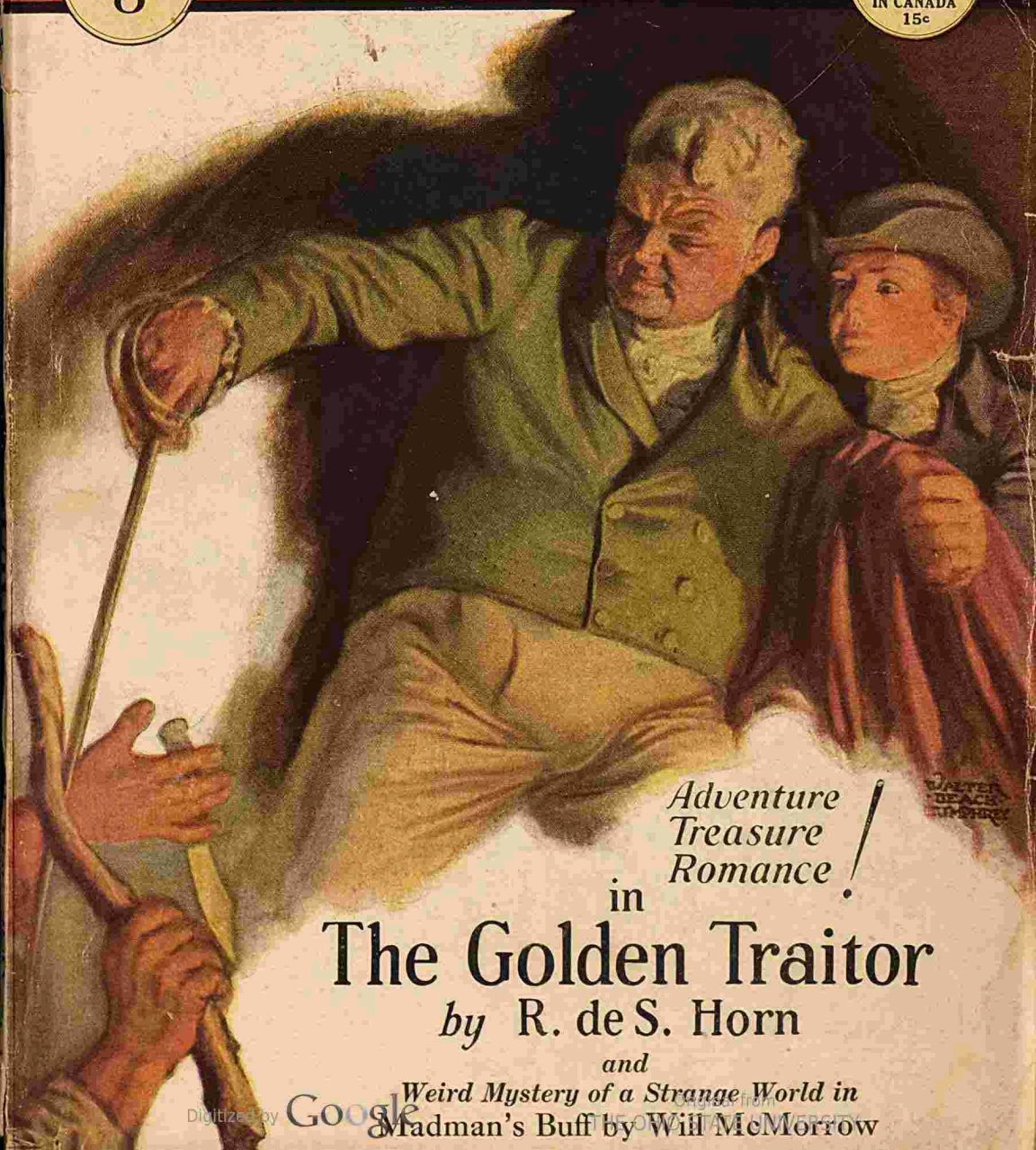


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CASE OF FIRE ***



*The crowd was
yelling like
mad*

IN CASE OF FIRE

By Walter Kellogg Towers

*Life is monotonous? Things never
happen to you? Just take a little
joyride on a fire engine and—well,
see for yourself*

“We’d like to borrow a couple of fire helmets, if we may.” Jim and I stood before the chief’s desk hopefully.

“What do you think this is? What do you take me for?” The chief hardly looked up from the report on his desk. “Oh, it’s you, is it?”

He finally straightened.

“You’re the new reporter on the *News*, aren’t you? What you want helmets for anyway?”

“Being engaged in piloting a fire truck from hither to yon, we desire to be suitably attired.”

“What fire truck?” barked the chief. “I suppose if I lend you the hats you’d then want to borrow the truck to go with them?”

“No, we have the truck.”

We led the chief to the

sidewalk, where a group of his men were admiring the fresh red paint and shiny brass of our vehicle.

“You see it’s this way, chief,” I explained. “Jim and I wanted to make a trip over the holidays—mostly for the ride. We picked Springfield, because Jim, who works for the Badger folks here, thought they might have a car they wanted taken down there. Also we know a couple of twin sisters there we hope to become more fond of.

“Jim couldn’t get a car, but they had this fire rig on a speed truck chassis that they’ve been demonstrating at county fairs round here with no results except drawing crowds. The Springfield branch thinks it might sell it to a

small town near there, so down it goes, and we got to ride it.

“Now here we are with a dandy fire truck all broken in and ready to go. We’ve got a siren, a gong, hooks, ladders, axes, hose and everything but helmets.

“How do you expect us to properly impress Springfield and points en route without helmets? We’d be practically undressed without them.

“Be a sport, chief! We’ll just take your dear old helmets out for a nice ride and see that they get back to their papa nice and safe. We’ve got to be back here Tuesday morning sure.”

“I’ll never see ’em again,” laughed the chief, “but pick out a couple from the reserve rack back there and get on your way.”

We got out of town and onto the turnpike without inciting any riots.

“This thing has its good points,” Jim called above the din. “The old fire siren clears the way, and she sure can step.”

“What troubles me is what would we do in case of fire,” I replied.

As we pulled into Kane, Jim shouted, “Give ’em the gong!” and pulled the exhaust siren wide open. The home-town folks sure took to their sidewalks. The way the cars scuttled up the side streets to give us room was beautiful.

We could see the lone traffic

cop at the main corners hopping around and waving folks back. One cider king with a truck load of hogs pulled up so short his passengers stood on their heads and their squeals almost drowned our siren.

“We certainly gave that town a thrill,” was Jim’s verdict, as we got into the country again.

“Well, why coast along at fifty?” I ask. “Give the motor a chance. We’ve got all day, and I’m a little fussy about my neck. You might meet some one who didn’t believe in fires and wouldn’t get out of the way fast enough.”

After Jim slowed down to thirty-five we hear the shriek of another siren behind us. I look back and make out a red streak in

a cloud of dust, with a long string of cars behind it.

“We’re pursued,” I tell Jim.

“As near as I can make out, another red fire wagon has come out to play with us. Better pull up and see what’s doing.”

“Don’t you think we’d better run for it?” asks Jim doubtfully.

“Certainly not; we might miss something. What have we done?”

“Well, belting through a town like that in a strange fire rig is a trifle unusual.”

“Ever hear of any one getting pinched for it?”

“Never even heard of any one doing it.”

The pursuers were upon us. As we pulled over to the side of the road another fire truck careened to a stop with its

radiator blowing steam and brakes screeching. Half a dozen of the citizenry, with helmets that fit worse than ours, jumped off their truck and rushed over.

“Where’s the fire?” they shouted.

“What fire?”

“Why, the fire you’re going to. We come to help.”

“Thanks a lot, but we’re just out for the ride.”

“We’re the volunteer department from Kane. Folks telephoned there was a big fire up north, that the fire rig from Southville had gone through, and for us to follow ’em.”

“Well, that’s all right with us, but we’re going quite a way—clear to Springfield.”

“Then there’s no fire?”

“Oh, we couldn’t say that. This is a big world and there might be a nice fire somewhere, but we haven’t one.”

“What’s the idea?” The red-faced man with the butcher’s apron and the helmet marked “Chief” seemed angry. “You’ve run us ten miles out into the country and like to of ruined our rig. It’s new and this was our first run.

“We blew off the radiator cap a mile back but kept on coming. Besides, we’re supposed to get fifty dollars for runs out of town. Who’s going to pay us?”

“Ah,” says Jim, “that’s an idea! Who’s going to pay us? We’re out here too!”

I figured we’d talked about enough. The boys from Kane

looked like they were getting over being bewildered and beginning to get mad. I kicked Jim on the ankle and he threw on the clutch, pulled around the crowd of cars that was beginning to gather, and we were on our way.

We got through the next two towns without anything new happening to us, though the citizenry made quite a day of it on Main Street, giving us a real welcome and a clear right of way.

Jackson is a real city, and there we drew not only special service from the traffic police but also a motorcycle escort. The motorcycle cop dashed ahead and waved us on, which was a new

sensation for us, but he seemed puzzled when we go right on out of town, and finally pulled up beside the road and watched us go on our way.

We stopped at Jenkins for lunch and gas, and, of course, our rig drew a lot of attention. We got out quietly and peacefully and were bowling along in a cloud of dust through Elk County when a police whistle shrieked alongside us.

“What’s the idea? Goin’ to a fire?” asked a rough voice beside us.

“Sure,” we answered and grinned.

By this time the dust had settled, and the rural arm of the law made us out.

“Why, you got a fire rig!” he

gasps. “Thought you was a truck speedin’ through here. Chased you two miles in this dust and like to broke my neck!”

“Sorry, but we’ve got a lot of fires and other business to attend to,” we responded.

“But you’re speeding!”

“Well, aren’t fire trucks supposed to speed? Answer us that! Ever hear of a law against fire trucks going as fast as they could? Would you want to be responsible for delaying us?”

“I dunno,” he mumbled.

“Is this the road to Skaneateles?” I asked suddenly.

“Dunno,” he responds.

“That’s the trouble with these rural officers,” I said to Jim.

“Absolutely no help in an emergency. Drive on. We’ll have

to find our own way.”

Jim got the idea and we left him beside the road trying to puzzle it out.

“Remarkable thing he didn’t know the road to Skaneateles when it isn’t even in this State,” says Jim.

“Well, it served to take his mind off whether to pinch us.”

We thought we were going to make Springfield without further excitement when the old bump, bump, bump behind says flat tire. There was no spare, but we located an extra tube and a power pump, and made out.

Just as we were getting things back together again, up the road came an old top buggy in tow of a decrepit horse. The rig got opposite us when the horse

sighted us and shied into the far ditch, awakening the big man drowsing in the seat.

“Whasmatter?” he inquires thickly.

“Not a thing,” we assure him, “unless you’ve had a shade too much, if we may suggest it.”

“But how’d thes fire enshine get there? Most unexpected plash to meet a fire enshine!”

“What fire engine? We don’t see any fire engine,” we both chimed.

“Isn’t that a fire enshine?”

“Certainly not—just our delivery truck.”

“And you ain’t firemen with helmets?”

“You mean these derbies of ours?” we said, lifting the helmets.

“Oh! Oh! It’s too bad!” He pulled himself up unsteadily, reached behind the seat and hoisted out a demijohn, which he threw overboard. “Too awful bad,” he repeated as it shattered against a rock. “Figured I’d go okay for a couple of days and have a big time, but already they’ve got me!”

He sagged down in the seat, hit the old nag a crack, and off they went.

It was nearly dark as we approached Springfield.

“It’ll be too late to get into the branch,” says Jim, “and that means we’ll have to pay storage on this contrivance. If we leave it

in the streets every boy in town will be equipped to play fire tomorrow.”

“Besides, we’d have nothing to take the girls riding in if we checked our nice touring car,” I added.

“Better stop in at the Schmitt place as we go by,” suggested Jim. “They live on this road outside the town. Lena told me the old man stayed outside to dodge taxes. Must be a tight old skinflint!”

The girls seemed glad to see us and were all set for a big joy ride until they spotted our chariot in the gathering gloom. “Lena, dast we ride on that?” asked the other.

“Why, it rides fine,” I insisted. “Lots of pep and speed, and you’d

be surprised how wide that seat is —just right for four. Since we can't tell you twins apart anyway we'd just as well keep you mixed up."

"But what would folks think?"

"Nobody notices who rides on a fire truck; they're too busy looking for the fire."

But the old man ruined the act fast enough when he sighted us and our rig.

"Come up and set with the girls on the piazza, but no monkey shines with no fire truck!"

He sold us on the idea of going to Adolph's Roadside Inn down the road a bit. We figured it would be handier and cheaper.

When Adolph got over the

shock of our helmets he took us in and assigned us a nice third floor walk-up with a two-boy bed and a bowl and pitcher. He even allowed we could use the shed by the barn for our truck without extra charge—but no siren or gong playing when we came in!

After we freshened up, we went back to Schmitt's, parking the fire rig by the gate. But neighbors kept rushing in to help fight the fire until the old man got fed up and so did we, being pretty tired anyway now that we'd begun to notice it.

We were back at the Inn and I'm sleeping like an Eskimo when I make out a pounding on the door that rattled the hinges, and in burst Adolph.

“Get up quick! Fire! Fire!”

“Where’s the fire?” we ask.

“Down the road.”

“That’s fine,” we said as we roll over.

“But you’re firemen. You’ve gotta go with your fire engine. Schmitt’s house will be burned clear up.”

“Aw, let the Springfield fire laddies do it; we need our sleep!”

“But they won’t come out here ’less’n we pay ’em a hundred dollars. Schmitt phoned special for me to get you there quick.”

“We’re not firemen. We don’t know what’s in those tanks, if anything. We don’t know how to use them. We have no idea what to do in case of fire!”

But Adolph routed us out and drove down the road with us.

“Why are you so interested in Schmitt?” I asked en route.

“We be cousins.”

“So that’s why we got sold on the Wayside Inn!”

Jim and I were agreed that messing around with the hose which we don’t understand would only lead to trouble, and that the only thing for us to do was to stick to the ladders and axes. It was beginning to get light as we dashed up to the house and there were quite a lot of folks passing water buckets from the cistern, and running around.

We saw smoke around the top of the house, but no flames. Jim and I grabbed the ladders, fitted a couple together, and with an ax apiece we swarmed up and knocked out a window in the best

fireman style as seen by us in the movies. The crowd was yelling like mad; but we didn't see Schmitt or the girls.

We climbed through the window. There was not nearly as much smoke as I expected, and we couldn't find any girls or anybody to save.

"Must save the furniture then," Jim shouted and we began pitching furniture out of the window.

Some one came belting up the stairs yelling, and it turned out to be old man Schmitt. "You tarnull fools," he shrieked, "stop it before I kill you! The fire's in the woodshed. I'll blow your fool heads off!"

He seemed so annoyed we decided not to argue with him, but

backed down the ladders. “Lynch ‘em!” yelled somebody. So we footed it to the truck, flung on the ladders and beat it up the road for town as fast as the truck would step.

“Now keep to the back streets,” I urged Jim. “And if you see any sign of fire drive the other way just as fast as you can!”

“We won’t run into any more fires,” said he, “the law of averages doesn’t provide for it.”

“Don’t kid yourself! The law of averages, the rule of reason, the law of gravity, and all other natural laws are suspended as far as we are concerned on this trip. You didn’t notice that we ran over an albatross anywhere, did you?”

“Well,” Jim insisted, “we

participate in no more fires. What we do in case of fire is just exactly nothing, or rather less than that if possible. They can't borrow so much as an ax if the town burns up. We scratched up the ladders back at Schmitt's, and I suppose they'll take the price of repainting them out of my pay!"

We got down by the Badger branch as quiet as we could. It was still pretty early and no one was stirring anywhere. Parking the truck out in the back lot by the alley, we were trying to get a little sleep when there was a terrific bang right behind us.

"Another tire," I mumbled to Jim as I straightened up in the

seat, “figure they’ll take that out of your pay?” But it was no tire. “The hoodoo’s got us again, Jim! Another fire!” We could see flames through the windows of a little brick building across the alley.

“Let’s get out of here before anybody comes,” grunted Jim. “We’ll drive until we come to a nice quiet lake, park in it up to our necks, and see if they can have a fire there!”

But just as we were trying to start, an excited chap in a blue suit was upon us. “You’re just in time!” he shrieked.

“Yah, just in time to get away from here,” I snapped. “Push on, Jim.”

“But the fire!” he yells.

“We’re no firemen!”

“Stop arguing and get busy,” he snaps.

With that he pulled a gun on us and showed a badge. “I’m the special police for the Grand Furniture Company there, and you don’t stir a step if I have to shoot you!”

After eying us fiercely for a short minute he slipped the gun in his outside pocket, grabs an ax from the truck and started for the burning building. “Bring along that hose,” he shouted.

We were pretty mad, not to say desperate, so we piled off the truck after him. I made a lovely flying tackle and brought him down just as he reached the building. Jim got hold of the revolver and threw it as far as he could. Then we grabbed the ax

and had a lovely tussle.

“Try to steal our ax, will you?” Jim grunts. “Fire or no fire, officer or no officer!”

“You fellows crazy?” he yelled. He puts up a fine fight, but we got the ax away from him and stalked back to the truck while the flames blazed merrily in the brick shed. Just then, of course, a policeman had to come running up the alley.

“Let’s fight it out to the last gasp,” I said to Jim.

He nodded. “Anything’s better than getting mixed up in another fire.”

The watchman saw the policeman and yelled: “The fire’s in the oil and paint shed. These firemen are right here with everything. They won’t work, and

when I try to get an ax to knock open the windows so we can turn the hose in, they steal my gun and knock me down.”

“No more monkey business,” said the cop pretty sternly. “Take care of this fire first, and we’ll settle with you later.” A couple more men come running up the alley. “Grab those axes and knock out the windows,” ordered the policeman. “I’m going to turn in another alarm.”

The fire was burning great guns in the little building, and flames were shooting through the roof, but the brick walls held and so did the windows, which seemed to be fireproof glass and steel sash.

“I warn you this is private property,” said Jim, firmlike.

“You’re not to touch an ax, a ladder, or a piece of hose.”

The watchman just grabbed an ax again; one of the citizens took another, and the other started to unroll the hose.

Jim drew a nice shiner in the first battle, and his fight was still up. “Come on,” he called to me and jumped the watchman again.

The two citizens were so surprised that they didn’t put up much of a fight, and we were doing fine when a fire rig dashed up the alley with the policeman on the step.

It boiled pretty fast then, and though we fought to the last ditch they dragged us back to our truck. This time the cop handcuffed us to the steering wheel and left us with a curious group looking us

over.

The regular firemen were soon throwing water all over the big wooden building near the paint shed, and in a little while the fire was announced as under control. The officer came back with a police sergeant.

“You fellows firemen?” asked the sergeant.

“Certainly not!”

“Oh, you admit it?”

“In fact we insist upon it,” I replied.

“Just driving across country in this rig for the fun of it?”

“That’s exactly it!”

“And what would you have in those nice big tanks?”

“How should we know?
Chemicals, if anything.”

“Sure, chemicals is what they call it in some drug stores. Old Man Volstead has sure put you boys up to some funny tricks. Last month we caught a couple all dressed up in black, even to the gloves, driving an undertaker’s wagon. Embalming fluid they called what they had, and I guess they were right.”

“I think it’s our duty to sample the evidence,” said the sergeant to the officer, with a wink.

“We warn you,” I shouted as he got down, stuck the house in his mouth, and turned on the valve.

There was a rush of foam that filled his mouth and spilled all

over his uniform. "I'm poisoned," he yelled as he flung the nozzle away from him so it sprayed all over the other cop. "It is chemicals. Run 'em in quick. I'll fix you two smart Alecs!"

"On what charge are we arrested?" I demanded.

"Resisting an officer! Assault! Arson! Attempted poisoning! Come along!" They soon had us locked in a cell.

Jim was sure pretty low, and I wasn't so cheerful myself. "Fine vacation trip!" he moaned.

"They'll stick us in jail for a couple of months; our jobs are gone, we're ruined!"

"Maybe it won't be so bad." I tried to cheer him up.

"Maybe it wouldn't have been if you hadn't kicked that fat cop

in the stomach. After what we did to the watchman, and then with the sergeant getting his mouth full of suds and ruining his uniform, that left us without a chance at a friend. What those three will testify to about us will be plenty.”

“Well, why didn’t you let them take the axes and the rest?” I countered.

We were still adding to our troubles by fighting each other when the turn-key unlocked the door and told us we were wanted in the office. There we found a pompous looking little man, all decked out in blue and gilt braid. I made him out to be the fire chief. Also there were a couple of business men, one of whom nodded to Jim.

“These are the men who kept

them from breaking through the windows with the axes?" asked the chief.

"That's them," says the police officer.

"But, chief," I breaks in.

"Not a word!" he snapped. "I have a document to read to you two gentlemen."

"Official charges, I suppose," I mutter.

They filled our names in from the police records, and the fire chief began to read:

Whereas, those two
visiting amateur firemen
did vigorously and with
their full force and
strength oppose the city
and private police and
prevent them from
breaking through the fire

windows and doors of the burning paint shed of the Grand Furniture Company, and, despite all difficulties, kept these intact until the arrival of the Springfield Fire Department; and,

Whereas, the opening of these fire windows or doors at that time would certainly have permitted the spread of the fire to the large frame buildings adjoining, while leaving them closed permitted the oil and paint fire to burn itself out without spreading.

Therefore, the Commissioners and Fire Marshal of Springfield join in commending these two young men for

their intelligence,
bravery, and
determination. They are
hereby made honorary
members of this
department, entitled to all
the privileges of such.

Before I was sure I'd heard right,
the chief was shaking my hand.

I heard Jim gasp and mutter,
“Well, I'll be—” But before he
could say anything the other
gentleman was talking.

“I am president and general
manager of the Grand Furniture
Company,” he said. “On behalf of
our company I not alone want to
thank you for saving our plant,
but to ask that you accept these
checks in token of our esteem and

appreciation.” They turned out to be for a hundred dollars apiece.

“Of course you gentlemen are at liberty,” said the fire chief. “On behalf of the city I wish to apologize for your unjust treatment by the police, and hope that you will forgive it.

“We in the fire department find that they are almost always wrong on the subject of fires, and while they doubtless mean well, their efforts are all too often unintelligent.”

I could see Jim slowly pinching himself, but finally he was convinced to the point where he took a chance and said “Thanks” as we started to leave.

The other man turned out to be the local Badger manager, and we walked over to the place with

him. "I suppose you want this check of mine to cover refinishing that fire rig," says Jim.

"Certainly not! The fire chief is so much pleased with you boys, and so tickled to put the police in bad, that he's agreed to recommend the purchase of the truck for one of the suburban stations.

"We've never been able to do a thing with him before. You've done a great job making this sale, and you have a share of the commission coming when it goes through.

"By the way, how are you boys going home?"

"We hadn't thought," Jim replied.

"I have a roadster that's supposed to go up that way. Glad

to have you drive it back if you'd like."

"Sounds fine," I said.

"Wait a minute," broke in Jim. "What color is it—red?"

"Yes, it used to belong to the fire department. We just traded it in."

"We'll take the train," said Jim firmly.

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