

Saint Mary's Beacon.

A BOY NAMED FORD

"There are twenty-two men at present employed at this camp," wrote the superintendent of a mountain saw-mill in Colorado, making out his quarterly report. Then he added as an afterthought, "And a boy named Ford."

And a boy named Ford! If the subject of that postscript could have seen himself so portrayed he would possibly have felt hurt at being held thus lightly, but not surprised. For although Bert Ford, only 16, was as big and strong as most young fellows of 20, all his strength, all his agility and willingness had never made him popular with the superintendent, who was an excellent man at heart, but hard-headed and rough in his ways. He thought the boy was apt to turn out "trifling," because he was quiet, thoughtful and read whenever he got a chance, and, in his opinion, all literature outside of the Bible and dictionary was fabulous. "Fairy stories!" he exclaimed a hundred times. "You'll put your eyes out and never mount to nothing over books that way. Go out and be a man!"

On the day the report was prepared Bert was driving a mule team up the mountain side, and had to look alive to keep on the narrow trail, for there was a haze of snow in the air, the last of a backward spring. The mill with its cluster of tributary houses all built of rough, unpainted pine and lying in a narrow valley, gradually dropped out of sight as he ascended, and even the tireless toot! toot! of the engine dwindled into a vague and half-inaudible echo, now dying altogether and now carried to him on a gust of wind.

The trail over which he drove the mules with much stumbling and shouting, and clanking of their chain harness, zig-zagged up the mountain, through a dense forest of spiny pine trees, to a chopper's camp, a good two miles away, where there was a considerable clearing and a shanty for the men. Connection between this camp and the mill was established by a curious passageway, called in the lumber regions a "log-shoot." It was nothing more than a V-shaped trough large enough to hold a tree trunk and stretching from the clearing to the valley in very nearly a bee line. Constant friction had worn the inner surface as smooth as glass. As logs were cut they were hauled to this vast incline by the teams with trace chains and tumbled in and with a roar and a rush they were gone. Men who had timed it claimed that the logs made the journey in less than two minutes, and at any rate, such was their speed that when they darted into the big yard below they ploved into the earth like cannon balls and were so hot one could not bear to touch them for a long time afterward. It was like a giant's toboggan slide.

The log-shoot followed the general direction of the zigzag and the huge freight continually passed Bert as he toiled along. It was a thing to send a tremor into untrained nerves. First a faint buzzing noise, growing instantly louder until it burst into a wild roar and then sinking as suddenly into nothingness again, and when the tumult was at its hoarsest pitch, a gray flash along the trough—that was all. It was impossible to see the log, make out its shape or even its color. The eye could at best but barely detect something had gone by at a tremendous rate of speed. Bert was too used to the spectacle to give it more than a passing notice and he was anxious to get to the clearing with the fresh team before noon. The zigzag of the trail made the distance twice as long and the soft snow "balled" so upon his heels that he had to stop every few moments to clear it off, but he came in sight of the shanty just as the faint reverberation of the steam whistle sounded from the invisible depths below.

"On time, Bert," shouted the foreman of the choppers good naturedly. "Twelve o'clock, boys, knock off everybody for dinner!"

The dropping round of axes ceased and a dozen men came straggling through the pines. They were stout bearded fellows inured to the hardships of the life and disposed to make light of them, and they shook the chips from their clothes with many a careless joke. The cooking cabin lay about an eighth of a mile beyond, in the woods, and thither they started.

The boy smiled and nodded, and perched himself on the edge of the log shoot. From where he sat he commanded an extensive view in all directions. Above him the pine trees gradually thinned as they mounted the steep ascent, until a few scattered veterans, like the vanguard of a legion, touched timber line, and below the valley spread itself out in the distance

until an abutting spur of the range shut it like a gate. At its further extremity, toward the north, there glittered a stream of water, fed by many mountain torrents and just now swollen by the freshets of melting snow into almost a river. Its course was brief for hydraulic miners in another canyon had built a dam right across the valley and turned the stream into their long line of sluiceway. The snow had ceased falling and Bert could see the level water of this dam shine up through the misty valley like a plate of burnished steel.

When the last footfalls of the choppers died away, an air of singular solitude pervaded the clearing. There were no birds in such altitudes, and in the perfect stillness the vast mountains seemed vaster and immeasurably removed from men. Bert was sensitive to these varying aspects of nature and he fell into a brown study. He wondered whether the superintendent wasn't right about him. Perhaps he did live too much among his paper-and-ink friends in the books, and if it came to an emergency in life, would he be a man and face it? Some such notions as these were floating through his head when his eyes, wandering idly up and down the stream, fell upon the dam with more intentness. He stared for a moment and then leaped to his feet.

What he saw sent the blood flying to his heart, and cold as the day was a perspiration started out upon his body. It would have been invisible to one of weaker eyes, but with his clear young vision, keen as a hawk's, he saw distinctly the middle supports of the dam sway and bulge out like a half-filled balloon and at the same instant a disturbance, like an eddy, broke the steely surface of the waters. It meant that the structure was giving away! It meant that it was already leaking just before the crash, and that once the prisoned flood was loosened the valley would be inundated on the instant! It meant death and destruction to every soul in the mill!

Bert saw and comprehended in a flash, and a sickening sense of his helplessness rushed in upon him. He would be compelled to sit as a spectator of the disaster he was powerless to warn them against, for the dam would certainly not hold together a dozen minutes and no man or beast could traverse a quarter of the precipitous road in such an interval. Were these men to die like rats in a trap when a word in time would save them? He cast a wild glance around him and saw the log shoot and an idea like an inspiration darted into his brain.

He had not a second to deliberate. The dam was going! He snatched up an ax and with a dozen lightning blows struck a long slab of bark from the nearest and smallest log. A lump of chalk the foreman had used in measuring lay close by. He seized it and on the smooth space on the log scrawled in great letters these words:

THE DAM IS BREAKING. RUN!
The shout was only six feet away, but the log seemed like lead. Bert stooped and made a mighty effort. He snatched up the log and ran, but he was built like a young athlete and slowly, tremulously he raised the great trunk on his shoulder. The sweat dropped from his forehead into the snow. He ceased, his arms outstretched, and he took six quick staggering steps and threw the log into the trough.

As the strange messenger whizzed out of sight a faintness laid hold of him and he felt, for an instant, that he would surely swoon, but he rose superior to it and strained his eyes up the valley. Never, perhaps, in his whole life, will he live again moments of such agonized and deadly suspense. Would the log coming down at this unusual time, attract attention? Would anyone be in the yard? Would the logged side fall upward? Did it turn in the trough and this roll on the chalk? Upon these questions, as upon threads, hung the life of the millmen.

Meantime the signs of breaking multiplied about the dam. Several large trees that grew upon the abutments of the dam in the yielding earth and suddenly sank into the water. Bert could see their bushy tops swept round and round in the eddy, and then, as it seemed, a glittering light shot from the top to the bottom of the dam, dividing it right in the centre, and in the next instant the waters leaped out in a vast, crowded wall, and rushed downward and away.

Bert had no watch and half-distracted by suspense he could not even guess how long a time had elapsed since he sent down the log. At one second it seemed half an hour, at the next not more than a minute or two. He cast another glance into the valley, through which now rushed a seething tempestuous torrent and started at a run down the trail. If they received his warning in time he must meet them. At any rate, he would soon know. The trail was as slippery as glass and before he had traversed it half way he was soaked from head to foot with slush from his many falls. As he neared the end his heart began to beat so quickly that he felt suffocated, and although the clustering pines still obscured the view he could now hear the dashing and roaring of the waters beneath. At length he cleared the last bend, stood out upon a little eminence that overhung the flood and saw nothing but desolation.

Where the mill had stood was a river. No sign was left not even a floating plank and the log shoot near by ended abruptly in the water. Up to this moment Bert had cherished a faint hope that the men might have escaped upon the other side, but a single glance at the opposite mountain destroyed it. All gone! The rough, big-hearted millmen whom he had come to look upon almost as brothers and whose voices were still ringing in his ears! Even the superintendent who, with all his gruffness, had never been unkind! It was an appalling thing to think that these men had been suddenly blotted out of life and in the midst of health and strength. The boy checked down a sob and turned away when a voice rang out loud and clear: "Bert! Oh, Bert!"

He turned around and there on a ragged spur of the mountain side, almost above him, stood the men from the mill. They were just as they had risen from the dinner table, coatless most of them and one in his fright and bewilderment still held his tin coffee can in his hand. Unable to reach

the trail they had scrambled up through the woods a little beyond and gained high ground just in the nick of time.

"Who sent down that log?" was the first question the superintendent asked when Bert reached the group.

"I did," said Bert coloring.

"You?"

"Yes, sir."

"What all alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bert," he said gravely, taking the boy's right hand in both of his own, "that sharp brain of yours saved all our lives. The horses went like card-board, all of them, and if we hadn't got that warning just when we did, we'd have gone with 'em."

"That's the mortal truth," said the men, crowding around.

"So I want to say before everybody," the superintendent went on, "that you are mistaken about you, Bert. I've been a little rough with you, boy, here something seemed to choke him for a moment, 'but I'll make it up to you yet."

"And make up he did. There is a new mill now built high on the mountain side, out of the reach of future freshets, and the book keeper is a boy named Ford, who, every day says, stands so well with the company that he will have the charge of their works they intend to put up before long in the gulch above."

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