

# The Ghostly Door.

Dave and I were tramping on a lonely bush track in New Zealand, making for a sawmill where we expected to get work, and we were caught in one of those three-days gales, with rain and hail in it and cold enough to cut off a man's legs. Camping out was not to be thought of, so we just tramped on in silence, with the stinging pain coming between our shoulder-blades—from cold, weariness and the weight of our swags—and our boots, full of water, going splash splash along the track. We were settled to it—to drag on like wet, weary, muddy working bullocks till we came to somewhere—when, just before darkness settled down, we saw the loom of a humpy of some sort on the slope of a tussock hill, back from the road, and we made for it, without holding a consultation.

It was a two-roomed hut of waste timber from a sawmill, and was either a deserted settler's home or a hut attached to an abandoned sawmill round there somewhere. The windows were boarded up. We dumped our swags under the little verandah and banged at the door, to make sure; then Dave pulled a couple of boards off a window and looked in—there was light enough to see that the place was empty. Dave pulled off some more boards put his arm in through a broken pane, put back the catch, pushed up the window and got in. I handed in the swags to him. The room was very draughty, the wind came in through the broken window and the cracks between the slabs, so we tried the partitioned-off-room—the bedroom—and that was better. It had been lined with chaff-bags, and there were two stretchers left by some timber-getters or other bush contractors who'd camped there

stools by the heads of our bunks, turned in, and filled up and smoked comfortably, dropping in a lazy word now and again about nothing in particular. Once I happened to look across at Dave and saw him sitting up a bit and watching the door. The door opened very slowly, wide, and a black cat walked in, looked first at me, then at Dave, and walked out again; and the door closed behind it.

Dave scratched his ear. 'That's rum,' he said. 'I could have sworn I fastened that door. They must have left the cat behind.'

'It looks like it, I said; 'neither of us has been going it lately.'

He got out of bed and up on his long hairy spindle shanks.

The door had the ordinary common black oblong lock with a brass knob. Dave tried the latch and found it fast; he turned the knob, opened the door and called, 'Puss—puss—puss!' but the cat wouldn't come. He shut the door, and tried the knob to see that the catch had caught, and got into bed again.

He'd scarcely settled down when the door opened slowly, the black cat walked in, stared hard at Dave, and suddenly turned and darted out as the door closed smartly.

I looked at Dave and he looked at me—hard; then he scratched the back of his head. I never saw a man look so puzzled in the face and scared about the head.

He got out of bed very cautiously, took a stick of firewood in his hand, sneaked up to the door and snatched it open. There was no one there. Dave took the candle and went into the next room, but couldn't see the cat. He came back, and sat down

door to close; then Dave got out very gingerly, and upon one end, and went to the door like a cat on wet bricks.

'You shot the bolt outside the catch,' I said, as he caught hold of the door—like one grabs a nettle.

'What are you doing that for?' I asked. 'If there's a broken-down burglar camped round here, and trying any of his funny business, we'll hear him if he tries to come in while we're asleep,' says Dave. Then he got back into bed. We composed our

door wouldn't come!—it was fast and locked! Then Dave's face began to look as frightened as his hair. He lit his candle at the fire and asked me to come with him; he unlocked the door, and we went into the other room, Dave shading his candle very carefully and feeling his way slow with his feet. The room was empty; we tried the outer door and found it locked.

'It must be gone by the winder,' whispered Dave. I noticed that he said 'it' instead of 'he.' I saw that he was shook up, and it only needed that to scare me bad.

We went back to the bedroom, had a drink of cold tea, and lit our pipes. Then Dave took the waterproof cover off his bunk, spread it on the floor, laid his blankets on top of it, his spare clothes, etc., on top of them, and started to roll up his swag.

'What are you going to do, Dave?' I asked.

'I'm going to take the track,' says Dave, 'and camp somewhere further on. You can stay here if you like, and come on in the morning.'

I started to roll up my swag at once. We dressed and fastened on the tucker bags, took up the billys, and got outside without making any noise. We held our backs pretty hollow till we got down on to the road.

'That comes of camping in a deserted house, said Dave, when we were safe on the track. No Australian bushman cares to camp in, or even near an abandoned homestead—probably because a deserted home looks ghostlier in the Australian bush than anywhere else in the world.'

It was blowing hard, but not raining so much.

We went on along the track for a couple of miles, and camped on the sheltered side of a round tussock hill, in a hole where there had been a landslip. We used all our candle ends to get a fire alight, but once we got it started we knocked the wet bark off manuka sticks and logs and piled them on and soon had a roaring fire. When the ground got a little drier we rigged a bit of a shelter from the showery with sticks and the oilcloth swag-covers; then we made some coffee and got through



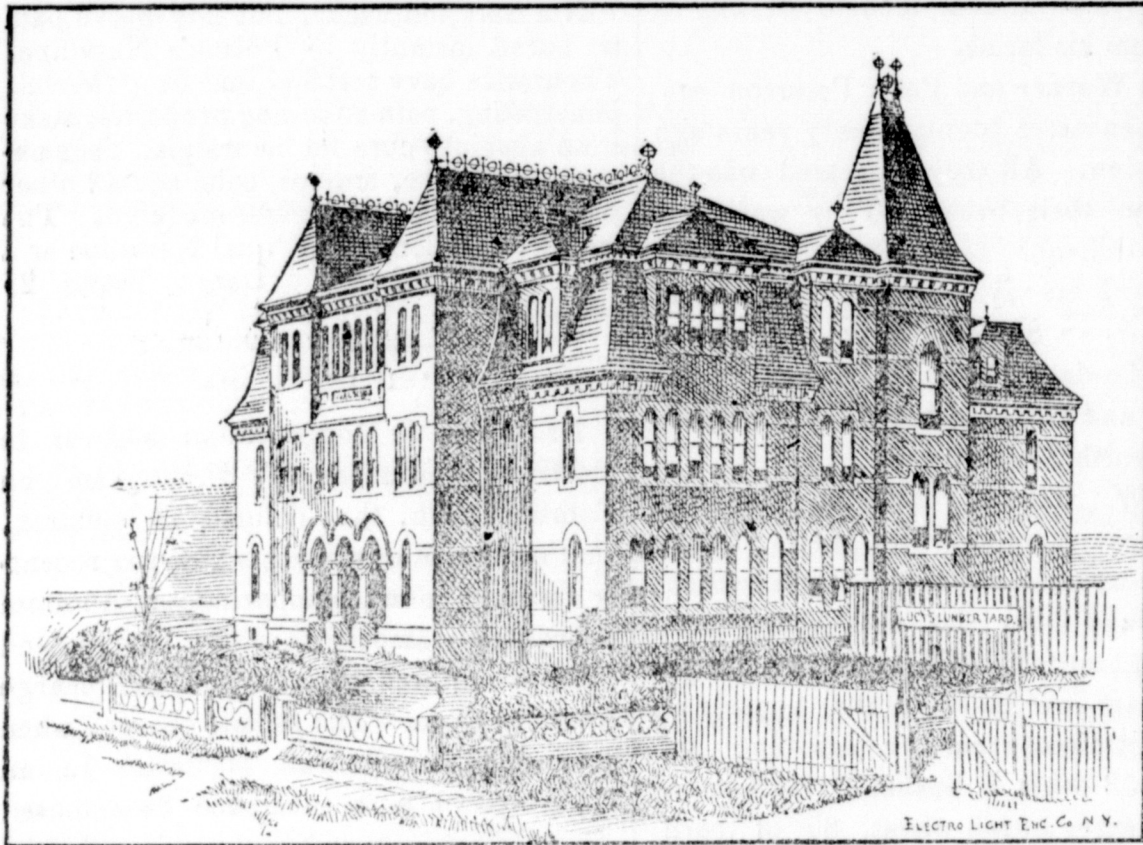
THE ROAD TO WANNAGAN.

'I'll swear I didn't,' said Dave. But he'd already turned the key a couple of times so he couldn't be sure. He shut and locked the door again. 'Now, get out and see for yourself,' he said.

I got out, and tried the door a couple

of times and found it all right. Then we both tried, and agreed that it was locked. I got back into bed, and Dave was

nerves with the 'Haunted Gulch' and 'The Disembowelled Corpse,' and after a while I heard Dave snore and was just dropping off, when the stick fell from the door against my foot and then to the ground with a tremendous clatter. I snatched up



THE NORMAL SCHOOL.

last; and there were a box and a couple of three-legged stools.

We carried the remnant of the wood-heap inside, made a fire and put the billy on. We unrolled our swags and spread the blankets on the stretchers; then we stripped and hung our clothes about the fire to dry. There was plenty in our tucker bags, so we had a good feed. I hadn't shaved for days, and Dave had a coarse red beard with a twist in it like an ill-used fibre brush—a beard that got redder the longer it grew; he had a hooked nose, and his hair stood straight up (I never saw a man so easy-going about the expression and so scared about the head), and he was very tall, with long, thin, hairy legs. We must have looked a weird pair as we sat there, almost naked, on the low three-legged stools, with the billy and the tucker on the box between us, and ate our bread and meat with clasp-knives.

'I shouldn't wonder,' says Dave, 'but this is the whare\* where the murder was that we heard about along the road. I suppose if anyone was to come along now and look in, he'd get scared.' Then, after a while, he looked down at the flooring boards close to my feet, and scratched his ear, and said, 'That looks very much like a blood-stain under your stool, doesn't it, Joe?'

I shifted my feet and presently moved the stool further away from the fire—it was too hot.

I wouldn't have liked to camp there myself, but I don't think Dave would have minded—he'd knocked round too much in the Australian bush to mind anything greatly, or to be surprised at anything; besides, he was more than half murdered once, by a man who said afterwards that he mistook Dave for someone else—he must have been a very short-sighted murderer.

Presently we put the tobacco, matches and bits of candle we had, on the two

by the fire and meowed, and presently the cat answered him and came in from somewhere—she'd been out the window, I suppose; he kept on meowing, and she sidled up and rubbed against his hairy shin. Dave could generally bring a cat that way. He had a weakness for cats. I'd seen him kick a dog and hammer a horse—brutally, I thought—but I never saw him hurt a cat, or let anyone else do it. Dave was good to cats; if a cat had a family where Dave was round, he'd see her all right and comfortable and only drown a fair surplus. He said once to me: 'I can understand a man kicking a dog, or hammering a horse when it plays up, but I can't understand a man hurting a cat.'

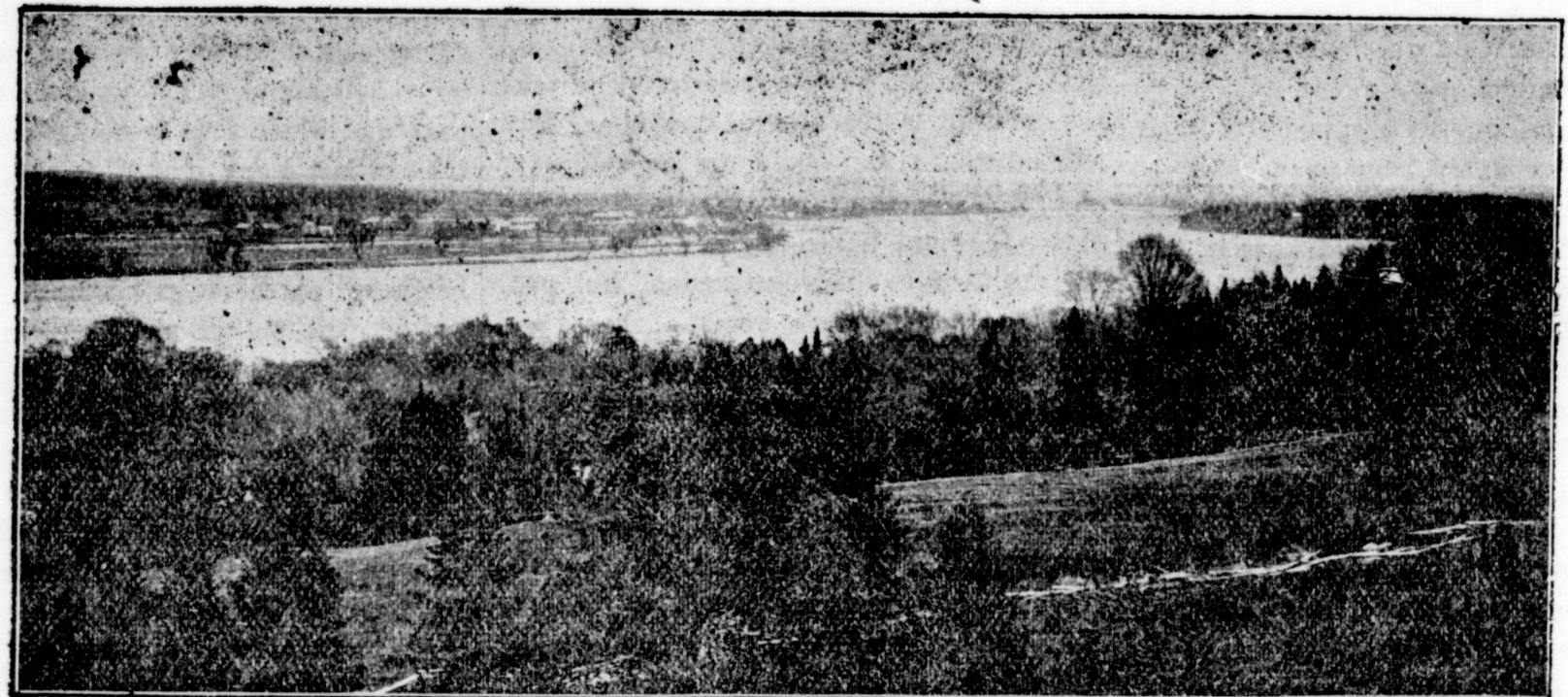
He gave this cat something to eat. Then he went and held the light close to the lock of the door, but could see nothing wrong with it. He found a key on the mantle-shelf, and locked the door. He got into bed again, and the cat jumped up and curled down at the foot and started her old drum going, like shot in a sieve. Dave bent down and patted her, to tell her he'd mean no harm when he stretched out his legs; and then he settled down again.

We had some books of the 'Deadwood Dick' school. Dave was reading 'The Grisly Ghost of the Haunted Gulch,' and I had 'The Disembowelled Hand,' or 'The Disembowelled Corpse,' or some such names. They were first class preparation for a ghost.

I was reading away, and getting drowsy when I noticed a movement and saw Dave's frightened head rising, with the terrified shadow of it on the wall. He was staring at the door, over his book, with both eyes. And that door was opening again—slowly—and Dave had locked it! I never felt anything so creepy; the foot of my bunk was behind the door, and I drew up my feet as it came open; it opened wide and stood so. We waited, hearing each other breathe, for five minutes it seemed, for the

time, paused and shut suddenly. Dave got out grabbed, a stick, skipped to the door and grabbed at the knob. And the

door opened only a little way this



VIEW FROM THE COLLEGE LOOKING DOWN THE ST. JOHN RIVER.



THE COLLEGE DRIVE.

about half in when a thought struck him. He got the heaviest piece of firewood and stood it against the door.

time, paused and shut suddenly. Dave got out grabbed, a stick, skipped to the door and grabbed at the knob. And the

the night pretty comfortably. In the morning Dave said, 'I'm going back to that house.'

'What for?' I said.

'I'm going to find out what's the matter with that crimson door. If I don't, I'll never be able to sleep easy within a mile of a door so long as I live.'

So we went back. It was still blowing. The thing was simple enough by daylight—after a little watching and experimenting. The house was built of odds and ends and badly fitted. It 'gave' in the wind in almost any direction; not much—not more than an inch or so, but just enough to throw the door frame out of plumb and out of square in such a way as to bring the latch and bolt of the lock clear of the catch (the door frame was of scraps joined). Then the door swung open according to the bang of it; and when the gust was over, the house gave back, and the door swung to, the frame easing just a little in another direction. I suppose it would take Edison to invent a thing like that—which came about by accident. The different strengths and directions of the gusts of wind must have accounted for the variations of the door's movements; and, maybe, the draught of our big fire had helped.

Dave scratched his head a good bit.

'I never lived in a house yet,' he said, 'as we came away—I never lived in a house yet without there was something wrong with it. Gimme a good tent.'—Henry Lawson in 'Castell's Magazine.'

Sincere Re-gret.

'Man Sandy, is that you?' exclaimed in surprise an old man in the other day. 'Man, I thought ye were dead. I heard ye were drowned?' 'O! no; it wasn't me!' returned Sandy, solemnly. 'It was ma brither.' 'Dear me, dear me!' murmured the old man. 'With a terrible pity!' There was a somewhat thoughtful look on Sandy's face as he wandered away.