

Flight of the Phoenix

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Illustrated by
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Flight of the Phoenix

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

ILLUSTRATED BY H. WESTON TAYLOR

Just as the bird of Egyptian mythology soared, young and beautiful, from the ashes of its destruction, so, sometimes, may men regain self-respect and rehabilitation in the crucible of sacrifice.

Ruth Fenwick stood upon the flat outcropping of rock which formed her door step and watched the coast steamer back away from the pier. The air across the little bay was not as crystal clear as usual but Ruth's accustomed eyes could follow the various evolutions by which the *Chilcoat* straightened her course and departed, leaving a long plume of saffron-colored smoke, floating low. She was fully two hours late, but the sun was still well up; summer brought long, sunny days and long late twilights to Leftover Bay.

Almost immediately upon the departure of the steamer, Ruth saw Johnnie Clark's boat shoot out from the ladder beside the pier. That meant that the freight was light to-day. Johnnie hadn't much truck to bring across the bay. Her own provision boxes from Murray's had probably not come. Not that it mattered. She had long outgrown the small excitement of unpacking boxes. There would be, though, yesterday's newspaper, a magazine, perhaps, and, possibly a letter.

She sat down to wait for them. The waiting was habit merely. She did not care about the paper or the magazine or the letter, but two years ago, when she and Tom Fenwick had come to Leftover Bay, she had said: "Let's not have supper till we see what the boat brings!" And they had fallen into the way of waiting. Somewhere out in the bush behind the house, Tom would be waiting, too. Supper was ready on the table. It was six o'clock and the day was over. Ruth hugged her knees and watched Johnnie's boat.

It was a dreadful old tub, Johnnie's boat, ugly in line, dirty, cluttered with odds and ends which meant Johnnie; but now with the western rays of the sun full upon it and upborne upon the dancing, sparkling water it was a lovely fairy thing. Its oars flashed and beckoned. Johnnie's figure, bending rhythmically,

spelled poetry. Ruth, thinking of Johnnie as he was, felt her lips relax into a smile.

“Thinking of something merry and bright?” asked Tom Fenwick. He had come around the corner of the house in time to catch the smile.

“No,” said Ruth. She felt that it sounded ungracious. She wished she could have added to it in some way—anything pleasant and trivial would have done. But it was becoming increasingly hard to be pleasant and trivial.

Tom sat down upon the pile of stones and moss, which had intended to become a rock garden but had failed of its intention. His profile was between her and the water—a very fine profile. Even the insertion of a battered old pipe between his close-clipped lips did not spoil it. Yet—stay? Were those lips a trifle less firm than they used to be—wasn’t there a sign of thickness under the chin?

“You’re letting yourself get slack, Tom.” The words were impulsive. She wished she hadn’t said them. Not because they disturbed him but because they didn’t.

“Feeling quite fit, thanks,” said Tom. “Johnnie’s waving at you, isn’t he?”

Ruth jumped up with a half-vexed laugh. “He wants me to blow the horn. What a silly old child he is.”

She reached for a battered dinner-horn which hung beside the door. Once she had rather enjoyed old Johnnie’s fancy for having his salute acknowledged by its melancholy “toot” but now the thing seemed merely ridiculous. Still——

She put the horn to her lips and blew. No sound came. She blew more strongly—and jumped, for the sound which resulted was not the ordinary mild bellow but a dreadful, broken gurgle, ending in a quavering shriek.

“Whatever in the world!—” began Ruth laughing. “Oh, I remember. Poly and his brethren were playing with it yesterday. They’ve stuffed it with—what’s the matter?”

Without word or sound, the man sitting on the rock garden had collapsed. He still sat there, but not as a man—rather as a huddled, shivering shape. The fine profile was blurred and distorted, the figure seemed to have shrunken, the flannel shirt hung loose.

Ruth Fenwick felt sick. But she had known the feeling too often to find it novel.

“Control yourself!” she said coolly. “I did not know that the thing would make that noise. Johnnie is landing. Better go into the house.”

The man made no movement to obey. He was clearly incapable of going anywhere. Ruth straightened her shoulders, left him, and went down to the beach to meet Johnnie . . . Johnnie must not see . . .

“Two letters fer you to-night, Missus Fenwick,” said Johnnie importantly. “*And* one paper, *and* one magazine. It’s a picture magazine, Missus Fenwick,” he added wistfully.

“You shall have the pictures as soon as I’ve read it, Johnnie,” she promised. “You’re very late to-night. I came down so you wouldn’t have to tie up the boat.”

“Oh, I ain’t never in no hurry,” said old Johnnie, truthfully. “I was goin’ to tell Mister Fenwick what the news is from Cedar Creek. They’re getting the fire in hand over there. It ain’t goin’ to get the Camp if they can keep it where it is. But up further, along of Deepwater, they’re having a spankin’ blaze. Shouldn’t wonder if you’ll be havin’ a fire-warden along here to-night a-tellin’ you folks to get ready to pull out.”

Pull out?” Mrs. Fenwick laughed. She looked around at the sparkling water and the lowering sun. The breeze, freshening from the sea, was full of salt.

From where they stood she could not see the dark column of smoke which, from a little farther out, was clearly visible. Looking landward from the bay, it might have marked the heart of some giant’s bonfire, hidden behind the rise between Leftover and Cedar Creek. She knew the smoke was there. It had been there for a week. Sometimes, when the wind was the other way, its presence made itself most disagreeably felt. But the lumber camp at Cedar Creek was well over the shoulder of the mountain, on another bay, and the men were known to have the fire under control. As for Deepwater—well, that was nearer. But they had had fire at Deepwater the summer before. It had done nothing worse than burn up the Deepwater shingle bolts—and serve them right for being so careless with their donkey engine in dry weather.

“I’ll tell Mr. Fenwick,” she promised. “And next time you come, maybe you’ll have time to fix the horn you gave me. It—squeaks.”

This, she saw instantly, was a mistake, for Johnnie was all for fixing the horn out of hand. Finally, with relief, she induced him to push off without “coming on up” to the house.

“Well, mebby I had better be gettin’ on,” he admitted. “If that there blaze over to Deepwater gets worse every man on the beach will be wanted to beat her back. Tell Mister Fenwick to keep his oldest shirt handy. And you won’t fergit to save me the pictures, will you?”

Mrs. Fenwick answered mechanically. Johnnie's last message had startled her. She hadn't thought of that particular possibility before. What if the old man were right and help should be needed at Deepwater. If the fire-warden—well, in that case the fire-warden would have to be told, that was all . . . it would only be another humiliation. Her lips set themselves in a hard line.

When she got back to the cottage, her husband was not to be seen. In his place on the rock pile sat a very different personage—one Napoleon Jonathan Peck. He had brought the week's supply of eggs and from his undisturbed and contemplative presence Mrs. Fenwick argued correctly Tom Fenwick's partial recovery. This child had always had a stimulating effect upon Tom. They had taken an immense fancy for each other. There had been times when Tom, playing with Napoleon, had seemed more like his old self than she had known him since his return from overseas.

"Well, Poly," she said, "how many eggs to-day?"

Poly solemnly counted ten on his fat little fingers.

"An' one that's twins," he told her proudly. "And maw says can she count that two?"

"It is a big one, isn't it?" Ruth exclaimed over the big double-yolked egg with proper admiration. "Yes, of course we'll count it two. Did you show it to Mr. Fenwick?"

The round, bright face of Napoleon clouded.

"Didn't show him nothin'," regretfully. "Mr. Tom's got a dreatful headache."

Ruth counted out the money for the eggs, asking considerately after the welfare of Mrs. Peck as she did so.

"Maw's gettin' kind of scart," answered Napoleon, with man-like pity for the frailties of woman. "She's scart the fire's going to jump."

"Jump!—jump what?"

But the informant was vague.

"Maw says it can—miles. . . . It's terrible hot in there along our way. It's dreatful cool here." His big black eyes looked longingly through the open door at the white supper table. More than this politeness would not permit.

"I was hoping to have you stay for supper, Poly," said Ruth, repressing a smile, "but as Mr. Tom has a headache . . . I wonder if you could eat some pie on your way home?"

Napoleon thought he could.

“I could put the piece I ain’t eatin’ in the basket,” he announced artfully as he emptied out the eggs. The big one he kept lovingly till the last. “I guess my old rooster laid this one,” he boasted. “My old rooster’s twicet as big as any of them other hens. . . . say, this basket holds a lot, doesn’t it?”

Ruth’s smile broadened as she added an apple and some cake to the double portion of pie. Undoubtedly, Napoleon Jonathan was a bright spot. She sighed as she watched his fat, brown legs disappear down the trail. How terribly she had wanted a Napoleon Jonathan—once.

“All the same,” she murmured to herself almost aloud. “I know I’m not being fair to Tom. I know he can’t help what’s happened to him . . .” After a pause she added dejectedly, “but neither can I help what’s happened to me.”

Tom was not in the house when she went in. She did not expect to see him again before bedtime. Brought back to something like himself by Napoleon he would have gone into the woods. To-morrow he would be exactly as if nothing had happened. It was always that way.

And, lately, she had almost begun to hope that it might be different. The grim set of her lips came back as she ate her solitary supper. On what had she based her hope of difference? On nothing. The problem she faced was always the same problem.

“And I’m weakening,” she admitted. It was the most she had admitted yet. When Tom had first come back, she had never dreamed of weakening. She had been on fire for sacrifice . . . her whole life . . . it had seemed little . . . yet in only two years she was realizing how long life can be.

It had been so wonderful to have Tom back, on any terms. And he had looked so natural, so big, so like the old Tom that she had privately called the doctors silly old women. “A bad case of shellshock,” they had said. But other shellshocked men did not look like Tom. There was Dick Wright, for instance, thin as a wisp and with twitching face, and Ned Baker who flew into scarlet rages on the least provocation. But Tom—well, Tom was just—timid.

To call Tom “timid” had seemed on the edge of humor. That it was already over the edge of tragedy, she had not dreamed. Tom, as she remembered him, had always put her in mind of the lad in the fairy tale who went about asking “What is ‘afraid’?” He had seemed constitutionally incapable of fear. She knitted her brows now and tried to remember whether that boy in the old tale had ever met Fear? Tom had.

he first thing she had noticed was that his laugh was different. Nothing unusual in that—considering. He would get back his natural laugh after a little. **T** But he didn't . . . awful to live with a person whose laugh was different . . . and he never called her "Nibbs" any more. She had asked him, diffidently, why he never called her Nibbs and he hadn't seemed to know why . . . he had said (of all things), "Why should I when your name is Ruth?" Perfectly sensible, you see? . . . But not Tom.

Other things had been more trivial. He was unable to go into the cellar to bring up coal. When Ruth first noticed this change she had tried surreptitiously to carry up coal herself. This he had stopped, when he discovered it, so they compromised on having a man come in for the furnace work.

Then there had been the car. They had had to give that up. A series of burglaries in the neighborhood of the city in which they lived after Tom returned home from overseas aggravated his nervousness. He refused to use a street car to get to the office after one on which he had been riding had left the rails—a trivial affair. But the climax came six months later when his partner was laid up with influenza, and Tom had to take charge of the firm's practical work. He had fallen down—badly. The work had to do with the new electric power house—they were driving a short tunnel between two buildings, a simple enough thing. No one had felt any misgivings—except Ruth.

Well, that had been a tragedy if you like—or a comedy . . . Ruth never knew whether the men who saw what happened had laughed or pitied. She had found it impossible to learn the facts. All she knew for certain was that Tom's direction of the work had come to a sudden end and that Tom's partner had made a record recovery.

The partner had come to talk things over with her. "I don't know just what to do," he said. "Poor old Tom! Perhaps a real rest—" They had decided that Tom must have a real rest. The family had been asked for advice and Uncle Andrew had come forward with the suggestion of Leftover Bay. There was a decent cottage on it and the soil would grow berries and garden stuff. There was about an acre clear. It was a quiet place, yet not lonely. Some settlers were scattered along the trails and there were a few summer cottages farther down the beach—ideal climate, beautiful bathing, boat once a day. They were welcome to it, Uncle Andrew said.

What Ruth had chiefly thought of was that it meant getting away. It meant privacy while Tom was getting well. When he was quite well they would come back. She had thought of six months. They had been there two years. And, outside, the world was busy. She could read about it in the day-old newspaper.

As Ruth ate her supper she went over all these facts. But very sketchily. She knew them all by heart. What she had to face was something more subtle. It was a new intimacy which concerned herself. What was it that was happening to her? What would she do if it kept on happening? Was there nothing she could do to stop it? She felt breathless with the effort.

“It isn’t fair to Tom,” she kept saying. “I know it isn’t fair to Tom. He is ill. One can’t judge people who are ill. One must just be patient with them, kind, loving . . . ah!” That was it . . . from the way she felt when she said “loving” she knew what was happening to her. She was falling out of love!

She hadn’t thought that one could do that. One fell *in* love, of course, without being able to help it. That was natural and right. But to fall out in the same way? One wasn’t supposed to do that. She put it brutally to herself. “I loved my husband when he was well. But I can’t love him now that he is ill. That’s the kind of woman I am.” She tried to feel a deep disdain of herself. But it didn’t help at all. Something, deeper down, kept whispering. “It’s not as simple as that. The things you loved in Tom are fading and your love is fading with them. The man you are married to is not the man you married.”

“And neither of us can help it!” she said aloud. “Neither of us can help it. We can’t do anything.” For the hundredth time she wondered whether Tom, who had so changed, had noticed any change in her.

Presently she rose from the supper table and cleared away, placing some cold meat and bread where they would be handy for Tom when he came in. She was washing the last cup when the back gate clicked. Tom, so soon? . . . No, it was a smaller man. It was MacIvor, the fire warden . . . and he looked . . . well, he looked “all in.”

Ruth slipped more wood into the stove and had swung the kettle to the front before his knock had ceased. She called “Come in,” while she put coffee in the pot.

“Can’t come in, I’m afraid,” said MacIvor at the door. “Yes, you bet, that coffee smells good—but . . . is Fenwick about, Mrs. Fenwick?”

“He’s in the woods somewhere. And you must have some coffee.”

“I wanted to tell him—”

“Tell me. And do sit down.”

“Can’t. Fact is, the Deepwater Camp is going and if the wind veers even a little the fire may be right here. Nothing to be frightened of, you know. You are perfectly safe, thanks to the beach. But it will be a shame if you have to lose

this nice little place here . . . Say, that coffee is good. I didn't realize how done I was! What you'd better do is to pack anything you care about and get it down to the water. This house has a chance on account of its position, but you can't be sure. And get woollen clothes on . . . you may have to stand in the water until the tug comes to pick you up. The *Chilcoot* is taking off the Deepwater folk. Ever seen a forest fire?"

"Never."

He grinned. "They say it's a grand sight if you can look at it with a detached mind . . . and say . . . get out all your blankets and rugs. All the settlers back in have been ordered out and are coming as fast as they can . . . wish I could spare you a few men . . . in any case, you'll be able to manage. Put the children in the boats and keep everything wet. Luckily the tide will be right . . ."

"But," said Ruth, handing a third cup of coffee, "I don't see any fire!"

"Listen!" said the fire-warden.

There was a far-off sound almost as if some gigantic beast moved within the bush. Then a faint, sharp detonation. "That's her!" said MacIvor. "Look!"

A dull glow lay over the trees like a clouded sunset, only the sun did not set in that direction. "She may jump, you know," said MacIvor. "Well, I'm off! Thank God for the beach. I'd hate to be caught inland with that." He turned back for just a moment. "When the women come, get them into the clear place down there—see? Keep away from the logs—the whole beach may flame. Tell Fenwick to join us down the Simpson trail."

She would have to tell now.

"Mr. MacIvor, Tom may not . . . I mean, it's shellshock. That's why we're here . . . I don't know . . ."

He was instantly sympathetic. Everyone always was. "Oh, sorry! Keep him here, Mrs. Fenwick. Tell him I'm leaving all the women in his charge . . . that will fix it. Well, so long!"

Ruth turned from the open door, dazed, to find the room filled with a strange, sombre half-light. The smell of smoke was getting more acrid every moment. But the trees stood green and dark; there was no actual sign of fire anywhere save that stinging smell and that far-off glowing sky.

Nevertheless she began at once to do as she had been told. Blankets first—all she had—the small rugs from the bedrooms—her thick coat and Tom's—

food—a large kettleful of strong coffee—

She dragged out a small trunk and began to pack the few things which she cared to save . . . odd, how few they were . . . she looked about the pleasant homely room and knew that she would feel no pang to see it wrapped in flame. And this knowledge lay somberly in her eyes when they raised themselves to meet the eyes of her husband who had come quietly in. For an instant they stared at each other. It was Ruth's eyes which fell first.

“Going to cut it?” asked Tom, in his ordinary voice.

He had noticed, then! But this was no time to take up the challenge. Very briefly she told him what MacIvor had said, trying to stress sufficiently, yet not too much, the personal safety guaranteed by the beach. If only she could keep him from a breakdown—before everybody. The fear of it made her fingers cold to their tips. And even in the crowd of other emotions she was faintly glad of that—if she could still dread his humiliation it meant that she cared for him still.

“It's lucky we've got the boat,” said Tom.

“Yes, we can put the children in the boats—if necessary.” Instinctively her mind expected instant agreement. It did not come. She looked up and the armful of things she was carrying fell into the trunk in a disordered pile.

“Tom!” she cried, with a very sharpness of terror . . . impossible to say more . . . impossible to put that terror into words! Once again husband and wife faced each other . . . that dreadful stirring as if from a beast in the bush was very loud in the silence! There was another sharp detonation, much nearer this time, the strange light in the room was brighter. But Ruth neither heard nor saw, her whole mind being fascinated by the look in Tom Fenwick's eyes. Her consciousness, used to words, groped after a word to fit it. But no word came. It was not what the eyes held, it was what they lacked. They lacked—they lacked—ah, that was it—they lacked shame. Even a dog's eyes know shame!

After an interval which seemed like eternity she dragged herself away from that unhuman gaze. The women from “back in” were arriving—excited, breathless women and tired children. They had to be served with coffee and milk. The cottage was instantly full of voices. Now that they had reached comparative safety the excitement of the thing was stimulating. Everyone talked at once—wondering—prophesying—a chorus of cheerful “I sez” and “he sez” rose and fell.

“Well, I'm glad they've left us one man,” said young Mrs. Brown in a high voice. She was a thin, flustered woman with three little children, like steps, and

a baby in her arms. “They’re not going to be able to stop it anyways. I told Brown they’re killing themselves for no good.”

“My man said MacIvor was making a fuss about nothing,” said another woman. “But I guess MacIvor knew his business—listen to that!”

A series of sharp explosions quieted them all and simultaneously a great light shot up into the sky.

“She’s jumping!” said somebody soberly to a suddenly silent room. “Do you know if everybody’s got in?”

“Here’s Mrs. Peck and the children now,” announced a worried voice with a sigh of relief. “Gracious! Look at ’em. It don’t seem possible that they’re all hers!”

The Peck tribe were indeed a small migration in themselves. There were twelve of them—the eldest a lanky girl of fifteen, the youngest a bouncing boy of three months.

“Land sakes!” said Mrs. Peck, setting the baby down with a bounce and using a cinder-blackened apron to smear her sweat-drenched face. “This is the worst I ever see! If that MacIvor’s fooled us, he’ll get a bit of my mind. Didn’t give us even time to bring the hens—’cept Poleon’s rooster that he wouldn’t leave. Sally—count ’em, will you?”

This numbering of the tribe was apparently a family custom. For Sally, the second girl, set about it expertly.

“There’s only ’leven, ma,” said she.

“Poly’s not here, maw,” contributed another.

“Where is he?” asked his mother severely.

But none of the eleven knew where Poly was.

“Yell at him, Sally,” directed Mrs. Peck.

Sally yelled.

“It’s that dratted rooster!” said Mrs. Peck. Her red face had whitened. “Marthar, take the baby. I’m goin’ back.”

“You can’t do it, ma,” said Selina, the eldest girl. She put down the child she had been carrying. “I’ll go.”

“No,” said Mrs. Peck, “not with that bad heart of yours, Seliner, you won’t. The doctor said—”

A terrific, whistling roar struck the words from her lips. There was a giant flash behind the barrier of trees.

“My God! She’s comin’ down the gully!” cried Mrs. Brown hysterically.

“Time we got to the beach,” said old Mrs. Eddy. “There ain’t a mite of use in stayin’ here. Mrs. Peck—how fur behind do you guess Poly will be?”

But Mrs. Peck didn’t know. None of them knew. Poly had started out with the rest of them carrying his rooster in a bag. Poly wasn’t a baby—he was six years old . . . no one had thought to take notice of Poly . . .

“I’ll just go get him,” said Mrs. Peck. The women looked at each other. Mrs. Eddy spoke. “ ’Tain’t safe, Mrs. Peck.” she said, and as she spoke she laid her hand on the other’s shoulder— “You can’t leave the baby, Mrs. Peck . . .”

“I’ll go,” said Ruth, in her pleasant voice. “I haven’t walked miles like you have. I’m quite fresh. And I know the trail—”

“Why,” broke in Mrs. Brown’s high soprano, “if we ain’t forgettin’ our one and only man! Where’s Mister Fenwick?”

There was a general murmur of relief—Mr. Fenwick, of course!

“He was takin’ a load of blankets down to the beach last time I see him,” volunteered Selina. “Oh, Mrs. Eddy—you don’t think—you don’t think—why, there wasn’t a sign, ’cept cinders, when we left home!”

“Don’t get excited, Selina.” Mrs. Eddy was still holding Mrs. Peck. “Poly can’t be fur behind. And Mister Fenwick will get him here in a jiffy. Where *is* Mr. Fenwick?”

“I seen him go out ’er the back gate,” piped up one of the little Pecks importantly. “He was goin’ awful fast.”

“There—you see,” said Mrs. Eddy, dropping Mrs. Peck, who collapsed beside her baby. “That’s the way men do. They get right on to a job while we stand talking. Mrs. Brown, I’ll take your two eldest if you can manage the baby and your bundle. Mrs. Fenwick, I guess we’ll leave this trunk for the next trip.”

Ruth Fenwick tried to shake herself out of the daze that seemed to envelope her. She tried to think. But her thoughts would not order themselves—Tom—Poly—they were depending on Tom . . . out of the back gate . . . going fast . . . where? . . . and little Poly . . . somewhere down that trail . . . alone . . .

She moved automatically toward the kitchen door . . . no need to say anything . . . if she could slip out . . .

The strong but motherly hand of old Mrs. Eddy fell upon her shoulder.

“ ’Twouldn’t do a mite of good, Mrs. Fenwick,” said the calm, old voice close to her ear. “If the little boy is safe, he’s safe anyway . . . and if not, it’s too late already . . . Mr. Fenwick can’t go far back. The smoke won’t let him. It’s only the sea breeze that keeps it back here. I’ve been through fires before.”

“I’ve got to go . . . you don’t understand,” whispered Ruth. “Tom may—oh —”

“You couldn’t help him either . . . you couldn’t do *anything*,” droned the calm voice, “You’ve just got to leave things now . . . don’t let them see you lose your grip . . . if you’ve got any courage, use it. Can you carry that coffee off the stove without spilling it?”

Ruth found herself carrying the boiling coffee as if under hypnosis. Mrs. Eddy, wise and old and noted usually for her taciturnity, kept up a steady stream of talk until they were once more engulfed in the excited groups upon the beach.

“Mr. MacIvor said we must move farther down where there are no logs,” murmured Ruth.

“Tell them so,” directed Mrs. Eddy.

“We must keep as far from the pier as we can,” said Ruth firmly. Her own commonsense told her that. “And we must get the boats together . . . there are only three of them.” Without being able to help it, she found herself taking charge. With the help of some of the older women, she marshalled everyone down to the strip of beach which the warden had chosen. Then there were the heavy rowboats to drag over the wet sand. The tide was still some distance out. They put the children into the boats and some of the littlest went to sleep.

Ruth tried to keep her eyes from the break in the trees which meant the opening of the Peck’s old trail. There was no near glow there—as yet.

But wisps of smoke were drifting out, lazily, flattening themselves into long ribbons above the trees. Everyone was remarkably quiet . . . even the children . . . Mrs. Peck, her brood around her, sat on the wet sands and rocked her baby with a crooning sound. Her smoke-reddened eyes never left that opening in the trees. Selina was sobbing openly beside her. The other children watched them with round, frightened eyes.

Then suddenly, as if lighted by some unseen hand, a tall tree, only a short half mile behind the semi-circle of the beach, burst with a smart “crack!” into waving flame.

A cry went up from the watchers on the sands . . . The fire had jumped again . . . Mrs. Brown began to laugh and sob in hysterics, but Mrs. Eddy calmly shook her into silence.

“Be quiet,” she said, “you’ve no cause to shriek, Mrs. Brown. Your man’s safe, likely, and your children too. There’ll be no time for nonsense here when the cottages go and the logs begin to catch. We’d better drag the boats farther out.”

Once again, in an awed silence, the women strained at the boats. But this time Ruth Fenwick did not help them. She sat on the glistening sand and watched the smoke above the trees. She knew that the women whispered together . . . she heard a murmur from one of the summer folk, “Yes . . . went back to get . . . no chance . . .” They were making a hero of Tom! . . . if she could only sit still and not scream . . . he was dead, she supposed, by now . . . that smoke! . . . Where would they find him? . . . Why hadn’t he hidden on the beach? . . . perhaps he had . . . would they ever find him? . . . Would nobody ever know? . . . her pride would be saved if they never knew . . . Had it really been her pride that had made the load so heavy . . . just pride . . . a little thing like that? . . . Well, she would have a lifetime to find out in . . . Little Poly! . . . dead too, by now . . . and the rooster . . . supposing Tom had really . . . would she be able to suppose that . . . in days to come? . . . Tom had been very fond of Poly . . . her roving mind saw the two of them so plainly . . . Poly’s short, brown legs across Tom’s stalwart shoulders . . . it almost seemed as if she could see them now . . . up there by the trail . . . hazy figures in a veil of smoke . . . moving slowly . . . dissolving . . . moving again . . . a mirage of the smoke . . . and with it a laughing echo . . . Tom’s well remembered, deep throated laugh . . . the sound of which had always lived so freshly in her heart . . .

“*Listen!*”

Selina Peck had sprung from her crouching position. Her shrill girl’s voice was shrieking something. Her thin arms waved.

“Oh, *maw*, listen!”

It almost seemed as if the roar of the fire listened. And in that tense second a man’s strong laugh floated lazily along the smoke-wreathed ridge.

Mrs. Peck had dropped the baby—she and Selina were racing madly for the ridge where now a burdened figure, looming largely through the smoke, was lurching downward to the beach.

“He’s got Poly! He’s got Poly!” screamed the little Pecks.

“And Poly’s got the rooster,” added one of them, with deep satisfaction.

Ruth felt the strong hands of old Mrs. Eddy help her up from the pool of water which had crept around her as she sat.

“There’s your man.” said Mrs. Eddy calmly. “I guess, maybe, he’ll be about all in.”

Afterwards, Ruth supposed she must have run with the others toward rescuer and rescued. But she did not remember doing it. She did not remember anything except looking into a smoke-blackened face with red eyes and fire-crisped hair, behind which a moon-like small boy rode pick-a-back, a limp and smothering rooster held tightly under one fat arm. She remembered someone detaching the small boy and the funny noises which the rooster made as the pressure on its wind-pipe was released. Then . . . she remembered . . . seeing Tom! Her Tom, for the first time since he had left her six years before.

“Hello, Nibbs!” said this returned Tom casually. “Mrs. Peck, better give that young man a good spanking. He’s a bad actor. Pretty nearly almost lost the whole Relief Force for the sake of loot. But I guess we’re all here now without casualties . . . where are the men making a stand, Ruth? Did MacIvor say?”

“You can’t get to them now, Mr. Fenwick,” said old Mrs. Eddy. “They’re cut off from here, but they’ll get out the other way—if they find they can’t hold her. Meantime we need to get these boats further out, soon’s we can.”

“Right!” said Tom, cheerfully. And looking at the rooster trying limply to stretch its twisted neck, he laughed again. To Ruth that laugh meant restored earth and a certain heaven. To the others it was just—a laugh. To Poleon it was a serious offence.

“Say, Mr. Tom,” said he, reprovingly, “this here rooster’s been through a ’nawful lot. I shouldn’t wonder if his next egg would be roasted!”

THE END

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.

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[End of *Flight of the Phoenix* by Isabel Ecclestone Mackay]