SPANISH PEAK: A STORY: BY CHARLES HOWARD SHINN

THE Forest Supervisor dismounted and let his tired horse wander at will. He himself sat under a pine, looking over the tumbled wilderness lying north, south and west of the crags which uplifted on their mighty shoulders the granite dome of Spanish Peak so that it was a humble companion of the still more majestic mountains of the Main Divide—Conness, Hilgard, Lyell and the rest. From Spanish Peak one could look out upon more than a million forest acres.

Now and then, this loneliness was food for the Supervisor's very soul; he, too, had troubles and misunderstandings, as all others have, but after continual striving he had learned that sometimes one must lie still and listen.

After a while he lifted his head, looking to see where his horse had gone, and just then the horse, which had found a green half-rod by a trickle of water from the snows, led by that secret bond of good feeling that man and beast have felt at times these thousands of years, looked over toward him, listening to know if he were called upon, then turned back to his grass-blades.

Slowly, at last, the new-hearted Supervisor came back to his daily tasks. He saw over all the wild regions across which he was gazing, the onward course which material development must soon, very soon, pursue.

Civilization would take strong hold, would run out its living tentacles, and fill the mountains with new industries and with busy and thriving people. He saw in his thoughts the ancient shakemakers, with worn-out, useless froses, passing into oblivion as single mills came in to work up the waste. He heard the half-humorous turbulence of the cowboys leaving their ranges at last, in coming years, to thousands of tourists, whose tents and cabins crowded the mountain meadows of the High Sierras.

"If I told aloud such thoughts as these," he said again to himself, in that out-world sweetness and greatness by the ferns and blue gentians, on the rocks golden with pine pollen, "I should be in trouble at once, for someone to whom no visions ever whisper secrets of the years to come might hear of it and write me down somewhere in official files, not in anger but in stern pity, as a mere dreamer!"

Rested and renewed, he turned back to well-broken trails and the home cabin, still bending his mind to the problem of the Spanish Peak Lookout for the coming summer. Dead was the old mountain-man who had for years kept this lonely peak each sum-
mer in as quiet self-forgetfulness and courage as ever inspired a weather-beaten old sailor watching the lighted lamp of his beacon high set above a rockbound coast.

When he died, alone, in his tent on Spanish Peak, and was laid to rest in a granite crevice of that stern old mountain, one ranger said: "For an old broken-down sheep herder, he was jest as fair-minded and honest as any man I ever knew. And he was peart as a robin, too."

The Supervisor, listening, replied with especial precision, using the official title: "Forest Guard Blaize was American born, of Huguenot stock on his father's side. Like John Muir he herded sheep a while in these mountains. Unlike Muir, who is the great prose poet of California, he had not one scintilla of ability to express himself, excepting to a very few people, at rare intervals. But he did his work here so well that the thought of him will make better men of the rest of us. I don't know where or when we can find anyone to take his place."

There the vivid and flashing little old man had lived till the end came, summering on his peak, wintering in his cabin somewhere among the yellow pines, and creating all about him his own atmosphere of simple and effective loyalty to the Forest Service. Twice a month, while he was keeping the outlook, Blaize had clambered cheerfully down from his peak to where some passing ranger had left his mail, and whatever supplies he needed. The rangers were busy, and had not much in common with the mountain dweller; when they noticed him coming down, they waved a careless hand, shouted a word of cheer and rode on their ways; but more often he had no glimpse of their passing.

At morning, and at night, he rang his telephone call for the main office, heard friendly questions, sent back his quiet replies, had his little requirements noted.

Blaize was the lone and responsible fire-guard of the whole vast region beneath his peak, searching it from daylight till dark with his marvelous eyes and his powerful binoculars. When a fire broke out anywhere, he was at once in closest relation to the work; he talked to the Office and to the rangers, reporting swift-changing conditions, telling them how best to reach the battle-ground, where to concentrate strength, and when to call up all the reserves. In crises his messages grew so terse, so strong, so full of leadership that they were obeyed as orders from a commander-in-chief.

How it relieved the anxious office when old Blaize at last rang up: "Only dead smoke now; the boys have tied their fire-lines together, this time for keeps!"
And now the solemn forest-keeping outlook was empty and masterless; soon it would need another fire-watcher, and who should be sent? Another accidental find among the old-time mountain men, as Blaize had been? Plenty of fellows had come to the Supervisor and had asked for the chance—it seemed an easy place in which a broken-down old man could earn his living, much better than the poorhouse, or with struggling relatives down in the hot Valley. But not one who had offered himself was fit for the exacting work required.

It began to look as if the time had come when a young ranger must be sent to Spanish Peak, one who knew something of the work of other rangers and who could be kept on in winter, not cast loose as a mere summer guard was. "We must take a step forward in this matter, and make the fire outlooks more important every year," thought the Supervisor, still considering the available men. But who, on the whole force, would most completely rise to the situation? While not a man on the force felt exactly willing to try the job, they knew very well that some one of them might be ordered there any day. "It was fierce," said tall young Runyon. "No dances, nobody to talk to, nothing but mice and lizards."

Hen Rivas spoke right out on the matter. He was a slender and brisk little ranger whose Spanish-American parentage had given him soft and mellow tones behind which he concealed an Irish wit, and now and then something not distantly related to veiled insolence.

Jauntily Rivas remarked to the Supervisor, as they rode through the woods: "All the boys is anxious to go to Spanish Peak this summer. If you're thinking of sending me, Mr. Black, I'll resign the chance in favor of someone else."

"No one could possibly think of sending you there, Rivas," the Supervisor replied, with a chill finality which forbade further discussion, then or afterward.

One of the most faithful of district men began to be troubled by the situation as he felt it looming up ahead of the Forest. The Supervisor had once told the boys, as he remembered, that a fire outlook demanded a tremendous amount of courage, knowledge and loyalty to the Service. Then the Supervisor would want to pick out one of the very best of the men for Spanish Peak. And what first-class man could be spared from the work, anyhow, while the timber sales were going on, and through the long, hard fire season? Not Little Jo, or Ramsden, or gray-headed old Wilson, or Maine-woods Jack, or that tall red-headed Scotsman from Tuolume.
THE there the matter rested, till one day it happened that the Supervisor again climbed Spanish Peak; with him, this time, rode a young ranger. Tall, eager, sinewy, built for battle, with an excellent education and with budding capacities for speech and writing in years to come, this ranger had but lately come to California, and to the Forest. No one else had given much thought to the dark-eyed young Avery from Virginia, but for weeks the Supervisor had been sinking shafts and running drifts into him.

"I have read all those books, Mr. Black," he said: "Muir's mountaineering, Clarence King's and Stewart Edward White's, and the Whitney reports, and what the Workmans have done in the Himalayas. You have been lending me mountain books these six months, ever since I came up here,—and—how much more the mountains are than the ocean! How did these men come to understand the mountains so well? We ride through them, but we miss something—I don't know what. It would be worth a lifetime to get the secret."

"Avery," said the Supervisor then, "I can tell you how to learn what Muir knows without having to winter in a cleft of the Sierra rocks as Tom East once did. Will you pay the price? If so, you will have got something better than the treasures of a sunken gal- leon. I can show you how to get a poise, a strength, and an understanding of the mountains in one short summer that otherwise will hardly come to you in ten ordinary years. Will you try the cut-off trail, Avery, or will you stick to the beaten highway?"

The young man's soul flashed up into speech. "I do not exactly know what you mean," he answered, "but it seems to me that you are thinking of this outlook. It is a wonderful place, but why, why do you think of sending me here? Every other ranger is trembling in his boots lest be may be chosen."

"Is it a dreadful place, Avery?" said the Supervisor. "It seems to me like the very gate of heaven, and perhaps I can tell you why, later. But," he added, "I could not be hired to send any human being up here against his willing choice. If you come, Avery, it must be for the reasons that you wish it, and that I believe it best for the Forest."

Then the Supervisor sat down on Spanish Peak, by the weather- worn telephone shelter, with its newly repaired wires swinging outward and downward, held to the rock by lead pins. He showed Avery the whole vast expanse of forest-lands, from the greater bat- tlements of the Sierra, past canyons and foothills to where the mists of the Valley hung above miles of vineyards. Inch by inch he unfolded to the young man the history, geology, botany, topography
of this wonderful domain. There, Mount Whitney loomed up, a white triangle in the southeast; there the circle of extinct volcanoes that form the Minarets guard their mines of iron and copper. Very dark were the forests; very light and clear the domes and precipices of glistening granite; very deep the gorges through which wild rivers hastened on their way. Slowly, carefully, skillfully he unrolled it, like a new map, before the young ranger, marked it with names, gave it life of its own, linked it with science, traditions and forest-needs. "This," he closed, "is the land which belongs to Spanish Peak."

"It is more wonderful than I dreamed of," said Avery. "Almost I cease to envy the Workmans on those Mustagh glaciers."

"Avery," said the Supervisor at last, "it is like this: Our poor dead mountaineer who kept this outlook so long, was one who had conquered all the lesser passions, and had come into his own freedom of soul. You have done enough thinking to guess, dimly, what that may mean.

"I who tell you this," continued the quiet Supervisor, "knew Blaize intimately. Possibly I was his closest friend—next to these mountains. I speak of these things now to you, not to be told to others. He not only loved and knew these Sierras, in all their heights and canyons, but they so companioned him that he was never lonely up here, or anywhere else on earth.

"Often he sat on these rocks for half the night, a silent, a happy and a clear-brained man. You see, Avery, heaven had hidden somewhere within Blaize the creative imagination which so many otherwise useful men are sorrowfully without, but, denying him any sort of commensurate expression, had very slowly and painfully brought him home at last to this tremendous relationship with the mountains.

"None of us loved these Forests more than Blaize did," continued the Supervisor. "Indeed, he first suggested this outlook. We looked it over together; then he took up the work, simply to help us, as best he could, in fighting fires. He was very saving, and lived all winter on what he laid by in summer; but once, when our funds were low and the question of abandoning this outlook came up, he told me: ‘I can live on fifteen dollars a month, and find something else to do next winter. Pay me that, and keep the old lookout going, for it's going to be a bad fire year.’ Of course, I managed somehow without that, but it warmed my heart. That was our own old Blaize of Spanish Peak.

"I came to know him a little better each fire season," again said the Supervisor. "After I felt his entire freedom from cares,
doubts, pains, angers and loneliness, I marveled more and more that he should still seem so near to our daily toil. But somehow he kept himself a living part of the Forest. I think that happened because of his real, though hidden, affection for men, his essential goodness, and his profound sense of right and wrong. He had moun-
taineered without human companionship for months, in fellowship with his Sierras, and they, his real intimates, had only brightened his ways of dealing with others when he came down where the rest of us lived.

"After I knew Blaize better, we sometimes talked over the tele-
phone. He unconsciously taught me more than I can ever tell any-
one. You know he broke down suddenly one night, and called me up. I started a ranger at once from the nearest camp.

"Then Blaize grew worse, and talked with me over the line, across that hundred miles of space, dropping his failing sentences into my ear, while that ranger from Dinkey was pushing on toward Spanish Peak.

"Just as sure of where he was going, and as contented over it, as any saint in the calendar, was Blaize that night. What our book-
ignorant fire-outlook man said over the line, not merely took away from me all sense that his death up there was strange, lonely or terrible—it somehow made all forms of death seem very easy to meet, very simple, friendly, natural. After a little he was not, for Nature took him to herself."

Avery’s eyes lit up. "I can understand something of that, Mr. Black,” he answered. "Lots of people said it was a frightful thing for him to die up there alone, but you know Maine-woods Jack was the one who rode up from Dinkey. He reached the tent just at sunrise, about three hours after Blaize probably passed away. Jack said it seemed to him like going into a church, and that there was a smile like a baby’s on the old man’s face. He was all clean and ready—not huddled up at all—and he had thrown back the tent-flap, so that the morning shone in. Besides, one of the last things that Blaize had done, as Jack thought, was to carry out his sugar-box and open it, so that the wild creatures could have a feast."

"Yes, I know that too," said the Supervisor.

"But now, Avery," he went on, "let us come at once to the main point. You have ability and imagination. You can conquer yourself, and the lonesomeness here; out of it you alone of the thirty rangers of this Forest can get the John Muir kind of knowl-
edge.

"But you will be sent here—if at all—for stern, untiring duty to the Forest. You must be fire-outlook man,—first, last and always.
SPANISH PEAK: A STORY

You will have instruments, and maps, and a mountaineer who knows every peak will stay here a fortnight. Then, if you choose, you shall try it, not to moon here, not to dream here, not to write poems here upon solitude, but to begin to live as Nature’s own friend and master.”

“I will, I will, Mr. Black,” cried Avery, clasping the hand of the elder man.

“Then come with me, Avery,” said the Supervisor. From the crest of Spanish Peak, down a smooth, narrow ravine, that dropped off into Kings River Canyon, they worked very carefully to a triangular shelf which ages before had been split across. Between the halves, in a deep crevice out of sight, all that was mortal of Forest Guard Blaize had been laid to rest in a rude coffin.

Standing on this shelf they looked down five thousand feet or more, and saw the sparkle of water-falls of streams that fell into the hidden depths of Kings River gorges. It did not seem to them as if such an exquisite and wonderful peacefulness, such a glory of perfect silence, had ever before gathered about one lonely mountaineer’s grave. His name was cut in the glacier-polished granite and there the two men sat, thinking the same thought—how little a thing it is to die, and how great a thing it is to put one’s very best into one’s work, up to the last minute.

“Beats all,” said one of the rangers, as the fire-season ended, “how much use that Spanish Peak outlook has been. If a greenhorn like Avery can go into a country he doesn’t know anything about, and get his points so as to be able to locate all his fires, down to the quarter-section, as Avery sure did, I guess that settles it.”

“Settles what?” asked the Supervisor, who had turned up in time to hear this.

“Why, that—well, sir—that you might have sent anybody up there, just the same. Them fire-peaks ain’t so difficult to run.”

“Well, Robinson, please wait till Avery gets in, and we will hear what he has to say about Spanish Peak.”

Instigated by the Supervisor, Avery appeared before a ranger meeting, armed with a map which showed in white, shades of gray and black, the areas within a hundred miles of the summit of Spanish Peak. The white spaces were where the outlook had full sweep to the surface of the ground. The grays showed where he could discover a fire only after smoke had risen. The black areas were hidden by other mountains, or were so deep in canyons that the outlook was useless.

Then Avery described his life, his work, his outdoor studies, his adventures during those four months. To the astonishment of
everyone, except the Supervisor and old Ranger Willson, he ended with: "And I want to go up there again. It's altogether the best job on this Forest."

"I s'pose you read a lot, and so slammed it through somehow, after all," said low-voiced Rivas.

"Why, no," said Avery. "How could a fellow get to understand that big country if he wasted any of his daylight? I carried up a pack of cards, and pencils and notebooks and some of our regular camp-fire novels. By George! I found so much to think about, so much to look at, so many new things to do, that I never took the cards out of their box. I kept up my diary, and wrote letters home, but all the reading I did was for an hour before I went to sleep. And the trashy novels were pretty thin diet, away up there.

"Then, fellows, one day when I went down to the Spanish Peak mail box, I found that someone had left me several of Shakespeare's plays, such as 'The Tempest,' and some other books which exactly fitted into that hour at night.

"No, I am not exactly sure where they came from, but I made a rough guess. Happened my name was written in them, too."

Later, when he sat with the Supervisor, Avery said: "I tell you, Mr. Black, when one lives up there, everything in the whole big Universe comes around and asks you a question, and then comes back later to see what you think about it. You really have to dig up some sort of a reply. I half-believe that Prospero kept a fire-outlook while he was learning his spells. That, Mr. Black, was the best thing you gave me this summer."

"No," said the Supervisor. "The best thing was the chance to begin to live on Spanish Peak."