

## THE FOREST FIRE

THE *Toronto Star*, of last Saturday, contained the most graphic portrayal ever printed in Ontario of what a forest fire really is, how it starts, what it feels like and looks like, and how it makes headway. The article was written by Mr. Sidney Howard, who has spent years in the North as a student of frontier conditions in the bush. As reprinted on this page it will be of exceptional interest to all those who have an eye to the welfare of country life.

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Set in a little hoie in the forest, like the bare spots on a carpet such as moths make in the deep pile, are a thousand little camps of the prospectors, those men of nerve and children of long chance. Surrounding, crowded close on every side, stand the long stems of the trees, those tall, thin, woody spruce trees, with the dead dry shadow-killed lower twigs and branches, those tall, ragged birch trees with their shreds of inflammable white bark hanging to their trunks, those mottled-trunked balsams, with the dry green beards of moss dry as tinder clinging to the underside of their brushy branches. Close-packed in the New Ontario forest the branches interlock. Winter and summer their shadow covers the ground, and their tops show on the hills like a rumpled carpet.

From the depths of these trees men look up to the sky for light. They work like ants in the grass. By dint of co-operation and ant-like industry men have cleared away little spaces in which to live and go about their ant-like work of boring holes in the ground. Ten thousand of them there are up there in the Porcupine, ten thousand prospectors in a forest which swallows them up as though they had never existed. Trails they have cut like seams and creases in the great carpet of trees, narrow lane-ways like footpaths in the wheat. And sixteen miles from the steel ribbon which binds that country to civilization, and on the shores of a wilderness lake they have built an imitation of a town, crowding it right into the midst of the untamed wilderness. Not one, but two, three, four beginnings of populous centres have been made in the midst of those close-standing trees. They grow so fast those places that the houses stretch along the sides of the tote road into the deep shade of the bush. Townsites are cleared, but the suburbs extend on into the uncleared forest, first as houses, then as cabins, shacks, and finally tents.

Comes now the dryest spring in the history of the country. May passes like a month in midsummer. June is hot and dry. July brings the hottest weather ever known in the Province since climatic conditions have been officially recorded. No rain falls.

In a thousand camps behind the Porcupine men are living and working, cooking their meals, some on open fires, using dynamite, smoking tobacco, burning matches. Every patch of moss is as dry as tinder. Every dead twig on the spruce trees is as dry as a match stick. The very air is super-heated and combustible.

Spontaneously, from a score of places at once come the reports of fire. Some one has thrown a lighted match into a clump of brush, expecting it to go out before it fell. The air, hungry for flame, kept it alive. It fell amid moss and the moss cherished it. Presently enough fire created, a draught had accumulated and the brush clump burst into flames. He who had thrown the match was by now perhaps a mile away.

The spark smoulders. Nobody pays

any attention to it at the camp. Men are careless of such things in New Ontario. Prospectors are smothered with trees. The black flies make their lives in summer a torment. They have little interest in preserving the bush that cumbers the land and the moss hides the mineral exposure in the rock. The fire creeps in a line, spreads in a circle, wings out. In the night the coolness of the air condenses, a wet vapor hangs amid the trees, and the progress of the creeping fire slackens. In the heat of the next day it grows, and spreads the wings of its crescent enclosing an ever-enlarging area. Then some time it strikes a hot hillside where the sun pours down at a vertical angle, and the trees are shriveling. Here the rocks are already hot. The ground fire reaches the base of the hill, and begins creeping up.

A draught commences, grows, increases, and presently the fire is rushing up the slope as up a chimney. The bark in the birches catches and breaks into clear yellow flame. The wind bears the burning shreds off and hurls them through the bush in advance of the line of fire. The fire lifts up off the ground. The tops catch. The flames of a thousand twigs and a million leaves join in one sheet. The forest carpet breaks with a great floor of flame. The smoke rises black above the trees, and great grey clouds of it spread away into the sky. The wind roars to feed the combustion. The gases in the air take fire and the flame rolls up into the sky. Clear off the trees, breaking out of the doom blackness of the smoke, with the rush and the roar that nothing in the puny power of men can stay, the tempest rolls across the land, travelling as quickly as a storm cloud, and sending a torrent of burning stars in advance. Where they fall the forest catches fire afresh and burning awaits the rush of holocaust. Nothing of man can stay it. The land is given to destruction until such time as God sends the rain, or the path of destruction is barred by lakes.

What chance have ants in the long grass when the match is put to the brown wither? At the ends of long trails through the trees are little cleared patches of an acre or so where men have sunk a shaft into the gold-bearing rock. In many cases the clearings are smaller, and in plenty of them, prospectors are tenting out with no work of clearing done at all.

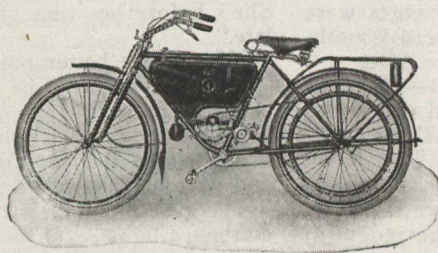
How are these men faring? What of the women at the ends of those long, trailing lanes, the wives of the mine bosses, or the cooks of their camps? Lakes and rivers afforded a refuge for some. The mine crews rushed to the shaft when the flames leaped the clearings, and sheltered underground. In one case five men in a recent bush fire at the Porcupine took shelter in the powder house, built in the cool, damp rock of the cliff wall. It is dangerous at best to seek refuge from a bush fire down a mine shaft. The fire may lick up the surface timbers and destroy the hoisting gear. Then, imprisoned in the depths of a mine, the last case is well nigh as bad as the first. Many a bush fire has leaped the lakes that refugees had thought to provide a barrier. Half a mile has often been recorded of such leaps. In the mountains of the West the draught becomes so fierce as to lift the burnt-through timbers of trees and hurl them before the march of the flames.

"Nothing avails save rain once the fire gets in the tops," as the old bush men say.

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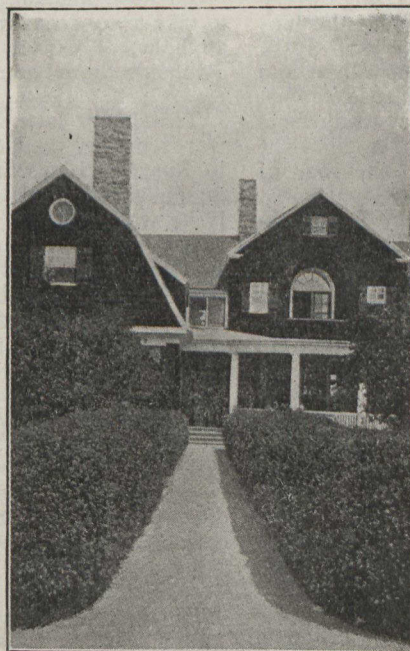
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