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The Fish River Caves.
By Ludovico Hart.

As these extraordinary and magnificent geological formations are so little known and so seldom visited, even by the inhabitants in their immediate vicinity, a fact which is no doubt due to the out of the way position in which these caves-are situated, and the means of access to them being so difficult, a short description of a recent visit to them, and of their illumination for the first time by electric light for photographic purposes, may prove interesting to some of your readers, and may induce many tourists to pay them a visit during the coming summer.

Our expedition was under the direction of Mr. E. C. Cracknell, who kindly arranged the necessary details, and took with him the batteries and apparatus for lighting up the caves, without which some of the interior views could not have been satisfactorily produced, and I desire to take this opportunity of offering my thanks to that gentleman, and to Mr.Kopsch who assisted him, for the valuable services which they rendered in enabling me to produce several very fine negatives of these marvellous subterranean galleries. The photographic staff consisted of myself and my two assistants; Dr.D., who, by the way was not a bad cook, and contrived in many other ways to attend to our creature comforts so, long as the material lasted; and four other gentlemen who volunteered to accompany us, and of whose assistance in getting the heavy cast-iron battery cells and other material through the intricacies of the caves we were heartily glad.

We left the Redfern railway station at 9 a.m., and after a glorious trip over the mountains and through the valley of Lithgow, we reached Tarana with its peculiar mountain ridges, and were glad to find ourselves comfortably, if not luxuriantly, housed in the Railway Hotel, whose host and hostess were unwearied in their attention to our comfort. After a comfortable night's rest and a wholesome breakfast we made our preparations for a start. Our caravan consisted of three double seated buggies and a four horse wagon to carry the baggage which, by the way, weighed over a ton. At 10 a.m. we bid a temporary adieu to Tarana. After passing by that grand old ridge of rock called Evans' Corner the road is very hilly and heavy, so we decided to remain at Oberon, where we looked up our quarters at the house of our guide, Jeremiah Wilson, who is the father and protector of these caves. Immediately after refreshing the inner man on the following day, a start was made for the caves, Mr. Cracknell taking the lead. The ridges were covered with snow and the ground was frozen where it was sheltered the sun. It is a long journey, but all went merrily until the first buggy called a "halt". A bridge over a creek had been washed away, and no crossing-place could be found. So all hands quickly dismounted, and under the directions of our able commander were speedily at work, with hearty goodwill constructing a temporary bridge over the Buckentol Creek. Fortunately some planks which formed part of the old bridge were at hand and with these planks, some boughs of trees, and sods of earth, a new bridge was built, and the whole party safely crossed the creek, after a delay of but three-quarters of an hour. This bridge was completed perhaps, in less time than any other bridge in the Whole colony, employer and employee having the same interest in the undertaking and when the stately four-horse wagon made its appearance and was successfully driven over the amateur construction three hearty cheers were given for the enterprise.

Our journey was now resumed, and after ascending for another hour we reached the top of the ridge, and commenced the descent to Cambridge's Zigzag, and thence to our halting place at the Caves, about 1800 feet below – on the top of this ridge nature presents itself in one of her loveliest aspects; before you lies a vast amphitheatre, mountain after mountain covered with verdure broken with rocks as immense as they are grand forming huge precipices and beautiful valleys which no language can adequately describe, and which must be seen to be fully appreciated.

Our guide, Mr. Wilson is putting up a very comfortable house; but unfortunately for us, it was not finished. Baskets and boxes were taken out of the buggies and preparations were made to satisfy the desires of the hungry men. It was a rough and ready meal, but was being thoroughly enjoyed when they were disturbed by a “coo-ee, coo-ee” proceeding from Jerry himself who, with his wagon and the baggage had now successfully rounded the last turn of the zig-zag and – *nous voila bien arrive.*

As we were all anxious to lose no time we asked our indefatigable guide if he could take us into the Cave Imperial That night. Although tired after his journey and anxiety about our precious freight, he willingly consented. Attiring ourselves in the costume most appropriate for the occasion, and, each taking a candle, we started. Entering the Grand Arch by the western side we groped our way over the boulders, which in time of flood, form the bottom of the creek or river that in ordinary seasons disappears underground before arriving at the Grand Arch to re-appear 60 feet below in the Cave Imperial. Two ladders are now approached leading up to the entrance of the Imperial, at the top of which an iron grating and gate effectually bar the passage and puts one in mind of the inner gate of a gaol. The guide takes out

his keys and ushers us in. Strict injunctions are now given to avoid touching the beautiful and never-to-be forgotten formations as we passed along and above all, not to drop any of the grease from our candles, because it leaves a black, ugly looking spot on the snow-white limestone. After a little stooping and sundry squeezings through narrow openings and tunnels, which at times became very hard upon some of us, more particularly our commander and the doctor, we at length came to one of the most charming parts of the cave, now called the "Margareta." It would be very difficult to find language that would adequately render justice to this fairy spot as we beheld it, but to convey the faintest notion of what the scene was like when lit up by electric light is quite impossible, more particularly when when different, coloured glasses, rendered the walls and stalactites red, blue, Yellow &c. Whichever way you turn the most varied forms are viewed, bunches of stalactities forming clustered columns, reaching from ceiling to floor, recesses containing the most lovely formations. putting one in mind of some richly carved and ornamented cathedral, with its numerous little side-chapels and altars. You take up another position and your eye meets other forms which cannot well be described, except that it leaves an impression upon your mind that you have seen one of nature's greatest achievements. To be thoroughly understood and appreciated the places must be seen. We could have stayed here for hours but there are other beauties to be examined so we proceed, and jump down about three feet, another squeeze and we are in the Helena Cave. Here again are stalactites of every possible form, one might fancy himself in Pompeii or ancient Rome, for there are columns upon columns innumerable, one stalagmite resembles the Madonna and child, and by a little effort of the imagination, a variety of other forms may be pictured. Reluctantly leaving these truly lovely spots, we retrace our steps for a few yards; and, after doing our best to save breaking our bones, we enter what may be called the Vatican gallery of the cave. I fear that those who have seen this place will laugh-at this poor and imperfect description, but it is all I can give, and I must leave the task of doing justice to this enchanting spot to abler pens than mine. Our business is now to do our best to produce pictures of the various objects of interest here, and not to write about them; so if I only take my reader hurriedly through you must pardon me for the haste. Proceeding along the gallery we first come to the subterranean river, already alluded to, some 60 feet below us, which you are requested not to fall into, as it might cause considerable inconvenience and delay in getting you up again. Then comes the Crystal Rock, a marvel of beauty. A little further on sheets of drapery fall from the roof in elegant and natural folds which, when lightly tapped with the hand produce tones not unlike a silver gong. Still proceeding, we see by our candles, in the distance, a grand stalagmite about 7 feet high. This resembles alabaster, and is called "Lot's Wife." Now we pass the "Salt Pans" And the show-room and turning off a little we view some magnificent columns; then we find ourselves among a vast and varied collection of stalactites and, stalagmites, well named the "Mystery," and further on is a lovely spot called "Nellie's Grotto." Retracing our steps a little we enter the "Vestry," and then pass between walls sparkling like thousands of diamonds, and called the "Crystal Walls." Now comes the "Fairy Bower," the "Crystal Palace," the "Bride's Veil," and lastly, but by far not the least interesting is the "Gem of the West." Having travelled thus far we considered it time to return to the camp, which we safely reached very tired but highly delighted with our first night's excursion. There are a great many wallabies in the surroundings, which make a very pleasant diversion for sportsmen. Next morning after a hurried breakfast, every available hand, from the commander downwards, was told off to unload and carry up the iron cell battery and the apparatus into the cave. This was no easy task, as each set of six cells weighed 96 lbs., - the whole, together with the acids and the electric light apparatus, exceeding 15 cwt.; but everyone joined with willing hands, and the work was accomplished much sooner than was anticipated. By 2.30 p.m. the battery was ready, and to the admiration of all present, "Cave Margareta" first saw the dazzling brightness of the electric light. Our photographic apparatus was soon placed in position, the plates exposed, and in fifteen minutes the first negatives were said to be all that could be desired. I will not trouble your readers with the practical details of this work; very few can imagine the amount of labour and care necessary for the successful issue of our undertaking and I take the opportunity of thanking every one of those present for their valuable assistance, without which our trip would have been almost fruitless. The Helena Cave was the next photographed, and we adjourned at 7.30 p.m. for supper and bed. After supper a party was made up and our guide was again called into requisition, when several of the party, including the Doctor, the Commissary-General, and those who were not too tired, started off to take a peep at the Lucas Cave. The entrance to the cave is situated at about half a mile from the camping ground, and is reached by winding along the ridge until you come to a hole in the rocks. The journey is commenced along a corridor at the end of which is now a very good staircase cut out of the rocks, at the bottom one sees by the dim light of our candles an immense cave, masses of rock lying pell-mell in every direction, bringing to the mind all sorts of imaginary beings. This hall having been traversed we find ourselves in a sort of passage, rather troublesome to cross, which ushers us into the Cathedral; here are many fine sights of great diversity; from here you ascend, or rather wriggle yourself into the Bride's Chamber. Off again, climbing, squeezing, tumbling, until you reach the Couch, where a grand view is to be had by lighting a magnesium lamp. This is a sort of half-way house; then there is the Lurline Cave, the Bone Cave, and a whole suite of other caves; but as this is not intended for a guidebook I must not - trespass longer on your valuable space. There are also the Elder Cave, the Nettle Cave, Carlotta Arch, and the Arch Cave, and I am sure, when once seen will be revisited by all who have the time and opportunity. Our labours were resumed next morning, when several additional very fine negatives were added to our stocks, including several

views of the exteriors. The discharging of the battery was unfortunately attended with a large measure of discomfort to those entrusted with the duty. The battery had been in operation about twenty four hours and nitrous and carbonic acid fumes from the acid on the floor, were being given off in heavy voluminous clouds, through which the caves wore a dark appearance, and the lighted candles looked like red stars. All hands were willing enough to assist but no one could stand the fumes, so that in a very short time the surrounding space was occupied by prostrate forms gasping for fresh air. There was an old miner there named Reed, who had a large experience in underground work, and consequently was pretty well acquainted with the various kinds of foul avocations of that kind. He entered the arena with a view to remove the troublesome battery, but very soon beat a retreat with an exclamation more forcible than polite, having reference to the smelling effects of nitrous and carbonic acid combined. It fell to the lot of Mr. Kopsch to make a final effort, and he at length succeeded in accomplishing his effort. The journey back to Oberon was cold and weary, as might well be imagined after a night of snow. We left the camp about 10 a.m. and reached Oberon at 4 p.m.. A good hearty meal soon caused a healthy circulation of the blood in our limbs which were numbed with the cold. We were then expecting our baggage wagon, but at one o'clock we received word of a break-down 14 miles distant; but next morning everything was put right. We all started for Tarana at 2.30 p.m. and returned to Sydney by the mail train arriving on Monday morning, having been away just one week. Oberon is 18 miles from Tarana station, and the Caves are about the same distance from Oberon; the whole distance of 36 miles may be travelled in the summer in one day – but very few persons would think of visiting the Caves in winter; and we would have preferred the summer, but had no choice as the Commissioners for the Melbourne Exhibition were desirous of having the photographs with as little delay as possible to adorn the New South Wales Court. I must add that the guide, Mr. Jeremiah Wilson, deserved and received our hearty thanks for the really devoted manner in which he attended to us during our visit to these lovely caves, and Mrs. Wilson must not be forgotten for the part she performed in looking after our creature comforts.

This article had no accompanying photographs.