

THE BUSH FIRES.

IN THE TRACK OF THE BLAZE.

HOW THE BUSH SETTLER FIGHTS THE FIRE.

THE HOMESTEADS OF A VALLEY SWEEP AWAY.

TAUMARUNUI, February 21.

Life is made up of sharp contrasts. As I rode along the Ohakuno-Raetihi road in the afternoon, a happy laughing wedding party—the ceremony over—was lined up in an orchard posing to the tender mercies of some itinerant photographer. A few miles further on families were fighting, if not exactly for dear life, for the next dearest thing—house and home—and bemoaning the loss of half their stock, and the results of years' of energy and hopeful planning.

RAETIHI ON THE QUI VIVE.

"I was just off to bury my clothes and a few of my belongings, at the back of my house for fear of the fire," explained the Raetihi chemist, who was on the point of putting out his shop light as I stepped in to purchase some plates.

Flickering lanterns in sundry back gardens, across the lights of which flitted moving forms, pointed to the fact that his example was being followed by more than one of his neighbours.

"Are you Mr. Dixon? Mr. Dixon, your place is in flames! We got as far as the whare when the horses stopped and we had to come back." These remarks were called out to me from the middle of the road by two agitated ladies on horseback. When they discovered it was a case of mistaken identity they cantered off and left one feeling sorry for Dixon.

Dropping into the barber's shop—that centre of gossip from immemorial times—the first observation that fell on the ear came from a man at the billiard table, trying to make a canon off two cushions. "Bill couldn't get up the Valley road horses stopped dead on him, and he come back. There was a murmur of momentary sympathy as the man with the cue finished his shot. "Jehosophat, he got the canon!" jerked out one of the on-lookers, and Bill and his sorry plight were forgotten. But they say Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

Coming along to the boardinghouse one's attention was arrested at the corner by a huge trench, twenty feet long, five wide, and about the same deep. Boards were laid along the bottom and the new earth was heaped up at the side. "They've all got 'em," remarked my guide, "ready for their Lares and Penates when the first spark catches."

These incidents and snatches of conversation are more graphic than columns of description, of the state of mind of Raetihi just now.

NATURE'S PYROTECHNICS.

Raetihi township was virgin bush a few years ago. To-day it is still surrounded by the forest, and most of the sections right up to the main street are still strewn with the trunks of the felled timber, now as dry as tinder. The place is full of smoke, and every second man you meet is rubbing his half-blinded eyes. The township is within a ring of fire. It was calm all the day I arrived, but a south-west wind came up at sun-down and the sparks were holding high carnival. Away to the south and west there is a bank of thick smoke coming up over the heavy green bush, which is just indicated here and there by some stray tree top which has caught fire. In the north and east, where more clearing has been done, the scene is awful in its grandeur. It should be moonlight, but the moon has got lost in the smoke, and the stars are too timid to show themselves, so that the night is jet black. Emerson in one of his essays speaks of a beautiful thought of a friend of his, who said that on going through a forest it always seemed as though the fairies stopped and waited in silence till mortal passed through before resuming their frolics. There is no suggestion of this hushed waiting in the forest at this fiery time. The fiends have broken loose, and

"About, about, in reel and rout,
The dead fires dance at night."

In the day you see really very little

fire—it seems all smoke. At night, against the blackened hillsides round the township, every spark and flicker is vividly visible. It is a phantasmagoria of flame, a kaleidoscope of lights. The top of a solitary tree on yonder hill burns high in the heavens, steadily and solitary like Tiritiri light, seen from across the gulf. Other lights wink in and out like Rangitoto beacon. On the hill to the left they run up in regular lines—like looking over Auckland city up Grafton-road way from the harbour, with a big cluster on the ridge for the hospital. Here they form a fairy ring; there the watch fires of an army sleeping under arms on the eve of battle; while further off there is a splutter like fireworks as the wind rushes up a gully.

Away on the right is a tree and all its branches perfectly outlined, in fire. It burns steadily, then the branches drop off one by one, till all is darkness, and it brings to mind the solemn midnight Tenebrae service in the Church of Rome, on the vigil of Good Friday, where the altar candles, representing the apostles, go out one by one. A gust of wind, a turn of the kaleidoscope, and the scene is transformed into a dance of devils. It is magnificent and wonderful, but uncomfortably near, and no wonder that Raetihi sleeps lightly to-night.

Later on the fire got into the Recreation Ground literally at the township's back door, and people were up all through the long night watching and waiting and fighting with the flames.

THE FRINGE OF IT.

In the saddle again soon after daylight, and off into the centre of the district where the settlers have suffered most severely. This is about an hour or two's ride from Raetihi, along the Ohura and Pukekaha-roads, in a north-westerly direction from the township. Mr. G. Goldsworthy, Messrs. Hatrick's popular traveller, has been all up and down the burned area, and he says he has seen nothing to equal this part.

Strangely enough the first man one met on the Ohura-road, about two miles from Raetihi, was Mr. Dixon, who had just been looking at his heap of ruins. He reckons his loss at 400 sheep and 300 acres of grass burned.

His neighbour, Mr. G. Berry, stands to lose about the same amount of grass and nearly three-quarters of his stock. The house was only saved by a night's unremitting toil—which was shared by several good-hearted neighbours—extinguishing the fires with water and sticks as soon as a spark found its billet. The front garden was strewn with a miscellaneous collection of household fixings, and a big mound, freshly made, marked the resting-place of the valuables. Two red-eyed children, almost blinded with the smoke, were keeping guard and beating out the sparks which fell from time to time from the burning bush a few chains away.

EIGHT HOURS IN A CULVERT.

Turning up the Pippi-road, one's horse shied at the remnants of somebody's home, dumped down in the middle of the road—a sewing machine covered with a sheet of galvanised iron held down with a tin trunk of clothes—a mute but eloquent evidence of a pretty general clear out. At the end of this road is Mr. Davis' place. He and his daughter had a terrible time. They were sitting down to dinner when the warning came, and they hardly had time to get out of the house before the standing bush a few chains from the house was a wall of flame. They and a neighbour, Mrs. Coutts, who was burned right out, just managed to race along the road about a quarter of a mile and find refuge in a big culvert when the flames followed them and literally enveloped the whole of the neighbourhood. Though safe, their troubles were not over. The smoke came through the culvert (which is big enough for a man to walk in) as through a chimney, and it was only by bathing their faces continually in the water running under their feet that they were able to bear the awful pain. They were in this terrible plight for nearly eight hours, and were

only rescued after dark. Oddly enough the Davis' House was not burned, although the adjacent woolshed, hayrack, fencing, and other buildings were reduced to ashes. It did catch, but was saved in a most strange manner. The morning before the blaze an old tin had been filled with water, and some paint brushes were put in to soak. A spark fell near the porch and burnt the wood on which the pot was standing. It capsize, the water extinguished the flames, and saved the house. A kick of a cow is said to have burned Chicago, and an equally trivial thing can put a fire out.

A tree and a yard or two of paling fence indicate what was once the home of Mr. Harris, whose boundary joins Mr. Davis.

Half-a-mile further on the road drops down into the beautiful Orantoha Gorge, several hundred feet deep, and clothed with glorious bush now unfortunately horribly scorched and full of great black gaps where the fire has run through it. Turning out of the countless bends which the road takes as it winds its way to the bottom the traveller comes on four tyres, a few bolts and some ironwork—all that remains of a waggon which was caught by the fire and simply burned in its tracks.

THE VALLEY OF ASHES.

But it is not till one gets to the Pukekaha-road, which trends away to the right from near the bottom of the gorge, that he realises the full force of last week's blaze. This was the storm centre of that awful day of death and destruction. Passing through a gate you come to a stream which it requires but little imagination to turn into the Styx, and you half expect to see old Charon and his boat come out of the gloom to ferry you over to the underworld, as you pull up at its edge and peer through the smoke at the scene of desolation beyond. The Pukekaha beggars description. The valley is full of thin blue smoke which half reveals the countless spurs which make up its contour. There is no sky line, and the hazy smoke has blotted out all idea of distance and perspective. Far as the eye can penetrate ahead, far as you can see on either hand, there is nothing but blackened hillsides from which the charred tree trunks rise like a forest of masts, and over the ground the logs lie on the thick ash-covered earth.

There isn't a blade of grass to be found with a microscope. The only relief to this utter, utter, desolation is the white ribbon of road which winds up and up, and along it you meet a stray sheep or two, a cow and a few horses, all half dazed and homeless, and looking for a bite in an inhospitable land.

Logs, stumps, and tall branchless dead trees are yet full of latent fire, and give off wreathing smoke. As the fire eats into the roots of the trunks, standing sentinel-like, they crash to earth with a roar and rattle as they splinter into a million pieces. Every few chains they have come down across the road, and been cleared away with much trouble, and you eye with suspicion some crackling monster leaning over at a perilous angle as you ride along almost underneath it.

At the foot of the road stands Mr. T. Austin's little one-roomed house, which, marvellous to relate, was not touched. When you see it nestling in the centre of acres of ash and cinder strewn hills you say "a miracle." On the top of the range the south-east wind, which fanned the flames to fury blew with hurricane force down the countless gullies, but here at the bottom there seems to have been a providential lull. Sixteen people found a camp of refuge at Austin's, one of them being an invalid, and the recital of their dash from the burning reads like a page out of "The Last Days of Pompeii."

A MARK TAPLEY TOUCH.

At the summit Mr. George Cox had one of the most comfortable homes in the district, and his garden was a byword for miles around. Fruit and vegetables of all kinds, all grown from seed, flourished in this out of the way corner of the Island, and all was fresh and charming. To-day a pile of white ashes represents the house, and the garden is a burnt patch, four square. Near by, a few sheets of corrugated iron knocked up in the form of a rough shack, and a small tent, house the Cox family and the few things they saved. In spite of their trouble the cardinal virtue of the out-wetter—hospitality—comes out at once, and "Come inside and have a cup of tea, the kettle is just on the boil,"

Continued on page 20.

The Fire Resisting Properties of Jarrah.

A USEFUL TIMBER.

The dreadfully destructive fires which have been sweeping over the bush districts in the North Island burnt miles and miles of fencing and thousands of pounds' worth of buildings—both farm and residence. Fencing is a particularly heavy item to the man in the back blocks, and he will welcome anything that would reduce the possibility of loss from fire—a risk which recurs year after year whenever the bush is being burned off. All timber is vulnerable, but there is one which possesses properties which specially recommend it to the man whose property is in danger from the fire fiend, and this is the Australian hardwood called Jarrah, which is the most durable of these very durable timbers, the life being given—in positions where it is alternately wet and dry—at from 40 to 50 years. Indeed the life has never been proved, the Millar West Australian Hardwood Co., Ltd., having in its possession specimens in perfect state of preservation, which have been in the ground and water for 70 years. With regard to its fire-resisting qualities, the company has some remarkable testimonials. G. P. Harris Scarfe and Co., Ltd., writes: "The examination of the result of our recent disastrous fire at Fremantle, West Australia, disclosed the fact that the portions of the building constructed of Karri and Jarrah withstood the flames remarkably well. We feel sure that had such portions been constructed of any other woods the same would have been totally demolished. A large amount of the timbers above referred to remain almost intact."

The British Fire Prevention Sub-Committee in their report on the fire at Victoria Docks, says:

"Though the Jarrah bore the brunt of the fire, as what wind there was blew in this direction, comparatively little damage was done to this pile, and this was confined to the north and west faces, the fire failing to penetrate far into the interior. Your Sub-Committee are of opinion that but for the resistance offered to the fire by this stack of Jarrah, the conflagration would have assumed much larger proportions, as in the rear were large quantities of deals, and had they ignited, the task for the fire brigades would have been far larger and more difficult."

"The Street," said: "The fire swept all before it until it reached the stack of Jarrah. The fierceness of the fire met an instant check, and failed to lay hold of the close-grained wood, thus giving the firemen the first chance of really tackling the flames, and eventually extinguishing them."

The company's Auckland branch office is at Mechanic's Bay, where there is a striking model cottage built entirely of hardwoods, showing what can be done with them.

Elderly: "Do you really think it's dangerous to dye the hair?" Kidders: "Oh, very. I knew a fellow of about your age who did it and the first thing he knew he was married to a widow with six children."

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