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Edward John Eyre

Excerpt

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JOURNAL OF EXPEDITIONS  
IN  
CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA,  
IN 1840-1.

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CHAPTER I.

THE CAMP PLUNDERED—NIGHT OF HORRORS—PROCEED ON  
TO THE WESTWARD—THE BOYS FOLLOW US—THEY ARE  
LEFT BEHIND—FORCED MARCHES—DESERT COUNTRY—  
BANKSIAS MET WITH—TRACES OF NATIVES—TERMINATION  
OF THE CLIFFS—FIND WATER.

GLANCING hastily around the camp I found it deserted by the two younger native boys, whilst the scattered fragments of our baggage, which I left carefully piled under the oilskin, lay thrown about in wild disorder, and at once revealed the cause of the harrowing scene before me.

Upon raising the body of my faithful, but ill-fated follower, I found that he was beyond all human aid; he had been shot through the left breast with a ball, the last convulsions of death were upon him, and he expired almost immediately after our arrival. The frightful, the appalling truth now burst upon me, that I was alone in the desert. He who had

faithfully served me for many years, who had followed my fortunes in adversity and in prosperity, who had accompanied me in all my wanderings, and whose attachment to me had been his sole inducement to remain with me in this last, and to him alas, fatal journey, was now no more. For an instant, I was almost tempted to wish that it had been my own fate instead of his. The horrors of my situation glared upon me in such startling reality, as for an instant almost to paralyse the mind. At the dead hour of night, in the wildest and most inhospitable wastes of Australia, with the fierce wind raging in unison with the scene of violence before me, I was left, with a single native, whose fidelity I could not rely upon, and who for aught I knew might be in league with the other two, who perhaps were even now, lurking about with the view of taking away my life as they had done that of the overseer. Three days had passed away since we left the last water, and it was very doubtful when we might find any more. Six hundred miles of country had to be traversed, before I could hope to obtain the slightest aid or assistance of any kind, whilst I knew not that a single drop of water or an ounce of flour had been left by these murderers, from a stock that had previously been so small.

With such thoughts rapidly passing through my mind, I turned to search for my double-barelled gun, which I had left covered with an oilskin at the

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## DEFENCELESS CONDITION.

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head of my own break wind. It was gone, as was also the double-barelled gun that had belonged to the overseer. These were the only weapons at the time that were in serviceable condition, for though there were a brace of pistols they had been packed away, as there were no cartridges for them, and my rifle was useless, from having a ball sticking fast in the breech, and which we had in vain endeavoured to extract. A few days' previous to our leaving the last water, the overseer had attempted to wash out the rifle not knowing it was loaded, and the consequence was, that the powder became wetted and partly washed away, so that we could neither fire it off, nor get out the ball; I was, therefore, temporarily defenceless, and quite at the mercy of the natives, had they at this time come upon me. Having hastily ripped open the bag in which the pistols had been sewn up, I got them out, together with my powder flask, and a bag containing a little shot and some large balls. The rifle I found where it had been left, but the ramrod had been taken out by the boys to load my double-barelled gun with, its own ramrod being too short for that purpose; I found it, however, together with several loose cartridges, lying about near the place where the boys had slept, so that it was evident they had deliberately loaded the fire-arms before they tried to move away with the things they had stolen; one barrel only of my gun had been previously loaded, and I believe neither barrels in that of the overseer.

After obtaining possession of all the remaining arms, useless as they were at the moment, with some ammunition, I made no further examination then, but hurried away from the fearful scene, accompanied by the King George's Sound native, to search for the horses, knowing that if they got away now, no chance whatever would remain of saving our lives. Already the wretched animals had wandered to a considerable distance; and although the night was moonlight, yet the belts of scrub, intersecting the plains, were so numerous and dense, that for a long time we could not find them; having succeeded in doing so at last, Wylie and I remained with them, watching them during the remainder of the night; but they were very restless, and gave us a great deal of trouble. With an aching heart, and in most painful reflections, I passed this dreadful night. Every moment appeared to be protracted to an hour, and it seemed as if the daylight would never appear. About midnight the wind ceased, and the weather became bitterly cold and frosty. I had nothing on but a shirt and a pair of trowsers, and suffered most acutely from the cold; to mental anguish was now added intense bodily pain. Suffering and distress had well nigh overwhelmed me, and life seemed hardly worth the effort necessary to prolong it. Ages can never efface the horrors of this single night, nor would the wealth of the world ever tempt me to go through similar ones again.

*April 30.*—At last, by God's blessing, daylight

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SCENE BY DAYLIGHT.

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dawned once more, but sad and heart-rending was the scene it presented to my view, upon driving the horses to what had been our last night's camp. The corpse of my poor companion lay extended on the ground, with the eyes open, but cold and glazed in death. The same stern resolution, and fearless open look, which had characterized him when living, stamped the expression of his countenance even now. He had fallen upon his breast four or five yards from where he had been sleeping, and was dressed only in his shirt. In all probability, the noise made by the natives, in plundering the camp, had awoken him; and upon his jumping up, with a view of stopping them, they had fired upon and killed him.

Around the camp lay scattered the harness of the horses, and the remains of the stores that had been the temptation to this fatal deed.

As soon as the horses were caught, and secured, I left Wylie to make a fire, whilst I proceeded to examine into the state of our baggage, that I might decide upon our future proceedings. Among the principal things carried off by the natives, were, the whole of our baked bread, amounting to twenty pounds weight, some mutton, tea and sugar, the overseer's tobacco and pipes, a one gallon keg full of water, some clothes, two double-barrelled guns, some ammunition, and a few other small articles.

There were still left forty pounds of flour, a little

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## NARROW ESCAPE.

tea and sugar, and four gallons of water, besides the arms and ammunition I had secured last night.

From the state of our horses, and the dreadful circumstances we were placed in, I was now obliged to abandon every thing but the bare necessaries of life. The few books and instruments I had still left, with many of the specimens I had collected, a saddle, and some other things, were thrown aside to lighten somewhat more the trifling loads our animals had to carry. A little bread was then baked, and I endeavoured once more to put the rifle in serviceable condition, as it was the only weapon we should have to depend upon in any dangers that might beset us. Unable in any way to take out the breech, or to extract the ball, I determined to melt it out, and for that purpose took the barrel off the stock, and put the breech in the fire, holding the muzzle in my hand. Whilst thus engaged, the rifle went off, the ball whizzing close past my head; the fire, it seems, had dried the powder, which had been wetted, not washed out; and when the barrel was sufficiently heated, the piece had gone off, to the imminent danger of my life, from the incautious way in which I held it. The gun, however, was again serviceable; and after carefully loading it, I felt a degree of confidence and security I had before been a stranger to.

At eight o'clock we were ready to proceed; there remained but to perform the last sad offices of

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## PROCEED TO THE WESTWARD.

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humanity towards him, whose career had been cut short in so untimely a manner. This duty was rendered even more than ordinarily painful, by the nature of the country, where we happened to have been encamped. One vast unbroken surface of sheet rock extended for miles in every direction, and rendered it impossible to make a grave. We were some miles away from the sea-shore, and even had we been nearer, could not have got down the cliffs to bury the corpse in the sand. I could only, therefore, wrap a blanket around the body of the overseer, and leaving it enshrouded where he fell, escape from the melancholy scene, accompanied by Wylie, under the influence of feelings which neither time nor circumstances will ever obliterate. Though years have now passed away since the enactment of this tragedy, the dreadful horrors of that time and scene, are recalled before me with frightful vividness, and make me shudder even now, when I think of them. A life time was crowded into those few short hours, and death alone may blot out the impressions they produced.

For some time we travelled slowly and silently onwards. Wylie preceding, leading one of the horses, myself following behind and driving the others after him, through a country consisting still of the same alternations of scrub and open intervals as before. The day became very warm, and at eleven, after travelling ten miles to the west, I determined to halt until the cool of the evening. After

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baking some bread and getting our dinners, I questioned Wylie as to what he knew of the sad occurrence of yesterday. He positively denied all knowledge of it—said he had been asleep, and was awoke by the report of the gun, and that upon seeing the overseer lying on the ground he ran off to meet me. He admitted, however, that, after the unsuccessful attempt to leave us, and proceed alone to King George's Sound, the elder of the other two natives had proposed to him again to quit the party, and try to go back to Fowler's Bay, to the provisions buried there. But he had heard or knew nothing, he said, of either robbery or murder being first contemplated.

My own impression was, that Wylie had agreed with the other two to rob the camp and leave us;—that he had been cognisant of all their proceedings and preparations, but that when, upon the eve of their departure, the overseer had unexpectedly awoke and been murdered, he was shocked and frightened at the deed, and instead of accompanying them, had run down to meet me. My opinion upon this point received additional confirmation from the subsequent events of this day; but I never could get Wylie to admit even the slightest knowledge of the fatal occurrence, or that he had even intended to have united with them in plundering the camp and deserting. He had now become truly alarmed; and independently of the fear of the consequences which would attach to the crime, should we ever reach a



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## APPEARANCE OF THE MURDERERS. 9

civilized community again, he had become very apprehensive that the other natives, who belonged to quite a different part of Australia to himself, and who spoke a totally different language, would murder him as unhesitatingly as they had done the white man.

We remained in camp until four o'clock, and were again preparing to advance, when my attention was called by Wylie to two white objects among the scrub, at no great distance from us, and I at once recognized the native boys, covered with their blankets only, and advancing towards us. From Wylie's account of their proposal to go back towards Fowler's Bay, I fully hoped that they had taken that direction, and left us to pursue our way to the Sound unmolested. I was therefore surprised, and somewhat alarmed, at finding them so near us. With my rifle and pistols I felt myself sufficiently a match for them in an open country, or by daylight. Yet I knew that as long as they followed like bloodhounds on our tracks our lives would be in their power at any moment that they chose to take them, whilst we were passing through a scrubby country, or by night. Whatever their intention might be, I knew, that if we travelled in the same direction with them, our lives could only be safe by their destruction. Although they had taken fully one-third of the whole stock of our provisions, their appetites were so ravenous, and their habits so improvident, that this would soon be consumed, and then they

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10           ADVANCE TOWARDS THE NATIVES.

must either starve or plunder us; for they had already tried to subsist themselves in the bush, and had failed.

As these impressions rapidly passed through my mind, there appeared to me but one resource left, to save my own life and that of the native with me: that was, to shoot the elder of the two. Painful as this would be, I saw no other alternative, if they still persisted in following us. After packing up our few things, and putting them upon the horses, I gave the bridles to Wylie to hold, whilst I advanced alone with my rifle towards the two natives. They were now tolerably near, each carrying a double-barrelled gun, which was pointed towards me, elevated across the left arm and held by the right hand. As I attempted to approach nearer they gradually retreated.

Finding that I was not likely to gain ground upon them in this way, I threw down my weapons, and advanced unarmed, hoping that if they let me near them I might suddenly close with the eldest and wrest his gun from him. After advancing about sixty or seventy yards towards them, I found that they again began to retreat, evidently determined not to let me approach any nearer, either armed or unarmed. Upon this I halted, and endeavoured to enter into parley with them, with a view to persuading them to return towards Fowler's Bay, and thus obviate the painful necessity I should have been under of endeavouring, for my own security, to take