

THE BURNED HAND OF FATE

Four near-tragedies in the space of an hour, and all caused by a six-year-old boy. That has to be noteworthy.

Three of the near-tragedies were averted because of my father's sound pioneer training. The fourth by sheer good luck.

My father grew up in the hard part of the early nineteen hundreds, when often, quick thinking meant survival. I had occasion to witness his expertise, and improvisational abilities quite often. But none as memorable as the morning in question.

I had just grown into the chore age that my brother, who was a year older than I, had managed to disentangle himself from. This chore was to bring in the firewood, as well as the kindling, to start the fire in the big barrel stove that provided the heat for our farm house, where our family of ten lived in the Gatineau Valley, in cold rural Quebec.

I was in bed one night when I realized I had neglected to perform my duties. But whistling December wind at my bedroom window only drove me deeper into the depths of my sanctuary.

The wood that I brought in the following morning was in no mood to be urged into roaring flame. It was effectively fire proofed by a generous coating of ice and snow. It just sat there and sizzled, and generally treated me with contempt. I was desperately aware that, if I didn't get the fire going before my father awakened, I would be helped along by the stout stick that he kept around



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for that purpose.

I gathered a large bundle of paper that I found lying about, lifted the uncooperative logs, and stuffed the paper underneath. Then I threw in some gasoline to speed things up.

The logs spat their wrath at me, and used the resulting explosion to blow the lids off the stove, making a deafening din. But they weren't satisfied with that little caper. They sent their flames booming up the pipes to the chimney, where they ignited the accumulated carbon. This resulted in a dangerous chimney fire.

The noise brought the rest of the family running, and me running for the barn to escape my father's ire. I looked back, but wished that I hadn't. The flames were roaring and crackling high into the air, now fed by the unholy combination of carbon gasses and oxygen.

I peeked between the barn boards to try to get a handle on the progress that was being made by my little bonfire, and saw my father cling to the house roof. With the help of the fire burning itself out, and some salt poured down the chimney, the fire

was soon out and the house back to near normal.

I had the uncomfortable feeling that another crisis was looming. My father now had the time to burn his attention to me.

I had not long to wait. As I watched my back trail, I saw my hangman leave the house and, stout stick in hand, head straight for the barn. All thought of being forgiven had, by now, evaporated. I decided to stand my ground.

My father found me working feverishly at the barn chores, trying hard to look just like any good, hard-working boy.

The first whack of his stick ignited the matches that were still in my pocket... "Where in hell is that smoke coming from?", my father yelled, as he dropped the stick to confront this new crisis. "The matches, the matches!", I cried, almost feeling good at his request for assistance.

The multi-colored smoke came billowing out of my heavy mackinaw pants pocket, with the awful smell of burning cloth, and the burned flesh of my father's hand, as he pulled out the lit matches and tobacco that I had stolen from his tobacco box. He dropped the burning debris into the hay, where it caused another fire to spring up.

After the fire was cleared from my pocket, my father and I joined forces to extinguish this new threat. We were partners now, as we stamped out the fires together.

When we had conquered this new challenge my father picked me up and we made our way toward the house. I noticed at this point that he was holding me a little snuggler than usually, and it felt good.