

Gameos of Colonial Life and Character.

BEING THE REMINISCENCES, RUMINATIONS, AND ROVINGS OF AN OLD COLONIST.

(BY THE AUTOCRATIC IDLER).

II.—IN THE CLOUDS.

THAT this present narrator (whom, thank goodness, nobody knows) has spent no small portion of a somewhat strange life, deep down in the world, has, I dare say, been apparent to every reader of this journal. Few, indeed, have penetrated further into the bowels of the earth than he did—for instance, at the bottom of the Magdala shaft at Pleasant Creek. Not at all a difficult place to reach, standing on the edge of a bucket; but by no means pleasant when one landed at last somewhere about a quarter of a mile from the surface—for the air in such regions becomes even more sultry than it is on top; and really there isn't very much real contentment or solid happiness at either place—so little of either, indeed, is there, that one wonders what one is above or below at all for, or why things in general are not constructed on a cooler and more agreeable basis, anyway? Heat (which is, after all, but a form or mode of motion) together with a want of capital (which, again, is but the cessation of motion in the circulating medium) drove the Magdala miners at length clean out of the claim. The history of this celebrated mine constitutes one of the exceptions to the general rule that downright perseverance and pluck are invariably rewarded, even in this life, with success. The plucky and persevering Magdala shareholders, however, did not get one speck of gold for all their years of deep sinking, and for the quarter of a million of money which they had invested. Some of them—poor fellows!—were driven to bankruptcy, when the discovery was made that they were looking for a reef which all the time was in the next claim to them—and didn't propose to travel any further. One shareholder—simply for the reason that he had more brains and less brass than any of the others—was taken into Bedlam when the collapse became inevitable. That shareholder wasn't myself, although you may think so; but I got there, later on, all the same, and will tell you precisely how, and explain exactly what sort of a place Bedlam really is, in my own good time.

But although I can at once recognize the leaden countenance, and the jaded eyes, and the wan figure of the miner, no matter where, or in what garb I meet him; and although drives and winzes, and levels and jump ups are quite familiar to me, and the trickle of water one thousand feet from the surface has dropped upon me and some of the highest personages of various lands, very often at the same moment (showing not the smallest regard for the most dainty bonnet), I intend, on this present occasion, to ignore underground operations altogether, and indeed had, when I took up this pen, not the smallest idea of mentioning the Magdala or any other mining property, being, in fact, bent on describing—or trying to do so—altogether different and diametrically opposite scenes. For, be it known to you, I have been in the clouds also—once only, but still, I dare say, oftener than you have: once in a balloon: once anyhow nearer Heaven than I daresay I ever will be again! The thing occurred in Bendigo, in the year 1872. I will not pretend to say that, when word was given to 'let go!' I did not feel some sort of nervousness. But I assure you all such passed away in a few seconds. Indeed, it was a real consolation to almost immediately find that it was—as usual—the bad, wicked old world that was in trouble, and in danger—it seemed to be sinking, below us, into abominable perdition, while we were immovable and quite firm; floating in air and cloud solidly. The clouds came down to meet us: the earth was tumbling down, falling, falling, below us! We did not ascend to any great height, nor did we go very far. We journeyed over the white hills leisurely: then the wind—very little was there of it—took us along the Eaglehawk lines of reef, and at about sunset we alighted without losing one cubic foot of gas, quite close to the city. The balloon was moored in the Mall, the very busiest quarter of Sandhurst for the night, and the next day the gas company received back again the gas they had given us the day before.

It may be that you do not know what a queer sort of place Bendigo was, in the year 1872? There was, at that time, one of the strangest outbreaks of mining speculation that, I think, the world had ever seen. Rich quartz had been struck in some deep levels in two or three mines, and the whole of Australia went absolutely mad over it, not for a day, but for over twelve months. Brokers and speculators came from all parts to do business 'under the verandah.' Our balloon passed right over the bee hive where these men used to assemble daily—one thousand or more men, perhaps,—all bent on making money anyhow, rapidly;

all bent on getting hold of money—your money—anybody's money—each other's money, if they could; all bent on making a fortune in a few weeks—a fortune out of very little in most cases; a fortune out of nothing at all, in some cases. There they were—a dense mass—blocking up the street—the street that seemed such a narrow strip, from our point of view! I don't know, I'm sure, what they thought of these people higher up than we were—I don't know what opinion the persons still further aloft had of them. To us they seemed ravens. We could see their note books in their hands two thousand feet in the air; we could hear the buzz of their voices in the clouds. One of these men I knew; came with £3 or £4 from Ballarat. In three weeks he left for the Old Country with £27,000. A driver of the Melbourne-Bendigo locomotive engine made a large fortune in almost as short a space of time. Many persons were, of course, utterly ruined: many servant maids and other poor people, lost the savings of years. The sharebrokers in those times had rare old times, I can tell you—never again will such times come, either for them or for anybody else. We were all in a ferment in the city in those heated days: in the evenings it was usual to go to the theatre to hear the Zawistowski sisters singing 'Shoo, fly, don't bother me.'

We passed over long lines of reef and the machinery of countless claims. The chimney stacks appeared like little pipes, spluttering smoke: the poppet heads like ladders. Every now and again the thud of gunpowder (for dynamite had not been invented then) told us that some more solid rock had been riven asunder. Still—all the time—the world was descending, descending.

And, presently we got into the parched up, yellow, burnt outakirts. The life of the people hereabouts is not a pleasant one. This was a broiling hot summer's afternoon, and the absence of green fields and flowers, and hedges, and rippling water, is but too evident. Children brought up in these localities have all the poetry in them killed very early. I am quite sure they are none the better for that. We can hear their voices anyhow, in our balloon; we can hear the crack of the bullock driver's whip; we listen to the rumble of the train rolling into the station from Melbourne.—and see it, too, creeping on, like a snake, through the burnt-up country!

Over the white hills—pipe clay hills, rich in gold once, but worked out and deserted over so long ago. Not a stick of timber on the hills now; no blade of green grass. A sad, dreary, melancholy place is a worked out diggings anyway—it looks no better from a balloon! One of my favourite amusements is throwing stones down deep, deserted shafts: listening to the story they tell, as they tumble down! Some poor fellow, mayhap, came up out of this shaft, a lucky man for life. Is anybody sorry? I hope not. But often, oftener, the case has been, and is, the other way. I have picked up an old worn-out shoe on a deserted diggings—a once dainty lady's little shoe. Where may the lady be now? She danced, no doubt, quite merrily in the dancing saloon—when that thronged establishment was in its prime and in its glory. Poor thing!—God only knows what's become of her. There isn't the smallest suggestion of her to be seen from this balloon!

We descended, as I say, quite easily. Those kind friends who had warned us that the balloon would 'bust,' were the first to congratulate us. As for the crowd under the verandah—as we didn't come from down below—they took very little notice of us. They were too high up in balloons of their own—balloons which most of them, really 'busted'; but what cared they so long as they themselves had had a safe landing? The residents of the city, however, were very good indeed to us, and I was a sort of hero for a day. There isn't anything very particular about the sensation.

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