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A LADY'S VISIT TO THE GOLD
DIGGINGS
OF AUSTRALIA IN 1852-53

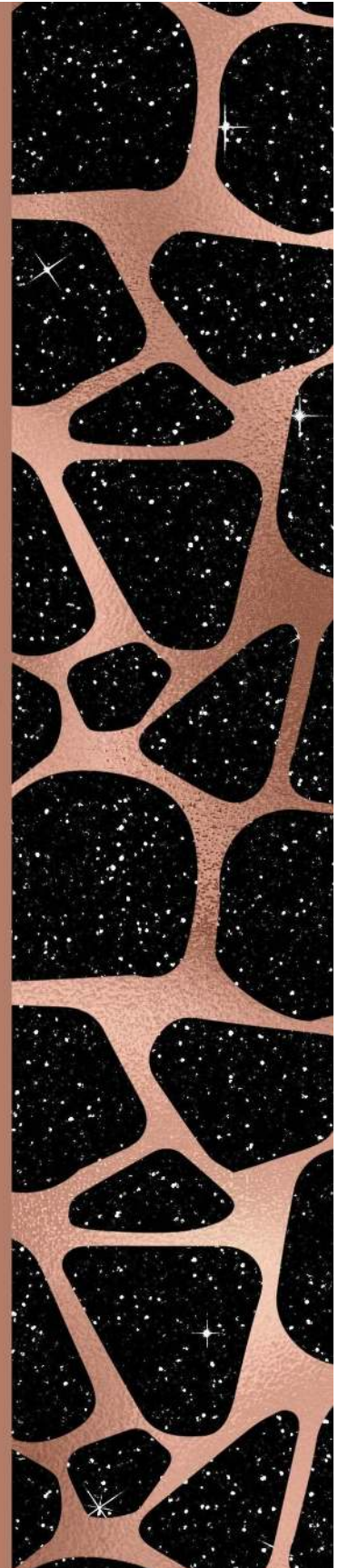
Ellen Clacy



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ELLEN CLACY

*A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of
Australia in 1852-53*

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Contents

Preface

1. The Voyage Out

2. Stay In Melbourne

3. Camping Up - Melbourne to the Black Forest

4. Camping Up - Black Forest to Eagle Hawk Gully

5. The Diggings

6. Eagle Hawk Gully

7. An Adventure

8. Harriette Walters

9. Ironbark Gully

10. Forest Creek

11. Return to Melbourne

12. Ballarat

13. New South Wales

14. South Australia

15. Melbourne Again

16. Homeward Bound

17. Conclusion

Appendix

About the Author

Preface

It may be deemed presumptuous that one of my age and sex should venture to give to the public an account of personal adventures in a land which has so often been descanted upon by other and abler pens; but when I reflect on the many mothers, wives, and sisters in England, whose hearts are ever longing for information respecting the dangers and privations to which their relatives at the antipodes are exposed, I cannot but hope that the presumption of my undertaking may be pardoned in consideration of the pleasure which an accurate description of some of the Australian Gold Fields may perhaps afford to many; and although the time of my residence in the colonies was short, I had the advantage (not only in Melbourne, but whilst in the bush) of constant intercourse with many experienced diggers and old colonists—thus having every facility for acquiring information respecting Victoria and the other colonies.

It was in the beginning of April, 185-, that the excitement occasioned by the published accounts of the Victoria “Diggings,” induced my brother to fling aside his Homer and Euclid for the various “Guides” printed for the benefit of the intending gold-seeker, or to ponder over the shipping columns of the daily papers. The love of adventure must be contagious, for three weeks after (so rapid were our preparations) found myself accompanying him to those auriferous regions. The following pages will give an accurate detail of my adventures there—in a lack of the marvellous will consist their principal faults but not even to please would I venture to turn uninteresting truth into

agreeable fiction. Of the few statistics which occur, I may safely say, as of the more personal portions, that they are strictly true.

One

The Voyage Out



Everything was ready—boxes packed, tinned, and corded; farewells taken, and ourselves whirling down by rail to Gravesend—too much excited—too full of the future to experience that sickening of the heart, that desolation of the feelings, which usually accompanies an expatriation, however voluntary, from the dearly loved shores of one's native land. Although in the cloudy month of April, the sun shone brightly on the masts of our bonny bark, which lay in full sight of the windows of the "Old Falcon," where we had taken up our temporary quarters. The sea was very rough, but as we were anxious to get on board without farther delay, we entrusted our valuable lives in a four-oared boat, despite the dismal prognostications of our worthy host. A pleasant row that was, at one moment covered over with salt-water—the next riding on the top of a wave, ten times the size of our frail conveyance—then came a sudden concussion—in veering our rudder smashed into a smaller boat, which immediately filled and sank, and our rowers disheartened at this mishap would go no farther. The return was still rougher—my face smarted dreadfully from the cutting splashes of the salt-water; they contrived, however, to land us safely at the "Old Falcon," though in a most pitiable plight; charging only a

sovereign for this delightful trip—very moderate, considering the number of salt-water baths they had given us gratis. In the evening a second trial proved more successful, and we reached our vessel safely.

A first night on board ship has in it something very strange, and the first awakening in the morning is still more so. To find oneself in a space of some six feet by eight, instead of a good-sized room, and lying in a cot, scarce wide enough to turn round in, as a substitute for a four-post bedstead, reminds you in no very agreeable manner that you have exchanged the comforts of Old England for the “roughing it” of a sea life. The first sound that awoke me was the “cheerily” song of the sailors, as the anchor was heaved—not again, we trusted, to be lowered till our eyes should rest on the waters of Port Philip. And then the cry of “raise tacks and sheets” (which I, in nautical ignorance, interpreted “hay-stacks and sheep”) sent many a sluggard from their berths to bid a last farewell to the banks of the Thames.

In the afternoon we parted company with our steam-tug, and next morning, whilst off the Isle of Wight, our pilot also took his departure. Seasickness now became the fashion, but, as I cannot speak from experience of its sensations, I shall altogether decline the subject. On Friday, the 30th, we sighted Stark Point; and as the last speck of English land faded away in the distance, an intense feeling of misery crept over me, as I reflected that perchance I had left those most dear to return to them no more. But I forget; a description of private feelings is, to uninterested readers, only so much twaddle, besides being more egotistical than even an account of personal adventures could extenuate; so, with the exception of a few extracts from my “log,” I shall jump at once from the English Channel to the more exciting shores of Victoria.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 5, lat. 45 degrees 57 minutes N., long. 11 degrees 45 minutes W.—Whilst off the Bay of Biscay, for the first time I had the pleasure of seeing the phosphoric light in the water, and the effect was indeed too beautiful to describe. I gazed again and again, and, as the darkness above became more dense, the silence of evening more profound, and the moving lights beneath more brilliant, I could have believed them the eyes of the Undines, who had quitted their cool grottos beneath the sea to gaze on the daring ones who were sailing above them. At times one of these stars of the ocean would seem to linger around our vessel, as though loth to leave the admiring eyes that watched its glittering progress.* * * * *

SUNDAY, 9, lat. 37 degrees 53 minutes N., long. 15 degrees 32 minutes W. — Great excitement throughout the ship. Early in the morning a homeward-bound sail hove in sight, and as the sea was very calm, our captain kindly promised to lower a boat and send letters by her. What a scene then commenced; nothing but scribes and writing-desks met the view, and nought was heard but the scratching of pens, and energetic demands for foreign letter-paper, vestas, or sealing-wax; then came a rush on deck, to witness the important packet delivered to the care of the first mate, and watch the progress of the little bark that was to bear among so many homes the glad tidings of our safety. On she came—her stunsails set—her white sails glittering in the sun—skimming like a sea-bird over the waters. She proved to be the Maltese schooner ‘Felix,’ bound for Bremen. Her captain treated the visitors from our ship with the greatest politeness, promised to consign our letters to the first pilot he should encounter off the English coast, and sent his very last oranges as a present to the ladies, for which we sincerely thanked him; the increasing heat of the weather made them acceptable indeed.

WEDNESDAY, 12, lat. 33 degrees 19 minutes N., long. 17 degrees 30 minutes W.—At about noon we sighted Madeira. At first it appeared little more than a dark cloud above the horizon; gradually the sides of the rocks became clearly discernible, then the wind bore us onward, and soon all traces of the sunny isle were gone.

FRIDAY, 28, lat. 4 degrees 2 minutes N., long. 21 degrees 30 minutes W.—Another opportunity of sending letters, but as this was the second time of so doing, the excitement was proportionately diminished. This vessel was bound for the port of Liverpool, from the coast of Africa; her cargo (so said those of our fellow-travellers who boarded her), consisted of ebony and gold-dust, her only passengers being monkeys and parrots.

SUNDAY, JUNE 6, long. 24 degrees 38 minutes W.—Crossed the Line, to the great satisfaction of all on board, as we had been becalmed more than a week, and were weary of gazing upon the unruffled waters around us, or watching the sails as they idly flapped to and fro. Chess, backgammon, books and cards, had ceased to beguile the hours away, and the only amusement left was lowering a boat and rowing about within a short distance of the ship, but this (even by those not pulling at the oars) was considered too fatiguing work, for a tropical sun was above us, and the heat was most intense. Our only resource was to give ourselves up to a sort of DOLCE FAR NIENTE existence, and lounge upon the deck, sipping lemonade or lime-juice, beneath a large awning which extended from the fore to the mizen masts.

TUESDAY, AUGUST 17, lat. 39 degrees 28 minutes S., long. 136 degrees 31 minutes E.—Early this morning one of the sailors died, and before noon the last services of the Church of England were read over his body; this was the first and only death that occurred during our long passage, and the solemnity of committing his last remains to their watery grave cast a saddening influence

over the most thoughtless. I shall never forget the moment when the sewn-up hammock, with a gaily coloured flag wrapped round it, was launched into the deep; those who can witness with indifference a funeral on land, would, I think, find it impossible to resist the thrilling awe inspired by such an event at sea.

FRIDAY, 20, lat. 38 degrees 57 minutes S., long. 140 degrees 5 minutes E.—Sighted Moonlight Head, the next day Cape Otway; and in the afternoon of Sunday, the 22nd, we entered the Heads, and our pilot came on board. He was a smart, active fellow, and immediately anchored us within the bay (a heavy gale brewing); and then, after having done colonial justice to a substantial dinner, he edified us with the last Melbourne news. “Not a spare room or bed to be had—no living at all under a pound a-day— every one with ten fingers making ten to twenty pounds a-week.” “Then of course no one goes to the diggings?” “Oh, that pays better still— the gold obliged to be quarried—a pound weight of no value.” The excitement that evening can scarcely be imagined, but it somewhat abated next morning on his telling us to diminish his accounts some 200 per cent.

MONDAY, 23.—The wind high, and blowing right against us. Compelled to remain at anchor, only too thankful to be in such safe quarters.

TUESDAY, 24.—Got under weigh at half-past seven in the morning, and passed the wrecks of two vessels, whose captains had attempted to come in without a pilot, rather than wait for one—the increased number of vessels arriving, causing the pilots to be frequently all engaged. The bay, which is truly splendid, was crowded with shipping. In a few hours our anchor was lowered for the last time—boats were put off towards our ship from Liardet’s Beach—we were lowered into the first that came alongside—a twenty minutes’ pull to the landing-place— another minute, and we trod the golden shores of Victoria.

Two

Stay In Melbourne



At last we are in Australia. Our feet feel strange as they tread upon TERRA FIRMA, and our SEA-LEGS (to use a sailor's phrase) are not so ready to leave us after a four months' service, as we should have anticipated; but it matters little, for we are in the colonies, walking with undignified, awkward gait, not on a fashionable promenade, but upon a little wooden pier.

The first sounds that greet our ears are the noisy tones of some watermen, who are loitering on the building of wooden logs and boards, which we, as do the good people of Victoria, dignify with the undeserved title of PIER. There they stand in their waterproof caps and skins—tolerably idle and exceedingly independent—with one eye on the look out for a fare, and the other cast longingly towards the open doors of Liardet's public-house, which is built a few yards from the landing-place, and alongside the main road to Melbourne.

"Ah, skipper! times isn't as they used to was," shouted one, addressing the captain of one of the vessels then lying in the bay, who was rowing himself to shore, with no other assistant or companion than a sailor-boy. The captain, a well-built, fine-looking specimen of an English seaman, merely laughed at this impromptu salutation.

“I say, skipper, I don’t quite like that d—d stroke of yours.”

No answer; but, as if completely deaf to these remarks, as well as the insulting tone in which they were delivered, the “skipper” continued giving his orders to his boy, and then leisurely ascended the steps. He walked straight up to the waterman, who was lounging against the railing.

“So, my fine fellow, you didn’t quite admire that stroke of mine. Now, I’ve another stroke that I think you’ll admire still less,” and with one blow he sent him reeling against the railing on the opposite side.

The waterman slowly recovered his equilibrium, muttering, “that was a safe dodge, as the gentleman knew he was the heaviest man of the two.”

“Then never let your tongue say what your fist can’t defend,” was the cool retort, as another blow sent him staggering to his original place, amidst the unrestrained laughter of his companions, whilst the captain unconcernedly walked into Liardet’s, whither we also betook ourselves, not a little surprised and amused by this our first introduction to colonial customs and manners.

The fact is, the watermen regard the masters of the ships in the bay as sworn enemies to their business; many are runaway sailors, and therefore, I suppose, have a natural antipathy that way; added to which, besides being no customers themselves, the “skippers,” by the loan of their boats, often save their friends from the exorbitant charges these watermen levy.

Exorbitant they truly are. Not a boat would they put off for the nearest ship in the bay for less than a pound, and before I quitted those regions, two and three times that sum was often demanded for only one passenger. We had just paid at the rate of only three shillings and sixpence each, but this trifling charge was in consideration of the large party—more than a dozen—who had left our ship in the same boat together.

Meanwhile we have entered Liardet's EN ATTENDANT the Melbourne omnibus, some of our number, too impatient to wait longer, had already started on foot. We were shown into a clean, well-furnished sitting-room, with mahogany dining-table and chairs, and a showy glass over the mantelpiece. An English-looking barmaid entered. "Would the company like some wine or spirits?" Some one ordered sherry, of which I only remember that it was vile trash at eight shillings a bottle.

And now the cry of "Here's the bus," brought us quickly outside again, where we found several new arrivals also waiting for it. I had hoped, from the name, or rather misname, of the conveyance, to gladden my eyes with the sight of something civilized. Alas, for my disappointment! There stood a long, tumble-to-pieces-looking waggon, not covered in, with a plank down each side to sit upon, and a miserable narrow plank it was. Into this vehicle were crammed a dozen people and an innumerable host of portmanteaus, large and small, carpet-bags, baskets, brown-paper parcels, bird-cage and inmate, &c., all of which, as is generally the case, were packed in a manner the most calculated to contribute the largest amount of inconvenience to the live portion of the cargo. And to drag this grand affair into Melbourne were harnessed thereto the most wretched-looking objects in the shape of horses that I had ever beheld.

A slight roll tells us we are off.

"And is THIS the beautiful scenery of Australia?" was my first melancholy reflection. Mud and swamp—swamp and mud—relieved here and there by some few trees which looked as starved and miserable as ourselves. The cattle we passed appeared in a wretched condition, and the human beings on the road seemed all to belong to one family, so truly Vandemonian was the cast of their countenances.

“The rainy season’s not over,” observed the driver, in an apologetic tone. Our eyes and uneasy limbs most FEELINGLY corroborated his statement, for as we moved along at a foot-pace, the rolling of the omnibus, owing to the deep ruts and heavy soil, brought us into most unpleasant contact with the various packages before-mentioned. On we went towards Melbourne—now stopping for the unhappy horses to take breath—then passing our pedestrian messmates, and now arriving at a small specimen of a swamp; and whilst they (with trowsers tucked high above the knee and boots well saturated) step, slide and tumble manfully through it, we give a fearful roll to the left, ditto, ditto to the right, then a regular stand-still, or perhaps, by way of variety, are all but jolted over the animals’ heads, till at length all minor considerations of bumps and bruises are merged in the anxiety to escape without broken bones.

“The Yarra,” said the conductor. I looked straight ahead, and innocently asked “Where?” for I could only discover a tract of marsh or swamp, which I fancy must have resembled the fens of Lincolnshire, as they were some years ago, before draining was introduced into that county. Over Princes Bridge we now passed, up Swanston Street, then into Great Bourke Street, and now we stand opposite the Post-office—the appointed rendezvous with the walkers, who are there awaiting us. Splashed, wet and tired, and also, I must confess, very cross, right thankful was I to be carried over the dirty road and be safely deposited beneath the wooden portico outside the Post-office. Our ride to Melbourne cost us only half-a-crown a piece, and a shilling for every parcel. The distance we had come was between two and three miles.

The non-arrival of the mail-steamer left us now no other care save the all-important one of procuring food and shelter. Scouts were accordingly despatched to the best hotels; they returned with long faces—“full.” The second-rate, and in fact every respectable inn and boarding or lodging-house