

Horatio Alger Jr.

**In A New World: or, Among
The Gold Fields Of Australia**



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Alger H.

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Alger Horatio, Jr. In A New World; or, Among The Gold Fields Of Australia

CHAPTER I. OLD FRIENDS IN MELBOURNE

A stout gentleman of middle age and two boys were sitting in the public room of a modest inn in Melbourne. The gentleman was known to the public as Professor Hemmenway, who announced himself on the programme of his entertainment as "The Magician of Madagascar," though he freely confessed to his confidential friends that he had never seen the island of that name.

The two boys were Harry Vane and Jack Pendleton, American boys of sixteen. One had come to Australia as assistant to the professor, and had been accustomed to sing one or two popular songs at the magical entertainments which he gave, besides rendering himself generally useful. Jack Pendleton was a young sailor, who had resolved to try his fortune in the new country, either at the mines or in any other employment offering fair compensation, before resuming his profession. Harry and the professor had been passengers on board Jack's ship, and the two boys had struck up an enduring friendship. The ship had been wrecked, and they had spent some weeks together on an uninhabited island, from which they were finally rescued, as related in a preceding story, "Facing the World." It had been the professor's intention to give a series of performances in Melbourne and other parts of Australia, but the unexpected delay had led him to change his plans, and he now proposed to return to America at once. Harry Vane, however, having no near family ties, for he was an orphan, felt inclined to stay with Jack, and try his luck for a time in the New World, which appealed strongly to his imagination and youthful love of adventure. The day had arrived for the professor's departure, and he and the two boys were waiting for the lighter to take him down the Yarra Yarra River to the point of embarkation, eight miles distant.

"Harry," said the professor kindly, "I don't like to leave you here. You are only sixteen, and I feel that it is a great undertaking for you to attempt to make a living so many thousand miles from your native land. I shall feel anxious about you."

"I don't feel anxious about myself, professor," said Harry, with the confidence natural to youth. "I am young and strong, and I mean to succeed."

"But suppose you fall sick?"

"Then Jack will look out for me."

"You may be sure of that, Harry," said the young sailor, with a glance of affection at Harry.

"You might both fall sick."

"Is it best to borrow trouble?" said Harry, smiling. "I think we shall come out all right. But I am sorry you won't stay with us, professor."

Professor Hemmenway shook his head.

"I am three times your age, Harry," he said, "and am not as hopeful or sanguine as you. Besides, I have a wife and children at home who are already very anxious at my long silence; I did indeed mean to make a professional tour of Australia, but the shipwreck, and those lonely weeks on the island changed my plans. Henceforth I shall restrict myself to America. I have a competence already, and can make an income at home twice as large as my expenses. Why should I incur any risks?"

"I don't know but you are right, professor, but Jack and I are not so fortunate. Neither of us has a competence, and our prospects are probably better here than at home."

"Remember, Harry, that if you return I shall be glad to continue your engagement and will even increase your salary."

Jack Pendleton fixed his eyes anxiously on Harry's face. He feared that he would yield to the professor's persuasion, and leave him, but his anxiety was soon removed.

"Thank you, professor," said Harry, "but I don't want to leave Jack. If I return in bad luck, I may look you up and see whether the offer still holds good."

"Do so. You will always find a friend in me. But that reminds me, Harry, of an important consideration. If you are to remain here, you will want some money."

"I have sixty dollars which I have saved up in your service."

"And how much have you, Jack?"

The young sailor colored, and looked a little uneasy.

"I have only ten dollars," he answered.

"That is, we have seventy dollars between us, Jack," said Harry promptly.

"That is too little," said the professor, shaking his head. "You must let me be your banker."

"On one condition, professor, with thanks for your kindness."

"What is that?"

"A gentleman at home, Mr. Thomas Conway, President of the Craven County Railroad, has charge of two hundred and fifty dollars belonging to me. I was fortunate enough to save a railroad train from destruction, and this is the money the passengers raised for me. I will give you an order on him for the amount of your loan."

"That is unnecessary, Harry; I am willing to wait till your return to America."

"Something might happen to me, professor, and I shall feel more comfortable to think that my debts are paid."

"Have your own way, then, Harry. Shall I give you the whole amount?"

"No, professor, I am afraid it would make me less enterprising."

"How much shall it be?"

"Jack and I have seventy dollars between us. A hundred more ought to be sufficient."

"As you please, Harry, but if you get into trouble, promise to communicate with me, and send for assistance."

"I will, sir."

At this moment a carriage drew up in front of the inn.

"It is the carriage I ordered to take me to the lighter," said the professor. "You and Jack must go with me to the ship and see the last of me."

"With great pleasure, sir. Come along, Jack."

The hackman put the professor's trunk aboard the carriage, and they set out for the banks of the river. It was a new trunk, bought in Melbourne, for the professor's trunk and clothing had been lost at the time of the shipwreck. His first care had been to get a complete outfit in Melbourne, and he was now as well provided as when he left New York.

The two boys found the trip down the river a pleasant one. The trip by land would have been considerably shorter, but the professor preferred the river. The distance to the mouth is nine miles. Vessels would be able to ascend the river but for two bars which obstruct its course. The city of Melbourne is situated chiefly on the north bank, and is at present a handsomely built and prosperous town of about five hundred thousand inhabitants. At the time of Harry's arrival it had less than half that number. The country bordering the river is not particularly inviting, but it was new, and the two boys regarded it with interest. The soil was barren and sandy, and the trees, which were numerous, were eucalyptus or gum trees, which do not require a rich soil, but grow with great rapidity on sterile soil.

"What peculiar leaves?" said Harry, "they look like leather."

"True," said the professor, "and you notice that instead of having one surface toward the sky and the other toward the earth they are placed edgewise."

Soon they reached the mouth of the river, and there, just beyond the bar, rode the good ship *Arcturus*, on which the professor was to sail for Boston. His baggage was hoisted on board, and then the professor himself followed.

"Will you come on board, boys?" he asked.

"No, sir; we will go back by the lighter."

"Then good-by, and God bless you and bring you good luck."

Harry could not help feeling sober as he bade farewell to his good friend, the professor.

"I have only you now, Jack," he said. "I don't know what lies before us, but we must stick fast to each other in sunshine and in storm."

Jack's only answer was to seize Harry's hand and press it warmly.

Nothing more was needed.

CHAPTER II. PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

The two boys returned to the Crown Hotel in time for dinner, of which they partook with the zest to be expected of boys thoroughly healthy. When the meal was over they repaired to the public room.

"Now, Jack," said Harry, "it is necessary for us to settle on our plans."

"All right," said Jack.

"Have you anything to propose?"

"No, Harry, you are smarter than I am, and I leave it to you."

"Thank you, Jack, for your confidence, but we are on a par here. Neither of us knows much about Australia. We have a great deal to learn."

"Then you had better decide for us both."

"Very well, I accept the responsibility, but I prefer to talk over my plans with you. First of all, then, shall we stay in Melbourne, or strike for the mines?"

"Just as you say, Harry, but I would prefer the mines."

"I feel that way myself, and for that reason I have been making some inquiries. There are three principal localities, Ballarat, Bendigo, and Ovens. We might try one of the three, and if we don't have good luck make our-way to another."

"Which shall we try first?"

"I have thought of Bendigo. I hear of one party that cleared two thousand pounds out of one hole."

"How much is that?" asked Jack, who was not very well acquainted with any but United States currency.

"It is equal to ten thousand dollars," answered Harry.

"That's a big pile of money," said Jack, his eyes sparkling.

"True, but we mustn't expect to be so fortunate. It isn't everybody who succeeds as well as that."

"I should be satisfied with a thousand, Harry."

"And what would you do with it, Jack?"

"Convey it home to my mother, Harry. But I would fix it so that my step-father couldn't get hold of it."

"You are a good boy, Jack, for thinking so much of your mother. I wish I had a mother to provide for," and Harry Vane looked sober.

"Do you know how far off Bendigo is, Harry?"

"About a hundred miles. That is, it is seventy-five miles to Mount Alexander, and the mines are twenty-five miles to the north of that."

"It won't take us long to travel a hundred miles," said Jack hopefully.

"On the contrary, it will be a long and difficult journey, as far as I can find out. The country is full of bogs, swamps, and moist land."

"Then we can't walk?"

"No; the custom is to charter a cart, drawn by oxen, which will give a chance to carry a stock of provisions. The roads are not very well marked, and are often impassable."

This description rather discouraged Jack, who was more used to the sea and its dangers than to land travel.

"I wish we could go by water," he said.

"So do I, Jack, but unfortunately Bendigo happens to be inland. However, you've got good stout legs, and can get along as well as the thousands that do go. Besides, it will give us a fine chance to see the country."

"Ye-es," said Jack doubtfully, for he had very little of the traveller's curiosity that prompts so many to visit strange lands.

"There's another difficulty besides the mud," continued Harry thoughtfully.

"What's that?"

"The bushrangers."

"Who are they?"

"Haven't you heard of them?" asked Harry in surprise.

"I heard two men speaking of them last night, but I didn't take much notice."

"They are highwaymen – robbers, who wander about and attack parties of miners and travellers, and unless successfully resisted, strip them of all their property."

"Are we likely to meet them?" said Jack eagerly.

"I hope not; but we stand a chance of doing so."

"When are we going to start?" asked Jack with alacrity.

"Do you want to meet these gentlemen, Jack?" inquired Harry with a smile.

"There'll be some fun about it," responded Jack.

Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think there'll be much fun about being robbed," he said. "I would rather they would give us a wide berth, for my part."

Jack did not answer, but from that time he was eager to set out for the mines. The hint of danger invested the journey with a charm it had not hitherto possessed in his eyes.

While the boys were conversing, a tall man, with heavy black whiskers and wearing a rough suit and a slouch hat, appeared to listen attentively. At this point he rose from his seat, and lounged over to where Harry and Jack were seated.

"Young gentlemen," he said, "do I understand that you are thinking of going to the mines?"

"Yes, sir," answered Harry, surveying his inquirer with some attention.

"And you talk of going to Bendigo?"

"Yes; do you know anything about the place?"

"I ought to. I only came from there last month."

"What luck did you have there, may I ask?"

"Pretty fair. I brought back about a hundred and fifty pounds in gold dust:"

"And how long were you there?"

"Four weeks."

"That is pretty good pay for the time."

"That's so, especially as I made little or nothing the first three weeks. I struck it rich the last week."

"What do you say to that, Jack?" said Harry, turning to his companion; "nearly eight hundred dollars in a month."

"That pays better than being a sailor," answered Jack, smiling.

"I should say it did."

"When do you expect to start?" asked the stranger.

"As soon as we can get ready," Harry replied.

"You are right there. Have you got money?"

"Why?" asked Harry rather suspiciously.

"It will cost something for an outfit."

"Yes; we have a moderate sum with us."

"That is well," said the stranger approvingly. "Do you know," he continued meditatively, "I have a great mind to go with you?"

"Then you are not satisfied with your pile?" said Harry.

"There's very little left of it," said their new acquaintance.

"You haven't spent a hundred and fifty pounds in a month?" said Harry in surprise.

"Pretty much. I may have twenty pounds left."

"You must have been living high, then."

"No. I have lived plainly, but the faro table has taken most of it. I'm so near broke that I may as well go back to the mines for a fresh supply before my money is all gone."

"We shall be glad of your company, sir. May I ask if you are an Australian?"

"I was born in England, but I have been out here half a dozen years."

"And have not made your fortune yet?"

"It is my own fault. I have been unable to keep money after I got it."

"We are from America."

"I surmised it," said the stranger. "That is a country I want to visit before I die. You have mines there, too."

"Yes, but they are a long way from where we live."

"My name is Fletcher – Dick Fletcher my friends call me."

"I am Harry Vane, and my friend is Jack Pendleton."

"We will drink to our better acquaintance. Here, John," addressing the barkeeper, "three glasses of ale here."

"If you won't mind, Jack and I will take sarsaparilla."

Fletcher stared at them in amazement.

"You don't drink ale?" he said.

"We belong to the temperance society," said Harry, smiling.

"You won't keep that up long at the mines," said Fletcher, shrugging his shoulders.

Harry did not reply, but quietly resolved that he would disprove that statement.

CHAPTER III. FLETCHER ACTS SUSPICIOUSLY

One circumstance led Harry to hurry his intended departure. He found to his dismay that the hotel charge for their very plain accommodations was a pound a day for each of them. The Crown inn was what would be called in an American city a one-horse hotel. There are plenty such to be found in the United States where the rate charged is but a dollar a day. But Melbourne was full of strangers, drawn thither by flaming accounts of the richness of the mines and the bright prospects of acquiring sudden fortunes, and war prices were prevalent everywhere.

"Five dollars a day!" exclaimed Jack in open-eyed amazement. "Do they take us for millionaires?"

"I began to think they were imposing upon us," said Harry, "till I made inquiries elsewhere. I find a pound a day is about the usual tariff for such accommodations as we have."

"But we have only a small bedroom, and the meals are very common."

"That is true, but it seems to make no difference."

"Our money will soon be gone at that rate," said Jack soberly. "Mine is already gone."

"No, it isn't, Jack. We are going to share and share alike, you know."

"But that is imposing on you, Harry," protested the young sailor earnestly.

"Let me judge of that, Jack; I'd a good deal rather have your company and half of the money than be alone and have the whole."

"Thank you, Harry. You are a true friend. I can't do much for you, but I'll do what I can."

"If I had known of the high prices, I would have drawn more money from the professor," continued Harry. "However, I can make this do. But I want to start to-morrow, if possible. We shall then be owing four days' board each, and that will make forty dollars."

At this point Fletcher joined them.

"By the way," said he nonchalantly, "I want to ask a little favor."

"What is it?" asked Harry unsuspectingly.

"I am rather short of money. Can you lend me five pounds?"

Jack looked at Harry in alarm. He was afraid Harry would grant the favor, knowing his obliging disposition. But he didn't know our hero. Harry was ready to do anything for a near friend, but he was too prudent to waste his money on acquaintances who had no sort of claim on him.

"I am sorry to refuse, Mr. Fletcher," he said, "but Jack and I are ourselves very poorly provided with money, and just before you came in we were considering how we could manage to pay for the necessary outfit."

"Haven't you got five pounds?" asked Fletcher quickly.

"Of course we have, or we should be unable to get to the mines."

"Then I think you might oblige me," he continued, looking very much displeased.

"I am the best judge of my circumstances," said Harry shortly.

Fletcher looked hard at him, and saw that the boy he had to deal with had a mind of his own, and was not to be imposed upon easily. Still he made a farther effort.

"Then I think," he said coldly, "I shall not be able to assist you in your preparations."

"Just as you please," answered Harry promptly. "As you volunteered, I accepted your proposal. Now I will act for myself. I have heard of a party about to start, and I will arrange to join it."

Fletcher felt that he was outgeneralled. He did not mean to let Harry and Jack slip through his fingers, for he had an idea, notwithstanding Harry's disclaimer, that he had a large sum of money, and thought he would be a good party to hang on to. He saw that he had made a false move, and hastened to repair it.

"Excuse me," he said, assuming a hearty tone; "I was hasty, and I apologize. You are right, and I like you too well to cut up rough, just because you can't do me a favor. There, take my hand, and we will make it all up."

"With pleasure," answered Harry, as he accepted the proffered hand, and Jack followed his example. Nevertheless Fletcher's demand had produced an unpleasant effect upon him. The coarse-grained selfishness of the man had shown through his outward varnish of good-fellowship, and he felt that henceforth he must be on his guard.

"I may have to ask for some money, however," continued Fletcher, in an off-hand manner, "for it is necessary to buy supplies for our journey. You know we shan't be able to put up at hotels on our way, but must furnish our own meals."

"So I have heard," answered Harry. "What is it customary to take?"

"Well, it will be best to buy a bag of coffee, a sack of flour, some ship biscuits, potatoes, and sugar. That will do to start on, and we shall vary our diet by what we are able to kill on the way."

"What can we kill?"

"Well, kangaroo meat isn't bad, and we can bring down a few birds occasionally."

"Then we shall need guns?"

"Yes, it will be well to have them."

This was another expense upon which Harry had not calculated. He began to think that he had been very improvident. The professor would readily have left him a hundred dollars more, and as it would have been repaid with his own money, he was sorry he had not availed himself of it.

"How much do you think the supplies will cost?" asked Harry.

"Well, you had better let me have ten pounds. I think that will be sufficient."

"For the whole or for our share?" asked Harry pointedly.

"For your share," answered Fletcher after a pause. "It seems to me you are very suspicious."

Really he had intended to make the two boys pay for the whole stock of provisions and save his own purse, for he had in reality as much money as they.

"I only wanted to understand clearly," said Harry quietly. "As we are in some sort partners, that is fair, is it not?"

"Oh, yes," returned Fletcher, but he did not respond with any alacrity. "I'm always fair and above board, I am. No man can say that Dick Fletcher ever tried to get the best of him. Why, if I was better fixed I wouldn't let you two boys pay a cent. I'd shoulder the whole thing myself."

"Your offer is a very kind one, Mr. Fletcher –"

"Don't say Mr. Fletcher; call me Dick," interrupted their new acquaintance.

"I will if you wish it, though as you are so much older, it hardly seems proper. What I was going to say was that Jack and myself are determined to pay our share. We couldn't accept any such favor as you mention."

"That's all right. Now, if you let me have the ten pounds I'll take all the trouble off your hands, and have everything ready for a start to-morrow morning."

"I would prefer to go with you and help select the articles."

Fletcher looked disconcerted.

"Oh, well, if you think I aint capable –" he began.

"I think nothing of the kind, but I want to learn as much as I can. I may have to do it alone some time."

It was well Harry adhered to his determination. It saved him three pounds, and Fletcher was forced to pay his share, as he had not intended to do. While they were making purchases they were accosted by a tall loose-jointed man, whom it was easy to recognize as a Yankee.

"Goin' to the mines, boys?" he asked in a strong nasal tone.

"Yes," answered Harry.

"So am I. I'd like to hook on to your party if you aint no objections."

For some reason Dick Fletcher did not appear to relish the proposal.

"I don't think we can accommodate you," he said abruptly.

"I think we can," said Harry, who was beginning to be distrustful of Fletcher, and felt safer in adding another to the party. "There are but three of us, and we shall be glad of your company."

Dick Fletcher looked angry, but did not venture to oppose the plan further.

CHAPTER IV. A TIMELY RESCUE

On the last evening spent in Melbourne the boys decided to take a farewell walk about the city, not knowing when it would again be their fortune to see it. Neither Fletcher nor their new Yankee acquaintance was at hand, and they started by themselves. They did not confine themselves to the more frequented streets, but followed wherever fancy led.

They had no thought of an adventure, but one awaited them.

As they were turning the corner of a narrow street, their attention was suddenly excited by a sharp cry of blended surprise and fright.

"What is it, Jack?" asked Harry, grasping his companion by the arm.

He did not need to await a reply, for by the indistinct light he saw two men struggling a few rods further on. One appeared to be an old man, with white hair, the other was a man of middle age. Clearly it was a case of attempted robbery.

"Run, Jack, run!" said Harry, in excitement. "Let us help the old man!"

"I'm with you," answered the young sailor briefly.

Harry had in his hand a heavy cane – his only weapon – but he did not stop to consider the personal risk he was running. As he drew near, the old man, whose feeble strength was quite unequal to a conflict with a man so much younger, swayed and fell backward. His assailant bent over him, and despite his feeble resistance began to search his pockets, at the same time indulging in savage threats. The old man gave himself up for lost, but help was nearer than he anticipated.

So occupied was the villain with his disgraceful work that he did not hear the approaching footsteps.

His first intimation of them came in a sounding blow over his shoulders, given by Harry's stick, which was laid on with a good will.

He jumped to his feet with an oath, and darted a rapid glance at his two assailants. Then, much to the surprise of Harry, he turned and ran rapidly away. It was a piece of great good luck, Harry thought, for he was not at all sure that he and Jack combined would have been a match for the highwayman.

"Are you hurt, sir?" asked Harry, bending over the old man.

"Not seriously," was the reply. "Will you kindly help me up?"

With Jack's help Harry got the old man on his feet. He was a tall man, of splendid aspect, over sixty years of age. He looked like a gentleman of wealth and position.

"You have had a narrow escape, sir," said our hero.

"Yes, indeed," answered the old man, "thanks to your brave interference. It surprises me that my brutal assailant should have run away from two boys."

"I am surprised also, sir. I feared we should have a hard fight. I suppose his object was robbery."

"Yes, he must have heard in some way that I had a large sum of money about me. Thanks to you, it is safe."

"I am very glad, sir."

"Do you mind accompanying me to my house? This attack has made me timid."

"With pleasure, sir."

The old gentleman lived perhaps a quarter of a mile distant in a handsome house. He pressed the boys to enter, and they did so. He questioned them as to their plans, and then selecting two bank-notes of large denomination, urged the boys to accept them as a recognition of the help they had given him at a critical moment. The boys, however, declined positively to accept any compensation, but expressed their satisfaction at having been of service.

"At least," said the old gentleman, "you must promise to call on me when you return from the mines. There is my card."

"That we will do with pleasure, sir," answered Harry.

He looked at the card, and read the name of Henry A. Woolson.

"Harry," said Jack, as they resumed their walk, "do you know that robber had a look like Fletcher?"

"So I thought, Jack, but I had only a glimpse, and could not be sure. I wish he were not to be in our party."

"We must be on our guard; I don't fancy him much."

When the boys saw Fletcher in the morning he appeared as usual, and they were disposed to think they were mistaken. Yet the lurking suspicion occurred to them from time to time, and made them feel uneasy.

The next day they set out on their journey, accompanied by Dick Fletcher and Obed Stackpole.

CHAPTER V. STARTING FOR THE MINES

Harry may be considered rash in his immediate acceptance of his Yankee acquaintance as a member of their party, but there are some men who need no letters of recommendation. Obed Stackpole certainly was not a handsome man. He was tall, lean, gaunt in figure, with a shambling walk, and his skin was tough and leathery; but in spite of all there was an honest, manly expression, which instantly inspired confidence. Both Harry and Jack liked him, but Dick Fletcher seemed to regard him with instinctive dislike.

"What made you accept that scarecrow into our company?" he asked, when Stackpole had left them to make his own arrangements for leaving the city.

Harry smiled.

"He isn't a handsome man," he replied, "but I think he will prove a valuable companion."

"You took no notice of my objection to him," said Fletcher, frowning.

"Our company was too small," returned Harry. "From inquiry I find that parties seldom consist of less than half a dozen."

"I know all about that," said Fletcher impatiently. "You might have been guided by me."

"I shall be to some extent," answered Harry, "but not implicitly."

"I am going to have trouble with that boy," thought Fletcher. "Wait till we get on the road." Aloud he said: "If you had mentioned the matter to me I would have found someone to go with us. You had better tell this Yankee that we haven't room for him, and I will do it now."

Fletcher's persistence only aroused vague suspicions in Harry's breast. He felt glad that Stackpole was neither a friend nor likely to prove a confederate of Dick Fletcher, and was resolved to hold on to him.

"I have invited him, and I won't take back the invitation," he said.

"How old are you?" asked Fletcher abruptly.

"Sixteen."

"I should think you were sixty by the tone you assume," said Fletcher with a sneer.

"Do I understand, Mr. Fletcher," asked Harry steadily, "that you claim to control our party?"

"Seeing that I am more than twice as old as you are, I am the natural head of the expedition."

"I cannot admit any such claim. If you are not satisfied to be simply a member of the party, like the rest of us, I shall not be offended if you back out even now."

This, however, did not suit Fletcher, and with a forced laugh he answered, "You are a strange boy, Vane. I suppose it's the way with your countrymen. I don't want to back out, as you term it. I fancy we shall get along together."

"I wish he had decided to leave us," said Harry when the two boys were alone. "Somehow I distrust him."

"I don't like him myself," said Jack, "but I don't see what harm he can do us."

"Nor I, but I feel safer with this Yankee addition to our party."

About ten o'clock the next morning the little party got off. It is needless to say that Obed Stackpole contributed his full share of expense, and more too, for he furnished the yoke of oxen that were to draw the cart which conveyed their provisions and other outfit.

"I don't want to push in where I aint wanted," he said, "but I'm used to oxen, and if you want me to, I'll drive these critters, and you three can foller along as you please."

"That'll suit me," said Fletcher with unusual graciousness. "I've no doubt you understand the business better than I do."

"I ought to understand it," said Stackpole. "I was raised on a farm in

New Hampshire, and used to drive oxen when I wasn't tall enough to see over their backs. I never thought then that I'd be drivin' a team in

Australy."

"What led you to come out here, Mr. Stackpole?" asked Harry.

"Well, a kinder rovin' disposition, I guess. A year ago I was in Californy, but things didn't pan out very well, so when I read accounts of the gold fields out here, I jist dropped my pick and started, and here I am."

"Didn't you find any gold-dust in California?" asked Fletcher, with sudden interest.

"Well, I found *some*," answered the Yankee, with drawling deliberation, "but not enough to satisfy me. You see," he added, "I've got two to make money for."

"And who are those two?" inquired Fletcher.

"The first is my old dad – he's gettin' kinder broken down, and can't work as well as he could when he was a young man. He's got a thousand-dollar mortgage on his farm, and I want to pay that off. It'll kinder ease the old man's mind."

"That a very excellent object, Mr. Stackpole," said Harry, who felt still more drawn to his plain, ungainly, but evidently good-hearted companion.

"I think so myself," said Obed simply.

"The other person is your wife, I fancy," said Fletcher.

"I expect she will be my wife when I get forehanded enough," replied Obed. "It's Suke Stanwood, one of Farmer Stanwood's gals. We was raised together, and we've been engaged for nigh on to five years."

"Very romantic!" said Fletcher, but there was a veiled sneer in his tone, as he scanned with contemptuous amusement the ungainly figure of his Yankee companion.

"I don't know much about such things," said Obed, "but I guess Suke and I will pull together well."

"You are not exactly a young man," said Fletcher. "You've waited some time."

"I'm thirty-nine last birthday," said Obed. "I was engaged ten years ago, but the girl didn't know her own mind, and she ran off with a man that came along with a photograph saloon. I guess it's just as well, for she was always rather flighty."

"It is very strange she should have deserted a man of your attractions," said Fletcher with a smile.

Harry was indignant at this open ridicule of so honest and worthy a fellow as Stackpole, and he wondered whether the Yankee would be obtuse enough not to see it. His doubt was soon solved.

"It looks to me as if you was pokin' fun at me, Fletcher," said Obed, with a quiet, steady look at the other. "I'm a good-natured fellow in the main, but I don't stand any nonsense. I know very well I'm a rough looking chap, and I don't mind your sayin' so, but I aint willin' to be laughed at."

"My dear fellow," said Fletcher smoothly, "you quite mistake my meaning, I assure you. I am the last person to laugh at you. I think you are too modest, though. You are what may be called a 'rough diamond.'"

"I accept your apology, Fletcher," said Obed. "If no offence was meant, none is taken. I don't know much about diamonds, rough or smooth, but at any rate I aint a paste one."

"A good hit! Bravo!" laughed Fletcher. "You are a man of great penetration, Stackpole, and a decided acquisition to our party."

"I'm glad you think so," said Obed dryly. "If I remember right, you didn't want me to join you."

"At first I did not, but I have changed my mind. I didn't know you then."

"And I don't know you now," said Obed bluntly. "If you don't mind, s'pose you tell us what brought you out here."

Fletcher frowned and regarded the Yankee suspiciously, as if seeking his motive in asking this question, but his suspicions were dissipated by a glance at that honest face, and he answered lightly, "Really, there isn't much to tell. My father was a merchant of Manchester, and tried to make me

follow in his steps, but I was inclined to be wild, incurred some debts, and finally threw up business and came out here."

"Have you prospered as far as you've gone?"

"Yes and no. I've made money and I've spent it, and the accounts are about even."

"That means you haven't much left."

"Right you are, my friend, but in your steady company I mean to turn over a new leaf, and go in for money and respectability. Now I've made a clean breast of it, and you know all about me."

In spite of this statement there was not one of his three companions who did not feel sure that there was much in Fletcher's history which he had kept concealed, and possibly for very good reasons.

CHAPTER VI. A NIGHT INCIDENT

The path of a gold-seeker in Australia was beset with difficulties. The country about Melbourne, and far inland, was boggy, the soil being volcanic, and abounding in mud which appears to have no bottom. The road to the mines was all the worse for having been ploughed up by bullock teams, and worked into a slough which proved the discouragement of mining parties. Some were even months in traversing the comparatively small distance across the country to the goal they sought. But the attraction of money, which is said to make the mare go, enabled them to triumph at last over the obstacles that intervened. It was not long before our party began to understand the nature of the task they had undertaken. The cart sank up to the hubs in a bog, and the oxen stood still in patient despair.

"Well, if this don't beat all creation!" ejaculated Obed. "I've been in the Western States, and I thought I knew something about mud, but Australy's ahead. I say, Fletcher, is there much of this that we've got to go through?"

"Mud's the rule, and dry land the exception," answered Fletcher coolly.

"Well, that's comfortin'!" remarked Stackpole, drawing a deep breath. "I s'pose people do get through after a while."

"Yes, generally. I was six weeks getting to the Ovens once."

"I wish we had some ovens to bake this mud," said Obed, with a grim smile at his joke. "It would take a powerful large one."

There was nothing for it but dogged perseverance. It took an hour to get the oxen and cart through a bog a hundred feet across, and the appearance of the party, when they finally reached the other side, was more picturesque than attractive.

"How would Clinton get along here?" suggested Harry. "I can imagine the poor fellow's despair."

"His trousers would suffer some," said Jack. "I think it would break his heart. The sea is much nicer. If we could only go by water," and the young sailor looked down at his mud-bedraggled clothes, and his shoes caked thickly over with the tenacious mud.

"Yes, the sea would be cleaner at any rate. I agree with you there, Jack."

Arrived on the other side of the bog, they were obliged to give the tired cattle a rest. Indeed, they needed rest themselves.

At the end of the day they made an encampment. As well as they could judge, they were about eight miles from Melbourne.

"Eight miles; and how far is the whole distance?" asked Harry.

"About a hundred miles," answered Fletcher.

"At this rate, we can go through in twelve or thirteen days, then."

"You mustn't expect this rate of speed," said Fletcher. "We shan't average over five miles."

"Well, I hope we'll get paid for it," said Obed. "If we don't I'd better have stayed in Californy. We haven't any such mines as this in that country."

"You'd better have stayed there," said Fletcher dryly, and he evidently wished that his companion had done so.

"'Variety's the spice of life,' as my old schoolmaster used to say," responded Obed. "I kinder want to see what Australy is like. All the same I don't want to stump through to the other side of the globe."

The travellers encamped for the night in a dry spot among a group of gum-trees, and it may readily be believed that all slept well. The boys felt dead tired, and it was with difficulty they were awakened in the morning.

About five o'clock Fletcher opened his eyes. He was one who slept fast, so to speak, and obtained as much refreshment from an hour's sleep as most people do from a period twice as long. He had been lying on the ground wrapped in a blanket, as was the case with the other members of the party.

Raising himself, and leaning on his elbow, he saw that they were all fast asleep. He nodded with satisfaction, and getting on his feet he approached Obed Stackpole with noiseless tread. The Yankee was sleeping with his mouth wide open, occasionally emitting a sonorous snore through his aquiline nose. He was not beautiful to look upon, as Fletcher evidently thought.

"Ill-favored brute!" he ejaculated. "I'd like to choke him!"

If any special advantage had been likely to accrue to him, Fletcher's conscience would not have been likely to stand in the way of violence; but his purpose now was different.

"The fellow must have gold about him," muttered Fletcher. "I wonder whether I can get at it without waking him up."

Obed seemed to be in a profound slumber, but it was a peculiarity of our Yankee friend to wake at the least touch. This, of course, was not known to Dick Fletcher, who felt that there would be no risk in a careful exploration of Obed's pockets.

He thrust his hand into one of the Yankee's pockets with the practiced skill of a pickpocket, when an entirely unexpected result followed.

"Why, you skunk, what in creation are you about?" exclaimed Obed, suddenly seizing Fletcher by the throat.

"Let me go!" said Fletcher, struggling violently, but ineffectually, to free himself.

"Not till you've told me what you are after."

"Let go, and I'll tell you."

Obed loosened his grip, saying sternly, "Are you a pickpocket, my enterprising friend, or what is the meaning of all this business?"

"You had better not insult me!" said Fletcher angrily. "I'm no more a pickpocket than you are."

"Then what is the meaning of your little game? Maybe you got up in your sleep."

"No, I didn't. I just waked up, and thought I'd like to have a smoke, but had no matches. I thought you might have some in your pocket."

"Why didn't you wake me up and ask me?"

"You looked so comfortable, and I thought you needed rest after a hard day's work, so I decided to help myself."

"It looks like it," responded Obed dryly. "So that's all you were after, was it?"

"Of course," said Fletcher, regaining confidence. "What else could it be?"

"Well, it strikes me it's rather takin' a liberty with a gentleman to search his pockets while he's asleep, that's all! In Californy, Fletcher, if you had been caught doin' it, ten chances to one you'd have been lynched, and lynchin' isn't usually regarded as comfortable or desirable. Where's your cigar?"

"I haven't any, but I've got a pipe."

"Well, I do happen to have a few matches in my other pocket, but I'd rather you'd ask for 'em next time."

"I will. The fact is, I ought to have brought some with me. It's very strange, old traveller as I am."

"It would have been a little better than borrowin' them of a sleepin' man without leave. Don't do it again, Fletcher."

"I'm not very likely to borrow them of you again, except when you're awake," said Fletcher with a short laugh. "Do you always wake up so easy?" he asked, in some curiosity.

"Always. I sleep mighty sound, but the least touch wakes me up."

"I shall remember that," thought Fletcher. "This Yankee is rather a dangerous man to tackle. I won't attempt it again unless I have the decided advantage."

"I hope you'll excuse me, Mr. Stackpole," he said aloud in a smooth tone. "I used to travel with a friend – a great chum of mine – and we never stood on ceremony with each other. I ought to have remembered that you and I are comparatively new acquaintances."

"Perhaps it will be best," said Obed dryly. "You see when I wake up I don't always have my wits about me, and I might cut up rough before I had time to think."

"Oh, no apologies, I beg," said Fletcher, waving his hand.

"Who's apologizin'?" demanded Obed, in surprise.

"Never mind, it's all right! I thought you were apologizing for seizing me by the throat. As you say, you waked up suddenly, and didn't have your wits about you."

"Well, I know!" ejaculated Obed half to himself. "I didn't think of that way of puttin' it. You're a cute fellow, Fletcher."

"Thank you, Mr. Stackpole. Now I will have my smoke;" and Fletcher, though he did not care for it, by way of removing any lingering suspicion, lit his pipe and puffed away with apparent pleasure.

CHAPTER VII. PARTING COMPANY

"I mistrust that man Fletcher," said Obed to Harry Vane the next day, taking the opportunity when, at one of their rests, the man referred to had sauntered into the woods.

"I don't like him myself," said Harry. "Have you any particular reason for mistrusting him?"

"He was searchin' my pockets last night when he thought I was asleep," answered Obed, and he related the incident of the night before.

"It looks suspicious," said Harry. "I have not much money, but I don't care to lose what I have."

"I should like to shake him, but I don't see how we can very well. He's a reg'lar member of the party."

"We can be on our guard at any rate," said Harry. "I'll tell Jack, and advise him to be careful also."

At this point Dick Fletcher returned. He looked suspiciously from one to the other, under the impression that something had been said about him. He asked no questions, however, and no information was volunteered. He could not but observe, however, that there was more or less restraint in the manner of his companions toward him, and that they were not disposed to be social.

That day they made nine miles, the road being slightly better than the day before. About five o'clock they reached a rude wayside inn, over the door of which was a swinging sign, on which was printed:

TRAVELLERS' REST.

"We might as well stop here, instead of camping out," said Fletcher.

"I'm agreeable," said Obed, "if the tax isn't too high."

"Oh, Linton is moderate in his charges," said Fletcher. "I've known him a good while. He's a good fellow."

This was not a very valuable recommendation in the opinion of Obed and the two boys, but they had no objection to becoming guests of the establishment.

It was a rude building, and the accommodations were very limited. In fact, there were but two sleeping rooms. One of these Fletcher occupied, and the other was given up to the other members of the party, there being two beds.

"I'd rather bunk in with you, if you don't mind," said Stackpole to

Harry. "I don't feel easy in the same room with Fletcher."

"We shall be very glad of your company, Mr. Stackpole."

"If I snore, just come and turn me over. I don't want to disturb nobody."

"I think Jack and I will be too sound asleep to be disturbed by your snoring," said Harry with a laugh. "However, if there is any occasion, I will follow your directions."

The landlord was a broad-shouldered man of moderate stature, who had lost the sight of one eye. The other, being covered with a green shade, gave him an ill look. His manner, however, was hearty, and showed a bluff, off-hand cordiality, as he welcomed the party to the hospitalities of the Travellers' Rest. He was familiarly called "Larry," by Fletcher, who greeted him like an old comrade.

The supper consisted in part of their own supplies, with some small additions from the larder of the inn. It was, at any rate, an improvement upon their camp fare, and the boys enjoyed it.

After supper they sat down on a settle in front of the inn, but presently Fletcher strayed away into the woods at the back of the house. Some fifteen minutes later Larry Linton also got up, but ostentatiously went in a different direction.

"I'm going a little ways to a squatter's to speak about some vegetables," he said.

"If you don't mind company, I'll go along too," said Obed.

"Better not," answered Larry. "There's a boggy spot which a stranger is likely to fall into."

"I've had enough of bogs," said Obed, shrugging his shoulders. "Seems to me you haven't got much besides bogs out in Australy."

So Linton went off by himself. After he was fairly out of the way, Obed said, turning to the two boys. "Did you think I wanted to go off with Linton?"

"I supposed so, as you made the proposal."

"I only wanted to find out if he wanted me or not. I have my suspicions."

"What kind of suspicions?"

Harry was the speaker, as usual, for Jack never took the lead when Harry was present.

"Fletcher and Linton are too thick together to suit me," answered the

Yankee. "Looks as if they was in league together."

"Do you think they have arranged a meeting?"

"That's just what I do think."

"But they have gone in different directions," objected Jack.

"Bless your simple heart, my boy, that's done on purpose," said Obed.

"Can't they fetch round together without our knowing it?"

"I didn't think of that," Jack admitted.

"Mr. Stackpole," said Harry after a moment's thought, "if you and Jack will keep each other company, I will explore a little myself. I may happen to be at the conference."

"Be careful if you do, Harry," said Obed. "Don't run no risk."

"I'll look out for that."

In the rear of the house, and almost reaching to it, was a forest of eucalyptus trees. It was unfavorable to Harry's purpose that these trees rise straight from the ground, and are not encumbered by underbrush. It was very pleasant walking though, and Harry sauntered along at his leisure. He almost forgot the object of his enterprise, until some half an hour later, in the stillness of the woods, his quick ear caught the sound of voices.

He was instantly on the alert. The voices, he doubted not, were those of Dick Fletcher and Larry Linton. He moved forward cautiously, and soon espied the speakers. They were sitting on the ground, under the overreaching boughs of a gigantic tree. Harry managed to get near enough to listen to the conversation, being himself concealed from view behind the trunk of a neighboring tree.

"Is there much money in the party?" he heard Linton ask.

"I can't tell you. The boys haven't got much, but that long-legged

Yankee has probably got considerable."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"He's likely to prove a troublesome customer. He is muscular, as you can see, and not easily scared."

"Has he any suspicion of you?"

"Yes; I put my foot in it the other night."

"How's that?"

"I saw him sleeping like a boy, and thought there was no danger of his waking up, so I took the liberty to explore his pockets. Before I could say Jack Robinson he had me by the throat, and wanted to know what I was after."

"That was awkward. How did you get out of it?"

"Lied out! Told him I was looking for matches, as I wanted a smoke."

"Did he swallow it down?"

"He didn't contradict me, but it has made him watchful and suspicious. If I'd got the money, I was ready to make tracks, and leave them to find their way as they could."

At this point the two rose and walked away, leaving Harry in his position behind the tree. As soon as he thought it was safe he came out, and made the best of his way to the inn, getting there

about fifteen minutes before Fletcher appeared, but without the landlord. During that interval he had time to communicate what he had heard to Obed Stackpole.

"Just what I expected!" said Obed. "The treacherous skunk! So he's in league with the landlord, is he? I'll fix him."

He cautioned the two boys not to show by their manner that they had made any discovery, but to appear as usual.

The next morning the party started as usual. They plodded on for almost a mile, when Obed, turning quickly to Fletcher, said:

"Let me look at that weapon of yours a minute."

Fletcher unsuspectingly handed it over.

"I think I shall *keep* this, Fletcher," said Obed, eyeing him steadily.

"I'm pained to have to bid you good-by."

"What does all this mean?" blustered Fletcher.

"It means that your room is better than your company. We'd better part."

"Would you rob me? That revolver is mine, and I paid for a share of the things in the cart."

"I'll allow you the vally of them and pay you on the spot, but we can't go on together."

Suiting the action to the word, Mr. Stackpole handed over a handsome sum of money.

"But I don't want to sell my revolver," repeated Fletcher. "What am I to do out here alone, and unarmed."

"You'd better go back to your friend Larry Linton. He'll look out for you."

"You will regret this high-handed proceeding!" exclaimed Fletcher angrily.

"Maybe I shall, and maybe I shan't," answered Obed indifferently. "I'll risk it."

Fletcher halted a moment as if undecided, then turned back, and was soon out of sight.

CHAPTER VIII. A VICTIM OF TREACHERY

All the party felt relieved to be rid of Fletcher. Without being able to prove anything against him, all believed him to be unworthy of confidence. Now they were a united party, and whatever might be the hardships of the trip they were ready to sympathize and co-operate with each other.

They had already learned that it was no holiday trip they had undertaken. The bogs have already been referred to. In addition the heat was oppressive in the middle of the day. Then the numerous insects that infest Australia – the ants, flies, and scorpions – were most troublesome. They had to be very careful to avoid being bitten, for the bite of any these is severe and dangerous. On the day succeeding their parting from Fletcher they accomplished but six miles, the road being unusually swampy.

"I feel about tuckered out," said Obed, about the middle of the afternoon, just after he had extricated the team, by great personal effort, from a morass. "If I'd 'a' known as much of the country before startin' I wouldn't have started at all."

"It's a long road that has no ending," said Harry, smiling. He, too, was very tired, but youth is hopeful.

"It's the worst country I ever travelled in, by a long shot. If I ever make my pile, I'll take the first steamer back to Frisco."

"Who's that?" suddenly exclaimed Jack.

Obed and Harry, looking up, saw a forlorn-looking figure approaching them. It was a man of middle age, and emaciated in appearance, looking the image of despair. He tottered rather than walked, from exceeding weakness.

"For Heaven's sake give me something to eat! I am almost famished," he cried.

"Why, certainly, friend," answered Obed, rising and advancing to meet the stranger. "We don't keep a first-class hotel, but you're welcome to what we've got. Are you travellin' alone?"

"Yes, if you call it travelling. I've been dragging myself along for several days, hoping to find somebody that would give me aid."

"Well, you've found somebody. Here, sit down, for you don't seem able to stand, and we'll provide for you. Harry, bring some biscuit and cold meat, won't you, and Jack had better build a fire. A cup of tea will put new life into you, my friend."

The biscuit were soaked in water and given to the stranger. He devoured them like a man in the last stages of hunger.

"Go slow, my friend. Your stomach must be weak," said Obed.

"If you only knew the gnawing at my vitals," said the new-comer. "I have not tasted food for three days."

"I never was in that fix, though I did go hungry for twenty-four hours once in Californy. You'd better believe I pitched in when I got to where victuals were."

"How did that happen, Mr. Stackpole?" asked Harry.

"I was lost in the mountains," answered Obed, "and couldn't find any trace of a livin' creature except an old miser, who pointed a musket at me, and didn't dare to let me into his hut. I don't think I could have stood it three days."

"That goes to the right spot," said the stranger, after he had gulped down two cups of tea. "Now I'm ready to die without complaining."

"If it's all the same to you, I think you'd better get ready to live," said Obed.

"I'd rather die now than suffer as I have done in the last three days,"

"You won't have to. We've got plenty and to spare."

"But I have no money. I have been robbed of everything."

"Robbed! How is that?"

"It's rather a long story. You may not have patience to hear it."

"We've got time enough, and patience enough, but perhaps you don't feel strong enough to talk."

"I didn't before you relieved my hunger. The food and the tea have put new life into me, as you predicted they would."

"Then go ahead, stranger. We're all anxious to hear your story."

"I am an Englishman," began the unknown, "and my name is Ralph Granger. When the report reached England of the richness of the Australian gold-fields, I sold out my business, and was among the first to come out here. By the sale of my business I realized about five hundred pounds. Three hundred I left with my wife – I have no children – to keep her while I was gone. It is very fortunate that I took this precaution and left her so well provided for, since, had I brought all my money with me, it would all have been lost."

The three adventurers looked at each other soberly. The ill fortune of their new acquaintance did not augur very well for their good fortune.

"Then you had bad luck," said Harry inquiringly.

"On the contrary I had good luck," replied the stranger.

"Good luck!" repeated Harry in surprise. "Then how –"

"How did I come into this plight? That is what you were about to ask?"

"Yes."

"You will soon learn. On reaching this country I was in doubt whether to go to Ballarat or Bendigo, but finally decided upon the latter."

"We are bound for Bendigo," said Jack.

"So I inferred. Ballarat is in a different direction. Very well, I reached Bendigo three months since. For a time I was unlucky. I found next to no gold, and the prices of living used up about all the money I had left after the expense of getting there. Just when I was on the point of giving up in despair my luck turned. I made a strike, and during the next six weeks I unearthed gold to the value of a thousand pounds."

"That certainly wasn't bad luck."

"It was extraordinarily good luck, and naturally drew the attention of the rest of the camp. This was unfortunate, for in such a settlement, as may well be supposed, there are many reckless adventurers, ex-convicts, and men utterly destitute of principle."

"Then you were robbed at the camp?"

"Not then nor there. I took the precaution to send the greater part of my money to Melbourne by experts. Destitute and lost, I have six hundred pounds in Melbourne awaiting my arrival, but for all that, I should probably have starved to death but for my opportune meeting with you."

"Come, then, you've got something to live for, after all," said Obed.

"Yes, you are right. Let me once get to Melbourne and I am all right. I shall buy a passage ticket to Liverpool, and carry with me the balance of my money. With all that I have lost I shall go home richer than I came."

"But how did you lose your money?" asked Jack, who was eager to have his curiosity gratified.

"When I got ready to leave the gold-fields, there was no party which I could join. I did not like to go alone. In this emergency a man who had been working an adjoining claim offered to go with me. He professed to have been fortunate, and to be ready to go back to the city. I saw no reason to distrust him, and accepted his proposal. We bought each a horse, made other preparations, and set out together. He won upon my confidence, and I told him everything. He was very comfortably fixed himself, he told me, and was glad he had fallen in with me, as he had been afraid of being robbed on the journey. All went pleasantly for three days, but on the morning of the fourth day when I awoke I found myself alone. A little startled, I felt for my gold, which I carried in a belt around my waist. It was gone, and so was my horse. Of course you guess how it happened. My companion had robbed me during the night, and left me in the woods utterly destitute."

"What was the name of your companion?" asked Obed quickly.

"He called himself Fletcher."

"I thought so!" exclaimed Obed, slapping his leg with emphasis. "We know the gentleman a little ourselves."

CHAPTER IX. A DISAGREEABLE SURPRISE

"You have not met Dick Fletcher?" said Ralph Granger in surprise.

"Yes, we only parted from him this morning."

"Did he rob you?"

"No, but he tried to."

Here Obed gave an account of Fletcher's searching his pockets during the night.

"He thought I was sound asleep," he continued, "and so I was, but it doesn't take much to wake me. When I gripped his throat, he concluded he'd tackled the wrong man."

"Did you part company with him then?"

"No; he pretended he had been in search of matches, and I pretended to believe it, but kept a good look-out. Last evening we stopped at the Travellers' Rest, and Harry, here, overheard him and the landlord out in the woods concocting a scheme to rob us, so I just told the gentleman his room was better than his company, and he cleared out."

"I am afraid he will turn up again," said Granger apprehensively.

"We'll try to be ready for him," said Obed coolly, "but I don't mean to borrow any trouble."

By this time their new acquaintance had satisfied his hunger. He turned gratefully to Obed Stackpole.

"How can I thank you for your great kindness?" he said earnestly. "I feel that you have saved my life."

"Tut, tut," said Obed, "I've only done as you would have done in my place. Obed Stackpole isn't the man to let anyone go hungry when he has enough and to spare. But finish your story, my friend. How long is it since you parted company with that skunk, Fletcher?"

"I think it is only seven days, but it has seemed a month."

"And didn't you meet anybody humane enough to relieve your hunger?"

"Yes, during the first four days, but not for the last three. Part of the time I lost my way, and did not meet anyone. I hope you will never know such torments as I have known in that time."

"Amen to that! And now, my friend, what are your plans?"

"I should like to go back to Melbourne," said the stranger hesitatingly. "If you say so, we'll fit you out with three days' provisions, and you can push on."

"I hardly like to go alone."

"I am sorry, for your sake, that we are going the other way. You see we haven't made our pile yet, and must go on. I wish we were on our way back, with our pockets well lined. Although you have been robbed, you've got a good sum waiting for you in Melbourne."

"True; I shall be all right when I get there, but as I am at present situated, it seems very uncertain when I shall have that good fortune."

"I'll tell you what you'd better do, Granger. Come along with us, and join the first party we meet bound for the city. You will, at all events, be sure of your victuals till then."

"I believe your advice to be good, and will accept your kind invitation. When I met you I was about worn out, but the tea and food have put new life in me, and my strength has returned."

After an hour's halt, the little party resumed their march. They were compelled to go so slowly, in consequence of the difficulties of the way, not caring, of course, to get ahead of the oxen, that Granger was easily able to keep up. He proved to be a pleasant addition to the party, and all were glad to have exchanged Fletcher for him. They were not destined to travel long together, however, for before nightfall they fell in with a party of eight persons bound for Melbourne. The two parties halted, and had a conference. Granger's story being told, they agreed to let him join their party, in consideration of a fair compensation which he agreed to make on his arrival at Melbourne.

"Good-by, Granger," said Obed, as they parted. "I think you're all right now. I wish you good luck for the balance of your journey."

"Thank you, Mr. Stackpole," said Granger, grasping the Yankee's hand cordially. "If I do, I shall feel that I am indebted to you for my good fortune. I shudder to think what would have been my fate if I hadn't fallen in with you."

"Then don't think of it! Good-by. Perhaps we shall meet again."

Granger also shook hands with Harry and Jack, and so they parted on the best of terms.

"I wonder whether we shall meet with any more of that mean skunk Fletcher's victims," said Obed. "He's in a pretty mean business."

"There's no doubt about that," said Harry. "I'd rather live poor all my life than live by fleecing my neighbors."

Toward the close of the day they entered a much pleasanter country. In place of sandy clay, baked hard in the sun, alternating here and there with a moist bog, they came to tall grass, trees of great height, and meadows suitable for grazing. The cattle revelled in the rich feed, and Obed suffered them to eat their fill, feeling that they had worked hard and deserved it. Though it was rather earlier than usual, they decided to encamp for the night near the margin of a creek, shaded by trees of a gigantic size.

Harry looked longingly at the clear stream, and a vision rose before him of a pond in his native town where he had been accustomed to bathe.

"Jack," said he, "let's have a swim."

"I'm with you," said Jack promptly. "I'll bet you a shilling I'll be in the water first."

"I'll make a try for it anyway." But Jack, being more simply dressed, was as good as his word, and plunged into the creek first. Harry was scarcely half a minute behind. The boys swam, dived, and frolicked as boys of their age will, and were loath to come out at the last. After their experience of mud and heat the bath seemed to them delicious.

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much since I came to Australia," said Harry with a deep sigh of satisfaction. "I wish I could have a bath every evening."

"So do I," said Jack; "I mean to have another to-morrow morning."

They slept soundly all night, but early in the morning, as consciousness returned, Harry was startled by the sound of hearty laughter. He looked at Jack and Obed in amazement, but both were fast asleep. Indeed, the sound seemed to come from above. He looked up into the tree beneath which they had encamped, but could see no person concealed among the branches. He did, however, notice a peculiar looking bird, and it dawned upon him that the laughter proceeded from it. He remembered now to have heard of the bird peculiar to Australia, popularly known as "the laughing jackass." This was the first chance he had had of hearing it, and he woke up Obed and Jack to hear it also.

"That beats all I ever heard," said Mr. Stackpole. "I wish he'd tell us what's the joke, and we'll laugh too."

This was not the only sound they heard. A flock of white cockatoos were roosting on the tree, and favored the party with their dissonant cries. They are described as having "most sharp and rasping voices."

"If that's singing," said Obed. "I shan't be afraid to try it myself."

"Don't you sing, Mr. Stackpole?" asked Jack, smiling.

"I thought I could once, when I was in my teens. I attended a singing school, and went in the attic one Sunday mornin' to practise. Soon my father was at the foot of the stairs, and asked me what I meant by sawin' boards up in the attic Sunday mornin'!"

Of course the boys laughed, but in spite of Obed's disclaimer thought they would prefer listening to him to the cockatoos.

They got ready to move at seven, the boys having made sure of a bath first. They were not destined to proceed far, however. About ten o'clock, as they were skirting the woods, six men on horseback rode out from the leafy covert. They seemed inclined to dispute the passage of the party.

"What can they want?" ejaculated Harry, with a startled look.

"I expect they are bushrangers," said Obed.

CHAPTER X. FLETCHER TURNS UP AGAIN

Harry didn't need to be told that bushrangers in Australia correspond to bandits in Italy and highwaymen in other countries. The escaped convicts and desperate characters who are naturally attracted to a new country, readily adopted the wild and lawless life of the bushrangers. Stories of their outrages were common enough, and among the dangers apprehended in a journey to or from the mines, that of meeting with a party of this gentry was perhaps the most dreaded.

Though Obed Stackpole betrayed no emotion, but was outwardly quiet, his heart sank within him when he saw the bushrangers strung along the road.

"I guess our trip to the mines must be given up," said he in a low voice to Harry.

Meanwhile Harry had been scanning the faces of the men who confronted them, and made a surprising discovery.

"Look, Obed," he said eagerly, "at that man on the extreme right."

Mr. Stackpole did look.

"Dick Fletcher, as I'm a living sinner!" he ejaculated.

But at this point the leader of the bushrangers broke silence.

"Do you surrender?" he asked in brief, commanding accents.

"I think we shall have to, squire," answered Obed, to whom the demand was naturally addressed.

"But I would like to ask a question or two if you don't mind."

"Go on."

"Are we prisoners of war? I didn't know for my part that there was any war in this country."

"I have no time for foolish discussion," was the stern reply. "You must give up what money you have about you."

"It's mighty inconvenient, squire. I'm a good many thousand miles away from home, and –"

"Peace, fool! Produce whatever you have of value."

"I haven't got much. You've tackled the wrong man, squire."

"Fletcher, search that man!" said the captain of the band.

Dick Fletcher dismounted from his horse, and with evident alacrity advanced to the side of the Yankee.

"I think we've met before," said Obed significantly.

"I think we have," said the outlaw, showing his teeth. "I told you we should meet again."

"I can't say I'm overjoyed at the meeting. However, I respect you more now, when you show yourself in your true colors, than when you sneaked up to me at night, and searched my pockets, pretending all the while to be a friend."

"Take care how you talk!" said Fletcher, frowning. "Yesterday you were three to one, now you are in my power."

"So you're a highway robber, are you, Fletcher? Well, I can't say I'm very much surprised. I guess that's what you're most fit for."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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