

'No, chief, no.'  
 'Yes, you would. Your education is exceptional. You know everything worth knowing about fire-fighting—know it by experience. What have you not done, and brilliantly done, in the service? You'd have been chief years ago but for your habitual shrinking from promotion. You're a shining example of modest merit that has waited for its own in vain. Now—you've served the public long enough.'

Colby grew a little pale.  
 'You're too old to climb ladders, scale shaky walls, and battle with smoke and flames.'  
 The white head sank, the blue eyes sought the floor.  
 'We propose to give you a thrice honorable discharge, a good pension, and let you rest. What do you say to it?'  
 Colby's eyes twitched.  
 'I hadn't supposed I was as old as that,' he said, slowly. 'I really don't know, chief, what to say to it.'  
 He got up and turned away.  
 'I'll think it over. Thank you. Good night!'

\*  
 'Don't take it so to heart, Colby; it's no calamity. There are things about it I like.'

'And I too, papa, decidedly. You're not old, and you are a wonderful fireman. You've proved it scores of times, and Mr. Hubbard was quite right when he said you ought to have been chief years ago. But don't you worry, papa. Will and Alfred and Tom and all the rest of us will stand by you and mother.'

Colby, gloomily thoughtful, was at the head of his table, eating his belated supper. On his right was his sweet-faced old wife in her silver-rimmed spectacles. On his left was Maggie, his baby, aged sixteen, and the especial joy of his latter life. The mother, genuinely concerned, was yet perfectly calm. The daughter's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were flashing.

'I s'pose they're right,' said Colby, munching his food, his eyes upon his plate.

'Papa, the chief's right; you're always too meek. One can't be too meek in this world and get on.'

'That's not Christian, Maggie,' said the mother.  
 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.'

Maggie tossed her head.

'Nobody can deny that I'm sixty or more,' said Colby. 'My eldest boy is engine-driver of the Empire Express, and everyone knows the company wouldn't have a youngster on that job. Besides, look at my grandchildren! Haven't they been seen often enough scampering into the hook-and-ladder station with their caps and aprons full of big red apples for me? All the same, I'm as spry as ever I was. I don't want any pension. I can't bear the thought of knocking off for good.'

'Well, papa,' said Maggie, somewhat wearily, winding her arms about his neck, 'I must go.'

'Go?'

'Yes; we're working overtime at the big shop just now. The holiday trade is in full swing. The whole staff will be on duty until eleven to-night. I'll come home by the half-past eleven car.'

Colby drew Maggie's head down till her hair hid his broad visage.

'Maggie, I'm mighty proud of my children—ten of them, all living, and not a bad one in the lot. You, the baby, always have been our pet. As a child, you were perpetually under the weather, though you don't look it now. I've pushed you for miles in your baby-carriage myself. Do you remember? Your eyes, looking up at me, were so blue and so beautiful. Your hair was exactly like your mother's—some pretty shade between gold and brown. In spite of your ills, I've never known a babe that smiled so much. Whoever else gets old, may the Lord keep our baby young!'

Maggie slipped a plump hand over her father's mouth, quickly kissed both her parents, and was gone.

'I must be off, too, mother,' said Colby, wiping his lips, pushing back and reaching for his cap.

'Now, Colby, don't worry to-night. Remember what the Psalmist says: "I have been young, and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread."'

His pipe alight, Colby stepped out into the fresh night. Strong emotions rolled through his consciousness. He seemed to be losing his hold upon the simple feeling, the simple point of view, that had characterised his career. He felt just at the point where he ought to count more than he ever had counted before. For life to turn upon him like this, after he had worked so long and so loyally; 'looks like playing it low down,' he muttered, and a certain outraged majesty transformed his whole look and manner.

All the firemen except Dan had gone up to their bunks. Dan, on watch, was seated at a small table, under a gas-light, playing solitaire. Brass-mounted harness yawned high on either side of the pole of the hook-and-ladder truck. The big dapple-grays were champing their food directly in the rear. The black cat was asleep on a straight-backed, wooden-bottomed chair. The old yellow station dog, Jack, was curled up on the boards at the lone card-player's feet.

'Good-night, Dan,' said Colby, knocking the ashes from his pipe and mounting the stairs.

'Won't you have a game before turning in?' called Dan.

'Not to-night.'

Quickly and curiously Dan looked after the towering figure. Certainly that was not Colby Hunt's familiar voice, and Dan had no recollection of so scant a formality in all the veteran's previous behaviour.

\*

Ten o'clock.

Faintly, from afar, came the strokes of the giant bell in the court-house tower.

Dan, dozing, was barely conscious of the sounds, when suddenly they seemed to grow infinitely louder. He sprang to his feet. The electric hammer just above his head was falling with a measured resonance upon the alarm-gong. The automatic doors at the rear had swung open, and the dapple-grays were lumbering to their places under the elevated harness.

Already Colby Hunt had slipped into his service boots and was rapidly buckling them about his thighs. To right and left his comrades were a-leap. All the station hummed with the noise of swift preparation—a ponderous machine abruptly thrown into strenuous motion. As he hastened Colby was counting the strokes of the electric hammer. He knew the location of every alarm-box in the city.

'One—two! One—two—three—four—five—six—seven!'

Twenty-seven.

Colby thrust the last button into place, sprang across the sleeping-room, and shot down the exit pole into the hook-and-ladder room. Men had gone before him, men were swiftly following, some throwing on their water-proofs, some reaching for their helmets. The horses stood beneath the harness, champing their bits, eyes and nostrils distended, feet beating a rumbling tattoo. The harness fell. The hames clicked round the collars. The great front doors swung outward, and the long, red truck, lined on either side with helmetted men, thundered into the street, hoofs and wheels smiting fire.

Straight north along the radiant boulevard sped those mettled runners. So flat did they lie to their work, so smoothly did they fly, that twin-spheres might almost have rested in the dimples of their backs. Colby Hunt, on the seat by the driver's side, under his feet the warning-bell pouring its clangor into the night, leaned sharply forward, gazing straight ahead, his white hair showing with great distinctness beneath the dark gloss of his helmet. At the Four's real-house a dying note echoed through vacant chambers—the last stroke of the second alarm. At the Two's engine-house, a hundred yards further on, rang out a fresh staccato. Colby glanced at his comrades, his comrades at him. In quick succession three alarms—not a schoolboy in the city but could have told the meaning of that.

And from Twenty-seven!

Twenty-seven was the heart of the mercantile quarter. There were the towering, gleaming buildings. There were the holiday throngs, elbowing, jostling, parcel-laden, happy, crowding the streets, packing the shops—men, women, and children in mighty, eddying pools, and in endless, turgid streams. There, too, were the salespeople—thousands of them—of both sexes, young and old, patient, weary, working overtime. Somewhere in that vast, unresting agglomeration—already the on-rushing hook-and-laddermen caught its muffled roar—was the bright particular star of Colby Hunt's domestic firmament—Maggie, his baby. Maggie had said she would come home on the half-past eleven car, and now it was a few minutes past ten. In the fitting light Colby's corrugated face was like an iron mask.

Swinging out of the boulevard into the chief shopping thoroughfare, the driver of the hook-and-ladder truck brought his team, rearing, to a full stop. From wall to wall the street was choked with people, and the air was a-wave with shrill babble, hoarse cries, and sobbing. Here and there a man gesticulated and cursed, a woman screamed and hurled herself impotently against the human embargo. Other persons, except when moved by the swaying of the mass, stood still, white and mute. Scores of police, shouting, pulling people back, pressing them on, crushing them to either side—vainly strove to make a passage through the crowd. In an ecstasy of perturbation, the hook-and-ladder horses were yet on their hindlegs, when every light—the arc-lamps in the street, the luminous globes in the shops—suddenly failed. With the failure—with the engulfing gloom, fell a hush as brief as it was instant and profound.

Ahead and upward appeared a tongue-like object. Darting into the street, it seemed thirstily, pantingly, to lick up the darkness. Where the darkness had been, bold in the lighted space shone a row of huge gilt letters—'Moultrie's.' Moultrie's was a household word, a miracle wrought by wit, toil, and time. Moultrie's was vast, varied, brilliant, enchanting. Moultrie's was housed in one of the noblest commercial structures of the world—a trade palace, big and beautiful beyond the palaces of reverie. And Moultrie's was wondrously equipped for security—fire buckets, hose, chemical extinguishers at every turn. Further, Moultrie's had its own trained fire brigade. Still further, Moultrie's was fire-proof. Yet a red tongue was licking up the darkness, and those great gilt letters were saying:

'Moultrie's is on fire.'

Colby Hunt's prophetic soul had not played him false. At the first stroke of the electric hammer, down at the hook-and-ladder station, he had said to himself, 'Moultrie's.' Possibly this was because, when the hammer fell,