

MACS ARE ROLLING

The roar of a passing truck awakened Lester. That was the worst of a bed on the veranda. You couldn't sleep late, even on Saturday morning. A second truck went by, and Lester realized what it meant. He sprang out of bed. "Macs are rolling," he thought, and dashed into the house to dress.

McIntosh Reds, the big juicy apples that have made the Okanagan Valley famous, were ripe and ready for shipment. Lester's father had promised to take the family to a show on Saturday evening, if the Macs in the home orchard were picked by four o'clock. They must be ready to haul to the packing house by then.

"Where's everybody?" Lester asked his mother a few minutes later, in the sunny kitchen. Dressed in overalls, she was tying a yellow kerchief over her brown curls, to keep them from catching in apple tree branches.

"Nancy has gone to the packing house, Jill is picking, and Dad has started hauling Major Paton's Macs to the packing house. He had the truck serviced and bought a drum of gas. It took our last cent, so I hope Major Paton will pay him to-day. Are you ready to work?"

"I'll be out in a few minutes." Lester served himself a bowlful of porridge from the double boiler at the back of the stove.

"I'm going out to pick now," his mother said. "You'll find bacon and toast in the warming oven. Be sure to put the porridge pot to soak."

When he had eaten his breakfast, Lester wriggled his head and arms into the straps of a picking-bag and went out to the orchard. Heads in red and blue kerchiefs looked like bright birds among the dark green leaves of the apple trees. The clatter of tongues made it sound as if a flock of parrots were picking the apples. Grace and Tom Wilson, whose family lived on the next ranch, were helping.

Under the load of deep crimson apples the boughs bent till many of them touched the ground. Lester picked those he could reach from the ground; then he set up a ladder. He was up the ladder among the branches before he remembered that he had not put the porridge pot to soak.

"Oh, dear!" he muttered, "I can't go back now."

Lester was a quick picker and knew just the twist that brings an apple off without breaking the fruit spur. He had long hands for a boy of eleven and could pick with both at once, holding three apples in each hand. He was careful, too, and emptied his bag into the orchard box so gently that the apples were not bruised.

Piles of orchard boxes were lying under each tree. Lester wondered how many Jill had filled. He didn't



want his sister to beat him in the day's picking, even though she was two years older.

"How many boxes have you picked, Jill?" he called out.

"Six."

"I'll be ahead of you by noon."

Jill laughed. "You'll have to hurry then, Les. I have a good start."

Lester worked fast. He was thinking that when Dad had finished hauling Major Paton's Macs, he would come to pick up the boxes from the home ranch. That would give Lester a chance for a ride to the packing house, if his job were finished.

The sky seen through the leaves was a deep, wonderful blue. The sun filled the orchard with drowsy warmth, and bees were humming. The pickers laughed and talked, sang and whistled, while truckload after truckload from other orchards roared past on the dusty road.

Lester's mother and Jill were picking the next tree, and, beyond that, Grace and Tom Wilson were working. Lester did a little rough figuring. There were eight trees of Macs that would yield an average of thirty boxes each. That made two hundred and forty boxes to be picked by five pickers.

"That's easy," he thought. "We'll be finished by two o'clock."

He worked faster yet, because he wanted to catch up with Jill and beat her. Besides, Dad gave him five cents for every box he picked, and he was saving to buy a camera. He wished Dad had more trees of Macs, because they were easy to pick and brought a good price. Most of the trees in the orchard were later apples and not so popular. That was one reason why Dad had to haul apples for other groves.

"Hello there, Jill," Lester called out. "How many boxes have you picked now?"

"Eighteen."

"I'm catching up with you. You were six ahead of me, but now you are only four ahead."

"You won't be even by noon, just the same."

At his sister's challenge, Lester put on a spurt. He went quickly down the ladder with a full bag, opened the flap at the bottom and let the apples roll into an empty box. They made so much noise that he glanced around

uneasily. His mother looked down from the top of a ladder.

"Lester!" she cautioned. "Please be more careful how you empty your bag. Macs bruise so easily. Sometimes a bruise won't show for weeks and then a brown spot will appear under the skin."

"I'll be careful, Mother," Lester promised, as he hurried up the ladder again. He came to a bough on which the apples were extra large, so that he was able to fill his bag quickly.

"I must have thinned this tree," he thought.

In the early summer, Jill and he had helped to pick off the young apples. They left only one on a fruit spur, or none, spacing the small, green apples four inches apart. This was to allow the remaining apples to grow large and well-rounded. Now, he was reaping the benefit of that work.

"Oh, boy," he thought, "I'll soon catch up with Jill."

Tom Wilson came with the tallest ladder to pick the high top branches that could not be reached by the ordinary ladders. It was heavy, and needed a strong man to handle it.

"I could pick the tops by climbing," Lester thought, "but it would be slow work."

At half past eleven, Mother went to the house to heat some soup. At noon she rang a gong. The welcome

sound brought the pickers hurrying down from their ladders. Just then a truck drove up to the gate and the driver called out, "Is Tom Wilson there?"

"I'm here," Tom replied.

"Your father sent you a message. He needs you to drive the truck this afternoon."

"All right," Tom agreed, taking off his picking-bag. "I'll go right home." He started toward the gate.

Lester ran after him. "Tom, how can we pick the tops if you go? I can't carry that ladder."

"Sorry," Tom said. "You'll have to manage some way. If Dad needs me, I have to go."

Lester saw the prospect of a trip to town and a show becoming suddenly dim. He turned to meet Jill and Grace Wilson.

"I don't see how we can do it," he said. "How many boxes have you picked, Jill?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Now that Tom's gone, we'll have a hard job to pick the Macs by four o'clock."

"We'll have a quick lunch and go back," Jill said.

Grace had brought her own sandwiches, but Mother insisted that she should have a bowl of vegetable soup as well. Mother looked worried when she heard that Tom had gone home.

"Who will pick the tops?" she asked.

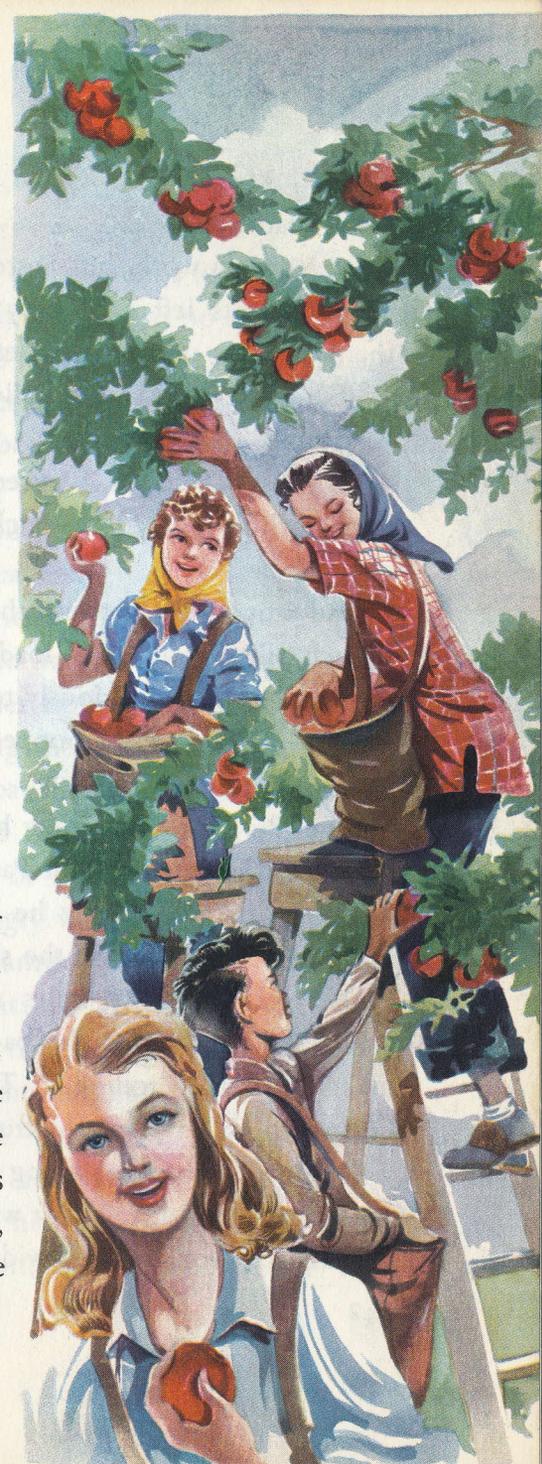
"I'll have to climb and bend the tops over so that one of you can pick them," Lester said. "I won't be able to race you, Jill, but that doesn't matter so much as having the picking done by four o'clock."

As soon as they had eaten their lunch, they hurried back to the orchard. Lester tried to use the topping ladder, but it was too heavy, even when his mother helped him.

"I'll have to climb," he decided.

"Do be careful," his mother begged. "I'm so afraid you will fall."

But Lester was not afraid, as he stepped lightly from one strong limb to another. He bent the long top branches over, and Jill, on a ladder, could reach to pick off the



apples. Mother and Grace Wilson went on with the lower branches.

It was slow work, but Lester and Jill kept on until tree after tree was left with only dark green leaves. Finally there was just one tree top left to pick.

"Oh, hurry!" Mother called up to them. "It's half past three."

"Dad isn't here yet," Lester answered, "and it will take him a while to load the picked boxes. Oh! There he comes now."

Dad drove along between the rows of trees. He stopped at each pile of boxes and loaded them on the truck, while the pickers worked furiously to finish. When the last box was in, Jill and Lester hopped into the cab of the truck beside their father.

"We did it!" Jill cried happily, and then, after a moment, "Dad, did Major Paton pay you?"

"Yes, I'm glad to say he did," Dad replied. "If we hurry, we can still go to the show."

Dad drove at fifty miles an hour along the straight stretch on the way to the packing house, for the apples must be started "rolling." That is what they say in the Okanagan Valley when the fruit cars move on the railroad.

While Dad was unloading the forty-pound boxes, Jill and Lester stood at the door watching the four big grading machines at work. Their wide belts moved slowly along,

with lines of marching apples which rolled into bins, each apple separated with others its own size.

The packers were too busy to look up or to notice them, and the graders made so much noise it was no use to speak. The packers' hands moved so fast they were a blur, as they wrapped each apple in paper with one skilful twist and packed it in order in the box. Rustlers were hurrying about with wheeled carriers, taking packed boxes to the nailers. Then the nailers put the lids on and brought fresh orchard boxes to the graders.

The only person who noticed Jill and Lester was their older sister Nancy, who spared time for a smile and a quick wave. She was sorting apples from orchard boxes to the belt of the grader and culling those with blemishes.

As soon as Dad had unloaded, they drove home. Jill went in to help Mother, and Lester ran to the wood pile. Mother would need plenty of kindling and firewood to cook a good dinner for hungry workers. When he came into the kitchen with an armful of wood, his mother greeted him with a complaint.

"Lester, you didn't soak the porridge pot and now I can't start the porridge for the morning."

"Oh, dear!" Lester wailed. "I forgot. I meant to do it at noon. I'll scrub it out now, Mother."

He started to work with hot water, scouring powder, and a brush. In a moment, he let out another wail.



"I forgot my chickens, too. They haven't been fed yet. I'll have to get along without dinner if I want to go to the show."

Jill came to his rescue. "I'll feed your chickens, Les. And if the porridge pot is not finished when I come in, I'll take a turn, to let you wash and change."

Lester reflected that sisters were not so bad after all, as he put more energy into his scrubbing. How that oatmeal did stick! "It would make grand glue," he muttered.

Dinner was on the table, and still Lester had not won the battle with the porridge pot.

"Sorry, Mother. I'm afraid I won't have time to eat dinner." He looked very sad and hungry.

"Come along, Les," Jill laughed. "I'll finish that old double boiler for you after dinner."

Lester came gratefully. Corn on the cob, sausages with potatoes and squash, tomatoes ripe from the vine, home-canned peaches and bran muffins made him feel like a new boy. Now he was ready for the evening's fun.

"Go and dress, Les," Jill said, as she cleared the table, "and I'll finish the porridge pot."

Everyone rushed around, doing his own job as fast as possible. By the time Dad drove the truck up to the door, dishes were washed and put away in the glass cupboard, the porridge pot shone, and the family looked trim in town-going clothes. Mother sat in the cab with Dad; and Jill, Lester, and Nancy had a rug and cushions in the back of the truck.

Town was gay and lively with cars parked all along the main street, while growers, pickers, and packers enjoyed their Saturday evening. After the show, everyone flocked to the ice cream parlour; and since they all knew one another, it was like a large party!

"I brought some apples," Mother said, as they climbed into the truck to drive home. "Anybody want one?"

There was a reaching out of eager hands for the first Macs of the season, as they jolted happily over the wash-board road. Under a yellow moon in the sage-brush scented air, they munched with full enjoyment the crimson apples that spurted delicious juice at every bite.

Life is merry, indeed, in the Okanagan Valley when Macs are rolling.

—Helen Dickson