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GASLIGHT

The Phantoms of the Fire

By Clark Ashton Smith

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THE PHANTOMS OF THE FIRE

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It was late summer, and the Georgetown road was deep with dust, which had settled like a dun pall on the bordering chaparral and pines. Since he had walked all the way from Auburn without securing a single lift, the man who was trudging along the road with the broiling afternoon sun on his back was hardly less dusty than the trees. He paused now and then to mop his face with a discoloured handkerchief, or to peer rather wistfully at the occasional cars which passed him without offering to stop. His clothing, though not actually ragged, was old and worn, and had the indescribable shapelessness of clothing that has been slept in. He was very thin, stoop-shouldered, and discouraged-looking; his general aspect was almost that of a professional tramp; and the people of the countryside were suspicious of tramps.

"Well, I guess I'll have t' walk all the way," he said to himself, whining a little even in his thoughts. "But it ain't much further now. ... Gosh, but things is hot an' dry." He looked about him at the familiar landscape of parched grass, brushwood and yellow pines with an appraising eye. "Wonder there ain't been more fires—there alluz is at this time o' year."

The man was Jonas McGillicuddy, and he was on his way home after a somewhat prolonged absence. His return was unannounced, and would prove as unexpected to his wife and three children as his departure had been. Tired of trying to extort a living from a small vineyard and pear-orchard of rocky El Dorado land, and tired also of the perennial nagging of his frail, sensitive-nerved and sorely disappointed wife, Jonas had left abruptly, three years before, after a quarrel of more than customary bitterness and acerbity with his helpmate. Since then, he had heard nothing from his family, for the good and sufficient reason that he had not sought to communicate with them. His various attempts to earn a livelihood had proved scarcely more successful than the fruit-ranching venture, and he had drifted aimlessly and ineffectually from place to place, from situation to situation—a forlorn and increasingly desperate figure. For a man of such shifting, un-

stable temperament, when all else had failed him, and he had wearied of the hopeless struggle, it was not unnatural to think of returning. Time had softened his memory of his wife's undependable temper, of her shrewish outbursts; but he had not forgotten her motherly ways when she was in a more tractable humour, nor her excellent cooking.

Now, with empty pockets, since his last money had sufficed merely to pay his train-fare to Sacramento, Jonas was nearing the hills in which lay his forest-surrounded ranch beyond Georgetown. The country through which he tramped was sparsely peopled, and there were great stretches of softly rolling hills and low valleys that had not known the touch of cultivation. The ranches were often quite isolated. Beyond all, in the hazy blue of the distance, were the vague and spectral snows of the Sierras.

"Gosh, but one of Matilda's pear pies'll taste good," thought the wanderer. His mouth began to water. He was not reflective enough, however, to wonder just what his reception would be, beyond an easy surmise that Matilda might give him a terrific scolding for his absence. "But mebbe she'll be mighty glad t'see me, after all," he consoled himself. Then he tried to picture his children, the five-year-old boy and the girl-babies of three and two respectively whom he had last seen.

"Guess they'll have forgotten they had a papa," he mused. The afternoon had been utterly still and airless, with a sultry brooding in its silence. Now, from the northeast, along the road he was travelling, there came a gust of wind, and with it the unmistakable acrid odour of burnt grass and trees.

"Hell, there has been a fire after all," muttered Jonas, with an uneasy start. He peered anxiously ahead, but could see no smoke above the dun and grey-green hills. "Guess it's all out now, anyway."

He came to the top of the low slope he was climbing, and saw before him the burnt area, which lay on both sides of the road and was of indeterminable extent. The brown foliage of heat-

"Wal, Jonas McGillicuddy, so you've come back," exclaimed this individual in raucous tones of unfeigned surprise. "Ye're a little too late, though," he went on, without pausing to let Jonas speak. "Everythin' burnt up clean, four days ago."

"But the cabin wuz here las' night," stammered Jonas. "I came through the woods 'bout sunset, an' I saw Matilda an' the children in front o' the steps, jus' as plain as I see you. Then everythin' seemed to go up in a burst o' flame, an' I didn't know nothin' till I woke up jus' now."

"Ye're crazy, Jonas," assured the neighbour. "Them weren't no cabin here las' night, an' no Matildy an' no children, neither. They wuz all burnt up, along with the rest o' the countery hereabouts. We heerd yer wife an' babies a-screamin', but the fire wuzall aroun' before ye could say Jack Robinson, an' the trees fell across yer road, an' no one could git in an' no one could git out. ... I alluz told ye, Jonas, t' cut them yeller pines down."

"My folks wuz all burnt up?" faltered Jonas.

"Wal, yer little boy died a year ago, so they wuz jus' Matildy an' the two gals."

seared oaks and the black skeletons of bushes and pines were everywhere. A few fallen logs and old stumps were still smoking a little, as is their wont for days after the extinguishment of a forest fire. It was a scene of complete and irremediable desolation.

Jonas hurried on, with a sense of growing panic, for he was now little more than a mile from his own property. He thought of the yellow pines that stood so close and tall about his cabin—the pines which he had wished to fell, but had spared at the earnest solicitation of the nature-loving Matilda.

"They're so pretty, Jonas," she had said, pleadingly. "I just can't see them go."

"Hope the fire didn't get into them pines," thought Jonas now. "Gosh, but I wish I'd cut 'em down when I wuz plannin' to. It would have been a lot safer; and I'd have had the money for the wood, too."

The road was strewn in places with ashen leaves, with the charcoal of fallen brands, and several trees had crashed across it, but had now been removed to permit the passage of traffic. It was hotter than ever, in this charred and blackened waste, for the brief gust of wind had fallen. The dust on Jonas' cheeks was runnelled with sweat which he no longer paused to wipe away. Irresponsible as he was, a strange gravity had come over the wastrel, and he felt an ever-deepening premonition of calamity,

He came at last to the little byroad which turned off to his ranch from the Georgetown highway. Here, he found with a sinking heart, the fire had also been, and had left nothing but devastation. In spite of his fatigue, he almost ran, with long, shambling steps, and rounding a turn in the byroad, saw that the fire had stopped at the very verge of his own property. The hillside orchard of stunted pear trees, the straggling vines of Mission and Muscat grapes, were quite as he remembered them; and beyond, in the grove of yellow pines, he could see the wreathing smoke that arose from the chimney of his cabin. Panting heavily, he paused, with a sense of relief and thanksgiving as poignant as anything of which his dulled heart was capable.

The sun had almost touched the horizon, as he climbed the winding road through the orchard and entered the grove above. Aisles of light perceptibly tinged with gold lay between the elongated shadows. Even to the sodden, insensitive Jonas, the beauty of the woodland scene, the magic of the sunset, the high, solemn, dark-green pines and the rich glow sifting among them on manzanita-bushes and beds of brown needles, were not without their charm. He drew a long breath, inhaling the clean balsams that the hot sun had drawn from the forest, and feeling as he did so a vague pleasure.

Now he could see his cabin, a long, four-roomed shack of plain, unpainted boards and weather-darkened shingles. A man in calico was standing in front of the steps. Two little girls were beside her, and he wondered as to the whereabouts of the boy, who had been a fragile youngster, always ailing and fretful. "Mebbe Bill is sick agin," mused Jonas. He was very glad to be home, but he felt a little doubtful, a trifle tremulous, as to the greeting he would receive from Matilda.

The woman looked up as he approached, shading her eyes with her hand from the last rays of the sun, which fell horizontally through the wood. He could see her apron, which was quite clean, as always, though worn and faded from many washings, like her dress. She did not seem to perceive him, but was apparently staring with great intentness at something among the trees. The children also stared, and huddled closer to her, clinging to the hem of her gown.

Jonas tried to call out: "Hello, Matilda," but his throat was so dry and dusty that the words were no more than a hoarse whisper. He started to clear his throat, but the simple act was never finished, for at that moment, the whole scene before him, the trees, the cabin, the woman and the children, were lost in a roaring sheet of ruddy flame that seemed to come from all sides at once and blot out the entire world and the very sky as it towered full-grown in what could have been no more than the fraction of a second. A blast of intolerable heat, fierce as the breath of a thou-

sand furnaces, blew in Jonas' face and swept him backwards like a hurricane. The mighty roaring pounded in his ears like a sea, and was mingled with human screams, as he went down into pitch-black gulfs of unconsciousness.

It was day when Jonas awoke, but he was too confused for a few instants to realize that the light was slanting through the tree-tops from a different direction, or that there was more of it than seemed normal in an evergreen forest. When his wits returned sufficiently to permit the comprehension of the fact that it was morning, he began to notice other things that were equally singular. He found that he was lying on his back among burnt needles, and above him towered the dark boles of fire-swept trees with the pitiful stumps of their cauterized branches. Darkly, indistinctly, in a sort of dull astonishment, he began to remember the events of the previous day, his return at sunset to the cabin, his glimpse of Matilda and the two children, and the all-engulfing sheet of flame. He looked instinctively at his clothes, with the feeling that he must have been badly burnt; but there was no trace of fire on his raiment, and the black ashes about him were cold. Nor, when he reared himself on his elbow and peered around, was there the faintest thread of smoke to indicate a recent conflagration.

He arose and stepped towards the place where the cabin had stood. It was a heap of ashes, from which protruded the ends of charred beams.

"My God!" muttered Jonas. He felt utterly dazed, and his thoughts refused to align themselves, failing to form any sort of intelligible order.

As Jonas spoke, a man arose from where he had been stooping behind the wreckage of the cabin, furtively dropping some object which he held in his hands. Seeing Jonas, the man came forward hastily. He was a gaunt individual in dirty overalls, with the profile and the general air of a somewhat elderly and dilapidated buzzard. Jonas recognized him as Samuel Slocum, one of his neighbours.