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## Hero Mine

By R. RAY BAKER

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Verna Pomeroy had a mania for heroes.

"I will marry the man who goes through fire, water, blood and iron for me," was the way she expressed it. Many there were who would have been willing to go through water, provided it was not too deep; and also through blood, as long as it was not of their own or their shedding; but as to fire and iron—well, the former was a little too much to expect and the latter was difficult.

If Verna had waited a few years she would have experienced no difficulty in finding a hero for herself. They are plentiful nowadays, but they were scarce when Verna was twenty-one and the "pretty stenog" in Jones & Jones' real estate office on the fourth floor of the Ashton building.

Somehow Verna figured that Dan Williams was destined to be the man. He was a fireman in the station house three blocks down the street, and he clung rather heroically, she thought, to the red juggernaut that roared and screeched past the Ashton on an average of at least four times a day. There was a man who would at least go through fire, and certainly through water, and probably meet the other requirements. He was a strapping blond young man, with strength rippling through every muscle, and he was very good for a hero worshiper to look at.

"Some day he'll prove to be my hero," she had decided on the day Dan followed his pet malsese cat in its wanderings from the station house across the street to the Pomeroy residence, where Verna happened to be seated on the porch reading "Brave Men I Have Met."

That's the way they got acquainted, and since then Dan had wooed Verna through the fourth floor window every week day and in the parlor of her home every night when he got time off.

When the siren of the ladder truck gave vent to its mournful shriek Verna always would look up from her typewriter and exchange a wave of the hand with Dan as the red demon dashed by.

But Dan was not the only one who wooed Verna through the window. Ben Vincent rode past the Ashton building twelve times a day. His pace was not as swift as his rival's, however, because his vehicle was a street car. When he approached Verna's window he always stood on the rear platform and waved one of his hands while the other rang up fares.

Verna liked Ben fully as well as Dan, but his life was so prosaic it offered few heroic possibilities. He had dark hair and eyes and his face was attractive, but he failed to come up to the fireman's shoulder and there was no noticeable bulge just above the elbow.

His acquaintance she had formed when she moved to a residence in the suburbs and was obliged to use a trolley car twice each day.

Ben's dark complexion was another handicap. Verna had hair that she liked to hear called "raven locks" and her eyes were of a similar hue; and she had read that a person should marry an opposite.

That's the way things stood when the rivals met one night a half block from the Pomeroy home. The conductor had been calling on Verna and the fireman knew it and waited for him. They both happened to be off duty, but Ben had been the first to ask her for an engagement.

"I've been waiting for you an hour," Dan announced as he stepped out from the tree against which he had been leaning. "You've been in Miss Pomeroy's parlor altogether too long. I can't stand for that."

Ben had no relish for a fight—not with those six feet of muscle—so he kept his temper in leash.

"Sorry I don't please you," he replied with sarcasm-sprinkled coolness. "I didn't know Miss Pomeroy and you were engaged."

The fireman knitted his brows into a savage scowl and looked disdainfully down at the pebble in his highway of love.

"Well, we aren't," he declared. "There is no engagement yet, but there is going to be. She wants a man, and I'm it—see? She isn't going to tie up with a shrimp like you, so you better make yourself scarce around her. I'm just warning you, that's all."

About this time Fate decided to take a hand in the affair. So a janitor went to sleep in the basement of the Ashton building late one afternoon and a cigarette dropped from his mouth into a barrel of excelsior. The

Ashton was a frame relic of past architectural grandeur and the flames ate into it as a finished lion eats into a chunk of red beefsteak.

The janitor awoke, choked with smoke and staggered to safety. The occupants of the building dashed pell-mell to the street by means of the stairway and the meager fire-escape facilities. The elevator boy deserted his post and fled with the rest.

Verna's bosses were playing golf and she was alone in the office cleaning up a pile of work. She had herself some of the qualities that heroes and heroines are made of. So she remained in the office and put valuable papers in the safe, while fire crept up the outside and inside of the building and smoke seeped through the floors.

"There's lots of time," she told herself, and kept rummaging for one very important document she had been unable to locate. She finally discovered it on a file on the junior partner's desk. Tossing it into the safe, she slammed the iron door, turned the knob and hurried into her coat and hat.

As she opened the office door a wave of heat and smoke rolled in upon her. She coughed and drew back for a moment, then dashed for the stairway. But the flames had been there first and there was no stairway. By this time she was really excited. She ran to the elevator entrance and pushed frantically and vainly on the bell. Baffled, she stood in a daze in the midst of stifling fumes which were becoming more dense with every minute that passed.

"Dan will save me!" she cried, and she struggled to her feet and ran back into the office, throwing open a window. Indistinctly through the smoke she made out a crowd assembled across the street. Bells were clanging as fire apparatus darted up and down the thoroughfare.

"Dan!" she cried, with all the power of her lungs. Repeatedly she called the name, while flames stole closer and closer to the fourth floor.

Presently she heard an answering shout, and a huge, light-haired fireman stood out in the center of the street and waved a hand at her the same as he had waved it countless times from his red demon.

He disappeared from her view. The heat grew more intense and the smoke got thicker. The flames were having a feast; they were gorging themselves.

Suddenly she saw something rising before her—an extension ladder. It wobbled and quivered before the wind and then slowly the ends settled against the ledge. She looked down, and there he was—the man—fighting his way up, inch by inch, through a shroud of yellow flames and blackness.

In a few moments he would be at the window and she would be saved. A dense cloud reached out, enveloped the ladder and blotted out the fireman from sight. When it rolled away there was Dan on the ladder—faltering. As she watched he shook his head, pointed at the flames above him, and slowly began to descend. Verna fainted.

The next sensation she experienced was one of being jolted. She opened her eyes and discovered she was in a street car which was bumping swiftly over the rails. She was half reclining on a seat—and she was the only passenger.

There was a step in the aisle and she saw a bedraggled figure in a blue uniform standing over her. It was Ben.

"How'd I get here?" was her first question after a silent moment of contemplation and wonder.

"I put you there," he responded simply. "I'm taking you home as fast as I can. My machine (he laughed dryly) was stopped by the fire. I saw you at the window and went after you."

She took a long breath of relief or two to get her lungs full of air or something. Then she noticed that about his forehead was a bloody handkerchief that his cap could not entirely conceal.

"Where'd you get that blood?" she demanded, shuddering.

He fumbled with his transfer punch.

"It wasn't much of a hurt," he said, "although it did bleed a lot. You see, I was able to reach you by running the elevator, which I found standing open. There was a regular blanket of fire in the shaft, but I guess the soaking I got from a hose when I made the run for the building helped to keep me from burning up. I got the blood when I rammed my head into the iron gate at the fourth landing, thinking it was open. The blow sort of dazed me, but I managed to open the gate, picked you up in the office and beat it back down the elevator with you. I bet I made an awful dent in that gate. My head feels like it had busted right through the iron."

Verna reached up and clasped one of his hands.

"Ben," she said, "do you know you have all the qualities of a regular hero?"

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