

ained; or cooked in the skin and in without the entrails being removed where it is. And so, while the native lives, the white man perishes of thirst or hunger—to often of thirst—the most terrible of all human sufferings.

I have told the story before—it was very many years ago—which I narrate now. It was worked up in more than one English periodical, and went, what is termed in Press language, the round of the papers.

A stock rider, by name Evan Evans, and a Welshman by birth, in the year 1865 or '66 was found missing from the home quarters of a cattle station, in the western part of Victoria. It was not a very heavily timbered district, and it was tolerably well watered, but it presented this somewhat peculiar feature: The ground rose and fell in irregular undulations. For many miles the same kind of country could be traversed without any appearance in the change of country. There was no distant hill or mount visible near or in the far vista to guide the stock rider who was in search of cattle. One chain of water holes would present almost the same features as another, and the trees were about the same growth. A man had to learn the country before he could commit himself to it. Evans had not so learned it. He was a steady but stupid man. A brave dare-devil care rider, and first-rate at cutting out any animal from a mob that might be wanted. Splendid at "roping" a beast, whether for branding or cutting, and was not too particular whether his employer's branding irons were put on a steer or a heifer belonging to some other owner.

It was one evening in the height of an Australian summer when it was discovered that Evans had not returned to his quarters, but it was not until well into the middle of the next day any uneasiness was felt respecting him.

Then it was that the stockmaster, a kindly-hearted Scotchman, sent to a native police-station, some miles distant, for two blacks to help to track and bring back the missing stockrider, who it was now felt to be quite certain had lost his way in the bush. These arrived in a few hours, and, as night had come on, it was agreed the start should not be made until morning.

At daylight the two blacks, with a stockrider from an adjoining run and three station hands, started off on the search.

The first and the most difficult thing to accomplish in following up a track is the getting upon it. Here several precious hours were lost. The way a track is found is somewhat as follows: The blacks described circles round the homestead from which a man is missing. If the track is not discovered within the area of one circle, a larger one is made, and this failing, still a larger, and again a larger, until the trackers have satisfied themselves they have come upon the right trail. This at last having been accomplished, the pursuit commenced. It was, as I have said, high midsummer, following on a protracted drought; indeed, no rain had fallen for five long months, and the ground being dry and parched, the track was difficult to follow. There were constant checks and frequent returns to keep the trail, but it was always found again. The party had provided themselves with flour, salt beef, sugar, tea, tobacco, rugs, and binder boxes; for a bushman in those days never trusted to matches. The provisions were packed on a small, hardy stock rider's horse. On the first day the search was continued until sunset, and the party camped until daylight the next morning. With their tomahawks the blacks stripped sheets of bark from the gum trees, and cut down some saplings. With these a guyah, or break wind, was formed, at the opening of which a fire was lighted for boiling water, and to aid in keeping off the mosquitoes. During the night huge black clouds ascended above the horizon, and covered the heavens with a thick curtain; rain soon followed, accompanied by vivid flashes of lightning and crashing thunder. This helped to make the track more difficult. But the blacks were but little put out, for they, with slight difficulty, took up the footprints, or such other indications as were to be observed, and following them persistently, travelling sometimes two and sometimes three or more miles an hour until noon, when a halt was called for refreshment and temporary rest. The foot of a man had probably never trode the region the party were now traversing. Here the opossum, the native cat, the kangaroo, and the wild dingo held their reign undisputed. Ever and again the native trackers gave forth a shrill cooey, but there was no response. At about half-past three in the afternoon of the second day the party came to a spot where the blacks expressed by gesture that the missing stock rider had sat down, and in confirmation they pointed to a stone which had evidently been removed from its original place. Here the blacks held up two fingers, indicating that two days had elapsed since a man had been there.

Three hours later a spot was reached where the missing man had lain down. He had been smoking, and had broken his pipe; for a piece of the stem was lying partially covered by withered herbage. The confidence of the trackers was now fully restored, and they quickened their movements. The

party now entered upon a country covered with large boulders. This rather assisted the blacks, who would frequently point out where the unhappy stock-rider had sat down to rest. After a time the boulder country was replaced by a forest of enormous gum trees. Here the men indicated by signs that the lost man had been running. Then, as they proceeded on the trail, they would shew that he had become wearied out and had fallen on his knees—perhaps from utter prostration; or it might be to pray to Heaven to put him on the right way for relief and a habitation.

The sun once more set; the man again camped, lit a fire for tea, refreshed and rested, to rise again with the break of early morning. The party had now followed the trail for it may be near upon forty miles, when they were nearing the borders of a country occupied by a hostile tribe. This so alarmed, indeed so greatly terrified the trackers that they showed a desire to turn back. But as the party were well armed, and no other blacks making an appearance, they were induced to proceed and to follow up on the missing man's track.

Then, after a little, a magnificent country, beautifully timbered, was reached, and the track of the stock-rider could be seen distinctly even by the white men. After a time a long gully was entered upon, with numerous large wattle trees were growing. From this tree a gum possessing nutriment to man as to birds and some kind of animals, oozes. And it was to some of these trees the blacks pointed out places from which the gum had been taken. They also drew attention to where several edible grubs had been taken from their holes, doubtless to be eaten. They showed that the man had in his possession a pocket knife, with which he had extracted the grubs where they had burrowed in the bark of the trees. But the native trackers still held up the two fingers as a sign that the lost man was as many days ahead of them. A small creek was shortly after reached, when the blacks pointed to a spot where a man had bathed, as shewn by the displacement of the pebbles as well as the foot tracks upon the bank.

This creek was followed up for some four or five miles, until it flowed into a swamp, the tracks being very distinct the whole distance.

After a time one of the man's boots was found, and further on the second one, shewing that he could no longer bear them on his feet. Next was discovered the neckerchief he was known to have worn when he left the station. And here evening closed upon another day, and night found the party worn with fatigue and almost dead beat with blistered feet and scorched faces.

The next morning, but not for two full hours after sunrise, another start was made, when a desert country had to be followed, where small stones and huge boulders commingled. The soil was caked with a hot sun following upon heavy rains; still the blacks, not for three minutes together, ever lost the track; and here, be it remembered, the lost stockman was without boots, and was of his very necessity, and of his great anguish picking his way tenderly. To the white man not the slightest sign of a track was visible.

Another sun went down to run its course and rise again, to allow the weary search to be continued in a country where there was every symptom that water would fail in the search for it, which meant death or an immediate return. All that day the track was followed up, when, towards night, the barren country led to a large lagoon which swarmed with wild swans and ducks. The party succeeded in shooting and recovering a number by swimming and bringing them ashore. The supply was doubly welcome: for not only was the salt beef running short but the thirst it created produced terror in the eating of it.

The blacks had now passed through the country of one hostile tribe, and were entering upon another—a tribe powerful, ferocious, and warlike. They were afraid to proceed, although but a little previous, by signs, the two blacks had made it understood they were but one day from the lost stockrider, who was now travelling slowly and unsteadily. The shrewdest of the four white men fancied the black trackers intended to forsake the party and make back again. Intimating this to his mates, they agreed to deprive them of their tomahawks, with which they had been supplied, and to tie both together by the wrists. This they succeeded in doing with but little trouble, for the native Australian, with the exception of a few belonging to one or two tribes is a thorough coward in the presence of a white man. The two blacks were made to understand that if they did not follow up the track they would be shot. Upon this threat they made signs that it was lost. The whites were firm, and insisted on their taking up the trail; and after a time they were once more in pursuit.

It was towards midnight of the same day that the man on watch was startled with that peculiar sound of the black, which with them has the same meaning as our word "hush," when we command silence and

direct the attention to some mysterious or unusual noise.

It was the beating of ocean waves on the shore. These blacks had never seen the sea, and the next morning, after an advance of about a mile, when they beheld the roll of the surf upon the beach line, they appeared to be horror stricken. Then followed a shout from one of them, who, holding forth both hands with the palms upward, indicated where the lost stockrider was lying with his face on the beach a little above high water mark. He was insensible; but by dragging him to the edge of the surf the spray fell upon him, and he was soon able to stand. He, however, was unable to speak for some hours. The return journey commenced, and after some suffering the party reached the homes from which they had started. Evans never recovered. He died three months after a raving maniac.

### XXIII.

[BY "SNYDER."]'

## THE GREAT CONFLAGRATION AROUND MELBOURNE.

WHEN in a previous reminiscence I narrated the terrible day of the 6th February, 1851, named then and remembered to the present time by all old colonists as Black Thursday, I told only of my own experience while travelling through the western district of Port Phillip. But it was on the Melbourne side of the country where the conflagration of that day laid waste such enormous areas, destroyed so much property, and caused so great a loss of life. I have before me now, in contemporary journals and printed narratives, the accounts which reached the principal town of the colony, from which it will be seen how many and how harrowing are the details of that day of hideous ruin and conflagration. For some weeks previous no rain had fallen, the creeks had dried up, while the water-holes were no more than beds of mud and tangled masses of decayed and decaying timber. The grass for many miles on the plains was bleached to a snowy whiteness, and both sheep and cattle perished in vast numbers through thirst and an almost entire absence of herbage. As far as eye could reach there was nothing to support life. Only in little oases where the water-holes were deep and the ground sheltered from the hot, withering rays of the sun, was there a little grass preserving something of its native verdure. On the Melbourne side of the country, as far as the Deep Creek and the Mount Macedon ranges, to the Black Forest and to the country many miles beyond, and on either hand dense volumes of smoke ascended, which indicated to those at a distance the forerunner of a dire calamity. The north wind set strongly in early in the morning, and by eleven o'clock in the forenoon it had increased to a gale, with the force of a typhoon. In the streets of Melbourne the heat was intense, and the atmosphere oppressive. Men and women, the veins over their respiratory organs swollen almost to bursting, breathed with difficulty, caused by a pressure upon the chest quite indescribable, and which few had experienced before. Huge dark clouds, in thick, dense folds, rolled up over the city, to be swept away by the force of the blast. The fires which blazed in the surrounding country were doubtless the cause of the suffocating sensation. It was felt to be hardly possible to move out of doors, unless for some very urgent purpose. The streets were nearly deserted, and those who were compelled to make the effort to traverse them kept close to the walls, and walked along with their faces muffled. No man, however bold, appeared able to face the furious and suffocating sirocco. By noon the inhabitants, for the greater number, had shut themselves up in their various dwellings, to get beyond the influence of the overpowering blast. There they remained confined until night, listening in terror to every gust of the superheated and smoke-laden gale. Had any portion of Melbourne ignited, the whole of the city must have been reduced to ashes. No effort, however strong, could have prevented the conflagration from becoming general and extending to all its quarters. The citizens were providentially preserved from so terrible a disaster. In the country the scene cannot be portrayed. There, throughout the districts, the hurricane had set in early, and bush fires swept across the land with the speed of the race-horse in full career, crossing roads and wide streams, running up mountain sides, and descending in ravines, gullies, and steep declivities, destroying men, women, and children, cattle and sheep, crops, fences, homesteads, orchards, vineyards, small holdings, and in fact everything which faced them. The flames spread everywhere, careering along the dried herbage on the surface, speeding in their way up large forest trees, and wantoning in the very excess of devastation.

When the flames first appeared, many brave men attempted to impede their progress and avert the ruin of their hopes. The green boughs of trees were cut down to be employed to sweep out the long line of flame which was consuming the grass. But all such attempts were useless, for the fire stretched out its thousand tongues,

blackening the ground with ashes as it swept along in forks of liquid flame. The herds and flocks, droves of kangaroos, the birds native to the forests and the plains, reptiles, and other animals endeavoured to escape the dread conflagration, but were overtaken, falling instantly a prey to the crackling and roaring flames. The Black Forest on this morning was in all its grand verdure—grand as it must have been for centuries; but in the evening of the same day nothing else could be seen for fifteen miles—from Gisborne to Carlshurue—than charred and blackened trunks.

How so many fires occurred simultaneously in so many parts of the country to meet at different points has never been ascertained. The whole district, far and wide, was filled with dense clouds, with which commingled myriads of sparks of fire wafted upwards by the gale. In many a settler's well-shaded sitting-room the thermometer stood at 120°, and on their verandah at quite up to 140°. And these settlers, confining themselves to the shelter of their houses, were generally not aware of their danger until the furious roar of the bush fires broke upon their ears, when, with their wives and families, they had to

abandon their property, and leaving behind them their household gods, they fled for the preservation of their lives. Not a few escaped death by taking shelter in creeks and water-holes until the violence of the fire had abated, and the atmosphere had become bearable. Some of these settlers, with delicate wives with sucklings at their breast, were eighteen hours in the water, and not a few, mother and child, subsequently died from the exposure. Many persons travelling in the bush, as it was in my own case, had narrow escapes as they became suddenly enveloped in the flames, and all but suffocated in the sweltering fumes of the surging blast. The hurricane at sea, as it sweeps in resistless cycles, carrying with it wreck and disaster, and terror even to the bravest hearts, may be of a higher order of sublimity to those who have watched the raging waters, but it is not accompanied with blacker horrors than when an Australian bush fire devours thousands upon thousands of acres of country, with all that is upon it.

On such a day the traveller starts on his journey, not anticipating danger. The wind from the north is no more than sultry to the senses, but gradually rises in force and volume. Then, later—but only a little later—the hot, fiery, blazing blast appears, charged with some element never before felt. It is now the smell of smoke comes strong upon the nostrils, and in a brief space the whole bush is in universal conflagration. Amazed and terrified, the solitary bushman finds himself face to face with destruction, and this, too, in the most awful form that death can come. Those who on this day were caught in the jaws of the flaming tempest, were "withered up like a scroll—in the twinkling of an eye—in the sound of a trumpet."

The only escape was to gallop, if possible, out of the line of the fire, or take shelter in water. Many that day had a hard race for their lives, and the intense heat acted upon their frames so severely as to cause the feeling of being parched up, while at the same time they were choked with an overpowering thirst—which even water, were it procurable, did not quench.

Towards night the wind chopped round to the south, when the thermometer fell within the short space of one hour fully forty degrees. But the whole of that long night the heavens were illumined with the many, many miles of bush fires, still raging like unto a destroying angel.

The day dawned upon the morning of the 7th to witness destruction indescribable. The most fertile districts were consumed; flocks and herds, abandoned by those in charge of them, who fled for dear life, were scattered or destroyed; the inhabitants of the districts over which the conflagration extended suddenly found themselves destitute, and great was the amount of suffering to be endured by the ruined colonists.

I here propose giving an instance of the calamities which beset that fatal day. It is extracted from the *Port Phillip Gazette* of 11th February, 1851: "An inquest was held on Saturday night last, at the Travellers' Rest, Collingwood, on six bodies consumed by fire, on the 6th instant, at the Plenty. These were Bridget, John, James, Joseph, Mary Ann, and Wm. McLellan. The conveyance containing the bodies did not arrive until some time after it was expected, and when at last it entered the yard of the inn, and the coverings were removed, a more harrowing spectacle can scarcely be conceived than was then presented to view. The bodies were quite charred, and the features undistinguishable; those of two of the children were dreadfully mutilated. The bereaved father who had been previously brought to the inn, appeared to be in a very precarious state from mental as well as bodily suffering. The coroner, in accordance with the dictates of humanity, did not shock his wounded feelings by any questions relative to the calamitous event, but ordered his immediate removal to the hospital.

The first witness examined was a shepherd named Alexander Miller, who stated that