

V.

THE REVERSE OF A MEDAL

AN ACCOUNT OF THE MAKING OF MARY
ELLEN'S HERO

MARY ELLEN DARRAGH was a strange girl. Her life may have had something to do with that. Left fatherless at sixteen, with a mother and three little Darraghs on her hands, she at once jumped into the breach, which in this case was the breeches, and by the use of good taste, a ready tongue, pleasant manners and plenty of hard work, performed her stint so well that now, at two-and-twenty, she was sole proprietor of a millinery establishment which employed four girls besides herself. Carriage-folk came to the door of Mary Ellen's establishment, she was so good—and so cheap.

Mary Ellen was born with both gray eyes

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wide open; she absorbed the department of the ladies of her clientele with the unfailing surety of grasp that made her a success. She had the "business" of polite intercourse down as fine as the most pronouncedly mannered of her patrons—even to the English. The objective case received all that was due it from Mary Ellen when she had "her airs on," as her detractors put it. Now, these were no airs; they were the girl's standard. More than the tilt of the head and a shade of the voice were in them. There was the hope of something above the buying and selling, and wheedling of cross-grained customers.

Yet the effect on her acquaintances was bad. They thought it buncombe, and although Mary Ellen was trim, pretty and stylish, she had never kept company with any young man until Fireman Carter appeared on the scene. Other young men had come, seen and left, saying that kind of gait was too swift for them.

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Mary Ellen wanted to sit at a reasonable distance from her caller and converse. It must be added that Mary Ellen's conversational powers were limited—there was a measure of justification in the course of the young men.

However, Fireman Carter was of another breed. He, too, had inner aspirations toward gentility. Let me at once confute any suspicion that Dick Carter was snob or prig. By no means. Indeed, in his effort not to be superior he sometimes exceeded the most ungentle actions of his companions. The war between his inner monitor and his desire to be rated a good fellow played havoc with Dick's peace of mind. When he first put his cap under the sofa in Mary Ellen's little parlor he recognized a quality in his hostess for which he long had yearned. For one thing, he had an opportunity to hold forth at length on that subject so dear to the heart of man—himself.

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Mary Ellen was smitten at first sight, and why not? A mighty agreeable picture of young manhood was Fireman Carter: thin, clean, dark, handsome in face; tall, strong and supple in body; alert and ready in mind; an ideal type of the finest corps of men in the world, the firemen. He looked especially distinguished in his uniform. So Mary Ellen listened to the song of Richard Carter. Again I must interfere. Dick didn't blow and bluster about his prowess; he merely took out his soul and explained its works to Mary Ellen. He left that night feeling he was understood at last. And he went again every time he had a chance.

Mrs. Darragh, worthy old lady, chaperoned the visits, an acquired idea of Mary Ellen's. She enjoyed her evening nap in the parlor almost as much as the young folk did their discussions. Little she was needed; Dick appreciated his lady's dignity too much

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to do ought to invalidate it. In fact, he studied for those evenings, reading up by stealth and artfully leading the talk to the subject on which he was prepared, and then it would do your heart good to see Fireman Carter, with extended hand explaining the primal causes of things, to Mary Ellen's cooing obligato of admiration. Solomon in all his glory was a poor fool to Dick Carter, in one person's estimation.

This was all very well, but Mary Ellen, like most young women in love, would have liked a more forceful demonstration of her idol's regard. She understood at last why her friends preferred action to conversation. This long-distance courtship might have been fatal to another man than handsome, daredevil Dick; as it was it added a piquancy; but it made trouble, nevertheless, and here's how that came.

Under the softening influence of Mary El-

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len's eyes Carter had grown an intimacy with a man of his company by the name of Holtzer. Holtzer was German by parentage and sentimental by nature. Especially did Holtzer deplore the fact that he knew no nice young women—those who liked music and poetry. Dick gave him a “knock-down” to Mary Ellen, and Holtzer also became a constant visitor. The fact that it is bad policy to introduce one's best friend to one's best girl can be proved either by cold reasoning or by experience. Carter tried experience. You see, he would acknowledge to no emotional interest in Mary Ellen when questioned by Holtzer—he scouted the idea—so Holtzer wasn't to blame.

As for Mary Ellen, Cupid had pounded her heart into a jelly. She was tender to Dick's friend to a degree that put the none too modest German in possession of facts that were not so. All the overflow of regard

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he received as Dick's friend he attributed to his own personal charms, and, unlike Carter, he didn't hesitate to talk about it. It was Carter's pleasant duty to listen to Holtzer's joyful expounding of the reasons why the latter felt he had made a hit with Mary Ellen, and not only to listen, but to indorse. It shows the stuff Fireman Carter was made of to tell that he stood this vicious compound of insult and injury with a tranquil face. The serpent had entered Eden, and utilized Adam to support his position, but Adam smiled and took his medicine like a man.

Several times he intended to question Mary Ellen concerning Holtzer, yet when in her presence a certain feeling of surety and a very big slice of pride forbade it.

In the meantime he was regaled with Mary Ellen, per Holtzer, until violent thoughts entered his mind.

Dick yearned for the first time in his life to

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do something heroic. He sweated to stand out the one man of the day; to be held up to the public gaze on the powerful pen of the reporter. He wanted to swagger into Mary Ellen's little parlor covered and rustling with metaphorical wreaths, and with an actual disk of engraved metal on his broad chest, and thus extinguish Holtzer beyond doubt—not Carter's doubt, nor Mary Ellen's doubt, but Holtzer's doubt.

In this frame of mind he went to sleep one night, to be awakened in the early hours of the morning by a singular prescience born of long experience, which told him the gong was about to ring. For years the alarm had not wakened Dick. No matter how deep his slumber, he was always alert and strained to catch the first note of it.

The metallic cry for help vibrated through the engine-house. It threw each inmate into action, like an electric shock. The dark win-

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ter morning was savagely cold, with a wind like an auger. The heroic cord was busted. "Damn the luck!" cried Dick as he took the pole; and it was no solo.

The two most picturesque feats of civilization are the handling of a field-piece and the charge of a fire-engine. Very fine was the old-time chariot race, but what was the driver's risk on the smooth hippodrome track compared to that of the man who guides a fire-engine through city streets? The chariot driver could, at least, see what was before him; the man who holds the lines on an engine little knows what's around the corner. But it's a tale told too often already. A rush, a clamor of hoofs, a roar, and they were rattling over the pavement, the stream of sparks from the engine stack and the constant lightnings from the horses' shoes making one think of the old adage of fighting fire with fire.

"I suppose," said Dick, clinging tightly

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with one hand and waving the other in wild circles as he got into his coat—"I suppose some old lady has left the cat to play with the lamp."

"Yah," assented Holtzer, "or else some Mick has taken his pipe to bed with him."

Then they cursed the old lady and the Mick or whoever it might be.

"The worst of it is that I'm scart now," confided Holtzer. "I didn't ust to care much, except for the trouble, but now, when I think of Mary Ellen, I hate to go shinning around taking chances."

General Bonaparte, the worst-mannered conqueror in history, said that no man was courageous at three o'clock in the morning, an unmerited slight to the vanity of his soldiery. However it may be as to courage, certainly no man was ever philosophical when hauled from his bed at that hour. It was in Fireman Carter's mind that a small movement of

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his foot would put his erstwhile friend in violent contact with the cold world below. However, civilization isn't impotent. He restrained the action and replied: "You want to leave your girl at home—fires is no place for 'em."

"You don't understand," retorted Holtzer, full of sentiment. "You can't get away from it. It ain't thinking what's going to happen to *me*, so much, as thinking how Mary Ellen will feel about it when she hears."

"You're awful dead certain on that part of it," said Dick, and now he hated his friend. The last vestige of humor had left the theme. "Perhaps she won't care a cuss—how do you know?"

Holtzer started to answer, while Dick listened, his hands clenched tight—maybe there was something he didn't know about?

There was no more time for conversation.

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As they turned the corner they saw their destination, an eight-storied storage warehouse, standing alone, with boarded vacant lots at each side of it.

The watchman was there with the keys; it was he who had turned in the alarm. Without delay the firemen, hauling the hose up after them, swarmed to the roof where the flames were beginning to curl.

The fire was in the back of the upper story. While some fought it on that level, the others cut holes through the roof and turned the streams down upon it.

The hose leaked and slippery ponds formed in an instant where the water fell. The wind sawed into one's marrow in this utterly exposed position.

A head popped up and called off all the men but Holtzer and Dick.

"You fellers hold her down as best you

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can!" it shouted. "Keep a watch and don't let it break through—come on, the rest of yer!"

They worked in silence on Dick's part, and with a continued rattle of what Mary Ellen would think of this from Holtzer. It wrought harder and harder on his companion's nerves, this prattle—indeed, such waves of rage came over him that he entirely forgot where he was.

Meanwhile the crowd below—gathered in strong numbers in spite of the weather and the hour—were wondering what must be the thoughts of those men standing over a furnace, a hundred feet from the ground. What could either man think of but the danger? The danger of one's daily work? There is no such thing.

This was a commonplace fire which soon would be well in hand. It had not in the least turned the current of the thoughts of the

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two men aloft who formed the spectacle, while the household gods below made burnt-offerings of themselves. Then, as if to show that no fire is commonplace, a giant flare sprang from the corner of the building, poised in the air for a moment, then, overthrown by the wind, toppled toward the firemen. They leaped back—one to safety; the other, slipping on a treacherous skin of ice, to fight vainly for his balance for a second, and then to plunge down the mansard roof, speeding for that hard ground so far away. It was a trained man who fell, though. He turned as he went, instinctively gripping with his hands, and they caught—the edge of the cornice—an ice-covered edge to which they clung miraculously, while his body dangled in the wind.

So Dick, safe, looked down at Holtzer, for whom it was a question of seconds, while the roar of pity from the crowd buzzed in his ears.

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He might well have done nothing. No man could go down the steep slant unsupported. Nothing was to be seen of Holtzer but his hands, lighted by the flames; hands that could not clench even, as to grip would be to force loose, but which could only make stiff angles of themselves. It would all be over in ten heart-beats, for to take it as we are doing is like examining the moving pictures one by one at leisure, instead of as they live upon the screen.

Then Dick moved. He ripped off his coat, soaked the arm of it in the hose stream, pressed it to the roof, where it froze fast on touching, and slid down his improvised cloth ladder, held only by the strength of the ice-film that bound the sleeve to the tin.

Before his frantic fellow-firemen below could scale the fence with the jumping-sheet he had hold of Holtzer's wrist with one strong hand. The strain was terrible; he felt the

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coat yield with a soft, tearing sound, his head spun, yet somehow he managed it, and there they stood on the cornice together.

Then, while the crowd that had been as silent as death cracked their throats with applause, Dick spoke to Holtzer on a private matter.

It so happened that a young man who did "space" for a morning paper lived on the top floor of the flat-house opposite, and saw the whole thing through an opera-glass. He hustled into his clothes and got down to the street, working a talk out of Dick by the plea that he needed the money.

The reporter was delighted. The incident had the two elements of daring and mother-wit that can be made into the long story of profit.

"How did you ever come to think of using your coat like that?" he asked.

"Why, a feller I knew when I was a kid in

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the country saved himself from drowning that way," replied Carter. "He fell through the ice miles from anybody, and if he hadn't froze the end of his muffler fast, and so anchored himself, he'd 'a' been a gone gosling all right. That thing come back to me on the minute."

That is why the first thing Fireman Carter saw in his morning paper was his own name. He started guiltily at the sight and threw the sheet away. No maiden caught *en déshabillé* could have been more abashed; and, as the maiden afterward might wonder how she *did* look—was it so *very* awful?—so did Dick. He picked the paper up again stealthily and read all about it, lost in wonder at the end. To the applause that came his way he turned an inattentive ear, thus giving further life to the old idea that the bravest are always the most modest, which looks like a double superlative and is no more true than that they are

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always the fattest, or anything else. The bravest are usually the most courageous, and there ends deduction. Dick was busy with his own thoughts—something troubled him. A strange thing was the fact that though his friend Holtzer scrupulously gave him every credit he did not seek his society.

The frown of hard thinking was on Dick's brow all day. At night he asked for a few hours off and got them.

Mary Ellen met him at the door. "Oh, Dick!" she cried and gulped. "Ain't you just grand, though!" she said, and looked at him with beatified gray eyes.

Here was golden opportunity. The proper play for Fireman Carter was to reach out his strong arms and gather Mary Ellen then and there, but he did nothing of the sort. He seemed distraught and worried.

To her anxiety, he seated himself on the sofa and fumbled his hat.

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"You ain't mad at me, are you, Dick?" she asked tremulously.

"Holtzer been here?" bruskiy interrupted her visitor with no apparent relevance.

"Yes," said Mary Ellen.

"What did you tell him?"

"I—I—I told him 'No.'"

Fireman Carter passed his hand over his forehead, then drew out a newspaper, saying: "You've read this, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"More especially this?" reading aloud the most laudatory paragraph.

Mary Ellen was not feazed by such flagrant egotism.

"Beautiful!" she said dreamily. "Just beautiful!"

"Beautiful!" yelled Fireman Carter, leaping to his feet. The scorn in his voice could not be rendered by a phonograph. Poor man! He was about to knock the light out of those

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gray eyes, to spoil his own image, and nothing is so trying to a man's temper.

"Hunh!" he continued. "Shows just about how much intelligence you got—beautiful! It's a—lie—it's fuzzy-water gas—there ain't nothing to it at all—d'ye understand that?"

This last came out so fiercely that Mary Ellen faltered as she said she did.

"All right," said Fireman Carter. "Now, I want to tell you just one thing: I ain't the man to back-cap no man, when I come to get cooled down—not with a girl nor nothing else." He tapped his knee with a perpendicular forefinger. "Not with a girl nor nothing!" he repeated. "Understand that?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now I'm going to tell you the God's truth. Holtzer'd been making his cracks about how he only had to speak and you'd fall on his neck, until he had me so sore I ached wherever m' clothes touched me. So,

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when I see him coasting down the roof, the one thing in my mind was that he'd go feeling sure that he was the star with you. I couldn't stand that. No, sir! I couldn't; so down I goes after him. When I snaked him up on the roof I tells him, 'Cuss your thanks! I want this much out of you, you flappy-footed slob—you go to Mary Ellen to-day and see whether she'll take you or not—I'll bet you three months' pay agin a cigaroot you get turned down.' Now, I was within my rights there—but"—Fireman Carter stopped, wiped his hands on his handkerchief, wiped his forehead, blew his nose and swallowed hard. "But," he continued bravely, "if all the yawp that pup of a newspaper kid got rid of has had anything to do with changing results, I don't care for any of the pie. There wasn't no 'laying down his life for another' nor anything of the kind in the whole play. It was just

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like I'm telling you. Well, that's all. I—I thought you might like to hear about it."

There was a lamentable change in the strong voice at the last words. The speaker stared at the door and drummed on his cap until the silence became unendurable, then he raised his eyes slowly, as a condemned man might to the gallows.

There sat Mary Ellen, drinking him in, still beatified. The meekest man who ever esteemed himself poor relation to the worm that squirmeth could not have mistaken the meaning of that glance. It was simply adoration.

He straightened up and stared at her openmouthed.

"I'll be durned if I believe she's heard one word I said!" thought Fireman Carter.