

Springboard

into
Comprehension

6

Main Idea Letters from the Goldfields

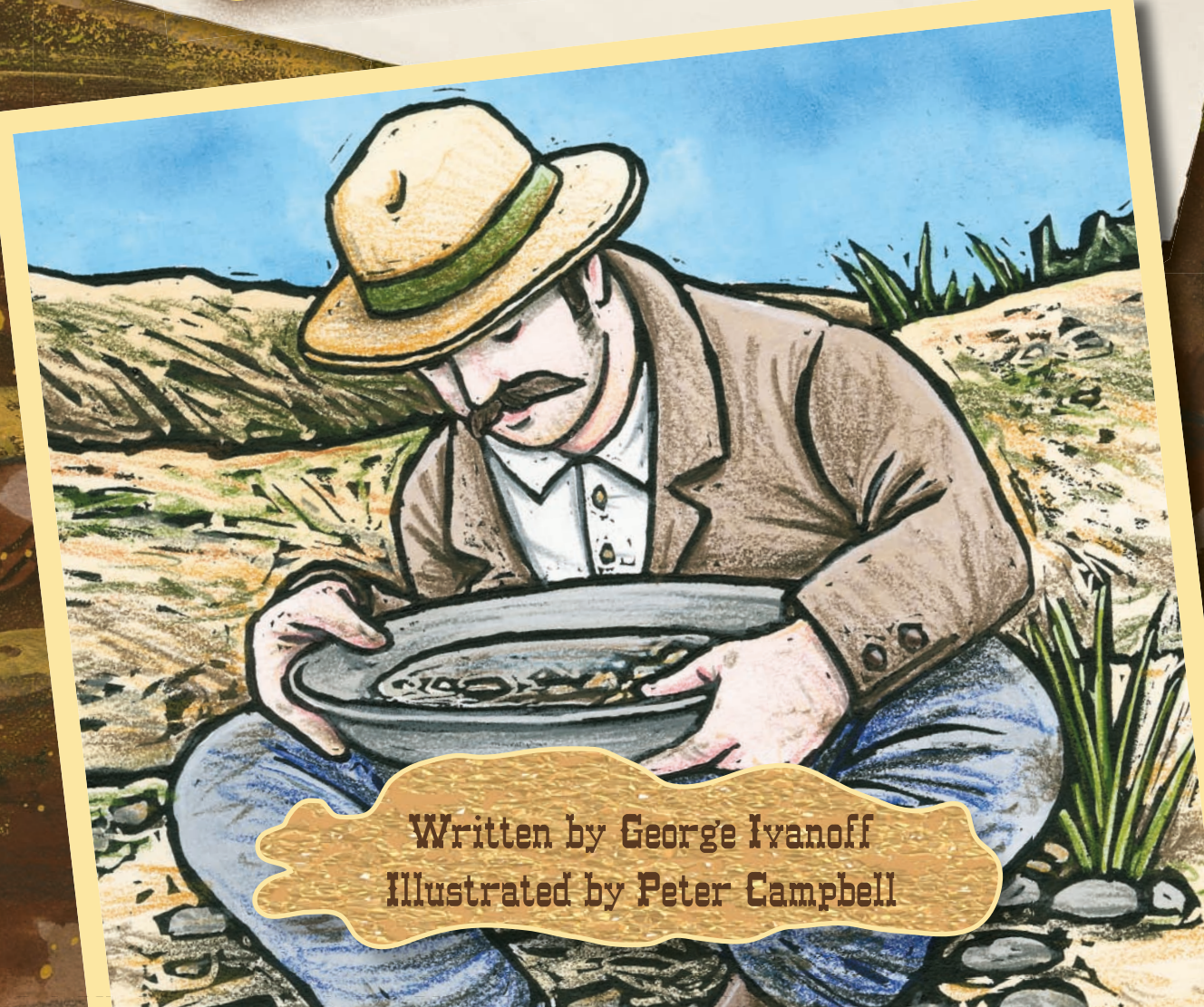
Compare and Contrast	The History of Looking Cool In the Public Eye Two Mines, Two Rescues
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RA 12.5+



Literary Recount

Letters from the Goldfields



Written by George Ivanoff
Illustrated by Peter Campbell

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Introduction

The fictional letters in this book aim to show what life may have been like for a variety of people who flocked to the Australian goldfields of Ballarat, Buninyong, Bendigo, and Mt Alexander in the early 1850s.

Letters

December 1851

To my dear mother,
I am in good health. The goldfields here at Buninyong are not at all what I had imagined them to be. For many weeks, drought made the digging extremely difficult, or so I'm told. However, it has been raining heavily since my arrival four days ago. I have found it almost impossible to work my claim – as I dig, the mud slides straight back in around me. Needless to say, I have not, as yet, discovered any gold.

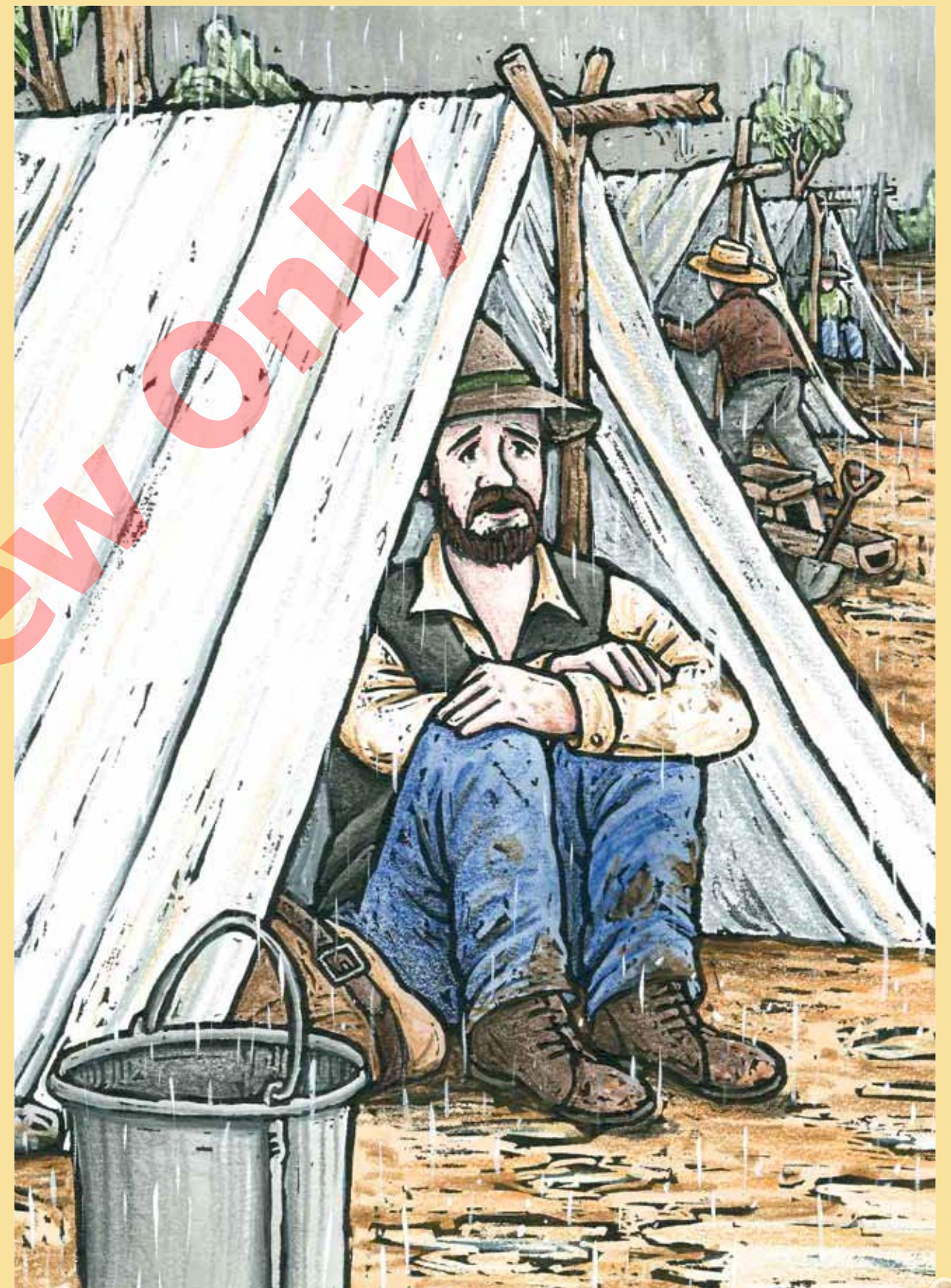
The fortunes of those I have met here seem to vary as greatly as the weather. I met a former schoolmaster yesterday who, in the three weeks since his arrival, has found gold to the value of twice his former earnings. I also met another fellow, a doctor, who has been here more than two months without a single find. The poor man is in debt and unable to pay his licence fee, yet he continues to dig, hoping to discover gold before the police realize he is without a valid licence. Here, doctors, teachers, and lawyers dig alongside sailors, labourers, and ex-convicts, and all are equally at the mercy of chance.

I am living in a tent, three minutes brisk walk from my claim, and most of the other diggers are also camped here. Some of them have been building a collection of small wooden huts further along the ridge. There is also a gold buyer's hut, and a general store is being built.

I pray for the rain to end and for good fortune to find me.

Your devoted son,

James



February 1852

My dear brother Tom,
I urge you to reconsider your recent decision, for there is much money to be made here. The Forest Creek area of Mt Alexander is rich with gold, and little equipment is needed – just a pan to sift the gold from the silt and a bag in which to place your findings. The only real expense is the licence fee. At 30 shillings a month it is rather high, but it has been a thoroughly worthwhile investment for me. If you do not have the money, I will happily lend you the first month's fee. You will, no doubt, be able to repay me several weeks after you begin panning.

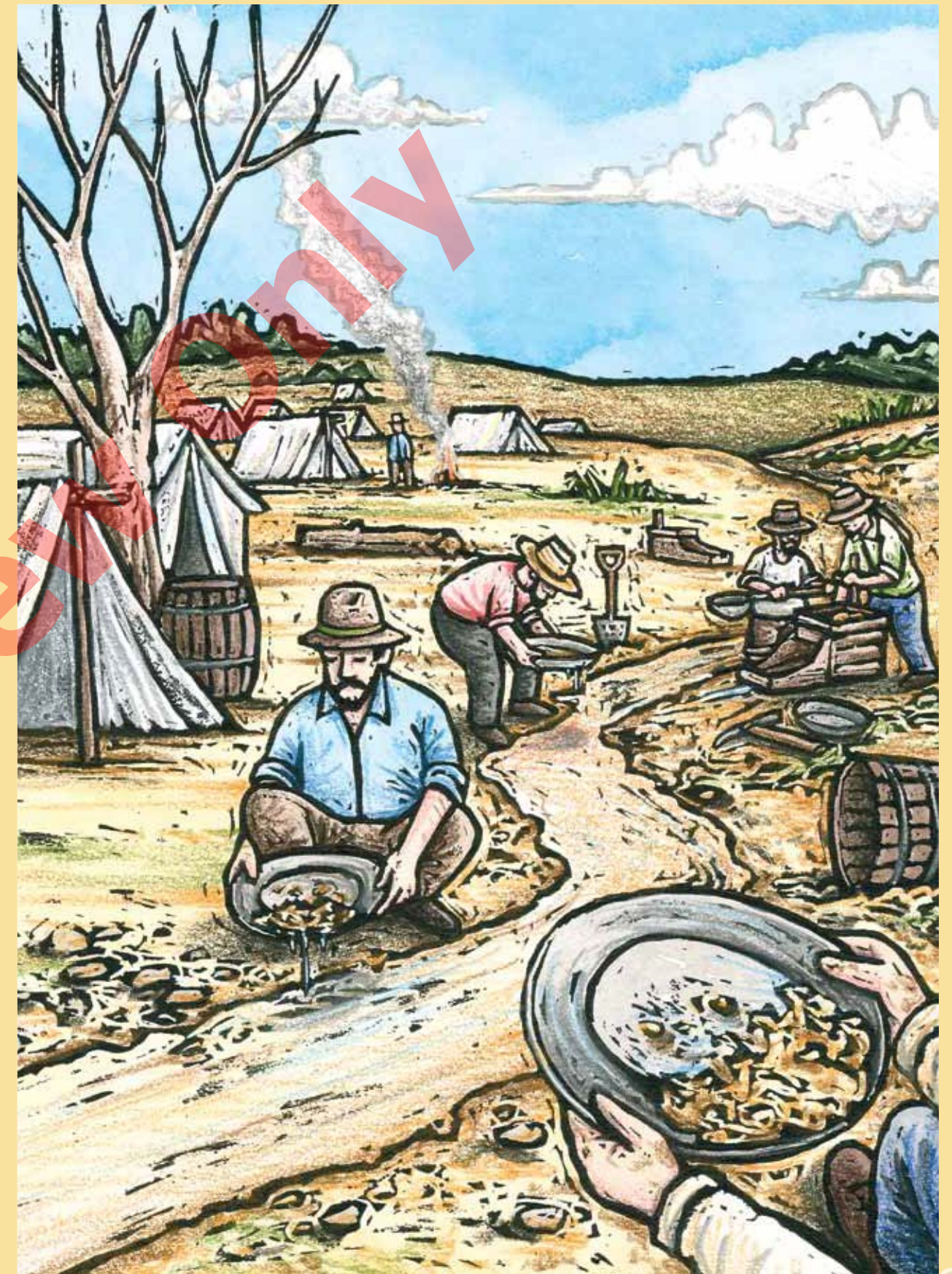
The area here abounds with creeks in which to pan, and the work is less strenuous than digging for gold, as they do in Buninyong. Certainly, digging may result in greater finds, but it seems to be entirely at the mercy of chance. It is the creeks, I feel, that are the best investment of time.

I am considering using some of my earnings to purchase a sluice or a cradle. With one of these devices, I could shovel larger amounts of silt, clay, and shale from in and around the creek bed. A pan is still required to separate the gold from the fine silt after the sluice or cradle has removed the larger rocks and shales.

It would be ideal to have a second pair of hands for this task. One of us could shovel material into the sluice or cradle, while the other pans out the gold from the silt. If we did this, you would not need a separate licence, either, as we would be working the same claim together.

Think about it.

Your brother,
Robert



October 1852

Gregory,

If you are thinking of joining the rush for gold, now is definitely the time to do it. More men come every day, and soon there will be more diggers than there is area to dig here at Ballarat. Conditions are harsh and the work is strenuous, but the potential rewards are a grand incentive.

I have joined up with a like-minded fellow to work a claim. William and I share the work *and* the gold, and one of us always remains at the dig to protect our claim from claim-jumpers. We must always be wary, for crime is rife here.

We take turns at the digging, which is the most strenuous work. When not digging, we carry the earth to the creek and separate out the gold using a cradle. We place the diggings into a cradle, which has a coarse metal sieve at the bottom, then we pour water into the cradle while rocking its contents from side to side. The fine sand and clay are washed away, leaving the larger rocks behind. Timber slats called riffles catch the particles of gold under the sieve – a simple set-up, but very effective.

If you decide to join the rush, there is space for you on our team, and an extra pair of hands would certainly be welcome.

Yours,

Jonathan



January 1853

Gregory,

Perhaps your decision not to join us on the diggings was wise, because it seems that all the gold near the surface has now been discovered. We are having to dig deeper and deeper, and there are days when I feel that I cannot go on...and yet I must. Our shaft now extends some 8 m down, and my back and arms feel the ache of every inch that I have dug. I am constantly in fear of the shaft collapsing in on me – already, several other diggers have been injured or killed when their shafts caved in. It must be a truly frightening way to die, and not a day goes by when I do not consider the possibility of this fate befalling me.

It is hot and very hard to breathe down there, and I fear suffocation. We have set up a canvas sail above the shaft, and a canvas pipe leading from the entrance to where we dig. If a wind is blowing, it is captured by the sail and directed through the pipe and down the shaft. This makes the work almost bearable, but on still days we can work only for frustratingly short periods at a time. Heaven knows how much further down we can dig before it will become completely impossible to breathe.

Jonathan

