



A One Man Fight

BY H. Knight Harris



THE last little line of flame was beaten out on the edge of the glade next the timber, and flickered into a wisp of gray smoke lazily curling through the hot May sunshine. It was all very still down there in the narrow bottom, that is only a few hundred yards across between the benches—those low, slab-sided, flat-topped foothills—with the real hills of scarp and forest rising right up to the blue a little way behind them. The unseen Crawl, that hugs the foot of the southern bench and gnaws eternally at its underpinning, alone broke the silence, as it roared over bar and snag-pile with its full volume of melted snows from outlying peaks of the Selkirks.

Cairns mopped his eyes out, and looked approvingly across the wild-hay meadow, from off the face of which he had just finished burning the dead stuff. One good, steady shower, and all that blackness would be green again—greener than ever. Then he looked at the high sun and the short shadows.

"Eats!" he exclaimed feelingly. He sauntered toward the cabin, and a puff of air struck gratefully on his forehead from the cool greenness of the dim cedar grove that bordered the creek. A little column of dry leaves and dust danced and whirled across the meadow, and fell dead again. Inside, he cooked and ate—then he smoked.

Luxuriously, after a long, hard morning, he lay back on his one bit of civilized furniture, a soft lounge chair, and watched from his little window the play of light and shadow in the waving branches of the sycamores round his spring. The breeze had freshened—"With luck, some rain tomorrow," he prophesied to himself.

Then his eyes narrowed, and he tensed. Five yards from the cabin, among the chips and rot around his saw-buck, a tiny spiral of smoke was rising—just a few inches! Before he could move, another jetted close by!

He was through the door with a bound. Beyond the clump of bushes about the spring-hole a tall, dead cedar

was blazing at a dozen points, a pennon of scarlet waving from its broken top. The picture told the story! Nourished by the sudden breeze, a spark of fire in a tump of half burned grass had freshened, had caught a train of dead leaves, run to the cedar foot, and leapt joyously up the mantle of stringy bark that still clung to the tree. The dead thing was much alive now!

Showers of sparks fell every way, as the breeze freshened and eddied about the hill-side. But mostly they blew away from the cabin. Cairns emptied his water pail over the dry stuff round the splitting pile, and snatched and poured half a dozen fills from the springhole. Then he grabbed his axe to tackle the tree—only to drop it as quickly—that way were madness, to lay low a hundred feet of fire athwart all the parched debris of the undergrowth. Better to pray that it might stand! He seized a couple of sacks, plunged them into the water, and ran past the cedar. A mat of dead leaves and weeds and fallen twigs and branches covered much of the ground, and smoke was rising and brisk young fires beginning in twenty places. He ran from one to another, beating at them with the dripping sacks. And many died; but they outran him in the end. A hundred yards away was a growth of young firs, a quarter-acre of them, their tops green and dense against the sun, their heart a shaded gloom of dead, resinous branches interwoven, and beneath all a thick carpet of brown needles, soft and warm and fragrant. A spark fell on the outer edge of the carpet, and it blazed like gunpowder. In a few seconds the whole windward edge of the fir-grove was a roaring whirl of smoke and flame.

Cairns scanned the clouds and the drift of the wind, and sighed relief. Control was hopeless now, but the enemy at least was going and not coming. Beyond the fir-grove, along the bottom land, was a rugged wilderness of small bush—birch and alder and red willow and their kind—

matted about the roots of vast grey columns, the dead trunks of the cedar forest that had died when another fire swept through it ten years earlier. Many of these giants were upturned, and the interlaced mat of their roots held great walls of pebbles and clay to the face of the sun, with slimy water half filling the holes they were torn from. A month of Spring sunshine had dried all of the Fall debris to crispness, and the young leaves on the brushes were still too scant for shade or succulence. Only along the actual river bottom, where the cool moisture of its dense jungle had stood off the fire before, would it serve the same turn again.

Eastward raced the thunderous torrent of flame, broadening out in a few minutes across the whole flat, and leaping a little lip in the ground to a lower level, where the bench on the left receded again, and left a broad hollow among the hills. Cairns climbed the bench, where the soil was too barren to fire, and looked down into the hollow. It roared and raged like a crater, with mighty volumes of brown smoke, as well as black, rolling up—the distinctive brown smoke that tells so surely in a forest fire of furnace heat below. Crash after crash marked the falling of grey giants, though many of them stood through this second onslaught even as they had survived the first, coming out but a little blacker, more naked, more torso-like than ever. Through the hollow swept the fire; and beyond it, where the valley curved southward and the thickets on the bench grew denser, it petered out in the bottom, upon a band of green timber lining a tribulet to the Crawl, and ran up toward the eastward hills instead. Half the heavens were blotted by the smoke screen; yet it well may be, that no eye but Cairns' own saw it, for he was four miles above the nearest in-dweller of the valley just then, and for a hundred miles to the north and east, whither the cloud drifted, there is naught but a trapper's trail.

The breeze flickered a little in the branches of the spring-hole clump,