

The "Red Bluff."

AMAZING STORY OF A "SPIRIT" COALMINE.

THIS is a story of the Bluff at Point Ormond, St. Kilda (Melbourne), the scene of one of the most amazing commercial ventures in the history of Victoria, and certainly to be classed among the strangest undertaken by any company of so called business men anywhere in the world (says the 'Argus').

To-day the Bluff is a grassy knoll, where children play. Not so very long ago it was the "playground" of a commercial company that spent thousands of pounds boring under it for coal which its members had been assured at a spiritists' seance, would certainly be found in great and payable quantities.

Rearing itself suddenly from the flat foreshore of St. Kilda, the Bluff seems to crouch like some ungainly animal watching over the waters of Port Phillip Bay. It was known in Melbourne's infancy as the Red Bluff, but with the years the smooth sides of the knoll have become clothed in green grass, and the word Red has been dropped. The history of the Bluff goes far beyond the 20th century. The days of the first immigrant ships are recalled by Glenhuntly road, leading to the Bluff, for the name is that of one of the first sailing vessels to bring pioneers to the infant colony of Victoria. In November, 1839, the emigrant ship Glen Huntley, of 450 tons, left London with 157 passengers for Melbourne. It was to be an adventurous voyage. The night after leaving Gravesend the ship collided heavily with a small coasting sloop which came up out of the thick night.

The following night the Glen Huntley slid gently through the dripping greyness of a Channel fog and a submerged rock severely strained the bottom timbers. In the North Atlantic the voyage was further enlivened by a collision with an American packer ship, the encounter costing the Glen Huntley her figurehead, jib boom, and starboard studdingsail gear. But the most serious mishap occurred near the Equator, when the fresh water became badly tainted and the

food—bad as most of it was—became very scarce.

Within a week typhoid raged through the ship. Several passengers died and were buried at sea, and when the Glen Huntley at last reached Port Phillip Heads the disease was widespread. The anchor was dropped in the bay, and the plague flag was hoisted at the foremast. The authorities of Melbourne town hastily decided to fit up a quarantine station at Red Bluff, and, thanks to careful attention, most of the immigrants recovered. Three men died, however, and were buried at the Bluff. But years later, during reclamation work, the bodies were disinterred, and moved to St. Kilda cemetery, where a monument was erected.

Coal-Mining Spiritists.

The strangest incident in the history of the Bluff occurred during the nineties. A company of Melbourne business men, with a leaning toward spiritism, was formed to seek coal at the Bluff. The venture was controlled by a "spirit" known as the "Old Gent," who operated through a medium, a brilliant young man in a Government position. The organisation, which was known as the Victorian Coal-mining Company, began operations in 1893. Before this the "Old Gent" had advised some business friends, through the medium, to bore for coal at Clayton near Dandenong. The advice was accepted, but no coal was found. Another seance was ordered, and at this the spirit admitted his mistake. He then directed the firm to sink a drill on the Red Bluff, at St. Kilda, being aware from his own personal knowledge, he said, that an extensive bed of the best anthracite coal was to be found a good distance beneath the surface. He assured the gathering that all the members would be millionaires in very little time. He also advised them to look up a certain wealthy maiden lady who lived in the southern suburbs, and to see whether she would provide the capital.

This was done, and to the surprise of the directors—and probably the "Old Gent"—the lady agreed to supply the necessary money. A splendid diamond drill was obtained from the Atlas Company's works at Carlton, and the woman capitalist devoted herself to finding money for the enterprise. She believed very firmly that a magnificent coalfield would be discovered which

believed very firmly that a magnificent coalfield would be discovered which would give work to all the unemployed in Victoria, and which would be the means of lifting Victoria out of the depression causing so much hardship at that time. The first sensible step taken by the company was to consult Mr Reginald Murray and Mr. James Stirling, the Government geologists. These two made an examination of the Red Bluff and returned a succinct report. "There is no more chance of finding coal in that silurian rock than of discovering pearls in paving-stones," was their decision.

But the company paid more respect to the advice of the "Old Gent," and it began boring. It had acquired a lease of 50,000 acres from the Government, and from the outset the drilling was done with the utmost secrecy. A large galvanised iron shed was erected on the Bluff, housing expensive machinery. A high fence guarded the property, and for two years no man penetrated the hallowed ground without the permission of the directors. The privileged few who obtained permission saw only the drilling plant and a number of greasy workmen. They were given no details of the progress

another maiden lady, a personal friend to manage her interests.

The drilling continued until the bore was 3500ft. deep, but still there was no sign of payable coal, and the silurian rock was so hard that the drill could

make little progress. By the end of November, 1895, the bore was deeper than any rock bore in Australasia, and it was claimed to be the deepest coalmine in the world! The lady capitalist had by this time lost £3000 in drilling operations, and as she was unwilling to invest additional capital, and as the drill could make little progress, the "Old Gent" regretfully advised the directors to close down. So, on Saturday, December 14, 1895, the Victorian Coal-mining Company went into liquidation. With its cessation went one of the strangest enterprises in Victorian history.

of the work—if one can except the deprecatory remarks of the workmen.

Soon after drilling began the amazing thing happened. Coal was discovered! The directors were delighted and the maiden lady scraped money together with renewed joy. However it proved to be only a thin layer of brown coal of no commercial value. The boring was continued, the powerful drill eating down through sandstone drift, and soft earth, into a solid bed of silurian rock which became harder and harder in consistency as the depth increased. Meanwhile the usual company meetings were held, all board meetings being attended by the "Old Gent." He gave his "instructions" through the medium, who would go into a trance at a moment's notice and, speaking with the spirit's voice, convey details to the directors. Some months after the penetration of the deposit of brown coal, the maiden lady began to express dissatisfaction at the rate the work was progressing. Now the "Old Gent" recommended that she should take a long trip to Europe, and the lady obligingly departed. She left another maiden lady, a personal friend