

Monday, December 17, 1900.

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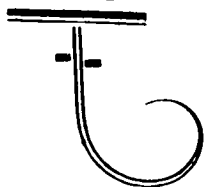
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# Our Acquaintance

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WITH



**JOE The HATTER**

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(For the Christmas Register.)  
By J. R. C.

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We had taken up new country. Our block joined on to a great tract of rough land, miles and miles through it. Gorges of sandstone, with basalt and granite here and there. A 'No Man's Land.' We bought cattle. They did well on the bits of flats. We built a rough humpy, and were building a stock yard. No stock people had ever penetrated into the country above us. There were legends of gold being found away in the inner depths of the wilderness. Only legends though. Nothing else definite. Once we saw mysterious boot tracks going into the gorges. We ran them until a horse could go no further, and then accepted the mystery of the beyond just the same as everyone else had done before us.

We lived in our humpy, and were, as I've said, building the stockyard. The logs were heavy to handle.

One evening, on our return to the humpy, we saw at once that in our absence we'd had a visitor. There were nailed boot tracks outside. Inside there was a stack of rations. Two fifty-pound bags of flour, some sugar in a bag, a new shovel, some salt, and about thirty pounds of corned meat. Moreover, on the rough dressed slabs of the door was written in charcoal:— *Ples leave rashns here. Come back 2 days. Joseph Angelo Guispetto. . . .*

We couldn't make out the rest. The slab was rough. We put the rations into a corner. We hung the meat up safe from the ants, and spent the two days conjecturing on the probable physical outline and peculiarities of our visitor.

Willie — he was our boy — used to write his lessons at night. He devoted some rear pages of his copy book to rude sketches, in which our visitor was portrayed with grotesque adornments in his hand, carrying an organ and a monkey. I reminded Willie that as there were no horsetracks, our visitor had evidently carried the one hundred and sixty pounds of his property the thirty miles from the township. It was as well, therefore, not to joke too much at the expense of one of such physical proportions and endurance. He might want to retaliate. Tom — he was our man — said it was most likely our visitor was a digger, getting out a stock of tucker. This seemed likely, and we accepted Tom's version until our man came. I mean *Joseph Angelo Guispetto* . . . and the rest that we couldn't make out.

It was the second night after that that our dog was yapping and snarling as we came up. It was at our visitor, who sat on a stump outside, awaiting our approach. He was a lean visaged, swarthy, loose-clad man, whose hands were stained with yellow clay, and smooth with puddling gravel, and when he smiled he showed his teeth.

He was full of gesture. He thanked us profusely for storing his goods, and indicated a third fifty of flour and some other gear, evidently the result of his second trip to the township. "You ver goot," he said, bowing, and when we answered and said it was nothing, he indicated the direction of the township and said "store."

We asked him where he was going, and he pointed up the creek, and said "Deegin'," and showed his teeth in a smile. Tom had been a digger, and he asked about the gold up there. "Ground pooah; only tucka," answered our guest. Then he added after a pause, and eyeing Tom almost suspiciously, "Verra pooah."

He indicated the country around the humpy with a broad gesture, and said "Zee cattel station," and we replied in the affirmative, and when Willie had the billy boiled, we spread

the tucker bag and invited our guest to share. He was responsive to our converse, and we gathered information of the country up the creek. At least, we learnt what we didn't know before, that the creek divided further up. He was willing to talk about anything except gold. We never got beyond "Verra pooah ground" from him, and gestures of depreciation. It was a big load he'd carried, and Tom asked me to invite him to spell a day. Tom wanted to find out more about where he was working. He stayed a day, and he helped us with some big logs at the yard. Then we loaned him our old horse and pack saddle with a broken gullet to carry his load. He could let the old horse go, and he'd come back, and the saddle had seen its day. Willie had an old single-barrelled gun with which he shot pigeons, and our guest wanted to buy this for a like purpose. Away up at his camp "pigeon tousan'," he said. But when we wanted to know which way his camp lay, he subsided suspiciously. Willie and he made a deal for the gun, and Willie showed us the nugget he got in payment. No one but Willie was present when payment was made, but Tom questioned Willie, and learnt about a well filled chamois bag carefully tied up. This set Tom going, and when our visitor went away gratefully, Tom said he was mean enough to follow him on the quiet.

I suggested he'd better go over to Baker's and get Gilligan to come and track, and we'd all be mean. When Gilligan came, he said he'd heard of our visitor, "Joe the Hatter. That's him," he said.

We picked up old Bally's track, and Gilligan followed on in the lead like a blackfellow. We hadn't been on the track for two miles before Gilligan hailed us to the front. "See," he said, "he has tied up the horse here, and waited, and gone back to see if you were following."

A few miles further on the grass had been fired. Joe the Hatter was alert to followers.

We followed the track all that day, and then we found the old horse feeding quietly in a flat, up to his neck with succulent vines and good pasture. The pack saddle was put up in a tree, and from there the nailed boot tracks came in in all directions. But though Gilligan searched round and round, he never found

a single track or sign going out, and finally he sat down, non-plussed. He must have taken his boots off, but even then Gilligan said he'd have got some sign of a track. We had another try, and followed up and down ridges and over gullies and gorges for a whole day, and every time Gilligan got a track it went down to where the saddle was.

Tom was vexed. "Damn it," he said, "He couldn't have gone away in a balloon."

I never saw Gilligan so completely licked. He was clean done, and couldn't say anything. Tom did all the talking and growling. The ludicrous side of the incident struck me, and Willie also, and I confess I laughed more over it than I had done for many a day. To see the floored look of Gilligan, and to hear Tom swearing and gaping about, looking on the ground, was a splendid pantomime. Once Gilligan found a track on a ridge, and we thought we had it, but to confound everything it came into a gully and down that to the same place as the others. Every track came in.

We put in the second day with the same result, and that night it rained a smart shower, and ran the gullies, and with the rain the tracks went out.

We hadn't brought any tent, so we got ducked through and through and a more woebegone lot never reached home more hungry. Tom swearing, and Gilligan disgusted, and all of us tired to death. However, we soon recovered, but gave the yard building a spell for a day, and Gilligan spelled with us. After supper we all lay outside yarning and smoking, then we made our beds and turned in. Gilligan made his camp by the fire. I was just dozing off to sleep an hour afterwards, when I heard Gilligan laughing to himself, and saying something about being a lot of "d---d goats."

Then he called: "Are you asleep, Jim?"

"No," I answered.

Then he said: "Well, we were a lot of blooming angoras."

"How?" I asked.

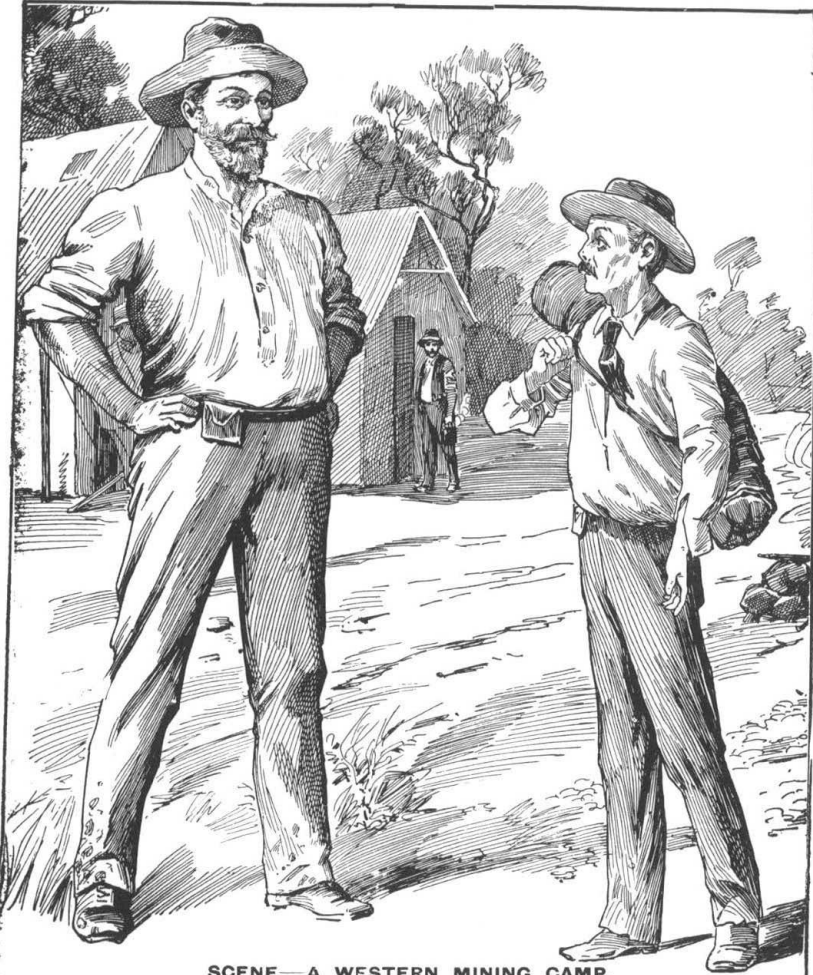
"Well," he continued, "I know now why we couldn't track him out."

"Why was it then?"

"Because he walked backward," he replied.

"Oh! By golly!" said Tom, jumping up, "so he did. I'm off in the morning."

"Not much good that, after the rain," replied Gilligan, and Tom subsided. Meantime we're waiting for our friend the Hatter to come by again, and then we're all going to look innocent.



SCENE—A WESTERN MINING CAMP.

TOM—(new arrival) "No need to ask how you are, Jack. Escaped fever, too?"

JACK—"Oh yes! No fever in our camp. Every one healthy and strong."

TOM—"How's that? Thought you had no comforts or good tucker here?"

JACK—Good tucker! Why, we have just the BEST. MACONOCHE'S RATIONS, PRESERV  
FISH and VEGETABLES supply our wants, and agree with us, as you see."