

# Weird Tales

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# THE EL DORADO OF DEATH

By PERCY B. PRIOR

**T**HE brothers Wakeford worked together in a South Australian chemical factory. There was a strong bond of sympathy between them, they were inseparable pals. Both of an adventurous disposition, they chafed at the restrictions of city life, and constantly planned to go prospecting. Like all young men, and not a few elderly ones, they dreamed of earning easy money. Working merely in order to make a bare living did not coincide with their ideas of what life was meant for. We have all of us, at some time or other, experienced this feeling.

One evening, while they were drinking together, they fell into conversation with a bearded man, bronzed and weather-beaten, gaunt and keen-eyed. They thought, at first, that he was merely one of those pests always to be found hanging around hotels, but were not long in discovering their error.

Many of his reminiscences were concerned with prospecting. He had sought for gold along the banks of creeks in lonely bush gullies, and many were the stories he told the two Wakefords of perils and hardships, of occurrences—grim, some of them, others ludicrous—that, by turns, had gladdened and saddened his adventurous wanderings. Warmed by their hospitality, the old bushman told them, among other places, of a valley in the Macdonnell

Range, and of a thin wisp of stream that meandered through it, in the dry bed of which, near a certain gnarled and aged tree, gold-dust, plenty of it, glittering in the sand, could be scooped up in handfuls.

In proof that his story was not an hallucination he showed the brothers a small quantity of the precious metal in a tobacco tin, and also gave them a plan of the gully roughly scrawled on a scrap of paper, with full directions for reaching it. They were astonished that he made no endeavor to sell them his secret, instead of divulging it gratuitously. His explanation, however, seemed reasonable enough. He had for years, he said, been a martyr to rheumatism, but, hopeful of shaking it off sufficiently to go gold-hunting again, he had never mentioned the gully and its auriferous creek-bed to a living soul. Alone in the world, and no longer hopeful of recovery, he saw no reason why its whereabouts should continue to remain a secret.

Their meeting with the old prospector inflamed imaginations and roused dormant aspirations. Suddenly deciding to throw off their shackles, they left their chemical factory, and purchasing a tent, blankets, and other equipment, set out in search of their El Dorado.

They could not have selected a more inopportune time to begin their quest. The heat that summer was

phenomenal. Unused to hardships that would have tried the stoicism of hardened bushmen, the brothers Wakeford trudged onward, with their heavy packs, the sun blazing fiercely down upon them. Their feet, which had never previously been called upon to carry them as far in a week as now, tramping from dawn to dark, in heavy blucher boots, they were compelled to travel every day, became blistered and raw. Insects of many kinds, some of them poisonous, bit and stung the two men with persistency.

At last the younger brother, half-crazed by the heat and parched with thirst, became too ill to proceed farther, and a camp was made in a drear and lonely spot, beside a stagnant pool, in a forest of dead and gaunt gum-trees that raised bleached branches as though in supplication to a relentless and white-hot sky.

A more appropriate scene for a tragedy, indeed, could scarcely be imagined. A thunderstorm, at first muffled and far away, crept even closer, and finally crashed above the tent of the two unfortunates, who, weakened by privation and comatose with fatigue and despair, huddled inside it. The storm intensified the desolation, the melancholy, and the loneliness, filling them with a sense of foreboding, as though of some impending calamity.

The younger Wakeford's sufferings, in particular, were intense, much more so than those of his brother, for, besides being weak and light-headed for want of proper nourishment and as a result of exposure to the pitiless sun, he was a nerve-racked and under-vitalized fellow, moody and imaginative.

**N**IGHT, illuminated by flashes of lightning and made hideous by the cannonading of warring clouds, closed round the desperate wayfarers.

Despite the uproar, aches and

pains, and a strained and overwrought state of mind by reason of which he was on the verge of hysteria, the younger Wakeford, controlling himself by an effort of will, determined to await, resolute and alert, the issue of events which he somehow felt, without knowing how or why, were impending.

The elder brother, overcome by weariness, fell into a deep and dreamless slumber.

Wakeford, the younger, was aroused toward midnight from a reverie by feeling that someone or something had entered the tent. Raising his eyes, he beheld bending over him a tall figure in white, which signed to him to follow. He rose immediately, and, the white-robed figure leading the way, they began to traverse a succession of damp and dark corridors, seemingly endless, until they reached, at last, an enormous cavern, filled with a moonlike radiance, where dancing was in progress.

Strains of weird music were pierced by a continuous strange and staccato clicking sound, like the turbulence of castanets.

Bewildered and dazed by the sudden transition from darkness and desolation to the glittering and crowded hall of festivities, it was some moments before Wakeford the younger was able to comprehend in its entirety what was going on. When he did so, he was chilled to the bone with horror, for the white-robed figures, gliding hither and thither across the crystal floor, were skeletons, and the curious and continuous staccato sound which resembled castanets was the clicking of their fleshless jaws.

The music ceased, and the couples separated, seating themselves upon benches of iridescent stalagmites ranged round the walls. Then, after a brief interval of awful and unbroken silence, the invisible musi-

cians commenced again, and the skeletons, to a different rhythm this time, began once more to glide about the cavern floor.

Young Wakeford was petrified with terror. The white-robed figure he had followed into the cavern seemed taller than any of the others, and to be in a position of command. It now ordered him, by signs, to select a partner for the next dance from the hideous throng surrounding him.

Horrified, he shrank from it, tried to run, but, held by some strange power, was unable to move from where he stood.

Irritated, the tall figure, turning upon him threateningly, raised its arm to strike. Quick as thought

young Wakeford, whose legs alone seemed stricken with paralysis, pulled a revolver from his holster, and, levelling it at the tall and ghostly specter, pulled the trigger.

With the shock of the report, the dreadful dream was shattered. The cavern with its ghostly radiance, its fearsome and ghastly dancers, and the threatening specter, all had vanished. Wakeford, the younger, was back in the tent again, staring, dumfounded, at his elder brother, who lay bleeding from a bullet wound in the chest, and gasping out his life.

Scarcely had the elder Wakeford breathed his last before another shot rang out. The two brothers ended the journey as they had begun it—together.

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