The miner's right, a tale of the Australian goldfields

Boldrewood Rolf
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A TALE OF
THE AUSTRALIAN GOLDFIELDS

BY

ROLF BOLDREWOD { pseud. }

AUTHOR OF 'ROBBERY UNDER ARMS'

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CHAPTER I

I am in Australia at last—actually in Botany Bay, as we called the colony of New South Wales when Joe Bulder and I first thought of leaving that dear quiet old Dibblestowe Leys in Mid-Kent. More than that, I am a real gold digger—very real, indeed—and the holder of a Miner's Right, a wonderful document, printed and written on parchment, precisely as follows. I ought to know it by heart, good reason have I theretofor, I and mine. Here it is, life size, in full. Shall I ever take it out and look at it by stealth in happy days to come, I wonder?

NEW SOUTH WALES,

No. 1163
MINING DISTRICT, AND DIVISION
ON PLACE IN WHICH ISSUED
Deb. 11th, March 1852

MINER'S RIGHT
Issued to Hereward Pole
of Yatala under the provisions of the "Mining Act 1854" to be in force until 31st December 1855
William D. Blake, Commissioner

Yes, I am here now, at Yatala, safe enough; as I said before, with my mates—Cyrus Yorke, Joe Bulder, and the Major. But I certainly thought I should never get away from England. One would have imagined that a younger son of a decayed family had never quitted Britain before to find fortune or be otherwise provided for. Also, that Australia was Central Africa, whence ingenuous youth had little more chance of returning than dear old Livingstone.

As for me, Hereward Pole, as I had but little occupation and less money, I was surely the precise kind of emigrant which the old land can so gracefully spare to the new. Gently nurtured, well intentioned, utterly useless, not but what I
was fitting myself according to my lights for a colonial career—save the mark!—for I had been nearly a year on a farm in Mid-Kent, for which high privilege I paid, or rather my uncle did, £100 sterling.

So, I had learned to plough indifferently, and could be trusted to harrow, a few side strokes not mattering in that feat of agriculture. I could pronounce confidently on the various samples of seed wheat submitted to me, and I had completely learned the art of colouring a meerschaum by smoking daily and hourly what I then took to be the strongest tobacco manufactured.

It wasn’t bad fun. Jane Mangold, the old farmer’s daughter, who was coaching me, was a pretty girl, with rosy cheeks, a saucy nose, and no end of soft, fluffy, fair hair. We were capital friends, and she stood by me when I got into disgrace by over-driving the steam-engine one day, and nearly blowing up the flower of the village population of Diblestowe Leys. Now and then I had a little shooting, and a by-day with the Tickham hounds. Life passed on so peacefully and pleasantly that I was half inclined to think of taking a farm near the Leys at the end of my term, and asking Jane to help with the dairy, poultry, cider, and housekeeping department. Then a little incident happened which changed the current of ideas generally, and my life in particular.

It was one of the fixtures of the Tickham hounds, which sometimes honoured our slowish neighbourhood. Old Mangold, being grumpy, had told me that I might go to Bishop’s Cote, or indeed considerably further, for all the help I was to him. I had cheerfully accepted his somewhat ungracious permission, and mounted on a young horse I was schooling for Dick Cheriton, a farmer’s son of sporting tastes, I made my way over, pleased with my mount, satisfied with my boots, and altogether of opinion that I was better treated by fortune than usual.

I could ride, to do myself justice, and shoot. Second whip or under keeper were the only posts for which I was really qualified. I could make a fly and tie it; could somehow hit the piscatorial need of most days and most waters. Mine was rarely an empty basket. In fact, I was like a very large majority of the young Englishmen of the day, in that I could do a number of useless things, mostly relating to field sports and manual accomplishments. Tall and strong, with thickish dark-brown hair, I had my mother’s features and dark grey eyes, that didn’t usually look anywhere but in people’s faces. For the rest I was wholly ignorant of every conceivable form and method of money-making, and could not have earned a crown to save my life.

Please to imagine me sitting sideways on my horse, thinking whether there might be time to have a smoke before the hounds threw off, then suddenly aroused by the rattle of carriage wheels, which denoted a stronger pace than was generally resorted to by county families assembling at a meet. Hastily
looking round I saw a pair of grand-looking brown horses, which had evidently bolted with a landau containing two ladies. The coachman was sitting still and doing his best, but he had only one rein; the other, broken short, was dangling from the near horse’s head. I knew the horses, and, of course, the carriage. I had often remarked them at the village church; they belonged to the squire, who was my host's landlord. I knew, of course, the lady of the Manor by sight, having gazed at her afar off; but the girl, who was by her side in the carriage—pale and proud yet despairing, with a piteous look of appeal in her large, dark eyes—I had never seen before.

We were both early. The hounds had not yet come up. Save the village apothecary in antigropelos, and a stray horse-dealer or pad groom, there was hardly a soul near. My resolution was taken in an instant. I knew that the road they were speeding so fast along gradually commenced to descend. A longish hill, flint bestrewn, with a turn and bridge at the end of it, would soon account finally for all concerned.

I took my five-year-old by the head and raced for the hedge and ditch. He gave a highly theatrical jump into the road just by the side of the carriage. I saw both the ladies gaze with astonishment as I sent him up to the head of the relentless carriage horse. ‘Help us, oh help us!’ cried Mrs. Allerton, ‘or we shall be dashed to pieces.’ The younger lady did not speak, but looked at me with her pleading eyes in such a way that I felt I could have thrown myself under the wheels then and there to have been of the slightest service.

Nothing so sacrificial was required of me. Jamming my youngster, fortunately one of the bold temperate sort, against the near side carriage horse’s shoulder, I got hold of the loose rein, and dragged at his mouth in a way that must have hurt his feelings, if he had any thereabouts. The coachman seconded me well and prudently. Between us we stopped the carriage within a quarter of a mile, and saved the impending smash. The rein was knotted, the bits altered to the lower bar, and peace was restored.

Both ladies were ridiculously grateful, though the younger, after impulsively placing her hand in mine, when her mother—as I found her to be—had shaken mine several times warmly, rather looked than spoke her thanks.

‘Haven’t I seen you somewhere?’ at length asked the elder lady. ‘I am sure I know your face and voice.’

I mentioned something about Dibblestowe Leys and Mr. Mangold.

‘Ah, of course, I was stupid not to remember you before. You will tell us what name I shall mention to the Squire, as that of the gentleman who so gallantly saved the lives of his wife and daughter.’

‘Hereward Pole,’ said I, bowing and blushing—one blushed in those days; ‘very much at your service.’
‘One of the Poles of Shute, surely not? Why, I remember the old place when I was a girl. And your dear mother, is she still alive? I shall hope to see her again. What a wonderful coincidence. And, now I think of it, you are like her, especially about the brow and eyes.’

‘Mamma, perhaps Mr. Pole would like to have his run with the hounds, now that we are all safe. We needn’t stay in the road all day. I see they have put the hounds into Hollingbourne Wood. Papa says it was near Durnbank; so if Mr. Pole cuts across these two fields with that clever horse of his he will be just in time.’

‘My dearest Ruth, you are a matter-of-fact darling; but I daresay Mr. Pole will enjoy the run after all. You young people are so strong. My poor nerves will be agaçé for days, I know. May we hope to see you on Sunday to dinner, my dear Mr. Pole? I suppose Mr. Mangold can spare you on that day.’

‘Or even on a week-day, perhaps,’ said the young lady maliciously. ‘You had better get away; I see something like business over yonder.’

I bowed low, and plunging in a dazed way at the hedge, was mortified to find that my steed adopted the tactics of multitum in parvo, and got through rather by force of character than activity. However, I flew the next two fences in very creditable style, and reached the outer edge of the covert as Reynard had stolen forth, a few moments in advance of old Countess and Columbine, the detectives of the pack, and was well away with the leading hounds before the carriage was out of sight in the direction of Torry Hill.

The run was a cracker. How well I remember it still. I sailed along in the first flight all through. Indeed, so well was I carried, that I never had a chance of riding the young horse again, as he was promptly snapped up at a large advance upon his previous selling price. A single day with its occurrence brightens or shades a life. Fate takes the dial, and turns the hands with strong slow fingers, and we think we can carve out our own path in life, can choose the good or shun the evil that lieth around us. Now, like children, are we hurried forward or frightened back on the track of doom!

When I returned to the Leys late that evening Jane was most anxious to hear everything about the day. Had there been a good run? Was I well up? Did Dick Cheriton’s horse carry me well? She didn’t see why I should go riding other people’s young horses. My neck was more valuable than Dick’s—a gambling, drinking, good-for-nothing fellow. Was the Squire’s lady there, and her daughter Miss Ruth? The undergardener had been down from the hall to see Deborah the dairy-maid, and had told her that they were going to the meet because Lord Arthur Gordon was to be there. He was staying at the hall.

I must have been more curt than usual in my answers; per-
haps I was tired or cross: men sometimes are, for no reason at all, like women. Anyhow, Jane was disappointed, and left off questioning me, saying that 'she supposed I would lose my temper after a night's rest. Only she did think——' and here there must have been a few tears, as I found myself consoling her efficiently and protesting all kinds of palliatives, Mr. Mangold having as usual gone to smoke his pipe in the snug sanded kitchen, which he said was a hundred times more comfortable than Jane's smart parlour, which he never would call a drawing-room, much to her distress.

On the following Sunday I announced my intention of going to church, a practice to which I generally conformed on the ground of mixed motives, involving as it did a pleasant walk back through the lanes with Jane. To her wild astonishment and that of the parish generally, I was most cordially greeted by the lady of the Manor; hardly less so by Miss Allerton, and finally carried off in the sacred hallowed carriage before the eyes of the dismayed villagers, who looked upon it as something hardly less than a translation to realms Elysian.

On arriving at Allerton Court, a grand old Elizabethan pile, we were met on the steps by the Squire himself, who most warmly acknowledged his indebtedness to me for the signal service which I had rendered his family. Delighted to find that I was the son of his old friend Dunston Pole, while I was in the neighbourhood he hoped—indeed, he would take no denial—that I must look upon his house as my home. He was aware I was learning farming at the Leys with old Mangold. Very worthy old chap, and paid his rents with much more punctuality than many of the newer lights. Pretty daughter too, Miss Jane. Mind what you're about. Must not go about breaking hearts; though girls look out for themselves nowadays pretty well, he must say that, however. I must come over and shoot. They always thought there was some of the best cock-shooting in England at Allerton Court, and as for hunting, he would mount me to the end of the season. I needn't ride five-year-olds after to-day; though the one I steered to the Hollingbourne must have been a 'nailer,' if his informant spoke truly.

The Squire's address was fragmentary and conventional, but the tone of my whole reception was so truly sincere that I felt at once that my position as the friend of the family was assured. The lady of the Manor looked at me with a truly maternal warmth of affection, and from time to time recapitulated for the Squire's benefit every incident of our joint thrilling adventure.

'Never was so near being a widower, my dear,' he said. 'I wonder who there is in the county that would have suited me? Never thought of it before! One should always be prepared for those kind of things though; couldn't have replaced my
ladybird here though so easily, eh, Ruth!’ and a tear gathered in the old man’s glistening eye.

‘You are a wicked old papa,’ said she, holding up a finger reprovingly; ‘you would have thought very little about successors and such rubbish, you know, if poor mamma and I had been dashed to pieces, which we should most certainly have been but for Mr. Pole’s help and good riding.’ And here I received a half-shy, half-grateful glance that made me consider myself a Paladin, and the lovely girl, the fairest of the fair, like her that was to reward _le brave et beau Dunois_, who of old returned from Palestine.

This was all very well, but one could not return from Palestine without having in the first instance gone there. It was no doubt mighty easy for such fellows as Dunois to go to foreign parts. Very little capital was required, and fighting, if a hazardous, is comparatively a cheap species of investment. Now, in these latter days, a man must either stay at home, leading an inglorious and unprofitable life, or be able to lay his hand upon a good round sum of money with which to be a backwoodsman in Canada, a squatter in Australia, a sugar grower in Natal, or an indigo planter in Nepal. The days of cheap yet dignified adventure seemed, ah me, to be fled for ever.

Matters went on smoothly for me during the rest of my sojourn at the Leys. I learnt a decent amount of farming; and, indeed, gained a reasonable meed of praise from old Mangold. This advance in agricultural knowledge was due rather to increased attention on my part than to the time which I was enabled to devote to my duties; for, indeed, Miss Mangold told me with more acerbity than I had suspected her of possessing, I was always up at the Court, and, as she expressed it more familiarly than elegantly, in Miss Ruth’s pocket.

I mildly repelled the accusation of living at the Court, excusing myself as to frequent visits by saying that one wanted a little change, and treating with silent scorn the unauthorised allusion to any part of Miss Allerton’s sacred costume.

‘You didn’t want so much change once,’ she said, tossing her head, which still looked pretty enough with her fresh colour and soft abundant hair; ‘but times are changed I can see.’

‘I shall have to go away next month,’ said I, evading the latter part of her remark. ‘You and I mustn’t part bad friends, Jane.’

‘I’m not bad friends,’ she said, ‘though some people are so fickle that they run after every new face they see just because people are high up in the world. I shall be sorry when you go, for it will be fearfully dull—worse than ever. But what will you do after you go away—take a farm about here? It will want money to do that, with the stock and rotation of crop you’re bound to, and all the other fads for making farmers spend money instead of landlords nowadays.'