

# A Strange Goldfield

By Guy Boothby

Of course nine out of every ten intelligent persons will refuse to believe that there could be a grain of truth in the story I am now going to tell you. The tenth may have some small faith in my veracity, but what I think of his intelligence I am going to keep to myself.

In a certain portion of a certain Australian Colony two miners, when out prospecting in what was then, as now, one of the dreariest parts of the Island Continent, chanced upon a rich find. They applied to Government for the usual reward, and in less than a month three thousand people were settled on the Field. What privations they had to go through to get there, and the miseries they had to endure when they *did* reach their journey's end, have only a remote bearing on this story, but they would make a big book.

I should explain that between Railhead and the Field was a stretch of country some three hundred miles in extent. It was badly watered, vilely grassed, and execrably timbered. What was even worse, a considerable portion of it was made up of red sand, and everybody who has been compelled to travel over that knows what it means. Yet these enthusiastic seekers after wealth pushed on, some on horseback, some in bullock waggons, but the majority travelled on foot; the graves, and the skeletons of cattle belonging to those who had preceded them punctuating the route, and telling them what they might expect as they advanced.

That the Field did not prove a success is now a matter of history, but that same history, if you read between the lines, gives one some notion of what the life must have been like while it lasted. The water supply was entirely insufficient, provisions were bad and ruinously expensive; the men themselves were, as a rule, the roughest of the rough, while the less said about the majority of the women the better. Then typhoid stepped in and stalked like the Destroying Angel through the camp. Its inhabitants went down like sheep in a drought, and for the most part rose no more. Where there had been a lust of gold there was now panic, terror—every man feared that he might be the next to be attacked, and it was only the knowledge of those terrible three hundred miles that separated them from civilisation that kept many of them on the Field. The most thickly populated part was now the cemetery. Drink was the only solace, and under its influence such scenes were enacted as I dare not describe. As they heard of fresh deaths, men shook their fists at Heaven, and cursed the day when they first saw pick or shovel. Some, bolder than the rest, cleared out just as they stood; a few eventually reached civilisation, others perished in the desert. At last the Field was declared abandoned, and the dead were left to take their last long sleep, undisturbed by the clank of windlass or the blow of pick.

It would take too long to tell all the different reasons that combined to draw me out into that 'most distressful country'. Let it suffice that our party consisted of a young Englishman named Spicer, a wily old Australian bushman named Matthews, and myself. We were better off than the unfortunate miners, inasmuch as we were travelling with camels, and our outfits were as perfect as money and experience could make them. The man who travels in any other fashion in that country is neither more nor less than a madman. For a month past we had been having a fairly rough time of it, and were then on our way south, where we had reason to believe rain had fallen, and, in consequence, grass was plentiful. It was towards evening when we came out of a gully in the ranges and had our first view of the deserted camp. We had no idea of its existence, and for

this reason we pulled up our animals and stared at it in complete surprise. Then we pushed on again, wondering what on earth place we had chanced upon.

‘This is all right,’ said Spicer, with a chuckle. ‘We’re in luck. Grog shanties and stores, a bath, and perhaps girls.’

I shook my head.

‘I can’t make it out,’ I said. ‘What’s it doing out here?’

Matthews was looking at it under his hand, and, as I knew that he had been out in this direction on a previous occasion, I asked his opinion.

‘It beats me,’ he replied; ‘but if you ask me what I think I should say it’s Gurunya, the Field that was deserted some four or five years back.’

‘Look here,’ cried Spicer, who was riding a bit on our left, ‘what are all these things—graves, as I’m a living man. Here, let’s get out of this. There are hundreds of them and before I know where I am old Polyphemus here will be on his nose.’

What he said was correct—the ground over which we were riding was literally bestrewn with graves, some of which had rough, tumbledown head boards, others being destitute of all adornment. We turned away and moved on over safer ground in the direction of the Field itself. Such a pitiful sight I never want to see again. The tents and huts, in numerous cases, were still standing, while the claims gaped at us on every side like new-made graves. A bullock dray, weather-worn but still in excellent condition, stood in the main street outside a grog shanty whose sign-board, strange incongruity, bore the name of ‘The Killarney Hotel’. Nothing would suit Spicer but that he must dismount and go in to explore. He was not long away, and when he returned it was with a face as white as a sheet of paper.

‘You never saw such a place,’ he almost whispered. ‘All I want to do is to get out of it. There’s a skeleton on the floor in the back room with an empty rum bottle alongside it.’

He mounted, and, when his beast was on its feet once more, we went on our way. Not one of us was sorry when we had left the last claim behind us.

Half a mile or 50 from the Field the country begins to rise again. There is also a curious cliff away to the left, and, as it looked like being a likely place to find water, we resolved to camp there. We were within a hundred yards or so of this cliff when an exclamation from Spicer attracted my attention.

‘Look!’ he cried. ‘What’s that?’

I followed the direction in which he was pointing, and, to my surprise, saw the figure of a man running as if for his life among the rocks. I have said the figure of a man, but, as a matter of fact, had there been baboons in the Australian bush, I should have been inclined to have taken him for one.

‘This is a day of surprises,’ I said. ‘Who can the fellow be? And what makes him act like that?’

We still continued to watch him as he proceeded on his erratic course along the base of the cliff—then he suddenly disappeared.

‘Let’s get on to camp,’ I said, ‘and then we’ll go after him and endeavour to settle matters a bit.’

Having selected a place we offsaddled and prepared our camp. By this time it was nearly dark, and it was very evident that, if we wanted to discover the man we had seen, it would be wise not to postpone the search too long. We accordingly strolled off in the direction he had taken, keeping a sharp look-out for any sign of him. Our search, however, was not successful. The fellow had disappeared without leaving a trace of his whereabouts behind him, and yet we were all certain that we *had* seen him. At length we returned to our camp for supper, completely

mystified. As we ate our meal we discussed the problem and vowed that, on the morrow, we would renew the search. Then the full moon rose over the cliff, and the plain immediately became well-nigh as bright as day. I had lit my pipe and was stretching myself out upon my blankets when something induced me to look across at a big rock, some half-dozen paces from the fire. Peering round it, and evidently taking an absorbing interest in our doings, was the most extraordinary figure I have ever beheld. Shouting something to my companions, I sprang to my feet and dashed across at him. He saw me and fled. Old as he apparently was, he could run like a jack-rabbit, and, though I have the reputation of being fairly quick on my feet, I found that I had all my work cut out to catch him. Indeed, I am rather doubtful as to whether I should have done so at all had he not tripped and measured his length on the ground. Before he could get up I was on him.

‘I’ve got you at last, my friend,’ I said. ‘Now’ you just come along back to the camp, and let us have a look at you.’

In reply he snarled like a dog and I believe would have bitten me had I not held him off. My word, he was a creature, more animal than man, and the reek of him was worse than that of our camels. From what I could tell he must have been about sixty years of age—was below the middle height, had white eyebrows, white hair and a white beard. He was dressed partly in rags and partly in skins, and went barefooted like a black fellow. While I was overhauling him the others came up—whereupon we escorted him back to the camp.

‘What wouldn’t Barnum give for him?’ said Spicer. ‘You’re a beauty, my friend, and no mistake. What’s your name?’

The fellow only grunted in reply—then, seeing the pipes in our mouths, a curious change came over him, and he muttered something that resembled ‘Give me.’

‘Wants a smoke,’ interrupted Matthew’s. ‘Poor beggar’s been without for a long time, I reckon. Well, I’ve got an old pipe, so he can have a draw.’

He procured one from his pack saddle, filled it and handed it to the man, who snatched it greedily and began to puff away at it.

‘How long have you been out here?’ I asked, when he had squatted himself down alongside the fire.

‘Don’t know,’ he answered, this time plainly enough.

‘Can’t you get back?’ continued Matthews, who knew the nature of the country on the other side.

‘Don’t want to,’ was the other’s laconic reply. ‘Stay here.’

I heard Spicer mutter, ‘Mad—mad as a March hare.’

We then tried to get out of him where he hailed from, but he had either forgotten or did not understand. Next we inquired how he managed to live. To this he answered readily enough, ‘Carnies.’

Now the carny is a lizard of the iguana type, and eaten raw would be by no means an appetizing dish. Then came the question that gives me my reason for telling this story. It was Spicer who put it.

‘You must have a lonely time of it out here,’ said the latter. ‘How do you manage for company?’

‘There is the Field,’ he said, ‘as sociable a Field as you’d find.’

‘But the Field’s deserted, man,’ I put in. ‘And has been for years.’

The old fellow shook his head.

‘As sociable a Field as ever you saw,’ he repeated. ‘There’s Sailor Dick and ’Frisco, Dick Johnson, Cockney Jim, and half a hundred of them. They’re taking it out powerful rich on the Golden South, so I heard when I was down at “The Killarney”, a while back.’

It was plain to us all that the old man was, as Spicer had said, as mad as a hatter. For some minutes he rambled on about the Field, talking rationally enough, I must confess that is to say, it would have seemed rational enough if we hadn’t known the true facts of the case. At last he got on to his feet, saying. ‘Well, I must be going—they’ll be expecting me. It’s my shift on with Cockney Jim.’

‘But you don’t work at night,’ growled Matthews, from the other side of the fire.

‘We work always,’ the other replied. ‘If you don’t believe me, come and see for yourselves.’

‘I wouldn’t go back to that place for anything,’ said Spicer.

But I must confess that my curiosity had been aroused, and I determined to go, if only to see what this strange creature did when he got there. Matthews decided to accompany me, and, not wishing to be left alone, Spicer at length agreed to do the same. Without looking round, the old fellow led the way across the plain towards the Field. Of all the nocturnal excursions I have made in my life, that was certainly the most uncanny. Not once did our guide turn his head, but pushed on at a pace that gave us some trouble to keep up with him. It was only when we came to the first claim that he paused.

‘Listen,’ he said, ‘and you can hear the camp at work. Then you’ll believe me.’

We *did* listen, and as I live we could distinctly hear the rattling of sluice-boxes and cradles, the groaning of windlasses—in fact, the noise you hear on a goldfield at the busiest hour of the day. We moved a little closer, and, believe me or not, I swear to you I could see, or thought I could see, the shadowy forms of men moving about in that ghostly moonlight. Meanwhile the wind sighed across the plain, flapping what remained of the old tents and giving an additional touch of horror to the general desolation. I could hear Spicer’s teeth chattering behind me, and, for my own part, I felt as if my blood were turning to ice.

‘That’s the claim, the Golden South, away to the right there,’ said the old man, ‘and if you will come along with me, I’ll introduce you to my mates.’

But this was an honour we declined, and without hesitation. I wouldn’t have gone any further among those tents for the wealth of all the Indies.

‘I’ve had enough of this,’ said Spicer, and I can tell you I hardly recognised his voice. ‘Let’s get back to camp.’

By this time our guide had left us, and was making his way in the direction he had indicated. We could plainly hear him addressing imaginary people as he marched along. As for ourselves, we turned about and hurried back to our camp as fast as we could go.

Once there, the grog bottle was produced, and never did three men stand more in need of stimulants. Then we set to work to find some explanation of what we had seen, or had fancied we saw. But it was impossible. The wind might have rattled the old windlasses, but it could not be held accountable for those shadowy grey forms that had moved about among the claims.

‘I give it up,’ said Spicer, at last. ‘I know that I never want to see it again. What’s more, I vote that we clear out of here to-morrow morning.’

We all agreed, and then retired to our blankets, but for my part I do not mind confessing I scarcely slept a wink all night. The thought that that hideous old man might be hanging about the camp would alone be sufficient for that.

Next morning, as soon as it was light, we breakfasted, but, before we broke camp, Matthews and I set off along the cliff in an attempt to discover our acquaintance of the previous evening.

Though, however, we searched high and low for upwards of an hour, no success rewarded us. By mutual consent we resolved not to look for him on the Field. When we returned to Spicer we placed such tobacco and stores as we could spare under the shadow of the big rock, where the Mystery would be likely to see them, then mounted our camels and resumed our journey, heartily glad to be on our way once more.

Gurunya Goldfield is a place I never desire to visit again. I don't like its population.