

BOYS AND GIRLS

The Lost Lead.

(‘Spectator,’ Australia.)

Jim Meredith’s store was deserted of all its usual frequenters. It had been raining all day, and the few who had ventured out to have a chat with the genial and popular storekeeper had dropped out again towards teatime, after settling all vexed questions about the campaign in South Africa and finally disposing of the Boers with true British self-conceit. Bob Tinning, the saddler, and Matthew Martin, the blacksmith, almost came to an open rupture over the disposal of the still uncaptured De Wet, Matthew persuading Bob to his views with a heavy fist brought down with a tremendous thump on the counter.

Drip, drip, drip fell the raindrops from the verandah outside, and the rattle of the rain upon the iron roof kept up a continual patter. It was raining as it only can rain in Gippsland—just as if it never would stop again. And as Jim Meredith looked out upon the darkness, and the light from the store streamed over the mud and glistened in the puddles of the roadway, he shivered, and turned, intending to close up for the night and retire to his cosy sitting-room, where a bright and loving welcome awaited him.

Jim Meredith was of a strong, upright build, inclined to be rather rotund as he grew older, and indulged less in laborious exercise. Jim was a Methodist of the good old-fashioned type—a local preacher. A man who, while he had a friendly word with all, yet spoke with no uncertain sound on the side of right. The store was his own; it held a good stock, and what with its profits and an occasional deal in cattle, care sat lightly on his brow. He faced the world with the look of a man who knew something of his own worth, for it had not always been so. Jim knew what it was to be poor, and was the better man for the experience.

As he turned to put out the light, the shuffle of rough boots on the gravel under the verandah, followed by heavy footsteps at the doorway, made him turn and face the newcomer. His eyes rested upon a sight only too familiar to many a storekeeper in or near any of our gold-bearing areas. The man who now entered was what is known as an old prospector. ‘Bob,’ or ‘Old Bob,’ as he was now known by the township, had quite a history of his own. Many years before Jim Meredith came to the district Bob, then in the heyday of health and strength, had struck a rich lead of gold, and for weeks had made big money out of it. Coming as he did from thrifty Scotch parentage, he looked around for a good investment for his spare cash. And as there was no store in the neighborhood he decided to build one, and then with his wife’s help to turn his gold to good account. But before the store was completed, the run of gold suddenly stopped. ‘A fault,’ Bob said; he would soon pick it up again. But week followed week of hard toil, and the golden vein refused to be found. The building operations had to come to a sudden standstill, or Bob must borrow money to complete them. When he found the gold again, he would soon clear off the debt. This was how he comforted his wife, who dreaded the idea of

borrowed money. The necessary funds were soon forthcoming at rather a high rate of interest, for it was well known that Bob must have it to complete his store. Then as the gold had not yet been found, he must make the best terms he could with the merchants for his stock. And so poor Bob soon found himself bound hand and foot by debt. His wife stood nobly by him, working day and night; but the cares and expense of a numerous family, having to give long credit and its accompanying bad debts, the drain of high interest, made the task too great, and after a few years of heroic struggle the end came. The store, with the business, was sold, and after passing through several hands, came at last into the possession of Jim Meredith.

Bob and his wife moved down to Melbourne, and recommenced the struggle there. For a time Bob worked steadily, with varying success; but ever before his eyes, asleep or awake, was the lost vein of gold. In his dreams he found it, and visions of what he would do with it floated before his imagination. But it was only a dream.

As time went on, the hunger to have another try grew on him; and when his wife decided to take in a few boarders, and one or two of the children began to bring in a few shillings of their earnings to swell the family purse, Bob could resist it no longer, and away he went to the mountains with his swag on his back. His children grew up to manhood and womanhood, knowing little of their father. ‘Tis true he came home at Christmas time for a day or two; but usually the prospects were so promising that he was only too glad to find himself on his way back again.

Then a dark shadow crossed his path. His faithful, hard-working wife died suddenly. Bob was left desolate, and tried to drown his grief in renewed exertions. But one morning while hard at his work, he slipped and injured his knee, and for long weary months he lay in the hospital, only to rise again crippled for life.

In the struggle for bread in a great city. his sons and daughters, scarcely knowing their father, soon scattered in different directions; and Bob, old and shattered, limped painfully away to his mine in the mountains. Years slipped away. Bob turned up now and again at Jim’s store, got his rations, and disappeared until necessity compelled him to apply for fresh stores. It is true he found some gold; but, like an ever receding vision, the lost vein always floated before his mind, and he still believed that the time was not far distant when he would strike it rich again.

Jim Meredith had seen nothing of the old man for some months past. So he greeted him with more than his usual friendliness when he entered his store this wet autumn evening, for he knew his story and felt truly sorry for him.

‘Well, how goes it, Bob? What are the prospects now?’

The old man clutched eagerly at the counter, and leaning forward, said, ‘Ah! Jim, my man, I’m nearing the vein again, and will soon have it.’

Jim shook his head, and after inviting his customer to sit down, enquired what he could do for him.

‘Well, Jim,’ said the old man with an

anxious quaver in his voice, ‘I want more rations. I’m quite run out, and cannot go on any longer without food. The gold is so near that I must go on now. A few days will surely end it, and then I shall be able to repay all your kindness to me.’

Jim looked puzzled, scratched his head, rubbed his chin, then turned to Bob, and speaking in a firm but kind voice, said, ‘Look here! This must come to an end some time or other. You are not so young as you used to be, and the winter is coming on again. The fact is, I want you to give up the prospecting, stay here with me, and make yourself comfortable. Why, you would be a wonderful help about the place, and the little room at the end of the verandah wants a tenant badly. Then look here, Bob, I don’t want you to think there is any charity about it. I will pay you for your labor, and board you as part payment for your wages.’

Jim looked very uncomfortable, coughed, cleared his throat, and tried to look as if taking an old crippled prospector into his employ was quite an everyday thing for him to do.

Poor old Bob just looked him over with a keen bright eye, then, with a gasp or two, dropped his head between his arms upon the counter, and a few hard, dry sobs shook his frame. Jim hastily flew to dust some tins at the other end of the counter, coming back with a suspicious moisture about his eyes.

Slowly the old miner raised his head and said, ‘No! no! Jim, my boy, it cannot be. I can’t leave it now. This search for the lead has taken full possession of me; it has been more than home, wife, or children, and even my faith in God seems to have been dried up within me. Thanks! thanks, lad! but it cannot be as you say.’ And the gray beard shook sadly, and the damp silvery locks fell over the tanned and wrinkled forehead. ‘Give me this fortnight’s rations, and I will promise you that when they are used up I will give up the quest, for this winter, at all events. But you must trust me once again. For this time I feel sure the gold is near; and when it is found, your score will be the first to be wiped off.’

Jim knew it was useless to argue with him, so busied himself with packing up all that he knew was wanted. When he had finished, he turned to the old man and said, ‘Well, Bob, have it your own way this time. But remember, there will be no more rations for you out of this store before next summer, and I mean it too.’

Bob slowly picked up his packages and prepared to go. But he stopped suddenly and said, ‘Give me a sheet of paper,’ and, drawing pen and ink towards him, he sat down and wrote, asking Jim to call in the maid and the carter, who were sitting by the fire in the kitchen wondering what this new move was. Jim did as he was told. ‘Now,’ said Bob to them, ‘I want you to witness my signature.’ He then wrote his name in full at the bottom of the paper, its contents being carefully folded away from sight. Each in turn affixed their signatures, and with looks of wonder upon their faces returned to the kitchen. Folding the paper and putting it in an envelope, he addressed it to Jim’s wife, with instructions that it was only to be opened on his death. Jim promised, and