



LUCK'S everything. Sometimes it chases a man, sometimes he trips over it, sometimes it buries him.

The queerest case of all round good and bad luck I ever knew of happened to a fellow I met in Western Australia just after Bailey's reward started the big rush.

I had been prospecting some gullies about sixty miles southeast of Hannan's that summer, just making tucker and tobacco out of a few fly specks and an occasional ounce slug. I had a pack-horse, plenty of rice and dried apples, a few tins of meat, with enough salt water two feet down in the clay pan to keep my condenser going.

I didn't feel settled enough to hoist my fly, so slept in the open by the fire. I was a hatter, didn't care for mates as a rule, and hadn't met any other prospectors on foot, horse, or camel since I had been out. Nobody seemed to want that bit of Australia.

One evening at tea a man came out of the scrub with nothing on but ragged trousers and fell down flat by the fire. His back was burned and blistered, his tongue thick, and his

bare feet were bleeding. I knew at once that he'd been doing a perish, so without asking questions I poured some hot tea down his throat, and gave him a bit of damper.

He came to pretty quickly and wanted to explain. I saw he was a new chum and told him to shut up. You don't have to apologize for what the bush has done to you when you've lost your bearings and your water bag. Then I threw a couple of flour bags over him, put a log under his head and let him sleep.

He was a little pasty-faced chap, one of the thousands Bailey's find had brought over from the East. Poor devils accustomed to streets and policemen, trying where men like me had failed for twenty years. A bushy would have wanted a smoke first, no matter how parched he was. I know I always did.

Next morning he was still weak, but got up and helped me to blow up the ashes. His name was David Baird, and he had been dry-blowing at the Six Mile, near Hannan's. He had tented with some mates who were working for wages on the Perseverance, and walked to and fro every day between there and his claim—which was a duffer.

At first I couldn't make out how long he had been lost, he didn't seem to know himself, but afterward I reckoned he did a three days. Three days without water is enough for an old chunk of diorite like me, but to Baird who had never before in his life been a hundred yards away from a bar or a water tap it was hell—no, it was Westralia, which is worse than hell.

Coming home to camp he had gone astray and didn't meet sign or sight of anything living till he fell by my fire.

"Wasn't there a track?" I asked.

"Yes, but I missed it somehow," he said. "I had been used to guide myself by the sound of the Boulder battery."

I knew the Boulder battery. It was the first bit of mining machinery on that field. It was not a real battery, with stampers and mercury box and blankets—there wasn't enough water to run one of that kind—but a sort of dry mill that ground up the quartz in a round hopper. The row it made used to scare the black fellows, it spoiled the bush I thought, as it interfered with your thinking. But Baird, used to the noise and the clatter of a city, liked it, and took it as a compass to steer him home to camp.

He didn't seem able to explain why it failed him that night, as he said he heard it quite plainly. He thought he must have mistaken the direction of the sound, but why he couldn't tell. The country was flat with low scrub and nothing to cause an echo, and besides he had been going by that battery for weeks.

"Anything wrong with your ears?" I asked.

"No, I heard it all the time nearly, but somehow I couldn't come up to it—it never got any nearer. Then the night came—and I was frightened—and began to run about in the dark and call out—you know how it is."

I did.

"My water bag tore on a branch, so I

lost every drop. Of course, I had nothing to eat and had been hungry when I left the claim. I thought p'r'aps I was walking in a circle and going round and round that battery which kept up its 'tum-te-te-tum, tum-te-te-tum' all night. So I stopped and made up my mind for a night in the bush. I couldn't light a fire as I hadn't any matches."

The new chum again. A bushman wouldn't stir a yard from camp or mate without feeling his pockets.

"Next morning I couldn't hear the battery at all at first. I started blazing a trail on the trunks with my shovel. The country was different, so I knew I had wandered. It wasn't the flat patches of red soil and quartz gravel I was used to, but low hills of ironstone and thick scrub. I climbed the highest I could see—and then I heard the battery again, just as if it was near by, it was so loud.

"But I couldn't see any tents or smoke—nothing but bush and sky, bush and sky."

I never saw a chap who could talk so much and drink so little. He said all that on one cup of tea, but then he had to stop. The bush and the sky make a man hold his tongue. All you can do is bite on your pipe and go through with it, and if you say anything, make it a prayer and it's best to think that.

I got his tale straight when he told it later, as he did many times. At first he used to mix up the middle and the end—what he did with what he dreamed—and always talked most of the things that hurt him most. Of course, he'd been out of his mind a bit, as a man will when he does a perish, but I don't think Baird ever quite came back for some time.

"I tried to steer by my shadow, but I couldn't always watch it, it made my neck stiff, and I bumped into rocks and tripped over roots. I remember once stopping and laughing, thinking how funny it would be if I found gold—and I jumped once, and the battery

went harder than ever, when I picked up a piece of quartz with specks on it.

“But it wasn’t gold, it was blood, and I saw I had lost my boots and my feet were bleeding. I heard voices besides the battery, Mary’s and the girls’ at home. That was in the night, and I ran toward them, and that’s when I fell and knocked my head against a tree in the dark—”

So he rambled on, telling his story in bits. I felt sorry for him, but he didn’t have to tell me. I had done it all myself, all except the battery. I never heard of that before.

I made him rest for a day or two while I went fossicking, and gave him some flour bags to make a shirt and a hat and boots for himself. He was a willing little chap, got to cleaning up the camp, boiling the billy, and he knew how to bake johnny-cake that didn’t taste of the ashes.

I liked him as much as I could like any man living in my camp, except that he took too much sugar in his tea and talked too much. He told me all about his wife and children, way back across the Bight waiting for him to find their fortunes—how he had borrowed money and the money-lender made him take out a life policy. “That nearly stopped me,” he said, “for the doctor who examined me said I had a nervous heart, and Mary was afraid, but he said the open-air life would do me good.”

Of course, like the rest, he thought it was a picnic. I advised him to get a storekeeper’s job in Coolgardie, and offered to give him tucker and water to go in—and a compass. I don’t think he was afraid of the bush, even after what he had been through. But he wouldn’t hear of taking a job. He had come to find gold, and find it he would.

That’s where the luck comes in. I had seen a new chum fall down a hole an old-timer had given up as a duffer, and strike it rich with his first shovelful. So I didn’t argue with him. Maybe I thought he would bring me luck. He was lucky in a way to tumble on me. If he

hadn’t, the crows would have got him by this, so I told him we could be mates till I had to go in for more tucker.

When I knew him better I found out that if city fellows know nothing they can learn quickly. He had picked up how to handle the dry-blowers’ dishes and occasionally came back with a pennyweight or so, and always had tea ready when I got home and bush tea at that, not ladies’ stuff.

He had grit, too, and actually persuaded me not to shift camp. Me, a battler of twenty years’ experience, bred to the game and bound to die of it. He said if one bit of the country is as good as another as it is in the West where the rotten volcanic gold comes anyhow without run or lead, we’d stand a better chance if we worked out one claim to bed-rock before shifting to another.

P’r’aps I wasn’t used to being talked to so much, p’r’aps I’d got some superstitions of my own in my build that I didn’t know of, anyhow we hung on.

One evening as I turned to the clearing I heard his ax going. He used it still like a new chum, letting the handle slip through his fingers till his palms blistered, I saw him stop dead still and lift his head in the air.

“What is it, Dave?” I said.

“I thought I heard the battery again,” he said.

I had a bad streak that day, the gold had been so fine the wind blew it away, so I was irritable.

“Drop that, Dave, there’s no battery this side of Hannan’s, and never will be. There’s not enough gold round here to stop a tooth.”

He didn’t answer me. The bush and me were teaching him to be quiet, but all through tea I could see he was listening, and it annoyed me, as there was nothing to listen to. I thought he had forgotten that battery dream of his, and I didn’t like it coming back.

I didn’t want a crazy man for a mate.

It's hard enough to keep sane oneself, without company. Stronger men than this little home-bred clerk have thrown up their hands to the bush. Back East where there's water—sometimes—and the trees are big and friendly, and there's life in the scrub, I've seen men jump up from a camp-fire raving, just because they couldn't stand it.

But in the West here where everything is dead, dry, and thirsty with stunted scrub, hot sand, and bald rock, with dry lakes and salt water you have to dig for. with never a beast or insect and the only birds crows waiting for you to die, it's harder still—and I was afraid for Davie.

But he said nothing, and we rolled over in our blankets with our feet to the fire as usual and slept. Next day I made my find. I knew it before I saw it. Something tingled along my pick handle the moment the point struck the quartz. Gold and I ought to know each other. For twenty years through New Guinea chills, Queensland blacks, and Westralian thirsts I had been looking for it—and we knew each other.

I wasn't at all excited, but just stood looking at that opened outcrop of quartz—and the jeweler's shop inside. I didn't even rush round and pick up sticks to peg out my claim. There was no need for that anyway as I don't believe there was another prospector between us and the southern ocean.

"There will be batteries here all right, Creswick, old man," was what woke me.

It was Baird at my elbow. He never could get over the town habit of calling me by my last name, and he was shaking my hand.

"I'm glad of your luck," said he.

I think I was glad to get angry on purpose for a relief.

"Your luck'?" I said. "Our luck, our luck."

Then I cursed him from there to Sydney for thinking I would leave him out of it. Only a town chap used to robbing his mates

for a living and calling it business would have thought of it. Didn't I give him my tucker? Didn't I call him my mate? Wasn't that enough?

I believe I'd ha' hit him if he was big enough, but I talked more than I had in a year till we shook hands again. Then we pegged out our acres, and Davie made our Sunday duff that night for tea.

Well, that's how we found the Last Look Mine.

We got our reward claim, of course, in addition to the one we pegged out, and in a week ten thousand men were on the ground. Creswick and Baird were registered partners in the warden's office, Creswick on the ground in charge as resident manager with a full crew to hold it under the regulations, and Baird on his way to Adelaide to float the company, get capital, and buy machinery.

When he came back three months later with five teams tugging through the sand he waved his new straw hat at me and pointing to the wagons, yelled "The battery, Creswick, old man."

We soon had the machinery up, and as we had dug out piles of yellow-streaked quartz by this time, very soon the first "tum-te-tum, tum-te-te-tum" of the Last Look battery was startling the crows from the trees.

"I told Mary about my perish," said Davie, "and she was feeling very blue about that time and praying a lot, but I suppose you don't believe that had anything to do with it."

"I'll believe anything," I said, "now."

For it was Baird's luck that made him do that perish, Baird's crazy dream about his battery that brought him to me, and something p'r'aps as crazy in myself that made me agree to stick on to that barren flat when all my prospecting sense of twenty years said "You're a damn' fool, get on."

Baird, in his Assam silk suit the boys used to guy, potted round the machinery shed day and night. He knew no more about

mechanics than a kitten does of geology, but in a week he had pumped Dan, the engineer, learned to run it himself, and knew every crank, valve, screw, and nut.

He did all the business, while I directed the shifts. His interest in mining stopped at the battery and what the battery crushed out. He worried if the returns dropped a pennyweight, and when the machinery was stopped to clean up—and the real old quiet came over the bush—he looked unhappy.

But the Last Look was like so many Westralian leads, and soon began to peter out. The jeweler's shop of the first few feet dwindled down to little threads dying out in the quartz, looking mighty sick to an old miner.

The reports home began to cause trouble, shares dropped, we needed capital for development, and it didn't come, and Davie began to worry, just like a town chap.

But I didn't. I knew those reefs, and had done fairly well out of this one, and if I lost, some storekeeper would go dividing mates with me and start me off again.

But Davie had never been broken in, he never had a knock-out, besides I suppose having a wife and girls does make a difference.

One day I dragged him off from where he was moping around the shaft and took him off for a prospect, like old times. We walked about six miles far away from the tents, neither saying a word, with our eyes on the ground as usual, sometimes stopping to feel the weight of a pebble with our toes, when he stopped with his old, listening look.

"It's going again," he said.

"It ain't," I answered. "It ain't worth spending the water on the steam for that low-grade ore, and Dan wouldn't start her without orders."

I was watching him, and knew he didn't mean our battery.

"You know what I mean," he said.

"It's the one I heard before, not ours."

I didn't get angry. I had learned to respect David Baird. He was a man, and I didn't know everything. But I was certain our battery had not been started, and there could be no other.

"Ca'n't you hear it—can't you hear it?" said Davie.

There was only one thing to hear besides Davie's voice—the dead, thick silence of the bush—that silence that is so heavy that sometimes it seems to shriek. We both stood as still as the rocks, Davie listening and me watching him.

"It's stopped now. I heard it, though. I heard it."

The way he said it made me feel queer.

We walked back, to camp, and I questioned Dan. The engine fires had been out and not even a hammer raised in the shed. When the men knocked off and tumbled up from the shaft, the foreman told us the quartz had died out of the diorite. We didn't even have a reef now.

Davie looked very white and troubled. I gave orders to start a drive next day to try and catch the underlay, and maybe the reef would make again. We sat down to tea. Davie had drunk one cup, when he rose to his feet.

"There it is again—can't you hear it, can't you?"

He was all wrought up, with his face flushed, and he caught hold of me and shook me as though to make me hear it. I tried to, but heard nothing. He wanted to go out, but I held him. I didn't want the men to see our manager like this. He seemed really crazy.

"Can't you hear it? It's louder than ever?—tum-te-te-tum, tum-te-te-tum—"

In a flash I understood. I was pushing him back into the tent, and I could feel his heart beating hard against my hand, and I remembered what his doctor had said.

"Davie, old man," I said, "it's the beating of your own heart you've been hearing

all the time.”

I should never have said it. I'll always feel I killed him, for he just slipped his hand under his shirt to feel for himself, tried to smile, and then dropped down dead at my feet.

His battery had stopped for good.

We buried him next day. I picked out the grave where we ended our last walk.

I thought it all out, the weak heart that raced with excitement or exertion, the weak heart that was the plucky heart, that hung on to what it wanted.

We made a coffin out of packing cases, and spread over it our only flag, the Australian red ensign with the Southern Cross, and six men carried him slowly through the bush.

As we came near the grave I heard voices, and saw men running and picking up sticks as they ran. The bearers began to get fidgety. A man passed saying they had struck a new reef, richer than the Last Look.

There was an excited crowd round the grave where, a few feet below the subsoil, the diggers had struck quartz, and their shovels had scraped the gold till it shone.

“Boys,” I said, “I take possession of this for the heirs of David Baird.”

We didn't bury him there, of course, but on top of a big ironstone hill, with a twisted tree for his monument, where his wife and daughters came later and heard the batteries of the new mine—the Beating Heart Mine—and I fancied Davie himself was there listening, too.

Some of the boys tried to jump the claim on priority, but the warden at Coolgardie upheld me. Digging a grave was mining, and besides I swore I pegged it out first.

I showed my pegs to prove it—jamtins stuck there in the night when I crawled round like a black feller to do it, to save the Beating Heart for my old mate's family.