

Good Prospects

“Another drink?” asked Rob, sitting at one of the round, Formica tables at the Alexandra pub.

“Eh? What’s that mate?” Fred leant forward. “Noisy crowd tonight.”

“Usual Friday night,” replied Rob. “Always noisy. The ones with the long faces are the skiers. No good in the mountains, it seems. I reckon we’re in for a nor’wester.” Rob drained his glass. “Need something to melt that snow in the mountains. All my irrigation water for next season is sitting up there locked up as snow. Yes. Snow is as good as money in the bank. Trouble is I can’t make a withdrawal. Snow up there’s as heavy as I’ve ever seen. Heavier than the 2002 fall. No letup this past winter. Luckily it’s not down here in the town. What d’you reckon, Jack?”

Jack stared into the remainder of his beer with his rheumy eyes. “1939!” he declared. “I was school age, but we couldn’t get to school. Snow, snow, snow. Streets were knee deep in the stuff. People wondered whether it’d ever stop. Water froze in the pipes. Started running out of food. Hard days. Yes, hard.”

Rob turned back to Fred. “You got plans, Fred? Weekend coming up.”

“Don’t make much difference – week, weekend – all the same.”

“All right for you retired gentlemen.” Rob gave a shrug. “Some of us need to work if we’re going to have food on the table.”

“Well, Glenda said lets head out of town.” Fred couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “A deal. That’s what I said to her. Mystery destination. Get her enthused.”

“Romantic getaway,” added Rob. “The world’s your oyster, Fred. Kick up your heels in one of the cities. Nightclubs around every corner. You could visit the Christchurch casino. Why not Sydney? Plenty to do there, I don’t doubt. Never been there myself.”

Fred remained silent.

“We allowed to know?” asked Rob. “We’ll treat it as strictly hush-hush.”

“Okay.” Fred paused for a few seconds. “Well, I’m taking the caravan up to Fraser Dam.”

The silence at their table lasted for many seconds.

“Fraser Dam.” Rob stared at Fred. “That’s your mystery romantic getaway?”

“Gold panning. Walks. Fishing.” Fred grinned.

“Goodness, with all that — how come it’s not over-run with tourists?” said Rob. “The great places around the world you must visit before you die. Taj Mahal, Grand Canyon, London, Paris, Fraser Dam.”

“No problems finding a parking space,” commented Jack. “And if you want a drink it’s BYO.”

Rob looked at Fred. “How much have you made out of your gold-panning, Fred? Come on. The old-timers worked that whole area over. Can’t be anything left.”

“It’s been done over twice,” said Jack. “Some of the Clutha gold-miners went up there. When they left, the Chinese moved in. You’d be lucky to find anything. Maybe a touch of colour, nothing more.”

“Old-timers claimed a seam of gold lay just up from Shek Harn,” said Fred.

“Where’s that?” asked Rob.

“Up the Fraser River above the dam,” said Fred. “Remains of stone huts. Chinese, I think.”

“Bleak place to live in winter,” said Jack. “Especially if y’ don’t find any gold. Probably under snow right now.”

“Plenty of people have searched but no luck,” said Rob. “Maybe you’ll be lucky, Fred. Will that car of yours get the caravan up there? Holden. Probably vintage model. The bonnet held in place with binder twine. How d’you get it through the warrant of fitness?”

“Hasn’t let me down yet,” replied Fred.

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The snow drifts lay over four metres deep in the upper Fraser basin, and deeper still where the winds had packed the snow against the ridge lines. One heavy dump after another without any intervening thaws had produced a near-bottomless powder. This had put the alpine basin into lock-down for the past four months.

However, that could not last and the first of the spring-time nor’westers promised a transformation. Soon one hundred square kilometres of snow-melt would be seeking a path through the narrow gorge at Shek Harn. From there it would pass into the Fraser River via the Fraser Dam before joining the Clutha River.

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“Fred! Breakfast.” Glenda always prepared a cooked breakfast on their first morning with the caravan. It had become a ritual.

The ‘mystery destination’ had lost its mystery long before they had left home. The gold pans, shovel, and sluice-box in the caravan, the map open on the dining room table – Glenda was not unhappy. Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to spend a few days in a swanky hotel in Paris or London. However, she did like the caravan, and was proud of the small touches she had added such as the lace curtains. She kept assuring Fred that a caravan holiday was as good as it gets. But, perhaps, just once in her life they could try something different.

“Warm today.” Fred sat on a fold-up camp chair beside the fold-up table, set beneath a canvas awning. “Weather forecast’s right so far. Might have the odd spot of rain later. I’ll go up the gorge. Likely not much water in the river. Might find some colour.”

With the substantial breakfast inside him, Fred said he had no need of any lunch. He carried his shovel and gold pan up beyond the head of the Fraser Dam. He worked his way along the scrub-covered riverbank until almost reaching the remains of the ancient settlement of Shek Harn. At a bend in the river he came face to face with a solid wall of snow, his favourite fossicking site now inaccessible.

He had never encountered deep snow at this level. The top of the snow was not smooth but clumped in a chaotic jumble, a sure sign that it was the result of an avalanche. Immediately downstream of the snow the riverbed lay completely dry. Gold prospecting needed access to water. Fred left his tools on the riverbank before clambering up the broken scrub-covered hillside.

Fred grinned to himself as he worked his way ever higher. Fitness had always been a priority throughout his life. It pleased him that even in his seventies he could still hold his own against much younger people.

His progress slowed when he encountered snow, then stopped. From his vantage point he saw that snow had completely hidden the tors in the upper basin. Heavy rain from the northwest masked the ridge on the far side of the basin.

Large drops of rain, warm rain, came as Fred made his way back down the valley. He zipped up his oilskin as the rain hammered the countryside.

At the caravan he changed into dry clothes.

“Goodness, Fred, time you got new boots,” said Glenda. “Look at your soaking socks.”

“Rather fond of these boots,” said Fred. “Reckon they’ll be right for a few more years.”

An afternoon spent in the caravan was not what he had planned, but their luggage included a sizeable collection of books. These included crossword puzzle books which they solved as a team effort.

“First question,” read Glenda. “Capital of China. Seven letters.”

“China? Never been there. Long way from New Zealand.” Fred sighed. “Pass on that. Next question.”

And so it went on.

Rain deluged their world through the night and the wind whipped the caravan’s awning into a frenzy.

Next morning Fred pulled on his oilskin and stepped into the maelstrom. With the awning stowed in the caravan, Fred walked around the water’s edge to the inlet river of the dam. He followed the river for ten minutes or so. Although the rocks were wet, still no water flowed. He walked further up, looking, listening to the clatter of the rain on his oilskin hood. Masses of snow, invisible now, would generate a cascade.

Back at the caravan he retracted the stabilizers that kept things on an even keel. “Hold fast in there, Glenda, I’m going to shift us up the hill a bit.” A grassy slope led back to the access road, but it was now slippery – wet grass on mud. His first attempt to tow the caravan resulted in a rear wheel of the Holden spinning. Fred resorted to what he referred to as a poor man’s diff lock. He applied a small amount of handbrake as he slipped the clutch. Both rear wheels turned without breaking traction.

The journey to higher ground accomplished, he extended the stabilizers before joining Glenda.

“We’re not going back home?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Our holiday’s just started.” He smiled.

“So why did you move us?”

“Yeah. Got an uneasy feeling.”

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High in the upper Fraser basin melt-water ponded behind mounds of snow. Above Shek Harn, slushy snow slid towards the riverbed, progress slowed by the packed snow of previous avalanches. The countless ponds began coalescing, but still no water ran in the lower Fraser River.

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It was late afternoon and the rain had eased. “What’s that noise?” asked Glenda.

Fred put on his oilskin and stood beside the caravan. A roar such as he had never heard before came from somewhere in the mountains. He knew what it had to be. He walked across to a small rock knob that commanded a view of the river as it sprang to life, a trickle transforming into a ferocious beast.

A foaming torrent accompanied the sound of tumbling boulders. The frothy water surged across the flats where yesterday their caravan had stood.

The water continued in a full, unrelenting onslaught as Fred returned to the caravan an hour later.

The next day dawned with a clear sky. "Let's get out, Fred. We can go home. Relax. Okay?"

Fred looked at the mounds of scrub and small trees torn from the soil by the flood. "Later, Glenda. Should be in for some nice weather these next few days. I'll just have a nosy up the river first."

The track beside the river had disappeared beneath rubble. Fred took to the hillside to bypass the worst of the jumble in the valley. At Shek Harn he scrambled around the old diggings, matagouri clawing at his bush shirt. Huge pieces of hillside, mud and boulders and scrub, had slumped into the valley. It was in one of these fresh landslides that a discovery made his heart pound. That afternoon he returned to Shek Harn with his gold pan and shovel.

Fred toiled there each day for the next fortnight.

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"The usual Friday night crowd," Fred said to Rob across a table at the Alexandra pub.

"Yeah. Good to have you back, mate." Rob took another sip of his beer. "Have any success?"

"Guess so."

"Didn't see your Holden outside," said Rob. "Didn't it survive?"

"Decided we'd be a two car family now." Fred grinned. "My new one is just outside."

It was later that evening that Rob and Jack joined Fred on the footpath. They were speechless as they looked at the brand new, top-of-the-line, shiny red Jaguar.

[1830 words]