"God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, and avalanches; but he cannot save them from fools, — only Uncle Sam can do that."

The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted.

The whole continent was a garden, and from the beginning it seemed to be favored above all the other wild parks and gardens of the globe. To prepare the ground, it was pressed and crumpled into folds and ridges, mountains and hills, subsoiled with heaving volcanic fires, ploughed and ground and sculptured into scenery and soil with glaciers and rivers. And in the fullness of time it was planted in groves, and belts, and broad, exuberant, mantling forests, with the largest, most varied, most fruitful, and most beautiful trees in the world. Everywhere...over all the blessed continent, there were beauty, and...foodful abundance.

These forests were composed of about five hundred species of trees, all of them in some way useful to man, ... For many a century..., nature fed them and dressed them every day.... Wide-branching oak and elm in endless variety, walnut and maple, chestnut and beech..., touching limb to limb, spread a leafy translucent canopy along the coast of the Atlantic ... — a green billowy sea in summer, golden and purple in autumn, pearly gray ... in leafless, restful winter. ... Westward... the forest reached their highest development. American forest! The glory of the world!.... Rich beyond though, immortal, immeasurable, enough and to spare for every feeding, sheltering beast and bird, insect and son of Adam...

...So they appeared a few centuries ago.... The Indians with stone axes could do them no more harm than could gnawing beavers and browsing moose. Even the fires of the Indians and the fierce shattering lightning seemed to work together only for good in clearing spots here and there for smooth garden prairies, and openings for sunflowers seeking the light. But when the steel axe of the white man rang out in the startled air their doom was sealed. Every tree heard the bodeful sound, and pillars of smoke gave the sign in the sky.

...[M]any of nature’s five hundred kinds of wild trees had to make way for orchards and cornfields. In the settlement and civilization of the country, bread more than timber or beauty was wanted; and in the blindness of hunger, the early settlers, claiming Heaven as their guide, regarded God’s trees as only a larger kind of pernicious weeds, extremely hard to get rid of. Accordingly, with no eye to the future, these pious destroyers waged interminable forest wars; chips flew thick and fast; trees... fell crashing by millions... and the smoke of their burning has been rising to heaven more than two hundred years....

[L]overs of their country, bewailing its baldness, are now crying aloud, “Save what is left of the forests!”...[S]oon timber will be scarce, and not a grove will be left to rest in or pray in. The remnant protected will yield plenty of timber, a perennial harvest for every right use..., and will continue to cover the springs of the rivers that rise in the mountains and give irrigating waters to the dry valleys at their feet,
prevent wasting floods and be a blessing to everybody forever.

Every other civilized nation in the world has been compelled to care for its forests, and so must we if waste and destruction are not to go on to the bitter end, leaving America as barren as Palestine. … Prussia [Germany] has learned that the forest plays an important part in human progress, … It has, therefore, …, refused to deliver its forests to … speedy destruction by permitting them to pass into private ownership. But the state [government owned] woodlands are not allowed to lie idle. On the contrary, they are made to produce as much timber as is possible without spoiling them. …

In France no government forests have been sold since 1870… No private owner may clear his woodlands without giving notice to the government, and the forest service may forbid the clearing: … to maintain the soil on mountains, to defend the soil against erosion and flooding, to insure the existence of springs…. A[n owner] who has cleared his forest without permission is subject to heavy fine, and … may be made to replant the cleared area.

The Russian government passed a law in 1888, declaring that clearing is forbidden in protection forests…. Even Japan is ahead of us in the management of her forests. … The feudal lords valued the woodlands, and enacted vigorous protective laws; …

In India systematic forest management was begun … under difficulties [like ours] — … fires, opposition from lumbermen, settlers…. 55,000,000 acres have been brought under the control of the forestry department, [for] … effective protection of the forests from fire, an efficient system of regeneration, and cheap transportation of the forest products; the results so far have been most beneficial and encouraging.

It seems, therefore, that almost every civilized nation can give us a lesson on the management and care of forests. So far our government has done nothing effective with its forests, though the best in the world, but is like a rich and foolish spendthrift who has inherited a magnificent estate in perfect order, and then has left his rich fields and meadows, forests and parks, to be sold and plundered and wasted at will, depending on their inexhaustible abundance. Now it is plain that the forests are not inexhaustible, and that quick measures must be taken if ruin is to be avoided. …

[Lists ineffective laws in US or laws which allow cheap harvesting of timber]. … By the act of March 3, 1875, all … railroads are authorized to take timber from the public lands adjacent to their lines for construction purposes; and they have taken it with a vengeance, destroying a hundred times more than they have used, mostly by allowing fires to run into the woods. …

…[T]he government has allowed millions of acres of the grandest forest trees to be stolen, or destroyed, or sold for nothing…. Timber is as necessary as bread, and no scheme of management failing to recognize and properly provide for this want can possibly be maintained. …

The special land agents .. are supposed to [prosecute timber thieves] …. But timber-thieves of the Western class are seldom convicted, for the good reason that most of the jurors who try such cases are themselves as guilty as those on trial. …[D]uring the seven years from 1881 to 1887 … the value of the timber reported stolen from the government lands was $36,719,935, and the amount recovered was $478,073, …. Secretaries of the Interior have repeatedly called attention to this …[b]ut … Congress has given no heed to these… appeals, and our forests, the most valuable and the most destructible of all the natural resources of the country, are being robbed and burned more rapidly than ever. …

That a change from robbery and ruin to a permanent rational policy is urgently needed nobody with the slightest knowledge of American forests will deny…. [I]n the [arid] flammable Rocky Mountains and California and Arizona,… farmers are beginning to realize that when the timber is stripped from the mountains the irrigating streams dry up in summer, and are destructive in winter; that soil, scenery, and everything slips off with the trees: so of course they are coming into the ranks of tree-friends.
Of all the magnificent coniferous forests around the Great Lakes, once the property of the United States, scarcely any belong to it now. They have disappeared in lumber and smoke, mostly smoke, and the government got not one cent for them; only the land they were growing on was considered valuable, and two and a half dollars an acre was charged for it. ... Only the forests of the West are significant in size and value, and these, although still great, are rapidly vanishing. Last summer, of the unrivaled redwood forests of the Pacific Coast Range the United States Forestry Commission could not find a single quarter-section that remained in the hands of the government.

Under the timber and stone act of 1878, which might well have been called the “dust and ashes act,” any citizen of the United States could take up one hundred and sixty acres of timber land, and by paying two dollars and a half an acre for it obtain title. There was some virtuous effort made ... to ... not allow any association [person or company] [to buy more than] one hundred and sixty acres. Nevertheless, under this act wealthy corporations have fraudulently obtained title to from ten thousand to twenty thousand acres or more. ... In one case... a lumber company hire[d] the entire crew of every vessel [ship] which ... [docks] at any port in the redwood belt, to enter one hundred and sixty acres each [per crew member] and immediately deed [give] the land to the company, ...the company's paying all expenses and giving the jolly sailors fifty dollars apiece for their trouble.

By such methods have our magnificent redwoods and... the sugar-pine forests of the Sierra Nevada been absorbed by foreign and resident capitalists. Uncle Sam is not often called a fool is business matters, yet he had sold millions of acres of timber land at two dollars and a half an acre on which a single tree was worth more than a hundred dollars. [...]Other things can be done now about the crazy bargain. ... The trees are felled, and about half of each giant is left on the ground to be converted into smoke and ashes; the better half is sawed into choice lumber and sold to citizens of the United States or to foreigners: thus robbing the country of its glory and impoverishing it without right benefit to anybody, — a bad, black business from beginning to end.

...The redwood is the glory of the Coast Range... This grand tree, Sequoia sempervirens, is surpassed in size only by its near relative, Sequoia gigantea, or big tree, of the Sierra Nevada... These two sequoias are all that are known to exist in the world...

As timber the redwood is too good to live [It’s really precious lumber]. The largest sawmills ever built are busy along its ... border. The big tree [giant sequoia] is also .....being made into lumber. ... The enormous logs, too heavy to handle, are blasted into manageable dimensions with gunpowder. A large portion of the best timber is thus shattered and destroyed, and, with the huge knotty tops, is left in ruins for tremendous fires that kill every tree within their range.... Still, the species is not in danger of extinction [because] magnificent sections of the forests have been reserved as national and state parks... efficiently guarded by a small troop of United States cavalry.... But there is not a single specimen of the redwood in any national park. Only by gift or purchase, can the government get back ... a single acre of this wonderful [redwood] forest.

The ... methods of lumbering are... grossly wasteful. In most mills only the best portions of the best trees are used, while the ruins are left on the ground to feed great fires which kill much of what is left of the ... timber, together with the seedlings .... Thus every mill is a centre of destruction far more severe from waste and fire than from use. The same thing is true of the mines.... The prospector deliberately sets fires to clear off the woods just where they are densest, to lay the rocks bare and make the discovery of mines easier.

Sheep-owners and their shepherds also set fires [in the] woods to facilitate the march of their countless flocks,... and ...improve the pasturage. The axe is not yet at the root of every tree, but the sheep is.... Not only do the shepherds, set fire to everything that will burn, but the sheep consume every green leaf, ...even the year young conifers ... thus at last leave the ground barren.

...It is not generally known that, [as much wood is cut for home]... from five to ten times as much is destroyed as is used, chiefly by... forest fires.
...[A]ll through the summer months, the smoke of mill and forest fires is so thick and black that... the whole sky, with clouds, sun, moon, and stars, is simply blotted out. ......The sky is black and the ground is black, and on either side there is a continuous border of black stumps and logs and blasted trees appealing to heaven for help as if still half alive.

Of course a way had to be cleared through the woods [for the railroads]. But the felled timber is not worked up into firewood for the engines and into lumber for the company’s use; it is left lying in vulgar confusion, and is fired from time to time by sparks from locomotives or by the workmen camping along the line. The fires... are allowed to run into the woods as far as they may, thus assuring comprehensive destruction.

Notwithstanding all the waste and use which have been going on unchecked...for more than two centuries, it is not yet too late, though it is high time, for the government to begin a rational administration of its forests. About seventy million acres it still owns, — enough for all the country, if wisely used. These residual forests are generally on mountain slopes, just where they are doing the most good, and where their removal would be followed by the greatest number of evils; the lands they cover are too rocky and high for agriculture... It has been shown... that if these mountains were to be stripped of their trees and underbrush, and kept bare and sodless by hordes of sheep and... fires the shepherds set, besides those of the millmen, prospectors, ...both lowlands and mountains would speedily become little better than deserts.... During heavy rainfalls and... snow... melt..., the larger streams would swell into destructive torrents; cutting deep...gullies, carrying away the fertile humus and soil as well as sand and rocks, filling up and overflowing their lower channels, and covering the lowland fields with raw detritus. Drought and barrenness would follow.

In their natural condition, or under wise management, keeping out destructive sheep, preventing fires, selecting the trees that should be cut for lumber, and preserving the young ones and the shrubs and sod of herbaceous vegetation, these forests would be a never failing fountain of wealth and beauty. The cool shades of the forest give rise to moist beds and currents of air, and the sod of grasses and the various flowering plants and shrubs thus fostered, together with the network and sponge of tree roots, absorb and hold back the rain and the waters from melting snow, compelling them to ooze and percolate and flow gently through the soil in streams that never dry.

...[T]he dawn of a new day in forestry is breaking....[W]hat belongs to all alike is reserved... for the public good. The people will not always be deceived by selfish opposition, whether from lumber and mining corporations or from sheepmen and prospectors, however cunningly brought forward underneath fables and gold.

...The wonderful advance made in the last few years, in creating four national parks in the West, and thirty forest reservations, embracing nearly forty million acres; ... shows the trend of awakening public opinion. The making of the famed New York Central Park was opposed by even good men...[but] now that park is appreciated. So we confidently believe it will be with our great national parks and forest reservations. There will be a period of indifference on the part of the rich, sleepy with wealth, and of the toiling millions, sleepy with poverty, most of whom never saw a forest; a period of screaming protest and objection from the plunderers, who are as unconscionable and enterprising as Satan. But light is surely coming, and the friends of destruction will preach and bewail in vain.

...[The US has always welcomed settlers who will use the woods productively and the forests can handle that. It is the] mere destroyers, tree-killers spreading death and confusion in the fairest groves and gardens ever planted, let the government hasten to cast them out...

The axe and saw are insanely busy, chips are flying thick as snowflakes, and every summer thousands of acres of priceless forests, with their underbrush, soil, springs, climate, scenery, and religion, are vanishing away in clouds of smoke....

All sorts of local laws and regulations have been tried and found wanting, and the costly lessons of
our own experience, as well as that of every civilized nation, show conclusively that the fate of the remnant of our forests is in the hands of the federal government, and that if the remnant is to be saved at all, it must be saved quickly.

Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and if they could, they would still be destroyed, — chased and hunted down as long as… a dollar could be got out of their bark hides…. Few that fell trees plant them; nor would planting avail much towards getting back anything like the noble primeval forests. During a man’s life only saplings can be grown, in the place of the old trees — tens of centuries old — that have been destroyed. It took more than three thousand years to make some of the trees in these Western woods, — trees that are still standing in perfect strength and beauty, waving and singing in the mighty forests of the Sierra. Through all the wonderful, eventful centuries since Christ’s time — and long before that — God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools, — only Uncle Sam can do that.