

tomahawk—could have produced no appreciable effect on the natural products of a large continent. Nor did they; but there was another instrument in the hands of these savages which must be credited with results which it would be difficult to over-estimate. I refer to the *fire-stick*; for the blackfellow was constantly setting fire to the grass and trees, both accidentally, and systematically for hunting purposes. Living principally on wild roots and animals, he tilled his land and cultivated his pastures with fire; and we shall not, perhaps, be far from the truth if we conclude that almost every part of New Holland was swept over by a fierce fire, on an average, once in every five years. That such constant and extensive conflagrations could have occurred without something more than temporary consequences seems impossible, and I am disposed to attribute to them many important features of Nature here; for instance, the baked, calcined, indurated condition of the ground so common to many parts of the continent, the remarkable absence of mould which should have resulted from the accumulation of decayed vegetation, the comparative unproductiveness of our soils, the character of our vegetation and its scantiness, the retention within bounds of insect life (notably of the locust, grasshopper, caterpillar, ant and moth), a most important function, and the comparative scarcity of insectivorous birds and birds of prey. They must also have had an influence on the thermometrical range, and probably affected the rainfall and atmospheric and electrical conditions.

When these circumstances are weighed, it may perhaps be doubted whether any section of the human race has exercised a greater influence on the physical condition of any large portion of the globe than the wandering savages of Australia.

Referring once more to the deterioration of our pastures in respect to quality, it is to be remarked as a consequence that our horses of today, though on the average decidedly superior in appearance and breeding to those of forty years back, have not the same stamina. In cattle and sheep a falling off of the sort is not so readily detected, though it probably exists. In both cases, however, the periodical scarcity of fodder, as compared with the abundance of the past must in fairness be taken into the reckoning.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *A Visit to the Moira in Company with the Police*

AFTER THE RETURN of my brother and myself from the Moira, we set to work to make preparations for occupying a block of country in that locality. Whilst so engaged, however, the solitude of Tongala was broken in upon by the arrival of several troopers, headed by the officer in charge of the native mounted police. The detachment, rather a larger one than usual, consisted, besides the officer, of four blacks and four white troopers. Such a visitation from the outer world, as a matter of course, somewhat fluttered us Volscians in Corioli. The station hands all turned out to gaze on the strange men and horses, as if such a sight had never met their eyes before, and bestowed on the removal of cloaks, unslinging of carbines, watering of chargers, &c., their undivided attention; whilst the uniformity practised in such matters by the troopers, and their systematic clock-work-like mode of managing matters which civilians are apt to look on as trifles, did not fail to elicit, *sotto voce*, uncomplimentary remarks from some of my men, to whom such methodical ways brought back unpleasant reminiscences of prison days. The officer, who accompanied me to my hut after he had seen his men disposed of, carelessly unbuckled his sabre and pitched it and his foraging cap on to the sofa, and taking a chair, amused me a good deal as he rattled out, in the most *déagé* manner, that he had received instructions "to put himself at the head of his present force, apprehend all troublesome Blacks, and restore quiet to the disaffected district; that a reinforcement in the person of Corporal Rolfe, a non-commissioned officer in whom he placed the greatest confidence, was momentarily expected; that his fellows were all of the right sort, specially trained indeed by himself; and that the service was thoroughly

to his liking, however he might otherwise regret his temporary absence from Melbourne and the ladies."

The effect of this unexpected gush was not a little heightened by the jaunty ways of my guest, who, having got rid of his buckskin gloves, and propitiated his moustache with some little caresses, sauntered up and down the room in all the fascinations of a preternaturally erect carriage, shell-jacket, fixed spurs, and red stripes down the side seams of his breeches. In fact the *tout ensemble* of the thing tickled my fancy so much, occurring in the midst of monotonous days, that I have not yet forgotten it.

Another of the little peculiarities of my guest (a pleasant and genial person), and one which I found exceedingly comical, was his habitual use of military phraseology; so that the shepherds' huts and places of the sort figured as *positions* in his conversation, men riding abreast were said to be *in line*; a camp in the bush took rank as a *bivouac*, and so on. In addition, it was charming also to notice on a short acquaintance, not only that the estimate in which this warrior (long since, poor fellow, a pilgrim to the happy hunting grounds) held civilians was, in the main, a low one; but that, unknown to himself probably, he looked on them as a very unimportant portion of the community, whose *raison d'être* might have been the erection of towns in which the military in times of peace might enjoy the usual *agrément*s of society, of which the daughters of civilians to flirt with formed a prominent feature; whilst, of course, in times of war, such places would be put to their proper purposes, and be defended, battered, and sacked in the orthodox way—as we always read in history.

To pass on, however, to the cause of what, in compliment to the manes of my military friend, let us call this armed intervention at Tongala. A few weeks previously, a shepherd of an altogether unwarlike spirit was tending a flock of weaned lambs on the trans-Murray portion of our run, the right to depasture which, the reader may remember, had been granted by the wrong Commissioner of Crown Lands on the occasion of his visit to Tongala. Whilst seated on a fallen tree in true Arcadian style, *sub tegmine Eucalypti*, watching his woolly charge crop the tender herbage, or rather "eving a smoke", as he himself related, his cogitations were suddenly disturbed by a loud "*Waugh!*" and a blackfellow tapping him on the shoulder. The intruder, it appears, was naked, in full war-paint, and

armed with spear and waddy. What the original intentions of this child of nature were on the occasion it would be difficult to determine, though possibly the circumstances, duly weighed, might lead persons used to such cattle to the inference that they were to knock out the brains of our Australian Corydon. But, at all events, from some cause or other the gentle savage did not proceed to such extremities, as it appears that he only asked in a quiet way for some tobacco; and the shepherd gave him some, with which, *and the carbine*, which was lying against a tree at hand, he hurriedly decamped.

The shepherd being thus disarmed, about seventy Blacks issued from a neighbouring scrub, where they had lain concealed, and each speared and carried off a sheep; the abstracted carbine being laid down for the shepherd to take possession of. The whole proceeding was very original, no doubt, and in the minds of the Blacks, I suspect, there lurked an idea that the restoration of the carbine would be held partially to excuse the abstraction of the sheep; probably a trivial matter in their estimation, as no doubt it would appear to them that we white men had far more live mutton than we were able to make use of. The shepherd, in the meantime, a good deal flustered, drove his sheep to the yards, and informed his hutkeeper of what had occurred, whilst no doubt the Blacks proceeded, with the ladies and children of their establishments, to cook mutton chops on a large scale. As, moreover, the Murray's wide stream intervened between the shepherd and Tongala, my brother did not hear of what had happened for some days, by which time, of course, our mutton-loving children of nature had made a pretty long trail.

This rather costly *déjeuner à la fourchette*, in which my father had compulsorily played the part of absentee host, was followed, as it happened, a few days subsequently, by the arrival of two troopers making the usual patrol, a circumstance which my brother thought particularly fortunate. They belonged to the border police, a body quite *au fait* at preserving order in the bush; and the first act of its representatives on this occasion, when they learned what had occurred, was to seize a solitary blackfellow who happened to be at Tongala, and secure him with a bullock-chain, one end of which was padlocked round his ankle, and the other passed through the slabs of the kitchen and made fast within. Next morning these two trooping

worthies, with their *détenu* as a guide, set off in search of the Blacks, for the purpose of "setting them right". It so happened, however, that when they got within a hundred yards of the Murray, their prisoner, who well knew what was in store for his tribe should he discover their retreat, made a bolt for the stream, when one of the troopers galloped after him, and, before he could reach the water, shot him down. The poor savage, I heard, dropped at once mortally wounded, close to the river bank; looked up at his slayers, and, drawing his opossum-rug round him, died shortly afterwards without a word or a groan. The troopers then went on and continued the search for some time, which proving ineffectual, they returned to the corpse, which was now cold and stiff. The friends of the deceased never exactly knew, I believe, what had become of him, for the troopers placed the body in a canoe which happened to be at hand, which, pushed into the current, conveyed its ghastly freight down the stream. Who knows what conjectures perchance occurred to distant tribes as they saw drifting through their ancient domain this victim of the white man? I always regretted this catastrophe.

This proceeding of the police, however, it was hoped would put an end to further aggressions of the sort, when, unfortunately, a hundred and twenty lambs were allowed by another shepherd to wander off unperceived from his flock. After straying some distance, this mob was observed by a party of Blacks, who, unable to withstand the temptation of fat meat *à discrétion*, drove the lambs to a secluded spot, where they killed and ate them. A large number, I afterwards heard from the Blacks themselves, were killed and roasted at once, whilst they broke the fore legs of the rest to prevent them straying, a message being sent to the absent part of the tribe "bidding them to the feast". In due time they arrived, to the number of a hundred or so, and ate up the lot in three days. Such feasting and greasing of heads had never probably been known in the history of the Bangerang, and no doubt the tribe was merry and witty at the expense of the "white-pella". This further outrage on the part of our sable neighbours being discovered a few days after its occurrence, was reported to the authorities in Melbourne, and hence the present appearance of the police on the war-path at Tongala.

As the Blacks, who were now to be taught manners, would

probably be found at the Moira, on the bank of the Murray, across which they would certainly swim on the first appearance of the police, it was agreed that the sheep and dray which I was despatching to the Moira should be sent on ahead and halted at some distance from the river, the tribe being decoyed to the encampment, so that the white troopers might be enabled to close with them away from the water. As regards the black portion of the "force" it was decided by the officer, for various urgent reasons, that it should be left at Tongala. This reduction of his forces, I noticed, seemed to prey a good deal on the military mind of the leader (a man of well-known pluck, however), and produced an uneasiness which even the timely arrival of Corporal Rolfe did not entirely remove. Why it should have been so I never could exactly understand. Danger (except to the enemy) there could be little or none, the result being substantially the same, in respect to fire-arms, whether they be opposed to spears or pop-guns.

Measures having been thus concerted, a flock of sheep in charge of several men, and accompanied by a dray and bullocks, was despatched to the Moira with the requisites for forming an out-station, the time of its arrival being so arranged as to be shortly antecedent to that of the police. This "combined movement", as the officer pointed out to me afterwards with some satisfaction, was managed more successfully than sometimes happens in war on a larger scale; for shortly before the police "debouched" from the timber which skirted the proposed scene of action, the other party had arrived in the proper quarter, and, as could be seen, had gathered round them the Blacks, whom it was so desirable to entice from the vicinity of the river and the reed-beds. The result of this was an immediate charge on the part of the troopers; a movement executed, as it seemed to my inexperienced eye, with more *élan* than regularity. Being myself with the party, and armed with sword and pistols, I received a friendly hint from the officer, before charging, to abstain from the use of weapons unless called on by him to act; an injunction which, being of a peaceful tendency, was quite in accordance with my feelings. And here I regret, for the reader's sake, that I am unable to describe the evolutions which ensued, for though I have a perfect recollection of what occurred, I am destitute of the knowledge necessary to enable me to set down the circumstances in the proper relations of cause and effect, as

the officer did in a report (bulletin?) on the subject, which he read to me prior to forwarding it to the authorities. That there were, however, some points concerning the matter in which we did not completely agree, truth requires me to confess, as he omitted some incidents which I thought should have been mentioned. On my hinting something to that effect, however, he laughed good-humouredly, saying that "persons unconnected with the public service know nothing of reports; indeed civilians from first to last are ill fitted to describe collisions of the sort, being apt to blurt out statements more properly held in reserve," which it has since occurred to me might probably be the case.

However, *lo cierto e*, that one of the police horses bolted at the outset and carried his rider almost out of sight, whilst another trooper, lodged by his charger in the fork of a tree, very providentially escaped getting his neck broken, the chargers generally being, as the officer stated in his report, "somewhat unsteady". The Blacks in the meantime passed through or round our "line" and fled to the river, followed by the remaining horse-men, no shots having been fired so far, or spears thrown; when, as the last aboriginal was in the very act of leaping from the bank into his native stream, someone at hand, not connected with the "force", on being called upon by the officer, discharged two barrels, putting one ball through the fugitive's arm, and the other through an old cap which he had on. This proceeding, however, appears to have been irregular in some way, as it found no place in the bulletin. At this juncture, I recollect, the officer, who was leisurely scanning the opposite bank of the river, across which he had driven the enemy in such masterly style, received a slight wound in his sword arm from a spear hurled by a blackfellow from the opposite side. "Hit at last!" was his laughing exclamation, as he handed me a white handkerchief, the corner of which I had noticed peeping from the pocket of his shell-jacket, to bind up what he termed the "scratch".

The Blacks having retreated across the Murray, and the troopers being assembled again around their leader, that indefatigable officer, after a few moments spent in reviewing the battle-field, turned his attention towards my sheep camp in quest of stragglers. Fortunately one blackfellow still remained there, who, having been promised the head of a sheep, which was being butchered for supper, waited quietly for the expected prize, in spite of the firing and galloping which had been going

on. This unfortunate was accordingly seized by our party and at once placed in handcuffs, which, being found too large for his hands, were transferred, at the suggestion of Corporal Rolfe, to his ankles . . .

The name of our prisoner was Warri. His wife, who was present at his capture, was allowed to escape unmolested, and when dinner was over we set out for Tongala, the troopers securing their captive by a rope, one end of which was round his neck and the other made fast to a trooper's horse. Once secured, and the hope of escape gone, the prisoner accepted his fate in a manly enough way, and marched stoutly along with his captors, so that we reached Tongala without accident. As Warri and I were well acquainted, we had several conversations during the two or three days the police remained at the station, he making frequent inquiries of me as to why he had been captured and what was to be done with him. During this time, as escape was impossible with the handcuffs round his ankles, he was allowed to wander from one hut to another during the daytime pretty much as he liked, the police of course having an eye to him, his style of progression under the circumstances being wonderfully grotesque. Though suffering somewhat from anxiety and uncertainty, however, poor Warri struggled manfully to keep up his spirits. Indeed, he smoked and yarned, and begged for tea and sugar, as if he had a century to live. Sometimes, too, he would come and seat himself before the door of my hut, when little dialogues like the following would ensue:—

Warri.—"Well, massa!"

A.—"Well! Warri, my boy, sit down."

W.—"Give me smoke? (I gave him some tobacco). Where police take me now?"

A.—"I believe to Melbourne."

W.—"Melbourne, eh? What will the white-fellows in Melbourne do to me?"

A.—"Well! can't say. I don't know."

W.—"I believe they'll hang me—eh?"

A.—"I believe so."

W.—"Well! (with a loud cluck) well! why are you stupid? Why do you get your own blackfellows hung?"

A.—"Well! why do the Blacks eat up my sheep?"

W.—"Stupid! Stupid! Blackfellow."

Warri would then hobble off in the most comical way, with

shortened stride, his pipe in his mouth, to seek sympathy elsewhere. My object in frightening the poor fellow was, of course, to impress on him thoroughly, and eventually through him on his tribe, the disagreeable consequences of sheep-stealing.

In due time Warri, in charge of a couple of troopers, was hoisted on top of a loaded wool-dray, which I was despatching to Melbourne, my men indulging in a good deal of coarse jeering on the occasion, the poor fellow's face looking blacker than ever. Probably he had little hopes of again seeing his native woods or his tribe, his idea being, I fancy, that he was to be executed in public for the special delectation of the Governor and white people of Melbourne. On his arrival in town, he was committed in due form by the Police Magistrate to take his trial for sheep-stealing, which, however, was brought abruptly to an end by Judge Willis (who then occupied the bench) declining to allow the trial to proceed until an interpreter could be found, on the ground that the prisoner was unable to understand the proceedings, or cross-question the witnesses. The expression of the prisoner's face whilst this point was being discussed was certainly strongly corroborative of the judge's view, as he answered none of the questions put to him, the only matter which appeared to arrest his attention being the barristers' wigs, which seemed to puzzle him a good deal. What he expected, I believe, was to see a strong man make a rope fast to one of the beams overhead, from which he was to be suspended before the judge, whom no doubt he took for the Governor.

Seeing that nothing was done, and that Warri had become a law-point incarnate, and was neither to be tried nor set at liberty, I lost all interest in the matter and returned to Tongala. Being in Melbourne again, however, some three months later, I visited the prisoner in his cell, and found him in bad spirits and ill-health. He was delighted to see me. Indeed, though he had assisted to devour my father's sheep, and I had got him imprisoned in return, a sort of friendly feeling had always existed between us, as for my part I never could view either him or his countrymen, on such occasions, as worse than naughty children, who should have been well flogged and locked up for a month. So, as I pitied the poor fellow, thought he had been punished enough, and was of opinion that his return to Tongala would add to the security of property there, I

bestirred myself to get him released. After some little delay this course was determined upon by the authorities, who, I fancy, hardly knew what to do with the prisoner. Upon learning that this decision had been arrived at, I visited Warri once more in his cell, and, after a little delicate badinage on the subject of hanging, informed him that he was to be set free; and at my suggestion, to prevent the Melbourne Blacks from killing him, that he would the next day after dark be driven in a spring-cart well outside the limits of the town, and there be set at liberty. Poor Warri stared at me with all his eyes, and was some time before he could believe that I was in earnest, and that his difficulties were to come to so pleasing an end; and it was only after I had shown him a blanket, tomahawk, and small supply of food, which I had brought for him, that he allowed himself to believe that what I said was the fact.

When I returned to Tongala, a fortnight later, I found Warri and his lubra (wife), Mirandola, already there, and had from him a long account of his adventures on the road up, and of how he passed through the country of some hostile tribes. Ever after he and I were the best of friends, as he ascribed his release entirely to me; whilst the sage Bangerang, who firmly believed that unnumbered police troopers and officers in shell-jackets would be sent to the Moira to punish any undue indulgence in mutton on their part, became henceforth quite reclaimed characters.