

## Fire! Fire!

Hetty rolled over in bed, feeling all warm and toasty under the sheets. As she settled onto her right side, she heard a crackling sound above her head. It was coming from the wooden beams of the attic. Rolling on to her back she slowly opened her eyes. The beams appeared to be smouldering. Smoke was swirling around them. Perhaps she was dreaming. She rubbed her eyes to make sure. No, it was really happening. A small piece of burning ash floated down from the ceiling and landed gently on her bedspread. Hetty quickly jumped out of bed and ran to her parents in the master bedroom.

‘Papa! Mama!’ she screamed, as she burst through the bedroom doors. ‘The house is on fire!’

Samuel and Susanna Wesley woke suddenly and looked at their daughter who was pulling the bedding off them as she raised the alarm. Samuel got out of bed first. It was more difficult for his wife, Susanna, as she was eight months pregnant. By now the fire had taken hold of their home and there was no time to dress. Samuel and Susanna rushed into the girls’ room. They

needed to escape immediately. Any hesitation could cost them their lives. The house was made of timber and plaster. The roof was thatched with straw. They only had moments to get out of the growing inferno.

‘Take Hetty and get out now, Susanna. Be careful on the stairs!’ commanded Samuel before running to the nursery calling out to the nurse to save herself and the children.

A fourteenth-month-old Charles was bundled out of his cot while Patty and the other children followed the nurse as fast as they could. Nancy and Molly met their anxious father on the landing.

‘Emily! Sukey! Get up! It’s a fire!’ bellowed Samuel to his two eldest girls in the other bedroom.

By now the fire was advancing aggressively. The air was dense with smoke. It was getting harder to breathe. Samuel ushered his family down the stairs. Moments later they arrived in the garden, a welcome refuge from the furnace. But where were Emily and Sukey?

Without any regard for her own safety, Susanna tried to go back into the flaming building to rescue her remaining children. Three times she attempted to wade through the intensifying fire, only to suffer burns to her legs and face in the process. She was distraught. Where were the eldest girls?

When they had heard their father’s warning. Emily had walked to the door of their room and opened it. With no one on the landing she assumed everyone was outside.

‘It’s a fire, Sukey!’ she screamed.

‘Can we get down the stairs?’ asked Sukey. Emily looked again, only to see thick plumes of black smoke rising up the staircase.

‘No. It’s too dangerous now,’ replied Emily.

‘It’ll have to be the window,’ said Sukey. She opened it as wide as it would go. A growing number of neighbours were gathering around the rectory to help. Sukey stuck her legs out of the window, holding on to the window ledge until her arms were fully extended. The drop to the path wasn’t too far away from her feet. She let go and landed safely on the ground.

‘Come on Emily!’ she shouted. ‘Do what I did!’ Emily copied her sister’s technique and fell to the ground, thankfully without hurting herself.

The two girls ran to find the rest of the family. Susanna grabbed them and hugged them tightly. She looked at Samuel. ‘Have we got them all?’ she asked.

Samuel checked the group of children about him. There were seven. There should be eight.

‘Where is Jacky?’ asked Susanna worriedly. John, or Jacky as the family called him, was missing.

Samuel rushed selflessly into the flames to save his son. He was repelled by the intense heat. He tried again, only to be beaten back by the fierce heat. In defeat and grief, Samuel gathered his remaining family around him in the garden.

‘Come, come, children. Let us kneel and pray for Jacky. Let us commend the dear boy into God’s eternal

rest,' he sobbed, as the tears ran down his scorched cheeks. The Wesley family knelt down to pray.

Upstairs in the nursery, John had finally woken up. He slept in a little canopy bed that was surrounded by curtains. The commotion did not stir him from his slumber immediately. It was the light of the blaze that aroused him.

'Nanna! Nanna!' he called out. There was no response from the nurse. 'Nanna, can you come to me?' he pleaded. John poked his little head through the curtains. He saw streaks of fire dancing on the ceiling of the nursery. He swiftly clambered out of his bed and ran to the nursery door. The floor outside the nursery was savagely burning and John knew he couldn't go that way. He turned back into the room and climbed on to a wooden chest that was underneath his bedroom window. John's slight figure at the window was spotted by a neighbour outside the house.

'Look! Up there at the window! I see a boy!' he exclaimed. 'I'll get a ladder.'

'There's no time for that,' shouted another neighbour. 'I have thought of something else. I'll stand against the wall. Get a light man to stand on my shoulders. We should be high enough to pull the boy from the window.'

The man fixed his hands firmly on the wall and stood with his legs apart to strengthen his stance. Another man was helped by some others onto the shoulders of the first. Seeing the plan, John opened the window. The

flames had taken over the roof completely. Billowing smoke shot upwards into the cold night sky.

‘Young master Wesley, lean forward out of the window and extend your arms,’ coaxed the light man as he straightened up. ‘Do not fear. I will hold you.’

John did as his rescuer ordered. The man grabbed hold of John’s arms and hoisted him almost brutally out of the window and grasped him tightly. At that precise moment, the roof collapsed inward to the nursery. The onlookers gasped with shock as the clatter of the disintegrating roof filled their ears. The men scrambled as fast as they could away from the crumbling house.

‘Jacky!’ cried Susanna. She grabbed the lad from the brave men who had saved him and held him tightly in her arms. All of a sudden, it turned into a group hug, as each member of the Wesley household clung to each other in the garden. They were shivering despite the heat from the emblazoned wreck which was their home only a few minutes before.

Samuel was overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. He could hardly believe it. He smothered Jacky with kisses just to be sure he was truly alive. He then turned to the crowd.

‘Come, my neighbours. Let us kneel down and give thanks to God,’ he implored. ‘God has given me all my eight children. Let the house go. I am rich enough,’<sup>1</sup>

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1. Samuel’s words, from *John Wesley, Into All The World*, by John Telford, page 18.

he continued, smiling at his children as they embraced one another.

Some neighbours joined the Wesleys in a short prayer of thanksgiving to God for the safe rescue of the family. Then they retreated further from the blaze and watched in horrified stillness as the house disintegrated before their eyes. Although Samuel was concerned that the distress caused by the fire might do harm to Susanna and their unborn baby, he was confident that God would give him his nineteenth child.

‘Samuel,’ said Susanna, ‘the children are exhausted. I am tired too. We need somewhere to sleep.’

‘I shall see if any of the neighbours can accommodate us tonight,’ Samuel replied. He left her side for only a short moment. Offers to help the Wesleys were not hard to find that night. The children were farmed out to their neighbours who were willing to give them a bed for the night.

The next morning Samuel Wesley went to inspect the charred remains of his home. The ashes were smouldering in the cold February air. It was immediately clear to him that everything was lost in the fire that night. However, Samuel’s heart was still rejoicing that his family, his greatest treasure, was safe and sound, thanks be to God! But he couldn’t help wondering how it was started in the first place.

When Samuel first arrived in the market-town of Epworth in the spring of 1697 as the new minister for St Andrew’s Church, the Wesley family received a

warm welcome from the community. Samuel junior was seven years old at the time and settled in well to life in Epworth. Emily, Sukey and Molly liked being there too. But not long after their arrival, in 1702, there was a fire at the rectory destroying a large part of the house. Fortunately it was easy to repair. At the time, Samuel suspected a disgruntled parishioner had started the blaze in his linseed field next to the house but couldn't prove anything.

As Samuel picked through the rectory remains, he couldn't help wondering if perhaps another neighbour wanted him to leave the parish. But he was determined to rebuild the house though there would be no financial assistance from the Church of England to do it. If he was going to pay for a new house he would rebuild the rectory out of bricks. Nothing says, 'I'm staying in Epworth' like a sturdy brick house, he thought.

Among the charred timbers on the ground he noticed the corner of a page from one of his Bibles. He picked it up and shook off the ash that obscured some of the writing. He could just about make out the verse from one of the Gospels. It read, 'Go, sell all that you have and take up your cross and follow me.' A very appropriate word from the Lord, he thought. He would endure come what may for the sake of his Master.

As for the children? There was nothing else for it, he thought, 'They will have to live with relatives and friends for the duration of the build.'

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The Wesley family were separated until the new brick rectory was completed towards the end of 1709. When the family reassembled, Susanna was horrified at how the children had lapsed in their studies and behaviour. Each home in which the children resided had different routines and disciplines, or lack thereof in some cases. She must sort that out at once.

You see, before the fire at the Epworth rectory, the children enjoyed a daily regime of arduous learning. There was little time for frivolous activities like jumping in muddy puddles when it rained or catching frogspawn in the local waters surrounding Epworth. Mrs Wesley's children were expected to study for six hours each day. Susanna taught them how to read as soon as they were able to recite the alphabet, which was usually a day or two after their fifth birthdays. The children learned the Lord's Prayer at an early age. They read the Bible together and prayed together every day.

Susanna expected good manners from all her beloved children. They were not allowed to shout. There were no snacks between meals in the day. The Wesley clan was not permitted to play with other boys and girls from the town. And they couldn't take things without getting permission from the person who owned it.

Now that they were back together, Susanna would soon lick them all into shape again.