

GIPPSLAND BUSH FIRES.

Causes and Consequences.

By A. A. Barber.

The tragic outbreak of forest fires in Gippsland, Victoria, reminds one of conditions as they were in South Gippsland in the years 1906 and 1907. In the 1906 disaster more than 50 homes were burnt out in three days. In the winter of that year the folk whose homes had been destroyed were living in tents. From a tent home, a little girl accompanied me to Sunday school, through the towering forest. I led my pony while the child walked by my side. Many a happy stroll we had through the forest shade. Grim tragedy came on the wing of a blasting north wind to that peaceful home, and claimed the child. Twenty minutes after the occupants first saw the fire, the house was burnt down. In the scurry to safety a cripple was placed upon a dirt track, but his life was lost. I noticed in The Register's account of the recent fires mention made of children being kept in a creek with saturated bags on their heads. I frequently had dinner with a family which in the fires of which I write, had a similar experience. During the height of the fire's fury the children (five merry little souls) were placed in a creek, as their home kept catching alight. Desperate attempts by the men folk (and no doubt the women, too) with wet chaffbage, at length saved the home. But heroes in the firefighting line do not always reap a just reward.

Dangers of the Forest.

The settler in the areas liable to fire is usually willing to talk about that which constitutes his principal dread. I think it is because the possibility of fire is ever before him. Around the firesides on winter nights—and it snows there in South Gippsland at times—blood-curdling tales are told of shocking deaths and perilous escapes. Once in a wooden home, surrounded by big dry timber, I saw on the whitewashed wall a fearful representation of a raging bush fire. Each summer the dreaded fire spectre "hovers" horribly real and near. No finer examples of heroism, adventure, and "thrills" could be found than are related by the side of blazing logs in a South Gippsland settler's home of inflammable slabs of timber.

The settler's home in a Gippsland outbreak is quickly surrounded by an inferno. Covering miles of country, it is impossible to control the fire, because it travels in tree tops 150 ft. from the blazing grass below. The heat is overpowering, quite apart from the smoke. I knew one man who was blind for three days after being

apart from the smoke. I knew one man who was blind for three days after being in the smoke. I have heard of a mob of 50 cattle suffocated by the terrible heat which reached them before the flames could do so.

In thinking of firebreaks the high cost of clearing must be considered, and the scanty means of the average pioneer. I know of a home where the land all round the house was cleared. Only one tree was left 100 yards from the front of the house. When the next bush fire came along that tree caught alight and that house was destroyed by a rain of flaming sparks.

Forest Giants.

During the time I was in South Gippsland it was stated that a tree which fell was 400 ft. long. I do not doubt it. I have before me the photo of a giant stump, at Foster, 84 ft. in circumference. A draught horse is standing in the "doorway." I know the missionary who once conducted a service for 22 people inside this queer tabernacle. In the old days the mailman carried an axe, so that if some fallen tree blocked the road from fence to fence, he could cut the wires or maybe the thin end of the giant tree to pass on. There are many settlers who dread the dry timber, in its rottenness, almost as much as a fire. It is a weird experience to ride a horse in podgy black mud, beneath these bare gaunt sentinels of progress, and to hear the uncanny knocking above you on a moonlight night of two trees that rub against each other. The danger from these rotting trees is great, and lives are often lost. But ringbarking is essential as the first step in clearing the land at a cost of from £25 to (I suppose) £125 per acre. A great number of the trees fall without provocation on perfectly still nights. I've known 90 to come down in one paddock one night in a storm, and I saw nine across a footpath in a distance of a quarter of a mile. In a storm a man rides at his peril. Trees may crack and crush all round him. Sharp pieces of limbs are driven into the ground with great force at his very side. Once a green messmate fell in front of me as I rode in a storm. It blocked the road, breaking both fences and falling away down the hillside. Within two minutes I was up to it, and jumped my horse over its thin part. If in falling one of these giants pursues you, there is little hope, on account of its length.

Heavy Rainfall.

During the year I was there, there was 55 in. of rain, the average is 50 in. Once it rained for a fortnight day and night. In some winters fine days are few and far between, and sledges are used instead of the family trap. The consequence is some isolation, especially for womenfolk. A contributing cause of fires is the famous Gippsland grass, which has made the equally famous dairying industry of these parts. This grass attains a height of from 18 in. to 2 ft. 6 in. At one season of the year, when in head, young grass springs up beneath the old plants to the height of about 6 in.; and combined with the older fodder makes excellent food. In the dry grass, and drier

bined with the older fodder makes excellent food. In the dry grass, and drier trees, a fire finds material to its liking, and obligingly travels in the tree tops and along the grass as well.

"Burning Off."

A frequent cause of fires, undoubtedly is the settlers' habit of "burning off." Certain seasons for doing this are sometimes adhered to; but selfish settlers will choose their own time and involve the country in disaster. Of course, the utmost care may not prevent a "get away." I have often ridden my pony along a road which ran clean through the middle of a 400-acre paddock, as dry as a thirsty crow. The patch fairly "sizzled" with heat. Just a match was needed, or some mysterious combustion of the heaped up inflammable material—and the area would have become an inferno. Below me on one side of the road was a gully with timber and masses of foliage, 10 ft. in depth. I always breathed a sigh of relief on a hot day when I got safely through that danger zone. What precautions can be taken when that 400 acres of "ready" fuel is multiplied by mile upon mile? I know of one which is to keep a cleared space round home, outhouses, and property. Another is in the comical but tragically suggestive "dug-out," as diggers would call it.

At the rear of the home that is subject to inroads of flame is a long, low cellar covered with earthen roof. Into this, at the crackling of diabolical flames, the furniture is thrust and securely covered, but for human bodies there is only the questionable security of shallow creeks and rare sheltered places. This intolerable situation, arising periodically, breeds a resource and heroism, much as was demonstrated by a little school girl I knew. She rode on her pony through a blazing forest, and wreathing smoke, and warned settlers of the oncoming peril. Such men and women, blinded by smoke and agonized by burns, need the best that can be given in brotherly relief, for they face the consequences—loss of stock, fences, property, feed—and even life!