

Confessions of a Fire Fan

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One of those thousands who cannot resist the call of an alarm and the lure of smoke tries to explain though not, mind you, to apologize

THE two officers on traffic duty cleared the way for the hook and ladder truck as it rolled out of the cross street and into the avenue. On the right hand running-board of the great, swaying apparatus, a small, meek eyed, old gentleman with nose glasses on a black cord and a Van Dyke beard was pawing into an official slicker. On his head he wore a leather fire hat several sizes too large.

"Pipe the fireman!" the recruit traffic officer pointed to the beard.

"That ain't a fireman," the veteran corrected, and blew his whistle. Cars poured into the lane through which the truck had run screaming. "He's a nut. A volunteer. Civilians ain't allowed to ride on the apparatus, so he's got himself appointed." A salvage squad announced itself with a shriek. The officer opened the way and it racketted after the truck.

"That guy you saw is one of them honorary assistant marshals," the officer said. "There's about a thousand of 'em. Don't get any pay, and some night when a wall falls on him, his widder won't get no pension. Just a nut."

Perhaps the police officer is

right. The meek old gentleman may be a nut. But the fire department, at least, is too polite to call him that. In New York the boys dub him and his kind "Buffs;" in Chicago, "Fans;" in Boston, "Sparks."

Who are they? Just a band of romantic adventurers who steal away from prosaic jobs to revel for a few hours in the glamorous uncertainty of battle. Architects, surgeons, stock brokers, lawyers, salesmen, laborers, teachers, priests. ...

It is difficult for a man to enumerate his reasons for being a fire fan to skeptical, sober-minded friends. They persist in looking on him as slightly demented and a bad, bad insurance risk. Wives are particularly obtuse. One of the hardest jobs a fan undertakes is to explain to his wife why it was necessary for him to frost his fingers and to return home six hours late with two inches of ice on his best overcoat.

She tells him that it wasn't *his* fire. The building belonged to Smith, who is rich — at least rich enough to own two overcoats. There were men paid to put out the fire. And besides, it was a waste of time! One might have been at home sweeping up the furnace

room.

There are other reproaches, of course. And it is hard to get the overcoat clean. In fact, it never looks quite the same again. Spots of rusty water that have washed down the dirt of ages from between the rafters before dripping on a crazy man's back, aren't the easiest stains in the world to remove from wool fabric.

Other scoffers, not one's wife, contend that the fan is a pyromaniac. Firemen know better. For the engine house boys look upon the fan as their best friend, just as they view the fire bug as their worst enemy.

For sake of argument let us admit that both the bug and the fan are eccentrics. But the bug likes to start fire. The fan likes to stop it. They are at opposite poles.

OF course there is something primitive in the fire fan. He thrives on the roar of battle, the great odds, the robustious heroism of firemen, the shrewd tactics of hose companies, the generalship of departmental chiefs. He loves to be an actor in a mighty fight, to stand shoulder to rubber-covered shoulder with howling pipemen, to take his dose of smoke with a daring rescue crew, to accept the challenge of flame and to battle it to the death. Next day, and the day after, he may drudge at a humdrum desk.

When a hundred thousand sane and normal citizens sit in the rain cheering the muddy efforts of twenty-two men with an inflated ball, when a hundred thousand others crowd a wooden arena to watch a pair of financiers exchange punches and go into clinches, and another hundred thousand grow incoherent begging a

fat athlete to hit the old pill on the nose . . . that's sport. But when another group of citizens goes in for a game that makes football look like ping-pong, a game that takes every fiber of nerve, every ounce of strength, a game that requires the shrewdest strategy and the staunchest heart, a game in which the stakes are millions of dollars and hundreds of lives ... that's eccentricity.

WELL, the fire fan is willing to be listed among the eccentrics, as long as you let him sit around the engine house awaiting the call to duty, as long as you let him keep his helmet and badge and roll out to battle with the boys.

The critical, workaday public forgets that there were fans before there were departments. No doubt while Nero fiddled there was a stout company of Roman volunteers in dripping togas, standing up to their waists in the Tiber, filling buckets for the imperial fire brigade. Pliny mentions the fans of ancient Rome. Apollodorus, architect to the Emperor Trajan, describes the Buffs of another day running with implements that resembled bagpipes, each full of water. Hero of Alexandria refers to "the siphons in conflagrations," and the hearty volunteers who manned them. It was a body of fans under General Phil Sheridan who finally ended the Chicago fire more than half a century ago.

New York's Buffs are the lineal descendants of those hearty burghers who rolled themselves in buffalo robes and slept over the engine house on winter nights in order to be on hand for emergencies. These elder

volunteers were facetiously called "buffaloes" by other burghers, who considered nine pins better sport, and the contraction of the name clings to this day.

In many middle-sized cities in the East, particularly throughout Pennsylvania, volunteers are still the mainstay of the departments. At Harrisburg, capital of the State, a city of eighty-five thousand, property is efficiently protected by three thousand volunteers. The chief of department and his assistant are paid members. Each of the sixteen engine and truck companies has a paid driver, on duty twenty-four hours a day. But the other three thousand members are fans. The Mayor of the city is a lowly hoseman, once the bell rings. Bank presidents shin up ladders. Not only are they volunteers, but they pay for the privilege of fighting fire. It costs each man a dollar a year to belong. And if he's absent from a fire he pays a fine of ten cents.

There are few absentees.

WHEN Big Bill Thompson, king-baiting Mayor of Chicago, was searching for a fire commissioner who, like Csesar's wife, would be above reproach, he picked a fire fan for the job, a man of such integrity that even the opposition newspapers hadn't the heart to criticize him.

This was Albert W. Goodrich, financier and director of the Goodrich steamship lines. For many years he had been a fan ... a simple, hearty, hose-lugging fan. He was one of the organizers of the Fire Fans' Club. He not only gave freely of money for departmental activities, but he put on helmet and boots and went out on the

job with the rest of the boys whenever there was a tough fire to fight.

It was largely through his efforts, long before he was commissioner, that Chicago responded wholeheartedly to the observation of fire prevention week. He organized business men, he advised department heads, he sponsored prevention demonstrations. Firemen love him.

"Say ..." they exclaim, "that guy's got a heart. He's our friend. He ain't a politician . . . he's a fire fan."

The Sparks of Boston are organized into several associations. One of these, the Box 52, Club, has fifty-two members, and in addition to hopping the tailboard and rolling to duty whenever there is an opportunity they meet formally once a month. The club has been in existence seventeen years and for twelve years has been a regularly incorporated institution. Every member has a department badge.

A member of this club, writing to a fan in a city half across the continent, explains its methods in part as follows:

"We Sparks are fortunate in hearing of multiple-alarm fires at all times of the day or night. We have contracted with a private watchman service that has an alarm tapper in its office. Each of us is notified of every second alarm fire. I average 180-200 runs a year and can reach the high value district in ten minutes by taxicab."

A hundred and eighty a year!
Lucky dog.

In many cities it is the fans who operate the coffee wagons that trundle out to night alarms (why wouldn't the

half-frozen men in the rubber coats love them?) In others the department ambulances are the gift of admiring, envious citizens, and the white-jacketted doctors aboard them, often as not, are receiving no pay for their services. In New York there are honorary department surgeons who keep up their own speed-cars, equipped with sirens and bells, and who install alarm recorders beside their beds in order to bunk out with the same alacrity as hose company recruits.

ADDICTION to fire fighting is difficult to break. Smoke, like hard liquor, gets into a man's blood. How many times have you heard the habitual fire fan swear he's through . . . usually after an engine turns over or a wall falls on a group of his mates? For a week he stays away determinedly from engine houses. In a spirit of martyrdom he throws out the alarm bell that has awakened him to joyous battle many a zero night. He mournfully puts off his helmet and boots. Say what you want, he's through. He has the family to remember . . . what if that wall hadn't missed him? And at his age, one must consider one's heart!

Then, when he least expects it, when his resistance is at its lowest ebb, he looks out of the window to see Engine 91 charging past. He tries not to reason why. But at last he opens the window and sniffs. Ninety-one wouldn't come thus far except on a second alarm. Other sirens, speeding gilt and crimson Loreleis, lure him with their seductive songs. He takes up his hat. He'll just run down to the corner and see where it is. Not get into

it . . . perish the thought. Just look it over. Stand behind the lines like any other civilian.

Hours later he crawls back to his desk or his wife, smelling of wood-smoke, wet, winded, his clothes a wreck, his eyebrows singed, his throat sore, his knuckles barked . . . and in his heart a sense of exultation.

"Well, we beat it after all!" he whispers. "It gave us a stiff fight for a while, but we beat it. And wasn't Smoky Joe Martin his grand old self, the way he swung along that cornice? And Engine 31 . . . what a beating they took before they had it stopped! Guess I'll go down to the firehouse tonight and see the boys."

It need not be his own boys. The fan is never geographically minded. Away from home, he always drops in casually at engine houses in the town where he happens to be. He examines the apparatus, looks over the alarm telegraph, inquires about the platoon system, discusses the merits of engines, argues the advisability of three-inch hose on first lead-off, and the trend toward siamese connections at every two-alarm fire. He's invited to supper by the captain, and if asked once, remains the night, sitting out the watches before the recorder instrument, or going to bed in the bunk room upstairs.

The problems of firemen are rather similar everywhere; the battle has as much tang on the West coast as the East. And firemen are the same everywhere, the same bluff, hard-fisted knights in helmets, loving the fight for its own sake, and loving the fan because he loves them.

There is something of the same

thrill in pulling the hose reel up Main Street in Mount Vernon, Iowa, as there is in riding south on the boulevard with Truck 9 in Chicago; in eating smoke with the seven-man department in Traverse City, Michigan, as in dragging high pressure hose in Lafayette Street, New York.

So the real fan never reforms. Set him down in Greenland, and let an Esquimo in his igloo overturn a whaleoil lamp, and the fan will come charging across the ice with his hat full of snow. When a professional fireman has done his bit, when he has served faithfully a long span of years, he is presented with a watch by the members of his company, hangs up his boots, accepts his pension graciously and goes fishing. Not so the fan. As long as he can totter, as long as his failing ears can pick up the staccato call of the joker alarm, as long as his nostrils can distinguish the haunting aroma of smoke . . . he never retires.

Don't pity the old gentlemen in the beard, struggling into a slicker on the running board of the ladder truck as it rolls along. Pity his wife, instead. And his children. And his grandchildren. They're probably out at the ball game this afternoon and have left him alone an hour or so. And when they get back and find that he's been at it again, they'll be ashamed for him.