

The Storyteller

HURLEY'S PROMOTION

Hurley was discharged from the service of a New York street railway company for wrecking his car in a collision with a fire-engine, and the railway thereby lost a motorman who could run down the most crowded street with a controller full ahead, and who rang his gongs regularly by dancing frantic fandangos on them when the heavy goods-trucks got on his tracks.

Hurley felt then that the fire brigade owed him a living, having deprived him of one; and the political influence of his brother-in-law helped the fire commissioners to pay the debt.

It followed that the brigade gained a probationer who loved excitement as a collie dog loves an open field, who could handle a forty-pound scaling-ladder from the shoulder with the muscles that had skidded car-wheels when he screwed down brakes, and who went up a windowed wall or took the thirty-five foot jump into the life-net in fire-drill at headquarters with the smile of a boy playing tag in a yard.

His term of practice and probation was all pure fun for him. He spent his days at headquarters and his nights at the station in Harlem, to which he had been provisionally assigned. He worked off ten pounds of fat, and he clipped his drooping black moustache until it stood out in a fierce bristle under his huge beak of nose. His comrades called him 'Burly,' and he pawed at them with a bear-cub playfulness that left them bruised about the forearms.

He was happy. He had but one cause of dissatisfaction—the Harlem station was not a school of arduous training. He saw a sure prospect of something more exciting when he received his appointment as a fourth-grade fireman, detailed to a hook-and-ladder company that had seventy-five calls to answer on a first alarm in the heart of the dry-goods district; and he chewed his moustache with one corner of his mouth and smiled crookedly out of the other.

'You'll straighten your face before you've finished with that,' they warned him. He straightened it forthwith in a grin that curled evenly on both sides of his nose. 'I guess that's right,' he said and nodded.

He reported for duty at his new station on the following day, and the foreman looked him over with an official scowl. Hurley saluted clumsily and stood stiff. He knew Capt Dougherty by reputation as a gruff disciplinarian.

The captain said, 'How much do you weigh?'

'One-seventy, sir,' Hurley answered.

'One-seventy?' he groaned. 'Do you know that truck weighs near ten thousand pounds already?'

Hurley regarded the hook-and-ladder truck with an aggrieved air.

'One-seventy! They must think we're rolling an ox-cart. Some of you'll have to get out and walk to the fires pretty soon!'

This was evidently sarcasm. Hurley smiled at it with uneasiness.

'Frank,' the captain called to the assistant foreman, 'show this man his quarters.' You'll go on the bright work. Do you understand?'

Hurley understood that he was to have charge of the shining brass of the sliding poles and of the truck. He said, 'Yes, sir,' and followed the lieutenant upstairs with an angry swing of the shoulders.

That was his introduction to Captain Dougherty. There followed his meeting with the ten men of the company, a meeting that was a clumsy ceremony of hand-shakes and embarrassed gutturals. He was shown his cot in the bunk-room and the locker for his wardrobe, and then he was left to shift for himself. He proceeded to inspect with due reverence the truck's equipment of ladders, hooks and axes, shovels, picks, wrenches, bars, handlamps, respirators, battering-rams and what not.

He picked out his helmet and his 'turn-out coat' from the row of them on the bed-ladders. He inquired for and found the cloth and chemical for polishing his 'bright work.' He studied the list of fire-alarms, patted the horses, and smiled at the 'jigger'—the jigger which would ring them off down the street like mad, clanging a wild bell and fighting with the sleeves of their coats while they swayed on the jolting truck.

He saw the stampede in his mind's eye, and wished that the bell would give its signal. It did not, and he went upstairs then to the reading room to wait for it.

Within an hour it was known to every member of the company that the new man played a poorer game of checkers even than Gorman, the second driver of the truck, who had a fatal weakness for leading from the

double corner. And that was the beginning of Hurley's popularity with the 'blue shirts.'

Captain Dougherty did not seem to see anything in the recruit excepting a hulking good nature which might easily be mistaken for the next of kin to stupidity. Hurley lay awake the greater part of that night listening in an excess of zeal for a fire-alarm that was not rung in.

In the morning he was heavy-eyed at roll-call and the captain remarked it. A summons to a small fire that was black when the truck arrived to the scene, brought Hurley the last man to his place on the step, and that was another mark against him.

He made a good record when 'taps' called the crew to their places at mid-day, but he closed his eyes when he was at watch on the desk in the afternoon, and the captain accused him of being asleep there. Hurley did not argue. He did worse—he sulked.

By the time he had turned in for the night he was discouraged, angry, and plainly marked for the captain's displeasure.

The jigger exploded its alarm. The lights swam in his head as he sprang from his cot and tugged on his 'turnout' of trousers and high boots. He shot down the pole to the main floor as if falling in a dream, and staggered to catch the side step as the great doors swung back and the truck rolled out in the darkness of the streets in a confusion of clattering hoofs and his-ordered voices. He was wide awake with the first rush of cold air across his face, but the ride that followed seemed still a nightmare—the three horses straining in their collars, the blown lights of the driver's lamps shining on the play of the muscles in their sleek flanks, the bell ringing furiously, and the silent men beside him on the step struggling into their oilskins while they clung to the side ladders of the truck. His own hands did not seem to belong to him; they were a great distance from him on the ends of long arms.

His helmet did not fit his head. He got one arm into his coat, and he was still fumbling for a second sleeve when the truck swung round a corner and he came into a street of smoke and throbbing fire-engines and the hoarse howlings of battalion chiefs and company firemen.

He looked up from this turmoil to see smoke puffing from the middle windows of a five-storey building that seemed immeasurably high in the darkness and the deceptive play of light. Lines of hose hung from the lower sills and writhed in the doorways. His eye was caught by the glare of flames shining on the glasses of a window, the panes burst and tinkled on the pavements; and then a stream of water shot up to overwhelm this sudden brilliance in a cloud of smoke and steam.

A rough hand thrust his arm into his coat and swung him round. He heard Captain Dougherty cry out an order, and he woke to find himself stumbling across the cobblestones with a steel tool in his hand.

The men ahead of him were battering at the doors of the building next to that which was on fire. Both were wholesale clothing houses, as Hurley could see from their sign boards.

The building was old. He knew it would be dry and unsafe. He knew, too, that they were to make vents in the roof. And then the door opened and the crew disappeared in the doorway, and he followed at full tilt to blunder up the stairs behind a handlamp that shone in the darkness ahead of him.

Smoke pricked him in the eyes and stung in his nostrils. There was someone behind him hurrying him forward. He took the interminable steps three at a bound, and raced along the hallways, and what with the excitement and the pleasure he took in it, his heart-beats seemed to lift him from his feet. He scrambled panting up the ladder to the roof-trap, leaped a dividing parapet between the buildings and attacked the tin roofing with an eager jab of his tool.

Around him axe and hook and cutter tore and stripped and splintered tin and rafters and the glass and sash of skylights, till the smoke began to curl upwards from huge gaps in the roof, and the men pushed back their helmets from their foreheads and wiped the sweat from their eyes.

The captain was shouting orders at them from the top of the cornice, where he stood to watch the work in the street below. They depended on him to warn them of danger, and they worked with as little apparent apprehension of their personal safety as farm laborers digging in a field.

At the captain's command a ladder was dragged over the parapet and lowered into the skylight. The assistant foreman and two men slid down it.

A moment later Hurley heard the windows of the floor beneath him crash into the street. A draft of evil-smelling smoke from burning cloth burst up through the vents like fumes from a crater.

'Mighty thick down there!' some one said.

Hurley wondered how the three men could live in it. The captain leaned over the cornice, bawling his direc-