

Matches

by

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

M. D. Charleson

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MATCHES

By BEATRICE REDPATH

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He's forever getting hurt," Paul Hastings sneered, "we don't want that kind of man in the North West. What other man but Niel Baker would stumble into one of his own traps. Just like him, though. I wish you joy of him. But he's so damned careless that some of these days he'll be careless once too often."

Ann Hastings held back the words which she would have uttered, had she not learned lately to suppress her anger, to listen and be silent. She did not even glance towards her step-brother, who was putting on his heavy snow boots, his sullen face half hidden as he struggled with a refractory lace. She went on with her sewing, but bent lower over her needle, to hide the anger that narrowed her gray eyes.

She never grew accustomed to the endless repetition. Not a day passed in which Paul did not sneer at Niel, scarcely an hour seemed to go by without some remark. Paul could not conceal, did not try to hide the anger that burned in him, the fire of sullen resentment that smouldered within.

The very fact that she had made him so comfortable, cooked for him, worked for him, slaved for him, since the moment she had entered his house, now caused him to vent his anger on the man who was robbing him of this comfort. He had referred to Niel Baker as his best friend, his only friend in the district, when Ann had first come out to the West; that was before he had had any idea that Niel would ever want to marry her.

She had realized, before she had been many days on her step-brother's ranch, just why Paul had written such kind letters after her father's death, telling her that she must make her future home with him. She remembered how kind and warm those letters had seemed to her, left penniless and alone, and coming from a man who was a complete stranger to her.

She had come out with such a desire to do all that lay in her power to show her gratitude for this kindness, but the gratitude had died swiftly. Paul Hastings had not even bothered to keep up any sort of pretense after she had arrived. He had been brutally frank.

“I guess it’s a good bargain all around,” he had said, soon after her arrival, “a housekeeper wants such high wages these days, and I could never be bothered with a wife. That means babies and doctor’s bills. Not for me. You’ll have a home and it’s not likely that you will be marrying at your age. A man wants something younger when he’s looking for a wife. I considered that before I paid your fare out here,” he had added with a short laugh, apparently taking pride in his frank speech. “I guess it’s an arrangement that suits us both.”

Ann would have returned to the East if she had had the money to do so. She was nothing more than a servant, and a servant without a wage. And then, soon after her arrival, she had met Niel Baker. Here was someone so different. Niel’s frank face and honest eyes became for her the only light in the drear round of days. After she knew him she decided that she could make the best of things, since his ranch was only six miles away.

Paul’s astonishment had been only equalled by his anger, when she had informed him that she and Niel were to be married in the Spring. He had never suspected such a thing. If he had been looking for a wife himself, he would have desired a different sort. More life, he would have said, more animation. Ann did not appeal to him in any way whatever except in the way of service. There, she suited him. He had never been as comfortable as he had been since she had come to the ranch. He had congratulated himself continually on the expenditure which he had at first considered foolhardy. But it had been a good investment. He had never made a better one. He liked his comfort and he liked his food. Ann’s cooking was of the best. He could not bear the thought of returning to haphazard cooking when he could have such comfort at no expense.

His anger at the thought of her marriage and his fierce resentment against Niel, frightened her at times. It made her fear for Niel’s safety. But Niel himself had only laughed at her fears.

“What could he do?” Niel had laughed. “I’m a bigger man than he is. He had better look out if he tries any funny business with me. Only I wish you were out of his house. Sometimes I think it would be best to marry right away. After all, what is there to wait for?”

“I gave him my promise that I’d stay with him a year,” she had said in reply. “I don’t want him to feel that I didn’t keep my word. By then I shall have paid him in full for all it cost him to bring me out here. After all, I owe him that.”

“I’ll pay him your fare, if that’s all,” Niel had answered promptly, but she had refused the offer. Paul would not be able to find anyone at this season to take her place. No, she would keep her word and wait for the Spring.

But Spring seemed long in coming, and sometimes she grew afraid. She laughed at her own fears, and told herself that it was simply nervousness. Paul would not do anything to harm Niel, would not dare to do anything. He was a coward at heart. It was only that she was alone so much, had so much time for absurd ideas to enter her head. Her common sense told her that it was nonsense. And yet, even so, she could not kill her fear.

She looked up from her sewing now, as Paul paused before going out to look after the horses. He stood with his hand on the knob of the door, looking down at her.

“I don’t want you to go out,” he said, “there’s going to be a blizzard. The glass has been falling all day. It will be the devil of a night.”

“I wasn’t thinking of going out,” she replied, and then as she glanced carelessly at him, suddenly her eyes became fixed and attentive. There was a curious smile on Paul’s thick lips, a gleam of satisfaction in his mean eyes. She thought, looking at him, that triumph was expressed by that smile.

In another moment he had turned towards the door and opened it. A cold gust of air swept into the room. The door slammed behind him, shaking the light frame house.

She did not pick up the sewing which had fallen into her lap. She sat staring before her, wondering . . . wondering why Paul had smiled like that. What could it mean? What had occurred to please him? Why . . . that triumphant smile?

There was only one thing that she could think of that would please him these days. She could imagine his looking just like that if some danger threatened Niel. That would bring that very expression into his face. His entire mind was occupied with his hatred. There was nothing else that seemed to enter his thoughts lately. She could think of nothing that would satisfy him so completely as disaster to Niel.

Danger to Niel! She started forward and jumped to her feet. She stood, thinking hard. Paul had been over at Niel's ranch only that morning. He had gone to borrow some tools. A cold horror froze her heart. Niel, with his injured foot, would be an easy victim.

Oh, but Paul would never dare to do Niel any bodily harm. The consequences of anything of the sort would be too swift and too sure. It would be laid at once at his door. If he did anything to harm Niel it would have to be something crafty, something that could be hidden. That thought frightened her the more. Her brain raced, trying to probe the meaning of Paul's expression, wondering what he could have done.

That smile had some meaning. Of that only, she was sure. There was nothing for her to do but to go and find out the meaning. She took a swift glance towards the window, remembering what Paul had said about the blizzard. It had been intensely cold all day. She had noticed, looking out of the window earlier, the deep purple shadow flung by the spruce trees, sharp and defined on the glistening crystals of the snow. The trees black and motionless and the sky vivid turquoise. Now the sky was clouded over, the panes were thick with spirals of white frost feathers, but out of one corner, where the frost had melted from the heat of the mom, she could see flakes blown against the window.

She thought of the six miles of rough road to Niel's ranch and her heart sank. The sun set so early these winter days, and the dark came so quickly after sunset. There would scarcely be more than an hour of daylight left to her. There would be no stars to guide her, and the blizzard would be an impenetrable veil. She had never been out in a blizzard, but she had heard Paul speak of them very often. She knew the danger of losing herself, of falling from exhaustion, but the other danger loomed up before her, more terrifying, more awful than anything else in the world. That smile on Paul's face frightened her more than the terror of the snow. There was something hideously wrong at that ranch six miles away. She knew that she must go at all costs. She would go mad if she stopped here with that terror devouring her.

If she only knew what it was that threatened Niel. But she could not imagine what Paul could do to harm him. But there was danger . . . that she knew.

She went to her room to wrap herself in her thickest and lightest clothes. She laced on her moccasins with quick trembling fingers, pulled the

scarlet tuque down over her brown hair and changed her skirt for a pair of homespun knickers. The snow would be too deep, if it came as Paul had forecast, for her to be impeded with skirts.

The wind struck at her like a knife as she opened the door. There was a thin driving snow that felt like particles of steel against her face. She pulled her scarf higher about her face and turned in the direction of Niel's ranch. The wind bit through the wool of her sweaters, but she only walked faster, moving lightly and easily in her soft moccasins, over the snow that was like sand, frozen into tiny particles with the intense cold. It was better this way than damp and clogging, she told herself, and felt encouraged and hopeful of reaching Niel's ranch before the blizzard broke with full fury.

The sky was like dull gray metal, flecked with the tiny flakes. There was the long, long whistle of the wind, but the rest was silence, mile after mile of that aching silence, broken only by the drone of the wind. The exercise kept her warm until her clothing seemed almost a burden. She wished that she was more accustomed to walking, that she had not shut herself in so much over household tasks. She was strong enough except when it came to great physical strain. To that she was not accustomed.

She told herself that six miles was nothing, but the muscles in the backs of her legs were beginning to ache with the strain. The snow was so heavy. In some places there were drifts clear across the road, and she had to struggle through them, which left her breathless and trembling with exhaustion. It was growing darker and she went faster. She must get to the spruce woods before it was quite dark. They cut across the country in a belt. There was a path through them, but it would be difficult to make it out were it dark before she got there.

The snow was sweeping across her path more heavily now. Each flake so light, so evanescent a thing, collectively all powerful, strong as death.

She was ploughing through it now, and it was like ploughing through deep shifting sand. It would have been better if she had brought her snow shoes. But she had never learned to use them. They always tripped her up. She had been afraid of twisting her ankle by wearing them. But she had had no idea that the snow would be so deep.

Now and then she paused to take her breath, staring ahead, striving to estimate how far she had gone, how far she had still to go. There were no landmarks until she came to the woods. After the woods it was only one mile more. But she was taking longer than she had expected.

The world was blotted out by the snow that was getting thicker. It stung her cheeks and froze on her eye-lids, and swirled in eddies on the wind. There was nothing anywhere but the snow, the shifting icy particles of the snow.

She gave a sigh of relief when she came to the woods. The spruce trees seemed to hold out friendly arms to her, protecting, and kindly, holding off the fierce fury of the wind. Her spirits rose as she went more quickly along the path that was almost entirely obliterated; she could only make her way by the opening through the trees. Above her head the trees swayed and the wind whistled and moaned through the topmost branches, but the lower boughs were still. They brushed her cheeks and clung to her hair. There was no sound but the eerie moaning of the wind except when a branch snapped sharply with the weight of the snow. The sound startled her over-strung nerves, and she would lean for a moment, trembling in every nerve, peering behind her through the dusk.

A new terror was rising in her heart. She was afraid that Paul, finding her gone, would follow her and force her to go back. He would know where she was gone. He would be on the alert if he had harmed Niel. Every moment she fancied she would look over her shoulder and find him there, his evil face leering at her, that smile on his lips.

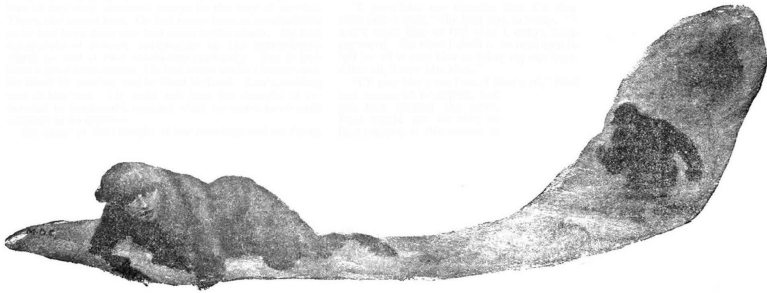
The thought spurred her to further exertion. She must not stop to rest for a moment. A log fallen across the path brought her to her knees. She struggled up, brushing the snow away from her face, the hair out of her eyes. She longed to be through the woods, out into the clear spaces again. She could do without their protection . . . they were filled with terror for her.

It was getting so dark she had to feel her way now. Would she ever get through the woods? Would she ever reach Niel . . . and when she got to the ranch . . . what would she find?

That thought sent her racing forward, careless of the branches that slapped in her face, but the increased speed only exhausted her, left her breathless and gasping. She must go at her steady pace, not faster or slower. Only that way would she ever reach the ranch.

At last it grew lighter . . . the end of the woods was reached, and she gave a great sigh of relief as the darkness fell behind her like a dropped cloak. But here, in the open, the wind had increased to fury, the snow was driving forward, it was like beating up against an impenetrable wall of white driving particles. It caught her breath, it whirled her slight body round. She steadied herself and steeled her body to receive the impact of this terrific

force. And then as she stood for an instant, helpless before the frightful drive of the wind, she heard a shout behind her. She gave one terrified glance back over her shoulder and then plunged forward into the wind, struggling and gasping.



She gave one plunge forward, stumbled and fell.

Paul it was Paul she was beaten defeated it was the end. She closed her eyes and stumbled on, but she could not go any faster he would be upon her in a moment. She gave one desperate plunge forward through the drift, stumbled and fell forward on her face.

But the voice that broke upon her, above the whistle of the wind, was not Paul's voice. The slurring Irish tones were kind and familiar. She lay, too startled by the swiftness of her relief to move.

"Whatever are you doing out here in this storm? Why, it's Ann Hastings!"

She felt arms lifting her, brushing away the snow that caked her face. It was Mike Gallagher, Niel's neighbor, whose ranch was half a mile to the north, through the woods. She caught at his arm with a fierce eagerness.

"Have you come from Niel's?"

"No. Why?"

She hesitated for a moment. How could she tell him of her fear? Looking into his kind friendly face, it seemed to her for an instant that all her terror was a childish obsession. She had been simply absurd to have imagined danger. She had been nervous and overwrought.

She did not like to tell him just why she had come. He would laugh at her. But the memory of that expression on Paul's face brought fear back.

“I think there is something wrong over at Niel’s ranch,” she said slowly.

“Wrong? How do you mean? What makes you think so? He was all right early this morning. His foot was getting along splendidly. I left him tucked up in bed for the day. Why . . . what do you think has happened?”

“I’m going to find out,” she said, ignoring his direct question.

She was almost shouting against the wind while he held her arm, steadying her. He shook his head.

“You can’t get to Niel’s to-night,” he said, “you’ll come back to my ranch. It’s only a piece through the woods. There’s no walking in the open to-night in that blizzard. You’d have to beat dead against it every inch of the way.”

But she resisted when he tried to lead her back into the shelter of the woods.

“No . . . no . . . I must go on,” she cried. “Niel is in danger . . . I know he is.”

Mike Gallagher looked at her puzzled.

“There’s no danger that could come to Niel,” he said, “but there is every danger to you if you try to get to Niel’s ranch through that. It can’t be done.”

“It’s got to be done,” she said wildly, frantic in her anguished terror. “Please let me get on,” she said. “I can’t stay here talking . . . every minute counts.”

If there were any reason,” he said slowly, and she broke in upon him, remembering his Irish blood.

“Don’t you ever have presentiments?”

“Not on a night like this,” he said with a grim smile, but he took her arm more firmly and turned with her towards Niel’s ranch. “Lean all you can,” he said, “we’ll beat our way through . . . we’ll get there if I have to carry you. You must be near the end of your tether . . . I don’t see how you ever managed to get this far.”

She looked at him gratefully and tried to thank him for coming with her, but he stopped her at once.

“Don’t talk,” he said, “we’ll need all our breath before we get through this.”

But in spite of the torrential force of the wind that beat them back at every step, it did not seem so bad to Ann as before. She no longer had any fear of Paul catching up with her. Mike Gallagher's huge frame protected her from that danger, and he was half carrying her along, pulling her, helping her with all his strength. She shut her eyes to the blinding particles of snow that cut her face, and bent her head, careless now of direction since Mike Gallagher was directing the course. Her limbs moved mechanically as though they did so without any direction from her brain . . . merely through habit. Now and then they paused and turned their backs to the gale for a breathing space, and then plodded on again without a word spoken.

The wind seemed to her like a great invisible beast, roaring angrily down upon them through the black night that was like a fathomless pit. It seemed to Ann that for hours and hours they struggled on, weary to exhaustion, but finding somehow the needed strength to carry them on. Weariness was weighing her down, like some vast hand pulling her, down, down, down. She was leaning her entire weight now, and Mike Gallagher was practically carrying her on his arm.

"We should be able to see Niel's lights," he said at length, peering ahead. "That's queer," he said half to himself, and Ann said quickly.

"What . . . what?"

"Oh, nothing," he said slowly. "We're just there. I thought we should see the lights . . . but this snow is too thick I guess to see through it."

"You're sure we are really on the right track . . . that we are really there?" she said, doubting that that journey could really be ended at last.

"Oh yes, we're all right. Come on and make a last spurt for it. It's only a few more yards . . . you're dead beat."

She struggled on with hope now. They had really got through. She heard Gallagher mutter something to himself, but this time she was too weary to inquire what it was . . . almost she was too spent to feel any more fear, any terror, to feel anything whatever but deadly, deadly exhaustion.

Then his voice penetrated that terrible nothingness into which she felt herself descending.

"There are no lights," and his voice was deep and anxious. "I guess you were right . . . there's something wrong."

She turned to Mike Gallagher sharply.

“What . . . what . . . oh, what?”

“We’ll see in a minute or so,” he replied. “Do you think you can stand alone while I look for some matches? I had some in my pocket. Here they are. I’ll go in first,” and he went on before her while she stumbled after him, half surprised to find that they were so near to the house. It was terribly dark and silent. She felt sick and shaken with fear.

Mike Gallagher turned the handle of the door and it opened easily. He struck a match and it flared in the darkness, then the wind blew it out. He turned and led her into the house and shut the door before he struck another. She heard Niel’s voice . . . but so strange . . . so curiously strange . . . coming out of the darkness. Relief swept through her in a flood. Whatever had happened, Niel was alive.



*As the light burned she saw Niel, huddled on a chair beside the stove,
beneath blankets and rugs.*

She held to the back of a chair while Gallagher felt for the lamp. As the light burned she saw Niel, huddled on a chair beside the stove, beneath blankets and rugs. He was shaking convulsively. She could hear his teeth chattering from where she stood. And then she noticed that the stove was black. . . . the room was deadly cold deep and anxious. "I guess you were right . . . there's something wrong."

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She saw Mike Gallagher go quickly towards the stove and put a match to the fire that was ready laid. Then he turned and put his hand on Niel’s shaking shoulders.

“Get close to that blaze you’re nearly frozen to death what’s the matter? why didn’t you have a fire?”

Niel’s lips could scarcely form the words.

“Matches,” he stammered “there were no matches the stove went out.”

Gallagher exclaimed.

“Matches! Why, you had a stock of them only this morning. I helped myself to a handful.”

So that was it! Now Ann understood. She came forward slowly. “Paul stole them,” she said clearly. “I knew there was something.” And then to her own amazement, now that the long, the terrible strain, was over, she burst out into long choking sobs.

Gallagher crossed to her and led her to the couch beside the stove.

“She’s absolutely done out,” he said, turning to Niel while she tried to choke back her sobs of relief. “I came upon her at the edge of the woods

. . . . she was on her way here thought you were in danger had a presentiment the presentiment was right. What you both need is a drink I have something here in a flask.”

“What sort of a presentiment, dear?” Niel inquired, somewhat warmed by the drink. He got up and came over to the couch and sat down beside Ann. She struggled with the sobs that were still choking her.

“Paul looked so queer he smiled he looked so triumphant I knew something was wrong to make him look like that.”

“And so you came through that blizzard because Paul smiled!” Niel said in wonder.

“If he hadn’t I never would have known until it was too late.”

Niel’s hand closed over hers and then he turned to Gallagher.

“He must have put out the fire when I heard him at it. He told me he was filling the stove. When the place began to get cold I came in there wasn’t a spark. I laid a new fire and tried to strike a spark in the old way but it wouldn’t work. I started to go over to your ranch but my foot was too bad. I had to come back. If you hadn’t come” and he paused and his hand tightened on Ann’s.

“And he would have got away with it too,” Mike Gallagher said grimly, as he put more wood into the blazing stove, “all that would have been said was that you were careless letting yourself run out of matches. It was clever enough. He’s always been going on about your carelessness. So that’s Paul Hastings. It’s a good thing to know.”

“And you’re here for good,” Niel said, smiling at Ann’s white face, while an expression of unutterable content came into his own.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

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[The end of *Matches* by Beatrice Redpath]