

THE LOST VALLEY

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The lost valley by J. M. Walsh

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J. M. WALSH

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By
J. M. WALSH



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PART I.

THE POSTHUMOUS PUZZLE OF MR. BRYCE.

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVENTURE ON THE SANDS.

I CAME upon the place quite unexpectedly. Centuries of wind and wave had carved a little nook out of the foot of the cliff and fashioned it so cunningly that I did not see it until I was right on top of it. After the warmth of the open beach and the glare of the white road I had recently travelled its shade looked so inviting that I limped in under the overhang of the cliff and dropped joyfully on to the cool patch of sand. It was the first moment of contentment I had known for many weary months, and, needless to say, I set myself out to make the most of it. I was absolutely sick of tramping about. My left boot had burst and, by the feel of it, there wasn't too much left of my right sole. I had been crawling along the road since daylight--and for many days before for that matter--searching for a job that failed to materialise.

Jobs, it appeared, were just about as scarce as cool spots in Hades. They had been very kind to me at the last farmhouse. The good lady had given me an excellent breakfast and an extra glass of milk, had loaded my bedraggled pockets with food and had

finally put me on the road to the sea. Work, she said, they could not give me. They had put off two men the previous day. I might find something to do in the next town. She did tell me what it was called, but my thoughts were on my own poor prospects and I didn't quite catch what she said. On the principle that a rose by any other name would still have its thorns, I didn't ask her to repeat it. I just said, "Thank you, ma'am," in my best tramp manner and set off down the road to the sea. On the way my left boot burst and a pebble worked in through the opening and set me limping. To make matters worse the day was perhaps the hottest of all that memorable summer, and the glare from the white grit of the road played the devil with my eyes. I was very pleased when at length I reached the low sand dunes and dropped between them on to the wet sand of the beach. I walked along this aimlessly for a mile or so until the big hump of the bluff rose up over me. Then, as I have already related, I came across that heaven-sent cave and threw my weary length on its damp flooring of sand, determined to snatch as much peace and repose as I could before I continued my search for work.

I can't say for the life of me how long it was before I first sat up and took notice of the fat little man. He was bobbing up and down in the surf for all the world like some ungainly porpoise, and every time he moved he shot sunlit streams of water off his gross body. I've seen fat men in my time, but this one was just about the limit. He was all up and down—and then across. I know that doesn't quite explain what he looked like, but it's about the only way I

can describe him. He was short and tubby; if he had been any shorter he would have been a human Humpty-Dumpty. He was so obviously enjoying himself and getting the best out of his gambols in the water that my heart went out to him. He was ducking and splashing about, rolling and wallowing in a way that reminded me of a hippopotamus I had once shot at—and missed—in happier if not more spacious days spent on the lower Nile. "The Hippo" I christened him, and then chuckled to myself at the singular appropriateness of the name.

Even his bathing dress seemed designed expressly to add to his rotundity. It was one of those queer garments bearing a faint resemblance to a convict's uniform, and the wide stripes of it went round and round his figure like hoops on a barrel. It was so funny that I chuckled again and forgot all about my burning feet and my burst boot.

Presently he stopped his antics and looked over my way. He gave one glance at me, and then started to run inshore with short, jumpy little steps. Something seemed to have struck him all of a sudden, and I was just beginning to wonder what the deuce it could be when, out of the corner of my eyes, I caught sight of a pile of neatly folded clothes thrust into the cleft of the rock a little above my head. I began to understand then. I looked more disreputable than I really was; my suit was in the last stages of ruinous decay, while his brand-new clothes just above me would have been a gift from the gods to a man with less conscience and more figure than I possessed. He evidently presumed on the strength of my proximity that I had evil designs on his clothes, but he needn't

have troubled himself. If I could judge anything from his own figure I would have been completely lost in them. I didn't like to confirm his suspicions by running away now that I found I was observed, so I just sat there and waited for him. There was a piece of something that looked very like driftwood protruding from the sand close to me, and I kicked idly at it as he came pounding up the beach. It was set loosely in the sand, and a more accurate kick than usual knocked it out of its resting-place. Something queer about it caught my eye, and I bent over to pick it up.

"Whatever else it is, it isn't driftwood," I said to myself. "I'll bet——," and then I stopped short, for I remembered that my sole worldly wealth at the moment consisted of exactly three pennies. All the same I was right about it. Driftwood doesn't get the dry rot, nor does it come ashore covered with rich black loam.

"Somebody's planted it here," was my next thought, and my mind strayed to the panting bulk of a man who was thundering down on top of me.

"It's his. I suppose," I said, and looked up at him. At that precise instant he tripped and fell full length on the sand. I've seen a good many lucky escapes in my day—a man who has travelled the out-of-the-way places of the world from the Yukon and the White Nile down to the headwaters of the Fly River in the snow-mountains of Dutch New Guinea does see a bit of life—but the way that fat chap upset himself into the sand was the most wonderful piece of good fortune I ever came across. He must have missed death by a fraction of an inch. I saw him