

was robbed of his scanty wages on the second night after his arrival. By mere accident he got a chance to drive a supply team to Ballarat, and from Ballarat he had drifted to the Magoari diggings, ninety miles to the westward.

Twenty years before, there had been rich finds in this vicinity, and in those palmy days the digging was of the most hasty and superficial kind. In the greed for gold, men dug awhile in one spot, and if unsuccessful, deserted it for another. And in a "nuggety" country not a foot of soil would be left unturned.

So a small colony of miners had located at Magoari, and here Tom Horton made his first essay at gold hunting. One and another of the friendly diggers contributed something to his simple outfit. They helped him repair a half-ruined shanty, and having taken possession of an abandoned claim close by, Tom went to work with his usual energy.

"And here I've dug and sweated for nearly six months," muttered Tom, disconsolately, as all these things passed in mental review, "and how much has it amounted to?"

Rising, Tom stepped into the shanty, which was lighted by a large window at the rear, guiltless of sash or glass. From under the coarse straw pillow at the head of his bunk he took a small bag, from which he emptied on the slab table a few very small nuggets.

"Not twenty pounds' worth in all," said Tom, continuing his soliloquy in the same discontented tone, "and here I'm owing pretty near half of it for supplies."

"Ha, ha, ha-a-a-a!" gurgled the big brown kingfisher from the dense underbrush close to the window.

"Con-found that bird!" angrily and unreasonably exclaimed Tom, and snatching up the nearest thing that came to hand, which happened to be a small iron skillet, he sent it crashing into the leafy thicket.

To his surprise and dismay, the act was followed by a howl of pain and a volley of oaths that certainly did not come from the laughing jackass, which skurried away with another exasperating "ha, ha!"

A heavily built man, whose dark, forbidding features were half hidden by an iron grey beard, dashed madly from the thicket, holding one hand to a nasty cut just under one of his eyes,

as Tom, sweeping his nuggets into the bag, hastily returned it to his bunk.

The mildest type of colonial language is more or less emphasized by profanity; but during the whole of his stay in Magoari, Tom had never listened to anything like the fluent blasphemies that escaped the newcomer's lips, as presenting himself at the door, he called attention to his wound.

"A-skitterin' of pots an' kittles through the winder into honest folks's faces as though the place was your own, you white-faced young kid!" he roared after somewhat exhausting his first outbreak of profanity.

"Honest people haven't any business sneaking about in the underbrush back of a shanty window," sharply retorted Tom. "And as far as the place is concerned, I'd like to see any one make out that it wasn't mine," he went on, defiantly.

The man, who had a square brutal lower jaw, and a low retreating forehead, dashed his battered billycock hat on the ground in an ecstasy of rage.

"You would, eh?" he shouted, throwing his hand to his hip, where hung a heavy revolver.

Tom was too quick for him. Snatching from the corner an old single barreled fowling piece given him by one of the miners, he covered the stranger in an instant.

"Drop that or I'll riddle you with a charge of buckshot," he said, but not a trace of his inward excitement was discernible in his voice.

By this time a small crowd had gathered from the neighboring shanties.

"Thunder!" exclaimed old Jimmy North, as his eyes rested on the scowling face of Tom's would-be assailant, "it's Black Mike. I thought he was—"

"Hung, eh?" surlily interrupted the gentleman in question, whose right hand had left the revolver butt; "well, I ain't, an' what's more, I've come back here to the shanty I built an' the claim I left nigh eighteen years ago—any one got anything to say agin it?"

It was evident to Tom, who turned his troubled face to the bystanders, that no one had. "Black Mike," otherwise Michael Deelish—with half a dozen aliases—was one of those characters not unlike the "Bad Man of Bitter Creek," known to the mining districts of southwestern Montana.