

## THE FIRST EXECUTIONS IN PORT PHILLIP.

(20TH JANUARY, 1842.)

Bob and Jack, the Vandemonian Aborigines, convicted of the murder of two sailors at Western Port, were the first persons hanged in Melbourne, and their execution was eagerly looked for by the thousands of people who felt a morbid curiosity to witness the departure of the wretches out of the world. After their condemnation and removal to the condemned cell, the culprits regarded their position with much levity, and were confident, almost to a certainty, that not only would the extreme sentence be mitigated, but that they would be pardoned altogether, and permitted to return to Van Dieman's Land. Their minds seemed possessed by a delirious anticipation of the pleasure they would experience in going home to the Old Hunting grounds of their race, and the zest with which they would resume those habits and customs of aboriginal life over the water, which they had voluntarily abandoned years before; and whenever they had the chance, it was a source of much enjoyment to them to indulge in the expression of such feelings to the prison attendants. But when the day was fixed for their execution, and they became sensible of the fact, all their castle-building was knocked to pieces—the fairy fabric constructed by the imagination dissolved like mist, and the dark bank of impending death stunned them. Bob grew sulky and taciturn; confessed his guilt, but declared that the woman had instigated the murder in vengeance for the death of some of their friends who, they said, had been killed at Port Arthur. Both were allowed to smoke in goal, but on their last evening Bob knocked off his pipe, and refused to partake of any food; whereas Jack on the other hand, grew positively jolly, and, so far from manifesting any diminution of appetite, disposed of a supper consisting of half a 4lb loaf, with 3 pannikins of tea, and by way of promoting good digestion, laughed and joked immoderately after. His pipe was by no means neglected, and having puffed until he was tired, he handed the clay to Bob, who refused it with a passionate wave of the hand, whereat Jack told him he was a fool and might as well enjoy the good things of life to the end. The Rev Mr Thomson, the Church of England minister, passed a good portion of the night with them, when both listened with attention to his exhortations, though the impression made on them was not the same. Bob seemed much affected and contrite, weeping piteously at intervals, but Jack was the impersonation of callous indifference. Mr Thomson did not leave them until 2 a.m., when they retired to rest, and each slept for a couple of hours. At 5 o'clock breakfast was served, and Jack devoured over 3lb of bread, washed down in two pannikins of tea, but Bob could eat nothing, though he drank a little. Jack next consoled himself with a long and last smoke, after which their prison clothes were changed for clean trousers, shirts, and stockings, and during this toilet Jack laughed, snapped his fingers, and shouted "that he didn't care a fig for anything." He said he was quite certain he was going to his father, to be happy with him kangaroo hunting over the sea; he also expressed a belief that he had three heads, viz:—One for the gallows, another for the grave, and the third the best for Van Dieman's Land. Bob remained silent all through, completely

and the third the best for Van Dieman's Land. Bob remained silent all through, completely unmanned. At 7 o'clock, the sheriff and chaplain arrived, when the gaoler summoned all the hands to attend divine service in the prison yard. At ten minutes to eight, a covered cart, drawn by two grey horses, was driven up outside the door, which was opened, through which the prisoners passed quietly out into Collins-street, and on being told to do so, got into the vehicle, followed by two constables. Thousands of persons were congregated all round, and such was the jostling and confusion, that a party of mounted police in attendance had difficulty in clearing a way for the death cart, which soon moved slowly ahead, surrounded by the shouting, laughing multitude, to whom it appeared to be a fine morning's fun. There was no private Execution Act then in force, and it was necessary that the hanging of criminals should be performed in public. There was no hospital, public library, or courthouse to break the wild open country north of Lonsdale street, and the walls of the intended new goal were only up to the height of some ten or twelve feet.

The place of execution was fixed on a green eminence some yards north-west of the western extremity of the present old goal, about where the modern wing terminates, near Bowan street. Approaching the spot from Swanston street there was a gentle acclivity, the ground was grassy, and everywhere about was not unlike a forest in the commencement of partial reclamation from its original savagery, studded with large trees, and presenting to the townspeople in the inspiring freshness of the infant day a prospect to be now looked for in vain. On this occasion there was a shocking mismanagement in the construction of the scaffold, which was a kind of narrow shaky stage, thus thrown together—two stout uprights were sunk in the ground about twelve feet apart and to the top of each was nailed a beam round which the ropes were twisted. Beneath, at a height of half a dozen feet, an eighteen-inch planking of wood was extended from each upright, and in the centre, not six feet long, was the drop, i.e., a portion of plank working on a hinge at one end and sustained by several bricks and a piece of quartering at the other. Around the quartering was looped a piece of stout cordage, the other extremity of which was (on a signal from the hangman) to be pulled by a prisoner of the Crown, stationed close by for the purpose. When the cord was drawn the quartering and bricks were supposed to come away, the drop fall, and the hanging be done. Nothing could well be imagined more scinty and insecure; in fact, it was only a degree removed from the proverbial "bucket," the kicking of which is supposed to have constituted the original form of English hanging. In the present instance the wonder was that either or both of the culprits did slip off and come to grief, or that Jack Ketch did not topple over and do himself harm. On being placed beside his companion, Bob was seized with such a fit of shivering as to make him knock against Jack, who began to tremble by the contact. The executioner lost no time in giving the finishing touch to his arrangements, and at last the ropes were secured, and the white caps pulled down over the black faces. The chaplain underneath had been reading the well-known words, "In the midst of life we are in death," the hangman signalled to the puller below and the drop fell, but a horrible scene of

in view, the hangman signalled to the puller below and the drop fell, but a horrible scene of strangulation followed. The ligature round the brick and timber support when tugged at so worked that whilst the bricks were displaced the piece of wood settled obliquely, causing the "drop" to descend only half way, and thus the two poor wretches got jammed, and twisted and writhed convulsively in a manner that horrified even the most hardened, until a bystander had the presence of mind to knock away the quartering and the removal of the obstruction clearing the fall, Jack died instantaneously, but Bob kept on struggling for some minutes longer.