

Extract from "The Australian Forestry Journal" January, 1925.

A LAMENT FROM A LOOKOUT TOWER.

The following interesting document has been received from one of the employees of the Western Australian Forest Service, Mr J. Perry, after a week's sojourn on fire lookout duty in the heart of the jarrah forest. It may be of interest to readers as giving a description of the daily life of a lookout man, as well as showing the attitude of the fire-fighter towards his job :

"My thoughts grow hazy. Here I am, like Alexander Selkirk, monarch of all I survey; and I'd give it all for a bath and a cool drink. But there! such luxuries are not for forestry employees on watch-tower duty.

"Ah! there - a flickering dot of light in the distance, that steadies and becomes motionless as I look. My own helio is already set up and sighted on the spot where the dot of light shines. xx I tap out, dash, dot, dot, dash, xx flickers the tiny pin-point of light in acknowledgment. Alert and watchful once more - even that wee dot of light reminds me there are other humans in the world, even though they be 12 miles distant at Greystones. 'Tis true it is not I they are personally interested in - all alone on Mount Dale though I be. No! what they signal for is not to inquire if little Sammy is well and fit, or if he'd like a cool drink. No, indeed! their request is 'How's things?. Is their area clear of fire? Life! just everybody for themselves.

"Once more I relapse into thoughts, and am just spending riotously a portion of the Tatt's ticket which one always hopes to win, when - a wisp of smoke rises. A bearing taken on it with the theodolite, in conjunction with one taken simultaneously from Mount Gunjin lookout tower, places it outside the area. I have just located the fire on the map when the telephone rings. 'Hullo, hullo! Dale, this is Barton's speaking. Howdy? 'All clear on the area' I reply. 'It's pretty warm. Say, Bill, when you're on Dale, did you see any butterflies? 'Sure thing, Sam, you can always see them when you've been there four days - you can't see them yet. You've only been up two days.' 'Well, I can anyway, big black and white ones.' 'Oh, my lad, they are there all the time. It's the coloured ones that turn up after four days. Well, so long, Sam. Good luck.'

"Having entered up the calls, helio, and telephone, in the time message book, and taken another survey of the country spread out for miles below the lookout tower, I pick up the only book on the tower I have not read, and try again to get up an interest in the impossible characters. Jessie, the simple country maiden, rejects with scorn the Lord of the Manor, in favour of the noble-hearted ploughman, etc. etc. Oh, drivel, and I've five more days to put in. I'll be reading the ads of pink pills ere those five days are gone. Oh, well, it's all in a lifetime, and a rest cure at that. Next week some other poor blighter will take my place. There's the view, that's worth a good deal; from Mount Bakewell in the east, far past Chidlow's in the north, away over Rottnest in the west, and bound by the Jarrahdale Range to the south. It is a fine panorama.

"The State forest over which we keep a lookout for fires is quite a small part of the view, occupying only one of the four sides of the tower, which consists of a small open-sided hut mounted on a 25-foot tower. It is equipped with a theodolite and map for finding and locating fires; a heliograph for communicating with any of the Forests Department employees in the State forest, and a telephone connection to Mount Gunjin Lookout Tower, to Barton's Forest Station, and to Forest Headquarters at Mundaring Weir itself. Thus communication can be established any time between Forest Headquarters and any employee in the bush.

"To date, it has been ideal weather for prevention of fires - late rains and cool nights, quite the reverse of last season, when the hot dry weather and gales of wind made it almost impossible to cope with the miles of country that had been so maliciously set alight.

"I have often thought (and Dale is a rare place for one to find time to think) that an enforced term of fire-fighting would perhaps have more effect as a deterrent on an incendiary than imprisonment. Consideration, then, for those who have to fight the fire might sway them more than the fact that it is their own wealth they are burning when they light the country for miles.

"The afternoon draws in. A final 'all clear' has been flashed to the helio. sub-station at Greystones, Barton's Forest Station, and headquarters have been given the same message by telephone, a final 'So long' to Gunjin, and down I go to the hut below the tower for tea. Quickly

the sun sinks; it is dark now, and the wind that ever blows on Dale murmurs in the trees around the hut, a brush rustles by. Away on the western horizon Rottnest Lighthouse is blinking, the only sign of civilisation - about 40 miles away, I think.

"The hard-hit hero of some of our modern best-sellers, who retires to an obscure spot to 'find himself,' should assuredly come to Dale. No one will ever interrupt him and there are many thousands of large stones in the granite ridge that forms the backbone of the hill, under which he could prosecute his search."

Australian Forestry Journal

15th January, 1925.