

THE HAND IN THE FIRE.

BY FRANK BASIL TRACEY.

MIDNIGHT and winter in the Saskatchewan. Midnight and moonlight. Over the whole land lies a great sheet of frozen snow—lies in the beauty of its virgin white made brilliant and dazzling by the soft and mellow light of the moon. So clear, so spiritual is the air that every form, adorned with Nature's crystals, stands out with startling distinctness, endowed with supernatural size, radiance and charm. To this world of glorified Nature the world of man presents a striking yet happy contrast. Everywhere are the quiet tints; everywhere are the notes of simplicity, calmness, repose. Peace, contentment and happiness seem to dwell in every breath of life.

In one village, indeed, I know there is peace. Heaven has smiled lovingly upon its people during the past twelve months. No pestilence or calamity of any kind has disturbed their even life; the soil has been most productive, the harvest rich and the market keen. Prosperity and health have been abundant and full.

On this Sabbath night the town is wrapped in that serenity and silence which belong only to the night and to sequestered spots far removed from the city's maudlin fever and naked sin. Only one sound breaks upon the echoing air—the sobbing of the engine and the slow rumble of the train which passed through the village a few moments before and is now climbing the slopes toward the Pacific. The evening service at the church had a peculiar charm, and with a security and trust even more than usually profound the village had gone to rest. Peace and silence within; the glorious moonlight and the jeweled snow without—and midnight.

But look! The engine, whose steady throbbing may still be heard far away, tossed a cinder into the air as it thundered through the town; it whirled and twisted about in the moonlight until it fell upon the roof of the Laurier elevator and glided off down upon the icy ground—no, not upon the ground, but into a heap of shavings left by the village carpenter late the night before. There it lies for a moment dark and silent, as if hesitating and drawing back from the infamy of its fate. Then, deep down in the heart of the pile there gleams a faint, white light—then a tiny tongue of flame—then a leaping, crackling fire! It runs like a race-horse in all the radii of the circle made by the shavings and scattered bits of wood until the powder trail reaches the elevator office. It nibbles for a moment at the ragged edges of the new boards, then catches them in its hungry teeth and leaps up towards the roof and into the room where awaits rich food for its monstrous maw. Still, no one hears, no one sees. Not until the roaring dragon of flame has devoured the office and galloped up, up to the high, square-shouldered roof and flung its taunting beacon far across the prairie, does one sturdy farmer, whose window looked toward the south, wake with a start, and with fearful, blinking eyes behold the doom of his home. A leap for his clothing a cry of warning to his wife, a frenzied dash to the engine-house, outside which stands the bell-tower with its dangling rope, an eager, fierce pull, another and another—and at last the town knows.

Sharp and quick rings out the bell. Faster and faster leaps the iron clapper from side to side. Out from their little homes pour the startled villagers. No need to ask questions; no need to issue orders. Every one knows what those tones tell—that the

one known foe of the village is upon it, is knocking at the gates and calling for its awful tribute of hoard, homes, lives.

Amid the pallid-faced folk poured about the engine-house appears the tall form of the minister, calm, brave, with head as clear as yonder bell. A steady gaze at the high light, and then his voice rings out above the chatter:

"My people, be calm! We cannot save the elevator, but the village is in no danger. There is no wind and the sparks will not carry far. If we watch and blanket the houses near the track all will be well."

This wise word has its instant, calming effect; the noisy, affrighted throng become silent. Many hasten to follow the pastor's directions, and soon upon the roofs of the houses nearest the tracks stand men pouring water from buckets passed along by a line of men and boys.

But most gather about the heroic figure of the night. It is a living, grand Temple of Flame. Out from the seams made by the fire and bursting sides pours the wheat in maddening flood—only to be set upon and lapped up by the greedy demon. Within the shell are heard the falling timbers and the crash of machinery. Some daring workmen rush into the building and attempt to save their tools, only to be driven back, blinded

and another follow his example, and at length a hoarse whisper is heard: "A south wind springing up!" Has the huge blaze itself so disturbed the calm atmosphere as to impel a current of air to replace that driven away by the fire? If so, why, in God's name, must it blow from the south? Or is it the soft breeze, harbinger of an early spring, so welcome and cheered in that shut-in, frozen clime? No, alas! it comes as an ill-timed and hated visitor, a curse, a devil! For, wise in the experience of other towns, the village is built north of the tracks to protect it from the prevailing northern winds which drive slight blazes into awful fires. A south wind tonight, even though gentle, means driving the sparks right upon and into the homes of the people.

But see! This is no mere breeze. It is a hard wind, a gale, a blast. It begins to sweep along with terrible, pitiless force, driving the sparks, now become burning brands, in hundreds across a vacant space and hurling them upon the helpless huts with malignant and poisonous touch. Although stunned for a moment at this new figure of evil, the people quickly arouse themselves and eagerly follow the leader who shouts, "To the engine-house!" It is a very crude fire department, but engine and hose have often saved the town from destruction and must again.

Meanwhile, the blasts come howl-



"The wind has changed, the wind has changed! We're saved, we're saved!"

and burned. Others break through the huge basement doors to rescue the dumb brutes imprisoned there. While heavy timbers fall all about them they grope their way to the poor, blind horse which has for years walked patiently in a narrow circle and turned the machinery of the elevator's feedmill. They release the shuddering animal and with a slap on the rump urge him toward the open air. Then they open the gates to the noisy swine, which feed on the mill's refuse, and drive them into safety. Repassing the stall they peer into it and see what they had indeed feared, the horse again standing there. Wrought up with compassion and vexation they push, drive, beat and drag the brute away from its doom. Exhausted and undone they fall down when they at last reach the light—only to see horse and pigs turn about and rush madly back to that red-eyed Circe, into that maelstrom of death. In a few moments, when all chance of escape is cut off, the fire seizes upon the bodies of those brutes; then they arouse from their fatal fascination and in their mute, animal way make a terrible but futile fight for life. What feelings, what thoughts these creatures of God have at such moments none but Him may know. Helpless, with glistening eyes and sad hearts, the people can only await the silence which follows incoherent noises and agonized cries, to know that the end is come.

Suddenly one of the men raises his hand into the air and glances swiftly up toward the flaming roof. Another

the people leap quickly from the instant's grasp of the cause of their helplessness to a search for a remedy. What shall be done? Thaw out the hose? Impossible—there is no time. Even now incendiary brands are falling about, a dozen buildings are crackling merrily, and the roar of the tempest becomes more horrible and fierce.

Each one looks into his neighbor's eyes, a thousand plans of relief passing through their brains only to be instantly rejected. Suddenly the truth flashes upon them: this means the annihilation of the town and their all. It means that unless help comes immediately their only alternative is flight or certain death.

"Help! Help!" comes the cry from every heart. But where can help be found? The railway station is already burned and so the telegraph is worthless. Even if word of the calamity could be sent to another village hours would be required to bring aid. To stay by the ruins of the village is impossible, for the cold will overmatch the heat from the burning buildings and in a few hours will freeze and kill. Help! There is no help.

Flight? Yes, but whither? The nearest village is thirty miles away, and the farmhouses are so few and scattered that they cannot count as places of refuge. There is no time for concerted preparations, even for warm garments and provision for the old, sick and feeble, some of whom must be carried or perish. All look in hopeless, then frenzied, despair upon the dazzling earth—there is want, cold, suffering and death in that long stretch of prairie whose richness just a few hours before was their choicest theme, that prairie which now frowns upon them with horrid mien, and upon which the moon is shining with a mellow beauty that seems to mock them to their face.

Then the panic! "Fly, fly, fly!" is the only word, the one command, the overmastering voice of the fever in blood and brain. "On every hand our homes are blazing, all about us fall the awful brands; our accumulations of years are being swept away; nothing is left except our lives, and they are in momentary and ever-increasing peril. Haste, haste! The devil comes nearer. Fly! Out upon the snow, upon the cruel earth in any direction, to any fate, if only we may escape this demon of fire, drawing nearer with every breath!"

Oh, the panic, the riot, the flight! Hoarse cries, bitter, wailing, agonizing shouts and even fierce cursing. But heroism, too. No dastards here. Not a family leaves its hallowed shelter for a leap into the unknown until all are together. Simpleton and cripple are not forgotten; loafers and vagabonds are transformed into men and angels. Even with the fever and delirium in the brains of these simple people, you must know that they are exalted and not debased by their terrible trials. It is the one chastening and broadening characteristic of war, the divine influence of sacrifice, the mellowing and uniting of hearts by a common peril. In spite of the frenzy and panic not one soul is missing. All are to be saved or perish, as God wills, together. The women and sick are placed upon rude wagons, and about them are thrown the clothing and blankets snatched from beds still warm. Fast and furious has been the work. Great is the tumult as the villagers fling themselves in one huge body out upon the bleak earth.

On the village's edge at the very rear of his people, who entreat him to come on, the minister stands for a few moments, his sweet face sad and white and his eyes fixed tenderly upon the awful scene of his once

Then come, as if in doleful answer, the sobs and wails of women. Men are seen standing by the engine-house as if made of stone, or running about wringing their hands in despair. "In God's name, what is the matter?" cries a man rushing from his blazing dwelling and, with beard and hair singed, and with clothing and hands frightfully burned, breaking into the group. One glance at the hose tells the sickening truth—it is filled with ice!

After the previous fire, a month before, the hose, full with water, was carelessly dropped on the floor; the nozzle fell against a chair and lay pointing upward so that the water could not flow out. In a few hours it became frozen and so remained, for the room was never heated and was never opened except at the call of fire.

What shall be done? The minds of