

Family Reading.

FIRE IN THE WOODS.

I can conceive of nothing in this world more awful than one of those fires which have frequently rushed through forests in North America, with more fearful rapidity and destructive fury than any lava-stream that ever poured from the fiercest volcano. The first time I ever saw the traces of such a conflagration was in Nova Scotia, between Halifax and Truro, on the road to Pictou. The driver of the stage—and a better or merrier never mounted a box, or guided a team through mud and over corduroy—pointed out the spot in which he and his charge had a most narrow escape. While pursuing his journey along one of these forest roads, ramparted on each side by tall trees that show but a narrow strip of blue sky overhead, he found himself involved in volumes of smoke bursting from the woods. It did not require the experience of an inhabitant of the great Western Continent to reveal to him instantly his terrible position. The woods were on fire! But whether the fire was far off or near, he could not tell. If far off, he knew it was making towards him with the speed of a race-horse; if near, a few minutes must involve him in the conflagration. Suddenly the fire burst before him! It was crossing the road, and forming a canopy overhead; sending long tongues of flame, with wreaths of smoke, from one tree top to another; crackling and roaring as it sped upon its devouring path; licking up the tufted heads of the pines, while the wind whirled them onwards to extend the conflagration. What was to be done? To retreat was useless. Miles of forest were behind ready to be consumed. There was one hope only of escape. Nathan had heard in the morning a report, that a mill had been burnt. The spot where it had stood was about six hundred yards ahead. He argued, that the fire having been there, and consumed everything, could not again have visited the same place. He determined to make a desperate rush through fire and smoke to reach the clearance. The conflagration was as yet above him like a glowing arch, though it had partially extended to the ground on either side. He had six horses to be sure, tried animals, who knew his voice, and whom he seemed to love as friends; but such a coach!—lumbering and springless, and full of passengers too, chiefly ladies; and such roads!—a combination of trunks of trees buried in thick mud. But on he must go or perish. Bending his head down, blind, hardly able to breathe, lashing his horses, and shouting to the trembling, terrified creatures, and while the ladies screamed in agony of fear, Nathan went plunging and tossing through the terrific scene! A few moments more, and there is no hope, for the coach is scorched, and about to take fire; and the horses are getting unmanagable! Another desperate rush—he has reached the clearance, and there is the mill, a mass of charred wood, surrounded by a forest of ebony trunks growing out of charred earth;—the fire is passed, and Nathan is safe! “Oh! sir,” he said, “it was frightful! Think only if a horse had stumbled or fallen! or had the fire caught us farther back!—five minutes more would have done it, sir!” That same fire consumed a space of forest ten miles long, and three broad!

But what was such a fire even, to the memorable one which devastated Miramichi, in New Brunswick, about twenty-five years ago! That terrible conflagration is unparalleled in the history of consumed forests. It broke out on the 7th October, 1825, about sixty miles above the town of Newcastle, at one in the afternoon, and before ten the same night it had reached twenty miles beyond; thus traversing, in nine hours, a distance of eighty miles of forest, with a breadth of about twenty-five! Over this great tract of country everything was destroyed; one hundred and sixty persons perished; not a tree was left; the very fish in the streams were scorched and found lying afterwards dead in heaps.

The morning of that dreadful day was calm and sultry; but, in an instant, smoke swept over the town of Newcastle (situated on the river Miramichi), which turned day into night. The darkness was so unexpected—so sudden—so pro-