



Annie Henry stood at the second-floor window, making faces at the men working in the fields below. They couldn't see her, of course, but it gave her satisfaction just the same. Ten minutes earlier she had been outside watching the men from close up. She was full of curiosity about the harvest as she darted back and forth between the mowers with the big scythes and the reapers with their smaller sickles.

By then her almost brother-in-law, John Fontaine, had grown annoyed and ordered her inside the house. "Annie, you're in the way," he said. "Go inside and stay where you belong. We've got a harvest to bring in before the rain."

As she remembered his words, her face grew hot. He hadn't even trusted her to go alone to the house but had taken her by the hand and led her there, a quarter of a mile. Annie imagined that she had heard the men laugh as she was led away in disgrace.

Now she stood at the window, a small, ten-year-old, dark-haired girl silhouetted against the glass. Together with her little sister Elizabeth, she gazed out at the flurry of activity below.

It was hard for Annie to stay angry. She knew John Fontaine was right, and from the window she could see a storm coming.

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Annie called to her sister, who was four years younger. “Elizabeth, look at all those men. Doesn’t it look like they are racing the storm?” She showed off the knowledge she had recently obtained. “See the scythe? They use it to cut the wheat. See that other man behind? He bundles the wheat into sheaves.”

“Why do they work so fast?” Elizabeth asked.

“Because there’s a storm coming,” Annie replied. “If we don’t get the wheat cut and covered, it will be lost. Look at the clouds over there.” She pointed in the distance where a thin line of black clouds bordered the horizon.

Elizabeth turned back to her dolls, but Annie continued to watch out the window. On a clear day you could see the mountains near Charlottesville, more than sixty miles away. But not today. As Annie watched, the wind kicked up. In the distance, lightning darted from a cloud.

Her attention turned from the sky back to the men in the field. Other men followed the mowers, stacking the sheaves into shocks. Eight sheaves were stood on end, and two were laid across the top like a roof so that rain couldn’t damage the grain. Soon, shocks of wheat looking like little houses dotted the field. The men, aware of the advancing storm, worked faster and faster as they struggled to cut and sheave the last field.

Although each man did something different—the mower cut the grain, the gripper bundled it, and a third man tied it—they worked together as one, Annie thought. Each man knew his job and did it quickly. They dropped those sheaves and went on while other men came behind and stacked them. Up and down the field they worked until nothing but the edges were left uncut. Annie knew that poor people could come and glean at the edges of the field and get whatever grain remained.

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"They're going to finish, Elizabeth," Annie said with a laugh. "They beat the storm."

The girls looked up at the sky. The clouds were closer, but the rain had not started and the men were finished. She felt a rush of satisfaction. Her father, Patrick Henry, would be glad. As soon as he returned home to his plantation, there would be a celebration.

A flash in the distant sky caught Annie's attention. *More lightning*, she thought, *but it doesn't matter now. The harvest is done. Now all we have to do is thresh the wheat, and that can wait.* She turned her attention to the room in which she stood.

It was a long room that stretched the length of the house. Usually it served as a playroom for the younger Henry children. But on special occasions it would be transformed into a ballroom. That's where the party would be tomorrow when her father returned.

As she returned to the window, a look of concern creased her brow. In the distance she thought she saw a fine line of smoke. "Elizabeth, come here," she ordered.

Elizabeth rushed to the window. "Do you see anything out there?" Annie asked as she pointed.

"What do you mean?" Elizabeth responded, peering out the window.

"Do you see smoke?" Annie asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't see it," she said, and went back to her dolls.

But Annie stayed at the window. She wasn't sure she had seen anything. Now it just looked like clouds.

Another bolt of lightning darted down from the clouds, and she thought she saw another stream of smoke. But when she looked again, what she had thought was smoke had blended so perfectly with the storm clouds that she wasn't sure.

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“What if I go down there and tell them there’s a fire, and I’m wrong?” she wondered out loud. “John Fontaine would be furious.”

Annie waited with indecision. The wind picked up. The branch of a walnut tree scraped the window. She could hear the heavy limbs moan with the wind. A third bolt of lightning lit up the sky, and Annie saw more smoke.

“I know it’s fire,” she said to Elizabeth. “I’ve got to warn them. It has been so hot and dry this summer, the stubble in the fields could easily catch on fire.”

Elizabeth joined Annie once more at the window. “Wouldn’t they smell it?” her little sister asked.

Annie shook her head. “I think it’s still too far away.”

She tugged at the heavy window but it wouldn’t budge. “Help me open this window,” Annie said impatiently.

The two small girls struggled with the window but could only move it an inch. Annie knew it was useless to pound on the glass. The men were too far away to hear.

“I’ll go down and warn them,” Annie told Elizabeth. “Stay here and watch the fields. Surely you see the smoke now.”

Elizabeth nodded. There were three distinct trails of black smoke rising to meet the lighter gray storm clouds.

“You have to let us know if the smoke is coming closer,” Annie said. “We won’t be able to see it from the ground. You’ll have to signal.” Looking around for something to use as a flag, she finally grabbed the red sash from her dress. “If the fire comes closer to the wheat fields, you must hang this sash out the window. I’ll watch for the sign, and I’ll be able to tell the men.” Annie grabbed her sister by the shoulders and said fiercely, “You have to pay attention, Elizabeth. It’s important. Can you do it?”

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Elizabeth nodded. Her eyes were wide as she watched the little trails of smoke get bigger and begin to merge as the fire spread. Annie ran down the stairs and out the door. The wind caught up her long skirts and twisted them about her legs, but she didn't stop. She yelled as she ran, but the men were still too far away to hear. Her side ached, but she kept going. Finally, breathless, she reached the harvesters, grabbed the arm of the closest man, and cried, "Fire!" while pointing across the fields.

The reaction was immediate. Men jumped up from the ground where they had been drinking water and eating cornbread. Annie watched John Fontaine bark orders. Several men ran to the barn for horses. Minutes later a wagon hooked to a team of oxen appeared, loaded with shovels, four large water barrels, and leather buckets. A few men climbed on while others had already started running across the field. John Fontaine grabbed one of the waiting horses and galloped off in the direction of the fire.

No one paid any attention to Annie, who suddenly remembered Elizabeth waiting at the window. Looking over, she saw the red sash hanging out. "The fire is coming this way," she yelled fearfully. "My sister is watching it from the window."

A farmer shouted the news to the men on the hay wagon. In the confusion, no one noticed Annie climb onto the wagon. She could smell the smoke now. Little pieces of ash floated from the sky as the wind gusted. "Oh, Lord," she prayed, "let it rain now. Let it rain."

It was hard traveling across the field because of all the ridges and furrows. Up a ridge the wagon would go, then down a furrow, until Annie felt she would get sick to her stomach. When the wagon finally found a road through the field, travel was easier. But it still took a long time for the wagon to get out to the fire.

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The closer the wagon came, the hotter the air grew. Annie found it hard to breathe. Her eyes watered and her throat burned. She could see orange flames blazing up from the dry stubble and wheat shocks. The fire didn't care whether it destroyed the wheat or the chaff. All of it was burning.

Annie shielded her face with the wide sleeve of her dress. The wagon stopped, and the men jumped out, joining the men who were already in the fields. They were beating the flames in a fruitless attempt to put them out. The men grabbed shovels from the wagon and began digging a trench to contain the fire. But the wind was an enemy. Gusts easily carried the burning wheat across the trenches like little torches that sent the dry stubble up in flames.

The men had to retreat before the blazing fire. Several moved the wagon back to get it out of danger. They feared the fire would surround them, leaving them no way of escape.

Others formed a bucket brigade to carry the water from the barrels on the wagon to the fire. One man filled the bucket and passed it down the chain until the man on the end emptied it. Then the empty buckets were passed back. Back and forth went the buckets until the water from the first barrel was all gone.

As they dampened the blaze in one place, it sprang up somewhere else, but the men kept working. Acrid smoke filled the air, making Annie cough until she felt she would faint. A farmer shoved a wet rag at her and told her to tie it across her mouth. Then he handed her a bucket and told her to work.

Annie worked side by side with the men until she was worn out. Then she worked some more. When the rag dried out, she dipped it in the water and tied it back on. Still she labored.

Finally, they had used all the water in all the barrels. They had dug the trenches. There was nothing more to do. And the

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fire still burned. All around, as far as Annie could see, wheat shocks had burned to ashes. She felt an overwhelming sadness. They had tried desperately to save the harvest, and they hadn't been able to do it.

A bolt of lightning, followed immediately by a clap of thunder, lit up the field. More lightning meant more fire, but Annie was too tired to care. She walked sadly to the wagon where the men were wearily taking off their gloves. No one spoke a word. Just then she felt something that gave her a bit of hope. At first Annie wasn't sure. Maybe it was just a splash from a water bucket or a piece of ash. But then, as if heaven had opened, the rain began to fall. It came in a downpour, and the raging fires quickly died out.

A cry went up from the farmers. It sounded unlike any cry Annie had ever heard: a crazy, yelping, howling cry of joy—and Annie found herself yelping along with the men.

John Fontaine did not join the others in their celebration. Annie glanced at him, a lone figure with his head bowed and his knees on the ground, giving thanks to God. Then he roused himself and directed the men. Since the rain was quickly turning the field into mud, John ordered several men to unhitch the oxen and walk them back to the barn.

As he looked around, he noticed Annie for the first time. "How did you get out here?" he demanded. But before she could speak, he went on, "We'll talk later. You ride back with me. Patsy will be worried sick."

John helped Annie onto the horse, then swung up behind her. Before they rode off, he turned to the wet and tired men in the fields. "Thank you," he said to them. "Your hard work helped save the wheat."

Annie's big sister Patsy was waiting on the steps when they rode up. She rushed down the steps and looked anxiously from

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John to Annie. "Are you hurt? Annie, what happened to you? What about Father's wheat?" The questions tumbled out so fast that neither John nor Annie had time to answer.

John smiled and took Patsy's hand. "We're all fine. We probably lost a field. I'll know better tomorrow. But thank God for Annie's warning. We were able to slow down the spread of the fire until the rain came."

The three stood under the porch roof for a minute, thinking about the near disaster. Then Patsy said, "You're soaked, Annie. And you're covered with soot. Go inside."

After Annie ran inside the house, Patsy turned to John. "What were you thinking, to let a little girl go out to fight a fire?" Patsy's voice broke.

"I'm sorry, Patsy. It was my fault. I didn't see her get on the wagon. But God preserved her."

She nodded. "I know I shouldn't worry so much, John. But I feel so responsible. With Mama ill and Father away, the burden falls on me. Annie takes so many unnecessary risks. Father must do something."

"He will, Patsy. But let your father do it. She needs a mother's gentle touch—and her mother can't give it."