

Fighting a Prairie Fire

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I AM writing this article under very novel conditions. I have but recently returned from fire-fighting, and although it is past midnight, I am ready accoutred to turn out between now and three or four o'clock to return to the task.

For days a huge fire, miles in extent, has been raging away to our south in the locality of the Wood Mountains. Sometimes the sky has been lurid with the reflection of the burning prairie; volumes of smoke have darkened the sky. Then a lull came in the devastation, and we hoped that the trouble had been effectually set at rest. At two to-day huge clouds of smoke again appeared over the hill-tops, and the indication that the unwelcome visitor was still hanging on our southern border was confirmed by the appearance of a tiny line of fire on the range of hills some five miles away.

At least ten miles of dry grass was alight, and like a regiment of disciplined troops it advanced from point to point, filling the hearts of the homesteaders in this locality with alarm. This was bad enough, in all conscience; but worse, far worse, was in store for us. About half-a-mile away to the north, ploughing was in progress, and in order that it might not be impeded by the long thick grass, a fire-guard had been made by opening two or three furrows and then firing the grass within the space.

I was sitting enjoying my supper at seven o'clock, after a hard day's work, in which I had finished my cellar—the task that has caused me more aches and pains than any effort I have ever been called upon to make—when away through the door I could see consternation and excitement had laid hold of the men on the land. The fire had jumped the guard. Giving the word to my companions, it took us but an instant to be outside the shack and, armed with sacks and such clothes as came easiest to hand, to rush for the spot where the trouble was thickest.

My pen utterly fails to depict the awful terror of such a fight. Grass ten to twelve inches high was as dry as tinder, from which the flames sprang as from oil. I thought I was tired, but what will a man not do to save the property of a district, and the only means of existence for hundreds of cattle? Coats and overalls, sacks and clothes, anything and everything was called into requisition, but our effort to stem the blaze was an absolute failure, and in less time than an hour miles of prairie land lay burnt and blackened, while everywhere there rolled on that vast volume of flame.

One dragged a wet sack on the edge of the flame, another beat out the life of it, while a third stamped out the last lingering sparks. And thus we worked in gangs of three or four, like men bereft. We panted and sweated, and yet strove with might and main, for it was up to us to do our part to save the home of the farmer, his barn and haystacks. None called for a pause, on and on we went, while away on our right there rolled down the hill-slope devastating flame from the "Woody."

It was a wonderful and an awful sight. We were almost encircled by a ring of fire; three parts of a hoop with an outlet away to the west; an expanse of burning prairie extending for over thirty miles. May I never see such a sight again.

After a while we paused for a rest, for we were all dead-beat, and then it occurred to the married men of our outfit that such a sight as we were witnessing was also visible to his wife, and one of us proposed to return and see that all was well with the little home that stood to the western side of the circle. So off we went to do what might be required for the man whose hospitality had been so much to us during the past weeks of cold and snow.

It was well we went, for there, not a quarter of a mile from his door, were the women of the home and the two children fighting the flame that had jumped a fire-guard, even in the teeth of the wind. At it again, men and women fighting side by side. Back and back it drove us, but we beat it at last—hammered the grass to a blackened powder in time to save its encroachment upon a homestead, where lay a mother, and a baby but lately arrived. Then we knew we could do no more. Our powers were completely exhausted, so home we went; a tramp of three miles across a smoking land.

How can I picture the sight we presented? Half-clothed and shockingly dirty; black from finger-tips to the roots of our hair. Soon we were fed and our thirst appeased, then out to the nearest neighbour to ascertain how it fared with them. We shan't sleep to-night; for, as I said, we were prepared to rush at a moment's notice to the nearest point of danger should that advancing host find a wind sufficient to drive it further north.

I have just returned from the yard, where I have taken a last impression of this awful devastation. The wind has changed. In parts the fire has lost some of its fierceness. But that is only as far as my vision can carry me, for beyond the range of hills I can see that it has simply passed on to other spheres there to spread terror and ruin. The southern circle has gained in strength and ferocity, and one of our party has just gone to point of vantage and on his report we shall consider the wisdom of back-firing, a process that is commonly resorted to on such occasions. A fine method to make flame devour flame.

Out at once, was the decision of our outpost. Fire was encroaching from the west—a long, brilliant line extending in a slanting direction from valley to hill-top. This my eldest son and I attacked while two others went due east, there to meet the advance from the "Woody." We fought from two to five a.m. side by side. Mile after mile we extinguished, unaided by any whose homes stood out clear and distinct in the early dawn; too lazy or careless to exert themselves in their own interests or in the interests of others; satisfied that the fireguard around their homesteads safeguarded them, they slept. Disgusted and tired, we decided to abandon the fight, for why should we protect those who made no effort to protect themselves?