

FIRE & RAIN

Great Chicago Fire, 1871

7 JUDGE ELMER CRAMDON ENTERED HIS house soaked to the skin and smelling of wet smoke. The entire city smelled of wet smoke. The day's downpour had succeeded in doing what days of firefighting hadn't, putting out the last embers of the conflagration that had devastated the heart of Chicago and left a third of its 300,000 citizens homeless.

"Where's your new umbrella?" Vera Cramdon asked as she unbuttoned her husband's sopping coat and hung it in the closet. The judge looked slightly shocked to discover his loss. "You're so forgetful," Vera chided. "How is everything with the Common Council? How is Mayor Mason?"

Elmer had spent much of the morning discussing the provisions for martial law and the return of essential services. "Sheridan, the war hero, has taken charge," he informed his wife. "Unfortunately, the fire came at the worst time for city officials. Joseph Medill plans to oppose us in the elections. Stricter building codes! Baa! It doesn't take a genius to suggest stricter codes now. But Medill's *Tribune* will take up the cause and his reporters will fan the flames." He winced at his unfortunate choice of metaphor.

"The city was growing so fast," Vera said consolingly. "Even if you had strict codes, people wouldn't have obeyed, especially in the poor districts where this whole catastrophe began."

"At least the *Tribune's* new fireproof building went up in smoke," Elmer laughed as he glanced out a side window. "Speaking of the *Tribune*, there's someone over at Rory Johnson's house. They're arguing."

"Let me see." In a second, Vera joined him. Just half a week earlier it would have been impossible to see from the judge's parlor window to the *Tribune* editor's. There would have been a stable and another house in the way. But the fire in its quixotic path had left, here and there, a few buildings completely untouched. On this block, three homes stood erect and whole amid the ashy rubble: the judge's, the editor's, and ironically enough, one belonging to the president of a fire insurance company.

"Too late," Elmer said, as Vera looked out the window. "They moved away. I couldn't see who; except it was a man and he looked angry."

"The whole city has a right to be angry at Mr. Rory Johnson," Vera said. "His paper will vilify every decent official in town, mark my words. He'll use this fire to accuse everyone of graft and profiteering and criminal neglect. By the way," she added, having reminded herself of criminal neglect, "is it true what they say about that Irish woman?"

Judge Cramdon nodded. "Mrs. Kate O'Leary. It started in her barn, although her own house not ten feet away somehow escaped the flames. Some say it was her cow kicking over a lamp. Some say it was her boys sneaking a smoke. There are some who even think..." He stopped.

"It was the French radicals," Vera Cramdon said, completing his sentence. "With their crazy ideas of the Paris commune. I knew it! They set their own city on fire and now they send someone to Chicago to do the same."

"Perhaps," said the judge, tiring of his wife's bilious theories. "I'm going into my study." And the judge sauntered into the next room, closing the door behind him.

Judge Cramdon hadn't been in his study for more than five minutes when a gunshot echoed across the North Division



neighborhood. When Vera opened the study door, she found him staring out the window. "A gunshot," she gasped.

"Two of 'em," the judge corrected her. "From Rory Johnson's house." Without another word, the middle-aged jurist went into the parlor, retrieved his wet coat from the closet and strode into the street. Mrs. Cramdon grabbed her own coat and followed.

The rain had stopped, but the rubble-strewn block was still deserted, all except for an artist who had set up an easel in the middle of the street. Cramdon had seen these entrepreneurs of disaster already popping up across the city, artists sketching the dramatic ruins, hoping to sell their works to the illustrated papers or to tourists. "Window. Over there," the man called out as he left his easel and crossed to the Cramdons. He spoke with a French accent and was pointing toward the Johnson home. Even from here, they could see the shattered side window.

"I was looking there when it happened. Bang! Right through the window."

"Did you see anyone?" the judge asked the rumpled young man.

"No," the man said almost apologetically. "Must've been shot from inside."

The judge was about to ask if the Frenchman had seen anyone leaving but then realized the front door wasn't visible from here. A minute later, the three arrived at the door and were met by a fourth. Walter Root, insurance company president, the only other homeowner left on the block, met them on the front steps. "I was just returning," said the heavy-set businessman, motioning toward a trap and horse tied to a blackened stone post by his own townhouse. "I heard a gunshot."

They tried the thick oak door and found it locked. It took an iron bar scavenged from the street and the strength of all three men to break it open. Rory Johnson was a bachelor and, like everyone else, had given his servants time off to deal with their own losses. "Mr. Johnson?" Judge Cramdon called out. When there was no response, he led the way back to the side library.

From the library doorway, they saw the crumpled body. There was no gun in sight, just a bloody candlestick and several deep gashes on Rory Johnson's head. "Keep Mrs. Cramdon out," the judge instructed the two men, then walked gingerly into the room and knelt down. "Here's the gun," he said and reached across to the far side of the corpse.

Walter Root joined the judge. The gun was a Colt 0.36, the type made popular by the Texas Rangers. "I didn't know Rory was left-handed."

"Did you know him well?" asked Cramdon.

"We met a few times," Root admitted. "He carried a gun everywhere. Dozens of men wanted him dead, so he said, for all the dark secrets he knew. He was at my house this afternoon."

"Why?" asked Mrs. Cramdon. She had recovered from the shock and now entered the room. "You weren't one of the dozens, I trust."

Root's laugh was hollow. "My insurance firm, as the world will soon discover, is going bankrupt. We can't possibly settle all the claims. A fire of this magnitude... Rory accused me of hiding funds, of declaring a false bankruptcy. Rory and his damned publisher want to unearth some scandal from this tragedy. Crooked business dealings, crooked officials, some international plot. Rory was looking everywhere."

The room fell silent for a moment as each mulled over Root's words. "What in the world happened?" Vera Cramdon finally asked.

"Well," her husband volunteered as he crossed to the broken window. "I saw Mr. Johnson at this very spot arguing with someone. About five minutes later I heard the shots."

"I didn't see a soul come or leave," said the French artist. "Of course, I had no view of the front door."

"It seems like Rory used the gun to try to protect himself," Root hypothesized. "The shot missed and went through the window glass."

"Might the killer still be here?" asked Vera. Then she turned and caught a glimpse out the broken front door. "Oh,

dear. If someone was inside, we gave him an escape. He's long gone by now."

The men all agreed, but half-heartedly. Instinctively they knew that Rory Johnson's killer was still in the house.

- (1) *Who killed Rory Johnson?* (2) *What was the sequence of events?*
 (3) *What piece of evidence points to the killer?*

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 136.
 To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 112.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE

FOR THOUSANDS OF years, fire was the most feared enemy of any city. Before the advent of fire-resistant materials and modern firefighting techniques, fires would often destroy entire metropolises, from ancient Rome to Restoration London.

The summer and fall of 1871 had been a particularly dry period in the mostly wooden city of Chicago. Then on Sunday, October 8, just after 9 P.M., flames broke out in the barn of the Patrick O'Leary family. Legend has it that Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern—and that explanation remains a possibility. Firefighters responded, but were exhausted from having fought a large fire just the previous day. Destruction spread for two days, until heavy rains on October 10 helped douse the flames. Over 300 people died and the heart of the city was destroyed.

The city rebuilt quickly. Just 22 years later, Chicago hosted the Columbian Exposition, celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in America. The site for this world's fair had been hotly contested among the largest U.S. cities. The long competition delayed the exposition for a year (until 1893) and led one New York editor to decry the Chicago delegation's vocal boosterism. He labeled Chicago "that windy city." And the nickname stuck.