

A Fiery Ordeal.

By MAUD PEACOCKE.

PART I.

It was the height of the New Zealand summer, and the hottest, driest, summer the colony had known for years. The crops had failed; the grassy paddocks were burnt brown, and the creeks had dwindled to mere threads, so that the cattle and horses had in many cases to be driven miles to water. The settlers in the district of Orangi in the North were beginning to shake their heads and prophesy ruin and disaster. And, indeed, ruin and disaster threatened many a homestead that summer of cloudless skies and brilliant sunshine. The whole countryside was alight with bush fires. Hundreds of acres of forest were swept away in flame and smoke owing to fires lit out of wanton mischief, or carelessness, well nigh as wanton, and which spread so widely and rapidly that in a few days they were beyond control, and a sight at which men could only stare aghast while they prayed for rain.

By day the hills far and near were shrouded in smoke, and at night the settlers' homesteads were ringed round by fire. The sun rose and set like a rayless disc of molten copper through rolling clouds of smoke. One evening as the sun was setting over the distant ranges, dyeing the rolling smoke clouds with ruby hues a man was walking rapidly across a wide grassy paddock towards a low rambling house standing alone in the clearing.

Thirty years ago David Carew, his wife and two children, landed in New Zealand with two or three hundred pounds on which to start farming. He bought a piece of land in the North, and by dint of steadiness and hard work, after the fashion of the hardy old pioneers of those days, he had made for himself a dwelling-place in the wilderness. Rude and primitive it was, but he and his wife were young and strong, and not afraid of hard work. His family had increased with the years, and the original little cabin, built of slabs and thatched with totara bark, had been added to many times.

As we watch David Carew stride across the short dry grass we see in him a fair type of the old New Zealand settler. A man of medium height, broad-chested and powerfully-built, with a weather-beaten face and grizzled hair and beard. As he swung the tall five-barred gate leading to the farm yard, he overlooked his son Ambrose driving the cows to the milking shed. Ambrose was a freckled-faced, bare-legged lad of fifteen. He was strolling very leisurely behind the cows and munching at an apple, while the animals themselves moved slowly, stopping now and then to crop a mouthful from the dry, burnt grass.

"Well, 'Brose lad, have you been to the ten acre?" asked Carew, pausing with his hand on the top-bar of the gate. Ambrose turned his apple about and about, and with a few rapid and scientific bites reduced it to the bare core, which after examining carefully and regretfully, he at length threw away. Then he made answer.

"Yes, me and Jack went. The fences are right so far, and we cut away and burnt the fern on each side."

Gazing westward, Carew cried suddenly, "By George, Tawhia's alight!" Away to westward lay the bush-clad ranges, and Ambrose, following the direction of his father's gaze, saw a thick column of smoke rising distinct from the smoky haze that hid the nearer hills. The Carews' house was free from danger, standing, as it did, in a wide clearing, but at the small settlement of Tawhia, some two miles away, the scattered homesteads were mostly built on the very skirts of the bush. Carew's married daughter lived there, and he mut-

tered anxiously, "I hope Tom has had his 'burn'."

For miles around the settlers were fleeing their homes, some in senseless panic, before the dreaded fires had reached their boundary fences. Some stayed on to the last, fighting doggedly for their homes, but driven back inch by inch till they, too, were forced to fly. The poor homeless ones took shelter with the hospitable settlers, who cheerfully gave them welcome, though not knowing when their own turn might come.

Carew proceeded to the house. After washing his hands in the porch he passed into the low-raftered kitchen. His wife, a cheery little apple-cheeked woman, met him on the threshold.

"Tea is quite ready, so be quick, Father," she said smiling.

In a short time the family were seated round the tea-table, Carew at the head, his wife presiding over the tea cups; three pretty daughters, and two tall sons. Beside their own family seated at that hospitable board were a family who had been burnt out a week before; husband, wife, and two children, and a feeble old woman, who kept dabbling at her eyes with a blue checked apron and weeping copiously. The husband sat moodily, staring straight before him, while the wife, when she spoke at all, scolded the children irritably. Carew tried to keep a conversation going, but gave it up at last in despair, and said good-naturedly to the old woman, "Cheer up, Mrs Tate, cheer up; things'll be brighter soon."

The old woman shook her head despondently, and her son, suddenly rousing himself, said savagely, "Do be quiet, mother; what's the use of crying over spilt milk," adding bitterly, "It won't bring back the home or anything else we've lost."

"Please God," said she in a quivering voice, "I'll not be a burden on anyone long."

Carew broke in heartily, "There, there, Mrs Tate, don't talk so. Let's hope you'll be spared a long while yet."

But she shook her head again, muttering of the "extra mouth" and "lard times."

Just then Ambrose, who had been looking from the window in a bored way, exclaimed, "Here's Tom and Milly."

As he spoke two horses swept by the window. Carew's son-in-law came first on a bay, holding before him on the saddle a small boy, bright-eyed and sturdy; and close behind rode his wife, with a sleeping baby on her arm.

The family seated at the table rose and hurried to the door. "Gran'pa, Gran'pa," cried the little fellow on the horse, stretching out impatient arms to Carew. But for once he was disregarded. One of his aunts lifted him from the horse and set him down, while they all crowded round the riders to hear what tale they had to tell.

Tom Ashley rose in his stirrups and waved his whip excitedly towards Tawhia, where in the gathering dark might be seen a lurid glow in the sky.

"The whole side of the range is a fire," he cried. "Merton's is burnt down to the ground, and the fire is travelling up the valley, over the scrub land, like an army of devils. I've brought Milly and the youngsters over to be out of the way, and you fellows must ride like the mischief back with me, or every stick and stone on the place 'll be in ashes before morning. The wind's rising, too, and blowing dead for the house."

In less time than it takes to tell of it four horses were caught and saddled, and leaving Ambrose to take care of the women and children, Ashley, the two Carews and Tate rode off. It was a beautiful starlight night, but the air was close and dense with smoke. On every side, far and near,

might be seen the fiery signals of ruin and disaster; pillars of mingled fire and smoke, lowering up to the ruddy sky, tracts of bush that had lately waved in the sunshine, now laid waste, smouldered sullenly in heaps of smoking ashes, and blackened stumps standing up gaunt and bare.

The men rode in silence. Sometimes they passed patches of blazing fern by the roadside. In the narrow tracks, where they dropped into single file, the horses were sometimes up to their fetlocks in warm ashes, that rose in clouds of fine grey dust as they disturbed it. The riders pressed on.

In a few minutes they came in sight of a long, low-backed range, covered with native bush from base to summit. Smoke hung over it now in clouds. There was no great show of fire in any one place, but at a hundred points the flames broke forth, and smoke arose in columns. As the riders approached they could hear the flames roaring and crackling in the undergrowth. Blazing fragments detached from the trees, and myriads of sparks whirled in the wind. There were several houses scattered about the valley, standing out plainly in the flickering glare. Tawhia settlement was quite a recent one, so that, though each house stood alone in its own patch of clearing, there were still patches of bush to be felled in the valley between the different farms. Only one house for years had stood alone at the head of the valley, an old tumble-down shanty, belonging to an old couple by the name of Weston, who had emigrated from the Old Country, and settled here when the colony was yet young. At one spot in the valley men were fitting about a comparatively cleared space, with torches in their hands. This was the scene of a last year's "burn"; gaunt, grey trunks of rata and kauri, flung out leafless limbs; little patches of fern starting a fresh growth; fallen trunks and blackened stumps.

It was a strange scene. The weird glare, the men blackened and grimy, flitting about working away with axes and fern hooks, amongst the logs, stumps and leafless trees. Their object was to clear everything that might feed the hungry flames, and so prevent the spread of the fire.

At his brother-in-law's first alarm, Jack Carew, a fine strapping fellow of two and twenty, had saddled in hot haste, and in his eagerness had outstripped his companions on the road. This was not all anxiety as to his brother-in-law's property. In the lonely house at the head of the valley, lived Peggy Weston, to whom Jack had quite lost his manly heart, though in his slow, cautious way he had not spoken of his hopes yet. She was a pretty brown-eyed girl, who led a lonely enough life, with her grandparents. Their house was in an isolated position, but Jack saw with the quick eye of anxiety that it was surrounded by thickets of gorse, ti-tree and bracken fern, up to the very fences. At any time the bracken will burn fiercely, but now, with much of it as dry as tinder, after the spell of hot weather, a falling spark might set it alight any moment.

As they all dismounted Ashley gave a cry of alarm. A spark had fallen on the thatched roof of a cow shed at the back of his house, and in a moment it was blazing. A post and rail fence ran in direct communication from the shed to the gate of the farm yard.

"Chop the fences down," cried Carew, and in a few moments they were engaged hacking at the fences with might and main.

The din was indescribable. The sound of the blows of the axes, the shouts of the men, fighting with the fire, the excited, ceaseless barking of dogs; the terrified bleating and lowing of sheep and cattle, and above all, the dull roar of the flames. Every now and again some forest king would fall to the ground, crashing through the lesser trees and undergrowth; shaking the earth with a dull thud, and raising clouds of dust and ashes. Here was the dull glow of some old tough stump, burning and smoking slowly away like a huge cinder; here the quick crackling blaze of a patch of dry fern; and here some great tree, wrapped in flame, stood like a pillar of fire against the dark sky.

After the fences had been chopped

down, the workers turned their attention to the fern at the back of the house. This they burned, beating the flames away from the house.

"Oh for a good downpour of rain!" groaned Ashley, looking up at the star-lit sky.

After seeing things comparatively safe here, Jack turned to look at the Weston's. To his dismay the fern on three sides of the house was in a blaze. The house stood on a slight rise, and the windows were lit with a ruddy glow. Otherwise the house was in darkness. It was now about 9.30. Jack knew the old couple retired early, and probably made Peggy do the same. It was awful to think they might be burned in their beds—his pretty Peggy, to whom he had never declared the love that thrilled him. And yet—how to get through that sea of flame? Men, selfishly, yet naturally, anxious, as to the safety of their own homes, had spared no thought for others, and now, there was only one approach to the house that was not cut off by fire, and that was on the far side. It meant a long ride, round another way, before he could reach there, and by that time, what might not have happened? The thought was agony. He ground his teeth in impatient despair, looking up at the house, and picturing horrors to himself.

Stay, was there not one way? At the back of the house was a small patch of bush, that was as yet untouched by the fire. By skirting the burning fern paddocks he might, with hard riding, gain this bush, before the flames, which were now racing towards it, reached it. It meant a race with the flames, but it was now neck-or-nothing. Jack sprang to his horse, leaped upon it, and galloped away across the clearing. Suddenly his good brown mare, Betty, pulled up, trembling in every limb.

"God!" he cried, in an agony of impotence and despair. A grim, five-barbed wire fence stretched across the path.

Jack set his teeth in grim determination, and, leaning over, patted the mare's neck. "We must jump it, old girl," he said in a dogged voice, "there's no help for it."

The mare, uneasy at the flames, shrank back with a snort of terror. Carew, galloping off to a short distance, wheeled her round again, and set her at the fence, but Betty reared on her haunches and refused to take it. Three times he tried it, and each time failed. It would have been a difficult jump, under any circumstances, but a sort of wild exhilaration had seized him, and he tried again with whip and spur.

The fourth time the mare went over like a bird, and, as they landed, Carew found himself shouting like a madman. They passed so close to the burning fern that he felt the flames scorch his face, and the terrified mare, bounding aside, was away like an arrow up the rise. No need for whip and spur now. Crashing through ti-tree scrub; over fallen trunks and blackened stumps, scattering the still warm ashes, under her flying hoofs, she thundered on.

Carew sat close in the saddle, guiding as well as he was able her mad flight. At times she stumbled, but always recovered herself in time. At length, however, as they had almost reached the bush, she put her foot in a rabbit hole, and floundered heavily forward: almost recovered herself, then stumbled again, and fell. There she lay, panting in pain and terror; with straining eyeballs, and shaking in every limb. Carew slipped off her back, and knelt beside her, patting the glossy brown neck. A pang of remorse seized him, that he had thus done the gallant mare to death. He had heard the sickening crack as she stumbled, and guessed too well that it meant the leg was broken.

"My poor lass," he cried, a sob in his throat, "done for now, poor girl."

She looked up at him wistfully. For the time everything else was swept off his mind. He just knelt beside her, stroking her neck, his eyes blinded with tears. A roar from the fire made him look up. There was not a hundred yards between the flames and the bush now. Starting to his feet Carew cast one lingering glance at his faithful brute-companion, who whinnied faintly after him. There was a lump in his throat, and a mist before his eyes, but, setting his teeth resolutely, he hurried on.

A few minutes later he plunged into the thicket of the bush. Fortunately there had been felling done lately, and the bush had been thinned a lot,