

On the Jobs

by Carl Mattison Chapin

“I WISH you could stay home to-night, Steve.”

Big Steve Lantry, captain of Hook and Ladder Company 13, let his uniform overcoat slip to the floor and held out his arms to the tired little wife. He folded her tightly in them, looking across the brown tangle of hair with his forehead wrinkled and his eyes filled with worry.

“I wish I could, honey,” he sighed, “but I’ve got to be on the job. You just pile into bed and forget your worries.”

“I can’t sleep, Steve. Elaine coughs so, and her throat fills up and she almost chokes. It scares me to death. I don’t dare shut my eyes.”

The husband patted her shoulders and pressed the brown head closer.

“Shucks, hon!” he chided. “You’re just tired, that’s all. The kiddie’ll be all right. You’ll wake up in the morning and find she’s just got measles or whooping cough, like the doctor said.”

“Yes, and he said she might have bronchial pneumonia. Suppose it *is*. Steve, her temperature’s going up all the time. If anything *should* happen in the night! Can’t you stay with me?”

The wrinkles in her husband’s expressive face deepened and his eyes narrowed.

“I can’t do it, hon,” he said gently. “I’ve got to be on the job.”

“I guess you wouldn’t lose your job if you was off one night,” she said hotly, drawing away from him.

He smiled rather wanly and took her hands.

“If it was only a case of my job, Rose, I’d jack it in a minute if you needed me. But there’s more to it. I’m drawing fat pay from the city whether I’m working or not, and the reason I’m drawing it is so’s I’ll be on the job when they need me. And I guess they need me to-night if

they ever need me—with two feet of snow and the wind blowing blazes and every company in the department short-handed——”

“Yes,” Rose broke in bitterly, “the rest of them can get off, all right—I’ll bet there’s a lot of them hasn’t got the excuse you have.”

“Well, hon, there’s quitters in every business, but they don’t live here. It’s tough for you and it’s tough on me, but we ain’t quitters. If I could do anything, really, I’d stay—but I couldn’t do anything. It might make you feel better and me feel better, but that’s all. We’ll just grit our teeth, hon, and stick it out, and to-morrow we’ll be glad of it. The old truck needs its boss to-night.”

“Well, what’s your lieutenant for?” she demanded.

“Sometimes I wonder,” he answered whimsically. “Tommy’s a good boy, but he ain’t got the head for that job. I don’t dare leave him in charge of that gang of muttonheads. If we get a call to-night it means rescues, and that bunch couldn’t pick a drunk off the sidewalk without me to boss ‘em—There, hon—buck up! This ain’t like you, hon.”

She was sobbing with her head on his breast. He tried helplessly to soothe her, feeling like a brute, yet knowing that he was right. It hurt cruelly to see her so, with her splendid, brave spirit utterly broken.

“B-but I worry so about baby,” she sobbed, desperately groping for a new appeal.

“Shucks!” Steve exploded, relieved to be on ground where his defense was sure. “He’s all right, down with Mary. You couldn’t stand having him here, too.”

“I know, Steve: but John’ll be out on the plow’s to-night, and Mary’ll have her own two to take care of——”

Steve tried to make his laugh sound natural

and hearty.

"Come on, now." he chided with rough tenderness. "If Steve Lantry junior ain't safe with his aunt, he ain't safe anywhere. Besides, he's right under my wing down there. Let's get together now, hon, and take this thing by the neck. The sun'll shine and everything 'll be lovely in the morning. S'pose I can kiss the kiddy without waking her up?"

"She's awake, all right." Rose said mournfully. "Little sleep she'll get!"

Steve tiptoed into the bedroom, where a dim light burned. As he bent over the crib two little arms reached up to him. His heart leaped, and he choked a little at the hot touch of her hands upon his neck. She pulled his head down against her burning face, and he could feel her lips mouthing hungrily at his cheek. His collar and his emotion together were choking him. He straightened up.

"How you feeling, kiddy?" he asked unsteadily.

"Better, fanks," she said.

It was the inevitable answer of her optimistic soul. Steve knew that if she were dying she would still have said, "Better, fanks."

"That's fine stuff, Wollipus," he declared. "You'll be all well when daddy comes to breakfast, huh?"

She smiled up at him bravely in answer, her eyes shining.

Outside it was, as Steve had said. "blowing blazes." All day long the January blizzard had been pouring snow into the gulches of the city streets. The restless wind, never satisfied with its work, was forever busy, piling new drifts, sweeping hollows where the old ones had been, now crooning eerily, now shrieking aloud as it worked.

Steve drew his watch-cap lower over his eyes and plunged into the storm, taking the middle of the street, where the plows had left an ill-defined trough, already drifted nearly level again. With head down, he fought his way into the teeth of the wind. It was a cushion against his body—soft, tangible, resistant, and freighted with driving particles of snow, hard, sharp, and suffocating as drifting sand.

Sometimes it leaped back from before him and, swooping down over the roofs with a screech of glee, caught him from the rear and drove him,

staggering, forward into the vacuum. At the street corners it laid traps for him, shrieking maelstroms which caught the breath from him and left him reeling in the vortex, his arms before his face.

At length he turned down a side-street with the wind behind him and untrodden snow above his knees. He could open his eyes now and look about, up at the windows of the tenements closely curtained against the questing blasts. Behind those shrouded casements were the hived thousands he must guard—thousands so utterly heedless of their own safety. And he so powerless to help them on a night like this!

He came to the truck-house and hesitated, looking yearningly down the street. Only two blocks on, around the corner, Steve junior lay sleeping. He had hoped to steal time for a bedtime romp with the bearer of his name and hopes, but already he had been away two hours when he should not have been away at all. There are no meal-hours for firemen in blizzard times.

In the warm interior of the truck-house the three blacks of the regular hitch stood beneath the harness, champing and pawing discontentedly. Their stalls were occupied by the untrained horses of the extra team.

They whinnied appealingly to Steve as he entered. Poor brutes! There would be no sleep for them. They would be lucky if they were not called upon to burst their hearts, tugging the huge truck through huge, impassable drifts.

Steve sent a detail to clear the runway in front of the house and level the drifts in the street, that the truck might have a fighting chance to make its turn and get under way if the call came. Then he went to his room, changed his clothes, and put on slippers, sitting down with his feet close to the singing radiator. Almost immediately the telephone rang. It was Deneby, chief of the district, his immediate superior.

"Hello, Steve!" he hailed his voice queerly muffled by the hum of the wind in the wires. "You there? Thought you'd be home. Kid better?"

"Worse, a little." Steve answered; "but I couldn't do any good there. The wife's nervous: but she'll be all right, I guess."

"Bad night for the little woman to be alone with a sick kid, Steve. Better go home and help her out. I can send the pung after you if we get anything bad. Just got orders to send out patrols—

one man—tend to it, will you? God, this is the worst I ever saw! Twenty-eight is snowed in completely—six feet deep all through the street. We've got a hundred men shoveling, but they ain't gaining an inch on it."

Steve despatched his patrolman, armed with a snow-shovel, to watch for fires, to clear the hydrants a little, to do what he might to neutralize the fearful advantage of the elements. Having arranged the schedule of hourly reliefs, he returned to his room and tried to settle himself for the long vigil. But he could not compose his mind.

He could not exorcize the vision of Rose and Elaine.

He began to wonder if he were really justified in inflicting this Spartan discipline upon the one being in the world who was dearest to him and most dependent on him. Was he taking his duty and himself too seriously? He knew that other men took duty far less seriously—perhaps they were right. Denehy had dismissed the matter casually enough, and Denehy was a notorious stickler for the small things of discipline.

Denehy had told him to go home. If anything happened, Denehy must answer; or, rather, whatever happened would be charged to the snow. Was not his duty toward the real emergency at home, rather than to this vague emergency of fire which might never materialize?

Was he a fool—a brutal fool?

It was nearly midnight, but none of the men had gone to bed. He could hear them prowling around the house, restless, gloomy, their ears nervously attuned to the click of the tapper, which remained marvelously silent. The weird spell of the storm and of impending crisis was upon them all.

Steve went to the window and, with the shade behind him, peered out into the ghostly mist of snow. At times, when the wind dropped for a moment, he could see a dim patch of light from a window across the street—somebody's "little woman," perhaps, sitting by the bedside of a kiddy with burning cheeks and shining eyes. He wondered how many such there were in the teeming hives that lay on every side of him—

It was *not* for Denehy to answer.

It was for him, Steve Lantry, a man grown, to answer where his duty lay. Great as Rose's need might be, it was not so great as the need of these

hundreds of other wives about him. She would suffer, and he would suffer with her, but the morning would find neither of them permanently worse for it. But should need come to these others, and he not there, for some there might be no morning.

He could picture it with fearful distinctness—the truck rolling in; the inefficient lieutenant and his green crew, winded by the long struggle through the snow, laboring excitedly and ineffectively at the cumbersome hand hoist of the old reserve truck temporarily doing duty for their own up-to-date apparatus; the long delay; and then the puffs of fire at one window after another and the screaming bundles hurtling down into the snow. And Engine 28, his nearest aid, hopelessly snowed in—

Steve returned to his chair. It was midnight now. He wondered why Rose had not called him. Perhaps she was asleep. A dozen times that thought had halted him with his hand on the telephone.

If things were not all right she would have called. Yet, she could not be asleep; perhaps something had happened that she could not call. He snapped the telephone toward him and called the house. Almost instantly her voice came to him, trembling, hysterical.

"Oh, Steve!" she cried.

"What's the matter? Elaine worse?"

"Her temperature's 104, and she don't know me, Steve. I thought I'd go crazy—Oh, I'm so glad to hear your voice!"

"Why didn't you call me, hon?" he questioned.

"I've been fighting so hard not to. I knew you ought not to come—I knew it, really, Steve, and I've been fighting not to bother you—"

"Can't you get the doctor?"

"He's just gone—he had to go—"

"What did he say?"

"He can't tell, yet—but he frightened me, Steve; he was so serious about it. He tried to get a nurse, but he couldn't find one. He says I must make her take the castor oil, and I can't make her take it—she fights, and my hand trembles so I can't hold the spoon—"

"Get Mrs. Kauffman in—"

"She's here now, but she can't make her take it. You've got to come, Steve—you can make her

take it—she'll die if she don't take it, Steve——”

“No, she won't, honey,” said Steve steadily. “Mrs. Kauffman will get it down her, don't you worry. You keep a stiff upper lip, and I'll be home to breakfast before you know it. Good night!”

“Wait, Steve! I can't stand it! There won't be any fires now, will there—it's so late? Can't you come, Steve? Please, please!”

“Now, girl, get a grip on yourself,” Steve urged. “You've been fine! Don't break now. I can't leave. We haven't had a fire to-night, and we're sure to have one—and it'll be all the worse for waiting. I sha'n't go to bed. I'll be sitting right here with the phone at my elbow. You can get me in ten seconds, any time——”

“Wait, wait, wait!” she wailed. I can't stand it! You've got to come! I've fought and fought, and I can't fight any more! I'll go crazy: do you understand, crazy!”

The wildness in her voice frightened him. It was no woman's whim, this breaking to pieces of her strong, tranquil self-possession. He knew that a woman's nerves are as real and tangible a thing to be reckoned with as a broken limb. No duty in the world could justify him in torturing her like this.

“All right honey; I'll come.”

“Thank God!” she sobbed

The registering of his decision brought to Steve, a feeling of great relief. He called his lieutenant.

“I'm going home, Tommy,” he said. “The kiddie's worse, and the wife's near crazy. Call Denehy and tell him you're in charge—he understands.”

The lieutenant's face expressed frightened helplessness. It chilled Steve, but he swung on his heel and tramped away. A moment later he was facing the blasts outside. The wind was in his face now, and blowing, if anything, harder than before. In half a block it forced him to turn while he drew his muffler higher about his mouth.

As he looked back, suddenly a beam of light shot out into the murk of the snow—the truck-house doors had opened. While he stared the horses lunged into view, and behind them the long, slender ghost of the truck. He watched the outfit wallow in the drifts; then, it turned from him and was blotted from view, only the tail-light remaining visible for a moment, swinging dim in

the smother. It was gone before he could collect his thoughts

So the call had come! But how did it concern him? He had made his decision and, doing so, seemed in some fashion to have shifted the burden of responsibility from himself. It was no concern of his now, what happened.

Rose was waiting for him; she needed him.

But what of that other, greater need toward which his truck was wallowing—his own truck, manned by incompetents, led by an incompetent? What of these people who had been paying him “fat wages,” twice every month, in gold coin, that he might be ready when they called?

He had taken their money and, now, when they called, he would not answer because his own wife was nervous—no, not even that was the true reason. He would not answer because his wife's pain made him uncomfortable. Merely for his own peace of mind he would have abandoned these people who had trusted him.

He plunged into the street and started at a painful, staggering run after the vanished truck. It was two blocks before he caught it, just as it lurched around the corner into the street where Stephen Lantry, Jr., slept. And as this fact came home to him he caught a glimpse of the building itself, where young Steve lay—and the front of it was wreathed in whipping smoke.

For the first time in his life panic took hold upon Steve Lantry—not the panic of fear, but the panic of haste, which must do everything instantaneously and hence accomplishes nothing. It is the frame of mind which paralyzes the activity of man in the face of emergency.

Steve recognized it and quelled it as swiftly as it had arisen. With it he fought to quell the thought of little Steve, just one soul in that house of a hundred souls. It was as though he turned a sharp, toothed knife in his heart.

There was no fire in sight, only great cumuli of smoke, rolling from the windows to be caught and whirled away on the howling gale. The single fire-escape was jammed, men, women, children, all struggling downward into the glut of humanity on the lowest platform.

The windows were dotted with heads, dim in the blinding smoke, and it seemed to Steve that a thousand were calling upon him for aid. In his ears roared a pandemonium of wind and screams.

He sent two men through the next building to the roof to open a vent for the smoke. He threw two short ladders to the fire-escape, one man to each to break the jam if they could. It was a job for ten men, but he could not spare more.

He drove the others, fairly twittering from excitement and the exhaustion of the run, to the cranks of the cumbersome aerial.

There was but one thing to do—to go where the picking was thickest and the peril most imminent; to pick as many as he could before smoke and flame overwhelmed them. Until all his ladders were placed and all his men at work he could not leave his post to search for little Steve.

The big ladder was rising slowly, inch by inch to the painful “huh! huh!” of the laboring crew.

Steve’s brain, as he strained at the cranks with his men, was a welter of rage against them for their slowness, against the truck, against the thieving politicians who forced such apparatus on him, against the whole scheme of the universe, against God himself, that he should permit such agony.

And ever he searched and searched among the throng on the fire-escape as if he really hoped that, by some miracle, Mary might have won to it with her three helpless ones. Through the entrance door the smoke glowed red. The fire had broken from the cellar and begun its deadly climb.

The ladder stood erect, whipping in the wind like a bamboo rod. Slowly it swayed over and came to rest against a window of the sixth floor. They raised the fifty-five-foot stick, but the wind snatched it from them and hurled it to the street. They let it lie, and threw the smaller sticks until there were no men left upon the ground save Steve.

He had done all he could, his very best, and even now none had come to help him. His eyes were fixed on those three windows of the fifth floor which marked Mary’s home. It was to them the fifty-five footer would have gone, They were almost hidden now by the thickening smoke which banked down steadily from the roof above.

He threw a life line over his shoulder, unhooked a scaling-ladder from the truck, and started for the stick which led nearest to where little Steve must lie.

There was a new uproar on the still-crowded

fire-escape. Two men, almost naked, crazed by smoke and fear, were fighting their way downward. Steve saw his lieutenant leap at them and go down beneath their feet. Below them the women, struggling for a place on the ladder, were shrieking and fighting to escape the new terror.

He dropped the rope and ladder in the snow and swung himself up to the lowest landing. He had gone suddenly mad with a lust to kill those two who had snatched him back from little Steve. He met them at the second balcony.

Into the face of the first he drove a fist, skilled in the striking of just such blows. The man doubled back over the railing with a horrible, gurgling “Ugh!” slipped to the grated floor and lie still. The second man leaped at him from the rung of the ladder. Steve caught him as he came and hurled him over the railing into the drifts beneath.

He swung himself down to the landing below and plunged into the writhing mass of women, here dragging one to her feet, there slapping another back to her senses. So he broke the jam and started the stream moving once more down the short ladder to the ground.

As Steve dropped again into the snow a wave of heat swept out at him from the doorway—the hall was a blast furnace whose vent must be the roof.

Seizing his rope again, and trailing his scaling hook, he climbed a ladder to the fourth floor, scaled the wall to Mary’s window, and beat his way into the smother of smoke within.

On hands and knees he crawled across the sitting-room and into the little hall.

As he passed the door of the outer corridor, tongues of flame were playing under it in a thin sheet, and the panels cracked and spit tiny balls of smoke into his face. He came to the bedroom, and there, by the dim light of an electric bulb, he found them, lying by the door as they had dropped in their belated flight.

He laid a hand on little Steve’s chest. The baby was breathing still, in Little, painful gasps. He dragged the three children first, past the crackling door, to the window at the front. Then he returned for Mary.

As they passed the door a panel fell inward and a wall of flame swept across the passage behind them. He staggered into the parlor and slammed the door.

The second truck had come at last, and they threw their first ladder at Steve's hook, dangling on the wall. They met him at the window and took down Mary and her brood, Steve followed with the little Steve in his arms. They carried them all to a house across the street, and there Steve stayed until the little one began to cry with open eyes. Then he went back to work.

It was two hours later when Denehy's pung deposited the two Steves in the snow outside their home. Weary, and a bit unnerved from all he had been through, Steve climbed the stairs with dread in his heart. A nurse, not unlike an angel in her crisp apron and cap, opened the door to him. She held a finger at her lips, but at sight of his uniform her face cleared.

"Rose?" he gasped.

"Asleep," answered the nurse softly.

"And the kiddy?"

"Fast asleep and sweating beautifully."

There was a little cry and Rose rushed from the sitting-room. Haggard and disheveled she was, still, but smiling now and sleepily calm. At sight of the bundle in Steve's arms she halted in

wonderment. Steve turned back the snow-powdered blanket and held the baby out to her.

"Thought you might like to see him," he said, not very steadily.

Suddenly Rose seized the little bundle and hungrily buried her face in it. Instantly she started erect with her eyes wide.

"He's all smoke!" she gasped.

She was reeling a little and the nurse leaped forward, one arm about her shoulders, the other beneath the baby.

"Well," said Steve, "Mary's place went up, that's all."

For a moment Rose seemed about to collapse. Then she steadied herself.

"And you——"

Steve tried to make his tone light, but his voice was not altogether steady.

"Daddy was right on the job, wasn't he, Bricktop?" he said.

And then, without a word, baby and all, Rose swayed into his arms, dropped her head upon his wet shoulder, and cried.