

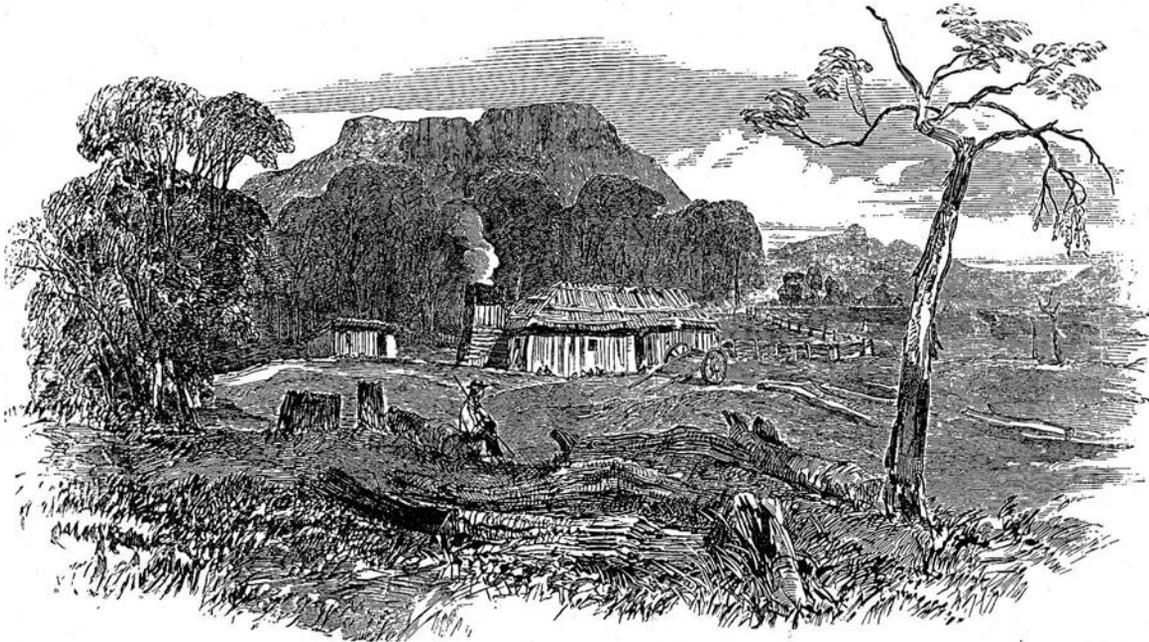
(VII) TRANSPORTATION



T might be supposed that after fourteen weeks on these "floating hells" the wretched convicts would sight land with feelings of relief, even of gladness. No doubt some of them did but many were to be sadly disillusioned. Life as a convict in Australia or Van Diemen's Land was, for a large number of men and women, an even more terrible experience than that endured on the voyage from England. The lot of those who had died on the way out was easier, often enough, than of those who survived.

When the transported convicts reached Australia the Governor had the right to their labour for the entire period of their sentence. In the exercise of his right it was the practice to "assign" to settlers such convicts as he did not need on government work. To all intents and purposes the convict became the slave of his master. If the settler happened to be a decent fellow with some of the milk of human kindness in his composition, life for the convict lost many of its terrors. Unfortunately, many of the masters had become brutalised by their surroundings and were utterly callous of the misery they

Convicts assigned to "Masters"



A SETTLER'S HUT

By courtesy of "Illustrated London News."

inflicted upon the unfortunates who were assigned to them. The law compelled the payment of a small wage to the convict and made some attempt to provide that he should receive proper sustenance. Such was the power of the settlers over the convicts, however, that the latter knew only too well that to complain was to invite a flogging. The magis-

Despotic power of the settlers

trates invariably accepted the master's word and treated all with great severity. The masters demanded far more work from their miserable serfs than they could possibly give. If the allotted task was not satisfactorily accomplished the convict was brought before the nearest magistrate, himself most probably a settler. He would order that the convict be lashed until his back resembled a jelly, on the general principle that he probably deserved it whether guilty or not.

George Loveless describes the experience in Van Diemen's Land of James Pocock, who was a willing, able and good workman. He was assigned to a settler, who promised if Pocock worked well, he would be rewarded. Pocock tried to please him but his best efforts were met with abuse and he was half-starved. The master threatened Pocock that he would have him flogged, and although dreadfully weak, Pocock worked until he could work no longer. "My master, as usual, said I had done nothing, and swore he would get me punished in the morning. I did not know what to do; I walked away from the house; my master took up a loaded gun and followed me, and swore he would shoot me, if I did not come back. I still went on, for I did not at that time care whether he shot me or not. The next day I was reported as absent, and after remaining four days in the bush, and nothing to eat, I was taken by a constable. When before the magistrates, my master said how well he had behaved to me, and what an idle fellow I was; so that the magistrates would not believe a word I had to say, and sentenced me to receive fifty lashes. I was punished and sent back, and my master put me to carry logs of wood on my back, which I could not endure. I ran away again, and gave myself up to a constable, and was again sentenced to fifty lashes, and sent back. My master was more cruel than ever. I then determined I would not stop with him if they hung me. I went away three times more, and got fifty lashes each time. I then told the magistrate that I could not live with my master, and that I hoped he would not send me back again. But Mr. Mason (the magistrate) said he would see who would be master; either I or they, and I was sent back. I instantly started, was taken, and sentenced to fifty lashes more, to go to Bridgewater chain-gang for three months, and then return to my master. When I was tied to the triangles this time, my back was in such a dreadful state the doctor ordered that I was to be flogged over the breech."

Those who were employed on government schemes of construction were engaged in the hardest and roughest labour on roads, harbours, salt mines and forests. These unfortunates were chained together in gangs under the supervision of overseers. The overseers, oftentimes convicts who had been promoted, clothed in a little brief authority, seemed to delight in inflicting on their victims diabolical cruelties. Some of the finest roads in New South Wales owe their origin to these

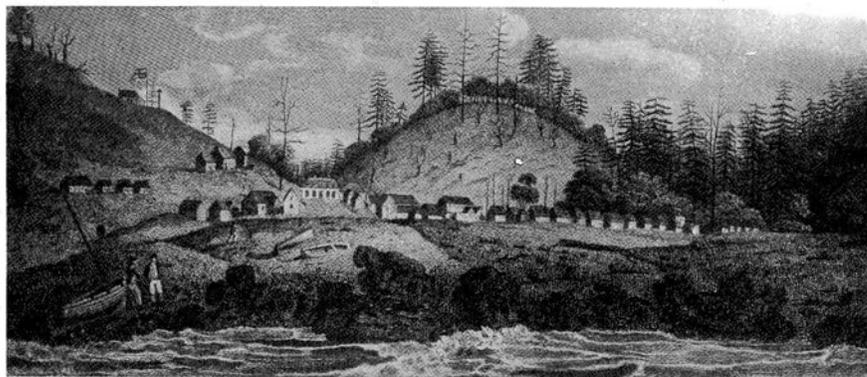
The story
of James
Pocock



lash-driven derelicts of humanity, who toiled in the sweltering sun chained together like dangerous wild beasts.

Then there were the penal settlements for convicts who had tried to escape, or had assaulted overseers, or who had offended against the laws in some way. Of these the worst were in or near Van Diemen's Land—Norfolk Island, Macquarie Harbour, and Port Arthur. Every convict lived in the shadow of these terrible places. Each man knew that for some perhaps quite trivial offence he might be sent to one of these penal settlements where

The penal settlements



NORFOLK ISLAND

life was almost unbearable. Dunbabin, in his authoritative *The Making of Australasia*, gives a few particulars about some of these places. Joseph Holt, the Irish "rebel," who was sent to Norfolk Island in 1804, described it as "the dwelling of devils in human shape, the refuse of Botany Bay, the doubly damned."

Macquarie Harbour was called after the Governor of New South Wales, and was founded in 1821 as a penal settlement. It became the home of the most desperate criminals, who were employed in felling timber and in building ships. Dunbabin says that men here were given 500 or even more lashes on the bare back, for what would not now be regarded as a very serious offence against prison rules. "Others were chained on rocks and left there cold and hungry for days and nights. So terrible was the life that here, as at Norfolk Island and other penal settlements, men committed murder, not from any special ill-will to the victim, but simply to get what they called a 'slant' up to Hobart Town."

Port Arthur was an equally terrible prison-house. Situated at the end of a long peninsula, the only exit was guarded by a line of savage dogs in addition to sentries. The convicts here worked in the coal mines, or felled trees, or cleared the land. Floggings were common, and the discipline was of the most brutal kind.

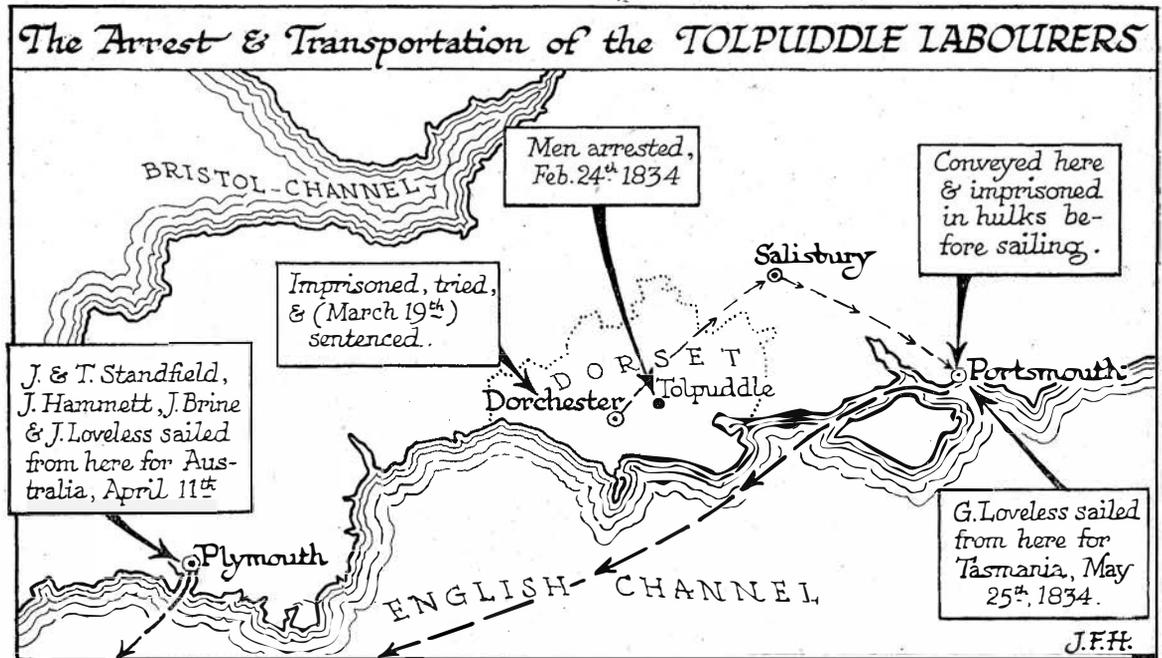
Brutal discipline

The behaviour of the Dorsetshire labourers was so exemplary and their bearing so eloquent of their innocence that they were not treated with the brutality experienced by many of the convicts. Nevertheless, they were forced to undergo sufferings, the imprint of which they carried to their graves.

Only the worst of the convicts were supposed to be sent to these settlements, but contemporary accounts show that conditions in the ordinary "chain gangs" in Van

Diemen's Land and New South Wales were little better. Some of the descriptions of sheer cruelty in *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* almost pass belief. Working in one of the gangs in the bush, Rashleigh was falsely accused of trying to injure the overseer. He was promptly arrested, and while waiting trial he was chained up without the handcuffs being removed for five days. In order to eat he had to drop on his knees and gnaw his food on the dish like an animal. Rashleigh escaped, but was compelled to travel with a party of convicts who had also escaped and had become bushrangers. An overseer who fell into their hands was tied down alive over an ant heap. Passing the spot some hours later the party found that nothing but the unfortunate overseer's skeleton remained. Later the gang was broken up, and Rashleigh was captured. As he had only been with them under compulsion his sentence of death was commuted to three years' labour at the penal settlement of Newcastle.

Physically unable to do the work demanded, Rashleigh was given 100 lashes and was ordered to be sent to work naked in the lime burners' gang. In this horrible occupation the penal settlement reached its lowest depth. Going straight from a flogging he was



unable to keep pace with the others, upon which the overseer flung a handful of quicklime across his lacerated back, and he then had to wade out into the sea to load boats. Several times Rashleigh saw men drown themselves, and it was not at all uncommon for one convict to murder another for the sake of a little food.

It was to this scene of violence, cruelty and exploitation that the six men of Dorset were banished by their oppressors, who cherished the vain hope that the fortitude with which they had defended their cause might be impaired by the dreadful and appalling ordeals which awaited them.