

*The Moira**

... WHEN, THEREFORE, I reached Tongala with the fifteen hundred ewes referred to in the last chapter, my first care, as a matter of course, was to obtain a proportionate increased area of run. As the neighbouring country, with the exception of the Goulburn frontage, was entirely unoccupied, the direction in which I should extend the run was a matter for consideration. It so happened, however, that my brother Richard, who resided at Tongala in my absence, had seen and taken a fancy to a tract of country on the south side of the Murray, which was known to the Blacks by the name of Moira. In a flying visit made to it some short time previous, he had found that, under water for several months of the winter and spring, it abounded in summer in excellent sheep feed, in the shape of couch grass, young reeds, and so on, and was usually as green as an emerald from November till March, when other pastures were withered and dry; whilst there was quite high land enough about it to ensure a retreat for the sheep in the case of any sudden inundation. As characteristic of the Moira, he mentioned that it abounded beyond all belief in unusually fat fish, swarmed with leeches and snakes, and the ducks were so numerous that I cannot tell now how many he bowled over at one shot. As we learned afterwards, its extensive reed-beds were the great stronghold of the Bangerang Blacks, whom, as will be told presently, my brother had found somewhat troublesome during my absence at Steele's Creek; and owing to the plentiful food supply, it was a favourite place of meeting for all the tribes in the neighbourhood. Hence, it had advantages and disadvantages. Since those days it may be noticed that the Moira has contributed largely to the fish supply of Melbourne and Sandhurst,

* In Australia it is not unusual to prefix the definite article to the names of places; as, *the Moira, the Terricks, the Wee-Waa*, &c.

and that a considerable export of its leeches has been made to London.

In consequence of my brother's representation he and I started before sunrise one morning to make a thorough examination of this country, and decide whether or not we should take it up. Mounted, I remember, on two vigorous rowdy horses, we trotted merrily along the Towro sand-hill, which leads from Tongala Station to Madowla Lagoon . . . So we cantered on, crossed the Tiia Creek at its mouth, and sped along the Blacks' track to Pama, and thence, keeping on the edge of the fine old red gums (off which we noticed many a canoe had been stripped in old days), to the Moira itself, at the mouth of the Baala Creek, some fourteen miles from home. After wading the creek, we dismounted to light our pipes and rub off numberless leeches which had attached themselves to our horses' legs and bellies as we passed through the water. On this, my first visit to the Moira, I thought the place had a very pleasant aspect, of a mixed Australian and semi-tropical character. It happened that there were no Blacks there at the moment; but some camp fires smouldering under the shade of a spreading tree, and the bags and nets which hung from its branches, showed that they were not far away. Looking around, on one side of us we saw extensive reed-beds intersected by the Murray, which (an unusual feature in colonial rivers) flowed here almost without banks, and on the level of the plain. The other half of the circle was occupied by open, grassy, forest land, which extended we did not know how far. The grass under foot, as yet undefiled by flock or herd, was as green and fresh as Eden, and the landscape generally bathed in a soft, hazy, sunlight, such as Monsieur Buvelot would love to depict. But we were just then intent on sheep-feed, and not on scenery; so, after a brief delay, we remounted and rode over a plain of green couch grass of some length, and on through a narrow opening in the reeds into what proved to be a charming little savannah of perhaps half a square mile in extent. The grass in it was about a foot high, and so thick that the tread of our horses was as noiseless as that of the camel.

Through the reeds, which stood considerably higher than our heads, a light breeze was playing intermittently, with a sound which reminded one of the gentle wash of the ocean in a sandy bay. The isolated meadow, into which we had found

our way, proved, as I have said, of but trifling extent, so that in less than a mile we found ourselves confronted by a wall of old reeds. They were about ten feet high and grew only a few inches apart, the interstices being occupied by the *débris* of those which had fallen, couch-grass, and numerous convolvuli. Some fifty yards off, amongst the reeds, however, was a gnarled and spreading gum-tree, from the branches of which a view of the neighbouring country might be obtained. To this solitary old giant we accordingly forced our horses, with considerable difficulty, and clambering up its short trunk took our seats amongst its branches some forty feet from the ground, when we were enabled to overlook the country for a considerable distance round, and discuss its capabilities at our leisure. A sea of reeds, of several miles in extent, as far in fact as the eye could reach, met our view on two sides, flanked by some grand old trees, amongst whose branches, no doubt, long generations of Blacks had hunted the opossum and flying-squirrel, the Murray, broad and bright, coming into view here and there. The reeds were by patches and strips of different hues and growth, in accordance with their ages and the periods at which they had been last burnt; and in the distance we could make out, by the reflection of the sun, a flight of white cockatoos, which, probably disturbed by some solitary savage prowling along the river's banks, had sought safety in flight, and after surging backwards and forwards for a few minutes, now flashing in the brilliant sunlight, now disappearing beneath the shadows, had settled not far from where they had risen, on a tree, to which their white plumage gave the appearance of being covered with blossom. On a closer examination we also noticed several patches of good open country, such as we had just left, and that the whole could be made available, with little trouble, by burning. As from our elevated seats we watched the smoke, which curled here and there from the distant camps of the Ngarrimowro, my brother, I remember, drew my attention to a reed at hand, which, more lofty than the rest, bowed gently to the breeze. A convolvulus encircled its slender shaft, opening a hundred azure chalices to the south wind, whilst about its feathery top, probably feeding on its seed, a fire-tail fluttered. Bathed in the argent light of an Australian sun, the bird, leaf and flowers seemed to us a charming object, fit, indeed, for an artist's pencil.

Having delayed some time, and satisfied ourselves that the Moira would suit our purpose, we retraced our steps to the mouth of the Baala, where we found some Blacks who had returned to camp, and were grilling fresh caught fish, in the disposal of which we gladly assisted them, giving them a little tobacco in return. As I wished to see the river frontage between the Baala Creek and Pama, which appeared too rough for riding, and might contain a reed-bed, I persuaded one of these Blacks, with whom I was acquainted, to take me in his canoe to the latter place, where my brother agreed to meet me with the nags.

The canoe in which Tommy and I embarked, like those commonly in use at the Moira, of which there were about thirty, was of very thick red-gum bark, something over twenty feet long, with a small fire—on which a fish or a duck might be grilled—burning on a hearth of clay in the bows. The craft being baled out, and a heap of fresh couch-grass put on board for my accommodation, I seated myself on it, gun in hand, whilst Tommy, a rather civilized Black, who had often been at the head station, and spoke English pretty well, shoved her off, and sent her merrily along with his rowing-pole . . . Stately and hushed, old Tongala* flowed on through his trackless woods! For myself I was inclined to be silent, but my boatman took up the cicerone's part, drawing my attention as we passed to spots which one way or another were of interest to himself and his tribe. The country on the right bank, he informed me, belonged to the Moitheriban, that on the left to his own tribe, the Wangatpan. The Moitheriban (literally, Moira people) were a numerous tribe, and had plenty of fish and thousands of spears. They had promised him a girl to wife, in exchange for his sister, whom he had given to one of them some time ago; but his intended was not old enough yet, he said, with a sigh, but was to come to his camp when next the manna was on the trees. Then there was a fishing weir, rather an extensive affair, at the mouth of a creek we were passing, which, he told me, belonged to some old man whose name I have forgotten; another, a little further on, was the property of quite a youth, a Kogomoolga, indeed, whose front tooth had only just been knocked out, his father being lately dead. Then there was a

* Tongala is the aboriginal name for the River Murray in this portion of its course.

little creek, which was bringing back the last of the flood-water into the river, the fish in which I learned belonged to an uncle of Mellapurning. All these were evidently very important matters with Tommy.

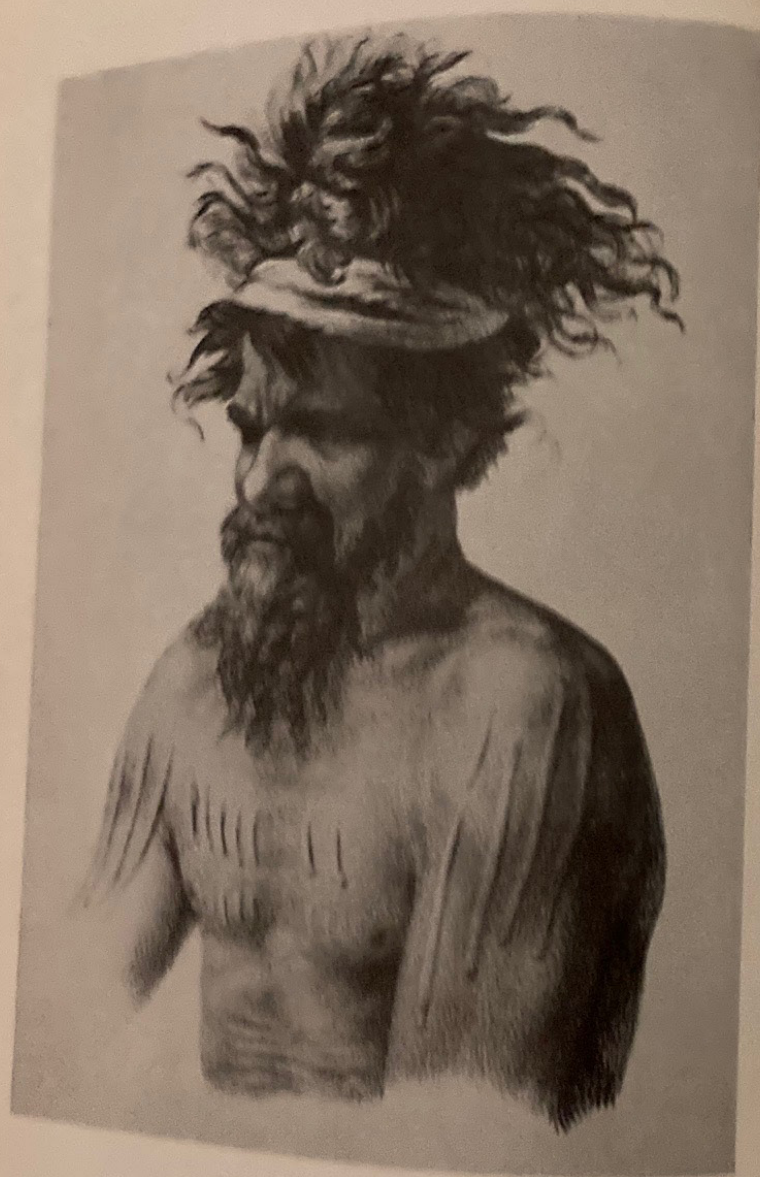
"By and by," he continued, "you see ole man blackpella. No gammon that pella; pather belonging to Warri. You look out now!" Nor had I long to wait for the sight of the promised patriarch, for, on rounding a point, a long reach of stream came into view, about the middle of which was a fishing party engaged at their work. The majority of these people, at least the elders, I learned from my guide, had not only never had the curiosity to look at my party, not fourteen miles off, at Tongala, but had never yet seen a white man, and I soon found that they were both surprised and displeased to find a pale-faced stranger invading their fastness without having sent them word. It so happened that the party was rather a defenceless one, consisting principally of women, old men, and children, the young men being out hunting, so that on seeing us, a general stampede took place for the shore; whilst yells of every variety of shrillness, from voices of every age, burst on our ears. Tommy laughed heartily at the scamper, and tried to reassure his kin-folk, shouting to them at the top of his voice "to sit down; that I was friendly and would not injure them", and so on. But his assurances were without avail. The *saue qui peut* was general, all paddling their canoes in hot haste to a point at which the banks, which were of some height, sloped gradually to the water's edge. To give them time to get out of the way, Tommy slackened the speed of our canoe, allowing her to drift broadside on, whilst our sable friends, big and little, stepped on to the grass, as their canoes, one by one, touched the shore, hurrying to the cover of some friendly trees near the bank. Old men and women, as they fled, might be seen picking up the children who were very numerous, whilst some little urchins, who had probably been amusing themselves spearing frogs and tadpoles at the water's edge, mounted lesser urchins on their backs and bore them to shelter in the most gallant manner.

To this precipitate retreat, however, there was one exception, in the person of a very old man—the identical Warri's father, of whom Tommy had spoken. From what I afterwards knew of him, I should think he must have scored his ninety summers. This poor wreck of humanity, disregarding the many and voci-



A Young Native Wearing an Opossum-skin Cloak

From Major T. L. Mitchell's *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia* (London, 1838)



Native of the Bogan
From Major T. L. Mitchell's *Three Expeditions into
the Interior of Eastern Australia* (London, 1838)

ferous entreaties of his friends, refused to retire. Somewhat emaciated and bent, with bald head and long white beard, he stood naked and defiant by the stream on whose banks he had seen the best part of a century pass by. He had never before seen a white man. His fishing spear quivered in his hand, and, after an abortive attempt at a warlike caper, he howled, abused, and spat at me, in senile fury, asking, as Tommy afterwards explained, why I came to the Moira? What I wanted? That I was a demon from the grave! That the water, the fish, and the ducks belonged to his tribe. That he spat at me and hated me. That I was Pekka (a ghost), but that man or devil he would spear me!

Whilst the poor old fellow was thus giving vent to his fury, every soul who had found shelter was yelling at the top of his or her voice for him to come away and join them, as I fancy they expected to see me raise the gun which I held in my hands (of which weapon they well knew the use) and put a stop at once to his abuse and his life.

In the meantime we were drawing gradually nearer to him, when I noticed amongst the trees a middle-aged man who seemed to have grown desperate, jumping about with his spear shipped in the yoolwa. This fellow dragged a girl of some ten years from behind a tree, and, with a sharp, angry exclamation, pushed her towards us, clear of the cover. Until forced on to the open ground, the child hung back and resisted. When she found that course useless, however, her manner altered, and she walked steadily towards the old man with a quiet and resolute step. Every cry now ceased. No doubt her people had heard that white men did not war with children, and it was on this ground that she, and not a man, was sent to bring back the tribal grandsire; but still they could have had no certainty of what I might do, and the moment must have been one of anxious suspense. Curious to test the temper of the people, I whispered to Tommy to be silent, that I should not hurt her, and raised my gun to my shoulder. The child, now not many yards off, noticed the action, looked me full in the face, and without altering her course, gathered her opossum-rug tightly about her, and with somewhat stately step, passed close before the gun to the gibbering old savage. Addressing him in a low soft tone, without further notice of me, she took his hand in hers. The simple act somehow seemed to bring back the old

man to his accustomed state of dependence, and, as if all recollection of myself and the scene he had been enacting had suddenly left him, he lowered his spear, and in silence the girl led him back to his descendants.

"Push, Tommy!" said I, unwilling to annoy these people further. One vigorous shove cleared us of the bank, and the stream soon swept us round a point, and out of sight of the camp. "Well, well!" said Tommy, "big one stupid old man! no gammon!" "What name belong to young girl?" said I. "Undy-ärning", replied Tommy. Good nerves, Undyärning, thought I, and a good representative of her race in that particular; and we again floated silently down our liquid road, between grand old gum trees, abundance of couch-grass, and clumps of reeds, up which climbed convolvuli in waste luxuriance. Here and there crowds of ducks, and swans occasionally, took wing at our approach; the white crane, the blue crane, and the nankeen-bird, with outstretched necks, looked at us inquisitively from many a branch a hundred and fifty feet overhead. At times, too, wigilöpka (the laughing-jackass) saluted us from his leafy arbour, whilst here and there, in spots which seemed to have special attractions for the bell-birds, their silvery notes were always ringing. Being satisfied with what I had seen, I shortly after applied for, and obtained, about eighty miles of Moira country, which turned out very valuable.

Since that day, some five-and-thirty years only have passed, and Blacks, reeds, and bell-birds are gone. Of the first scarce one remains; his cooey is heard no more in those parts, whilst the old forest itself is fast being converted by steam sawmills into railway sleepers. In our go-ahead days people of course are jubilant about such things, and I suppose I ought to be so too; but as a fact, the saws and the steam engines do not fill me with any particular delight, and I may as well out with the truth, that when the subject occurs to me it is to remember with regret the primitive scene, the Black with his fishing canoe, the silence, and the gum-trees.