

The Tenant on the 13th Floor

by John York Cabot, 1918-1944

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Illustration:

The little man wasn't in the car when it got
to the 14th floor.

IN my business I have to put up with a lot. I meet a lot of screwy people and hear a lot of third-rate humor and fifth-rate weather reports. Sometimes it's, "How's business, Mike? Going up?" And other times it's, "Hot today, isn't it, Mike?" Or, "Think the rain'll go on all day?"

All very funny. All very interesting.

Sometimes, when the car is jammed with passengers, I think I'd like to run the elevator straight up through the top of the roof. Just for the hell of it. For you see, that's my racket—running an elevator in the Binx Building. And it is a most

monotonous racket indeed. Up and down. Up and down. Lord, how I wish I could go sideways just once!

But that's because I'm probably going crazy. I'm not sure I am, mind you. But fifteen years of going up and down, up and down, for a living *might* have a bad effect on the brain tissues. And if *I'm* not crazy, then *someone* is I'll let you decide that for yourself.

The first time I saw the little guy was on a dismal March morning. It was raining outside, and people clumped in and out of my car in muddy shoes and soggy clothes, smelling damp and trying to put out my eyes with umbrella points.

The little guy carried an umbrella. He wore a black derby and a high celluloid collar that protruded above the black, wet sheen of the rubber raincoat that hung around him. His feet were encased in a pair of galoshes, and he wore tortoise shell spectacles.

I had never seen him before, and I wouldn't have noticed him then, except for the fact that he nodded cheerfully to me as he stepped into the car. Generally only regular tenants of the building did that.

The car wasn't awfully crowded on this trip. Just about eight passengers including the little guy.

"Ten!" someone called.

"Eight!" someone else said.

"Twenty-one!" said another voice.

I threw the lever forward and the car started up.

"Thirteen, please!" said a pleasant voice.

I'd heard that gag so often it wasn't funny any longer. Of course there was no thirteenth floor on the Binx Building. Like plenty of other big office buildings we just skipped the thirteenth floor; twelve, then fourteen, see?

I glared over my shoulder to see who the gagster was. The little guy was the only passenger smiling.

"What did you say?" I demanded. "Thirteen, please," he answered.

I knew how to fix his clock. I'd done it to other funnymen who'd called for the thirteenth floor. Just ignore them when they asked for the floor they really wanted. Ignore them and ride them all the way up to the top.

I STOPPED at eight and two passengers got out. One got in. Then it was ten. Four passengers got out. I shot past twelve, then fourteen, stopped the car at sixteen and one passenger got out. Twenty was the top floor, and when I stopped the car there I turned around again, ready to give the little guy a so-yuh- thought-yuh-were-smart look.

But he wasn't there. The only passenger was a fat old dame. I blinked.

"Lady!" I demanded, "what happened to the little guy who called for thirteen?"

She looked startled, wheeled around. "Why," she gasped, then she wheeled back to face me, "he was standing right behind me. I'm sure he didn't get out!"

Our eyes met, and she stepped hastily out of the car as if it might suddenly fall from under her. I looked at the back of the empty car where the little guy should have still been standing. No holes in the floor. He hadn't dropped through.

"He *musta* gotten off at one of the stops!" I told myself. Running an elevator gets you that way. You begin to worry about such things.

The bell in the other shaft rang. It was my turn to start down again. But I looked very carefully at the blank gray wall between fourteen and twelve on the way down. And for the rest of the day it was somehow uncomfortable every time I'd pass the thirteenth floor that wasn't there.⁽¹⁾

I was working the late shift that day, nine-thirty in the morning to seven at night. And at seventeen minutes to seven—you count the minutes that way when you're on the long shift and almost ready to go home—I picked up three of the scrub women on the sixteenth floor to take them down to the second.

Most of the offices in the building are closed by five o'clock, so the last two hours on the long shift aren't very busy and the cars are never crowded.

The scrub women had their pails and mops and stood near the back of the car chattering to each other as I took them down to the second. It was a quick trip, non-stop from the sixteenth down. Then I stopped the car and they were pulling the pails and mops out. The buzzer on my board flashed to indicate another passenger was waiting up on the twentieth.

I slammed the door and started up.

"All the way down, please," said a pleasant voice.

Something at the nape of my neck got very chilly. I knew that voice. I stopped the car with a lurch and turned around.

The little guy stood in the back, smiling at me.

"All the way down, please," he repeated.

I swear that he hadn't gotten on at sixteen with the scrub women. And that was the only stop I'd made!

"Look," I said, and there was a croak in my voice. "Look, when did you get on?"

He smiled pleasantly. "At thirteen, of course."

Now that he'd told me, I wished he hadn't.

I PUT the car into motion very carefully. My nerves were screaming. We went down to the first floor. The little guy stepped out. I was trying to close my eyes against the sight of him.

"I had to work a little late tonight," he said.

"Did you now?" I answered carefully.

"Yes," he said. "But then, business is so good I shouldn't complain." He stood there, not making any move to walk out of the lobby, obviously making conversation.

"You have an office here?" I asked cautiously.

He smiled in that very happy way of his.

"Oh yes. Oh my yes." He laughed. "I've had an office here for almost twenty-five years now."

I'd been running elevators in the Binx Building for eight years. I'd never seen him until today. And yet he didn't *seem* to be playing the wiseacre.

"That's funny," I said in a sort of strained voice. "I've never seen you until today."

This didn't faze him.

"Of course not," he answered cheerfully. "Today is the first day I've ever used the elevators. Until today I always walked up."

"To the thirteenth floor," I said in a choked voice.

"Yes," he seemed happy to chatter, "thirteen flights of stairs are good exercise. Excellent exercise. Used to keep me in splendid condition. But of course," he gave an apologetic little laugh, "I believe I'm getting a little old for such strenuous exertion now. So today I used the elevator for the first time. I think I'll continue to do so."

This was more than I could take. He was really pulling my leg. I got a little sore. This was all nonsense. What could I have been thinking of?

"So you have an office here?" I asked nastily.

He nodded.

"On the thirteenth floor."

"Where's your firm name on the building directory?" I asked, pointing a finger at the directory board on the wall across from the elevators.

He stepped over to the board and pointed with a thin finger.

"Here," he indicated. "Right here."

I stepped out of the elevator and walked over beside him, squinting up at the spot at which he pointed. It was black and blank. Nothing was there. It was the empty space at the bottom of the "H" section.

Illustration:

"There it is," he said, pointing at a blank space.

"Z. Hobson & Co."

"Listen," I snapped. "If you're trying to be wise—" and I glared down at him.

He looked bewilderedly at me.

"It's right there," he said. "Z. Hobson & Company."

But it wasn't, of course. Yet the expression on his face was so sincerely *convincing*. Still it *wasn't* there!

He suddenly looked down at a big watch he'd pulled from his pocket. A watch with a huge, old-fashioned gold chain.

"My," he said. "Oh my, it's getting late. I must hurry, or I'll miss my supper." He smiled apologetically, tapped his black derby. "Good-night," he said pleasantly.

I watched him walk briskly out of the building. Then I turned and looked at the spot on the directory to which he'd pointed. It was still blank. There wasn't any Z. Hobson & Company there.

WHEN the night man relieved me, ten minutes later, I went straight to the bar next door. I needed a few quick ones. My wife gave me hell when I got home groggy, of course, but I couldn't tell her the reason. I couldn't tell anyone. Up and down. Up and down. Up and down. Maybe I *was* going nuts.

And if I was going batty, the symptoms were still with me the next morning. For the little guy stepped into the elevator again, and again he nodded pleasantly. If the elevator hadn't been so crowded I think I'd have refused to take him up.

And it would have been better for me if I had refused. For the same damned thing happened again. He called for the thirteenth, while a chill ran up my spine. I didn't dare look at him as I made my stops all the way up to the fourteenth. But when I turned around to look at that stop—he wasn't there.

He hadn't gotten off at any of the previous stops. I know. I watched that door like a Junior G-Man. But he was gone!

And I took him down, around six o'clock, that evening. Took him down even though I *knew* he hadn't stepped into the car at any stop!

I was in no mood to make light talk with him that night. And I reeled in on my wife's cold dinner for the second night in a row. But I needed the alcoholic fortitude.

Obviously there was no thirteenth. I told myself this for the next two days. But for the next two days the little guy got on and off at the thirteenth floor. I wasn't sleeping nights. I was a wreck.

It was on the third evening, about six o'clock again, when I whipped past the gray wall where the thirteenth floor *wasn't* and I suddenly *felt* him standing in the back of the car.

I looked straight ahead. I didn't dare turn around. My voice must have been almost hysterical as I spoke.

"Look," I quavered. "Hasn't this been going on long enough?"

"Eh?" he said behind me. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand you."

"This thirteenth floor stuff," I blurted crazily. "You know there isn't any thirteenth floor!"

His voice was clearly bewildered as he answered.

"I'm afraid I really don't understand you. My office is on the thirteenth. I get on and off there."

His last sentence was the one I didn't care to face. It was *too* true. I was getting more than frantic.

"But the Binx Building doesn't *have* any thirteenth floor!" I wailed.

"Oh," said the little guy, and there was sudden understanding in his voice. "Oh, I see. You mean *actually* it doesn't."

He didn't add anything to that. That seemed to make it perfectly clear. Ha ha. It didn't *actually* have any thirteenth floor. Ha ha ha. Yes, indeed. That made it all right. I felt like gibbering wildly.

He suddenly spoke again.

Illustration:
The tenant

"But I *do* save rent that way," he reflected.

I GOT the elevator down to the first floor before I lost control completely. I jerked the door open. I couldn't get him out of there soon enough.

He stepped out into the lobby and turned to make some nightly small talk. But I wasn't having any. I slammed the door and shot up as quick as I could. That night I got so drunk I told my wife. It didn't help. She just looked at me. When I reeled off to bed I heard her calling her mother's to find out if they had an extra room for her.

I came to work at the Binx Building the next morning resolved that it would be my last. I would quit as soon as the day was over. Enough was enough. Another day and they'd take me away in a steel-ribbed jacket.

But nine o'clock passed without the appearance of the little guy. Ten o'clock went by and I still hadn't seen him. At eleven he stepped into the elevator. He smiled pleasantly, touching his black derby.

"Have an extra heavy load for you today, Mike," he said.

I didn't answer. But I thought, my God has he got *friends*?

"I'm moving out," he went on. "Have to expand. Business is getting so very good I need new quarters."

I shut my eyes and shook my head hard. But he didn't disappear. Didn't disappear, that is, until the thirteenth floor. At least he must have disappeared. For he was in the car at the twelfth, and gone when I made the stop at the fourteenth!

And it was three trips later when I saw him again. I was going down, in an empty car, when suddenly the weight in the elevator was jolted. I noticed quickly that I'd just passed thirteen.

Then I looked over my shoulder.

The little guy was there. And three big filing cabinets and a heavy old fashioned typewriter were also there.

"This is all I have to move," he said, smiling in that friendly dog way. "It's not too heavy. I telephoned for some movers to meet me in the lobby. They'll take it to my new offices."

"Your new offices," I managed to blurt, "will they be on, on, the—"

"On the thirteenth floor?" he finished my sentence. "Of course. The thirteenth is very lucky. I wouldn't have any other floor for my office."

"But there are no thirteenth floors in the business district of this town," I protested groggily.

He smiled again. "Not actually," he conceded. "But I've found one that will do, just a block from here, for a while. It's on the thirteenth," he finished.

AT LAST, thank God, we were down on the first floor. And there, so help me, were two burly, bearded, overall-clad moving men. They stepped into the car and lugged out the filing cabinets and the old typewriter. The little guy gave them a slip of paper and I suppose it had directions on it for delivery.

Then he turned to me, extending his hand.

"Goodbye, Mike," said the little guy beamingly. "It's been pleasant knowing you. If there's ever anything I can do for you, I wish you'd look me up. Here's my card, my, ah, business card."

He handed me a white pasteboard. There was nothing on either side. I gagged.

"Wha—what's your business?" I managed to gasp.

"I make invisible ink," he said. "Well, goodbye."

He turned then and marched out of the lobby, a little guy in a black derby hat and a high celluloid collar, whistling happily. The boss of the Z. Hobson Company, Invisible Ink.

That afternoon I caught the manager of the Binx Building. I wasn't going to quit, but I did need a vacation. The manager saw the color of my face and felt that I needed one too.

"Starting today?" I begged.

"Starting today," the manager agreed.

I started to turn weakly for the door. Then I stopped for a minute.

"Say," I demanded, "how long have you managed this place?"

The manager looked at me as if I were crazy.

"Fifteen years," he said.

"How long," I asked carefully, "has the Binx Building not had a thirteenth floor?"

The manager thought.

"About ten years," he answered.

"Who," I gulped, "was the last tenant on the thirteenth, before it was changed to the fourteenth?"

The manager frowned. After a minute he said:

"An old duck named Z. Hobson. A little fellow, as I remember, whose business was ah, let me see, oh yes—invisible ink. He died two days before we inaugurated the no thirteenth floor idea. Nice pleasant old duck."

I must have staggered for the door.

The manager called after me.

"Why were you so curious, Mike?"

"He just moved out today," I croaked.

"You take a nice long vacation, Mike," the manager said in sudden anxious solicitation. "I'm sure you'll straighten out."

Maybe he's right. Maybe I will.

I'm still on my vacation though...



⁽¹⁾ Modern office buildings do not skip the 13th floor. However, there are many among those buildings more than fifteen years old, which do not have a 13th floor. It is amazing that hardheaded business people are still found who are so superstitious that they number floors in a large building so as to skip a number to which bad luck is generally attached. The truth is that most great tragedies, caused by fires and explosions, have occurred in office buildings *which had no 13th floor*. However, in order not to be superstitious on our part, it must be pointed out that modern buildings, possessing a 13th floor, are fireproof, and that factor alone accounts for the disasters' apparent selection of buildings without 13th floors since they are old and not constructed to eliminate fire menace as are the newest skyscrapers.—Ed.