

Hatter's Gold

by Renata Hopkins

I own a dead man's boots because the coal miners went on strike. Our teacher, Baldy Bremner, would say I was drawing a long bow talking like that – bending the truth into a shape that suits me better. But I'm not, you know. If the strike hadn't gone ahead, Mum could have afforded to buy me new boots, like she'd been planning. I wouldn't have gone looking for gold ... and I wouldn't have found the Professor staggering down the Croesus track with a bloody rag tied around his leg, the red drops going all the way back to his chopping block.



The strike started on a Thursday. It was February the 27th, 1908.

We were walking home for lunch, and I remember I stubbed my toe on a rock. I was hopping around, clutching my foot and swearing, and Teddy said, "You'd better not let Dad hear you saying them words."

Then Pearl glanced up the road and stopped laughing. "He'll hear you himself in a minute," she said. I turned, and there were the miners walking in a big group towards town. Us kids got a scare at that. Seeing the men above ground, in the middle of the day ... that usually meant an accident down the mine. I was relieved to see Dad at the front of the group.

Dad told us about the strike on the way home, making it sound like a good joke on the bosses. But when Mum heard the news, halfway through slicing the bread, she froze. "A strike?"

"Don't look so surprised, love," Dad said. "You know trouble's been brewing. Fifteen minutes for crib is an outrage."

Crib is what the miners call their tucker break. They joke that a man can eat his lunch in fifteen minutes no trouble, just as long as he gives up chewing and swallows his sandwiches whole. The miners were striking because they wanted half an hour for crib. Dad said it was high time they got it but the workers had to stand together. Mum didn't argue, but she did say the shopkeepers would stand together, too. They'd refuse to give anything on tick to the miners' families, and without Dad's pay coming in, our savings would run out quick smart.

Mum had been cutting nice thick doorstops for lunch, but after Dad told her about the strike, the next slices were half the size. I knew right off we'd be scrimping on plenty of things besides bread. I could wave goodbye to my new boots. I looked at the rim of dried blood under my stubbed toenail and thought of the burning, itching chilblains to come.

A few weeks later, Pearl found me getting the old gold pan out. “Where are you going with that?” she asked.

I told her I might head up the Croesus track to do some panning. I said it like the idea had just come to me, but Pearl wasn’t fooled. It’s like she pokes her warty fingers into my ears and pulls my thoughts out while I’m sleeping.

“You’re dreaming, Laurie,” Pearl said. “You’ll never find a nugget big enough to buy them boots. You can’t even win a game of marbles.”

That got me mad. I did the walk in cracking time, imagining the look on Pearl’s face when I proved her wrong.

I saw a gold nugget once, in the window of a jeweller’s shop in Greymouth. It looked like a tiny golden potato, and for the first hour, panning in Clarke Creek, I pictured a perfect little nugget just like it in the bottom of my pan. When you’re shimmying out the stones and gravel, you’re always just about to get lucky – if not in this pan, then the next one, or the one after that. I reckon that kind of thinking is what hooked all those men during the gold rushes.



Pearl was right about my luck. After two hours, all I had was a few piddling flakes and cramp in my leg. I thought I might as well head up to see the Professor. He’s the last of the old hatters around here. Dad says they’re called hatters because they never take their hats off – not even for a bath. But Baldy says it’s what they call any miner who searched for gold on his own, long after everyone else had given up. It’s true that the Professor keeps to himself, but not in a crabby way. Mum has a soft spot for him. She’d given me a jar of blackberry jam to take to him.

When I ran into the Professor without warning on the track, he was such a sight, I dropped my swag. I heard the jar crack – but wasted jam was the least of our worries. The Professor’s axe had bounced off a big chunk of firewood and chopped his leg instead.

“Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him, eh, Laurie?” the Professor said as I got his arm around my shoulder. I thought he might be going a bit doolally. Then again, he always talks in that wordy way. That’s why we call him the Professor.



“It’s Shakespeare,” he added. “Do you know which play?”
I shook my head.
“The Scottish play. I can’t say its proper name. It’s bad luck.”
I told him it was a bit late to worry about bad luck, and he actually laughed.
We set off down the track, me doing my best to take the Professor’s weight. It felt like the three-legged race at the town picnic: stepping on toes and trying not to go over in a heap.

“What’s the news of the strike?” the Professor asked. I could see fresh blood leaking through his bandage, but I told myself that if he could manage to chat, then it couldn’t be as bad as it looked.

“Still going,” I said. “Mum’s getting a bit maggoty having Dad under her feet all day.”

“I’ll be bound. But your father and the others, they’re thinking of your future. When you go down the mine, the working conditions will be better.”

I said nothing to that.

“I take it you don’t want a miner’s life?”

“A gold miner’s maybe.”

“You arrived a bit late for that, my boy.”

“I know. Just my luck.”

Down a coal mine, there are plenty of ways for bad luck to find you. You can be crushed by a rockfall or go under a coal tub. Or maybe an explosion will finish you. The year I was born, sixty-five men breathed poisonous gas and died in the Brunner mine. I tried not to think about where I was headed once I’d finished with school.

Instead, I asked the Professor about his days chasing gold. He did his best to answer, but he was starting to shake, and his breath came fast and raggedy. After a time, he went silent. That scared me, so I took over the talking. I told him how I needed winter boots, how Athol Crewe could spit from the schoolhouse to the fence. I was telling him that Mum had more jam at home and she’d make scones to go with it, when crash – the Professor went over, taking me with him.

I tried to get him up, but he was past it.

“I’ll run the rest of the way,” I said. “I’ll get Dad.”

The Professor grabbed my arm. Then he spoke. He was so quiet I had to lean in to hear. “The gold’s not just in the creek, Laurie. It’s all around us. Take your chances, son. Make your own luck.”

I thought he really had gone loose in the head. But I swear, his eyes looked clear into mine. “This world is golden,” he said. “I am lucky to have known it.” That’s what Baldy would call the past tense. The way you talk when something is over and done with.

“Hold on, Professor,” I said. And I ran.

I’d had it when I finally found Dad and Mr Higgins. I didn’t go back with them. Dad told me how they’d found the Professor, lying there in his bare feet. He’d taken his boots off and lined them up neat beside him. Dad and Mr Higgins thought that was odd ... until they saw the message scratched in the dust with a stick: For Laurie.

The boots are too big for me right now. But when the cold weather comes, I’ll pack the toes with rags. I’ll grow into them.



illustrations by Matt Haworth

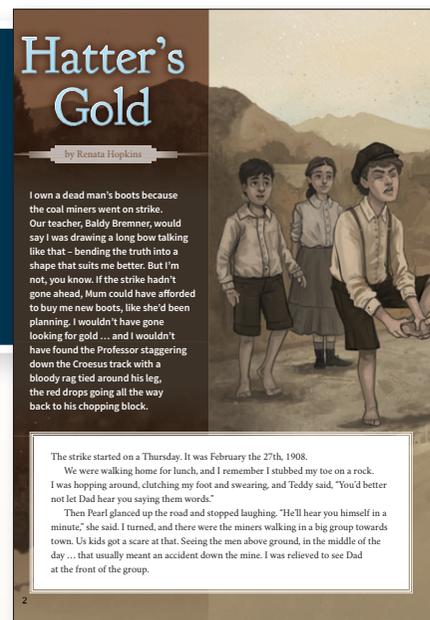


Author’s note

The Blackball miners’ strike in 1908 did happen, and it really was about winning the right to a longer lunch break. It was also about working an eight-hour day (the mine manager wanted it increased to ten). The strike lasted for three months, which made it the longest in New Zealand’s history. The miners eventually won. I learnt about the strike by reading the novel *Blackball ’08* by Eric Beardsley, my grandfather.

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Published 2015 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.

www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 16452 7 (online)

Publishing services: Lift Education E Tū

Editor: Susan Paris

Designer: Simon Waterfield

Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop

Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione

SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4, OCTOBER 2015

| | |
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| Curriculum learning areas | English Social Sciences |
| Reading year level | Year 8 |
| Keywords | Blackball, coal, coalmining, early 1900s, gold, goldmining, hatters, historical fiction, miners, New Zealand history, poverty, strikes, workers' rights |