

The Rocking-Chair Chief

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SMOKE-EATERS ARE A SPECIAL BREED—AND THIS ONE WAS AS HOSTILE AS THE FIRES HE FOUGHT

GARRY O'MALLEY was born several blocks west of the stockyards, in a house that happily no longer exists. At fourteen he joined the Black Creek gang. At seventeen he left it, to the relief of the gang leaders, who considered him insubordinate.

At eighteen he drove a truck for a packing house, at nineteen led three hundred other drivers in a strike that was both bloody and futile, and at twenty again drove a truck, this time with no pride in the work.

At twenty-one he decided to become a uniformed fireman.

He entered the department with a reputation that was hardly savory, but with a temporary political backing that erased several of the more unpleasant chapters from his record. He was not wholly to blame. From his father's father he came by a robustious spirit.

From his father's mother, who was a Casey, he derived a hatred of ordered method. His own mother, half Slav, half Latin, passed on to him a temptation to quarrel, the inclination to mope, and the love of flamboyant leadership.

In addition, from each of his ancestors, he inherited a set of lovable but inconsequent virtues. He was

handsome, in a vague, perplexing way, with features that were pleasant but ill matched. His nose, a little too flat, his eyes that were too bright, his chin that was too sharp, and his color that was too delicate for his size, blended together into a personality that was not unattractive.

He was fearless, and loved the sound of battle; especially battle against odds. He was stubborn in the defense of whatever he decided at the moment was right, or just, or interesting.

But vested authority was the scourge of his exciting existence.

Now a member of the fire department, he gravitated to the seventh battalion, that lusty, ill-drilled crew on the north side. And no sooner had he set his rubber boots down in the seventh battalion, than he drifted, quite naturally, to Engine Company No. 24, an aggregation of wrangling roustabouts, who had earned for themselves the blackest name in all the battalion. Among this handful of men he established himself firmly as the most persevering outlaw in the company.

Persevering, that was it. It was as if he set out, purposefully, to be the hottest headed objector in the worst

trained company in the least disciplined battalion in the department. And that year the department's morale was low over all the city.

Before he joined the department, he had felt, quite unconsciously, a fellowship for fire. It destroyed. It wiped out many a nuisance. It produced turmoil and battle.

Not until he put on the blue shirt and leather helmet did he recognize in fire a natural and alluring foe. But once he realized its unconquerable capabilities, he pitted himself against it as if it were an ancient enemy. He fought it stubbornly, and hated it with satisfying gusto.

He hated it nearly as much as he did his superior officers.

II

Garry O'Malley, like all recruits, entered the fire department through the path of a trying and detested routine. Politicians may pull appointive strings, but they can't put spine in a spineless man, lungs in a flat chest, or heart in a coward.

The drill school, to which all probationers first are assigned, tests each man with multitudinous tasks. It brands him unsuitable and turns him back to civil life, or it marks him fit and harasses him daily with soul provoking labor.

Battalion Chief Daniel Alkorn acted as drillmaster and chief instructor at the time Garry slouched into the school. Garry condemned him at the end of the first day.

"This here Arsenic Alkorn," he told his mates in the bunk room that night, "he's poison to me already! Thinks he's rough, that guy does! Say, you know what he is? He's nothing but a rocking-chair chief, and no mistake!"

Other recruits, many seasons before, had bestowed on Drillmaster Alkorn the alliterative nickname of Arsenic. Alkorn liked it. It gave him a blustery self-respect. But when he heard the whisper that he had been called a rocking-chair chief by a new, unbroken man, he turned purple and inarticulate and smashed the chair he had sat in.

It had been a comfortable chair, too. Afterward he was sorry. For three years, on sultry summer afternoons, he had sat in the shade in that rocking-chair, directing recruits in their evolutions in the drill tower. He was a big man, even for a battalion chief, and inclined to overweight. Increasing pounds had added little to his dignity. He was one of those beefy, perspiring men who never become portly.

He looked at Garry O'Malley early in the morning of Garry's first day at the school, and decided that here was a young man worth breaking. Unfortunately, Arsenic Alkorn's broad face was as easy to read as a billboard. Garry looked at it, sensed exactly the thought in the drillmaster's mind, and the blood of his ancestors raced through his veins at double time.

"Does that baby think he'll get rid o' me?" he asked himself. And then, with the wisdom of twenty-one years devoted chiefly to personal and private wars, he mapped an

immediate campaign. Get rid of him? How? Well, not for disobedience, and not for inability! He would take the old man's insults, for the simple pleasure of defeating the will of authority.

He had no intention of becoming a good fireman. His only plan was to make as much trouble as he could and remain safely within the letter of the law.

The rocking-chair remark passed swiftly about the barracks that night. The next day, and many days thereafter, Alkorn attempted to contrive evolutions on the drill tower that would sicken this recruit.

But, as the evolutions became more difficult and more dangerous, he saw Garry go through them with an added zest; saw him pit sense of balance and ten frail fingers willingly against dizziness and great heights. In spite of himself, he had to admire such swaggering impudence.

III

After six months, Garry went as a probationer to the Seventh Battalion and Engine Company 24. The company quarters were in a cramped old brick building between two ancient warehouses, in the wholesale clothing district. It was an unenviable post. Engine Company 24 held several records other than the one of which it was proudest, the record for ill discipline.

At the end of each year, when the alarms were tabulated, it was Engine 24 that led the list, with a total of eighteen hundred runs, an average of five a day. And when the officers of the Mutual Aid sharpened

their pencils the first Monday of each January, and checked the names of new widows, of firemen who never again would ride howling to duty, because of smashed skulls or burned lungs or broken backs, Engine 24 once more topped the column.

The "suicide squad," it was called. Small wonder discipline was flexible.

Garry had served two reckless years on the company when he first crossed hydrants openly with authority. It had been a particularly dangerous job, a phonograph record factory that spit out geysers of yellow and black smoke for three desperate hours, before twenty pumpers succeeded in drowning it.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Engine 24, which had responded to the third alarm, managed to run its line into the rear of the basement, and there, shoulder deep in warm, dirty water, fought out the last of the battle alone.

A helmet poked down the coal chute, a glistening helmet, enameled white, to designate its wearer as a marshal or battalion chief. Under the dripping brim, Garry made out the beefy cheeks of Alkorn.

Garry had the end of the brass pipe, just behind Captain Flannery. Opposite him, panting and cursing, old Cardigan, senior pipeman, struggled with the line. Max Bloomfield, Daugherty, and Binney sloshed along the hose behind him.

The white helmet had disappeared.

"It's the rocking-chair chief!" Garry sang out in a voice louder than the drum of the streams. "One eye he

sticks in, and that's all out o' him for the day!"

"What's that?"

Arsenic Alkorn's voice bellowed the interrogation out of the darkness to the left of them.

"Hit her a bit lower," Garry suggested, as if he had not heard, and did not so much as twist his neck.

"Get up in there, if you're so brave!" the rocking-chair chief retaliated. "If you're so damnably brave. Up ten foot and hit it!"

When the fire was out and the hose lines had been yanked section by heavy section into the drying tower at the rear of engine quarters No. 24, Joe McGraw, chief of the seventh battalion, climbed out of his red motor buggy at the curb. Captain Flannery, who was not so well disciplined himself, had finished his shower and rubdown. He was leaning on the alarm stand at the front of the quarters, biting his tongue and writing the day's report painfully in the company log.

"Evenin', chief."

"I'll speak with you," his superior said, and his voice had an unpleasant ring. "Have you heard of the old man, the chief marshal? Well, he had a stroke this afternoon, in his office. He's in a bad way. So they put in an acting marshal. It's Alkorn—Arsenic Alkorn—and your respects are due him."

"Hum!" said Captain Flannery.

"And Arsenic Alkorn had me pompiering all over his office not twenty minutes ago," McGraw went on. "Seems as he was in the basement with you this afternoon."

"He was."

"And he heard something!"

"If he wasn't deaf he must of heard a bit. It was right noisy down there."

Garry O'Malley, who was scrubbing the rear right wheel of the pumper, moved around to the left, where he could hear better. He had no liking for this turn of affairs. It meant a fight, of course. He had no objection to that.

But this would be a defensive fight, and his best style was aggressive. He was one of those men destined to go through life in the first advancing wave.

"Alkorn's got no liking for the rocking-chair name," McGraw said, "and one of your men stuck it on him again today. He says it's the last time."

Captain Flannery rubbed his chin.

"Seems to me I heard somebody make a remark. In some other company, I think."

"No other company in the world would go poking a chief in the face, Flannery! And I have a good guess as to which of your men it was. Listen, captain, we're near the end of the string, you and me. I'm down sick with hearing nothing but complaints and annoyance from the main office. It's got to stop."

IV

At supper that night, Captain Flannery mentioned the matter. His company received his remarks casually. He had none too proud a name himself as a disciplinarian. Twice since he became an officer he had been suspended five days for

disobedience of regulations.

Only Garry, of the half dozen men, took the matter seriously. He became more determined in his hatred of authority. He grumbled as they went to bed that night, discussed rocking-chairs and politics, and hoped that the chief marshal was recovering his health.

“Not that the old man’s a shining angel,” he concluded, “except that he’s a good fireman, and no old woman sitting in a rocking-chair!”

In his own quarters at the front of the house the captain pretended not to hear.

But the chief marshal died.

Twenty days later, with aldermen stewing, with captains and lieutenants, rabbis, priests, social workers, and the Insurance Exchange yanking frantically at political hawsers, Arsenic Alkorn was appointed chief marshal, and the word went down the line that respect, courtesy, and obedience were due the rocking-chair chief.

O’Malley sulked. Stubbornly he refused to respect the new commander, no matter how well he obeyed. There was no thought of feud in his mind. He held little against Arsenic himself. But the rocking-chair chief embodied in his opinion all the abstract unpleasantnesses of authority.

Time and again he told his fellows, especially Max Bloomfield, who had three brothers in the garment trade and two others in Siberia, that the time would come when he and the rocking-chair would meet face to face.

“And the best man wins,” he always concluded, “be he pipeman, second class, or the chief of ten

departments.”

Garry completed his third year, growing daily more combative. Twice and a third time he faced the disciplinary board, once was warned, once was fined, and the third time was suspended. The first time he had forgotten to execute an order. The second time he had disobeyed purposely. The third, filled with a fierce and overwhelming disregard for consequences, he had pummeled an acting lieutenant. The next time he would leave the department with a dishonorable discharge.

“And when I leave, done and disgraced,” he told Bloomfield, “it won’t be for poking no simple-minded company officer. I’ll make a night of it, I will, and knock off all the white helmets in the whole crowd.” The summer had been dangerously hot and dry. The month of August came and passed, with one scant shower. September baked the wooden roofs in the tenement districts, charred lumber yards, scorched frame walls, and gave Engine Company 24 a new record on departmental lists. The members of the crew, being tired, were harder to manage than ever.

Fire Marshal Alkorn, with customary enthusiasm, accepted his new responsibility with an effort to tighten up discipline. He knew the reputation of Engine 24. He decided to change it. But before he had the opportunity, there occurred the wool warehouse disaster.

The first alarm tapped in at seven o’clock, while the members of Engine 24 sat at supper. Bloomfield was on duty before the joker, his chair tipped back, feet higher than his head.

The first box call was followed by a two-eleven alarm, that sent five additional companies to Water and Trade Streets.

"A two bagger off Box 8x4!" Bloomfield shouted, and Captain Flannery dropped his iron fork noisily. Supper was over in an instant, although Engine 24 was not due until the third alarm.

"One o' them woolers, down around that corner, I bet you!" Binney commented. He was a scrawny man with few teeth, and a pointed, protruding chin. "That section's full of 'em."

"Best put on our bunkers," the captain said.

The crew galloped upstairs behind him, kicked off their shoes, jerked out of their blue serges, and slid into their heavy combination breeches and boots, ready for a night alarm.

They waited twenty minutes. Then the three-eleven came in from Water and Trade Streets. Engine 24 whooped out into the dusk, its siren shrieking and bell rope jerking, the six-cylinder Seagrave motor humming under the crimson hood.

V

A wool warehouse it was, just as Binney had said. Half a mile away, its smoke cuddled down to the pavement, making firemen curse and civilians cough. It was a tall building, poking up eleven floors, jammed with bales and sacked wool. The second assistant marshal, who first took charge of the battle, was turning over command to the rocking-chair chief at

the moment Engine 24 bellowed into action.

"Twenty-four reports!" Captain Flannery shouted.

"Lay your line down the alley," Alkorn directed. "And listen! Don't go off halfcocked. When you get her laid out, I'll place you. Wait for me. I'm going in."

"Six section—lay and break," was the company commander's order. "Follow up! "

Garry O'Malley ran with the brass pipe, the first section of limp fabric hose flapping at his rubber heels. Already other companies had their hose stretched in serpentine, throbbing lines down the alley.

Bloomfield, who was overfat and inclined to smoke sickness, dragged the second fifty-foot section. Cardigan tugged the third. Brass couplings rattled and rung against the pavement.

Binney and Daugherty, their wide mouths spilling out noise, yanked line off the engine tailboard. King, the engineer, chewed tobacco and stood ready with his canvas glove on the water gate.

Smoke churned down from black windows and piled against the cobblestones of the alley; men waded through it, while it sucked like mud at their ankles.

"Twenty-four!"

"It must be the rocking-chair!" Garry grumbled.

"Twenty-four! In here — this stair— basement—get far's you can— she's going good up center!"

Basement! With smoke dropping like lead! Garry charged around the chief marshal, taking no

care not to trip his superior with dragging hose. Just ahead of him, poking his ax handle experimentally through the murk, Captain Flannery hunted the door.

Hunted it, found it, plunged in.

Garry followed. Smoke jammed down his throat. It lodged like gravel in his lungs, choked him, clouded his eyes.

“Sending men into a basement—”

“Come on!” the captain ordered. Then a gasp. “Black as an alderman’s heart!” he added.

Garry groped ahead. What a trap it was! The stair dropped menacingly steep.

“I ain’t hankering for no Jacob’s ladder,” Garry snorted. “It might be the pit in here.”

A warm draft puffed into his face, rank with the smell of burning wool. The basement floor still lay dry under foot. Not enough water had poured in yet. Take a lot of water—Garry thrashed forward into a rough stone wall, felt along it, left, right. There—a door. Hotter.

Less air. Was a man expected to breathe soup?

“Get in there!” Captain Flannery urged. “Step out! Was you waiting for a reception committee to hand you along?” Garry growled and made sure that his captain heard it.

“Enough!” Flannery commanded. “Hell’s a poor spot for disrespect!”

“It’s a poor spot to go chasing a man in ahead of you!” Garry answered.

Back in the dark, through the rumble of drumming water, he heard

Bloomfield cough. A smoke cough. If he started so soon—

“Bloomfield!” It was the captain. “Down low and through your nose. Are you a blasted ree-croot?”

Binney swore mightily at the foot of the step. Daugherty answered him with a snort. Then came Cardigan’s voice, that always seemed old and worn-out in the dark of a smoky basement:

“They’s a stiff draft comin’ through from somewheres.”

“Aye, and devil take it!”

“Best have a light.”

“Bloomfield! Out with you. Get a squad company. Bring a flare!”

VI

Members of Squad 3, that reckless rescue crew from the tindery west side, with axes, wire cutters, and crowbars in their knotty hands, were charging down the alley just as Bloomfield fled out.

“Flare!” he cried.

“Aye, coming!”

The blue white acetylene torch thrust unsteady shadows into the rear of the basement, lighting the smoke in dusty halos. With its sputtering flame at their backs the members of Engine 24 explored deeper under the overladen warehouse, deeper into the smoke, into the breathless, dry warmth of the cellars.

Bloomfield, warned twice and a third time by his cough, was the first to drop. Smoke seized his throat, gouged his eyes, sent him floundering to the cement floor. He crawled, with terror pushing his hands and legs, in a frantic search for air.

Captain Flannery, poking his gloves ahead, called back huskily;

“O’Malley!”

“Aye! Blast this used up air!”

“She shows red.”

“I can’t see nothing!”

“Move ahead, anyways,”

Flannery bade.

Cardigan, gasping, his nose to the floor, wriggled forward. Binney rooted along on his chin, advancing three feet. Daugherty, bringing up the rear, heard their muttering voices indistinctly.

“We must be in Egypt already!”

This was Garry.

“Come along, I say!”

Smoky authority in the captain’s voice spurred the O’Malley temper.

“I ain’t riding no bicycle. Coming fast’s I can!”

Two feet more.

He saw light ahead through an arched opening, a dingy and beclouded luminance, vagrant flashes of crimson upon sulky salmon-colored swaths of smoke. Fire there, all right!”

“Water!” the captain ordered.

“Charge the line!” Garry passed the word back.

Daugherty took up the order. “Engine Twenty-Four—for saints’ sake, charge that line!”

The command passed down the alley. Engineer King spit, tipped his head to one side, heard his own number bawled through the medley of destruction, and yanked his water gate. The fabric hose leaped like a startled python.

“Drag her here,” Captain Flannery demanded fiercely.

His order smote the O’Malley

ears like a challenge. As if it were not enough having fire to fight, without a bunch of officers telling him how to do it! The rocking-chair chief sending them in here, with all the world pushing down on top—a man killer, Alkorn was! And the captain—if he had the guts of a gnat he’d have refused to come!

The fire stuck out an impudent yellow tongue from around the stone arch. Water pushed air through the one-inch tip of the brass hose pipe, and sputtered after it. Garry, feeling the jerk of the line, the sudden pulse of the engine, drove the stream ahead at the advancing flame.

“Go after it!” the captain urged.

“I’ll tend my own tip,” Garry answered.

“No more talk out of you!”

There was no time for quarreling. A new deluge of smoke, thick as the wool that made it, dropped in an overwhelming blanket upon them. Cardigan sputtered and rolled over to his side.

“Take him out!” the captain said, and Binney, yanking the old man over his own shoulder, started to crawl toward the stair.

Daugherty dodged in, yanked at the line feebly, and sat down on the floor. Only the captain and Garry O’Malley held firm to the pipe.

“She’s crawling up on us,” the officer said.

“Nobody but a rocking-chair chief—”

“Save your wind!” Flannery answered.

The fire marched across a beamed ceiling, and sent out exploring feelers as it advanced. Heat raced

ahead of it, heat that made Garry's skin parch and his lips split, that put a great weight on his neck and needles into his eyes.

"Hold that line," Flannery bade, "an' I'll go get help. You, Daugherty, get a holt here. Eh? Why, the man's keeled! Are they children or widders, these men of mine?"

The captain spoke in a sleepy, mumbling monotone. Garry saw him edge back.

"Are you scart, mister?" he taunted.

"Be damned to you!" Flannery snapped.

"I'll drop me pipe and leave you have what you're aching after!"

VII

Garry O'Malley, outlaw, felt a fierce rage at his company commander. Flannery was backing toward the stair that led up to the alley. In front the fire menaced nearer.

Garry held his face close to the brass tip, breathing up thirstily the air bubbles that found their way out with the water. He shouted insubordinately over his shoulder, wrapped legs and arms about the pipe, then bellowed insults at his captain.

Still, here was fire. He wanted to run out to the alley after Captain Flannery, to thrash him. His scorched knuckles ached for the satisfying feel of the Flannery ribs. Still, here was fire.

With enemies in front and behind, he chose the more ruthless.

Resolutely he faced the fire. Let all the officers go to the devil! What a disadvantage they took of a man,

anyway! He'd never be an officer! Anybody offer him a bugle for his hat—and he'd stamp on it.

Discipline? A long word with a lot of meaning! Meant bullying a man who couldn't bully back. Meant sending men where you're afraid to go yourself. There was the rocking-chair chief, for instance.

He swallowed thirstily. Have to knock this fire or get out—

Far forward in the building something rumbled. Garry heard it dizzily, A wall? Hardly. Floor? More likely a floor.

Here came water, a hot torrent across the cement. A floor all right, tumbling down with a load of water. And new parched drafts—breathless drafts, whipped along threateningly. The fire took new life, spread out left and right, leaped down, twenty feet away.

Where was the rocking-chair?

Garry choked. Blast Alkorn! He was out in the street somewhere, with his white helmet poking up where the crowds could see it! Posing around like a ten-cent actor! Garry retreated two feet, grudgingly.

"The lazy loafer! If I get out of this, I'll tend him—him and all officers!"

Even now there was nothing personal in his rage. It pointed as it always had, against vested authority, against all men enforcing a hated discipline, all servants of order, all compulsion and all restraint. Fire slapped at his face, and hooted about his ears. He vented his bile on it, sloshed and drove, swore mightily, and backed two feet more.

He was conscious then of

another voice, not the captain's, too resolute and demanding for any of the other men.

"Take him out!"

Two white helmets bobbed close together through the smoke. Other helmets, black, with battered red numbers, jogged nearer. It was Binney they were lifting. Binney, who had come back to help and had dropped.

They carried him away. Only one white helmet remained.

The man wearing it groped nearer. Firelight splashed against his face. It was the boss himself—Arsenic Alkorn!

He crawled nearer. Not too near. Over his shoulder Garry, watching him bitterly, saw the older man's hands draw back from the heat and his knees lift from scalding water.

"Get in a bit closer and hit it!" the chief marshal commanded.

Garry swung about fiercely, a chill resentment dashing through his baked body.

"Closer, your eye!" he bellowed. "Would you go killing a man? You come here like—"

"Eh?"

"Go do it yourself, you lazy rocking-chair!"

Alkorn's helmet tipped upward, exposing his beefy face to the pitiless onslaught of the fire. He stretched out one gauntleted hand toward Garry. Garry's own arms, that had been clamped tight about the throbbing pipe, loosened their grip.

Now was the time! Here was the minute of all minutes! He had insulted the highest officer of them all, and, in spite of his crawling, burned flesh, he felt a gaudy deliverance, a new

and enheartening freedom. He had insulted the chief!

And now, as soon as he was rid of this cursed line, he would thrash him. His left hand raised combatively.

VIII

It was over so suddenly that Garry never knew, nor did the chief, nor any of the hundred howling firemen outside, exactly how it happened, exactly what did happen. Those in the street in front, guiding three tripod pipes, those clinging to the two extension ladders tipped precariously against third and fourth floor sills, those manning the turret wagon with its triple siamese brass water cannon, those aiming the snout of the tall water tower, all told the same incredible tale.

The fire went out. Like a match in a bucket of water, the flame expired. Wind sucked into the windows in a mighty gasp.

One second the blaze poked defiant fingers from a score of windows and waved its plumes insolently atop the roof. The next second it smothered black as a pocket. There was an inrush of air. And then a fragment of utter silence, to the distant purr of pumping engines and the drum of water on hot bricks.

"We've knocked it! It's out!" a recruit on the ground cried.

"Watch sharp!" warned a captain.

"Run!" screamed a battalion chief who had more wisdom in the ways of fire.

The roof fell first. Like a giant eggshell, it crushed down in the

center. Then the top floor, all of it, grunted upon the tenth, and the tenth upon the ninth, and the ninth upon the eighth.

It held there a precarious instant. The front wall swayed out. The rear wall trembled. The south side wall, on the alley, staggered drunkenly, pushed out at the sixth floor, in at the top and bottom, and crashed.

Like a salvo of fieldpieces, its bricks boomed down. The sixth floor fell, and the fifth, and the fourth. The third held on three sides, spilling water and smoke, wooden beams and brick and stone, toward the southeast corner. There the second floor yawned. The first opened, and ruin and destruction poured into the basement.

It rumbled down upon the hose of Engine 24 where the line ran into the cellar stair, covered it, and buried it deep. It shut, barred, and locked the basement with hot brick and blistering mortar. Then it sent down its smoke to plague any throat that might still breathe, and washed twenty tons of boiling water to the cement basement floor. .

Garry O'Malley ducked. Chief Marshal Alkorn felt the first puff as the roof came down, heard the reverberations of other crashing floors.

"Look out, boy!" he cried.

For an instant the flame leaped at them, and withdrew. Darkness followed, and the thunder of tumbling floors above.

And here they came! A beam caught Garry's chest, heaved him into the smoky air, yanked him toward the broad stone arch, flung him down in the scant protection of the wall.

His right leg doubled under him. It snapped. Fresh cold sweat pushed out of his face. Terror and agony overwhelmed him. He felt his senses slipping away.

The chill spray from his own stream, spattering into his face, revived him. What was he doing? Letting fire beat him? Saints spare a man! Beat him? He lifted to one elbow, and opened his eyes.

Firelight once more streaked down through the wreckage, piled like a giant's jackstraws atop him. He could move— move his arms, anyway. Blast that leg!

"Who is it here?"

The voice emerged from under a near-by heap of lath and brick and plaster. Even with his reeling senses, Garry knew the voice. The lazy rocking-chair!

"Where you hiding at?" he asked, and gulped down the pain in his throat.

"Here — my damnable arms are smashed—"

IX

The flames above howled unrepentantly. Garry felt a hard substance throb against his chest. The brass pipe, eh? Its tip drummed with silly insistence against a pile of bricks. At least here was water. And somewhere over there was the rocking-chair — somewhere, for once, where he couldn't rant and bully!

"There's a couple of tons on my neck!" Again that was the voice of the chief.

Garry squinted up through the ruin, at the crazy dance of the flames.

A matter of time, of minutes only. How could any man get out of this? Any whole man? Let alone a man with a leg that had snapped' like a rotten tree?

"Ree-croot! Where the devil are you?"

"Aw—I'm coming. Fast's I can. Don't go blowing your sireen!"

Garry took his bloody hand off the pipe. The brass nozzle wedged solidly. He yanked it upward, spilling its stream at the nearest blaze. There'd be less smoke now, anyway! A man could breathe, give him fireproof lungs.

"If you move that beam that's settin' on me—"

"Stop your noise. I'm coming!"

The beam was a dusty, oaken timber, under a heap of wreckage, that pinned the chief marshal tight in the scalding water on the floor. Dragging his right leg, Garry crawled toward it.

"There's an ax under me," the chief muttered. "Are you dead? A little speed!"

Garry's hands drew back. He'd leave the old tyrant! Flame, pounding down from above, mocked him. His hands moved forward again.

"Where's the ax?"

His mind seemed to keep revolving. Didn't mind the heat. Didn't mind the smoke. Didn't mind anything but his leg. Soon wouldn't mind that.

"I got it. Now lay still. I'll whittle." Twice he stopped, before the timber was severed, to haul away stone and brick, and to reset his brass pipe to point at the swelling fire. Then wood splintered, and the chief rolled over.

"Both my arms," Arsenic Alkorn

grunted. "Broken."

He arose painfully. His eyes, red as the flame, took in the cramped scene.

"We're under the whole toboggan!" he grunted. "Damnable luck!"

Then, after a moment:

"Well? You got hands, ain't you? Hit that there fire—see, she shows there back of you!"

The words that tried to push themselves out of Garry's throat stuck on his tongue. He swallowed them resentfully. The chief's left arm hung limp. The right bled fiercely at the wrist.

The two trapped men, in a precarious cavity too low to stand in, too narrow to lie down, with scalding water below and blazing ruin above, looked balefully at each other in the fitful light.

"It's a good spot to hit it," the chief growled. "Take up that tip. You're hurt? I'll push you over."

With his bruised shoulder, the chief propelled Garry toward the pipe.

"Take it up. Know how to hold a nozzle? Do it, then! Hit that lath over there—and that—what is it, sacks? Hit 'em. Wet 'em down."

Garry's head sank forward. His ears hummed with other sounds than the noise of fire.

The marshal kicked him, howled, bawled threats and encouragement.

"A bit higher! Now down! Oh, if I had my hands!"

"I'm hitting her best I can! My eyes has gone out!"

"Out?"

"Can't see nothing."

"It's the heat. Hit her down a bit. Left—fine! Keep your eyes closed. They won't hurt so."

Two minutes, three, ten. Fire rushed close to them, was driven back, rushed close again. The rocking-chair chief lay on his left side, inhaling smoke, his mouth open because he hadn't the strength to shut it. In front of him, slumped into a limp heap, Garry O'Malley fought fire, blindly, obediently, without rancor and without hate.

"I've bled a bit," Alkorn said at last, his voice husky. "I'm some off my head. If I slip under, keep at it."

Then a silence.

"Hey, ree-croot! Keep at it. They'll be hunting us by now. That's how I trained 'em. They'll be hunting us."

X

Garry heard the pounding far away. Some noise of the fire? There was less heat. The water, dripping on his head, was not so scalding. Then he felt a cool deluge—and heard the voice:

"This way!"

The chief, who had been silent a long time, muttered and tried to sit up. He opened his eyes.

"Hit her a bit to the right," he commanded sleepily.

Garry tried to shout. He rattled the ax against the brass pipe.

"I hear 'em!" a voice cried back. "They're living!"

Men from Rescue Squadrons One, Three, and Ten, lifting immense weights, facing immense dangers, daring with immense disregard for

themselves, prowled down into the ruin, following the fat line of hose from Engine 24. Ladder men with extra lines beat a wet path through the wreckage. Axes bit into floors and sills, cleaving a narrow, treacherous way.

"Saints, they're still flinging water!" Garry felt a hand pull at his slicker. "Come on—why, the rubber's melted!"

"Take the other guy," Garry mumbled. "I'm tired of hearing him talk."

Chief Marshal Alkorn was the first of the pair to walk, for a man can carry two broken arms in slings. He found Garry still propped in the hospital bed, with weights on his foot.

Garry looked up at him.

"Morning, chief." He swallowed hard. "Morning, lad. It's the rocking-chair come to see you. Three weeks it's been since you and the rocking-chair—"

"Listen," warned Garry O'Malley. "I won't have nobody, in fun, or earnest, go making such remarks! Your name's Arsenic, and they's no argument about it." Chief Alkorn grunted.

"I'll make you a lieutenant, boy." Garry O'Malley rubbed his chin, that was a little too sharp, and looked at the chief reflectively. After all, the tradition of his family was combat. He had yielded good ground to vested authority in the matter of Arsenic's name. But there was a limit to anything, especially to amiability. Be an officer?

"No, you won't," he declared stubbornly. "I've sworn it."

"You won't take it?" the chief

cried.

“I won’t,” Garry answered.

He was not wholly to blame. From his father’s father, his father’s mother, his own mother, and many other ancestors, near and remote, he had inherited a complete distaste for authority and all its trappings.