

A Spirit of the Cascades . . .

One autumn, many years ago, eastern Oregon seemed to have gathered all her forces of storm and flood into peacefulness. Each day the sky rose blue and distant above the bare hills and sagebrush plain. The hills bore no majestic trees to make petty the distance from earth to heaven, and men had not yet cared or were not able to erect lofty buildings to break the brown monotony of the valleys. While the clouds seemed to have forgotten that their duty was to hold men to the necessities of life and had wandered away, leaving the children of earth to dream in idleness, unimproved by rain or wind. Day after day one might gaze up from the lazy stretch of those dull plains to the cloudless blue sky—so blue and so far away that it filled the senses with indefinable sadness.

A world of peace it seemed, but the few who watched saw many signs of coming storm. The creatures of the mountains were deserting their homes and stealthily gathering in the valleys. The timid deer, forgetting shyness, ran lightly past the cabin doors. Clouds of fine dust that rose suddenly from the dry hill-top and ran quickly from summit to base, announced the coming of the graceful antelope to water. The hardy badger—surely he, in his earthy stronghold is safe if any is—even he had donned a rough, shaggy coat of fur that made his already burly and clumsy body look grotesquely awkward as he sunned himself before his ground-house door. Rabbits were masquerading in snow-white robes, running in and out among the gray sage-brush or sitting upright affectedly, with dainty forefeet held drooping before them like hands. Watchers saw these signs, recognizing the thick and silvery fur and the friendliness of the usually distrustful as oft-noted heralds of winters long remembered for their merciless cold.

Soon the promise was fulfilled and the beauty of late autumn yielded to bleakness of winter. Clouds of cold gray covered everything with a shadow of gloom. The cutting wind sent men shivering to the fireside and drove the patient cattle ceaselessly before it. O' huddled them close under shed or tree. Every living creature sought a hiding place, venturing forth only when forced by hunger or thirst. The clouds grew heavier and the cold more intense until hill and valley lay under a mantle of snow.

Travel was almost impossible and the lonely lives of the ranchers threatened to become even more desolate as the routes were shortened and changed. But the mail had been carried without a failure along one of the most dangerous lines—the one leading from the "City of the Reinrock," over the clear waters of the Crooked river and swift Deschutes, on up and across the Cascades, near the stately Three Sisters. The mail-carrier of that road was daunted by neither heat nor cold. The night of the great storm found him at the lodging house in Ochoco valley, and when he awoke in the morning and, opening the door, saw the snow follow over the threshold, and looked out over the white world before him, he exclaimed:

"Well, well! Old Mother Earth's put on her nightcap! Let her sleep; we've no need of her for weeks to come."

Undismayed by the storm's severity, he had mounted his horse, ploughed through the heavy snow, forded icy rivers and safely reached his last resting place before the mountain was crossed. Then he brought out his home-made snowshoes, for the horse could go no farther.

In the bright sunlight of the winter morning a group of men stood before the juniper cabin, watching the mail-carrier's preparations for his mountain climb, each giving his warning or prophecy as to the day's weather.

"I wouldn't be in your shoes for a bit today," said Joe. Then added, "Not as I've got anything against the shoes as shoes."

"Folks over the summit hadn't ought to look for mail during storms," said another. "It's too much risk for the sake of o' scrap o' paper."

"If the lava bed was out o' the way," said another, "t'wouldn't be so bad.

Now, today dark is liable to catch you in the middle o' the lava an' then you're as good as buried."

The white light of the snow intensified the strong lines of the men's faces; but falling upon the woman in the doorway revealed only marks of care and hardship. A little in front stood the mail-carrier, just bending to fasten his snowshoes. With a last lift and shake of each to prove security, he turned to answer his friends' warnings. A hearty contented face looked out from the dark fur cap drawn close over head and ears, and his eyes held no trace of uneasiness as they glanced from sky to snow covered earth.

"Bigger danger for me underfoot than overhead today," he said with a laugh. "Yonder cloud's black with storm," said the woman as she pointed to the eastern sky. "You'd better let it pass by before you start. There's a snow-bird frozen—see it fall! When the birds of the air are helpless men'll soon be crying for shelter."

"No, no, Mother Crale, your cloud's no more than a wind that'll lift me up the mountain like a feather," answered the carrier. "Never worry, my day'll bring me back sound as ever."

Tossing the mail-bag over his shoulder and winding the bright scarf close about his neck, he walked swiftly over the glistening snow. The woman returned to her work and the men, entering the cabin, tilted their chairs comfortably against the wall or drew them to the open fire, which piled high with juniper knots, blazed and sparkled, filling the room with ruddy light.

"There's a hard trip ahead of him this time," said old Joe as he gave his time-worn pipe a generous filling.

"But it'll take more than snow to scare him," replied the man in the corner. Then he told how, in the storm a few years before, the mail-carrier had ridden all day in blinding snow, while the cold froze his breath as it passed from his nostrils, and left his eye-lashes stiff with frost. On and on he had urged his way until he had found the object of his search—an old horse, useless from age, but once his master's boast; a horse that raging cattle could not bewilder; that, unguided, over the most dangerous trail and in blackest night could carry his master home without a falter. And his master had not forgotten but had saved him from the fury of the storm.

As the tale ended old Joe drew his pipe from his mouth, gazed into it, laughing silently for a moment, and began:

"He us't to be forever helpin' Mac's boy rig up firearms to play with. The lad came in an inch o' killin' himself a dozen times or more. Mac got worn out at it and wanted to know of the fellow what he meant by puttin' such mischief in the boy's head."

"The carrier studied a bit, then turnin' in' on Mac, says he: 'You've seen 'em bring in a wild magpie to train? You know the foolish thing 'll bruise its head and batter its wings 'gainst the bars, as if all it craved was just to mangle itself out o' all shape. But let the worry run its course an' you'll see your flighty bird settle down on its perch an' prattle away, purty as a child.'"

"But s'pose you shackle it up so's it can't flutter a feather. why' man, it'll soon be stone dead on your hands, or if it pulls through it'll turn out witless as a chicken. An' Mac, says he, 'human bein's take after magpies mighty close. If they're ever goin' to be worth raisin' they've got to get many a hard knock fore you can get 'em to sit content on their perch in life. Don't grudge the lad his fun—the knocks ha' got to come and young bones 'll mend sooner 'n old ones.'"

"Mac was so upset by the man's harangue that he said if he'd known the boy was goin' to blow 'em all up that night he couldn't 'a said a word."

Thus these idle men sat and gossiped until the frost pencillings on the window panes gave way to blurring steam.

Meanwhile the mail-carrier was speeding swiftly over the encrusted, sparkling snow, while the cold air set his blood dancing in his veins. Twice he stopped to place mail in what a stranger would have called a "bird-house!" as he saw

the little box perched on a tall, slender pole,—but in reality mail-boxes, odd little homes where the ranchers from miles away sought cheer and company. Then came the big trees, marking the foot of the mountain, and every bow was veiled in misty white. Shrubs and bushes had vanished from sight, tucked away under the warm white covering, and the trees, looking their scorn on these dwarfs and babes in their cosy beds, stood sad and unflinching under the burden that bent their strong limbs to the earth. Now and then a pine bow grew weary of its burden, and, swaying quickly, would tip the snow off with a startling whisk. Then, rising merrily like a lazy man as he yawns and stretches until each finger, each muscle feels the sensuous thrill—so the bough relaxed and expanded to the utmost, until every needle stood stiff and apart from its fellows. Thus the morning passed and afternoon came, bringing with it a quick snow storm from which the carrier sought shelter under one of the heavily laden trees.

When he again took up the journey the snow crust of the morning was hidden under the soft, fresh snowfall. There was pleasure in feeling the dry, powdery whiteness yield at every step and in seeing the light flakes on either side fall over foot and snowshoe; a pleasure akin to letting the bare feet sink deep into the warm, golden dust of summer, or walking through quivering pine needles or grass thickly strewn with apple blossoms of spring time; a pleasure rare and sweet to one whose feet have long been bound to hard walks and sunbaked earth. But the carrier's pleasure soon passed, for each step became more difficult than the last. When the steep mountain lay below, night was almost upon him and the traveler's cabin he must reach was across the wide lava bed. The dark clouds that had been steadily gathering during the afternoon, for a moment parted and the mail-carrier saw the lava bed clothed in splendor. All through the year it had lain thus hideous and desolate, like an accursed place, but the glittering snowdrifts and the glow of the setting sun smoothed its jagged peaks and deep ravines into a gleaming plain. The clouds shut out the sunshine and the mail-carrier went wearily on. Through those hidden ravines he must seek a pathway, marked only by the tree trunks blackened as guides, when a false step would throw him headlong into an abyss or bury him in the uncertain depths of a snowdrift.

Before the distance was half passed the storm came on and the way grew dark. Once he stepped off the pathway and plunged into a ravine, shivering as he felt the sense of subjugation by the snow, of oppression by a blind, lifeless thing. And once he wandered far out of the way, finding his mistake only when he came to a lone tree that he knew. Again and again he bent his numb fingers to scrape the snow from his heavy shoes. Weary and benumbed with cold, he at last passed the lava bed and wandered blindly up and down over the snow heaps in search of the cabin on the summit. He could see nothing, could find nothing, until, after long groping, he stumbled against the chimney top—the cabin was buried beneath the snowdrift.

He leaned dejectedly against the snow-draped rocks, too exhausted to battle longer. At length he roused himself and slipping his mail-bag from his shoulder, he struggled until he loosened his snowshoes, and placing them with the mail, dropped them all down the dark chimney. Slowly and drowsily climbing upon the chimney top, half falling, he descended after them. Lying prostrate on the floor he pushed the wood ready for lighting, into its place and reached to the wall near by where he knew each traveler took care to leave the matches. His hand, moving uncertainly, upset the box. The matches fell thickly on the floor before him.

He reached for one to light the fire. His frozen fingers could not grasp it! Resting and striving again he struggled desperately to force the numb fingers to their work. Again and again he tried. He could hold nothing. Hopelessly his head dropped upon his outstretched arm. In a moment the mail-carrier was asleep.

So they found him; there on the summit of the Cascades his comrades gave him a grave befitting the life he had led.

On the road which crosses the mountains close under guardianship of the snow-clad Sisters, a few steps before the lava bed is reached, there is a square pile of rocks, evidently arranged with care. Travelers often ask its story and the guide has as often answered:

"That's the grave of the mail-carrier who crossed the mountain in early times. He froze to death with firewood in a foot of him and matches right under his hands. The cabin? You can see some of the charred timbers there. Yes, a hard life the mail-carrier leads."

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