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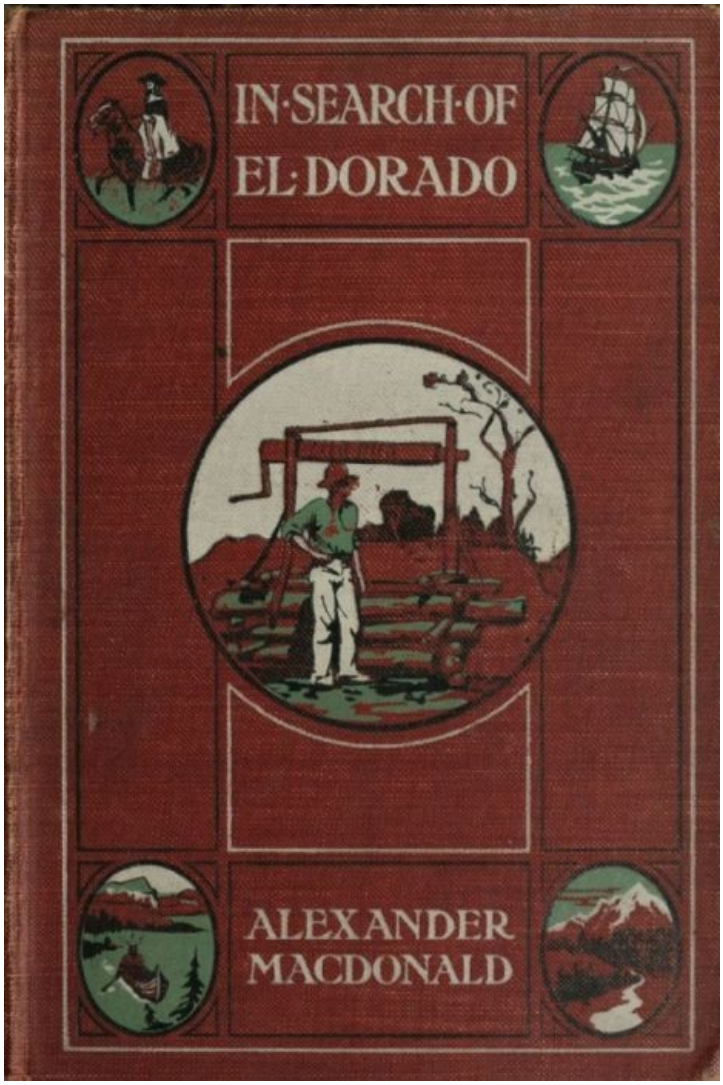

IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO

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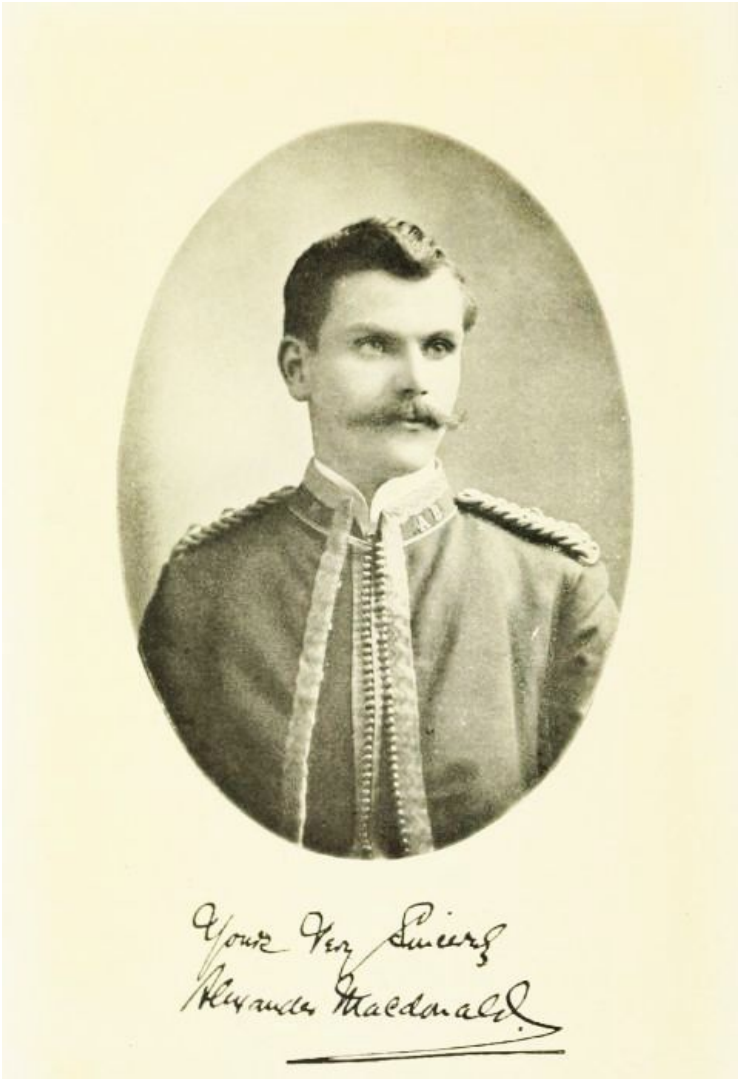

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IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO

A WANDERER'S EXPERIENCES

BY

ALEXANDER MACDONALD

F.R.G.S.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY ADMIRAL MORESBY

ILLUSTRATED

SECOND IMPRESSION

LONDON: T. FISHER UNWIN
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First Edition 1905

Second

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TO
MY MOTHER

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Introduction

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"Good wine needs no bush," but because a man does not always himself see the full scope of what he has written, an introduction may have its uses for author and readers alike. And to me—the adventure of whose own career has reached the inexorable *Finis*—these true stories of gold and gem seeking have an interest beyond the mere record of peril and achievement, though, in the words of Sir Philip Sidney, it "stirs the heart like a trumpet-blast" when brave men come to grips with dangers which (like the treasure-guarding dragons of fairy-tales) yield not only their hoard, but their own strength, as reward to the conqueror.

And these are true romances—no fiction with its *Deus ex machina* at the psychological moment, but the unadorned risks, escapes, and failures of adventurers on the quest of those strange commodities, seemingly haunted by death and fear, from their secrecy in the recesses of the earth till they shine with a sinister light in the crowns of kings or make rough, for better handling, the sword-grips of warriors.

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The quest of "El Dorado" begins with the history of man, and in pursuit of the glittering phantom have "many souls of heroes gone down into Hades," only that others might step into their empty places in the ranks. For whatever is found, always just beyond reach flits what is not found—what never will be, be it the golden city of Manoa, with its palace of the Inca, "all the vessels of whose house and kitchen are of gold, and in his wardrobe statues of gold which seemed giants, and ropes, budgets, chests and troughs of gold," or the mysterious jewels of the wisdom of Solomon, or the genie-guarded gems of the Arabian Nights.

The instinct of delight in this adventure which has dazzled the mind of man from time immemorial is universal: it is a relish of youth which persists into the old age of the world; it warms the coldest blood; and our author, who has himself followed the mirage and felt the fascination so keenly, is able to transmit the magic of the search to his readers. Whether toiling over the Chilcoot Pass, hunger-pinched, and desperate with cold and exhaustion, or thirst-tormented in the burning deserts of Central Australia, the indomitable desire that drives him forward with his comrades, drives us also on this modern Odyssey, where the Siren sings on beaches of dead men's bones, and perils as terrible as any man-devouring Cyclops lie in wait for the wanderers.

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The author, leaving his book to the verdict of the public, is once more an explorer in the Australian deserts, collecting who knows what strange experiences for future use, so I may, in his absence, characterise him as a born leader of men, a very prudent Odysseus; for what lesser qualities could have held together so strangely assorted a band as the rough-hewn Mac and Stewart and the gentleman adventurer Phil Morris? Reticence is perhaps unavoidable, but one

would willingly see and hear more of the central figure than his own modesty allows him to give us.

Yet, as I said before, it is not only the adventure which gives a charm to these studies of wild life. They are little epics of comradeship—impressions of men to whom gold and jewels are much, but to whom loyalty is the one thing better. It is good to see the yellow gleam in the washings, and the milky fire of the Australian opal is worth the perils endured, but there is also the abiding knowledge that quite other and less elusive treasures reward the quest—courage, endurance, and above all—"the manly love of comrades."

And to me—to whom some of these studies recall in keenest remembrance scenes which I shall never behold again with my living eyes—there is another point of view and one of wider interest. Such men, in working out their own destiny, are evolving also the imperial destiny of the Mother-Country. They break the path, and other feet follow. There is the march of an army behind them, [Pg x] for they are the vanguard of civilisation—the first spray of the tide that, however slowly it flows, does not ebb. It is well, since the change must come, that these men, of good home-spun stuff, honest and kindly in thought and deed, should be among the forerunners of the race that will abide where it has set its feet. Scotland need not be ashamed of her sons as they stand before us in these true stories of daring and endurance, and speak with their enemies in the gate.

The inexhaustible mineral and gem deposits of New Guinea are only glanced at, but the description of those marvellous tropical forests, through whose deep ravines rush the gold-bearing torrents, from which "Mac" was able to wash out thirty pounds worth in one day, proves what possibilities England possesses in that great island, and sheds light on the policy of a time, now happily past, when I had hoisted the Flag, in 1872, and thus taken formal possession of Eastern New Guinea. I reported to my chief, and his reply has a curious interest in view of many later developments.

"Have we not enough tropical possessions, without requiring more? Enough issues to sap the strength of our Englishmen, without giving Government patronage to the infliction of new wounds on our body? Enough circumstances in which there must be a subjected race alongside of our English proprietors, without putting the Government stamp on a new scheme which will help [Pg xi] to demoralise us, and weaken our moral sense as a nation?"

Such were the views of the Little Englanders thirty years ago. Such seem strangely out of date when explorers of the Alexander Macdonald type are tapping the remotest sources of commerce in the interests of the old country.

So I leave the little band to the reader—very human, compound of great generosities and small failings, travellers, like ourselves, on "the Great Trail" that leads to the Mountains of the Moon, and beyond, but always *men*, and knit together by so strong a bond that each might well say of the other, with Walt Whitman—

"Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade."

J. MORESBY.
Admiral Rtd.

BLACKBECK,
April 19, 1905.

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Preface

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I desire to assure all readers of this book that the scenes here depicted, and the events described, may be taken as faithful representations from life. I would also add that the geographical descriptions throughout are accurate in detail; my knowledge is borne of long and varied experience in the countries of which I write.

A friendly critic, on reviewing my MSS., said that the book might be misunderstood because of its containing the remarks and conversations of my companions, which he considered could not very well have been remembered by the writer. On this point, however, I beg to differ, and I feel that I shall have the sympathy of my fellow-wanderers on my side. When a man has travelled for many years with the same companions, and has shared danger and sorrow and gladness with them, surely it is not too much to assume that he must ultimately know their temperaments well, and would scarcely need to draw upon his imagination when recalling their various remarks on striking incidents.

At the conclusion of our Western Australian journey the outbreak of the South African war caused a temporary disbandment of my party, all of whose members served at the Front with the Australian Contingents during the campaign. As a result it will be observed that in the third part of this volume the narratives partake somewhat of a general nature, and are also more or less disconnected. [Pg xiv]

Finally let me say in extenuation of any brusqueness or crudity of expression which may be noticeable, that I write as a traveller whose hand has more often gripped the rifle and sextant than the pen.

ALEXANDER MACDONALD.

ELCHO PARK, PERTH.

March 1, 1905.

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List of Illustrations

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PART I

THE FROZEN NORTH

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"And, as his strength
  Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow—
  'Shadow,' said he,
  'Where can it be
This land of El Dorado?'

  'Over the mountains
  Of the moon,
Down in the valley of the
      Shadow,
  Ride, boldly ride,'
  The Shade replied
'If you seek for El Dorado.'"

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UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE WHITE PASS

I have stumbled upon a few "tough" corners of the globe during my wanderings beyond the outposts of civilisation, but I think the most outrageously lawless quarter I ever struck was Skagway in the days of its early infancy. Now, I am told, Skagway is a flourishing township, boasting of the orthodox amount of "broad" streets and "palatial" buildings for an American "boom" camp. This may be, though—unless the geographical features of the district have altered—I can hardly credit it. When I was there the embryo city balanced itself precariously along the lower slopes of the White Pass, and a good percentage of the population had to be content with huts built on piles within the tidal limit of the Lynn Canal. In short, there was no room to build anything, and Skagway existed simply because it marked the entry to the Yukon's frozen treasure. Its permanent residents were, for the most part, sharpers of the worst type; indeed, it seemed as if the scum of the earth had hastened here to fleece and rob, or, failing those gentle arts, to murder the unwary voyagers to or from the Golden North. There was no law whatsoever; might was right, the dead shot only was immune from danger.

It was late autumn in the year when the first news of Klondike riches burst upon the world, when I, with my companion Mac, arrived at the head of the Lynn inlet, *en route* for the land of snows and nuggets. Our ship, the *Rosalie*, carried a goodly number of passengers, but they were mainly of the ruffian "store and saloon-keeper" variety, and few, if any, of them ever got beyond the pass. The true gold-miner is proverbially poor, and as yet his kind had not been numerous on the trail. As for myself, I was enterprising if nothing else, and my companion made up for my deficiencies in other respects. He was a ferocious individual without a doubt, my worthy henchman; without him my early journeyings would have ended before they had well begun, but, being a hardened traveller, he knew how to adapt himself to circumstances, and how to come off best in a scrimmage, both of which traits were brought fully out before we had been long in the villainous little camp of Skagway. Our first twenty-four hours' experiences may be worth relating.

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We were the only representatives of Old England in these uncouth parts at this period, a fact which had not made us any more beloved by the aggressively hostile Yankees on board the *Rosalie*. Times without number they told me how the "great American nation" could wipe the British Isles off the face of the earth at a moment's notice, and how a "free-born American" was equal to a dozen Britishers, and how we two would be swallowed alive by these same men should we dare say a word to the contrary. We bore a good deal of this sort of thing in silence, though occasionally throughout the protracted voyage my fiery aide-de-camp retaliated angrily, and did considerable damage among his tormentors, who proved to be warlike only in their speech. But this is a digression, and though I could write pages on that momentous cruise—we ran aground five times, and were practically wrecked twice—I must desist and continue my narrative.

The first man we saw after being dumped on the muddy shores of Skagway Bay was a short, red-headed individual, with ruddy countenance to match, who fairly bristled with weapons of the most bloodthirsty description. He approached Mac and me as we stood hesitatingly by the water's edge looking around for some habitation wherein we might find refuge for the first night of our sojourn in a strange land.

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"Hallo, stranger!" he saluted, affably, firing a huge revolver unpleasantly close to my ear in a most nonchalant manner.

"Hallo!" I said without enthusiasm, feeling cautiously in the rear of my nether garments to make sure that my own gun was where it ought to be.

He seemed somewhat hurt at the stiffness of my rejoinder, and toyed suggestively with his revolver for some moments without speaking. Meanwhile Mac proceeded unconcernedly along the beach to where a huge hulk lay moored, whose broad beam bore the legend in giant letters —"Skagit Hotel. Recently of San Francisco. Finest accommodation in town."

I was preparing to follow in my comrade's footsteps, marvelling at the enterprise which had brought the old dismasted schooner so opportunely to such a region; but my friend with the gun was not to be put off.

"Say, stranger," he growled, stepping before me, "you don't know who I am, I reckon——"

"I don't," I interrupted, shortly, "and I am not over anxious to make your acquaintance either."

He glared at me savagely for an instant, then broke out into a hearty laugh. "For a darned Englisher you are mighty pert," he said, "an' I won't slaughter you—just yet. Still, for your future benefit I may tell you that my handle is Soapy Sam, an' I've planted considerable men like you in my time. I'm a bad man, I is, but your ignorance saves ye."

The conversation was being uncomfortably prolonged; yet I dared not make any movement. [Pg 6] "What's the damage, Soapy?" I asked contritely. "I suppose you are collecting toll in your polite way?"

He lowered his weapon and grinned. "Every tenderfoot as lands in this here city has to play poker with me or fight," he acknowledged smilingly.

I realised my position at once. It was painfully clear to me that the "fight" would be all on one side, and could only end in one way so long as Soapy held the "drop," and it was also clear that the alternative was to submit to wholesale robbery. A loud shout at our back made us both turn with alacrity, and behold there stood Mac with his long Winchester repeater levelled fairly at Soapy Samuel's head. The wily individual had scented danger, and had made a *détour* expressly for my benefit.

"Say when," he murmured calmly, from behind his artillery, "and I'll blow the deevil into vulgar fractions."

I stepped out of range of fire without delay. Soapy's fingers twitched on the stock of his lowered revolver as his ferret-like eyes blinked down the muzzle of the deadly tube, which never wavered a hair's breadth. Then his weapon dropped from his nerveless hand, and slowly his arms were upraised towards the sky, and he smiled an exceedingly sickly smile.

"You've got the pull on me this time, partner," he said. "I caves."

At this moment a hoarse chorus of cheers rang out from the vicinity of the Skagit Hotel. The inmates had assembled on the upper deck to witness the discomfiture of their common enemy.

"Shoot him!" they roared; "he killed old Smith."

But Mac was not disposed to make himself public executioner. "Ye'd better vanish, Soapy," he grunted.

A Party of Miners going in by the Skagway or White Pass Trail.

"Never mind the cannon ye dropped; it'll just suit me. Quick, fur I'm getting nervish." [Pg 7]

Soapy fled, slipping and stumbling through the snow in his intense haste. But when he had placed a good hundred yards between him and his conqueror, he turned and waved his hand cheerily.

"I bear no ill-will, boys," he shouted; "I was clean bested. But," and he turned towards the *Skagit*, "I'll have it out with you afore long, and don't forgit it."

A yell of derision greeted him in return. Apparently the *Skagit* dwellers meant to take all chances with a light heart. Mac grounded his rifle with a grunt of satisfaction.

"This is the deevil's ain country we've struck," he grumbled. "It's a blessed thing I got insured afore I left auld Scotland." I agreed with him heartily, and together we sought the hospitable shelter of the stranded hotel, where we were welcomed effusively by the proprietor thereof, a merry-faced Irishman of the name of O'Connor.

"We're chock full up, but we'll gladly make room for you, boys," he said. "It wouldn't be safe to allow you to go up among Soapy's gang."

I expressed my gratitude for his tender solicitude, then made sundry inquiries as to the prospects of crossing the pass within the next day or so.

"You want to cross the pass?" he echoed, in amazement. "Why, you won't be able to do that until next spring. The snows are on, and the trail is blocked with hundreds of dead horses anyhow."

I had heard this statement so often of late that I was in nowise taken aback. "We certainly did not come here for the good of our health," I said. "We'll try the Chilcoot Pass if the Skagway route is impossible. Dyea is not very far from here, I think?"

"Only about four miles round about," he replied. "It is at the head of the inlet you would see before your ship branched in here. A mighty miserable place it is, for the winds sweep right down from the sea almost constantly." [Pg 8]

"We didn't expect to find roses growing on the track," snorted Mac, impatiently. "We'll try and get round to Dyea in the morning."

But now another difficulty arose. There were no boats to be had stout enough to withstand the heavy gales which, as we had just been told, blew ceaselessly up the funnel-like entrance to the Chilcoot Valley, and even if there had been, our outfit of flour and miscellaneous foodstuffs was rather an unwieldy factor to be considered.

"It's a maist ungodly country," commented Mac gloomily. "There seems to be nae room for anybody but thieves an' murderers, and it' very funny that there's no' an honest gold-miner among the lot."

Our fellow-passengers nearly all had found congenial quarters further back in the city, and one or two had erected their tents on the beach, forgetting in their haste to found a home that the tide would wash over their camp site about twelve o'clock that same night. Yet no one cared to inform them on the matter, and Mac watched their progress with undisguised joy, and howled with delight when one of his old enemies began to haul timber from the hillside for the purpose of building a substantial edifice on the sinking sands.

"They might know that the old *Skagit* couldn't have walked up here," laughed our host. "But they'll find out their mistake soon enough, I reckon," and he chuckled, long and loudly.

Having partaken of dinner, Mac and I sallied forth to visit the scattered array of huts and tents which constituted the town.

"Look out for Soapy Sam," warned a swarthy-visaged man in picturesque attire. "He's a nasty sort of skunk to meet, even in the daytime, as you already know. If ye get into trouble just yell on me —Black Harry is my handle—and I'll be with you in a couple of shakes." [Pg 9]

I thanked the dusky warrior, who indeed looked as if he could give a very good account of himself when necessary, and with the butt of my revolver clutched tightly in my hand, I walked citywards with Mac, who gravely whistled selections from a hymn entitled, "There is a Happy Land." On our arrival in Klondike Avenue, as the main thoroughfare was elegantly styled, not a solitary individual was to be seen. The weather was bitterly cold, and the denizens of the camp, with commendable good sense, avoided all danger of frostbite by keeping within the shelter of their wigwams. The deserted avenue was therefore a most dreary spectacle, and the gathering shadows of night hanging over the grim pass in the background did not tend to enliven the gloom of the scene.

"And to think that for the last fortnight I hae heard nothing but stories o' American grit, American hardiness, American—everything," soliloquised Mac, sarcastically; "yet every deevil o' them is frichtened o' catchin' cold—but hallo! what's this?"

He directed my gaze towards a flaring poster nailed to a tree. We approached, and read the rude notice. "In the Skagit Hall to-night. Grand concert. Miss Caprice, of New York, the world-famed variety actress, will hold the camp in thrall. Leave your guns at home, and come early to avoid the rush. N.B.—Poker tables have been fixed up for the convenience of the audience."

The last clause gave the key to the whole concern. Miss Caprice—whoever that might be—was merely an extra attraction. Appended was a weird diagram purporting to be a sketch of the aforesaid Miss Caprice in the intricacies of one of her dance specialities. Mac shuddered and looked pained. [Pg 10]

"This is maist decidedly no place for a white man," he asserted, with a sigh. Then we turned and

headed back for the *Skagit*, where in the later hours the world-famed artiste was billed to disport herself. As we passed by a large log structure set back among the trees, I was surprised to hear a husky voice call out to us, and while we hesitated the door of the hut swung open, and Soapy Sam appeared and beckoned mysteriously. He apparently had discarded his armoury, but I was not disposed to trust much to appearances, at which our old enemy looked considerably aggrieved.

"I bear no grudge, boys," he said. "No man can say that Soapy Sam went back on his word. You downed me fair."

"Then what is it?" I inquired suspiciously.

"Ye must admit, Soapy, ma man," added Mac drily, "that your reputation even among yer ain folk is no' just rosy."

But Soapy was evidently determined not to be offended by anything we might say. He approached with hands extended in token of good faith, and, noting this, we stayed our progress and waited wonderingly to hear what he wished to speak. He did not enlighten us much, however.

"I say, boys," he whispered when he came near, "can you both swim?"

Mac nodded. "But it wouldna be a pleasant diversion in this weather," he remarked, with a shudder.

"Then don't go near the *Skagit* to-night," said Soapy impressively. "There's a storm rising, and I shouldn't wonder if the old barge bursts her moorings before morning."

He was gone in an instant, and Mac and I gazed at each other in dismay. "What can he mean?" I said. [Pg 11]

"Heaven knows," growled Mac; "but we'll likely find out before very long. He's a gey slippery customer, is Soapy, an' no' easily understood, I'm thinkin'."

We continued on our course meditating deeply, but, no solution of the mysterious warning presenting itself, it escaped our minds utterly in the noisy excitement that prevailed on our return to the *Skagit*. O'Connor, the proprietor, was all agog with the importance of his position as master of ceremonies; he was busily superintending the placing of a rickety old piano when we made our appearance, and he immediately seized on Mac for a song during the evening, a favour which was most promptly refused.

"Miss Caprice an' me wouldna suit on the same programme," was the worthy diplomatist's excuse. "Get Black Harry an' Soapy Sam—"

"Soapy Sam is barred this circus," sternly interrupted O'Connor. "I'm running a concert to-night, not a funeral undertaking establishment." Assuredly Soapy Sam's prowess was no mean factor to be considered.

At 7 p.m. prompt—as advertised—the entertainment began. The room was crowded with truly all sorts and conditions of men, and the air reeked with tobacco smoke. The piano manipulator—a bewhiskered and groggy-looking personage in top-boots—took his place with stately grace as befitted the dignity of his office. He ran his fingers clumsily over the keys as if seeking for some lost chord or combination, which, however, he did not find, and then he rattled out an ear-shattering melody in which the audience, after a moment's pause, joined lustily. In the midst of the uproar thus let loose a gaudily-bedecked creature of the female persuasion, wearing a grin [Pg 12] that almost obliterated her features, appeared on the raised stage at the end of the saloon, and joined in the pandemonium, her shrill voice screaming out the touching information that there would be "a hot time in the old town to-night," which coincided with the item on the programme.

This was Miss Caprice—a type of the "noble and enduring" women whom recent "Klondike" novelists have portrayed so tenderly in their "realistic" romances. Heaven forbid that the respectable British public should be thus deceived. There was no woman with any claim to the name on the long trail in these days.

It would be impossible to describe the course of that memorable "concert." It continued in spasms—or turns, which I believe is the correct term to use—far into the night, with occasional interruptions in the shape of fights and wordy altercations among the poker players, diversions which lent pleasurable variety to the entertainment, though now and again it seemed as if a funeral or two would surely result therefrom. But all smoothed off harmoniously under the influence of Miss Caprice's moving melodies, which always were turned on at opportune moments. Mac said that her voice was like unto the buzzing of a steam saw in cross-grained wood, but perhaps he was prejudiced, or his artistic senses a trifle too fine. Anyhow, she pleased the multitude mightily, and they roared out their appreciation boisterously at the conclusion of each of her vocal exercises, and implored her to continue her soothing ditties unendingly. The too free use of the flowing bowl was probably accountable for the warmth of their approval; but Miss Caprice, having indulged in equal degree with her admirers, was getting less and less able to trill forth sweet sounds for their edification, and matters were fast beginning to assume a by no means inviting aspect.

Several times during the progress of events Mac and I endeavoured to make an unobtrusive exit, but all to no purpose. [Pg 13]

Slowly the time dragged on its weary course, then suddenly I became aware that the old *Skagit* was rising with the incoming tide. She swayed cumbrously once or twice, and her rotten timbers creaked and groaned dismally under the strain, but no one seemed to consider these indications

worthy of attention, and the roystering chorus went on without interruption. At intervals I could hear vague voices calling excitedly without, and I guessed that the men who had built their homes in the sand were having a bad time.

Another half-hour passed. By this time the taste of the audience had reached the sentimental stage, and they loudly clamoured for a song suited to their altered temperament. The accompanist, however, persisted in playing the "hot time" tune to everything, so he was discharged with ignominy by the scornful prima donna, who announced in broken accents that she would give a rendering of "Ashtore" without musical assistance, which was most unwise on her part. Still, she persisted at her task, and got to the end of the first verse without mishap; but as she screamed out the last wailing notes of the chorus the old *Skagit* gave a sudden lurch, and sent her reeling head foremost into the centre of the room.

"What's the matter with the darned barge?" howled several indignant voices among the crowd, but no answer was forthcoming. The *Skagit* at that moment was seized with convulsions, and rolled and pitched in a most unaccountable manner.

"Howlin' blazes!" yelled Black Harry. "The happy home must have broken loose."

The rush that followed is beyond description. Mac and I, being less affected by the motion of the hulk than the majority, reached the deck first. Away far back to the right the lights of Skagway shimmered out over the smooth waters of Skagway Bay. To the left the faint illuminations of Healy's Store at Dyea shone at the head of the Chilcoot Inlet, along which great seas were rolling in from the main channel. We had drifted out with the ebbing tide, and we were now being borne onwards by the uninterrupted ocean gales. If we escaped being dashed to pieces against the rocky bluffs of the peninsula, we might be driven ashore on the mud banks at Dyea; but it was certain that the *Skagit* could not return to her wonted anchorage that night. [Pg 14]

Loud and deep were the curses that now arose from all on board.

"It's Soapy Sam's work," howled O'Connor. "He must have cut the moorings. He said he would do it."

Then I remembered Soapy's warning, but held my peace, and while the men raved, and threatened, and prayed in turn, the old *Skagit* dashed on her new course, buffeted by the great seething rollers crowding in from the sea, and spinning like a top in the swirling waters. Crash! At last we had struck, and the surging waves swept over the deck in a copious flood, and the night was filled with the shrieks of the frenzied band, who feared the worst; but it was only a sand bar after all, the first of a series of similar obstacles that bar the Dyea Channel at high water.

"We could never have got round here ourselves," muttered Mac, as we stood watching the slowly-receding waves. "It is a fact that it's a gey ill wind that blaws naebody good."

In a short space the *Skagit* lay high and dry where she had been deposited, and for the first time we learned that the Dyea Bar stretches out three miles from the village. But I was satisfied. As Mac had implied, the *Skagit* had unconsciously done us a service of no mean order in transporting our outfit nearer the Chilcoot Pass. With calm contentment he and I sought peaceful slumber in the humble quarters allotted to us earlier in the day, while the rest of the ship's company—including Miss Caprice—started to climb the dividing mountain ridge to Skagway on the trail of the elusive Soapy. [Pg 15]

SHOOTING THE WHITE HORSE RAPIDS [Pg 16]

It was a month later when we reached the shores of Lake Linderman *en route* for the frozen North. The Chilcoot Pass had presented an almost impassable barrier to our advance; a light film of snow clung to the bare rocks and filled the numberless crevices of the "Summit"—that last grim climb, where the Dyea trail mounts all but perpendicularly upwards to the blizzard-swept glacier cap of the pass—and no room for foothold could be traced. It would be impossible to describe that frightful climb. When we reached the top and saw far below the twisting line of Indian "packers," who seemed to stick like flies to the white wall, we could not understand how the ascent had been accomplished.

Crater Lake, on the "other" side, was covered with a broad sheet of ice which was not sufficiently strong to bear our sleighs, or weak enough to allow of a passage being broken for our portable canvas boat. Here we were delayed many days, laboriously dragging our outfit to a less lofty and more congenial climate.

Long Lake, Deep Lake, and Mud Lake were successfully negotiated in turn; their waters glistened cold and cheerless, surrounded by the great snowy peaks that were rapidly opening out into the magnificent Yukon valley. Far down in the hollow, seemingly in a sunnier and well-timbered spot, nestled Lake Linderman, and beyond, the Yukon channel could be traced between the ever-widening mountain ranges. We had packed sleighs in our outfit, not expecting to use them until we reached the Klondike river, and how successful they might prove should it be necessary to force a trail across the frozen waters was a matter for conjecture. [Pg 17]

THE CHILCOOT PASS.

At this time Linderman's shores were the scene of much bustle; many intending voyagers were building their boats in feverish haste, for they knew that the elements must soon lay firm grip on the waters, and render their work useless.

Major Walsh, the Canadian Administrator of the Yukon Territory, had just made his appearance from over the Skagway trail, and he was all eagerness to proceed. He immediately bought—at fabulous prices—the boats that were built, and, without a day's delay, set sail northwards with his staff.

Two days after the Major's departure, I succeeded in purchasing a twenty-feet "Dorie" from a disheartened miner who had decided to return to Dyea, and wait for the ensuing spring.

I need not detail our journeyings for the next few days. Linderman was sailed over within two hours, then the half-mile porterage between it and Lake Bennet was accomplished after much labour. This latter lake is twenty-eight miles in length, its northern extremity narrowing down to a deep and swift-flowing channel, which extends but a few hundred yards before expanding into a broad, shallow lake or lagoon, colloquially known as "Caribou Crossing." The current here is sluggish, and the water abounds in shoals and sandbanks, which at that time were a sore trial to the adventuresome navigator with his precious freight of flour and other necessaries.

Tagash Lake forms the next link in the great lake chain of the Yukon, and it stretches full twenty-nine miles, then contracting to a fierce-flowing stream by which the Canadian Customs Offices are now stationed. [Pg 18]

Beyond this is Marsh Lake, and here it was that our troubles began.

Not a breath of wind stirred the waters of the lake, and our crudely-built dorie, containing 1,000 pounds of flour and 1,000 pounds of miscellaneous foodstuffs, ploughed slowly through the wide expanse to the accompaniment of much wheezing and groaning of oars, and an endless string of forcible expletives that burst from the lips of my stalwart companions, who provided the motive power of the ungainly craft. The favouring wind had died away, and, unaided by the sails, we could make but little headway over the still water. The weather had become strangely cold considering the earliness of the season, and I was almost benumbed as I sat in the steersman's perch, directing the course by sundry sweeps of a great-bladed Indian paddle, which I wielded with both hands.

"Keep it up, boys," I encouraged. "We are more than half-way through the lake."

"Twa miles an 'oor," grunted Mac between his efforts. "This is the worst boat I ever pulled."

Stewart, his companion, another brawny Scot who had joined me at Dyea, rested his oar for a moment to breathe a sympathetic swear word of much intensity; then together they bent to their labours, and the rasp of the oars, and the brief swish of the eddying pools created, alone broke the deadly quiet.

Towards nightfall I was surprised to notice here and there large sheets of ice on the lake surface, and occasionally our heavily-laden boat would grind against these obstacles, shouldering them off with much effort: then my oarsmen's long sweeps would rend and split them as they passed alongside.

It was very plain that the Yukon headwaters were fast freezing over. [Pg 19]

"We'll have to keep going all night, boys," I said, "for we'll be ice jammed if we camp anywhere around here."

The fierce torrent issuing from the end of the lake and rushing towards the dread White Horse Rapids would in all probability be free from ice—if we could reach that far.

Strenuously my companions pulled at their oars. The gloom deepened, then the stars came out, and by their feeble light I could distinguish far ahead a scintillating field of ice.

The sight caused me almost to despair—we had been sailing since early morning, and were tired and very hungry.

Before I could get the head of our boat turned inshore, it had crashed through several flaking sheets, and immediately after I realised that we were hopelessly in an ice maze from which there seemed no exit.

"We'll gang straight on," said Mac, with determination, and he levered powerfully with his oar against the frosted masses.

A quarter of an hour passed, then the up-turning stem of the dorie went thud against an immovable barrier, and I knew that we were indeed ice-jammed beyond the possibility of forcing a passage with the oars. Nor could we return, for the ice-pack we had negotiated for miles was now seemingly welded together in one solid mass.

Cautiously Mac put his moccasined foot over the prow and bore heavily on the glittering ice; it neither strained nor yielded.

With a fervent malediction he jumped on "shore," and felt the edge of the sheet.

"It's mair than twa inches," he said sorrowfully. "Hoo can we get through this?" [Pg 20]

Very sadly we got out of our boat, and, taking the cooking utensils, the tent, and some flour and coffee, sought a sheltered spot among the dense timber on the lake side. Soon we had almost forgotten our woes, and were regaling ourselves with copious draughts of coffee and much hard damper.

From our tent door we could see our boat stuck fast amid the ice. How we were to get it free I could not well imagine. In the morning, however, we awoke with renewed energy and more hopeful hearts.

"We cannot have far to go, boys," I said. "We'll cut down a couple of trees and use them to break a passage."

After breakfast we lost no time in making the effort. Armed with the heavy logs, we re-embarked, and soon the ponderous hammers had begun their work and a passage was slowly made towards the Yukon. With great reluctance our boat moved ahead, leaving a trail of glittering ice boulders. Mac leaned over the bow and opened the channel, while Stewart and I belaboured the masses that closed in on either side.

About midday we neared the end of the lake, and the channel beyond appeared a rippling, crackling flood of jagged ice-floes.

We felt the suction of the current long before we had reached the limit of the ice-field. The sheets became thinner and broke away readily, so that the oars came again into play, and we crashed onward impetuously on the bosom of an irresistible stream.

At last we were free, and our boat dashed madly into the narrow egress, bumping, grinding, and rocking against the detached fragments of ice that appeared everywhere.

With a great effort we managed to slow our craft before coming into contact with a sharp jutting rock that reared high in the middle of the stream, and then we found that it required all our energies to evade the miniature icebergs that rushed alongside. These floating dangers looked harmless enough, yet they were fully six inches deep in the water, and contact with them would result in much damage to the planks of our dorie. Several times, indeed, we were almost overturned by colliding with unusually large floes. [Pg 21]

In another hour we had nearly navigated the extent of Miles's canyon, and only several hundred yards ahead I noticed Major Walsh's flotilla, buffetting the seething waters cumbrously, while the men at the oars strained every muscle to escape the perils that abounded in their course.

"We're not far away from the White Horse, boys," I said to my sturdy henchmen, who were working away like galley slaves. They ceased their labours for a moment to look round, and at

once our vessel swung about and drifted dangerously near the rocky river steeps.

"We maun keep a way on her," said Stewart.

"Let's ken when we're through," said Mac, and their oars cleft the water like the paddle floats of a fast river steamer.

The current was flowing at the rate of ten miles an hour, and to keep a steering way on our unwieldy barge was, as may be understood, no easy matter.

Frantically I swung my paddle and strove my utmost to avert the calamity that every moment seemed to threaten us.

We were rapidly gaining on Major Walsh's outfit. He had four boats in all, three of them being clumsy barges laden entirely with provisions. These latter were manned by several members of the North-West Mounted Police, who worked their oars from difficult-looking perches among the flour sacks. [Pg 22]

The police boats, however, steered a very erratic course, sometimes being carried forward almost on their beam ends. I guessed that the heavily freighted craft had become unmanageable; certainly the steersmen seemed to have no control. Yet I had little time to notice those ahead, for our own "clipper" required every attention.

"Keep her going, boys," I yelled, as I worked my steering paddle with a will, evading rocks, boulders, and ice floes in turn.

Suddenly the white dashing surf of the Rapids came into view, the river narrowed to a fraction of its former width, and over the cataract a jagged sea of the dangerous floes crackled and roared into the abyss beyond.

I saw the Major's first boat fly like an arrow from the bow into the heart of the boiling foam; it careened dangerously on taking the sweep, then righted itself and disappeared into the flying mists.

"Steady, Mac!" I cried, as our craft entered the race. The dense spray almost obscured the great deflecting rock, and we rushed seemingly to destruction.

Then, before my eyes, there appeared an awful spectacle. Faster than I can write the words—one, two, three—each of Major Walsh's three boats reared high in the sleety mist and overturned one after the other as they took the curve.

"Let her go, boys," I bellowed. "Bend to it." The crucial moment had arrived; we were enveloped in foam, and were dashing straight towards the torrent-deflecting bluff. I leaned far back over the stern of our half-submerged boat, and with a mighty stroke of the paddle swung her head round, and we grazed death by barely half a dozen inches.

After the Rapids.

KLONDIKE-BOUND MINERS AND THEIR OUTFITS ON LAKE LINDERMAN.

A moment more and we were floating in almost placid waters. Beside us bobbed three smashed boats. Major Walsh stood sorrowfully on shore assisting dripping men from the water. [Pg 23]

"It's all over, boys," I said to my crew; "you can ease off now," and I steered for the beach and lent my aid in the work of rescue.

The half-drowned Canadians were dragged ashore gasping and almost senseless, and while we scanned the grim waters anxiously for a trace of one still missing, his body was tossed at our feet by the relentless waves. Soon after, the sand was littered with sacks of flour, and beans, and miscellaneous foodstuffs.

Several camps were in evidence around this melancholy spot, erected by men who had lost their all in the rapids, and were only waiting a chance to return to civilisation. They eagerly accepted the Major's offer to purchase their scanty outfits, and without loss of time that intrepid old Indian fighter had embarked again for the north. To him it was a race with the elements, but the elements won after all, and compelled him to make his winter camp at Big Salmon River, forty miles further north, where we overtook him a few days later.

"It's no use my lads, you can't do it!" he said, on my reiterating my intention of proceeding onwards. "Why, the river's frozen solid from here to St. Michael's."

"Then we'll put skids under the old boat and make her into a sledge," quoth Mac, drily, and I hailed the suggestion with encouragement.

We duly arrived at Dawson City after many days and weeks of ceaseless struggle with the elements on that long and terrible icy trail, and our coming was received with rejoicings by the few half-starved miners who at that time peopled the "City." We had proved the feasibility of an over-ice route to Dyea.

THE LAND OF THE THRON-DIUCKS [Pg 24]

The Klondike Valley in that winter was the scene of many stirring incidents. Owing to the non-arrival of the Canadian Government Commissioner and his police no law or order prevailed. To make matters worse the utmost bitterness existed between the Canadian and American sections of the community, each of whom claimed the rich gold-bearing territory as being within their country's boundary. Quarrels more or less serious were consequently of every-day occurrence. However, the following incident involves no harrowing description of these fierce skirmishes—though it might have led to a most sanguinary encounter with the *true* owners of the land.

Accompanied by "Cap." Campbell and "Alf" Mackay, two well-known miners, my party set out on a prospecting expedition into the mountains flanking the upper reaches of the Klondike River. We had one dog, a powerful mastiff, named Dave, which had proved an invaluable companion to me on our earlier prospecting journeys. Previous to this we had been very successful in our quest for the yellow metal, having located three creeks rich in the precious golden sand. But our eagerness seemed likely to cost us dear, for our store of foodstuffs had become wonderfully small, and we

were many days' journey from our camp on Skookum Gulch, where were our headquarters.

The return journey proved to be more difficult than we had anticipated; the weather had been very severe for the last few days, and the snow on the hillside was hard and dangerously slippery. [Pg 25]

"We'll try a short cut over the mountains, boys," said Mackay, as we strove vainly to reach the frozen river far beneath.

The Klondike takes many twists in its erratic course, and it so happened that if we could cross a mountain spur we should strike the trail only a few miles from Eldorado Creek.

"We'll make the attempt," I said, and Mac and Stewart concurred with emphatic ejaculations. One sleigh carried the possessions of the whole party, and it was tugged along by our combined efforts, including the assistance of Dave, who struggled in his harness in the leader's position. At last we surmounted the great glacier-capped ridge and gingerly made a trail through a narrow ice-bound gulch issuing from the crystal dome and marking a long line of gigantic ice boulders far into the wooded slopes beyond.

We slid, and clambered, and buffeted with the snow wreaths and intervening ice fields for over an hour, and then the gully led us across a thickly-timbered flat well sheltered from the elements by the surrounding mountains. At this stage we were, to judge by the lay of the country, but a few miles from the main channel; but the afternoon was far advanced and darkness was quickly closing over the valley, so that further progress was rendered difficult. We were looking about for a suitable camping ground when Mac, who had been closely examining the landscape, gave a howl of delight. "Injuns!" he roared, "I see Injun hooses!" Sure enough there appeared, nestling among the drooping pines, a straggling array of Indian huts and several totem poles. Before I could restrain them, my henchmen dropped their sleigh ropes and rushed impetuously towards [Pg 26] the supposed settlement, but their moccasined feet stuck deeply in the soft snow under the trees, and, using my snowshoes to good effect, I succeeded in rounding up the doughty pair before they had gone far.

"It's an Indian village," I explained, "and not a circus."

"I ken weel what it is," indignantly howled Mac. "Hiv I no seen Injuns afore? When I wis oot on the pampas o' Sooth America—"

But I listened no further, and Stewart condoled with his comrade in well chosen words of sympathy.

"This is nae country for us, Mac," said he. "A lot o' Injun hooses, wi'—wi' chunks o' caribou hangin' inside, an' we maunna touch them!" He almost wept at the thought.

"Howlin' blazes, boys!" shouted the Captain, "them Injuns'd make ye into mince pies at oncet; ye wur committin' sooicide!"

But Mackay smiled broadly and winked reassuringly at Mac, whereupon that gentleman began to chuckle audibly.

"We've nae floor, an' nae bacon, an' nae beans—nae naething," he said meaningly. "If you have no 'jeckshuns,'" added Mackay, addressing me with much deliberation, "we'll camp a leetle furrer down."

I had no objections whatever. If I had, it might not have mattered much, for my warlike retainers seemed on the verge of mutiny. So we proceeded on our way, cautiously and silently, keeping in the densest shadows, and as far distant from the village as we could conveniently get.

Ten minutes later our tent was fixed and our camp fire blazing brightly; and Stewart, with a lugubrious countenance, busied himself preparing the last of our hoarded stores. Our fare was certainly meagre and unsatisfying, and unfortunately the keen air had given us extremely healthy [Pg 27] appetites. I am inclined to think, when I recall the matter, that my share, as doled out by Stewart, with many a sigh at its diminutive proportions, was unnecessarily meagre, and purposely served so by that wily individual in order to destroy any conscientious scruples I might have. If that was his purpose it succeeded admirably, for when my humble repast was finished I felt hungrier than ever, and had not the ghost of a scruple left.

"Talkin' about Injun villages," began Mackay, when the cooking utensils had been cleared away, "I've niver seen wan yet that hadn't a winter storehouse of dried salmon and cariboo somewheres handy."

"Ye're a man efter ma ain heart," beamingly interrupted Mac, and Stewart murmured: "Dried cariboo!" and smacked his lips.

"As I was discoursin'," continued Mackay, "them Injuns hiv always got rations hid away in their wigwams."

"Likewise a few tommy-hawks an' an assortment o' clubs," grimly edged in the Captain.

No one seemed anxious to say anything in a direct sort of way, although the general meaning was plain enough.

"To cut it short, boys," I ventured to remark, "you are in favour of visiting the village to-night?"

"Fur reasons which it ain't necessary to shout out loud—precisely," answered Mackay.

After that further speech was superfluous, and we made hurried preparations for our marauding journey. The Indians at this time were very hostile towards the white invaders of their country, and there was little reason to hope that they would either barter or sell any of their stores to us.

There is a proverb which states that "necessity knows no law," and as we were in rather a sad plight we agreed with it to the letter; there may have been room for some slight condonation of [Pg 28] our errors of reason at such a time. About eight o'clock that night we sallied out, leaving Mac with the dog in charge of the sleigh, with instructions to clear out lively should he hear a revolver shot. The worthy Mac was much disgusted with his lot, and gave vent to his annoyance in no stinted terms.

"It wis ma idee at first," he grumbled, "an' it's gey hard fur a man tae be sacrifeeced tae wait here a' the time."

"You've got the healthiest job, my friend," said the Captain, "an' you ought to be durned well pleased."

The moon shone brilliantly, illuminating the open snow patches and shooting down through the heavy foliage myriad rays of dancing light. I remember well how we had hoped for darkness, and how nervously we crept along seeking the shelter of the deepest shadows. A death-like stillness reigned; the thermometer in camp had registered 37 degrees below zero, and we knew that the mercury would keep falling till midnight. Our faces were quickly framed in icicles, and a thin dazzling frost draped us from head to foot. We presented truly ghost-like figures, but we were too much engrossed with other matters to notice our strange appearance. Soon we arrived within sight of the village, and stealthily we manœuvred from tree to tree until we were but a few yards distant from the largest logged structure. And still not a sound was heard; the frosted edifices showed no sign of life within.

"Seems to me we're in luck," chuckled Mackay, gazing on the desolate scene with evident enjoyment. "The population has evidently gone out huntin' bear or moose deer, or some sich quodroo-ped, and thar shid therefore be no call fur any skirmish. Put up your guns, boys," he added, "there's nary soul in the village."

We were all greatly relieved at this, yet it was with a feeling of deep humiliation that I [Pg 29] approached the most imposing of the houses and began to investigate the best and surest means of forcing an entry. I had seen a few Indian buildings in my travels, but this one was unlike any design I had ever witnessed. There appeared to be two heavily-barricaded wooden windows in the usual places, but search as we might, no door could be found.

"We'll try another," said Mackay, loath to acknowledge that the peculiar structure was beyond his comprehension. We examined each one—there were six in all—but they were alike in every particular, save that the one which had first received our attention was larger than the others, and had a very imposing totem pole in its foreground.

"The first was the most likely, boys," I said, "we'll go back to it." And back we went.

Stewart was now working up something approaching a righteous wrath against the "heathen sort o' buildin's." "I'll shin mak' a door," he said, with emphasis, bracing his shoulders; then something caught his eye on the rough planking walls, and he beckoned to me mysteriously before applying his energy towards their demolition.

"What is it?" asked Mackay impatiently.

"Come and hold a match," I said. He did so, while I laboriously spelled out a series of Chinook characters which had evidently been cut deep into the wood through the agency of some sharp instrument, most probably a tomahawk. The result was rather mystifying, for, translating into English, I read twelve names ending with the words, "*Chief of the Thron-Diucks*." Eleven of the names were simply unpronounceable, but the last entry had a decidedly English appearance; it required no translation, and read: "*King James the First, Chief of the Thron-Diucks*."

"We've struck the King's house," said Mackay with a laugh. "The old skunk and I hev niver [Pg 30] agreed, so I hope he doesn't come along now."

"I thought he called himself 'James the Second,'" said the Captain slowly.

But Stewart would wait no longer. "Staun clear, a'm comin'!" he cried, and his voice rang with shivering distinctness through the air. With a short rush he threw himself against the wooden barrier; the stout timbers bent and quivered, but resisted the shock, and from within came a harsh, tearing sound, terminating in a muffled crash, as of something falling heavily. Again and again Stewart acted as a battering ram, but only vague echoes rewarded his efforts; the logs were evidently unusually firmly founded. The noises created by these various onslaughts—and ultimately we had simultaneously applied all our energies without avail—had a most demoralising effect upon us, and after each attack we waited breathlessly until the echoes had died away. Assuredly, if the Indians were within several miles of us, they could not fail to hear the diabolical din we were creating.

We had been over an hour at our depredating labours, and I was beginning to wish I had never sanctioned the expedition; then the indefatigable Stewart made a discovery. We had hitherto neglected to examine the barricaded holes which seemingly served as windows, deeming them too securely fastened for our nefarious purpose; they were closed from the inside, and were too high in any case to be within reach of Stewart's impetuous shoulder, but now our strong man had but lightly pressed the window-guard, and behold! it swung open. His hearty "hurroo" drew my attention.

"For heaven's sake shut up!" I whispered angrily. But Mackay made even more noise by exploding into a loud laugh, which resounded weirdly over the tree-tops.

"Good fur you, Stewart!" he cried; "now we're right." [Pg 31]

The Captain, like myself, was not very enthusiastic over our night's exploit. "Let's get it over quickly, boys," he said. "Give me a lift-up, Stewart." But Stewart had reserved to himself the honour of first entry, and was even then dangling midway through the aperture, and squirming his way forward vigorously. The opening was very small, not more than two feet square, and as I watched my companion scrambling in, I thought that if the level of the floor was lower than the surface without, which is usually the case with Indian huts, considerable difficulty might be experienced in making an exit! Stewart, however, was apparently troubled by no unpleasant anticipations, and soon a crash, followed by an ejaculation of much fervour, heralded his arrival on the other side of the stoutly-timbered wall.

"Are you there?" cried Mackay, preparing to follow.

"Whaur did ye think a wis?" came the somewhat surly reply, and the doughty warrior's voice sounded almost sepulchral as it floated out of the darkness. Then he added enticingly, "Come in, ma man, come in, an' bring a licht wi' ye, fur it's pitch dark, an' an' awfu' smelliferous." To me the insinuating tone of my comrade's voice sounded suspicious, but neither Mackay nor the Captain noticed anything unusual.

"I'll be with you in a jiff, Stewart, old man," said the former gentleman, vainly striving to get his head and shoulders through the aperture. But his body was somewhat rotund and made rather a tight fit in the narrow entrance. "Push, ye beggars!" he gasped, and the Captain and I went to his assistance, only to see him jerk suddenly forward and disappear with a clatter inside, while Stewart's voice spluttered out in firm protest, "Come awa' in, ma man, an' dinna block up the ventilator." For some minutes longer I waited in suspense, while Mackay struck match after [Pg 32] match and spoke never a word, and Stewart kept up a continual flow of mysterious grunts and sundry forcible expletives. I had a small piece of candle in my pocket, and this I lit; then, with the Captain's aid, I thrust my head through the window and surveyed the interior. Mackay quickly seized the piece of tallow from my hand, and held it aloft, and then I saw what had baffled the usually fluent descriptive powers of the worthy Stewart and his fiery companion. The room was bare save for the presence of several shelves roughly built up in the centre of the floor and reaching almost to the roof, and on each of these shelves a massive oblong box rested, the sides of which were heavily inlaid with silver or some similar metal. The whole structure presented an appearance not unlike a Chinese pagoda in miniature; the meaning of the arrangement was more than I could understand. The noises which we had at first heard had evidently been occasioned by the uppermost cases falling from their resting-places, for Stewart was examining with much interest one of several of the strange receptacles which were lying on the heavily-logged floorway. As I gazed in mute wonder on the extraordinary scene, I was quickly made aware that a wonderfully-powerful odour pervaded the room. It assailed my nostrils and my eyes, causing me to choke and blink, and finally withdraw my head into the pure air.

"It's the thickest perfume I've iver struck," groaned Mackay, and he staggered against the weird-looking pagoda.

I heard a shuffling rattle, and looking in a second time, saw the spidery monument sway, then fall with a dull hollow crash, scattering its curious freight in all directions. At the same time a yell from Stewart all but shattered my little remaining nerve, and he came leaping wildly across the fallen boxes towards the narrow egress.

"A'm comin' oot!" he bellowed; then Mackay, forcing up behind, and making strenuous [Pg 33] endeavours to preserve his usual *sangfroid*, said weakly, "I guess I need a breath of air also, boys."

To make matters worse, the Captain, who had been warily prospecting around, now came rushing back, gesticulating energetically. "The whole tribe is quite close, and comin' fur us!" he announced in a loud whisper when he came near. Here was a predicament. The two eager individuals whose heads were thrust appealingly out of the window, groaned in anguish, for they could not get out without assistance, struggle as they might.

"You had better stay right where you are, boys, and we'll come in too," I said to them hurriedly, for the shuffling of many snowshoes now reached my ears, and there was no time to effect a rescue.

"Heaven knows what's goin' to be the end o' this," muttered the Captain as he swung his lank frame through the opening. It took some time for him to wriggle inside, and then I attempted the acrobatic performance necessary to make an entry. I was just a little late, for, looking around before making the final duck inwards I saw a number of wild-looking figures approaching quickly over the snow. The moon then encountered a belt of dense, fleecy clouds, and a welcome darkness enveloped the landscape just as Stewart, with a grunt of satisfaction, tugged me ingloriously into the odoriferous realms from which he had been so desperately anxious to escape, and shut the heavy barricade. A few minutes passed, during which time we were all but stifled by the pungent air; then our miseries were forgotten in the danger that threatened. Snowshoes hissed and skidded around our shelter, and deep, guttural exclamations in the Chinook tongue sounded on every side. And as I pieced together the various monosyllabic [Pg 34] utterances, I refrained from translating them to my companions, although I had a dim idea that both Stewart and Mackay had fully decided that, whatever it might be, the strange structure in which they were was certainly no storehouse for dried caribou or salmon.

We had been barely five minutes in the dismal room, yet the time seemed an age. The Indians contented themselves with circling round each house in turn, keeping several yards distant from them, for a reason which was now painfully apparent to me. I could stand it no longer. "Boys," I

said, "we've got to get out of this, lively, for the Indians will probably patrol about till sunrise, and half an hour will just about finish me."

"An' me," groaned Mackay.

The Captain, however, was not satisfied. "Look here, boys," he said, "I don't hitch on to yer meaning a bit. Are the Injuns afraid to go into their houses, or—I'm hanged if I can make out thish yer circus. Is this an Injun village, or is it not?" he demanded.

There was no need to hide it from him further. "No, Captain," I replied, "it's not."

"Then what place is this?" he asked slowly; and Stewart answered him in dolorous tones—

"A graveyaird, Cap'n—an Injun graveyaird."

So it was. The cases contained but the dust of long-deceased warriors, wrapped in blankets which were impregnated with a sickly-smelling scent made by the Indians from the roots of certain plants. In the darkness I could not see the Captain's face, and for some moments he said nothing, then he spoke, musingly: "James the First" said he, "yes, I might have known, for it is James the Second who is now Chief of the Thron-Diucks."

The swishing of snowshoes again sounded ominously near. We waited till the Indians had passed; then Stewart, swinging open the barricade, Mackay scrambled up, and was shot forward into the [Pg 35] snow with our combined effort. "Hurry up, boys," he cried, when he had recovered himself; "they are at the end, and are just turning to come back." Breathing heavily, Stewart was next propelled into the open; then came my turn, the Captain being the tallest, waiting to the last; but tall as he was he could only reach his head and a part of his shoulder through the window, for the floorway was sunk considerably. No time was to be lost. With a howl, Stewart gripped the outstretched arm, Mackay the exposed shoulder, and both pulled as if for dear life. Despite the need for silence, the Captain was but human.

"Howlin' tarnation, you're twistin' my neck off!" he yelled, as he was yanked like a sportive fish on to the glistening snow.

"Run, ye deevils, run!" roared Stewart, himself setting the example. There was much need. Scarcely twenty yards away fully a score of tall, bemuffled warriors were speeding towards us, silent and grim, like a raging Nemesis. On the impulse of the moment I discharged my revolver as a signal to Mac to move ahead; then with a wholesome fear in our hearts we set a course for the camp, where Dave, aroused by the revolver shot, was baying loud and fiercely, and skipped over the intervening snow-wreaths at an uncommonly lively rate.

Whether the Indians followed us, or whether they remained to make good the work of our desecrating hands, we never learned, but I rather think they waited to rebuild the tombs of their ancestors. They were certainly not in evidence when we overtook Mac, and we gave a simultaneous shout of relief.

"Whaur's the cariboo ye wis gaun tae fetch?" asked that gentleman in an outburst of righteous indignation.

"Say nae mair, Mac. Say nae mair," eloquently pleaded Stewart, gripping a rope and feverishly [Pg 36] assisting the sleigh on its onward progress. "If you had suffered what I hae suffered this nicht ——" His voice failed him, and Mac simmered down at once.

"Was it as bad's that?" said he commiseratingly.

"We'd better keep going all night, boys," Mackay hastily remarked, with a furtive glance behind. "And to-morrow," he added, more cheerfully, "we'll have a good blow-out at Skookum Gulch." And so it came to pass.

PAN-WASHING IN SKOOKUM GULCH.

THE FINDING OF "GOLD BOTTOM" CREEK

[Pg 37]

As the season advanced the ground hardened so that with our primitive fire-burning methods we could barely thaw more than eighteen inches of gravel in the short day, and even this occasioned tedious labour. The depth of bedrock was sixteen feet, and the frost had penetrated far beyond this level, so that our tunnelling operations along the line of the wash proceeded very slowly indeed. The miners around had begun to flock into Dawson to frequent the saloons and gamble away their hardly-earned gold, all declaring that it was too cold to work—the thermometer registered 25 degrees below zero—and soon Skookum Gulch was almost deserted. "Cap." Campbell and "Alf" Mackay alone remained to keep us company.

My knowledge of the Chinook tongue had been of considerable service to me, and the Indians inhabiting the upper Thron-Diuck valley occasionally visited our camp, bringing many presents of dried salmon and caribou, all of which Mac and Stewart accepted with voluble thanks. Then one day "King James," the chief of the tribe, paid us the honour of a call.

"Why you dig, Mis'r Mac?" he interrogated, apparently much mystified to see us excavating the ground.

"Fur GOLD, ye heathen," howled Stewart, popping his head above the shaft.

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King James did not understand the full significance of the remark, but smiled indulgently when I translated it, and solemnly inclined his head towards the speaker.

"You squaw," he said, "you squaw to Mis'r Mac." Which meant that he considered Stewart somewhat presumptuous in addressing a chief of the Thron-Diucks.

After much talk had been indulged in, King James appeared to realise that we were really searching for gold, and had no idea of carrying away or shifting the course of his river; and his dry old face spread out in a broad grin when I explained that much gold, in our country, was equivalent to many squaws. Suddenly he turned and strode solemnly towards his sleigh, which was guarded by several richly-robed squaws and half a dozen youthful warriors; and after groping among the bearskin rugs for some time he came back to me, displaying in his greasy palm a beautiful specimen of alluvial gold: it was large and flat, with smooth surface and water-worn edges; it must have weighed at least three ounces. I gazed in bewilderment; the Indians rarely looked for gold, which to them was not even so valuable as silver, and the latter metal they used only for making ornaments. Mac and Stewart were soon by my side, and while we examined the specimen with undisguised interest, King James lit his pipe—a former present from myself—and puffed leisurely, eyeing me the while with a half-amused expression.

"What think o' that, Mis'r Mac?" he asked at length.

"It's good stuff, King James," I strove to answer in his language, and with a sigh I offered it back. My surprise was great when he waved it aside right royally, and placing his grimy hand on my shoulder in quite a fatherly manner, he spoke out several sentences rapidly.

"Hold hard, King James," I cried. "I cannot follow you if you talk in that fashion. Come into my tent and have some 'baccy."

[Pg 39]

He smiled benignly, and spoke a few words to the sleigh attendants, who immediately unhitched

the dogs and proceeded to build a fire near at hand; then he followed me to my camp and ensconced himself by the stove. I still carried the nugget in my hand, but obeying the old chief's directions, I now placed it in a bottle with my other specimens and sat down beside him. Stewart meanwhile turned his attention to culinary matters, and while the billies boiled, King James and I conversed earnestly on matters dear to the Indian heart.

He was no lover of the white men who had invaded his domain and driven his people to seek the refuge of the mountain fastnesses, and he intimated plainly enough that he should not be sorry to see Dawson City speedily deserted by the white intruders. As for gold, the idea of grown men seeking for the yellow metal aroused his keen amusement, and he was very incredulous about my statements as to its value in the wigwams of the white people. After the subject of his woes had been gone into at great length, and our hearty sympathies enlisted, he remained silent for a time as if absorbed in thought. Then his eyes surveyed the mining implements and firearms in the tent, and finally rested upon my nugget collection with a newly-awakened sparkle of interest.

"You come wi' me, Mis'r Mac," he said thoughtfully, after a long pause, "Heap big bear on Thron-Diuck; you come wi' King James——"

I shook my head vigorously; we were not very anxious to shoot big game at that time, but his hospitality would not be denied.

"Me show you whar big gold come from. Me show you Gold Bottom," he hastened to add: "too much gold for white men in Dawson—me show *you*, Mis'r Mac."

Stewart was so astounded at the old chief's last words, spoken in broken English, that he nearly chopped his fingers with the axe instead of the solidified flour he was preparing to bake. [Pg 40]

"I'll gang," he bellowed.

"An' me," growled Mac, who, like his comrade, had only understood the last sentence.

King James smoked stolidly for a few moments, then patted Stewart patronisingly on the back. "You good squaw," he said, gazing at the half-baked flour with much approval, "you come wi' me."

The appellation "squaw" by no means pleased the fiery Stewart, and he would have burst out angrily had I not restrained him.

"Yes, I guess we'll go with you, King James," I replied. "I want to see Gold Bottom Creek badly, and I don't anticipate any evil effects from too much gold." And so the compact was made, and old "Leatherskin," as Stewart promptly dubbed him, smiled softly when I explained to him the workings of my big game rifle, and went into a transport of delight on being presented with a serviceable Colt revolver and a box of cartridges. Suddenly his face clouded, and he said anxiously—

"Only you come, Mis'r Mac; only you an' squaws."

I restrained my companions with difficulty from rushing at him to choke back the objectionable epithet; then an idea struck me. I wanted "Cap" Campbell and Mackay, my adjoining burrowers in the frozen gravel, to accompany me; they had shared with us the plodding uncertainty of things at Skookum Gulch, and I wanted them to reap some of the benefits attached to the discovery of the mysteriously-famed "Gold Bottom" before the district was rushed. I could hardly doubt that King James's information was correct, and the specimen given me was sufficient for even the most incredulous-minded person. The inducement was very real indeed, but the chief would only allow Mis'r Mac an' squaws.

"All right, King James," I said, "but I have two more squaws." He eyed me with a look that was fast changing from one of mere friendliness to one of much respect. [Pg 41]

"You great man, Mis'r Mac," he grunted. "Four squaws? Ugh!"

When he saw the brawny giants that Mac hastily called in, his surprise was unbounded. "Good squaws," he chuckled.

"What in tarnation does the old skunk mean?" said Mackay, and Campbell's anger was rising visibly.

"Look here, boys," I said. "King James has told me of a creek that is lined with gold, and this is a sample"—I showed them the specimen received. "He asks me to go and take charge of the lot, but only myself and squaws. You had better be squaws for once in your lives. *Savez?*"

They did "*savez*," and made every effort to show their cordiality to the King, who appreciated their advances with tolerant grace, but grinned expansively when he saw their well-filled cartridge-belts.

Stewart made a triumphant success of his cooking that day, and in honour of the occasion he filled the little "doughboys" with pieces of dried apricots and peaches, and, indeed, everything in that line our larder afforded. So luxurious a repast did he provide that King James sighed regretfully when he rose to go.

"You come to-morra', Mis'r Mac!" he cried when he was rolled up in his sleigh blankets, like, as Mac said, an Egyptian mummy.

"Right!" I answered, waving him goodbye. But he had not finished.

"Be sure bring cook squaw," he murmured contentedly.

The long whips cracked and the dogs bounded forward; the shriek of the sleigh-runners effectually drowned Stewart's vehement curses; and the King departed. [Pg 42]

Next morning we started out for the Indian camp. Mac and Stewart had the tents struck, and it with the blankets packed in neat rolls on our sleigh soon after sunrise. Our rather small store of flour and other necessaries found ample space on the same conveyance, and to this load Dave was harnessed. Campbell and Mackay did not delay us; they were up betimes and had their dog-sleigh ready with ours. The temperature this morning registered 30 degrees below zero, and even while we were engaged tying the sleigh ropes, long icicles formed at our chins and dripped from our eyelashes.

"Are you ready, boys?" I cried to my freshly-acquired squaws.

"Right!" they responded with one voice.

"Gee up, Dave," said Mac, and with a bound and a shriek our sleigh led the way towards the Klondike's unknown source. We were not much concerned about leaving our properties on Skookum Gulch; it was not likely that any one would "jump" our claims; the weather was too cold for the tender feet of Dawson to venture out around the creeks. Soon we left the Dome in the distance behind, and swiftly we crashed through the powdered snow and blown ice on the main river. No white man, at this time, had explored the head waters of the Klondike. In the earlier season I had attempted the task, but was repelled by the deep gorges and grim cañons that marked the river's channel for many miles when near an outlying spur of the "Rockies." Now we forced a trail far beyond my furthest travel, tracing here and there the track of the old chief's sleigh where the runners had cut deep through the blistered ice. Our visages were soon framed in icicles, and our cheeks rendered stiff by a thin film, as of glass, which caused us much pain. [Pg 43] Mac and Stewart ambled beside the staggering dogs, occasionally helping them over obstacles and badly-blown patches. For once they were forced to march in silence, for their mouths were sealed as if by iron bands.

The Grand Cañon was entered soon after midday, and the majestic powers of old King Frost had so metamorphosed the dark gorge that we made our trail over the frozen torrent almost nervously. The great stalactites and dripping ice cones shut out the sky completely, and we forged ahead in a vague eerie shadow reflected from the translucent pillars. Here and there the roar of the flood echoed from giant clefts in the ice, and caused the glassy walls to quiver and crackle; then again came the oppressive calm, broken only by the dull rumble of the rushing torrent full fifty feet below.

It is impossible to picture the grandeur of an Alaskan cañon when the elements hold it in thrall; there is nothing like it in the whole world. Nevertheless, we were not sorry when we emerged into the comparatively open country beyond, and picked up afresh the track of King James's sleigh which we had been unable to trace in the gorge. Our destination could not now be far distant, for the frowning peaks of the Rockies loomed directly ahead, and the valley was rapidly becoming lost in the minor ranges that appeared; we were surely near the mystic source of the golden Klondike. The dogs never slackened their trot, though now and then they staggered and stumbled over large ridges of blistered ice, which cut their paws cruelly. Our moccasins were being quickly reduced to shreds, and our clothing generally had become stiff with the frost and rent in great holes by contact with the brittle, flaking ice. Few white men would have dreamed of making such a journey on such a day. I contented myself with that reflection, though probably [Pg 44] the miners in their snug huts at Dawson would have dubbed us colossal fools for venturing so far back into the Indian territory; but gold was always an irresistible incentive.

"I reckon," said Campbell, coming up from behind, and grimacing frightfully as he spoke, while the ice shivered on his face with the effort, "this is not much of a picnic, is it?"

It was some minutes before I could reply, and while I strove to coax the muscles of my mouth to relax without doing serious injury to my features, Stewart's hoary visage shook itself clear of its icy sheath with a crackling, splintering sound, and his voice rang out—

"I see the Injun camp! Hurroo! D——!" The last expression was given in a most sorrowful tone as he felt the blood trickle on his cheeks and freeze into icy appendages.

"You've got to think a lot before speaking in this country," I sympathised, but he would not open his mouth again.

Rounding a bluff, we saw, nestling in the shadow of a great pine-forest, an array of mud huts and tepees covered with caribou skins. Many fires were blazing in the vicinity, fed lavishly with logs drawn from the wooded slope behind. A number of King James's subjects superintended operations with unmoved faces; it was a routine to which they had long become accustomed—for bear-fires were very necessary indeed in these parts; Bruin had not yet reconciled himself to his winter slumber, and, as I have noted, the Klondike valley was infested with various species of his kind.

With a sigh of thankfulness I signalled to Mac to draw up alongside the largest fire, and he needed no second bidding. A few moments more and we were all eagerly thawing ourselves [Pg 45] before the blaze. Even the dogs crept as close as the burning logs allowed, and warmed their poor frozen bodies on all sides, turning continually, as if on a revolving toast-rack. From the most imposing hut now came rushing towards us King James, with numerous squaws; and while the King congratulated me effusively on my safe arrival, the squaws beamed coquettishly on my companions, who felt in no wise complimented by their attentions.

"They tak' us fur squaws, Stewart!" howled Mac, more in sorrow than in anger; then I heard them both with much deliberation calculate out the value of the Queen squaw's dress as she stood by them, speaking words of welcome in a tongue they could not understand.

"It's a rale guid beaver," I heard Mac say.

"An' what a bonny silver-tip cloak," burst in Stewart.

"An' the moccasins," continued the first speaker, "are faur ow'r guid fur an Injun tae wear."

At this juncture I turned anxiously; I thought it very necessary.

"For heaven's sake, Mac," I said, "leave the squaw's beavers and moccasins alone. We'll get murdered if old King James——"

"Wha's touchin' their belangin's?" interrupted Mac indignantly; but despite his righteous outburst, I knew that he and his doughty comrade would have had little qualms about appropriating the bonny beavers and moccasins also. Their logic was vague, but conclusive enough to satisfy themselves. However, with much grumbling they unharnessed Dave, and started to erect the tent in a sheltered spot, Campbell and Mackay having already got their smaller canvas home fixed up.

"It's fair disgracefu'," muttered Mac, as he pulled on the guy-rope, "tae think o' livin' near Injuns! We're comin' faur doon in the world surely."

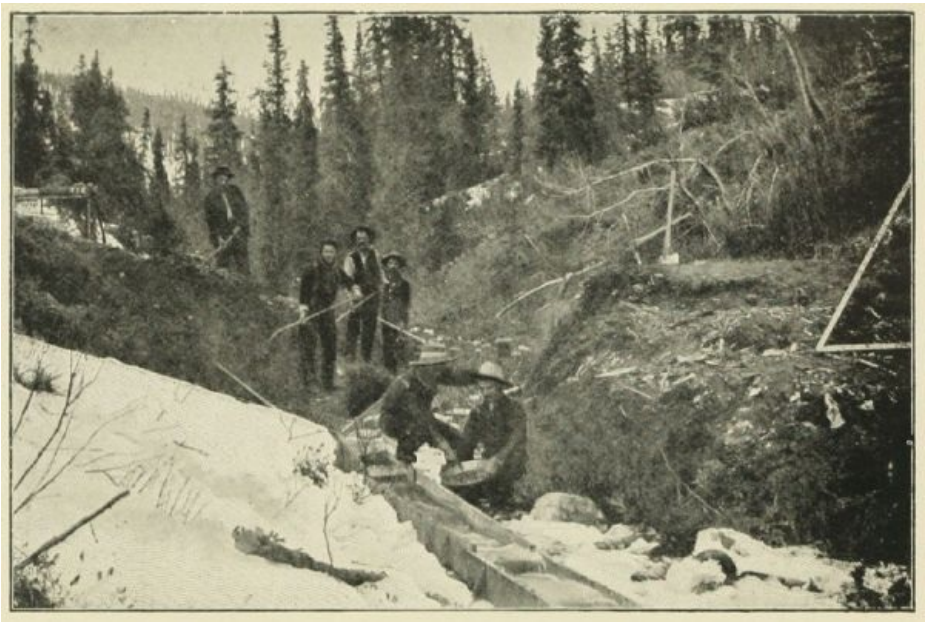
"Ye're richt there," spoke Stewart mournfully; "bit, man, did ye ever see sic a bonnie beaver?" [Pg 46]

Next morning, when the dim grey light was beginning to appear, we set out to explore the creek containing "too much gold." King James's sleigh led the trail, for which I was truly thankful. The dangerous nature of the route from the Indian camp was all too apparent. Miniature glaciers hung perilously over each mountain ridge, and formed a sight well fitted to unnerve any man but an Indian; and when we crawled over their glassy surfaces, and slid down on the "other" side, it seemed to me that we were running risks enough for all the gold in Klondike. We had not gone very far, however, before King James drew up his dogs in the bed of a deep chasm that traced directly from an enormous ice-field overhead. I looked around and saw the frozen channel of the Thron-Diuck about a hundred yards below; the King had taken us by a "short cut" over the mountains rather than follow the much easier route by way of the main river. For a moment I thought that he had purposely meant us to lose our bearings, but he soon dispelled that fear.

"Gold Bottom here, Mis'r Mac," he said. "You dig." He measured about a four-feet length on the snow, meaning, I suppose, that we should find bedrock at that level. "You find much gold, Mis'r Mac, too much gold——"

"Hold hard!" I interrupted; "I guess we'll deserve all we get. This is the devil's own part of the world we've struck."

King James grinned incredulously, but kept silence; and arranging his sleigh rugs, he whipped up his long line of dags and sped back over the trail we had just traversed. We watched him till his sleigh, careering dangerously, rushed down into the valley beyond. The mining instincts of Campbell and Mackay now overcame their dislike of our chill and uncompromising surroundings.



Gold-Bottom Creek.

"It looks likely country," said Campbell, "and I shouldn't wonder if that glacier has worn down quite a lot of gold." [Pg 47]

We were not long in pitching our tents and building several fires to thaw off the icicles that clung to our faces; then we felt much more enthusiastic over our prospects. The timber was plentiful, and close at hand; we were far indeed from the madding crowd.

"We'll make a start, boys," I said; "we'll see whether old Leather-skin spoke correctly."

My two companions were rather disconsolately surveying the scene.

"Too much gold!" muttered Mac in derision. "No vera likely. It wad tak' hundreds o' thoosands o' pounds tae pey me fur ma sufferin's in this God-forsaken country."

All day long we kept great logs burning over the frozen gravel silted up on the edge of the channel. Slowly we excavated the "dirt" in fragments, picking energetically at it after each fire had been cleared away. The icy body of the creek had evidently long since been formed, for not a drop of water flowed beneath; and after sinking a few feet we came to a level where the frozen mass contracted from the old river-bed, leaving a clear dry space in which a man could almost stand upright. We at once abandoned our shaft, and crawled into the strange cavern formed. The gravel over which the torrent had flowed was dry, and hard as flint. We had reached bedrock on the true channel of the stream, and with water still flowing overhead! A yet unfrozen fluid gurgled in the heart of the great ice column above; the effect was wonderfully beautiful.

"I guess we'll stick to the shaft, boys," said Mackay; "this looks uncanny," and he scrambled out; [Pg 48] the idea of working underneath the flowing stream was too much for him, though he was a veteran miner. Campbell and I soon followed his example, leaving Mac and Stewart, who were not easily daunted, to survey the wonders of Nature at their leisure. They at once commenced picking the frozen channel, and the thud! thud! of the blows came to our ears, as we stood by the fire above, as the sonorous notes of a deep-toned bell. Already the murky gloom of an Alaskan night was fast closing over, though it was yet but two o'clock in the afternoon. Thud! thud! thud! went the pickaxes below, and I marvelled at the persistence of my companions, for I knew they could make little impression on the flinty sands.

Suddenly the echoes ceased, and the sounds of a wordy altercation rumbled up towards us; a few minutes later Mac popped his head out of the shaft and beckoned me mysteriously, then disappeared again. Wonderingly I let myself down through the narrow aperture and wriggled into the cavern. A strange sight met my gaze. A lighted stump of candle was stuck in the ground, and its pale light, reflected against the glistening roof, gave the scene a somewhat unearthly appearance. Stewart was kneeling on the gravel, examining carefully a flat, pebble-shaped stone; beside him was heaped quite a number of similar fragments, and these were evidently the results of my companions' labours, for many hollows in the channel showed where the pebbles had been extracted. When I entered, Mac was feverishly rubbing one of the pieces against his moccasined leg.

"What kind o' stane dae ye ca' that?" he asked eagerly, handing his prize to me.

"I've tell't him it's ironstane," broke in Stewart in a convinced tone of voice, "but Mac aye likes [Pg 49] tae be contrairy."

The specimen given me was a rough and rusty-looking pebble, very much water-worn. At first glance it certainly looked like ironstone, and its weight proved it to be either of that nature or—I dared not hoped the alternative. I took my sheath knife and endeavoured to scrape the edges, but they were hard as flint.

"A kent it was ironstane," grumbled Stewart, yet I was not satisfied. I held the specimen close to the candle-flame for several minutes until it was heated throughout, then I again tried my knife on the edges. The effect was astounding; the rusty iron coat peeled off as mud, and lo! a nugget of shining gold was brought to view.

With a howl of delight Stewart started up, cracking his head against the crystal ceiling in his haste. " Gold!" he shouted, and grabbed at the handful of stones he had collected. "Mak' some mair," he said.

But there was no need to doubt further; every rusty-coloured pebble unearthed was in truth a fine alluvial specimen of the precious metal, and when scraped each tallied in every characteristic with King James's nugget. The iron coating was but a frozen mud cement which had formed over the irregularities of surface with vice-like tenacity. The bed of the creek was indeed gold bottomed; the King had not stated wrongly.

Campbell and Mackay soon joined us; they had become alarmed at my prolonged absence.

"This beats Bonanza and El Dorado hollow," was the first individual's comment.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" feebly murmured Mackay, gazing blinkingly around.

The light danced and shone on the yellow fragments, and sparkled on the crystal dome. The sight was truly gorgeous. Even the fabled Aladdin's cave could hardly have surpassed the splendours [Pg 50] of that Alaskan icy vault.

It was plain to us that the depth of "pay gravel" could not be more than a few inches at most; the steep declivity of the channel was a sure proof of that fact, and our "find" would not, therefore, take long to work out. It promised, however, to be the richest strike in the Klondike valley. The gold being so close to the mother lode, which was, unfortunately, covered by the glacier, was all of a coarse nature; none of the pieces collected came under the pennyweight limit, and one specimen we computed to be at least five ounces....

Such is the record of one of our prospecting trips to the glacier streams of the Upper Klondike, and "Gold Bottom Creek" from that time occupied an honoured place in every miner's reference book.

THE PERILS OF THE TRAIL [Pg 51]

All through that dread winter no news reached civilisation from the frozen El Dorado, no communication had been established with the great mushroom city of the far Nor'-West, and only the wildest sort of speculation could be indulged in as to the fate of the pioneer inhabitants of the Klondike valley. Only too late was the knowledge forced upon the almost fanatical gold-seekers that the iron grip of an Arctic winter was upon them, effectually barring retreat and sealing the narrow gates of the country against all further expeditions from the outside. They had lived on in the steadfast belief that the "Great American nation" would send in supplies in good time to prevent any likelihood of starvation. But so ignorant was the world regarding the nature of the northern land that many companies continued even at that time in Seattle and San Francisco to outline in the press their plans for sending stores to Dawson in the "coming" winter—this in November, when the elements had already a vice-like grip of the country.

Several expeditions really started, but so ludicrous were their equipments that they without exception failed to penetrate beyond the coastal barriers—the grim old Chilcoot and the murderous Skagway trail.

[Pg 52] And so in the "promised land" the chill November blasts were hushed and the deadly quiet of a December frost reigned supreme. The majority of the miners worked out on the creeks, but when the intense cold forced them to cease their labours they flocked into Dawson and idly frequented the saloons, bragging of their riches to their less favoured comrades, and cursing the ungodly nature of the country in forcible language.

At this time very few had more than three months' provisions, and the majority were at their last bag of flour. The stores would sell nothing unless at fabulous prices. Everything commanded one dollar a pound. Even salt, that cheap but necessary commodity, had the same value. Baking powder was unpurchasable—there being none. Before long one hundred dollars was offered and refused for a sack of rolled oats. The restaurants for a time supplied "meals" at exorbitant charges, yet one by one they had to give out for want of supplies. The end came when seven dollars was asked and given freely for a meagre portion of bacon and beans—the staple food of the Arctics. Only a few days did this establishment—"Dawson's Last Hope"—hold out, and then the familiar legend, "No supplies," was posted on the logged doorway. It was only then that the real state of affairs was impressed upon the unthinking people.

Many tragedies were enacted in that northern mining camp during the weeks that followed. A kind of panic prevailed. Short rations was the rule, and starvation only too frequent. There seemed nothing but death ahead for all. On short rations, with the thermometer averaging forty-five below zero! who could view such a prospect with equanimity? Thefts of goods were often attempted, and almost invariably death by revolver bullet was the end of the poor hungry would-be thief's career, for the necessaries of life were more strictly guarded than gold. Gold could not [Pg 53] buy them. Many would have given their all gladly for a sack of flour. Long before Christmas all work was suspended. The population took to their log-huts, and barricaded every nook and cranny in vain endeavour to keep out the cold. Daylight appeared at ten o'clock in the morning, and night closed over the camp soon after three. The "city" seemed deserted, all but for the presence of a few dog-sleighs, which were constantly employed in carrying timber from the mountain-side. The strong men who had dared the elements and dragged the gold from the unwilling soil now gave way utterly. The keen air whetting their appetites rendered their existence on short rations a long-drawn-out agony. The weaker element soon fell ill, and then a reign of terror began. Fever became prevalent, and the little cemetery soon had to be extended to accommodate the many victims to its fury.

A "roll-up" of the miners was by unanimous consent held to reason out the dangerous situation, and it was decided as a last desperate resource to attempt the long overland route to Dyea across the treacherous Chilcoot Pass. Until the arrival of my party over the ice none had dreamed that such a journey was practicable. During the heart of an Arctic winter, to march seven hundred miles over ice and unfathomed snows! The idea seemed absurd, yet it now became the only hope of life to all. That "roll-up" is pictured clearly before me now, and never again do I expect to be present at a more cruelly dramatic gathering. Starvation showed plainly on every face; each white frosted visage was seamed and furrowed as if by a load of care. They were indeed a motley crowd, comprising representatives of all nationalities. To me fell the questionable honour of leadership. I was supposed to know the valley of the Yukon better than any present, nearly all of [Pg 54] whom had entered by way of St. Michael's.

"All right, boys," I said, in answer to their request, "my party will make the trail for you as far as Big Salmon River. Then Major Walsh may be able to advise us what to do."

And so the strange company began its long and deadly march. Half a dozen dog teams headed the column, after which came men pulling their own sleighs, and at the rear wearily trudged the multitude who carried their all in packs bound with straps to their shoulders. It was a strange and pitiable spectacle at the start; what would it be at the finish?

The Stewart River was reached in four days, and here the "blown" ice was almost insurmountable. It piled up in great blistering sheets, the elevations in some places exceeding a height of twenty feet. Over these obstacles the dog-sleighs crashed, breaking a way for the long trailing human caravan. Moccasins were cut into shreds, and clothing soon became tattered and torn. The thermometer had now dropped to fifty degrees below zero, and many became frost-

bitten. Not a few lost the use of their arms, and marble-hued noses were common indeed.

Sometimes I would get well ahead of the main party, and from a convenient point watched them approach and pass. A stranger sight could not be imagined. The staggering line of dogs came first; over their lowered heads the long whips cracked, and the poor brutes bounded forward with nerve and life in every motion. Then the weary sleigh-pullers passed in solemn array, shoulders bent and bodies leaning forward. Their sleighs were pulled along to the accompaniment of the harsh grinding sound emitted from the iron runners on the frozen snow. Lastly, the "packers" straggled in Indian file, and they were surely a sight to be viewed with mingled feelings. Tall men, short men, stout men—and they were few—and thin men followed in miscellaneous order. Some were lame, and limped painfully; some had their heads bandaged, many wore nose coverings, and a few were minus the nose altogether. Strange it was to see at intervals, when this almost weird procession lagged to the rear, how strenuously they would endeavour to recover ground, and when with one accord they broke into a run the spectacle offered would have been laughable had it not been so seriously, so truly a race for life.

DAWSON CITY.

Salmon River was reached at last. Five men had died on the trail and two were seriously ill, though they dragged themselves along, helped occasionally by the dog-sleighs. Here I formally gave over my responsible charge to Campbell and Mackay, and having been entrusted with mails and despatches for the coast, with barely a halt pushed on ahead with Mac and Stewart. Our stores had diminished greatly beyond my calculations, and it was evident that an extreme effort must be made to increase our rate of travel. Yet despite our utmost endeavours, when we entered upon the snowy wastes of Marsh Lake we pulled a sleigh on which reposed a few furs, a bag of mineral specimens, and about as much flour as would make one good square meal. [Pg 55]

For the last several days our progress had been severely hampered by the increasing depth and softness of the snow filling the valley of the Yukon as we approached nearer the dreaded pass. Our daily march since leaving the northern capital had rarely fallen below twenty-eight miles, until the unfrozen White Horse Rapids had stayed our advance and caused us to make a wide *détour*; but now, do what we might in our semi-famished condition, we could barely travel twenty miles in as many hours, and full eighty miles yet intervened between us and the sea. On this day we had been on the trail since sunrise, and the darkening shadows of night were already beginning to creep over the billowy wastes, though it was but two hours after noon. [Pg 56]

"We are near the end of the lake, boys," I shouted encouragingly, as I noticed the failing efforts of my companions. "We must try and reach Tagash River to-night."

Mac groaned dismally, and Dave emitted a plaintive howl as he struggled in his harness. Then Stewart, who had grown wofully cadaverous of late, stopped and addressed his compatriot.

"I mind, Mac," said he, "that there used to be an Injun village aboot here."

"I hae a disteenct recollection o' the place," returned Mac shortly, bending to his labours afresh.

"We are passing that same village now," I cried cheerily. "That makes ten miles since our last halt."

The sleigh stopped with a jerk; half a dozen log-huts with a like amount of totem poles, were plainly observable among the dense timber on shore.

"Them Injuns must have something for eating in they houses," spoke Mac thoughtfully, gazing at the rude structures intently.

"But we have nothing to barter, and we know they won't sell," I broke in impatiently.

He made no reply to my remark, but turned to Stewart, who was evidently in a fit of deep mental abstraction: "What's your idea, Stewart, ma man?" he asked insinuatingly, and that individual responded promptly.

"I am wi' ye, Mac, every time, but I hope it's no' a graveyard like the last we tackled." They threw down their sleigh-ropes simultaneously, and were half-way to the village before I had recovered myself.

"Hold hard!" I roared. "What——"

Mac's substantial figure spun round at once. "We'll be back in a meenit," he whispered mysteriously. [Pg 57]

I loosened Dave from his harness, and hastened after the doughty pair, expecting every instant to hear sounds of deadly strife, but all remained silent as a tomb, and I shuddered with painful recollections. I found them cavorting around the largest edifice in the group in a manner that under different circumstances would have seemed ludicrous.

"There's naebody in the hooses," cried Stewart gleefully. "The whole tribe must have gone out moose-hunting."

Not infrequently a village is entirely deserted in this way, and I heaved a sigh of relief. "But they may be back at any time," I said, glancing fearfully round.

Mac shrugged his shoulders; "I think, Stewart," he remarked in a most matter-of-fact tone, "I think the door is the weakest place after all."

I swallowed my scruples at a gulp, and became interested in the proceedings at once. Strangely enough, for the moment we all seemed to have forgotten how very similarly our first escapade of the kind had opened.

Crash! Mac's broad shoulder butted the barricaded doorway right ponderously, but though the heavy logs quivered and bent, they resisted the shock. And now Stewart braced himself for the attack, and together they hurled themselves against the wavering supports. There was a resounding echo as the entire structure gave way, and with many chuckles of delight the adventurous couple disappeared within, while I remained outside, my rifle at full cock, listening for the tramp of moccasined feet that would herald the Indians' return. I heard Mac strike match after match, muttering discontentedly the while, and Stewart's dissatisfied grunts filled me with dismay. Was our depredating raid to go unrewarded?

"There's jist the sma'est bit o' caribou ye could imagine in the hale hoose," snorted Mac indignantly. "It wis high time the deevils went huntin', I'm thinkin'." [Pg 58]

"Let's try the other hooses," counselled Stewart.

At that moment Dave gave a long, low growl, and immediately an indescribable chorus of yells issued from the forest near at hand. Then, to my horror, I perceived numerous dark forms speeding towards me. Instinctively I levelled my rifle, then by an extreme effort of will lowered it again. We were surely in the wrong. "Come on, boys," I cried, "we must run for it."

"Haud on till I get that bit o' caribou," murmured Mac desperately.

A moment more, and we made a wild burst in the direction of the sleighs, pursued by a number of stalwart warriors, whose vengeful shouts inspired our failing steps with an unwonted activity.

"Let's stop and fecht the deevils," implored Mac, as we grabbed the ropes of our sadly-light conveyance, and even at that juncture he examined his stolen piece of caribou with critical interest. "It's no' fit for human use," he protested angrily. "I'm no' goin' to run for nothing."

But the yelling horde at our heels made him think better of it, and muttering sundry maledictions he hitched on to the rushing sleigh, and lumbered manfully alongside his gloomy compatriot. Fear did certainly lend wings to our flight, and by the time we had reached the outlet leading to Tagash Lake, our pursuers were far in the rear, the obscuring darkness probably being much in our favour. And then, as we hastened over the shelving ice on the connecting river, we beheld a sight that drew from us ejaculations of sheer chagrin. A great fire blazed on the shores of the frozen stream, illuminating in the background a solidly-built logged erection, and showing clearly the outlines of a giant Union Jack fastened to a tree close by. Not a soul was in sight, but I could fancy the comfortable group inside the generous dwelling whiling away the time before a glowing stove or indulging in a luxurious dinner. [Pg 59]

"It's a Government station," I said drearily. "It must have been put here just before the ice closed in."

We halted for an instant, and gazed wistfully at the snug police camp. Here surely we might obtain some little stores for our urgent needs, but how dared we ask? The Indians were British subjects, and would indeed be treated with more consideration than we might expect, for it is the policy of the Canadian authorities to protect, even to the outside extreme, the rights of their dusky subjects. Then, again, we had been long on the trail, and our clothing was rent and ragged. The police might judge us by appearances, and then—I did not care to think what might happen. Many thoughts flitted through my mind as we stood there hesitatingly, and my worthy companions, by their silence, showed that they too were thinking deeply. The unmusical cries of

our pursuers jarred on our meditations with seemingly awakening vigour.

"They've got our trail," I said sadly. "We'd better get along."

"Civilisashun be d—— d," fervently, if ambiguously, muttered Mac and Stewart almost with one voice, and we staggered out into the bleak, snowy plains of Tagash Lake, and pursued a dogged course southward.

THE TENT AT CARIBOU CROSSING

[Pg 60]

It was midnight before we halted, and then we camped on the middle of the frozen lake, and near the entrance to the Big Windy Arm; and here, after a most miserable night, we were forced to abandon the greater part of the stolen venison as being in itself but little satisfying to our urgent needs. We started again before daybreak, steering by compass in the darkness. Indeed, it was absolutely necessary that we should keep moving if we would prevent the blood from freezing in our veins. Our plight was surely an unenviable one, and as we stumbled on through the ever-deepening snow, Mac and Stewart cursed the country endlessly in choice vernacular; and even Dave, struggling desperately in his harness, found opportunity to give his verdict in hoarse, muffled growls of deep displeasure.

"We'll bile the first Injun we meet," said Stewart solemnly, after several hours had passed in silence, and he shook his head clear of its encompassing deposits of frosted snow and ice, and gazed at our meagre sleigh-load with pensive eyes.

"I'm no sae sure that Injun is guid for eatin' ony mair than mummy caribou," rejoined Mac after much thought. "I mind," he continued ruminatively, "o' eatin' snake sausages in Sooth America, an' they were wonderfu' paleetable, but Injun?" He shook his ice-enclustered head doubtfully. [Pg 61] The day was already drawing to a close; the sun had risen at ten o'clock, and its short arc in the heavens was almost completed. The time at which one usually expects to fortify the inner man had passed in grim silence, and the darkening shadows were creeping over the billowy white waste.

"We must reach Caribou Crossing to-night, boys," I said. "We dare not camp again on the open lake in case a blizzard gets up and wipes us out."

The blackness of night enveloped us completely, and the tingling sensation in our cheeks warned us that the frost intensity was far below the zero scale. Our moccasins sunk through a powdery fleece so crisp, that it crushed like tinder beneath us, and the steel sleigh-runners whistled harshly over the sparkling beady surface. The stars twinkled and shone brilliantly, and great streaks of dazzling light shot at intervals across the northern sky; the night effects were indeed splendid beyond description, yet we were too much engrossed with more practical matters to wax enthusiastic over astronomical glories. Suddenly the sharp hiss-s of a sleigh reached our ears, then out of the darkness came the sound of laboured breathing and smothered growls, as of dogs straining under an undue load. Obeying a common impulse our sorely-tried caravan came to a halt, Dave whining piteously and pawing the ground impatiently, while my companions peered into the night earnestly, then turned and gazed at me in silence. The hurrying sleigh was fast approaching on a course that would lead it but a few yards to our left. I was on the point of stepping forward to intercept the advancing dog-team which was now showing dimly in the starlight, when one of the two men who accompanied it spoke, and his voice sounded distinctly in the still air.

"I thought I heard something," said he.

"What could you hear?" answered his companion gruffly. "There can't be any one nearer than the station at Tagash, and it's far enough off yet, worse luck." [Pg 62]

"All the same," reiterated the first speaker, "I'm sure I heard sleigh-runners skidding over the snow. It's mebbe some poor devils coming out from Dawson."

They were almost beside us now, and I wondered that we had not been noticed.

"You'll remember, Corporal," came the tones of the doubtful one in hard, official accents, "that on no account can I give out any supplies. I have my own men to provide for."

For the same reason that we had hurried past the station at Tagash River, I had no desire to bring my party to official notice now; so, inwardly cursing the niggardly captain, I decided to let the team pass without soliciting relief. It was clearly a Government "outfit" for the benefit of the men at Tagash. At a jerky trot the four leading dogs swept by us, swaying wildly as they pulled in their traces. Four more dogs followed, then a heavily-laden sleigh came creaking and groaning through the snow, the runners sunk deep and churning up clouds of vapour which almost hid from view the plump sacks of flour on board. The men came after at an amble, their faces muffled so that they, apparently, could neither turn to the right nor left. I could scarcely restrain my companions at this point from breaking into a vehement denunciation of the police captain and his corporal. They would, indeed, have stormed the sleigh cheerfully, and meted out no gentle treatment to the owners thereof. With energetic pantomimic gestures I implored them to be calm; the team was fast being swallowed up in the gloom, but before it had disappeared from our penetrating gaze a broken sentence floated back to our ears: "Pity ... had to leave so much ... Caribou Crossing ... back to-morrow.... D—— d Klondikers." [Pg 63]

For five minutes more we waited in silence, during which time Mac and Stewart were effervescing to an alarming climax, then we gave full vent to our joy. "Ho! ho! ho!" laughed my companions. "Pity left so much at Caribou! D—— d Klondikers! Ho! ho! ho!" Dave, too, seemed to understand the situation, and promptly proceeded to bark out his appreciation; but his exuberance was too noisy, so it was hurriedly checked.

"Get under way, boys," I said, when my henchmen had recovered their equanimity, "for we'll need to look lively before the trail is blotted out." We had not spoken a word about the matter, yet there existed a perfect understanding between us. If anything edible had been left at Caribou Crossing we were determined to commandeer it.

The well-weighted sleigh had made an easily-observable trail; in the dim starlight the twin furrows formed by the runners glittered and shone like the yeasty foam from a ship's propeller. We carefully directed the prow of our snow-ship into these well-padded channels, and with renewed energy forged ahead, thinking longingly of what might await us at Caribou. Soon the shadows on either side of the lake drew nearer and nearer, and the steep, wooded shores of the dreary waterway narrowed inwards, so that the feathery fronds of the stately pine-trees were plainly discernible; we were approaching the entrance to Caribou Crossing. Five minutes later we had passed through the narrow channel—it was barely twenty yards across—and were speeding silently over the deep drifts of snow which were wreathed in giant masses on the surface of the frozen lagoon. The hitherto heavily-marked trail now appeared blurred and indistinct, and the dense forests lining the "crossing" threw a shadow on the track which effectually neutralised the [Pg 64] vague glimmer of the stars, so that we had literally to feel for the deep sleigh channels.

"If I'm spared to come oot o' this, groaned Mac, as he crawled gingerly on all fours across the drifts, "I'll never speak o' ma sufferin's, for naebody could believe what I hae endured."

"I hae traivelled faur," supplemented Stewart, lifting up his voice in pathetic appeal, "but I've never been sae afflicted."

Having now introduced the subject of their woes they proceeded to comfort one another in well-chosen words of sympathy. "You'll suffer a considerable amount more if you don't find the trail soon," I broke in by way of getting their attention more concentrated on the very urgent matter on hand. But Stewart would have one word more:

"I'll mak' a fine moniment tae ye, Mac, ma man," he said with a sigh, adding lugubriously, "puir, puir Mac."

"I'll hae yer life for that, ye deevil," roared that irate gentleman, getting to his feet suddenly, and in consequence floundering to the waist in the chilly wreaths.

Again I essayed to interfere. "Seems to me, boys," I said, "that you'd better reserve your energy ——" A loud bark interrupted my further speech, and Mac immediately bellowed,

"Dave has got the trail; come on, Stewart, an' we'll hae a glorious feast o' Government stores very soon."

I thought he was anticipating over-much, but I took care to say nothing to discourage the pair, who now, side by side, were crawling rapidly over the snow, tracing a new series of markings which led into the heart of the thick foliage on shore. I followed after my comrades with alacrity, but the drifts were very wide and deep, and I sunk to the neck in their icy folds, and was almost frozen before I managed to extricate myself.

"Are you following the trail, boys?" I cried, "or is it a bear track you are tracing up?" They were [Pg 65] too much engrossed in their sleuth-hound operations to notice my inquiry, but as I had reached the shelter of the timber where the snow was but thinly laid, I now groped my way more quickly forward, and overtook the keen-eyed couple as they stopped short and emitted a simultaneous howl of delight.

"Got it! Got it!" they yelled in unison, and Dave made the wooded slopes resound with his deep-mouthed bark.

"Got what?" I interrogated, when opportunity offered, for nothing but absolute blackness surrounded us.

"Licht a match," joyously spoke Mac.

Somewhat mystified I struck a sulphur match and held it aloft, and by its sputtering flame I saw before me a 10 × 12 tent, on the roof of which was painted in huge black letters, "N.W.M.P."

"We certainly have got it," I said with much satisfaction, "and we'll see what's inside without delay."

"Scotland yet!" roared Stewart, in an ecstasy of delight, performing a few steps of the Highland fling as delicately as his heavily-padded moccasins would permit. Mac was more practical; he proceeded to execute what appeared in the gloom to be a solemn ghost dance, but in reality he was searching for the "door" end of the tent.

"Haud yer noise, ye gomeril!" he said shortly, addressing his pirouetting companion, "an' when ye've feenished capering ye'll mebbe get a candle off the sleigh."

The candle was quickly forthcoming, and the flap of the tent discovered; it was laced tightly with long strips of caribou hide, and so was not easily located in the darkness. We were not long in forcing an entry, the board-like canvas was rooted up from the snow where it had frozen fast, several hoary branches were pushed away from the inside wall, then we boldly took possession. [Pg 66]

At first survey our "find" seemed disappointing, the tent was almost empty; only a few very dilapidated-looking sacks were piled within, and the dripping icicles from the ridge gave a most frigid aspect to a dismal enough scene. Mac, however, was not discouraged. "There maun be something for eatin' in they bags," he said cheerfully, which was logic of the clearest nature; then he proceeded to explore their contents, and while thus engaged Stewart gathered together some branches and started a bright blaze at the doorway.

"There's flour in this ane!" announced Mac joyfully, "an' beans in anither!" he supplemented; then his delighted cries were frequent. "We've got a wee thing o' maist everything that's guid," he summed up finally, issuing out into the ruddy glow of the fire, where the billies, filled with rapidly-melting snow, were fizzling away merrily.

The good news affected Stewart visibly. "A'll mak' a gorgeous re-past the nicht, ye deevils," said he, "A'll mak' a rale sumshus feast."

The keen edge of our appetite was dulled as a preliminary by copious draughts of coffee and the remnants of the morning's damper, then operations were begun for the "gorgeous feast." Mac obligingly acted as cook's assistant, and chopped off from the solidified contents of the sacks the requisite amount of flour and other ingredients necessary—and I fear many that were not altogether necessary in the strict sense of the word, for beans, and flour, and rolled oats, and rice did not seem to me to be a correct combination. But I was a novice in these arts and feared to speak, and the manufacture of the "sumshus repast" went on apace.

The night was far advanced, yet for once on the long dreary march from Dawson we were in no hurry to court slumber, although we had travelled over thirty miles that day. I think Stewart sized [Pg 67] up my own thoughts rather clearly when he said, during a lull in his artistic labours, "What fur should we gang awa' early the morn'? It wad be a rael pity tae leave this mag-nificent camp."

"We might wait just a little too long, Stewart," I replied, and visions of an angry captain and his stalwart followers floated unpleasantly before my eyes.

It was near midnight when the gurgling billy was lifted from its perch amid the glowing logs, and Stewart gingerly fished from its interior a round steaming mass, neatly enclosed in an old oatmeal sack and tied at the top. With deft fingers its author undid the wrappings, and lo! a rubicund pudding of cannon-ball-like aspect greeted our expectant visions, and was hailed with loud acclamation.

"Ever see a puddin' like that, Mac?" demanded Stewart, gazing at it tenderly, and his cautious compatriot somewhat sadly replied—

"Only aince, Stewart, an' that wis when we found Gold Bottom Creek, an' ye nearly killed King Jamie o' the Thronducks wi' indegestion."

The compliment was just a trifle vague, and was regarded with suspicion by the prime conspirator, but he said no more, and we attacked the "puddin'" in silence, and with a vigour borne of many days' travel on short rations.

Despite its heterogeneous nature, Stewart's culinary creation proved a veritable triumph to his art; at any rate it quickly disappeared from view, even Dave's share being rather grudgingly given. Never, since we had entered the country, had we fared so well, and when coiled up in our blankets close to the blazing fire, we felt indeed at peace with all mankind—including the police captain. All night long we kept the flames replenished, and dreamily gazed at each other through the curling smoke, for our unusual surfeit had banished sleep from our eyes. And but a few yards [Pg 68] away from the burning logs the air was filled with dancing frost particles that seemed to form a white wall around us, for our thermometer, hung on a branch near by, registered forty-two degrees below zero. The long hours of darkness dragged slowly on, and it was nearly eleven o'clock in the morning before the faint light of day gradually dispelled the murky gloom, yet still we lolled laggard-like by the fire, starvation did not force us on this morning, and we had not rested these last six hundred miles. About noon, however, we decided to get up and have breakfast, and after many abortive attempts we succeeded in unwinding our bodies from the blankets in which they were swathed like Egyptian mummies.

"It wis a gorgeous banquet," ruminated Mac, as he busied himself with the sleigh and made fast thereon various little sacks appropriated from the tent.

"There's nae man," responded Stewart with eloquence, "kin teach me onything aboot cooking—especially puddens."

I now thought it advisable to examine the markings on the snow where the trail had given us so much trouble on the night before. I could not yet understand why a tent and stores should have been left at Caribou Crossing, one of the most gloomy spots throughout the whole course of the Yukon. "Be lively with the breakfast, boys," I said, "for I am inclined to think the climate thirty miles further south will be healthier for us to-night." And I made my way out to the edge of the forest.

I reached the lakeside without difficulty; the keen frost of the preceding hours had given a thick crust to the deep snow-drifts intervening; I then made a careful scrutiny of the various sleigh-runner channels which were plainly evident, and which united at the point where we had to diverge into the wood. A double trail led southward towards Lake Bennet, but a single one only [Pg 69] continued its course to Tagash station. At once the meaning was plain. Two sleighs had started from Bennet station, and the drifts on Caribou proving unduly deterrent, one sleigh load had been temporarily abandoned. I remembered the two teams of dogs in the sleigh we had met. Everything was clear in an instant. "Yes, we'll certainly be healthier in a more southerly latitude

to-night," I said to myself as I turned to go back to my companions. The enticing odour of an unusually appetising breakfast greeted my nostrils, and brought back a feeling of serene contentment. But my happiness was shortlived. I had barely reached the camp fire when I became vaguely conscious of some disturbing element in the air. I listened intently, then faintly sounded the tinkle of sleigh bells in the distance, and now and again the sharp crack of a dog-whip smote the keen air. There was no need to explain matters; even Dave whined knowingly, and backed voluntarily into his harness.

"Jist oor luck," grumbled Stewart, grabbing the cooked bacon and thrusting it into one of the billies.

"It's a blessed thing," quoth Mac, philosophically, "that we had such a magnee——"

"Are you ready, boys?" I interrupted. The bells sounded sharply now, and I could hear the irascible captain cursing on the dogs.

"I'm staunin' by the ingines," grunted Mac.

"There's naething left," said Stewart, "unless we tak' the tent."

"Then full speed ahead," I cried; "we'll camp somewhere near the head of Lake Bennet, to-night."

With a sharp jerk the sleigh bounded forward, keeping the shelter of the timber for the first few hundred yards, then sweeping into the open at the entrance to Lake Bennet, we forced a trail towards Lake Linderman at an unusually rapid rate.

ACROSS THE CHILCOOT PASS

[Pg 70]

The snow was falling in thick, blinding sheets when we reached Lake Linderman, and struggled up the first precipitous climb leading to the dreaded Chilcoot.

A death-like stillness lingered in the valley; the towering mountain peaks enclosing the chain of lakes had formed ample protection from the elements; but soon we ascended into a different atmosphere, where the wind burst upon us with dire force, and dashed the snow in clouds against our faces. In vain we laboured on; my comrades sank at times to their necks in the snow, even the sleigh was half buried in the seething masses, and rolled over continuously. I alone had snow-shoes, and for the first time in the seven hundred miles' trail we had traversed I strapped the long Indian "runners" to my moccasins, and endeavoured to pad a track for the following train, but the attempt proved futile. Two hours after leaving the lake we had barely progressed a mile, and the air was becoming dark and heavy with the increasing fury of the gale, which tossed the white clouds aloft, and showered them over our sorely-tried caravan. Never had we dreamed of encountering such weather. We had come from the silent Klondike valley, where the tempests were hushed by the Frost King, who reigned with iron hand.

At two in the afternoon we reached timber limit, and here a few stunted trees showed their tips above the snow, but beyond the bleak surfaces of Deep and Long Lakes appeared bare and [Pg 71] forbidding, and the loud shriek of the gathering gale warned us to venture no further that day. We hurriedly scooped a hole in the snow, and lined it with our furs; then the sleigh was mounted as a bulwark against the drifts, and we lay down in our strange excavation, exhausted and utterly disheartened. Mac at length broke the silence. "We might have a fire o' some sort," he said, looking round. Very gingerly he and his companion crawled towards the tree-tops, and broke off the tough green branches. After much coaxing the unwilling wood ignited, and we clustered joyfully round the pungent smoke—for there was little else—and endeavoured to infuse some warmth into our frozen bodies. The thick blackness of night was rapidly closing over, and the storm showed no signs of diminishing; so we obtained what timber we could from the tree-tops, and stored it in our shelter to feed the feeble fire through the long dreary night. Then we thawed some snow, and boiled a "billy" of coffee, and the warm fluid helped to sustain us greatly; but still the wind howled and the snow pattered down on our faces with relentless force, and the drifts from the edge of our pit ever and anon deluged us. How we passed that night is beyond description. We huddled near to each other for warmth, while our dog beside us groaned and shivered violently despite all our efforts to protect him from the icy blasts.

Morning at last arrived, but no welcome light appeared; the air continued murky and dense with flying snow. Ten o'clock, eleven, and twelve passed, and we were beginning to despair of getting a start that day. Then the gloom merged into a dull grey haze, and we could distinguish faintly through the driving mists the glacier peaks flanking Long Lake. We had thawed snow and made coffee for breakfast, but notwithstanding that fortification we felt ill-prepared to renew our battle [Pg 72] with the elements.

"We'll make another try, boys," I said, after a brief survey around. "We may reach the summit to-day, but the chances are against it."

Dave was again harnessed to the sleigh, and with three separate ropes attached we straggled forward on different tracks, and pulled as if for dear life. Slowly we forged ahead over Deep Lake, staggering, stumbling, and floundering wildly. Even Dave sank in the yielding track, and his efforts to extricate himself would have been amusing—under different circumstances. As we proceeded the gale increased, and almost hurled us back, and I noted with alarm the heavy gathering clouds that seemed to hang between us and the pass; they spread rapidly, and with

them came fresh blasts that whistled across the white lake surface, and tore it into heaving swells even as we looked. I prayed for light, but the gloom deepened and the snow fell thicker and faster. At length we reached the cañon leading to Crater Lake, and with every nerve strained we fought our way forward literally foot by foot. The snow-wreaths here were of extraordinary depths, and several times my companions would disappear altogether, actually *swimming* again to the surface, for only such a motion would sustain the body on the broken snow.

At three o'clock we had travelled but two and a half miles, and the storm was yet rising. Had we been provided with food our position would not have caused us much alarm, but coffee had been our lot for forty-eight hours, and now raw coffee alone must be our portion, for we were above timber limit, and so could have no fire. Starvation from cold and hunger combined promised to be rather a miserable finish to our labours. The deep breathing of my companions betrayed their sufferings; their weakened frames could ill endure such buffetings. At every other step they [Pg 73] would sink in the vapoury snow, while poor Dave's muffled howls were pitiful to hear.

"We'll have to camp again, boys," I shouted. But where could we camp, and preserve our already freezing bodies? As I have said, we were beyond timber limit; only the dull, drifting snow appeared on every side, and the darkness was quickly hiding even that from view. I relinquished my sleigh rope, and battled forward against the blizzard alone. My snow-shoes skimmed rapidly over the treacherous drifts, but the extreme exertion was too much for me, and I had to come to a halt. The air in such a latitude, and at a 3,500-feet altitude, is keen enough even when there is no blizzard raging. In the few hundred yards I had sped ahead I had left my comrades hopelessly behind; they were blotted from my sight as if by an impenetrable pall. Suddenly, through a cleft in the driving sleet, I caught a glimpse of a blue glistening mass close before me. I remembered that I was in the vicinity of the large glacier at "Happy Camp," but the glacier had evidently "calved," for it was formerly well up the mountain side. I staggered over to it, and felt its glassy sides with interest; then I noticed a great cavity between the giant mass and the mountain-ledge. It was indeed a calved glacier, and in its fall it had formed a truly acceptable place of shelter. I cried loudly to my companions, but only the shriek of the blizzard was my reply. I was afraid to leave my "find" in case I might not discover it again, so I drew my Colt Navy and fired rapidly into the air. The sound seemed dull and insignificant in the howling storm, but a feeble bark near at hand answered back, and through the mists loomed my doughty henchmen with their sleigh-ropes over their shoulders, and crawling on all fours beside the dog. They had been forced to divide their weight over the snow in this strange fashion, and even as it was they sank at [Pg 74] intervals with many a gasp and splutter into the great white depths. "Happy Camp!" I cried.

"This is an end o' us a' noo," Mac wearily groaned, staggering into the ice cavern.

"Happy Camp" was the name derisively applied to the vicinity in the summer. It was then the first halting stage after crossing the pass, and as no timber existed near, no fires could be made, and hence the name. But what it was like at this time, in midwinter, is beyond my powers to describe. Imagine a vast glittering field of ice stretching from the peaks above to the frozen stream below, and a small idea of its miseries as a camping-ground is at once apparent. Yet it was a welcome shelter to us at such a time, and we dragged the sleigh into the dark aperture thankfully, and, wrapping ourselves in our blankets, listened to the moaning of the storm outside. At each great rush of wind the walls of our cave would quiver and crackle, and far overhead a deep rumbling broke at intervals upon our ears. Our glacier home was certainly no safe retreat, for it was gradually, yet surely, moving downwards. My companions recognised their perilous position immediately they heard the well-known grinding sound, but they said nothing—they were evidently of opinion that we were as safe inside as out, and, as Stewart afterwards grimly said, "It would hae been an easier death onywey."

The cold was very intense, and we shivered in the darkness for hours without a word being spoken. To such an extremity had we been reduced that Mac and Stewart assiduously chewed the greasy strips of caribou hide which did duty as moccasin laces, while I endeavoured, but with little success, to swallow some dry coffee. If we could only have a fire, I reasoned, we might live [Pg 75] to see the morning, but without it there seemed little hope.

We had all grown apathetic, and indeed were quite resigned to a horrible fate. I was aroused from a lethargic reverie by the piteous cries of Dave, who remained still harnessed. I patted his great shaggy head, and pulling my sheath-knife, cut the traces that bound him. As I did so my hand came in contact with the sleigh, and at once a new idea flashed over me.

"Get up, boys!" I cried. "We've forgotten that the sleigh will burn."

In an instant they were on their feet. One thought was common to us all—we must have a fire, no matter the cost. Mac lighted a piece of candle, and stuck it on the hard ground. Then he and Stewart attacked the sleigh energetically, and in a few moments the snow-ship that had borne our all for seven hundred miles was reduced to splinters. Eagerly we clustered round as the match was applied, and fanned the laggard flame with our breaths until it burst out cheerily, crackling and glowing, illuminating the trembling walls of the cavern, and causing the crystal roof to scintillate with a hundred varying hues. Sparingly Mac fed the flame; if we could only keep it alive till morning the blizzard might have abated. Piece by piece the wood was applied, and the feeble fire was maintained with anxious care. Hour after hour passed, and still the blizzard howled, and the swirling snow-drifts swept to our feet as we bent over our one frail comfort, and protected the wavering flame from the smothering sleet.

At various times throughout the weary hours I fancied I could hear a faint moaning without our shelter, but the inky blackness of the night obscured all vision, and after aimlessly groping in the snow for some minutes after each alarm, I had to crawl back benumbed and helpless.

"It must have been the wind," said Stewart. [Pg 76]

"There's nae man could cross the pass last night," spoke Mac.

Dave lay coiled up on my blanket apparently fast asleep. The noble animal had had nothing to eat for two days, and I feared he would not wake again. Suddenly, however, he started up, growling hoarsely. The moaning sound again reached our ears, prolonged and plaintive. Then came the sharp whistle of the blizzard, clear, decisive. There could be no mistake. Assuredly some unfortunate was out in the cruel storm. Our four-footed companion struggled to his feet with an effort, and swaying erratically, he rushed from the cave whining dolefully. We gazed at each other in silence; we dreaded the discovery we were about to make.

"Keep the fire alight as a guide to us, Mac," I said, and Stewart and I went out into the storm. And now Dave's deep-mouthed barks penetrated the dense mists, and we crawled towards the cañon in the direction of the sound; but we had not far to go. A few yards from our retreat I felt Dave's furry body at my knees, and then my hand came in contact with a human form half buried in the drifts.

"It's a man, Stewart," I said, and he answered with a groan of sympathy. We extricated the stiff, frozen body from the engulfing snow and dragged it tenderly towards the light we had left; and there, in that miserable spot, we strove to bring back the life that had all but fled.

"We have nothing to gie him," said Mac hopelessly; "an' the fire's gone oot."

"There should be some coffee," I answered, "and the furs and my long boots will burn."

Soon our treasured possessions smouldered and flamed; boots, moccasins, silver-tipped furs—all that we had that would simmer or burn was sacrificed, and a piece of ice from the wall was [Pg 77] thawed and slowly boiled. When the hot fluid was forced between his lips the rescued man opened his eyes and looked around. Soon he had recovered sufficiently to speak a few words. He had ventured across the Chilcoot, despite all warnings from the miners at Sheep Camp. He had wandered over Crater Lake all day, not knowing where the valley lay owing to the dense mists prevailing. "The blizzard has been blowing on the pass for two days," said he; "your light attracted me last night, but I could not reach it." Such was the tale of the poor victim of the pass; he died before morning, despite our struggles to save him, and we felt that we could not survive him long.

No light appeared at ten o'clock, nor was there any promise of the blinding storm abating. Our fire had gone out, and we sat in darkness beside the lifeless body we had saved from the snows.

"We'll make another try, boys," I said. "We may as well go under trying, if it has to be."

Our load was small enough now; the pity was we had not lightened it sooner. I strapped the small mail-bag to my shoulders; my comrades carried all further impedimenta, and, leaving the dead man in his icy vault we staggered into the darkness and forced an erratic track towards the Chilcoot Pass. Crater Lake was reached in two hours; I could only guess we had arrived at it by the evenness of the surface, the air was so dense that objects could not be distinguished even a few feet distant. I tried to fix a bearing by compass, but the attempt was futile, the needle swaying to all points in turn, owing to the magnetic influences around. Then we *felt* for the mountain-side on the left, and staggered over the blast-blown rocks and glaciers along its precipitous steeps.

As we neared the summit the howl of the blizzard increased to a shrill, piercing whistle, but we now were sheltered by the pass, and the fierce blast passed overhead. All this time we forced [Pg 78] onward through a murky gloom with our bodies joined with ropes that we might not lose one another. At three in the afternoon I calculated that we were near the crucial point at which the final ascent can be negotiated, and we left the white shores of Crater Lake and clambered up into the rushing mists where the blizzard shrieked and moaned alternately, and hurled huge blocks of glacier ice and frozen snow down into the Crater valley. The top was reached at last, and no words of mine can describe the inferno that raged on that dread summit. We lay flat on our faces and writhed our way forward through a bubbling, foaming mass of snow and ice. Our bodies were cut and bruised with the flying *débris*, and our clothing was torn to rags. The blizzard had now attained an extraordinary pitch, the mountain seemed to rock and tremble with its fury, and inch by inch we crawled towards the perpendicular declivity leading to the "Scales"—full eight hundred feet of almost sheer descent. Cautiously we manœuvred across the great glacier that rests in the Devil's Cauldron—a cup-shaped hollow in the top of the notorious pass—and at once the blaze of a fire burst before our eyes, illuminating the apparently bottomless depths beyond.

The ice-field on which we lay overhung the rocks to a dangerous degree, and I realised that we must make the descent from some other part of the semicircular ridge. We crept back hurriedly, and as we stood gasping in the "cauldron" before making a *détour* to find a possible trail, a mighty rumbling shook the pass, and we clutched at the snow around, which flew upwards in great geyser-like columns, almost smothering us in its descending showers. The overlapping ice had plunged into the valley, carrying with it hundreds of tons of accumulated snow; we escaped the powerful suction by a few yards only.

On the safe side of the Pass Again.
Mac—Self—Stewart.

When we approached the edge a second time a smooth, unbroken snowsteep marked the trail of the glacier, and to it we consigned ourselves, literally sliding down into the black depths. We were precipitated into an immense wreath of snow covering the scales for over a hundred feet. The fire had been blotted out with the icy deluge, but luckily, as we learned later, the fire-feeders had abandoned their post long before the avalanche had come down. Three hours later we arrived at Sheep Camp, and entered the Mascotte saloon, where the assembled miners were clustered round a huge stove in the centre of the room, listening to the ominous shriek of the gale outside. [Pg 79]

No one dared venture out that night, but in the morning the four days' blizzard had spent itself, and we formed a party to explore the damage done. A light railway that had been laid to the Scales was completely demolished, and half down to Sheep Camp the channel of the Chilcoot River was filled with enormous ice boulders. An avalanche had also fallen on Crater Lake during the night, and when we had painfully climbed the now bare summit the frozen plateau beyond was rent for nearly a mile with enormous gashes over ten feet in width, and the ice cleavage showed down as far as the eye could reach.

[Pg 80]

[Pg 81]

PART II

UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

[Pg 82]

THE FIVE-MILE RUSH

[Pg 83]

It was a very hot day in September when we arrived at Perth, Western Australia, and hastened to put up at the nearest hotel to the station, which happened to bear the common enough title of the "Royal."

We had come up with the mail train from Albany, where the P. & O. steamers then called, and even Westralia's most ardent admirers would hesitate to claim comfort as one of the features of the Colony's railway system. So we arrived, after a long night's misery, dusty and travel-stained. No one attempts to keep clean in the land of "Sand, sin, and sorrow," for the simple reason that, according to the nature of things there, such a luxurious state of æsthetic comfort can never be attained. The streets were sandy, and as a natural sequence the atmosphere was not of ethereal quality. The people were sandy and parched-looking, and we found the interior of the hotel little better than the outside, so far as the presence of the powdery yellow grains was concerned.

In the darkened bedrooms the hum of the festive mosquito was heard, and my companions chuckled at the sound.

"It's a lang time since I heard they deevils," said Mac; then he proceeded, "Noo, oot on the Pampas——"

"D—n the Pampas!" roared Stewart, as he clutched wildly at one of the pests that had been quietly resting on his cheek for full half a minute.

"Ye've pushioned that onfort'nate beast," Mac retorted, with unruffled serenity; "noo, can ye no let the puir thing dee in peace?" [Pg 84]

We remained but a short time in Perth; it is a neatly-laid-out little city with streets running off at right angles to each other, and containing a fair sprinkling of fine buildings, among which may be mentioned the General Post Office and Lands Offices, and they are palatial edifices indeed. The Botanical Gardens are small, yet very pretty; and here, instead of the usual garden loafer, may be found many weary-eyed and parchment-skinned gold-diggers from the "fields," whose one idea of a holiday lies in a visit to Perth or Fremantle, where they stroll about or recline on the artificially-forced grass plots of these towns, and wile the weary hours away.

The Swan River at Perth forms an exquisite piece of scenery, which redeems the environs of the sandy city from utter ugliness. Innumerable black swans swim hither and thither on its placid waters, and by the sloping banks, well fringed with rushes, many notable yachting clubs have their pavilions. There is nothing in this Capital of the Western Colony to attract. Even to the casual observer it is plain that the bustling, Oriental-looking town is essentially a gateway to the goldfields, and little more. Fremantle, on the other hand, is the Port, and chief engineering and commercial centre.

At this period I was, like most erratic travellers, without a definite object in view. In a certain hazy way I thought that we should visit the mining districts at once, as we had done in other and more impracticable countries; yet I was aware that the known Westralian goldfields were by no means so new as the "finds" in North-West Canada, and in consequence the ground might be over-pegged or long since rushed.

"The countrie is big enuff," said Mac when I mentioned my doubts, "an' we'll mebbe find anither Gold Bottom Creek faurer oot than onybody has gaed." [Pg 85]

"We're better diggin' holes, even if they are duffers," spoke Stewart, "than makin' oorsel's meeserable at hame." Which argument in a sense settled the matter, and I forthwith purchased tickets for Kalgoorlie, with the intention of penetrating thence towards the far interior.

It is a weary journey eastward from Perth, and one that cannot be too quickly passed over. The single narrow-gauge line has been laid without any attempt at previous levelling, and the snorting little engine puffs over switchback undulations ceaselessly, at a speed that averages nearly sixteen miles an hour. It is a fortunate circumstance for the fresh enthusiast from "home" that the "Kalgoorlie Mail" leaves Perth in the evening. The discomfort experienced in the midnight ride is bad enough, but he is mercifully spared from viewing the "scenery" along the route, which would assuredly have a most demoralising effect: Western Australia must be taken gradually.

The Coolgardie "rush" may be fresh in the minds of most people. The township now stands almost deserted, bearing little trace of former glory; and yet it is but a few years since the railway was pushed out to this remote settlement. Southern Cross, two hundred miles nearer the coast, was formerly the terminus of all traffic, and the hardy pioneers of Coolgardie daringly ventured on foot from this point, as did also the vast numbers who "followed the finds."

Very insidiously Kalgoorlie has risen to high eminence as a mining centre; it accomplished the eclipse of its sister camp some time ago, and by reason of its deep lodes it is likely to retain its supremacy indefinitely. To the individual miners a new strike or location is considered to be "played out" when limited liability companies begin to appear in their midst, as only in rare cases can fossickers succeed in competition with machinery. However, the flat sand formations around Kalgoorlie have proved one of the exceptions to this rule, and the alluvial digger may still sink his [Pg 86]

shallow shaft here with every hope of success, and even in the proved "deep" country surface indications are abundant.

When my little party stepped from the train at Kalgoorlie, we saw before us a scattered array of wooden and galvanised-iron houses, white-painted, and glistening dully in the sunlight through an extremely murky atmosphere. On closer acquaintance the heterogeneous erections resolved themselves into a wide principal thoroughfare, aptly named Hannan's Street, after the honoured prospector of the Camp's main reef, and a number of side paths that bore titles so imposing that my memory at once reverted to the fanciful names distinguishing the crude log shanties of Dawson, where there were: Yukon Avenue, Arctic Mansions, Arcadian Drive, and Eldorado Terrace. Here, in keeping with the latitude of the city, more salubrious, if equally fantastic, were the various designations of the alleys and byways.

In the near distance we could see the towering tappet heads of the widely-known Great Boulder mine, and the din created by the revolving hammers of the ever-active stamping machinery assailed our ears as an indescribable uproar. But beyond the dust and smoke of these Nature-combating engines of civilisation, the open desert, dotted with its stunted mulga and mallee growths, shimmered back into the horizon. Here and there a dump or mullock heap showed where the alluvial miner had staked his claim, but for the most part the landscape was unbroken by any sign of habitation.

"There's a lot of room in this country, boys," I said, as we stood unobserved in the middle of the street and took in the scene. [Pg 87]

"It's a deevil o' a funny place," Mac ventured doubtfully.

"It's a rale bonnie place," reproved Stewart, whom the inexpressible gloom peculiar to the interior country had not yet affected. "I'm thinkin'," he continued, with asperity, "that ane or twa men o' pairts like oorsel's were jist needed at this corner o' the warld."

"In ony case," Mac now agreed, "it's better than being meeserable at hame."

Instead of seeking the hospitality of one of the numerous hotels close by, we decided to begin our campaign in earnest right away, and get under canvas as a proper commencement. So we prospected around for a good camping site, and that same night we slept in our tent, erected about a mile distant from the township.

There was no water in our vicinity, and next morning Stewart set out with two newly-purchased water-bags to obtain three gallons of the very precious fluid at a condensing establishment we had noticed on the previous night, where, at sixpence a gallon, a tepid brackish liquid was sparingly dispensed. It should be understood that water, in most parts of Western Australia, is more difficult to locate than gold, and when obtained it is usually as a dense solution, salt as the sea, and impregnated with multitudinous foreign elements extremely difficult to precipitate.

"There's aye something tae contend wi' in furrin countries," Mac philosophised, as he leisurely proceeded to build a fire for cooking operations. "In Alaska there wis snaw, an' Chilkoots, an' mony ither trifles; bit here there's naething much objeckshunable let alane the sand an' want o' watter."

I agreed with him if only for the sake of avoiding an argument. "There may be a few—insects along with the sand, Mac," I hazarded cheerfully, and then I went into the tent to arrange the breakfast utensils. [Pg 88]

"Insecks!" cried he derisively after me. "Wha cares fur insecks, I shid like tae ken? What herm is there in a wheen innocent muskitties, fur instance? Insecks! Humph!"

The absurdity of my remark seemed to tickle him vastly, and as he broke the eucalyptus twigs preparatory to setting a match to the pile he had collected, he continued to chuckle audibly. Then suddenly there was silence, a silence so strange that I felt impelled to look out of the tent and see what had happened; but before I had time to set down the tinware cups I held in my hands, his voice broke out afresh. "Insecks!" I heard him mutter. "Noo A wunner——; bit no, that canna be, fur snakes hiv'na got feet, an' this deevil's weel supplied i' that direction. It's a bonnie beast, too. I wunner if it bites?" I gathered from these remarks that the valiant Mac had made the acquaintance of some unknown species of "insect" with which he was unduly interested. "If it's an inseck," came the voice again, "this countrie maun be an ex-tra-ord'nar'—— Haud aff! ye deevil. Haud off! I tell ye." I hastened outside just in time to see my companion ruthlessly slaughter a large-sized centipede, which had evidently refused to be propitiated by his advances.

"It's a vera re-markable thing," said he, looking up with a perfectly grave countenance, "hoo they—insecks—persist in bringin' destruckshun on themsel's. I wis just pokin' this onfort'nate beast wi' a stick—in a freen'ly wey, ye ken—an' the deevil made a rin at me, wi' malishus intent, I'm thinkin', an' noo he's peyed the penalty o' his misguided ackshun."

STEWART PREPARING OUR FIRST MEAL.

"In future, Mac," I warned, "you'd better not attempt to get on friendly terms with these—insects; a bite from a centipede might kill you." [Pg 89]

"I'll gie ye best about the insecks," he returned thoughtfully, applying a match to the pile, "bit ye'll admit," he added, after some moments' pause, "that it's maist ex-tra-ord'nar' tae see insecks o' sich onnaitural descripshun rinnin' aboot on the face o' the earth."

I fully concurred, much to his satisfaction, and just then Stewart arrived, perspiring under his watery load.

"Dae ye mean tae tell me," howled the new-comer, addressing no one in particular, "that ye hiv'na got the fire ken'l'd yet?"

"Ca' canny, Stewart, ca' canny," sternly admonished the guilty one. "There's been a narrow escape here, ma man, a verra narrow escape."

Stewart's ruddy face blanched slightly, then slowly regained its colour when the slain centipede was pointed out. "Ye've raelly had a providenshul escape, Mac," said he. "Noo, staun aside an' let me get on wi' the cookin'."

Our first breakfast in camp was an unqualified success; it was not a very elegant repast, certainly, but the traveller must learn to forego all luxuries and enjoy rough fare, and we had already served our apprenticeship in that direction. Stewart, however, had lost none of his art in matters culinary, and, as he himself averred, could cook "onything frae a muskittie tae an Injun," so we had every reason to be contented.

"If we wur only camped aside a second Gold Bottom!" sighed Mac, getting his pipe into working order.

"It's a bonnie countrie," mused his companion, "wi' a bonnie blue sky abune, an' what mair could a man want?"

"I think we have had no cause to complain, so far, boys," was my addition to the conversation, "and I'll go into the township in an hour or so and make investigations as to the latest strikes. To-morrow we may make a definite camp." [Pg 90]

And so the early day passed while we rested and smoked, and recalled our grim experiences in the land of snows.

"It's mebbe wrang tae mak' compairisons," grunted Mac, "bit gie me the sunshine an' the floo'ers ——"

"An' the centipedes!" Stewart slyly interpolated.

"D—n centipedes!" roared Mac; then he recovered himself. "Mak' nae mair allushuns, ma man," said he with dignity. "An' hoo daur ye spile ma poetic inspirashun?"

The sun was now well overhead and shooting down intense burning rays; the sky was cloudless, and not a breath stirred the branches of the dwarfed eucalyptii on the plains.

"It's a g-glorious day," murmured Stewart, mopping his perspiring forehead.

Mac chuckled: "Wait till ye see some o' the insecks the sun'll bring out," said he, "ye'll be fairly bamfoozled."

At this moment I was surprised to notice a man, armed with pick and shovel, approaching rapidly in our direction. As he came near I saw that he bore, strapped to his shoulders, a bundle of wooden pegs which had evidently been hastily cut from the outlying timber. "Some energetic individual thinks we have made a find at this camp," I thought; but I was mistaken. The stranger

made as if to pass a good way off our tent; then he hesitated, looked back, apprehensively, it seemed to me, and came quickly towards us.

"What in thunder does yer mean by campin' here, mates?" he demanded hurriedly, grounding his shovel impatiently and letting his eyes roam in an unseeing manner over the surrounding country.

I had barely time to explain that ours was only a temporary camp, when, without a word, he [Pg 91] shouldered his shovel and sped onwards into the brush.

"Maist onmainnerly behaviour," Mac snorted wrathfully. "Noo, if I meet that man again, I'll——" He stopped suddenly. "Ho, ho!" he chuckled, "there's mair o' them comin'; I begin tae smell a rat." We now observed what had caused the sudden flight of our visitor. Rushing from every shanty near the township, and issuing from the main street in a chaotic mass, a perfect sea of men bearing axes and picks and shovels came surging down on us. As we looked the fleeter members of the "rush" forged quickly ahead, so that the spectacle soon appeared as a medley army advancing desperately at the double in Indian file.

There was no need to be in ignorance as to what it meant; we had seen the same thing often enough in Alaska when strikes on the Upper Klondike were frequent.

"Get the tent down, boys," I said, "and follow on when you're ready. I'll represent this camp and see that it is not last on the programme." Even before I had finished speaking, my companions were tugging wildly at the guy ropes, and loosening the wall pegs of the tent.

"We'll no be faur ahint," growled Mac from beneath the canvas folds which in his zeal he had brought down upon himself.

"Ye shid let me gang first," grumbled Stewart, "fur ye ken weel that I can sprint wi' ony man."

I seized an axe and shovel and awaited the approach of the van-leader of the struggling line of humanity, who was fast drawing near: not knowing the destination of the rush, it was necessary that I should follow some one who did. I had not long to wait. A lean, lanky true son of the bush, with nether garments held in position by an old cartridge belt, burst through the brushwood a few yards wide of us. His leathery face showed not the slightest trace of emotion, and though the [Pg 92] heat was sweltering not a drop of perspiration beaded on his forehead. Heaven knows how often he may have taken part in a rush and been disappointed.

"Mornin', boys," he said genially. "Fust-class exercise, this," and he passed at a regular swinging pace, with eyes fixed straight ahead, steering a direct course.

"He gangs like clockwork," said Mac admiringly, gazing after him; "bit haud on. What's this comin'?"

The second runner was now coming forward at a rate that was rapidly annihilating distance; he had passed the bulk of the others since he had joined the race, and I had been much interested in watching his progress.

"Guid Lor'," ejaculated Stewart, stopping in his work of rolling up the tent, and gazing at the approaching runner in dismay. "Did ye ever see onything like that in a' yer born days?"

There was ample excuse for his astonishment. The fleeing figure was hatless, and otherwise ludicrously garbed—for Westralia. What Stewart called a "lang-tailie coat" spread out behind him like streamers in a breeze, a "biled" collar had, in the same gentleman's terse language, "burst its moorings" and projected in two miniature wings at the back of his ears, and a shirt that had once been white, bosomed out expansively through an open vest. Yet, notwithstanding his cumbrous habiliments, he had well outdistanced his nearest "hanger-on," and it was plain that the wiry sandgroper still in front would have to screw on more speed if he meant to keep his lead long.

With lengthy strides the strangely-garbed runner shot past; in his hand he gripped a spade, which tended to make his appearance the more wonderful, but that he meant business was very evident.

"Fur Heaven's sake, pit aff the coat!" howled Stewart, and Mac toned down the impertinence of [Pg 93] the remark by adding stentoriously—

"Ye'll rin lichter withoot it, ma man."

The individual addressed slowed up at once. "Thanks for the idea, boys," said he good-naturedly, and he promptly discarded the objectionable emblem of civilised parts and threw it carelessly into a mulga bush. Then noting that he was a good way in advance of the main army, he mopped his streaming face and gave the information, "There's been a big strike at the Five Mile, boys, wherever that may be. I am letting the first man steer the way on purpose."

"Ye're a daisy tae rin," admiringly spoke Mac, seizing the tent and a packet of miscellaneous merchandise, while Stewart feverishly gathered up the remainder of our meagre belongings. He of the "biled shirt" now set down to work again, making a pace which I, who had joined in the chase, found hard indeed to emulate; and my companions, heavily laden as they were, hung into our rear like leeches.

Far behind we could hear the sand crunch under hundreds of feet, and the mallee shrubs crackling and breaking, but hardly a word was spoken. Mile after mile we crashed through the endless brush and over the monotonous iron-shot plains. Mac puffed and blowed like some huge grampus, and Stewart's deep breathing sounded like the exhaust expirations of an overworked steam engine.

"Keep her gaun, Mac; keep her gaun," this personage would splutter when his more portly comrade showed signs of flagging, which well he might, considering that he clutched in his arms a weight of nearly forty pounds.

"Wha's stoppin'? ye inseegneeficant broken-winded donkey engine!" retorted his aggravated compatriot, rolling along manfully. [Pg 94]

But the race was nearly over. Half a mile further on the land dipped ever so slightly, and in the gentle hollow formed about a dozen men rushed madly about, pacing off prospectors' claims, and driving rude pegs at the boundary corners.

The sight had an exhilarating effect on Mac and Stewart, and with wild shouts they quickly drew up the little distance they had lost, and would have passed my white-shirted pacemaker and myself were we not compelled for very shame to keep our lead if we died for it.

"By Jove!" panted he of the strange garments, "these beggars behind can run."

And Mac at his heels chivalrously grunted between his breaths, "I've never had a harder tussle tae keep up ma deegnity—no never."

A few minutes more, and we reached the field of operations. The men there were too busy marking off their properties to give us much attention. I noticed swiftly that our first visitor of the few words had his claim neatly pegged, and was sitting in the middle of it, complacently smoking. He must have received special information of the find or he could not have got away so much before the others. Our second passing acquaintance—he of the emotionless countenance who had steered our quartet unknowingly—had got in a hundred yards ahead of us, and he was now coolly cutting pegs with which to mark his chosen area.

"It's a deep alluvial leader, mate," he said to me. Then he added obligingly, "I guess I knows the lie of the kintry, an' if ye hitch on at the end o' my boundaries, ye'll likely sink on it, plumb."

The advice of an experienced miner should always be accepted; and while Mac and Stewart were felling several small trees for use as marking-posts, I proceeded to line off the direction of our claim as suggested by the angle of my adviser's corner channels. I performed this work with much care, knowing how slim are one's chances of holding any gold-bearing area at a rush unless the holder's title is beyond dispute according to official regulations. [Pg 95]

The straggling body of men was now beginning to appear on the crest of the undulation which marked the only visible natural boundary of the valley; in less than three minutes the madly-striving crowd would be upon us, and we should be assuredly swamped by its numbers so that no pegs could be driven. Then I noticed the man who had doffed his fashionable coat to oblige Stewart, standing dejectedly near by; his sleeves were rolled up, displaying splendidly-formed muscles, and he held his shovel loosely in his hand as if uncertain what to do with it.

"Better get your pegs fixed quickly," I advised.

But he shook his head rather sadly. "I haven't got an axe," he said, "and—and I'm new to this sort of thing."

Mac had by this time obtained the four blazed posts necessary to denote our "three-men square," and Stewart promptly began to smite them into position in their proper places.

"If ye'll alloo me," said Mac, "I'll get the bitties o' sticks fur ye; I'd be vera sorry tae a bonnie rinner like you left in the cauld."

But there was no time now.

"Shift out our posts instead, Mac," I instructed, "we'll make a four-men lot of it and divide afterwards."

Our white-shirted associate looked at me gratefully, and held out his hand. "My name is Philip Morris," he said. "I am an Englishman, just out from the old country."

A swaying mob of perspiring and fiery-eyed men of all nationalities now flooded the valley as a tumultuous sea of humanity, and scattered in twos and fours throughout its entire length. [Pg 96]

"You've struck a circus for a start, Morris," I said. "I think we'll all remember the Five-Mile Rush."

SINKING FOR GOLD [Pg 97]

Next morning the Five-Mile Flat was the scene of extraordinary activity. Tents sprung up like mushrooms in all directions, and the thud, thud of picks sounded incessantly. It was almost pitiful to witness the feverish eagerness with which most of the diggers tried to bottom on their claims. The depth of the Lead at Discovery shaft was given out to be only forty feet, but the strata encountered before that level was reached had been of a flinty impervious nature, necessitating the use of much giant powder.

At least the original prospectors, who were camped near to us, gave me that information in a fit of generosity when they learned that I had some little experience of geological formations. They even allowed me to descend their shaft—most unheard-of thing—and compute the angle and dip of the lode for the benefit of the general assembly; a privilege which was duly appreciated, as it enabled me to calculate the proper position in our own claim at which to sink. The lode, so called,

proved to be an auriferous wash, or alluvial gutter, the bed of an extremely ancient watercourse, probably silted up long before the time of the Pharaohs.

Our newly-acquired companion, who had already won the good graces of both Mac and Stewart, astonished me greatly, while I was expounding my theories on these matters for his special edification, by making several courteous corrections to my statements, so that I was forced to [Pg 98] tread more cautiously; and when I had finished, he capped my argument with a lucid technical discourse and much scientific addenda.

"You certainly know a fair-sized amount for an inexperienced man," I said, with some irritation; but he hastened to explain.

"My knowledge is purely theoretical," he replied. "Perhaps I should not have spoken."

His admirable good sense appealed to Mac's idea of fairness. "I'm thinkin'," began that gentleman, gazing at me reproachfully, "I'm thinkin' that oor freen Phil-ip is a vera modest man, a vera modest man indeed."

"I'm o' the opeenion," cried Stewart, from the interior of the tent, "that if he keeps awa' frae tailie coats, and dresses rashunal, he'll be a rale orniment tae ony camp."

The young man was much moved by these expressions of good-will; but when I asked him to mark off his allotment on our too large mining territory, he stubbornly refused. "If it had not been for your kindness I should have no claim to any corner of the ground," he said.

I explained, however, that Mac, Stewart, and myself would not be allowed by law to possess a four-men holding, and therefore there was no kindness on my part in giving him back his own. Yet still he hesitated.

"I am all alone, boys," he said at last, "and I don't think I could do much damage to the ground by myself. Might I come in with you?"

This was a *dénoûement* I had not anticipated, though in some unaccountable manner I felt drawn to the stranger; still, the vision of his coat-tails fluttering in the wind could not be dispelled.

"What do you say, Mac?" I asked, expecting a gruff rejoinder in the negative; but the answer agreeably surprised me.

"Discovery" Shaft—on Gold.

"He's a man o' pairts like oorsel's, a modest man, an' a golologist forbye," replied Mac, [Pg 99] grandiloquently; "it wud be sinfu' tae refuse him oor guid company."

Then Stewart, who had been paying great attention, rushed from the tent and added his testimony. "Tailie coat or no tailie coat," he shouted, "he's a guid man, as I kin testeefy, an' me an' Mac'll be prood tae hae him wi' us. Forbye," he continued, "he's a Breetisher, an' tho' he isna Scotch, me an' Mac'll look ower that fau't wi' muckle tolerashun."

"I wis aboot tae re-mark——" began Mac, but Stewart had not completed his peroration.

"Haud yer tongue, Mac," said he sternly; "ye ken weel yer nae speaker like me." Then he resumed the flow of his eloquence: "An' noo," he said, "on behauf o' Mac—wha is a man o' disteenction tho' he disna look it—an' in conformeety wi' ma ain incleenations, I hae pleesure in signifyin' oor muckle approval o' yer qualities."

The candidate for admission to our illustrious company looked gratified, as well he might, and straightening his tall form he endeavoured to make suitable reply to the expectant couple.

"Gentlemen!" said he, and at the word Mac hitched up his nether garments and looked solemn, while Stewart coughed discreetly. "Gentlemen," repeated "tailie coat" in a voice that seemed to issue from his boots, "it is with considerable feeling of elation that I have heard your extemporaneous——"

"Haud on!" howled Mac in horror; "ye'll dae, ma man, ye'll dae. Come on, Stewart." And as they walked sorrowfully apart Stewart's voice floated back plaintively,

"Noo, Mac, hoo am I gaun tae keep up oor digneety efter that—ex-tem-por-anee——! He's deceived us, Mac; he's a lamb in sheep's ooter gairments, he is."

"Well, Phil," I said, when they had disappeared within the tent, "I think we'll get along all right." [Pg 100]

"I feel at home already," he replied, looking towards the tent in grim amusement, "and enthusiastic enough to swing a pick with either Mac or Stewart, and that means much, I think."

"It does," I agreed with significance, and we went off to mark the site of our prospective shaft.

It was nearly midday before we commenced to excavate the ground, and by that time most of the miners around had penetrated several feet of the top sandy formation in their various claims. But haste is not always advisable under such circumstances, and I preferred to make as sure as possible of the lode's position within our pegs before sinking, and so obviate any necessity for laborious "driving" when bedrock was reached. We were fortunately in the "shallowest" ground, being within a hundred yards of the forty-feet level strike, which meant, judging by the dip or inclination of the auriferous wash, that we should probably find bottom about fifty feet down. As for the numbers below us, they might have to sink over a hundred feet, and even then miss the golden leader, so elusive are these subterranean channels.

The usual size of prospectors' shafts on any goldfield is five feet six inches long, by two feet six inches wide, and this just permits of sufficient room for one man to wield a pick. The aim of every miner on an unproved field is to get down to bedrock with the least possible labour, which is also the speediest method. A shaft can be widened afterwards when it has been found worth while, but it is always well to refrain from shovelling out two or three tons of granite-like substance, as is done by most "new chums," merely for the sake of having more elbow-room during the trying process of sinking.

After our experience with the frozen gravel at Klondike, it almost seemed like child's play to dig [Pg 101] out the comparatively loose sand conglomeration which formed the topmost layer in the line of our descent. There was no fire-burning necessary here, but Nature, nevertheless, had made the balance even, for the auriferous levels in Alaska were rarely half as deep as even the shallow gutter we were now searching for. And again, in frozen ground the surface formations are naturally the hardest, whereas in most other workings that order is reversed.

"It's a pleesure tae work i' this grund," was Mac's statement, when, after scarcely two hours' labour, he stood nearly waist deep in the new shaft. With much foresight, that wily individual had volunteered to sink the first few feet alone. "I'm just burstin' wi' surplush energy," he explained to Stewart, "an' you can dae twa or three fit o' the easy stuff when I'm feenished."

"It's rale conseederate o' ye, Mac," said Stewart feelingly, with thoughts on the nature of things at Skookum Gulch, and he went inside the tent to try if anything edible could be gathered together for lunch, a matter on which he said he had "graive doots."

Our new comrade, whom we had already begun to address as "Phil," quickly showed himself to be a very worthy addition to our party. After exploring the scrub for timber suitable for banking-up purposes, and drawing back a goodly load, he politely insisted on Mac taking a spell while he swung the pick. "I can see," he said diplomatically, "that you would soon work yourself to death out of sheer consideration for others."

"Dae ye think sae?" grunted he in the shaft cautiously, pausing in his labours.

"I do, indeed," reiterated Phil with much earnestness.

Then Mac laid down his weapon, and leaning back lazily in his excavation made further circuitous inquiry. "Ye've never dug holes afore, Phil?" said he; and receiving a negative answer, he [Pg 102] supplemented, "An' ye ken that ironstane is a wee bit—weel, I'll say solid?"

"Yes, I can understand that much," admitted Phil wonderingly.

"Weel," continued Mac, lowering his voice, "I've come on a bed o' it the noo, an' I'm jist makin' the tap o't clean an' tidy fur Stewart when he comes. He thinks he can equal me at onything, an' I've got tae check that fause impreshun. Dae ye savy?"

"Mac," said Phil with decision, "he'll be a smart man that gets the better of you."

"I've traivelled a bit," returned the schemer shortly, "an' Stewart's sometimes ill tae pit up wi'. I'll gie ye a bonnie saft bit tae practeese on efterwards," he added after a pause.

A little later Stewart announced that he had got some rice and "tinned dog" cooked. "I houp ye'll excuse the rice," said he, "it's a bit podgy, fur there wis vera little watter tae bile it in."

"Ye're looking rale worried-like, Stewart," said Mac sympathetically, as he gulped down his portion of the roasted grains. "It's exerceese ye're needin', I'm thinkin'."

"Mebbe it is," sighed Stewart dolorously.

"Weel," spoke Mac again, "ye can try an' wear doon the shaft a bit in the efternoon, an' me an' Phil 'll gang into the city an' get some tasty bits o' provisions. I'm vera concerned aboot ye, ma man."

It was indeed very necessary that we should obtain supplies without delay, for our stores consisted only of the remnants carried so hurriedly from our previous camp. Already, the first flush of excitement having died away, representatives from the different claims were hurrying towards the township on a similar mission. Enthusiasm and an empty stomach seldom agree. But [Pg 103] here a difficulty arose. Phil's wardrobe was painfully small; his once spotless shirt was now yellow with sand, and almost torn into shreds, and the rest of his limited apparel was in such a state of disrepair, owing to his scramble through the brush, that, as Mac said, he looked "hardly respeectable."

"Ye can hae ma jecket," said Stewart magnanimously, "seein' that it wis on ma account ye pit aff the tailie coat."

Phil accepted the offer promptly. "There's a wonderful change in my appearance since I left the Old Country a few short weeks ago," said he, surveying his dilapidated garb ruefully.

"I shid think sae," grinned Mac. "It wud be a rale treat tae see ye walk doon Peecadeely in they claes." And they departed.

"Dae ye tell me that Mac has gaun doon five fit?" asked Stewart, when we were alone.

"I believe he has," I replied, "but in this country it is easy to dig near the surface where the sand has not even solidified."

"Easy or no' easy," responded Stewart impressively, baring his strong right arm, "what Mac can dae, I'll dae. Wha pu'd harder than I did gaun tae Klonduk?" he demanded, making a digression, but I waived the question.

"Let me know when you have had enough of the shaft," I said, "and I'll relieve you."

"Umph!" he grunted, ignoring my remark in turn, "Five feet! Whaur's the pick?" And he strode off to emulate his comrade's achievement.

A few moments later a series of sharp metallic echoes issued from the shaft mouth, intimating that Stewart had attacked a hard unyielding substance. Then, not wishing to be present when he [Pg 104] desisted from his labours, I made my way stealthily to the adjoining claim and entered into conversation with its owner; but still the unsympathetic ring of steel meeting some kindred element reached my ears, and I sorrowed for the unfortunate Stewart right deeply.

The wiry sandgroper whom I interviewed was not one of the bustling kind. I found him enjoying a siesta under the scant shade of the solitary mulga bush on his domain, and scaring the numberless flies away by his vigorous snores. It was almost impossible to realise that he was the valiant runner of the day before. "Mornin', mate," said he, rubbing his eyes, after I had hustled him gently. It was late afternoon, but that was a small matter, and I did not trouble to correct him; and we talked together on mining subjects for about an hour.

"I ain't wan o' them cusses," he said, "that tries to git disappinted early. My tactics is: git thar in the fust place—at which you'll allow I is no slouch, nuther?" I made the necessary allowance, and he proceeded. "In the second place, thar ain't no call to be desp'rit'ly excited; thishyer life won't change worse'n a muskitter whether we does git to bottom on a spec. three or four days sooner or later." I ventured to remark that his reasonings did him credit. "I does philosophise a bit, mate," he agreed languidly. Then there followed a long silence, during which I missed the regular thuds of Stewart's pick, and wondered where that persistent gentleman had gone.

Suddenly a noise as of thunder startled me; it was succeeded by an explosion that shook the ground under our feet. "By the Great Howlin' Billy!" ejaculated my leather-skinned companion, "somebody's fired your shaft." I looked in time to see great boulders of jagged ironstone, and a dense volume of sand, hurled from the mouth of the narrow pit where Stewart had been working. [Pg 105]

Filled with a vague fear I rushed to the scene of the disturbance, where the sand-clouds were fast settling, and just as I arrived I beheld Stewart calmly coming out towards me from behind Phil's timber pile, where he had been sheltered. My surprise was so great that for the moment speech failed me, and I looked vacantly at the shaft and at my companion in turn. Then he took pity on me, and condescended to explain.

"It's a' richt. I'm nae pheenix," he announced cheerfully, and he led me to the mouth of the shaft, which no longer retained its oblong contour, but was ragged and rent with the upheaval. "I wis lookin' fur ye aboot an hour since," he continued further, "tae get yer opeenion concernin' a sort o' irin furmashun what wis gi'en me sair trouble, bit as I could'na see ye, I kent ye could rely on ma guid jidgement tae dae what I thocht best——"

"But I was not aware that we had any gelignite or giant powder in our possession," I interrupted.

"Nae mair we had," said he, "bit I kept ane or twa extra speecial cartreedges what we used fur burstin' glashiers oot in Alaskie—as samples, ye ken—an' I pit them a' in. They've made a vera bonnie hole," he wound up; "that's the best o' they labour-savin' devices."

On examination it was found that the ironstone bar had been completely shattered, and little trouble was experienced in removing the remaining fragments. The cavity wherein it had rested was fully five feet deep, so that Mac's plot for outwitting his rival had proved a signal failure.

It was six o'clock when we descried Mac and Phil returning from Kalgoorlie, laden with stores;

darkness was rapidly closing over the valley, so that their forms could not be distinguished until they were quite close. Then Stewart uttered a howl of rage. "They've brocht back the tailie coat," [Pg 106] he cried feebly, and in strutted Mac, wearing not only that hateful garment, but also having perched on his head at a rakish tilt a highly-burnished silk hat.

"We fund the hat a wee bit faurer on than the coatie," said he, doffing his glossy headgear and gazing at it admiringly.

"If ye've ony regaird fur ma feelin's, ye'll pit them baith awa' at aince," Stewart implored, much affected.

His compatriot gazed at him commiseratingly. "Ye've been workin' ow'er hard the day, ma man," said he, "yer nerves are in a gey bad state, I'm thinkin'. Hoosomever," he added sternly after brief thought, "it's ongratefu' on your pairt tae despise the gairment, fur I promised Phil that ye shid hae it, purvided ye had sunk aboot three feet the day. Which," he climaxed, nonchalantly, "I hae nae doot ye hae dune?"

Stewart beamed. "I apologeese, Mac," he said, "noo gie me the coatie."

"Hoo muckle hae ye sunk?" demanded the generous giver, much taken aback.

"Full five feet," came the smiling answer. "Mac, ma vera dear freen, ye've made a ser'us mistak' this time."

Mac stood as if transfixed, gazing appealingly at Phil, who seemed equally amazed; then he turned without a word and rushed out to the shaft. When he came back a moment later, he stripped off the coat and handed it to Stewart. "I'm prood o' ye, ma man," he said with an effort; "ye're an indiveedual o' muckle strategy."

Then Phil joined in with commendable tact. "You've still got the hat, Mac," laughed he, "it's a fair divide."

STEWART FINDS THE GROUND HARD.

WE "STRIKE" GOLD

[Pg 107]

For over a week sinking operations on the Five-Mile Flat were continued with unabated vigour, and then a hush of expectation seemed to fall over the community, for the miners in the shallow ground at the head of the lead were nearing bottom, and the vast array who had pegged along the supposed course of the auriferous wash ceased their labours and waited in tremulous eagerness for reports from Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, below Discovery. There was good reason for anxiety. If these claims bottomed on pipe-clay deposits or other barren clayey formations, little hope could be entertained for those who had followed their line of guidance. The direction of the golden channel certainly could not be ascertained by judging the lie of the country on the surface, for it was almost absolutely flat, and bore not the slightest resemblance to the original country far beneath. Practical tracing from claim to claim was the only method by which a miner could safely calculate, and that meant that those a little way off the first proved shaft, and all following claim-holders, must either be possessed of a vast amount of hope and energy or an

equal amount of patience. It is not unusual, also, to find a deep lead suddenly "fizzle" out with little warning; and again, it seldom fails to create consternation and disappointment at an anxious time by shooting off at right angles, or diverging into numerous infinitesimal leaderettes. [Pg 108]

So it was that when the first flush of excitement had died away attention was turned to those claims mentioned, and for the time all work was suspended. We, at No. 7, were still several feet above the level at which we had calculated to find bottom. Since Stewart so peremptorily burst out the ironstone bar we had encountered nothing but a series of sand formations, which we managed to crash through at the rate of five feet each day, and now our shaft measured fully forty-one feet in depth.

My companions worked like Trojans in their efforts to reach gold-paying gravel before their neighbours. Neither Stewart nor Mac had the slightest fear of our shaft proving a duffer, and their extreme confidence was so infecting that Phil forswore many of his pet geological theories in order to fall into line with their ideas. "After all," he said to me, "geological rules seem to be flatly contradicted by the arrangement of the formations here, and only the old adage holds good, that an ounce of practice is worth a ton of theory."

"It looks that way," I answered, "yet I do not like the look of these enormous bodies of sandstone. If I were to go by my experience in other countries, I should promptly forsake this ground and look for more promising tracts."

We were standing by the windlass pulling up the heavy buckets of conglomerate material which Mac was picking below with much gusto. The glare of the sun reached barely half-way down the shaft, and the solitary worker was beyond our gaze, but well within hearing, nevertheless, for his voice rumbled up from the depths in strong protest.

"I'll no hae mae idees corrupted wi' sich fulish argiment. Naitur has wyes o' her ain, an' whaur golologists think gold is, ye may be sure there's nane; bit whaur it raelly is, there ignorant [Pg 109] golologists insist it insna. There's nae pleasin' some fouk."

We kept silence, and, after waiting vainly for our comment, Mac again attacked the solid sandstone with sullen ferocity.

The air was close and sultry, and the dumps thrown up from the many shafts around glistened in the intense light and crumbled off into the heat haze as filmy clouds of dust. The entire landscape seemed as a biographic picture, and affected the eyes in similar degree. It was a typical Westralian day. Thud! thud! went Mac's pick, and now and then came a grunt of annoyance from that perspiring individual as an unusually refractory substance would temporarily defy his strength.

We leaned against the windlass barrel, awaiting his call of "Bucket!" which would intimate that further material was accumulated below, and ready for discharge into the outer air. Few men were about, unless at No. 2 shaft, where there was much activity. On the adjoining lot our friend of the leathery skin—who rejoiced in the title of "Emu Bill"—dozed under the shade of a rudely-erected wigwam.

"It's a bit warm," ventured Phil. He was not quite sure of his ground, and did not wish to exaggerate.

"It's d—d hot!" rolled a well-known voice from the depths, and Stewart within the tent sang gaily an adaption from "Greenland's icy mountains."

When quiet was restored I looked again towards No. 2, and at that moment a red handkerchief fluttered to the top of a tiny flagpole surmounting the windlass, and hung limp. A moment later a long, hoarse cheer swept the flat from end to end, and, as if by magic, each claim appeared fully manned, and a sea of faces turned in our direction. No. 2 had signalled, "On Gold."

"Staun by the windlass! I'm comin' up!" roared Mac, who had vaguely heard the sound-waves [Pg 110] pass overhead and was wondering what had happened.

"Gold struck on No. 2, Mac!" I shouted, and Phil, who had not quite understood, staggered in amazement, loosening with his feet a quantity of sand and rubble which descended with much force on Mac's upturned face, and interrupted a second passionate appeal to "Staun by the windlass!"

"I'll hae yer life fur that, ye deevil!" he spluttered. "Ye did it on purpose."

Then Stewart came upon the scene in great haste. "I tell't ye sae! I tell't ye sae!" he cried, and for the especial benefit of his isolated companion he bellowed down, "They've got gold at number twa, Mac! Oceans o't!"

Mac was then half-way to the surface, with one foot resting in the empty bucket attached to the cable, and both hands gripping the strong wire rope, which strained and rasped as it slowly coiled on the wooden drum. He was no light weight, and Phil and I felt our muscles twitch as we held against the windlass arm at each dead centre, for there was no ratchet arrangement attached to prevent a quick rush back, and our heavy bucket-load made the safety of his position somewhat doubtful by swaying the rope impatiently, and indulging in other restless antics.

However, when he came near the light and saw how matters stood he became quiet as a lamb; but the sight of his face smeared with the grime so recently deposited upon it, and wearing an intensely savage expression, was too much for our gravity, and our efforts faltered.

"Hang on, ye deevils!" pathetically implored he, as he felt himself tremble in the balance. Then seeing Stewart's face peering down upon him, he besought his aid. "Staun by the winlass, [Pg 111]

Stewart, ma man," he entreated, "or I'll never see auld Scotland again."

But Stewart was at that moment seized with a paroxysm of laughter. The appeal was vain, and his comrade, being now near *terra firma*, and comparatively safe, again addressed him.

"Git oot o' ma sicht, ye red-heided baboon!" said he. "Nae wuner they couldna work the winlass wi' you staunin' aside them."

It is an unwritten law on most goldfields throughout the world where the individual miner tries his luck that a flag be at once hoisted over every shaft that bottoms on paying gravel. It is a pretty custom, and a generous one to the less fortunate diggers, who judge by the progressing line of flags whether their own remote claims may have a chance of intercepting the golden channel. As it happened in this case, No. 2 shaft could hardly have failed to pick up the lead, which had been traced in its direction to the boundaries of Discovery claim. Still, there was much rejoicing when the red symbol went up, and for the rest of the day a renewed activity was in force to the uttermost end of the Flat. Even "Emu Bill," as our near neighbour was picturesquely styled, felt called upon to do a little work; but, as he took care to explain, he did it only to satisfy mining regulations, which demand that a certain amount of labour must be performed each day. "You'll notice," said he, "that 3, 4, and 5 hiv tacked on d'reckly in line—as they thought—an' you'll furrer notice thishyer propperty, No. 6, an' yer own, No. 7, hiv not exzactly played foller the leader." Which was true; for Emu Bill's claim had taken only a diagonal guidance from its predecessor, and ours continued the altered route, while those following varied considerably between the two angles thus given.

"When you sees a flag floatin' on No. 3, boys," continued he meditatively, "it's time to pack up your traps, an', as I said afore, I believe in waitin' events an' jedgin' accordin'." [Pg 112]

"Hoo lang hae you been diggin' holes in this countrie, Leatherskin?" Stewart politely inquired. And he of the weary countenance chewed his quid reflectively for several minutes ere he made reply.

"I reckon over a dozen years," he said at length, "in which time I perspected Coolgardie an' Kalgoorlie wi' old Pat Hannan when there was nothin' but niggers within' a couple of hundred miles of us."

"A'm o' the opeenion," announced Mac, "that what Mr. Leatherskin disna ken aboot the vagaries o' his ain playgrun' is no worth menshun."

"Seven is supposed to be a lucky number," spoke Phil, "and I think it will prove so with us."

After which Emu Bill went back to slumber, and Phil went down to labour in the shaft. "You've got tae mind," instructed Mac, who manipulated his descent, "when you want the bucket jist lift up yer voice tae that effeck, and I'll drap it doon gently on the end o' the rope."

Phil promised, and was speedily lowered into the darkness, and Mac, neglecting his post at once, came round into the tent, where Stewart and myself were trying hard to find a half-hour's oblivion in the realms of dreamland, and the myriad flies buzzing everywhere were trying equally hard, and with greater success, to prevent our succumbing to the soft influence. Mac's entrance at this moment was particularly distasteful to his comrade, who was just on the verge of sweet unconsciousness, and whose essayed snores were beginning to alarm the flies besieging his face.

"Go awa' oot this meenit, Mac," said he, opening his eyes, "and tak' yer big feet aff ma stummick at aince."

Just then a far-away cry of "Bucket" was vaguely heard, and calmly ignored by the new-comer. "Stewart, ma man," he began, sitting down on a portion of the weary one's anatomy, "I wis wantin' tae get yer idees on one or twa maitters o' scienteefic interest." [Pg 113]

"Get out, Mac!" I ordered. But he seemed not to hear, and another hoarse call for "Bucket" passed unobserved.

"I wis wantin', for instance," he continued earnestly, "tae speak wi' ye ser'usly on metapheesical quest-shuns——"

"Let me alane!" Stewart howled, writhing in torment. But his visitor was not to be shaken off.

Five minutes later a stentorian yell from the shaft intimated that Phil's patience was being unduly strained, and Mac reluctantly desisted from expounding further the intricacies of science, and rose to go. As may be understood, the bottom of a narrow and deep pit is not the most pleasant of places in which to idle away the time, and Phil, after digging as much as the limited area of operations would allow, was filled with wrath at the neglect of his associate, and cursed that worthy gentleman with fervour between his shouts. "Bucket!" he roared, for the twentieth time, and Mac, who was then scrambling towards the windlass, inwardly commented on the unusual savageness of the voice. "He's a wee bit annoyed," he murmured. "I'll better try an' propeetiate him." So he leaned his head over the shaft mouth and whispered in winning tones, "Are ye vera faur doon, Pheel-up?"

"Lower away the bucket, you flounder-faced mummy!" came the prompt reply, which penetrated the darkness in sharp staccato syllables.

Mac looked pained. "Noo, if that had been Stewart," he muttered grimly, "I wud a kent weel what tae dae, bit being the gololog ist——" He shook his head feebly, and reached for the hide bucket, which was lying near. Then, forgetting in the flurry of the moment to hitch it on to the rope, he let it descend at the fastest speed the law of gravity would permit. [Pg 114]

"Staun frae under!" he yelled, realising too late what he had done; but in such a narrow space there was no room for dodging, and the leathern receptacle struck the unfortunate man below with more force than was agreeable. "Ye brocht it on yersel'," consolingly spoke Mac. "It's a veesitation o' Providence fur miscain' me sae sairly."

The words that greeted his ears were eloquent and emphatic, and he marched into the tent in high dudgeon. "Gang an' pull the gololologist oot o' the shaft," said he to Stewart. "He's in the position o' a humourist, an' he canna see throo't."

Perhaps there are few who could have smiled and looked pleasant under similar circumstances; but the "gololologist" was of a forgiving nature, and his enmity dissolved when he reached the surface.

"You'll admit, Mac," he said, after allowances had been made on both sides, "that I had some slight cause for grumbling, and in your magnanimity you might have spared me your last forcible addition to the argument."

"That wis a mistak'," Mac replied apologetically. "I had the baggie in ma haun, meanin' tae send it doon in orthodox manner; bit yer injudishus remarks made me nervish, and doon it drappit, sudden-like."

After these explanations peace reigned again; but Stewart's rest had been so rudely broken that he now thought to work off his lassitude by an hour's graft with the pick. We had arranged ourselves into shifts, which went on and off alternately, or otherwise, as we thought fit; but it was my plan to reach bedrock without delay, so the shaft was never allowed to remain long unoccupied. Leaving Mac and Phil to attend to culinary matters, I went out with Stewart, and, after lowering him into the Stygian gloom, kept watch by the windlass until the night closed over and Phil announced that tea was ready.

No. 2 Claim—Just Struck Gold.

Two more days passed uneventfully. The hourly-expected bulletin of good news from No. 3 was being long deferred, and vague fears were beginning to be expressed that all was not satisfactory there. It was known that Nos. 3, 4, and 5 had put on extra shifts in the last few nights, and the depths of their sinkings must at this time have exceeded fifty feet. We at No. 7 awaited developments with keen interest. It was natural that we should hope for the worst at No. 3, for, as Emu Bill had said, we were on an entirely different tack, and might cease our labours when the gaudy emblem appeared over that claim. In these two days progress had been very slow with us, for a hard bar of conglomerate quartz had intervened at the 45-foot level, and we dared not use gelignite in case the heavy discharge might bring the upper walls inward and render our whole work useless. [Pg 115]

It is always precarious to use blasting powder of any description at the deep levels of an alluvial shaft, and the more so when the upper formations have proved to be of non-cohesive nature. So we were compelled to laboriously pick the unyielding mass where we might, and otherwise drill and shatter it with hammers.

On the morning of the third day after the flag had been raised at No. 2 the Emu seemed to awake from his lethargy in earnest, and set to work with right good-will to make up for lost time.

"You wasn't wrong in takin' my advice arter all, mate," he said to me, when I appeared to inquire

the reason of his unwonted activity.

"There's no flag up at No. 3 yet," I answered tentatively. [Pg 116]

"No, nor won't be, nuther," he returned with evident satisfaction. "I tell you what, mate," he continued impressively, "the first flag that goes up will be at your own shaft, No. 7, so you'd better get your flagpole ready. The man what says I don't know this country is a liar, every time."

Yet still the men at the shafts in question continued to dig deeper and deeper. "We hasn't reached bottom yet," they said, in answer to all questions, and on that point they appeared decided.

"I'll go up and pint out the evil o' their ways," Emu Bill said, coming over to us after midday. "I don't believe in no man exartin' hissel' to no good." Then he addressed himself to Mac far below: "I say, Scottie, you're going to strike it first, and good luck to you, you hard-working sinner."

"Same to you, Leatherskin, an mony o' them," a voice from the depths replied gruffly, for the "hard-working sinner" had but imperfectly understood.

Leaving Phil in charge of the windlass, I accompanied Emu Bill to the shafts he now considered doomed. "Look at the stuff they're takin' out," said he, drawing my attention to a heap of white and yellow cement-like substance; "the beggars have gone clean through the bedrock and don't know it."

The men at the windlass eyed us savagely as we came near, and I experienced for a moment a malicious joy when I noticed our uncommunicative visitor among them. "We don't want no more opinions," one of their number cried; "we knows we hasn't struck bottom yet."

"Mates," said Emu Bill, with dignity, "I hiv sunk more duffers than thar be years in my life—an' I'm no chicken—an' I tells ye straight, you've not only struck bottom, but you've gone three or four feet past it. If you means to tunnel through to Ole England, that's your business, but if not, you'd better give it best." [Pg 117]

Without further words, we retraced our steps, my companion fuming inwardly because of his brusque reception. Yet his advice must have had due effect, for that evening the unfortunately-placed shafts were being dismantled and late in the night the all too sanguine owners struck their camps and departed for other fields. Their disappointment was keen. They had missed fortune by only a few yards.

Next morning all the Flat knew that Nos. 3, 4, and 5 had duffered out, and, as a result, there was a great exodus of those who had been guided by these locations; but, on the other hand, rejoicings were the order of the day with the miners who believed Nos. 6 and 7 to mark the true continuation of the lead, which had last been proved at the second workings.

Our claim was then the cynosure of all eyes, for the Emu's shaft was yet barely six feet deep, and we were supposed to be close on the dreaded bottom. I was convinced that we should know our luck immediately the ironstone bar was penetrated, and that obstruction was not likely to hinder us much longer.

"I'll be the man that'll see gold first," Mac announced confidently, as he shouldered his pick after breakfast and prepared to take first shift.

"I've got a rale bonnie flag to pit up when ye're ready," said Stewart, displaying an imposing-looking Union Jack which had done service at Klondike, and which he had been surreptitiously repairing for some days past.

Phil was silent. "I sincerely hope we may not be disappointed," he said at length. Like me, he could not understand the presence of the refractory formation so close upon auriferous wash—if the latter really existed in our claim. [Pg 118]

"Geological rules don't count in this country, Phil," I suggested hopefully; then Mac departed, grumbling loudly at what he was pleased to call my "Job's comfortings."

For the best part of the forenoon I listened to the thudding of the pick with an anxious interest, for any stroke now might penetrate to the mysterious compound known as the cement wash; but the blows still rung hard and clear, and I grew weary waiting. It was not necessary to send the bucket below often. Though Mac smote the flinty rock with all his strength, and a vigour which few could have sustained, the result of his labours was almost infinitesimal. Every half-hour Stewart would receive from his perspiring companion a blunted pick, hoisted up on the end of the cable, while a fresh one was provided to continue the onslaught. Mac seemed tireless, and Stewart above, at a blazing fire, practised all his smithy art to keep the sorely-used tools in order; while ever and anon a hoarse voice would bellow from the underground, "Mak' them hard, Stewart, ma man. Mind that it is no butter A'm diggin'."

"You must come up, Mac," I said, when one o'clock drew near, but he would not hear of it. "I ken I hivna faur tae gang noo," he cried. "I can hear the sound gettin' hollow."

Another ten minutes passed, and now I could distinctly note a difference in the tone of the echoes ringing upwards. Thud! Thud! Thud! went the pick, and Mac's breath came in long deep gasps, that made Stewart rave wildly at the severe nature of his comrade's exertions.

Then suddenly there was a crash, followed by a shout of joy. Mac had bottomed at last.

For several moments complete silence reigned; then a subdued scraping below indicated that Mac was collecting some of the newly-exposed stratum for analysis. [Pg 119]

"What does it look like?" I whispered down. There are few indeed who could withstand a touch of

the gold fever at such a critical time, and I was impatient to know the best or the worst; either report would have allayed the indescribable feeling that possessed me then. The most hardened goldseeker is not immune from the thrill created when bottom has been reached; at that moment he is at one with the veriest novice who eagerly expects to view gold in its rough state for the first time.

My companion did not at once gratify my longing for knowledge, and when he replied, Phil, Stewart, and myself were peering down into the shaft awaiting intelligence with breathless interest.

"I think," he muttered, in tones that struck upon our ears as a knell of doom, "I raelly think—ye micht keep yer heids oot o' the licht."

"Mac!" I admonished, "remember this is no time for pleasantries."

"Weel, weel," he responded apologetically, "I wis wantin' tae gie correct infurmashun, bit the glint aff Stewart's pow mak's a' thing coloured." Stewart promptly drew back his head with a howl of rage.

"Mak' nae mair refleckshuns!" he cried indignantly.

There came a creak at the windlass rope as Mac put his foot into the half-filled bucket and prepared to ascend; then his voice rolled up to us again. "Wha's makin' refleckshuns? I was only makin' menshun o' the bonnie auburn——"

"Shut up, Mac," Phil interrupted, and Mac obligingly cut short his soliloquy and roared—

"Staun by the windlass, ye deevils, I'm comin' up wi' specimens!"

If he had had cause at one time to comment on the slow and uncertain nature of his upward flight, he assuredly had no room for complaint in that direction on this occasion. All three of us went to the windlass and yanked our comrade to the surface at a rate that caused him much consternation. Then I seized the bucket, which contained a few pounds of an alarmingly white-looking deposit, and hurried with it into the tent, where the gold-pan, freshly scrubbed, lay waiting beside a kerosene tin half filled with muddy water. On closer examination the samples looked decidedly more promising; little granules of quartz were interspersed with the white cement, and a sprinkling of ironshot particles were also in evidence. We had struck an alluvial wash: that was clear enough, and now the question was—would it prove to be auriferous? Without speaking we commenced to crush the matrix into as fine a powder as possible, and when that operation was completed, the whole was emptied into the gold-pan. [Pg 120]

"It looks just like sugar," Stewart broke out, "an' no near so dirty as Klonduk gravel."

"Get your flag ready," I said, "we'll know our luck in a few minutes." I now filled the pan with water, and began to give it that concentric motion so familiar to those who search for the yellow metal. Gradually, very gradually, the water was canted off, carrying with it the bulk of the lighter sands, and finally the residue was left in the form of some ounces of black ironstone powder, which, because of its weight, had remained, and about an equal amount of coarse quartz grains that had escaped crushing.

"But I don't see any gold," said Phil despondingly.

"Ye're faur too impatient," Mac reproved. "Ye didna expec' tae see it floatin' on tap o' a' that stuff surely?"

I tilted the pan obliquely several times in order to make the contents slide round in the circular groove provided, and as it slowly moved under the gentle pressure of the little water remaining, it left a glittering trail in its wake, which caused my three companions to break out in a whoop of delight. [Pg 121]

Some sixty seconds later the Union Jack floated bravely above our windlass, and was hailed with a thunder of applause.

CAMP-FIRE REMINISCENCES [Pg 122]

For many weeks work went on merrily. One after another the various claims reached paying gravel, and flags of all designs and colours soon marked the course of the lead for fully half a mile, after which distance the golden vein effectually eluded discovery; it had apparently disappeared into the bowels of the earth. For the first few days succeeding our location of the auriferous wash we contented ourselves in dollying the more easily disintegrated parts of the white conglomerate, and collecting the solid and cumbrous blocks excavated into sacks, each of which when filled weighed over a hundred pounds. These I meant to send to some crushing battery when several tons had been raised.

The water for dollying as well as for all other purposes was obtained from a deep shaft sunk near at hand by a speculative individual, who considered that water might ultimately pay him as generously as gold, and as he charged eightpence a gallon for the brackish fluid, and had an unlimited demand for it at that, he probably found it a less troublesome and much more lucrative commodity than even a moderately wealthy claim on the Five-Mile Lead. As it so happened, however, when other claims began to copy our tactics and dolly portions of their wash, it was made evident that the water bore was not equal to the strain, and once or twice it ran dry at a

most critical time. After a careful computation of its capacity we saw that it could only be drawn upon for domestic purposes in future, and even then there was every probability of the supply giving out if a good rainfall did not soon occur to moisten the land and percolate to the impervious basin tapped by the bore in question. [Pg 123]

Our Shaft.

At this time a public battery, owned by a limited company, was doing yeoman service to the dwellers on an alluvial field some five miles south of us; and after much consideration we, in common with the most of the miners, arranged to despatch our golden gravel thither, as being the only way out of a difficulty. Public batteries exist all over those goldfields, for, owing to the absence of water, a prospector can rarely do more than test samples of his find, and thereby estimate its value; and these public crushing plants are, therefore, a very necessary adjunct to his success.

The time passed pleasantly enough now that the trying uncertainty of the first fortnight was no longer with us, and the auriferous channel was being slowly and surely tunnelled and cut in every conceivable direction. Work was pursued in matter-of-fact fashion. The glamour of the goldseeker's life had departed with the risk.

Yet when the practical and perhaps sordid work of the day was done, and we gathered together around one or other of the numerous camp fires, it seemed as if a new world had descended upon us when daylight gave place to the mystic glimmer of the lesser stars and the steadfast radiance of the glorious Southern Cross. Only the world-wanderer who has slept beneath all skies can truly appreciate the grandeur of the southern constellations. The bushman has grown to love them from his infancy; they have been his companions on many a weary journey, and he regards them with an almost sacrilegious familiarity. But to the traveller from other lands these shining guide-posts in the heavens arouse a feeling akin to reverence, and later, when he ventures into [Pg 124] his grim desert land and trusts his life to their constancy, his admiration, were it possible, increases tenfold. There is, of course, one great reason for the stranger's attachment to the sky sentinels of an Australian night other than their calm, clear brilliance. In no other country is the wanderer brought so close, as it were, to the luminaries of night. In Canada, Alaska, America, India, or China, or, indeed, in any portion of the globe, by reason of climatic or other conditions, one must perforce sleep under canvas, and in some cases where the cold is severe—as in Alaska—the shelter of a heavily-logged hut is almost a necessity. But in the inland parts of Australia, where rain seldom falls, and where no pestilence taints the atmosphere, the sky alone usually forms the traveller's roof. Many times have I gone to sleep in the great silent interior with only my coat for a pillow, and coaxed myself into slumber while watching for the advent of a favourite star, or tracing the gradual course of the Southern Cross.

To me the stars of the south have a peculiar significance. When I gazed at them, even while divided from civilisation by over a thousand miles of dreary arid sand plains, I felt comforted, for though compass and sextant may fail, the stars will still show the way.

I recall our evenings spent at the Five-Mile Camp with deepest pleasure. There only did I meet and talk with the typical men of the West, and the simple, true-hearted, restless spirits of the Island Continent who have pushed the outposts of their country far into the desert. It was my one

experience of a Western Australian mining camp, and afterwards, during our weary wanderings in the far interior, we often longed for the company of the generous-minded men who used to gather round our fire and review their early experiences with such vivid effect.

Emu Bill, I have already mentioned, but there were several others whom we came to know during the later days of our sojourn at the golden flat, and they had all their own peculiar characteristics, with a sterling honesty of purpose as the keynote of their lives. [Pg 125]

"Old Tom," I remember, possessed an interest in the claim next to ours; not much of an interest it was, either, for he was too old a man to have come in nearly first in the rush. He had simply been promised a percentage of returns in No. 8 for doing all the work thereon; and as at first the presence of gold there was much doubted, it was no great generosity on the part of the owner of the lot to promise slight reward and no wages for labour done. Yet for once Old Tom scored in a bargain, and his labours were not, as he cheerfully said they had ever been, wholly vain.

Old Tom must have been a splendid specimen of manhood in his day; now he was nearly seventy years of age, and his bent shoulders detracted somewhat from his great stature, while his slightly-bowed legs—whose deviation from the perpendicular, he insisted, had been caused by much walking—gave to him a more frail appearance than was justified.

His knowledge of his own country was extensive, but he had fallen into the strange belief that the world began at Australia, and that Europe, Asia, and other portions of the globe were merely remote colonies or dependencies of his own land. "I hiv walked all over Australia, mates," he used to say; "I know the world well."

"You ought to see London, Tom," I said, one night, after he had been recounting his travelling experiences; but he shook his head.

"It's too far to walk," he replied sadly; "Old Tom's walking days are nearly over. But," and he brightened considerably, "I've heard tell that Lunnon is full o' people, an' there wouldn't be no room for an old man like me to peg his claim."

It was one of his fixed ideas that the whole world was but a goldfield on which all men had to try their luck. And the sea had its terrors for him, as it has for nearly all bushmen, although most of them get accustomed to it sooner or later. With Old Tom it would be never. "I went on a ship once," he admitted, "when I was a young 'un, an' the mem'ry o't will never leave me." He shuddered at the recollection of his sufferings. "I kin walk 'bout as fast as a ship, anyway," he added with much satisfaction, "an' a hundred miles more or less don't make much difference when Old Tom is on the wallaby." [Pg 126]

At another time, when news of Kitchener's brilliant successes in the Soudan had reached us, I read out to him from an old home newspaper details of the capture of Omdurman. There were many around the fire that night, and all listened eagerly to the thrilling narrative except Old Tom; he gazed listlessly into the glowing fire, and smoked his pipe unmoved.

"Have you no interest in these things, Tom?" I asked.

"It's a long time since I've been in the Eastern Colonies," he answered slowly, "an' I hiv lost my bearin's among them names. Soudan is in Queensland, isn't it? Or mebbe it is west'ard in Noo South Wales?" Poor Old Tom! he had fought the aborigines times without number, and taken his life in his hands on many a lone trail, yet he would have been surprised had anyone said that he was more than usually venturesome. He knew no fear, and acted his weary part in life nobly and well.

"Silent Ted" was another of our camp-fire comrades; he was, as his name implied, not a talkative individual. Long years spent in the bush had served to dry up the vials of his speech. Yet he was not morose or taciturn by nature; he simply seemed too tired to give expression to his thoughts. His eyes were ever fixed and emotionless as the desert sands—sure evidence of the bushman who has lived in the dreary wilderness beyond the Darling. He had been a long time in striking gold, and we all thought his shaft was likely to prove a duffer; but despite our gloomy prophecies he joined our evening circle night after night, and smoked his pipe cheerful as usual, though that was not saying much. [Pg 127]

"I forgot to tell you, mates," he broke out one evening, to our great surprise, "that I struck bottom yesterday."

He meant to say more, but his mouth closed with a click in spite of himself, and in reply to our congratulations he handed round for examination two fine specimens of alluvial gold which he had taken from his first day's tests, and when they had been inspected by the community and returned to him, he passed them on to his neighbour with a sigh; he had apparently already forgotten their existence.

The devil-may-care fossicker, also, was well represented, and his species rejoiced in cognomens so euphonious and varied that I could never remember the correct titles to bestow upon their several owners, and only realised my mistakes when greeted with reproachful glances. Among our acquaintances were, "Dead Broke Sam," a proverbially unfortunate miner in a perpetual state of pecuniary embarrassment; "Lucky Dave," who always "came out on top;" "Happy Jack," who seemed to find much cause for merriment in his rather commonplace existence; and "Nuggety Dick," who at all times could unearth one or two specimens from some secret place in his meagre wardrobe, and describe minutely where they had been obtained—usually some place comprehensively indicated as "away out back."

These gaunt, bearded men had many strange stories to tell, and in the ruddy firelight they would trace on the sand intricate charts emblematic of their wanderings. They were those whose roving natures compelled them to follow up every gold rush, with the firm belief that extraordinary fortune would one day crown their efforts. "It's a durned hard life, boys," Dead Broke Sam, who worked with Old Tom on similar terms of remuneration, would often say, looking round for the sympathetic chorus that was always forthcoming, "but if we doesn't peg out, we is bound to strike it some day." [Pg 128]

There is no blasphemy in the speech of the Australian miner. The most rugged-looking fossicker is gentle as a lamb, save when undue presumption on the part of some new chum, or "furriner," arouses his ire, and then he makes things hum generally; but his forcible words are merely forcible, and perhaps "picturesque," but nothing more; the inane profanity of the Yankee fortune-seeker finds no exponent in the Australian back-blocker.

Many were the tales "pitched" on these long starlit nights, and narratives of adventure in search of gold, and hairbreadth escapes from the aborigines succeeded each other until the evening was far spent, and the Southern Cross had sunk beyond the horizon. Then we would disperse with a monosyllabic "night, boys," all round, and seek our separate sandy couches.

My comrades, Mac and Stewart, were shining satellites at these meetings, and weird stories from the Pampas plains and the Klondike valley formed at intervals a pleasing change—from the miners' point of view—to the accounts of gold-finds, and rushes, and hostile natives, so fluently described by Nuggety Dick and Co. And now and then a whaling anecdote would lend zest to the gathering, faithfully told by Stewart with much dramatic effect; he was, indeed, a past master at the art, and never failed to hold his audience spellbound.

Emu Bill, though recognised by all as the most experienced miner present, rarely condescended to spin a yarn, and he listened to his *confrères'* tales with ill-concealed impatience, but showed a decided liking for my two warriors' romances. One evening, however, he broke his reserve and proceeded to give a rambling survey of his wanderings, and as he warmed to his subject his eyes began to glow, and his gestures became eloquent and impassioned. [Pg 129]

"Yes, boys," said he, winding up a *resumé* of his exploits in various parts of Australia, "I calc'late I hev had a fair-sized experience o' gold mining in my time, an' as ye may guess, I hevn't allus come out right end up, nuther, else I shouldn't be here. Thank the Lord! I've struck something at last."

"I'm wi' ye thar, mate," grunted Old Tom in sympathy. "I guess this is Old Tom's last rise."

Then a silence fell over the little assembly, during which Emu Bill drew fanciful diagrams in the sand with an improvised camp poker, and Silent Ted almost went to sleep. The rest of us gazed at Emu Bill with a show of interest, expecting him to proceed with his reminiscences, and soon he started again.

"Yes, boys, I've had my disappintments, as we've all had, I opine, but I had an un-common disappintment at the time o' the Kalgoorlie Rush——"

"Kalgoorlie Rush, Bill?" I exclaimed. "Were you in that?"

"Wur I in that?" he echoed dismally. "I wur, an' I wurn't, which is not mebbe a very plain statement, but you kin jedge fur yourself if you care to hear my yarn."

"Let her go, Bill," said Nuggety Dick.

"I'm listenin' wi' vera great interest," Mac spoke slowly. "Ye've been a man o' pairts, Emoo."

After sundry expressions of approval had been elicited, Bill again picked up the thread of his narrative.

"You've heard o' old Hannan, of course," he began, "the diskiverer o' Kalgoorlie? The diskiverer o' [Pg 130]
Kalgoorlie!" he repeated, mimicking a general expression often heard on the fields. "Well, boys, I kin tell you how Kalgoorlie was diskivered.... Pat Hannan an' me had been mates for a considerable time. We walked from South'ron Cross together afore the railway, an' we 'specked around Coolgardie camp wi' fairish success. There was no township at Coolgardie then, boys, though that jumped up quick enough. One day we thought we'd jine a party as was going out eastward to 'speck for gold furrer back in the nigger country; an' after gettin' our water-bags filled an' provisions for a month rolled up in our swags, we all cleared out. In two days we camped at Kalgoorlie well. You know where that is, boys; but there was nary a shanty within twenty-five miles of it then, nothin' but sand an' black boys, an' hosts o' nigs. But we never thought o' lookin' for gold there, worse luck; at least, none o' the rest did; but old Hannan had a skirmish round' an' reported nary sign o't, so we struck camp at oncet. But jest as we wur movin' off, Hannan comes to me with a twist on his mug an' snickers, 'Bill, me bhoy, phwat can I do? Me water-bag's bust!' Now that wur a ser'us matter, for we needed all the water we could carry, not knowin' when another well might turn up, so I voted we shid all camp again until Pat's water-bag had been repaired, an' the rest o' the boys of course agreed, unan'mous. But that wouldn't suit old Hannan, 'Ye'd better go on, boys,' said he, 'an' I'll come after yez in half an hour.' So we went on; but though we went slow, and arterards waited fur half a day, no Hannan turned up, an' we had to continue our journey without him. Well, boys, we came back in less'n a fortnight, arter trampin' about in the durnedest country on God's earth in search o' water an' findin' none. We
hadn't time to look fur gold, so ye kin guess we wur mighty miserable when we drew near to the [Pg 131]
place where old Hannan's water-bag had busted; but the appearance o' the camp sort o' mystified us, thar wur rows an' rows o' tents, an' the ground was pegged fur miles. 'Howlin' tarnation!' I yelled at the first man we came across. 'Is this a mir-adge, or what has we struck?' 'Nary mir-adge, mate,' said he, 'this is Hannan's Find, or Kalgoorlie if yous like that name better.' ... An' it wur a bitter fack, boys. Old Hannan must have notised an outcrop somewheres around, an' being allfired afeared that we, his mates, might get too much benefit, he had ripped the water-bag on purpose so as to get an excoose fur waitin' behind. Then, of course, he had gone back to Coolgardie an' got the Government diskivery reward, which otherwise would have been divided atween us. But we got nothin', boys, nary cent, an' nary square inch o' ground. The camp had been rushed when we wur sufferin' howlin' terrors out back.... There's wan favour I'd ask of you, boys, don't none of you start 'God blessin'' old Hannan for diskivering Kalgoorlie in my hearing. I can't stand it, boys, an' you know why."

Bill ceased, and a murmur of sympathy ran round the little group. The Kalgoorlie rush was fresh in the minds of nearly all present, many of whom had taken part in it. Every one knew Hannan, but who better than his one-time partner? and if his tale showed the much-honoured finder of Kalgoorlie in a less favourable light than that in which he was usually regarded, no one doubted Emu Bill's version of the story; yet it was hard to dispel from the mind the glamour of romance associated with the event from the first. One more illustration of the difference between the real and the ideal, but it seems almost a pity to destroy the illusions, they lend so much colour and interest to otherwise sordid episodes.

The night was unusually dark, fleeting clouds constantly obscured the feeble light of a slender [Pg 132]
crescent moon, and the myriad stars glimmered fitfully. Our fire was the only cheerful object in the darkness, and it blazed and crackled, lighting up the weather-beaten faces of the circle around it, and illuminating our tent in the background. For a long time no one spoke, every man seemed gloomily affected by Bill's story, and with chins resting on their hands they gazed into the vortex of the flaming logs long and earnestly.

Then a familiar voice interrupted their reveries. "When Stewart an' me discovered Gold Bottom Creek——"

"Go slow, Mac," I objected wearily; "it's getting late and we'd better turn in."

"It is wearin' on fur midnight," grunted Dead Broke Sam, surveying the heavens for the position of his favourite reckoning star.

"What was your last battery returns, mate?" asked Emu Bill, turning to me with a revival of practical interest.

"Fifty tons for 150 ounces," I replied.

"Not too bad," commented Nuggety Dick.

"I'm 20 tons fur 60 ounces," said my interrogator, "which is the same ratio. I guess Nos. 6 and 7 are the best properties on the Five Mile."

"I'm 25 for 51," announced Happy Jack cheerfully.

"Thank the Lord, we've all got somethin'," Old Tom muttered devoutly, as he rose to his feet. Then we went our several ways.

HAPPY JACK AND DEAD-BROKE SAM.

THE "SACRED" NUGGET

[Pg 133]

At this time much interest was aroused by the report that an extraordinarily large nugget had been found within a few miles of Kanowna, an outlying township, but as the days passed and no confirmation of the rumour was forthcoming, the miners throughout the whole district decided to hold a court of inquiry and elicit the facts, or at least the foundations on which the panic-creating statement had been based. As may be imagined, where gold is in question no rumour, however wild, is allowed to die a natural death. The miners *will* sift and probe into the matter to the bitter end—and usually the end is bitter indeed to those who have been too eager to join the inevitable rush, and sink the almost equally inevitable duffer shafts.

In the present case, however, the sifting process was speedily fruitful of results. Tangible evidence was obtained that two men had been seen early one morning carrying what seemed to be an enormous nugget in a blanket, some little distance from the settlement. Where the men came from with their find no one knew, and it was not likely that they would have given the information had it been asked; but where they had gone afterwards promised to be an equally mysterious question; they had vanished, leaving no trace or clue.

The warden of the district professed complete ignorance of the entire affair, and suggested that a practical joke had been played on the people; but this only served to make the miners unite in an [Pg 134] outburst of genuine indignation. Already many shafts had been sunk in the most unlikely places by men who could ill afford to labour in vain. The mad enthusiasm created had had dire effect. Hundreds of men were flooding into the camp daily from every quarter; work on all the leads had ceased in anticipation of a rush. The joke, if joke it was, was indeed a cruel one, and its perpetrators deserved the wild denunciations that were heaped upon them. "We'll lynch them!" roared the miners, and they meant it; but despite the utmost searching, the nugget-carriers—whose names were known—could not be found.

Then just as excitement was dying out, when the people were all but convinced that they had been hoaxed, and were preparing to return to their various labours, confirmation of the rumour came from a most unexpected quarter. A Roman Catholic priest publicly stated that he was aware of the existence of the nugget, that he had been under a promise of secrecy to the finders not to reveal its location for ten days, but that owing to the extreme panic aroused he felt constrained to admit its authenticity, so that one doubt might be set at rest. As for the district in which the great find had been made, he would give full particulars on the following Tuesday. He further gave out that the nugget weighed something over a hundred pounds, and was a perfect specimen of true alluvial gold.

The state of affairs after that can be better imagined than written. There promised to be a rush unequalled in the annals of goldfields history. Men flocked into Kanowna in their thousands; excitement was raised to fever heat; and the whole country seemed to await the coming of Tuesday.

We, on the Five Mile, did not escape the prevalent craze. Our various properties were becoming [Pg 135] worked out, and in any case who could resist being influenced by the mention of such a large

nugget? The gold fever is, indeed, a rampant, raging disease which few can withstand.

"It'll be a bonnie run," said Stewart, "bit I can haud ma ain wi' ony man."

"I think Phil could gie ye a sair tussle," commented Mac, "an' as fur masel'—I alloo naebody's sooperiority."

But it was plain to all, long before the eventful day arrived, that the rush for the Sacred Nugget, as it was called, would be totally different from that in which we had taken part with so much success. And little wonder. Since Father Long's announcement, horses and bicycles and buggies of all descriptions were being held in readiness. No one had a notion how near or how far the rush might lead, but all seemed determined to have the speediest means of locomotion at their disposal. Under these circumstances my companions' running powers could avail little, and I was not disposed to favour their desire to try their luck in the stampede.

"We've had enough of gold-mining, boys," I said, "and after we have finished here I think we'll prospect further out." And the thought of journeying into the unknown back country pleased them mightily. It had long been my wish to explore the central parts of the great Western Colony, and I was seriously considering the feasibility of my plans towards that purpose when the Sacred Nugget excitement burst into prominence, and for the time being served to demoralise my schemes.

"I don't think we ought to trouble with any new strike about here," Phil said wearily. The monotony of the gold-seeker's life in Western Australia was beginning to affect even his usually buoyant nature.

"Don't go, boys," advised Emu Bill earnestly. "I is satisfied the thing isn't straight. Father Long or no Father Long, thar's been too much mystery about the consarn. Thar's a ser'us hoax somewheres." [Pg 136]

It was a surprise to hear such advice from him. I thought of the time when I first saw him leading the rush to Five Mile, and unconsciously I smiled. "In spite of what you say, I believe you'll be there yourself, Bill," I said. "I'm sure it would break your heart to be absent from such an event."

"I'm not deny'n' but you're right," he replied soberly. "Wi' me it's a sort o' madness, but that don't affeck the honesty o' my remarks wan little bit."

"Weel," began Mac with emphasis, "if ye dinna want tae gang, ye'll no gang. Stewart and me'll see efter that. I'll dae ye a kindness fur aince, Emoo."

We decided at last that Phil and I should go and view the "circus"—not to join in it by any means, but simply that we should see, and have our curiosity gratified; and so the matter rested. But on Tuesday morning, when Emu Bill saw the eager throngs passing inwards in the direction of Kanowna, his resolutions began to waver, and when the Five-Mile Flat also began to show a deserted appearance, he came over to our tent with a mournful countenance.

"I is goin' with you arter all, mates," he said simply.

"Ye're gaun tae dae naething o' the sort, Emoo," roared Mac. "Did ye no promise tae wait wi' Stewart an' me? No, ma man, fur yer ain guid we'll keep ye here."

And after much eloquent argument Bill resigned himself to his fate, almost cheerful at last to find his own views resisted so strongly. But as Phil and I were starting out, he came to me with an eager light in his eyes. "If you does think it's goin' to be any good," he said, "mention my name to Tom Doyle. He'll give you anything you want. Goodbye, boys, an'—an' good luck." And he was led away to be regaled with stirring stories of other lands, by the masterful pair. [Pg 137]

The momentous announcement had been advertised to take place on Tuesday, at 3.30 p.m., from the balcony of the Criterion Hotel, and when we reached the township about midday we found the main thoroughfare a jostling mass of boisterous humanity; while cyclists in hundreds, lightly garbed as if for a great race, waited patiently in the side street leading to the post-office, and in full view of the much-advertised balcony. The cyclist element was composed of strangers, for the most part, who had cycled from Kalgoorlie and other settlements within a radius of twenty miles; hence their early arrival on the scene; they had timed themselves to be well ahead, so as to be fully rested before the fateful signal was given.

As we forced our way through the crowd I could not help remarking that the majority had been imbibing over-freely to ensure rapidity of action later on. Indeed, it looked as if the Criterion Hotel, which formed the centre of interest, was to be most benefited by the rush. It had not been by any means the most popular rendezvous of the miners, but on this day it received a huge advertisement, and profited accordingly.

We walked to the end of the street, where the bustle was considerably less, and here we noticed a large wooden erection bearing the sign, "Tom Doyle, Kanowna Hotel."

"That is the name Bill mentioned," said Phil; "he seems a fairly important individual in his own way. Suppose we interview him, or at least have dinner in his mansion."

To the latter part of the suggestion I was agreeable, and so in we went. I had met Tom Doyle on several occasions since my arrival in the country; that gentleman was most ubiquitous in his habits, and had a keen scent for gold, so that his lanky figure might be expected anywhere where good prospects had recently been obtained. He was also future mayor of the camp, and so was, as Phil had put it, quite an important individual in his way; but how we could benefit by giving him Emu Bill's name and compliments was more than I could understand. [Pg 138]

The hotel seemed to be completely empty; even the bar was deserted, which showed an extraordinary state of matters. "If Mac and Stewart were here," laughed Phil, "there would be a repetition of the Indian village raid I have heard so much about." Which I fear was only too true. However, we determined to give fair warning of our presence in the establishment, and halloed out lustily; and at last a heavy footstep sounded in the room above.

"Doyle!" I cried, "Sir Thomas Doyle!"

"Lord Doyle!" added Phil, in a voice that might have awakened the seven sleepers.

"Phwat the thunder'n' blazes is yez yellin' at!" roared the object of our inquiry, suddenly appearing on the stairway. Then he noticed the vacant bar. "Thunder'n' turf!" he muttered helplessly, "has all the shop cleared out after that d—— d nugget?"

"Looks like it, Tom," I suggested. "Have you been asleep?"

"Av coorse. It's me afternoon siesta I was having. I'll be in time for the rush all right, an' don't you forget it."

"We didn't come to warn you about that," I said. "Emu Bill of the Five Mile said you had a few good horses——"

READY FOR THE RUSH.

"Emoo Bill!" he howled. [Pg 139]

"Same man," I admitted; "do you know him?"

"Does I know Emoo Bill? Well, I should smile. Why, me an' him were with Hannan when that old skunk went back on us at the discovery ov Kalgoorlie. Howly Moses! Poor owld Emoo! Horses, boys? Surely. I'm goin' to use 'Prince' myself, but yez can have the two steeplechasers, 'Satan' an' 'Reprieve.' I'll do that much for the Emoo; an' d—— n the others who expect the horses."

Events had certainly developed much more rapidly than I had anticipated; neither Phil nor myself had entertained the idea of joining in the rush. I had mentioned Emu Bill's message idly, never dreaming it would produce such a prompt effect. Tom Doyle was a noted sporting man in the district, a second Harry Lorrequer in a small way, and provided he was not drunk, he could break in even the most unruly horse when all others had failed.

The noise on the street was now becoming terrific; small armies of miners bearing picks and stakes were arriving from the local diggings, and buggies and horses were being hurriedly equipped.

"We'll have a dhrop av the crater first," said Tom, noting the disturbance outside, "and then we'll saddle up."

Shortly afterwards we emerged from the hotel courtyard mounted on horses that were the pride of the countryside. Tom rode "Prince," a powerful-limbed, coal-black cob of sixteen hands; Phil bestrode "Satan," a fiery Australian brumby; and I clung to "Reprieve," an impetuous high-stepping bay. "Keep at my heels, boys," cried Tom, as he started off at a canter, and it was at once evident that if we could keep at his heels we should be in at the death without a doubt. It

was slightly after three o'clock, and when we reached the scene of excitement we found the street absolutely blocked. There must have been several thousand men packed like sardines right across the broad passage, and on the outskirts of this vast crowd over a hundred cyclists stood ready; beyond them still, a line of horsemen were drawn up, in numbers exceeding a regimental squadron. [Pg 140]

Scores of buggies and other spidery racing contrivances were scattered near at hand, and extended far down the side street leading towards the post-office. It was indeed an extraordinary sight. We formed up with the other horsemen, Tom's approach being hailed with loud cheers, for every one knew the dare-devil Irishman.

"You'll get a broken neck this time, Tom," cried one of his acquaintances cheerfully.

"I didn't know Prince was broken in to the saddle yet, Tom," said another.

"No more he isn't," replied Tom, "but he's broken enough for me. Stand clear, bhoys."

And then the black charger reared and bucked and curvetted wildly, while its rider kicked his feet out of the stirrups and kept his seat like a Centaur. Few of the horses present had been much used before, and they now became restive also, and pranced dangerously. Phil and I had a bad five minutes. We did not know the nature or temper of our mounts; and besides, neither of us cared to place much reliance on our stirrup leathers, they looked frayed and wofully fragile.

"If they *go* with yez, bhoys," advised Tom, "give 'em their heads. They'll get tired soon enough. Thar's lots o' room in this country."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Phil, "what a comfortable prospect we have before us! My back is about broken with this kicking brute already."

The vast assembly was now becoming impatient. The stated time, 3.30, had been reached, and as yet there was no sign of the Reverend Father who had been the cause of the extraordinary meeting. Then just as threats and curses were being muttered, a pale-faced young man in clerical garb made his appearance on the balcony, and a deathlike stillness reigned in an instant. In a few words the priest explained his strange position, but he was rudely interrupted many times. [Pg 141]

"It's gettin' late. Where did the nugget come from?" the rougher spirits roared. The young man hesitated for a moment.

"The nugget was found on the Lake Gwinne track," he said, "at a depth of three feet——"

With a long, indescribable roar the multitude scattered, and the speaker's concluding words were drowned in the din. "Hold on!" cried Tom, as Phil and I swung round to follow the main rush, "the d—— d idiots didn't wait to hear how *far* it was from Lake Gwinne." There was scarcely a dozen of us left; the breaking-up had been as the melting of summer snows.

"And the position is two miles from the lake," repeated the young man, wearily. Then Tom gave his horse a free rein and we followed suit.

Lake Gwinne was a salt-crusted depression in the sand surface, about five miles distant from the township, and in a very little frequented vicinity. The so-called track towards it was nothing more than a winding camel pad through the bush, and had the miners stopped to think, they would have at once realised how insufficient was the data given. With our additional information we were slightly better off; nevertheless I was not at all inclined to grow enthusiastic over our chances. The district mentioned had been very thoroughly prospected many months before, and with little success. "I think Father Long has been hoaxed after all," I said to Phil, as we crashed through scrub and over ironstone gullies in the wake of the main body, which we were rapidly overtaking. But he could not reply; his horse was clearing the brush in great bounds, and as it had the bit between its teeth, my companion evidently had his work cut out for him. [Pg 142]

A few yards ahead Tom's great charger kept up a swinging gallop, and every now and then that jolly roysterer would turn in the saddle and encourage us by cheery shouts. We soon passed the men who were hurrying on foot, but the buggies and the cycles were still in front. The sand soil throughout was so tightly packed that it formed an ideal cycle path, but the sparse eucalypti dotting its surface were dangerous obstacles, and made careful steering a necessity. The goldfield cyclist, however, is a reckless individual, and rarely counts the cost of his adventurousness. Soon we came near to the cyclist army; the spokes of their wheels scintillated in the sunlight as they scudded over the open patches. But one by one they dropped out, the twisted wheels showing how they had tried conclusions with flinty boulders, or collided with one or other of the numberless mallee stumps protruding above the ground.

On one occasion Tom gave a warning shout, and I saw his horse take a flying leap over a struggling cyclist who had got mixed up in the parts of his machine. I had just time to swerve my steed to avoid a calamity, and then we crashed on again at a mad gallop, evading the bicycles as best we could, and sometimes clearing those which had come to grief at a bound. It was in truth a wild and desperate race.

When the last of the cyclists had been left behind, and the swaying, dust-enshrouded buggies and one or two solitary horsemen were still in front, Tom turned again.

"Let her go now, bhoys," he said, "there's a clear field ahead. Whoop la! Tally ho!"

For the remainder of that gallop I had little time to view my surroundings; I dug my heels into "Reprieve's" flanks, and he stretched out his long neck and shot forward like an arrow from the bow. Buggies and miscellaneous vehicles were overtaken and left in the rear. Various horsemen would sometimes range alongside for a trial of speed, but "Reprieve" outdistanced them all. [Pg 143]

"It's Doyle's 'Reprieve,'" one of the disgusted riders cried; "an' there's 'Satan,' an', fire an' brimstone! here's Doyle hissel'."

Tom's weight was beginning to tell on his noble animal, which had given the lead to my horse who carried the lightest load; but with scarcely a dozen lengths between us we thundered past the foremost racing buggy, and were quickly dashing down towards Lake Gwinne, whose sands now shimmered in the near distance. We were first in the rush after all.

Suddenly we came upon a recently-excavated shaft with a dismantled windlass lying near, and with one accord we drew up and dismounted.

"If this is where the Sacred Nugget came out of, it looks d—— d bad that no one is about," growled Tom, throwing the reins of his horse over a mulga sapling and looking around doubtfully. It was clearly the vicinity indicated by Father Long, and we lost no time in marking off our lots in the direction we considered most promising. We had barely taken these preliminary precautions when horsemen and buggies began to arrive in mixed order, and in a short time the ground all the way down to the lake was swarming with excited gold-seekers.

"I'm blest if I like the look o' things at all, at all," mused Tom, and I was inclined to take a similar view of matters, for a more barren-looking stretch of country would have been hard to find. Then, again, by examining the strata exposed in the abandoned shaft we could form a fair estimate of [Pg 144] the nature of the supposed gold-bearing formation; and after Phil and I had made a minute survey of all indications shown, we came to the conclusion that our ground, acquired after such a hard ride, was practically worthless and not likely to repay even the labour of sinking in it.

The hundreds of others who had pegged out beyond us were not so quickly convinced, and they announced their intention of sinking to bedrock if they "busted" in the attempt. About an hour after our arrival at the Sacred Nugget Patch, Phil and I started back for the Five-Mile Flat, satisfied to have taken part in so strange a rush, yet quite certain that the Sacred Nugget had been unearthed in some other district, or that the entire concern had been a stupendous hoax. Tom Doyle decided to camp on the so-called "Patch" all night, without any special reason for doing so beyond holding the ground in case some fool might want to buy it for flotation purposes, as had been done often before with useless properties.

When we reached home that evening we were tired indeed, and in spite of ourselves we felt rather disappointed at the unsuccessful issue of the much-advertised stampede.

"Ye've had a gran' time," said Mac regretfully, when Phil told of how he and "Satan" came in first after a most desperate race.

"I'm glad I didn't go with you," said Bill. "I hope I can resist temptation in the way o' rushes until I is ready to sail back homeward."

"It would certainly be better," I allowed, "than to give up a proved property for a miserable sham."

As it happened, the famous rush had indeed proved but a worthless demonstration. Not a grain of gold was discovered near the Sacred Patch; and after much labour had been expended there, the disgusted miners abandoned their shafts in a body.

A Breakdown in the Rush.

The mystery connected with the alleged nugget was never explained. Every bank in the Colony denied having seen it, and its supposed finders did not again appear on the fields. Father Long must have been cruelly victimised, of that there was no doubt, for no one could for a moment believe that he had perjured himself. He was justly known as a thoroughly honourable man and a conscientious teacher. Even the most suspicious mind could not accuse him in any way. And he, the unfortunate dupe of a pair of unscrupulous rogues, did not long survive the severe shock given to an already feeble system. He died some months later, and with him went the secret, if any, of the Great Sacred Nugget. [Pg 145]

INTO THE "NEVER NEVER" LAND [Pg 146]

A few weeks after the Sacred Nugget rush had taken place we lowered our flag at the Five-Mile Flat, having come to an end of the auriferous workings within our boundaries. I had meanwhile succeeded in purchasing from an Afghan trader two powerful camels and five horses, with the intention of using them on our projected inland expedition. The horses, I feared, would prove of little service, but for the early part of the journey they might relieve the camels somewhat by carrying the various tinned foodstuffs necessary for a long sojourn in the desert. These "various" stores vary but little notwithstanding their distinguishing labels, and the bushman's vocabulary, always expressive, contains for them a general title, namely, "tinned dog."

Tinned dog and flour are, indeed, the sum total of the Australian explorer's needs. The traveller in the great "Never Never" land is not an epicure by any means, and should he be burdened by over-æsthetic tastes they quickly vanish when "snake sausage" or "bardie pie" has appeared on his *menu* for some days!

Phil had decided to accompany us, and as he had shared our fortunes since our entry into the country, I was by no means loath to accept of his services, knowing him to be a highly trustworthy comrade, and an invaluable addition to our little party he proved.

It was hard to say goodbye to our old associates of the camp fire; I knew they would not remain much longer at the same diggings, which were showing signs of playing out in almost every claim, and it was not likely we should ever meet again. [Pg 147]

Old Tom was much affected; he had been our near neighbour so long, and under the happiest circumstances of his wandering life, so he said, and now we were going back into the "Never Never" country, and would never see him more. I was not quite certain whether Old Tom meant that we should most probably leave our bones in the central deserts, or whether his words were due to an extreme sentimentalism on his part, but I preferred to believe the latter.

"We'll call and see you at Adelaide some of these times, Tom," I said, while Stewart and Mac were bidding him an affectionate farewell, but he only shook his head mournfully, and would not be comforted.

As for Emu Bill, he had considerable faith in our enterprise, and would, I believe, have come with us had I said the word. He was, however, a true specimen of the independent bushman, and unwilling to demonstrate his wishes.

"Durn it all, boys," said he with vigour, "I is not an old man yet, an' tho' I knows you aire a big enuff party without me to get through the mallee country, I guess I'll coast it round to Derby in time to jine you in a Leopolds trip."

"I thought you were going home after this rise, Bill," I said quizzically, not surprised to find his early resolutions wavering.

"I'll mebbe see you 'cross the Leopolds first," he replied gravely. "I calc'late I knows that bit o' kintry better'n any white man."

"Goodbye, boys," roared Nuggety Dick and his satellites, waving their shovels from their distant claims, and the echoes were taken up from end to end of the lead, for where I was wholly unknown Mac and Stewart had endeared themselves by devices peculiar to that crafty pair. It was pleasant to receive such a genial send-off, and though I am not as a rule affected by farewell greetings, yet on this occasion I felt strangely moved. The camels and horses stood ready, laden with the great water-bags and unwieldy mining machinery, and Phil was stroking the mane of one of the horses in listless fashion. [Pg 148]

"It's a fairly long trip for you to start on, Phil," I said, noting the far-away expression on his usually bright face.

"I was thinking of *other* things," he answered quietly.

"Gee up, Misery!" cried Mac, cracking his long whip.

"Gee up, Slavery!" echoed Stewart. And we started out, heading N.N.E., bound for the land where the pelican builds its nest.

For the first few miles we crossed the gridiron-like tracks connecting the numerous camps and settlements lying out from the main township of Kalgoorlie; but soon these signs of civilisation vanished, and in the early afternoon our course lay over a wildering scrubland, with iron-shot sand-patches here and there among the stunted shrubs. The camels, which we had named "Slavery" and "Misery," led the trail. They were, indeed, wiry animals, and as I paced beside

them, noting their almost ludicrously leisurely tread, I could not help remarking on the vast amount of latent power indicated in every movement of their rubber-like bodies. "Slavery" was a patient and gentle animal, and marched along meekly under his load of full seven hundred pounds, but "Misery" soon displayed a somewhat fiery temper, and before our first day's journey was completed we were compelled to adopt stern measures with the recalcitrant brute.

The horses formed a sad-looking line behind the sturdier beasts of burden, and they would [Pg 149] cheerfully have forced along at a speedier rate than the progress of the camels allowed. Among them were two high-spirited animals, which we named "Sir John" and "Reprieve," while the three others we dubbed simply "Sin," "Sand," and "Sorrow."

We camped that evening just twelve miles from our starting-point, and yet it seemed as if we were already beyond the reach of civilisation. Not a trace of a white man's presence was visible anywhere, and for the first night we missed the crashing rattle of the ever-working batteries. A deathlike stillness filled the air, broken only by the startled scream of the carrion crow or the weird double note of the mopoke.

"There's any amount of room for prospecting here," hazarded Phil, gazing around, after the horses and camels had been safely picketed. Which was true; yet who could have the heart to sink a proving shaft amid such inhospitable surroundings?

"If we locate an outcrop, boys," I said, "we may trace it up, but otherwise we can only test the surface sands with the dryblower."

It was but vaguely known what kind of country lay far to eastward of us. Many thousands of square miles had never been crossed by any traveller, and strange rumours were often circulated among the miners of the various outposts regarding the extraordinary riches of the vast "Never Never" land. It was even predicted that a great inland river flowed northwards towards the Gulf of Carpentaria; how far it flowed before sinking in the arid sands was a matter for conjecture, but it was confidently supposed to drain fertile valleys, and to be flanked by noble mountain ranges rich in gold and precious gems. It was a rosy enough picture, surely, but one which, [Pg 150] unfortunately, no explorer had yet succeeded in bearing out.

"It's a gran' thing," said Mac thoughtfully, when supper was over, and we were reclining on our blankets gazing at the stars, and listening to the tinkling of the camel bells. "It's a vera gran' thing," he repeated, "tae be alane aince mair, an' wi' the bonnie stars shinin' brichtly abune——"

"Here's a centipede!" roared Stewart, interrupting his comrade's moralising.

"Then pit it in yer pocket, ma man," was the calm reply; and he resumed where he had left off: "Ay, it's a gran' thing, Phil, tae ken that ye're traivellin' in new country, breathin' the bonnie pure air. Noo if ye had been wi' me an' Stewart oot in Alaskie——"

"Spin me a yarn, Mac," said Phil, drawing his blanket closer, while Stewart started up in sheer amazement.

Mac was visibly affected; he took his pipe from his mouth and gazed at the camp fire blankly for some time without speaking. "Ye're a guid an' thochtfu' man, Phil," he said at length with great earnestness, "an' A'll gie ye a rale bonnie story...."

I will pass but briefly over the early days of our march. Our track at first led through the Murchison district, for I wished to make a mid-northerly latitude before steering east; but after leaving the Gascoyne Channel the country traversed was of the most dreary nature, and similar to that around the more desolate southern gold camps. Several soaks were found opportunely when the water-bags were becoming dangerously flat, and our progress continued uneventfully for over a week, but then the formation of the land-surface began to change rapidly for the worse. The dwarfed eucalypti became sparser and sparser, and in their room appeared bushy clumps of saltbush and tufts of spiky spinifex grass. The hard ironsand soil, too, gave place to a white yielding gravel which hindered our advance greatly. The camels, certainly, were not seriously inconvenienced, but the staggering horses sank over the fetlocks at each step, and stumbled forward painfully, while we floundered alongside, almost blinded by the rising iron dust which filled our ears and nostrils.

Our Last View of the Five-Mile Working.

For two days we crossed this disheartening waste, fearing greatly for the safety of the horses, which showed signs of collapse. No water had been located for three days before entering upon this miserable tract, and assuredly none promised on its parched expanse. The horses—poor animals!—fared rather ill in consequence, for we dared not give them much of our rapidly-diminishing fluid supply. On the morning of the third day, however, our course led across slightly-improved country, so that better progress was made, and our chances of finding water were decidedly more encouraging. [Pg 151]

At noon we entered a belt of scrub, and soon were crashing through a miniature forest of stunted mallee; but this state of affairs was not destined to last, for we could see in the distance, at a slightly higher altitude, the open plain extending back into the horizon. At this point Phil considered the indications very favourable for water, and we decided to make a temporary camp, and search the district thoroughly before proceeding. We were preparing to unload the camels, when Stewart, who had gone a little way ahead, came rushing back in great excitement. "Niggers!" he hoarsely whispered. Looking up I saw quite an assembly of stalwart bucks directly in our course, and scarcely two hundred yards in front. Some bushes partially hid them from our view, and they had evidently not yet observed us. They were well equipped with spears and waddies; probably they were out on a hunting expedition, and, if so, it boded well for the resources of the district. [Pg 152]

While we hesitated, debating on our best plan of action, they saw us, and gave vent to a series of shrill yells, yet were apparently undecided whether to resent our presence or escape while they might. Then a shower of spears whizzed through the air, but fell short, and buried their heads in the sand at our feet. We were just out of range of these missiles, luckily enough. My companions were not disposed to tolerate such tactics, and Mac discharged his gun, loaded with small shot, at the hostile band. They waited no longer, but made a wild rush into the densest part of the scrub, and were quickly lost to sight. Then we proceeded onwards warily, whilst far in the distance the branches crackled and broke before the fleeing horde. The scene of their stand was littered with fragments of brushwood, and the dying embers of a fire smouldered in the centre of a small clearing close by. All around, shields, spears, and boomerangs lay scattered as they had been thrown when their owners took to flight. The sight was curiously strange and impressive.

My usually loquacious companions had been wonderfully silent during the last day or so, owing, perhaps, to the uninspiring nature of our environment, but now Mac succeeded in launching into a lengthy diatribe, in which he consigned the blacks generally to a very warm climate indeed.

"At the same time," said he, "we shidna forget that such inceedents serve a vera usefu' purpose."

"They seemed rale dacent black buddies," reflectively murmured Stewart.

"And they entertained the laudable desire of puncturing us with 'rale dacent' spears," Phil added shortly.

The camels stood patiently within the clearing, with their long necks outstretched, and their heads moving up and down with the regularity of automatons; the horses straggled behind, gasping feebly. [Pg 153]

"We'd better make a halt right here, boys," I said; "the horses seem played out completely." So while Mac and Stewart were engaged in the work of unloading them, Phil and I made a minute survey of our surroundings. A huge breakwind guarded the circular space, and behind it a well-

padded track led backwards into a richly-foliaged dell. Creeping plants and luxurious ferns grew in profession around the base of a single lime-tree which found root in the hollow, and a long wiry kind of grass flourished abundantly under its genial shade.

"I'll investigate the cause of such unusual vegetation," Phil said, stepping forward.

"Look out for snakes," I warned; then turned to assist Mac in raising poor "Sorrow," who had rolled over on the ground, pack-saddle and all.

"The puir beastie's feenished," Mac said sorrowfully, "an' nae wunner."

"Here's anither ane," wailed Stewart, and I looked up to see him wildly endeavouring to keep "Sin" from falling on the top of sundry cooking utensils. It was plain that two at least of the horses could go no further if fortune did not speedily favour us.

"This is the deevil's ain countrie," groaned Mac helplessly, and for the moment I felt utterly disheartened as I watched the poor animals convulsively gasping on the sand.

A shout from Phil drew my attention. "There's a spring here, boys," he cried gleefully from the lime-tree hollow.

It was a welcome discovery; I had almost despaired of finding water in the vicinity. "We'll camp for the day," I said, "and give our pack train a much-needed rest."

The spring was a small one and beautifully clear; its waters gurgled gently through a fissure in a white kaolin formation, and the surplus flow was absorbed by the spreading roots of the climbing growths mentioned. It was half hidden by an outjutting boulder, and further cunningly screened from view by a heavy clump of overhanging grass. Evidently the blacks were in the habit of camping here frequently; the breakwind might have been erected for one night's shelter, but the track towards the well had been long in use. [Pg 154]

"I hope our landlords do not visit us to-night," Phil remarked, as we gazed at each other through the smoke of our camp fire some little time later.

"It wud be a vera onfort'nate happenin'," Mac grunted placidly, drawing his gun closer.

"They're mebbe cannibals," suggested Stewart uneasily.

"We'll keep a watch in case of accident," I said; "but I don't expect they'll give us any trouble."

But Stewart was still uneasy. "Their spears ha' an ex-tra-or'-nar' bluid-thirsty look," he grumbled again, examining the double-barbed weapons he had collected, "an' I hae nae faith whitever in they black-skinned heathen."

However, the night passed without alarm, though we kept a careful watch and were ready for an attack should any have been attempted.

We continued our march next morning, and in less than half an hour had emerged into open country, but now the surface soil was of a hard, gravelly nature, liberally strewn with the iron pebbles so abundant in more southerly latitudes. Straggling growths of mallee and mulga spread everywhere, and at their roots reptiles and numberless nameless pests seemed to abide. Black snakes writhed across our path, centipedes squirmed over our boots, iguanas in myriads started before our approach, and flying creatures with hard, scaly wings rose from the shadeless branches and dashed into our faces. Flies in dense clouds assailed us, causing indescribable torture, and the diminutive sand insect was also extremely active, seeking into our socks and ragged clothing despite our most stringent precautions. [Pg 155]

For over a week we journeyed across this dreary wilderness, nor did we once observe a break in the horizon's even curve; the weather, meanwhile, being of sweltering description. Then a dim haze towards the north-east gradually outlined into a well-defined mountain range as we advanced, and the country in general took on a more irregular appearance. We were now nearing the line of the explorer Wells's northward march, and I altered our course slightly in order to intersect it at a point where a good water supply was charted, for four days had elapsed since we had last discovered any trace of moisture.

All that day we forced onwards wearily, the sun beating down upon us mercilessly the while. No more desolate tract could be imagined than that which lies in these latitudes: the motionless mallee and mulga shrubs, the glistening beady surface over which we dragged our feet, the quivering heat haze that so distorted our vision, and the solemn stillness—the awful stillness of a tomb—all tended to overwhelm the mind. A broken range of sandstone hills loomed clearly out of the haze early in the afternoon, directly in our track, and I again shifted the course so as to round their southern extremity. Towards the south the sand wastes extended far as the eye could reach, but east and north many mouldering peaks now interrupted our view.

We found the spring without difficulty; it contained about forty gallons of muddy water, over which a thick green scum had gathered, and it was simply moving with animal life. Many bones of doubtful origin lay heaped near to it; some were probably the remains of kangaroos killed by the natives, of whom there were numerous signs in the neighbourhood, but Phil insisted that not a few human bones were among the bleaching mass. At the bottom of the spring the complete vertebræ of several snakes and similar reptiles almost wholly covered the chalky, impervious base, but how these came to be there was a matter beyond my comprehension. [Pg 156]

"Most probably," said Phil, "the natives like a snaky flavour in the water."

"It mak's it extra paleetable tae them, nae doot," groaned Mac with a shudder, "but I hae nae parshiality fur crawly bastes, even when they're deid."

Stewart had by this time acquired a philosophical turn of mind. "What's the guid o' growlin', Mac?" he snorted. "There's mebbe waur than that tae come yet."

That we were in a district favoured by the blacks was very certain, although we had not yet observed any of the dusky savages; three or four breakwinds sheltered a space close to the spring, and the ground was black with burnt-out smokes and charred logs. The water, notwithstanding its pronounced medicinal flavour, was a great improvement on the fetid solutions of the various soaks we had encountered, and we decided to camp by it for several days, so as to test the auriferous resources of the surface sands, which looked rather promising, and also to give us time to make some much-needed repairs in our tattered wardrobe.

The results of our experiments with the supposed auriferous country proved too insignificant for more than a passing mention here. A few colours were obtained, but nothing to give confidence to even the most unambitious goldseeker. Rather disconsolately we prepared to resume our march in a more N.E. direction, and three days later we started on our altered course. The [Pg 157] eternal sameness of things in the Australian interior makes daily records of progress unentertaining reading, and though each day's travel comes back to my mind now as I write with painful vividness, yet it but cries out in the same strain as its predecessor and follower, "Sand, sand, everlasting sand."

For many miserable days and weeks we struggled eastward, sometimes deviating to the north or south in vain endeavour to escape unusually deterrent belts of the frightful wastes now so familiar to us all.

Sometimes we would locate a soak or claypan when least expecting such a find, and again, we might be reduced to almost certain disaster before the water-bags were replenished at some providential mudhole in our course. I do not wish to enlarge upon the miseries of our journeyings; we took these willingly on ourselves at the start, hoping for a compensating reward in the shape of valuable knowledge; and is not experience always priceless? Knowledge we did gain, it is true, but not of the kind we had over-fondly anticipated; still, we had not yet reached the planned limit of our expedition, and who knew what might await us in the dim, shadowy mountain that stretched its cumbering height far on the eastern horizon?

We had sighted this landmark nearly a week before, but having been more than usually zealous in our search for the precious metal among the outcropping iron formations now frequently encountered, our rate of travel had been reduced to a few miles each day. Two of the horses were still left us; the last of the ill-fated three had succumbed from sheer exhaustion nearly fifty miles back, but "Sir John" and "Reprieve," though no longer the high-spirited animals they once were, still carried their jolting burdens of tinned meats, flour, and extracts, though their steps were [Pg 158] daily becoming weaker, and their bright eyes clouding in a manner that foretold the worst. The camels stubbornly paced ahead, with the great water-bags tantalisingly lapping their tough hides, and the miscellaneous mining implements perched on their hollow backs; they had already served us well and nobly, and I devoutly hoped their vast energies would bear them over the worst that lay before us.

TAKING OUR POSITION.

EL DORADO!

[Pg 159]

We were now close on the 125th degree of longitude, which I had marked as the limit of our eastward course, and my faith in more northerly latitudes was so little, indeed, that I dreaded making any change in our direction of travel.

"If we don't strike gold within the next couple of days," said Phil, "there isn't much likelihood of our being overburdened with wealth at the end of the trip."

Mac, who was pulling the nose rope of the leading camel, at once lifted up his voice in protest.

"For Heaven's sake be mair pleasant wi' yer remarks, Phil," he cried. "I was calculatin' on goin' home like a young millionaire——"

"You'll need to calculate again, then, Mac," interrupted Phil, "for I don't think we'll get a red cent out of the ground on this journey."

But the complainer was not yet satisfied.

"What's the guid o' bein' a golologist?" he demanded wrathfully. "I thocht——"

What he thought remained unspoken, for at that moment we heard a scramble behind, and looking round we saw the doughty Mac and his compatriot Stewart engaged in fierce conflict.

"I saw it first, ye red-heided baboon," roared the former, with remarkable fluency of expression.

"The fact o' seeing it is naething—naething at a'," returned the other with great complacency, "It's sufficient to say that I hae got it." [Pg 160]

The camels, feeling the strain of guidance relaxed, had come to a halt, and were now seemingly taking an interest in the squabble. It was a rare thing for them to be left to their own devices, even for a moment. Time is precious when crossing these vast salt tracts, and midday stoppages in the blazing sun are dangerous.

"What are you two quarrelling about now?" I asked sternly, feeling in no gentle mood with the hinderers. Mac's face assumed an intensely aggrieved expression, but he held his peace, and Stewart calmly displayed a small rounded pebble between his finger and thumb, announcing

blandly that it alone was the cause of the disturbance.

"It's a bonnie stane," said he, gazing at his treasure admiringly.

"An' it's mine by richt," howled Mac.

I was about to lecture the pair strongly on their foolish behaviour over what I supposed to be an ordinary fragment of white quartz, when Phil uttered an exclamation, and, rushing back, snatched the pebble from Stewart's hand and proceeded to examine it closely. So eager was his scrutiny that in a moment we were clustered round him, awaiting his verdict with extreme interest.

"What do you make of it?" said he at length, handing the stone to me.

"Weather-worn quartz," I replied promptly. He shook his head.

"We'll work it out in specific gravity later," he said, with the air of one who was sure of his ground; "but I will bet you this half of a shirt I am wearing that it's a genuine ruby, and there must be more of them in the vicinity."

"Hurroo!" yelled Mac and Stewart in unison, prancing around delightedly, and for the moment [Pg 161]
Phil's delinquencies were forgotten in the tribute of praise that my worthy henchmen generously accorded the "gololologist." They ended by making him a present of the fateful gem, though Mac somewhat spoilt the effect of the gift by soliloquising rather loudly—

"It'll be well to propeetiate the gololologist, Stewart, my man, for he's nae sae stupid as he looks, efter a'."

Soon after we renewed our march, much uplifted at the thought of acquiring treasure even more valuable than gold; but though we kept a sharp look-out on the ground surface, the early afternoon passed without any further coloured pebbles being discovered, whereat Mac again commenced to revile the country with his customary eloquence.

"That ruby wis a delooshun," he asserted stoutly. "Some o' the El Dorado fairies must ha'e put it there on purpose to deceive us, an' noo they'll be having grand fun at oor expense."

"Hustle along old Misery, and don't moralise," I interjected hastily.

"Moralise?" he echoed. "Me moralise? No vera likely. I never dae such a thing. Gee up, Meesery, an' stop winkin' at me this meenit."

But the mention of El Dorado had aroused in Stewart a strain of recollection, and as he paced beside his cumbrous charge he made several ineffectual attempts to recite some ancient verses as learned in the days of his youth.

"I canna mind the poetry o' it," he broke out at last, "but the story was real bonnie; it telt hoo a warrior went out to seek for El Dorado, and—and——" Then his memory came back to him, and he chanted out dismally

— [Pg 162]

"And as his strength
Failed him at length,
He met a pilgrim shadow.
'Shadow,' said he,
'Where can it be,
This land of El Dorado?'

'Over the mountains
Of the moon,
Down the valley of the
Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,'
The Shade replied,
'If you seek for El Dorado.'"

"Which is," grunted Mac, "which is, metaphorically speaking, preceesely what we are doing. Gee up, Meesery, and dinna look sae weary-like."

"Our specimen must have been shed from that mountain," I repeated, when we lay down in our blankets at night.

The morning dawned clear and beautifully calm. The sky was cloudless, save where in the east a billowy sea of gold marked where the sun had risen. The leafless branches of the mulga shrubs growing near quivered in the rising rays, and the long sand-track ahead sparkled as the waters of a gilded ocean. But now, through the dispelling haze the firm outline of a precipitous mountain became clearly visible only a few miles ahead. In our eager search on the preceding afternoon we had not observed the nearness of the welcome sentinel, or probably it was that the darkening sky in the early evening had shut it from our view. There was certainly no doubt about its presence now, and we hailed it right gladly as we watched it loom out of the dissolving mists.

"It's mebbe a mirage," suggested Stewart apprehensively.

"Nary miradge," retorted Mac; "it's El Dorado, that's what it is. Just what we were looking for."

Five minutes later I was ogling the sun with my sextant, while Phil stood by with the trusty chronometer in his hand to note the time of my observations. [Pg 163]

"125 degrees 17 minutes east longitude," he announced, after a rough calculation, "which makes the mountain about ten miles off."

"'Shadow,' said he,
'Whaur can it be,
This land o' El Dorado?'"

Stewart trolled out lustily as he set about the preparation of the morning meal. About eight o'clock we were ready to start, which showed unusual alacrity in our movements. The camels, too, seemed imbued with fresh life, and allowed themselves to be loaded without their customary protests.

"I've never seen Meesery sae tractable," Mac said in amazement, patting the trembling nostrils of the leading camel. "I wonder what's gaun to happen?"

"We're all ready," sung out Phil blithely, and I gave the usual signal for the advance.

"Gee up, Meesery," grunted Mac.

"Aince mair, Slavery," implored Stewart, and we set out for the mountain at an unusually lively pace. The forenoon passed without event, and so speedy had been our progress that our midday halt was made amongst the straggling timber belt which feathered the base of the mountain. We lost no time in making ready for the ascent, and within an hour after our arrival we had hobbled the camels and were starting out on our journey of discovery.

For the first half-hour we made fairly good headway through the straggling belt of eucalypti covering the lower slopes, then we emerged on a treeless, boulder-strewn expanse, on which the sun scintillated with burning intensity. Over this scorched area we clambered as best we could. [Pg 164] The sharp rubble cut through our boots, and the glistening rocks, hot as a fiery furnace, burnt our clutching hands. Our mountain exploration was surely becoming less of a picnic than we had anticipated. Directly above, a solid mass of basalt reared its head, gaunt and bare, but when we came to the edge of the glass-like cap, we hesitated—we might as well have attempted to cross a field of molten metal. From this point various dry channels tore down the face of the hill, radiating outwards into the plain. They were so silted up with rock fragments and ironsand as to be scarcely perceptible, but Phil's trained eye at once noted their significance.

"Ages ago," said he, "those gullies were filled with rushing torrents, which goes to prove that a crater lake existed on the top of the mountain."

He walked over to one of the ancient beds and scraped among the drift of black sand conglomeration. At once several water-worn specimens of quartzite were uncovered, and of these over fifty per cent. bore the characteristic markings of the ruby.

"Fill your pockets with these, Mac," he said quietly. "They should be worth considerably more than their weight in gold."

Prolonged travelling in Western Australia does not tend to develop enthusiasm, and the extraordinary find so unexpectedly made was greeted by no extravagant manifestations of delight. Relief rather than joy was ours at that moment, for in one important sense at least our quest seemed surely ended.

"If we can find water in the vicinity we'll camp at the foot of the hill for a few days, boys," I announced with much satisfaction. "Meanwhile we had better explore a little further, and see what the country looks like from the summit."

A Native Camp.

But Mac and Stewart were already busily engaged collecting specimens, which they stowed in every nook and corner of their ragged garments. [Pg 165]

"Come along, you gloating misers!" cried Phil, as he and I started to negotiate the last stiff climb.

"There's nae time like the present," growled Mac oracularly, pursuing his congenial task with supreme content.

"I'm o' the same opeenion," spluttered Stewart, who had turned his mouth into a receptacle for the finest gems in his collection. So we crawled over the smooth climaxing dome alone. Our surprise was great when on reaching the top we found ourselves on the edge of a small circular area that depressed ever so slightly towards the centre, providing a space which looked remarkably like an ordinary circus ring. This impression was much heightened by the fact that a well-marked path seemed to have been worn around the periphery; but through what agency this had been done I could not well imagine. We stood surveying the odd arena, filled with wonder.

"It is one of Nature's strange tricks," I said, after a considerable silence.

Phil looked doubtful, but he did not speak. Then we made a further discovery. The saucer-shaped hollow was graven out of a solid lava formation, but exactly over the point of its deepest dip several crumbling branches lay strewn. Of a certainty they had not come there of their own accord, and at once we were overwhelmed with dire misgivings.

"It means that there are some native tribes in the neighbourhood," said Phil, watching me kick aside the branches with much interest. What we saw then did not add to our bewilderment, for we had already partly guessed the significance of the peculiar arrangement. Under the layer of brush, a narrow, funnel-like shaft had been hid, which apparently descended into the heart of the [Pg 166] mouldering desert sentinel, but why this hole had been covered was more than we could understand. While we stood in silent contemplation of the remarkable state of affairs disclosed, our energetic companions, having marvelled at our long absence, swarmed up beside us, breathing heavily.

"Nebuchadnezzar's furnace wouldna be in the same street wi' that biler," began Mac, patting his scantily-covered knees with tender solicitude.

"I smell nigger," howled Stewart, taking in the scene at a glance.

"That's aye what happens when A come oot withoot my gun," sorrowfully muttered the first arrival, moving over to the narrow crater mouth and peering into the darkness with studied nonchalance.

It so happened, however, that the loose pockets of his flimsy upper garment were filled to overflowing with cherished specimens, and the half-kneeling attitude which he assumed allowed them to escape in a copious stream, so that they fell down into the depths. With a bellow of rage he drew back, but not before the bulk of his treasure had disappeared; then the air was filled with the fulness of his wrath, and sulphurous expressions loud and deep were hurled into the Stygian gloom.

"Calm yersel', Mac—calm yersel'," adjured Stewart soothingly.

"Calm be d—— d!" roared the afflicted one. "Hoo am I goin' to get back my rubies?"

This was a point which seemed unanswerable.

"You'll get more to-morrow, Mac," I said, "but we'll have to return to the camels now, in case the natives get a hold of them before we have time to take precautions."

He remained unappeased, however.

"We'll mebbe hae to flee for oor lives afore morning," he protested gloomily. "It's no the first time we've had to strike camp in a hurry." [Pg 167]

As he spoke he unwound from his waist a long coil of rope which he usually carried in case of emergency, and, with dogged determination, proceeded to sound the depths of the well.

"You'd better let me gang," advised Stewart, guessing his companion's intentions before they had been uttered; "I'm no sae bulky as you, an'——"

He got no further.

"Mak' nae mair allooshuns," came the answer, with a chilling dignity. "I'll engineer this funeral mysel'."

Hastily fastening a fragment of rock to the end of the rope, he dropped it into the narrow orifice and carefully noted the length of line run out. All this time Phil and I had made little comment, never expecting that any satisfactory bottom would be found; but great was our surprise to see the rope become stationary when little over twenty feet had been paid out.

"I'm really anxious to know what is at the bottom of that hole, Mac," said Phil; "but I hope you don't find a nice fat, healthy crocodile awaiting you——"

"Haud the end o' the rope, Phil, an' dinna speechify," broke out the harassed Mac impatiently; and he wriggled his somewhat substantial form into the vertical channel until his arms alone saved him from falling down altogether.

"It's a—a tight fit," he grumbled, with diminishing enthusiasm. "Noo haud on tight, ye deevils; haud on—haud on!"

His voice rumbled up dolorously to our ears as we lowered him gently into the mysterious pit, until, when the lower depths were reached, the rocky vault seemed to tremble with vague echoes. Suddenly the strain on the rope was relaxed, and we waited expectantly for tidings from the adventurer. [Pg 168]

"It's vera dark doon here," came the ghost-like voice from the underground. "I think—I think I'll come up——"

"What sort of bottom have you got, Mac?" I shouted. "Try and fetch up a specimen."

A few more inconsequent remarks issued from the pit mouth, then we could see the dull glimmer of a match far below. Almost immediately after a jubilant yell of triumph swelled up to the surface.

"I've got them! I've got them!" he cried. "An' there's gold quartz here, foreby." Then came a crash, a rumble, and a dull, heavy splash, and we on the surface gazed on each other in dismay.

"Let me doon! Let me doon!" wailed Stewart. "Something serious has happened to Mac. Haud on to the rope." He let himself into the narrow aperture with unwonted agility, and, with an unspeakable fear in our hearts, Phil and I commenced to pay out the rope.

"Wha the—who the—— Wha's blockin' the licht?" bellowed a well-known voice from the bowels of the earth, which had the effect of ejecting Stewart into the outer air with a celerity astonishing to behold. Then we breathed again.

Apparently some ledge had first intercepted our sounding-line, and also provided a precarious foothold for our valiant associate; but that the true bottom had now been reached there was little room for doubt.

"I might have guessed before," said Phil, "that the crater would have an impervious base, and so retain any rain that might be collected."

Judging by the snorts and puffs emitted by the individual who was in a position to know, the shaft must have held a fair amount of liquid contents.

"Haul on the rope, for heaven's sake!" spluttered he. "This water would pushion a nigger. Haul me up quick! There's snakes an' wee crocodiles tickling me!" [Pg 169]

In haste we endeavoured to obey his beseeching call, but the sodden cord was not equal to the strain, and twice the strands snapped before our comrade's bulk was raised from the water.

"We'd better double the line, boys," I said. "Mac must have increased in weight during his sojourn below."

The unfortunate victim of his own prowess groaned lugubriously from his dank and dark prison, but found time between his grumbling to curse right heartily the various denizens of his watery environment.

"Be patient, Mac, be patient," counselled Stewart, rearranging the haulage system. "Scientific exploration is not without its drawbacks, as you should well ken by this time." He continued addressing choice words of wisdom to his helpless compatriot while he deftly spliced the rope. During this lull in operations I chanced to look abroad over the sweltering plain, and at once my eyes detected the curling "smokes" of a native camp. We had been too busily engrossed with other matters since our arrival on the hill-top to observe the landscape on the east, and now the nearness of a possible hostile band appalled me. Our rifles had been left in camp, and I only carried a revolver.

"By Jove!" said Phil, "we are going to be in a fix." Then a shout of alarm broke from him: "There's about a dozen of the ugliest bucks I ever saw coming right up the hill," he said feebly. I followed

his gaze, and, sure enough, I could see a number of hideously-scarred and feather-bedecked warriors making their way through the scraggy brushwood, scarcely a hundred yards from where we stood. With frantic haste, we again endeavoured to rescue our companion from his awkward predicament, but fate was surely against us. We had with our combined efforts raised him only a few feet when the rope came in contact with the broken ledge, and the strands parted like so many straws, so that Mac was once more precipitated back into the slimy waters. Our plans had now to be made quickly. [Pg 170]

"Go down to the camp, Stewart," I said, "and fetch a camel pack-rope and my rifle. Phil and I will make the best of things till you come back." Forgetful alike of the burning rock and the sharp-edged rubble, he slid down the smooth declivity, and made a wild burst for the foot of the hill. Almost immediately the many-barbed spears of the aborigines bore into view from the opposite side of the dome, and we laid ourselves flat on the curving wall and breathlessly waited events. Slowly a weird procession filed on to the elevated platform, and continued a solemn march around the well-trod channel which had first claimed our attention. Round and round they circled, clashing their spears and shields, and swaying their lithe black bodies drunken-like. Then suddenly they broke out into a dismal chant, and quickened their step into a half-run, ludicrous to behold. It was soon evident to us that the warrior band had not come to level their spears against us; they never once glanced in our direction. Their gaze was apparently fixed on the ancient crater in which Mac lay entombed. They had come to worship the great spirit Wangul, the dreaded "Dweller in the Waters."

The *dénoûement* of this interesting ceremonial was rapid and unexpected. Just when the reeling warriors had ceased their vocal exercise from sheer want of breath, when the ensuing silence was broken only by the pattering of many feet on the sun-baked lava, a hoarse voice thundered up from subterranean caverns, and at the sound the poor nomads halted in their mad career, and gazed at each other terror-stricken. [Pg 171]

"Babba, Wangul, Moori!" they cried shrilly, "Babba, Wangul, Moori!" ("The Water God speaks"). Again a sonorous echo reverberated up from the heart of the mountain, completing their demoralisation. A moment they hesitated, then, dashing their warlike arms to the ground, and tearing the feathers from their hair, they fled madly back whence they had come. Phil gave a gasp of relief, and I felt thankful beyond expression. Then we quickly made our way through the litter of discarded weapons towards the Wangul's home. The words that floated to our ears when we gazed into the depths were sulphurous in the extreme. Poor Mac could not understand why he had been so ruthlessly neglected, and his complaints were deep and eloquent.

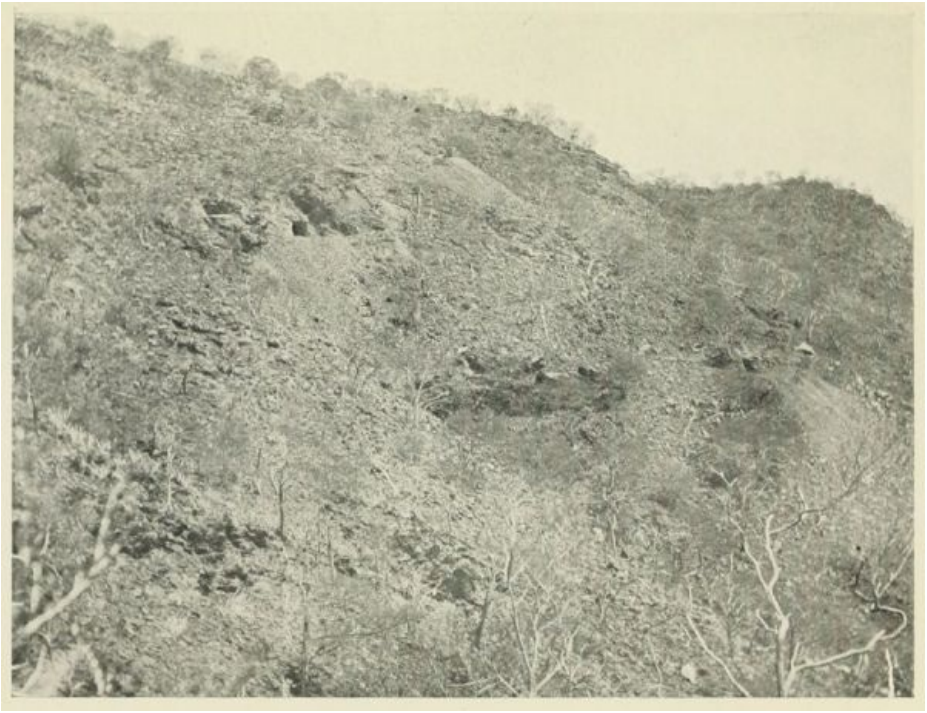
"Stewart, ye red-heided deevil, are ye goin' to pu' me oot, or are ye no?" he howled in righteous indignation, and I was glad that the individual named, who just then came swarming over the rocks, puffing tempestuously, had not heard the fervent malediction bestowed upon his faithful person. He approached laden with the whole armoury of the expedition, the perspiration streaming from his face, and his gaunt frame trembling visibly.

"I thought ye had been all slauchtered," he muttered, subsiding behind his equipment, "an' I wis goin' to hae revenge."

With the aid of the stout camel-ropes we soon raised our dripping comrade to the surface. As he approached the light of day I noticed that his rugged old face bore a distinctly grim expression, as if he was of the opinion that we had been having a huge joke at his expense; but when he heard of what had occurred, and the part he had unwittingly played in the ceremonial, resentment gave place to mirth, and he laughed uproariously. [Pg 172]

"An' here's the rubies, Stewart, my man," he said, extracting the precious stones from some secret corner of his bedraggled wardrobe; "I got them safe efter a', and you shall have the finest are o' the collection for yer maist splendifferous efforts on my behalf."

Soon after we returned to camp, but it was many days later when we said goodbye to the lonely mountain which Mac persisted in misnaming El Dorado.



El Dorado!

WHERE THE PELICAN BUILDS ITS NEST

[Pg 173]

There is little need to recount the monotonous details of my log-book for the many weeks that ensued. The same description applies to nearly all the vast interior country, and we struggled over ironshot sand-plains and through scraggy brushwood belts, with rarely a diversion in the landscape to gladden our weary eyes. The sun shines on no more desolate or dreary country than this great "Never Never" land of Australia, whose grim deserts have claimed many a victim to the cause of knowledge. The explorer's life amid the deadly solitudes is not one of many pleasures. Rather do unpleasant possibilities for ever obtrude upon his jaded brain until he is well-nigh distraught, or at least reduced to a morbid state of melancholy in keeping with his miserable surroundings. Little wonder, therefore, that disaster so often attends the traveller in these lonely lands. The strongest will becomes weakened by the insidious influences of the country, and the most buoyant spirit is quickly dulled. All Nature seems to conspire against him. The stunted mallee and mulga shrubs afford no welcome shade; they dot the sand-wastes in endless even growths, and the eye is wearied by their everlasting motionless presence. The saltbush clumps and spinifex patches conceal hideous reptiles. Snakes and centipedes crawl across the track; [Pg 174] scaly lizards, venomous scorpions, ungainly bungarrows, and a host of nameless pests, are always near to torture and distract. Even the birds are imbued with a solemnity profound that adds still more to the plenteous cares that already overwhelm the wanderer in the silent bushland. The pelican stands owlishly in his path as if to guard from intrusion its undiscovered home; the horrible carrion crow with its demoralising croak is for ever circling overhead; and the mopoke's dull monotone is as a calling from a shadowy world.

These various influences were not without their effect upon my little party, and we became strangely silent as we kept up our dogged march of fifteen miles each day; and when danger threatened, as it did on more than one occasion, we almost viewed our approaching fate with indifference, so sodden had our mental faculties become. Eleven days after leaving the mountain, our last horse, "Sir John," dropped quietly to the ground, utterly exhausted, and at once the air was filled with screaming crows, and flies in thousands began to settle on the dying animal's heaving flank, and crowded into his ears and nostrils. I ended the poor brute's agony with a revolver shot, and again old "Slavery" received additional burden; then we hastened onwards, not daring to look back.

We were now many hundreds of miles from any outpost settlement, and with only two camels between us and—eternity. Yet these ponderous animals bore up bravely, seldom showing signs of weakness even when crossing the most dismally arid wastes, and their slow but sure movement raised our drooping spirits when our circling crow convoy became suggestively daring. I made a course due north, determined to intersect any promising country that might intervene in the middle latitudes, but so far our changed route had led us full three hundred miles over the most [Pg 175] barren-looking desert that could possibly be imagined.

Only once did we observe natives, and that was when under the 23rd Parallel, in a scrubby country offering the only inducement to the poor nomads within a hundred miles. At this place we located a local well containing, seemingly, an unlimited supply of lime-flavoured fluid; our perilously-flat water-bags were thankfully refilled, and our hopes rose high at the unexpected find. But when we renewed our march the scrub-land soon merged into the blistering plain, and our dreams of a coming El Dorado were again rudely dashed.

On one occasion we encountered a stretch of salt-crusted country, evidently the bed of an ancient lake: it extended for five miles in a N.N.E. direction, and towards its latter extremity the surface was marshy and damp. We extracted sufficient moisture from the muddy basin for cooking our usual allowance of rice, so that we might save what remained of our comparatively fresh supply for more urgent needs.

Beyond this swamp we entered upon a more broken expanse than had met our view for many weeks. Decaying sandstone rocks reared their heads above the gravel, and enormous dry gullies tore up the ground in all directions. But this state of affairs did not continue with us long, and, as if by a grim law of compensation, a belt of the most miserable sand country soon intervened to retard our progress. Here the sand was loose and deep, and unmixed with the usual iron gravel; and the slightest wind blew the fine dust into our faces, almost blinding us. We sank over the ankles at each step, and the camels slowed their already slow march to a mere crawl, and staggered and floundered in the wavy masses.

[Pg 176] Gradually the land-surface took on the appearance of a great sand-sea, with billows rolling back in a northwesterly direction. As far as the eye could reach, a series of gentle undulations rippled into the vast distance. I altered the course several points to eastward, and we traversed the disheartening obstacles at a difficult angle; but the undulations grew more general as we advanced, until they surrounded us in the form of seemingly endless furrows, about a hundred and fifty yards apart, and from ten to fifteen feet in height. A sparse vegetation of spinifex found root in the hill-crests, giving the appearance—from a distance—of a huge cultivated and well-tended field. But on closer acquaintance the ridges showed up miserably bare and cheerless, and their white gleaming sand formation caused our eyes to quiver and close, so trying was the light reflected from them. No life of any kind was observed. Even the crows had abandoned us. We seemed to be traversing the bed of an ocean whose waters had long since subsided. A day's march over these hindering obstructions, however, led us into the familiar ironshot and scrub country, which, desolate though it was, looked cool and inviting after our experience with the sand elevations.

More than once after this fortune favoured us opportunely by the happy location of a soak or claypan in our course, and we grew to trust Providence in a much greater measure than we had ever anticipated. The weather was almost unbearably hot; a vertical sun stared down on us in the daytime with burning intensity, and at night the air was as the breath of Hades. We were surely paying the penalty of the pioneer to the full.

By this time our clothing had reached a state far beyond repair, and we must have formed an extraordinarily dilapidated-looking quartet. Our garments, not very lavish from the start, had been discarded in tattered portions, and we were left with cool and scanty apparel, the sight of [Pg 177] which would have caused the most abandoned tramp to turn aside in disgust. It came to be a subject of jocularity with us as we noted the gradual disintegration of our meagre remaining sartorial glory; and I was glad even for such an excuse to introduce the lighter vein into our conversation. "I'll shin be able tae flee," Mac would say, ruefully surveying his rags. "Ay, Mac, the wings are sproutin' awfu' fast," his comrade would sorrowfully reply. "Bit it's a blessin' the weather's no cauld," he never failed to add, with philosophical gratitude.

We were reaching an extreme northerly latitude, with the great central deserts behind us, and though we had been bitterly disappointed with the non-auriferous country crossed, yet the thought of emerging safely from the "Never Never" land for the time took the place of vain regrets and cheered us on to fresh endeavour. We had found no El Dorado in the blistering salt plains; the Land of Promise had eluded us completely—if such a land existed. Our time, it is true, had been more taken up in searching for water than prospecting for gold; still, we took occasion to analyse samples of every probable gold-bearing patch encountered, but always with insignificant result.

One morning we found ourselves in the unenviable position of having but a few pints of water left in the canvas bags, and as we had located no soak for over a week, our immediate future seemed gloomy indeed. The camels were for the first time showing signs of collapse; and little wonder; they had gone eight days without a drink, and their load, since the last of the horses had succumbed, had been unduly heavy.

"We've got to find water to-day, boys," I said, "or something serious is bound to happen."

[Pg 178] Mac chuckled dryly. "The deil aye tak's care o' his ain," he announced with an effort at pleasantry; and Stewart cackled harshly in agreement.

Soon after breakfast, Phil, in surveying the landscape by the aid of his field-glasses—a very cherished possession—detected in the distance a long, curling column of smoke, sure evidence of the aborigines' presence, and at once our hearts became lighter and our waning strength renewed. "There must be moisture of some sort about," I said to Phil, as we staggered along together in the wake of the camels. "The country is changing for the better," he replied, "yet I can scarcely imagine a spring to exist in any such soft sand formation." The vagaries of the interior plains had always mystified him, but he could not be brought to reason against his geological

principles.

Mac's verdict was borne of a more practical kind of observation. "Fur ony sake haud yer tongue aboot furmashuns, Phil," he shouted back from his position by the side of "Slavery." "A black buddie needs a drink as weel as a white buddie, an' we'll shin be in the land o' Goschen noo."

"There's one thing we had best remember, boys," I said. "The natives in these latitudes are probably very different from those in the south. They may be cannibals, and considerably more hostile than any tribe we have yet met."

"Niggers!" snorted Mac and Stewart almost simultaneously, with an indescribable inflection of contempt. Further words failed them, but I could see that they had completely forgotten the little episode at El Dorado.

Towards noon we arrived at the point where the smoke had been seen, but only a few charred logs were now in evidence, and they were scattered about in the sand as if they had been partially burnt long previously, and afterwards half submerged in the drifts caused by many seasons' willie-willies. The natives had vanished in some unaccountable manner, leaving not a trace of their recent presence in the vicinity. Far off near the horizon a thick belt of timber stretched across our track, but beyond that again the bare desert merged into the skyline. [Pg 179]

"Whaur hae the black deevils gaun to?" Mac demanded indignantly, as if a considerable breach of etiquette had been committed by the rapid flight of our prospective hosts.

Then Stewart proceeded to poke among the scattered ashes, and soon discovered several still glowing logs well sunk beneath the surface. "Mac," said he solemnly, when we clustered round to examine his find, "we'll hae tae ca' canny; the deevils are no defeecient in strategy, an' it's plain they dinna want oor guid company."

Stewart was right; the blacks must have observed our approach, and being unwilling to meet us, had hastily decamped, first taking care to cover up any clue that might have aroused our curiosity. "That field-glass of yours has done good work, Phil," I said, when we turned away. "If you had not noticed the smoke we should never have dreamed that there had been any one here for at least a year, and goodness knows what might have happened if we had gone to sleep in this district without keeping a watch."

Mac chirruped to his patient charge. "Gee up, Slavery," said he, "ye'll get a drink the nicht."

In spite of our most strenuous efforts, however, we were unable to reach the timber belt that day, and darkness closed over and compelled us to camp while we were yet a good way out in the open. For the last several miles the camels had literally to be dragged over the ground by a constant pressure on their nose ropes, and when we halted our weary caravan and unloaded the suffering beasts, they sank upon their knees breathing heavily, and made no attempt to search for anything to eat. It was plain that, should another day pass without water being discovered, our four-footed companions must give up the struggle, which in turn would mean that we should all be doomed to a most unenviable fate. [Pg 180]

"Ma puir animile," said Mac, stroking "Slavery's" quivering nostrils, "ye've been nine days withoot a drink, but ye'll get a' ye can tak' the morn."

"Slavery" seemed almost to understand the sympathetic words, and grunted feebly in reply; then I was surprised to see him struggle to his feet and proceed to feed on the spinifex tufts growing around.

"He kens I'm tellin' the truth!" shouted Mac delightedly; and there was much joy among us when "Misery," determined not to be outdone, after several efforts succeeded in rising shakily and joining his neighbour.

"There's life in auld 'Misery' yet," applauded Stewart with hearty satisfaction; and the wonderful endurance shown by the dumb animals made me somewhat ashamed of my own collapsing resolution.

"Let's be happy, boys," counselled Phil in most lugubrious tones. "Life is short, you know, and we'll be a long time dead."

"If I hear ony mair o' they on-comfortable re-marks," slowly spoke Mac, with a reproachful glance at the last speaker, "I'll sing ye the Deid March. A lang time deid, did ye say? For ony sake, Phil, think on something cheery."

"All right, Mac," retorted Phil. "I'll think of the feast we're going to have in the Hotel Cecil when we get back to civilisation." While he spoke he unconsciously hitched in his belt another hole.

Then Stewart's voice rasped out dismally, "There's ... nae ... place like ... hame——" [Pg 181]

"Stop that concert!" I cried, while Phil squirmed in agony; but Mac had already seized the throat of the musician in a relentless grip, and the melancholy refrain spluttered out spasmodically to a finish.

"Ye on-ceevilised backslider!" Mac roared in righteous wrath. "Hoo daur ye whine aboot hame in sic a menner? Fur twa peens," he concluded, with rising ferocity—"fur twa peens, ma man, A'd shak' yer teeth oot!"

The half-choked culprit smiled with benign expression, "I wis makin' a joyfu' noise," he replied calmly. "Ye're gettin' gey hard tae please, I'm thinkin'."

Phil laughed till the tears sprang to his eyes and traced small channels down his unwashed face, but he stopped abruptly when Mac shoved a tin pannikin under his chin.

"What a sinfu' waste o' water," said the sphinx. "I raelly wunner at ye, Phil."

Stewart, who had been busying himself about the fire, now interrupted again. "Supper's ready," he howled, "an' the menoo is tinned dug an' damper, or damper an' tinned dug; wi' a puckle roasted rice fur them as wants indee-gestion; the hale tae be washed doon wi' twa or three draps o' dirty watter."

"That sounds nice," I commented, at which he began again.

"Aye an' it's vera dirty watter. It's the last in the bag, an' there's tadpoles an' wee crocodiles swimmin' in't, an——"

"Hold hard, Stewart," said Phil, while Mac was groping about for something substantial to throw at his comrade's head. "Hold hard, you grinning gorilla, and let us discover the mysterious ingredients of our humble fare for ourselves."

"There's an auld saying," Mac grunted complacently, "that what the eye disna see the hert disna grieve fur. If ye'll tak' ma advice, ye'll dine awa' back frae the firelicht." And we took his advice without demur. [Pg 182]

We kept a watch that night for the first time during many weeks. The reputation of the Northern Australian natives was not such as inspired confidence in me. I had a wholesome dread of being speared while asleep, and these hostile savages were known to make their attacks invariably after the sun had set, when their tired victims were probably slumbering, unaware of the presence of danger.

Mac volunteered for the first spell of duty, and as a preliminary he carefully drew the small shot charges from his cherished elephant-gun, and replaced them with ominous-looking buckshot cartridges.

"This shid dae mair than tickle them," he grimly remarked, looking at us as we lay stretched upon our sandy couches, and his face, lit up by the ruddy glare of the fire, assumed an unusually malevolent expression.

"You've got to remember, Mac," Phil warned, "that the beggars are probably cannibals, and as you are the fattest of the party, the natural sequence is——"

"Say nae mair," our wary guardian interrupted with a deprecatory wave of his hand, "Spare yer in-seen-uashuns. There's nae nigger'll get near while I'm daein' sentry go, bit at the worst the black deevils wud never bile me when they could get guid tender golologist." With which dark statement he shouldered his gun and commenced to execute what looked like a solemn ghost dance around the boundary of our camp fire's illumination.

The sultry hours dragged slowly on, and the Southern Cross had set and risen again in the eastern sky, yet not a sound reached our ears. Phil relieved Mac at midnight, and I in turn took his place two hours later, but the night passed without alarm.

An Extinct Volcano we camped on.

We had a very dry and unpalatable breakfast next morning; only a few drops of chocolate-coloured sediment remained in the canvas bag, and this none of us cared to swallow for a variety of reasons. So we munched our hard damper, and chewed refractory portions of tinned dog, [Pg 183]

imagining it to be the most luxurious fare extant, though, unfortunately our imagination was not of a very strong order. We lost no time in making a start, for the early hours were the coolest for travelling, and we wished to gain the shelter of the brush before the sun had swung right overhead. The camels were truly in a very bad state; they could scarcely bear their usual burdens, and reeled drunken-like for several minutes after being loaded, but seemed to recover somewhat when a few miles had been traversed. Yet, strive as we might, we could not make speedy progress, and it was almost noon when we drew near to the timber. The heat was becoming very intense, and in our semi-famished condition we suffered severely.

"We'll camp in the most shaded part of the scrub, boys," I cried, signing to Mac to alter "Slavery's" course more to westward. Phil now clutched my arm excitedly.

"Is that smoke or a light cloud-patch over the tips of these trees?" he asked, directing my gaze towards a thick clump of lime-trees that lay well ahead in the line of our changed route.

I surveyed the feathery shadow indicated intently. "A native smoke, Phil," I answered, as quietly as I could, though hope sprang up within me at the sight.

"What we must do, then," said Phil determinedly, "is to capture one or two representatives of the tribe and make them lead us to water."

"Me an' Stewart'll shin attend to that," growled Mac, hearing the suggestion with ill-concealed delight. [Pg 184]

We were now entering the outskirts of the pigmy forest, and Phil and I took the lead of our caravan with firearms ready in case of attack; while Mac and Stewart, leading their charges warily in our tracks, peered suspiciously into the densest shadows as they passed. The shrubs were of much greater height than we had expected, and soon they surrounded us in thick even growths through which we steered an erratic course with difficulty.

I was about to call a halt when a thick pile of withered branches, propped against the lower heights of some half-dozen close-growing trees, arrested my attention. "A windbreak! Go slow!" I cautioned those in the rear; but soon we found that we were in the midst of quite a number of these rude shelters, all of which seemed to be of very recent erection. "There is evidently a tribe in the vicinity," I said to Phil, who was gazing at the strange contrivances with much curiosity, and noting how differently they were constructed from the crude wind-barriers met during the earlier part of our journey.

"They appear to work on some design here," he remarked thoughtfully; "the branches are interlaced, and the construction might ultimately evolve into a kind of hut or wigwam."

"I am much more concerned about the whereabouts of the population," I said, and I glanced apprehensively through the trees; then we resumed our march. A few minutes more passed in silence as we proceeded with ears alert for the slightest sound.

We were, as nearly as I could guess, about midway through the forest when Mac suddenly gave a yell of mingled joy and surprise.

"Haud on! Haud on!" be shouted. "I see niggers richt forrit a wee bit. Come on, Stewart, an' we'll shin catch are or twa speecimens." [Pg 185]

Mac's information was correct. A convenient gap in the foliage had not been overlooked by him, and his sharp eyes had quickly taken in the view directly ahead. His warning had scarcely been given when we crashed through a maze of windbreaks and entered a clearing in the thicket, and there, in the centre of the open space, fully a dozen hideously scarred and painted warriors stood with spears and boomerangs upraised, gazing in our direction. Mac and Stewart were now forcing past me, and it took Phil and me all our time to restrain their ardour. We had instinctively retired into the shelter of the brush, and none too soon, for a hail of spears rustled through the willowy branches and stuck fast without doing any damage.

"Their spears may be poisoned," I said to the indignant pair. "You've got a different sort of savage to deal with in these latitudes."

"They'll get awa'!" Mac roared excitedly. "They'll get awa'!"

"Let me gang," implored Stewart. "I'm that thin they couldna hit me, an' in ony case I'm teuch eneuch tae staun ony pison."

"Get the camels sheltered, boys," I ordered; "we'll try a policy of conciliation in the first place."

My aides-de-camp grumblingly led "Slavery" and "Misery" back a few paces, and Phil examined the chambers of his Colt Navy with considerable impatience. We were by no means hidden by the scraggy branches fringing the open space, and that fact was impressed upon us most plainly when several more well-directed spears glanced along the sand at our feet. Mac fumed, and the hammers of his gun came back with an ominous double click. "You can cover them with your cannon," I said to him, "while I try the powers of persuasive language," and I stepped as boldly as [Pg 186] I could out towards the hostile band. "Babba, babba," I cried, with my hands raised in token of peace. They gave a curious gurgle of surprise and retreated before me as if afraid. I repeated as much of the native jargon as I knew, with, as I thought, an exceedingly friendly inflection. Then they recovered themselves, and came rushing towards me. I stood irresolute for an instant, for the warriors had discarded their spears, and I wondered for a brief space whether they were now hurrying to tender their expressions of good-will. When they were within a dozen yards off, however, they united in a shrill scream, and brandished in their right hands most bloodthirsty-looking clubs which they had carried secreted at their backs. Their intention could not now be

doubted, and I turned and fled.

"Give them the small-shot barrel, Mac," I cried.

"Sma' shot be d—— d!" he howled in reply, and the boom of his artillery filled my ears as he spoke.

When the smoke cleared away I saw that the blacks had retreated to the extreme end of the clearing, where the bulk of them stood huddled together, groaning horribly, and making most frightful grimaces at us.

Two feather-bedizened warriors were prancing absurdly in the middle distance, and emitting piercing shrieks as they slowly hopped back to rejoin their comrades.

"I aimed low," said Mac apologetically, noting their antics with much satisfaction, "an' I dinna see what they're makin' a' that row aboot."

I was glad to notice that no serious injury had been done to the poor creatures, and, judging by the activity shown by the wounded pair, they were evidently much more frightened than hurt.

"I don't think there is any more fight in them, boys," I said, and I stepped forward, followed by my companions, who tugged at the nose-ropes of the reluctant camels. A few belated missiles, flung [Pg 187] in half-hearted fashion, struck the ground at our feet; the blacks still stood in our path, glaring at us sullenly.

"Level your cannon again, Mac," I instructed, "but *don't* fire."

He obeyed with alacrity, just in time to check a fresh flight of spears. The natives had already acquired a wholesome dread of the formidable-looking breechloader. With ear-splitting yells they scattered before our advance, and in a moment were lost to sight in the forest.

We made a brief halt by the scene of their stand in order to search the near vicinity for water, but not a drop of moisture could be located anywhere around. Wind-breaks were very numerous some little distance back from the enclosure, which showed that we had practically stumbled upon a native village. Yet it must have been only a settlement used as a temporary camp between two known springs, unless the water resources of the district were very cunningly hidden.

"There must be water near at hand," said Phil. "These trees could not grow so freshly otherwise."

"We've missed our one chance, I fear," I answered him sadly. "We ought to have captured one of the natives while we had the opportunity."

"Let us go now," said he; "they cannot be very far off yet."

"We'll gang! we'll gang!" Mac and Stewart cried clamorously together. "We'll shin catch the deevils!"

But I restrained them. "You are both too reckless," I explained, "and we should probably never see you again if you lost your bearings in the bush." I knew that my worthy henchmen would disdain to use any stratagem, and in consequence would surely be speared by the vengeful savages.

"You can trust me, Mac," said Phil grimly. "I'll fetch you a specimen or two to play with," and [Pg 188] Mac, noting his unusual fierceness of expression, felt comforted.

Leaving our over-eager companions in charge of the camels, I took a hurried bearing of our position, and dashed off with Phil in the direction taken by the fleeing band. I could still hear the branches crackling before their wild rush, and I hoped that the sound might guide us in our quest. For several minutes we kept up a rapid pace, but we quickly realised that our running powers were not equal to those of the blacks. The blistering sand showered in our faces, and the brittle twigs of the mallee cut us severely. The sun had now reached his meridian, and shot his rays so fiercely upon us that we were soon compelled to reduce our speed. We dared not allow ourselves to perspire, and so lose the little moisture our bodies contained. Meanwhile the vague crackling of the brushwood in the far distance became fainter and fainter, intimating to us very plainly that our intended prisoners were far from our reach. We were weary and hopeless, yet we mechanically continued on. Our thoughts, as may be guessed, were the reverse of pleasant, and we did not care to give them expression. Few would have recognised in Phil, the fresh-faced, merry-spirited young man who had led the Five-Mile rush. His face was now deeply bronzed, and bore the stamp of the hardships encountered, and his firm-set mouth showed a vastly increased force of will.

"The beggars seem to have vanished completely," he said, when we had travelled at least half a mile in silence. "What a tidy row of skeletons we'll make," he added lightly. "'A rale dacent coleckshun,' as Mac would say."

"We'll hear Mac's remarks later," I answered, "and we're not by any means dead yet."

We had now reached a slight dip in the land surface, and in the depression a well-padded native [Pg 189] track appeared. We followed it eagerly until it broke off into two trails, forming an acute angle.

"You take one, I'll take the other," I said. "If you find anything signal with your revolver, and I'll do the same, though it is more than likely they lead to the same place."

"All right!" he replied, and we separated.

Hurriedly I sped along, now this way, now that, as the trail twisted and twined in the manner peculiar to most bush tracks, and I seemed to have entered a maze. Then I came to a point where it divided and subdivided, and I hesitated, wondering which branch to follow. I went down on my

knees and closely examined the sand at the junction, and after a careful scrutiny I was rewarded by distinguishing the imprint of an aboriginal's ungainly foot at the entrance to one of the offshoots, and I hastened along the course indicated, half stooping and sometimes kneeling, in my extreme anxiety to keep on the pad, which could only be traced with the utmost difficulty.

Gaily-plumaged birds now surrounded me, chattering noisily, and their presence imbued me with hope. There, indeed, must be water near, if I could only find it. My guiding path led me several hundred yards over a sand and gravel surface, through which a stray blade of wiry grass peeped here and there; but gradually the grasses grew closer, and their trampled appearance showed me that some one had only recently crossed that way. I was brought to a halt abruptly. The track had come to an end, and I stood at the edge of a small circular space, in the centre of which a tall lime-tree stretched high above the stunted shrubs adjoining.

The significance of the sight was not altogether lost on me. I had usually found lime-trees and [Pg 190]
water in close proximity, but here no welcome spring gladdened my eyes, the circle was bare and parched-looking, except on the far-away side, where a rank clump of spinifex lined the gaunt stems of the mallee. I was bitterly disappointed.

"Looks like a circus-ring," I said to myself. "Probably used for holding grand corroborees." I turned away in disgust, and sat down in the sand, heedless alike of snakes, scorpions, or other crawling things. I was trying to consider what our immediate future must be, and my deductions were not cheering. Then I wondered where Phil had gone, and whether his quest had been more successful than mine; but I had heard no signal, therefore, I reasoned, he would be in a somewhat similar plight to myself, or perhaps he had already rejoined Mac and Stewart. I continued my musings in a calmly-resigned state of mind, but was suddenly aroused to alertness; the faint sound of rustling branches reached my ears. I got up speedily and looked all round, but nothing could be seen, and I blamed my too eager fancy for the alarm. Glancing at the sun, and taking a rough compass bearing, I prepared to return to my companions by a direct route through the bush. But again the peculiar sound attracted my attention. My fancy had not deceived me this time, and I surveyed the open space closely, but nothing met my anxious gaze. Then, just as I was leaving the scene, the secret of the rustling branches was revealed, and I smiled grimly at my lack of perception. On the extreme edge of the clearing, half hidden by the spidery tendrils of the sparse fringing bush, two natives lay sprawling on the sand, carefully piling a heap of twigs and spinifex grass, as if in preparation for a large fire. They lay with their backs towards me, pursuing their work with diligence, and as the colour of their bodies was [Pg 191]
almost similar to that of their surroundings, they were not easily observable, as I had already proved. I noticed with satisfaction that their weapons were strewn in the grass some few yards out of their reach. These comprised two evil-looking waddies and a number of double-barbed spears—a formidable collection, truly. I examined my small S. and W. revolver with purposeful intent, and was on the point of rushing forward when a loud crackle came from another part of the ring. It seemed to me as if a stout branch had given way before some other, and more impetuous, watcher than myself. More natives might be near. I drew back into the shadow. The dusky pair were evidently wildly alarmed; they leapt to their feet and looked about with a startled expression, and then I recognised them as two of those who had so stubbornly contested our advance less than an hour back. They glared at each other terror-stricken, and pointed to the sun and the four corners of the earth in turn, accompanying their odd gesticulations by a stream of monosyllabic utterances. Apparently they were invoking various gods to their aid. In the midst of this pantomime a well-known figure burst into the enclosure from the still swaying scrub, and before the natives could escape he clutched them both in a tight embrace, and bore them back by almost superhuman effort.

"Phil!" I cried in amazement, jumping forward, and relieving him of one of his prisoners.

"We've got them!" he shouted with fierce emotion. "Keep still, you imp of darkness!"

His prisoner was still struggling violently, but soon realised the hopelessness of his efforts, and became quiescent as mine, who was rolling his eyes at me beseechingly.

Then we looked at each other, half in amusement half in surprise, and I noticed that his sole [Pg 192]
upper garment, his sand-stained shirt, was torn half across the shoulders.

"It caught in a branch," he explained, examining the rent ruefully, "and the noise I made in breaking loose nearly frightened the blacks away."

"But how did you get here?" I asked, for the tracks we had followed seemed to lead very widely apart.

"The trails intersect, but all find their way here," he answered. "Anyhow, I've been watching these beggars building a monument, or something like it, for the last five minutes or so."

"I have had my eye on them also," I said, but I didn't dream of your being so close. Hold my prisoner a moment," I added; "we'll see what they have been doing."

He promptly sat on my savage's neck, while I got up and kicked away the pile of branches. And lo! beneath them lay disclosed a gurgling spring of clearest water.

I could not describe the joy that was ours at that moment. Phil simply gasped with relief, and was not satisfied that his eyes did not deceive him until I lifted some of the sparkling liquid in the palm of my hand and let it trickle slowly through my fingers. The blacks remained passive enough now, only groaning dismally at intervals. It was not difficult to understand why they had attempted to hide the spring. As Stewart had first surmised, they did not want our good company, and who could blame them? There was no need to rejoin our comrades now, so we

discharged our revolvers as a signal to them to approach, and soon their familiar voices were heard far back raised in high debate. Mac was apparently holding forth on some pet doctrine with which Stewart doggedly refused to coincide. They had forced their thoughts far away from unpleasant topics; they knew how necessary it was to keep up a semblance of cheerfulness in [Pg 193] trying times, and for the rest they trusted to my greater experience and Phil's superior knowledge.

The dwarfed trees broke before the advancing train. Poor old "Slavery" was evidently leading the trail at a harder pace than usual.

"Come alang, 'Slavery'! Wad ye hae me pu' ye?" I heard Mac's voice raised in pathetic entreaty, as the swaying brush about a hundred yards back betokened their near approach. A few minutes more and "Slavery" and "Misery" staggered into the clearing, with Mac and Stewart pulling strenuously at their nose-ropes. The poor beasts' eyes were gleaming strangely, and their breath came in long wheezing groans.

"We can hang oot anither day yet," Mac shouted encouragingly immediately he saw us, trying bravely to look cheerful. Then when he noticed the natives on whom we were comfortably seated his astonishment was great. "Guid heavens!" he ejaculated. "Stewart, we've got them efter a'."

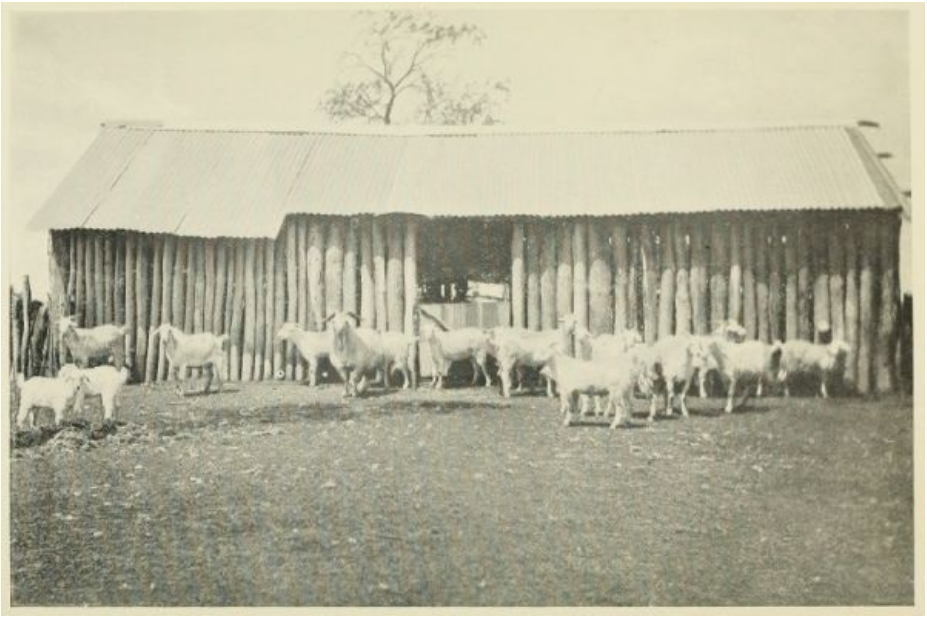
But Stewart had caught sight of the glistening water, and with a fervent exclamation he buried his face in it and drank deeply. The camels now, feeling the tension relieved at their nose-ropes, sank upon their knees dead beat, and their heads drooped in the sand. Phil and I watched the scene in silence: it was as the last act of a drama, with the proverbial happy ending. Mac's rugged features fairly glowed when he saw the saving spring. He strode forward, and jerked his comrade's dripping face from the water. "Dinna mak' a beast o' yerself' he said shortly. "Ower muckle's bad for ye, an' it's ma turn onywey." But they found room for two heads, and Phil said they reduced the level of the water by several inches.

The camels' wants now received attention. We allowed them to drink sparingly only, as they [Pg 194] would quickly have drained the well, which refilled very slowly; but before the day was out they had absorbed their full supply, and were on a fair way towards the recovery of their wonted vigour. We camped by the spring, which we named "Warriors' Well," for two days, during which time we were engaged filling the great water-bags, and patching our tattered clothing so as to make a respectable appearance when we arrived at the nearest settlement, now less than a hundred miles distant. We fed our prisoners lavishly on tinned dog and flour while they remained in our charge, and they seemed to appreciate the diet hugely; yet, do what we might, they retained their sullen demeanour, and always howled plaintively when we approached near them. They made their escape on the morning of our departure, much to Mac's disgust. That worthy had conceived the idea of training them to act in the capacity of body-servants to Stewart and himself.

"They would hae been bonnie orniments tae tak' hame tae auld Scotland," he said regretfully.

"We'll be bonnie-like orniments oorsels, Mac," responded Stewart, surveying his dark-brown skin. "We'll be nigger enough like, I'm thinkin'."

We resumed our march with lighter hearts than we had had for many a day. Our journey was practically completed, for our water supply would now last until we reached comparatively sure country. It is true we had not benefited by the expedition as I had hoped when starting, but we had gained a hard knowledge of the country, and of our own powers of endurance under extremely adverse circumstances, which would prove invaluable to us in the further journeyings I was at this stage planning. Phil had become indissolubly connected with my little party. His worth had been demonstrated over and over again, and it was with pleasure I heard his decision, as we drew near settled latitudes, to throw in his lot with mine in my future travels.



THE ONLY CREATURES THAT CAN EXIST IN THE N.W. INTERIOR.

"Ye're a man o' pairts, Phil," was Mac's unhesitating verdict, and Stewart added, as a fitting tribute, "I'm o' the same opeenion." [Pg 195]

Twelve days after leaving the providentially-found spring we arrived on the north-west coast of Australia, and there disposed of our faithful old camels to ready purchasers. Mac's eyes were moist when he said good-bye to the gentle "Slavery," and Stewart was loath to part with his old charge, "Misery." As they were led away I bestowed a benediction on the trusty servants of our dreary journey, and elicited a promise from their new possessor that he would treat them kindly as they deserved. About a week later we sailed for Sydney.

[Pg 196]

[Pg 197]

PART III

PROMISCUOUS WANDERINGS

[Pg 198]

[Pg 199]

IN THE AUSTRALIAN BACK-BLOCKS

Australia has attracted much attention from all quarters during the last few years, but to most people the vast interior is still a *terra incognita*; and even on the streets of Sydney or Melbourne the appearance of a copper-skinned back-blocker excites as much comment as might a being from another planet. The man from "out west" cares little for the opinion of the townsman, however; and if his carriage be not so graceful as that of those whom he so unceremoniously jostles on the pavements of Bourke Street or the "Block," he gets over the ground more quickly; and if his speech be ungrammatical, it is at least expressive, and only used when absolutely necessary.

The back-blocks, generally, are the western division of Queensland and New South Wales; and

although in some parts of the former State the hardy squatter has established himself well out into the great desert, the country inside the "run" of his domain is probably unprospected, and outside entirely unexplored. In this almost boundless tract of country, where the bush merges into the silent desert, the back-blocker has his home, and, indifferent to the flight of time and the struggle and worries attending existence in the outside world, he leads a life of untrammelled independence.

Only occasionally does a stranger come among these sons of freedom; and if he once sees "where the pelican builds its nest," or experiences the strange fascination of the desert camp-fire circle, [Pg 200] he will not soon leave them. The new-comer may be fresh from the old home-land, an outcast from continental Europe, or a wanderer from the crowded cities on the Australian coast-line; but in all cases he is welcomed, and soon he speaks in the same quaint dialect, forgets his past, and becomes a child of fortune.

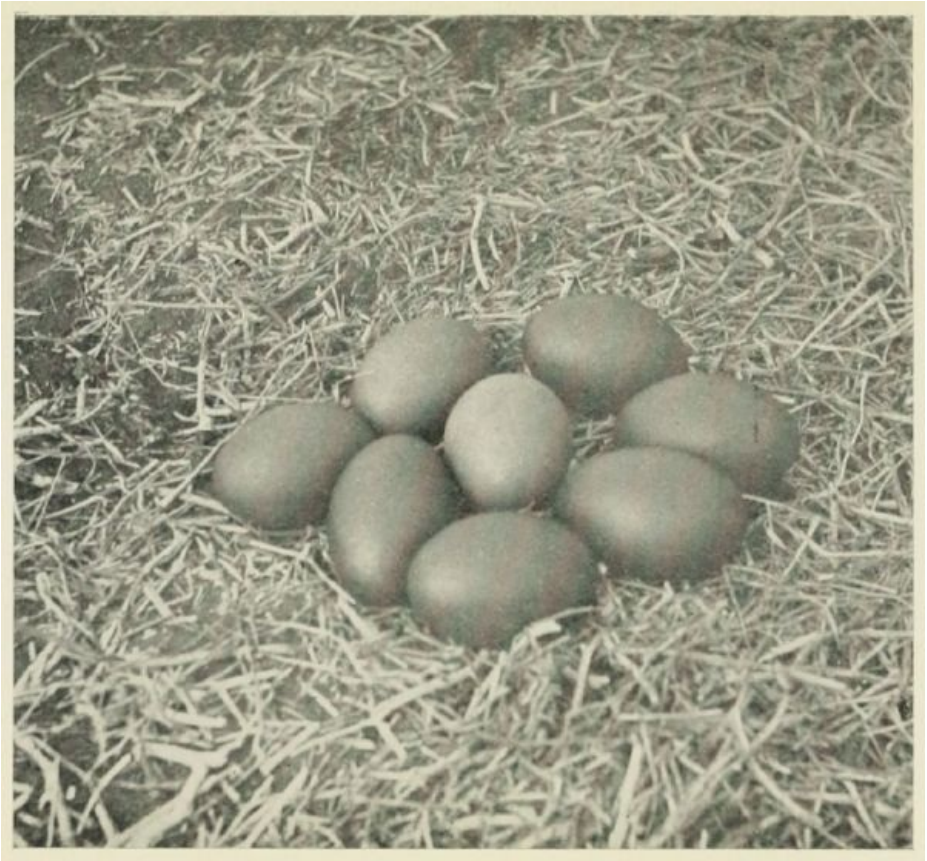
"But how do you manage to exist? This place would not support a rabbit," I said to an assembly of those men one evening in Queensland. I had struck their camp while endeavouring with a companion to cycle from Spencer Gulf to the Gulf of Carpentaria; and our surprise may be imagined when, hundreds of miles from the nearest settlement, as we thought, their camp-fire suddenly appeared in front of us. There were about twelve men in the party, and, as it was just sundown, we naturally camped beside them, and, prompted by the somewhat elaborate preparations being made for supper, I had put my question.

"Oh, not too bad," a tall and gaunt Queenslander answered. "We keeps a team of our own always on the move with stores from the nearest township."

"But that must cost a lot of money so far out as this. How do you earn——?"

"We can always make tucker shootin' kangaroos and emus for their skins; an' if any man wants a cheque bad, for a spell or anything, he can always go shearing inside country. Of course we takes turns at opalling, if we strikes a good show; an' if thar's any new gold discoveries, we git there quick an' lively."

"But you can never make a fortune at work so uncertain?"



An Emu's Nest.

"Lor'! mate, but you is hard to please. Here, Charlie; you lend a hand here; this stranger's fresh, [Pg 201] an' I is no good pitchin'——" Charlie stepped forward, and at once relieved his comrade of the burden of conversation.

"You reckons we can't make no money?" he said. "Well, I reckons ye is wrong. How about old Tyson, the millioner? An' how about Gilgai Charlie sitting over there?—my handle is Vic Charlie,

cos' I comes from Victoria—he made four thousan' clear outen his opal claim only last week; an', darn it all, mate! there's Shandy Bill, that little fellow on yer left, he made ten ounces yesterday jes' by dry-blowing in a pan——"

"Ten ounces! of copper?"

"No—of gold; an' Long Tom here shot one hundred and twenty-three kangaroos at ninepence each——"

"Did you say that your companion found gold?"

"I reckon I did, stranger, an' what's more, we has all dropped on to gold."

"What! There is no gold so far west as this."

"So we was told, mate. Them as is supposed to know, say there can be no gold west of the ranges; but you can allow that this push knows gold when they see it, an'—but show it to him, Shandy." Shandy instantly detached a leather pouch from his belt, and without a word put it into my hands.

"That is gold without doubt," I said, handing it back; "I know by the weight." Vic Charlie seemed surprised at my knowledge of the metal, but he said nothing.

"Does you know much about minerals?" inquired an elderly man who had been listening intently to the conversation.

"I have prospected in most countries," I answered, "and ought to know all that is worth knowing by this time, for the experience was about all I did get."

"Tucker!" sang out some one. "Git table-covers for the visitors, an' look lively." My own companion, while I was talking, had been engaged in similar fashion in the centre of another [Pg 202] group, and I smiled to see how intensely interested were his listeners. *He* was not seeking information, I knew, but from the unconscious ejaculations which frequently arose from his audience, I guessed that he was imparting some; and his selections were invariably strange and wonderful. The cry of "Tucker," however, created a diversion, and during the half-hour that followed, all apparently had but one object in view, and being blessed with a healthy appetite, that same object was very pleasing to me. I was placed between a gentleman called Dead-broke Peter and one dubbed Silent Ted. I afterwards discovered that Peter had been a member of the New Zealand Parliament, but Long Tom introduced him simply as the best talker in camp. I suppose it was to balance matters that the thoughtful Tom placed Ted on my other side, for *he* never spoke.

"He is a first-class cook an' a most extraordinar' thinker, though," said Tom; and as Ted's corrugated but wonderfully expressive face beamed at the compliment, I saw that a tongue to him was quite unnecessary. The night was very dark, and as the fitful fire-flashes lit up the surrounding gloom and cast fantastic shadows of the squatting men on the sands behind them, the scene was indeed weird. Towards the end of the meal Dead-broke Peter began a conversation, at first very general in character, and which I easily sustained without interrupting my study of the men around; but before I realised that Peter was a man with a past, I found myself floundering in the subject of astronomy hopelessly beyond my depths.

"Yes," I said, endeavouring to collect my senses, "it is wonderful how the science has advanced, but I cannot understand how you have made the heavens a clock."

"Oh, that is a simple matter," he replied. "Canopus sets behind Warrego plains at half-past nine at present; take that fact for your unit, and then the positions of the Cross will indicate plainly, even [Pg 203] to minutes, the divisions of the night. But look at that poor snake crawling out of the hollow stump beside you; that means a cyclonic disturbance is approaching——"

"Great Scot! That's a black snake. Look out, boys!" I cried, springing to my feet. Ted, who had been drinking in every word spoken, quietly reached over, and catching the wriggling creature by the tail, skilfully swung it round his shoulder and brought its head forcibly against the log. The snake must have been killed instantly: but its long body quivered convulsively for a moment, and then with a sudden jerk shot backwards and coiled tightly round Ted's arm. To my surprise, none of his comrades troubled even to look at Ted during this performance: all, with the exception of Peter and himself, were absorbing the words of my very Scotch companion, who was relating with powerful dramatic effect some peculiar experiences of his in other parts of the world. But evidently Ted did not expect any attention, for without uttering a sound he arose, shook his encumbrance into the fire, and sat down again, with a look on his face that plainly said to us, "Go on! What have you stopped for?"

Peter politely directed my gaze to a nine-inch centipede that was prospecting across my boots, and then launched into a discourse on theological matters, which in time led into the supernatural, and finally narrowed down to a discussion on the mysterious rites of the aborigines' Bora.

"Little Bob, that tall man sitting next your companion, has had much experience among the natives of the north," Peter said, "and if you could only get him to talk he could tell some marvellous tales."

I looked over to the other side of the fire, and saw that Little Bob was the individual who had asked the extent of my mineral knowledge. "I have heard some tall stories of their corroborrees, [Pg 204] Ghingis, and Bunyips," I answered; "but no white man has ever seen anything that could not be easily explained."

"Think not? Perhaps you are right, but my experience leads me to think differently. There is a Bunyip's pool seventeen miles from here—in fact, we get our water from it; but there is not a man in this camp who would go near it at night for—well for anything. And as for the corroborrees, there are men here who have actually gone through a series of them, and if you stay with us, or travel northwards, you will probably see some for yourself."

Peter's words interested me greatly, so, careful not to interrupt his flow of eloquence, I soon became as silent as the gentleman on my left, and was rewarded by hearing a most wonderful account of the dreaded Bunyip—that strange mysterious creature, half fish and half fiend, the very sight of which, it is said, means death to the unfortunate beholder. I had often heard of this "dweller in the waters" from half-caste aborigines in New South Wales, and knew that it was supposed to live in the subterranean pools which abound throughout the Australian interior; but I never imagined that white men could be so firmly convinced of its existence as were my present companions.

"It's in the Brumbie's water-hole, you can bet your life," said a strangely deformed man, who had joined our group when the name was mentioned.

"How do you know? Have you seen it?" I inquired.

"No, an' doesn't want to; but Jack Ford did."

"And where is he?"

"Ask Sam Wilkins. He's the only glory prospector here."

"What has he to do with it?"

"Lor'! stranger, if he doesn't know where Jack went, no one here does. Jack was as fine a mate as iver I met; but whether he staked off a claim up aloft, or pegged out in the other place, I'm [Pg 205] darned if I knows. He saw the Bunyip one full moon, an' croaked the next day."

I now noticed that all the men had gathered round our little group, and before I could further question the speaker, Long Tom broke in. "Is ye in a hurry to git up to the Gulf country?" he said.

"Not particularly," I answered.

"Yer mate tells us you is a great mineralogist?"

"Oh, no,—not great; but I know a little of the science."

"Does ye know what that is?" Tom opened a sack as he spoke and took out a greenish mass of something.

"That is copper sulphide. Where did you get it?"

"Mate, if it's any good, there's hundreds and thousands o' tons o' it lyin' on top not mor'n fifty mile from here. But what is this?"

"Why, that is native silver; and that conglomeration in Ted's hand is an ironstone formation carrying gold——"

"Say, mate," interrupted Little Bob, "does ye know what this is?" He held in the palm of his hand a mixture resembling tea in appearance, but which after tasting I knew could not be that substance, "Ah! ye is bested, mate, an' I is glad," continued Bob. "I knows ye is honest now, an' don't skite when ye doesn't know."

"Thank you; but what is it?"

"Pidcherie, stranger. Money can't buy it. It comes from the Mullagine swamps; an' gold nor lead wouldn't make a black fellow part with it. Swallow that, an' you can dance in the fire an' not feel nothin'; cut yourself in little bits an' you'll think it fun. Only the niggers knows what it is, an' no white men barrin' us back boys has iver got any——"

"Time for that again, Little Bob," cried Long Tom, "The question just now is, Will the stranger jine [Pg 206] us? Yous can git two shares an' we does all the work," he added, turning to me.

"But, Mr.—that is—Peter here knows more than I do. He——"

"Him!" snorted Tom. "Mate, he's the most on-reasonable man in camp. When he starts talking we can't stop him; an' when he is stopped, darn me if we can start him." I turned to see how my late entertainer took these words, but he was lying back on the sand—asleep. Finally, after much quaint reasoning, the men persuaded us to try our luck with them, at least for a time. "Yous can leave us when you like, if it doesn't pay," was Tom's summing up; but as he had just told me of a sand-patch in which tucker could be made by dry-panning, and of a "darned curious country across the Cooper" which was on fire with opal lying on the surface, I thought that the adventure was well worth any risk in that direction. We were still talking when the Southern Cross dipped behind the Grey Ranges; but before we stretched ourselves on the sand to rest it was decided that I and three others should set out in the morning to inspect the opal formations beyond the Cooper, and pending our report as to its value, the others would keep up the funds by kangaroo-shooting and dry-blowing for gold.

Next morning with the first faint streaks of dawn we were ready. Mac and I had our cycles, which we stripped of all their previous accoutrements, and Kangaroo George and Gilgai Charlie rode two of the finest horses in Queensland.

"Be good boys," cried Long Tom, as we prepared to move off after breakfast.

"There is a willy-willy coming soon, so watch where you camp," warned Dead-broke Peter; and

without more ado we plunged into a clump of gidgyas, and in a few minutes burst out on the ironshot plain. Neither George nor Charlie was inclined to waste his wisdom on the desert air, and even Mac found it advisable to keep his mouth closed when the fine clouds of sand began to rise. For hours we headed due west, dining at noon, in the open, on a piece of damper and some cold mutton, washed down with an extremely sparing amount of muddy fluid from our water-bags, and then going on again. Before sundown we reached a dried-up creek, where, after scraping in the sand among the roots of a solitary lime-tree, we found sufficient liquid for the horses, which we then hobbled and went into camp, fully forty miles from our starting-point. The sun was now racing down on the western horizon, and the desert around seemed like a sea of gold. The day had been oppressively hot, and consequently we expected that night would be kept lively by the many pests. Nor were we mistaken. Just as our surroundings became blurred in the shadows of night a dingo's dismal howl broke the strange stillness, and then the blood-curdling shrieks of some laughing-jackasses in the tree above irritated us almost beyond endurance. The mosquitoes next joined in, sinking their sawlike suckers deep into our sun-blistered skin; and when the mournful "morepork" added its depressing note, the desert orchestra was completed. [Pg 207]

"I reckon there's a storm comin'," remarked George, as he assisted a small death-adder into the fire.

"For onysake let it come, then," growled Mac. "A dinna see what ye've got to complain aboot. Da —— darn it!!"

"Is ye bit, Scottie?" inquired Charlie. "Lor'! there's a centipede on your neck. It feels like red-hot coal, doesn't it?" he added sympathetically.

"No," groaned Mac; "it's a rale cooling sensation; but, here, feel for yersel'." He poised the creature on a twig as he spoke, and skilfully landed it on Charlie's back, and the yell that followed might have awakened a Bunyip, had there been such a monster within five miles. [Pg 208]

"Shut up! darn ye, Charlie!" roared George, lifting a nicely browned damper from the ashes; "ye has set the black fellows' ghosts off again. Lor'! just listen to 'em."

"Hurry up with that damper, George," I interrupted—"that is, if there's no snakes in it."

"There's many things worse than snakes, boss," innocently replied George; "they is prime, if ye roast 'em an' has got any salt——"

"Haud yer tongue, man, or A'll mak' a corroborree o' ye," roared the hungry Mac, and I had to interfere hastily to prevent bloodshed.

The memory of that night's tortures still haunts me. The desert was alive with all sorts of reptiles and insects, and from my companions, as they rolled sleeplessly in the sand, many short but heartfelt expressions arose which I dare not repeat. At sunrise we set out again, and all day travelled westward over country similar to that which we had already passed, camping at night on an "Ana" branch or backwater of the famous Cooper, and enduring another night of misery.

"I reckon we should be near the Ghingi's opal now," said George as we resumed our journey on the third day; "but say, boss, what's wrong with the ole sun? or is it the willy-willy?" There certainly was reason for George's question, for the sun as it shot up over the edge of the plains seemed merely a dull red ball; but the gem-shot haze which danced between showed the cause, and I realised that a cloud formed of minute particles of sand was partly obscuring it from view.

"We'll get across the main river and look for shelter," I said, "for evidently this storm has been working up for some days." We crossed the "Ana" channel and proceeded slowly, for the ground was now broken up as if by volcanic agencies. I was anxious to see the Cooper, the great inland sea of the early pioneers, but to my astonishment no water was yet in evidence as far as the eye could reach; so, leading our steeds, we picked our way over the cleft and burnt ironstone. [Pg 209]

"These is the Ghingi's holes," said Charlie, as we came to some unusually large and deep chasms, "an' keep your eyes open, for there should be opal here."

"Whaur has that patent river got tae, I wunner," muttered Mac. "I never had muckle faith in Australian rivers, an' I doot the nearest water-hole in the way we're goin' is the Indian Ocean."

"Say, boss," suddenly said George, "how far is it to the war?"

"Oh, South Africa is about seven thousand miles from here. Are you thinking of going?"

"Well, some of the boys was talking that way; but none o' us knew the country, nor if the track was to sunrise or sundown."

"Africa is west from here, George."

"Is ther enuff water for horses on the trail?"

"Why, man! you cross the ocean."

"Well, I reckon old Joy here can cross anything; but it beats me to know how a fellow can carry tucker. I s'pose there is plenty stations on the road, though?" I looked at George in amazement, and Mac grinned with delight.

"Maybe they wouldn't want us, Kangaroo," put in Charlie; "but I reckon we can ride anything as has feet, an' shoot——"

"Lie down flat, mates!" shouted George; "here's the willy-willy."

I turned and saw a huge black wall gyrating wildly towards us. A roar like that of thunder filled the air, followed by a sound as of waves breaking upon a rocky beach. A fierce blast of back- [Pg 210]

drawn sand struck my face, and as I threw myself down I felt as if drowning for a moment; then a hail of stones, scrub, and sand rushed over me, tearing my clothes to shreds, and penetrating my skin like shot, while a thick blackness blotted out everything around. I lay still, conscious that a deposit of sand was fast covering me; but I also felt that the suffocating tension was already becoming less severe, and next minute a current of moist cool air, delightfully soothing to my sand-blasted skin, swept over the desert, and I sat up. It was still dark; but the awful vortex had passed, and away to the west I could still hear the indescribable rumbling sound of the flying boulders among the Ghingi holes.

"Is we all here?" sounded Charlie's voice close beside me, and I felt relieved when I heard the muffled responses of my comrades, for I knew that if caught in the centre of such a storm we had just escaped, nothing living could withstand it. I groped for my cycle, and moistened my throat with the damp sand that now filled the water-bag, noticing, as some of the contents spilled down my neck, that the temperature must have fallen considerably, for the accident caused me to shiver.

"Ye talk aboot gaun into the Australian interior," spoke Mac dolorously, as he in turn swallowed a mouthful, "but I'm thinkin' that a lot o' Australia has gone into mine."

"Never mind, Mac," I replied, as we all crawled towards each other, "here comes the first rain we have had since leaving Adelaide, and if the horses are all right, so are we."

"I reckon they is O.K.," said Charlie; "they knows more than most people, them horses."

While he was speaking we cast off our scanty garments and revelled in the refreshing drops; but [Pg 211] rain in the back-blocks is worth more than its weight in gold, and this shower only lasted about a minute, and passed on in the wake of the willy-willy. Shortly afterwards the darkness rolled away to the west like a huge receding screen, and near us we saw the two horses rolling on the ground with evident enjoyment. But I did not ask my companions how it was that our four-footed friends had escaped so lightly, for my attention was attracted by a scintillating streak of something on the edge of a small hole, and as my eyes became used to the now blinding glare of the sun, I saw that the whole surface of the desert was literally blazing with small points of colour.

"Lor'!" exclaimed my Australian comrades simultaneously, "we has struck the very place after all."

"Ay, mon," said Mac wrathfully; "an' hoo did ye no' ken that afore?"

"'Cos the opal was dead," replied George, "an' the rain has made it 'live again."

Mac looked suspiciously at the speaker; but Charlie added that "dead" and "live" were terms used in speaking of dull opal that could be made to flash as if alive by the application of water. This explained why we had not seen the gems before, and without troubling to inquire where the Cooper had gone, or how—if Charlie and George were correct—we had got to the other side of it, we attacked the ironstone boulders with our small hand-picks.

"Every gibber's got an opal heart," remarked George, smashing a large boulder to fragments.

"Take care, then," I warned, "or you will break it too."

"Then how is we to do it, boss?" inquired Charlie, poising his pick in mid-air. "Does ye think it will come out if we whistle on it?"

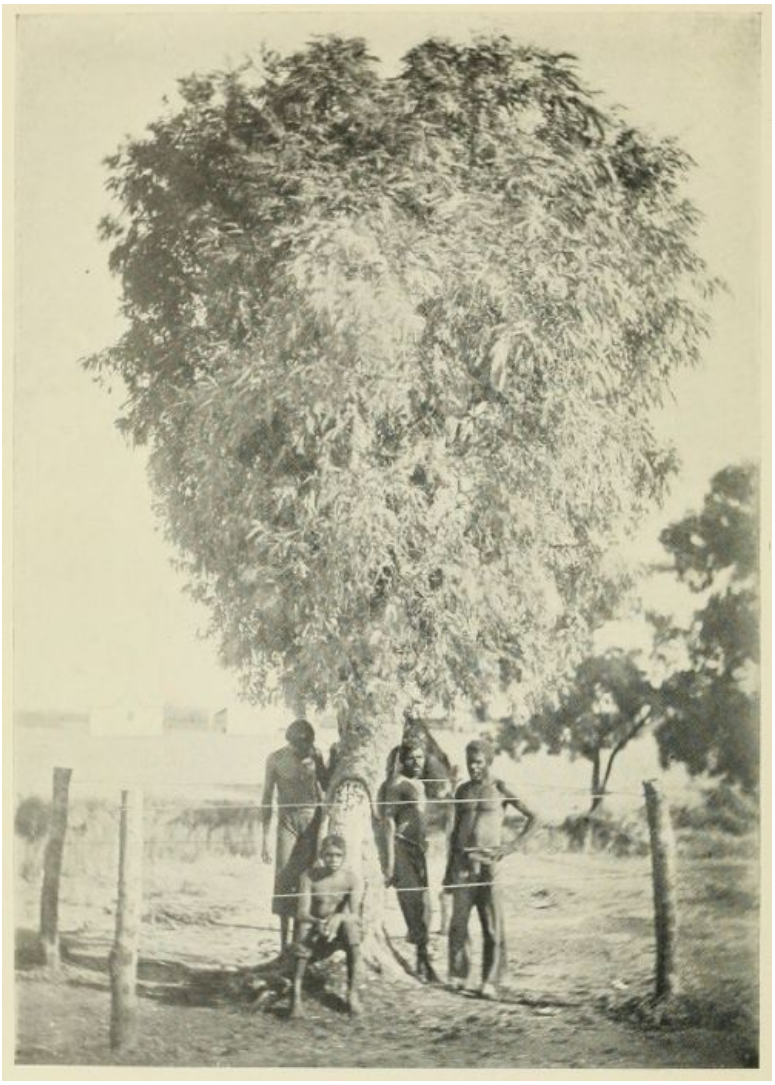
I did not; nor to this day have I found how to get that opal out intact. We tried every method that [Pg 212] could be devised, but without success, for each time we broke the outer casing the more brittle core was also shattered by the blow. Patiently and laboriously we chipped the ironstone, only to find that the gem was in powder form when we reached it. We then tried roasting the stones, carrying them to a small clump of stunted gidgyas for that purpose; but found then, that although the shell broke with less hammering, the "life" of the opal was destroyed by the heat, and a dull lump of glass-like substance was all our reward.

For two days we wandered among the Ghingi holes trying specimens continually, but with the same results, and at last I was convinced that further work under the circumstances was useless. The horses were now beginning to suffer for want of proper food, and I saw that the water question would also trouble us as soon as the pools formed by the willy-willy shower had evaporated. Cooper's creek as a flowing stream had ceased to exist. Probably its waters, or all that seven years' drought had left of them, had gone to feed that strange tide which ebbs and flows so mysteriously under the heart of the great Lone Land; but in its old channels we saw only dead and dying creatures of the desert, and the banks were simply a nursery for fever germs.

"I reckon we'll have to give it best," at length said Gilgai Charlie, and I could see no alternative.

"If sufficient rain came, we might be able to bring a team out," I said, "and cart a load of boulders back to Eromango. If we could not there get the ironstone dissolved with acid, we could at least send them to Brisbane and get them cut.

"That's all right, boss," spoke George, "but I reckon we might as well look for gold nuggets droppin' from the sky as enough water for a team." And I knew he was right.



"Leichardt's" Tree.
The Last Trace Found of the Great Explorer who Attempted to Cross the Interior and was Never Heard of Again.

We thought of striking across to the central ranges of South Australia to prospect the ruby formations there, but we found, when we reached the end of the broken ground, that our course lay through a belt of soft sand in which our wheels sank over the rims; and having neither sufficient water nor stores to risk walking for an unknown distance, we were forced to abandon the attempt. On the afternoon of the third day we started on the back track, and that night camped on the Ana pool. We made our old camp by the "soak" the next night, and at noon, the day following, struck the camps of those of our comrades who had gone dry-blowing. [Pg 213]

"Well, mates, don't worry. It doesn't matter anyhow, for we'll git it some day, if we doesn't peg out," was the general comment when they had heard our story; and then the billy was boiled.

I was much surprised to see that gold was present in the sands of the desert; and even although the quantity was small, and only in patches widely apart, the fact afforded much food for thought. The process of dry-blowing adopted by the men was extremely simple, consisting of dropping the sand from one pan raised above the head to another resting on the ground, then reversing the positions of the pans and repeating the operation. In action, most of the sand and other light material was carried away or diverted by the wind; but the gold—if any—in accordance with the law of gravitation, dropped straight. When the bulk was thus reduced until only the precious metal and the heavier ironstones were left, the contents were put aside, and another panful proceeded with in the same manner. Finally the collected matter was thrown on an improvised inclined plane that had bars of wood fastened across its surface. In rolling down, the ironstone [Pg 214] pebbles cleared these ripples and fell to the ground; but the gold, being too heavy to do likewise, was caught in the angles, and afterwards carefully removed by the operator. The work was very slow and laborious, and often attended with very disappointing results. "But," said Dead-broke Peter, while explaining this to me, "we sometimes strike a patch that pays well."

"Can you explain why there is *any* gold here?" I asked. "There are no auriferous reefs which could shed it nearer than eight hundred miles, and, according to all geologists, the entire desert is the deposit of the ocean."

"That may be," Peter replied, "but I have conclusive proof that there is a gold-bearing reef not more than a quarter of a mile from where we stand. I have no doubt that the rocks carrying it once reared themselves above the surrounding sea; but that was—well—before our time; and now they are too deep for us to reach."

I suggested that if the men had some mechanical appliance which could treat the sand in large quantities, they might do well with the surface deposit. "Perhaps," Peter said indifferently; "but there would be too much worry attached." And seeing that Silent Ted had dinner ready, we changed the subject.

Long Tom and four of the men had gone out emu-and kangaroo-shooting, and were not expected back for a week, and knowing that neither Mac nor I could be of any special service to the men at dry-blowing, we at length resolved to proceed to the Gulf, as was our original intention.

Our companions were very sorry when we announced this; but I told them we had come out expressly to study the aborigines at home, and that when we had done so we might come back.

"You'll see them before you go far," said Shandy Bill.

"An' don't go foolin' near a corroborree, Scottie," warned Little Bob; "'cos if ye does thar will be a funeral, as sure as them currants in that damper there is only ants." [Pg 215]

Dead-broke Peter was evidently qualifying for a Silent Ted reputation, for it was only when kicked repeatedly by that individual that he roused himself, and in effect said, "Remember, if you happen to get into trouble, that the various corroborrees are only stages in the grand Bora; and that the signs used in their working have a wonderful resemblance to those of a certain society to which I see you belong." This information was startling, to say the least of it; but Peter had again fallen into his listless attitude, and could not be induced to say more: so, after receiving many messages, written and verbal, to despatch from the first settlement reached, we departed.

Eight days later we crossed the north Cooper (here called the Thomson river) at Jundah—it was in flood here—and in another four days we reached Winton. From this unique township we made good time northwards through a well-watered country, which, although in the tropics, is blessed with a pleasant climate; and while running down the Flinders river had our first adventure with the natives. The Australian aboriginal is believed to be the lowest form of humanity extant; but there are many things in his philosophy of which the white man has not dreamt. He fights with nature for his very existence, his food being the crawling creatures of the earth and what he wrests from other animals; and even then he is haunted with an eternal dread of devouring demons, who—according to his belief—are for ever seeking his destruction. His Bora is his only safeguard against these Ghingis and Bunyips; and it is in matters pertaining to the observance of its various corroborrees that he has achieved such triumphs over nature, and performs feats that, to the white man, are entirely inexplicable. [Pg 216]

An ordinary corroborree is merely a meeting that may be summoned by the chief or elders of any tribe; but those relating to the Bora are a series of religious ceremonials culminating in a weird fire-test, which all young warriors must undergo before attaining to the state of manhood. This fire-test, with various modifications, is also practised by the New Guineans and South Sea Islanders; but with the latter it now seems to have degenerated into a performance for the priests alone; and in the Fiji Isles a form of fire-walking is still observed, chiefly for the benefit of the sensation-loving tourist. Among the Australian aborigines, however, the working of the Bora is the chief object of their existence, and with them the tests are very real indeed. The fire-test is worked by a procession of aspiring natives marching round on a path which leads through the centre of many fires. A figure in the fanciful attire of some strange monster apparently controls the movements of the warriors by the motion of some object which he swings rapidly round his head, and which produces a humming sound not unlike that of a steam-siren. The performance is followed by a warlike display supposed to strike terror to the heart of the dreaded Bunyip, and if that creature could see the grotesquely garbed warriors as we saw them—hiding in the mulga scrub with our bicycles lying beside us—I have no doubt that it would speedily take itself off to some less dangerous-looking part of the globe.

It is supposed that no white men have ever witnessed the higher corroborrees; but that belief is erroneous, for during our journey northwards we met several back-blockers on the wallaby to the opal district who were quite familiar with the entire ceremony, and some, like little Bob, had even taken part in them, of course not willingly. [Pg 217]

The aborigines are very scarce now, and happily, perhaps for us, most of our adventures with them tended more to be ludicrous than exciting, and in due course we arrived at Normanton, the chief town in the Gulf country.

A month later we landed at Brisbane from the ss. *Peregrine*, and in two days were completely tired out and disgusted with the artificialities of city life. The Queensland contingent of the Imperial Bushmen was to embark in the afternoon for South Africa, and we joined the cheering throng that lined Queen Street to see the men ride past. I have seen the Scots Greys in Edinburgh, but the men of "England's last hope" were not like them. Their smart dresses hung loosely on their angular frames, and their tanned faces were in vivid contrast to those of the Brisbanites. They were all tall, and sat in their saddles in a style that was certainly not military, and their faces wore an absent-minded expression. I knew, however, that fever would have no effect on these men, that they could stand any hardship, that an earthquake could not unhorse them, and that every time those eyes with the far-away look glanced along the rifle-barrel something would drop somewhere. A shout from Mac interrupted my musings, and knowing that he always had some reason for what he did, I followed him through the densely-packed crowd, and found him in the act of hauling a trooper from his horse.

"It's Kangaroo George!" he yelled, "an' he's dreamin'!"

"Hallo, Scottie!" suddenly said the roused warrior; "did yous see the nigs?"

"Hang the niggers!" roared Mac; "it's you I want tae ken aboot. Hoo——?"

"I see you have got on to the South African trail after all, George," I said, grasping his hand. [Pg 218]

"Close up there, men!" roared the sergeant.

"Darn it! Dead-broke, doesn't ye see who is here?" remonstrated another familiar voice, and next instant I was shaking hands with Sergeant Dead-broke Peter—I never knew his other name. There was now a general confusion owing to the men having to lead their horses down to the wharf where the transport *Maori King* was waiting to receive them, and by adopting tactics not unknown nearer home Mac and I got down with the troopers.

"An' has ye not a word for Shandy Bill?" suddenly spoke another voice at my side.

"An' Sam Wilkins?" said a quiet-looking trooper.

"An' me—Corporal Vic Charlie?" cried the one who had remonstrated with his sergeant.

"Is the whole camp here?" I cried surprisedly, while Mac muttered strange words anent the results of shaving on a person's appearance.

"No; only five," answered Vic Charlie. "Gilgai and Little Bob came down too; but they were too old, an' they is goin' out west again to-night when they see us away."

"I say, boss," whispered George to me, "you knows the trail, doesn't ye?"

"Fairly well, George," I replied; "you see the Southern Cross all the way."

"Then can you give us a notion how far out our first camp is?"

"You don't camp at all. You travel night and day—that is, unless the propellor shaft or something else breaks."

"Lor!" was all George's comment, but his face spoke volumes.

A Famous Mine in the Gulf Country.

We stayed with our old comrades until the last moment arrived; and then, in company with Gilgai Charlie and the giant Little Bob, who had joined us on the wharf, went and dined. These two worthies were, as they said, already "full up with the city," and when the western express left that night it had on board four men and four cycles booked through for Cunnamulla *en route* to the opal fields. Twenty-eight hours afterwards we landed at the western terminus, and taking advantage of the full moon and the hard camel-pads leading farther west, we made sixty miles before morning. [Pg 219]

ON THE OPAL FIELDS OF WHITE CLIFFS [Pg 220]

There are many strange places and peoples in this world, and of those the opal fields and opal miners of White Cliffs, New South Wales, are good examples. The opal district is situated sixty miles N.N.W. of Wilcannia, a somewhat remarkable township on the Darling River, and the men who make gem-hunting their profession number over two thousand. Of this amount, less than a

half belong to some branch of the Anglo-Saxon race, the remainder being a mixture of all nationalities, of which Germans are the most numerous. The township of White Cliffs stands in a hollow in the centre of the "workings," but it is merely a collection of galvanised iron drinking saloons and stores; the population living out on their claims, some in tents, some in their horizontal excavations or "drives"; and others with only the sky for a roof. When it is stated that the town also contains a Warden's residence, a hospital, and a good substantial prison—there is as yet no church—that most of the stores are run by Chinamen, and that the Jew gem-buyers form the aristocracy, the description of the town is complete. The fields, however, at present extend for three miles round the town, and in all probability will stretch further out on the great western desert when some means of providing sufficient water for the miners is devised. But the [Pg 221] opal has been proved to exist in such vast quantities within the three miles radius, that there is as yet no need for any one to go further out.

The methods employed in searching for opal are extremely simple. Briefly, this consists of sinking a shaft, or, if the claim happens to be located on a slope, tunnelling into the ground until a seam of gem-carrying matrix is encountered; from which the opal is then separated by means of a small "gouging" pick or other tool. These layers exist at various parallel levels from the surface down to forty feet, but no "paying" opal has yet been struck at greater depths. It is highly probable, however, that this is because the task of further sinking with the primitive means of pick, spade, and windlass, the only appliances used, becomes at this point somewhat difficult, and the men, knowing the value of the shallower levels, prefer spending their energies on another shaft in fresh country. The matrix in which the gem is found consists of a hard silicious conglomeration, usually thickly impregnated with ironstone. The opal is embedded in this material in the form of thin sheets, which, however large they may be while in the formation, can only be removed in divisions of about the size of a five shilling piece.

Opal is of all colours and shades, but unfortunately for the miner a piece of exquisitely coloured blue, green, or red stone is considered absolutely valueless if not accompanied with the vivid scintillating flash which denotes its "lifeness." Tons upon tons of this worthless stuff, "Potch," as it is called, are daily thrown out of the shafts by disgusted opallers, for in common with most things in this world, the bad is very plentiful, in fact it is almost impossible to get away from it; but the gem or "live" opal is correspondingly rare. Nevertheless, fortunes are frequently made [Pg 222] here by the merest chance, and perhaps to a greater degree than elsewhere is a man justified by results in believing that some day he will "send his pick through a fortune." As said before, the miners are of nearly all the races of mankind, and many incongruous partnerships are formed for the holding and working of a two, three, or four men's claim; but on the whole, good fellowship rules throughout the camps, and an American negro, a half-caste Chinaman, or a Turk, stands by the windlass of a canny Scot, a Frenchman, or a Hindu.

There are no disputes between capital and labour in White Cliffs, every man is his own master, and follows out his own usually erratic inclinations, unless sometimes when, after a lucky find, he imbibes too much of a certain commodity falsely-labelled Scotch, and consequently the police exercise a slight control over his movements.

There are no surface indications to guide one in searching for opal, and as the most experienced "gouger" knows no more where the gem may be than the latest new chum, all work is done on chance. To such a strange state of mind has the desert environment reduced those men of the back-blocks, that they look upon the grim side of circumstances with indifference, and magnify the trivialities of life into a proportion which to the stranger suggests a land of Burlesque. But soon he, too, catches the mysterious infection, unconsciously he is overwhelmed by the influence of his surroundings, and he ceases to see anything remarkable either in his own doings or in those of his fellows. An observer, while he retained his own mental equilibrium, might see instances of this strange perversion in almost every man in White Cliffs; but, perhaps, my own experiences there may serve to give some fair examples.

My claim was staked about a mile from the town on a small stretch of rising ground which at [Pg 223] some time in the Earth's history formed the banks of the lake, in the old bed of which White Cliffs now stands. For comrades I had a powerful Scotsman and two Australians, while the claims around us were worked by an American and a native of Mauritius, known as Black George, a German and an Englishman—the latter being termed the "Parson," a New Zealander and a Swede, and several other single miners, the chief being one called Satan. We were all good friends, and nightly gathered round a common camp-fire to discuss things in general.

Silent Ted and Emu Bill, my two Australian comrades, were perhaps the most experienced prospectors on the field; the one had a very thoughtful cast of countenance, and never spoke, and the other was a splendid specimen of the Australian pioneer, but when he spoke it was chiefly in short, crisp words, of decided colonial origin, which Mac said would have qualified him "A1 for the position of a Clyde stevedore." Together they had crossed the divide between the Darling River and Cooper's Creek, and occasionally, when the moon was full, and the Southern Cross dipping behind the Great Barrier Ranges, Bill would tell of a land where fire-flashing opal burst through the surface sands, and shone in dazzling streaks of every imaginable colour from every wind-swept ledge. Ted would eagerly follow his comrade's words, and his wonderful face would light up with genuine admiration when Bill's word-pictures were powerfully descriptive. But he was too sympathetic, and frequently, alas! got into trouble because of that.

"Shut up, Ted!" Bill would suddenly cry, pausing in the middle of his narrative. "Is it you that's tellin' this yarn or me?"

At these rough words the silent one would slowly turn a reproachful glance upon the speaker

which said as plainly as words, "Why, Bill, I did not speak." [Pg 224]

"I knows that," would come the unhesitating answer, "but your face does, an' it's been an' got to the end of this story afore me."

This was in a manner true, and sometimes when Bill, as Hoskins the American said, was "long-winded in getting to the point," we had but to look at Ted's face for the *dénoûement*.

"But how vas it you came away unt leave all dat opal? There must be millions there," our German friend would say when Bill's narrative was concluded.

"I reckon there is, Kaiser," the *raconteur* would answer, "but the country is full o' darned crows an' willy-willys, an' ye can't sleep no how with the sand-flies an' snakes an' 'skeeturs. Water, did ye say? No, there ain't none."

However much Ted and Bill may have ignored the absence of the precious fluid, that was the only consideration with most of their listeners, and had there been any water, some of us, at least, would have gone out West at once and chanced everything else.

One evening Bill was unusually eloquent in his discourse on the lavishness with which Nature had gifted the desert, and as all our claims had been yielding but poor returns for the last week or so, we paid more attention to his words than we had been in the habit of doing.

"I wouldn't mind having a try out back," said Scottie, "if there were a railway, or if we had fleein' machines."

"Couldn't we go as we are?" lisped the Parson, "we may work here for ever, and not better ourselves."

Bill gave vent to some sarcastic remarks anent the last speaker's powers of endurance, but otherwise made no comment.

Boring for Opal Indications.

"Bill says the surface is ironshot," continued the Parson blandly, "and, as I saw a team come into town to-day with about two dozen bicycles for sale, I thought——" [Pg 225]

"Man, ye are a thinker, Parson," cried Scottie, "I'll gang away wi' ye the morn if ye like—that is if the machines are no ow'r dear."

"I think we ought to get them, no matter what they cost," I remarked, "for if we do go out they would enable us to cross right over to the Cooper at a pinch, if they did not break down, and the ground was passable."

"Well, I guess I am one of the crowd that goes," announced Hoskins.

"Unt me," cried the German.

"I reckon we is all going," said Bill, looking round the camp-fire for corroboration. "Int you, Satan?"

"Of course I is," answered the individual addressed, a corrugated-skinned specimen of humanity. "I is goin' where Scottie an' the Parson goes; but where in tarnation is ye goin', and what for?"

"Cooper's Creek, for opal," roared Scottie.

"Opal," repeated Satan vacantly. Then his eyes kindled suddenly, and he exclaimed, "Lor', I forgot to tell ye, boys, I has been haulin' the stuff out by the sackful these last two weeks."

"What!" yelled all in chorus, springing to their feet, and even the stoical Ted stopped in the act of lighting his pipe to gaze at Satan.

"It are a fact, mates," continued that gentleman apologetically, "I reckon I has near got a waggon-load dumped out by now. Lor', what's the racket, mates?"

Few heard his last words, for as the full literal import of what he had just said began to dawn on the assembly, a stampede took place down the hill towards the shaft; but another surprise was in store. While some were rummaging in Black George's tent for candles to explore the long drive in [Pg 226] Satan's claim, and others were sliding down his windlass rope, a series of sounds broke out round our deserted fire, the fervour of which made Hoskins say, "Hallo, boys, how is Bill not here?"

"I is here, darn ye!" came the muffled response from the darkness; "that's Ted that's shouting," which information made it clear to all that Silent Ted in his excitement had placed the blazing mulga stump in his mouth and thrown away his pipe.

I had known Ted for a long time, but that was only the second occasion on which I had heard the sound of his voice. A few seconds later we had crowded into Satan's drive, and after crawling over a heap of mullock that blocked the passage to within one foot of the roof, we found ourselves in the chamber where, from the presence of his pick and other implements, we knew he had recently been working. In a moment the candles were lit, and then a cry of wonder burst from all. We were standing in what might have been an Aladdin's palace, and the walls danced and flashed in the gloom as if alive. The roof was simply one blaze of ever-changing orange and green, and through the whole would dart spasmodically a "living" flash of fiery red. Clearly Satan had struck it, for there must have been several thousand pounds' worth of opal exposed, whatever amount may have been hidden behind. Bill was the first to break the silence of admiration, which had fallen over all, and he only said one word. It was characteristic and expressive, but quite unprintable; and slowly we filed out again and clambered up the rope to the surface. When we got back to our camp we found Ted, Satan, and the Swede sitting in silent meditation round the fire. Probably Ted would have accompanied us, had it not been for the fact that he, being cook, had to look after a mysterious compound of flour and other substances commonly known as [Pg 227] damper, which every evening was prepared among the ashes.

"Well, boy, you have struck it, an' no mistake," called out Ford, the New Zealander, to Satan as we approached. "You're a millionaire now."

"Get awa' frae this fire, you unceevilised heathen," roared Scottie, in virtuous indignation. "A man that wouldna' tell his mates when he struck a ton of opal is nae frien' o' mine; get awa' before a dae ye damage."

"Come Scottie," began the Parson, but Mac would have none of him.

"Don't Scottie me," he bellowed, " Ye—ye——" Then seeing the look of pain on the face of the would-be peacemaker he calmed down and said, "Weel, ye shouldna anger me. I'll alloo ony man to judge if——"

"Lor', Scottie, what is ye sayin'?" interrupted Satan anxiously; "I forgot all about the darned stuff. I has no mate, and if you will come and help spend it you can have the half."

"Mein Gott," cried Kaiser, "I vil be your mate for von quarter."

"Satan," began Mac, " A'm sorry A spoke, but A can see ye're no fit to be left alane, among so mony Germans and foreign heathen. Sell yer opal, lad, and bank the money in Sydney. The coach leaves the morn's nicht."

"I'll be darned if I do. I never went and left my mates yet, an' I ain't goin' to start now," exclaimed Satan doggedly.

And then I explained that he had already done sufficient to merit our blessing by discovering the layer of opal at the forty-four feet level. "It in all probability extends throughout all our claims at that depth," I said, "so you had better go down to Sydney and dispose of yours before the news leaks out. Otherwise there will be so much of the opal for sale locally when we all strike it that [Pg 228] the buyers may be frightened."

Ultimately we convinced Satan that he should go down to the coast, for it was evident he needed a change, and he could now well afford it. Shortly afterwards the party broke up for the night, and soon the camps were wrapt in slumber, each man dreaming, doubtless, of the opal he would get on the morrow four feet beneath the floor of his lowest drive.

In the morning the Parson, Kaiser, and Mac went over to assist Satan in working out the opal showing in his claim, and in the evening he departed with twenty pounds weight of first-grade opal tied securely in sacks so as to excite no suspicion. The news of the deep-level find soon spread, and at noon of the day following Satan's departure our little community was the centre of a "rush," which by evening had swelled into a great canvas settlement stretching right across the white glistening lake-bed towards the township.

That evening our usual camp-fire circle was increased by the addition of over a hundred

hardened fortune-seekers eager to obtain any information as to the levels, depths, and formations of the country, which, obviously, only we who had shafts already sunk were able to supply.

"It are the forty-four feet level seam we has struck," Bill answered to all inquiries, "an' it likely spreads out all over the flat there, though I 'spects it turns into Potch before it goes far."

"I reckon we'll chance that," was the general response, and next day the many heaps of upturned sand that grew in proportion as we looked, showed that the new arrivals were fast doing so.

Meanwhile, the buyers were greatly agitated. They had heard exaggerated reports concerning the find of the "forty-four," and had arranged among themselves to beat down the prices of the [Pg 229] opal to £4 an ounce. It, therefore, surprised them to find the days passing and no one offering to sell any opal; and one morning two of their fraternity repegged Satan's abandoned claim, evidently with the intention of investigating matter for themselves. As we had been endeavouring by various subterfuges to keep this claim intact, some of us having even altered our boundaries the better to do so, we were much chagrined at this brilliant move on their part, but marvelled how they had come to know that it was not legally manned. However, the claim was worked out, and as the two new holders knew as little about the practical part of mining for opal as we knew of the value of the gem, we consoled ourselves with the reflection that, after all, we might be able to turn their proximity to account.

Thus it was that every evening a well-packed sack was carefully hoisted from each of the shafts of the surrounding claim-holders, and a rumour spread abroad that a new Sydney syndicate was buying opal by the ton. Our two Hebrew friends, by dint of persistent effort, gradually insinuated themselves into our good graces, and one day astonished us by announcing that they were capitalists, and would purchase our claims if the terms were reasonable. At this straightforward way of doing business, so foreign to the nature of their compatriots, I felt that we had greatly wronged them, and as they said, truly enough, that they did not know what our claims contained, and that their offer was merely a part of honest speculation, the Parson and I were much worried over certain matters.

"I reckon I vote for selling," said Bill one evening as we held a meeting to consider the proposal. "The money will pay ex's for a trip West, an' darn 'em! they're Jews anyhow."

"A'm wi' ye, Bill," cried Mac, and one by one all signified their approval of the sentiments [Pg 230] expressed until only the Parson and I were left.

"Of course I will not vote against my partner, Kaiser," began the Parson, "but really there is nothing in our cl——" He stopped abruptly, for, from the shadows of our mullock-heap, stepped a stranger. There seemed something familiar about his gait as he crossed the fire-lit zone, and sat down on the empty kerosene tin on which Satan used to sit, but I could not recollect whom he resembled. For a moment no one spoke; the stranger's amazing coolness had taken our breath away. He was dressed in, presumably, the latest style of Sydney clothing, but even in the dim light I could see that his garments hung loosely on his person. Evidently he had just arrived in White Cliffs, and had not yet been in a willy-willy (sand-storm).

"Look here, ma man, hae ye a ticket?" said Mac at length.

"If ye is a new chum ye will get tucker in that tent there," said Bill, "but——"

"Lor', mates! What does ye mean? Doesn't ye not know me?" interrupted the stranger. "I is Satan ——"

"Golly! an' so it is, but—but where's your whiskers," cried Black George, holding a lighted match in the stranger's face.

"Satan, ye deevil, gie's yer hand," roared Scottie, "A'm rael glad to see ye."

"Oh, mates, I is glad to git back, I is," began our old friend. "I hasn't had a proper feed since I left, an' I has been disgraced. I went to a theatre in Sydney an' there was a fight on the stage, an' because I jumped up an' jined in socially like, the police came in an' started on me. I couldn't fight them all, for there war' mor'n a dozen, an' next day the judge, a very decent old gentleman, told me to git from Sydney, for it war' full o' sharks. I gitted to Melbourne, but, oh, Lor'! mates, don't none of you never go there——"

THE BELLE OF THE BUSH.
A SALVATION ARMY CONVERT IN WHITE CLIFFS.

"But your opal, Satan? What did you get for it?" I broke in. [Pg 231]

"Oh, that darned stuff? Mates, it weren't worth much after all. There war' two young fellows in the Wilcannia coach with me, an' they told me that it war' no good. They war' Jews of course; but they went down all the way with me an' took me round all the buyers in Sydney, an' none o' them would look at it. I didn't know what to do; and I was mighty glad when the two Jews gave me two hundred pounds for the lot. I spent the money as quick as I could, an' here I is back again, an'—— But has ye got no tucker?"

For full five minutes the air was filled with the most powerful words in at least four different languages, during which entertainment Satan unconcernedly ate the piece of damper which Ted had handed to him.

"I suppose you do not remember the names of your two kind friends, Satan?" I said, passing him the tea billy.

"No, but they both wears a chain with a most 'culiar pendant, something like what the Parson showed us one night."

"Ah!" I cried. "Gentlemen, our business is settled. We will sell our claims to-morrow: we cannot refuse the kindly, disinterested offer of Satan's two benefactors."

"But I reckon the price has risen, hasn't it?" inquired Bill.

"Yes," answered the Parson grimly. "Satan's opal was worth £8,000."

Next morning the two Hebrews came out from town a full hour earlier than usual, and without more ado the Parson, as spokesman, informed them that having considered everything and being [Pg 232] desirous of going out West, we were willing to sell our joint claims for three thousand pounds in cash.

"But two tousant was the agreement," remonstrated one.

"There was no agreement," replied the Parson. "Candidly I can't imagine why you wish to have the claims, for opal seems to have fallen in the market, but if you still desire them that sum is our

price until we hear from other possible purchasers."

While he was speaking, Mac and Hoskins were assiduously painting the address of a famous Sydney firm of jewellers on a well-roped candle-box, and after eyeing them intently for a minute, Aaron—— said—

"Vell den, we don't cares, we is speculative business men. No, we do not want to see your drives. Ha, ha! we vas not built to go through rabbit-holes. Here is de money, sign this papers all of you, an' come and dine with us in the Australian Thirst saloon."

The above is the history of the finding of the "forty-four" feet level, and the selling of "Block 91." The money was equally divided among the men interested, after which most of them pegged out fresh claims elsewhere, but Bill, Ted, Satan, Black George, Scottie, the Parson, and I, procured bicycles and water-bags, and started off on our Western prospecting trip that same afternoon. It is unnecessary to repeat the details of our journey. The country was at first a hard, sandy plain dotted here and there with sparse growths of the ubiquitous mulga scrub, and occasionally broken by outcrops of silver lodes; but as we advanced, all forms of vegetation disappeared, and on the third day we found ourselves on an undulating sea of ironshot sand bounded only by the horizon. We had not as yet seen any signs of surface opal formations, and of course had no [Pg 233] intention of sinking shafts to investigate, in the heart of such a desert. On the fourth day we calculated that we had now reached a point one hundred and forty miles west from White Cliffs, and that night we camped on the edge of a dry clay-pan and considered the advisability of returning. Bill and Ted, however, persisted that we had not yet gone far enough to see the place of which they had spoken so often, and although I could not understand how they had managed to travel such a distance, nor how they knew whether we had passed their farthest-out camp or not, I had implicit faith in the correctness of their observations.

"I reckon we has to go 'bout thirty miles yet. We was jest a day off here," said Bill.

"You must have been quite close to Lake Frome then," I said.

"Never seed it, nor knowed of it, nor don't believe there ever was any lake in this part o' the world," replied Bill, and I wondered greatly, seeing that Lake Frome was distinctly marked across our path on the Government map in my possession. We had no fire that night, there being nothing that would burn within at least a day's journey, and consequently our supper was not of a tempting nature.

"Well, men, I don't know that I care to be responsible for taking you further west," I announced. "How much water is left in the bags?"

"There war' six gallons between them all after supper," answered Satan, "but Ted took a drink since then."

"Let us try another day yet," advised the Parson, "we can go back over our tracks in two days, and the opal might only be an hour ahead."

All expressed their approval of these remarks, so soon after, we scraped the top off the hard sand and went to sleep. The pests were unusually energetic that night, and several times we were [Pg 234] awakened by their voraciousness. The Parson and Black George seemed to be affected even more so than the others, but it must have been an exceptionally large and active centipede that bit our dusky comrade in three places before he could discard his garments. At any rate, his yells aroused four evil-eyed crows from their dreams of the gorge they expected to have soon, and a skulking dingo also started in affright, emitting as it retreated a blood-curdling howl, that instantly brought us all to our feet.

"Lor'! nigger! Has ye not never been bit before?" cried Satan in a reproving tone of voice, as he cast a sand-snake from under him.

"Who does ye expect can sleep with you on the corroborree, Nig? Darn it! An' you a black fellow too. I reckon you oughten 'pologise," grumbled Bill.

George's answer was picturesque, but three bleeding wounds on his back showed where the venomous creature had got in its work on him. He was a hardy piece of humanity, however, and after the Parson had lanced the rapid swelling flesh and applied ammonia, he went to sleep again. Shortly afterwards the Parson himself rose to his feet with an exclamation of annoyance, and began kicking up his sandy sleeping place.

"What's wrong?" I inquired.

"I don't know. There seems to be a boulder or something hard under me. Hallo! What's this— Great Scott! Opal!"

Again the party sprang up, and as the glistening stone was rolled out on the surface and examined by match-light, many and various were the comments made on the poor Parson's ignorance, for the boulder which had sought out the soft corners of his body was a mass of green copper sulphide.

"And has this material no value?" asked the object of the unkind remarks. [Pg 235]

"None; it's worse than potch," roared Bill. "See, Scottie's got more. Lor'! it's everywhere."

"It is really worth a considerable amount," I said, "but the expense of treating it properly out here would be too much for us. That is an outcrop, and to all appearance it is one of the richest ever discovered."

We slept no more that night, and before sunrise started off across the clay-pan. The surface was

smooth and hard, and with the aid of a slight breeze which arose with the sun we skimmed along at an almost incredible pace.

"Hallo, Ted! There's our old stakes," suddenly yelled Bill, steering for the crest of a broken piece of ground, and following in his tracks, we soon were standing round a broken pick-handle standing upright in the ground and on which was inscribed: "C.B. and S.T. Pros. Claim. Corner Peg."

"How on earth did you manage to lead us here, Bill?" cried the Parson wonderingly.

"Easy enough; this is the same season as when we were out, so we jest ran the ole sun down an' at night ye can always git the bearin's from the Cross."

The Parson's surprise might have been greater had he known that my compass had been useless since the second day out, and that but for a few haphazard observations taken, Bill had been our only guide. Meanwhile Ted had unstrapped a pick and set to work, and before I had fully realised that we stood on what—in the rainy season, if such a season existed in those parts—was an island in the centre of Lake Frome, and that it was its salt-encrusted bed we had been crossing since morning, he handed me a piece of some scintillating substance, inquiring, by the shape of his face, my opinion as to its value.

"Why, that's opalised wood," I exclaimed." But what have we struck now?" [Pg 236]

"The opal we told ye about, of course," grunted Bill. "The sand's blown over it, and Ted's dug it up again; that's all."

Truly we had encountered a marvellous formation. Great masses of fiery and orange opal were uncovered on every side, and for a day we did nothing but gather the best. It was evident that a forest had at one time occupied the site of the lake, for most of the opal showed the grains of wood throughout its structure, and many opalised leaves were found embedded in a matrix which looked uncommonly like bark. This latter fact was most puzzling, for the trees with bark in Australia are few indeed. We pegged out seven prospector's claims, and after a final look round prepared to move, our intention being to arrange for suitable transport for stores and water, and then come back.

"Ye talk about the effeeciency o' the steam engine," muttered Scottie, as he examined the liquid contents of our bags, "but it's far oot o' date now, for we've each got to run a hundred miles a day on a pint o' water, and if onything can beat this——"

"No doubt your remarks are the result of much study, Mac," I said, working out an elaborate calculation on the sand, "but we are not more than ninety miles from civilisation straight ahead, and if we care to travel over what remains of the lake by moonlight and the ground continues passable after that, we will strike the South Australian railway somewhere near Beltana siding to-morrow afternoon."

And so it proved. We reached the S.A. line on the following afternoon, and an hour after sundown stopped the Port Augusta-bound train by kindling a fire in the middle of the track. Thirty-six hours later we found ourselves parading Rundle Street, Adelaide, in quest of some of Scottie's friends who resided there.

The Dingoe Or Native Dog.

A week later I was in Sydney, and while crossing on the *Kirribilli* from Circular Quay to Milsons Point I came face to face with Aaron——. [Pg 237]

"How vas you?" he cried effusively.

"As usual," I replied. "How are the claims turning out?"

"Oh, not too bad," he answered, but his flushed face told another story; "but tell me," he continued, "who vas it bought your opal in Sydney?"

"No one. We sent no opal to Sydney."

"But the boxes and sacks——?"

"Were filled with potch."

"An'—an' the forty-four feet level is—but ah! you make mistake; I bought five tousant pound of its opal before I saw you."

"Yes, I know, but you bought all that ever came from that depth. It was merely a pocket; we discovered that much two days after Satan, your old friend, left White Cliffs. It was in his claim, probably because it happened to be the lowest lying. We might not have sold our claims to you but for the fact that Satan returned, and—well, you know two hundred pounds is not fair value for five thousand."

Aaron's rage was great, but he afterwards paid six hundred sovereigns for the opal we had brought down from Lake Frome. We did not go back there, a shower of rain came on and flooded the lake, and after chasing the elusive gem over the greater part of Queensland with more or less success, our party reformed and set out on a gold-prospecting trip to British New Guinea.

PROSPECTING IN BRITISH NEW GUINEA [Pg 238]

The life of the prospector in New Guinea is not fraught with many pleasures, but in my experience, oftener than elsewhere, he enjoys that exquisite sensation which attends the unexpected finding of gold, and here the dreary monotony of life in the Australian interior is exchanged for conditions more congenial to his wandering nature.

British New Guinea is to most people the least-known part of our empire; but there are few valleys in its dark interior in which the prospector has not "chipped" some quartz formation, or "panned" some sand from the river's bed. The British flag was first planted in Eastern New Guinea by Captain, now Admiral, John Moresby, of H.M.S. *Basilisk*, in 1872. This officer, whilst employed in superintending the pearl shell fisheries in Torres Straits, learnt that adventurers, both American and French, were contemplating expeditions and occupation of the then unknown shores of Eastern New Guinea.

The captain of the *Basilisk*, being aware of the great strategical importance of these coasts to

Australia, resolved to forestall any such attempt, and fortunately succeeded in securing for England the whole of Eastern New Guinea and its adjacent islands. Ultimately, however, a large part of his labour was lost owing to the retrograde policy of the times, when Germany was allowed to seize so considerable a part of North-Eastern New Guinea without opposition. [Pg 239]

Samarai has now eclipsed Port Moresby as the chief port of the possession. It is built, or rather erected, upon a small island at the extreme south-east of the mainland, and is in direct communication with Cooktown in Queensland and the Australian capitals. From Samarai coasting-steamers run regularly to the mouths of the Mambare, Kumusi, and Gira rivers on the north-eastern coast, and in the upper reaches and sources of these rivers are the great gold deposits, the origin of which has completely baffled the mineralogist and geologist to explain. The men there do not trouble themselves as to its origin, however, and while the river-beds continue to yield a sure and steady quantity of gold to the ordinary miner, and the mountain gorges or creeks provide sensational "finds" for the more daring prospector, no one cares whether the presence of the precious metal is in accordance with the views of geologists or otherwise.

"It is a fact that the bottom is on top," said an old pioneer. "But then the outcrops are all inside the darned mountains, so we are quits."

The township of Tamata is the most important centre of the New Guinean goldfields, but the Yodda Valley camp rivals it closely, and it is expected that some of the new camps at the base of Mount Albert Edward will in time surpass them both. The fierce, unreasoning hostility of the natives renders prospecting at any distance from the settlements an extremely dangerous occupation, as the writer, who has had several experiences among the cannibalistic tribes of the lower ranges, can testify. As a rule, however, the prospector scorns all such dangers, and if he escapes the dreaded fever, trusts to his rifle for protection and his luck for fortune, and straightway proceeds to cut a path into some unknown river valley. [Pg 240]

The famous Yodda Valley, where men at first made fifty ounces of gold (equivalent to £180 per day), was discovered in such manner, and if the stories of some of the prospecting parties who crossed New Guinea in all directions were given to the world, doubtless a "rush" would set in towards the deadly fever-swamps, unparalleled in the world's history both for its general extent and the amount of victims. Round the camp-fires at night, enveloped in their smoke to escape the many pests, the men of the various settlements regularly gather to discuss the latest news from the coast, and to consider the many strange reports of "great strikes" constantly circulated by the friendly natives. Frequently a party is organised to go and prove the truth of any such report, and when in turn word is sent back that the chances are good, a general exodus often takes place, all setting out for the new fields with light hearts and high hopes.

Miners cannot stay in New Guinea for more than one season at a time; they are forced by repeated attacks of the various fevers to leave their work and take a "spell" in the southern parts of Australia or New Zealand. In my opinion lack of proper food is the prime cause of these fevers, as it is only when the men are "run down" that the kuri-kuri breaks out among them. The stores are floated as far as possible up the rivers in oil-launches and whale-boats, and then transported overland to the camps by native carriers in the employment of the diggers. The majority of the miners are Australians; but in most prospecting parties there is usually a Scotsman and an Irishman, and not infrequently a German.

In the party with which I was associated there were two typical Australian prospectors, one German, one Irishman, and, including myself, two Scots. We also had six native carriers and two dogs. My Scottish comrade said that "the dugs were as guid as ony twa men"; but however that might apply to the whites, it was at least unfair to our dusky "boys," who were Fly River natives, and only cost one shilling each for wages per day. We all had had experience on other goldfields, and each man was fever-proof, which in New Guinea means impregnated with quinine. "Doc," the Irishman, was a Dublin University man of some repute. He had been in turn a member of a famous North Polar expedition, and an officer in the American Philippino campaign. Mac had been everywhere, but his accent seemed to become more pronounced the farther from home he wandered. The two Australians, Emu Bill and Starvation Sam, were good specimens of the wandering Anglo-Saxon. Bill was one of the pioneers of Coolgardie, but if he were addressed by his real name, William Hambley, he would probably not recognise it. Sam was the son of a governor of a not unknown "'link' in our chain of Empire"; but as he adopted his cognomen to hide his identity, and no one would dream of calling him anything else, perhaps I will be excused from going further into his family history. He was six feet five inches in height, had been in his time soldier, sailor, missionary, pearler, outlaw, and mail-carrier, from which description all Queenslanders and South Sea travellers will immediately recognise him. Our German companion was a first-class mineralogist and an excellent comrade—and cook; but he deeply resented the appellation of Kaiser, which Mac bestowed upon him. [Pg 241]

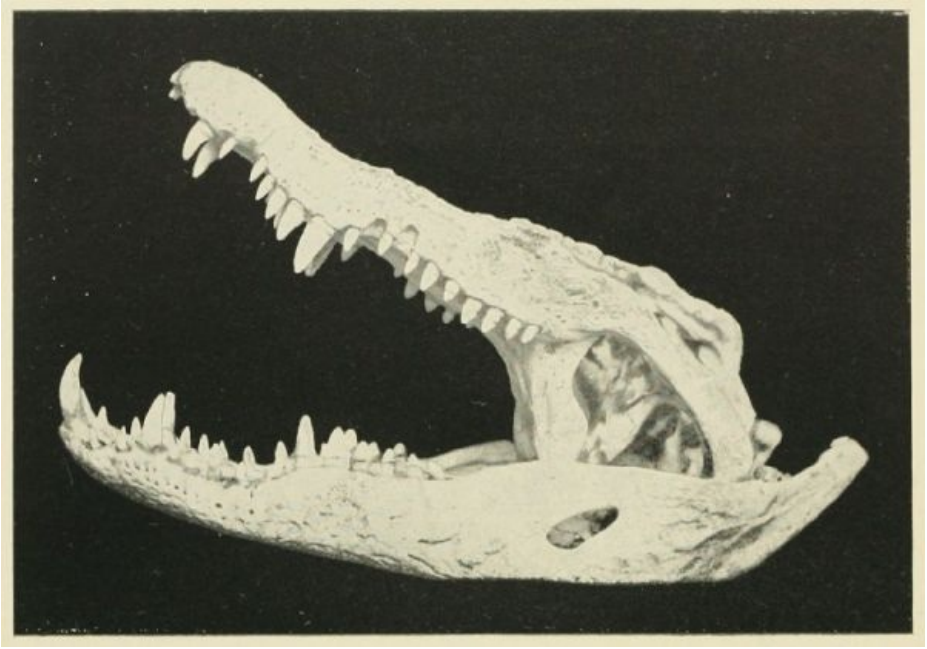
"I am not Cherman," he would say. "I vas been as mooch English as you, Scodie."

"A ken that fine, Kaiser," Mac would answer. "A'm Scotch frae Dundee." [Pg 242]

We left Tamata with the intention of prospecting the Owen Stanley ranges, and among the miners in general were considered to be the most experienced and best-equipped prospecting party that ever essayed that venture. Our journey for the first week was, allowing for the nature of the country—uneventful. A crocodile gripped one of our carriers while crossing the Ope River, but making a combined attack on the huge saurian, we forced it to relax its hold, and finally, as Bill remarked, "Ther' war one inseck less in the darned country." Another day we were attacked by myriads of bees, and, despite our face-nets, they inflicted much pain upon all. The New Guinean bee does not sting, in the strictest sense of the word; it has an intense craving for salt, and,

obeying some instinct, it fastens into the skin and raises great blisters thereon by its peculiar suction action. At lunch-time we carefully made a pile of dry brushwood, and shook a small packet of salt over it. Instantly the bees left us and followed the salt down through the loose heap, and then with a chuckle of delight, and a grunt of satisfaction from Kaiser, Mac applied a lighted match. Doc said that Mac chased the only bee that escaped for over half a mile, but at any rate we were not troubled further that day.

Continuing our journey, which at first had been through the swampy and pestilential morass formed by the Ope River's periodical overflow, we at length crossed the "divide" between the Ope and Kumusi waters, and travelled through a country in which brilliantly-hued creepers blazed from the tree-tops, and luxuriant vegetation flourished everywhere. Gaudy-plumaged parrots, cockatoos, and birds of paradise flitted overhead, making the forest resound with their deafening chatter. Snakes of nearly all varieties started from the dense under-growths as we approached, and our dogs had plenty of exercise in chasing these undesirables. They in turn were the hunted when near rivers, and many a narrow escape Mac and his charges had from the enormous and impregnable crocodiles that infested the banks of all streams.



Crocodile's Jaws.

There were several native villages in the district which we now traversed, but having had previous experience of the treacherous nature and cannibalistic proclivities of most of the tribes in that quarter, we avoided them, and altered our course when we struck a native pad or track. We knew that our tracks must be seen, however, and nightly expected a visit from the warriors, who, fearing only the Government police, looked upon prospecting parties as the lawful prey allowed them by a considerate Government. We were not disappointed. One night, when camped near the Kumusi, and about thirty miles from the Yodda Valley camps, the long-expected attack came, and, to Mac's intense disgust, we did not stay to argue the point, but departed hurriedly and ignominiously. Two days later we reached the Yodda, and camped for some time, to try our luck and hear the latest reports from the mountains. A day previous to our arrival a strong party had set out to prospect Mount Scratchley, and while we were camped a famous pioneering company arrived from the interior, and reported the discovery of vast gold deposits in the gullies of the higher ranges. Several of the members showed some peculiar stones which they had taken from the mountain ravines, and one veteran, in whom Sam recognised an old comrade, hinted mysteriously that the nuggets and slugs which they had with them came from a lava deposit at the source of the Gira, in German territory. While Doc and I noted that significant fact for future reference, Kaiser was more interested in the stones. [Pg 243]

"Dat is vat is called zircon," he whispered to me, as he placed a pebble on his tongue. "Gott! it is over twenty carats," he continued excitedly. "Ask him ver it vas come from." [Pg 244]

"Why not ask him yourself?" I suggested jokingly, but the reproachful look he gave me made me regret that I had spoken. Kaiser's race, in most British colonies, is always suspected of underhand dealing. On my inquiring of the owner where he had found the stones, he placed them in my hands.

"In some creeks in the back ranges," he answered. "You can have them all. I ain't going to carry them further."

"But look," I said, chipping the edge of one, and disclosing a translucent mass of pale straw

colour, in which a tinge of port wine danced according to the manner in which the stone was held.

"I don't care," he replied. "I is a gold-miner, an' I knows that every ounce of gold is worth £3 17s. 6d.; but that is darned stuff only Jews will buy, and I'll throw them away if you don't want them."

I had no spare money—the prospector never has—and as he refused to take a new Winchester rifle and my silver-mounted revolver, I did not know what to give him in return.

"Ye'll need all yer pop-guns where ye are goin'," he said. "I is going down to South Aus. with my pile; but say, if ye has any fruit-salt, or sugar, or quinine to spare, I an' the boys would be ontarnally obliged to ye."

I gave him a bottle of quinine tabloids, and another of saccharine, and, as few of the miners had ever heard of the latter substance, and of course seldom carried sugar, their delight was a treat to see. We entertained them to dinner, and next morning they started for the Kumusi River, *en route* for the coast, Samarai, and Australia. At the same time we picked up their old tracks and steered for the distant peak of Mount Scratchley. [Pg 245]

Our progress was now necessarily slow, for, in addition to being in a hostile country, through which Sir William Macgregor and his native police was the only armed force that had ever passed, we had to carry on prospecting operations. Three days out, our first "strike" was made. We bridged a deep river in the usual manner, by felling a tree across from bank to bank, and after we had crossed, Kaiser, who was an enthusiastic botanist, descended into the channel to examine a curious growth on an under branch.

"Come on, Kaiser," shouted Mac; "there's nae gold doon there."

"Bring up a sample, anyhow," Bill added, throwing him a gold-pan; and laughingly we all passed on, leaving our inquisitive comrade to follow at his leisure. Shortly afterwards Doc shot a wild pig, and, as all prospectors adopt the rule of dining when opportunity offers, a halt was called for that purpose. During cooking operations Kaiser arrived, carrying Bill's gold-pan. Bill took the dish from his hands with the intention of replacing it in its former position on a carrier's back; but, to his loudly and vigorously expressed astonishment, he found that his comrade had followed his instructions, and actually carried about two pounds of sand from the river's bed.

"Lor', but ye is green, Kaiser!" he remarked, preparing to throw the sand out.

"Haud on a wee," Mac cried, seizing his arm; "it's aye whaur ye dinna expect to find gold that ye get it. Noo, I dinna think there's ony there, so try it."

Bill looked at Mac in thoughtful silence for a minute.

"I reckon it's worth trying, anyhow," cried Sam. "Pitch it here, an' I'll pan it." [Pg 246]

Bill did so, and Sam walked over to a creek near. Shortly after we were all startled by his shout. "Did you salt" (add gold to) "this dirt, Scottie?" he roared.

"Get oot, man, an' no mak' a fool o' yersel'!" Mac answered, walking over. "Hallo! Come here lads," he continued; "we've struck it!"

In a moment six excited men were round the pan, to which Sam was still imparting a gentle concentric motion, and, to our unbounded amazement, every movement of the dish still increased the comet-like tail of deep red gold in the ripple of the pan.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" said the two Australians simultaneously.

"I'll be d—darned!" remarked Mac, with great feeling.

"Mine Gott! Tree ounce stuff!" cried Kaiser.

"Better come and have dinner," suggested Doc.

I do not remember what I said; but even our "boys" babbled away in unintelligible but excited language. Of course we returned to the river—one of the Kumusi head-waters—and by sundown had tested the sands at various points for a distance of two miles on both sides of our bridge. Kaiser, meanwhile, had set to work with his pan, and when we returned to our camping-ground he had about half an ounce of coarse gold to show for his efforts.

Next day we pegged out six prospectors' claims along both banks of the stream, including, of course, as much of the alluvial land on either side as our claims would allow. For several days afterwards we devoted some time to the most promising bars and deposits; but, as we had neither the tools nor the material for constructing sluice-boxes, our methods were restricted to simply washing the "dirt" in our pans. On the fourth day Mac threw down his pan, ejaculating at the same time the most-used word in his fairly-extensive vocabulary. [Pg 247]

"What is the matter, Mac?" I cried, from the opposite bank.

"I dinna see hoo I shood hae tae work like a Clyde steevedore," he answered, "when ony man wi' the sma'est scienteefic abeelities could get as much gold in hauf an hoor as the lot o' us can in a day."

"Explain, Mac. Have you an idea?"

"Ay, thousands o' them. But what's tae hinder us frae taking a wheen split bamboos an' stringing them thegether like a sheet o' galvanised iron——"

"Nothing. We have our axes. But what——?"

"Turn the affair upside down and lean it against the bank there. Some o' us could throw the sand on tae the thing and Kaiser could keep it goin' wi' enough water tae wash the sand awa.'"

"But the bamboo is too smooth. The gold would be carried over the edges with the sand."

"Pit a hale bamboo in atween every twa split yins, an' if the gold could rise ow'r that it wad be too licht for savin' ony way."

"All right, Mac," I responded. "You make the affair, and if it works we will appoint you our chief engineer."

Mac did not answer. He knew that all his appointments merely meant so much additional work left to him as a matter of course; and even as things were, he never had "ony time for meeditaishun." He made his corrugated inclined plane, however, and as all his comrades, excepting Kaiser, laughed at his idea, he worked it himself for the first day. That evening, as we sat in the smoke of our camp-fire, Doc remarked, "Well, boys, I made about an ounce to-day, but I can't say that I care much about the work."

"I reckon I is good for an ounce too," said Bill. [Pg 248]

Sam was cook, Kaiser camp-guard, and I had been writing up my log, so we had nothing to say. Mac evidently—like an Australian bushman—believed that silence was golden, for it was only after being asked several times that he spoke. "Ah, weel," he said reflectively, "there's some folk in this weary world content tae work awa' frae morn till nicht for a paltry three pounds seventeen an' saxpence worth" (one ounce of gold), "but I'm no ane o' them."

"Mac is home-sick," Doc laughed.

"Has your patent turned out a duffer?" inquired Sam.

"I reckon Scottie is keeping back his gold from his mates," said Bill aggrievedly.

"How much did you get, Mac?" I interrupted soothingly, for Mac had been my companion in many a journey, and I understood his nature well.

"I dinna ken," he answered, handing me a fair-sized pouch; "aboot hauf a pun', I think."

"What!" roared the men, springing to their feet.

"Lor, Scottie! Does ye mean——?"

"Eight ounces exactly," I announced. "Mac has made £30 for one day's work."

"Scodland for ever!" shouted Kaiser from the midst of a cloud of native tobacco-smoke, and the others echoed his sentiments. Next day all hands assisted at Mac's machine, which showed in its construction many signs of that gentleman's ingenuity; but it had not been designed to bear the strain now put upon it, and after a few hours' work the bamboo ripples fell away. However it may apply in other circumstances, it is a recognised law among prospectors that misfortunes never come singly, therefore we were not surprised that afternoon when the river suddenly came down "a banker" (in flood) and carried away all our preparations for a new machine. Doc, who was of a [Pg 249] philosophical nature, went out shooting when it became apparent that no further work could be done that day. When he returned to camp I saw from his face that the last of our misfortunes had not yet been reached.

"The Papangis and Babagas are out," he said quietly.

"That means——?" I said.

"That we'd better git, quick an' lively too," interrupted Bill.

"This creek runs into a large river about three miles down," continued Doc, "and there is a palisaded village near the junction. I saw some canoes drawn up on the banks, and from their design and peculiar ornamentation I at once guessed who their owners were. There were also some bearing the symbol of the Sizuretas; but probably they were those taken from that tribe when the great massacre occurred. I did not see any natives, and as I was quite close to the palisades I therefore concluded that they did not wish to be seen, and you can all guess what that means."

Doc's words caused great consternation, and when our "boys" gathered that they were in the country of the dreaded Papangi they set up a wailing. "Papangi no good. Hims eat poor black devils. Stick head on pouri dubus" (sorcerer's house), cried one, on whom we had bestowed the title of King George.

"Dinna you be frichtened, ma man," said Mac consolingly. "If ony o' the Papangi heathens come near enough I'll gie them sic a feed o' lead that their ghosts'll hae indegeestion." King George did not understand all that Mac said; but he brightened up considerably at his words, and at once began to infuse spirit into his companions. Mac was always delighted at the prospect of a fight; but as these tribes had only a month previously murdered and eaten most of the inhabitants of Angerita, the chief village of the Sizuretas, and afterwards successfully given battle to the [Pg 250] Warden of the Northern Division and his police, who had gone to punish them, we thought discretion the better part of valour, and prepared to move, much to Mac's disgust.

"Are ye gaun to rin awa' again?" he bellowed indignantly. "Let's get ma gun, an I'll gang an' fecht them ma'sel."

"An' your head vas look vell on pole-top, Scottie," said Kaiser as he struck our tent.

"We will fight if we can get a good camping-ground where they can't get behind us," I said, and

with that Mac had to be content.

In a marvellously short space of time our carriers were loaded and across the stream, after which we cast our bridge adrift and started up the north bank, intending to follow the river to its source, and then prospect for the lode from which the gold was shed. The sun had just disappeared as we began our march. We had not stayed for supper, and perhaps this fact had something to do with the depressing influence that seemed to rest upon all. Animal life had suddenly become very active; and to feel a coiling, writhing object among the feet, or to tread upon some nameless amphibious creature, was anything but a pleasant sensation.

The moon shone brightly for the first two hours, and we travelled much faster than is usual in New Guinea. Our dogs, however, seemed conscious of some impending danger that was not yet apparent to us; and it grieved Mac sorely to see how his dumb charges hung so closely to his person, and how spiritless they had become.

"I fancy we should have stayed and risked a fight," Doc said at length, as we paused at the mouth of a narrow ravine through which the stream rushed furiously. "Our boys will never face that."

"Can't we get over the top?" I suggested; but Bill and Sam, who had been reconnoitring, said our [Pg 251] only possible course was to traverse the stream and trust to there being no pools. This prospect was not very pleasing. "We did not know the length of the ravine, nor what animals might have their homes in its depths, and our nerves were already at high tension.

The moon was now obscured with banks of dark clouds that had suddenly shot up from beneath Mount Victoria, and the birds of night, before so noisy, were now strangely silent. The atmosphere had also become oppressively close, and we had to throw down our loads, from sheer physical inability to longer sustain them.

"It's a 'buster' comin'," Sam gasped; "git up the flies—quick!" A flash of lightning lit up the valley as he spoke, and a terrific thunder-clap reverberated through the ravine. A minute of what felt unnatural silence passed, during which we all struggled with our long canvas "fly," and then the storm burst. We had got our flour-and rice-sacks under cover, and following Kaiser's example, crawled in under the folds beside them. The rain was the heaviest I have ever experienced, and soon we were drenched to the skin, even through the thick canvas. Suddenly one of the dogs started up, and instinctively fearing some new calamity, I gripped his nostrils tightly, while Doc crawled to the edge of our covering.

"It's them," he whispered. "They are on the other bank; Heaven help us if we are discovered!"

"Let me oot!" growled Mac; "I'm no gaun to be speared like a rabbit in a hole."

"Shut up, Mac," I remonstrated. "It's too dark for them to see, and they cannot cross the water in any case." The patter of feet could now be heard on the opposite bank, and an occasional Che-ep (battle-cry) showed that we were not mistaken. In this new excitement we soon forgot our [Pg 252] miserable condition; and from the characteristic behaviour of the individual members of the party, it was evident that the actual presence of danger had dispelled the strange feeling of depression which previously had almost unnerved us. Mac was muttering to his dogs, Bill and Sam were—unconsciously, I believe—pouring out a torrent of Australian bush words which, as Kaiser afterwards said, "sounded like poedry." Kaiser himself, I knew, was munching a piece of damper, which with thoughtful precaution he had carried from our last camp. Our boys lay still, as if asleep. I was so engrossed in the study of my comrades that events outside passed unnoticed until Doc's voice startled us. "Come out, boys!" he cried; "all is clear." We crawled from under our soaked covering, and found Doc puffing at his pipe as serenely as if he had just risen from supper. The storm had ceased, the moon was shining again, and the dark clouds were speeding towards the Yodda Valley.

"Evidently our friends were surprised by the 'buster' as much as we were," Doc said; "at any rate, they have gone home to dine on something else."

"That minds me that I'm hungry tae," cried Mac; "come on, Kaiser; gi'e us a haun.'"

By some miraculous means these two worthies got a fire kindled, and while we dried ourselves by the blaze of the gum-logs, the "billies" were boiled, and soon some copious draughts of thick black tea made us feel quite recovered. When morning came the waters in the gorge had subsided, and after a hasty breakfast we forced a passage up the stream, and finally emerged on the wooded slopes of the mountains.

The details of our journey from thence onwards would require too much space to enumerate. We steered for the distant ranges, because we wished to prospect them before the state of our stores [Pg 253] rendered that impossible, knowing that, if unlucky, we could always come back to the sands of the river. We were attacked twice by hunting tribes of what must have been the notorious Tugeris; but we were no longer inclined to run away, and for the benefit of the gold-seeker who might come after us, we taught them that it was dangerous to interfere with prospectors.

One day in the middle ranges we traced up a rich gold formation, and by the primitive method of dollying with improvised tools obtained 110 ounces from it in three days. In this region—near the source of the Gira—signs of gold were everywhere; but we were not equipped for systematic mining, and could only treat the rich free ore or the alluvial deposits. There seemed to be few natives here, and owing to the height above sea-level the country was much healthier than in the lower valleys. One day we came on a deserted village, in the stockaded garden of which were cocoanut and betel palms, and the usual taro and sweet-potatoes. The sugar-cane and tobacco-plant were also much in evidence, showing that some civilising influence—probably that of the missionaries—had been at work among the former inhabitants. We saw no sign of life, however,

and therefore concluded that the fierce Tugeris had recently raided the place.

Another day Doc and I, while climbing up the mountain-side from our camp, found our progress suddenly barred by a steep gully that cut transversely along the slope. Descending with difficulty into the valley, and following up the course of an old water-channel, we found a heterogeneous deposit of zircons, sapphires, topazes, and many other gemstones amidst the *débris* of an extinct blowhole. We gathered some of what appeared to be the best, intending to find out their value at [Pg 254] the earliest possible opportunity. The valley formation itself would have gladdened the heart of any geologist; from any point lower down the mountain the slope seemed continuous, and only when at the edge of the "breakaway" was the valley evident.

We were now near the German boundary, and hesitated between our desires and our duty as law-abiding prospectors. While camped on doubtful territory an incident occurred that may serve to illustrate more than one thing. We were satisfied with our luck so far; and therefore light-hearted, so much so that one night Mac began to sing, and soon we all joined him. The air was very clear on the mountains, but it struck me that the echoes lingered strangely; and after we had turned in for the night, volumes of sound still rose and fell on the atmosphere, sweeter far than that produced by our own rough voices. Next night, as we sat at supper regarding ruefully our fast-diminishing stores, we were startled by a loud "Hallo!" "Hallo!" we shouted back, and then to our astonishment four men and six carriers marched into our fire-lit circle.

"It's a graun' nicht," cried one. "Hae ye onything for eatin'?"

"Well, I'll be—Scotched!" remarked Doc, while Mac sprang to his feet and stared at the new-comers.

"You are just in time," I said. "What clan do you represent?"

"Macpherson; A'm frae Laggan-side. Sandy here is a Glesga man, but Bob an' Jim are Englishmen; they're nane the waur o' that——"

"We heard you singing last night," interrupted Bob. "We are as hungry as hawks—but how is the war?"...

The new party had just come from a protracted trip in German territory, and they told many [Pg 255] strange tales of what they had seen in that mysterious land. Unfortunately their stores had given out, and on investigation we found that ours could not last more than ten days for both parties. However, as Mr. Robert Elliot informed me, they had made enough gold to warrant their going back again; and, pending considerations as to the advisability of our joining forces, we all resolved to have a "spell."

We eventually reached the coast at Holnecote Bay; a week after we landed at Samarai, and eight days more found us in Sydney.

Here two Hebrew gentlemen offered Sam and Kaiser a £10 note for our entire stock of gem-stones. In consequence of this generous offer (!) and the fact that his great height afforded an easy means of identification, we had to send Sam rather hurriedly to Melbourne. We eventually restored peace, however, by selling our stones to the afore-mentioned individuals for £80; and since then Aaron K. has informed me that one stone alone, when cut into four parts and polished, fetched fifty-three sovereigns.

IN THE GUM-LAND OF WANGERI

[Pg 256]

There is a region away in the far north of New Zealand, where sooner or later the wanderer who knows the world by the track of his footsteps must surely gravitate, there to mingle with kindred spirits and pursue the even tenor of life's way for a brief space under tranquil circumstances, digging for the Kauri-resin deposits of former ages along the fern swamps and uplands, amassing wealth if fortune favours, but casually content with the generous subsistence his peaceful labours at the least will bring, until his restless nature compels him to journey forth again on his ceaseless pilgrimage.

My acquaintance with this odd corner of the globe was made some years ago, when chance—fatality, the gum-diggers would call it—led me to take a trip on a coasting steamer trading from Auckland northwards. I had never heard of the gum-digging industry except in the vaguest way, and curiosity had fired my interest in inverse ratio with the amount of information gathered. But I could not help noticing that all my inquiries on the subject were treated with scantily hidden disapproval, and in consequence I never pressed my apparently awkward questions, fearing that I had by accident hit on a conversational topic, which, like that of convict history in Australia, had best be tabooed. So it happened that when the SS. *Bulimba* moored alongside the jetty in the beautiful harbour of Wangeri, I stepped ashore, meaning to put in a day or so in the picturesque [Pg 257] little township which looked so alluring from the water, yet wholly unaware of the fact that I had at last reached the centre of the gum country. That was a small matter, however, on which I was speedily enlightened.

I had just got clear of the long wharf, and was looking about the quiet street in which I found myself, in hopes of spying the hospitable portals of an hotel near at hand, when four extremely ragged men emerged from the doorway of the establishment I had at that moment decided to patronise. Their outward appearance was bad—very bad, and though I have foregathered with all

sorts and conditions in my time, I like to choose my company when I can. I resolved promptly to pass on to some other house. The disreputable quartette were now hurrying towards me, and I moved aside to give them ample room to go by. Three of the party were engaged in animated discussion; the fourth walked a little way ahead, his eyes fixed listlessly on the ground. He looked up as he noticed the shadow across his path, and at once an expression of relief brightened his weary countenance.

"I ask your pardon, sir," he said, with quaint courtesy. "But will you do me a small service?"

My hand slid into my pocket involuntarily; then I recollected that I was not in Britain, and withdrew it again carelessly. "Fire away," I said; "what's the trouble?"

The argumentative trio had meanwhile ceased their wordy altercations and were staring at me eagerly. Their polite spokesman began again:—

"I presume you have been in the various Australian cities?"—he nodded in the direction of my portmanteau, which I had set down in the middle of the road, whereon were emblazoned the advertising devices of many enterprising hotel proprietors.

"You are certainly a lineal descendant of Sherlock Holmes," I ventured with mild sarcasm, half wondering if in this remote settlement I had stumbled upon an adapted version of the old, old confidence trick. [Pg 258]

He appeared to understand my innuendo, for he flushed up angrily, then suddenly glancing at his dilapidated wardrobe, he checked a fiery outburst and smiled feebly instead. His companions too seemed powerfully affected by my simple remark, and their wrath did not cool down as swiftly as I would have wished. They crowded around me threateningly, while the vials of their speech overflowed in a tempestuous torrent of indignant reproaches.

"We is Ostralians," they bellowed with one voice, "we is——"

"Calm yourselves, boys," I entreated. "You're over-sensitive to be abroad in this wicked world. I said nothing——"

"An' don't say it again," interrupted the tallest and ugliest of the group. "I is known as Long Ted in these parts, I is; an' I fights when my fur is raised, I does."

It was now my turn to feel annoyed; the aggressive nature of the party almost confirmed me in my first doubt.

"Suppose you stand out of the way," I suggested. "I'm not holding a levee——"

The leader at this stage endeavoured to throw oil on the troubled waters. "I must apologise for bringing this trouble upon you," he said, frowning severely on his associates. "We are not tramps, though I have no doubt our looks are against us. We are gum-diggers out for a spell; at least my companions are on a holiday; I—I am only going to take care of them."

"Then the gum-diggings are here?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"All round about for sixty miles or more," Long Ted answered gruffly. "English Bob is going to Melbourne with us——" [Pg 259]

"Sydney," interjected a voice at his elbow.

"Adelaide," prompted another.

English Bob quelled the rising storm with an impatient gesture. "You promised to let a stranger decide the matter," he cried appealingly; then turning to me he continued, "Will you be so kind as give me your opinion on these three cities mentioned. In short, which is the finest of the lot for a holiday?"

A murmuring babel of sound followed his words, and the three fire-eaters glared at me savagely, awaiting my verdict. But I had once before been in a similar position—only once, but that was enough. I realised that the harassed Englishman had in tow a South Australian, a citizen of New South Wales, and a Victorian. I approached the delicate question warily.

"Adelaide is a tidy little town," I hazarded tentatively. Long Ted's basilisk-like eyes peered at me dangerously.

"And Melbourne is a fine city," I continued reflectively. Long Ted smiled, but his nearest neighbour snarled. I could venture no further. "Not for gold or precious stones will I commit myself," I protested. "I am a peaceable individual——"

"Ho, ho, ho," laughed English Bob in genuine merriment, slapping me heartily on the shoulder. "You've sized them up right away. I have never been in Australia myself, and cannot understand why my companions should have such diversified opinions on a simple subject. I am certainly obliged to you for showing them my difficulty, for if you cannot tell them what they ask, how can I?"

"Toss for it, boys," I recommended; "it will be the safest way, and can arouse no ill-feeling."

"Right you are, mate," shouted Long Ted, and a twin echo of applause intimated that all danger of immediate disturbance was at an end. I seized my portmanteau in haste, and proceeded on my interrupted course; but the fighting trio leisurely kept pace, Long Ted gently insinuating the bag from my hand into his own horny palm as we walked along. [Pg 260]

"If you don't mind," spoke English Bob, coming up in the rear, "I'd like to—to shout for you. We've plenty of time to catch the old *Bulimba*, and for my own part I'm not very anxious whether she

sails south without us or not."

I marvelled at this strange *dénoûement*, but said nothing, and together we entered the hotel they had so recently vacated. Within the five minutes following our advent into the gilded "saloon bar," I had become fairly well acquainted with the vicissitudes of the gum-digger's life. Long Ted was as exceedingly communicative as English Bob was reticent, while the remaining pair added titbits of information now and then as occasion demanded.

"But what sort of men make it their special calling?" I asked at length. "No one seemed very willing to give me any knowledge on the subject in Auckland."

English Bob roused himself, and looked at me curiously. "We are a cosmopolitan lot," he answered, with just a note of sadness in his voice; "we come from all corners of the globe; but no one makes it a special calling unless, perhaps, a few Maoris——"

"We is the dead-beats o' civilisation, that's what we is," put in the garrulous Ted, with cheerful emphasis. "But say, boss, what is you goin' to do here? Is you goin' into the gum country? Is you full up o' Sydney and Melbourne too?"

I evaded the pertinent allusion, not knowing exactly its true import; I was commencing to understand why the gum-diggers were looked upon with suspicion by their eminently respectable brethren of the towns. Yet in spite of myself my sympathies went out to the world-wanderers who seemed to be brought together in this land through the subtle hand of an all-wise Providence. [Pg 261]

"Give me the bearings of the camps, and I'll go out right away," I said. "Gum-digging may suit me as well as gold-digging, and I want to know what it's like, anyhow."

At that moment the *Bulimba's* shrill whistle sounded out on the still air, and Long Ted immediately grabbed his "swag" and made a bolt for the door, a proceeding which his two Australian comrades copied with alacrity.

"Hold on, boys," I cried; "she won't sail for an hour yet; this is only a warning blast. Surely you are acquainted with the habits of coasters by this time."

English Bob, however, had made no movement, and missing him the excited trio came back. "I knows the old *Bulimba*," howled Ted. "Captain Thompson would hustle the blasted barge out just on purpose. Come on, Bob."

The Englishman stretched himself lazily, and started to follow his companions, who were again half-way down the street. "Goodbye, sir," he said; "I'll see you again soon if you are to remain in the country. But one word—don't judge by appearances on the gum-fields."

I returned his greeting, and thanked him for his advice, "Here's the *Auckland Express*," I said, fishing that paper from my pocket. "It is the latest date, and will be something to read on the boat."

He took it eagerly, and glanced casually down the open sheet; then his face paled, and the paper dropped from his nerveless fingers. I turned aside for a moment, and when I looked again, English Bob's countenance was stern and hard. [Pg 262]

"You'd better go," I advised kindly; "the *Bulimba* will be moving out soon."

He shook his head. "I have decided to stay and go back with you to the fields," he answered with an effort. "But I'll run down to the wharf and say good-bye to the boys."

He was gone before I could speak another word, and wonderingly I picked up the paper which had caused such a sudden change of programme. Only one item appeared in the page he had scanned which could in any way be considered of remotest private interest. But it read as follows: "Robert Lorimer, the absconding Bank Manager of a country town in England, has at last been traced to New Zealand. Local inquiries are being instituted, but it is regarded as tolerably certain that the defaulter will be found in the northern gum-land, and the police of that district have been warned accordingly. Meanwhile the port of Auckland will be stringently watched."

That was all, yet viewed in the light of recent events it was amply sufficient to suggest to me that English Bob and Robert Lorimer were one and the same person. Still, my late interrogator as to the attractions of Australian cities did not strike me as being such a man as the bald news paragraph implied. His face was gentle, and contained a certain quiet dignity, which I felt assured could belong to no criminal's countenance. His manner, too, was distinctly in his favour. Already I had forgotten the unprepossessing garb of the outer man. My reflections were cut short by the dismal shriek of the *Bulimia's* syren—sure signal that that persevering vessel was at last under way.

"Yes, she's off now," volunteered the bar-tender, surveying the deserted arena beyond the counter ruefully, and making a mental calculation, I have no doubt, as to the probable "stagger juice" capacity of his solitary remaining customer. I disappointed him mightily by making my way outside, and there, to my surprise, I saw English Bob approaching with Long Ted expostulating volubly by his side. [Pg 263]

"Hallo, Ted!" I cried, "have you also decided to remain where an unfeeling civilisation sent you?"

"Of course I stays with the boss," responded that gentleman, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye, "but my poor old swag has gone with Slim Jim and Never Never Dan. They would have stopped too, only they couldn't swim, an' the darned ship had moved off afore they knew we wasn't comin'."

"We'll go back to our old camp by the coach to-night," said English Bob. "I'm tired of even this

fringe of civilisation already. Will you come?"

I needed no pressing. Somehow I felt that I was being drawn into the final act of a life's drama; the damaging testimony of the *Auckland Express* loomed largely before my vision, but the pale sad face of the exile awakened in me pity rather than repulsion, his silent exercise of a superbly strong will aroused in me admiration.

"I shall be glad to go with you," I answered.

That night we journeyed by mail-coach out towards Wangeri, a constantly shifting settlement forming the headquarters of the ever-roving gum-diggers. For the early part of the route our lumbering vehicle careered over rocky bluffs and steeps, then down into beautiful alluvial valleys and forest glades, where silvery streams of purest water gushed onwards to meet the sea, their winding channels, glittering in the moon's filtering beams, showing at intervals through the wavy fronds of the stately kauri. But soon the majestic forest lands gave place to rolling plains of burnt soil, with occasional stretches of fern-swamp and tea-tree dunes. [Pg 264]

"This is the old forest country of New Zealand," explained English Bob. Ted had long since fallen asleep.

"And is the gum not to be found here also?" I asked, somewhat nonplussed to find the site of an ancient forest so bare and desolate.

My companion gravely acquiesced. "Gum-diggers are not as a rule a careful class," he said; "and the young timber on these flats has all been recklessly burnt down to suit their needs."

Long and deep channels here and there intersected the scorched wastes, and mounds like gigantic mole-hills were abundantly evident. But in the vague light only a blurred panorama of the true aspect of things could be seen; which was perhaps just as well, for the New Zealand Government has long complained about the devastating nature of the gum-seeker's employment. They certainly do not make the desert "blossom like the rose," but if an opposite parallel could be drawn, it would suit them exactly. This feature of affairs was due, I was told, to the plodding and ceaseless excavations of a number of Austrians who stormed the country many years before, and not to the more leisurely routine pursued by the orthodox happy-go-lucky digger.

Once again, however, we entered a broad timber belt which extended far along with undulating hillside forming our southern boundary at this stage, and seemingly feathered the land for a very considerable distance northward also. And now many twinkling lights began to shine through the sparse foliage at the base of the tall kauri, and fleeting glimpses were caught of groups of men standing at the doors of their "whares," watching the coach rumble past with an odd listlessness which seemed the more strange considering that the arrival of the mails was but a weekly occurrence, and sometimes not even that when the rainy season was on, and the valleys and flats alike were flooded to a dangerous depth.

THE GUM-DIGGERS' SWIMMING POOL.

"Their interest is in their daily occupation," said English Bob, guessing my thoughts. "The men you meet here for the most part know the world well. This is a haven of rest for the wide earth's [Pg 265]

wanderers. Mail day to them means little, for they receive few letters and perhaps send less."

"And have you travelled far, that you speak in such a strain?" I asked chidingly. "Surely the world has not grown dim to your eyes, which have seen fewer years than mine."

"Years do not always bring sadness," he answered evasively, "nor does the lack of them make one the less liable to suffer. As for my travels—do not ask. I have——"

"Wangeri," yelled the driver, reining up the horses with a jerk which had the effect of propelling the slumbering Ted heavily on to the floor of the coach. The words that issued from that valiant warrior's lips then were sulphurous in the extreme, and the offending Jehu, hearing of his own premeditated doom, slid hastily from his perch and vanished into the night. There was little indeed to see at Wangeri. A small "store and post-office" occupied the central position in a forest clearing, and around it in a straggling ring about a dozen log huts were dully discernible through the gloom.

"The whares are scattered all through the forest for miles around," said English Bob. "Wangeri is only a kind of station for the export of the resin collected. But come along to my little wigwam; it is a bit away from the others, but it's on a good patch, and you are welcome to try your luck with Ted and me." [Pg 266]

I expressed my gratitude in, I fear, rather stinted terms, for the eerie shadow of the great pines had a somewhat depressing influence on my spirits. I tramped on with my new acquaintances in silence, my swag slung picturesquely over my shoulder as in days of yore.

"It *is* a bit lonesome like," grumbled Long Ted, as he marched on ahead, separating the festooning branches for our easier progress. "Can you blame a man for being ragged after this?" he demanded irrelevantly a few moments later, his mind apparently reverting to our first meeting. It was clear that Long Ted's frustrated holiday was still a rankling subject in that worthy's breast.

The air was wonderfully cool and invigorating, despite the enclustering thicket, and the absence of the ubiquitous mosquito made me marvel not a little. It was the deathlike silence that hurt; it oppressed the senses to an appalling degree, and tended to reduce one unaccustomed to forest solitudes to an enervating state of melancholy. Had the journey been made by daylight it might have been different, but fate ordains that the traveller to this land should first see Nature's most dreary aspect. I was startled from my unprofitable musings by English Bob shouting—

"Here we are at last. Now, Ted, make us some supper; and let us be merry, for to-morrow we——"

"Go out gum-digging," I prompted, sinking down in a corner of the aptly-named wigwam with a sigh of relief.

It was a week later. The sun was shining brightly over the sylvan slopes of the great gum region, and tinging the nodding plumes of the stately forest giants with a deep bronze effulgence; yet down below the spreading branches a perpetual twilight reigned, and here, piercing and [Pg 267] trenching the mossy sward in search of the fossilised resin residue, the strangely assorted waifs of the world wandered, English Bob and I had become fast friends during our brief sojourn together. Concerning his past I did not inquire, having already learned that the grim gum-land swallows up many of life's tragedies; but day by day I expected a dread *dénoûement*. The newspaper paragraph still haunted me; my mind was filled with conflicting doubts and fears. The motley assembly who formed our neighbours near and distant were a generous and true-hearted people, among whom it was a pleasure to abide. The same environment affected all, and for the time we were as one huge family, dwelling within the encircling arm of grand old mother Nature.

Each day we sallied out armed with spade and spear, the latter implement being merely a long pointed stick provided with a handle for leverage, and rarely indeed did we return to camp without a goodly store of the amberlike deposit. The method of working was simple. By means of the spear the spongy soil was easily penetrated, and the presence of any gum strata localised at once, after which the spade came into play. The value of the crude material thus brought to the surface was no mean figure, ranging from £50 to £70 a ton.

This morning we had been exceptionally fortunate, Long Ted spearing a huge block of the gelatinous substance almost with his first effort, and we were busy clearing away the covering earth when two woe-begone individuals appeared before us.

"Slim Jim and Never Never Dan," gasped Long Ted, gazing at the apparitions in undisguised wonder. "Where—what—how—an' ye does have a mighty neck to come back in them togs."

Then I noticed that the miserable-looking pair were arrayed in fashionable raiment, though [Pg 268] already considerably torn by contact with the entangling brush.

"We didn't git no farther than Auckland," muttered Slim Jim shamefacedly. "We didn't calc'late on goin' nowheres without the boss, so we has come back."

English Bob smiled. "But how have you managed to arrive at this time?" he asked. "Surely you did not walk from Wangeri."

"We just did," asserted Never Never Dan. "We couldn't wait on the bally old coach, so we came right away last night——"

"Come an' have some tucker, you heavenly twins," roared Ted, relinquishing his shovel, his honest face glowing with pleasure at the return of the prodigals.

When they had departed towards the hut, English Bob looked at me inquiringly. "Could you

imagine men like these in any other country than this?" he said. "They are just like children."

Slowly the sun climbed up in the heavens, and we two persevered at our work of excavation. Then gradually I became aware of the rhythmic hoof-beats of many horses sounding faintly in the distance, and soon the dense forest rang out with the unwonted echoes. And now the rushing of the gum-diggers hither and thither came plainly to our ears, and a chorus of warning cries swelled out above the prevailing din—"The troopers are coming."

At once the truth flashed over me that the man whose whare I shared was the object of their search; the inevitable crisis had come at last. As for him, he stood almost defiantly erect, with the blood alternately surging to his cheeks, then leaving them deathly pallid.

I laid my hand on his shoulder. "Why do you try to hide from me that which I already know?" I said gently. "Sometimes it is possible to help——"

"You know?" he gasped. [Pg 269]

"I saw the paper," I answered simply.

He covered his face with his hands, and his whole frame shook with a strong man's emotion. "Do you—believe?" he asked hoarsely, without looking at me.

"Assuredly not," I said.

He gave a sigh of thankfulness. "I have been tracked like a dog all over the world," he murmured brokenly, "but I have reached the end of the tether now."

"But why did you run away?" I asked hurriedly. "Surely an innocent man only courts disaster by flight."

The troopers were now near at hand. I could hear their sergeant talking to some of the diggers scarcely a hundred yards from where we stood. English Bob recovered himself with an extreme effort of will. "I may have been foolish," he said quietly, "but things looked very black against me, and—and the disgrace would have killed my old mother."

I did not reason further. "There may be a way of escape yet," I said, seized with an uncontrollable impulse. "We are both very much alike. I'll talk to the sergeant."

"No, no!" he cried, " I cannot allow——"

"Why, man," I interrupted impatiently, "it's your only chance. They'll find out their mistake soon enough."

"Good morning, boys," came a jovial voice from the timber, and its owner, a stalwart New Zealander, bearing the emblem of his office on his arm, rode forward alone. We responded to this cheery salutation gloomily.

"Why," he exclaimed, "you've struck a patch here. But I do wish you people would be more careful and take out licences before you start to dig. The Government is getting rather riled about your free-lance way of working."

"But we have licences," I remarked mildly. [Pg 270]

He laughed. "I'm glad of that," he said, "for I find very few of your neighbours have thought it necessary, and my troopers seem to have the deuce of a job in explaining matters to them." He wheeled his horse, then reined up again suddenly, and came back. "Which of you is Robert Lorimer?" he said directly.

His method of procedure appeared to me unnecessarily cruel. "That's me," I answered sharply, before my companion could speak. "But couldn't you have asked at first?"

He stared at me wonderingly. "Great Southern Cross, man!" he cried. "What!" He broke off in a long low whistle, and held out his hand. "Let me be the first to congratulate you, sir," he said. "Of course you could not have heard, but you needn't be so hard on me for all that. But let me tell my story," he continued, waving aside my interruptions. "I was instructed from headquarters to come for you officially seven days ago, but though I am a policeman I don't like the job of running any man to earth, and I delayed until I should have to come in any case to attend to the licence question. Only yesterday I was informed that the warrant was off, as the notes you were accused of stealing had been found in an old ledger, placed there, no doubt, by some careless clerk. That's all. Good luck to you, my boy, and a safe journey home."

He was gone in an instant. Then English Bob and I clasped hands in silence.

WITH THE PEARLERS OF NORTH-WESTERN AUSTRALIA [Pg 271]

On the north-western shores of Australia, between Cossack township and Port Darwin, lies a strip of coastline which has not yet received much attention from the outside world. This is the pearling-grounds of the Nor'-West, and the lordly pioneers who rule there hope that their preserves may long continue to be neglected by the check-suited globe-trotter. The headquarters of the pearling industry is at Broome, the landing station of one of the Australian cable systems. Broome, when the fleet is in port, has a population of about 1,500, which is made up of 200 white men, 800 Malays, 100 Japanese, and the same number of what are termed Manilamen, the remainder being a heterogeneous lot of aborigines, coolies, Kanakas, and specimens of almost

every other race on earth. When the pearlers are out, however, the town is practically deserted.

Dampier was the first European to skirt this coast, but it was long after his advent that it became famous for its pearl-shell deposits, although, even before the great explorer's time, it was probably known to the aborigines, who until recently were in the habit of gathering for food the bivalves that the monsoon storms threw up on the beach. But since the days of Dampier many changes have occurred on these desolate shores, and it is even doubtful if the coast has the same [Pg 272] configuration now as it had then. While the eastern states of Australia were still struggling for existence, the fierce Malay pirates reigned here, and indeed it is only lately that it has been freed from all suspicion in that respect, although the pirates may not always have been the Malays. The early sea-rovers were not long in finding out that it would pay them to give some attention to the treasures of the sea, and it is probably owing to their efforts that Roebuck Bay and the Ninety-Mile beach came into prominence as pearling-grounds. From that time up to about twenty years ago these individuals worked the shores and shallows by various methods peculiar to themselves, the chief consisting of forcing the unfortunate aborigines to dive for the shells while they merely extracted the pearls.

This system ceased suddenly so far as the power of the Malays was concerned; for towards the end of the 'Seventies some colonial adventurers sailed up the coast from Fremantle, and although little is officially known as to what then transpired, pearling shortly afterwards became a recognised profession among our colonial cousins. Some of those pioneers are still engaged in the trade, and many strange stories are told of their doings before the light of civilisation, in the shape of telegraphic communication, was let in upon their coast.

At present, taken as they stand, the pearlers of the Nor'-West are one of the wealthiest bodies of men in the world. They are certainly one of the most daring and most hospitable, and do not hesitate to share their wealth with any unlucky comrades. The methods in vogue now are much different from those employed twenty years ago. Beach-combing and enforced labour have given place to specially-designed luggers, profit-sharing systems, and the most modern diving-dresses, although among the South Pacific Islands beach-combing is still another name for piracy and [Pg 273] slave-raiding. Strangely enough, the pearls do not now form the chief support of the industry. Nevertheless, some are frequently found worth £100 and upwards, and many of a value of £10, while from that sum downwards to 1s. for a thousand the pearls are very plentiful. The shell, however, is now the backbone of the industry. It is valued at from £100 to £180 per ton, and finds ready sale through Singapore agencies of London firms at anything between those prices.

The pearler of the present day is a Briton in every sense of the word, and takes great care to impress that fact upon all who visit his domain. He usually owns the lugger he commands, but in some cases he has only a share in it and its profits, the real owner being a speculative gentleman who resides in his schooner and pays only occasional visits to the various luggers under his flag. In some of these deputy-managed craft the only qualification necessary to obtain the position of skipper or commander is that of being a white man and not a German; but when the master pearler goes to the British port of Singapore he is invariably forced to "come down a bit," and do his business with the prosperous and well-satisfied sons of the Fatherland.

Pearling is chiefly carried on in what are termed "proved grounds"; but if a good haul be made at any time the pearler is not averse to prospecting for new grounds (waters). As a rule the commander is the only white man on board the lugger. The crew is composed of Malays and coolies, but the diver is always an intelligent Manilaman or Filipino, who receives a small commission on the results of his work. The depth at which the shell is found is now about sixteen fathoms. Of course shallower ledges are still worked, but it is considered that they are almost exhausted, and few pearlers waste time over them. In working, the diver is lowered over the [Pg 274] gunwale by means of a winch, or in some cases dropped over unceremoniously by two of the Malay crew, and another two pump air down to him.

These people are always quarrelling among themselves, and consequently the diver runs many risks he does not at the time know of, unless he guesses what is happening above when he experiences the sensations attending the stoppage of his air supply. He is accustomed to such trifles, however, and being more or less a fatalist, probably wonders what the men at the pumps are quarrelling about, and in a disinterested sort of way speculates on which of his two pumpsmen will prove the weaker, and accordingly feed the sharks with him. Notwithstanding the uncertainty of life, he gathers all the shells within his limited range of vision, and when—if not too late—the men aloft stop fighting, he is hauled to the gunwale, where he is relieved of his spoil and dropped over again.

The shells are found in patches, and when one deposit is exhausted—or perhaps before, for the vessel is drifting all the time—the diver moves on to the next, crashing through dense forests of coral and other strange submarine growths *en route*, and frequently having to cut the fearful coiling creepers from his person. Often, too, he is precipitated into a deep, dark chasm of unknown extent. In such moments the diver's sole idea is to preserve his balance, for he is really but a feather-weight in the water at the sixteen-fathom level, and in due time he is safely hauled across the gulf, when, if he has not retained a vertical position, or if his line has not been kept taut overhead, he is dragged head-first through any vegetation or oozy slime that may lie in his path. When he regains his equilibrium, he once more turns his attention to the oyster-beds.

READY TO GO DOWN.

Meanwhile the lugger drifts erratically over the surface of the ocean. An evil-eyed Malay may be [Pg 275] asleep by the tiller, and the white commander will likewise be serenely indifferent to his surroundings, unless the thought strikes him that the quality of the last case of whisky he had was not in accordance with the labels on the bottles or the price he paid, in which event he will probably be making things lively among the crew, and the profits of the trip will increase in proportion. Every fifteen minutes or so the diver comes up for a "blow." If the shells are plentiful he may send them up in a net between times; but, as a rule, there are a few yards separating the shells of any size, and it is not often that he cannot bring them all aloft with him. A "blow" to this individual means being suspended over the gunwale with his helmet unscrewed for such time as the lugger may take to sail to the next known patch, after which he is allowed to drop again.

When a full cargo of shell has been obtained, the lugger's course is shaped towards Broome, where the molluscs are opened in sheds erected for the purpose. In the cases of the pearlers who possess several luggers a schooner is sent round periodically to collect the shell from the smaller craft, thus saving the latter a journey which they are ill able to accomplish, owing to their peculiar design and extremely small freeboard. The process of opening is sometimes carried on while the schooner sails for Broome; but, as most of the pearler kings make their homes on board these vessels now, and do not care to suffer the attending unpleasantness, the system is fast dying out, and the schooner, in turn, discharges at the Broome opening-sheds.

The methods of opening are many. In the early days the shells were torn apart with a knife or any other convenient weapon, and if no pearls rewarded a brief search, the carcass of the oyster was [Pg 276] scooped out and left to rot on the sand until a merciful monsoon tide caused its removal. Lately, however, the pearlers have copied the plan of the Chinese beachcombers of the Archipelago, and a simpler system could not well be devised. The shells are laid on a slightly-inclined bench, at the lowest edge of which is a carefully-constructed ledge containing some water in the angle formed. After two days in this position the oyster "gapes" and "spits out" the pearl—if any—which, of course, rolls down the bench until it is caught in the angle, from where it is gathered by the attendant Japanese or coolies. The number of pearls obtained in this way is about 30 per cent. greater than was formerly the case by the forcible method, and it is therefore evident that the hasty pearlers must have lost a considerable amount through their carelessness and the incompleteness of their method of extraction. As said before, the pearls do not now form the chief part of the business; nevertheless there are usually a fair number in the shells discharged from one schooner. When the pearls have been collected the molluscs are cleaned out from the shells and either buried or otherwise destroyed, their late casings being stored to await shipment. The chief opening establishments are owned by a London syndicate of jewellers, who employ in their service as many aborigines, coolies, and Japanese as may care to offer themselves. This syndicate is always willing to purchase "on chance" any shipment of shell that may come into port, and have a large fleet of their own luggers constantly on the waters during the season. As might be expected, this organised company is not liked by the independent pearlers, who—rightly or not—imagine that a monopoly of the trade is the real object in view. To such an extent is this rivalry carried that, notwithstanding the fact that Messrs. S. & Co. have special facilities for shipping, [Pg 277] and will pay full Singapore prices for all shells sold to them, the pearlers, unless temporarily financially embarrassed, will have nothing to do with them, and prefer to pay the expense of shipping their own shell to Singapore by some of the Holt Line of steamers, which call regularly in at Broome for that purpose while *en route* from Fremantle to the great Oriental metropolis.

During the monsoon season the pearling fleet shelters in Roebuck Bay, on the shores of which

Broome stands, and then that wicked and evil-smelling township wakens up from its sleep. Its drinking saloons are crowded with black, yellow, and white humanity; the joss-houses are filled with maddened nondescripts; and the far-seeing abilities and correct judgment of the man who designed the prison to hold the entire population becomes apparent. Unfortunately there are some renegade whites who run gambling-hells; but, in justice to Britons at large, it should be stated that these men are mostly mongrel foreigners. The master pearlers, as a rule, do not frequent these places, preferring the narrower but healthier confines of their own vessels to that of the filthy, mosquito-infested town; but if any do go ashore, they all meet in a saloon owned by a gentleman with a very Highland name and dusky countenance, or in the cable-house, where fortunes may be gambled away in a night. These men are indifferent to this matter. Money, to most of them, has no attractions, and if they were denied the excitement of being alternately worth a fair fortune and without a sixpence in their possession they would probably die of *ennui*. But some of the pearlers—indeed, the majority—are made of sterner stuff; they still retain memories of lands where green vegetation and flowing streams of crystal water take the place of hideous mangrove swamps and parching deserts, and their efforts are all made in the hope that [Pg 278] some day the results will enable them to return to those lands. These men only come into Broome when in need of stores, and, after landing their crews, spend the "off" season in some of the numerous bays and inlets farther north, occasionally finding rich patches in those sheltered sounds capable of being worked at all seasons.

It matters little on this coast what the original temperament of any person may have been, the influence of his surroundings soon has its effect upon him and makes him like his fellows. With the pearlers this takes the form of a feeling of reckless indifference, and a stranger suddenly thrown among them sees much to interest and amuse him in the incongruities brought about by this state of affairs.

When I visited this quarter I was not aware that there was any special industry carried on; in fact, I did not even know that a township existed between Roebourne and Derby until one evening the ss. *Nemesis* sailed into Roebuck Bay, and the skipper calmly announced that I would require to go ashore and await the next steamer, as he was going no farther. I was booked to London, *viâ* Singapore, but I had expected to be dumped ashore somewhere, as the *Nemesis* was not the regular connecting steamer, and I had taken it chiefly with the desire to get away from plague-stricken Fremantle, to which city I had come round from Northern Queensland.

"All right, captain," I said; "but you might give me my bearings first."

"Go straight ahead from the jetty until you see the cable station, then starboard hard, and you are into Roderick's Hotel. Drinks don't cost more than a shilling there."

"Thanks. But what is the name of the port? I presume we are still in Australia?"

"We are. This is Broome, the headquarters of the pearling fleet, and the hottest hole on earth." [Pg 279]

"Oh, I think I'll survive till the *Australind* comes along," I said, as indifferently as I could; and, after seeing my baggage on shore, I followed out the captain's directions, and finally entered a well-lit saloon, in which the strains of a gramaphone were evidently causing much appreciation. No one seemed to notice me as I made my way forward. All the occupants were clustered round the gramaphone and indulging in various comments as to the correctness of the song it was giving forth. There were about ten men in the party, all of whom were white. Some were garbed in the most approved London clubland fashion, while others were very scantily clad indeed; but the careless manner in which handfuls of sovereigns were occasionally flung down on the counter showed that money at least was not much of a consideration with any of them.

"Hallo, boys! here's a stranger," suddenly cried one, seeing me looking on interestedly, and instantly a general move was made in my direction.

"Name it, boss," spoke the bar-tender, coming forward; "that is, if you is not an S—— 's man."

"What will happen if I am?" I inquired, slightly curious to know what an S—— 's man was.

"You'll get fired; that's all——"

"Shut up, Bob," reproved a tall, broad-shouldered man. "This is the master-pearlers' club," he continued, addressing me, "and as a stranger you are very welcome to whatever it affords."

"Thank you, but I understood that this was Roderick's Hotel?"

"Same thing," laughed several of the men. "Who sent you here?"

"Captain Lawrence of the *Nemesis*."

"Then it's all O.K. He is one of us," said the first speaker. "You will be my guest to-night, after [Pg 280] which we will consider what is best to do with you."

"Gently there; I am a Britisher, and quite able to look after myself."

"You can bet, my boy, that we're all coloured red here, but of course if you don't wish——"

"You are needing a spell south, Wilcox," interrupted another gentleman. "You don't give the stranger half a chance. We are pearlers," he continued, turning to me. "This is the off season, and as hell is let loose in this town when the fleet is at home, we arrange to look after any white stranger that may be cast upon these shores. Listen! There's the Malays' infernal racket starting now. I shouldn't wonder but they will have a fight with the aborigines before morning."

"I see I have made a mistake, then, gentlemen," I said, "in coming here, but I assure you that it was not from choice I came."

"Oh, don't let that trouble you. We are very glad to have you. But you can now understand why we reserve this hotel for our own use. We don't all necessarily make beasts of ourselves, although you see us here. Some of us, it is true, have a failing that way, and there are others over in the cable shanty now going it pretty stiff; we therefore make it a point that a dozen of us come here every night to look after any of the boys who may take more stagger-juice than they can carry; but allow me to introduce the company. This is Alf Chambers. Here is Sam Wilcox—Moore—Macpherson—Edward Wilson, commonly known as Dandy Dick—Will Biddles—Gordon, of G.B. diving-dress fame, and, the finest gentleman on the Australian coast, Gentleman James——"

"What about yourself, Cap?" spoke the last-named, waving his hand deprecatingly at the compliment.

"Me? Oh, I forgot. I am Biddles. You may have heard of me down in Perth?" [Pg 281]

"I believe I have," I answered. "You are the man whom the American skipper mistook for a pirate, and who, up in King Sound——"

"I see you have my history all right, lad; but there goes the dinner-gong, so come along and sample Broome fare."

In the company of the light-hearted pearlers the time passed very quickly. It transpired that I had known in Queensland some of their comrades who had drifted down country from the Gulf pearling-grounds, and being well accustomed to meeting all sorts of people, I readily grasped the little peculiarities of my hosts, and soon became on the best of terms with them all.

"I think we'll go now, boys," said Wilcox, some time about midnight. "You fellows that are sober can see after the other boys, and we two will get aboard the *Thetis*."

"Why, don't you stay here?" I cried.

"Not likely. There wouldn't be an ounce of blood left in us by morning. The mosquitoes here are A 1; but can you swim?"

"A little. Why?"

"Because I expect you will have to. You see we don't care to give the mob a chance of going aboard while we are on shore; so we never use our dinghys."

"Oh, how about your clothes?"

"Leave them on the jetty. I always send the cook round for them in the morning."

I did not answer; I recognised that I was again among a strange people. We were now threading our way among the coolies' huts and shanties towards the beach. The moon was shining brightly, thus enabling us to jump over several forms which were huddled up in various positions across our path without disturbing them.

"These people would stick a knife in a man for his bootlaces," my companion remarked; "but [Pg 282] luckily they are always too drunk to stand."

"But if you treated them fairly might there not be better results?"

"Look here, my lad, you've still got some of the old country notions about you. You can't treat the Malays as you do white men. They do not understand what gratitude means. Great Southern Cross! don't you know the history of this coast? Haven't you heard of poor Woods? He was going to reform everything. Gave the beggars a share of the profits, and wages besides. First thing we knew was when his Chinese cook rushed into Roderick's one night and told some of us that Woods's crew had mutinied because of their tinned dog being off colour—as if it ever was anything else."

"And what was the result?"

"Oh, they killed Woods and threw his body into the sea, and then sailed for Java. The cook jumped overboard and swam ashore, and that's how we knew. The Dutchmen chased them up and sent them back from Surabaya in chains, and we hung them."

"These men were Malays?"

"Yes, but the half-castes and aborigines are just as bad. Take the case of Dr. Vines, for instance; they murdered him because he couldn't give them what he hadn't got himself. And then there was Captain Skinner; but you'll not sleep if I tell you any more. Yonder is my craft. Get ready."

Wilcox discarded his coat as he spoke and plunged into the inviting waters, and somewhat dubiously I followed; for although my garments were of the usual Siamese silk variety, and therefore did not greatly impede my movements, I could not help wondering what would happen if there were any sharks about. As I struggled after Wilcox this thought kept recurring to me in [Pg 283] spite of all my attempts to convince myself that there could be no such creatures there, and just when I had almost succeeded in believing that such might somehow be the case, I suddenly remembered that I had been watching these very monsters playing around the *Nemesis* all that afternoon.

"What about sharks?" I gasped, as the stern light of the *Thetis* shone out ahead.

"They're too well fed here to trouble about white men," came the reply, and I had to satisfy myself with the hope that the sharks would be able to distinguish without personal investigation that I was of the fortunate colour. We reached the schooner without mishap, however, and scrambled over its stern by means of a friendly rope, and soon after I was asleep in what might have been a comfortable berth but for the presence of some hundreds of other occupants of

divers kinds.

Next morning I found my baggage and the clothes I had thrown off in the cabin beside me, and on going out on deck had my first view of Broome by daylight. It was not much to look at. There were some tents, two or three dozen "humpies" and "wind-breaks," and about twelve galvanised-iron structures, of which the jail, the cable station, Gummows' and Roderick's Hotels, were the most conspicuous. The *Nemesis* had sailed away south again during the night, and there was no sign of life anywhere. During the day—by way of a treat—Wilcox and some others took me to inspect "their prison," in which they had evidently great pride; but I could not work up any enthusiasm over the sight of a score of miserable wretches chained together by the ankles.

"These are the murderers of old Smith," remarked one of my companions. "They turned on him because he plugged one of them with a '44,' one day when he was drunk, up in King Sound." [Pg 284]

"We're keeping them here until we can get an executioner," added the jailer, "but it's spoiling the trade of the town; every one is afraid of getting drunk, as they might then be induced to take the job on."

I was glad when we left the place, and, eager to obtain information of a more pleasant kind, I asked to be shown the opening sheds.

"Well, you are a strange fellow!" was Wilcox's only comment as he led the way thither, and as we neared the shell-strewn benches I began to understand the meaning of his words, and signified that, after all, I thought I would rather not go farther.

"They do smell a bit strong," laughed my friend; "but we're not near enough yet, and the wind is not off the proper quarter to give a Broome appetiser. But there's Biddles semaphoring for us to dine with him in the club; let's get along."

Several days passed agreeably enough to me among these free-hearted Britons; but in time I began to calculate when the next steamer would be due. "I fear there's no steamer coming into Broome for two months, my boy," said Captain Biddles, when I asked him, and a visit to the cable station confirmed his fears; for, when the obliging officials there wired to Fremantle, they received the reply that the ss. *Australind* would miss Broome and call instead at Derby, on the head of King Sound.

"Then I will have to cross country to Derby," I said. "I suppose that is easy enough; the telegraph line runs all the way?"

"Oh, it's about as easy as going to heaven!" answered Biddles. "The aborigines are very considerate between here and Derby—they always kill you before they make a dinner out of you. [Pg 285] But are you sure you can't stay here?"

"It is four years since I was north of the equator," I said, "and I have a strong desire to cross it as soon as possible."

"In that case, I suppose you will have to go. Wish I could myself."

"Why can't you? You are rich enough now, surely?"

"Ha, ha! Imagine old Biddles going back to civilisation! Why, man, they would—— Well, well; never mind. Here's the boys coming. We'll see what can be done."

That evening I was informed that the *Bessie Fraser* was to sail north to King Sound in the morning with stores for George Hobart's schooners. I could go with it, and Hobart would find some means of landing me at Derby. This arrangement, the pearlers assured me, was not made in my behalf, as the *Bessie Fraser* would have to sail in any case. Thus it came about that next morning I parted with my kindly friends, and in company with Harry Quin, the skipper, six Malays for a crew, a Chinese cook, and a Manilaman diver, rounded the long, sandy point and headed northwards.

After lunch, the captain announced his intention of having a sleep if I didn't mind, and, thinking that he would require to be on the watch during the night, which would certainly be stormy, I said that I could easily pass the time looking round, and, in an endeavour to do so, soon after entered into conversation with the cook.

"Is it going to be rough to-night, John?" I said, by way of introduction, watching him as he went through some mysterious performances necessary for the preparation of our next meal.

"Velly. Me no need make breakfast. Captain sick. No want any."

"What! The captain sick? What do you mean?" [Pg 286]

"Huh! Him no sail man. Him only gole' glabber; no know nothing 'bout sea. D——" John disappeared as he gave vent to his last exclamation, and, turning round, I saw that Aguinili, the diver and sarang, was approaching.

"Good day, sir," he said, in excellent English.

"Good day, Aguinili. You have given Ah Sing a fright."

"He gabble gabble all day when captain not well."

"Great Scot! What is wrong? The captain was all right half an hour ago."

"Yes, but we are round the head now, and the monsoon is on. I come speak with you, for to-night I have only one man to steer with me; the rest no good. I come ask will you take helm for time to-night, else we must go back?"

I was certainly surprised at Aguinili's words, but, grasping their import, I at once signified that I would willingly take a watch, and following him aft, I was made acquainted with the little peculiarities of the schooner in regards to her steering.

"Malay bad man—you no trust him," remarked Aguinili. "No let them know captain not well?"

"Never fear!" I answered; "I have sailed with their kind before. But call me when you want me, for I cannot navigate by the stars as you do, so I must hunt up a chart and get out my own instruments."

At that moment Ah Sing came aft and informed me that the captain desired my presence, so, making my way to his stuffy cabin, I soon stood beside him. He was lying in his bunk reading, but as I entered he cast aside the book and said, "I say, mate, ye needn't give me away more than ye can help."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Nothing, so long as I lie on my back; but this darned motion doesn't agree with me in any other position." [Pg 287]

"Do you mean to say——?"

"That I is no sailor? You struck the bull first shot. I ain't. I is a gold-miner, and got stranded in Broome after making a pile on the Marble Bar fields, an' losing it down in Roebourne. Lord knows how I got here, but old Wilcox got me this billet with Hobart, 'cause I could swear at the nigs better than any man he knowed. I know nothing about navigation except what a bushman knows, and here I is at sea entirely."

"But have you never had any accidents?"

"Oh, there have been some narrow squeaks, but that chap Aguinili is a smart fellow; he manages somehow, and I swears at—— Lor'! but I is bad. Oh!—--"

"You'll be all right soon," I said sympathisingly, as I left him. He was the best example of a bluffer I had ever come across, but he had the true grit of the sons of the Southern Cross, and as he knew nothing of navigation, he got along wonderfully well by leaving everything to fate and Aguinili.

It was a very rough night, but the *Bessie Fraser* weathered it all right, thanks to the skilful handling of the sarang. Next evening we entered King Sound, and by seven o'clock were safely moored alongside the schooner *Electron*, George Hobart's headquarters.

This gentleman was a very superior person to those usually met in such latitudes; he was of a scientific turn of mind, and had designed many strange appliances which were the wonder and admiration of the pearling fraternity.

"You have just arrived in time to witness the trial of my new dress," were almost his first words to me; and after dinner, in answer to my inquiry, he proceeded to explain wherein his dress differed from others, and to point out its anticipated advantages. "Sixteen fathoms is the greatest depth at which we can work with the old dress, you know," he said, "and even at that a diver can only last out three seasons." [Pg 288]

"Well, what's the odds?" interrupted Quin; "they're cheap, ain't they? and there's any amount where they come from."

"That may be; but this dress is designed to give the diver a longer lease of life, and also to enable him to stand a good two or three fathoms more pressure. I have just got down a new G.B. dress from Singapore, and I intend to try mine alongside it to-morrow."

I did not then know what a G.B. dress was, but not wishing to display my ignorance, I did not inquire, and during the evening's conversation I gathered that it was the invention of two Glasgow engineers, who had designed it to allow of greater depths being explored.

In the morning all hands began to prepare for the trials, and after breakfast Aguinili, as the most experienced diver, was lowered from the derrick in the G.B. dress, and Jim Mackenzie, the *Electron's* chief officer, was also weighted and dropped over in Hobart's.

"Isn't there a nigger handy to go down in the old dress now?" asked Quin, kicking over a helmet. "I'll go two to one on it yet."

"The water is too deep here," answered Hobart. "No man could bottom in the old dress."

"I'll go," said the intrepid Quin, "and chance it."

"No. Hallo! Mackenzie is down. Great heavens! The pumps are not working." Hobart sprang to the pumps, and threw the two Malay operators across the deck, then, assisted by Quin and myself, began pumping furiously. It was useless. The pumps were not drawing air. The perspiration burst out over my face as I realised the position that poor Mackenzie was in. Quin swore, and then rushed to the winch, where the crew, in answer to Hobart's signal, were already hauling in. In less time than it takes to tell the diver was above the surface, and in another second his helmet was unscrewed. [Pg 289]

"Poor old Mac," said Quin, as the limp form was removed from its cage; "I always reckoned that he would peg out before me."

"Wrong again, Quin," feebly murmured Mackenzie. "You won't be mate of the *Electron* this trip —— But I say, there's shells down there as big as a table, and they are packed like peas."

"Never mind them at present, Mac," spoke Hobart. "We're glad to see you all right again; but what happened to the dress——?"

"The dress is all right, but the beggars must have stopped pumping while I was sinking, and when they started again I fancy the check-valve would not work."

"Ah! then we burst the connection on deck when we rushed to the pumps. That means my dress won't do for twenty fathoms at any rate. Hallo! there's Aguinili's signal. Haul away. Why, it is shell, and look at the size."

In answer to the diver's signal the men had hauled up his shell-net, and when it appeared above the waters the size of the shells had drawn forth an exclamation of surprise from all. Soon after Aguinili himself came up laden with the spoil of the nineteen-fathom ledge, and when he was brought on deck and his helmet removed he told a wonderful story of the wealth of the deep deposits, which hitherto no man had seen.

"Shell plenty. No need move away; fill net all time same place. Good shell for pearl, I know that, for I see sea-snake feed much. I go down again quick."

"No, no, Aguinili," cried Hobart, handing him a glass of spirits. "We have plenty of time for that. Have the shell been moving much?" [Pg 290]

"No. Shells grow there. No currents; no monsoons; deep, deep coral bottom. No shell on sixteen-fathom bottom here."

"Well, gentlemen," finally said Hobart, "we have seen the result of the G.B. comes out first. I will cable to Singapore to send down some more of them, and I will see that Gentleman James, Captain Biddies, and the others get to know of its good points. Who knows what fortunes we may now obtain from these deep neglected sounds."

Two hours afterwards the *Electron* was sailing down King Sound towards the Indian Ocean, and on my venturing to ask where we were bound for, Hobart informed me that he had received word from Derby that the bubonic plague had broken out afresh in Fremantle, and it was therefore obvious that the *Australind* would not now call at the northern port; for if she did so she would assuredly be quarantined at Singapore through not having been sufficient time at sea since leaving Australian waters.

"We are going to put you on board now," he added, "and Mackenzie is going up to Raffles with you to see about the new dresses. Meanwhile the men are opening the shells from the deep level, and I hope that we will find a memento to give you of your visit to this coast."

Early in the afternoon a long hanging cloud of black smoke became visible away on the southern horizon, and knowing that it must be issuing from the funnels of the *Australind* or the Adelaide Steamship Co.'s trader *Albany*, we steered out to investigate, and, if need be, to intercept. It proved to be the former vessel, and in due course she answered our signal and hove to.

"Well, goodbye then, lad. I hope you will come back to this coast when you are tired of the old country," were Hobart's parting words as Mackenzie and I clambered up the sides of the *Australind*. [Pg 291]

"If you see a lugger cheap at Singapore you might buy it for me," cried Quin, throwing me a miner's gold-bag; "and, I say, you might send me the second part of the book you gave me to read when we were coming up through the monsoon on the *Bessie*. I am darned curious to know the wind-up."

"And here's a pair of the deep shells; take care of them," cried Hobart, fastening a couple into the sling in which my baggage was being hoisted.

Three days after landing at Singapore I bought a small lugger for Quin, and sent back the balance of his money, and a complete copy of the "Pilgrim's Progress" (which was the book requested) with Mackenzie, who also undertook to see about the lugger going south. Four days later, while tossing in the bay of Bengal on the ss. *Ballarat*, I began to rearrange my belongings so that they might be readily transferred to the connecting P. and O. mail steamer *Himalaya* at Colombo. In doing so I chanced to open my shells and found therein two magnificent pearls, and a note which read: "Please accept one of the enclosed from me. The other is from Aguinili, who has asked me to offer it to you in kind remembrance."

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