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Smoky Days.

IN SIX CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.—THE FIRE-FIGHTERS.

HUSH, there's mother's good little girl! Hush, Ann Susan! I thought I heard Pete shouting."

"Shut yer head, Ann Susan! Don't you hear yer maw?" said David Armstrong.

Ann Susan, weary of the smoky and still air that had filled the backwoods for three days, rubbed her sore eyes and screamed more vigorously.

"Hush, Ann Susan! Hush, baby!" said Mary, the eldest daughter, rattling two iron spoons together. "Look what a good little girl Eliza Jane is. Listen if brother Pete's calling."

Ann Susan did not condescend to obey. Eliza Jane, the five-year-old, gazed across the table at the screaming "baby" with an air of superior goodness.

"Hush, there! What's Pete sayin', maw?" said the pioneer, with alarm. His wife listened intently.

"Oh dear, oh dear, it's too bad!" she cried, suddenly, in such anguish that Ann Susan was startled to silence.

For a moment nothing was heard in the log-cabin except the rythmical roar of the rapids of the Big Brazeau. Then a boy's voice came clearly over the monotone of the river.

"Father! Do hurry! There's fire falling near the barn!"

"The barn'll go, sure!"

Armstrong sprang up so quickly as to upset the table, whose pannikins, steel forks and knives, coffee-pot, fried pork, potatoes and bread clattered to the floor.

As Ann Susan stared at the chasm which had suddenly come between her and Eliza Jane, Armstrong and Mary ran out. The mother, as she tottered after her husband and daughter, wailed, "The barn is going, sure! Oh dear, if only He could 'a' spared the hay!"

The children left sitting stared silently at one another, hearing only the hoarse pouring of the river, and the buzzing of flies resettling on the scattered food.

"De barn is doin', sure!" echoed Eliza Jane. "Baby tum and see de barn is doin'." Ann Susan gave her hand to Eliza Jane, and the two toddled outside, where the sun, dimmed by the motionless smoke-pall, hung like a great orange over the clearing.

As David Armstrong ran towards his son Pete he saw brands dropping straight down as from an invisible balloon. The lighter pieces swayed like blazing shingles; the heavier, descending more quickly, gave off trails of sparks which mostly turned to ashes before touching the grass.

When the pioneer reached the place of danger the shower had ceased; but grass fires had already started in twenty places. Pete had picked up a big broom of cedar branches tied together, and begun to thrash at the blaze.

His father and sister joined without a word in the fight against fire that they had waged at intervals for three days, during which the whole forest across the Big Brazeau had seemed burning, except a strip of low-lying woods adjacent to the stream. Night and day one of the four grown Armstrongs had watched for "fire falling," but none of the previous showers of coals, whirled

catching sight of a strange boy, who had ascended from the Big Brazeau's rocky bed to the Armstrong clearing.

None of the older Armstrongs had yet seen the stranger boy, who neither announced himself by a shout, nor stood on the bank more than long enough to comprehend the danger to the barn.

Grasping the meaning of the scene, he remarked, "By Jove!" threw a light pack from his back, unstrapped it, ran down to the river with his large gray blanket, dipped this into the water, and trailing it, flew swiftly to aid in the fight against fire.

"Here, you boy," cried the new-comer to Pete, "come and take the other side of this blanket!" He had already drawn it over the flame-edge nearest the barn.

Pete understood and obeyed instantly, though he resented the tone of command.

"Take both corners!" cried the new-comer. "Now then! Do as I do."

He and Pete walked rapidly over the wet blanket. When they lifted it the space was black.

"Again!" The stranger spoke in a calm, imperative voice. They repeated the operation.

"Never mind the fire over there!" cried this commanding youth to David Armstrong. "Come here—gather between the barn and the blanket! Slap out any sparks that fly between!"

The stranger had brought into the struggle a clear plan and orderly action. Now all strove together—brooms and blanket as organs of one fire-fighting machine. In fifteen minutes there was not a spark in the clearing.

The smoke-blackened Armstrongs stood panting about their young deliverer, who was apparently quite cool.

"You give us mighty good help, young feller. Jest in the nick of time, too," said the pioneer, gratefully.

"Aw—very glad, I'm sure," drawled the lad, almost dropping his 's. "I rather thought your barn was going, don't you



AFTER THEY SAVED THE BARN.

know." high on the up-draught from the burning woods, and carried afar by currents moving above the still smoke-pall, had come down near the barn.

Now the precious forty tons of hay seemed doomed, as scattered locks caught from the blazing brands. The arid, long and trodden grass caught. Every chip and twig, dry as tinder in that late August weather, blazed when touched by flame. Sparks, wavering up from the grass to drift a little on, were enough to start fresh conflagration.

Pete thrashed till all was black around him, but a dozen patches flickered near by when he looked around. Beating, stamping, sometimes slapping out sparks with their bare hands, the father, son, and daughter all strove in vain, while the mother looked distractedly on.

"Lord, O Lord, if you could on'y have mercy on the barn! We could make out without the house, but if the hay goes we're done!" she kept muttering. Eliza Jane, hand-in-hand with Ann Susan, watched the conflict, and stolidly re-echoed her mother's words, till startled to silence by suddenly

know." "So it was, if you hadn't jumped in so spry," said Mrs. Armstrong.

"Aw—well—perhaps not exactly, madam. It wasn't to be burned, don't you know."

The mystified family stared at this philosopher, while he calmly snapped his handkerchief about his belted blouse, his tight trousers, and even his thick-soled walking-boots. When he had fairly cleared his garments of little cinders and dust, he looked pleasantly at the pioneer, and said, with a bow: "Mr. David Armstrong, I believe?"

"Dave," said the backwoodsman, curtly.

Pete laughed. He had conceived for the ceremonious youth that slight aversion which the forest-bred boy often feels for the "city feller."

Mrs. Armstrong and Mary did not share Pete's sentiment, but looked with some admiration on the neat little fellow who had shown himself so ready. Pete had rashly jumped to the opinion that the stranger was a "dude"—one of a class much re-echoed in the columns of the *Kelly's Crossing Star* and *North Ottawa Valley Independent*, in whose joke