

IN AN AUSTRALIAN FOREST.



THE lover of nature whose mind is stored with memories gained by long surrender to her subtle influences amongst the lonely hills, quiet vales, and autumn woods of the Old World, would, if suddenly transported to the depths of an Australian forest, almost imagine himself to have fallen on

another planet. All his old experiences would fail him in such novel surroundings, and what beauties he sees on either hand are so different that at first sight he can scarcely make up his mind whether they are beauties or deformities. Not only the natural phenomena, but many of those things that are universal and abiding—the birds that are still birds, the trees that are yet trees—have turned into something new and strange.

From the tall masts of forests of gum-trees—red gums, blue gums, white gums, and every variety of the eucalypti—hang long strips of bark idly swaying, and sighing, and rustling in every passing breeze like the cordage of some great Australian liner! All these, not being of the deciduous order, shed their bark and not their leaves. A strange aromatic perfume comes stealing in puffs and breaths from numberless shrubs beneath them: sweet-thyme, peppermint, and the native musk. Tree-ferns of majestic growth rear their dark swarthy stems all around, while here and there we mark the milk-white trunks of one variety of Eucalypti—the white gum—showing up splendidly amidst them like the tall form of an Anglo-Indian officer amid his diminutive native troops. The golden wattle, exhaling indescribable fragrance; the drooping acacia, or “myall,” with its odour of violets; the Shea-oak, through which the wind at night makes mournful music; the sassafras, and the native myrtle, all add to the strangeness of the scene; and wild flowers of semi-tropical growth abound in scattered nooks and clefts.

Gaunt, spectral forms of scorched trees left by frequent bush-fires stand all around, but near them spring numberless young gums—perhaps the most beautiful variety of all—with bright green transparent leaves, through which the Southern sun penetrates as through a film of wax, as they dance and gyrate in the sparkling light with all the youthful giddiness of tree-life. Near us, on an acacia-tree, which displays the beautiful cool grey-green colour of the silver wattle, a troupe of parrots, in a royal splendour of gay variegated hues, vivid as those of an Eastern rajah, disport themselves with much satisfaction, as though perfectly aware of the enhanced effect given to their beautiful plumage

by a background of low tones of subdued harmony. Here and there a gigantic monarch of the woods lies stretched in death across some deep gully or yawning chasm; and where the tree falls, there doth it lie!

At the precipitous foot of a cloven ravine, a narrow, thread-like rivulet falls from slope to slope towards the stream-fed glen at “Fernshawe.” At the summit of the pass of the Black Spur on the “Dividing Range”—a chain of mountains stretching across the centre of Victoria from west to east, and bearing some resemblance to the Apennines in character—near views are obtained of the loftier peaks of the range, Mount Juliet and others, densely wooded from base to summit; and the descent to “Nar-bi-thong”—one of the numerous native names yet retained—is not unlike some of the Vals of the Italian side of the Alps. “Nar-bi-thong” consists only of an hotel and store but is a favourite place of sojourn for those who love to be alone with nature among the hills.

There are bush-tracks around where you may plunge into shadowy forest depths, and enjoy, on a limited scale, all the imagined delights of bush-travel without its perils and privations. Under a roof of leafy boughs the broken light of “shadows dark and sunlight sheen” is refreshing to weary eyes, and this charm is further enhanced by the dreamy, surging sound of the summer wind sweeping through the trees, that everywhere accompanies you. Gigantic gums of immense growth, and numerous varieties, of all ages—grave senators and youthful cadets of the great family of the Eucalyptidæ—encompass you, but the “blazed” trees mark out clearly the track.

Soon you realise that you are in the midst of another *fauna* as well as *flora*! A pair of shining eyes, looking furtively out of an old tree-stump, belong to a frightened opossum. A native bear climbs hastily up a tall tree, and is soon lost to sight among the luxuriant foliage, while at its foot the dogs leap and bark in a frenzy of impotent rage. All at once a loud gurgling cachinnation of unbounded derision flushes your cheek, and you turn hastily to see a bevy of “laughing jackasses” fly away to a remoter tree, whence a fresh burst of echoing laughter makes it evident there will be no apology for this rudeness to strangers. “Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!” rings out again in the distance, even as we reflect on the disappointing fact that if he who laughs last wins, then is the victory undoubtedly theirs. But by-and-by we come across a laughing jackass which had choked himself in partially swallowing a small snake just a little too large for his throat, which he can neither disgorge nor accommodate, and this was seen at a glance to be no laughing matter. The beautiful note of the silver-voiced bell-bird next compels attention. It is said to be unutterably welcome to the thirsty wayfarer overtaken by “summer’s fur-naced noon” in Australia, as indicating where water may probably be found. The “coach-whip” bird is another curiosity, and has a loud, full note, ending

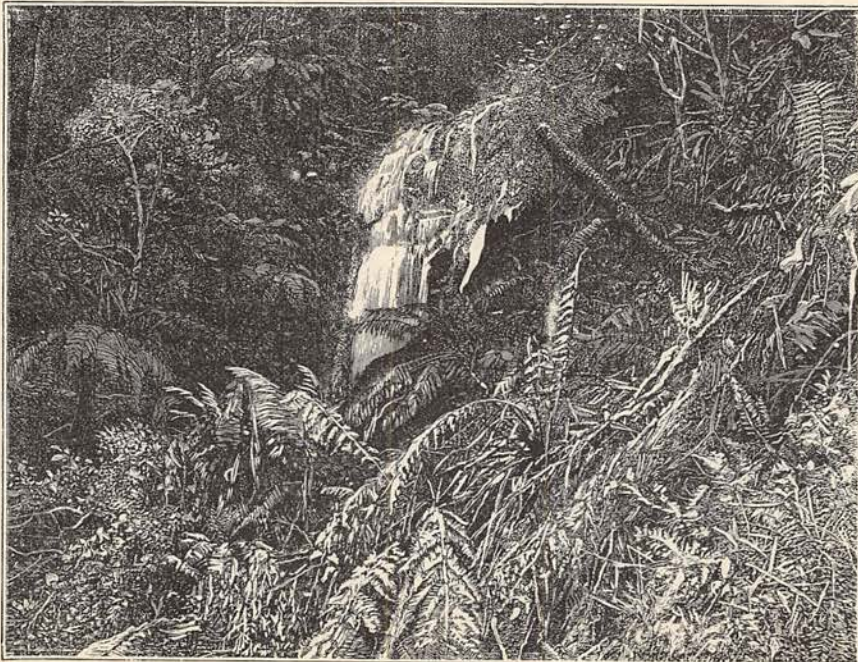
sharply like the crack of a whip. The "musical magpie," with its clear note and pied plumage, though differing greatly from the home variety, is a popular member of forest or plain; but the "lyre-bird," or mountain pheasant, with its curious long tail precisely like an ancient lyre—the Apollo of the woods—can match the notes and cries of all the others put together. There are not, however, many song-birds in this summer-land of silence.

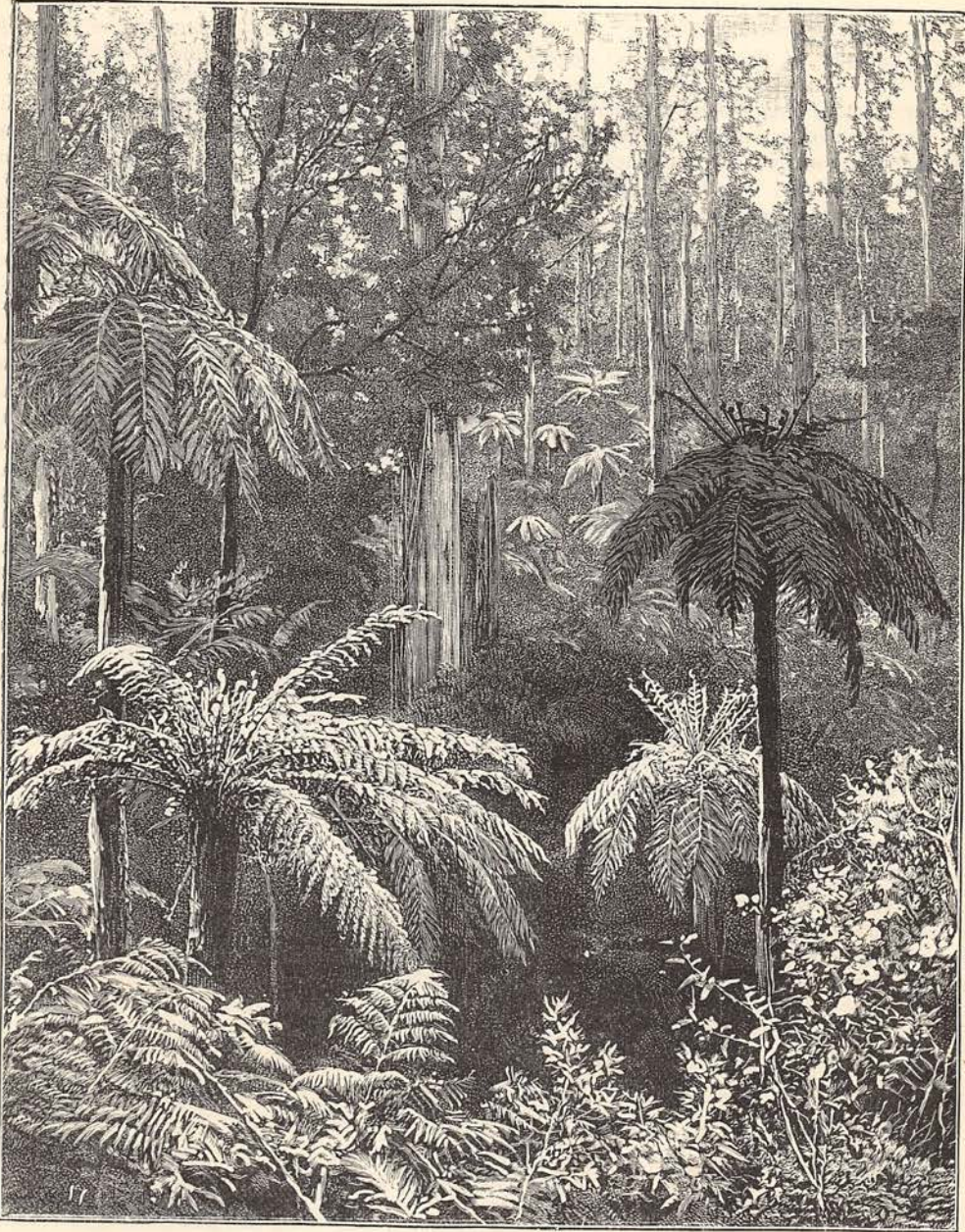
The Australian bee-eater is a very beautiful bird, and the honey-suckers have a singular fleshy appendage below each ear, the "wattle-bird" being a good example of these. Our old friend cock-robin has here decked himself out in gorgeous raiment, and to the most brilliant scarlet has added yellow, blue, and rose-colour. Jenny wren has been weak enough to follow his pernicious example, and flutters around in all the pomp and vanity of a court suit of turquoise-blue and velvet-black. The rock-wallabies, or rock-kangaroos, belong to these mountains, but the kangaroo proper better affects the plains, and the wombat—the largest of the marsupials next to the kangaroo—after its kind, is addicted to keeping late hours, and we make no nocturnal acquaintances.

The pig-footed bandicoot is another curious variety seen here, also the flying squirrel. By the streams on the Marysville side of the Spur, we see that strangest and most anomalous of all the Australian mammals, the duck-billed Platypus, or "water-mole." This strange creature presents a link between the quadruped, the bird, and the reptile. About a foot and a half in length, it is covered all over with a beautiful rich fur like seal-skin, has strong claws and web-feet, and a pair of broad flat mandibles like the bill of a

duck. The "beaver-rat" is another singular animal. Lizards of large size are very numerous, and we one day nearly trod on the head of a "guana," a very large variety of that tribe. Snakes are, of course, in so warm a climate very numerous, but the study of their fearful beauty is attended with too much peril to be very anxiously sought. As the day declines, the golden sunset sets all the woods aflame, and darkness, without any intervening twilight, soon succeeds, while flights of cockatoos fly past with ghostly shrieks, and at night the dismal howl of the "dingo," or wild dog, is yet heard on the Black Spur, though it is gradually retreating to more solitary districts.

One of the most gifted Australian authors has said that the dominant note of Australian scenery is "Weird Melancholy." Its vast solitude is desolation. Its gloomy mountain forests—funereal, secret, stern—seem to stifle in their black gorges a story of sullen despair, and the very animal-life is either grotesque or ghostly. Australia has rightly been named the "Land of the Dawning," for here alone is to be found in the same measure the grotesque and the weird—the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write. Certainly the roads wind round these hills to no steep surmounted by old romantic feudal castle or ruin as in other lands. There is none of that interchange between dead memories and present life, that constitutes the great charm of travel. "Man is dear to man," but here the spirit of the Past is silent. The prevailing tone of the few poets Australia has yet produced is one of sadness. The best of Kendall's production describes the story of one who, speared by blacks beside his camp fire in the solitude of Australian wastes, is left alone—





"With Night and Silence in the sobbing rains.

But while the English Autumn filled her lap
 With faded gold, and while the reapers cooled
 Their flame-red faces in the clover grass,
 They looked for him at home; and when the frost
 Had made a silence in the morning lanes,
 And cooped the farmers by December fires,
 They looked for him at home. From sun to sun
 They waited. Season after season went,
 And Memory wept upon the lonely moors,

And Hope grew voiceless, and the watchers passed
 Like shadows, one by one, away."

And Gordon's verse is pervaded by the same quality,
 despite an assumption of recklessness which ill con-
 ceals a deeper vein. Just as when the jester shakes
 his bells,

"'Tis but to hide the tears he sheds."

When the scented breath of spring stirs the wattle-

boughs with vague whisperings, he buries his face in the deep grass, and

"Oh! the dreary wistful longing,
The faces that are thronging."

Such is the key-note of these first sweet singers of Australia!

But lonely solitudes often possess a solemn beauty of a very impressive order. If the dominant note be weird melancholy, another may be placed beside it—wearisome monotony! the first-named probably having its root in this, to which it is at least half-sister. The most striking feature in Australian scenery is the prevalence of trees and shrubs that make no perceptible difference in the landscape in summer or winter, their colour being always dark and monotonous. Unchanging as enduring, autumn lays no fiery finger on the leaves; winter passes by on the other side with averted gaze; the winds of departing spring scatter no showers of white blossoms like drifted snow; and crowned summer is merely a cruel despot who wields a fiery sceptre. There is little outward change of aspect throughout the Australian year. The pathos of fading autumn with its October woods and glowing tints, the stern reign of winter with its mantle of snow, the mighty ravishment of spring, stirring the heart into strange ecstasies, the joy and gladness of summer-time, are in other lands all well-defined and strongly-marked changes; all of them seasons forming backgrounds of infinite beauty and suggestiveness to the shifting incidents of this our life. This restful change is the natural counterpoise to monotony. The poet of the "Seasons" could never here in Australia have concluded his task with that triumphant burst of enthusiasm commenced in the well-remembered line—

"These as they change, Almighty Father, these."

The ever-varying phenomena of a greyer clime, full of the frequent rain-cloud and the yellow leaf, the tender influence of poetic twilight and dewy eve—both unknown here—cannot be foregone without artistic loss,

and a climate devoid of them tends to harden the perceptions and impair the sensibility to many of the more delicate qualities of the Northern temperament. The greatest charm of one of the most popular novelists of our day is in the skilful interweaving of these atmospheric surroundings with his most tender episodes. It is quite possible to be cloyed with sunshine. The metallic glare of a too bright sun may become intolerable to eyes that first opened on less-bright but more expressive skies, and have grown familiar with the changeful moods of climes that possess a far wider range of delicate gradations and subtler nuances of colour. It is not easy to find mental sustenance or inspiration in a clime where all is *fortissimo* or *pianissimo*, without delicate shading or half-tone—a limited gamut with many chords left out, and those mostly that have the power to move as with a touch of fire, or to chasten and subdue. The absence also of great streams or broad majestic rivers is the loss of an indispensable element in the agencies we have just passed in review. River scenery is the one thing above others most associated with all the history, art, poetry, and legendary lore of every land. It is indelibly bound up with the most powerful associations, and flings a spell over this our day, even when the wild minstrelsy, born of midnight raid and border foray, exists only in the fading colours of a far-off time, inspiring such verse as that of Scott's—

"Sweet Teviot! by thy silver tide
The glaring bale-fires blaze no more," &c.

And though the historic aspects and associations of such scenes must perforce be foregone in any new country, yet the circumstance of a vast continent unpossessed of these natural features remains to be deplored by every one to whom these things are dear. These limitations must be accepted. They are not of man's creating. But the fact that they exist will always remain a difficulty in the development of a native school of art or letters. No man is independent of scenery or climate.

STEPHEN THOMPSON.

"SISTER EYES."

A COMPLETE STORY. BY THE AUTHOR OF "SO BLUE: THE STORY OF A GIRTON GIRL," ETC. ETC.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

HERE are many girls and women nowadays who will sympathise with Katharine Ackroyd as she sat one afternoon apparently engrossed in an instructive book, but in reality chafing against the monotonous littleness of her existence, and seeking some worthier solution of the enigma offered by her presence in the world.

Round the table in the centre of the cosily-furnished boudoir, into which the schoolroom of former days had

been transformed, were gathered her three sisters, busy over their various so-called pursuits. She could not blame them for their industry, their content, their pleasure in justifying the oft-paid compliment to the effect that the Miss Ackroyds were never idle; and yet she knew in her heart that it was all a farce—neither she nor her sisters were doing any real work in the world, and their platform of culture and petty artistic endeavour was in none but a superficial sense above the level of actual idleness.

Katharine was seven-and-twenty now, and had for many years led the tranquil, easy life of the eldest daughter in a well-to-do house. Nothing was required

