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The Fire at Ross's Farm

Henry Lawson

The squatter saw his pastures wide
Decrease, as one by one
The farmers moving to the west
Selected on his run;
Selectors took the water up
And all the black soil round;
The best grass-land the squatter had
Was spoilt by Ross's Ground.

Now many schemes to shift old Ross
Had racked the squatter's brains,
But Sandy had the stubborn blood
Of Scotland in his veins;
He held the land and fenced it in,
He cleared and ploughed the soil,
And year by year a richer crop
Repaid him for his toil.

Between the homes for many years
The devil left his tracks:
The squatter pounded Ross's stock,
And Sandy pounded Black's.
A well upon the lower run
Was filled with earth and logs,
And Black laid baits about the farm
To poison Ross's dogs.

It was, indeed, a deadly feud
Of class and creed and race;
But, yet, there was a Romeo
And a Juliet in the case;
And more than once across the flats,
Beneath the Southern Cross,
Young Robert Black was seen to ride
With pretty Jenny Ross.

One Christmas time, when months of drought

Had parched the western creeks,
The bush-fires started in the north
And travelled south for weeks.
At night along the river-side
The scene was grand and strange —
The hill-fires looked like lighted streets
Of cities in the range.

The cattle-tracks between the trees
Were like long dusky aisles,
And on a sudden breeze the fire
Would sweep along for miles;
Like sounds of distant musketry
It crackled through the brakes,
And o'er the flat of silver grass
It hissed like angry snakes.

It leapt across the flowing streams
And raced o'er pastures broad;
It climbed the trees and lit the boughs
And through the scrubs it roared.
The bees fell stifled in the smoke
Or perished in their hives,
And with the stock the kangaroos
Went flying for their lives.



The sun had set on Christmas Eve,
When, through the scrub-lands wide,
Young Robert Black came riding home
As only natives ride.
He galloped to the homestead door

And gave the first alarm:
'The fire is past the granite spur,
And close to Ross's farm.'

'Now, father, send the men at once,
They won't be wanted here;
Poor Ross's wheat is all he has
To pull him through the year.'
'Then let it burn,' the squatter said;
'I'd like to see it done —
I'd bless the fire if it would clear
Selectors from the run.

'Go if you will,' the squatter said,
'You shall not take the men —
Go out and join your precious friends,
And don't come here again.'
'I won't come back,' young Robert cried,
And, reckless in his ire,
He sharply turned his horse's head
And galloped towards the fire.

And there, for three long weary hours,
Half-blind with smoke and heat,
Old Ross and Robert fought the flames
That neared the ripened wheat.
The farmer's hand was nerved by fears
Of danger and of loss;
And Robert fought the stubborn foe
For the love of Jenny Ross.

But serpent-like the curves and lines
Slipped past them, and between,
Until they reached the bound'ry where
The old coach-road had been.
'The track is now our only hope,
There we must stand,' cried Ross,
'For nought on earth can stop the fire
If once it gets across.'

Then came a cruel gust of wind,
And, with a fiendish rush,
The flames leapt o'er the narrow path
And lit the fence of brush.
'The crop must burn!' the farmer cried,

'We cannot save it now,'
And down upon the blackened ground
He dashed the ragged bough.

But wildly, in a rush of hope,
His heart began to beat,
For o'er the crackling fire he heard
The sound of horses' feet.
'Here's help at last,' young Robert cried,
And even as he spoke
The squatter with a dozen men
Came racing through the smoke.

Down on the ground the stockmen jumped
And bared each brawny arm,
They tore green branches from the trees
And fought for Ross's farm;
And when before the gallant band
The beaten flames gave way,
Two grimy hands in friendship joined —
And it was Christmas Day.

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