

their lips. Once the boy fell to the ground with a cry of pain. The Duke dragged him up—dragged him on. His own limbs felt like lead and burnt like fire. They reached the little clearing, and here the Duke hacked a hole in the ground large enough for the boy to hide his face. He pushed the youngster down. "Cover your head with your tunic, and don't creep away for Heaven's sake. Try to bear the heat. It's your only chance."

"Where are you going?"

"To look for your dad. When I come back I'll bring some water."

But the Duke knew he might never come back. He took off his own saturated tunic, and threw it over the boy. Then, creeping on all fours, he made his way towards the shanty.

Old Tom had lost control of himself. He had reached that condition of panic into which even the strongest of men will fall when beset by dangers they cannot hope to overcome. Mechanically, frantically, he was wielding his bucket, throwing impotent draughts of water from the almost empty well by the shanty on to the surrounding bush.

Alec's fingers closed upon his arm like a vice. "Come on, you fool, and save yourself," he cried, snatching the bucket from the frenzied man's fingers.

He led the way back towards the pitch—both men stooping forward in a strained attitude. Their breath came and went between clenched teeth; the hair of their heads curled and singed in the heat. In the distance they could hear the shrieks of a dozen distress sirens, only faintly discernible above the roar of the approaching fire.

As they reached the pitch the Duke stooped down and touched Billy on the shoulder. "All right, Billy," he enquired.

"Yes. I fancy I can pull through if it gets no worse than this."

"It will get worse, Billy. You must be brave and try to stick it. Don't leave here on any account."

Then he turned and spoke to Tom Lawrence. "Lie down here," he said, "and if you've got a spark of manhood in you try to protect the boy. I'm going for water."

He seized the bucket, and again groped his way from the doubtful sanctuary of the cricket pitch. Reaching the river he lay down in it to cool his smoking clothing. For a moment he thought of the awful place he had left behind, and what awaited him if he went back. Death where he was was certain, but a death a thousand times more merciful than the heat of the burning forest.

He scrambled to his feet, bucket in hand. How he got back to the cricket pitch he never knew. He remembered bearing a roar, and looking up to see a huge cloud of detached fire, several acres in extent, racing overhead on the wings of the hurricane. Then there came a roar—louder—more terrifying. It filled the great forest with an ocean of sound, and at the same instant the smoke cleared, and instantaneously the whole surrounding bush seemed to take fire.

In the crimson glow the Duke saw Billy and his father crouching where he had left them. He fell on his face, and began to worm his way inch by inch to where they lay. As he drew near Tom Lawrence rose to his feet, and began to grope his way wildly towards the river.

The Duke was upon him in one leap. His fist shot out, and Lawrence collapsed in a heap to the ground. Over him the English public school boy poured half the contents of the bucket. He tried to speak—to tell the frenzied man to lie still, but no words came. He dragged him into the centre of the clearing and left him there, groping his way on towards Billy.

Billy had never moved, though all his senses cried out to him to search for a better shelter from the awful heat. His hero had told him to lie still, and that was enough for him. As the Duke drew near the boy held out a blistered hand, and the Englishman wrung it. Speech was beyond them, but each understood in a dazed and painful way, that they were "going out" together. So they shook hands upon it.

Then the Duke threw himself down on the body of his small companion to defend him from the heat. Around them the fire roared like a thousand lions. Hungry tongues of flame reached out towards them across the clearing. As

though in a nightmare Billy was aware that someone was suffering for him—that the awful heat no longer scorched his back and shoulders. He heard deafening reports all round as the trunks of the forest giants burst into pulpwood, and once he saw his father creeping towards them like a giant spider, through what appeared to him as a white-hot furnace.

As for the Duke—he thought that he had already suffered all that is within the range of human endurance, but somehow it seemed not to matter. Billy might pull through, and if so he would grow up into a topping good fellow. He felt sure of that. Billy was made of the proper stuff. He had the soul of a gentleman, and some day would find his level. He, the Duke—kicked out of a British public school and disowned by

his people—had failed in many ways where Billy would succeed.

In a few minutes the worst of the fire was passed, but all round them the bush was still burning savagely. It would burn for hours, they knew, though mercifully they lost all sense of time as they huddled there, their faces to the ground, their heads defended by their tunic.

What at length called the Duke back to earth was the boy's voice. It said—"Gosh, but I'm thirsty."

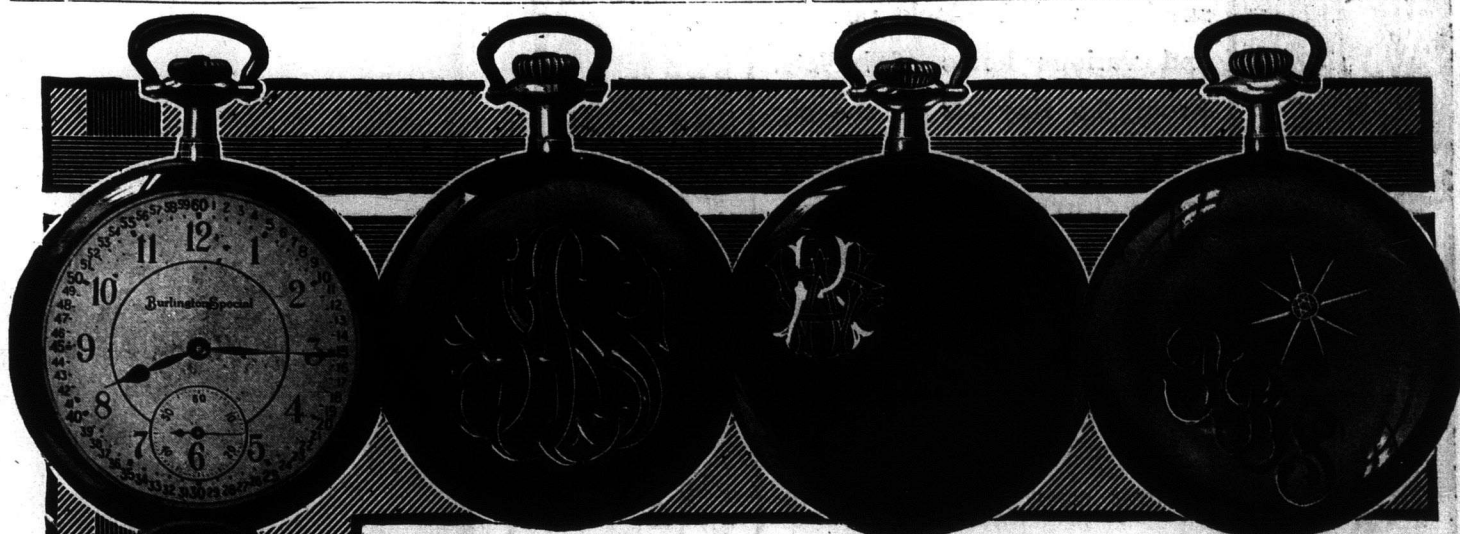
Then the Duke remembered the bucket. He stretched out his hand to reach it, but the iron handle burnt his fingers. The water within it was almost boiling.

He sat up with an effort and tried to say—"Billy, the worst's over. We've pulled through. Shake!" But he said nothing at all.

A few minutes later the Duke began to grope his way, bucket in hand, toward the river. His clothing fell to pieces as he went. After what seemed an eternity he came groping back without the bucket, and motioned to Billy. "Billy," he managed to mutter, "we can live in the river now. Come on."

The boy followed him. Ere they had gone many yards Billy turned back and ran towards his father. Foot by foot they dragged Tom Lawrence to the river, and once within the cool and comforting water they knew all danger to be past.

Little Billy Lawrence received the news of his father's death with a stiff lip. Before the advent of the Duke he had lived a lonely and neglected boy, but now that poor old Tom was gone Billy called to mind the few kindly actions



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