

PATRICK'S DECISION

BY

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BIG, jovial, reckless "Devil" Morgan lay in state upon his cot in the dormitory upstairs, and Seventy-seven's crew mourned unaffectedly.

Silence pervaded the engine-house as it had not since a pusillanimous mayer had long ago insulted the courage and spirit of the crew by calling them names behind their backs, and denying it weakly when the reckoning came. No man could speak except of poor Tom and his need, and of the heroism with which he went to his fate.

Answering an alarm the evening before, when the streets were a glare of ice, and 77's rubber-tired wheels skidded and slipped upon the cobbles between the Elevated pillars on the Avenue beside the engine-house, Tom had seen his duty and done it like a man. Only a few blocks away, when the three splendid grays were plunging along at full stride, their necks tight in the straining collars and the engine lunging along behind with shrieking whistle and hissing valves, the most dreadful sight a fireman can see appeared to Morgan.

Called "Devil" in affectionate token of his disregard for danger in a thousand desperate encounters, and for his fire-loving qualities, Tom leaned far forward from his seat, bareheaded and bareheaded, talking to Jenny and Bill and Smut. They heard and answered, in true fashion, with a burst of speed and power that whipped the three-ton monster behind them about like a toy. Tom was enjoying it, forgetful of freezing drizzle and the danger of skidding, when a young girl stopped squarely in front of the grays and stepped.

An instant she hung in the wind—frantically scrambled to get back—went down with a living scream that echoed above the roar of engine and passing Elevated train. Not an instant did "Devil" hesitate. Throwing his full weight on the off rein, he sent the grays crashing into the nearest pillar.

Hissing, shrieking 77 shivered with the impact and toppled over on her side. The grays screamed in equine terror, fell, struggled. But Morgan was picked up by sliding men whose whiskers were grizzled with ice and tears, and taken back hurriedly to his cot. The doctor shook his head and pulled up the sheet. Silence fell upon the engine-house, and 77's men missed their first fire in years.

The coroner came and went in silence, and the crew sat stolidly about, dreading to utter a word, until Patrick, young, red-headed, blue-eyed Patrick, could stand the strain no longer.

"He hadn't oughta done it!" he cried vehemently. "He hadn't oughta done it!"

The white-headed old Captain looked at him bitterly, and snarled: "Shut up! Tom was a better man'n anybody here. He had guts. You'll have 'em, too, when your turn comes. Don't go sayin' he hadn't oughta done it!"

ever taught me anythin'. He shown me the difference between bein' a damn fool an' keepin' cool. I can't forget it. He taught me how to drive. An' now—my God, look at him!"

He broke down again and snivelled openly: his mates growled their sympathy. This was no child's sentimental silliness;

law," persisted Patrick, stubbornly, "it's wrong for a man who can do good to the community to give his life for a kid that's in a place where it ain't got no business. Can the kid save lives? Can he save prop'ty? Can he swing three big horses, or hold a nozzle against a blazin' tenement, w'ile his mates is on the scalin' ladders?"

Dagos trapped on the upper floors, crazy with fear. How'd they manage to get out before 63 could get up from her house? Wouldn't a lot o' them be burnt or smothered w'ile old 77 was lyin' in the road useless?"

The men had not taken that view of the matter, and some of them nodded approvingly, as they saw the crowded picture

year's raise, she should move far up town and out of the danger zone. She knew he was right, but the golden head had sobbed upon his blue shoulder unrestrainedly, as they prayed he might never have to do his duty.

There seemed small chance of it as the fall wore away and winter came on, stern and uncompromising, bringing slowly with

On the footboard behind, the austere Captain had seen—77 shrieked and wailed and bellowed. The child stood stock-still, petrified with terror. The grays saw nothing, heard only the whistle screaming to them for more speed.

Patrick had not seen it like this. His theory had presented itself for test. If he swerved a foot to the right, there were the pillars—iron. If he kept on, he must crush the child—flesh. Which should it be? Behind him the Captain was cursing foamily.

"Turn out! Turn out!" he yelled through the shattering din of the whistle's wild terror. "Turn out! Quick! For God's sake, turn!" yelled the black, hazy dots in the trolley car windows.

Red-headed, fresh-faced, blue-eyed Patrick ceased to be a boy at that instant. His face blanched to gray. "Devil" Morgan's sad brown eyes peered at him remorselessly out of the wild past.

It was an agonizing moment of indecision. He had never supposed it would be like this. His duty to his helpless mates, to the public, to himself, swept by in lightning review. The thought of the fire far ahead shot after them. His duty—he squared himself, the powerful muscles in his shoulders and arms tightened.

Two thoughts, two distinct sensations raced parallel in his whirling brain. He knew how he should decide—yet he hesitated. The agony unnerved him. Only a second more remained. Every instant the thundering team came nearer the motionless figure of the child before him.

Patrick was beyond reason; his actions had resolved themselves mercifully into the primitive. Surging up in him at the last yard of distance, just as the child found tongue in a heart-rending cry of more than human despair, came the intuitive spirit of Man.

Once more 77, hissing and shrieking and belching fire, hurled herself into the iron—passed by the flesh.

It was his profane, fire-scarred, kindly old martinet of a Captain who stood fidgeting with his clumsy helmet at the white bedside as Patrick opened his eyes some hours later in the Mercy Hospital. The veteran's face was anxious, his bristling mustache thrusting out hedge-like as he bent above the still figure on the cot.

Patrick stared at him from an immeasurable distance, through a veil of haze that softened and blurred the familiar features.

"Wha—? What happened?" he whispered weakly, wincing at the pain his cracked ribs shot through him. "Back-draught . . . ?"

"Sh, now—you mustn't talk. Everything's all right," the nurse replied. And the interne, who had patched him up with swift skill, added: "Only a couple of cracked ribs, my man. You'll be back on the job in a day or so."

"But what happened—floor go down?" persisted the wounded fireman in feeble petulance. "I don't understand."

"Course you don't, lad," broke in the Captain grimly. "Nobody does—but they all do it, just the same. I'm proud o' ye!"

Patrick sighed his annoyance and frowned. It was all a puzzle. He knew he was in the hospital—that much was clear. But how or why, he could not imagine. Memory ran back to the morning, to afternoon, to the little flat in Harlem—and ceased. Why couldn't they be decent and tell him?

The surgeon saw his trouble and whispered to the Captain: "It may do 'im good; you had better explain. This suspense isn't doing him good now. Tell him."

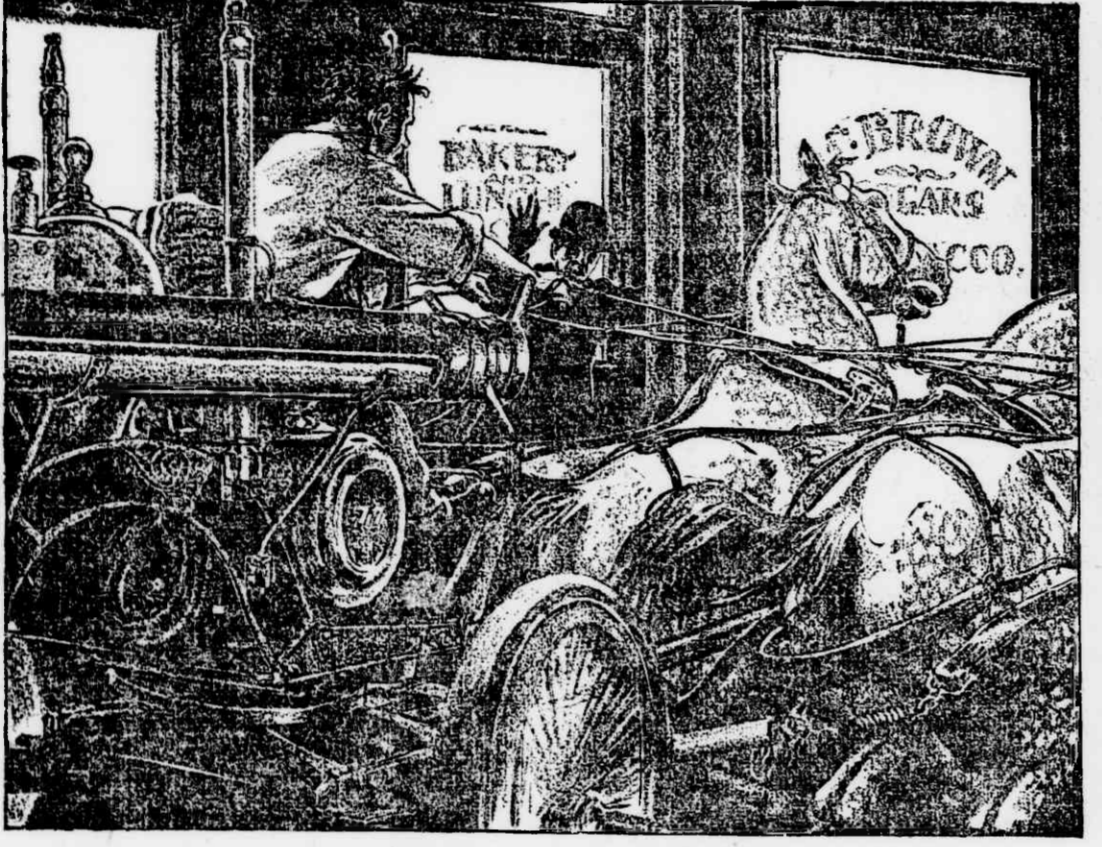
The veteran nodded, and told him, bit by bit, helping out his paralyzed memory with a rapid patchwork of narrative that brought intelligence back into the blank eyes. When he had finished, and the three stood quietly by the bedside, Patrick closed his eyes, his face set rigidly in lines whose pain was not mere agony of the body. The watchers stepped a little closer. Slowly he looked out at them again, and his lips moved. They bent forward.

"I didn't understand when I said I wouldn't do it," he muttered, in scarcely audible accents. And after a pause for the breath, whose coming and going tortured him but faintly in comparison with his thoughts: "My God! Suppose it had been one o' my kids . . . ?"

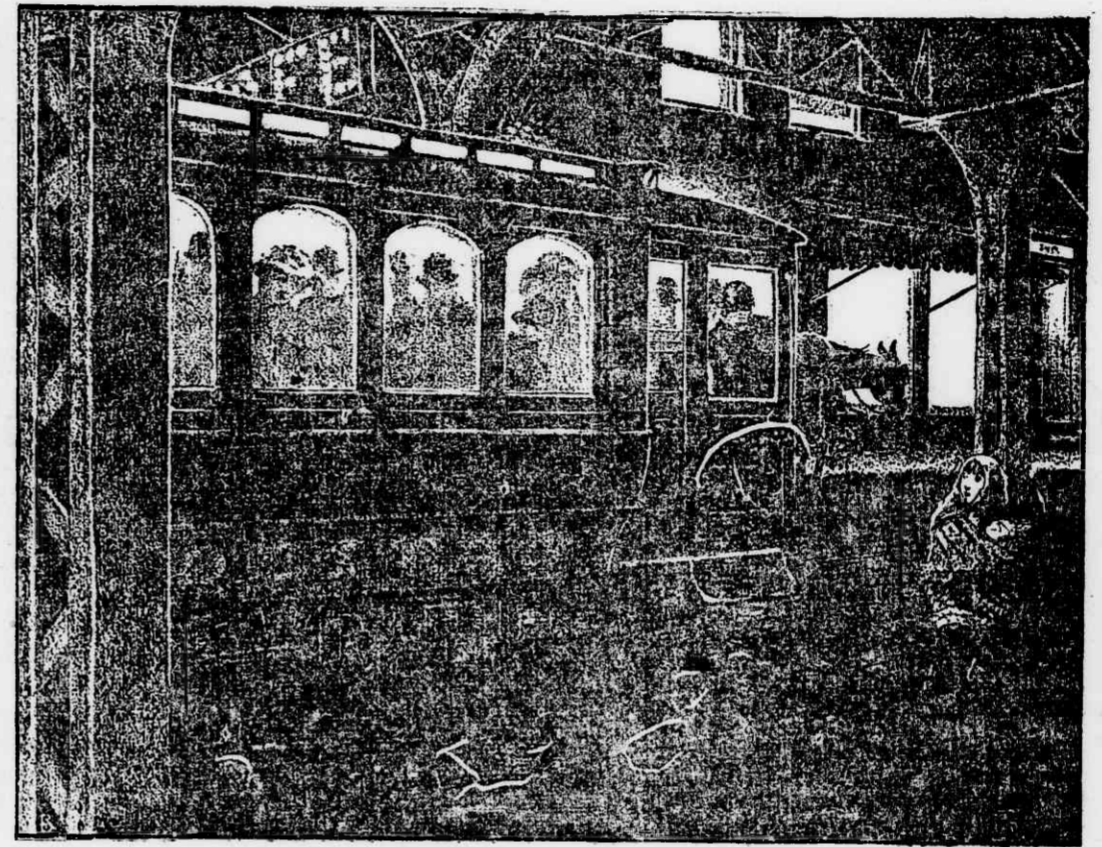
"I knew, lad! I knew!" exclaimed the Captain, bending down and pushing something indistinct into the range of his vision. "I knew ye was a man, boy. Here's the kid . . ."

Patrick opened his eyes again languidly, too exhausted to wish for a sight of the life he had saved—sat bolt upright, regardless of pain and plaster cast—

"Marv! My Mary—God!"



FEAR, SUCH AS HE HAD NEVER KNOWN BEFORE, GRIPPED HIM ABOUT THE THROAT



FROM BEHIND THE CAR STEPPED A CHILD—A GIRL-CHILD

Patrick had proven his right to weep. Even the hard-headed Captain, whose lips opened more frequently to undam a flood of turgid objurgation than for any other purpose, whimpered a little as he frowned over his desk.

Patrick took up his argument again. "Tom, he told me he'd get it that way some night. He knew it would be at night. Told me so; but he wasn't scared of it on a first alarm. Said it'd come on a second or third; downtown, not up."

"But he said it was wrong. I know it."

"Say, you—" broke in the Captain curtly, with more show of wrath than was really necessary, to conceal his own emotion.

"Hol' on, Cap. It's in my system. I got to git it out. Lemme alone," Patrick snuffled, without looking at him. "He was like my own brother, on'y older. I wouldn't be drivin' 77 now on'y for him. An', I say it's all wrong—wrong! W'y should a man kill himself an' mangle up his hosses to save a kid that walks out into the street? My God, boys, ye can hear old 77 for blocks! W'y'd anybody walk out into the street in front of a noise like she makes? Ain't that criminal carelessness? Is the driver to blame for runnin' down any fool like that?"

"Cut it out, Patrick. Don't call no hard names. Ye prob'ly run out in front o' the engines yerself w'en ye was a kid, many a time. They can't help it. Mebbe some o' them ain't never been taught nothin', an' mebbe some o' them don't hear good."

The Captain was holding the match he had raised to light his pipe at arm's length, watching it scorch his fingers without feeling it. "No, sir; a man's a man, an' he's just got to look out for them that can't take care o' themselves. Remember that!"

"W'y don't they make a law about it?" inquired the Lieutenant, slowly, as the idea took vague shape in his rather dull wits. "I'd think they c'd make it a misdemeanor to interfere with th' engines that way."

"Is a law!" retorted the Captain gruffly, feeling the smart of the match. "But no law's any good at a time like that. Think a man's going to stop an' holler for a cop to come an' pull the kid off the track, w'en he's got just time enough to swing his team or commit homicide?"

"Don't make no difference, law or no

"Aw, shut up!" blustered the Captain. "Don't be a fool!"

"Well, s'pose it happens to be a girl, then, like it was for poor Tom. How about that? Mebbe the boy could grow up an' be a fireman or a cop. But how about the girl? How could she ever do the world any good like we can?"

"She could give birth to a dozen firemen," suggested one of the elder men, whose ideas of families seemed commensurate with the importance of the profession.

"Mebbe, if she got married. But don't you fellers know there's four times as many women as th' is men in New York right now? What show has three girls out o' four got to git married an' have kids?—tell me that!"

The Lieutenant interrupted more slowly, more embarrassed than before. "Now, boy, you're married yourself, an' got kids. S'posin' it was one o' them . . ."

The crew sat breathless an instant. This was something they had not thought of. What could the answer be? What could a theory like Patrick's do in the face of such a blow but collapse? Yet they had reckoned without their man. The recruit who had single-handed fought down the fire among the chlorate barrels in a smoke-filled basement, when the building overhead was a furnace and the entire crew had deserted him, was not the type of man to back away from anything. He answered promptly.

"It couldn't be, boys," was the proud reply. "My family don't live near the engine-house for nothin'. I've learned them kids to keep out o' the way. They're taught, they are, both o' them. Mary's old enough to take care o' Tommy. But he's old enough to mind, too. They won't never trouble us."

"Yes; but s'posin' they did happen to forget or somethin'?" persisted his superior, doggedly determined to pin him down to an answer that could leave no doubt. "W'at could you do then but smash things, like Morgan done?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't. If my kids break the law, they got to suffer. I've done my best. I can't do no more than that. If they get in 77's way, they got to get out of it. I'd try to get past if I could. But I wouldn't smash up no hosses or engine," was the Spartan declaration.

"Ye'd kill yer own flesh an' blood!" gasped the Captain, too amazed at the heroism he did not comprehend to be profane. "Ye'd be a killer!"

"Yes," Patrick answered soberly. "If I had to, I would. It sounds awful, but just stop an' think. S'posin' I wrecked her w'ile we was going to somethin' real bad, like one o' these here Ginny tenement fires, an' there was a couple o' hundred poor

Patrick had drawn so simply. But the Captain was obdurate.

"W'at the hell's a lot o' Ginny's anyway, compared with yer own kids? I'll send you down to th' surgeon for examination!" he exclaimed angrily.

"All right, sir, send me if you like, but I'm as right as any man here. If you don't like the idea o' Dagos, w'y, take that big double-decker full o' Jews an' Irishmen three blocks from here, just off'n the Avenue. Ain't some o' them people worth savin'?"

The discussion waxed bitter, the dead hero on his cot forgotten as his fellows wrangled. Patrick's final clincher that "God's always been good with babies, an' the man that's once had 'em can usually get more, but ye can't always be sure o' replacin' a feller like Morgan," still further disquieting them.

But at last the furious Captain shouted all argument and resistance by crushing: "I'm in command here—I'm responsible for every mother's son of a gun of ye! I say my driver's got to be a man an' wreck us, if a kid or a woman gits in the way. Are ye goin' to obey orders, or'll I have to send ye down to Headquarters for insubordination?"

The young man did not answer, but bowed his head, though the rebellious glint in his blue eyes spelled disobedience, even at the risk of what he held most dear.

The days passed in the usual routine and no accident marred 77's record, though the superstitious still expected the other two disasters that must inevitably come to fill out the run of bad luck that always delivered its blows by threes. They dreaded the strident voice of the brazen alarm gong. Even the grays, a stranger now filling poor Smut's place between the parallel shafts, sprang to their work with expanded nostrils and nervous pawings that told of their own sense of impending trouble. Yet it did not come. Weeks passed, one with a terrific battle through which 77's men passed victorious and unscathed to greater glory than ever, and gradually the strain of expectancy wore away and was forgotten.

Morgan became only a name, a part of the heroic records of the Department, a fabled knight, whose deeds were good to inspire young recruits when their spirits lagged, or the effortless routine of alarmless days dragged heavily. Patrick and his commanding officer buried the hatchet, and the Captain, proud of the younger man's record and of his derring with the ribbons, hoped he had forgotten all that weird nonsense and would acquit himself as became a member of the stoutest-hearted engineering in the whole city.

But Patrick had not forgotten, had not changed. He and terrified Molly had talked it over more than once, at home in his off hours. It was the specter haunting them both, and Patrick had promised her huskily that, as soon as he got the next

year's raise, she should move far up town and out of the danger zone. She knew he was right, but the golden head had sobbed upon his blue shoulder unrestrainedly, as they prayed he might never have to do his duty.

And so Patrick came whistling back to 77's house, contented and happy, full of the anticipated joys of seeing his hopes fulfilled. Taking off his best coat and folding it away in his locker, he was getting into his working clothes when the huge gong below began to hammer out its furious appeal to speed and courage and daring. It drowned his cheery whistle with its tumultuous clangor, shot him across to the sliding pole and hurled him up into his seat upon the apparatus as the great grays jumped in their harness, the doors rolled back and 77, smoking and gurgling with the fire and water in her bowels, rumbled out into the street.

The avenue was clear. Urging on his team with word and rein, leaning forward until the heavy strap about his waist held his weight, Patrick peered ahead through the crisp moonlight that filtered down to bar the trolley tracks with light and shadow. He had had no time for gloves, and the bitter air nipped his hands until the fingers tingled with the frost and the reins left red and white streaks across their backs. But he felt the exhilaration of speed and power; his voice trembled with delight and the importance of his mission.

How many poor devils might not be in dire peril, awaiting the help he was thundering toward them? Under him 77 trembled and quivered, eager with the tense eagerness of a leashed hound. The wind swept under her gratebars and sucked from her funnel a crimson shower that spattered back from the ties of the Elevated; her whistle shrieked wild alarm; her trail gloved orange and scarlet with bits of burning coal dropped behind for the wind to sport with.

Suddenly the new horse in the center shielded violently at a blown bit of paper, and Patrick spoke to him sharply, glancing down at the flying cobbles with a start of nervousness, as he recognized the corner where Morgan had gone down a year before. Before him in the near distance a crowded trolley car paused, its lighted windows black with eager heads strained to see the powerful apparatus shoot past on the gallop.

Patrick tightened his grip. His heart contracted. Fear, such as he had never known before, gripped him about the throat, blinded his eyes.

From behind the car stepped a child—a girl-child.

Out of the driver's lips leaped a frantic, surging oath. His hands unconsciously heaved on the reins. But the grays were out of control, mad with the fire-fury, knowing only their one duty—to gallop, and gallop, and gallop.

Patrick opened his eyes again languidly, too exhausted to wish for a sight of the life he had saved—sat bolt upright, regardless of pain and plaster cast—