



Gold fever

By C. Peter Van Gorder

On a recent vacation to Australia, my wife and I were treated to an amazing tour of an abandoned gold mine in Ballarat, Victoria. What secrets and heartbreaks that town held! One man's trials and triumphs particularly spoke to me. Here is the story of Jack McAuley.

Mary, I have decided that I am going to sell my business and travel to the gold fields of Australia to strike it rich!"

"Strike it poor, you mean! Now, Jack McAuley, I'll have none of that fancy dreaming while my babies and I go hungry!"

"Look, let me go and try it. If I don't find anything, I will come back before the fall. I promise you that."

Over his wife's protests, Jack sold his coal wagon, his route, his grandfather's gold watch, and a few other family heirlooms to get enough money to leave Wales in 1840 and travel third class to Melbourne, Australia.

After a long and difficult ocean voyage, he took the bumpy coach to the gold fields of Ballarat. There he was shocked to see how crazy the town was with gold fever. People were even digging

in the city streets, hoping to find their fortune. When they did strike it rich, they would often squander their money on saloon girls or gamble it away, and be broke again in a few days.

Jack was determined that would not happen to him. No sir! With the last of his money, he bought a mining license and the food, equipment, and other supplies he would need. Then he set off for a promising site.

The days turned to weeks and the weeks to months. Every day he would return to his site and dig into the bowels of the earth like a tunneling mole. Jack was obsessed with one thing and one thing only—gold. But he did not find gold. Instead he found hunger, blistered hands, sore muscles, and disappointment that grew into desperation.

At the end of the day, as he lay in his cot, his thoughts turned to Mary. Her picture,

framed with a lock of her hair, would be the last thing that he looked at before he went to sleep and the first thing he saw when he woke in the morning.

The second thing he saw every morning was his tent-mate, also from Wales, a brute of a man named Brian, or as some called him, "The Mauler." Brian had earned this name as a champion prizefighter. He stood a towering six feet five, and his fist was as big as a ham.

Everyone thought he was unbeatable until one fight that changed his perspective on life. Before he had been proud, surly, cursing continually, never speaking a kind word to anyone, but that night the unthinkable happened—he was knocked out cold. He lay in bed for weeks, drifting in and out of consciousness, struggling to recover. In his dreamlike state, he traveled through a tunnel with a light at the other end, met an angel who showed him his

entire life and gave him a choice to return to earth or to give up and die. He chose to live.

The experience remade him into someone that his old buddies could not even recognize. What would they say now, if they could see him kneeling next to his bed and praying like a little kid? Not having the heart to fight any more, he traveled to the gold fields to make a new start in life.

Jack went to his food cupboard to make his breakfast. It was empty. Turning to his companion, Jack said, "Brian, tomorrow I am putting my things up for sale. I'm getting out of here. I don't have enough for a ticket back to Wales, but somehow I'll get a job in Melbourne. Then I'll go home to my pretty wife and sweet children. I've got to go before the quartz fibers kill my lungs and there's nothing left of me to save."

"Don't give up, Jack. The gold fever has you. If you don't quit, the good Lord will help your dreams come true."

"All those pretty words sound good enough, but even the gold fever can't keep a man working when he is down to watery coffee and his last corn biscuit. I can't work the mine anymore. It is just too hard."

"No one is asking you to work without food. I have some grub left. Not much, mind you, but enough to get you through another day. Don't quit yet. Maybe tomorrow will be your day. Wait and see. Just try one more day."

"I can't take your food. What will you do then?"

"One more day won't make much difference to this iron-clad stomach. If you strike it rich you can pay it back—with interest if you like. That way it won't be charity."

"It probably wouldn't hurt to try one more day," Jack admitted.

"Now you're talking. Come on and pray with me. Get down on your prayer bones and let the floorboards feel your sincerity."

Jack felt a bit awkward about the whole idea, but he swallowed his pride and did it anyway. "But, but ... I don't know how to pray," Jack stammered.

"That's OK, I've been getting enough practice lately for the both of us," Brian said as he closed his eyes and began. "Lord, we are coming to You asking for a favor. My friend here, Jack McAuley, is down on his luck and he needs one of Your spectacular miracles. You know, the kind that You used to specialize in when You walked the earth. Like the time You told Your disciples to go down to the lake and pull out a fish and there was a gold coin in its mouth. We need one of those miracles tomorrow.

"You see, Jack here has left his wife and children to come here to find gold, so he could give them a better life, where the roof won't leak and his babies won't go hungry. Please help him to find some gold tomorrow, or he is going to be in a heap of trouble.

"Well, that's about all. We're counting on You and know that You will take care of us like You promised You would. Thank You kindly. Amen."

In the morning Jack set out to the field as he had done every day for the past three months. It was just another day. His last, he thought.

I'll just dig today to humor Brian. He did go to the trouble to say that pretty prayer for me and give me his last meal, so at least I can show him that I tried.

Nothing special happened that morning. He was about to give up when his eyes spied something shiny. He turned it over with his pickaxe. Could it be? He brushed away the dirt that hid its glory. Yes, it was a gold nugget the size of an apple!

He was rich! The rest of the day he was too elated to do much of anything else but whoop and holler for joy, but the next day he telegraphed his wife with the good news. She came on the next ship with her children. She and Jack began a general provisions store with the gold he had found. They opened up a shop in town called "The Gold Bug" that became very prosperous. Brian the Mauler was their store manager.

So when you come to the end of your rope, don't give up. Just look to God, follow Him, and the storm will pass. The rainbow will come, and you'll be glad you turned to Him. And maybe if you reach out to help someone in need, like Brian did for Jack, He will reward you for that, too.

But, you may say, "I will never strike gold like Jack did!" Well, if you look, you can find something even more valuable than gold. The Bible tells us, "How much better to get wisdom than gold! And to get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver." (Proverbs 16: 16.) Look for God's gold, and you'll find treasure where you never expected it.

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