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THE GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

From a Spark

By Belle Maniates
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On a hazy, warm breezed Indian summer day a huntsman trod through the thickly grown brush that bordered the country road. Once or twice he stopped and looked about in appreciation of the day and the beauty of the country. Then he lighted a cigar, tossing the match aside before it was extinguished. By the time he had vanished from view the half spent match had accomplished a rivulet of fire that ran merrily through the brush which skirted the woods.

Mabel Wallace, coming down the old sawmill road, saw the crackling fire and hastened her pace. She noted the quickening breeze blowing toward the woods and the stretch of dry, parched grass and brush that intervened. She knew that if the flames were not extinguished at once the whole piece of woods would go. She caught up a stout stick as she ran, and when she reached the farther end of the running fire she began a vigorous beating.

"Say, teacher, I'll help you," squeaked a piping voice, which she recognized as belonging to the boy in the First Reader class, next to the foot.

"Johnny, run down to the first white house beyond the woods and tell them to send help. They have a telephone. Ask them to notify all the neighbors," she directed between beats.

Johnny was reluctant to leave a bonfire of such proportions as this was assuming, but he detected the "teacher" in her tones and concluded to obey.

"That's the stuff!" she next heard and looked up to meet the approval of the farmer at whose house she boarded.

He procured a stick and made an effective onslaught upon the flames. Presently they were re-enforced by a passerby, and after a time the fire was extinguished.

"You best go home and rest a spell," counseled her landlord. "You look all hot and tuckered out."

"It was pretty warm work," she acknowledged, arranging her hair, which the breeze and her exertions had tumbled about her face.

"Well, I tell you what, you just saved them woods, all right. The owner ought to make you a nice present," Mabel laughed.

"Who is the owner?" she asked carelessly.

"His name is Max Thornton. He's a young city swell, I heard say." She had inserted the last halpin and now started for home with burned face and blistered hands.

Meanwhile Johnny, returning from the white house, heard a shot ring out in the woods.

"I'll get him to come and help teacher," he thought as he scurried through the cool woods after the man behind the gun.

"Say, the woods is pretty near on fire. It's now 'erep' on 'em!" The man laughed good naturedly.

"Do you think I am in any danger?"

"The woods is! Teacher sent me for help. She is beating it out with a stick."

"All right! Come along." And the man made for the road in long strides, the boy keeping pace by a quick trot, explaining with many elaborations the particulars of the fire.

"My! Teacher was just more than layin' on it with a stick. I never s'posed she could hit out like that!"

"Hain't she laid it on to you yet?" laughed the hunter.

"Naw. She ain't tched one on us yet. I bet the boys would behave if they'd seen her beat that fire."

The hunter was occupied for a moment with conjuring the image of "teacher hittin' the fire."

"Say, young man, has your teacher got red hair, and does she wear glasses?"

"Yes. How did yer know?" he asked curiously.

"I just felt it."

When the hunter came up to the men, he said to the farmer.

"I came to help put out a fire, but I see you have done good work," gazing at the blackened ground.

"We only got here to the tail end of it," explained the farmer. "The school-teacher got here first, and she fit it like a tiger. Guess some of you hunters set it on fire."

The hunter laughed and walked on, remembering the match, but he felt no compunctions. "A man has the right to set fire to his own if he wants to," he thought. "Suppose it would be only decent in me to go and thank the schoolm'am. Wonder how I can make her a substantial token of gratitude without offense?"

"Here, boy!" he turned and called to Johnny, who lingered near the ruins. "Do you want to earn a quarter?"

"You bet yer boots!"

"Then take me to your teacher, if it's not too far."

"It's jest down the next road a ways, and mebbe she's stopped in at the school's down the lane."

"On a Saturday?" he asked skeptically.

"Yes. She writes her letters there?" They relapsed into silence, Johnny making plans for the investment of his quarter and the man absorbed in thoughts of a bitter, cynical trend. A few months before he had been the happy, accepted lover of a beautiful girl who in moderate circumstances. Some pessimistic relatives of his had intimated that his wealth and not himself was the object of her adoration. The little shaft, though resented, rankled and lingered and grew until in a moment of desperation and ill judgment he sent her a letter saying that

his fortune had been swept away in the late panic and offering to release her from the engagement.

He waited in suspense for her reply, which came promptly. She coldly and briefly agreed that the engagement should be broken, owing to change of circumstances.

Wounded through and through, he went abroad, aimlessly wandering from one place to another, hating all women for what one had wrought.

He was wondering now as he walked along the dusty highway what had become of her. Had she landed another millionaire? What a useless, helpless wife she would make for a poor man! Then he thought of the struggling, sordid existence of this schoolm'am. In his mind's eye he pictured her—lank, gawky and spectacled, beating the flames.

"Even at that," he thought, "she is more to be loved than a woman who feared poverty. Faith, I believe I'll marry the schoolm'am and settle down to a country life if she'll have me."

A turn into a lane brought them to the little schoolhouse, and Johnny looked in through the open door.

"She's in there," he said.

"All right. You needn't come. Much obliged." When he entered the schoolroom, which was darkened, he dimly discerned a form at a desk on the platform. Her head was resting wearily on the big dictionary.

"I beg your pardon. I came to thank you for saving my property."

He had come nearer now. She lifted her head, and he saw her.

"Mabel!" he gasped.

"I didn't know," she said coldly, "that it was your property I was saving until afterward, but of course it made no difference."

"Mabel! You, a schoolteacher, here—why?"

"Because," she answered bitterly, "in that panic in which you pretended to lose your fortune my father lost every cent he had."

"I wish you'd tell me all about it," he said remorsefully.

"There's not much to tell. Just as father had broken the news of our loss to me your letter came. I showed it to him. He said it was not true, so I thought it a ruse—that you had heard of our reverses and did not want to wed a pauper."

He groaned and attempted to speak, but she hastily continued:

"Father went west to look after some claim he thought he had out there, and I came here to teach. That is all."

"No; not all. Listen," he cried. He told her of the remarks, his test, his departure and ignorance of her loss.

"Forgive me, Mabel, and take me back."

"No," she said proudly. "You didn't believe in my love. You had to put it to a paltry test."

He was thinking hard for the right thing to say.

"Then let me woo you again, not as the Mabel Wallace I knew in New York, but as the country schoolteacher to whom I came just now with a heart full of admiration for her kind heart and stout arm. Mabel, look up! You've been crying!"

"No. It was the smoke from the fire," she said confusedly; "and my hands—see!"

She held out for his inspection two reddened palms.

He seized them and pressed them to his lips and then—well, then, Johnny came running in.

"Oh, g'wan," he said to Thornton.

"You know'd her all the time and pretended you jest guessed at her havin' red hair and specs."

Thornton laughed happily as he looked at the soft, squirrel colored hair and the eyeglasses. "Well, I meant different red and specs, but I do know her."

"Be you her beau?"

"Yes, I am her beau, and you'll have a new teacher. Here, take this for telling me of the fire." And he gave the delighted boy a silver dollar.

On the threshold Johnny paused.

"Say, teacher, I cum to tell you thar wa'n't no one to hum at the white house!"

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