sixty hose companies, and fifteen hook and ladder companies.

There are forty-nine engines in working order, nine ordinary, forty-three hose carriages in good condition, sixteen ordinary, eleven hook and ladder trucks in good order, and four ordinary, twenty-seven hose tenders, seven ordinary, and fifteen building.

The hose used by the Department measures thirty-three thousand four hundred feet in good order, thirty-seven thousand four hundred and fifty feet in ordinary condition, and ten thousand four hundred feet pretty nearly good for nothing.

First class companies are entitled to	70 men.
2nd " "	60 "
3rd " "	50 "
Hook and ladder "	50 "
Hose "	30 "

The Fire Department was organized in 1813, and has been steadily progressing to its present efficient condition, though even as it stands now there could be introduced into its economy and action ideas that might tend greatly to the benefit of the establishment; but it is not our province to offer our more especial opinion here and at this time. Rowdyism has happily been entirely extinguished, and that was nearly as good a thing as putting out a fire.

Returning for a moment to the preliminaries of a conflagration, let us look in upon the sentinel of the Watch Tower. He has rung his bell and signaled the district in which the fire has broken out. No sooner has the bell sounded the requisite number, than the nearest policeman, startled in his drowsy musings, puts his stereotyped cigar from his mouth, and with a voice of power sings out the awful word, Fire! Then look down the street, and keep your eye on front doors and areas, for there will be an avalanche of red shirts before you can say "Jack Robinson," and as each brave fellow slams the door behind him, he repeats the cry of the policeman, and all the street's stir to the blazing fact. Then for the chaso, for he who reaches the engine-house first can claim the trump of fame, and for the night is foreman of the heroes. The warm home is left, perhaps made happier by a loving wife and more dear by a sick child lying

in the cradle needing the father's care; perhaps a lover sits under the first gospel preaching of a sweetheart's fond confession, and faintly would tarry by her side to hear the sweet sermon through and say "Amen," and kiss the lips that told him in the discourse how dear he was, but he will leave her with her lips apart, "like a monument of Grecian art," and forth to the fireman's field of fame, the burning building of a stranger, must fly the husband and the lover, governed by an impulse that for the moment is stronger than a private grief or a rewarded love.

The history of the New York Firemen is to be written at length, and the writer must be imbued with the profound belief that the motive that governs them is the untaught chivalry of man.

The scene of the conflagration is one of the grandest, combining the vigor of form with the sumptuousness of color. Glean then the winged flames, hissing and roaring, and masses of smoke pour in wreathing volumes from roof and window. Afar up on the dividing wall, in the bright blaze, you see a man standing calm and composed. His figure looms in the luridness as he surveys the heaving volcano at his feet—one moment is enough for him, and with his axe, in the midst of uplifted brands and beams, now hidden by the smoke, now glowing in the firelight, he performs some task that may save the neighboring house from ruin.

Few men, in their moments of calm reflection, would like to climb over the top of an old fashioned chicken-coop that was on fire, even to save the life of a patent egg-laying hen; but it is otherwise with our firemen, and the most clamorous man to have the ladder hurried to the window of the blazing building, is he who mounts with the butt in his hand, to pour into the raging chambers the torrent of the hose.

Imagination stops at the portal of reality, and admits that in her most daring flights she could not conceive of a quiet man, a hard working man, with a family at his elbow, with young ones coming on, house rent to pay, marketing to provide, fires to keep bright in winter, education of growing boys to attend to, jobs in his trade to be looked after, mounting a flight of ticklish ladder steps, to pour, amid tumbling timber, smoke and flame, one element upon another, and all to render a service to a man whom he never saw, never heard of: who may be his political opponent, and for what he knows and cares, not believing in the Constitution of the United States, the fishery question, or the principles of '98! Imagination says it is wonderful to see this brave fellow, standing there on the last round

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GUIDING THE CROTON TO VICTORY.

of the ladder, calm as a summer day (and nearly as hot), and only thinking of how he shall put out the fire, and never of how he will feel in case the rafters above fall on his helmet, and knock him and it into a couple of cocked hats, and perhaps a couple of next weeks, with Greenwood in the distance. As long as wall stands, as fire burns, as smoke rolls, as water lasts, as ladder leans, and life holds out, that Achilles in a red shirt will keep on with his fight, and take a hundred and more rounds, and not give in after all.

That's pluck; for if the Lord willed it, and all circumstances considered, it would seem as if the Lord could not help it, Mr. Fireman with the butt end of the hose would not be able to stand against the half dozen or more enemies that encompass him, for two minutes. As we said before, there is the roof, the fire, the smoke, the big sleeper, as it is called in carpentry, and the smoke and a possible avalanche of brick-bats, and each one of them would be enough for one man, but, altogether, seem to have no power against the charmed fireman.

Some years ago, a fire broke out in the city, and speedily the flames enveloped the whole building, leaving but small chance of escape. Jamison Cox was Chief Engineer at that time. Though the fire had progressed at a fearful rate, the exertions of the men were not relaxed, when suddenly the lady of the house burst through the canopy of smoke and flame,

and pointing to the upper story, said that her daughter was in one of the rooms, cut off completely from any chance of safety. Not a moment thought the brave James Riker, then a young man of Company No. —; and without delay a ladder, at his request, was brought, and he went against the burning building, and up the ladder Riker went, now lost in smoke, now seen climbing higher, until, rushing against a blast of flame, he disappeared at a window. A few moments of suspense, fearful and intense among the crowd, of speechless agony to the mother, when again the intrepid man is seen issuing from the window by which he had entered, and rapidly descending, he placed the precious burden he had saved from death in the mother's arms. Think not that through the smoke and ruin there went to heaven no thanks from that maternal heart, potent to invoke perpetual blessings upon the hero's head.

To work with the rest of them went the gallant fellow, as if he had done nothing more than rescue a family soup ladle from the crucible.

In 1830, when a fire broke out in Livingston street, corner of Essex, a sick woman was, with her child, confined to one of the rooms in the upper story. The fire was raging in the interior of the house, so as to cut off all possibility of escape, except by the ladder. To the ladder then resorted the fireman, and one gallant nameless one to us, mounted the hazardous ascent, and through all obstacles rescued the poor sick woman and her child, bearing them like a Hercules from the scene of suffocation, by the same ticklish means he had used to get to them. Like Hercules, for the performance was as wonderful as any performed of the great twelve, by that renowned heathen of muscle.

It would be invidious to particularize in the long list of noble deeds, done by our firemen in later days. The record is bright with their glory; not glory won in combat against a nation's foe armed for the equal fight, not under the banner and leaders of renown, not in the "imminent and deadly breach," where nations inch by inch defend their liberties, or tyrants would usurp the people's rights, but at times when the night is on the world, and only a blazing block can light their way, amid confusion, fear, and labor, without the excitement of huzzaing squadrons, the charge of chivalry, the bugle's wildering blast, that against the element of destruction that threatens the neighbor's property—his home, furniture, and his goods. He does not know or ask the name of the man he has rescued from ruin, he does not stop to look if the woman is as old as Stuyvesant's pear tree, or as beautiful as a Damascus rose, but up



THE RESCUE.

her, Venus or Heccaté, Macbeth's witches or Byron's Medora, all the same to him, the being beautiful or ugly, dear to husband or henpeckish to husband, scold or soother, out of the crater lifts he her, through the torrent of water that pours in upon the volcano of fire, even worse than burning plow shares, he stoutly struggles, and struggling wins the safe place, and leaving the helpless in the hands of friends (and every man of every fire company present, is a friend), back rushes Achilles to the combat without his buckler, but invulnerable.

Steam-engines are spoken of as probable substitutes for the old-fashioned hand-worked machines now in use. Will the ancients of the department entertain the idea? We hope so, and they need not be afraid that steam will wither their laurels. They will have less work to do in the street and more to do in the building, and there will always be a young lady, an old one, and a child lying round loose somewhere for them to rescue. That's the trouble—but it is at the same time the glory,—not all the glory either, for there is glory in leaving a warm bed, etc., of a fierce January night, and, without more than a moment's notice, go to be half frozen by water and half roasted by fire.

Napoleon the Great held that he was truly a brave man who could fight at day-break. What would he have thought of a New York fireman? That follow with the pipe in his hands

at the window will answer the question.

The steam-engine will be adopted, just as the Isaac Newton has taken the place of the Hudson River schooner, that in the time of Deiderick Knickerbocker transported passengers from New York to Albany and back again, all within the space of a few months. Steam will pour a river upon a fire when the old system can but squirt a bucket full, but care must be taken not to damage the furniture or drown the ladies left in the upper apartments. Steam will annihilate fire, but not put out the ardor of the fireman's courage, and we will hail with pleasure the great improvement whenever it is established in our conflagrations city. We must allude to one trait that seems to rule the breasts of this important body of our fellow-citizens. Courtesy is one of their predominant characteristics, and in proof, you can but observe how gracefully they welcome the visits of companies from distant cities of the country. Dinners, badges, beautifully engraved plates, banners, balls, festooned engine-houses, garlanded engines, glowing red shirts, all in force, to add to the interest of the occasion and adorn the "elephant." We close with a regret that we have not ample verge to do justice to a body of men who, individually and collectively, have done more to impart to deeds of daring the glory of disinterestedness than any similar number of men upon the surface of the globe.—at least that is our opinion.