

OVER THE BLUE MOUNTAINS.

By DAVID CHRISTIE MURRAY.

The first scene of this history shall be played, if you please, in the smoking room of the Savage Club, London. There are present two born Australians, one Australian resident of wide experience, on holiday in the home country, and the present visitor. The present visitor has been talking enthusiastically about what he means to do in the way of painting on his projected, unfulfilled journey. One of the born Australians, an artist who is fast achieving a European reputation, cuts the enthusiastic short.

"You may leave all your painting traps behind you for anything that you will be likely to find in Australia. As a matter of fact there is nothing to paint there, and I let you go to New Zealand now you will find it otherwise. New Zealand is the home and the province of the picturesque."

The present visitor momentarily sets forth the fact that the limits of time to which he has bound himself will not allow of a visit to New Zealand, and thereupon resigns himself to the belief that due to the efficient Mr. J. journey has seemed to progress in a hazy way from him. When a day later he has emerged upon the fery of packing, the disillusioned artist puts his painting tools at the very bottom of the chest and supposes that they will remain there for the whole of his intended tour. The other native Australian and the returned colonist tacitly consent to the decision of their artistic brother, and the wanderer sets out upon his journey with a sort of general notion that the land for which he is bound is as far as possible, as colorful as a London fog, and as pictorially interesting as a tea chest.

Some of the second-for events must more rapidly—indeed the artist approaching Hobart, with somewhat rising spirit in view of the hills that smile in the rising sun. There are pictures here naturally, if one had but the means of hand to paint them, and long before the port is reached he would have brought the album to an exchange a dozen times over that he might like the lovely landscape on canvas or on paper. But then comes the dreary night journey through the Tasmanian bush, and a pessimistic fellow traveler assures him that the desolated region through which he is passing very fairly represents the average scenery of the vast island which he is bound to visit. His newly awakened hopes wither and die within him. The dreary railway journey over he dare the way in a tinpot of a boat with a back-kettle of a boiler, and through slow discomfort reaches midnight Melbourne. Midnight Melbourne is no more than a stranger's eye in chill August weather, and even the most cheerful of people realize that the city has little to show in the way of beauty. Wide streets and lofty buildings and such a profusion of lettered house fronts as they no other city in the world can show lower down to the artist's eye. The artist grows resigned. He will not look for beauty here, or if he can he will follow the example of the administrative head who—

Landed here.

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As if anything in the wilderness, any recognition of the old-fashioned beauty of the landscape, say, a Sydney township, for example. The second act, you observe, has brought us to Sydney already, and has brought us through miles and miles and miles of unimpeachably beautiful land; but as the bush is, the passage through it has taken to the winds the Australian artist's creed. There are half a dozen pictures to be painted even there, out of which some Antipodean Turner or Holbein, Constable or Claude shall make a reputation which shall endure as long as the memory of art itself, and shall be a picture which shall give the sense of time so long as pigment keeps their color and the canvas holds together. The range of things is limited to be sure; but what things they are, how full of sentiment, how inspired by a mournful yearning, exuberant! Here the sunshine breaks the great darkness, silent land! How deeply the sunset grieves and broods above it! How wild and wide and lone is the land deep blue of twilight! How rarely you may see elsewhere the sentiment—ay, and the pictorial sentiment too—which animates those scenes of square miles where all the forest is lighted with the sun's own first coming and the trees lift their giant arms in a dumb agony of impatience. The sun will come one day who will paint things. If I could paint them as I have seen, and so I know them now to my mind's eye, while I sit far away in many a lifeless, I could have immortalized my artistic Australian friend and I will have ample opportunity for discussion when we meet again—though, if this impression does not change, to last him for a lifetime.

And now for act III. I have been to Sydney and have smiled on the beautiful harbor. It is beautiful but it is not paintable, and so artist, so far and so on, was to find great inspiration there. Perhaps in years to come, when it is crowded with shipping, its shores may find a background for a forest of masts, and in many grow pictures in that way, just as the lower reaches of the Thames have done. But as it stands the artist finds little or no paintable in it.

I have had two real letter days—days to remember as long as I am able to remember anything. I do not pretend to have discovered the Blue Mountains, even in that limited sense in which Sir Francis Head was once supposed—on the publication of the book in which he recorded his travels—to have discovered the United States of America. But I have seen them, and must needs say my little word about them. Wherever I may go I am for the rest of my life a walking advertisement of their beauty. I went there with a Knight Commander of the Yeo, who had begged about their charm and splendor until I was prepared to be heartily disappointed. The K.C.P. is a person of the refinement and overbearing order, who, conceiving that knowledge is bigger than Mount Elison, will have all other men share his faith, and being himself ready to share death at the stake or block is anxious to secure companions in a possible martyrdom. The martyrdom is not only possible, but probable. One of these days he will die for his opinions. Some outraged lover of truth unaided will kill him.

On our way up we talked of the Twin Alps, of the Trauma, of the Grampian Hills, the Balkans, the Austrian Tyrol, the mountains of North Wales. Our speech was of more dead peaks and ghastly precipices and yawning caverns, and then of fairy dells and mountain dimples where some beauty he has seen.

We were already some hours from Sydney on our way, and after zig-zagging to and fro at an increasing height above a broad green plain had come to a high tableland, where the train dragged its length along through a stretch of waste as ever of the new familiar bush. Looking out of the window, I asked my companion—

"Where are the Blue Mountains?"

"You are on top of ten, my boy," he answered me. He smiled with an air of familiar mockery, and but for the lingering effects of an early Christian teaching I should have said him where he sat. "You don't see their full beauty yet," he went on, "but wait till you come to Katoomba. I talk about your Blue Mountains then! Talk about your Australian Tyrol! I have seen them all. There's nothing in Europe to compare with the Blue Mountains!"

There was nothing in the whole prospect which had a thing of blue about except the sky unless it were my conception of the journey, and there was no faintest promise of a mountain anywhere. I do not think that I have ever been so profoundly disgusted in my life. The K.C.P. was triply armed against reproach and wholly inaccessible to satire.

"Wait till you see Katoomba," was his sole answer to whatever invective I might heap upon him or whatever shaft of irony I might launch against him.

At last we came to Katoomba, and betook ourselves to the Carrington Hotel there. Like Orlando, "I thought that all things had been savage here," and was somewhat mollified to find that our hostelry at least promised comfortable quarters. The view from its handsome veranda was in itself a compensation for the journey, though it was by no means what I had come out to see. Far away below and beyond the tabulated, laborious, and steep train

the distance our host gave us, I believe—by Sydney like a pale line winding gently on that background of steel color. There had been a refreshing blast in the breeze that morning, but here, though we stood in a brilliant and even dazzling sunshine, the air was keen and bracing, and a refreshing wind was blowing; it seemed to sweep through brain and body, blowing all the noisiness from one's rooms of fancy, and exhilarating the spirit as no champagne ever yet did in the world. Amongst other benefactions that bright wind carried on its wings was a most admirably appetizing, and, this satisfied, the K.C.P. (still beautiful of the wonders of the mountains and ready to back Australia in general against the universe at large, in no matter what particular)—the K.C.P. and I, under the guidance of our host, went out to explore the neighborhood. We got into a street haggard were driven for a time along an excellent country road, where we passed the famous race track under which the earliest explorers of this region rested at the end of their first journey—a dead end of unusual proportions, its great hole vaulted about by stone-work, with a pallid sea of sky of it. Then the haggard plunged into the bush, and the driver taking the thing as unimportant as though he was on the best of modernized high ways, drove us into scintillatingly inaccessible places—up hill and down dale, rising between trees whose distance from each other scarcely afforded a spare inch of room, and twice a minute or thereabouts threatening to jam us in or overturn us. The K.C.P. took the size of one's manner here, though I devoutly believe him to be no more of a fool than I am, and when he held on did it with a certain easy expert which seemed to imply that it was only one of those moments of my fear for his safety that he took the precaution at all. For my own part, I am free to confess that I laid on the proverbial Grim Death to the proverbial sliver. I am a man of unobtrusive habits, and in spite of all his kind of ease found, I believe that my colonial brother of the pen was within himself as doubtful of the result of my journey as I was. At last, however, even an Australian whip came to the conclusion that it might be safer to proceed on foot. So we left the haggard and walked a while by a woodland path, I coming not to ask within myself where these Blue Mountains were which I had come so far to see. Our host stopped us on the edge of a cliff of no particular dimensions, a mere gully of a hundred feet or so, and waved his hand. I thought I was going to be introduced then and there to the splendors of the hills, and set down the whole thing as a grim joke on the part of the guide book, which I began to suspect had all been inspired or written by the K.C.P. It appeared, however, that our attention was simply being directed to one of the earliest Antipodean tribes, which were banded to its stem the inscription "Koko Yeo." Our host stepped down to it and shouted, but the rejoicing wind which swept over the great table land tore half the sound from his lips and only a dim voice came back in answer from the hillside opposite. On still days, he told us, the echo was wonderfully distinct, and we were fain to be content with that sentiment.

A minute later there was no need for any further question as to the whereabouts of the mountains. Nowhere else, I should suppose, does the scorching after natural beauty come upon the realization of his most fortunate vision so suddenly and unexpectedly. It makes no sense, which but for the curiosity of the Zigzag railway is so essentially commonplace as it will can be; he travels for miles through the grey, uninteresting scrub, and then he stands with scarce a moment's warning in the presence of a spectacle as strange and stirring as any to be seen in the world. We stand upon the broad edge of a precipice, which fell sheer for hundreds and hundreds of feet. Below, vaulted on two sides by precipitous and Titanic towers of rock, dull red and orange and grey, lay a vast unending valley, grey with billowing gun trees. To right and to left bold headlands jutted out like islands in the sea. Far off one huge table mountain stood up as if it rose over the valley, and far beyond, laid on fold, the mountains rose wild and strange alike in form and tone. The landscape was surely of this earth at all. Form and color were alike unuttered, alien; I felt as if I stood upon the balcony of an unknown world. I have travelled much in my time and have seen nothing to which I could liken the Katoomba Valley. Comparison is impossible. Meticulously might make for home there. The billowy wind buffeted us, and sang in its deep organ tones about our ears, but whenever we gained a moment's refuge from it the valley sent up to us the almost awful message of dead silence. In all that billowy seeming sea of foliage below we saw a hough was seen to move. Whenever we went that day we heard no note of bird or rustle of timid creature of the woods, or came upon any sign of life except that which had and there a bush road, a rail fence or the beginning of a clearing afforded. It was curious to find in the midst of these appalling mountains huge boulders of stone suggesting that this or the other site for building or this or the other lot of land was for sale and that particular might be had from Messrs. So and So. That indestructible British blood! What other people who ever inhabited the globe would have a wilderness in that fashion? They come, calmly commercial, quietly confident, making war against a desolate new world with pigmy arms and spade and plough—the indomitable indefatigable insects that they are—and they conquer wild Nature and work their will with her without even seeming to know that they are doing anything out of the common. One of these days—though neither you nor I will live to see it—the final, stony face of morning upon the land has worn since the beginning of things will often and grow to the most radiant friendly smile. Wonderful to think of! We are at the beginning of that and already.

We saw the Wentworth Falls, but there was not enough of water there to make them imposing. We saw, too, later, on a stony ridge and a small mine, at sight of which, with all their constant ugliness, Mr. Banks would have filled the mountain air with fireworks. But, after all, it is not the mission of the British race out here to conserve the desolate beauty of the spot. For one must work and landscape here may reap if they will, but the world will have its way in spite of them, and one of its ways is to make money.

Some of the nomenclature hereabouts is apt and striking. The great lonely "Orphan Rock," for example, is well named. The "Three Sisters" and the "Elphinstone" are by no means inappropriate titles for the natural objects they represent. But there are miles of nameless country in the region—nameless, because in all probability untraced from the beginning of the world. They say that the blackfellow himself never ventured there, having nothing to gain by it in the way of food or sport, and it is certain that no white man has ever penetrated these desert solitudes.

Some of the pet theories of the geologists who have made Australia their study seem hard to reconcile with the most obvious and striking characteristics of the Katoomba district. The said theory and the water action theory seem to me a light unobtainable in view of the actual facts of Nature. For my own part, I can see nothing which explains the varied phenomena of the region half so well as the Glacial Period would do. I know very well that that theory has been discarded by many competent men of science, and I offer my own beliefs with all due modesty. But what if it were not the slow, gliding process of immeasurable tens of superimposed ice—cut the upper surface of that from hard rock into circles and semicircles? What, if not that same action, were the perpendicular shape of the rocks into the shape they have, and occupied out these precipitous valleys into their peculiar forms? Some authorities affirm that Australia is the eldest of the continents, and that its flora and fauna are the survivals of an older time. Suppose after all it should prove to be so due investigation, the youngest of the continents, and that these same fauna and flora should have before them such an era of evolution and development as those of the elder world have already passed through? It is impossible to conceive that some trifling two or three million years ago the great continent of Australia detached itself in process of nature from the antarctic zone of ice and so became the latest of all the habitable spaces of the world? This is too large a question to pursue here, but it seems to me that it is worth while