

## THE FISH CAVES OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

BY H. G. SPEARING.



THE ROAD TO THE CAVES.



T seems almost like an anachronism to talk of English robbers inhabiting a cave, and sallying forth from it to lay the surrounding country under contribution; and yet it is not so very many years ago that this good old custom was revived in Australia, and flourished too, the robbers having been lucky enough to discover one of the most convenient and intricate series of caves that the most fastidious chief could have desired.

Away up beyond the wild Blue Mountains, whose precipitous cliffs offered for so many years an impassable barrier to the enterprise of the earlier colonists, away and on towards Bathurst, once of golden fame, there lies a large stretch of broken country covered with primeval bush, and even yet hardly invaded by the far-wandering squatter or the patient free selector. There, at the junction of two of its deep and narrow valleys, the wily bush-rangers were at last run to earth; and their pursuers, finding the gigantic cave at the entrance encumbered with the bones of innumerable horses which had been stolen to help carry the booty, and afterwards slaughtered for fear of their wandering home and betraying the secret hiding-place, christened it the Devil's Coach-house. A weird place truly by night or by day, and the effect is not diminished when

you enter it again, after hours of wandering in the wonderful passages that ramify in every direction around it.

It is difficult at first to realise that beneath its lofty vault shelter could be given to the towers of Westminster Abbey, or perhaps even to the dome of St. Paul's; but careful measurements are said to have been taken, proving that it is nearly 300 feet in height.

It is not altogether easy to trace all the steps in its formation, but it is certainly due to the comparatively rapid washing away of the rocks in the valley beyond. Like all other stalactite caves, it is formed in hard limestone rock, a vertical bed of which runs right through the country, and now presents, where it crosses the valley, the form of an immense wall several hundreds of feet in height, completely blocking off the channel of the main stream from its tributary valleys above. The rock on both sides of this wall was more easily eaten away by water, and the stream, having been obliged to find a way through the fissures and crevices of the limestone, has gradually enlarged, and shaped, and adorned them with their present fantastic beauty.

In bygone years—no one knows how long ago—the valleys must have been much less deep, and the stream must have run at a much higher level, and it has left its traces in the solitary "Carlotta" arch piercing the rocky wall like a vast window in some ruined giant's castle. Above this arch you can pick your way along the uneven top of the narrow ridge, but take care to avoid any fissures, however harmless they may appear to be, for in some places, if you test them with a small boulder, you will hear it go thundering down and down, sending out with every plunge a new series of reverberations, each booming more hollow and

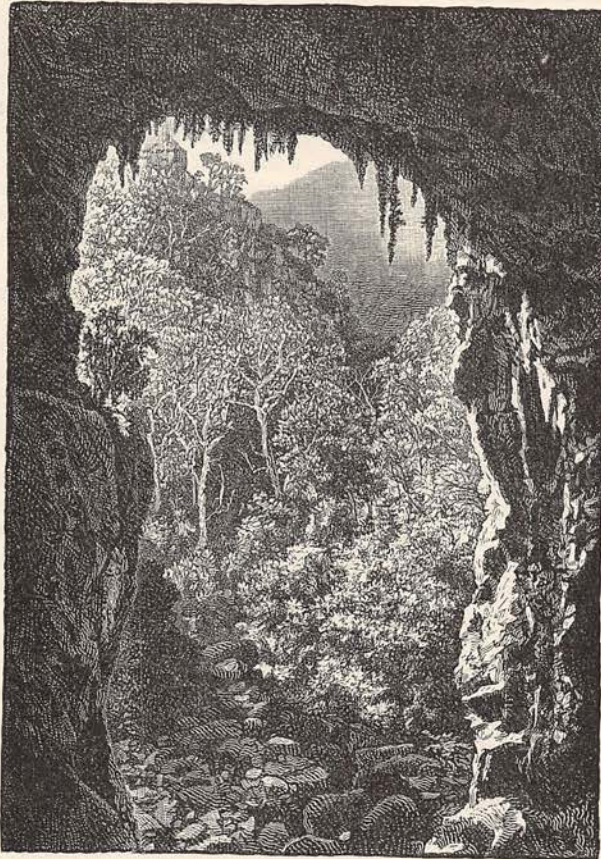


dismal than the last, until, just as the sound seems to have died away in the bowels of the rock, you are startled by a loud crash issuing from the mouth of the cave in the valley beneath, and the guide tells you with a quiet smile that *that* is where you would have gone to had you managed to slip down that hole.

This guide, Wilson by name, is a most interesting companion, and quite devoted to the caves. The Government of New South Wales have been public-spirited enough to take them under their protection, and have appointed him as keeper. At an expense of some thousands of pounds they have constructed a road through the bush and down the almost precipitous sides of the valley, and they have built two or three houses to accommodate travellers and their horses. No one is allowed to visit the caves without a guide, and great pains are taken to prevent them being spoiled by the smoke of torches or the profane hand of scribbling or relic-hunting tourists. Explorations are constantly being made, and with such success

you can wind in and out among stalagmitic bosses, some of which curiously resemble petrified judges' wigs, till you reach the Nettle Cave, a sort of ante-chamber to the dark vaults beyond. The stalactites here have a peculiar appearance like fretted Gothic work, each column being encrusted with thousands of little columns arranged around it with considerable symmetry.

The passages out of this are wonderfully regular, just comfortably broad enough for an ordinary man; and the roof is rounded off as if by artificial vaulting. The water-level of some bygone period is very clearly shown here, or rather I should say the water-levels are shown, for in various parts of the same passage the level varies several inches, or even feet. When the passage ascends, the brown line of the water-mark is found higher up; you descend, and yet the mark hardly ever seems to reach to the top of the passage. There almost always seems to be a portion of the vault unstained by the water. The guide pointed this



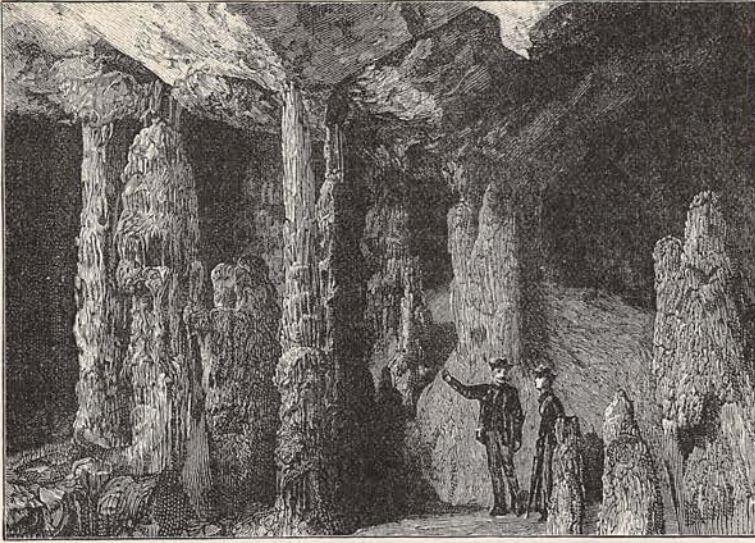
THE DEVIL'S COACH-HOUSE.

that entirely new series of passages and caverns have been opened up, so fresh and perfect in their crystal beauty as to far excel the most famous caverns of Europe.

Clambering up the sides of the Devil's Coach-house,

out as a wonderful phenomenon, but the explanation seems simple enough. In each undulation of the passage a portion of air got imprisoned at the top, and prevented the water rising any further, and these large bubbles of air being at different levels, the water-





STALACTITES IN THE NETTLE CAVE.

mark was naturally different. The brown coloration of the sides shows that it was probably flood-water, and therefore did not remain long within the passages; indeed, if it had remained long, the air would most likely have oozed out through the rock, and the water have risen to the top.

It is a great relief to your head and shoulders when you emerge from these narrow tunnels into a large chasm, although its gloomy heights are equalled by depths as gloomy, and far more dangerous. Some of these overhanging masses of rock might indeed fall and crush you; many have already fallen, as is proved by the huge blocks lying about in wild confusion, but one naturally disregards that possibility in presence of the much more evident danger of slipping down into one of the numberless rifts and fissures.

However, through most of the caves a very fair pathway has been made, and every precaution taken for the safety and comfort of visitors. Massive iron bridges have been thrown across many of the worst places, and tunnels have been cut so as to avoid as much as possible the necessity of returning over the same ground.

It would be very interesting to have a good plan of the caves, but I do not think that any reliable ones have been made.

Of the aforesaid fissures and chasms you can get a very good idea from one weird den to which access is now fairly easy, although it hardly looks inviting when your guide stops at the mouth of an apparently bottomless pit, and, pointing to a small wire rope ladder, remarks that "you can go down there if you like. It is said to be about eighty feet deep." As it is pitch-dark, there is no danger from giddiness, but it requires a little care to keep your knuckles from the rocky sides, and to prevent your candle getting to the bottom long before you do. At the end of the ladder is a

steep earthy slope, and at the foot of this runs a veritable river Styx. Issuing noiselessly from beneath a low dark arch, it flows rapidly past, and disappears in the mysterious depths of a gloomy cavern, which, filled from side to side with its cold, dark stream, seems to defy the rash intruder to follow its course even in imagination.

What a contrast it is to wander back into one of the upper caverns, and get the guide to light up his magnesium lamp and flash it on to the myriads of brilliant snow-white crystals that seem to have come pouring out of the crevices above, and running down from roof to floor, have become fixed and rigid in their magic glitter, like enchanted cascades in the bower of some vanished Sleeping Beauty. Wonderfully varied, indeed, are the shapes assumed by these incrustations; sometimes they even grow into long stalactitic pipes, pure and transparent as glass; and their stems are often branched and curled and twisted in the most fantastic manner. In most famous caverns the pristine purity of these crystal growths has been sadly sullied by the smoke of torches; but as torches are not allowed in these caves, these lovely, delicate forms may be preserved for years as pure and beautiful as they were when first the eyes of man rested upon them.

Another very interesting form assumed by these deposits is that of a curtain. Great sheets hang down some fifteen or twenty feet, with curious curved folds, and bands of red and orange following every curve; sometimes, too, the edges are even toothed and scalloped. They are so thin as to be quite translucent, and a very rich effect is got by a few candles skilfully disposed behind them.

I am reminded, as I write, of a curious property possessed by some of the stalactites. In a small secluded cave at the end of a short passage,



were hanging some massive pendants seven or eight feet long, and each of these, on being struck, gave out a deep bell-like note. Strange that such music should have remained so many ages dumb !

Not that there have been no inhabitants in the outer part of the caves. For centuries the rock wallabies must have made it their habitation ; and often you may find a projecting knob beautifully polished by the continual passing over it of these little animals. In some of the crevices, too, are to be seen numerous bones of smaller marsupials, curiously resembling the fossil finds at Cheddar and elsewhere. I discovered a few bones in some of the stalagmitic deposits, but I was unable to determine them. Perhaps some day patient research may unearth treasures there similar to those of Kent's Cavern or the Neanderthal. Certainly, in many parts the floor sounds quite hollow to the tread, and evidently layer upon layer of stalagmite has been formed at very different periods of its history.

In some of the smaller caves the floors have been broken through, and the underlying material washed away, so that there is a certain resemblance to a two or three-storeyed house with its front wall knocked

down. In these cases the lowest stratum is, of course, the oldest, and each layer represents a long period of rest, during which the accumulations of sediment from floods or running streams were covered up by these slowly-formed crusts of stalagmitic stone. It is beneath these that ancient remains are to be sought for. What a tomb for the ancestors of one of the lowest of the known races of mankind ! Mighty emperors have built themselves vast edifices, and sacrificed the lives and happiness of thousands to secure a resting-place befitting their grandeur and their might ; yet now the empty vaults of St. Angelo contain no trace of Hadrian ; Augustus Cæsar can but haunt a gaudy Roman circus, and lament his vanished mausoleum ; even the cyclopean work of ancient Pharaohs could not preserve their remains from the desecrating hand of avaricious Arabs ; and yet in caves like these the unthinking and unambitious savage has been treasured up for countless ages, guarded by intricate labyrinths, and shrouded in primeval gloom ; for him the living rock with silent tears still weaves a winding-sheet of crystal stone, and moulds a peal of crystal bells to sound his funeral knell.

## UNDER A STRANGE MASK.

By FRANK BARRETT, Author of "By Misadventure," "Harlowe's Helpmate," "Hidden Gold," &c. &c.

### CHAPTER THE TENTH. A STRANGE OLD MAN.



MR. LESTRANGE.

AS I had promised Redlands, I went over to Loecliff the next morning, and straight to the Court. There I found Miss Sylvester in her neat morning dress, decorating her rooms with fresh flowers from the conservatory. She was in remarkably high spirits, and, setting down the sprays she was arranging, gave me both hands, and held up her cheek

to be kissed—for, as I have said, we were real friends, and only stood upon ceremony in our business relations. I attributed the brightness of her eyes, the glow on her cheek, her general gaiety, to the influence of her grandfather, knowing nothing then of what had happened the preceding evening ; but when, after our greeting, I inquired about the old man, her countenance fell, and I saw that the source of her happiness was not in his society. So dropping into a chair, I

opened the question I had come about, as a good way of changing what was clearly an unpleasant subject.

"My dear young lady," said I, "I've come to talk to you about that poor young Redlands."

"Have you?" said she, turning to pick up her flowers, but without much concern in her tone.

"Yes. His success over this mining business seems to have turned his head ; and I am sorry to say it looks as if he were going to make a fool of himself."

"Why, how's that?" she asked cheerfully, still bending her brightening face over the flowers.

"Well, it seems he's smitten with this new teacher you have up at the school. At first I thought it was old Jigger ; but he swears it isn't she."

"Does he really, *really*, REALLY love her?" she cried, in a crescendo of emphasis.

"Oh ! he's mad—raving mad—about her, as you may imagine when I tell you that he declares he will marry her, and that actually before he knows her name or anything about her."

"Are you quite sure he doesn't know her name?" she asked archly, yet not daring to look me in the face, lest I should see the pitfall she was leading me into.

"As sure as I sit here. Why, he came over to Coneyford expressly to find out, through me, what her name is. To humour him, I promised to inquire, but in his real interest chiefly I came here to see if you and I couldn't prevent his making such a mistake."