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SCENES IN AUSTRALIAN LIFE.

The Story of a Wild-Cat Skin.

During my stay at one of the Australian Diggins, I purchased a commodious residence, in which I lived for some time in solitary state. This tenement was situated in a most desirable locality, in the midst of beautiful woodland scenery, and surrounded by very extensive park-like grounds. There was a right of free warren attached to the property, and good shooting in the neighborhood. To descend to particulars I may say that the residence in question consisted of a bark-hut which was made over to me by my friends, the Colters, when they set out for Mount Koorang; and which I believe to have been one of the best appointed and most convenient dwellings at that time on the Diggins.

The fixtures and furniture of the hut also came into my possession, including a table, of which the legs were weak and uncertain, and the top slightly on an incline; an original grid-iron or bent hoop; several empty bottles; two benches; one shelf for sheet of bark nailed to the wall, containing candles, salt pipes, and tobacco, and which usually filled with water when it rained, the roof being rather leaky. In addition to these valuables there was a bedstead or frame of logs covered with boughs—an article whose luxurious character it is unnecessary for me to point out.

I considered myself one of the most fortunate fellows in the country, till I discovered that the Colters had left behind them other things of a less desirable nature. After having bought my first bag of flour, I became aware that I had come into the possession of a populous colony of mice, which consumed among them almost as much flour as I did. They rattled over my furniture at night, and scolded me with faint squeaks of displeasure as they picked into my provisions. There was no keeping them out. I put my damper into double bags, and hung it from the ceiling—that is to say, from the ring-pole—but they climbed down the rope and gnawed a hole in the bag. After many fruitless efforts, I caught one, and made an example of him; but I found that example was entirely lost upon the rest. They were incorrigible, hungry and would eat. They increased and multiplied to such an extent, that at length matters became serious.

I hope I am not by nature cruel, nor much given to what are called atrocities. I like all living creatures in their proper places. There was an old frog-beetle, I recollect, which resided in my chimney, and which was of a social disposition, and would come out sometimes to pass the evening with me. He would sit on the hearth and stare fixedly at me with his contemplative eye for an hour at a time. I never thought of doing him any harm; but then he was not obtrusive in his manners—above all, he did not eat flour at 1s. 6d. a pound.

Powder and shot were expensive, but their effects were lasting. I got out my revolver, loaded it carefully, and having placed my last new damper, unopened, in the middle of the floor, I turned into bed, keeping my eye on the damper, and my finger on the trigger. But not one of the cunning little rascals would come out. Several times one fat old fellow popped his head out of his hole, as though on the watch; his residence was entirely undermined by these animals—looked at me, and then popped back again; I think he winked at me.

The other inhabitants of the hut were less troublesome. There were some tarantulas, or "tri-antelopes," as Colter called them, which lived in the bark, and were in the habit of biting people; but I was told they always respected the person of the proprietor. Then there were a number of insects of such curious forms and brilliant colors as would have delighted an entomologist. Any one with a proper regard for the interests of science, would certainly have collected some of them in a bottle, and burned lucifer matches in it. I, however, contented myself with watching them as they crowded on my table at night. When by chance they would dart right to walk over the white paper, and flutter their gorgeously painted wings, there was a kind of moth with four wings, a little gray-coated fellow, and I used to observe with a melancholy curiosity. He would come flying down upon the paper, where he would walk about for a while; and then, as if he preferred that mode of travelling, would cast off his wings, one after the other, and become a mere grub. Here was a theme, on which perhaps, a gold digger might moralize.

The diggers in the neighborhood went away, one after the other, till I became confined almost exclusively to the society I have described. However, there was a store still standing about half a mile off, and as long as that remained there was no great cause for complaint. A butcher I had no need of, while the powder and shot lasted, for the woods yielded plenty of game, and in abundant variety. There were quail, pigeons,

(these were fine birds with golden wings, larger than the English wood pigeon), parrots—not to speak of many smaller birds, which were not to be despised when the big ones were scarce. Then sometimes a shot might be had at an opossum or a bandicoot, or some other four-footed tenant of the woods, which, like the birds, went into the frying-pan, and was consumed without saucers or ceremony.

On the whole, I was not dissatisfied with my company, nor particularly pleased when I found my privacy intruded upon by a stranger. One night, on returning home from work I found a man lying asleep on my bed, with his hat on, and his face buried in his arms. I stood for a moment in admiration of the coolness and then stirred him up with a pick until he awoke.

"Who are you, pray?" I asked.

He turned towards me and said: "It is me, Mr. Smith; don't you know, Gardner?"

His clothes were in disorder, and his face haggard and dirty; but I recognised him at length, as a man who, a few weeks before, had been working in the gully, but who had been absent since that time. He began, to tell a story of how he had gone with a party to the Ovens Diggins, then just discovered. He had met with no luck at the Ovens, and, as he had quarrelled with his party, he had come back to stay with me. This was highly pleasant and satisfactory. I knew nothing of Mr. Gardner, and was by no means disposed to have his society thrust upon me in this manner. I was at a loss to understand why he should have come to me, for I had never had much intercourse with him. I remembered him as a civil spoken man with whom I had sometimes exchanged a word, but who had never shown a disposition to court any society beyond that of the man with whom he was working.

However, it would not do to turn him out at once; night was coming on, and he was evidently too much fatigued to go elsewhere for a lodging. He had sold his tent and everything belonging to it, having trusted, as he informed me, entirely to my hospitality. I gave him to understand that he was welcome to the shelter of the hut for the night, but that I wished to work alone, and did not want company. He thanked me so earnestly for this sorry offer, that I became better disposed towards him, especially when he insisted upon making himself useful, and, tired as he was, set to work to look out supper. There was, however, something strange about his manner. He never spoke, unless in answer to a question; then his reply was short, and uttered in an odd, incoherent sort of way, for which I could not account. As soon as supper was over, he seated himself in a corner of the fire place with his feet buried in his hands. After a while, when I supposed he was falling asleep, a sudden shiver passed over him and he moved his position without looking up and doubted himself still more. I asked if he was cold, and he stared at me as though surprised at the question. He was not cold, he said. I advised him to turn in; and then he got up, and proceeded to heap some logs on the fire, after which he rolled himself in his blankets. I did the same; and, having determined to turn my sulky companion out of doors on the morrow, I fell asleep.

Next morning, as soon as I awoke, Gardner called to me in a faint voice, and asked me to bring him a drink of water. On going to him, I found that he was too ill to move. During the day his illness increased, and I proposed to go the government camp for a doctor; but he begged me not to leave him, and insisted that he suffered more pain of mind than of body, and the convulsive twitching of his face, as he lay with closed eyes in bed, was not a pleasant sight to see. He expressed his gratitude for such services as I was able to render him, and was evidently anxious to give me as little trouble as possible; but when I asked him to explain what ailed him, and wished to avail myself of any knowledge of medicine I might possess, he would make no answer, or he would only say as before, that he should soon be better.

During the night which followed, I was awakened with a loud groaning. The bed which he occupied, was at right angles with mine, and as the fire was still burning, I could see his face from where I lay. He was evidently struggling with some fearful dream. His breast heaved convulsively; a gurgling noise issued from his throat, and presently he broke out with a cry: "Ned! Ned!" several times repeated. I remembered that Gardner's mate with whom he had been working before he left the gully, was a man commonly known as "Long Ned," who was believed to have been a very successful digger. This man had quitted the neighborhood at the same time as Gardner, and probably in his company.

I got out of bed for the purpose of waking my companion; and having lit a candle, I saw that the convulsions were renewed, and that he presented the appearance of being in

a fit. I took hold of his arm and awoke him. He stared wildly about him, and recognizing me, he sank back with a sigh of relief.

"Gardner," I said, "where's Long Ned?"

He raised his head with a scared look, and put his hand to his face.

"Why don't you answer me?"

"What makes you ask me that?" he groaned out.

"No matter; I do ask it. Where is he?"

"I don't know," he gasped.

I felt certain he was not telling the truth; and a suspicion occurred to me, which I determined to set at rest at once.

"Look you, Gardner, I must know what is the reason of your groaning and crying out in your sleep. Such dreams as these don't come to honest men."

"What do you take me for?"

"I believe you have got something on your mind; if it is anything you dare tell, I advise you to tell it, or I shall think the worst of you," I said.

He made no reply and I continued:

"Did Long Ned go to the Ovens along with you?"

"Don't ask me, I can't tell."

"I ask you again, what's become of him?"

He made no reply for some minutes, and then suddenly raising himself up, he said:

"I will tell you. You won't wrong me, will you?"

"Strangely, why should I? What do you mean?"

"I've got a bad story to tell you, and perhaps you won't believe it; but it's all true. You asked me where Ned was?"

"Well, poor Ned's gone; he was murdered in the bush—not by me—don't look like that, I did not do it."

My companion seemed so much agitated, that I got him a drink of tea, after which he grew calmer.

"Tell me all about this," I said; how did it happen? I will not trouble the reader with the questions by which I obtained the narrative of the murder. It was in substance as follows:—

Gardner and Long Ned had set out together for the Ovens, carrying nothing with them except their blankets. The latter had wrapped in his bundle forty ounces of gold which he would not send to Melbourne by the express, as he said he did not want to be short of money at the new diggings. Long Ned was a very good sort of fellow, but unfortunately he could not pass a grog-shop or drinking tent without going in; and he invariably staid by his bottle till he had finished it. Gardner said that his companion would often get so drunk in the middle of the day, that it would be impossible to get him away from the place till the next morning; and on this account they travelled very slowly.

One afternoon when they were going to stop by the roadside for dinner, Long Ned caught sight of a tent standing back from the road, on which a dirty cotton handkerchief was flying in the breeze, as a sign of more or less good cheer to be had within. On a nearer inspection, this place of entertainment proved to be a frame of rude sticks, covered with pieces of tarpaulin and strips of old blankets, and beside it stood a shed for a horse and cart. The proprietor was dozing beside the fire, with a short pipe in his mouth. Long Ned, in his usual way, declined the offer of coffee, and desired the man to bring out a bottle of "stuff," at which all were presently occupied.

The owner of the tent, the only person they saw there, was a short squat man, unusually dirty even for the diggers, and with a face so covered with dark, matted hair, that the features were scarcely distinguishable. However, he seemed of a social temper, and did his best to please his visitors. Long Ned began to brag about the gold he had found; how he had got forty ounces in his "swag," and tickets for about fifty ounces more, which he had sent down to Melbourne. The landlord said it wasn't everybody who had such luck.

There being no room for all three to sleep in the tent, Gardner, with a good deal of trouble, persuaded his companion to resume the journey. The landlord offered an opposition to their departure, but on the contrary directed them to a lodging tent which they might reach before dark by a short cut over a neighboring hill. He brought out another bottle of spirits, and offered them a parting glass at his own expense, which neither refused.

They took their way in the dusk over the hill he had pointed out; but before they had walked a mile, Gardner began to feel a stiffness of arm and shoulder with dizziness. His companion soon began to show the same symptoms in a greater degree, although they were both tolerably sober a few minutes before. Staggering along, scarcely conscious of where they were going, they came to an old traveller's camp, with two miamis, or bush-tents still standing. Gardner

managed to get under one of the miamis and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

He said that he never had such a sleep as that. All sorts of shapes seemed dancing before his eyes; and there was a cold weight as it were upon his heart, such as he had never felt before. Then he thought he heard his name called loudly, louder still, and then faintly. He made a great effort to awake, and at last succeeded, but he was in a half-stupor state. There was a noise of some person moving near him; and a low moaning. He got on his knees to creep out of the miami, and by the light of the moon he saw his mate lying on the ground with blood issuing from a cut on the head, and a man kneeling beside him, and searching his pockets.

Horror-struck at the sight Gardner was at first unable to move, but at length, with a sudden impulse, he threw himself upon the assassin, and tried to bring him to the ground. The latter, although surprised by the attack, soon freed himself, and snatched two caps of a revolver at his assistant; but the pistol missing fire, he caught up the bundle of Ned and made off into the bush.

Gardner had no strength to follow him but sunk down by the body of his mate, and lay there he could not tell how long. When he again came to himself, it was daylight. Having satisfied himself that Ned had ceased to breathe, he ran away from the spot and walked for two days without sleeping, until he found his way back to the hut.

"It's all true," said Gardner, when he had ended his story.

"What made you keep it secret?" I asked.

"Did you give me information to the police?"

"I dared not. They'd have said that it was me."

I could hardly restrain my indignation at this reply.

"I know what the police are," he repeated; and if you was like me, you wouldn't have told them either."

He would not explain what he meant; but I afterwards found out the reason of his fears which were not altogether groundless. Gardner was, in the language of the colonies, an "old-timer"—that is to say, a discharged convict; and he knew that if the murder became known, he would be suspected of having killed his mate for the sake of the gold he had about him.

I told Gardner that he should give information to the police at once. Seeing that I was resolved, he at length gave his consent, and I set off for the government camp, and inquired of the guard for one of the commissioners who bore a good name at the Diggins. Fortunately, that gentleman was engaged at a rubber of whist, and, therefore, although it was near midnight, I had no difficulty in getting to see him. He listened to me politely, and showed a degree of energy not altogether common among those officials.

"This is a strange story," he said. "The fact of the murder is true enough, for the body has been found under the circumstances you describe, but why should this man want to conceal it? I must see him."

I told him Gardner's condition, and he sent for the doctor from the whist-table, ordered three horses to be saddled, and desired me to lead the way to the hut. In half an hour more, he had heard the story from Gardner's own lips, and ascertained that the murder had taken place on the third night before.

"Could you swear to the murderer if you saw him?" the Commissioner asked.

Gardner said he could not; he was so stupefied that he remembered nothing about him, except that he was a stout man.

"You say there was a grog-tent where you stopped, about a mile from the place?"

"That tent is not there now; I was round all the place last night."

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," Gardner said.

"You are mistaken; I do believe you. I know there was such a tent there. You say the man took your mate's swag with him—what was in it?"

"Nothing but a possum rug that his gold was tied up in."

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing that I know of."

The Commissioner considered. "That's awkward," he observed to the doctor. "A bag of gold and a possum-rug are things not easily identified."

"I should know that rug among a thousand rugs," interposed Gardner.

"How so?"

"Why, it was made in a hurry, or else in a place where possums are not so plenty as they are here. There was one cat-skin in it."

"You are certain of that?"

"I am sir," he replied.

"Could you swear to the man that kept the cat-skin, if you saw him?"

"I should know him anywhere."

"Very good. Doctor, I believe you to examine your patient. Let him have anything he wants from the camp. You need not be

alarmed, my man, you are not suspected about this affair. Good-night to you."

I followed the commissioner outside, and asked if he thought he could trace the man at the grog tent on whom our suspicion had fallen.

"I think I can," he said. "Time is everything; he has three days start of us, but it may be done. And the commissioner mounted his horse and galloped away."

The doctor pronounced it necessary to have Gardner removed to an hospital-tent, which had just been fitted up at the camp. Next morning, he sent down some assistance for that purpose; we took down the door of the hut, which was formed of sheet bark, and with its assistance we constructed a rude litter on which the sick man was carried without much difficulty.

On the evening of the following day, a man with a horse and cart was pursuing leisurely the road from the Ovens to Melbourne. He had just emerged from a long line of forests, and had reached the rising ground from which a wide view stretches over plain and sea. The city lay within a few miles; and as the sun was not yet down, the traveller would get there easily before dark. So he thought to himself, as he stopped near the police-station to light his pipe, and then resumed his journey at the same pace as before.

Two troopers, one of whom appeared to be an officer, were lounging before the door as he was passing, and bade him "Good-evening."

"Evening," replied the man. "Let us look at what you have got in your cart, my man," said the officer.

"What's your game?" was the reply—

"There's nothing in the cart but my traps. Look it you like. And he seated himself on a log, and smoked his pipe, while the police man turned over the contents of the cart.

It contained articles of bush-furniture, cooking-utensils, two or three casks, and other articles of a similar kind. In one corner, tied up with a rope, was opossum-rug, which the officer unrolled and spread out on the ground. The man on the log then took the pipe out of his mouth. The rug was a large one, with a defect in the make, which was very unusual; it contained one wild-cat skin.

"What do you want with that?" said the owner of the cart gruffly.

"Is this your rug?"

"Why, of course. Whose else?"

"How did you come by it?"

"How did I come by it?" he repeated with a laugh. "Why I bought it. They're cheap enough, ain't they?"

"Very true," replied the officer, and he rolled up the rug and replaced it in the cart.

Then going up to the man he said: "You killed a man on Friday, near the Goulburn. You cut him on the head with a tomahawk when he was asleep. You took that rug from him, and forty ounces of gold, which you have got now in your pocket."

At this speech the man dropped his pipe, and sat for a moment stupefied; then suddenly started up and put his hand to his belt, in which he carried a revolver. The officer, who saw the motion, was beforehand with him, and catching him by the throat, threw him down.

"Joe, tie his hands," the officer said to his man.

The prisoner having been secured, he was searched, and a quantity of gold was found upon him, amongst which was a bag containing exactly forty ounces. He was then placed in confinement, and subsequently sent back to the Diggins.

As soon as Gardner's state of health would permit, he was confronted with the prisoner and immediately recognized him as the keeper of the tent where Long Ned and himself had stopped on the afternoon of the murder and where he had no doubt they had been "hooused."

When the prisoner was brought to trial in Melbourne, it was proved that he was a man of notoriously bad character, and there was great reason to fear that poor Ned had not been his only victim. With respect to the crime for which he was arraigned, other facts came out which removed all doubt of his guilt, and he was condemned and executed.

As to Gardner, I never saw him after he recovered from his illness; but before he left the Diggins, he informed me that he should go to the Tasmania to a little farm he possessed there. I wished him good luck and returned with considerable satisfaction to the society of the mice.

[C. Chambers' Journal.]

The Marquis and Marchioness of Chandos arrived in New York, by the last Cunard steamer. They are coming north, we believe, to meet the Prince in this city and accompany him on his tour. Lady Georgina Fane, sister to the Earl of Westmoreland, arrived by last steamer at Halifax, and came up the Gulf by the steamer Lady Head to Quebec.—[Montreal Gazette.]