

FOR THE JUNIOR MEMBERS

A Gold Buying Adventure in Otago

Written by I. B. COOKE, 1897.

In the early sixties I was employed by the Bank of New Zealand as Agent and Gold Buyer in the Dunstan (Clyde) district having a sub-agency at the Manuherikia (Alexandra) and Gold Buyers at the Kawarau (Cromwell), The Nevis, Teviot (Roxburgh), German Hill, etc. These latter were storekeepers, constituents of the Bank, to whom advances of cash were made to be used for gold buying; settlements being made periodically, the buyer being allowed a commission per ounce purchased. Some of these gold buying Agencies being in remote districts at a considerable distance from my headquarters on the Dunstan, it was part of my duty to proceed on horseback to collect the gold, supply extra advances and bring the dust into Clyde to be forwarded by Government escort to Dunedin.

On one occasion I received notice from the representative of Messrs. Smith and Hibbard at the Teviot that they had a considerable quantity of gold on hand and were running short of cash and asking to be relieved of the former and supplied with notes and silver. In response I put up £500 in a valise, had a horse saddled and started for the Teviot, concluding to call in at the sub-agency at Manuherikia *en route* and count the cash there. By the time I had done this it was getting well on to afternoon and as I had a long and dreary ride over the Knobby Range before me I hastened to cross the river and instead of going round by the road, led my horse up a track up the mountain side which saved several miles of a detour. Just as I had reached the top of the ridge something, a rolling stone or a bird, frightened the horse and he started back and dragging the bridle out of my hand galloped off along the track. I followed after him on foot. After going some distance at full pace he settled down into a trot and finally into a walk occasionally stopping to catch a mouthful of grass, but directly I approached within a few yards he would throw up his head and start off again. In this way I followed him some miles until evening was approaching and I began to fear being benighted on the mountains and I had no provision for camping out, my overcoat being with the valise strapped on the saddle. In this extremity I determined on making a last and desperate attempt to recapture my steed and his valuable burden. I crept close up to him very cautiously and then making a rush succeeded in grasping the bridle when he slewed round and planted one of his hind feet right in my face knocking me senseless. When I recovered my senses I found myself lying on the mountainside with a frightful wound over my left eye from which the blood had saturated my face and neck. It was pitch dark and I was alone, there being no sign of the horse. I was in a nice plight. At least twenty miles from the nearest habitation or assistance, without steed or money; desperately wounded and weak from loss of blood. It was also bitterly cold: with a slight fall of snow so that I felt far from happy. I passed the remainder of the night under a rock and with the first appearance of dawn proceeded to make a search for the missing horse and property. In this I was much impeded owing to a dense fog so that after some hours spent fruitlessly on this attempt I was forced to abandon it, and fortunately coming in my -wanderings upon the main track I determined to start back for the lower township, as the Manuherikia was then called, and get assistance in the search. I regretted not having shot the horse with my revolver and recovered the money, as I regarded my chance of getting it now as very dubious as it was a very rough country and there were some very suspicious characters amongst the diggings population and cases of robbery, murder and sticking up had only recently occurred. If the horse fell into the hands of these people the chances of my seeing the money again were hopeless. I proceeded along the track until about noon when, the sun breaking through the fog I found to my dismay that I had been 'travelling all the time *away* from the township. This I discovered from the fact of the Old Man Range on the other side of the river Molyneux being on my right hand instead of to the left, as it should have been, had I been going in the right direction. Under these circumstances I determined on attempting to make for Baldwin's station, the only dwelling between the Manuherikia and the Teviot. By constant plodding along the track I managed to reach the homestead by dusk. It consisted of an iron cottage with out-buildings

surrounded by a sod wall, there being no timber either for fencing or firewood in that part of the country. As I approached a wicket gate in the sod wall at the rear of the premises a servant girl who was engaged taking in the evening meal from the Kitchen to the house, caught sight of me and seeing me roughly dressed, covered with blood and with a revolver in my belt she at once took me for a bushranger and screaming out and dropping the dish she was carrying, she rushed into the house. In a moment Captain Baldwin was at the door with a double barrellled gun in his hands which he presented at me. I called out to him not to shoot and told him my name and who I was. Still dubious he kept the gun levelled, but called to me to throw away my revolver, with which demand I quickly complied, and we then held a parley, when, as he kept his account with me at the Dunstan, although we had never before met, I was able to satisfy him as to my identity. This done he lowered his gun and very hospitably invited me to his house. There I was supplied with hot water, had my wound dressed and bandaged and after dining with him and his lady was accommodated with a bed for the night. Next day the coach for Dunstan, which ran twice a week from Tuapeka, passed and by it I took passage home. On arrival at Clyde I at once communicated with the police and some of my friends accompanied by a trooper and the town herdsman, an expert tracker, set out to search for the horse and money. I then consulted a surgeon and was informed that the frontal and cheek bone were both fractured. The eyelid was laid open and had to be stitched up; perfect rest was enjoined by the doctor who feared brain fever. The posse sent out returned without finding any signs of the runaway and a whole week elapsed during which I remained in a state of the greatest anxiety, when at the expiration of that period the horse was led into town by a young Scotch shepherd on Captain Baldwin's run who had found him quietly feeding in a gully running down to the Molyneux, with saddle and bridle upon him and the money untouched. The shepherd had not heard of the accident but when he discovered the cash in the valise, more money than he had ever seen in his life, he promptly and very honestly brought the treasure into the Dunstan to the police camp, where he was told to take it to the Bank. I had advertised a reward of f25 for the recovery of the property which I very readily paid him, and with this the honest young fellow, after buying some presents for his wife and children, proceeded to have a glorious spree, returning to the bank shortly afterwards with several bottles of champagne which he wished me to share with him and was quite offended at my refusal. In the afternoon he again returned and to save him from getting into the hands of the police I locked him up in the stable, and the next morning sent him back by coach to the station with a deposit receipt for f10, the balance of his reward remaining on him. "All's well that ends well"! and this proved to be the case here ; for I recovered the horse and money and with the exception of the loss of the £25 reward and a scar that I shall carry to the grave I experienced no further ill-effects from my "Gold Buying Adventure."