

Killing an Old Man

It was shortly after the opening of the great exhibition of 1851 that I set sail from England for the gold fields of New South Wales, with a heart brim full of hope and expectation, and pockets, boxes and portmanteaus made of sufficiently capacious dimensions to hold any amount of the precious metal (when found,) in addition to my somewhat scanty wardrobe.

Well do I remember the packing of that black leather portmanteau, and the swallow-tailed coat that my mother would insist upon putting in, although, having a presentiment that such articles of apparel were not *comme il faut* at the gold fields, I vigorously resisted the measure. I also remember the many pairs of warm socks that had been manufactured with sisterly affection and gray worsted, by the five girls—from Julia the eldest, aged nineteen, down to Susan the youngest, just turned nine. Finally, I have a distinct memory of how my maiden aunt, on the strength of her sixteen stone weight, jumped upon the aforesaid portmanteau and performed a kind of war-dance thereon, so as to enable Tom the groom, and Mary the house-maid, to strap and lock it; and how, after many tears being shed by my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and my maiden aunt in particular, I was whisked away to the railway station, in order to catch the 9.45 A. M. train for London.

I will not dwell on the voyage out, because it was very much like other voyages. Suffice it to say that in just a hundred days we arrived at Sidney, the capital of New South Wales, and here I discovered that the favorite gold field of the day was at Ophir, near Bathurst, 145 miles up the country. Here some tremendous finds had lately been made, and people had been turning up nuggets like an Irishman shovels up potatoes.

In due time, after a fortnight's weary journey in an ox cart, which also contained my cradle, my pick and shovel, my tent and other camp requisites, as well as all my personal luggage, I arrived at the gold fields.

I found Ophir then a peculiar and yet romantic-looking place. Two hills rose in a pyramid shape toward the sky, both covered with gentle undulations, both thinly timbered to their summits. The lower slopes of these hills were thickly dotted with digger's tents, and the Summer Hill creek wound right around their base.

At the time I reached this gold field the diggings there were estimated to cover an extent of 300 miles, though eight months previously the existence of gold in any part of Australia was utterly unknown.

I lost no time in pitching my tent and making out a claim, and 24 hours later I was as hard at work as the rest of them.

My tent was pitched in close proximity to one occupied by two strong, burly fellows of the old convict class, or at least such I set them down to be, on account of the odd way in which I fancied each of them lifted the left leg in walking—a peculiarity appertaining to most men who have been accustomed to perambulate in leg-irons for any lengthy period. These men were always very civil to me, and of course I was the same to them; and yet somehow or other I

contracted a dread of them, which I could neither overcome nor combat; and when sometimes one or the other of them would stroll up, pipe in mouth, to the edge of my pit, and ask me how I was getting on, I used to fancy that it was only done to see whether I was turning up anything good, and consequently worth robbing; and I used to conceal my gold in all sorts of out-of-the-way places to elude their suspected designs.

One night I heard a horrid revelation that confirmed all my suspicions against these men. And now I come to the very subject matter of my story.

I have said that my tent adjoined that of my two mysterious acquaintances; in fact, the canvas of one tent touched that of the other; and from my tent I could hear the conversation they carried on in theirs very plainly. I had never before listened to their discourse, but one night, just as I was retiring to bed, I heard one say to the other: "Yes, this little knife did it for him; I killed the old man with one blow, sir."

The horrible admission staggered me, and I felt that I must listen to the end of the discourse now, at whatever risk to myself; so I glued my ear to the canvass in time to hear his mate rejoin: "Did you now? And did the fellow resist you?"

"Faith, and he did," replied the assassin. "He grasped me till he nearly pressed the life out of me, and tried to rip me up with his spur; but I drove the knife into him up to the hilt, and then cut his head off."

"Bravo, Charlie!" cried the other; "that makes the seventh old man we've killed since our arrival in the Colonies, don't it?"

"No, the eighth," was the reply. "Don't you remember the black fellow?"

"Oh, aye, to be sure, right you are," and the other; "but what have you done with the illustrious dead in this present instance?"

"Why, I left the body in the bush, with the exception of the legs, which are here in the tent."

The conversation here ceased, and was not resumed; in fact, a stentorian snoring sound soon told me that it was very improbable that I would be so for that night at least; so I crept into my bed, not to sleep, (how could I after so horrible a discovery?) but to reflect upon all that I had heard.

"The eighth old man they had killed! and one of them an unfortunate black fellow. Oh, the wretched miscreants!" I muttered to myself; and then my mind wandered away, and I wondered why it was that they always murdered old men—how it was that their last victim tried to rip his murderer up with a spur, such an extraordinary weapon of defense, and what on earth had induced the assassin to cut off his victim's legs and bring them into his tent. At last, however, I did sink into a disturbed, unrefreshing slumber, and was afflicted by a frightful dream, in which I fancied that one of my next-door neighbors was kneeling on my chest, and cutting my throat from ear to ear.

My dream had, in fact, some slight foundation, for I was awakened by a rough hand shaking me by the shoulder; and my eyes, on opening them; rested on the rough, bearded face of the very man I had been dreaming of.

I was about to scream “murder!” for I thought that my last hour had come; but glancing around I saw that it was broad daylight, and that the fellow was merely asking me for a match to light his pipe with. This I immediately gave him, and he went away with a muttered expression of thanks.

That day, instead of going to work, I set out for the tent of the police commissioner, and after a long walk, succeeded in reaching it. I had to wait a very long time before I was granted an audience; but when I was ushered unto the presence of the dread functionary, and told him as succinctly as possible the circumstances of the case, and how I heard the rascals confess their numerous crimes, and particularly their last murder, the proofs whereof were within their tent, the enthusiasm of the commissioner was fully aroused, and he felt as anxious for their capture and punishment as myself. He suggested that two policemen, disguised as diggers, and well armed, should come to my tent that evening on the pretense of paying me a visit as old acquaintances, and that after it was dark, and the murderers had turned in for the night, we should rush into their tent and secure them.

This was a very feasible plot, and I heartily entered into it, so I minutely described the position of my tent, and to make it more easily discoverable, promised that a bright red pocket handkerchief should be hanging on some conspicuous part of it, as though to dry, and having made all these arrangements, I took my leave.

Well, I got back to my abode about one o’clock in the afternoon, and after a hasty meal, not wishing to lose a whole day, I went to my claim, and set to for a three hours’ dig. Strange to say, I had not been at work five minutes when I came across a pretty little nugget, of about the size of a walnut, and a few minutes later picked out another as large as a crab-apple. I was about to pocket the latter, when I looked up and saw one of the assassins looking down at me.

“Lucky find, mate!” said he, with a broad grin, that in my prejudiced mind seemed to say, “Aye, but it will be mine before long.”

“Pretty well,” I replied, brusquely, and he walked away.

I found no more nuggets on that occasion; and at 5 o’clock I knocked off and made my way to my tent, where, after a good wash, I pulled an old gin case outside, sat down on it, lighted my pipe, and coolly awaited the arrival of my visitors.

I had not to wait long. I presently observed two strongly framed men strolling leisurely in my direction, as though merely sauntering at random through the diggings. As they came opposite to me, one of them started, and addressing me, exclaimed: “Hello Ted; how long have you been at Ophir? and where did you hail from last?” and stepping up he grasped me warmly by the hand.

Seeing what was expected of me, I heartily returned the pressure, saying, in a loud tone, “Why, about three weeks. But when did you leave Sydney? Come in man, and bring your friend with

you. Old friends like you and me should liquor up before questions are asked and answered,” and inside we all three of us went.

One of the two men that we wanted to catch was an eye and ear witness of all this scene, but it was so naturally enacted that no suspicions that my two acquaintances were detectives could have entered his head.

I found that each of my visitors was armed with a revolver and a pair of handcuffs. They were both strong, powerful men, and more than a match for the others in every way. The plan, however, to make all things certain, and to prevent any unnecessary spilling of blood, was to wait until the ruffians were in their beds, and asleep, when we were to steal in, and handcuff them before they could wake up.

We had to wait many weary hours for this time to arrive, but at last the snoring commenced in earnest, and this was our signal. Handcuffs in hand, the detectives crept into the adjoining tent. I followed them with my revolver leveled, in case that one or both the rascals should wake up and be too quick for them. They did not wake up, and the irons were clasped around and locked on their wrists without their even twinkling an eyelid.

But now they were roughly awakened, and the senior officer said: “Tom Jackson and Bill Watson, I arrest you for willful murder. You must both of you get up and come along with us. I am Detective Sinclair, of the New South Wales police.

I never saw two men so struck with consternation and surprise as were those two worthies. At last, one of them gasped out, “Murder! Willful murder! Detective Sinclair! Why, you must all be mad.”

“The evidence of their crime are in this tent, remember,” I said to Sinclair, nudging him with my elbow. “Let us search for the limbs of their last slaughtered victim.”

The hint was promptly acted upon. We seized spades and picks, and in ten minutes every inch of the ground covered by the tent was turned over to a yard in depth.

No old man’s legs were found; but we were not to be daunted, and proceeded to ransack the tent all over, still without any old man’s legs turning up, though we spied two fine hind legs of a kangaroo hanging up in an obscure corner.

“Well, are you satisfied?” asked one of the prisoners. “Are you convinced that you are on some wild goose chase? If so, take these cursed irons off and be going.”

“No, we are not so convinced,” answered Sinclair, with some asperity. “This worthy gentleman” pointing to me, “heard you confess last night to having murdered no less than eight old men, and such crimes will have to be accounted for. He heard you confess too, to having hid the legs of your last victim in this tent; but doubtless you have this day removed them to some more secure hiding place.”

“He told that, did he? the young donkey,” screamed one of the accused, with a hyena-like laugh. “And so we have, too—old men kangaroos—and there are the legs we spoke of hanging up in that corner ready for tomorrow’s pie. Ah! ha! ha! he has brought you on a fool’s errand, sure enough,” and the roars of laughter the two men indulged in fairly shook the tent.

Both detectives looked fearfully annoyed, and yet they could not help laughing. Without a word to me they took the handcuffs off the men and returned them to their pockets. Then Sinclair said: “What will you take to keep this matter a secret? You see, through this unfortunate new chum’s blunder, we shall get laughed off the diggings, unless you choose to be merciful. I’ll give you £5 note out of my own pocket if you will keep this unfortunate affair dark.”

“I will supplement Sinclair’s offer with the largest of the nuggets I dug up today,” I said, feeling that if being laughed at was the general dread, I stood in the worst position of the trio.

“Hang your bribes!” was the retort. “I would not give up the chance of circulating so glorious a yarn for ten times the value of what you offer. However, I will tell it as leniently as possible. And as for this new chum,” turning to me, “when I first came to the colony, I and my mate here were both of us green enough to have made just as stupid a blunder; so I can’t blame him. Come, let us sit down and have a drink all round of real old Jamaica rum, of which we have an [untouched] keg in stock.”

The invitation was readily accepted, and we kept it up until day-break with grog, songs and toasts.

So ended the tragedy of “killing an old man,” which I now learnt was the name universally bestowed on a large male kangaroo. These animals, when attacked, are very ferocious, and if they cannot get away, and are engaged at close quarters, will clasp you with their short fore legs, and pressing you tightly against their chest will raise one of their strong hind legs, which is armed with a terribly long, strong, and knife-shaped spur, and rip you right down with it, causing almost instant death. When hunted with dogs, the “old man” will generally, when once at bay, disembowel two or three of his canine adversaries before he is dragged down and dispatched and the human foe is sometimes served in the same manner.

These two terrible murderers, as I thought them, turned out to be two right good fellows; one had been a cornet in a crack cavalry regiment at home, the other a curate in the church of England. We soon became fast friends and partners in what turned out afterwards to be a well paying claim, and in the year 1867 we all returned to old England rich men.

The Columbia [TN] *Herald*, May 6, 1870

Mount Alexander Mail [Victoria, AU], May 19, 1870

Cromwell [NZ] *Argus*, June 8, 1870

Tuapeka Times [Lawrence, NZ], July 28, 1870