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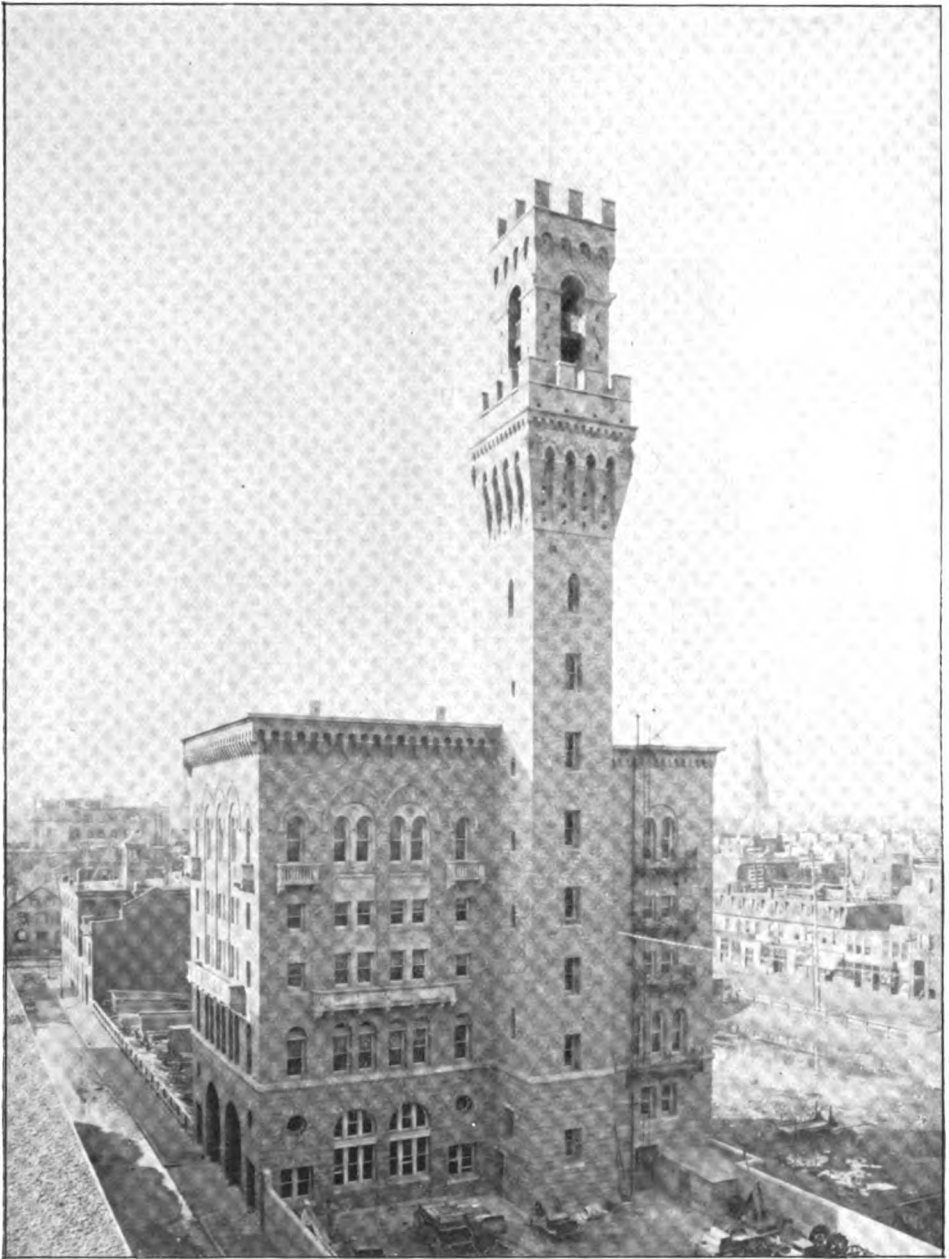
BY ROBERT G. FITCH



UPON my first visit to this city, a number of years ago, I called, soon after my arrival, upon a college classmate, who possessed that inestimable advantage in life of being "Boston born." As I was about to take leave, I asked him to direct me to Bunker Hill Monument, which had been the Mecca of my boyhood longings. He did so to the best of his ability, qualifying his instructions with the remark: "I think that will get you there all right; I have never been there myself." I

have since learned that in this respect he was by no means peculiar among Bostonians; also, that neglect of that famous obelisk is not an exception to, but part of, a general rule, and that the people of this city are very much like the people of other cities in their indifference to, and practical ignorance of, the objects and institutions which are nearest them, and which excite special interest in remote localities.

Our enthusiastic and pleasantly-remembered friends, the Christian Endeavorers, and the Knights Templars, who were with us a short time ago, carried away consider-

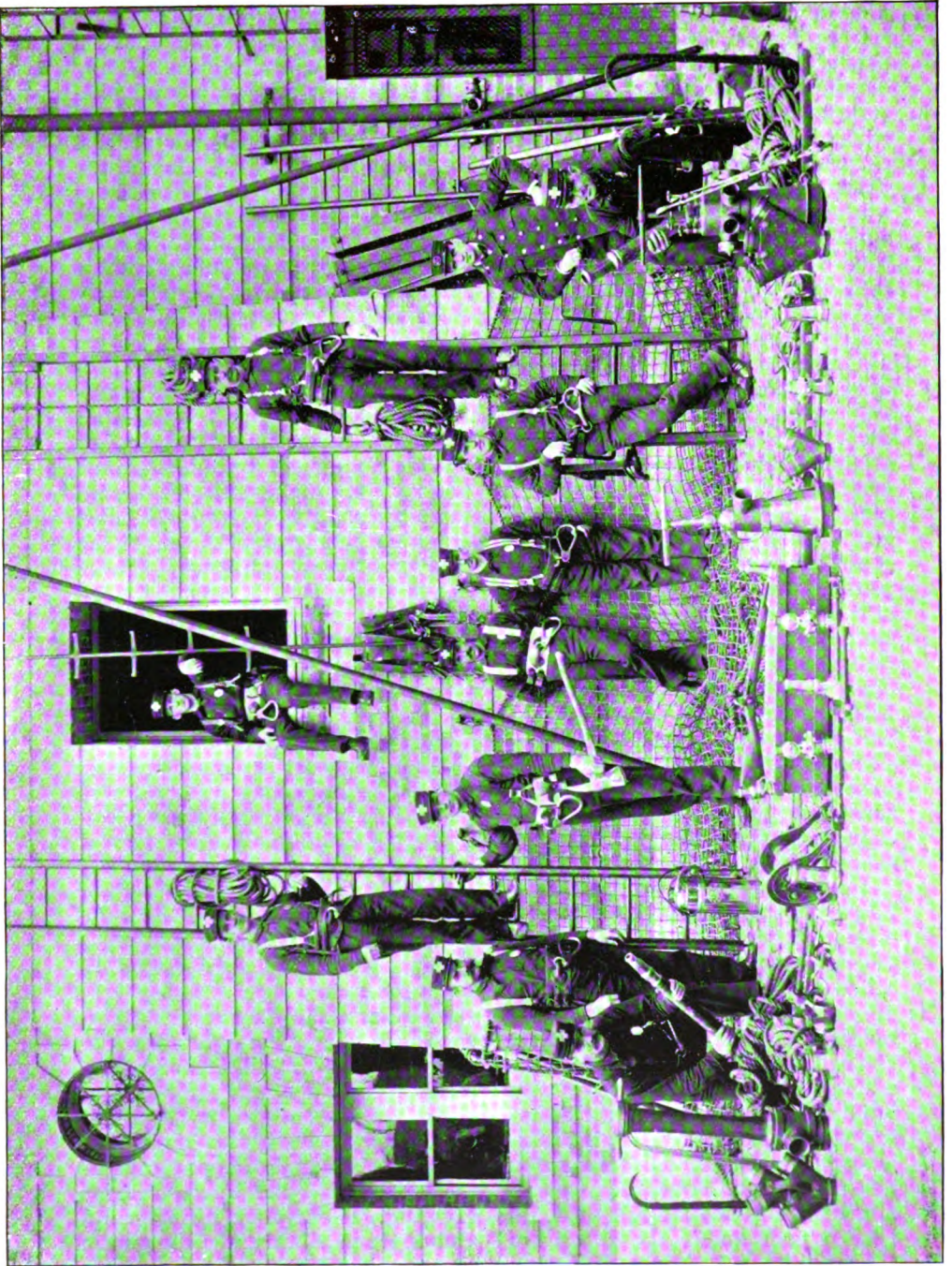


Headquarters of the Boston Fire Department, Bristol Street

able of value besides a strengthening of fervor, and a renewal of grace. They came here realizing the standing of Boston as an historic town, and burning with zeal to familiarize themselves with the palpable evidences of that history. Their instinct for everything that was old and quaint, their persistence in resolving all the musty and time-worn data that came under their eyes or hands, caused many smiles of amusement, perhaps not entirely free from contempt, among us superior Boston beings who have these monuments and tablets and sacred relics with us all the time, even if to a large extent we are not aware of it, and do not know what they mean. But these patient gleaners in the birthplace of American history and American liberty could afford to let us smile. They were all the while getting the best of it, for it is hardly an extravagant statement that the thousands who returned to their homes at the conclusion of these pilgrimages were better grounded in the more realistic points of Old Boston and Massachusetts history than an equal unselected number of our own citizens could prove themselves to be, even though educated in our public schools.

In all this, it is not my intent to bestow reproof, or indulge in criticism. My own house is too fragile to justify me in casting stones at others. I remember that almost every morning for two years I walked by the Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg, with free tickets in my pocket, and yet I never saw that famous spectacle, though I heard its praises sung by a whole train-load of Sunday-school convention delegates from all over the country. I have sometimes thought I would take a year and make a tour of exploration in Boston,—if I only knew where to begin.

These prefatory observations may seem irrelevant, but they have a bearing on what follows. They illustrate the peculiar mental phenomenon that, while distance attracts, nearness repels, or at least deadens our interest. One of the commonest sights in the city of Boston is the response of the department to an alarm of fire. Nearly every man, woman, and child, is familiar with it. There were nearly two thousand such alarms last year, each one calling out from two to nine pieces of apparatus. The spectacle never grows old. The sensation one derives from it is like that produced by glorious music, or fervid eloquence, or impassioned poetry. It quickens the blood and raises the spirits. Even the most sluggish temperament cannot be indifferent to its influence. There is also the charm of seeming mystery about it all. Just one pull of the hook in that little red box, and men, horses, and machinery seem to spring out of the ground. But the mystery is only apparent. It is simply the perfection of system. A splendid team of three horses abreast comes forging along at a powerful gallop, twirling behind them a ladder-truck weighing five or six tons, with as much seeming ease as a boy draws his toy-cart. From another direction an engine appears on the scene, its black smoke showing that energy for needed service has already been developed. Those light skirmishers, the chemical-engines, dart in and out, and perform deploy service while the heavier batteries are getting ready for action. The clanging of gongs, and the penetrating notes of the bugle, announce the arrival of apparatus farther away, and the interest keeps growing. There is something grand and noble in all this, and the public so acknowledge it. They are for the moment fascinated and exhilar-



" A fireman is trained in throwing ladders, scaling buildings, with the pempis, using life-lines and jumping-nets, connecting and running lines of hose, plicing chucks, " etc

ated. They have seen a vision, and when it is past they depart, not knowing whence it came, or into what it has been resolved.

Here, again, that strange ignorance manifests itself with respect to an institution that is everywhere with us, is a part of us, and indispensable to our safety and well being. Probably more Bostonians could give a fairly intelligent description of the contents of the Louvre, or the internal arrangements of St. Peter's at Rome, than could pass a satisfactory examination upon the organization, government, and discipline of their own Fire Department. It is said that a gentleman in a city adjoining Boston, some time ago undertook to send in an alarm from a box numbered "62." He was found by the department vigorously pumping away, supposing that sixty-two pulls were necessary to give the desired information. Another story is told of a South Boston policeman, new to the business, who, seeing a fire in Cambridge, turned in an alarm from the first box on his beat that he came to! When called upon to explain his conduct, he said his instructions were, when he saw a fire, to go to the nearest box and pull it. These stories may or may not be apochryphal, but certainly as queer misconceptions are not uncommon. A gentleman whose cellar was flooded last spring, telephoned me a request to send a chemical-engine and pump it out. There are instances almost innumerable of people living or doing business for years opposite a fire-alarm box, with instructions posted in large letters above it, who, when a fire occurred on their premises, either did not know where to find it, or how to manipulate it when found, and to this fact can be traced much unnecessary waste of property and loss of life.

About a year ago I was visited at department headquarters by one of our best known and most highly respected business men. He came in his own behalf, and as a representative of others, to petition the Board of Fire Commissioners for a reversal of its action in a particular case. The very nature of his errand showed that he entertained vague and erroneous ideas about the department, for he was pleading against his own interests, as he would doubtless acknowledge to-day. In discussing the matter I said to him, "Mr. Blank, do you know anything of this department from your own investigation?" He frankly replied, "No, I do not; I have never been even to the engine-house nearest my place of business." "Then all you know of it is what the fire underwriters have told you?" "That is all," was his reply. He might as wisely have appealed to his Satanic Majesty for a true exposition of Christian theology. Yet it is probable that ninety-nine out of every hundred business men are no better posted than he was. It is not strange that this should be so. A knowledge of the Boston Fire Department, or any other, requires more study and time than they are able to devote, for they are busy people.

The means at hand for getting this information are abundant enough, and easily obtainable. The annual reports of the department are fairly good records of its character and service. But public documents are proverbially dry reading, and do not appeal to the taste of the average citizen. There is little evidence that even mayors and city councils seriously burden their minds with them, as important recommendations, reiterated year after year, usually find between the covers of these same re-

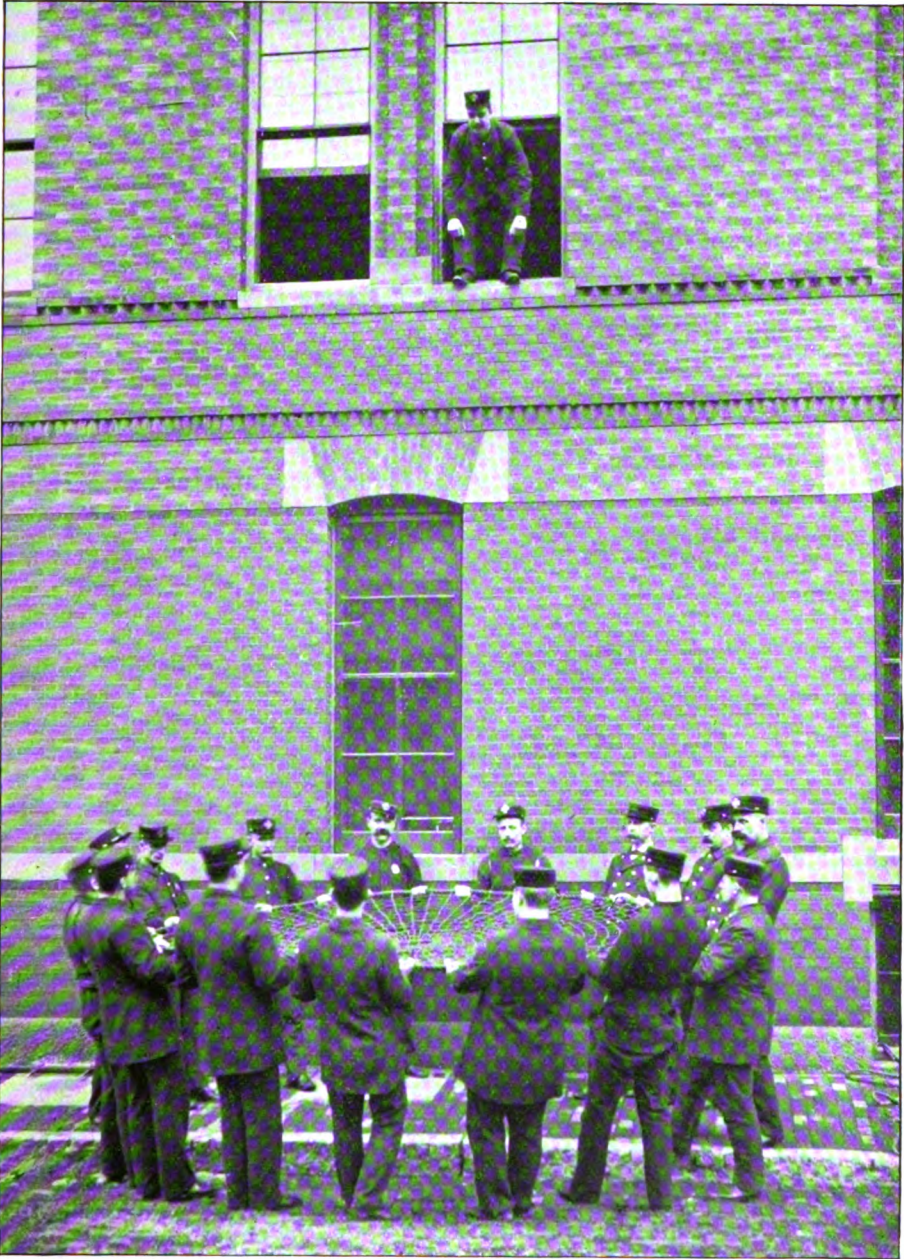


Commissioner's Office

ports an undisturbed mausoleum. They blossom for a day in the columns of the newspapers, and then perish from financial drought.

In attempting a brief outline sketch of the department, the top is a more definite starting point than the bottom. That is the Fire Commission. Whether composed of three heads, as has been its character for over twenty years, or of one, as at present under the provisions of the new city charter, its work, authority, and responsibility are the same. A popular conception of the service of the board has been that it drew comfortable salaries, and passed its time in entertaining callers. But this is only one of many erroneous ideas concerning the department. It is true that a Fire Commissioner fails in his duty when he attempts to repulse the public. He is a public servant, and when he forgets that fundamental fact his usefulness is

seriously impaired. He should listen patiently, courteously, and considerately to the requests or to the complaints of the citizens of Boston, or those whom they have chosen to represent them. Many of these requests or complaints may be unreasonable, frivolous, even grotesque, but it is his business to sift the wheat from the chaff, to try to help the people whom he serves, and derive help from them. In no other way can he so accurately test the public pulse; in no other way obtain the general information necessary to intelligent practical service. This is not always an agreeable duty, for bores and cranks enter every door that is opened, but it is a duty all the same. This, however, is incidental. There are in the active service of the department seventy-nine different pieces of apparatus, distributed over the entire city, and made up as follows: forty-five steam fire-engines, in-



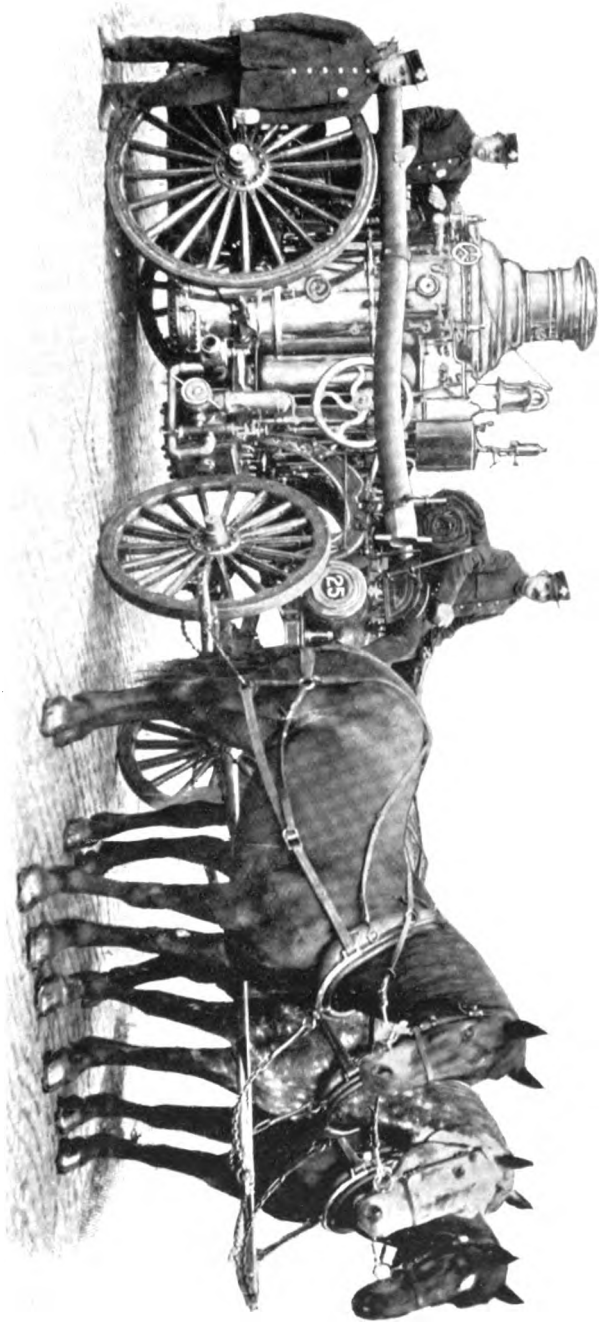
Exercise with the Jumping-Net

cluding the old and new fire-boats, Engines 31 and 44 ; seventeen ladder-trucks, nine chemical-engines, two combination wagons, two water-towers, and four hose-carriages, independently located. All this is exclusive of a considerable amount of reserve apparatus, and supply, coal, and wrecking-wagons, etc.

With most of these pieces there are full companies, and with all of them separate detachments or details of men. From all these separate sources there come to the Commissioner every day reports that account for every man in the department. They tell him who is present, and who absent, who sick, who on leave, who on day off, and who on vacation, showing the strength of each company at a given hour, and the consolidated strength of the whole. But that is only a small part of what he receives, and must consider. Requisitions for stock, equipment, and repairs ; requests for transfers, for leave, for promotion ; charges against members, or possibly of members against officers ; communications from other departments, correspondence from all parts of the country, and many other matters, come up for official digestion at each daily board meeting ; and to make the best and most harmonious disposition of these heterogeneous items of business, is part of the duty of a Fire Commissioner. Furthermore, ultimate authority is vested in him, and ultimate responsibility is laid upon him. All new members of the department are appointed by him. All transfers, advancements, promotions, rewards, and penalties emanate from him, while last, but not least, he is held accountable for the judicious expenditure of an appropriation now amounting to \$1,100,000, and not nearly large enough at that. He must give hearings on

charges, and pass judgment according to the best dictates of his conscience and ability. This is an exceedingly delicate office. There is the department on the one hand, and the man on the other, to be considered. He must not be governed by his sympathies alone, or largely, as laxity would creep in and discipline would suffer. But if he treats men simply as machines, and stands ready to blast their reputations and deprive them of their means of livelihood, when a little judicious charity would save them, he can erect a very lofty monument of injustice in a very short time. A gentleman prominent in municipal affairs remarked some time ago that the work of the Fire Department was purely executive. Between one and two hundred trials a year of men on charges liable to work a forfeiture of what they prize most, short of life and liberty, would seem to argue that, to no small extent, the functions of the Fire Commission were also judicial.

There is another popular delusion that almost any man, possessing the proper "pull," can get into the Fire Department. Those who have tested this idea, however, no longer have any faith in it. The way out is frequently short and direct, but the approaches are long and devious, and often prove very discouraging to those who attempt to travel them to a conclusion. With the first steps the Commission has nothing to do. The applicant has at the outset, and for a considerable time thereafter, special business with the Civil Service Commission. He first applies for an application blank. Unless he can show the requisite physical stature, even this is refused him, and his hopes are dashed forever. Up to about seven or eight years ago the standard was not an

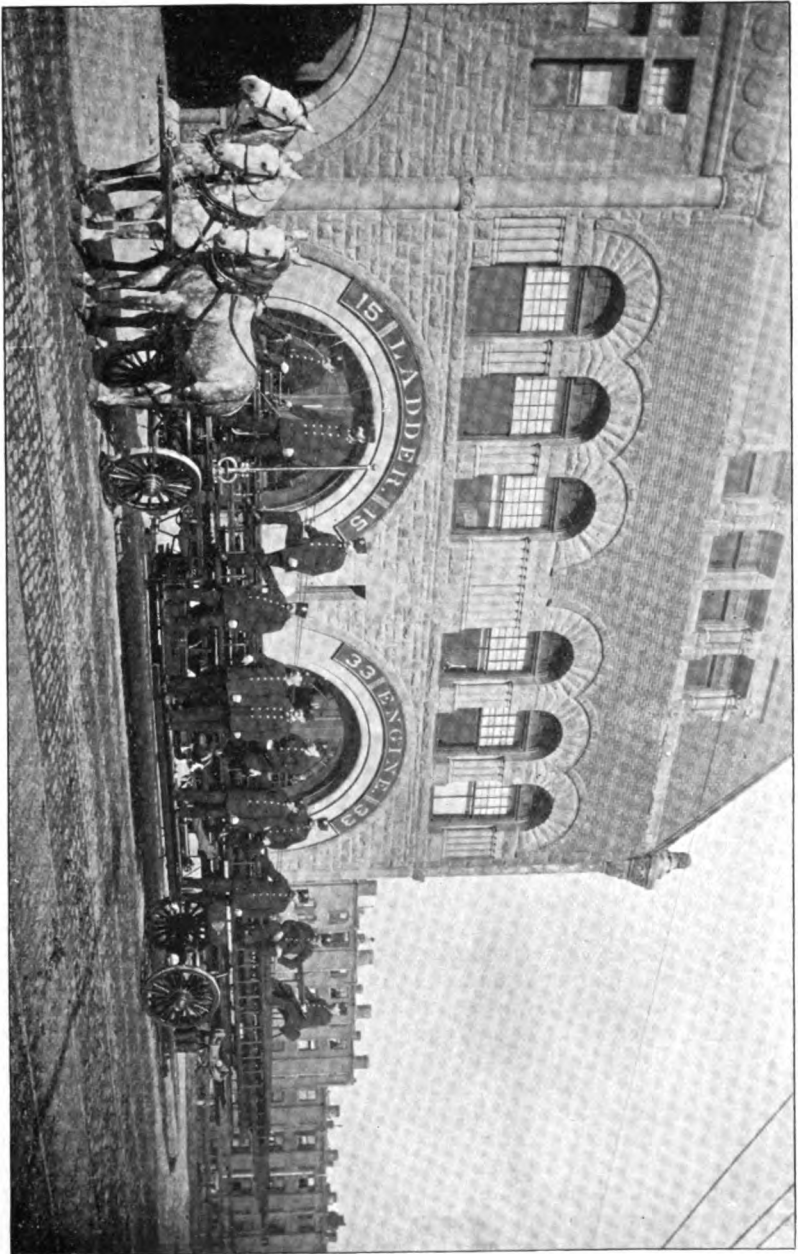


A Three-Horse Hitch Applied to an Engine

exacting one. The candidate had to be five feet and four inches in height, and weigh 120 pounds. Too many small men found their way in at these figures, and at the request of the Fire Commissioners the minimum was raised to five feet six inches, and 130 pounds. A year or two ago, another inch and an extra five pounds were required, and while this occasionally excludes a man who would be a valuable member of the department, on the whole a decided physical betterment will result. If the candidate is fortunate enough to have his application entertained, he must then wait until he is notified of the times to take his several examinations. He must satisfy the city physician that he is sound in mind and body, while the Civil Service examiners manifest a good deal of curiosity with regard to him. He must convince them that he is a citizen of Boston; that he has never been convicted of an infraction of the laws of the State; that his habits have not blasted his past, and do not threaten his future; that he possesses a certain amount of general and theoretical knowledge of the department he proposes to enter; and that his mental equipment in certain other respects reaches a prescribed measure. If he escapes unplucked, he is passed along in due time to the gymnasium director, who enters into a very detailed and technical analysis of his physical make-up. The different muscles are measured, the proportions are recorded, tests of the heart, lungs, and other organs under pressure are made; the man is conducted through various exercises, with or without apparatus, to prove his strength or develop his weaknesses.

All these results, figured to close fractions, are added and averaged, and the product is the net stand-

ing of the man. If he has done better than 65 per cent. he is eligible for an appointment when his services may be needed; but his chances will be very remote if he does not show as high as 78 per cent. At best, his period of waiting may become rather tedious. To reach the eligible list is certainly a hopeful advance, but I believe there are as many as two hundred there now, and some of them will have to wait a long time. While the applicant has been passing through the throes of preparation, the Fire Commission has known nothing about him. When men are needed to fill vacancies, a requisition to that effect is made upon the Civil Service Commissioners. If five men are needed, ten or twelve names will be sent down, certified as eligibles. These undergo a general examination, the required number is selected, and the other names are sent back. The fortunate candidates are appointed, conditionally, permanent substitutes in the Fire Department. The new recruit, no matter what his previous record or known attainments, is never admitted to a higher grade. He must then pass through thirty days' practice and instruction at the department drill-school. If at the end of that time his conduct has been good, and his proficiency satisfactory, he is confirmed on six months' probation. At the end of six months, if his superior officers report his conduct and capacity, both at fires and at quarters, what they should be, he is given a raise of salary. He keeps that status for eight or ten months more, when he is promoted to be a permanent fireman, with a salary of \$1,000 the first year, \$1,100 the second, and \$1,200 the third and thereafter, and he can keep his position as long as his conduct is good and he possesses



A Three-Horse Hitch Applied to Ladder Trucks

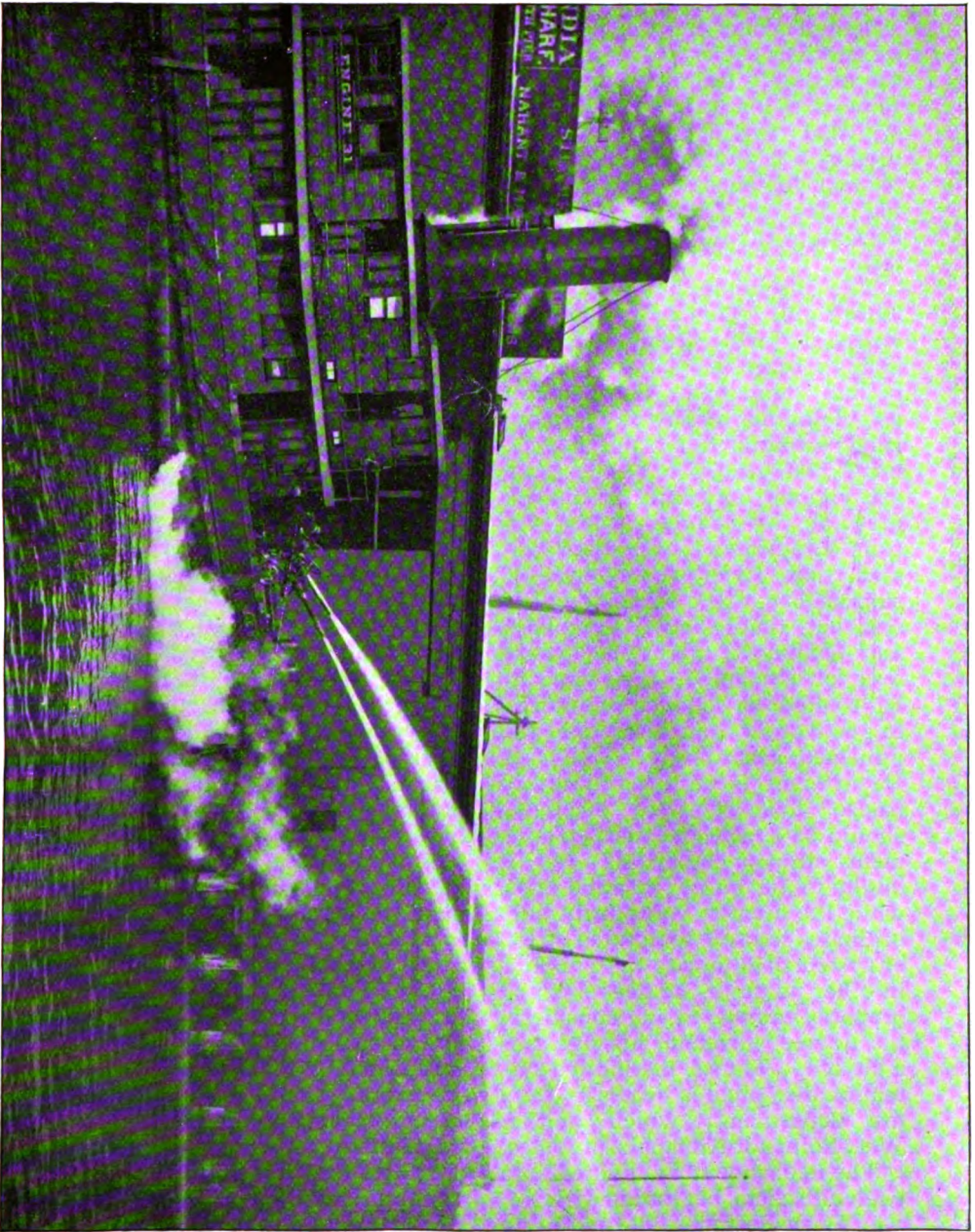
the ability to perform the service required of him. Thus it will be seen that, to enter the department, one has to run a rather formidable obstacle race, but so many attempt it that the supply is always largely in excess of the demand.

In the last seven or eight years the department has made a more conspicuous record of development and growth than in the previous twenty. In this it has responded to the quickening forces at work in fire departments generally. There has been a gain everywhere, not simply in size, but in methods and in discipline. Nine years ago the service here was about half call and half permanent. Now there are over six hundred permanent men, and about one hundred and ten call. In other words, we have been sloughing off our provincialism and putting on a metropolitan character, just as rapidly as means would permit. The reform should have been complete years ago. A call membership in an American city of half a million inhabitants is a reflection upon its enterprise, and an element of weakness in its fire-service.

In the period here considered, the engine companies have increased from thirty-two to forty-five,—a numerical gain of over 40 per cent.; but that does not tell the whole story. A number of the old call companies have been made permanent; new engines of more powerful capacity have been put in service, and, where practicable, three-horse hitches for engines, and two-horse hitches for hose-wagons, have been substituted for two-horse and one-horse hitches, respectively. This gives greater and surer motive power in getting to a fire, and more efficient service after arriving. There are now two fire-boats instead of one, and either of them is more than twice as power-

ful as the old "Flanders," which, however, was an excellent craft for her day and generation. Instead of one tower of the old Greenleaf pattern, which required from fifteen to twenty minutes for adjustment, the department now has two of the Hale chemical and hydraulic raising type, which can be elevated in almost as many seconds, and furnish a much more abundant delivery. Similar advance has been made with respect to other kinds of machinery. Of seventeen ladder-trucks to-day, five are of the aerial pattern, while eight years ago only two trucks out of the fourteen were aerial. Chemical-engines have increased in number, and combination wagons, an entirely new feature, have been added.

Four or five years ago the department drill-school was instituted, and has proved itself to possess great value. Previous to that time a raw recruit might be placed on an engine company where he would stay, perhaps, for years, with no opportunity to learn anything of other branches of the service; or he might be placed upon a ladder company with the same result. A man's instruction was disjointed and unsystematic. If he was eager and quick to learn, and his officers took an interest in him, he could acquire something; otherwise his progress was slow, and his initiation oftentimes painful. Now, admission to the department depends upon proof of his proficiency at the drill-school. He there has every opportunity to acquaint himself with all kinds of apparatus and equipment, study their character, and observe their operation. He is trained in throwing ladders, scaling buildings with the pompiers, using life-lines and jumping-nets, connecting and running lines of hose, placing chucks, and a thou-



The Old Fire-Boat at Work

sand and one other matters which belong to the service of a fireman. When he completes the period, if he survives the crucial test, he has the necessary technical knowledge to perform his duties intelligently. All that remains is to become inured to fire and smoke, and learn to wear his harness without chafing. He can then call himself a fireman in the full meaning of the term.

The discipline has also grown more rigid. This is inevitable as we recede further from a call basis, and approach more nearly metropolitan standards. The penalties for violations of any of the many rules formulated for the government and guidance of the force, are various, according to the degree of the offence. They run from a reprimand to a discharge, and cover forfeiture of days off, suspensions, fines, etc. Many lapses, that, simply between employer and employed, might be passed over or condoned, here have to be treated as conduct prejudicial to good order and discipline, and punished accordingly. The Fire Department is on a semi-military basis. The rules of discipline should be exact, and their enforcement strictly impartial; but it ought to be borne in mind that, while the fireman voluntarily subordinates himself to a much stricter system of authority than obtains in other pursuits, he does not and probably cannot, to any considerable degree, surrender his rights as a citizen. Thus a distinctive system of discipline is necessary for a fire department, which neither West Point nor Annapolis provides.

The department is divided into twelve districts, beginning with No. 1 in East Boston, and running to No. 12 in West Roxbury. Each district has a chief of its own, subordinate, of course, to the Chief of

Department. In most other large cities they are designated battalion chiefs, but district chief seems a term of more definite meaning. Each full permanent company is officered by a captain and a lieutenant, responsible, primarily, to the chief of the district. Every company is governed in its response to alarms by the running-card of the department, which looks very simple on its face, but is in reality a series of many nicely and carefully-adjusted tables, sometimes requiring months in its preparation, and frequent revision afterwards.

The dramatic and soul-stirring exhibitions of rushing horses and apparatus, with their gong and bugle obligatos, are, no doubt, very fine, and to those not burdened with responsibility for results, very pleasing. But the wizard that puts this force in action is a magical, mystical agent, that works in secret, traversing, with the quickness of thought, hundreds of miles of wire, and carrying its tidings of danger and summons to duty to every member of the department. Back of everything stands the fire-alarm system. That must be prompt and true, or disaster is likely to follow. As soon as a street-box is pulled the record is made at headquarters, and a delicate and intricate machine is instantly put in operation, which notifies the different apparatus-houses by striking the number on the box-gongs through a direct current. When that is completed, the same alarm is repeated by reverse current upon the large gongs as a verification, though a company that responds to the alarm never waits for the gong, provided the first rounds are distinct and definite. This will bring a company upon the street in from eight to ten seconds in the daytime, and in from fifteen to twenty seconds at night, when the men

are asleep. In the operating-room at fire-alarm headquarters two men, and sometimes three, are on watch night and day, there being three relays. They must understand their business to a nicety, and their vigilance must be ceaseless.

A valuable addition to the architecture of the city is the new building on Bristol Street, used as department headquarters. Its stately and handsome yellow tower attracts the attention of travellers to the city, whether by sea or land. It was designed somewhat after a famous Florentine model, and is at once commanding and beautiful. In it are located, upon the first floor, one of the water-towers, the wrecking-wagon, and horses for both. The floor above contains the offices of the Commission and the Chief of Department, and room for clerks. Above that is the gymnasium, while the upper floor is devoted to the new fire-alarm plant, and the dynamos which supply it. The tower, about one hundred and sixty feet in height, is very ornate, but beauty is not its only, or even its principal, object. It is used by the drill-school, and is the leading factor in its operations. Each new recruit has to make its intimate acquaintance, not by means of the interior stairway, but by the scaling-ladders previously mentioned, working his way from window to window. The building, in most respects, is admirable; the location is not, and its selection was acquiesced in by the Fire Commissioners only after all their previous recommendations of better sites had failed to meet with a favorable reception.

This presentation of facts carries its own demonstration of progress along practical lines, the greater part of which has been effected during the last six years. The last annual report points out, however, many needs unsatisfied,

and to meet them would require an expenditure of at least \$300,000 beyond any present or immediately prospective appropriations. New apparatus-houses are needed, and old ones are suffering from lack of repairs. More engines and ladder-trucks should be purchased and put in service, and the call element of the department should give place to a general extension of the permanent force. Were this done, Boston's Fire Department would not have a superior in any city of this or any other country. Perhaps it would not be worth the cost, simply as a gratification of our pride; but as an elimination of the points of present weakness, the expenditure would be most judicious. Even as we are, our reputation is high. Captain Brandon of New York, one of the ablest insurance inspectors in the country, praises the improvements that have been made here, and gives the department a standing second to no other. It is certainly admirably organized and officered. The present Commissioner, Colonel Henry S. Russell, is deeply interested in the service, and is giving his best thought and energies to maintaining its efficiency. Chief L. P. Webber has completed almost eleven years of honorable and excellent duty in his present position. He has carried himself through many trying situations with a manly dignity that has always won him friends; pursuing the even tenor of his way and attending to the business for which he was appointed, whether evil or good report followed him, until he stands higher to-day in the respect and confidence of the city than he ever did before. The district chiefs are almost all men in the prime of their powers, loyal, alert, and enthusiastic; and the force, as a whole, shows splendid material. I cannot imagine a finer

exhibition, or one more interesting to the people of Boston, than the whole Fire Department in line. It would take several miles of our streets to accommodate such a parade, and of course, under the present system of discipline, it would be morally impossible. Three years ago, however, a representative section of the department made a large portion of the procession on a veterans' field-day, and impressed all beholders with a lively sense of what the magnitude of the display would be should the whole strength of the

service pass in review before them.

I have not considered it desirable, for the purposes of this article, to enter into close details. That would carry me too far, and obscure the benefits that may follow a broader survey. Certain it is, that the citizens do not know as much of their own Fire Department as they might and ought, in justice to themselves as well as their public servants; and if I have thrown even a few feeble rays of light upon the subject, I shall feel that the labor was not wholly in vain.

