

IN THE BURNING BUSH.

RELENTLESSNESS OF THE FIRE FIEND.

MILES AND MILES OF FLAME AND SMOKE.

"They also serve who only stand and wait." The full meaning of the poet's line comes home to one after seeing back block settlers living through the awful suspense of a bush fire. It is not so much the actual damage that worries him, but it is the horrible uncertainty that gets on his nerves and brings the set lines of anxiety to his brow. "If it would only take what it has got and leave it at that we would not mind, but who can tell where it is going to stop?" asked Mr. White, an Otau settler, of a "Star" representative who went up to have a look at the fires raging in that district. Otau, as most people are probably aware, is upon the ranges, about eight miles from Clevedon, on the Wairoa South River. The land is all taken up, and many homesteads are scattered over the block. A great part of it is still in bush and the houses of the settlers stand in the midst of forest in all stages—some standing, some half cleared, and some of the land is grassed, and carrying a good deal of stock.

The fires have been burning here, as they have in many other parts for the past month or so, but it was on Wednesday last that the settlers first experienced any immediate danger. A gale of wind sprang up on that day, and the slumbering flames, which had hitherto contented themselves with quietly demolishing patches of the bush, were fanned into something wild and fierce. The fire fiend swept over the face of the land like a devastating spirit, and thousands of pounds of damage were done in the course of a few hours.

Every stick and every blade on the earth is bone dry as the result of the abnormal season we have had, and the fire ran unchecked through mile after mile of bush, scrub, and clearing. Nothing checked it in its mad career. All night the employees of Orum's timber mill fought with the flames to save the valuable plant, which at much cost and trouble had been carted right out to the heart of the block. Ceaseless vigilance and a slight change in the wind enabled them to save the property, but the danger is not even over now and the men have still to watch every spark that comes wheeling across on the breeze.

As we rode along the Otau Road we met a waggoner driving a four-wheel timber lorry, and when asked how the fires were out back, he said he went out to bring in a load but had been forced to turn back, as the horses would not face the fire, which was sweeping across the roadway. Coughing and choking with the all-pervading smoke which hangs over the country like a funeral pall we managed to get our reluctant horses past the danger zone, and a few miles further on came to the homestead of Mr. Fawcett, which had been in most danger of being consumed by the hungry fiend. Standing on a hill surrounded by smoking fires on every hand, the owner showed us where the fire had swept up the valley across 70 or 80 chains of bush and clearing in an hour and a-half. It seems to travel with the rapidity of thought, and the very earth itself appears to burn. Lone stumps and gaunt dead trees standing in the middle of a clearing suddenly smoke in one or two places and soon are streaks of flame. The slightest spark carried on the wind is enough to awaken the fire that now seems latent in all nature. A solid looking stump is burned right out of the ground in an incredibly short time, and even the spreading roots, half bedded in the soil are consumed, leaving the blackened likeness of an evil octopus with its great body and cruel arms.—symbolical of the all devouring genius of the pitiless fire!

"Where my stock is I don't know," said Mr. Fawcett, as we gazed into the impenetrable wall of smoke that surrounded the place. An almost human cry from out the smoke across the ridges told where some poor beast had been caught by the fire, and the haunting sound was repeated every few minutes. Some five hundred sheep and between 60 and 70 head of cattle were out there somewhere in the smoke, and the only hope was that they were on the other



THIS IS A TYPICAL SETTLER'S SECTION IN THE BACKBLOCKS, AND GIVES A VERY GOOD IDEA OF THE UTTER HOPELESSNESS OF ATTEMPTING TO STAY THE PROGRESS OF THE RELENTLESS FLAMES.



THE BURNING BUSH.



THIS HOMESTEAD, THE PROPERTY OF MR. C. A. FAWCETT, WAS IN GREAT DANGER OF DESTRUCTION, AND WAS ONLY SAVED BY A CHANGE OF WIND.

BUSH FIRE PHOTOS TAKEN IN THE OTAU DISTRICT, NEAR CLEVEDON (WAIROA SOUTH), AUCKLAND.