

whole business in a better light. I think I'll try it!"

As the spirit of youthful buoyancy again took possession of him he rose and began to pace up and down the little sitting-room of his lodgings.

"Good!" he thought, as the names of two of his university chums occurred to him; "I'll look them up at once if they are still in town. What a capital idea. Now for a jolly time. With Medical Brown and Divinity Duncan I shall be proof against all the evil spells of the fatal gully, as Bertha used to call it." Then, breaking out in the words of a ditty which, in his undergraduate days he had helped to compose and render at the annual capping ceremony in honour of his professor, he sang gaily, to the tune of "White Wings":

"Farewell to mines and tail-races." His song was cut short by a boisterous knocking at the door, and before he had time to utter a response the two friends who were then uppermost in his mind stood before him in the room.

The first cordial greetings over, they explained that they had come to ask him to join them in a lengthy walking tour.

"That you have turned up so opportunely," replied Fraser, "is a promise of the good fortune that will attend a little scheme of my own. Sit down and listen to me, and if I don't convince you that I have a plan worth two of yours I'm no true Scot."

Alec had little difficulty in winning them over to his project, and the first thing he did after they had left him was to write to Bertha Sinclair, telling her that as soon as the necessary preliminaries could be arranged, he and his friends would leave Dunedin and spend the next few weeks in prospecting "The Gully."

This was the letter that Bertha now had before her. She had tried in vain to discover some satisfactory explanation of the long silence that had followed it. Making every allowance for the absence of postal facilities in the isolated locality he had gone to, she could not understand why he, who was usually such a regular and zealous correspondent, should have allowed so long a time to elapse without sending some further communication.

There was some consolation in the fact that he was not alone. But she could not escape the depressing influence of the memory of those bygone Christmas days. In a few days it would be Christmas again. What would be his message for her? She was not superstitious beyond the ordinary, but she was a very human little woman, with an affectionate heart, rather prone to misgiving, and a set of nerves that all too readily absorbed the influence of her surroundings.

The door opened, and her sister entered the room.

"Well, are you still worrying about your young fortune-hunter?" she inquired cheerfully. "Won't you come out with me for an hour? I have some shopping to do before tea, and the walk will do you good. It will never do for Alec to arrive and find you ill worrying about nothing. What kind of character will he give me if he finds his plump and rosy little lassie wasted away into the thin and colourless young lady you threaten to become? And, remember, he promised to be here for Christmas, and that is only a few days off now."

The kindly rebuke was not without its effect. Bertha rose, and kissing her sister warmly, said: "You dear old girl! I know it is foolish of me, and I do try not to worry; but now and then, when I think of all that place has meant to us I wish Alec hadn't gone. I could bear the waiting for news if it were not for the harassing recollection that father and Uncle Dick died there. I suppose it is silly." And a suggestion of tears could be detected in the girl's voice.

"Silly? Of course, it is," replied her sister. "Now come along with me, and see if you can't develop a more reasonable frame of mind. Down in the dumps at Christmas-tide! Whoever heard of such a thing?"

"You are quite right, Nell, I know," answered Bertha; "but don't you see it is just because Christmas is so near that I think so much about Alec's strange silence. To be greeted with 'A Merry Christmas,' when this uncertainty makes anything like merriment or gladness impossible to me—it would sound like mockery. Besides, you know it was at Christmas that the wretched place brought us trouble before. But I mustn't keep you, Nell. I won't come out with you just now. That wind has given me a headache, and I think I would rather stay at home this afternoon. But I promise I shall be in quite

a Christmas mood when you return. I see you have Braeken here. I shall read him while you are away."

And opening the bookcase she took down "Musings in Maoriland," and resumed her seat at the window, while her sister set out for town.

Bertha turned at once to "Nichols' Creek," and read the poet's description of the waterfall she had so often visited and admired:

"A shower of molten silver falling down  
An emerald moss-clad precipice of rock."

It recalled to her memory some of the happiest moments of her life. It brought to her mind another Christmas Day, a day of unclouded happiness, when, in the first flush of their early love she and Alec had climbed up the stony creek and gathered ferns from the steep sides of the narrow gulch that led up to the waterfall. There in the illustration was the old tree-trunk lying across the creek at the foot of the fall, on which they had sat together as they told anew the story of their love, and painted in the fairest hues the picture of the days to come. She could almost hear again the soothing murmur of the water as it fell like a bridal veil over the face of the cliff, and there came back to her as she looked at the picture something of the gladness and peace of that happy time.

"I see you have kept your promise, Bertha," said the elder sister on her return from town. "You look quite yourself again. Braeken has worked wonders, surely."

"I believe he has," answered Bertha, with a smile, as she laid aside her book,

in course of formation to work the field on the most up-to-date lines. It is expected that the lower flats near the river will be successfully dealt with by dredging, but operations will also be carried on some distance up the stream that joins the Taieri at this point. Mr Alexander—[Alexander, it says, Bertha]—Mr Alexander Fraser, one of the prospecting party, who is an Associate of the Otago School of Mines—[sounds well, doesn't it?—and a gentleman of considerable practical experience, will probably be appointed to the full charge of the workings. He is leaving to-morrow [that's to-day, Bertha] for Wellington, on business connected with his company. I don't think Alexander told the whole truth if he said that was all he was coming here for, eh, Bertha? but it looks as if you were going to have a Merry Christmas after all, doesn't it? There's the door bell."

Dropping the paper hurriedly, this vivacious and kindly elder sister went off to answer the call, leaving Bertha to collect her scattered senses. Nell returned almost immediately, and holding a telegram aloft teasingly, said, "Guess whom it is from." Then handing it over submissively, she waited for the news.

"Alec will be here the day after to-morrow—the day before Christmas," said Bertha, and her face was radiant, if her voice was rather uncertain.

It was Christmas Eve. Alec and Bertha stood together on the verandah, looking out across the waters of the harbour, over which the rising moon was silencing a rippling pathway. What

ceeded in getting a letter conveyed safely to the nearest post office, the building, which was at once post office and store and sly-grog shanty, had been burned down as the result of a drunken brawl.

It was a singular series of mischances, but since all had ended well he could look back upon these experiences and regard them lightly.

"But he had not yet told all. 'And you were able to solve the mystery?' asked Bertha. The question had been in her mind all day, but she had hesitated to put it before.

"Poisoned!" answered Alec, with the emphasis of one who has investigated a problem, and solved it beyond all question.

An exclamation of horror escaped the girl at this announcement.

"Whoever could"—she began.

"Oh, I don't mean that," interjected Alec. "Nature is the only culprit in this matter. I had held the theory for a long time, and I went to the ground prepared as far as possible to investigate it. I kept my suspicions to myself, however, intending, of course, to speak when the time arrived. As it happened, my suspicions very nearly led to a third fatality. We spent our first day prospecting the lower ground near the main river, and next day worked up Sinclair's Gully towards the position on the hillside which we readily recognised as the site of the two previous camps. It was then, when some distance ahead of my companions, that I met with the accident of which I have already told you. As I had not put in an appearance by the time they had pitched their tent, Brown set out to look for me, and as I was not very far off, he had no difficulty in getting me to the camp, only to find further trouble awaiting him there. When, thanks to his skill and attention, I came to myself, my first words were, 'Did you drink it?' 'No,' he replied, his glance alternating between me and the opposite side of the tent, 'but Duncan did. You knew about the water, then, did you? But keep quiet just now. We can talk about that when you are well. Meanwhile, you see I have my hands full, though I am glad to say that both my patients are progressing favourably."

"Was the water of the stream really poisoned?" asked Bertha.

"Yes," said Alec; "we made analyses of the water and portions of the ground over which it runs, and satisfied ourselves, quite apart from the testimony of Duncan's experience, that the stream at that part is highly charged with a mineral poison. I have no doubt that this is the solution of the mystery of those two fatalities. We found, however, that higher up the stream the water is quite harmless. We have set a limit to the evil influence of the place. 'The fatal gully' need be feared no longer. But it's a good thing we had Brown with us, isn't it? . . . Hark, there is Nell at the organ."

"Yes," replied Bertha, awakening from the reverie into which she had fallen, "she is going to have some Christmas hymns with the children. Listen, it's dear old 'Noel.' And as the voices of the little ones swelled out in the music of the hymn, Bertha took up the strain and sang with them:—

"It came upon a midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth  
To touch their harps of gold.  
Peace on the earth, good-will to men,  
From Heaven's all-gracious King,  
The world in solemn stillness lay,  
To hear the angels sing."

It was a happy family that gathered round the breakfast table next morning.

"Well, Bertha, you won't mind me wishing you a Merry Christmas now, will you?" asked Nell.

"No, dear," said Bertha, "and if you care to wish us a Happy New Year also, you may, for I feel sure it is coming."

#### THE BUSTLE:



WHERE IT  
USED TO BE,

AND



WHERE IT IS  
AT PRESENT.

and proceeded to set the table for the evening meal.

The light was beginning to fail when she took her seat again at the window and looked out over the city. The wind had dropped suddenly, and there was now hardly breeze enough to give direction to the smoke that issued from the tall chimney of the destructor—the Gehenna of the city. The sun had already gone down behind the hills skirting the western side of the town, leaving the sky aglow with gold and ruby light. Bertha watched dreamily as the colours changed and faded and passed, and the stars, like watchful sentinels, took their places one by one in the clear evening sky. The world seemed to be going to its rest in peace, and something whispered to the listening heart of the girl that all was well.

She was aroused from her reverie by the entry of her sister with the evening paper.

"Bertha," said the elder woman, as she turned on the electric light, "I wonder if this will interest you." And the twinkle in her eyes and the droll humour of her expression told at once that the girl had nothing to fear from the news she had brought.

"Listen: 'Dunedin, 21st December. [that's yesterday.] A small party, who have been prospecting for some weeks near the head of the Taieri River, have struck some remarkably rich gravel. The ground has been well tested over a considerable area, and a company is now

questions he had answered since his arrival in the morning! With what attention to detail she had endeavoured to extract from him every item of his experience since he had turned prospector, and with what enthusiasm they had discussed the outlook that now opened before them! And that long silence—how short and trivial it seemed now, and how easily it had been explained, albeit there were passages in the explanation that had made her hold her breath. He had narrated how, a day or two after his arrival on the field, when he had just been able to see enough to satisfy himself of the richness of the ground, he had stumbled over a steep, rock face, and had lain senseless at the bottom, with a sprained wrist and a bruised head, until discovered by his companions, and how Medical Brown had nursed him back to consciousness and strength, though the process was all too slow for his active temperament. He had told how, as soon as his hand was able to wield a pen he had written a long letter, telling of the excellent work being done by his mates under his direction (for he could do little more yet than supervise); and how the messenger to whom he had entrusted it had been carried away by the food-swollen river, losing the letter and almost all else but his life. He had explained how the river had continued to rise, until communication with outside was entirely cut off for many days. And finally, he had recounted how, when at last he had suc-

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