

The Bush Fire

Alan Sullivan

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Night fell; there was no sign of rain:
Day broke; the sweltering day again:
Then, with the light, a scorching wind
And a grey wall driving close behind,
A thick grey wall that, mounting, spread
Like a vast blanket overhead.
It blotted out the breathless sky,
Feifing the woods; where, deep and dry,
Dead brush, dead leaves, dead branches lay
Like tinder strewn. From far away
Ibrough the invisible chaos came,
A crackling monotone of flame.
Fanned by the top-rid blast it swept
Redfooted; onward, upward leapt,
Cleaving with quick and licking tongue
The cloud that o'er its furnace hung.
Then plaintive cries and whimperings
Of dumb and terror stricken things,
A stumbling, maimed and blistered tide,
Hunter and hunted side by side
And, winnowing the acrid air,
Lost birds were calling everywhere.

JOHN STRONG, C.E., rammed his face up against the eye piece of his transit, and peered impatiently down the line. Half a mile away, at the end of the curve, a man straddled the track, balancing an iron shod picket. Strong's left arm went out. The picket wavered.

A faint blue cloud gathered along the right of way and shifted toward the instrument. "Damn the smoke," said Strong, and peered again.

The picket had vanished. He was looking into a nebula of twisting wreaths. They loitered delicately across the hundred foot lane of clearing, curled lazily around the raw stumps, and crawled sleepily along the ragged edge of forest that marched unbroken for a thousand miles. He sucked in the acrid smell through expanded nostrils. "This time most certainly this time," he said to himself, picking up the transit and dropping it like a golf club across his shoulder. The rod man's figure jumped up at him through rapidly increasing fog. "Come on," said Strong, "there's water at the siding."

An hour later a nervous operator, at flag station No. 17, was rapping out the call for the divisional point at Bisco. The wire was bad. Presently Bisco came on with a peremptory click.

"Number-three-passenger-special-left-nine-fifteen-trestle-on-fire-mile-eight-one-four-stop-her-Jenkins-Division-

The operator received with cigarette stained fingers that trembled over the tilting keys "Get busy" they rapped. Then he looked up and saw Strong.

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The Engineer, leaning over the rough counter, had got it click by click. Peters knew that, but shoved out the yellow sheet scrawled with his own jerky handwriting. He began to feel unusually lonely, and it was good to have someone there.

"Where is she now?" said Strong.

Peters turned to his key and tapped out a call, waited, and called again; but all he got was the hum of the rising winds that sang through the wires. Bisco was silent. No. 16, the nearest flag station, was inert. Fifteen gave no answer. "I can't get 'em any of 'em," he said desperately. "Say, what am I going to do?" Peters had a yellow streak in him. It may have been cigarettes, or perhaps it was the reflex of the vast loneliness that for a year had swallowed up his insignificant person. The impassive Strong suddenly loomed up as the only way out of a box that in a flash had grown too tight.

"Batteries?" queried Strong.

The batteries tested up with a vicious snap. Peters fingers were very shaky, but he proved that, absolutely. The office door swung slowly open, and the pungency of the pale blue atmosphere sharpened. "Where's your velocipede?" demanded Strong.

Flag station 17 was at mile 827, sixty miles from Bisco. No. 3 had left Bisco at 9.15. She would strike the trestle at 10.30 if he looked at his watch, then at Peters. "No. 3 has got to be stopped keep on that wire, and if you can get the wrecking crew up here, get 'em and lend me a blanket, will you?"

The railway velocipede as a means of locomotion follows after the steam shovel and precedes the Pullman. It has two wheels beneath a wooden frame on one rail, and an outrigger to another wheel on the other rail. It is propelled by man power, and its speed varies with the man. Strong gripped the lever handles and grinned at Peters "There's three feet of water in the borrow pit round the curve that is, if you should happen to want it," he added, quizzically, and sent the weight of his shoulders forward.

The Flag Station dropped behind, the velocipede rattled over the switch points, and Strong breathed deeply and thought hard. To the southward, whence came the wind, lay the gold country. A thousand men were pushing through its tangled fastness, stripping the deep green moss from the ribs of earth, and waking mysterious echoes with the boom of dynamite. Of them was born the fire. It had crept away beneath dead logs and dry rootlets and the tinder-like mattress of dead leaves, till it revealed the jointed rocks, seamed and banded with fissures and ribbons of quartz.

Strong looked southward and set his teeth. The sky was blurred and overcast with yellowish grey vapour. The sun hung like a menacing globe of strange hue, adding its heat to that of the parched earth. The air was full of small, sharp smells: the pungency of them cut his throat and nostrils. Knobs of bare and torrid granite shouldered out of the tangled bush, and stood here and there in shaven nakedness along the right of way. On each side ran the ditch, with patches of green scum-covered water shrinking from its baked banks. He could see a mile, and then not at all. The woods around him were alive with cracking, as heavy beasts shouldered along, not yet daring to have the open.

He breathed more and more deeply, sending all the weight of his great back and stomach muscles into the long oscillations of the driving lever. His arms he used not at all, except to hold on with. At the fourth mile he saw distant fire a flicker of pink that licked the belly of a grey bank of smoke. At the sixth he was wet with sweat, that trickled into his eyes and fought acidly with the smoke. At the big cut, a moose lumbered down the bank, stopped to stare at him, and then trotted along in front of the velocipede, his long flanks plastered with dried mud and patches of old and matted hair. At the eighth he struck the crest of the two per cent. grade that he had, as a maintenance engineer, cursed fervently for the past month; but now the long slope fell away in front, and the

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velocipede swayed lightly and giddily over the crowding rail heads.

At the foot of the grade a hundred cords of firewood, within throwing distance from a locomotive tender, were blazing merrily. Beside it the ties were already smouldering, and the rails expanding till the fish plates lifted irregularly. "By God!" said Strong grimly, and shut his eyes as the heat struck them.

He came out at the other end choking, his right arm blistered white, his hair singed, and the leg of his trousers on fire. At the end of the grade was a swamp, and here for one precious moment he stopped to plunge into a slimy patch of morass. Then he soaked the blanket, and laid it over his legs.

By mile 815 the woods were ablaze on both sides, and the right of way was like a terrified menagerie. Fear of the unknown had spread abroad in the forest. Hair, fur and feather went wild. Rabbits with scorched feet ran round in circles. Partridges shot like bullets through the long red wall and fell crumpled on the track. Every pool was trampled to mud with the stamping of cloven feet. And through it all raced Strong, his heart pumping and gulping, as if hot and clotted blood were drowning its labouring valves.

The wind shifted, hesitated, and dropped. There was a moment in which everything seemed to stop and take one long, tremulous breath. Then the wind came again; but in that blessed space the right of way broadened out into a bare plain, which previous fires had licked clean of everything that would burn and on the other side glinted the trestle. Strong leaned over as the roar of it came up through his clicking wheels, and gazed far 'down to the creek bed. There was no fire here yet.

At the end of the trestle was the big rock cut. He rattled into it, and as the clamour of his car clashed back from its jagged sides, he caught the rumble of No. 3 come wisping along the rails. He tried to get off, but his muscles refused obedience. Bone and sinew alike were wedded to the long sweep of the lever. A black mass loomed above him, and he heard the locking grip of brake shoes as the drivers bit. Then, with the nose of her pilot touching his outrigger, the locomotive of No. 3 stopped dead, with the staccato panting of her compressor drowned in the roar of her lifting safety valve.

Again Strong tried to let go, but his fingers would not release the handles. Men climbed down out of the cab, and he sat and stared at them with smoke-rimmed eyes. His coat hung in long, smouldering shreds. The blanket had fallen away, and the white skin of his legs was blackened and patched with angry stains. The human smell of him came out strongly with the taint of scorched hair and clothing. Then he suddenly felt sick and shut his eyes; but the lids were cracked and seared like acid.

"Is the trestle safe?" he heard someone say. Strong nodded.

The voice came back like a voice from very far off "And the other side?"

"Hell," whispered Strong, and fainted away.