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"We, sitting in the open space trying to comfort the little children and the old people, were running backwards and forwards to the water race, wetting handkerchiefs to put over one's eyes, watching the great tall trees come crashing down, with the sky looking like millions and millions of stars and the smoke getting unbearable. The bracken all around was burning fiercely and we decided that it would be better inside the schoolroom. I remember dragging the little organ outside, the only item of furniture worth bothering about, and running around outside with a bucket of water putting out small fires.

Then, as the hours crawled by, the women were getting more and more anxious about their men-folk.

What were they doing? Were their houses still standing? Were the men still alive? What was happening? Somebody should go and find out!

Naturally I was ablest and most independent and so I went. I made my way cautiously up the track where the fire had passed. There were still burning branches dropping off trees at times, and once a couple of tiger snakes reared up in front of me. I stood still till they passed, probably to a fiery death, and finally reached the settlement. Somebody told me that all was well and the men had won the fight but were standing by.

From time to time the few men trying to save the mill would come stumbling up the track, almost overcome with exhaustion. We would get to work with water and handkerchiefs and dig the cinders out of their eyes, and then after a long drink they would be back to their mates to continue the fight. At last by about 3am, somebody came down and said we could go home. Mrs Brann and I made tea—the only water was the race water, now dirty and full of all sorts of rubbish, but it was good tea.

The men who were returning from their weekend asked at Three Bridges how Beenak had fared and were told "We don't know what you'll find, if anything. The fire went up there at 50mph and nothing would stop it". They could scarcely believe their eyes when they finally got through. There was every house and hut standing and not one lost - not even badly burnt.

Gradually news filtered through of tragedy all around. At Worley's Mill 17 people burned to death and every building razed. At Russell's Mill every building gone but the people saved their lives by lying flat in the creek. At the Big Mill all buildings gone, but two men saved themselves by getting into a hole and placing a sheet of iron over them.

Our school was closed for a fortnight. It was used as a morgue. All the bodies from Worley's had to be carried across on stretchers and left in the school till arrangements could be made from Gembrook. I wrote to the Department explaining the situation and was given 10 days or so leave. I spent some of the time at Treloars' and was several days getting over puffy eyes etc. Then a few days home in Stawell. My parents must have had a very anxious few days, for it was some time before we could get any communications out and I can imagine their relief when my telegram "Safe and well" arrived.

On my return to Beenak I surveyed the devastation. There were smoking trees around for weeks and that everlasting burnt smell everywhere. The insects and reptiles that had managed to escape now came into the houses. I had a plague of fleas in my bedroom, a snake in the wall, and every night before getting into bed I went round the walls with a shoe killing spiders, centipedes, and whatnot. But we were thankful to be alive."

The full text of this fascinating story is available via the link on [The Beenak Cemetery website](http://www.beenakcemetery.org):
www.beenakcemetery.org

