

he was dreaming of Maggie, and Maggie worked on a high floor of that high building of Moultrie's. At any rate, the idea was now an irresolvable fact, before him. Other red tongues, as if desert-parched, were licking up the darkness. The ruby glare was everywhere—on the sky, on the sign-strewn walls, on the wires and the poles and the people. Moultrie's main entrance doors were flung wide open, and a mixed throng was storming through them. The broad plate-glass windows were also open—crashed outward—and the frantic exodus was packing the crowd in the street as a hydraulic press. Scores of figures were appearing on the fire escapes, moving quickly, but dazedly, like sleep-walkers fleeing from some stupefying vision.

One sweeping glance and Colby Hunt had noted all—the seat of the fire, the fire's demoniac fierceness, the immovable pack in the street, the congested fire-escapes. Moreover, higher up he had caught sight of a line of distracted, ashen faces—girls' faces—in groups. Each group was at a window, leaning over the sill, staring into the lurid gulf below. The girls were not crying—not making a sound—just clinging closely to one another and staring down numbly. Colby's children—especially Maggie—were more than rooted in his being; on its tender side, they were his being. Was the enemy he had fought all his life about to make the first gap in this love-linked company?

Two panther-like bounds, and Colby, just touching the pavement, was on the shoulders massed before the hook-and-ladder horses. With a startled outcry the men beneath him swayed, staggered, and struggled apart. But Colby had not paused; he had plunged desperately ahead, scrambling on all-fours. Now he was on his feet, striding forward, reeling. Now he was down again, wriggling and floundering like a great fish stranded. Once more he was up, stepping upon a back, a shoulder, a hatted head. From under his boots rose grating cries—cries of alarm, rage, pain—as metal shrieks when wheels crash over it. Colby seemed battling with twisting, rolling, dipping logs in a whirlpool. But finally he was upright, balanced, speeding unchecked, his footing bending, as thin ice bends beneath a skater's feet. Out of the red-lit night crashed a weld of exultant voices; a helmeted figure had cleared the blockade!

But what of this?

What could human power avail in such a strait?

Growing warmth on his cheeks, low thunder in his ears, Colby found himself among clattering hoofs and quivering flanks. Mounted police were at close quarters with the multitude. Before their merciless charges the mass had begun to move. People were still streaming down the fire-escapes. Engines, hose-carts, and chemical waggons were crowding up. Dodging, edging, fighting, Colby reached the door of Moultrie's. Lines of hose, half buried in charred, ill-smelling slush, lay across the vacant thresholds. Split by fleeing feet, here and there the hose emitted thin, beaded streams. Even as Colby looked, from within came a heavy report, followed by a blinding outrush of smoke and embers. Firemen burst forth headlong. They had abandoned their hose-lines, lost their helmets, were blistered, singed, and covered with ashes. In a vague medley of sounds Colby made out: 'A wall has fallen—the masonry of the doomed rotunda is down—Ten firemen are buried!' Smudged and bleeding, Assistant-Chief Arnold reeled through the blackened doorway.

'Colby'—Arnold's voice sounded like the rustle of dried husks—'I'm hurt, and Chief—Hubbard's—dead!'

Colby felt as if a dagger had pierced his vitals. Chief Hubbard dead, Assistant Chief Arnold fainting at his feet, and the centre of Moultrie's becoming a roaring furnace! Moreover, the flames were running out right and left, the buildings across the street were heating, fiery particles were reaching the upper air—the city was menaced! If the lower floors of Moultrie's were clear of people, on the higher floors were the working girls; their faces were still at the windows. Easing Arnold to the pavement, Colby swung round. The blockade had been broken, the crowd beaten back and roped away at either ends. Except that early, ill-fated company, the entire fire department was there—every wheel, every foot of hose, every ladder, every man. Imposing, indeed, was the array, but Colby stood agast. Not a reel was turning, not a ladder rising, not a muscle moving—consternation was king!

Hiss and crackle and roar, and then such a cry as breaks from a bugle's throat in the crisis of a battle.

'Man the "extensions"!'

The machine-laddermen jumped like galvanometric needles.

'The scalers to those high windows.'

Silhouetted against the glare behind him, Colby Hunt faced the fire-fighters massed in the street. His head was back, his brows lifted, his eyes blazing, his hands raised and spread in the air.

'Volunteers to the front!'

Twenty men sprang forward.

'Bring out your comrades—if you can!'

Rattle of hand-ladders, grind of machinery, and the street bristling like a mast-studded harbor.

'Reels One and Two to the rear and the Four's laddermen to their support! Chemical Six to the east, Chemical Seven to the west! Reels Three and Four to the buildings opposite! Reels Six and Eight to the right, Reels Ten and Twelve to the left! Moultrie's is doomed! Look to the city!'

Into this turbulent conflux—this single big-issue moment, Colby's life-zeal as a fireman, his long experience with every unit of the service, poured its resistless resultant. Bit by bit, falling like thunderbolts, his commands crumpled away the deadlock in the street. More rapidly than it can be portrayed, bewildered inaction quickened and differentiated into bewildering action. One extension ladder after another shot its swaying length through the gathering smoke. From window to window leaped the scaling ladders, until the topmost storeys were compassed. Up and down with astonishing agility, moved tight-lipped firemen, bringing out the half-suffocated, the helpless ones. Patiently the others were waiting. Countless streams were storming and hissing, filling the air with spray, clustered drops and broken shafts of water. The roadway was a ruffled, glistening sheet, and the gutters gurgled with a blackened flood.

Stationary only long enough to shout out the bold lines of his policy, Colby had become a remorseless executive. His grey head seemed to be everywhere; and everywhere—encouraged, counselling, commanding—his deep cry threw skill, tenacity, and desperate valor into the conflict. The historical Colby Hunt was not there; in his person was a pale, grim, imperious man, keen-sighted, coldly methodical, yet in every artery athrob with passionate purpose. Scan the huge, dishevelled figure! His helmet is thrust back, seered and battered; his water-proofs are burnt and torn; his face and hands are peeling. And all the while a dull agony gnaws at his heart. 'Tom, seen Maggie?' 'Frank, know whether my girl is out?' 'Andy, was Maggie with that lot?' 'I say, Dan, any word of Maggie?' And always the answer was the same. The crowd was so large, the rush to terrify, the confusion so great, that nobody could be sure; certainly nobody had seen the veteran's daughter.

On a sudden Colby appeared, moving rapidly up an extension ladder. A sponge was over his mouth and nose, and at his heels were other firemen similarly equipped. The fire-escapes were empty, the white-hot iron, at the lower floors, was writhing into wild contortions. Scorching haze blinded Colby to any faces that might remain at the windows. Half-way up the ladder burnt his hands; apparently anything done had to be done in almost a moment. Intermittently visible to the crowds below and on neighboring roofs, the climbers reached the front of the building, mounting two scaling ladders, and entered the top storeys. Flames were roaring up stairways and lift ways, producing a choking whirl. At the first step Colby touched the fallen figure of a girl. He caught her up, glanced at her face, and passed her back. So a second, a third, a dozen. Hands outstretched, from room to room, he groped and stumbled, crossing and re-crossing his tortuous tracks. So painful were seeing and breaching that every yard of the way was a battle. Often Colby's followers lost sight of him entirely, but ever ahead, through the gloom above the uproar—rang out his poignantly emotional call, 'Maggie!' 'Maggie!' 'Maggie!'

'Colby!'

Dan had seized the old fireman about the waist and was violently hauling him back.

'Quick, Colby, the ladders are firing half-way down.'

'Dan,' said the veteran, going doggedly, 'no trace of her?'

'No; but she must be out. I think everybody's out. All the girls would have fled to this floor, and we've been over it from end to end.'

In a twinkling the two firemen, last of the rescue party, dropped down the scalers, and flashed along the smoking extension-ladder to the ground. As Colby's foot touched the pavement he heard his name anxiously shouted, and saw a fireman with a blistered and troubled face rushing towards him, pushing his comrades aside as he ran. The man spoke with difficulty, yet rapidly.

'Maggie's in the far corner, on the next-to-the-top floor. I found her there with two other girls, all huddled into the window. Maggie told me to take the others first, saying she was a fireman's daughter. Comin' down with the second girl, my ladder caught fire above me and the upper half burnt off and fell into the street.'

All at once the glare-lit multitude saw the hook-and-ladder horses start at a mad gallop for the corner of the blazing skeleton of Moultrie's. There, the waggon brought to a quick stand, the main ladder rose until it loomed high in the middle of the street, its polished rungs at right angles with the faces of the opposite buildings. It did not stand quite perpendicularly; the angle was some eighty degrees. Up this ladder hurried a grey-headed fireman, climbing with all his strength. About one of his shoulders hung a coil of life-line, its gleaming metal clasp dangling as he climbed. White and calm, bent on one last desperate effort to save his child, Colby paused at the ladder's giddy point and glanced upward.

(To be concluded.)

To keep the mind occupied with good, pure, useful, beautiful, and divine thoughts precludes the possibility of thinking about, and thus being tempted by, things sinful, low, or gross. It is because St. Paul knew this that he says so earnestly: 'Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are of good report, think on these things.'