An Adventure of Truck Six

By Ray Stannard Baker

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The Wellington hotel was burned on the 10th of April. On the following morning the papers contained columns of description, but the adventure of Lieut. Swenson and his men received only a few paragraphs. A somewhat more extended account was given by the "citizen," Harrison, two days later in the hospital. When I asked Swenson about it, he only said: "The Marshal told me to go up, an' I went up. She got too hot, an' I came down."

Geiger and Ford, however, finally gave me the details, though piecemeal and somewhat shamefacedly.

It was a few minutes past 5 o'clock in the afternoon when the cook of the Wellington hotel rushed up from the basement and pulled the knob of the red fire alarm box back of the clerk's desk. In the laundry behind the kitchen the flames were spreading along the walls and reaching out of the windows and doors. Five minutes later they had found the wooden elevator shaft, where they leaped with a roar to the top of the building and blazed out over the roof like a smoky, red torch.

The Wellington hotel stood at the corner of Cass avenue and Thirty-first street, in a comfortable residence district of the city. It was of brick, five stories high, and built in the form of a big L, with a roomy, whitewashed court in the angle at the rear. Adjoining it in Cass avenue stood a thin frame building, two stories high, occupied on the first floor by a dealer in hats and gloves, with a photograph gallery overhead.

Fire Marshal Collins saw at a glance that the Thirty-first street L was doomed. The fire leaped from every window in its five stories. There was only one thing to do—save as much as possible of the front L and prevent the fire from spreading to the other buildings of the block. In half a minute Collins had disposed his forces. Three streams of water drove in the windows of the upper floor near the corner of the hotel; three companies closed in at the rear along the alleyway, and truck No. 6, Swenson, lieutenant, wheeled up close to the curbstone and ran a Bangor ladder to the roof of the photograph gallery. The ladder swayed and dipped like a poplar pole and then rested lightly against the cornice. Swenson and his men scrambled up with their lanterns and axes. Captain Hill of engine No. 14 and four of his company followed with a lead of hose. From the top of the gallery Swenson raised another ladder until it tipped the fourth story window. From this point a short scaling ladder was pushed up and hooked to the stone ledge of the window on the fifth floor. Swenson drove in the sashes, frame and all, and a moment later they dragged the hose down the carpeted hall and into a room that opened on the court. From the window they could command the other L. Hill signaled for water, and they dropped a hundred-pound stream into the thick of the fire.

After establishing this lead Swenson, with Kirk, his axman, and two truckmen, Geiger and Ford, went down the hall to find a suitable place for the second hose line which No. 4 was dragging up the ladders. At a turn of the passageway they heard a voice shouting.

Geiger went ahead with his lighted lantern. Kirk and Ford shouted again and again, but there was no reply. The smoke was fast becoming unendurable, even to a seasoned fireman, and they turned and ran back, opening the doors and peering into the smoky interiors of the rooms as they passed. Presently Swenson stumbled and all but fell over something in the hallway. Geiger held his lantern. A man on his hands and knees, with a handkerchief over his mouth, was crawling on the floor.

"Where's the stairway?" he mumbled.

Swenson lifted him up and guided him down the hall. On nearing the window at which they had entered, they were startled to see the hose line crawling rapidly down the hall floor and wriggling out of the window like some long snake. The brass nozzle head rang sharply on the stone ledge and was gone. The room where the pipemen had been at work was vacant and upon looking out of the hall window Swenson saw the flames bursting up from the photograph gallery, the flimsy roof of which curled before them as if it was made of pasteboard. The ladder reaching to the fourth floor was already down. In the street below Swenson saw Hill and his men running to safety across the street. They had stayed a moment too long. There was no escape from that side of the building.

At Swenson's order, Kirk and Ford drew up the scaling ladder that hung from the window, and they all groped their way through the smoke, which was now driving through the hallway in dense, choking currents. Swenson opened a door leading into one of the rooms which faced the Cass avenue front of the building. Here he threw up the window and looked out. The street pavement was mapped with a criss-cross of hose lines. At the corner, No. 8's engine was squealing frantically for coal. A dense knot of firemen was steadying a hose nozzle on the sidewalk opposite. The crowds had been choked back until they stood wedged deep and dark around the further corner.

Swenson saw Collins wave his hand to the men of truck No. 2 and point upward. He saw them start with their ladders, and then of a sudden, the whole building shook and a dense cloud of smoke belched from the basement below and filled the street. And Swenson knew that the building directly under him was on fire. In four or five minutes at the most the floors would go down.

To any one but a fireman there would have been no way of escape. But Swenson stood two inches over six feet in his stockings, and he was cool with the experience of fifteen years of fires. His plan was formed instantly.

Kirk drove out the window sashes with a single blow of his ax. Swenson seized the ladder, and ran it outside, hooks up. Then he stood on the stone ledge; Geiger and Ford seized his belt, one on each side; and he leaned far out as if to jump. Carefully the ladder was lifted toward the edge of the roof, the iron cornice of which extended some distance over the street. For a moment he swayed and strained. The hooks rasped on the wall, but they would not reach to the top. The ladder was too heavy; in that cramped position Swenson could not raise it to its full height.

"No use," said Ford, despondently.

After a moment's consultation with the other men, Swenson formed another plan. Placing the foot of the ladder firmly on the outside window ledge, he lifted its top in air. Then he and Geiger each took firm hold of it with one hand, gripping the other around the inside casing of the window, Kirk, who was the lightest of the number, stepped upon the window sill. He had kicked off his boots and thrown aside his helmet. He was white to the lips.

"Don't look down," said Swenson.

Kirk climbed up the ladder until he was posed in mid air, sixty feet sheer above the stone sidewalk. At the end of the ladder he paused and looked around.

"Go on," shouted Swenson.

Kirk went up another step and released his arms, standing on the second round from the top. Slowly Swenson and Geiger drew the ladder closer to the wall. Kirk swayed and swung like a pole-balancer. Then he reached for the top of the building. It was still above him. He stepped from the second rung to the bare top of the ladder and balanced dizzily, with one hand resting lightly on the wall. In that moment he heard the roaring of the fire and the squelching of the water through the windows below him, but he saw only the gay scaled edge of the cornice. He knew that if he did not go up, he would go down sixty feet to the flagging below.

Slowly he raised up. His fingers slipped just over the edge of the cornice. He drew himself up and rolled over on the gravel roof.

"Now, Ford," said Swenson.

Ford had not looked when Kirk climbed. Such things are not good to see. He ran up the ladder rapidly. It was again drawn in, and when Ford reached the top Kirk, reaching over, seized his wrists and helped him up. As he disappeared from view, Harrison, the citizen whom they had saved, rushed wildly forward.

"You're going to leave me," he shouted; "you're going to let me burn up."

"No, we're not," growled Swenson; "it's your turn next."

At that Harrison, who had thrown off his coat and shoes, sprung up on the window sill. Then he looked down. The smoke from below was now seamed with streaks of fire. It was a long way down to the street. The ladder looked frail and unsteady. He sprang back and darted half way across the room.

"I can't do it," he said.

"Steady the ladder," Swenson said to Geiger.

Then he seized Harrison by the collar and shook him as if he had been a poodle dog. After that he cuffed him soundly, first on one side of the head and then on the other.

"Get up there or I'll pitch you into the street," he cried.

Harrison climbed. At the top of the ladder he looked up. Kirk and Ford were reaching down to him. He went one round higher.

Harrison raised himself slowly and lifted his hands. Just as he felt Kirk's fingers he gave way and swayed against the wall. Kirk gripped him hard. For a moment he dangled helplessly. Then both men reached his arm and pulled him up.

"Now, Geiger," said Swenson.

"You can't hold the ladder," said Geiger.

"I can," answered the big Swede.

They stood still a moment. They heard the ominous crunching of the fire under them and they knew that it soon would knock at the door. Geiger climbed. Swenson strained hard with both feet braced under the window sill. He had promised to shout when he could no longer hold the ladder. When Geiger was half-way up he shouted. Then he felt the ladder lighten suddenly and he saw Geiger's body swing off into the air. For a moment he went sick at the sight; then he saw Kirk and Ford pulling him up on their belts.

All this had taken place in less than three minutes. The whole building was burning now and the air was full of cinders. Swenson could not see the street pavement, but he caught glimpses of the white rods of water driving into the windows below him.

"Straighten up—steady now," said Kirk calmly.

Swenson stood on the stone ledge with one hand gripped inside of the window casing. Then he lifted the ladder and threw it up round by round with his right hand, pausing between each hitch to be sure of the balance. So much for the fire drill. When it was nearly up he strained hard, and Kirk and Ford, who had buckled their belts together at the end, drew it up, and fitted it firmly over the cornice edge. Swenson swung out on the lower end of it, scrambled to the top, hand over hand, and rolled out on the roof.

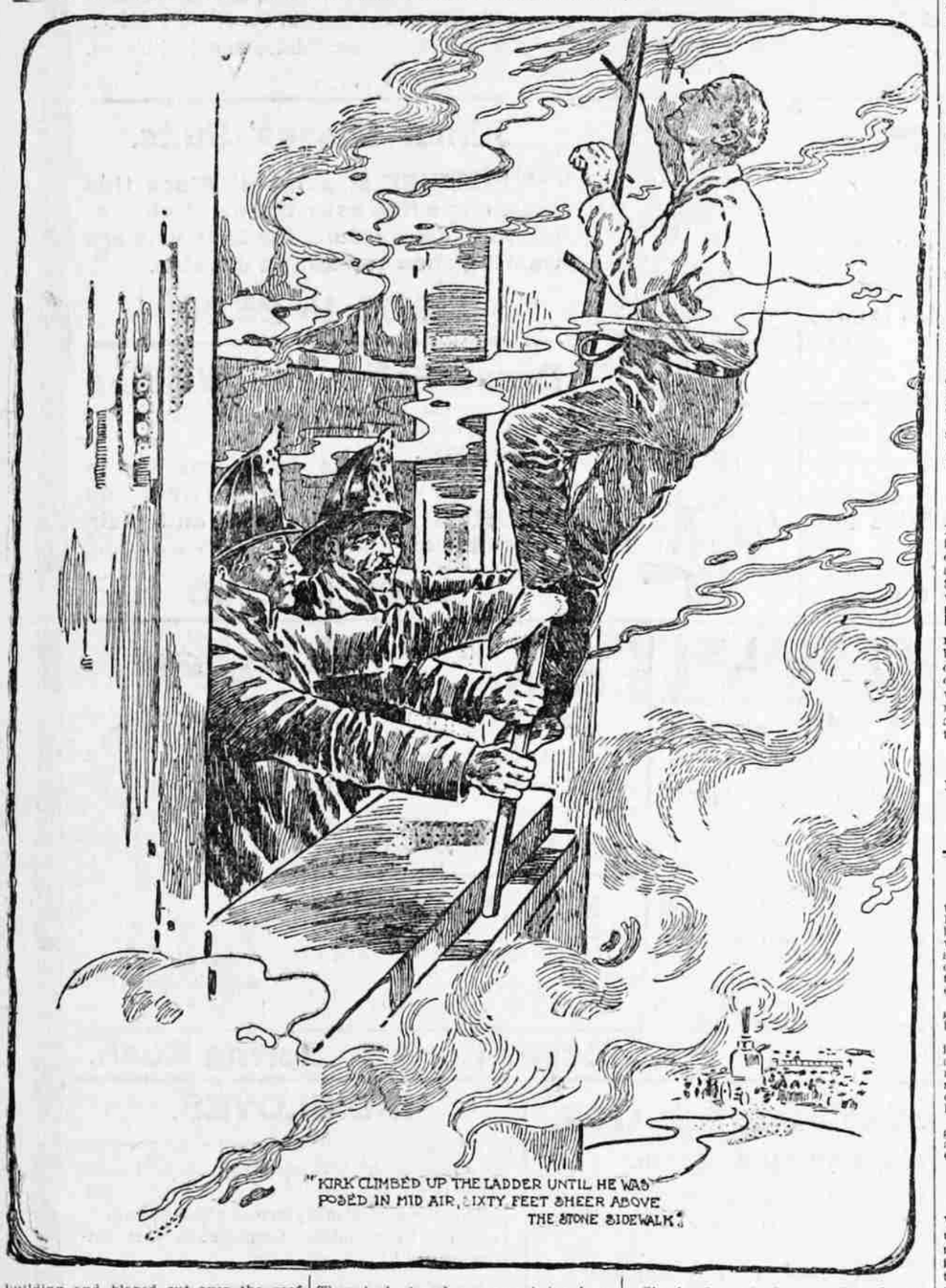
They were just in time to see another section of the roof go down with a terrific crash that sent the flames and cinders leaping a hundred feet in air. The whole building quivered, and for a moment they thought the walls were going down. There was fire on every side of them and under them and the smoke cut off the sky from above. Their faces were already scorched from the heat.

Directly across the street from the Wellington hotel and about sixty feet away there stood a four-story apartment building. A telephone wire cable a little more than an inch in diameter extended from the roof of one to the roof of the other. On the top of the hotel it was fastened to a stout post, and it pitched off over the edge of the roof at a sharp angle downward to the other building. Kirk, being the lighest, was selected to go first. Swenson and the other three men, fearing that the cable had been injured beyond the post, laid firm hold of it and braced their feet. Kirk sat on the edge of the cornice with his feet hanging over. Then he slid off, crossed his legs over the wire as over a life line, and slipped down. The cable sagged until it seemed about to snap. Hand over hand Kirk slid across the chasm, teetering and swaying from side to side until the men on the roof turned their heads away. When Kirk was over Ford followed him without a word, and Geiger followed Ford. Each time the cable sagged deeper and the post bent further down. Swenson buckled four belts together and brought them around Harrison's body and over the cable. "Keep hold," he said, "and you can't fall."

But Harrison was now dazed and only half conscious. When he began to slide he grasped feebly at the cable, and then it slipped between his fingers. His body shot down heavily and stopped with a jerk that all but snapped the cable. For a moment he dangled at the end of the belt straps, then he whizzed across the street and drove headlong into the post on the further side.

By this time Kirk and Ford had lost all trace of Swenson. Smoke and flames enveloped the entire building, and from the shouts in the street below they knew that the wall would soon go down. Suddenly Swenson shot out of the smoke, spun a moment on the cable and fell at their feet. His hands and ankles were terribly lacerated and burned where they had slipped on the cable. But all four of the firemen managed to hobble downstairs without assistance. On the first floor they passed through a company of hotel guests talking to reporters about their narrow escapes—three women had fainted, and one man had fallen downstairs.

"One hundred thousand dollars fire damage," said the headline in one of the papers next day, "but no lives lost."



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