

McClure's Magazine
December, 1899

The Adventures of Tillerman McDermott

A True Story of the Firemen

WHEN the truck of 21 came out of her house, McDermott sat with his legs braced, and turned the iron tiller. What with her ten ladders—one an eighty-five-footer—her two line-guns, and her hand extinguisher, to say nothing of axes, ropes, lanterns, door-jimmies, smoke-hoods, jumping-nets, and all the other various armament of the fire-fighter, Truck 21 weighed something more than five and a half tons; but McDermott brought her around the sharp corners, among the frogs of the car crossings, as if she were a buckboard. McDermott is an Irishman, built as square and solid as a post; not tall, but heavy; short of legs, long of arms, and thick through the chest, where a man's strength lies. You would know him for a fireman from the puckered red scars on his face where he has been cut with falling glass. He is one of the twelve men chosen from more than 2,000 as members of the Exhibition Class, for ladder work, for net-jumping, and for other feats of muscle and daring.

It was shortly after noon on St. Patrick's Day when Truck 21 stopped in Forty-sixth Street near Fifth Avenue. There had been a 3-3 alarm, and Martin had driven the big blacks a mile through crowded streets in a few seconds more than four minutes. Above the hotel the smoke was already rising in huge, slow-moving clouds. It was even creeping from the tops of the upper windows, with here and there red streakings of fire. In the streets the police were pressing back the broken St. Patrick's parade, men were rushing in and out of the hotel entrance like bees at a hive, and over all rose the vast roar of voices.

The marks yet remain in the pavement where Truck 21 stopped with set brakes. Martin threw his seat forward, and he and McGuire and the others sprang to the windlass of the extension ladder. Just then Beggin, the captain, saw a woman sitting perilously on the ledge of a sixth-story window, eighty feet sheer above the stone flagging of the sidewalk. She was waving her hand and screaming, although the noises of the fire drowned out the sound of her voice. There was fire above her and smoke below, and the windows were giving out a peculiar ominous orange glow that told the grim story of the destruction within. Beggin motioned to McDermott. Without waiting to put on his scaling-belt, McDermott wrenched a scaling-ladder from the truck and ran to the building. Raising the ladder, he drove the long steel hook through the glass of the second-story window. Then he ran up like a cat, crooked one leg over the sill, braced himself, drew up the ladder hand over hand from beneath him, and plunged the hook through the third-story window; and thus, like a great measuring-worm, the man and the ladder crept up the sheer brick wall. At the fifth floor the heavy glass of the window fell in fragments in McDermott's face, cutting him deep over the eye and on the hand. He drew his sleeve across his face to wipe away the blood, and hooked the ladder over the sill of the window where the woman sat. Instantly she turned as if to come down or else to jump. "Keep quiet," shouted McDermott; "I'll take care of you."

Mounting now until he could see in at this sixth-story window, he saw the inner walls all afire and the entire interior a raging furnace. The woman on the sill was pale and scarcely conscious. She held in her lap a small, barking pet dog wrapped in a cloak. On her left wrist

she carried a little leather bag of jewels, and she clutched a purse firmly in her hand. McDermott threw the dog and the cloak inside the room.

“You must do just as I tell you,” he said. The woman turned on the sill, with both feet out of the window, and leaned a little outward. The crowd below held its breath. McDermott went a few steps down the ladder, grasping the sill with his right hand; the woman slid out upon his left shoulder. She was heavy, nearly 170 pounds; the ladder, unanchored at the bottom, swayed under the weight of the two like a cotton string. For a moment McDermott paused before he let go of the sill. Then of a sudden, from within the building, there was a terrific roar of falling walls, and smoke and fire gushed outward from the windows above them. McDermott let go, and stepped down one round. His foot held a moment, and then the round gave way with a snap, broken short off. Instantly the ladder swung far out to one side, and McDermott hung there in mid-air by one hand, six stories up, with a fainting woman on his shoulder. He felt the tendons of his arms stretching, indeed snapping; but he did not lose his presence of mind. Grappling with his legs, he succeeded in getting another foot-hold. A few rounds more, and he had reached the bottom, and there he hung waiting. Beneath him he could see the dense masses of men in the street, and above him the white streams of water from the engines curving like bows and opening in spray at the end where they cut into the rolling smoke. And of all the sounds he heard, that of the fire rose in a vast volume above everything else. Blood from his cuts was trickling into his eyes again, his arms were numb, and he was choking with smoke.

In the meantime Beggin and his men had lifted the extension ladder. It now swung and swayed eighty-five feet in the air. Seen against the black walls it seemed a mere thread. And yet on the very top round, with his legs drawn up under him, sat McGuire. Gently the ladder nodded toward the building. McGuire reached out and touched McDermott. “Hold on, old man,” he said. Then, with infinite care, but swiftly, McDermott stepped from the scaling-ladder to the extension ladder. It was with difficulty that he released the clasp of his right hand, so benumbed had it grown. It was a moment of awful uncertainty. If the frail ladders, one of which was loose at the bottom and the other loose at the top, should be parted under the strain of the heavy burden, all three would drop to their death seventy feet below. They were half down when they heard a faint sound of barking above them. There in the window stood the pet dog, begging as piteously as a dog could. It was as much as a man’s life was worth to venture upward again; but McGuire went. He took the little dog under his arm, and brought him down. “I couldn’t see him burned,” he said afterwards somewhat shamefacedly.

All this, from the moment Truck 21 stopped until McGuire reached the ground, had not taken more than ten minutes. If they had stayed one minute longer they would have been buried, truck and all, in the ruins of the hotel, for the wall fell just as they reached safety.

McDermott showed me the scars on his face and hand, and the ugly swelling on his wrist where the tendons had “drawn.” He also showed me a little flat leather box containing a gold shield pendent from a gold bar. The brief account of McDermott’s deed on the shield was as graphic as the Bible. I asked him if he would do the same thing again if he had the chance.

“Of course,” he said; “it’s business.”