

FLY FISHERMAN'S FIRE

By Nick Lyons

THE FIRE RUSHED in on the crest of furious December winds. It buffalooed up out of the stone church next door and did its work quick and avaricious as a fox on a chicken raid. I wish a fire on no man. I especially do not wish one on the devout fly fisherman. For is not half a fly-fisher's life tied up in a veneration for certain choice and old and familiar pieces of equipment?

My wife and children were safe—that much I learned first, after I raced up from my office in mid-afternoon, hearing the sirens and engines, seeing the smoke a full ten blocks away. They had not made it with much to spare—but they had made it—and that was what really mattered.

But when I had set them up in a hotel some hours later, calmed them, reassured them, I went to the apartment and my mind turned to other things. A policeman took me in after I'd waited two hours for the Fire Department to declare the building safe. There were no lights and I had to follow him up the six flights of narrow stairs, trailing behind the bright and wavering beam of his huge flashlight. The door had been battered in by the firemen and together we pushed the remnants aside. The floor was soaked with a full few inches of water; every step was like walking along the soft sod banks of a stream after the first thaw. He sprayed his light across the living room first.

"Gutted," he said emphatically. "A total loss, buddy."

My wife's paintings were hanging tilted on the walls, their green hills and red barnhouses and bright blue-green streams blackened or burned through and shredded. My books were a bloated mass of wetness and char. In the kitchen, I picked around in the black morass and came up with several pieces of charred silver. In the freezer, a chicken had been roasted.

The last room contained my little fly-tying table, all my equipment, some first fishing stories of mine and notes for half a dozen others, my typewriter, and some prized old angling classics. It was a quiet covert in the midst of the gray and frenzied city, where I could retire and live for a few hours in greener thoughts.

The policeman's light flicked through it and the whole story was out in a moment—gutted. There was nothing left that we could identify except for a distorted lump of metal that must have been the typewriter. The whole table was burned out—with all my necks and feathers and hooks and tying equipment.

There was still the closet. Perhaps that had escaped. I borrowed the flashlight and shined it into the hollowed-out section of the wall; the door had been burned away. The aluminum rod cases were charred black and I thought at once that the heat must have expanded and warped the bamboo. My vest, in which I had most of my working tackle, hung loosely from a wire hanger. It was in black shreds. On one side, several plastic boxes had been chewed through: the flies were all singed or destroyed; nothing could be saved there. Nothing. Little things—like tippet spools, leader sink, fly dope, clippers, penlite, and extra leaders—could be replaced easily enough—they were all gone. My Hardy reel was in the other side and that was a more dubious matter: it was scorched, bent by the heat, and the plastic handle had been burned away. The fly line had caught fire, and was unusable. My waders were a lump of melted rubber, an ancient felt hat was a mere bit of rag,

It happened years ago, but it was still a difficult story for the angler to write. The disaster kindled a new fire for angler Nick Lyons, author of the charming new book of angling reminiscences, The Seasonable Angler (Funk & Wagnalls).



several glass rods without cases had gone up, a fine old net that had always been there at the crucial moments was only a charred stick, my old wicker creel was a small black skeleton on a rear nail, and a whole shelf of angling knick-knacks had collapsed and lost itself in the wet black debris on the floor. I cannot even now remember all that was on it, for it contained bits and pieces from thirty years of angling—since I never throw out even a scrap of old equipment.

The rods. And possibly the reel. They were all I might save. I owned a fine little seven-foot Thomas and a sturdy eight-foot Granger; none of the glass rods had survived.

"Didn't leave you much," said the policeman, shaking his head.

"Not much. Except a lot of memories."

"Haven't seen one like this in ten years. Must have been the wind. You a fisherman, buddy?"

"Used to be," I said, fingering the curved stick that was once my net. "Couldn't save many big ones with this."

I piled a bunch of small items into a shopping bag,

tucked the two black rod cases under my arm, pushed the deformed Hardy into my pocket, and headed back to the hotel glumly.

I didn't look at those rods or the reel for a full month, for there were no end of domestic and practical problems. When I finally did one evening after everyone had quieted down, I saw that the guide windings of the rods were cracked and would have to be rewound. A couple of joints had opened slightly, and there was a slight set in the Thomas. They'd need care before they could be used. And even then I didn't trust them. I didn't even have the heart to take them in for repairs.

I'd scarcely ask to borrow a rod for the season, and I simply could not at the time afford one that I'd like as a permanent possession. So I didn't call or write any of my angling friends, not wanting to burden them and somehow anxious not to get involved with those sweet endemic fishing stories that would light up my fires at this miserable time. I would have to miss a season or two. It could have been worse.

NEWSPAPERS spread as fast as the fires themselves. We had a lot of unsolicited help from friends, and were lucky to find a decent new place. Within two months the family was back in business . . . but not the fisherman. The insurance had not gone far enough—and there was none left for new equipment. It would be a glum season, indeed; and I had no energy to redeem it.

In February, while we were setting up our new apartment, I got an unexpected letter from Frank Mele:

URGENT COMMUNIQUE: Only about fifty-five more days until Opening Day and you had better start giving some serious thought to preparations for the new season. You can start by doing exactly as follows: Arrange with Joe to get both your Granger and Thomas over to Payne's for a check-up of glue-joints, guides, and what-not. Or, send them on to me and I'll have it done. Jim's been informed and has agreed to check them out.

"I suppose your lines were destroyed and flies and all the rest. You haven't told us, but from what I heard there wasn't much left. I have a spare line, I'm sure. Joe will have something, Jim, too. But you *must* let me know! Believe me, Nick, it will be no skin off anyone's nose to set you up again in basic stuff, and it would give us much pleasure to have the surplus gear get some use. But you have got to set about reviewing your tackle situation seriously—if possible, within the next few days.

"As for the rod, the sooner the better—before Jim Payne really gets involved in the spring rush that will begin in a few weeks."

Only a letter. Only a simple acknowledgment by a friend. He was not asking: he was telling me to keep *one* fire firmly lit. It galvanized me. I sent him the rods the next day and he got them right over to Jim Payne's. A good barred-rock neck arrived a week later; a couple of browns, half a cream, an old vise, hackle pliers, thread, some furs, a selection of a wood duck—all these followed soon after. I tinkered with my reel, bending it slowly and methodically, putting on a makeshift wooden handle that seemed to hold. A couple of weeks later the rods came back—old friends, now even more venerated because they had been rejuvenated by an old master. The word was, they would be fine.

And then a couple of floating lines arrived, which Frank had gotten in a trade for some Mele-tied flies. And Jim Mulligan, himself ailing sorely from a recent truck accident, still found the will and the energy to tie me up a good batch of my favorite Hair-wing Coachmen, some Sulphur Duns, and a few terrestrials and minutae.

By April I was virtually all put together again, and not a little of my enthusiasm for *all* things came from the fish-fires awake inside me again. And then, when Frank's note came that the Quill Gordons had begun to appear, sporadically, on the Esopus, all the old fever returned. Nothing now could stop the Hendricksons, Cahills, March Browns, and Green Drakes, all in their good time. And now, through that special current that binds anglers together, and fires them, nothing could stop me. ●