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AND

SIR DOUGLAS STRAIGHT

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A DARWINIAN EXTRAVAGANZA.

“IMPOSSIBLE!” I said.

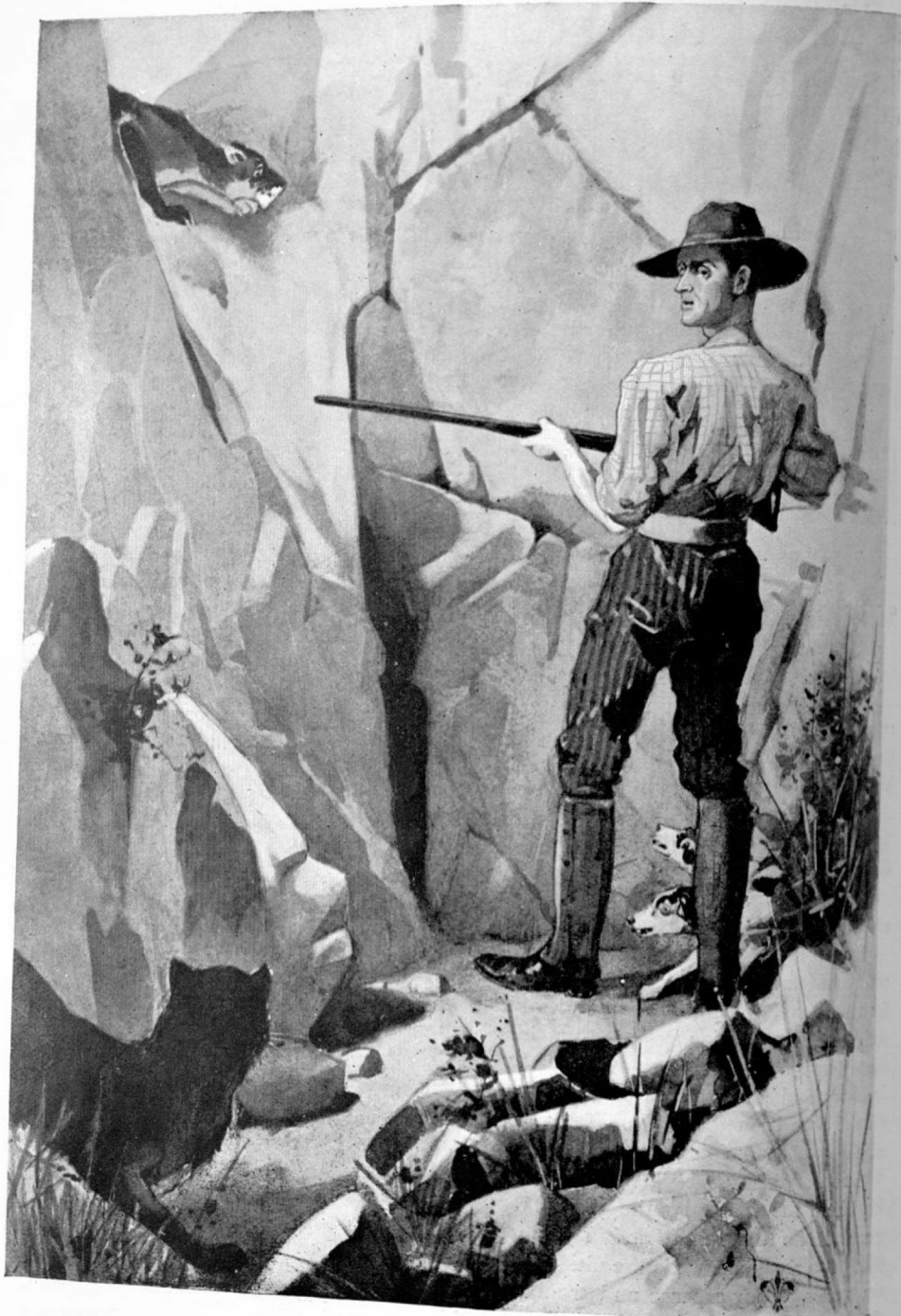
“But I saw it,” persisted Howhow—“saw it with my own eyes for ever so long; and so did the dog, for he barked at them.”

“You mean to tell me, Howhow” (and I spoke very gravely) “that you actually saw with your own eyes the stones rolling up the hill of their own accord? Rubbish! Go and see after those bird-skins, and let me know when they are ready to pack away. The idea!”

And Howhow went off, vastly disgusted at the obstinacy of his master, and the terrier walked at his heels as if he were a partner in the dispute and a sharer of the disgrace.

In the end, Howhow was very proud of having spoken the truth. But let me first explain where I was and what it was that we were doing.

In the south of the Indian country, bordering on the Big Valley, lies a broad stretch of country seldom visited by travellers. It is very unpromising-looking land for agriculture, broken up by a multitude of stony ridges and bearing only a scanty and stunted vegetation. Moreover, like all the “Bad Lands” in America, it had something of an evil reputation as having been a favourite battle-ground of the Indians; and the numbers of arrow-heads lying about in places showed that many a fight had been fought here for possession of the head-waters of the Rio Claro, which rushed tumbling along the valley towards the distant Pacific. The general desertion of this tract by everybody else recommended it to me as a collecting ground, for where the fewest go the chances of finding something new to Science are the greatest. So to the Bad Lands I journeyed. The trip thither was in itself delightful enough to repay me, while the ultimate discovery which I made was worth, a thousand times over, all my expense and trouble. Being within easy reach of civilisation (for there were Mormon settlements within a day’s ride), I took with me only a light waggon, drawn by a pair of riding mules, and, for companion, had my assistant Wilmot, an English-speaking half-caste who answered to the name of Howhow, and my three fox-terriers, Jack, Jill, and Tumbling After. Our camp was pitched in a grove of



"I was fairly non-plussed."

small pines, and at the foot of the slight eminence upon which they grew was a swampy patch of turf, out of which from a spring flowed a tiny streamlet; and here, with the abundance of insects of all kinds that we daily collected, time passed busily enough.

One morning I went down to fill a bottle with water, and, as I was stooping to do so, my eye fell upon an animal's footmarks. They were too large to be Jack's or Jill's, and, indeed, reminded me of leopards' "pugs," with which I had become familiar enough in India. I called to the terriers, and they no sooner got scent of the marks than they showed the greatest excitement and not a little alarm, exactly as dogs will do when they smell their arch-enemy the leopard. With the hair round their necks standing out on end and their tails drooping, they growled at the invisible beast, keeping close at my heels until I got back to my tent. Taking up a single-barrelled shot-gun, the only weapon I had, and a handful of cartridges, charged only with dust shot and intended for shooting the smallest birds, I went back to the spring and followed up the pugs. On the soft ground they were visible enough, but very soon I lost them, and, except that the dogs showed no desire to stray, not even to accept the challenges of the chipmunks which impudently chirped at them from the tops of the stones, I should have forgotten all about the "leopard's" footprints. And, as a matter of fact, I did very soon forget them, and strolled along in and out of the small ravines, picking up specimens here and there as I went, until the slanting shadows told me it was time to return. To shorten the distance I struck across the ridge so as to reach the waggon-track, which ran along the other side of the slope, and was easier walking.

Some few miles farther on a small party of Mormons had started a saw-mill. As I walked towards the track I heard in the far distance their whips cracking and the voices of the drivers as they were coming along in my direction with a loaded waggon. I went across a small rocky ridge, and, walking along the hollow at the bottom, was about to ascend the opposite slope, when Jack and Jill, suddenly and simultaneously, growled, and as I turned to see what was the matter, I noticed them both in an attitude of utter terror. In the face of the rock at the end of the ravine was a narrow cleft coming down to the ground, and it was upon this cleft that the dogs' terror-stricken gaze was fixed. The narrowness of the opening precluded the possibility of its being the entrance of a wild beast's den, and I was puzzled to account for the terriers' perturbation. But, all on a sudden, an angry snarl drew my eyes upward; and there, on the top of the ridge, its round head, open-mouthed, showing between two large stones, lay a puma; and the next instant, with a short, fierce grunt of anger, her mate leaped on to the path I had just walked up, and stood there with waving tail and head erect.

What was I to do? To walk back by the path I came, past the one puma, or climb up the ridge past the other?

I was not alarmed, for the puma is not a very serious beast of prey; but just then there came a sound from the cleft, and from my very heels, as it were—a sound that quickly changed my mood. It was the mewling of a cub. I saw the danger of the situation at once. I had disturbed the family by my approach, and the cubs had slipped into the cleft while the parents mounted guard on the rocks above. And here I was, actually blocking up the cleft, and, worse than all, with two dogs for my companions!

The pumas were certainly justified in the very bad opinion they evidently had of us; but what was I to do? If either puma would have moved out of my way I would willingly have taken myself off, for a pair of these beasts in defence, as

they supposed, of their young might prove as dangerous as any tiger. There is great power, we are told, in the human eye, and majesty in the human voice. But these pumas stared me out of countenance, and when I shouted, waving my wide-brimmed hat, they merely growled and crouched closer to the ground. I reached out my hand, and, picking up a stone, threw it at the one on the path. It never budged. For its young ones were behind me, and the puma had made up its mind that, cost what it might, it was going to get them out of the cleft and me out of the way.

To fire at them with shot intended for humming-birds, and which scattered into dust as soon as it left the barrel, was to involve myself in an immediate fight out of which no man could hope to come unharmed except by a miracle.

I was fairly non-plussed; and meanwhile, the wretched kittens, hearing their parents' voices, mewed most piteously, and it was evident, from her constant fidgeting, that the puma on the top of the rock, some twenty feet off my head, was finding the situation intolerable, and more than once I thought the impatient beast, guided by the cries of her cubs, would launch herself upon me. And, as if to excite her all the more, Jack and Jill began growling loudly.

But it was eventually the male that took the initiative, for it now began to move towards me—not crouching, as when about to spring upon a victim, but erect, with very short, slow, stilted steps, and its body all awry, in the attitude that makes the common cat look so absurd when about to fight. But there was nothing laughable in the approach of the puma. It moved as if its legs were wired, and its whole appearance was that of a very badly stuffed specimen. But I was in no humour for mirth. Nor when, as it got nearer, it began making those indescribable noises at which, when tom-cats make them, we have most of us laughed, had I any inclination to laugh.

My eyes were fixed intently upon those of the approaching beast, and my bird-gun was at my shoulder, and inch by inch the puma came on. Inch by inch, inch by inch, till I began to feel quite dazed staring at the yellow shadow that was nearing me with an almost imperceptible movement. I fell into a kind of brown study. Is that the fascination that they say the creeping cat-kind and the gliding serpents exercise over their victims?—my eyes, wide open and fatigued with gazing, were fixed upon the puma, but my thoughts were everywhere.

I felt a fly crawling on my neck. A cricket was chirping at my feet. Some birds flew close overhead.

On the waggon-track beyond the ridge I heard the whistling woodman and the jangle of harness.

Inch by inch, inch by inch the puma approached. How my eyes ached!

The mewing of the puma-cubs in the cleft seemed dying away in the distance, the growling of the dogs grew fainter and fainter. Was I falling asleep?

And then, all on a sudden, as if the hypnotist had shouted in my ear "Awake!" the spell fell from off me. I realised that I was face to face with death—that in another instant of time I might be struggling with my hands against the teeth and claws of two maddened beasts of prey. I pulled myself together, dropped very quietly on to one knee, and covered one of the puma's eyes with my gun.

It was within six feet of me. My hand was as steady as possible. The eye was of a beautiful sherry-colour, and seemed to flash with the puma's anger.

And as I looked full into it the eye began to grow dull, the expression of the whole face changed, the bristling hair lay flat, the tail drooped, and almost as carefully as it had advanced the puma began to retreat.

It drew back its silent paws, one by one, placing them on the ground so cautiously that it seemed afraid to tread, lest the earth should break under its feet. I watched the spectral thing backing out of my presence; and then, all in an instant, and with one offended spring, the puma flashed out of my sight, and the rattle of loosened stones above me told me that the dam had sprung away too after her mate.

I drew a long breath of relief, and took off my cap and turned to sit down. Great Heavens! What had happened? Was I daft? My arms fell listlessly by my side, my cap dropped out of my fingers on to the ground. I felt imbecile with sudden consternation.

The dogs were gone!

Gone? But where? Into the cleft, the mere sight of which had sufficed to strike them crazy with horror? Impossible. Up the face of the ravine, right into the jaws of the waiting puma? Impossible. Down the path up which we had come, and past the other puma? Impossible. Yet, of three impossibilities, they had certainly done one, for they were gone.

For a minute or more I stood looking round me in a dazed way, and then I stooped to pick up my cap. What! Was I mad—stock, staring mad? I gave a kind of wild beast yell and fled down the ravine as if the devil were behind me.

The cap was gone!

When I got to the tent I called Wilmot in and told him soberly and exactly what had happened. I could see he thought I had had a sunstroke or was insane. He expressed no surprise, spoke half soothingly to me, and, as he passed out, quietly picked up my gun to take it away.

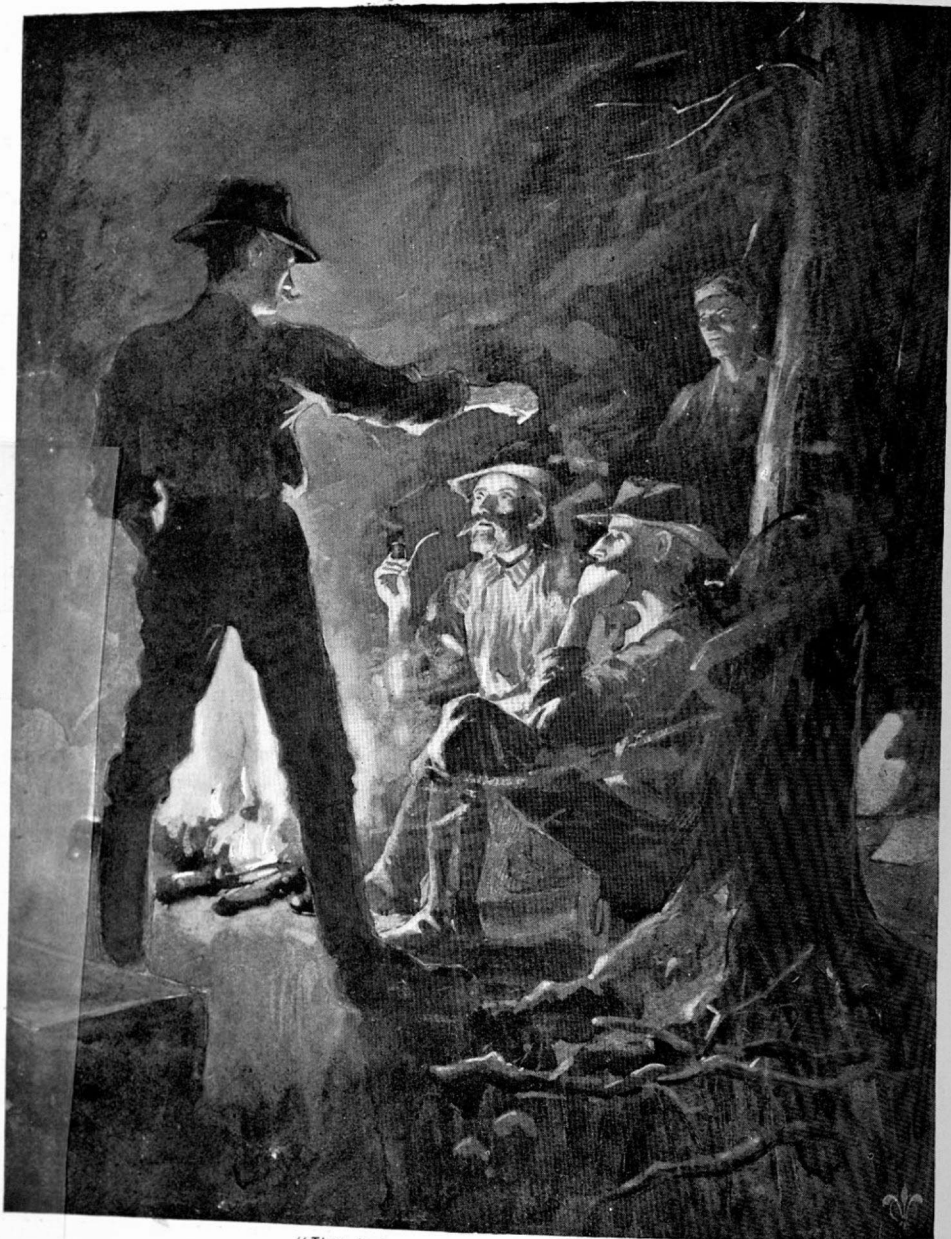
"It is loaded, Wilmot," I said; and then, leaning my head on my hands, fell into a stupid reverie.

I was aroused from it by strange voices. The woodmen passing had stopped their waggon for a chat and an exchange of whiskies. I joined them, and noticed that they saw nothing unusual in my manner; and by-and-by, although the events of the afternoon were perpetually before me, I fell into conversation with one of the party. He had prospected all the surrounding country for gold, and was full of interesting information. One thing he told me attracted me especially—that in some ravines, a dozen miles or so from my camp, were the remains of some very singular Indian huts.

"They've got nothing like them," said he, "anywhere else, and there isn't an Indian of any sort about here, Piute, Apache or Navajo, that has ever seen any others of the kind. And I've described them to Sioux and Pueblos, but they had never heard of the like before. They puzzle me outright, for they're built, as it were, out of coils of stone and clay, without a break in the coil, just as the old straw bee-hives—'skips' we called them in England—were made. They're very queer, those huts, and the queerest thing about them is that they break out, as it were, all over a hill-side in a day or two, mostly in rainy weather and then the rain washes them away again. And the Indians that build them never live in them. No one has ever seen them being built."

I was thoroughly interested, feeling that I was on the track for discovering, perhaps, a non-Indian race of American aborigines; and having taken notes of the direction of this curious village, and various landmarks, promised to let my friend know the result of the visit which I had already determined to make to it.

Next day I took Wilmot to the place of my adventure with the pumas, showed him the cleft, the two stones through which one puma had looked down on me, and the spot where the other had stood.



"They had never heard of the like before."

"And now," said I, "where did the dogs go, and my cap?"

Wilmot, meanwhile, was examining the cleft; but there was nothing to examine. It was a simple cleft in the rock, deeper than his stick would reach, and wide enough to let a terrier go in easily.

"The dogs," said he at last, "went in here. They couldn't have gone up this rock, and if they had gone down the ravine you and the lion" (for so the Americans call the puma) "would have seen them. So they went in here."

"Very good," I said; "and pray, where did my cap go to?"

Wilmot shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, and we returned in silence.

Next day we struck camp and started for the ancient village. With us we had the remaining terrier. Tumbling After was a dog with an extraordinary thirst for knowledge, and perpetually in trouble through his inquisitive researches. However, it was the results of his investigation of a ground wasps' nest that had saved him from the mysterious fate of Jack and Jill; for, both his eyes being closed up with stings, he had been left at home chained up to the waggon-wheel on that most eventful afternoon. Travelling very slowly, owing to the roughness of the ground, we did not reach the ridge that overlooked the village till nightfall of the second day.

At dawn I was up, and soon found myself among the ruins—for such, to my great disappointment, they were. Here and there was a trace of the "coil" that our visitor had described, but for the majority they were simply shapeless heaps of mud. But even so they were remarkable, for where in this stony valley had the mud come from? The ridges on either side were so closely strewn with small, slaty shingle, that walking up was very difficult, and coming down a simple matter of sliding, while the valley was just the same—a bed of soft, broken slate.

Whence, then, came all this earth, yellow clay and red, of which the huts had been built? While still examining the mounds, Wilmot, who had now come up on the crest of the ridge, called out that there was another village in the next valley. I joined him, and to my great delight found several complete huts. Sliding down the ridge, I was soon amongst them; and there, sure enough, built of ropes of mud or rather clay studded with rubble, stood the coil-like habitations of the vanished race.

My camera was soon at work, and by evening we had thoroughly exhausted the valley. Oddly enough, none of these huts had any doorways, and promised an interesting problem for the ethnologists, as when we broke into them there was no trace whatever of human occupation, nor of their having been put to any sort of use. Into a few an entrance had been broken, large enough to admit an Indian creeping in on all fours. These had probably been used by some of the gipsy Piutes as a temporary shelter, for the ground within had been cleared of all stones, and was thickly strewn with grass and leaves. In one I found some bones, and on the outside of several were pictures drawn in charcoal, representing men and women of the primitive black-beetle type with which the first efforts of every nursery artist have made us all so familiar.

Well content with my discoveries, I wrote out a brief statement intended for the New York press, and sat down next day to write a detailed letter for publication in London. It was while I was immersed in this delightful task, and letting my fancy rove in the prehistoric times in which the mud-rope hut-builders lived and moved and had their being, that Howhow broke in upon me with that astounding assertion that he had seen stones rolling up the hill-side of their own accord with which this narrative commences.

Chastened by the memory of my cap having removed itself from the surface of the earth without assistance, I only replied "Rubbish!" and sent him back to his birdskins.

Next day Howhow went off on a mule with my letter for the *Pall Mall*, telegrams for the New York papers, and a packet of negatives for the photographer at Helensburg to develop. Wilmot and I spent the days in solitary excursions, for we did not dare to leave our goods in camp without a guard, as the Indian, however friendly he may be to you, will steal anything he can lay his hands on unobserved.



"Wilmot meanwhile was examining the cleft."

One day I had gone out, taking *Tumbling After* with me, and, passing through the village, came out, after a while, upon a spur, where there had evidently been a landslip, the side of the hill being for part of the way a smooth slide of shingle, with a great accumulation of *débris* at the bottom. Walking across it would be very tedious, and I turned to skirt it, when my ear caught a stealthy sound, as of shingle slipping gently. Looking in that direction, I saw some fragments slipping down the hill, and, as I watched, the process of disintegration continued, and small companies of broken slates came sliding down.

I cast my gaze a little lower down, and there, as *Howhow* had said, I saw, with my own eyes, some of the stones rolling *up*!

To meet them I saw others come slipping across the face of the hill; and little by little the astounding fact was borne in upon me that there was some central point of attraction, for the stones, I now perceived, were slowly travelling from every

point on the circumference of a circle, that was about eighteen feet in diameter, towards the exact centre. But they did not heap themselves up there—they evidently disappeared into the hill-side. For though they were in perpetual motion towards the mysterious magnet, the surface of the hill remained the same smooth slide.

Nor was this all, for, my eye growing accustomed to the movement, I detected, one after the other, five separate centres of attraction, upon each of which the stones converged from every possible direction.

I walked cautiously towards the nearest circle. As I approached, the travelling stones stopped in their course, and when I reached the centre all was still, and there was nothing to be seen, only shingle. There was nothing to distinguish the particular spot upon which the stones had, a minute before, been disappearing, from any other spot on the hill-side.

In turn I crept as silently as I could to each centre, and each in turn as silently ceased to be active. Within half an hour the hill-side was absolutely quiet.

At this moment I heard the bugle, which was our signal that any absentee from camp was wanted at home, and turned my face, walking in a dream, away from the bewitched valley.

I did not say a word to Wilmot—I was ashamed to—but I sat down to write a full account of what I had seen, and meanwhile, in the hope that he might behold the same phenomenon, sent Wilmot with the camera to take photographs of the landslip.

The bugle had been blown to announce Howhow's return; and, before looking at the letters he had brought, I asked him if he remembered having seen stones rolling up a hill.

"Of course I do," said he; "I'm not likely to forget it. As I told you, I——"

"Yes, never mind that," I interrupted; "where do you say you saw this happen?"

"It is over there, beyond the village, in a place that looks as if there had been a landslip."

"Thank you;" and then I turned to the perusal of my post and the newspapers.

While I was reading Wilmot returned with the photographs.

"Whew!" said he: "it is hot in that place." And there was something in his manner as he went about the tent which made me suspect that he had seen what both Howhow and I had seen—namely, stones travelling up-hill. But I said nothing, and later on I overheard him asking Howhow the same question that I had done.

This was too much for Howhow. He knew where Wilmot had been, and he put two and two together.

"Ah!" he cried triumphantly, "both the master and you have been to the landslip to-day, and you have both asked me where it was that I saw stones going up the hill! *You have seen them too!*"

This was now too much for me, and I went out, and comparing notes found it was indeed as Howhow had said. We had all three seen the same thing, and only Howhow had had the courage to say so. Suffice it to say, our talking did nothing to help each other to a solution of the puzzle.

The next day we moved camp to our old quarters under the pines by the waggon-road; and here a day or two later, on his way back to the saw-mills, came the man who had told me of the village. I invited him to stay over the night, and he did so, and next morning left me to "prospect," as he said, "a bit of country across the road that he had been over."

So away he went, across the track and over the ridge and down into the valley beyond, and I went back to my work in my tent. An hour later we heard our

visitor shouting at the top of his voice, and looking out I saw him running at full speed towards us. Seizing my hat, I ran to meet him. He was breathless and terribly excited. But at last, speaking with the voice of a man who has just seen a ghost, he said, "There is another village of the same huts just across the ridge there, and it has all been built since I passed there three weeks ago."

And I found it was as he said. There in the valley, within half a mile of my tent, stood a score of these great beehive huts, and one of them was so fresh from the builder's hands that I could thrust my stick into the coil of mud!

Not a single one had a door, and there was not a trace of a fire in the whole village. Where were the builders, and who were they? And we all four wandered about among the silent huts, deserted as soon as built, like moonstruck folk, and Tumbling After was with us pushing his investigations in all directions. And on a sudden we heard him barking, and, looking at him, saw him scratching away like a demented dog at the hut that had been last built. I went up to him, and then I saw that his scratching had partially uncovered some object that was embedded in the mud-coil. I saw at a glance what it was, and, thrusting my hand into the clay, seized and pulled out *the lifeless body of Jill!* Howhow was sent back to camp, and with the spade he brought we soon unearthed poor Jack, as dead as Jill; and Tumbling After whimpered most pitifully over the corpses of his old playmates. A few minutes later, and we had got out two dead puma cubs—and then *my cap!*

Our visitor, who had never heard the story of the disappearance of the dogs, was, as he put it, "clean stuck up" at finding fox-terriers built into the walls of an Indian's hut. Nor were we, who knew where the terriers came from, much less bewildered. They had disappeared into a cleft on the other side of the waggon-road, and here they were, a hundred yards away from the cleft, in the middle of a mud-hut! The excitement of our discoveries set us searching in all directions, aimlessly enough, but hoping by some accident to find the solution of the mystery.

And it came in a most unexpected way.

Tumbling After, foremost as usual in research, was scrambling about on the hill-side, when he suddenly uttered a cry; and as we looked up we saw him with his legs spread out trying to get a hold on the sliding shale slowly going backwards *up the hill.* Three of us knew what was happening, and we sprang up the hill all together. And Wilmot was only just in time, for before the magnet ceased to be active at his approach the dog was already in the centre of the attraction, and half buried in the stones that had converged upon him from all sides. He was terribly frightened, but unhurt; and then, after telling our visitor of the adventure with the pumas, and of the proceedings of the shingle at the landslip, we turned our faces homewards, four utterly bewildered men.

We buried Jack and Jill, and thereafter sat down to smoke. All of a sudden, as if he had been exploded off his seat with a blasting-charge, our visitor leaped up.

"I have it!" he cried—"I have it!"

"Have what?" I asked.

"*Worms!*" was the astounding reply.

We gasped at him open-mouthed. Had the day's experience been too much for his brain?

Then his meaning flashed upon me. The huts were gigantic worm-casts. The cleft in the rock was a worm-hole. So were the centres of suction on the hill-sides. We had rediscovered the colossal worm known to prehistoric man,—the "Great Orme" of world-wide legend!