

A Modern Fire-Worshiper

A Detective's Story

by A.T. Sinclair

A reign of terror prevailed in Paynesville. For months stealthy and tireless incendiaries had held the town at their mercy. The consternation had become universal. At last, urged on by a resistless popular demand, the town authorities resolved upon heroic measures, and a large reward was offered for the detection and arrest of the fire-fiends. It was at this point that I was called into the case.

I began my detective work by numerous private conferences with the city authorities, citizens and officials of the insurance companies, questioning them upon the facts and attending circumstances of the fires. I also examined the fire records in connection with a local map of Paynesville, and the result of three days' interviews, questions and examinations was the following collected data: Of fifty-two barns, stables and outbuildings burned within a period of about three years and a half, thirty-four had been entirely empty and disused at the time of setting on fire; nine contained property of little value; five held valuable stocks of hay and grain; three had each two animals in them, and not rescued from the fire; and only one case, but that a remarkable one, presented any exception to this general condition of emptiness and disuse. This was in the burning of the large private stable belonging to a wealthy resident of Paynesville, where eight animals were lost, together with several valuable carriages, etc., while the coachman's family of seven persons, living over the stables, barely escaped with their lives. With this exception there had been little loss of live stock, and there was but this one instance where human lives were endangered.

The latter case bothered me for a while, apparently conflicting with a certain hypothesis forming in my mind. But upon subsequent inquiry, I found that the stable had been empty and entirely unused for several months before the fire, and had only been occupied a few days previous, the owner's family having returned from a prolonged absence abroad.

The fires had nearly all occurred about eleven o'clock at night, usually between a quarter before and ten minutes past eleven; when later, there was evidence of their having been started earlier, but for some cause they had been slow in breaking out. Of the fifty-two fires, all of them had occurred between the hours of half-past ten P.M. and two A.M., and thirty-three of them had broken out shortly before or soon after eleven P.M. The fifty-two fires had all happened on dark nights, when there was no moon, but the atmosphere clear. Not one of the fires had been on a stormy night.

My examination of the local map, in connection with the records of the Fire Department, showed the localities of the successive fires to be in recurrent opposite directions, skipping about in their course, but with a certain methodic order, every third or fourth fire occurring in the immediate neighborhood of a previous one, this regular coming back again in their course indicating a definite, intelligent planning.

There was also a strange periodicity in the recurring intervals of these fires, two of them sometimes occurring within a week of each other, and then there was a lapse of from four to five weeks before the next fire; thus suggesting an element of femininity that struck me like a sudden revelation, and of which I could not afterwards rid myself.

There was a noticeable regularity in the frequency of the fires, covering the long period of over three years, which indicated permanency in the presence of their perpetrator, not the chance coming and going of the occasional tramp. Had they been the incendiarism of wandering tramps, there would have been periods of a close succession of several fires, followed by an interval of rest and no fires.

From all these collected facts I concluded that the incendiary was a woman, probably of good station, from the marked avoidance of stormy nights, and a permanent resident of the place.

My next step was to visit the sites of all the fires, both recent and remote. I not only visited the scenes of past fires, but I also inspected and dotted down on a map, that I made out as I went along, all the present empty and unoccupied barns and stables. At the end of rather more than a week I was ready to settle down to my regular work of possible detection of “the person or persons unknown.”

In my examination of unoccupied buildings, I had noted three, which, from a close study of the map I had made, showing the routes followed by the fires, I considered most likely to receive the next visit of the fire-fiend. Of these, two were on the outskirts of the city, near the sites of old fires. The third was a rickety mass of low, shambling buildings on a side street, a lonely, secluded spot, densely shaded by heavy maple-trees, making the place dark enough at night to conceal any crime, while the trees lining the street on both sides for several blocks provided a long distance of safe escape.

These stables were owned by a non-resident, and had been allowed, from want of repair, to become unfit for use. They adjoined handsome private grounds, and had long been an eyesore to the people.

Having fixed on these three buildings as the next threatened, I called in six of my best men and prepared for action.

My plan was to set a night-watch of two men in each of these three buildings, myself making the third in one of them, at the same time protecting each of them from fire. I therefore had collected and carefully placed in each building a number of old carpets, blankets and woolen refuse, some large casks filled with water, buckets and hand-grenades—for I intended to let the incendiaries start their fire, under watchful eyes, so as to have absolute proof of their guilt, and then extinguish it before any serious damage was done. It is true, this work would have to be quick and sure, for the free use of kerosene in starting these fires had been clearly traceable in nearly every instance, and was, in fact, the only way to account for their gaining such rapid headway, making total destruction of the building all but certain before the firemen could arrive. But my men were cool of nerve, trusty, and skilled in their work, and I had no fear. I also arranged

between the two remote buildings, no great distance apart, a means of communication, so that the men in each could instantly go to the aid of the others at a given signal.

By the time I had completed these arrangements full two weeks had gone by. A period of comparative inactivity now followed, and the authorities were becoming uneasy at the lack of some definite results of "all this work and expense." But meantime my men were not idle. They were mingling with the people, visiting suspicious haunts, and exercising a keen scrutiny everywhere.

One day, Parker, one of the men on night-post with me, on making his report, remarked, incidentally:

"There's a woman that's very fond of driving about the country. She is here and there, in and out of town, and along the roads. She drives a pony phaeton, sometimes alone, but sometimes has a coachman; she is a regular barn-inspector, with a fancy for looking at vacant ones. Today I met her as I was coming along the road to Elliott's Mills. There is a place there 'For Sale.' The family moved away about a month ago, and house, barn and everything else are clean dead empty. Just as she was opposite the gates she made the coachman stop to pick up her parasol that had fallen out; and I'll be hanged if she didn't drop it herself on purpose, so as to have a good look at the place."

"What is she like?" I asked.

"She is about eighteen or twenty, of medium build, black hair, large, soft dark eyes, and as pretty and quiet-looking a piece of furniture as you ever set eyes on."

The next day, Martin, one of the men in charge of the other buildings, reported a woman, answering the same description, passing and repassing his barn in a slow, watchful way, as though expecting to meet somebody, yet always eying the barn, which faced directly upon the street, and finally walking quietly away.

I instructed my men to get this woman, in case she were wanted; and next day she was traced to her home on Summit Heights, a woodland ridge in the suburbs of the city, where a number of fine residences were situated, and from which a commanding view of all Paynesville could be had.

That same night, about nine o'clock, I was returning from an interview with the Mayor, and was on my way to my post, when I was overtaken by a violent thunderstorm, with heavy rain. I hastily took refuge under a railroad bridge, glad to escape a drenching. Bracing myself behind one of the projecting stone foundations, I was soon lost in thought, and did not at first notice two men who had sought the same shelter soon after me. I had enough to think of. The Mayor was getting impatient, complaining of "delay," "nothing definite," and I had to admit to myself that I had as yet very little "to show." Tonight rounded the third week of my stay in Paynesville, tomorrow would begin the fourth week since the last fire, and I had really no direct, positive clew to the perpetrators of the deed. I was busy cross-examining myself, judge and jury in one,

asking if I could possibly have made any mistake, when, between the heavy peals of thunder, I suddenly caught the words:

“Seen Dick lately?”

“No; guess his fire-queen has gone back on him again.”

At the words “fire-queen” I pricked up my ears.

“The ‘red paint’ business doesn’t seem to agree with Dick,” continued the first speaker, with a half-laugh. “I saw him the other day, and he looks years older than he did a month ago.”

“If I had that woman I’d clap a pair of ‘bracelets’ on her, of a kind her dainty wrists wouldn’t like,” replied his companion.

“If it wasn’t for betraying an old friend I’d give my ladybug up right quick, and gather in that reward. A clean five thousand isn’t to be picked up every day for the asking,” said the other, rather gruffly.

“She’s played a pretty long rope,” was the curt reply; “but she’ll find, some day, she’s come to the short end of it.”

I had my case! I knew it! My heart gave a great throb of triumph and relief. After all, it was a woman! From that moment those two men were to be in my close care until they led me to my quarry. The sharp flashes of lightening had revealed them to me, while they had not seen me in my concealment.

The storm had now abated, and the men left their shelter, followed by their shadow, myself. They took me to a saloon in the neighborhood. From there I sent for a District Telegraph boy, and directed him to go to the corner near the building where I had my night-post; when there, to give a peculiar whistle, and to bring the man who would join him to me. In fifteen minutes Parker came into the saloon. I soon communicated with him, gave him the spot on my two men, and left them in his charge. They could have no better keeper.

I had seen the men before. They belonged to the better class of tramps, and one of my men had already made their acquaintance. I put him in their company, and they soon connected with the man I wanted—the “Dick” of the railroad-bridge conversation. His name was Creighton. I had already met him, and had once spoken with him, but without knowing his name. Dick Creighton was a thoroughly first-class gentleman tramp, about twenty-seven years of age, good-looking, a man of excellent family, and of college education; but early dissipation and irregular habits, leading to the loss of one situation after the other, had gradually brought him to what he was.

Dick was now taken care of, in hopes that he would soon bring us to his “fire-queen,” and, sure enough, in two days he had an interview with her, and, as I anticipated, she proved to be our young lady friend of Summit Heights, Miss Natalie Raymond.

She drove her pony phaeton alone, and met him on a secluded road by the woods, the old forest growth that still skirted the town. Their conversation could not be heard, but Dick was very earnest with her, and seemed to be anxiously pleading for some object. She listened quietly, sometimes prettily defiant, then talking to him in a coaxing, caressing way; and once, as he held her hands, and was vehemently remonstrating with her, she broke down and cried bitterly. For some time he let her cry. At the end of it all she evidently made some promise that was satisfactory to Dick, for, as she drove off, she turned around, and, with a light laugh, cried out, "I will keep my promise this time, Dick!" And she left Dick standing looking after her with a glow upon his face as though a rainbow illumined it. Perhaps it did—the rainbow of hope in the lover's heart.

I at once telegraphed to Columbus for another man, and upon his arrival placed this woman in his charge, for from that hour, wherever Miss Natalie Raymond went, day or night, her shadow followed her like fate.

It was now four weeks since the last fire had occurred, and Paynesville seemed lulled to rest in a period of fancied security. People had ceased talking of "firebugs," "tramps" and "incendiarism," and even the Mayor and his official adjuncts appeared to have forgotten to question me about "results."

It was about half-past ten o'clock one night. I was on my regular post, inside the building; Parker and Owens on watch outside. Everything was as quiet as a graveyard. The night was still and dark, the sky overcast, neither moon nor star to be seen, and but little wind stirring. "Just the night," I had remarked to Parker, "for ladybugs to be out." It was two days since Dick Creighton's interview with Miss Raymond. I was busily thinking over all the present situation, and of that interview. What was that promise she had made to him? Had it anything to do with the fires? If so, would she keep it? And would that put a stop to the fires, and—The signal was given me that some one was approaching.

I waited, keenly on the alert. In a few minutes the small door swung in, and the main door of the stable, which stood partly open—for so I found it on first examining the place—was slowly pushed back, and a woman stood in the opening. She paused a moment, then stepped over and within, stood still, as if to make sure no one was about, then slowly closed the door. Again she waited a few moments, then hastily, but with singularly quiet, easy movements, went to the back part of the stable, where a low shed, that had been used for tools, joined on two sides the main and wing buildings respectively. Here she gathered together some loose boards, broken boxes and small chips, and drawing a can of kerosene from under the loose dark cloak she wore, she poured a quantity of it over them. She then went to a light-wagon, which some neighbor, undaunted by past fires, had put in here out of his way, and fairly saturated it with kerosene, then taking it by the shafts, she pushed it towards the entrance of the shed.

As I watched the thoroughness of her work, for a moment a question of its consequences flashed across me. But my men had close instructions, we were well prepared, and I had no fear of them now that the moment of decisive action had come.

She next took a box of matches from her pocket. She was cool, quiet and deliberate in all she did, pausing every now and then to look about before continuing her work. When all her preparations were completed, she went to the door and looked out. Apparently satisfied, she returned, struck a match and set fire to the piled-up material in the shed. For one brief moment she watched it, as if to make sure the flames had well started, then, with a slight, quick movement, she ignited a heavy twist of paper she had made up, threw it burning into the kerosene-saturated buggy, and with a rush started for the door. But as she reached it my grip was on her arm, the sharp signal given, and my men were fighting the fire, the first vivid flash of which had shown me the face of Natalie Raymond, and I knew for certain that my fire-bug and Dick's fire-queen were the same.

As she felt my grasp upon her arm, she gave a start, flashed up a quick, piecing look at me, and then, seeing the flames leap up, she gave a sudden, sharp cry of "Fire! Fire!" In an instant I clapped my hand over her mouth, and with a word made her understand she must not repeat her cry. She then made a mad, fierce struggle to free herself from my hold, when I slipped the "bracelets" on her wrists, for there was no time to be lost fooling with her, and I did not want to hurt her. I then fastened the small door, and she knew she was a helpless prisoner, and became quiet.

I was free to help my men, now reinforced by Wilson, her shadower, who had followed Miss Raymond from her home; and thus there were four of us at work. It was a sharp, fierce fight for a few minutes, but we had kept well prepared, for every night in my round of inspection I had seen for myself that in each building the blankets were freshly wet, the old carpets sprinkled just enough to keep them damp, the casks and buckets filled with water, and the hand-grenades ready to be snatched up. These precautions served us in good stead now, and soon the flames were smothered and the fire stamped out, leaving the smoked and blistered wagon, some burned boards and a few charred timbers as blackened proof of the incendiary's act.

I sent for a carriage, directed Parker to call the men off post in the other buildings, for their duty was over, and putting Miss Raymond into the carriage, drove to the hotel, and placed her in a suitable room. I took the handcuffs from her wrists, that she might remove her hat and cloak, and as I did so she asked me, with a strange simplicity that went straight to my heart:

"What are they?"

"They are ugly things," I answered, as I put them in my pocket, "that we don't like to use." Poor thing! the "bracelets" were a kind of jewelry she had never seen before, and had too soon learned the use of.

I wrote a note to her father, telling him that his daughter was in my custody at the hotel, and requesting his presence, and sent it by Wilson. I also sent a messenger with a note to the Mayor. She watched me at first very quietly while I did all this, but I noticed now and then a strange glitter in her eyes. She soon became restless and uneasy in her movements, and talkative, but in a nervous, high-pitched tone of voice, and with a half-irrelevant lack of meaning in her speech. I now tried to get a confession from her about the fires, but I might as well have talked to the dead. She would not speak about them, but sat bolt upright in her chair, while the curious glitter in her

eyes, as she looked from me to Parker, who had joined me, and back again, seemed every moment getting brighter and her face was ghastly white.

“What are you going to do with me?” she kept asking. “Shall you take me away somewhere?” And as I attempted with soothing words to allay any fears of harsh treatment, she arose and paced the room in a somewhat tragic manner; but she would neither deny nor acknowledge any part in the fires, nor, in fact, take any notice of my questions or accusations. Finally, thinking to startle her into some admission, I said, “Shall I send for Dick?”

Alas! I was the incendiary this time. Like a flash of lightning she was upon me, beating my chest furiously with her hands, tearing wildly at me, and trying with unnatural strength to push me over, while, with a sharp ring in her voice, she cried:

“You shall not see him! You shall not tell him! Dick will never forgive me!” Then she broke off with a shrill laugh, “Oh, it was such fun to see them burn!”

Then, with another violent rush at me, she threw up both hands, and with a wild, piercing scream that rang through the house, shrieked, “Fire! fire! fire!” and the next instant was swinging across my arm in a dead swoon, and I knew that I had before me insanity in one of its worst forms. I placed her upon a couch, summoned the matron of the hotel, and sent for a physician. When Natalie Raymond recovered from her swoon she was a raving maniac.

I will not attempt to describe her father’s anguish upon being told the sad facts. He had suspected nothing. Natalie was his only child, her mother dead, and the insanity hereditary, her maternal grandmother having died in an insane asylum. Up to this time Natalie had shown no symptoms of the disease, for though sometimes a little wayward, she had always had a remarkably sweet and amiable disposition, while her sex, her youth, her social position, and the peculiar cunning of insanity, had completely warded off all suspicion of her incendiary acts.

As for poor Dick Creighton, when I sent for him the next day and told him all that had happened, I pitied him. The story of his acquaintance with his “fire-queen” was simple enough. He had first met her one day as she was driving along the road, alone; an accident had happened to the harness, and he offered his aid. They were mutually attracted, for, as I have said, Dick was a gentleman, and the acquaintance thus formed soon ripened into a genuine affection on both sides. Dick promised to reform and win her father’s favor, and all seemed well, when one night Dick and his two companions, the men of the railroad-bridge conversation, were in a barn which she set on fire, and discovered her in the act, but too late to save the building; yet Dick’s first thought, even in the horror of recognizing the woman he loved in the incendiary, was to save her from detection, and he had hastily sworn his friends to secrecy, for his sake, and for her sake, a woman. She had afterwards partly admitted to him her complicity with previous fires, but “meant no harm—she liked to see them burn,” and “no one was hurt!” and promised never to light another. Then came another fire, and Dick knew that she had done it. No wonder he had grown so old in a few weeks.

In the interview watched by my men, he had, partly by a due manly severity, partly by a lover’s pleading, finally won from her a full confession; that it was she who for these three years past

had started all the incendiary fires, but always selecting empty barns, that “no one should be hurt.” In the one instance noted at the beginning of my narrative she did not know it had been so recently occupied. With the tears of repentance flowing from her eyes, she had promised him, if he would forgive her, never to repeat her acts. Dick had then told her of a position he had secured in St. Louis, and added that, before leaving to take it, he would ask her father’s consent to win her for his wife. But he did not add, to her, that he also intended to tell her father all the unhappy circumstances, and beg him to take his daughter away from the scenes of her constant temptation, in the hope that time and change of surroundings would cure her. But he was too late. The disease was developing too rapidly, insanity knows no promise, and she lit one fire too many.

The rest is soon told. Miss Raymond was removed to an asylum, and the sad affair, for her sake and her father’s, was kept quiet, so that only those immediately connected with it knew that the incendiary had been discovered. Mr. Raymond was not only a wealthy, but a just and an honorable, man, and he reimbursed, so far as possible, all those whose losses were not covered by insurance.

The shock upon Dick Creighton produced a complete reform. He took his position in St. Louis, became a steady business man, and has since been admitted to partnership. His two companions, by the influence of my men, were induced to abandon their tramping. One of them returned to his regular trade of carpentry, married an old love, and became an industrious member of society. The other is now one of the ablest men in my force.

In about three months Miss Raymond sufficiently recovered to be taken to Europe, where her reason was finally restored, but her health failed, and the next year she died of a fever contracted at Rome during the Carnival.

Paynesville has since enjoyed a peaceful immunity from fires, and the last I heard from there, it was rejoicing in the full possession of a paid fire department.