

All morning the pupils of school district, Number two, Turtle Valley, had been most inattentive. Miss Harley, the little school teacher from Ontario could not understand their uneasiness over the trifling matter of a blazing pine slope four or five miles away and finally, discovering that the windows were receiving more attention than the geography lesson she pulled all the blinds on the east side of the room down. When lunch time came two or three of the pupils who were mountain born and mountain bred warned her that it would be only a matter of an hour or more until the fire would invade the valley, so Miss Harley, after a glance out-of-doors to assure herself that this was the truth and not merely an excuse for a half-holiday, dismissed the school.

"But I'm going to stay and correct these papers," she said, "so don't wait for me, any of you. I can watch the fire and as soon as it seems really dangerous I'll run."

So, when she had let them all go she settled down behind a big pile of examination papers and was soon lost in her work.

Once she sprang up to look at the fire. It seemed no nearer and she decided that it would veer and work away south. Another hour passed. Correcting papers in literature is an interesting occupation especially if half of the young authors are of Swedish, Galician, Russian, Danish and Red Indian stock.

A sudden gust of hot, acrid air penetrated to Miss Harley as she sat, pencil poised, eyes bent on her work. She glanced swiftly up, and then down the aisle to the open doorway. What she saw forced a muffled scream from her lips. Without waiting to gather up hat or coat she ran—ran out and up the trail to where the bridge, that led across the creek into Turtle Valley settlement, stood. Here, however, another surprise awaited her. The bridge was blazing at the farther side! Everything seemed to be blazing. She was ringed about with fire. Wringing her hands, her face white as her own chalk, she flew back to the road and plunging off it into the deep brush made for the water. One chance remained. If she could wade the shallows and reach the other side of the creek! But the recent rains had made the stream im-

passable by that means, and unfortunately she couldn't swim. She wondered why someone had not come to warn her before this, and the silence of this mountain district, which before had seemed soothing, was now almost unbearable. No sound but the steady roar of the fire and an occasional hissing when a burning brand fell into the water. No sight but blazing pines and thick yellow smoke.

A breeze had risen and was fanning the flames and the air was full of flying cinders. The little teacher covered her blistering face with her hands and staggered blindly up the slope again. In a voice half choked she cried repeatedly for help, but the cry fell on the hot, close air like an impotent whisper in a terrible nightmare.

The settlement lay to the west. That way her escape was completely cut off. So, to the eastern end of the valley she made her way, hoping to find a sandy stretch or a small lake or even a marsh. She seemed to be running directly in the path of the fire fiend but with courage, born of despair she kept on.

At the top of the first slope a glad cry broke from her lips. There was an answering shout from across the coulee and a man on a cayuse came galloping through brush and over boulders in a marvellously adept way for a Cheechako as she knew him to be. For despite his charred clothes, blackened face and hands she recognized the young artist who had painted her picture the previous autumn.

"Quick! Into the saddle!" he cried, as he came up.

"The bridge is burning! You can't go on!" she answered.

"I'm not going on. I'm going back. Quick! Give me your hand and jump up."

"But how did you get here—how can you get back through that awful—"

"I picked out a ticklish bit of trail. Hope you're not light-headed Miss—I've forgotten your name I think —"

"Harley."

"Miss Harley then. You see I just happened to remember that there was a school over here in the path of the fire and so I came across to see that all was well—which it isn't."

"Oh, yes it is. I sent the children home."

"So they told me. (I met two of them about one mile beyond the Indian encampment.) But you, I am afraid are either very brave or very foolhardy."

"Don't scold, please."

"All right, I won't. But for punishment you will have to climb a nasty bit of a mountain ledge. Are you game?"

The flash of her eyes answered him. They rode on in silence for a time, the horse picking a deft course along a rough boulder-strewn coulee.

"I don't think we've met," McCartney said presently, "since that afternoon I sketched you at the school picnic."

"Was the picture saleable?"

"It brought me a fair-sized cheque. I called the picture—which of course I painted later—The Maid of the Mountain Mist. I have a copy of it that I will show you if we reach the spot where I cached my bundles before the fire gets there. Jove, it's hot!"

"My face feels like a live coal."

"Mine feels like a coal-heaver's. I've lost part of my eyebrows and my mouth is full of cinders. But thank heaven I got to you in time!"

"Where are we going? Is it really safe over here?"

"Hobson's choice! We're heading for my old cabin, about the only safe place hereabouts, now. And to think I left it for good—said good-bye to it very sentimentally in fact—only this morning!"

"Were you going away?"

"Going to be married."

"Oh!"

"Now put your arms tightly around me—I'm an engaged man and quite safe—and hang on, for here we come to that ticklish place."

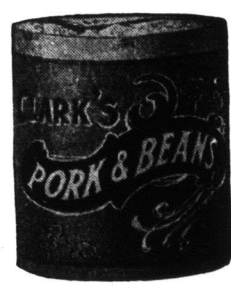
Miss Harley took only one look downward. Then she shut her eyes tightly and gripped the waist of her escort, while the cayuse climbed nonchalantly over a stretch of ledge that was scarcely two feet wide. Far below at a dizzy depth—the river purred musically. It looked like a bit of silver cord to the eyes of the artist. Silence had wrapped them round now, for here in this canyon the rush and roar of the fire had diminished. But it burst upon them again as they descended upon the other side.

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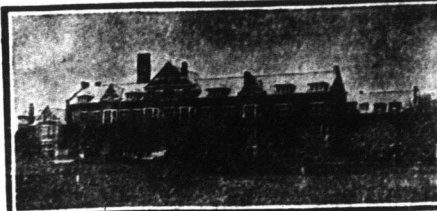
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