



A Forest on Fire

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FROM THE VICISSITUDE OF SEASON WHICH takes place in the temperate clime we inhabit, the inhabitants can form but a very faint idea of many of the miseries experienced by settlers in less favoured lands. Among others the frequent fires which take place in the forests, and which, sweeping like a flash of lightning or with the effect of a tornado, devastate the entire country for miles around. The following awful description of one of these “forest fires” we copy from that justly celebrated work relative to the Birds of the United States of America, from which our readers will remember we some weeks since quoted the interesting account of the “Habits of the Turkey.” M. Audubon relates it as from the mouth of an individual who witnessed it, and thus described its effects:



About twenty-five years ago, the larch or hackmitack trees were nearly all killed by insects. This took place in what hereabouts is called the “black soft growth” land, that is, the spruce, pine, and all other firs. The destruction of the trees was effected by the insects cutting the leaves, and you must know that, although other trees are not killed by the loss of their leaves, the evergreens always are. Some few years after this destruction of the larch, the same insects attacked the spruces, pines, and other firs, in such a manner, that before half a dozen years

were over, they began to fall, and tumbling in all directions, they covered the whole country with matted masses. You may suppose that, when partially dry or seasoned, they would prove capital fuel, as well as supplies for the devouring flames which accidentally, or perhaps by intention, afterwards raged over the country, and continued burning at intervals for years, in many places stopping all communication by the roads, the resinous nature of the firs being of course best fitted to ensure and keep up the burning of the deep beds of dry leaves of the other trees.

“I dare say that what I have told you brings sad recollections to the minds of my wife and eldest daughter, who, with myself, had to fly from our home at the time of the great fires.” I felt so interested in his relation of the causes of the burnings, that I asked him to describe to me the particulars of his misfortunes at the time.

“It is a difficult thing, Sir, to describe, but I will do my best to make your time pass pleasantly. We were sound asleep one night in a cabin about a hundred miles from this, when about two hours before day, the snorting of the horses and lowing of the cattle which I had ranging in the woods suddenly awakened us. I took yon rifle, and went to the door to see what beast had caused the hubbub, when I was struck by the glare of light reflected on all the

trees before me, as far as I could see through the woods. My horses were leaping about, snorting loudly, and the cattle ran among them with their tails raised straight over their backs. On going to the back of the house, I plainly heard the crackling made by the burning brushwood and saw the flames coming towards us in a far extended line. I ran to the house, told my wife to dress herself and the child as quickly as possible, and take the little money we had, while I managed to catch and saddle the two best horses. All this was done in a very short time, for I guessed that every moment was precious to us.

“We then mounted and made off from the fire. My wife, who is an excellent rider, stuck close to me; my daughter, who was then a small child, I took in one arm. When making off, as I said, I looked back and saw that the frightful blaze was close upon us and had already laid hold of the house. By good luck, there was a horn attached to my hunting clothes, and I blew it to bring after us, if possible, the remainder of my live stock, as well as the dogs. The cattle followed for a while; but, before an hour had elapsed, they all ran as if mad through the woods, and that, Sir, was the last of them. My dogs, too, although at all other times extremely tractable, ran after the deer that in bodies sprung before us, as if fully aware of the death that was so rapidly approaching.

“We heard blasts from the horns of our neighbours as we proceeded, and knew that they were in the same predicament. Intent on striving to the utmost to preserve our lives, I thought of a large lake, some miles off, which might possibly check the flames; and urging my wife to whip up her horse, we set off at full speed, making the best way we could over the fallen trees and the brush heaps, which lay like so many articles placed on purpose to keep up the terrific fires that advanced with a broad front upon us. By this time we could feel the

heat; and we were afraid that our horses would drop every instant. A singular kind of breeze was passing over our heads, and the glare of the atmosphere shone over the daylight. I was sensible of a slight faintness, and my wife looked pale. The heat had produced such a flush in the child’s face, that when she turned towards either of us, our grief and perplexity were greatly increased. Ten miles, you know, are soon gone over on swift horses; but, notwithstanding this, when we reached the borders of the lake, covered with sweat and quite exhausted, our hearts failed us. The heat of the smoke was insufferable, and sheets of blazing fire flew over us in a manner beyond belief. We reached the shores, however, coasted the lake for a while and got round to the lee side. There we gave up our horses, which we never saw again. Down among the rushes we plunged by the edge of the water, and laid ourselves flat, to wait the chance of escaping from being burnt or devoured. The water refreshed us, and we enjoyed the coolness.

“On went the fire, rushing and crashing through the woods. Such a sight may we never see! The heavens themselves, I thought, were frightened, for all above us was a red glare, mixed with clouds of smoke, rolling and sweeping away. Our bodies were cool enough, but our heads were scorching, and the child, who now seemed to understand the matter, cried so as nearly to break our hearts.

“The day passed on, and we became hungry. Many wild beasts came plunging into the water beside us, and others swam across to our side and stood still. Although faint and weary, I managed to shoot a porcupine, and we all tasted its flesh. The night passed I cannot tell you how. Smouldering fires covered the ground, and the trees stood like pillars of fire, or fell across each other. The stifling and sickening smoke still rushed over us, and the burnt cinders and ashes fell thick about us. How we got through that



night I really cannot tell, for about some of it I remember nothing.

“Towards morning, although the heat did not abate, the smoke became less, and blasts of fresh air sometimes made their way to us. When morning came, all was calm, but a dismal smoke still filled the air, and the smell seemed worse than ever. We were now cooled enough, and shivered as if in an ague fit; we removed from the water, and went up to a burning log, where we warmed ourselves. What was to become of us I did not know. My wife hugged the child to her breast and wept bitterly; but God had preserved us through the worst of the danger, and the flames had gone past, so I thought it would be both ungrateful to Him and unmanly to despair now. Hunger once more pressed upon us, but this was easily remedied. Several deer were still standing in the

water, up to the head, and I shot one of them. Some of its flesh was soon roasted; and, after eating it, we felt wonderfully strengthened.

“By this time the blaze of the fire was beyond our sight, although the ground was still burning in many places, and it was dangerous to go among the burnt trees. After resting awhile, and trimming ourselves, we prepared to commence our march. Taking up the child, I led the way over the hot ground and rocks; and, after two weary days and nights, during which we shifted in the best manner we could, we at last reached the “hard woods,” which had been free of the fire. Soon after we came to a house, where we were kindly treated for a while. Since then, Sir, I have worked hard and constantly as a lumberer; but thanks be to God, here we are safe, sound, and happy.” 🏠