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Opening Extract from...

Albert of Adelaide

Written by Howard Anderson

Published by Serpent's Tail

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Albert of Adelaide



Howard Anderson



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First published in the USA in 2012 by Twelve, an imprint of Grand Central Publishing, Hachette Book Group, New York

First published in the UK in 2012 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
website: www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 840 9
eISBN 978 1 84765 xxx x

Designed and typeset by sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk
Printed by xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



It seems fitting to dedicate this book to an Australian soldier I met at a bar many years ago in Sydney. All I can remember about him was that he had a bad bayonet scar from service in Malaya and that he got me hopelessly lost on the New South Wales rail system before he passed out.

Preface

THE COUNTY THAT STRETCHES FROM Melbourne in the south to Sydney seven hundred and fifty miles up the coast is green with trees and paddocks. On the farms along the coast, sheep graze in the fields, and foxes eat the rabbits that in their turn eat the lettuce growing in the gardens. The sheep, the foxes, and the rabbits live their lives no differently than did their ancestors in England not so many generations ago.

The animals and men that used to live along the coast, in the days before the bush became suburbs, don't come to this part of Australia much any more. Kangaroos and wallabies have found ways to prosper, but the rest have been pushed back into the deserts or survive in zoos as relics of the past. Tasmanian devils snuffle along the concrete floors of their pens next to panda bears from China. Cassowaries feed in fenced enclosures next to kudus from Africa.

The original inhabitants of Australia have become curiosities to be stared at, along with other unwilling creatures from continents far away. Times have changed along the coast, and there is no room for those that used to live there. The animals living in the zoos remember that Australia once belonged to them.

They talk of a place far away in the desert where things haven't changed and the old life remains as it once was. As with most stories, hope rather than truth wins out with each telling, and in the end the only way to be sure of what's real and what's not real is to go to the source of the tale.

Albert of Adelaide



1 Desert crossing

THE TRACKS OF AN OLD railway line run from Adelaide in South Australia to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. For many years, as each train passed by on its thousand-mile journey between the two towns, passengers threw their empty beer bottles from the windows of the cars into a landscape that seemed unimportant to them. The broken bottles accumulated along the road bed and the route from Adelaide to Alice Springs became a shining ribbon of broken glass.

At Alice Springs the railway line continues, south to north, in an almost undeviating straight line across the center of the country and passes through the towns of Tennant Creek and Katherine. The tracks parallel a road that was widened many years ago to take war materials from Alice Springs, in the center of the country, to Darwin on the northern coast. The war drifted away from Darwin to its conclusion in other parts of the Pacific, and traffic along the road slowed to almost nothing. It took almost another lifetime to complete the final nine hundred miles of track from Alice Springs to the coast. North of Alice Springs the railway line disappears into a series of mountain ranges that cross the center of the continent.

Beyond the mountains is a red desert. It is a desert of vast distances and, when closely examined, of great variety. The occasional cliffs and gorges are red in color, as is the soil and sand that covers sections of the desert floor. The color fits well with the blue and normally cloudless sky that on occasion brings water to the dry riverbeds that cut across the land.

The desert is covered in patches of short, stunted grasses that have won a marginal hold in the red, sandy soil. Scattered across the sand and grass, desert grevillea bushes seem like giants in the treeless flats. In some places the bushes grow close to one another, and small birds flutter among the branches. The birds don't sing, and the silence of the desert is broken only briefly by the flutter of their wings.

There are paths in the desert where passing animals have walked the weak grasses into extinction. These tracks, unlike the railroad, follow no set direction. They wander aimlessly through the flats and up and down the banks of the dry rivers, heading to destinations unknown. The age of the tracks is impossible to tell, for the grass grows back slowly in those parts of Australia.

In the early morning of a day long after the war, a small figure walked slowly along one of the winding tracks somewhere to the east of Tennant Creek. On close examination, the figure didn't look any different from most of his kind. He was about two feet tall and covered with short brown fur. He had a short, thick tail that dragged the ground when he walked upright and a ducklike bill where any other animal would have a nose.

The only thing that set Albert apart from any other platypus was that he was carrying an empty soft drink

bottle. It was his possession of a bottle, coupled with the fact that he was hundreds of miles north of any running water, that made him different.

Albert had crept away from the railway station at Tennant Creek and into the desert three nights before. For the first day after leaving the station, he had walked along the railroad track. A train had come by late in the afternoon and Albert had hidden himself in a bush near the roadbed. No one had seen him, but he was almost hit by a half-full bottle of Melbourne Bitter thrown from a second-class coach. After that, Albert stayed away from the tracks. From a distance, he had paralleled the roadbed north for the last two days, because without that landmark Albert would have been hopelessly lost. As it was, he was just confused.

The problem was that Albert had no idea where he was going, or exactly what he was looking for. The stories had been vague at best… *somewhere in the desert… a place where old Australia still existed… keep going north… the Promised Land.* Those descriptions had sounded good in Adelaide, but they were worthless in a desert where every direction looked the same.

His escape from Adelaide and the trip to Tennant Creek had been easier than he expected. Security on the smaller animals was minimal. It had been only a matter of time before a careless attendant left his enclosure latch unfastened. Then a quick midnight run through the deserted park and a short swim across the River Torrens had gotten him into the city proper.

Some of the larger animals had been brought to Adelaide by train and then to the zoo by lorry. They told him about the trains and described how to reach the railroad yards.

Traffic on the city streets was infrequent late at night, and Albert managed to get across town to the station by hiding behind rubbish bins from the occasional passing automobile. After that, he had hopped a freight to Alice Springs and then another to Tennant Creek, the entire trip courtesy of the South Australia railway.

With the limited resources available to him, Albert had tried to prepare for the journey. He had saved part of his meal at each feeding and put the grubs into a discarded popcorn box he had pulled into his cage when no one was looking. Water he had taken from his dish and put in the stolen soft drink bottle. His planning had gotten him to Alice Springs and then to the desert outside Tennant Creek. Now, he was out of food, out of water, and out of plans.

He had filled his bottle the night he left the train at Tennant Creek, but his bottle didn't hold that much. The water had run out yesterday and Albert knew that if he didn't find more that day he would die. A platypus is an animal that lives in or near water all its life and can't survive without it. He didn't mind the dying as much as he minded not living long enough to find the place he was looking for, somewhere without people and without zoos.

Albert continued to walk north. He had decided to get as far away from Adelaide as he could before the end. His eyes were red-rimmed from the sun, and his fur was discolored from the reddish dust his feet kicked up as he walked. He had given up trying to make sense of the faint trails that occasionally crossed his path. Albert clutched the empty soft drink bottle and put one webbed foot in front of the other, moving slowly toward the distant horizon.

As the day grew longer Albert began to hallucinate. Dreams of water would mix with the heat waves rising

in the air, and Albert could see the Murray River. He could feel himself slide down the mud ramp in front of his burrow and into the coolness of the river. He would float down the river and watch the green banks pass by. Just when he was sure that he was back for good in the place where he was born, the river would evaporate, and he could see faces smeared with cotton candy and jaws that dribbled popcorn. The faces laughed and handless fingers poked at him through wire mesh. The horror of the visions caused Albert to start shaking, and when he did the faces disappeared. In their place, the emptiness of the desert and the heat of the day would push their way into Albert's consciousness, and he would force himself to begin walking again.

As the day wore on, the brush became thicker and the desert began to give way to bush. Most of the brush was taller than Albert, and he lost sight of the horizon and the railroad track. As the sun changed position in the sky it became more difficult to tell exactly which direction he was walking.

After one of the series of hallucinations passed, Albert noticed something in a clump of saltbush a few yards from where he was walking, something with a rectangular outline deep in the thicket of brush. Ignoring the pain from being scratched by the branches, Albert pushed his way into the brush until he came upon a weathered sign that read:

PROPERTY OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIA RAILWAY
TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED

The management

Just then the wind came up, and Albert knew that it wasn't going to be his day.

He struggled out of the saltbush and once again began walking in the direction he thought was north. The wind blew harder and dust began to swirl around him. Albert shouldered his way through the dust for some distance. He ran into clumps of brush several times and instinct alone told him which direction to take. The dust in the air became thicker, and the world disappeared in a reddish-brown haze. It wasn't long before Albert lost his way completely.

When he realized he might not be going north any longer, he gave up. He was afraid that he might have turned back south, and he didn't want to die any closer to Adelaide than he had to. Albert saw a large desert grevillea through the dust and pushed his way through the wind until he reached it. He crawled under the bush and lay down. The bush blocked a little of the wind and it seemed calmer there. Albert closed his eyes and held his soft drink bottle against his chest. He began laughing because he knew the South Australia railway would never get the chance to prosecute him.

As Albert lay under the bush, red dirt and sand began to drift over him. He began to dream that the sand was the water of the Murray and that he was going home. Above him the wind rattled the branches of the bush.

As the branches rattled the bush began to sing. The song was very faint. Albert heard "glory," followed by "banks" and then "reedy lagoon." It was a song that Albert had never heard before, and he couldn't understand why a bush would want to sing it to him.

Albert didn't like the song. It took him away from the

riverbanks and brought him back to the desert. He wriggled in closer to the roots of the bush and tried to think of home, but song wouldn't leave him alone.

"I once heard him say he'd wrestled the Famous Muldoon."

Why would a bush listen to anyone? Who was Muldoon and why was he famous? Albert lay there asking himself those questions. The bush couldn't sing very well. It was off key, and that bothered Albert. It's hard to lie down and die when you are upset. Albert slowly rolled out from under the bush and stood up in the wind. He cocked his head and listened.

"And where is the lady I often caressed,
The one with the sad dreamy eyes.
She pillows her head on another man's breast.
He tells her the very same lies."

The song was scattered through the surrounding bushes by the wind. The wind would shift, and with each shift the singing could be heard coming from a different place.

Albert looked out into the dust storm that obscured the desert. He couldn't see more than a few feet, so there was hardly any chance of finding the singer. Yet it was a chance, and one that hadn't been there before. Albert put the bottle under one arm and started walking straight into the wind.

The sand in the air bit into his face and forced him to keep his eyes closed. He pushed on, walking into as many bushes as he walked around. The song flowed out of the wind and washed over Albert like the waters of the river that wasn't there.

"High up in the air I can hear the refrain
of the Butcher bird piping his tune.
For spring in her glory has come back again,
to the banks of the reedy lagoon."

With each step the song grew louder. He tried to walk faster. He was sure that around the next bush, or the one after that, he would find where the song was coming from. Just one more verse was all he needed to hear, but the last verse never came.

Albert stopped in front of a large saltbush. He stood for a long time, but all he could hear was the wind and the rustling of the branches. The feeling of hope and his last link with the Murray River collapsed, and all that remained was the certainty that this was where it would end.

All at once Albert smelled smoke and heard a gruff voice say, "If this is spring in her glory I can bloody well do without it."

Albert jumped at the sound of the voice. If he hadn't been so tired, he would have run toward it. As it was, he had only enough energy to walk around the saltbush.

There, in the middle of a clearing, with the wind scattering sparks and ashes in all directions, was a small fire. A metal tripod had been placed over the fire, and hanging from the tripod was a battered billycan. Steam was escaping from under the edge of a small plate that covered the top of the can.

On the far side of the clearing, partially obscured by the dust and the flying ashes, a blanket lay spread under a bloodwood tree. The blanket fluttered in the wind and the only thing that kept it from blowing away was the heavy pack resting on it.

Standing over the blanket, with his back toward Albert, was a bulky figure wearing a long drover's coat and a gray slouch hat, trying to tie a dirty piece of canvas between the tree and a saltbush a few feet away. Each time the creature came close to getting the rope tied, the wind blew the canvas hard enough to pull the rope from his grasp. With each failed attempt, the creature would mutter, "Spring, bah!" and redouble his efforts to tie the canvas to the bush.

After many attempts, the he managed to get the canvas tied off so that it formed a barrier against the wind

The figure in the long coat waited until he was sure the knots would hold the canvas, then nodded in satisfaction and turned back toward the fire. This gave Albert a clear view of him: a large wombat with a graying handlebar mustache.

The wombat, intent on keeping the wind from blowing the hat off his head, didn't notice Albert watching him from the far side of the clearing.

When the wombat reached the fire he turned his back to the wind, which had shifted and was now coming from Albert's direction. The wombat crouched down and fed small pieces of brush into the fire under the can. As he did, he began to sing in a whooping monotone that carried over the wind.

"My bed she would hardly be willing to share
were I camped by the light of the moon…

The wombat stopped singing in midverse and began to laugh.

"Ain't that the bloody truth… not to mention if I got upwind… It's not the keeping square that has kept me single… It must be something else… I wonder what else it

could be… I can lie pretty well… that can't be it… I know it's bathing… true love demands soap and water… a habit I don't intend to cultivate."

The wombat laughed again and began whistling the song as badly as he'd sung it.

If he hadn't been certain that there was water in the can hanging over the fire, Albert would have crept back into the bush and let someone more desperate than himself confront a singing wombat in a drover's coat.

Instead, he took a deep breath and started to say "Excuse me" in a loud voice. What came out was a garbled hiss. Albert hadn't spoken a word to anyone since his journey began, and he hadn't realized how dry his throat was. The wind had quieted briefly as he tried to talk, so the hissing noise carried clearly to the whistling wombat.

The wombat jumped several feet in the air and at the top of his lungs screamed, "Snake!" Upon landing, he grabbed a heavy stick that was lying by the fire and began beating the ground all around the spot where he had been crouching. After he finished pummeling every inch of ground within reach of his stick and knocking his firewood all over the clearing, the wombat stopped, looked around and saw Albert for the first time.

He stared at Albert a few moments, then began to walk toward him. Albert grabbed his soft drink bottle by the neck and prepared to sell his life dearly. Just then the wind rattled a saltbush next to the canvas windbreak. The wombat turned and ran toward the offending bush and at the same time shouted in Albert's direction:

"Thank God, reinforcements. Hurry up and bring your bottle. There's a snake around here, but I've got him on the run."

The wombat reached the bush and began beating it into pieces. Albert was too exhausted to chase a snake of his own making. He walked over to the fire and sat down.

The wombat finished destroying the bush and poked through what was left with the end of his stick. After a careful examination of the debris, the wombat looked over at Albert and said, "Hear anything?"

Albert shook his head. The wombat looked back into the remains of the grevillea bush and listened for a few moments, then threw down his stick.

"Damn, he got away. That's a snake's luck for you."

The wombat walked back to the fire as if nothing unusual had occurred and lifted the plate off the billycan. He peered inside the can, sniffed it, and put the lid back. "Tea's done. Want some?"

Albert nodded vigorously.

"Got a cup?"

Albert shook his head.

"I sort of figured that, you being naked and all."

Albert wasn't wearing any clothes but he was covered in fur, so as far as he was concerned he wasn't naked. He started to give the wombat a sharp retort, but he remembered what happened the last time he tried to speak. Rather than start the snake business all over again, he kept quiet.

The wombat went over to the pack lying on the blanket and rummaged through it until he found two dented tin cups. He wiped the cups with the sleeve of his coat and brought them back to the fire. He gave one cup to Albert, then filled both cups from the billy.

The wombat motioned to Albert, then went over and sat on the blanket behind the canvas windbreak. Albert got up and sat on the blanket next to him. His earlier fear of

the creature had been replaced by gratitude for the tea.

They sat quietly for a while. The heat of the tea passed through the thin sides of the tin cup and burned Albert's paws. Albert ignored the pain and drank. The tea was mostly soggy tea leaves, sand, and ashes, but it was wet and that was enough.

The wombat drank his tea in gulps, ignoring the dirt that blew over him from the gap under the canvas, and stopped only to spit out tea leaves. When he finished his tea, he went over, took the billycan down from the tripod, and brought it back to the blanket. He filled Albert's cup and put the can down next to him, being careful to put the plate back on top to keep some of the dirt out. Then the wombat sat back down on the blanket and pulled out a short-stemmed briar pipe. He proceeded to fill it with tobacco taken from a pouch he pulled from another pocket.

Albert watched and wondered. He had never seen an animal smoke. Then again, he had never seen an animal with clothes on. Maybe, just maybe, he'd reached the place he was looking for. Albert kept thinking as he drank cup after cup of tea.

The wombat didn't say a word. He just smoked his pipe and stared off into the dust storm.

Albert waited until he was sure his throat was wet enough that he wouldn't hiss, then he spoke:

"Is this the place?"

The wombat looked at the pieces of desert being blown around them and took the pipe out of his mouth. "I hope not."

"What I meant was, is this the place where things haven't changed and Australia is like it used to be?"

The wombat thought for a long time before he answered. "If you mean somewhere animals run around without any clothes on while being chased by people with spears and boomerangs, the answer is no. It's not bloody likely that you'd find old Jack in a place like that."

2 Jack the Wombat

THE WIND HAD STOPPED DURING the night. The sun was high on the horizon, and the coolness of the desert morning was beginning to disappear. The bush that surrounded the camp was silent. The light woke Albert. He pulled the blanket down from his face and squinted at the sunlit tops of the bushes that circled the clearing.

The saltbush was light green against a blue sky, and some of the grevillea bushes sported small yellow flowers that were beginning to attract hoverflies.

The tripod remained standing in the middle of the clearing, a small monument to the fire that had been blown into extinction sometime during the night. The piece of canvas had long since parted company from the saltbush and hung limply from the bloodwood tree. The billycan sat partially covered by a small red sand dune next to where Albert lay.

If it hadn't been for the objects surrounding him, Albert would have been convinced that Jack was just another hallucination brought on by too many miles and too little water. His vague recollection of Jack covering him with a blanket was confused with dreams of being naked and poked with spears.

He couldn't remember very much of what happened after Jack told him the place he found wasn't the place he expected. Exhaustion had followed hard on the heels of fading hopes.

Albert lay under the blanket for a long time, trying to sort out the night, without much success. The sun rose above the bloodwood tree and dangled the possibilities of a new day over the windblown camp. Finally, Albert sat up and watched several pounds of sand slide off his blanket and onto his feet. He was preparing to stand when Jack started talking in a muffled voice:

"Sardines?"

Albert looked around. "I beg your pardon?"

"I said sardines."

Jack crawled out from beneath a sand-covered blanket. He was still wearing his drover's coat, and his hat was pulled down firmly over his ears. He poked the sand piles that were scattered around the camp until he found the pack.

"I don't know what you eat, but sardines is what we've got."

"Sardines will be fine."

Jack began pulling tins out of his pack. Along with the tinned fish, he pulled out a crushed felt hat and a coat, both articles having seen much wear. Jack tossed the coat and hat to Albert.

"Best put 'um on. It looks like the sun hasn't been treating you too well lately."

Albert reached up and felt his bill. It was blistered and hurt when he touched it. Albert hadn't realized how badly sunburned he had become during his walk north. He'd had other things on his mind.

Albert put on the hat and it fell down over his eyes. He put on the coat, and it felt like a tent had collapsed on him. Albert pushed the hat back on his head so he could see, and rolled up the sleeves, and in a little while he found his front paws.

Jack looked him up and down. "You aren't going to win any fashion shows, but those should work until we can get something better." He opened two cans of sardines, walked over, and handed one to Albert. "Jack is the name."

"I'm Albert. Pleased to meet you."

Jack sat down next to Albert and began pulling his sardines out of the tin one at a time and eating each one slowly.

"Around the district they call me Jack the Wombat… don't know why. It's not like wombats are thick on the ground. I heard there was wombat named John east of here…never met him, though."

Albert ate his sardines quickly. He hadn't realized how hungry he was. "I guess that would make me Albert the platypus."

Jack finished his sardines. After inspecting the tin to make sure he hadn't missed one, he buried it in the sand.

"To tell you the truth, just 'Albert' will probably work. I've never seen or even heard of a platypus, and I've been here a lot of years."

Albert's heart dropped. Not only had he ended up in the wrong Australia, he was ending up as the lone platypus.

"We live in the banks of rivers and don't come out much," said Albert.

"I've never even seen a river," said Jack

Albert put down the tin of sardines. He wasn't hungry anymore.

"Are you going to eat the rest of your fish?" Jack asked. Albert shook his head, and Jack picked up the tin.

"If you don't mind my asking, what brought you out this way?"

Albert thought quite a while before he answered the question. "Adelaide."

Jack nodded sagely. "I figured that there was a female behind it."

"Adelaide is a place."

Jack ate a sardine. "Bet you it was named after a female." He smiled as he finished the last sardine and buried the can. "Where are you headed to now, Albert?

"I haven't thought that far ahead."

Jack started picking up the blankets. "I've got business at Ponsby Station. You can come along if you want."

Albert hesitated. "I'm not sure I belong here."

Jack cocked his head and looked over at Albert. "Maybe not, Albert, but I've walked a hundred miles in every direction, and this is all there is."

If Jack was right, and Albert had no reason to doubt him, staying alone in this desert would be the start of a short trip to the end of the line.

"I guess I'll come with you Jack… if you don't mind."

"I don't mind. Help me break camp. Get your blanket and grab the tripod." Jack fished a canteen with a shoulder strap out of the pack and tossed it in Albert's direction. "You'd best carry your own water in case you get lost again."

Albert picked up the canteen and put the strap over a shoulder. The canteen reminded him of the soft drink bottle he'd carried into camp. He poked around the sand piles until he found the bottle. He put it one of the pockets

of his coat. The bottle was the only physical evidence of the reality of his journey from Adelaide, and Albert wasn't sure that he wasn't still in the middle of a bad dream.

He took the tripod to Jack, who tied it to the outside of the pack. After a quick look around the clearing, Jack shouldered the pack and set off. Albert followed, trying not to trip over the bottom of his coat.

They walked for several hours, heading north by northeast. Jack walked at a steady pace, not talking much but occasionally pointing out a plant and telling Albert if it was good to eat or if it had some medicinal properties. Albert was still exhausted from his trip from Adelaide, and it was all he could do just to keep up with Jack, but he kept walking and didn't say a word.

The landscape gradually began to change. The salt and grevillea bushes began to thin, and the red sand gave way to salt pans. The flats were broken only by large rock formations, and in the distance beyond the flats were low hills, and beyond the hills, mountains with gray granite cliffs.

The midday heat finally forced Jack to stop at one of the sandstone formations. There was a shallow cave at the base of the formation that had been scooped out of the soft rock by windblown sand. The cave was on the shady side of the formation. Jack walked into it and put the pack down. Albert followed Jack and sat down at the back of the cave. The sand was still cool from the chill of the previous night and felt good on Albert's feet.

Jack sat for a while, then pulled the tobacco out of his coat and began filling the bowl of his pipe. "I don't like walking in midday. It's best to stay here until the sun starts to go down."

Albert took a drink from his canteen. Jack lit his pipe

with a match he struck on the sole of his foot.

"How long were you watching me last night before you came into camp?" Jack asked.

"Not too long," Albert replied. "It was the singing that led me to you."

"I know you saw me singing and talking and making a fool of myself about that snake," Jack looked embarrassed

"I don't remember much, Jack. I was pretty tired last night."

"I think you remember more than you're saying, and I appreciate it." Jack lit his pipe before continuing. "I've been alone a long time, Albert, and people who live by themselves do silly things because they figure no one else is watching. I try not to make a fool of myself… too proud, I guess… and I hate it when I do."

Albert didn't know quite what to say to Jack, so he didn't say anything.

Jack smoked his pipe for a while, lost in his own thoughts. When he was through, Jack knocked the dottle out of the pipe with his heel and put the pipe back in his pocket. He opened the pack and pulled out a large white rock and an old pepperbox pistol. "Excuse me a second."

He got up and carried the rock outside. He put the rock on the ground, stepped back, and fired a shot at the rock. The noise of the shot bounced off the back of the cave and nearly deafened Albert.

A cloud of smoke and the smell of sulphur drifted into the cave. Jack picked up the rock and examined it closely in the sunlight. He put the rock back on the ground and fired another shot at it. Albert had just enough time to put his paws over his ears before the second shot was fired.

Jack picked up the rock and examined it a second time.

He nodded in satisfaction and turned back to the cave. Jack put the pistol in his pocket, and when he did, Albert took his paws off his ears.

"This is a piece of white quartz I picked up two days ago, a pretty rock, but not worth much, unless…" Jack pointed outside the cave, "Take it out in the light and give it a close look."

Albert took the rock into the sunlight outside and examined it closely. "It has gold specks in it."

"It sure does, and those specks make that rock worth quite a bit."

Albert carried the rock back into the cave and gave it back to Jack. "Is it really gold?"

Jack shook his head. "A little bit of it is, but it's mostly iron pyrite, which looks a lot like gold. I take that old pistol and load up two of the barrels with thirty grains of black powder, some wadding, a little gold, and a lot of pyrite, and I shoot it at pieces of quartz. Given a minute or two I can turn any rock into the mother lode."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know yet, but I never saw a situation that was made worse by having a little gold."

Jack put the rock and the pistol back in the pack, and pushed the pack to the back wall of the cave. Jack lay down on this back with his head resting on the pack and closed his eyes. Albert had been thinking about what Jack had said about being alone.

"I was only alone once… it was after my mother died."

Jack opened one eye. Albert continued:

"When I was young, I wandered too far from our burrow. A dog attacked me and… my mother did what she could to defend me. She wasn't very big, but she had a lot of heart…

In the end a lot of heart wasn't enough."

Jack opened both eyes. "I would have liked your mum."

"I thought she was special, but I guess everyone thinks their mother is special."

After a moment, Jack turned his head and looked at Albert. "What happened to the dog?"

"I don't remember," said Albert.