

THE GOLDEN KANGAROO

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The golden kangaroo by Ambrose Pratt

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AMBROSE PRATT

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KANGAROO**

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CHAPTER I.

THE UNDER-WORLD.

AT a quarter hour short of noon Alan Brandon left the change house of the Golden Kangaroo Mine, and, in company with a crowd of miners, mullockers and truckers (arrayed like himself in flannels, dungarees and bluchers) he proceeded to the time-keeper's window. There he received his allowance of "grease" and trudged over to the shaft head, passing on his way the shift men who had just come up. At the shaft head a group of loiterers talked noisily. The men for the lower levels had gone down, and these were awaiting their turn. The shift boss detached himself from the group. "Only half a shift to-day for the six hundred level, my lads," he announced, "but you'll all be paid full time."

The miners who had followed Alan raised an approving cheer. The shift boss hurried off in the direction of the candle house. Alan glanced enquiringly at the loungers. "What's the game?" he asked.

"Inspection by the Chairman of Directors," one of them replied.

"Nine hundred!" yelled the brace man sud-

denly. The men for that level trooped into the cage. A bell rang, and the cage vanished.

Alan stared at the quivering, gleaming cable, lost in thought. Why should there be an inspection of a level which, according to all report was about to be abandoned in consequence of a fault at the end of the workings? Had the Directors lost faith in the management of Mr. Starke? And would the inspection reveal the error in survey which he, Alan Brandon, had detected? He remembered having pointed out the error to Mr. Starke, and the manager's angry acceptance of the information.

The brace-man's shout, "Six hundred!" recalled him from his dreaming. The bars were let down, and a moment later he was cramped in the dripping cage with a dozen others. The plat man rang up the engine house and in immediate response the cage abruptly sank. Alan had become inured to the sensation long ago, but he always found a fresh interest in the lights and shades of the journey into Erebus. The cage bumped and jolted on the runners fearsomely. The sounds of life and work were not. The world seemed utterly cut off. Presently the cage slackened speed and halted. The side bars were raised, and the men trooped out to stand on solid ground again, six hundred feet below the sunlit surface of the globe.

Alan passed out with the rest. The familiar odour of dank earth saluted his nostrils. The men began to banter each other as they separated to their several jobs in twos and threes. Alan stepped into the drive and strode along the truck

rails, musing silently. He was not popular among his fellow workers because of that brooding habit of his. But some of them liked him in spite of it. One such was his mate, Tam O'Neil, with whose mother he "boarded" at the Tinker's Gap. Tam was as garrulous as Alan was reticent. He always found a good listener in Alan, and Tam loved nothing better than his own voice. He was very young for a miner, barely eighteen, but he had been reared from his cradle "underground," and was as strong as a bullock. He tramped behind Alan, loudly chaffing with the others, and gibing at each section as the men vanished into the drives branching from the main. The reverberating rumbling of voice and laughter gradually died away. Alan and Tam worked on the farthest branch drive.

It was timbered with great ten by ten inch baulks of Oregon. Tam followed his mate, grumbling fractionally. If this level was going to be abandoned, why should they waste their time in it? Everyone knew that there was not a colour in any of the truckloads sent up during the last forty or fifty shifts. And, anyway, it was a dog's life to work in a stope so badly timbered. A man might be crushed to death any minute. These and a score of cognate complaints did Tam pour forth. Alan answered not a syllable. Soon he paused and raised some planks, revealing a black hole, a sheer descent into Avernus. Silently he lowered himself into the cavity and step by step downwards on a quaking ladder he proceeded. Three flights of ladders and the descent ceased. Crawling between several great blocks of Oregon Alan slipped at

length into his stope, and stood erect. The atmosphere was hot and heavy. The air reeked clamminess, and a curious footour made it still more disagreeable. Stepping over a couple of plank-covered chutes leading to still fouler depths below, Alan crossed a heap of stone, and leisurely surveyed the empty "sets" which it was his task to "mullock in." The stope was timbered with thick driving laths bent bow-like by the pressure of the "ground" behind. Many of the laths were bolstered stoutly with heavier baulks. Some were cracked; all looked perilously overstrained. With a sigh of resignation Alan took up his shovel and began to ply it with the monotonous method of the expert. Tam O'Neil followed suit, and for an hour or more his tongue kept up a ceaseless concert with his blade. Alan worked like a machine. His thoughts were occupied with the forthcoming official inspection of the level. What did it mean? What was the reason of it? Who had inspired it? He paused, lighted his pipe, and attacked his work again. Tam wagged his tongue like a magpie. Alan mechanically nodded or shook his head at intervals. Tam wanted no more. At a quarter to four Tam flung down his shovel. "Must be darned near crib time, mate," he cried. "Me stomach's askin' if me throat's cut. Spell oh, laddie!"

Alan threw a final heap of dirt upon his "set," then gaped and stretched his arms.

"What beats me," said Tam, "is that never a boss has been near us the whole of the half shift. Rummy, ain't it? Wot do you think, Alan?"

Alan spoke for the first time. "Can you work a plant and keep a tight mouth, Tam?" he asked.

"Try me!" replied the other, with unusual brevity. There was a look in his mate's eye that had set his heart beating queerly.

"I'm going to overlook this inspection if I can," said Alan. "I want you to go up when the whistle blows, and if the shift boss asks after me, tell him I was taken sick and went up with the C. 700 men an hour ago."

"But you'll lose your pay, mate."

"I'll put up with that."

"Wot's the game?"

"I have told you."

"You intend to stay down, an'—an'—"

"Play the spy, Tam? Certainly. Never fear to call a spade by its right name, Tam."

"Wot d'yer expect to find out, matey?"

"I wish I knew, Tam. Something shady, I'm afraid."

"I've always said Gid Starke was a rotter," exclaimed Tam excitedly. "Say, Alan, let me stay with yer. I'd just love to be in the fun."

Alan shook his head. "That would defeat my purpose. You must go up in order to explain my absence. You see, they might search the stope."

Tam nodded a reluctant assent. "But you'll put me fly to what you find out, won't you, Alan?" he asked anxiously.

"Aren't we mates?" demanded Alan.

Tam's face cleared. "O' course," he declared,

and glanced at his Waterbury. "My ticker says four. I'm off. S'long, Alan. Good-luck!" He slithered through the baulks and vanished.

Alan Brandon sat down upon a heap of mullock and wiped his forehead with a knot of cotton waste. Presently he arose, and blew out the candle that guttered in a "spider" spiked in a neighbouring beam. The resultant blackness was a thing to be felt. Very soon he became aware of sounds, till then unheard or ignored, which pierced the heavy stillness of the cavern. The stope was "talking." Now it was the plaintive crack of straining timbers; now a hollow little boom signifying subterranean movement of some sort; and now again, the swishing sug-sug of trickling earth. He arose at length with a shudder of relief and proceeded like a blind man to the ladders. The branch drive was as dark as the stope he had abandoned, but as he pulled himself out of the chute hole he heard a distant hum of voices. With the stealthiest care he crept down the tunnel. The hum gathered in crescendo as he moved. Sometimes it broke off sharply into silence, but each time it was renewed it had a fresh distinctness. Presently Alan could detect the timbre of individual voices in the drone. When he reached the main drive he was amazed to discover that he was still two hundred paces from his quarry. He had forgotten to take into account the wonderful sound-carrying and sound exaggerating capacity of the tunnels, so he quickly took the path again, and when next he paused he could see and hear distinctly.

Two men were standing on guard near the angle of the error in survey, which Alan had discovered