

Sendall stood a moment irresolute. 'I think I'll come with you,' he said at length, turning towards the gate. 'I can look in here another time.'

'Come by all means if you care to,' responded Mark, who had the best of reasons for his good-humour.

They walked to the end of the road, caught a 'bus into Queen-street, and were soon comfortably settled in Mark's lodgings.

'I suppose I can't induce you to try a cigar,' said Mark, who, after some hesitation induced by his resolve to turn over a new leaf, had helped himself to a choice Havana.

Sendall shook his head. He was a rather stout young man of seven or eight and twenty, with a pair of pale eyes set so close together that in moments of excitement they were apt to fall into a squint. 'I wanted to have a chat with you,' he said. 'I am thinking of getting married.'

Seeing they had never been on terms of much intimacy, Mark wondered at his choice of a confidant. 'Congratulations you,' was all he said.

'Oh, it's not so far advanced as that yet,' said Sendall, moving uneasily. 'The fact is, I just wanted to ask you. You know the Bertrams. Do you think I have any show? Of course the old man can be managed all right. You know we have a good many ideas in common, but d'you think I've a show with the girl?'

Mark sucked at his cigar for a while in silence, then he glanced at the other and averted his eyes. 'I'm very sorry, old man,' he said, feelingly, 'but save you ask me, I don't think you have, not the ghost of a show.'

'Why not?' asked Sendall. 'Well, I'll tell you,' said Mark, laying down his cigar. 'I am in a kind of a way engaged to her myself, and I have the old man's provisional consent. I tell you this only under compulsion as it were, and to save you pain. Of course you'll respect the confidence and not let it go any further.'

'When was it arranged?' asked Sendall presently. His face was white, and his fat cheeks trembled with an involuntary twitching of the muscles. Mark gave him fuller particulars.

'I am surprised at Bertram,' Sendall said presently in an aggrieved voice. 'A man should adhere to his principles. Now, I have been blue-ribbon all my life.'

'Just so,' said Mark, who was in too equable a frame of mind to take offence.

Conversation proceeded in a desultory manner for some time on the same subject, Sendall seeming unequal to getting away from the theme. In response to the latter's question as to what he intended doing, Mark explained that he had resolved to try his fortunes on the goldfields in the hope that fortune might again befriend him. Shortly afterwards Sendall took his leave.

Early the following morning Mark was surprised by a second call from his visitant of the previous night. After a few aimless remarks Sendall explained his business, which was a desire to join Mark in his proposed expedition. 'I tell you candidly, old fellow,' he said, 'I'm a bit hipped, and shall be glad to get out of town for a while. Of course I'll pay my share of the expenses,' he added, 'and I don't think I am a man you will find it difficult to get on with.'

Mark saw the advantages of the offer, especially when he reflected on the low state of his finances, and after a few days' consideration an arrangement was arrived at, and a week or so later they left Auckland for the Thames. For a couple of months they continued their explorations without success. At the end of this time Mark fell ill. For some time past he had been surprised by sudden fits of nausea and dizziness, with intervals during which he felt as well as ever he had been. As time went on these fits increased in frequency. He became continually conscious of a bitter taste in his mouth and of disorders in his vision.

'I can't make it out,' he said as he returned to the tent one morning, white and trembling from a violent attack of sickness. 'If you did not keep all right I should imagine there was something wrong with the flour, or baking-powder, or something.'

'Perhaps we had better get in a fresh stock in any case,' said Sendall, who looked concerned.



'Pah!' he exclaimed, 'the stuff is as bitter as gall.'

Mark lifted his half-empty cup of coffee with a trembling hand and set it to his lips. 'Pah!' he exclaimed, 'the stuff is as bitter as gall. What is it?'

'It's the extract,' said Sendall. 'Shall we start a fresh bottle?'

'God knows, old man,' Mark replied wearily. 'There's something come over the world, and I don't seem to trust it any more. I'm better when I am outside,' he added, rising and picking up his hammer.

Scenes of this sort recurred again and again, and at length Mark seemed disposed to yield to Sendall's reiterated advice to call in a doctor. It was a curious

thing, however, that whenever this weakening of the strong man's disinclination to obtaining medical assistance came over him, Mark's worst symptoms took to themselves wings.

Prospecting still proceeded with more or less energy, but without results. At length one morning, Mark enjoying a bright relief from suffering, their wanderings brought them to the abandoned workings of the Yellow Dwarf. A spirit of curiosity led them to enter and explore the mine. Some of the old workings had already sunken in and become impassable, but two or three drives still remained open. Into one of these they penetrated as far as the termination of the works, Mark preceding and carrying the light. The expedition was not unattended with danger, for the timbers, consisting in many cases of light wood which had evidently been only intended to serve a temporary purpose, had rotted with the damp, and in one place a heavy beam, weighed down by the pressure above, hung suspended from one end, supporting itself by little short of a miracle.

Of a sudden Sendall's manner became curiously excited. 'Look, Weatherly!' he cried, sharply extending



Mark turned in the direction indicated, holding up the light.

his hand towards the end of the drive. Mark turned in the direction indicated, holding up the light. In the next instant he was conscious of a heavy blow, which knocked him to the ground, and then of a dense weight pressing him down and suffocating him, as though the whole hill had fallen in upon him. For half an hour he lay unconscious, then awoke with a sensation of choking. This, he soon found, arose from the fact that he was lying on his face, for on attempting to move his head he discovered that he could do so freely. Also on shifting his body he found that the weight rested almost entirely on his lower limbs, and he conjectured, as was indeed the case, that the beam, in falling, had struck the wall, and thus been the means of saving him from certain death.

When he realized his position Mark began a careful endeavour to extricate himself. Wriggling forward inch by inch with the utmost exertion of his strength, he at length found himself free and able to stand erect. His first act was to strike a light, a feat which, owing to the nervous shock he had sustained, he performed with some difficulty. A terrible sight met his gaze. The timber in falling had let down the superincumbent mass of earth, so that he was now shut in a cavern hardly more than five feet square at the end of the drive. Whether Sendall had escaped, or whether he, too, had been struck down, and possibly killed, by the descending earth, he had no means of discovering. He shouted aloud, only to hear the sound of his voice instantly annihilated by the thick walls of his prison. If Sendall had escaped, how long would it be before he might hope for a rescue? An hour? Several hours? The match burnt down and went out. Mark seated himself on the ground, for he was still dizzy from the blow he had received, and endeavoured to think over his position. Presently a thought struck him which brought him again to his feet with an ejaculation of despair. Already it seemed to him that he breathed with difficulty. How would it be when the air in his narrow prison was entirely exhausted? The thought stung him into action. Again he struck a light and examined the wall of earth in front of him. The stuff, which was of a loose and gravelly nature, had fallen inwards, and he found that by kicking his feet into it he could reach the solid timber at the roof of the drive. His only chance lay in surmounting or boring through the wall. The latter seemed impossible, and success in the former depended on the amount of earth which had fallen, and on the possibility of there being a vacuum above. These could be only determined by experiment, and in total darkness Mark began his effort to escape.

For what appeared to him several hours he worked on, hacking away the stuff with his knife, only to find its place immediately taken by the earth deposited above. The sweat poured from him in streams, and his hand, which clutched the beam, trembled violently. At length, however, there came a diminution in the flow, and he was enabled to put his hands, and finally his head and shoulders into the orifice. He again struck a light and examined his new surroundings. Above his head the earth was arched three or four feet high, and from the dim glimpse he caught of it seemed to be of a hard and substantial nature. He lost no time in scrambling up into the new cavern. His hopes of ultimate escape had now increased to such a degree that after a careful examination of the ground he fell to work with redoubled energy, and in less than half an hour had scraped away sufficient earth to allow the passage of his body down into the unimpeded drive. Before lowering himself, however, he again took out his matchbox. Something in the character of the rock roof of the cavern, as he had seen it when ascending from the other side, returned to his memory, and it was with a vivid presentiment of good fortune that he struck two or three matches together and peered upwards. The sight that encountered him, however, far exceeded his most hopeful anticipations. Over his head, spanning the cavern in a gleaming arch, ran the lost reef of the Yellow Dwarf, glittering at every pore with gold. Mark gazed holding his breath, his mind a tumult of joy, astonishment, thanksgiving, until the smart pain of a burnt finger recalled him to his senses, and he let himself cautiously down into the drive. A few minutes sufficed him to gain the open air, and he threw himself down in the fern with a deep breath of relief. Almost immediately the thought of Sendall brought him again to his feet. He had seen no sign of his companion on either side of the mass of fallen earth, and though there was a possibility of his being completely buried beneath the debris, still the position in which Mark had last seen him rendered this unlikely, and he felt disposed to believe that Sendall, on observing the accident, had immediately gone away for assistance.

Mark determined first of all to make for the camp, not that he thought it was at all likely that he would find his companion there, but in the desire to make as certain as possible before going on to the township. The road ran within a hundred yards of this, so that little time was wasted by the detour. A thick grove of tall ti-trees grew down close to the tent on one side, and through this Mark made his way rapidly. On parting the last bushes he came on a full view of the tent, and also, to his great astonishment, on Sendall, who stood quietly with his back towards him emptying the contents of a small phial on to the ground. To say that Mark was astonished, however, is only dimly to indicate his state of mind. There was something other than wonder working in his brain—something that caused him to draw back into the shelter of the ti-tree and to observe the man before him with clenched hands.

Having emptied the bottle, Sendall drew back his arm and threw it strongly from him into the scrub. Then with an enigmatical smile in the direction of his unseen observer, he re-entered the tent.

Mark was on the point of quitting his hiding-place when Sendall again came out, as before carrying a small bottle. This time he poured the contents into his hand and scattered them from him, then he raised his arm to throw away the bottle. As he did so he felt himself suddenly seized by the wrist, and in a moment the phial had been torn from his grasp. 'What is this?' asked Mark, with a cold quiet.

Sendall drew back, his face blanching and trembling, in his eyes the unmistakable look of the poisoner surprised. 'Weatherly!' he ejaculated. 'I—I thought you were dead.'

'And did you not intend to take steps to see whether I was dead?' asked Mark.

'Of course, my dear fellow,' replied Sendall with a desperate effort to appear at his ease. 'I was just going—I was tidying up a bit—you see I thought you might be brought here.'

'What were you tidying up?' asked Mark significantly. 'Were you tidying up the evidences of an diabolical plot as was ever perpetrated by one man on another. What is this?' he demanded again, holding out the bottle on which he was conspicuous a skull and cross-bones in red ink. 'Sendall,' he cried, suddenly relinquishing his calm manner and seizing the other by the throat, 'confess yourself the devil you are, or I will throttle you where you stand.'

The unhappy wretch made a desperate effort to free himself from the strong grip of his antagonist. Mark, roused to fury, tightened his grip, and shook him till the blood darkened in his face. 'Let me go,' choked the victim at last, 'I confess everything.'

Mark gave him a final shake and released him. 'Pack up,' he said, sternly, 'and go. If you address one word to me henceforth I will punish you as you deserve.'

When an hour later Sendall had disappeared in the direction of the township, Mark cleared the tent of all the eatables it contained, scattering them broadcast through the scrub. Even the hermetically sealed tins of meat shared the same fate, for he decided that nothing which had passed through those evil fingers was fit for human consumption.

The following evening much excitement was created in the township when it became known that the lost reef of the Yellow Dwarf had been rediscovered by one of the original prospectors.

Six months later Mr Bertram was called upon to fulfil his promise. Mark Weatherly was indisputably in a position to support a wife.

SAMUEL CLIALI WHITE

At a benefit in Edinburgh many years ago, the play-bill stated that the evening's entertainment would finish with an interlude!

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