

"Mate, wasn't it somewhere hereabouts there was supposed to be an old shaft that would suit our purpose?"

"Whist, Jack!" replied a voice. "You shouldn't be thinking aloud like that, how's we to know there may'n't be somebody about?"

"It would be a bad job for that somebody as would hinder us now, that's all I can say!" returned his mate, half savagely, with a muttered oath; and Ralph crouched silently closer in shelter, yet straining his ears to catch the next words.

"Well, it must be along here, it were sunk long ago, and abandoned. It ain't likely ever to be disturbed; its safe enough, I reckon, and even the river might tell tales."

"Here it is, here's the very place!" exclaimed Jack. "Let's put a mark here, so's to know it," and suiting the action to the word, he hastily notched a tree near the spot with his pocket knife; it seemed to Ralph as though the knife was in his own brain.

"All right then, come along to the hut, and let's carry our swag carefully, and get all done before daybreak," replied the other. "Then for the Auckland boat, and ship straight home with our luck, eh, mate?"

"Aye; but mind, we goes equal shares, no crying off! I'm running no risk for nothin', not I!" cried Jack.

"Oh, all right, old boy, that's understood; ain't we pals?"

With a satisfied grunt, he seemed to turn in an opposite direction, for the voices grew more and more indistinct, until Ralph heard them no more.

Then he rose softly and painfully, creeping quietly on hands and knees nearer to the direction from which the voices had come, until he felt quite sure he was near the spot, then with a great effort he got on his feet, and there sure enough was the notch cut in the tree. At first he thought of creeping under the shelter of the tall bracken around him, then he decided that would be hardly safe, as they might trample over him.

After a brief search he found a hollow tree, into which he crushed himself safely

out of view, but within sound of their voices if they returned.

It seemed a much longer time to Ralph, but in less than an hour the men returned. He could hear their muffled voices and careful tread as they neared his hiding place.

"Steady, mate; rest a bit, he's a heavy 'un!" said Jack. "I'm near blown; it's no easy work, this!"

"Well, now, the moon's nearly down, we must get it done," replied the other. "Then we can rest when we'er sure of the job."

They appeared to be carrying a heavy burden between them, and lucky indeed was it for him that Ralph had chosen another hiding place; for no sooner had they laid down their load, than Jack said:

"I'm for making his resting place easy for him, mate, and throwing in some of this fern here; it won't seem such a heavy thud, you know. I don't half like this job. I can't help thinking of the little lass."

"Oh, you chicken-hearted youngster, you're always drawing back! Well, if you're afraid of him falling too heavy, why didn't you let me put him out altogether; you're a milk-and-water sort to have for a mate, anyhow!"

Jack took no notice of his mate's muttered reproaches, but quickly throwing down bundles of bracken, proceeded to fasten a long rope round the drugged form of his victim, while the other swore at such useless waste of time.

"Well, it's for her sake," muttered Jack. "She were awful fond on him, and would'n't like him hurt. He'll sleep better maybe, and I feel beastly mean, somehow!"

Then the two lowered their burden down the deep shaft, and having covered the mouth of it with branches of fallen trees, and waited a little to assure themselves they were unwatched, they turned away, and were soon lost from view.

"Now here's a go!" said Ralph to himself, cautiously emerging from his hiding place. "There's a bloke down that shaft, as sure as I'm alive, that's been put to sleep, as Jack says; and I believe these fellows have made off with his swag of gold! They said