

A
NARRATIVE
OF
BUSH LIFE
IN AUSTRALIA.

by
Jeddy Wood

Devoted to :

JOHN WOOD, PRINTER AND STATIONER, MARKET-PLACE.

1890.

Being requested to read in a back number of "Tit-Bits" the account of an Australian Bushman, it occurred to me that a narrative of my own experience of Australian Bush Life might be equally instructive and entertaining.

IN 1848, nearly 42 years ago, an elder brother and myself started from Yorkshire, England, having been brought up as Fancy Manufacturers - a very different calling to what we had to turn to in Australia. But we went "with a will Joe" to work, and, if possible, to succeed. We left home on the 29th of March, 1848, - I being then in my 23rd year - travelled all night by train to London, via Penistone and Manchester.

We set sail on the 3rd of April, in the ship "Sultana", and soon got real experience of sea life in the English Channel. On the first morning I proffered my help in raising the anchor, but had speedily to return to my bunk below, there to remain for the next three weeks, - lying on my back most part of the time, quite unable to swallow a mouthful of solid food, I drank cold water, and sucked a little Spanish juice. Only fancy the effect on one's feelings in listening to one of the mates calling to the cook to bring a piece of fat pork, with a string attached to it, in order to grease a fellow-passengers throat.

The Canary Isles were the only land we sighted during that voyage of sixteen weeks. The first object to cheer our vision after the weary waiting, was Cape Otway Lighthouse, on the Australian coast. The ship sprang a leak in the Cape Seas, and pumping became necessary one-third part of every hour, the rest of the voyage. All the able-bodied men on board were bound to help in the work. The sea was running mountains high, and in all my sailing since (crossing three times) I have not witnessed any waves so fearful. After a four-months' passage we landed in Melbourne, which city had been in existence then about 13 years. It certainly had been planned on a large scale, and some of the future streets were macadamized, but a many still in their native simplicity. Only a few good buildings were then erected. The day after our arrival we started by boat for

Geelong, and there I found myself just £20 in debt, with no prospect of immediate employment, and small chance of getting a situation in town. We remained a few days with some relatives in Geelong, then started off into the bush, steering a direct course towards the station occupied by Mr. Stead, a squatter, from Yorkshire, to whom we had a letter of introduction. The first day's walk was about 25 miles, and very toilsome too, having so recently come off ship-board. We crossed open country about 14 miles, and then bush or forest ground. Night seemed to be on us quickly, as there is little twilight in that country. I carried a small pocket pistol so as to be ready for the blackfellows, if they made an attack on us, but this was a new chum's idea of defence against the natives, as the blacks rarely quit their mums after dark, being, as they express it, "too big one frightened of devil devil," to venture abroad during the night. To my surprise next morning I found the pistol destitute of powder, which had been lost on the way, so it was now dispensed with as useless.

Well we kept on the bullock dray road for two hours in the darkness, through the forest to Mr. Charles Steiglitz's Home Station, and Durdid Warra (native name). My brother knocked at the cook's hut door, and the man called out "come in if your shoes are clean". When he saw us enter, he exclaimed "I beg your pardon". He took us over the way to the house, and there we were hospitably entertained for the night. Next morning, as may be imagined, our limbs were sore and stiff to such an extent that we could scarcely put one foot before the other, yet we did manage to walk about five miles in the course of the day, as far as Messrs. Cowie and Stead's Sheep Station, Bunjil Tap (native name),— two of the oldest settlers in Victoria. We were cordially received by Mr. Stead to whom the letter of introduction was addressed (given kindly to us by Mr. Wm. Armitage, of Netherend). We remained with him for a few days, although no billet on the station just then was open for us, so we had to travel back to Geelong, the entire distance of 30 miles in one day. But many times afterwards I rode the same journey in four and five hours. Shortly after our return to town, Mr. Stead wrote offering me a shop-herd's billet, which I accepted, truly no inviting work for a

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new arrival, though many a Londoner had to turn to the same thing and I would observe here, that young men going out to the colony should not be nice as to the most suitable or desirable posts, in the first place, if only they can get what may seem a low start in life, whilst still aiming to advance to something better as time goes on.

Well, I marched off the second time up country with a 'swag on my back, blankets, etc. After sundown, I turned into a shepherd's hut on the plains, and got to the station next day. On the morrow, one of the men from the home station took me to my flock of sheep - 2000 odd, - stayed with me the day out, to show me the entire boundary of the run, there being no fences then, but a ploughed furrow on one side, a pipe clay gully on the other and the station road along the remainder. The run was about two miles square. Just fancy my feelings when I had, that night, to get into a shepherd's wooden box, and sleep, if I could, alongside the sheep-fold, then, the next morning, to face the solitary bush alone, with no human being visible, only my dog and the sheep as companions from sunrise to sunset. The second evening the sheep took me back to their camping ground near the hut. After that I got accustomed to the ins and outs of the run, so as to find my way readily. Shepherds have two substantial meals per day. The hut-keeper generally provides a good warm supper for the evening, consisting of roast beef or mutton, cooked in a camp oven, covering the lid with hot ashes, and this beautifully done, along with the damper bread (i.e. without leaven) put into the hot ashes, covered with the same, when it comes out clean and well-baked; tea - the invariable accompaniment of all meals; and sometimes we got doughboys, or, in other words, suet dumplings.

The hut-keeper's duties are: to cook for the two shepherds; kill a sheep when required, and cut it up the next day, putting most of it into a cask of brine, and, after a few days, boil as required. When cold it was beautiful, at any rate hungry shepherds thought so. The hut-keeper is also expected to move the hurdles every day, so that the sheep can have a fresh camping ground every night. I fell in for the wet weather (August and September), but fortunately most of the rain comes in the night, and rain is rain there. When fine weather returned, I borrowed a gun with which to shoot parrots, or anything worth the skinning and curing in order to be sent to friends at home, all excepting the bird Laughing Jackass, so called in the colony on 25.

account of its loud cackling notes, which are something between a donkey's bray and a laugh. These notes the bird gives distinctly before dawn every morning, whether dark or moonlight, also at certain intervals during the day. In fact it serves the purpose of bushman's clock. This bird is protected by Government, and greatly valued as the destroyer of snakes, and other reptiles; these it kills and eats, having a powerful beak. It is about the size of a wood-pigeon, brown in colour, with dark spots and short tail.

After shepherding nine months, I was offered another billet on the home station, as general useful, foot-rotting sheep, carting firewood, sheep washing, loading sand for Mr. Stead's new house (which was in course of erection) ploughing two paddocks of about ten acres each, for oats and oaten hay, at which work I had scarcely ever tried my hand before coming to the colony. Whatever was asked of me to be done that was in anyway practicable, I tackled it without demur, indeed I was complimented by an old Yorkshire farmer, living on the station, for having performed the farming operations very satisfactorily, which included the breaking in of three young horses.

At that time my brother was overseer on the station, of course he got more wages than I did, mine for the first 12 months were £24 yet in addition to it, Mr. Cowie gave me a few pounds for extra services.

With the cash my brother realized, to which mine was added, besides a small deposit of his at Geelong, we bought nine bales of wool, and shipped it to London, where it sold at a profit of £30. All our earnings, in the hands of the ordinary bushman, would have been wasted at the public house, or grog shop; so it was with the majority of the old chums, who ended their days in the poor house or hospital.

Occasionally some minister of the Church of England, came to Mr. Cowie's, and gave a service at his house on the Sunday, and at intervals in summertime, we rode to other stations, a distance of 4 or 5 miles, to hear a sermon at the homestead of Labilier, Stieghts, or Wallace, as the case might be. The last-mentioned was a Scotchman, and a Scotch minister preached there, if we could not get to any of these places, we had a Sunday Service in the woolshed. Not long after this Messrs. Cowie and Stead dissolved partnership, and Mr. Stead let his portion of the run to a Mr. Cuthbert, for whom I became over-seer, at a

Salary of £130 per annum: but at the end of the year he gave me £150. In that capacity my duties were of a varied character. Some mornings before sunrise, I had to ride to out station huts, count the sheep out of the fold, and if any were missing, go in search of them, and probably find them joined with some of our neighbours flocks; another day would have to drive in a fat beast for killing, then either shoot it, or rope it to the stock-yard fence, and fell it with an axe. In one case we had not drawn in the slack of the rope sufficiently, I went towards it, ready to fell it, and it came rushing at me, with all its force, I caught it in the forehead and killed it with one blow of the axe. If I had not caught it I might have been killed by it. The following day, I had to cut up the beast. My employer said to a friend of mine, from Pontefract, "Wood can kill a beast, and cut it up, but it would puzzle any man to name the joints when he has done it." Even for this I could have given him a good reason, namely, by so doing the good and inferior cuts were equally distributed amongst the hutkeepers. I had also to give out to them rations of tea, sugar, and flour, weekly. In summer time they had to kill their own mutton from the flocks. Occasionally I had a pig to kill. I remember a circumstance in connection with one pig we had made up in a wooden sty. Some blacks happened to be looking at it, and made the following remark - - "Merrygig you, gunyon to quanby in and white fellow to feed you," or in other words "lucky fellow you, house to live in and white man to feed you." Sometimes I had to be in the saddle from morning to night, looking for stock. Now and again I got pitched off by bucking horses, at times by putting a cold saddle on the horse and mounting it immediately. Several times my horse has fallen suddenly and sent me off, and once he shied at a black log of wood, and I was being pitched headforemost, but having tight hold of my reins, and the horse suddenly jerking up its head as I was falling, it brought me straight on my feet, and I was no worse. One afternoon I was riding fast to one of the outstation huts, when my horse leaped right over a snake which was lying on the road, sunning itself. Another day, going up the river side to let water off for sheep-washing, I espied a snake coiled up on a path, and carrying a spade on my shoulder, I brought it down as sudden as thought across its coils, so

killing it. It might have had the best of me, my spade being so short.

During my residence on the station, one poor fellow, a shepherd, was bitten by a snake when in the act of putting some young parrots into their nest in the hole of a tree, these had evidently fluttered out of the nest through dread of the serpent which is their mortal foe. The poor man only survived a few days. I have killed numbers of venomous snakes at different times, and the Australian ones are mostly of that class, but they are easily dispatched by a slight blow across them. Mr. Cuthbert went off for a trip to Van Dieman's Land (now called Tasmania) for the benefit of his health, the climate there being much cooler than Victoria. When going away he wished me to thatch his house before he returned, a three-roomed cottage on the ground floor. I did not "let on," as they say in the bush, that I had never done anything of the kind before, but as in other instances, I tried, and accomplished it, about the time he returned. The great feat was, there were to be no bands or brods to appear outside. I placed one length of long grass on the eaves of the roof, pegging it down with sticks into the old thatch, and so I went on, turning the corners, and finishing the work.

I was never benighted so as to have to bush it out all night, or unable to find my way to the homestead, though I had often to pilot others in the dark from station to station, when they have admitted after, had it depended on them, they would have been bushed all night. One of my fellow overseers left my hut one evening after dark, in order to cross the bush to his station, got lost, tied his horse to a tree, stood by it till daybreak, and to his vexation, the paddock fence was in sight. What he ought to have done when he found he was lost, was to have thrown the reins on the horses neck, and it would have taken him home. (the same gentleman has in his possession at his home in Pontefract, Yorkshire, the skeleton of a black-fellow which he met with in the bush.) I remember starting to walk to the same station one morning, intending to drive some sheep back in fact I did bring them back with me after all. When I left the road to cross the bush, a thick fog came on, I walked two hours, came back to the same road I had left so long since, tried again, got in sight of Mr. Wallace's station this time, the one further

down the river than our own. The fog was now clearing away, turned up the road to Mr. Edgerton's station, where I had been steering for all the morning, after having a feed and a rest, I started off with the sheep, and got home alright.

Now comes the most memorable event of those years, Feb. 6 1851, Black Thursday as it is called, a day, the recollection of which (while reason holds her seat), will never be effaced from my memory, nor from any of the colonists I think, that had to work amongst the fire that day. The whole country seemed to be enveloped in smoke, and the bush fires, none who witnessed the effects of the devastating element as seen in our locality, could ever efface from his mind, the dread impression of it. That morning, I rode over to Mr. Edgerton's station (poor fellow, some time after this, he was gored by a bullock in the stock-yard, right in the eye, and died immediately.) The bush was then thick with smoke, I had not been there long, before I saw the fire coming through the bush in the direction of the woolshed, apparently as fast as a horse gallop, we tried to keep back the flames by beating at them with green bushes, but could not, the shed was burnt down, the wind being so strong we had no chance, also a stack of eaten hay was burnt, we did manage to save the house, hut and stable. I was nearly blinded by working amongst the smoke and flames, I rode most of the way home that evening with my eyes shut, and water running from them at a fearful rate, I expected my sight would never be right again, but by bathing and other remedies, my eyes got better. Many a poor fellow lost his life that day, others great value in live stock, and more after from want of food. I was very thankful to find on my return, that our station had not suffered much, the wind having gone down considerably before the fire reached there and night coming on, accompanied by the dew, checked it. The logs burn or smoulder all night, and then if a breeze springs up next day, off the fires go again. After all this, the country was in a bad state, for cattle, &c., till after the rain came, great numbers dying.

The next experience to be recorded shows to what extremity we may be put in an out-of-the-way place. A youth about 8 or 10 years old, got drowned in a water hole. I had to do duty as minister - at the request of his parents - by reading a portion of the burial service, and sexton, by digging, filling in, and

fencing round the grave. Then came in the same year (1851) the wild excitement of the gold diggings, which caused a many to lose their common sense. For instance, one successful digger goes into a pastrycook's shop in Melbourne, asks for some pastry, tenders a £5 note in payment, and says "Give the children the change". Of course all, to some extent participated in the excitement.

The settlers were nearly at their wits end to get men to attend to their sheep and cattle, which the shepherds, in some cases left unprotected. I remained with my employer till after sheep shearing, and then went off to the diggings with four mates, started from Melbourne with horse and dray, provisions for about a month, tarpauling for a tent, which we threw over the dray at night, to sleep under while on the road to Fryer's Creek. We remained there about four weeks, bringing back with us to Melbourne a little over £600 worth of gold to divide amongst the five of us. I took steamer for Geelong, that being my port. After a short rest in town, I set out again with four other mates for Fryer's Creek, but not getting gold enough there, we went ahead to Eaglehawk Gully, cleared £200 odd each in about five weeks. This sort of life was very rough and excitable. One afternoon I went into some old workings and found in one of the partitions betwixt one claim and another 3 lbs. weight of gold worth £109.16s.0d.

I still possess my digger's license, framed and hung up, its date 2nd of Feb., 1852.

Others of our family arrived in the colony about this time. My brother had recently gone in partnership with a timber merchant, at Geelong, but as trade in town was very stagnant for a short period, in consequence of so general a rush to the diggings, nearly all the male population leaving the town. It was agreed by the partners that my brother should try his luck there also, in the meantime, until trade revived. He and his mates realized by the venture about £600 each. After a time we bought the timber business, and took into our firm another brother, who had settled in Geelong two years previously. Then working together in what turned out to be a prosperous undertaking, we made the most of what we have, in 5 or 6 years. Mr. Cuthbert before leaving the colony to return to Ireland, asked me to take the management of his station at a salary of £300 per annum, during his absence,

but being then fixed in business I declined. He then took in a partner, set sail for England, called at Tahiti on the way, caught the yellow fever there, and died on shipboard. Wild excitement was prevalent in town and everywhere as the effect of this sudden increase of wealth. New companies were formed to deal in all sorts of things for profit, one party sent to Singapore for ready-made houses to erect a whole terrace. In addition to these doings on a large scale, it was somewhat of a mania with returned diggers, to possess each his own weather-board cottage, thereby causing a great demand for timber. We obtained our timber from various quarters - hardwood from Tasmania, cedar from Sydney for cabinet work and bank fittings, &c., another sort from Singapore, pine from America, and deals from the Baltic.

My own fancy, beside the timber trade, was to buy young horses, principally out of the bush (draft) break them in, and sell them for carting to the diggings. The profit from this source amounted to £900 in a short time. One foal I bought for £28, and sold it when about 2 years old for £150.

My elder brother went to England on a visit to his relatives and friends, and there married before his return, bringing back with them various relations connected with both. I shortly after this (in 1858) along with my other brother and partner, paid a visit to the old country, but not being successful as to the main purpose of my visit, sailed once more to Victoria in the early part of 1860, took stock of our business, sold out to my elder brother, and then bade adieu to the colony. In 1862, I married a Yorkshire lady, and settled down for good in England. Still I much prefer the colony, and its climate, and had it not been for family ties, I should in all probability have been there now. My own success and safety during those years of varied enterprise I ascribe to God's good providence over me. I was delighted with the Wild West Show at the London Exhibition of 1887, especially to see the bucking horses. I noticed they were different in one point to the Australian bucking horse - they, the latter, buck forward three or four times, making a sudden twist round to right or left, and he must be a good horseman that can stick in the saddle then. I once saw a little shoemaker mount a bucking horse in the bush, he stuck on like a nonkey, and after some considerable effort, the horse walked quietly away with him.

Should this account meet the eye of Mr. Wr. Stead, now supposed to be located in Ireland - of which country his mother was a native - I would repeat to him what was said by an old shepherd on the run of his late father's sheep-station, Enley Park, formerly portion of Bunjill Tap - "A Yorkshire Irishman has been born there," at the new house built by Mr. Stead Senr., who named the homestead and grounds after his native place, Enley Park. The shepherd went on to quote the old adage, "Give a Yorkshireman a halter and he will find a horse." The Hon. G. F. Bolcher was brother-in-law to Mr. Stead, and sold the station for him, to Dennis and Osborne through my recommendation. I should very much like to see the old place again. I have read with great interest the fine description of Ballarat given by Mr. Froud, in his "Oceana", and can scarcely realize that this beautiful city and its gay suburbs are now occupying the site of what I saw a few weeks after the diggings broke out, about 35 years ago, when I drove up from the sheep-station on business. The best description I can give of it at that time, would be, of a swarm of bees, all intent on making honey. The only difference, theirs (the diggers) was hard gold instead of honey. Such a sight and clatter of cradles for washing gold, on every side I never saw or heard before or since. Mr. Froud evidently was the guest of well-to-do settlers, and did not come in contact with the ordinary bushman.

In conclusion, my advice to anyone going out to Australia would be, - "If you have money at your disposal, place it in the bank till you get colonial experience."

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