

The Coming Holocaust--Can We Stop It?

A Stern Warning to Canadians that a Great Forest Fire Disaster Can Only be Prevented by Immediate Public Action

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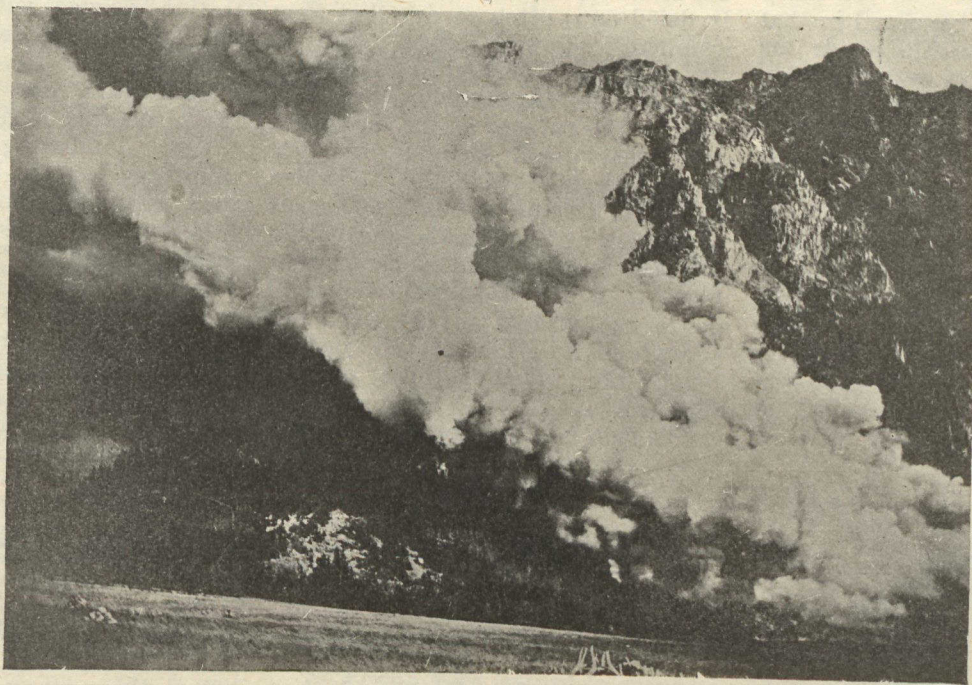
NOT long ago a man who had been through the Porcupine fire, of 1911, came into my office. He had lived and worked in the north country; he had helped, about twenty years ago, to lumber the site where the town of Cobalt now stands; he had tried his hand at farming; he had fought forest fires and settlers' fires in the neighborhood of Haileybury. We discussed the difficulties in the way of adequate fire protection, both in the forest and in the farming communities of Northern Ontario. The point was made that in the areas in which settlement is taking place it is a soil clearing rather than a forest clearing problem. It is not very difficult to control the burning of brush and uprooted stumps that result from converting forest into farm. Fires from such debris quickly burn out and get out of hand as a rule only through gross carelessness. Clearing the soil of the deep over-lying layer of peaty material and vegetable matter, however, is much more difficult. This accumulation of duff is too deep to plow under. Scraping it off and carting it away or even scraping it into piles and burning it, would make the cost of tillage prohibitive. The only practical and effective way, said my informant, was to burn the thick carpet of vegetable matter as it lay naturally spread out over the soil. This humus deposit is usually too moist to burn except in the very driest portions of the year. At best the

lower portion of the stratum burns but slowly; little progress in preparing the soil for the plow can be made if the fire is quenched every night. Therefore, it is allowed to burn for days at a time. Hundreds of these soil clearing fires are burning in the colonizing districts of the north every summer. Nearly every summer some of them get out of bounds, but are prevented from doing serious damage by the fire rangers. Periodically, however, an excessively dry period occurs and these hundreds

of a disastrous conflagration. You prohibit the settler's soil clearing fire and you prevent, or seriously restrict, the further agricultural development of the region." "That is the exact situation," my informant replied. "Well," I asked, "What is the answer, what is your solution of the problem?"

"I DON'T know. I am not sure there is one," he said. "Whatever it is only time and patience can work it out. Those who live in the older settled portions of

Ontario, before they judge too hastily, should understand the conditions of settlement in the north country, not forgetting to take into consideration the psychology of the pioneer." He re-lighted his pipe and after gazing meditatively for a moment through the enveloping haze, he continued: "It might be that some progress could be made toward the solution of the problem through a commission investigating thor-



of settlers' fires are swept together by an unusually high wind and disaster follows.

"What is your solution?"

"AS I understand your outline of the conditions in the regions in which settlement is taking place," I said, "the situation is this: The soil can be prepared for the plow without prohibitive cost only by burning off the deep layer of decaying vegetable matter. The drier the season, the easier this duff is burned and at the same time the greater is the danger

oughly the nature of the soils on which settlement is taking place to determine what proportion of the soil is actually covered with a layer of humus too deep to be plowed under. It may be that we north-country people have over-emphasized that point. Such a commission might investigate the possibility of grouping the areas to be developed into farms. The farm buildings could be located in the centre of the cleared areas far enough from the edge of the forest to be comparatively safe. Greater security from fires would not be the only advantage of segregating the