

—the hard crackle of growing flames and just the touch of a clapper on a brass fire gong. I opened my eyes, saw the orange light of flames reflected from my bedroom walls, and I jumped out of bed and grabbed my glasses. I looked out my window and saw the fire next door here, the flames and sparks shooting out the window in a strong updraft, licking the eaves two stories up; and I saw the fire engine a dozen yards away toward the street, and the firemen were tugging at the hose, unreeling it just as fast as they could pull. I stood and watched them. Best view of a fire I ever had.

"They worked fast; they got their hose connected to the hydrant out at the curb, and they had a good stream on the fire, the pumper at work, in no more than a minute. In five minutes, maybe less, they had the fire completely out and wet down good. Then they packed up their hose and left." Nordstrum stood there in his old-style button sweater, looking at me over the top of his glasses.

"Well, what's so hard to believe about that?" I asked.

"The fire engine, Oscar, had a tall, upright, cylindrical boiler made of polished brass, narrowing at the top to a short smokestack. It looked like a boy's steam engine, only a thousand times larger. Underneath that boiler was a fire made of wood and coal; that's what heated the water that supplied steam pressure for the pump. The whole thing, my boy, along with hose, axes, and all the rest of it, was mounted on a low-slung wagon body with big wooden spoke wheels, painted red; and it was pulled by four big gray horses who stood waiting in the light of the fire stomping their hoofs in the soft dirt now and then and switching their tails.

"And when the fire was out and the hose reloaded, the

firemen climbed onto the fire engine—two in the high seat up front, where the reins were; the others on the low step in back, hanging on—and the horses pulled it down the driveway, turned onto Fremont Street, breaking into a trot, and that's the last I could see of them. The firemen wore helmets and rubber coats, and they all had large mustaches, and one had a beard. Now, what about it, Oscar? You think I don't know what I saw?"

I shook my head. "Hard to see how you could be mistaken about what you saw unless you've suddenly gone crazy."

"Which I have not," said Nordstrum. "Not yet. Come here." He turned to walk down the old carriageway toward the street, then stopped and pointed. "Here's where the horses stood," he said, "well away from the heat of the fire."

I looked down at the dirt and saw the horseshoe marks sharp and plain in the damp black earth, dozens of them, overlapping. Nordstrum pointed again with his foot and I saw the manure and, deeply imprinted in the earth at the edges of the carriageway, the long, indented ribbons that were wagon tracks.

That was just under a year ago. Two months later, in September, Doug Blaisdel sold the Pollard place—cheap, as he had to, but still he was glad now that it hadn't burned down—to a retired farm-equipment dealer from Peoria who'd grown up in Galesburg. It took all last winter and I don't know how much money—the farm-equipment business must have been good—to get the old place fixed up; but now it looks the way it always used to, clean and white again, the lawn and iron fence and the burned window restored, and the inside of the house is beautiful. They've got an unmar-