

# AN "ACT OF GOD"

By Noel Robinson

The forces of nature in violent disturbance constituted a memorable and majestic spectacle. The storm was punctuated by alternate vivid flash and terrific reverberation high over mountain, river and lake. There was little rain and for long periods at a stretch we stood in the darkness in front of the log house in its isolated and impressive setting upon the bank of the Harrison River watching the play of sheet, forked and chain lightning above and between the mountain peaks and ridges and listening to the cataclysmic crashes and rumblings, which suggested nothing so much as the thunder of the guns in France.

Eight hundred feet up the side of the thickly wooded mountain across the river two magnificent cedars had been selected by the gods of the lightning for sacrifice upon the altar of their fury. There must have been a fearful rending, for, when seen next day, the great trees stood torn clean from pinnacle to base. Above them a faint preliminary curl of smoke told of the incipient fire threatening an extensive area of forest monarchs and smaller brush. Imagination could almost sense the

inarticulate cry of those splendid trees for protection against their fiery enemy:

Oh, can it be that last fled  
roseate light

I'll see no more—no more will  
signal morn

With my high coronet; laugh at  
the blight

Of Autumn or of winters yet  
unborn;

Feel the dark smother of the  
misty rains;

Hear cool nocturnal sylphs sing  
soft refrains?

Led by a particularly conscientious and efficient fire-warden we blazed a way to the scene of operations, which proved to be more or less of a hollow on the mountain side. And there we fought the fire for the better part of a week, ultimately clearing with axe and spade and mattock a swathe right round it and removing every trace of vegetation from the ground covered by that swathe. Though a summer of almost uninterrupted sunshine had rendered the bush dry as tinder there was no wind and the sparks did not fly far. Magnificently the flames wreathed themselves about the lower bulk of the

great trees and licked up the brush. Seething, crackling, hissing, they made their own wind, and there were times when it seemed that nothing could stop them spreading. But the magic circle held good.

As tree after tree was attacked—despite the intense heat—with masses of earth heaved against its sizzling, blazing sides the flames leapt to other victims. But none leaped the magic circle. The fight resolved itself into a war of attrition. Subtly insidious the fire pushed its way under the surface during the night, flameless but persistent, smouldering yet impotent when it reached the barrier of cleared earth which hemmed it in.

It was a quite ordinary experience in the fire-warden's life, but it was some years since the writer had taken part in fire-fighting and he was not sorry that this "Act of God" had afforded an opportunity for once again realizing the devastating possibilities latent in the bush during every dry summer.



"PYTHIAN"