

WITH THE HELP OF JESSIE MCLEAN

Victor Speer

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ON a bright, sunshiny day in 1874 Murray walked out of General-Superintendent Finney's office in the Canada Southern Station at St. Thomas. He had just returned from Cleveland, and had made a report on the arrest of a thief, who at one time had been bothersome to the company. As he strolled down the platform he saw a group of trainmen laughing and chatting and sunning themselves. They were talking of fires.

"Sparks from Canada Southern locomotives seemed to become contagious, and various buildings along the line began to shoot sparks and to go up in smoke," says Murray. "It grew to be bothersome, and the insurance companies became considerably wrought up. The complaints, of course, came to me.

"At that time one of the features of life in St. Thomas was Jessie McLean. Jessie was as bonnie a Scotch lass as a man could meet in twenty counties. She was good-looking, with peachy cheeks and sunny hair and merry eyes. But, above all, Jessie weighed 250 pounds. She was the biggest girl in St. Thomas. Some of the fellows used to joke at Jessie, but I always treated her with courtesy, and I remember the days when I used to walk a quarter of a mile just to see Jessie McLean on her way to church. It was not a case of love, but simply a desire to see a 250-pound girl go by. Every man, as he looks back through the years into the little town where he lived long ago, can recall certain sights and scenes that stand out vividly in the vision of his memory. 'Twas so with Jessie McLean. I can close my eyes and see her still, tripping churchward, 250 pounds of graceful femininity.

"But back to the burnings. The climax of the fires came when the Dufferin House, in St. Thomas, burned. The Dufferin House was named after Lord Dufferin, then Governor-General of Canada. It was a large wooden building with sixty or more rooms, and stood on Talbert Street, near what is now the Michigan Central Station. Johnnie Hanley was the proprietor. He had \$9,000 of mortgages on the house. The hotel was not paying, and Johnnie could not pay the mortgages.

"One quiet Sunday evening in October the Dufferin House was burned. No lives were lost. The insurance people were certain the fire was incendiary in its origin. Mr. Westmacott, the insurance representative from Toronto, came to me; and I also heard the talk that engine sparks caused the fire. I took charge of the case. I began a search for evidence. It was a difficult task. The evidence was not connected in its chain of circumstances. Finally, I found the pastor of the Baptist Church could strengthen my cause; but I still lacked the desired clinching testimony. Where was I to get it?

"The answer came in Jessie McLean. The 250-pound Scotch girl told me she had seen Johnnie Hanley as he came hurriedly off the back steps just before the fire. It completed the case, and, thanks to Jessie McLean, who had been on her way to church when she saw him, Johnnie Hanley was convicted and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.

"Hanley had a son-in-law, Bill Cronin, who kept the Detroit House; and subsequently it was burned. Assisted by Chief-of-Police James Fewings, who also aided me in the Hanley case, I convicted Cronin of setting the house on fire, and he also was sent to prison for seven years. After Cronin had followed Hanley to prison, the sparks of the Canada Southern engines seemed to become harmless; for there were no more mysterious fires, and the insurance companies breathed easy, and Jessie McLean continued on her innocent, 250-pound way, and finally

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married a bouncing railroad conductor."