

FIGHTING FIRE—A TRUE STORY.

"Come here, Johnny, and let me brush your hair. Why, your father wouldn't know his little boy if he was to see you now. Oh, I do hope James will come back soon. My heart aches as I think of him and all my kindred so far away. It is so lonesome here. Only these two little boys," and she gazed down fondly, though sadly, at her four-year-old Frank, taking his after dinner nap in her lap, and master Johnny standing at her knee, "and no grown person to speak to. How I wish Mr. Matthews lived nearer."

Saying which, she sighed, and laying down her baby boy, went about her household labors. It was a strange place for Mary Sherwood to be in, gentle, sensitive as she was. It was on the border of civilization, where everything was rough and new. Here, in a half-finished farmhouse, on the bank of a pretty Iowa stream, with a back ground of heavy timber and a foreground of unending prairie, she sat alone with her babes.

Why was she here? A woman's devotion to a husband's health. One year ago his physician had said to Mr. S. that he must seek some absolutely quiet place or die. It did not take the wife long to decide. In a few months they were here, living in a log cabin, which had just given way to this unpretentious house. Here, from all thoughts of literary labors, in the pleasures of rod and gun, the husband and father was slowly gaining health. It was now fall, and business engagements had imperatively called him east.

No wonder, then, that she sighed. The days dragged heavily. Her husband and her father's home were 1,200 miles away. This was thirty years ago, when to travel from New York state to Iowa was more than a journey to Rome is now. It was hard, slow, weary work.

It was a pretty picture Mary Sherwood made that bright October afternoon standing in her doorway and straining her eyes across the prairie to catch sight of a human form at Henry Matthews' place a mile away. A delicate form, a sweet, refined face, and a weary, far-away look in her eyes. All about her tall black oaks stood like sentinels on guard. Only a moment, and she had gone to her work.

Woman on the frontier has little time for indulging in grief or reverie. Hers is a life of action. Only for a moment may you see this sad, wistful look. In hard work many a fair daughter of Eastern parents has outgrown the bitter heart-ache and the fear of a lone frontier life.

Who could tell what an hour might bring forth! Surely Mrs. Sherwood had little idea of what was in store for her that same Indian summer day.

"Mother, I'm afraid," was the hurried exclamation of six-year-old Johnny, as he came rushing into the kitchen a few moments later.

"What's the matter, my dear little boy? Did you see a snake?"

"No, no-o-o, I heard a great noise like ten thunders, rumble, rumble, rumble; and a rabbit ran by me just as fast as he could go, and a flock of pheasants came and lit right over there, and they're all in a flutter. There, I can hear it now. Don't you hear it now, mother? Rumble, rumble, rumble. What is it, mother? Don't you know?"

Yes! she knew—knew with a sickening sense of her weakness, danger and loss. It was the steady march of fire. It was rolling right on, up through the dark woods to the south. It was nearing her home; and unless she could do something it would soon lay in ashes, all for which she and Mr. Sherwood had toiled all summer. But what could she do? No neighbor was in sight; no mortal ear could hear. Her babes were but a hindrance. Only God above and her right arm.

Mrs. Sherwood was a resolute woman. She had proved that when she decided to come west; she had proved it in a deadly sickness. She was now about to prove it again.

"Johnnie, wake up Frankie and bring him along, and keep close to me."

And the little six-year-old boy, with a sense of his responsibility, obeyed implicitly. At the same time she seized a water pail in one hand and a mop in the other, and keeping a watchful eye on the children, went out to fight the fire.

It is hard work to fight fire. Men seldom perform such exhaustive labor as while the excitement of a fire is upon them. Such work is harder for women than for men; and Mary Sherwood was a delicate woman, and bearing burdens only mothers know of. Nor was she used to severe labor. Her arm was not strong; she had been tenderly reared, nor did she weigh one hundred pounds. But if she had not the strength of some, she had what was better—nerve and pluck and quick wit.

The fire was making such headway, feeding on dry autumn leaves, that many a woman or man would not have dared to go near it. But she felt that it must be done, and so did it. Filling her pail at the creek, she rapidly dipped her mop into it, and then began to put out the fire. The fire ran rapidly along the ground, licking up the leaves, fallow trees and other debris. But the brave woman attacked it unflinchingly, and as fast as her mop touched it a little of the fire went out; and on the scorched and burnt ground the little boys stood, following her as she heroically met that line of fire, and stopped it.

Mrs. Partington could not wipe out the Atlantic Ocean with her mop. But there are times when a mop will quench a prairie fire. The fire of which we speak came from the prairie, swept up and into the woods, and was now passing on to the prairie beyond.

Here was a scene fit for a painter. That long line of forked flames,

laughing, crackling, devouring, surmounting every obstacle, and hurrying forward faster and faster as the breath of the distant mountains began to be felt. And in their lurid glare a solitary woman battling that long, hot line of fire, alone, and conquering.

The minutes sped away into hours. The sun sank down and lingered at the horizon. Over and over again had she travelled the ever-lengthening distance to the creek to replenish her pail of water. The fire in the woods was all out. The house was safe unless the flames should be turned by the rising western wind, and sweep down from the northwest.

But now a new danger arose. For as it swept out on to the prairie, Mr. Sherwood's cornfield and haystack stood right in its path, and towards these the bright flames were steadily moving. Must they be destroyed? The little family could ill afford to lose corn and hay this fall. And so this brave woman toiled on; fighting the fire across the prairie; fighting it oftentimes at the very border line; mopping it off the burning rails which fenced in the corn and hay. But never giving up, never ceasing, ever winning, inch by inch, in the terrible struggle.

Hour after hour the little feet dragged after her. Often she heard their complaints:

"Mamma, I'm so tired. Mamma, Frankie's so cold."

But she had only time to give the little fellow a hasty caress and the word:

"Hold on a little longer, baby boy, Mamma's most through."

"Pretty soon: "Mother, I'm awful hungry. Can't I have something to eat?"

"Not yet, Johnny. We must put out this big fire and save the hay and the corn and the house."

But words could not long pacify them.

"Mamma, I'm so tired. I want to go home; I want to go home."

"Yes, yes, baby boy, mamma knows you are tired. Mamma's tired, too; oh, so tired. But be a good little boy, and we'll soon be going home."

"I am a good little boy, and I want to go home. Come, mamma, I want to go home."

"Mother, I've hurt my foot. Oh, oh. And I'm hungrier an owl. Can't we go home?"

"No! Johnny, not just yet. There, there, Johnny, be a brave boy and I guess it won't hurt long. Remember, papa wants his little boy to be brave."

"I can't be brave. I'm so hungry."

And then, cold, tired, hungry and hurt, the poor little fellows lay down together, weeping as if their hearts would break.

But the mop never stops, though the mother's heart bleeds for her suffering babes. Stroke follows stroke, and the baffled flames die sullenly away, leaving acres and acres in its track covered with smouldering debris. The sun has gone down. The chills of night have settled around her. Two little boys, all grime and dust, are heavily sleeping. But the mother keeps on. Her task must be done—all done. The stars come out, and the earth grows black. At last the fire is all out. It is a dark, cold night. The woods look gloomy and forbidding, as that lone woman, tired as few women ever are tired, wakes up her sleeping boys, gathers the younger to her bosom, and slowly drags her homeward way.

Yes! her home is still there. The fire has come and gone, and left only blackness and ashes in its wake. Another cannot follow. She has conquered. Her little home and crops are safe.

This tale is true. I knew her long and well who fought that fire. I know and love her still. *I was one of those boys.—Golden Rule.*

STARS.

The following illustration is taken from an address delivered at the first anniversary of the Reform Club of Lowell, by Rev. Charles Dana Barrows, D.D., pastor of the First Congregational Church of this city:

Go stand at twilight and gaze into the upper sky. A clear blue spot alone appears. You stand and look upon it; and as you gaze, lo! a star leaps out, and then another, and still a third, where but a timesince you saw only the deep, impenetrable blue. And still you gaze, till ere long the whole expanse of blue is filled with constellations of sparkling brightness. You have waited, longed and looked, and the very heavens have lent their treasures to complete your wish. And so it is with you members of this Reform Club. You stand—you have for twelve months past stood—looking up in the sky of reform, which has spread its canopy above you. At first, only the deepest blue, with but a star to stud its firmament appeared. But you still looked, till one after another they have leaped forth to give light and hope to your waiting hearts. You are looking still for more. Does the work seem doubtful at times? Nay: do not despair, but trust and work; and in the future of your life, lo! the glory shall increase, the constellations in these heavens shall multiply with every year, till the brightness of the glow shall declare to all mankind that their hope is realized and the glory of reform complete.

These eloquent words of promise and exhortation to labor, may well be applied to many temperance societies that through the year past have rejoiced over the reclamation of those who had seemed beyond the hopes of reform.—*Reform.*