

THROUGH THE FIRE

BY HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH

AUTHOR OF "THE FLOWERING OF VENGEANCE"

THE sweating horses had galloped neck to neck, but now the gray fell behind. Though his rider struck the spurs deep and shouted encouragement, his pace still slackened. Even the horror that drove the rabbits past them in hordes was powerless to hasten him. The poor brute groaned with something of human agony in the sound.

One of the men drew rein. The other turned over his shoulder an ashen face, and cried:

"Faster, faster!"

If he saw the woman's hopeless gesture, he did not heed it. Setting his face to the east, he rode on.

"He's right," the woman said. "There's no use sacrificing three lives instead of one." Her eyes met those of her companion without flinching. "Good-by, Jim!"

"Get up behind me!" said the man roughly.

For a moment her voice rose shrill in protest.

"Your horse can't carry double. He's 'most winded now. For God's sake, ride on, Jim!"

"You're wasting time," said the man.

He pulled up his horse and folded his arms; and with a cry she yielded.

Under his double load the black galloped gallantly ahead. Suddenly he stumbled, throwing both his riders. The woman sprang lightly to her feet; the man rose heavily, his face contracting with pain; but the black horse did not rise.

"Put his foot into a rabbit-hole, poor fellow," said the man. "His leg's broken." He cast a glance over his shoulder, and drew his revolver. The merciful bullet did its work, and the man turned stoically to his companion. "We'll go over to Williamson's clear-

ing, Mary. Not that it makes much difference!"

For some time she walked at his side in silence, turning occasionally to look back at the wall of mingled smoke and flame, pursuing like an avenger. Suddenly she became aware that her companion's right foot dragged.

"Are you hurt, Jim?" she cried anxiously.

A grimace, suggestive of a smile, crossed the man's set face.

"Yes, I'm a little lame; but by night-fall it won't matter."

"You're dying for me!" the woman wailed.

"You hush!" He took her hand and held it. "This is better luck than I ever hoped for—to die for you and with you, and him galloping out of the way at last!"

The woman said nothing; but for a moment her face relaxed, and she seemed forgetful of the doom drawing nearer moment by moment.

"You know how it's been with me, Mary. Ever since I was a boy I've loved you, but I never hoped for anything as good as the right to tell you so. With death a half-hour away, there's no use making a secret of it any longer."

The woman broke in with sudden passion.

"Why didn't you tell me so long ago, when we were boy and girl, before—"

He rested his disengaged hand on her shoulder.

"Mary, you know how it was. I had my mother and the younger children to look after. It didn't seem fair to ask a girl to wait."

"It isn't fair not to give a girl the chance to wait if she wants to," the woman cried. Their eyes met, and hers were aflame. He blinked like a man

dazzled. "Jim," she went on, "we don't know much about the next world, but I reckon it's a big place, and maybe we might have hard work to find each other over there; so, for fear I shouldn't see you again, I'm going to tell you that I've loved you all these years." She drew a tiny object from the bosom of her dress. "It's the only thing I tried to save," she said.

The man examined it curiously. It was a cherry-stone cut into the shape of a basket, with the letter M scratched on one side.

"You don't remember," she reproached him. "You made it for me. I was twelve years old then, and you were fourteen."

"Looks like it had been burned," said the man with awkward tenderness.

"I threw it in the fire the night before I married Ed, and then I snatched it out again. Don't you remember how my hand was blistered?"

She drew a breath that was between a laugh and a sob. The imminent peril was for the moment as nothing beside the tender memory; but as the man's arm slipped about her waist, and his face bent to hers, she drew back.

"No, Jim! No, dear! I told you this because we're the same as dead; but I won't kiss you. If we find each other over there, you know there'll be nothing to keep us apart."

They had reached the clearing. The plow standing in the furrow showed the effort the owner had made to protect his home, before he surrendered hope. The door of the house stood open wide. Within, all was confusion. Chairs were overturned. Articles strewn about the floor suggested a hasty selection of the most prized possessions.

The man went into the abandoned house, and reappeared with several blankets in his arms.

"Come to the spring, Mary. We'll soak these with water, and wrap 'em around us."

"What's the use, Jim?" she objected gently. "We've got to die in the end, and it's better to have it come sooner than later."

"If there's a chance, I'm not going to throw it away." He turned his gaze toward the ominous wall of flame and

smoke, leaping over the miles between it and them. His eyes measured the strip of plowed land about the farmhouse. "If there's a chance," he repeated, "we'll take it!"

In the hour that followed little was said. The air thickened, grew black and suffocating. A terrible heat, as from a furnace, was about them. Blazing firebrands fell, hissing, into the water beside them. Gasping, choking, crouching low over the water to take breath, her lips cracking with the heat, the woman envied the dead brute they had left on the prairie. Once or twice she moaned to her companion:

"Oh, let me die, Jim! This doesn't pay!"

Through the dull roar of the flames she heard his answer:

"We won't give up while there's a chance."

At last they were looking at each other like two dead creatures, creeping out of their graves to meet, their faces blackened, their hair singed, their eyes bloodshot. All around them was desolation, while to the east the billows of flame still swept on. The man stood up, grimy, triumphant.

"We took our chance," he said. "That plowing that Williamson did this morning saved us. Are your hands burned much, Mary?"

"I don't mind the hurt much," the woman answered.

She had the air of one dazed. As she tried to move, she staggered, and he sprang to her help.

"Pretty well used up, ain't you, Mary?" His rough voice softened into a whisper like a caress. "It's enough to lay out a man, let alone a woman. I reckon you hardly feel sure yet that you're alive; but it's all true, Mary. We're here, and we're young, and life's ahead of us!"

The woman shuddered. She drew away from him, and looked to the east.

"How soon do you think we can get to Singing Water?"

"Singing Water? Do you want to go there?"

"Ed's there."

"Oh, yes, Ed's there. The last we saw of him, he was headed in that direction, and at a good hard gallop. It's

safe to say he got there; and, to my mind, that's a good reason for our keeping away."

"He's my husband," said the woman.

"Mary!" The word was a cry of rage, but the man controlled himself with an effort. "Mary, Ed's not a man. He's not even a hound. There's not a name fit for him that's fit for your ears to hear. A thing that would gallop off to save his own life, and leave you to such a death!" He choked, and cleared his voice by an oath. "And then to talk as if he could have a claim upon a woman!"

"He's my husband," the woman repeated monotonously.

Again Jim fought for self-control.

"There's two sides to that. The man who won't protect his wife loses his right to her. When he left you to me out there"—his grimy hand pointed to the charred waste—"he the same as gave you to me. We've been through death together, and you're mine!"

The woman stood erect as he strode toward her. Every sign of weakness and weariness had vanished. Her voice rang clear.

"Jim Townley, I've been mistaken in you. I've been thinking of you all these years as a man a woman could trust, and loving you for it. There's a weak spot in most women, and I showed mine to-day when I told you what your living cars ought never to have heard. It seemed to me that we were the same as two spirits, as we stood there with death chasing us." She took from her bosom the grotesque trinket she had treasured from her childhood, and stamped it under her heel. "I'm going back to my husband. If he's a coward, I'll be brave for two. If he shirks, I'll do double duty. Now, what have you to say?"

"Nothing, Mary." He stared at the blackened, tattered woman, the passion dying out of his eyes, and worship taking its place. "Nothing, except that we've got to wait till the ground cools. And, Mary, you can trust me still."

"Thank you, Jim," she said steadily. "I've been through enough to-day, without losing faith in you."

When they walked into Long Tom Fowler's cabin, days after, that old Indian fighter screamed like a woman.

When assured that they were flesh and blood, instead of apparitions, he attempted by a frenzied hospitality to atone for his churlish welcome.

"Have you seen Ed?" was Mary's first question.

"Seen Ed? Yes, indeed. He came into Singing Water the day of the fire. Good horse, that horse of Ed's."

"He's safe, then!"

The woman leaned back in her chair and shut her eyes. A deadly exhaustion showed itself in her face. Long Tom brought out his supplies, apologizing for their scantiness, and the hungry pair ate and drank in silence. As Jim finished his meal, he was aware that Tom was standing at the cabin door, making mysterious gestures. Jim joined him, and the old man drew him out of hearing.

"Look here," he whispered; "there's bad news for her. I don't know how to tell her."

"What d'ye mean? Wasn't that straight about Ed's getting to town safely?"

"Oh, he got there, all right. He said that when he got home he found his wife gone, and made up his mind that she'd started for town without him. He seemed dreadful worked up at not finding her here ahead of him; but of course it was too late to go back. The poor devil started in to drink right away, and nobody wondered. Well, he's been drinking ever since, and last night, in Beard's saloon, all at once he let out a screech like somebody'd knifed him. Somebody asked him what ailed him.

"'It's that Mary,' says he. 'She follows me everywhere. When I wake up at night, she's setting on the edge of the bed, looking at me, same as if I'd killed her. She's in the corner now,' he says, pointing, and I tell you it gave a man a chill to hear him. 'I can't stand it any longer, and that's all there is to it,' says he; and with that he whipped out his revolver, turned it on himself, and was dead before they could get across the room to him."

There was a long silence. Twice Jim took an irresolute step toward the cabin door. Twice he stopped and looked away.

"Somebody else has to tell her," he said at last. "I can't!"