Payable Gold

Henry Lawson

Among the crowds who left the Victorian side for New South Wales about the time Gulgong broke out was an old Ballarat digger named Peter McKenzie. He had married and retired from the mining some years previously and had made a home for himself and family at the village of St. Kilda, near Melbourne; but, as was often the case with old diggers, the gold fever never left him, and when the fields of New South Wales began to blaze he mortgaged his little property in order to raise funds for another campaign, leaving sufficient behind him to keep his wife and family in comfort for a year or so.

As he often remarked, his position was now very different from what it had been in the old days when he first arrived from Scotland, in the height of the excitement following on the great discovery. He was a young man then with only himself to look out for, but now that he was getting old and had a family to provide for he had staked too much on this venture to lose. His position did certainly look like a forlorn hope, but he never seemed to think so.

Peter must have been very lonely and low-spirited at times. A young or unmarried man can form new ties, and even make new sweethearts if necessary, but Peter's heart was with his wife and little ones at home, and they were mortgaged, as it were, to Dame Fortune. Peter had to lift this mortgage off.

Nevertheless he was always cheerful, even at the worst of times, and his straight grey beard and scrubby brown hair encircled a smile which appeared to be a fixture. He had to make an effort in order to look grave, such as some men do when they want to force a smile.

It was rumoured that Peter had made a vow never to return home until he could take sufficient wealth to make his all-important family comfortable, or, at least, to raise the mortgage from the property, for the sacrifice of which to his mad gold fever he never forgave himself. But this was one of the few things which Peter kept to himself.

The fact that he had a wife and children at St. Kilda was well known to all the diggers. They had to know it, and if they did not know the age, complexion, history and peculiarities of every child and of the "old woman" it was not Peter's fault.

He would cross over to our place and talk to the mother for hours about his wife and children. And nothing pleased him better than to discover peculiarities in us children wherein we resembled his own. It pleased us also for mercenary reasons. "It's just the same with my old woman," or "It's just the same with my youngsters," Peter would exclaim boisterously, for he looked upon any little similarity between the two families as a remarkable coincidence. He liked

us all, and was always very kind to us, often standing between our backs and the rod that spoils the child—that is, I mean, if it isn't used. I was very short-tempered, but this failing was more than condoned by the fact that Peter's "eldest" was given that way also. Mother's second son was very good-natured; so was Peter's third. Her "third" had a great aversion for any duty that threatened to increase his muscles; so had Peter's "second". Our baby was very fat and heavy and was given to sucking her own thumb vigorously, and, according to the latest bulletins from home, it was just the same with Peter's "last".

I think we knew more about Peter's family than we did about our own. Although we had never seen them, we were as familiar with their features as the photographer's art could make us, and always knew their domestic history up to the date of the last mail.

We became interested in the McKenzie family. Instead of getting bored by them as some people were, we were always as much pleased when Peter got a letter from home as he was himself, and if a mail were missed, which seldom happened—we almost shared his disappointment and anxiety. Should one of the youngsters be ill, we would be quite uneasy, on Peter's account, until the arrival of a later bulletin removed his anxiety, and ours.

It must have been the glorious power of a big true heart that gained for Peter the goodwill and sympathy of all who knew him.

Peter's smile had a peculiar fascination for us children. We would stand by his pointing forge when he'd be sharpening picks in the early morning, and watch his face for five minutes at a time, wondering sometimes whether he was always *smiling inside*, or whether the smile went on externally irrespective of any variation in Peter's condition of mind.

I think it was the latter case, for often when he had received bad news from home we have heard his voice quaver with anxiety, while the old smile played on his round, brown features just the same.

Little Nelse (one of those queer old-man children who seem to come into the world by mistake, and who seldom stay long) used to say that Peter "cried inside".

Once, on Gulgong, when he attended the funeral of an old Ballarat mate, a stranger who had been watching his face curiously remarked that McKenzie seemed as pleased as though the dead digger had bequeathed him a fortune. But the stranger had soon reason to alter his opinion, for when another old mate began in a tremulous voice to repeat the words "Ashes to ashes, an' dust to dust," two big tears suddenly burst from Peter's eyes, and hurried down to get entrapped in his beard.

Peter's goldmining ventures were not successful. He sank three duffers in succession on Gulgong, and the fourth shaft, after paying expenses, left a little over a hundred to each

party, and Peter had to send the bulk of his share home. He lived in a tent (or in a hut when he could get one) after the manner of diggers, and he "did for himself", even to washing his own clothes. He never drank nor "played", and he took little enjoyment of any kind, yet there was not a digger on the field who would dream of calling old Peter McKenzie "a mean man". He lived, as we know from our own observations, in a most frugal manner. He always tried to hide this, and took care to have plenty of good things for us when he invited us to his hut; but children's eyes are sharp. Some said that Peter half-starved himself, but I don't think his family ever knew, unless he told them so afterwards.

Ah, well! the years go over. Peter was now three years from home, and he and Fortune were enemies still. Letters came by the mail, full of little home troubles and prayers for Peter's return, and letters went back by the mail, always hopeful, always cheerful. Peter never gave up. When everything else failed he would work by the day (a sad thing for a digger), and he was even known to do a job of fencing until such time as he could get a few pounds and a small party together to sink another shaft.

Talk about the heroic struggles of early explorers in a hostile country; but for dogged determination and courage in the face of poverty, illness, and distance, commend me to the old-time digger—the truest soldier Hope ever had!

In the fourth year of his struggle Peter met with a terrible disappointment. His party put down a shaft called the Forlorn Hope near Happy Valley, and after a few weeks' fruitless driving his mates jibbed on it. Peter had his own opinion about the ground—an old digger's opinion, and he used every argument in his power to induce his mates to put a few days' more work in the claim. In vain he pointed out that the quality of the wash and the dip of the bottom exactly resembled that of the "Brown Snake", a rich Victorian claim. In vain he argued that in the case of the abovementioned claim, not a colour could be got until the payable gold was actually reached. Home Rule and The Canadian and that cluster of fields were going ahead, and his party were eager to shift. They remained obstinate, and at last, half-convinced against his opinion, Peter left with them to sink the "Iawatha", in Log Paddock, which turned out a rank duffer— not even paying its own expenses.

A party of Italians entered the old claim and, after driving it a few feet further, made their fortune.

We all noticed the change in Peter McKenzie when he came to "Log Paddock", whither we had shifted before him. The old smile still flickered, but he had learned to "look" grave for an hour at a time without much effort. He was never quite the same after the affair of Forlorn Hope, and I often think how he must have "cried" sometimes "inside".

However, he still read us letters from home, and came and smoked in the evening by our kitchen-fire. He showed us some new portraits of his family which he had received by a late mail, but something gave me the impression that the portraits made him uneasy. He had them in his possession for nearly a week before showing them to us, and to the best of our knowledge he never showed them to anybody else. Perhaps they reminded him of the flight of time—perhaps he would have preferred his children to remain just as he left them until he returned.

But stay! there was one portrait that seemed to give Peter infinite pleasure. It was the picture of a chubby infant of about three years or more. It was a fine-looking child taken in a sitting position on a cushion, and arrayed in a very short shirt. On its fat, soft, white face, which was only a few inches above the ten very podgy toes, was a smile something like Peter's. Peter was never tired of looking at and showing the picture of his child—the child he had never seen. Perhaps he cherished a wild dream of making his fortune and returning home before *that* child grew up.

McKenzie and party were sinking a shaft at the upper end of Log Paddock, generally called "The other end". We were at the lower end.

One day Peter came down from "the other end" and told us that his party expected to "bottom" during the following week, and if they got no encouragement from the wash they intended to go prospecting at the "Happy Thought", near Specimen Flat.

The shaft in Log Paddock was christened "Nil Desperandum". Towards the end of the week we heard that the wash in the "Nil" was showing good colours.

Later came the news that "McKenzie and party" had bottomed on payable gold, and the red flag floated over the shaft. Long before the first load of dirt reached the puddling machine on the creek, the news was all round the diggings. The "Nil Desperandum" was a "Golden Hole"!

We will not forget the day when Peter went home. He hurried down in the morning to have an hour or so with us before Cobb and Co. went by. He told us all about his little cottage by the bay at St. Kilda. He had never spoken of it before, probably because of the mortgage. He told us how it faced the bay—how many rooms it had, how much flower garden, and how on a clear day he could see from the window all the ships that came up to the Yarra, and how with a good telescope he could even distinguish the faces of the passengers on the big ocean liners.

And then, when the mother's back was turned, he hustled us children round the corner, and surreptitiously slipped a sovereign into each of our dirty hands, making great pantomimic show for silence, for the mother was very independent.

And when we saw the last of Peter's face setting like a good-humoured sun on the top of Cobb and Co.'s, a great feeling of discontent and loneliness came over all our hearts. Little Nelse, who had been Peter's favourite, went round behind the pig-stye, where none might disturb him, and sat down on the projecting end of a trough to "have a cry", in his usual methodical manner. But old "Alligator Desolation", the dog, had suspicions of what was up, and, hearing the sobs, went round to offer whatever consolation appertained to a damp and dirty nose and a pair of ludicrously doleful yellow eyes.