OPAL:

THE GEM OF THE NEVER NEVER

T. C. WOLLASTON

Benj. M Shaub
Nov 1932

OPAL:
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Black Opal.

[*Frontispiece.*

Opal:

The Gem of the Never Never

LONDON
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The Gem of the Never Never

By
T. C. WOLLASTON
Author of
"The Spirit of the Child."

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

As it fell to my lot to pioneer in turn each new Opal field of Australia — Queensland, White Cliffs, Lightning Ridge and Coberpedy (excepting only the first Boulder)—and market its product in Europe and America, I felt I was better equipped than most to tell the story of the Opal : and the general and growing interest in the stone, now greatly stimulated by the Empire Exhibition, has encouraged me to make the attempt.

If my book is somewhat unorthodox in structure, it is but in keeping with much of the Opal which it describes.

T. C. W.

September, 1924.

Part I

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL GEM

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I.

THE HOME OF THE OPAL.

Australia is the home of the opal. It is only what one might have guessed, for it is just that kind of home, with the ample room and happy conditions, which enables such a radiant child to grow and express itself in so many different ways.

For the last thirty-five years Australian opal has been the *only* opal on the world's markets. Other lands have produced opal in the past, but it hardly seemed happy there. I shall only touch on them en passant, as they do not now count. Opal was not really at home in those other places, and had no business there.

In Hungary, for instance, it had been boiled in its infancy, and squeezed into tight little veins in the walls of a hard white rock, and, being cramped in there for so long, it became delicately beautiful indeed, but somewhat pale and anæmic. Finally, getting further from the sun, it "pinched out" and died—and Hungary has had no luck since.

Mexico produced what is termed "fire opal," but it had few twinkling lights, no tongues of living flame, and could hardly be distinguished indeed from kauri gum. Stones of lambent beauty it is true, as well as

that queer Girasol or fire opal, came from that country, but they also had been ill-used in their youth, and usually developed cracks on exposure to the air, and the colours, though mildly pretty, often faded off or wandered rather aimlessly about. Our Tintenbar Opal from the N.E. corner of New South Wales is a blood relation, was born under like conditions and behaves in the same fashion, and is therefore excluded from competition with pedigreed stock.

Honduras produced opal in veins and little pockets in the rock, rather watery or glassy in appearance, which did not pay to work commercially.

A pretty opal matrix came from Colorado and Arizona, though little clean pure opal, and apparently not in marketable quantities.

Where the opal grew in ancient days appears to be doubtful, but it was not only known centuries before Christ, but prized above all other gems, and became the symbol of hope and purity. Pliny is enthusiastic about it, and Orpheus declared that " the opal fills the heart of the gods with joy." But no one has written with sweeter appreciation than the ancient Greek writer, Onomacritus, who says, " The delicate colours and tenderness of the opal remind me of a loving and beautiful child." All down the ages opal has stirred the artistic souls and passionate hearts of mankind, the Romans as well as the Greeks being lovers of " this miracle and Queen of gems," as Shakespeare hath it in " Twelfth Night." Ruskin's appreciation, as might have been expected, was profound, and it is indeed hard to imagine any but very dull and half-witted people being altogether dead to its compelling beauty. " The

opal," says one, " is a kind of touchstone whereby the shallow and the arrogant are rebuked, for it hath no charms for them."

Wherever the Greeks and Romans obtained their opals they were evidently rare. Mark Antony, it will be remembered, coveted so much the opal ring of Nonius, to give to Cleopatra his sweetheart, that he banished Nonius for refusing to part with his treasure. I lift my hat to the memory of the excellent Nonius, and feel sure he was happy in his exile. Had his opal been an Australian stone he would have enjoyed many extra thrills, for in that happy land, as I have already declared, it is at home, and only in such a true environment can even a stone come to perfection.

The Australian opal is a child of the Desert and delights in the Never Never, for in its babyhood it paddled there in the shallow inland sea, which covered our vast interior like a silver quilt, romped with the periwinkles and mussels and fan shells, teased the sick lizards and captured their knucklebones when they died, and took possession of the little harsh sponges and the grey fluted corals, and slipped into every odd corner or snug little hole where the waters were drying up and where the sun could be sipped at leisure. It *grew*, grain by grain, to the music of dripping water, true and unhurried, building up a glad-eyed responsive nature like a babe does. And just as any active babe when its sleep is over kicks off its clothes in its love for freedom, any vigorous opal, feeling the clear warmth through the thin covering of earth, could, in its brisk impatience kick off the quilt, and bask on the burning ridges, where one may catch the gleam of its starry eyes now and then as one rides through those grey solitudes.

II.

THE MAIN TYPES OF OPAL.

There are four main types (or occurrences) of Australian opal (so far known), with characteristic differences, but each after its kind bewitching, viz., Boulder Opal; Sandstone Opal; Seam Opal and Black Opal.

Boulder Opal.

This variety occurs in thin veins, ramifying through hard jaspideous grey and brown ironstone boulders, varying in size from a man's fist to a man's body. They occur at varying depths here and there in the strata, and there is little to guide the miner to their hiding-places—and as they are heavy and the cost of carting them away prohibitive, the gentle services of the tomahawk are called into requisition for carving up these boulders, and the miners become expert in its use, hewing out fair-sized pieces of rock with faces of colour marvellously polished on the fractured surfaces.

Nevertheless, much of the opal is splintered and shattered in the process, and if the Boulder Mines are worked again, or new ones discovered, doubtless some intelligent effort will be made, in these days of portable motors, to introduce a less brutal method of dissection.

The quality of the opal in these thin veins is usually of a brilliant character, is somewhat harder than

seam opal, and rings like metal when freed from adhering rock.

The "Sandstone Boulder" and "Yowah Nut" might be termed sub-varieties of Boulder Opal, as they are all concretionary; but the Sandstone Boulder is of softer material and often a mere shell, or series of shells, of coarse sandstone and hard siliceous clay with layers of opal between, and occasionally the opal is found filling the centre and shelling out when the boulder is broken in cubes or squares like cakes of cracked mud in a dried-up pool. The quality is usually inferior, and in fact it can be laid down as a general rule that opal occurring in soft ground or in clay, or where easily deposited into large slabs, is inferior to opal formed in thinner pieces, or in hard rock or sandstone.

"Yowah Nuts" are tiny boulders that occur in a unique formation not far from Yowah Station, and about twenty-seven miles north-westerly from Eulo in W. Queensland. On the average they are not much larger than walnuts or large almonds, and of both shapes, and form a regular band about one foot thick, like a skirting board, round the floor of the mine. They are packed in much as pebbles in concrete, and perhaps seven per cent. to ten per cent. contain opal, either as a *centre kernel* (and hence the name) or as a thin jacket running between the outer coating and the deep chocolate ironstone centre — occasionally little veins traverse the interior, but *never* run out to the outer edge of the "nut." Frequently the centre is hollow; sometimes filled with a white siliceous powder;* rarely, with a loose, half-polished opal.

* An analysis of this white powder gave SiO_2, 60.4; $Fe_2O_3+Al_2O_3$, 27.8; H_2O, 1.8. *Vide* Jackson's Report.

The Yowah Matrix, constituting in places a kind of "band," is often extremely beautiful, as also the "kernels" themselves, the best of which compare with fine Black Opal.

Boulder Opal was discovered about 1875 in W. Queensland, or somewhat earlier, but leases were first taken out in 1878 by Mr. Herbert Bond of Toowoomba, who had the distinction of introducing this product of Australia to the London market, and a Company was formed with offices in Pall Mall. The "Aladdin," the "Scotchman" and other mines at Coonavalla, on Eurounghella Station, were worked for some years, and also the Yowah Mines referred to near Eulo. But the venture, for several reasons, was destined to failure, chiefly through the wrong methods of winning and marketing the gems.

Sandstone Opal.

It was not till 1889, when the first Sandstone Opal was taken by the writer to London, that the market was captured, and from that date Australian Opal has steadily gained ground till in the Black Opal it has become famous and reached a very high place amongst gems.

There was a difference between Boulder and Sandstone Opal, which gave the latter a good start in the race for popular favour. This variety occurred in the form of "pipes"—from the thickness of a needle to one inch or more, running through a free sandstone—which were nearly always thick enough to cut into well-shaped cabochon (domed) stones of pure opal, whereas Boulder Opal was usually so thin, as broken out, that the cut

A Pair of Gems.

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stone had a *flat* face and a backing of matrix or rock; and these heresies the market had not yet been educated to forgive for the sake of the brilliant colour. This came in time, to some extent, but only after the Australian Sandstone Opal had won its way to the hearts of the American people and had been hall-marked by them as infinitely superior to the ordinary milky Hungarian stone.

Seam Opal : White Cliffs.

This discovery was made in 1890 by a party of kangaroo shooters about 60 miles north of Wilcannia in New South Wales. It was the first instance of true "Seam" opal, and came out clean from the ground without any adhering matrix, in thin flat cakes from, say, 1/20th of an ounce in weight to 3 oz. each, exceptionally up to 6 or 7, and varying in thickness from a wafer to a bush biscuit. In vertical seams it is often much thicker, and also when below the "band" in the clay, where lumps occur exceptionally up to 50 oz. in weight, but in such cases the major portion is common opal with merely thin bands of noble opal traversing its desert areas.

Black Opal.

This now famous stone was discovered in 1903 at Lightning Ridge, near Walgett, New South Wales, by Charlie Nettleton, an old prospector, and strangely enough it took three years at least before its claims to world-wide fame began to be recognised. And this came, as usual, through America, which seems less dull

than other countries in appraising the worth of any new thing.

The characteristic forms of the Black Opal are locally known as " Nobbies," and the highest authorities declare they are pseudomorphs after sponges and corals, which give, I think, an added interest to their mysterious beauty.

The output of these Black Opal mines has been slowly dwindling for years, and all too soon, I fear, they will pass back to the dingo, the bilby and the mulga snake.

Coberpedy.

This is a comparatively new field discovered in 1915, situated at Stuart's Range, South Australia, about 700 miles from any other of the mines. It is of the " Seam " variety and identical with White Cliffs Opal, and will probably rival that once famous field.

III.

OPAL: A GEM OF THE FUTURE.

That the opal is one of the *gems of the future* seems to me beyond doubt. Consider the great progress in popular favour made by this stone since its discovery in Australia. There are no available means of estimating the value of the yearly sales from the Hungarian Mines before they closed down twenty years ago, but for the last half-century at least the total was negligible; while in the twelve years from 1891 to 1903 the Australian White Cliffs Opal Mines produced over 1½ million pounds sterling. That is not a fancy estimate but an official record, and probably below the mark.

Since then the Black Opal has made an even more remarkable conquest, and is prized to-day by many before all other gems. Again the opal has never been even passably imitated, nor does it appear likely it ever will be. And though fashions change, and gems like poets and musicians and schools of painting have their periods of favour and neglect, yet every natural thing of deep intrinsic beauty is bound to strengthen its appeal as true education spreads amongst mankind.

The fickle-hearted, the ill-educated, the rabbit-brained—they are a goodly host and are welcome to their superstitions. They are very nice people but of a

certain glazed type, with whom it is idle to argue, and you will realise at once that the glowing beauty of the opal is not for them. Its appeal is to the Artist and the Lover—to all whose hearts are young and true, and whose eyes are ever watching for that rare Spirit of Delight of which Shelley so rapturously sings.

No other gem can compare for an instant with the opal in its depth of colour, in its infinite variety, and in that changing mystery of loveliness, the secret of which it so sedulously guards. Those glorious lights, one must realise, are not the ordinary hues of the diamond and prism, but far softer and deeper tones which burn and glow with steady flame, that quiver and ripple and palpitate and vanish in an instant and gleam again in never-ending surprises of form and colour — meteoric shafts and pulsing star-glints and broad joyous flashes. "Interference" colours, I believe, you may correctly call them, but just how they are produced has not yet been finally determined. Now it is only possible, I hold, to compare a sapphire or ruby or emerald, through their long possession of the field, with this glorious living thing "tind and lighted at the sun."

The diamond is wonderfully pure, and, as a companion for every other gem, incomparable. It is a kind of guardian angel with a flaming sword, but it does not quite speak to us and set our own lamps burning. Is not its brilliance just a trifle cold, its fire an intellectual fire, searching and a little merciless? But the tones of the opal are homelights, warm and tender.

The pearl again is wonderfully soft and pure—a perfect thing—and those of the "rosy" tint are as warm and divinely toned as their destined home—but

where is the " infinite variety " of the pearl? I know it may be put with some force that " infinite variety " is not required of it, especially in its chief use in necklaces, and I entirely agree. The pearl is unrivalled for that purpose, on account mainly of its *infinite sameness* as well as its natural shape, its delicacy, its soft tone, its fine skin, its " oriental " lustre and its lightness. But opals also can be picked to match, and while it is possible to have a thousand opals all glorious and not two alike, yet necklaces can be cut and graded from the right material and matched to please the most fastidious taste. And then they are most exquisitely beautiful, harmonising in general tone, but showing enough diversity to give character to the whole ornament.

The pearl and the diamond will hold their places for ever, one can be sure of that, but I claim that the opal will draw up beside them to form a lovely trinity. Simple in composition, and all three symbolic of purity in ancient days, they together embrace all colours and every shade and tone of them, and every degree of brilliance and softness — from the steely flash of a bayonet to the velvet bloom on a crimson rose petal.

The sapphire and the ruby are very fine too at their best, their twin colours holding the eye captive and asking it to tell which hue predominates, but do they not retain their extraordinary prices more as counters in the rivalry of the rich than because they are held precious for their own compelling intrinsic beauty? There is, however, so much money sunk in them throughout the world that their synthetic replicas, chemically and optically identical, will probably continue to be ignored by the wealthy, who

will cheerfully pay up handsomely for what is dug out of Burmah and spurn that which is dug out of Paris.

Happily the freedom of fancy is not strained, any more than the quality of mercy; and we all may indulge our peculiar tastes.

The Binghis at Broome finding fig-leaves scarce, tried pearl-shells, and, noting the scenic effect, adopted them for good, though intrinsically they hardly form the ideal kind of rosette. Pacific Islanders favour dogs' teeth as ornaments, and I doubt not swell with pride as they watch a smiling rope of them dangling from the hips of their dusky brides, and it is not such a far cry after all to the glass beads of Birmingham and Pforzheim, and the painted wood from Czecho-Slovakia, in which many Australians to-day are content to deck their wives and sweethearts. It is a matter of fancy, of taste, of education, and, perhaps, of character.

But whatever the respective merits of gems may be as judged either by popular taste or by severe critical and mechanical standards, opals for very many will always stand high and clear above all other precious stones—the perfect expression of everyone of them at its best and brightest, yet in some mystic way of its own adding something which they lack. Ever since the days of my northern trek in my youth, I have never needed to " chase rainbows," for I've always had one in my pocket. In fact it has been suggested more than once that it would pay some old gouger,* looking wistfully towards the Never Never, but grown too stiff and weary to breeze off there any more, to peg out some of my old discarded working pants under Miner's Right!

* " Gouger " is the bush name for an opal miner.

Well, he certainly would get " colours " and possibly a " clinker " now and then, overlaid with seeds and bonedust and raffia perhaps, but I believe his chances would be about as good as " noodling the dumps."*

Strange indeed is the fascination of colour for certain natures—and amongst them you will find here and there some old Barnacle of the Bush, who will hold one of these exquisite twinkling gems in his big, cracked, horny hand and look down upon it as lovingly as a mother at her first babe. They are bright bonny stones anyway, and when one has lived, and, shall I say, juggled with them so long as I have, it is perhaps only natural that for me at least they should seem to be alive and almost as precious as a rose or daffodil.

* " Noodling the dumps " is the process of searching the tailings for gems that have been missed.

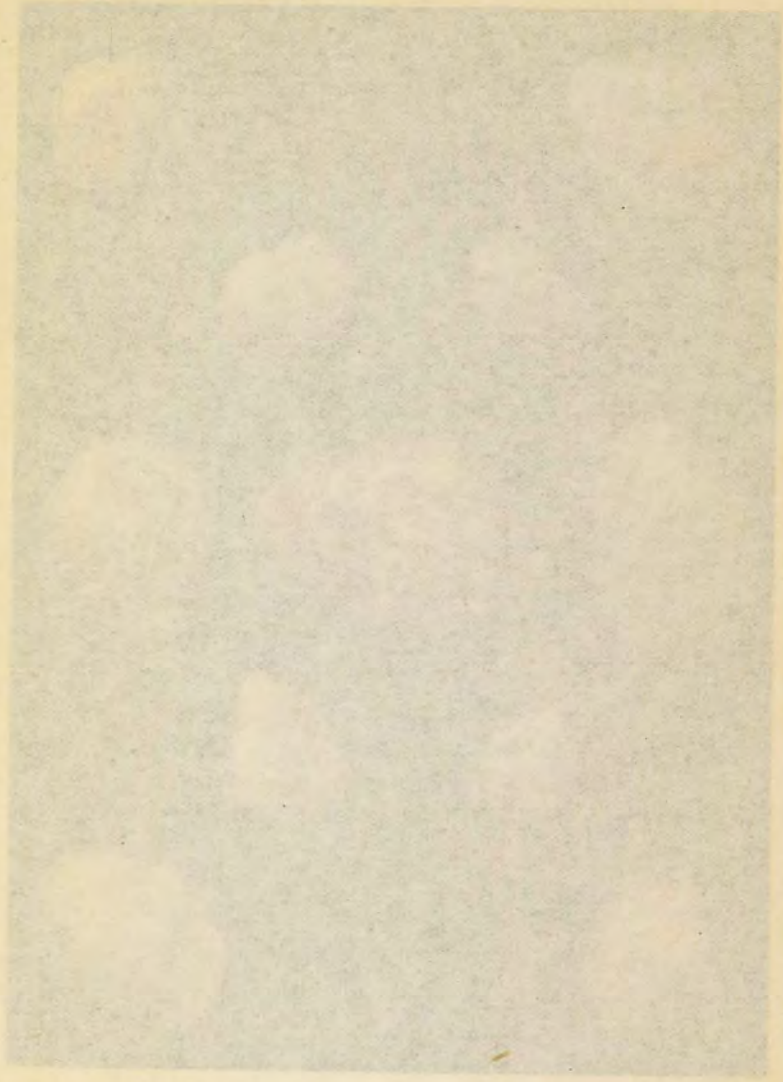
IV.

HOW THE OPAL CHOSE ITS HOME.

It seems to be pretty well agreed amongst geologists that in Cretaceous times a shallow inland sea stretched like a broad silver sash across Australia from the extreme tip of Cape York to the Great Australian Bight, covering all that land described as the Rolling Downs Formation and the Desert Sandstone which overlies it.

In the fulness of time, or perhaps a little earlier, a great upheaval took place, and it can be easily understood that after a few million centuries (more or less) any submerged ordinary ground not hopelessly lethargic, would appreciate a change in position, and, with half a chance, would kick vigorously to get a bit of fresh air.

There was nothing doing down there, and so the Rolling Downs gave a heave up, but did it a bit sideways, yet quite enough to feel the benefit, and so after a pause to get breath, and after consultation with the Desert Sandstone, they upheaved together and tipped the sea off, leaving little shining dimples all over the face of the country where the sea urchins and periwinkles could still play duckstone and do Morse signalling, so long as they were not riotous, but left that to larger game. They in their turn would become sub-



Ovulized Shells.

Opalized Shells.

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dued soon enough and gradually go to sleep in the mud, or if they had ambition they would grow wings in place of heavy stumpy legs and fly off, or grow legs, long and vigorous, in exchange for feeble wings, and stride or leap thirty feet where before they broke records in painfully ambling one. They could do whatever they liked it seemed, if only they would not be bothered. It was a time of magic and enchantment, and almost anything would do for a fairy wand if it was waved properly and often.

For instance, some pretty sea-things that used only to swim about spied through the sheet of water that was getting ominously thin, and saw other pretty land-things flying about above them and set out at once to grow gauzy blue wings. Then they became so eager that they began little stunts out of the water rather too soon, and were too timid to stay out long enough to get feathers—for as they flopped back the water would wash off the wee sprouting things every time.

But the pools and lakes kept drying up more and more, and yet these fairy creatures could hardly bring themselves to entirely surrender the joy of swimming, to be swathed up for good and all in such stuffy coats as owls and kestrels have, or to grow toes as well and hang with their heads down, so they finally fluttered away while there was yet time, back to the deep blue sea, and still kept by constant practice the delicious art of flying in that measure which in difficulty they had won.

But wasn't it sweet that the precious mantle of Desert Sandstone should be thrown over the Rolling Downs or Glue-pots, and not the Glue-pots over the

Sandstone, so that a happy and friendly home might be forming for the advent of the loveliest thing on earth?

How should they be so different—these two formations? At any rate, to look at and skate over. The plants and trees when they came soon felt the difference. I suppose that when the Rolling Downs was laid down there was more ready-made mud about, more beetles and seaweed and odd fluff—and far more squid. I feel sure the top spit of the Rolling Downs Formation is mainly ancient squid. The geologists do not say so, but then they are often reticent on many points about which we should like information. If they had been stuck as long and as often in the Glue-pots as I have, I believe they would tip squid.

At any rate, it is a blessing, as I said, that the Sandstone was on top, for it is in the Sandstone that the Noble Opal occurs, and that priceless revelation to man might have been indefinitely delayed had its home been completely overlaid by a thick coating of fish-glue.

And the remarkable thing is that the Desert Sandstone seemed to contract the habit of rolling, while the other formation got the credit of doing it. Perhaps the latter is waiting for all the Sandstone to roll off it first before it begins on its own. Certainly the Sandstone is doing it as fast as it can—though 25,000 square miles yet remain to roll. It hardly had time to dry its feet, when it pushed up from below, before it felt the breezy call of the new enviroment; the joyous explosive impulse of the chained thing set free, and forthwith began rollicking and dancing and rolling down off the Rolling Downs out of pure fun. Whether it meant to

go on doing it so long, I can't say. Some things, like some people, can't stop when they begin, and 19/20ths of the Desert Sandstone, we are told, has now rolled down, and I presume gone into the Cooper and Thomson and Diamentina and Paroo and Bulloo and Warrego and Darling, and into holes and caves of the earth, and been blown hither and thither and taken up by " whirligigs " and scattered to the uttermost ends of the continent, and is still having the time of its life. And incidentally while it was doing it, the Precious Opal was disclosed, released from that safe but rather close embrace and free at least to smile at the sun.

Now that is merely my fantastic and extravagant way of picturing to myself the solemn march of events up there in the past, but to correct any unfortunate impressions and to maintain a stricter accuracy perhaps, I hasten to quote from the Geological Survey Report No. 177, on the Opal Deposits of Queensland, by C. G. V. Jackson, B.E., late Assistant Government Geologist there. The Queensland Government have very kindly allowed me to use this report and several of the plates appearing in it.

Geological Survey Report.

" *General Geology*. — The Desert Sandstone rests horizontally, and with unconformability, on the lower Cretaceous rocks or Rolling Downs Formation.

" Of the latter, Mr. Jack has stated in his ' Geology of Queensland ' that it marks the position of a sea which, in Cretaceous times, divided the Australian continent into two islands.

" It covers an area which may be roughly stated at three-fourths of the total extent of the State. It extends westward from the Palæozoic Range on the East Coast, from near the heads of the McIntyre in the South, to the Palmer in the North; west of this line it occupies the whole of the State, save where it is unconformably overlaid by the Desert Sandstone, and where the Palæozoic rocks of the Cloncurry and of De Little, Cairn, and Grey Ranges rise from beneath it like islands.

" Westward and southward it extends across South Australia into Western Australia and New South Wales, but except in Queensland it appears to be covered to a considerable extent by tertiary rocks.

" As follows from its mode of origin, the Rolling Downs Formation consists of a series of sandstones, shales, and other sedimentary rocks.

" Of the Desert Sandstone Formation, Mr. Jack states that, after the Rolling Downs Formation had been laid down in the comparatively narrow sea which connected the Gulf of Carpentaria with the Great Australian Bight, a considerable upheaval took place, and the denudation of the Rolling Downs Formation followed, and must have gone on for some time.

" Unequal movements of depression then brought about lacustrine conditions on portions of the now uplifted bottom of the old deep-sea strait, and in other portions permitted the admission of the waters of the ocean.

" Finally, a general upheaval placed the deposits of the period just concluded in nearly the positions in which we now find them.

" There is abundant evidence in Queensland that the upper Cretaceous rocks of the Desert Sandstone Formation must at one time have covered almost the whole of the Rolling Downs Formation, and occupied a similar area of about three-quarters of that of the whole State, or 500,000 square miles.

" Its denuded remains now occupy less than the twentieth part (25,000 square miles) of the area over which it originally extended.

" The remaining portions of the Desert Sandstone are now only seen in the form of low ranges, tablelands, and isolated flat-topped hills, and such areas of the formation occur at frequent intervals, chiefly within the limits already defined in the western portion of the State. There are also other small detached patches and a large area covering the greater portion of the Cape York Peninsula.

" The deposits of precious opal are found wholly in these outlying patches of the Desert Sandstone, and the country within which prospecting for the gem has so far been carried on may be generally stated as extending from the southern boundary of the State to Kynuna beyond Winton, and to be limited on the east by the termini of the main trunk railways, or, roughly, a line joining Charleville, Longreach, and Hughenden; the mean width of the area would be about 250 miles.

" *Mode of Occurrence.*—The deposits of precious opal in Queensland occur almost entirely in the softer beds underlying the siliceous capping of the Desert Sandstone series, but in one or two instances the gem has been found in the porcellanite immediately overlying them.

" There is everywhere a tendency to opalisation in the Desert Sandstone; common forms—wood opal, semi-opal, etc.—occurring throughout. Precious opal, however, has only been found here and there in small patches.

" The opal which is found may be roughly divided into two classes, known to miners as ' boulder ' opal and ' sandstone ' opal respectively.

" Boulders are nodules of siliceous ironstone of concretionary origin which sometimes contain precious opal and occur in the opal-bearing sandstones and clay at varying depths.

" The opal-bearing stratum ' band,' in which the sandstone opal is found, occurs in the falsely bedded series of sandstones and clays at the base of the sandstone, and at its junction with the underlying clay.

" It is found occasionally on the surface, but generally at some distance below, the average depth of shafts being about fourteen feet. The deepest shaft is about 65 feet. As the term ' band ' is rather indiscriminately applied on different fields for the particular portion of the formation from which the supply of gem stones is obtained, it may be advisable to explain its most general significance.

" Between the clay and the overlying bed of sandstone there is almost universally a thin perfectly defined stratum, varying from a film to one or two inches in thickness of highly ferruginous and siliceous material which can be easily separated from either the clay or the sandstone, and which is generally called the ' casing.'

" Immediately above this casing the base of the

sandstone for a thickness of from two or three to twelve or eighteen inches is generally more ferruginous and somewhat hardened, and though there is no well-defined line of separation, this portion may be detached or broken down, and it parts from the main mass of the sandstone along a plane of weakness approximately parallel to its under surface or junction with the clay. This hardened portion is generally called the ' band.'

" Precious opal is obtained in various localities from the clay, from the casing, from the band, and from the main mass of the sandstone.

" Sometimes the mineral is found scattered over the surface being set free by the denudation of the rock in which it was formed, but, as a general rule, there is little or no evidence of the whereabouts of valuable patches of mineral below. Prospecting for opal is a decidedly hazardous business, and the site for a shaft is most frequently chosen at haphazard in the vicinity where some scattered specimens (colours) have been found on the surface.

" Exploratory drives are sometimes put in, but opal-miners, unless the gem is met with in the shaft itself, as a rule do very little driving, frequently abandoning their shafts without any adequate trial, and often never even piercing the strata above the opal-bearing land."

Some Queries and Theories.

But how did the Precious Opal grow in that friendly home, the Desert Sandstone of Queensland, and why should it always occur in the form of pipes?

In the concretionary ironstone boulders it runs about " any-old-how " as the miners say, and I imagine fills up crevices and cracks in them, but the usual occurrence in the sandstone itself is in pipes averaging, say, one-fourth of an inch in diameter and running for perhaps a foot or more, with the same colour patterns persisting throughout and " natural joins " every few inches, due no doubt to unequal pressure.

Quite often where the sandstone has become soft or powdery the pipes shed out free, usually in one to two inch lengths; and hundreds of them of equal dimensions.

Is it possible they were fossil roots of a former age replaced by opal? The replacement, though, seems too complete and leaves too few traces of wood structure, and it is more likely they are filled worm holes.

The Seam Opal, as at White Cliffs and Coberpedy, does not appear hard to understand—more or less irregular horizontal crevices in the bed have been filled with silica, and unequal pressure has cracked these sheets of opal into the flat pieces in which we find them, scores of them can be fitted up into one piece. Or possibly, perhaps, seams of gypsum have been replaced by opal? I have specimens which show partial replacement.

Again, one is interested in the question why in the same stone part of it is common colourless opal known as " potch " and part gem material. In knowing this we should perhaps know just how the colours are produced: what part, if any, the presence of water plays, and the reasons why some opals crack and the majority do not. All opals, like other stones and rocks, of

WHITE CLIFFS TOWNSHIP, SHOWING THE "GIBBER"-STREWN PLAIN.
Gibbers are rounded liver-coloured, weather-worn siliceous stones.

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course crack if severely weathered, but I mean opals from the ordinary depths common to the several fields.

I have never known Queensland opal to develop cracks, nor had we ever heard of Australian opal doing if at all, till in a part of the Lightning Ridge Field certain types of stone made an exception.

It is supposed to be due to super-hydration, but has it ever been proved? And what percentage of water can be safely held, and how, and is it a fixed amount in all good opals? Or can all the water be driven off as the late Professor Sir W. H. Church declared without losing the colour? Again in a 2-oz. stone, say, of alternate areas of "potch" (common opal) and noble opal from mere threads of both to bands of one-eighth of an inch thick or more—is the percentage of water and the density of the stone the same in both sections—the potch and the noble opal? And if not, how was the difference secured in areas between perfectly true and definite lines? That is, if the structure of the gem material is cellular or lamellar and the potch is not, that might account for the difference in the colour result, but how are the separate areas laid down with such precision? In other words, why don't they always, or often, *poach on each other's preserves*, as in rare instances they do?

In the main bulk of the regular *horizontal* Seam Opal and in the pipe formation in Queensland Sandstone, almost without exception, the precious opal runs *true* and occupies the whole area of the flat even cakes or round-pipes in which form it usually occurs—till with any alteration in the strata it weakens off irregularly, and gradually alters in type in its transition

into potch precisely as one would expect it to do. As its roof or bed alters slightly and the regular deposition (or replacement) is interfered with, so its regular pattern is altered, its "grain" becomes twisty, with blank patches, running out into dull purplish blue or grey with no play of colour. But in "verticals"—seams of opal out of the horizontal plane—there are always blanks of potch between the colour bands of precious opal. These colour bands are invariably horizontal whatever dip the verticals may have, so that from the stone itself its former exact position in the ground can be determined. It seems to me rather a curious fact that opal from "verticals" should always be of this character: and disappointing too in quality when cut. Naturally it is wasteful in the cutting, for the stones must be cut at right angles to the lines of colour, and these run obliquely across the edge of the stone and not lengthwise. If cut so as to make the edge the top, as is often done, it is still not pleasing, for the colour then appears in stripes, and thus most vertical stuff is best used for beads.

But I am not raising the point as a lapidary's problem, though it is that too, but as possibly shedding light on the secret of the colour productions and as to how noble or precious opal has been built up. That it was deposited by water seems obvious, but why in verticals should it always be in bands of colour alternating with bands of potch, and not uniformly occupying the whole stone as in horizontal Seam?

The bulk of the Australian opal boasts a pattern or "grain" as we call it. It may be in harlequin chequers or irregular lines and squares, in acute

triangular shafts leaning to a focal point, or in pin points or bold spots, in radial and fan-like segments or in Chinese writing and Egyptian hieroglyphs; but it is a *pattern* as distinguished from the floating colours in Mexican and other types of opal which have as it were no colour boundaries. And the predominating pattern in all Seam opal and in Queensland opal too, is in more or less regular spots and splashes. The black opal, largely pseudomorphic, is more wayward. In many of these stones the colour runs along fan-like radial lines or is enclosed within defined black threadlike boundaries. The colour pattern, it would seem, might be controlled by the manner and rate of the deposition of the silica grains and the size of them, as if filtered through the even, overlying sandstone in a regular way. But how the bands of colour in verticals should traverse the potch between irregularly spaced but perfectly parallel lines it is hard to imagine when the whole stone is hydrated silica. I would gladly give suitable specimens for exploitation to anyone qualified for the task.

Part II

ON THE TRAIL OF THE OPAL

ON THE TRAIL OF THE OPAL

I.

THE EARLY IMPULSE.

One of my earliest recollections as a chunky little South Australian nipper about the size of a penguin, was the persistent search after gems in which I would indulge whenever I could manage to sneak away by myself. The favourite hunting-ground perhaps was around an old limestone cave where the flat travertine paved the ground, and where after a shower of rain quartz crystals and bits of coloured stone could be picked up. Here I would wander round in magic circles murmuring an incantation which had many frills and variations according to the inciting mood, but the "burden o' the sang was aye the same and ower again"—

"O please, Miss Em,
Send me a gem,
Drop me a gem,
Toss me a gem"—

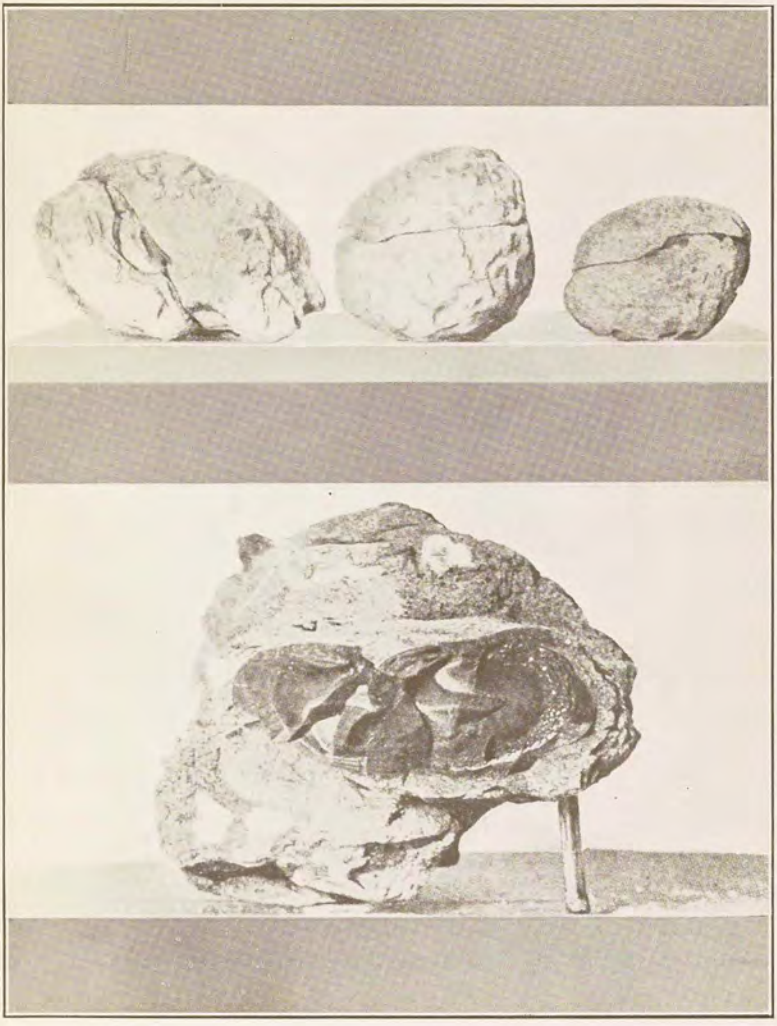
a prayer which, it will be seen, gives rather wide opportunities to the deity addressed.

Whether "Miss Em" was invoked merely because her name provided a suitable rhyme, or whether my youthful imagination had been fired by the rather mysterious being who at long intervals passed our home and stayed a night there, I cannot now say. I

think the latter more likely, as the lady in question was a striking contrast to any other human being in those parts. Swathed in layers of shawls and veils she hardly "opened up to your satisfaction" (as opallers express their hope in sending parcels), or at least to your expectation, for when peeled off these wraps disclose an intensely black head, with well-oiled ringlets at the temples, set on a rigid stalk ribbed like a bit of celery — immense slow-winking hazel eyes with long lashes which gazed steadily at the horizon from beneath black brows, while the thin-lipped mouth ran round the face in a half-circle. And yet the expression was but mildly severe, if severe at all, and when she turned her gaze fully upon you it was little more than a blend of mingled melancholy and astonishment, as of a convalescent poodle rebuked by a daring rat.

But just such an enigmatic personality it might be, nevertheless, who, if caught at the psychological moment and approached with the due degree of shy confidence, would toss you a gem with no more ado than another woman would hand out a hairpin.

I do not remember ever to have tapped a very rich pocket in my early youth through the lady's good offices, or a sense of gratitude, I think, would have impelled me before this to testify in public. But the favours received were quite sufficient to string me on, and fan that youthful passion for precious stones, so that when, later on, half a chance came my way, I scorned the cheap delights of the Survey Office and pushed out on the tricky side with Miss Em.



YOWAH "NUTS" OR "KERNELS"—
Tiny concretionary boulders which contain precious opal in the centres.
The bottom one is shown embedded in the matrix.

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II.

OFF TO THE OPAL COUNTRY.

Thus it came about that, struggling out of the back-wash of the burst Silver Boom, and after preliminary canters in the stone line with Australian "Rubies" and Tasmanian Sapphires, I found myself one hot Wednesday, November 21st, 1888, heading out to "spot" Joe Bridle and his newly-found Opal Mine on the burning ridges of the far Kyabra Hills.

And one of the whitest bushmen that ever boiled a quart went with me.

The programme was to hire camels from Hergott; strike across to Strelecki and on through Innamincka and up the Cooper to Windorah, and thence through Hammond Downs, Maroo and Tallyho to the Kyabra Hills, where my meagre information fixed the man who was supposed to have made the discovery of Sandstone Opal. My informant had seen him there three years before fumbling round, and that was the nearest I could get. It seemed rather a long shot—but when I shut my eyes I could plainly see Miss Em shake her oily ringlets and point with a long decisive finger towards the North Pole. That was enough for me and I breezed off—leaving with a pang my young wife and a babe of six weeks old.

ADELAIDE TO INNAMINCKA.

November 21st.—Nothing worthy of note the first day but the grill at Riverton, and the pretty township of Quorn circled by the Flinders Range. 111° in the shade.

November 22nd.—Flinders Range is a bold and picturesque line of hills which escorts the train for several miles and divides at Hookina. (The Range opposite Mern Merna reminds one of Marble Range, Port Lincoln side.) Saltbush country with stunted black-oak sparsely distributed, and gums tracing any creeks.

Good old "gibbers" soon began—the unmistakable hall-mark of the Never Never. These are hard siliceous stones like beach pebbles, smoothed by weathering and normally about the size of a man's fist. They pave the tablelands of the interior for hundreds of miles, and form the chief feature of the landscape—there is, in fact, often nothing else to form it.

November 23rd. Hergott.—Red clay plain, treeless and grassless. Stock dying everywhere. About 100 per week being dragged away from the bore and burnt. Found we had overshot the mark, returned to Farina and arranged with Mr. Richardson for two riding camels as far as Innamincka. There a third would be available for Tomtit, our black boy, out of a loading pack then due to start with Abernethy in charge.

November 25th. Sunday.—I had a poor kick-off. Buttfield, my mate, suggested I should save two days' travelling with the camels and go out as far as

Lyndhurst with a station-hand in a trap. I fell in with this idea—and that was only the beginning of the descent. The driver was in that affectionate stage of drunkenness when he is apt to repose on one's bosom and croon a lullaby. The road lay through deep red sand across desolate saltbush plains, and I felt I couldn't stand lullabies long under such conditions; but as a discipline for the coming trip I suffered them longer than I now like to recall, till at last I had to bump Jehu off his perch and take the reins and whip, for in striking at the horses he generally missed and hit me.

The night closed in very dark, the road was heavy and a fierce hot wind stung us with sand and grit—sometimes we were on the road, what there was of it—sometimes upended on a barb-wire fence; but my companion had no preferences. He waved his oozy, damp arms and waggled his foolish head at Venus when she looked out now and then from the murky clouds, for, like Teufelsdröckh, he "sat above it all"—he was alone with the "three stars" of his spree.

It was not an auspicious opening for me, but in the early morning I got two hours' sleep on the cart-seat and then went up to the station for breakfast, where Mr. Ive and old friend Jack Bishop gave me welcome.

November 27th.—The twenty-two packs came up and at 1.45 p.m. we ambled off. This was my first experience of camel, but I felt quite at home behind that lofty summit, rather to my surprise. The Australian rides *behind* the hump on a wooden

framed saddle and not on the apex as in the East. It is further from the treacle-like juice that oozes from the back of the beast's neck, and one cannot be scraped off quite so easily if the deft animal dodges under a straggling limb of timber—it hits the hump first.

At five miles, Frome Creek : silver grey wattle, titree and gum traverse its main bed. Sharp abrupt ridges of red slate—the scattered tiles lying in all directions. Picturesque country. Rock wallaby and kangaroo abound.

November 29th.—Made Freeling about 3 p.m. and Old Freeling at sunset. Pretty spot; hills higher with mulga, cotton bush, broom and gums—two huts in the valley.

November 30th.—Coolest day since leaving Adelaide. Camped mid-day at Trinity Well. But at one o'clock a furious hot gale arose and blew with incredible force all afternoon and night, bringing from the camping grounds — a central watering place—suffocating clouds of dust.

December 1st. — Made twenty miles by 2 p.m. and reached Blanchewater—a chain of large pools or miniature lakes of fresh water, with sloping banks thirty feet high. The largest one is about half a mile long, six to twenty feet deep and abounds with fish. Ducks, shags, cranes, ibises and water hens are plentiful, and the large gums that border the waters are white with cockatoos, the nature of whose shrill din suggests an hilarious attempt to justify a base deed. Snipe and spoonbills wade round the clumps of very fine green bulrushes, the rock

wallaby threads his way amongst the miniature crags, leans out at odd angles from crevices and small fantastic caves, and now and then a brilliant blue kingfisher flits across from bank to bank or darts into the clear waters to claim his share of the spoil. A pretty picture, surely, yet lying dead and dying along the track and near these very waterholes are scores of sheep and horses! A perfect paradise for birds, and wallabies can dig out roots of all descriptions and top-up with bark and gum nuts, and hither these favoured ones are drawn in drought time when their local sources fail; but the larger animals, alas, grow weaker and weaker as they nose over the foodless plains and at last hug the waters and starve there while the birds and furry night-beasts delight their little souls in fatness. It seems a horrid arrangement, but is mainly due to man's want of foresight and conscience.

Spelled here all next day, and shot teal and woodduck and devoured them, and varied the menu with fish. Glorious swim night and morning. Washed my moleskins and praised God.

December 3rd.—Lunched at Blanchewater Station three miles further on, and, before leaving, George Clark cut my hair with the horse clippers.

December 4th. — Deadly day. Twenty-five miles of fierce sun, sandhill and shadeless plain. Reached Monte Collina at 4 p.m. Horses, sheep and even crows dead round the well and others dying; water salt and putrid.

December 5th. — Short stages, ten miles—struck

Strelecki Creek; also ants, wasps and flies in myriads. Flocks of *gelars* first noted here, and thence onwards all over Western Queensland. Dear, friendly birds.

December 6th.—Passed Caraweena Station, but did not call. Camped at the Sawpits. Saw the first *bauhinia* tree to-day, which is plentiful further on; a large framed tree with thick dark green foliage, leaves not unlike the Judas tree. The long pods contain beans said to be nourishing, but we were content to let the camels decide it.

December 7th.—Two baby camels made their appearance during the night, and we spelled the day to give them an opportunity to unwind their legs. Next day they rode aloft on the maternal humps. Odd little fellows. Heat almost unbearable.

December 8th. — Horrible to see dying stock everywhere, to hear their loud harsh breathing and watch their patient misery. It stabs me to the heart with a kind of rebellious wrath. Who is responsible? It seems so callously wicked, that, to be accompanied with this awful daily horror, lies on my spirits like a suffocating shadow. We killed some sheep to-day with the tomahawk to end their sufferings. The air is tainted for miles, and the whole country is a roasting gehenna.

December 9th.—Heat unbearable, close and stifling; mosquitoes and ants beyond belief. Heavy dust-storm broke over us; lurid clouds, but no rain fell. At 4 p.m. moved on to Tinga Tingana, known as Burkitt's, made heartily welcome and stayed that night.

December 10th.—Mrs. Burkitt, secret disciple of Miss Em's, has a collection of agates and pebbles from the Strelecki. To have a chat and break camel monotony was refreshing. Pushed on seven miles after lunch, and camped at well in the creek bed.

December 11th.—Waiting for packs all day—they had the tucker! (I miss my sweetheart very much.) The birds are very tame, through the parching heat—greenies, minahs, crested pigeons (wongas) and zebra finches come down and drink from a jam tin I have filled from my bag. One little bird, a sweet grey-green little thing, rather bigger than a silver eye, came into Burkitt's tent where I was lying and sat on my chest and then on my face. I caught it and gave it a drink, but after I let it go out it returned several times and would sit on my finger like a tame bird, which I thought very strange.

December 12th.—Arrived at Toolache about 3.30 p.m., 118° in shade, with furious hot wind blowing. Tommy Rough, renowned far and wide for his profanity, is the presiding genius here—a kindly soul, interested (God help him) in his garden and his fowls, and not to be judged by his wild tongue, which seems perhaps but a natural product of this unrelieved expanse of red-hot desolation.

Duststorms throughout the night and a few drops of hot rain — then stretches of suffocating closeness, with mosquitoes as large as bees. The nights are awful.

December 13th.—Same solid comforts—including the water (got ancient 'possum's leg in my billy at first

dip)—ground thick with tiny burrs which our nap takes up and retains for our delectation during the day—(we ride on our nap on a wooden saddle).

December 14th.—Innamincka at last. Only twenty-three days since leaving Adelaide, and it has seemed like twenty-three years! Bought a water-melon from John Chinaman—God prosper him!

December 15th and 16th. — Letter writing, playing chess with the trooper and swimming in the Cooper.

INNAMINCKA TO WINDORAH.

December 17th.—Ordering stores and getting ready for start, which we began at 5.30 p.m., and made twelve miles by moonlight, passing Koonamurra Waterhole, largest on the Cooper, which abounds with fish and game.

December 18th.—Made Nappamerry about 4 p.m. Met Mr. Conrick, the owner, who made us welcome and prevailed on us to stay. Good stone house and outbuildings. What an oasis! Glorious fresh-water lake, rock-bordered and tree-girt. Swans, ibises, ducks and waterfowl of all descriptions fore-gather here, and Conrick allows no shooting near the station. Fine fish abound in the lake, and we swam after them for hours but caught none.

December 19th.—Swim at 6. Cooler to-day, but bad going—sand and porcupine. "St. John," my riding camel, fell with me three times to-day. Reached waterhole 7 p.m. tired out—aching limbs and sore throat. The hills, called St. Anns, have curious rounded tops and are of even height.

NEAR KYNUNA, WINTON.

The rock on the hill is a typical example of weathering of the Desert Sandstone.
The attitudes of both men and tired horses are also typical.

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December 20th.—Made Barioola by 3.30. Very tired and unwell.

December 21st.—Mulga came in to-day, and "Dead Finish," a straggling crooked Acacia (wattle), needle-like foliage and fine dark red wood—excellent pipes are made from the fragrant root-wood, but the upper wood cracks. A wonderful change has come over the country since yesterday. Fairly timbered and any amount of good dry feed; tussock and Mitchell grass. "Caustic" is a curious growth — up to two feet high, like light green macaroni or rounded sea-grass, the stems full of acrid milk—I do not know the botanical name. Bad road; gibbers all the way. Camel tender, and I walked ten miles on foot.

December 22nd. — Horrible day. Gibbers, flies and tender-footed camel. Twenty-two miles. Camped in dry watercourse. Caught trumpeter for supper in waterhole. As I fished a pretty banded water rat whisked about all the time—I nearly hooked him. Early next morning he was there again, diving and fussing round, and finally climbed up on a dry tree trunk that stretched from the opposite bank well into the pool. There he dolled himself up, curled his whiskers, massaged his pink nose, drained the water out of his back hair, and let the early morning sun soak into his ribs — the one blessed hour for man as well as rat, 4.30 to 5.30 a.m., fly-free, sometimes cool, usually still, bracing one to ensure the shadeless horror of the gibber plain. Presently I espied a large grey wild cat stealthily emerging from the stunted bluebush on

the opposite bank. Puss had been on the same enterprise before, and was coming on spec, as the rat was not visible to her. I petrified myself and rod so well that she did not spot me at all, although in full view. She crept down the bank and then paused at the butt of the fallen tree. I heard the softest "pop," like a bream lazing up, and there was ratto yards away under the water, the chuckling brat! He also had been at the game before. Blissfully unconscious, puss crept warily forward, stealthily flattened her body along the log, moving like a huge grey caterpillar, but so deadly in earnest, so tragic even! "Old Stripey" was coming back again in open derision, with the tip of his pink nose making rings on the water, and the silent drama tickled me immensely. The cool insolence displayed by the hunted one, blowing out as he did small beady bubbles now and then, accompanied by scornful little sniffs as he came nearer, made me rejoice so incautiously that I rang down the curtain all too soon, and puss, pausing for one agonised instant, dashed off, a mere streak of grey fur, into the saltbush. How often had the game been played, I wondered? And would "Old Stripey" fall a victim at last, and his humorous pink nose pay the penalty of its impudence? I fervently hoped not. At any rate, I was cheered all that day to think that in the "Lives of the Hunted" there was one that managed to extract a good bit of fun out of the business.

Passed Durham Downs to-day—a well-known station.

December 23rd. — Same old conditions; sore-footed camel; walked ten miles on foot. Mirages wonderful to-day; unbelievable till seen. We sing by turns every song we know to cheer each other on. The hours drag out so interminably we dare not look at our watches. The first semblance of shade near noontime we usually embrace as the signal to camp for our mid-day spell; one withstands during the morning numberless assaults of "craving-to-see-the-time," and then finally succumbing in the blessed hope of indicated noon, finds perhaps 8.45 a.m. registered! To "wait for the morning watch"—yes, I feel I know all about it.

December 24th.—Padded out 25 miles to-day; passed Tarco Station about one mile and camped at Tarco waterhole. Had a glorious swim. Fifty to sixty blacks were here netting fish. Like birds and wild animals they draw in to their blessed lands of Goshen in times of drought and trouble, and it is man's greed and carelessness and callousness surely which together are responsible for the wholesale starvation of animals introduced. We destroy their instincts, ring-fence them and let them depend on our catering — and our catering amounts to a few dams—and damns.

We exchanged some flour and tobacco for seven large "Emperor" fish weighing from 2 to 5 lb. each, and we tried to eat the lot, as the weather was horribly sultry and we could not bear to think of wasting such celestial food. We had to give in before we got half through. The trumpeters I catch here and there at the waterholes are mere

vexatious playthings, full of sharp bones, and only serve to tease one back to a lusty bite of tinned dog.

Whether we ate too much Emperor, as seems likely, or whether the awful oppression of a brooding thunderstorm was responsible, or both, we spent a racking night—devoured by mosquitoes, persecuted by burrs, and waiting for the burst of rain which never came.

III.

ANOTHER STAGE OF THE JOURNEY.

December 25th (Christmas Day). — Long, wearying day, oppressively hot—camels slow and weak. Camped in an old dry donga for lunch and pledged our wives in cocoa! More than once we casually alluded to the fact that we had "*something stronger in the pack*," and though we did not openly say so, I think we were both rather impressed with the unusual character of our self-restraint. For be it realised the sun had been boring into our necks for five solid hours, and the lunch that fell to our lot that day was damper and *tinned cow's heel*, jolted into a warm gluey liquid with froth on it! If either had given a lead—as we both, it seems, had secretly prayed—solid support would have been accorded by the other, for on later reflection we came to the conclusion that having gone so far as to *have* "something stronger in the pack" it was an error of judgment on such an occasion to leave it there. But we often benefit by our errors, and it is comforting to think that this may have been one of them, for it took rather more moral courage than we could well spare to attack those freckled islands of cow's heel, lying in their frothy sea of glue—that is, in the true joyous

Christmas spirit. A tot of Usher might have put a bead on our gratitude!

December 26th.—Made Gilpippie—ten miles. Heat intense; couldn't face it, and camped till 4 p.m. Pretty country just here, grassy flats and small red sandhills with bushes, clumps of gums and bauhinias.

December 27th.—Same old entry, "heat awful." Self and beast utterly exhausted on reaching Tanbar at 9.30 p.m. The sun went down rayless in an angry murk of blood, and a hot wind came fanning over the stony floor. I was desperately tired; partly delirious perhaps, for I seemed to be laughing or crying at intervals or talking to myself. Buttfield had gone ahead to pick a camp; his camel was much stronger, but my poor beast I had had to urge all day to make him travel at all, and had walked on foot as long as I could hold out. I shall, as long as I live, remember that blood-red sun sinking over the blackening desert, that sickening hot wind, fanning up as it were from Gehenna, the smell of smoking clay and burnt stones, and the sinking sense of despair. I was cold and clammy. I crouched on the saddle and tried to pray for strength to hang on, but nothing but meaningless words seemed to come—some of them approached the humorous indeed, as when I found myself repeating "bless the porcupine with understanding!" It was really a very fine original prayer—requiring much faith—but I didn't know it then. I repeated the words again and again till I got a gleam of business sense which braced me up

a bit. "You're going miffy at the top, lad," I said aloud, and, looking up from my crouching position, I could see that patient old head held wearily aloft plodding painfully along, and a thrill of compassion set my blood humming again. I could have hugged the old darling if he had been more adaptable for the purpose. As it was, I called to him to breeze along and hang it out, and I would pledge my honour he should have a week's spell at Tanbar.

December 28th. *Tanbar.* — A fine name, and fine people. The Hendersons were very good to us, invited us to breakfast and dinner, and loaded us with good things when we left at 2.30.

Tanbar and Nappermerry stand out like light-houses on our chart.

True to my promise, I left old St. John at Tanbar with Tomtit to follow on later, when both had spelled a bit, and I took Bulby, the black boy's camel. It was a good exchange, and the rest and good food of the day helped me very much, and we camped again, and had a long night and good sleep at the Nine Mile.

December 29th.—Early start. Made thirty miles, our record, I believe, to date, reaching Witcherloo, an outstation of Tanbar, at five o'clock. Meals at hut; usual salt junk. Hard days, but I was young and pretty tough. Met a big, burly fellow here with exceedingly dirty white shirt front, but with large diamond stud!

December 30th. — Hot, wearisome day. Reached Stoney Point (Windorah) at five. The whole

township came out to spy on the camels and criticise their odour and anatomy—both unknown there before. The blacks call the camel "Emunando," *i.e.*, "Emu-horse," which is pretty cute, I think. Dreary hole.

December 31st. — Township en fete. Races—beastly hole at any time I should say; super-beastly at race-time, as I can vouch. The boisterous hilarity of drunken men, or semi-drunken men, is wearisome and disgusting anywhere, but New Year's Eve humour, especially in a back township where races have drawn the crooks and spielers together from miles around, is a special type. It is difficult to get *far* from the madding crowd, because there is only scrub or spinifex about, and the crowd straggles along too. If you sit down the burrs stick and the ants bite you.

We knew we should receive marked attention later on when the fun grew fast and furious, being strangers, and we made our preparations. We first made a doss out amongst the spinifex (porcupine) on the rise beyond any buildings—spinifex, like adversity, keeps people off. Then we mixed with the riotous horde till towards midnight and had a parting glass — ostentatiously led out the stray goats that usually accumulate under one's bunk in these parts, and muddled our beds (as the children say) to show we were using them—which we weren't. Then, extinguishing the light, we slipped through the back window into the back-yard, ducking under buckboards and over piles of bottles on all fours, and through a green drain.

We waited in shadow of the pigsty, and peered out listening from that savoury vantage point to make sure the coast was clear.

High-pitched wailing, as of exceedingly lost chords, came floating on the rum-scented night breeze. It was the "moaning of the bar," and we took courage and faded off into the pale night.

It was better than being glued to a gin-case and stuck on the counter, "shouting for all hands," and listening to their dulcet strains.

We had scarcely laid aside the last pipe—"sweetest of the day"—and settled into the soft sand, when the storm broke and the stream of muddled, maniac humanity, with tins and pots and bullock bells and flaring torches came climbing out of the landscape, and we could plainly see them concentrate on the back room which had been ours. They were baffled there, and so began the hunt, and we thought the surging mob were surely on our trail. With wild whoops, cat calls and dingo howls they made straight for our camp, seeming much nearer than they actually were by the flaming torch-light. But on the way they chanced on some hapless humpy not yet molested and where a quiet family lived. Them with horrible yells and jangling they furiously baited, hammering on the door and threatening to pull Jock out of bed feet foremost, and his missus too, unless he "skipped up quick and lively and shouted for the crowd." But the lusty mother had been trained in quite another school, and with disconcerting alacrity she emerged quicker than they had bargained for. "Hot water you've got inside," she exclaimed,

" now try some outside." And with a deft swing of a big washing dish she soused the scalps and upturned gibbering faces of the crowd with a generous measure of scalding suds which had been ready on the fire. That was *her* idea of humour just then, and a good deal can be said for her point of view.

At any rate it diverted the crowd, and we blessed her as we settled down in peace.

The Drought Breaks.

January 1st, 1899.—Telegram from Home! All well with wife and babe! What a transformation! Windorah " Royal " had suddenly become the Ritz, the green sluggish drain was the Danube, or the Rhine at Schaffhausen; the rank old billy-goat a saintly Mahatma! It really shows it's the *way* we look at things that counts—and Ruskin, you remember, recommends anyone grown stale with sight-seeing to hang the head down and look between his legs in order to appraise the true value of the landscape. Races—(and fights) all day.

January 2nd.—More races — and more fights. The crowd would leave the races to see the fights, and vice versa, and there was general disintegration—and enjoyment. But we felt it was a time for self-discipline, so we hooked the camels off the roly-poly* and pushed out at 5.30; consoled by the re-

* Roly-poly is an odd bush-like growth as round and large as a pumpkin. It is prickly when dry, but camels are not fussy and munch it up. It is a curious sight to see scores of these straw-coloured grass balls bowling along the plain in a hot wind, and sometimes as they roll past a camel will snap one up, as if trained at short slip, and transfer it into his system as he ambles along.

flection that we might strike better places, but couldn't strike worse.

We had not gone far before a sharp thunderstorm broke over us, and then—then—could it be possible?—steady rain set in!

The drought breaks—Gloria in excelsis!

Soaked to the skin but exultant, we swished on, singing "O Dinney! come out of the wet." The night was very dark and the camels couldn't get their sea-legs; they flopped about like walruses, and when we reached "The Crossing" we decided to camp. It is a mud hovel, at the crossing of the Cooper, and the publican and his spouse were away at the races of course. The "Hotel" had been left in charge of a Yellow-Billy, and when a "push" came along (en route for the races too) and found such an easy win, they promptly relieved the half-caste, and now lay about in all stages of argumentative, vocal and lachrymose intoxication. It was a strange scene; any imaginative person unused to Never Never conditions might easily have concluded that he was on the Ark, and that Noah was wetting the new baby's head, and had invited the menagerie to join in—for dogs, goats, cats, fowls and a few lambs were huddled inside (to get out of the rain)—under the tables and bunks, in the fireplace and in every corner, and a flaring "slush lamp" lit up the weird picture. One great hairy lout lay on the broad of his back on the bumpy mud floor singing love songs, and a wet dog was curled on his chest shivering—more perhaps at the sentiments so frankly expressed than because of the cold.

The livestock did not agree too well amongst themselves—there were periods of calm and then seismic movements, and a goat would walk on one's neck or a rooster shake its wet tail in one's ear. Altogether it was rather unrestful, and we wished we had come over to reconnoitre before shooting our packs. Sleep was impossible; it was cleaner and less damp in the mud and rain, and we crept out with a welcome for both, in our relief from the strange conditions within. It should be explained that a bush "pub" of this grade is made of logs and mud, has one large space called the "Coffee Room" from which there are apertures to bedrooms and also to the bar. There are *no doors*, and the floors are all clay, worn into holes. The bunks are made of bags and mulga, and the roof is thatch or iron, or both in places, or patched from any old material lying about. There are three such "hotels" in this district to my limited knowledge—"Pinthara," "Tallyho" and "The Crossing," and those who are responsible for granting them licences should be sentenced to live in these hovels every annual holiday they take. Animals—chiefly goats and fowls—can come into one's bedroom at any time, day or night, and do, and bunt you in the small of the back as you dream, or snore on your pillow as only a whiffling rooster can.

I had come to the conclusion already that chasing the twinkling gem was not all moss and humming birds, and I tightened my belt and put another half-hitch on my courage.

January 4th. — Reached Tenham at lunch, and then pushed on to Maroo. Mr. and Mrs. McGeorge made us very comfortable. A poor place but fine people, and that makes the difference. Clean beds with sheets (ye gods!) and food free from the multitudinous army of biting, buzzing and crawling insects, and from burrs and sand.

January 5th.—Lovely day!—and we were just the boys who could prize it! "Hardship is worth while" we said.

January 6th.—Got away at 2.30 and made sixteen miles. Took with us Old Stanley, whom we had dug up at Stony Point: supposed to be a crafty bushman and to know the opal country—but a poor discovery, as will later appear. Camped at pools in the lignum, where the mosquitoes and frogs made sleep impossible for themselves and us.

On the break up of a big drought the channels and billabongs,* dongas and gilgais,* the lignum swamps and the whole flooded country palpitate with green frogs—and if the magicians of ancient Egypt had known of a similar patch handy they would have needed no enchantment to flood Pharaoh out with them. As I lay in a fevered agony all night long, pierced by their shrill, raucous and rasping emanations, I thought of the dear Onk at home—the drooping willows, the clean sand, the smell of water-mint, and the reed-warblers in the bending canes! "Swift flowing Mincius crowned with vocal reeds"—I said the lines over and over till at last their sweet music,

* Larger and smaller swampy backwash or flood pools.

like some divine anæsthetic, gradually shut out the oozy gilgai and the vocal frogs.

It would hardly be impartial of me if I did not spare a line for the mosquitoes. Hereabouts they are chiefly Scotch Greys with long chequered legs and a tendency to knock-knees. They twang the harp a good deal and walk about sampling with their divining rod before they put down a bore. This gives one a fair chance to speed up their circulation. But in the swampy ground it is the black, stumpy, bandy-legged little beggars, silent as Satan, that stab and burn so wickedly, and they are as the sands of the sea-shore—innumerable.

January 7th.—I swopped beasts with Stanley, and rode his brumby on to Tallyho—log and mud shanty, mud floors, doorless rooms.

The Last Lap.

January 8th.—After riding to Kyabra Station for missing plans, returned to Tallyho in time for lunch, and then—at last—we pushed out for Bridle's Opal Mine twenty miles west, with our immediate destiny in the hands of our weak-eyed guide.

He proved to be weak-witted and weak-kneed as well, and got us very effectively bushed, even before sundown, and we deposed him, and camped at dark amongst thick mulga and gibbers.

January 9th.—Next morning we were moving at 4.30, and as Stanley had an iron-hoofed brumby we sent him off to strike Joe's camp, if he could, and bring back water—but more in hope of getting rid

of him than in faith that he would strike anything but Tallyho.

Strange how often it occurs that those who know the risks of an enterprise and religiously warn others, themselves fail to adopt the measures they advocate! They are caught napping.

Buttfield had spent most of his time in the bush, and was never tired of rating the folly of those who take chances with the water supply, but here, because we had but twenty miles to cover, we came out with one day's supply. Of course he packed on Stanley, but Stanley was about as useful to pack on as a house of cards.

We were up against it. The country was far too rough for camels to travel long—in fact, owing to cracked hoofs, it was difficult to get them to travel at all—on gibbers.

We made a start, however, and before long struck a track running N.E. and S.W., and followed till we saw it was leading back to Tallyho.

We agreed to unpack and hobble camels, and make a patient search for water first, and, if successful, then on foot to run Joe to earth.

This parched country soaks up rain like a sponge, especially after a long drought, and in the creek near which the track ran there was no sign of anything wet, and our hope lay in following it up till rocks came in. If unsuccessful, we must return to Tallyho for water.

We planted our packs and made them snug in a clump of gidya, and began our search. We were

desperately anxious to get forward, for at Windorah and on the track onwards we had heard persistent rumours of land being pegged out for opal leases, and an idea was growing since Stanley left us stranded, that we might be tricked.

We ourselves were supposed to be pastoral men on the look out for cattle country, and when we struck a garrulous broadcaster, we rather encouraged that idea by casual inquiries as to carrying capacity and value of stations in the district.

In less than an hour I had a stroke of luck. I was working the main creek, which was bone-dry, and while pausing to fill my clay I caught sight of a zebra finch flitting past, and then two or three. They were not following the creek. I noticed that, and set myself to watch and follow the direction. Zebras are thirsty little birds and good guides to water, but gelars are brass-throated. Well, I soon had their plant—a nice little rock-hole up a small blind creek off the main one. We filled our bags and canteens, returned to our depot, made tea, filled two metal canteens, and set off in good heart at about 8 a.m. We had had three or four hours' juggling already though, and the day was going to be a frizzler. But as we felt sure we would score in an hour or two we thought we would not open up any tinned dog, but would do very well on our tobacco and tea. We had a gruelling, deadly day, and I have often thought since how nearly we came to getting pocketed in a stretch of impenetrable scrub,

WEATHERING OF THE DESERT SANDSTONE—
A good example at The Little Wonder Mine, West Queensland.

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where the same fate would have overtaken us as befel my good mate and comrade a little later on.

What put us wrong was following the fresh horse-tracks of Joe's mate, who had been in to Tallyho a few days before to get meat. We had been advised to look out for these tracks, and when we cut them we thought we were set fair. But the wicked old lout had been "tonic'd," as they call it, and had wandered about *bushed* for twenty-four hours, and came into Joe's camp from the opposite direction!

We only found this out when we got there at nine o'clock that night; Buttfield retching and exhausted and too sick to eat or sleep. Seventeen hours on our feet—and twelve of them in a fiery furnace, over rough ground and without a bite. I was young and sound, and after a splash in the soak I attacked a rough supper of salt goat and damper, and slept like a babe. It would be too tedious for others to read a description of our vicissitudes that day—our bad and good luck—and the last four weary miles coaxing and helping my mate along in the dark. It was only by following a foot-pad for the last lap that it was possible.

But now we were actually at Stony Creek Opal Mine, *and there was Joe Bridle in the flesh!* That was the happy fact!

We had covered our 700 miles in seven weeks in the worst year known, and over long stretches where much manœuvring was necessary to keep even a camel alive.

We had risked the whole venture on the hope

of finding a man in that ungetatable spot, whom Buttfield had not heard of for two years at least. It sounded a ridiculous enterprise, and no doubt was so described by some of my stay-at-home friends, but it succeeded and put an end to any criticism.

Good old Joe! What a fine fellow he was, and with what quiet friendliness and confidence he met us! Somewhat over middle height, square set and as strong as a horse, he was a terrible toiler, and the determined set of his features—square jaw and "executive" nose—were lit up by a kindly blue eye. I loved the man, though he led me many a dance, and we worked together for long years.

I must tell here a little episode connected with Joe. I visited his dear old mother in Dorset on one of my trips to England, and the good lady's happy tears compelled me to accept without demur the impossible commission of taking out a cream cheese to her wayward but beloved son. Think of it—a cream cheese from Burton Bradstock, Dorset, to Tallyho in far West Queensland.

It was wrapped up in tissue paper and some dock leaves with an outer covering of tea lead, or something like that, which I supposed was vital to cream cheeses, and I kept it just so, only putting on fresh wrappers when absolutely necessary.

Of course, in the Indian Ocean it melted and ran about, and enclosed some of the tissue paper and tea lead, and when I got to Adelaide it had set hard again, somewhat in the shape of Ireland. It had inlets round the edges and corrugations all

over it. In fact, it was more like a mineral contour map than anything else, showing lead deposits gleaming out here and there.

Well, I had a fearful time with it before I got it finally delivered, and all the way up the track *I wouldn't own it*, but only stuck at the job of pitching it back into the coach or buckboard on the sly at the last moment, when the driver or any passenger had slung it away at the stopping-places.

"Here's that —— thing again!" they would exclaim, and shy it off, holding their noses and spitting, for it smelt like a dead snake.

When we got to Eurounghella late at night Joe was in hilarious mood and did not notice the smell. I could see the loyal side of his nature was touched as, with a few appropriate words, I handed over the cheese and bade him appreciate it for his mother's sake, for he immediately fell to and made preparations, and I heard him working at it all night. His bedroom adjoined mine with a seven-foot matchboard partition only between us, so that I was often roused when a pellet of lead fell to the floor, or Joe had a fit of wheezing, which was quite unusual with him.

In the morning, though Joe appeared somewhat thoughtful, there were no other traces of a banquet except odd-shaped bits of lead and little wads of tissue paper scattered over the floor.

Here were we, weary and exhausted, stretched out in Joe's Camp at Stony Creek, thankful beyond words that he, as well as ourselves, was still in the land of the living and at our service.

IV.

THE HOME OF THE OPAL.

Next morning, imagine my impatience to get done with breakfast and actually behold *where the opal grows!* If Joe had given us poached mulga-apples on greenhide instead of eggs on toast, I would scarcely have noticed the difference.

I could see Miss Em's sympathetic if capacious mouth slowly broadening out into that rare smile, which absorbed her chin and took quite a minute to relax again into settled melancholy. Or was it the reflection of my own sub-conscious smile which, oyster-like, had been passively waiting its turn—a sort of repressed complex that was rather rushing the season and getting a spin before its time? Anyhow there it was, like an up-turned rainbow, resting above the coffee tin which contained the last opals obtained from the mines —Joe's haul of yesterday.

I leaned forward painfully expectant.

With scant reverence Joe seized the tin and shot the contents out on the bare rough table, and really they hardly deserved a better fate.

I would not, of course, admit it, even to myself just then, *but I was woefully disappointed.* My hardly repressed and fatuous smile, or let us say, the lambent arc resting shekinahlike above the tin, reversed engines

and vanished like a whip snake, and my enthusiasm cooled away as swiftly as ordinary spinach does.

I suppose Joe noticed a kind of monsoonal depression developing in me, and, in apology, explained that these opals were "*only seconds*," and "was really where the patch was dipping away from the band." This was meant to be reassuring, but in face of those pale twisty colours split up with sandy holes and bars it was rather cold comfort. We judge of Hercules by the size of his foot, and if "firsts" are to be inspiring, "seconds" should be respectable!

Well, they were not! and there was nothing to do but swallow the disappointment without remark and go on to the mine.

But my chastened mood remained as we descended the shallow pit six or eight feet deep, and then followed along the drives and cross-cuts which pursue the stone whithersoever it goeth. The men were not "on stone," it seemed, but perhaps I could change the luck? So I took the pick and had a bang, but with no result but a fat blister.

I began to suspect Miss Em. She had gone hunting or shearing or something of that sort. She was plainly not minding her business.

However, I did not, I hope, show all the impatience and disappointment which I felt, and I remember I cracked a few feeble jokes before I took my stub of candle from its niche in the rock, and went up longing for a sip of sunlight to brace me.

A feeling of absolute failure had suddenly taken possession of me. If this was an "Opal Mine," God help the shareholders, I thought. Of course it was

very unreasonable, but perhaps natural, after the long looking forward through those gruelling days of physical and mental strain—700 miles of them—and the sudden and complete disillusionment. To measure those dowdy bits of speckled sandshot stuff against the glowing jewels of my dreams! I felt a burst of hot resentment against the lady who had aided and abetted me in my foolishness!

But relief, though partial, was already at hand. As I stumbled along the rough floor and dropped hot grease over my thumb, I caught a glint in the debris, and, stooping with my guttering light, picked from the dust a merry little thing, a real live opal twinkling like Sirius in an east wind!

Miss Em, though she had not actually tossed, had undeniably *dropped*, me a gem, and I was humbled and grateful. And when next day, on moving over from our depot to Joe's camp, he dug out his " plant " and showed us his " firsts " I felt what a feeble ass I had been to become so easily dejected before I was really hurt. I think the fact was that Joe had not at first made up his mind that he would show us his good stuff at all.

Nature in the Never Never.

Then came interesting days, exploring the country on horseback and on foot, and visiting different workings where prospecting had been carried on. It was all new to me, bred as I had been in the flat limestone country of the West Coast in South Australia.

Some of the same living things familiar to our bush country there, were present here also, and their

pretty interesting ways I knew from a child. Our beloved Roos and Wallabies, of course, and the Euros and opossums, and the stately Emu with her lovely troop of twelve or fifteen youngsters—the loveliest sight as they "float and run," now in single file, or nearly so, now bunching together, starting off with a sudden impulse, pausing as suddenly and starting off again as if not properly wound up and then off in earnest, their graceful tails shaking like the hips of a Maori dancing girl in her featherlike dressing of grass thongs. And how the old birds shepherd the young things, going ahead to give the pace and easing back to encourage and protect when danger threatens!

The stone plovers, the twelve apostles, the bronze-wings and the magpies are all here, as well as the numerous ducks and waterfowl, and the dingo and pelican, which are fairly spotted over the Continent.

But there are others, absent from the Port Lincoln country, which abound here—the cheeky little Zebra finches, the Wonga pigeons, with red eyes and wheel-like crests—the friendly and ubiquitous Gelar, the large Butcherbird, black and white (with the heavenliest note perhaps in bird creation, challenging the Harmonious Thrush)—the Brolga or Native Companion—that unconscious humorist—and the fascinating Bower Bird—and others which at the moment I do not call to mind.

The opal country proper is very picturesque with its tentlike hills, their tops snipped off, rising abruptly from the level ground and sprinkled about singly or in nests of three or four; sandstone ridges and little dips between, and grassy flats; long red flat-topped outliers weathered into fantastic caves and used by the Rock

Wallabies and Euros* for camping in, the floors of which are sometimes ashine with shredded asbestos which these quaint fellows scratch out. Gidgee, Emu Apple, Opal Bush and Cassia form pleasing groups, with Coolibah and Box here and there, and the pretty weeping Myall, giving an occasional break in the monotony of the melancholy Mulga.

On the tablelands there are usually only gibbers and no plant growth at all, except salt bush and blue bush and stunted herbage. Then there are rocky ridges and broken gaps, and small stony gullies covered with black prickly ironstone flagging — "burnt ground" — and ironstone boulders tossed about, and black gravel everywhere as round as buckshot. Needle bush, stunted mulga, and "dead finish" complete a tangled mixture hard to navigate, and it is quicker and pleasanter to go ten miles round such a rough patch than two miles through it.

And over all, in the hot weather, there is the shimmer of mirage, the blue distances relieving the general tone of brown and grey, and far beyond at intervals there are more shadowy tentlike hills and weathered outliers. In winter the sky is deep blue, with here and there a snow-white strayling—tiny skiffs on the upper ocean; but in summer, when the gerri-beetles pierce the panting stillness and the yippra berries hang like great drops of blood, the snowy woolpacks pile up in a brazen sky, enormous, majestic—the grandest things in Nature.

The "Pull" of the Never Never.

It is partly the friendly harshness of the Never Never which attracts us and constitutes the "pull."

* The Euro is a thick-set marsupial, shorter than the Kangaroo.

THE FLAT AT OPALTON—
Originally known as the Fermoy Field, 130 miles west of Longreach, showing the alluvial workings.

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Its suffocating fires have interest, its long distances exclude hurry, its shy creatures give the note of gentleness, its awesome silences the note of peace. There is hard fare, but it is freely shared, few comforts but kindness takes their place, and many dangers and necessities, but these call forth that comradeship which says little and does much.

There is yet one other thing, which, though unrealised, largely enters in, I believe, to endear the Bush to us, and that is the vitalising nature of the inland climate. We feel well: Hot dry, and microbe proof, it is healthy in summer and in winter bracing, and if one feels as spry as a grasshopper it is largely on this account.

There are no "Space-Time" limits either, and no learned disquisitions thereon, and that means another brick taken off our load. . . .

But I remember we were prospecting when I stopped to tell of the country—visiting different workings and doing a bit of work ourselves; and ground which we then rode over and discussed as likely, was afterwards pegged, and many thousands of pounds worth won from it.

A fortnight afterwards we saw "The Scotchman" and "Aladdin," the Boulder Mines which Mr. Bond had previously worked, but now abandoned, and also a new show called "The Exhibition," which I pegged out. Camped at Potts's Spring. Intensely hot, shade register 114°.

Next day explored "The Southern Gem" and "Friday Gully," and pegged the former. Had lunch at Donald Gordon's camp—the only other party in the

hills at that time, and here I blossomed out into the merchant and made my first purchase of opal!—sixty-one pieces of Breakfast Creek Stone from Charlie Whitehead for £27 10s. It was small stuff but very brilliant, and the dancing lights pricked my hands in a delicious way.

In less than three weeks after arrival I had decided to apply for leases of "Stony Creek," "Exhibition," "Southern Gem" and "Breakfast Creek," and this had to be done at Windorah, the scene of our happy New Year's Day; then catch the following buckboard* mail to Adavale and Charleville, thence to Brisbane and home by rail. Buttfield, with the black boy, would finish pegging the claims, start a limited number of miners going, and equip them with tools and rations from Stony Point for which the camels would serve. Then these two former companions would return to South Australia by the same route which we had followed on the forward journey.

Getting Leases.

I was very reluctant to part from Herbert Buttfield—a fine mate, never a quitter, cheery at all times—good all through. But we hoped to meet again in Adelaide in three months' time. So we parted there at Joe's camp, which we had had such a rough spin to find, he and Stanley making for "The Exhibition" in the heart of the driest stretch of country, and I starting a cross-country ride on McGeorge's old mare to cut Kennedy's yards. This would save twelve miles at

* Buckboard is a four-wheeled light vehicle made for bush conditions.

least. It was rough country with no landmarks, and the risk was one which perhaps should not have been taken, for the weather was fiercely hot and my beast weak with a foal at foot. I certainly had an anxious time. Twenty miles of thick scrub gives ample room and verge enough to get bushed, but somehow I fluked it very well, and hit the lignum swamp near Kennedy's yards at sundown, though I had to walk and lead the mare for several miles, as she completely knocked up. And I had a double bit of bad luck. As we crawled along in the sultry noon the thirsty foal had chewed the corner of my waterbag as it hung at the saddle flap, and all the water was gone! And then when at last we reached the waterhole in the lignum it was *dry* save a square yard of foul churned-up mud in the centre—cattle had been watering here for some days. So I dragged the poor old mare as far as I could out of the worst mosquito zone and camped. It was a choking sultry night, and I shall never forget it. I had a stringy chunk of salt beef, but no water, and my bag had been empty since noon. Heavy thunderclouds hung round, but no rain fell. I was away again by 5.30. The mare had not moved from where I had left her, poor beast, on the previous evening.

It took us two hours and a half to get through the first four miles. Then the good beast brightened up and essayed to leave the track, and giving her her head, she brought me to a small clay-pan in the mulga with some soupy water left, but four dead bullocks in it also.

Neither man nor beast, however, seemed fastidious that morning. The mare thrust her nose well down into the mulligatawny, sinking to the knees in the pug,

and I, standing on the carcase of one bullock not so dead as the others, dipped out as far as I could from his hide with my quart, scooping up a decoction of pretty high specific gravity, but taking it, like auction furniture, with all faults and errors of description, I drank to the morning glory and hoped for the best!

For the rest of the day our progress was slow. I walked on foot most of the way, reaching Maroo at sundown.

Next day I was parched and ill, and perhaps it was not surprising. At 10 o'clock I was in great pain, and for three days Mrs. McGeorge had me swathed in flannel and soaked in turps, while her husband kept up a running fire of O.P. rum, and whether the red or the white corpuscles, the outward or inward treatment, or the nice balance of them all, won, I can't say—but I recovered.

I was very anxious to get forward, fearing as one does at such times to be forestalled in the enterprise. So I borrowed "Profit," a strong brisk horse from good friend McGeorge, and made a fresh start when I certainly should have been in bed. . . . I only wish I could report that night's experience so as to convey any true impression of it, however faint. I shall try, but I fear I can only describe the elusive thing in the feeblest way—and yet the experience itself, as regards feeling and emotion, remains definite and always the same.

The Trancelike Ride.

The night was pitch-black—the darkness that could be felt. So black indeed that I could not see the horse I rode, nor even my hand before me—for the track was

narrow and flanked on either side by a dense wall of mulga. Neither could I catch my Profit's footfall in the soft red sand, but only feel the brisk motion of his springy steps.

The air was deathly still, and the silence rang in my ears.

For just one flashing instant I had a curious spasm of fear as we were entering the mulga belt, when the darkness, not yet complete, allowed the weird arms of some dead trees to be faintly visible—ghostly arms they were—shrunken and tossed up in a kind of wildness. But a glow of quiet happiness as suddenly supervened—a *state* it seemed to be wherein was neither thought nor memory, but only a vivid consciousness of *being one with everything*. The trees and stones which I could not see I felt—they were a very part of me, and the horse I rode and the soft red sand which caressed his feet.

The innumerable night things I knew were smiling out of the blackness, which was but a veil through which our shyness vanished, and we saw each other truly then, and were all glad together. I had been very sick indeed, but I never felt so well, so quietly, utterly well and content. The happiness grew, but I did not wish to shout or dance or sing or break the lovely feeling of unity and wholeness. I did not argue or think about it at all or analyse my emotion. I can only do it now by recalling the kind of exaltation which seemed for that short space of time to dissolve the thin fabric of my grosser self, and let the sprightlier spirit through to the fellowship of all created things. That may sound odd, but it is the nearest I can get to it.

Hour after hour must have passed by the stretch of country traversed, but I do not think I was aware of time or fatigue (though I had been three days sick in bed), and the only perceptible passing from that period of strange elation to the state of ordinary self-consciousness was the noting of the change as we passed into more open country when I wondered if dawn were drawing near.

And then, little by little, I imagine, the senses began to report things in their usual fashion, tactfully pushing back the S.C.M.* into its padded cell, without scuffle or recriminations on either side.

But that strange glad feeling of being an actual part of all things, and they of me, persisted while I rode. I had left Tenham at 5 p.m., and it was 2.30 a.m. when I reached Conlan's, thirty-two miles. I hobbled " Profit " across the Cooper and slept on my saddle.

Next day I felt safe at last! I had deposited my applications for leases—and no one was ahead!

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* Sub-conscious mind.

V.

HOME AGAIN.

The day after, I was on the home track, and only those who have hungered for home and realised in weariness and peril the precariousness of life, know the thrill of the corner turned! God, how I used to battle to get through, and not miss a day when once my face was set towards home! In the last lap, four days and three nights, sometimes of *continuous* coach travel, if you know what that means, before the twenty-five hundred miles of train—by buckboard, by shanghai, by thoroughbrace, on boat or raft, on mule-pack or camel, I would stick it in drought and flood on rough roads or none, to make my connections and get forwards by the blocking-on team. . . . Good luck to those hard old days!

In about ten days, or perhaps eleven, I was back in Adelaide and reported to my Syndicate.

It was Paradise to be back again with my girl and babe; with clean water to drink and flowers, and gentle speech and love! . . . But my rejoicing was cut short with cruel emphasis, for three days after my arrival I received an urgent telegram from the police at Windorah, Queensland, "Regret report Buttfield perished, come up if possible."

And so with heavy heart I took to the road again, first breaking the tragic news to the wife and family of my dead comrade.

It was a hard sad trip, and I only propose to briefly tell how simply my friend met his fate :—

Breakfast Creek Claim had been left to the last to survey, and it lay in dry remote country fifteen miles from the nearest water—the Fishponds. Buttfield, with Charlie Whitehead, had finished the job on the second morning before breakfast, and they had spread their bit of tucker and boiled their quarts, and then Buttfield suggested they should round up the camels first, before having their snack, as he noticed they were making back early when they first went out.

So they left their quarts by the embers and hung their bit of junk in the shade, and slipped off expecting to be back in ten minutes or so. The heat was fierce, no doubt, but camels do not get hard pressed in two days, and no one would expect them to make a ding-dong sprint of it.

Well, it is not the long dry stage which is dangerous — one takes precautions—but where no risk appears there lies the trap !

It is easy to see what happened—they went on and on, expecting every moment to come up with the animals, and when the question arose whether they should not return for food and water, the dilemma was simply this. They had covered nearly four miles already—should they return those four miles and then pad them back again, making eight, and then, by *that* time, *certainly* have to cover the ten miles on to the Fishponds, *or* should they keep straight on as they were

going now, with the reasonable hope of coming up with the camels at any moment?

They went on, as I imagine any hardy bushman would have done, and one of them paid the penalty. When written down it sounds mere carelessness, but will be easily understood by those who know the game.

At 10 o'clock or so, Buttfield, feeling a bit cheap, advised Charlie to push on but keep the cattle pad, and he would spell an hour or two, and then make a strike across and perhaps save a couple of miles. The pad went round on the clearer country. If he struck the camels, of course he would bring them back during the next two hours.

What exactly happened Whitehead never seemed to know. He wandered into Donald Gordon's camp on the second day in a state of collapse, and out of his incoherencies they gathered something had happened and that Buttfield was missing, and immediately sent across to Bridle's camp. It was early in the morning, perhaps 5 o'clock, but Joe lay dressed on his bunk. He had felt anxious and had slept in his clothes.

He set off at once with our black boy, and on the second day they found Buttfield. Fully dressed and with his hat on, he lay face downwards, his forehead resting on his arms, as the bush custom is, to shut out the glare and the flies. Within half a mile the precious water lay.

I hope and think, he died in his sleep from heart failure, induced, no doubt, by thirst and fatigue, but not through thirst alone.

Our good Tomtit, the black boy, once on the job, stuck at the tracking like a sleuth hound they said, back

and forth in the pitiless sun. Through that rough impossible country, over which meanwhile many cattle had passed, his eyes like live coals, moaning a little to himself now and then, refusing food, but sucking fiercely at the water bag when they laid hold of him and made him drink.

Well, that was the tragically simple way a good life was lost—the life of one, too, who dreaded such a death and was never weary of rating the folly of those who took chances without a water bag at hand.

And so I was back in the land of gibbers and bleached bones now to take over his few simple effects, and to carry out the arrangements which I had commissioned him to make: to arrange for the survey of the leases, juggle with the principalities and powers of darkness and wetness and eternal leisure; order and transport stores and generally act as M.C. in establishing mining camps in a wet and hungry district (for the floods came), with a black boy of 20 as second in command.

Well, Tomtit was all right, and stuck to me faithfully—more faithfully than I stuck to him—for, God prosper the youth, he undertook the back journey alone to South Australia with the three camels (the drought having broken), and carried it through successfully till he reached Blanchewater, his ain countree. And then, with a lively trust in Providence, to boost the camels along to Farina, he turned them adrift, and two of them actually turned up; but old "St. John," loath to leave the charm of Blanchewater, never returned. I cheerfully paid Richardson £40 for him, and bore Tomtit no grudge whatever.

Off to London.

Eight days after reaching Adelaide, I was abroad the M.M. boat "S.S. Sydney," bound for London, with my wife and babe. And within exactly seven weeks from eating "Salt Billy" at Stony Point on the Cooper I was dining in the very heart of Paris!

Such a turn in my affairs had never entered my head—rather, perhaps, to its credit. For, on reflection, it does seem a little unreasonable to expect others at the Antipodes to put up the cash to prove the inexhaustible riches which you hope are packed into your property, but which you have taken no steps whatever to disclose!

However, I was young and ready and hopeful—and glad enough to go—I certainly was not one to shiver on the brink and fear to launch away, especially when the Syndicate, which had been enlarged, was paying my passage.

It would be tedious to explain why Syndicates and Companies which engage in gem mining are destined to failure, almost as certain and complete as that of a Government when it tackles the job. I imagine it is pretty obvious too. If they knew their game for a beginning, and could ring-fence their men and keep them in compounds, etc., it might be different. But this was not apparent to me as a youth. I just didn't think about it at all, till the Syndicate by its methods forced the few vital problems upon me which I must rightly solve if I were to make any progress in the business.

I arrived in London in July, about the worst time possible for such an enterprise, and within three months' time I received a cable instructing me to return.

Meantime a new chum had been sent up from the office in Adelaide as " Purser " to manage the finances, and he kept them so effectually " straitened " up that the company's dishonoured cheques were floating round the district, and not a storekeeper anywhere within 200 miles would accept them, while the Syndicate had £700 on deposit in the Savings Bank in Adelaide for the sake of the 3½ per cent. interest!

But the only important point which I want to bring out clearly, and emphasise, is this: that when I got to London, I found that *opal was not on the market at all*, for there was no supply. There was, it is true, some of Mr. Bond's Boulder Opal, lying on approval at Edwards' shop in the Poultry, but this could not be called a hopeful method of introducing a practically new stone. It was undeniably opal, but not the pale, white-ground Hungarian gem which the English people had been accustomed to get under the name of opal. If ours was superior, as we said it was, they didn't know it, and such a new stone needs the confident handling and backing of leading dealers who themselves must be first won to realise its claim.

It takes time and persistence to find this out, and to do it—for one naturally goes to jewellers, and they —save the bright exception here and there—look at you reproachfully, more in sorrow than in anger, but sometimes with suspicion, and nearly always with that kind of ineffective pity which seems to bid you be enlightened, but does not lend a hand to ensure it. " Although you never can be like us, be *as* like us as ever you can be." That was the sentiment expressed in the attitude adopted, and it leaves one rather forlorn.

At last, however, I found in Hasluck Bros., of 104, Hatton Garden, a firm ready and even eager to give this new sandstone opal a chance, and before I embarked for Australia we had a cutter established there, and had sold through the late Mr. Louis Tannenbaum, of Hatton Garden, the first parcels of cut opals for the American trade.

Hasluck was a name as sweet as honeycomb just then. It was constructive and had an optimistic ring. It suggested a kindly sporting spin for anyone who was eager and came in faith—and especially with opals. And the word of promise was kept not only to the ear but to the hope. I felt I had got a kick-off, and went back, not satisfied indeed, yet not wholly discouraged.

The small lot of Breakfast Creek Opal which I had bought for the Syndicate I was able to sell, returning the directors a remarkable profit, but they never seemed to realise this—did not seize it as a solution, and say, "Breeze on, young man, and do better—buy all the opal you can lay your hands on, satisfy the men and unload them of their stone as they dig it out, and we'll pay in cash now and not in blank cheques any more." But the *scrip* selling idea prevailed, and ruined the chances, for them of *opal* selling.

VI.

UPS AND DOWNS.

When I arrived back in Australia the Syndicate had nothing to propose, remained cold to my arguments in favour of my going back to the mines to open them up with vigour, and preferred to take the advice of their new Mannikin, who proposed "prospecting."

Well, I put the corks* on my cabbage-tree again, and, with renewed confidence in Miss Em's sporting instincts, I loped off to the Never Never on my own.

I was by far the largest shareholder in the Syndicate, had borne the burden and heat of the day, with practically no pay, and now my chances were being walled in by a well-meaning, but wooden Board, with only one bright exception. There had been no disagreement between us, no want of confidence expressed, but merely, I think, a laudable though belated hesitancy in putting "mines" on the market which had not been proved, and an easily quenched faith which paralysed any effort in that direction.

I had not gone very far or very clearly into the question of what I should *do* when I got back to the mines! I had, of course, no authority to propose any policy concerning them. I was disappointed at being called back from London when I had scarcely begun my task, and so was my Co-Attorney there, but I was

* Some old "hard shells" put corks on their hats to knock the flies off.

wrath at having the Claims practically condemned without adequate trial. They had been selected with such care and taken out with so much toil and difficulty, that to abandon them so easily seemed rather cruel to me then, as well as foolish. We were all ignorant together when we began, but they would not bother to learn the game and threw down the cards at the first poor hand.

So my impatience did not wait for the sanction of a reasoned programme, but drove me out to have a long talk with good old Joe, see the mines again, and "swat" over the whole position. I had too much at stake now to let the enterprise fail without an energetic kick, and the feeling that perhaps my mystic goddess was purposely putting me through the mill to test my steadiness and devotion, braced me for the effort.

Dejection.

But when at last I was there and had seen all the muddle and had heard and said all that there was to say, my light burnt low. I came, I saw—but that was all! I couldn't finish the sentence and that mood of high resolve began to shrink up, as it has a wretched habit of doing, and I thought of the poor Taddies in the swiftly drying up pools whose legs won't come fast enough to help them to escape their fate.

In that dejected mood I lay out at Joe's camp, one night when he had gone to Kyabra, watching the shy-bush things come in to the "soak." And scenes from the swift panorama of the late past came flitting through the screen of memory—the lovely palm-fringed Seychelles glowing in the dawn; the glittering streets

of Paris; the first glimpse and thrill of Old England; the rounded greenness of Kent; the glorious Abbey . . . and my dead comrade lying over there in his lonely grave; the horror of the dying stock, living creatures done to death by inches and the dry sob of their breathing . . . my wife and babe . . . I didn't dare to think too much—but the pictures would come, in spite of me, flitting past like those in the cinema.

I longed for that glad feeling of all-rightness which came to me in the silent darkness on that trancelike ride to lift me again on its tranquil wings and subdue my fearful heart with its other-worldly content. And as a relief to my feelings, I scrawled out by the core of embers with a stub of pencil the following lines :—

AT THE SOAK.

The Mill of Day has ceased—insistent Day,
With all its harsh demands,
Confusions and hot strife:
Lift up the drooping hands
Once more, spent heart!—drink life
Anew from silence and the play
Of all night's silent things,
Cool lights, swift shadows, and mysterious wings.

Flung is the royal mantle russet-gold
Along the Desert's rim
Thro' which shy stars may catch
A fleeting glimpse of him
Whom Night with noiseless latch
Bars from her mystic spirit-fold,
Lest, dulled by coarser Day,
Her children lose the fairyness of play.

Adoring Night! Alive with comfort—eyes
Of welcome and release

Leap to the lover's gaze;
  Deep eyes that make for peace,
Glad eyes that waken praise.
It is not strange indeed we prize
This cool assuaging hour
Which holds such gifts of healing in its power.

Glide in the thirsty bronzewings to the soak,
  The Emu, with her troop
Of bunchy darlings, peers
  And pauses—rings a loop
Around the cane-grass spears
And round the dark belar and oak,
Ere, bending on the brink,
She bids those little black necks bend and drink.

Along the gibbered ridge the bilby threads
  His eager way, his ears
And breast-fur softly lit
  With starlight till his fears
Arrest him: bit by bit
He stretches near and nearer, spreads
His fore paws on the bare
Damp pad, draws in, and softly laps his share.

Noiseless as very shadows and as strange,
  Released from prisoning day,
The Curlews, spirit-swift,
  Race past, and fade away,
And reappearing lift
A listening foot and watch, and range
Along the line of cool
And puggy ooze that issues from the pool.

And so the shy bush things in patient scores
  Steal in and drink and pass
Into the silence; not
  A stir of leaf or grass—

A far off rifle shot
Clean as a pebble smoothly bores
The ringing stillness—brings
A human note amidst those shadowy things.

* * * * * * *

I would be as a child, Father Supreme,
Thy child, Oh, nothing less—
Thy beauty is my shield—
A sword and a caress.
My eyes I dare not yield
To sleep without Thee, lest I dream
Of darkness where no eye
Makes darkness light, gives rest security.

I try to find Thy thoughts, O Merciful,
Why Night is made for tears,
Unless tears make for rest?
Why peace from conquered fears
Is precious, and the best;
And why some joys are sorrowful,
Some sorrows joyous cries—
Unless the half life's sweetness be surprise?

'Tis surely well our seeing comes thro' love!
Thoughts are but swallows bright
Skimming the misty deeps,
But drooping in the night
Of sorrow: while Love keeps
Her steadfast way and, like the dove,
Back from the wastes of fear
Brings tidings of the hopes we hold most dear.

Smile, O Eternal, to our wistful eyes
Searching Night's sacred dome,
Until stars answer stars
With lovelight as from home,
And there is naught that mars
Our vision, naught we should despise
Held in pride's secret place
To cloud the bliss of seeing face to face!

LITTLE WONDER.

Early next morning, before I had pulled my toes out of the ashes, Joe came bouncing along on his big chestnut with the news of a rumoured new find of rich Sandstone Opal twenty miles away back from Euronghella.

"What about a crack at it?" said he when he had finished, and I eagerly assented.

"Very well, we'll have a go. It's old Bill Johnson, and they say he has some orl-right stuff. They go in to the station once a fortnight for meat, and we might ride across past Conavalla and try to cut the tracks."

"What horse'll I take?" I asked; "you can't very well take the chestnut again."

"Yes, I will—he's as tough as glue, and won't talk about the little canter this morning. You can have the brown mare."

It was a rough trip, and we ran pretty bare before we struck Old Bill. It was raining beetles the first night, and we got in an old hut to avoid them, but we ran into another kind of danger. Still, they were not as bad as the beetles, wretched brown curcuglios, hard-shelled shabby affairs with untidy rubbishy under-wings which they do not tuck in properly when they alight. They rain down in thousands, out of a clear sky too, and without a sound unless striking a board or tin. It is their horrible whim to creep into every hole, crack or crevice—down one's neck—up one's nose, but preferably into one's ears, where they quickly burrow and penetrate, scraping on the eardrums in a terrifying way. I loathed them.

Next morning we got away early, and within a mile or so Joe made a complete circle, arriving back at the hut. I had hinted that we were doing the wheel trick, but he wouldn't have it, till we came in sight of the hut. Suddenly he paused and stared, and then, wheeling his horse round, drove his spurs home and went off at a gallop, crashing through the bushwood! I had my work cut out to keep in sight!

"You keep behind a bit," he said when I got abreast again. "You seem to bore me over," and I chuckled and reined back.

On and on we went, chewing pigweed occasionally to save our water bags, which is quite a doubtful expedient, but it sounds cunning. Joe pulled up several times—mentally weighing our chances, I thought, and I said nothing—and then on again without a word.

I could see he was a bit anxious and worried.

Presently, while I was in the rear, I saw him pull up, study the ground, and give the chestnut a brisk clip to quicken him to the pace of his own impatience, and then a little further on he waved his elbow in the way, which to a bushman, means "all right."

I knew he had cut the tracks, and drew up alongside. "Cut them?"

"Well, it's a ridden horse," he answered cautiously, "and about the right direction," and within a hundred yards or so the tracks joined others, forming an easily followed pad, and in less than two miles we were at Bill Johnson's camp, glad to see the billy smiling at the galley fire.

And then!—shall I ever forget it? Old Bill, after interminable delays as they seemed to me, tooling off

to " spring his plant," while I waited by the embers trying to regard life as vain and my circulation defective!

It is not etiquette to look in the direction the gouger is going when he " springs his plant," you must turn your back on that—but I was by-and-by aware without looking that Bill had returned with a bran sack and was deploying in front of his tent amongst some bushes. At last he made some signal, and Joe said, " He's ready, I think."

Why should one lethargically saunter, when the impulse is to run like mad? It is a curious instinct to camouflage our excessive interest, I suppose.

William Johnson had his " firsts " rolled up in an ancient nut-brown singlet, stuffed inside a blue dungaree trousers-leg, which was tied at each end with wallaby sinew. This was not, I imagine, inexorably de rigueur as regards " firsts," but was more distinctive and seemly than mere sugarbag, in which " seconds ' and " thirds " were wrapped.

We squatted on our haunches like three bilbies at a prayer meeting. My heart was knocking chips off my ribs, and I wondered if the other two could hear it. But while Joe was curious and pleasantly expectant, Bill was as unperturbed as a gibber.

His stubby fingers didn't tremble in the least as he fumbled with the sinew, nor as he extracted the nut-brown garment from its blue pupa-case and tumbled the sacred balls of fire into a glowing pool.

I felt a queer stiffness—I could not reach out to touch one of them. My lips were dry and dumb. I could see four men squatting there. Joe and Bill had

faint doubles like rainbows do, and I should not have been the least surprised if they had turned into solid opal. It must have seemed puzzling to Old Bill, this queer indifference, for he picked up a fiery piece, shot through with electric stars of green and violet, and, tossing it across to me as one would a turnip, remarked, " That's not too bad, is it?" but for the moment I could not just get the import of the words. If he had said, " Why hop ye so, ye little hills?" or words to that effect, it would have loosened my tongue perhaps, but he could not be expected to know that.

Of course, it was but half a minute's pause, I suppose after all, and when Joe said quietly, " Good stuff, isn't it?" the spell was broken.

Sixty pieces of pure red grained opal as large as walnuts were in his " firsts," and his " seconds " and " thirds," though clothed in sugarbag, were by no means poor relations.

All the opal I had ever seen paled into insignificance beside this Little Wonder Stone, and I was absurdly handicapped in making a bargain. If Old Bill had demanded a life pension, a villa on Lake Como, or the Elgin Marbles, or any trifles like these as a condition of sale, I should have closed with him instantly, and when he merely said: " One thousand—quid " in a nervous but half defiant tone, I couldn't for the life of me suggest breaking that deliciously " cool " figure. Metaphorically, I leaned my forehead up against its coolness, and steadied up sufficiently to write out a legible cheque.

I found it difficult to realise, bending there in the stillness beside my Pool of Radiance, that I was not

living in imagination and still amongst my boyish dreams. Everything around me was grey and stolid. The crows didn't sing a note, nor the carneys whirl their prickly tails in ecstasy, as I would certainly have expected them to do if the thing were real. For although I had been plodding and dashing about on this very serious hunt for a year or more, it yet had so often seemed that I was chasing an elusive thing which peeped out in little star glints now and then, only to vanish like a will o' the wisp, or slip away between the cracks of sandstone like a bark lizard.

For a few moments I appeared able to mentally detach myself and spy down from above, as it were, upon this odd little brown bunched-up bit of excited humanity transfixed there, automatically and aimlessly shifting the gems about, as a child does its toy bricks. And the S.C.M., or some near relative, was humming away at the old incantation, back at the limestone cave!

Here, at long last, Miss Em had toss'd with glorious prodigality, and though in the thirty-three years since then, I have handled thousands of larger and perhaps finer gems, I have never been so dramatically stunned with glory as when Old Bill Johnson emptied out his blue trousers-leg amongst the needle bush and gibbers.

It was drawing on towards early dawn before the joyous commotion in my heart would let me sleep, for here was a prospect and a programme. A lively hope to get out on the wing with a clear run for goal. It was a glad exultant feeling, and it ran on through my dreams when at last I fell asleep.

With my blue trousers-leg and the "seconds,"

fondly wrapped in my swag and Joe's bold chestnut trusted with the " thirds," we set off contentedly next morning with our booty, but took Old Bill's tracks into Eurounghella, and from there I pushed on South at once, leaving Joe to forward my other gear on his return to Stony Creek. I was tremendously anxious to get my treasure away to a good solid strong room — for it seemed to me that the very crows would be conspiring to pick holes in my swag! Since then, I have grown hardened to the necessity of dispensing with blue trousers legs, and of treating opals as other luggage.

A PART OF THE OPEN CUT ON THE ENGLISH COMPANY'S BLOCKS.
A heavy rain has converted it into a temporary lake.

[*To face page* 89.

VII.

WHITE CLIFFS.

The journey back from Queensland with the booty from Little Wonder was as rapid as continuous travel could make it, and on my arrival in Adelaide I found a fresh surprise awaiting me.

Charlie Turner, a former fellow officer of mine in the Survey Department, had sent me down some specimens from 60 miles north of Wilcannia. I had not seen him for several years, and had known him very slightly at any time, and so it seemed rather strange that he should pick me out from the hundreds he knew in Adelaide. In my heart I felt sure that here was another instance of tossing—and from a kangaroo shooters' camp away in the back blocks of New South Wales to my office in Adelaide, was a rather remarkable toss too.

The stones were something quite new and exceedingly interesting. Noble Opal, more of the Hungarian type, but occurring in flat cakes quite free of adhering matrix, and opalised fossil shells, saurian bones, and strange bunches of crystals—(opal pseudomorphs after gaylussite as now determined) — the so-called "pine-apples" of the miners.

These had been weathered out of the hillsides and lay strewn on the surface, and though most of them had

been bleached by the sun, they were of value for collectors.

So, after two days' rest in Adelaide from my arduous Queensland trip, I was on the track once more, speeding back to the Never Never.

Broken Hill by rail, thence via Yancanya, Bourke's Cave and Corker's Well to Wilcannia, thence northerly 60 miles to the Kangaroo Shooters' Camp, soon to be known far and wide as the celebrated White Cliffs Opal Mines, from which at cash field prices one million and a half sterling was won.

These were the days of Mick Ridge and Billy White, coach drivers on the Wilcannia track, and what good chaps they were, on that twenty-seven hours' journey with perhaps two hours at Bourke's Cave, where one might get a sip of "goat's milk and fruit salts," and forty winks. Then from Wilcannia to Mount Browne there was a buckboard, and George Hooley, one of the party of Kangaroo Shooters, met me somewhere on the track with a horse, and we rode over to the camp.

These men had done some shallow working, and had hit the seam and fossicked out some opal of nice quality, but they were quite at a loss to price it, and, indeed, doubted whether it had any value at all. I did not know much—they knew nothing, and asked me to offer for it. I have no doubt I could have got the whole lot —specimens and all—for £10. In fact, they told me afterwards, if I had turned it down, they had decided to throw the stuff amongst the gibbers and continue their shooting, at which they were making good money.

I had to stumble at it the best way I could—it was

a new type and I was new at the game. I thought I could risk £150 if only I could manage to scrape it together. I would offer £140, and give myself room to spring £10—but I got no chance! On my naming the figure there was a great calm. They were simply paralysed, but only for a moment, and then eight eager hands shot out! But I did not regret making a fair offer, and I saved my tenner anyway!

How the way was opening up for me! Here was what looked like a new field, 700 miles from Little Wonder—and I had the first booty from both. From the blue trousers leg to the Kangaroo Shooters' Camp, it had been one simmer of excitement. On this Australian side, I could see that the supply would be forthcoming, and that I must get away swiftly and see what could be done to stimulate and control the sale overseas. I was free, and with no directors to misdirect, I might do something.

Hard work, indeed, it proved, to "encompass" these two parcels of opal and book passages for myself and wife, but by the help of friends it was managed, and presently we were outward bound more once—just sixteen months from starting on my first camel trip. I had covered a fair stretch of ground in those strenuous months, and, on the whole, I trust had not broken Miss Em's faith in me.

On my arrival in London, I arranged with Hasluck Brothers to engage another cutter, and we steadily made headway till within a year we had six wholly engaged on Australian Opal, and the cut product was selling as fast as they could turn it out.

This was the best answer to croakers; and now

some of the large wholesale dealers, who had advised me not to waste my time with opal, changed their attitude, and were anxious to take large parcels in the rough, and after due experience with the cutting, I gradually began the rough selling, and, finally, after a few years, adopted it altogether. For those who deal direct from the mines in a large way, it is, in my opinion, the best method, and perhaps the only method to handle stocks successfully. One cannot eliminate the small cutters and dealers—they are as necessary as middlemen in any business. Much pathetic nonsense is talked about the "middleman," and vile names are hurled at him. He is either necessary on account of the exigencies of that particular business, or he comes into existence because the producers and the consumers are well meaning but inept blockheads, and he bridges over their jealousies and prejudices and brings them together. He generally knows their business, much better than they know it themselves, and will take risks in juggling with their produce, at which they baulk. The labourer is worthy of his hire.

Before I left again for Australia the trade in opals was brisk.

I had already been away far too long from the mines, for although my partner, D. Morton Tweedie, kept things going, he could not be away from the office for extended trips, and perhaps, too, he hardly understood the psychology of the rough miner. Keen competition had already set in both in Queensland and at White Cliffs. Messrs. S. Hoffnung and Company were represented by a buyer; Messrs. H. Newman and Sons, of Melbourne, were getting stuff from Queensland, and

Messrs. McBean from White Cliffs. A little later, Messrs. Benjamin and Sons, Grove Brothers, Samuels and others from Melbourne, and W. G. Jira from Sydney, with all the German buyers, and field buyers such as T. Brady, and " truckers " locally evolved, formed a host of lively rivals, and prices soared up both on the field and abroad.

There were large parcels awaiting me both in Queensland and White Cliffs, and as soon as I arrived back in Australia, I dashed off and cleared both fields. At the Cliffs, I arrived in the nick of time. All the miners were assembled to hear the proposition of a Melbourne man of Hebraic faith, who sought to tie them to sell alone to him. He would guarantee to buy £300 per month (!), and might take more, but they were to ballot amongst themselves whose stuff should go first and hold the rest, and gradually he would buy more. Well, many were inclined to accept, for buyers had been spasmodic up till then, and faith in the gem was not yet established amongst them. With such a mild opponent I had an easy win. I mounted the table and merely said: " Lads, if you've got opal, I'm a buyer—I make no restrictions—sell where you like, and let the best man win," and this appeared the right stuff for them! I remember I gave £150 for one stone and spent £3,000 clearing the field.

It was now, I think, that I fell in with that quiet but tireless " battler," Mr. E. F. Murphy, who himself was trying his luck gouging. I bought one of his first parcels—£200, I think—and we soon found out that we could work together. He became my agent, and acted for me when I was away, and gradually worked into

buying, and finally, on my recommendation, became manager of the White Cliffs Opal Mines, Limited, the English Company which bought some of the best leases on the field.

But their experience proved once for all that gem mining is not an enterprise in which a company can indulge with any hope of success. Time would fail me to tell of all the whys and wherefores—are they not written in the Book of the Royal Commission, 1901?

Now that Australian Opal—(that is, Queensland and White Cliffs, for Black Opal was still in hiding)—had won recognition and taken up an honourable position in the world's markets, our main task in Australia was to keep up a steady supply of good stone at prices which could be maintained at a fair level.

This we could only ensure by making it profitable for the miners to work their claims, while providing for ourselves a sufficiently interesting margin of profit.

It is far from an easy task to satisfy the market, the miner, and oneself, and yet, if business is really to prosper, one must do it.

For the next ten years it was well I was young and strong and active, for I was bunkered, I suppose, at nearly every river and creek and glue-pot in West Queensland, and often had to swim from Wanaaring to Hungerford too on the way up—a good long stretch for breast stroke. Who knows the thrill of the Cuttaburra and the Sabbath calm of Green's Creek if I do not? But in between whiles, I would glide off to London again, as I now did in five months, taking large stocks and returning via New York, Chicago and San Francisco.

Opal now was no longer a neglected stone, and tens of thousands sterling flowed in every month for several years to pay for what was won on the White Cliffs and Queensland Fields. But one great difficulty lay in knowing when the opal on hand in the various camps scattered over large and dry areas in Queensland would justify a visit. One could not live there or anywhere indeed in those days—and few miners cared to send their parcels away through the post by buckboard, etc., over hundreds of miles with the delay and the risk and the disadvantage of dealing by mail. But they were notoriously bad valuers of their own opal, however critical they might be of their mate's, and yet they disliked showing to those who might know better.

I had correspondents here and there, *supposed* to be better judges, and who were paid to keep one posted, but accidents of course occurred, and they would get bunged eyes, a very common thing up there, or some lunar irregularity would affect the light and induce optimism, and a new discovery of opal would be reported by *urgent wire* as rich and wonderful when quite other adjectives would be used to describe it, when, finally, after 3,000 miles of hard travel, its dismal commonness shattered one's ardent hopes!

Yes, they were hard and strenuous days out there, but relieved by good fellowship in odd and interesting camps, where, by the galley fire, one told and listened to bush yarns and smoked the pipe of peace. What queer characters Fate manages to bunch together and join up in partnership!

VIII.

QUEENSLAND AND WHITE CLIFFS FIELDS CONTRASTED.

As White Cliffs increased, Queensland decreased as an opal producer—and the reasons were not far to seek. Firstly, as before stated, the Cliffs stone was more easily estimated, cut and matched, with consequently less risk all round. Secondly, the supply was steadier. Thirdly, Queensland Mines were spread over a wide area, often hundreds of miles apart, raising the water trouble, and the character of stone varied somewhat in each mine, so that it was more difficult to cut the gems to gauge in the same quality, which is a factor in the lower grades, for wide marketing.

And what I mean by " raising the water trouble " is that seldom, on the groups of claims (or " mines ") in Queensland, were there enough men to either themselves construct dams and sink wells, or make their voices heard and prod the Government of the day to secure for them an adequate water supply. Many of the miners there had hearts like lions, and would tramp daily to and from their work four and five miles each way. The camp must be at the " Soak." It is easy to say " open out the soak and cart water to the claim and camp there," but it's not so easy to do if you're a poor man. Besides, your claim may " cut out " or the soak

A TYPICAL MINERS' CAMP—WHITE CLIFFS.

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may " jib on you as you go to open her out "—the lady has a way of doing it. Numbers bring confidence and lighten labour and expense, and before you can draw numbers to the Never Never you must make sensational finds. The Government is not to be indiscriminately blamed either. Before spending money on tanks or bores, it must be reasonably satisfied that the field has a life before it of a year or two at least.

Still, there are rich centres where the expenditure of £500 or £1,000 would secure enough water to serve a wide area, and tide the men over the worst drought periods. See what was done by the double tanks at White Cliffs.

If gougers know they are sure of their water supply, they are good " stickers," and if, say, £1,000 were spent on the Gum Hole between Stony Creek and the Gem in the Kyabra Hills—or even were the workings of the old Stony Creek Mine itself converted into a huge underground tank—either one of them would serve a fairly wide area. Men do not mind carting four or five miles—but not ten or twenty.

The White Cliffs Field, practically one square mile only, could bunch its gougers in that small area, and was rich enough at the beginning to draw crowds and so command facilities in mail, meat, water and other services. It otherwise would not have lasted for twenty years and brought into the country over *one and a half million sterling*, which is a record striking enough to arrest the attention of our people and convince our Government of the *importance of the opal industry to Australia*.

It is not at all a wild faith which would expect the

value of the opal deposits of Australia *to exceed the value of any other single metal, mineral or precious stone therein.* A century may work the gold out, but not the opal—nor perhaps ten centuries. Certain types may work out—perhaps in a few years—like the Black Opal—for special conditions have been responsible for their unusual character, but the ridges of desert sandstone from Kynuna to Eulo are sown thick with starry eyes, and all that area N.W. and N. from Coberpedy at Stuart's Range, as well as the same formation all through western New South Wales.

It must not therefore be assumed that opal will become as cheap as pebbles on the beach. It will always be hard to win, and the price ruling will largely regulate the supply, for miners will not dig it out unless they obtain some remuneration adequate to their toil and privations, but will disperse to their shearing, dam-sinking, timber-getting and station work.

But as Australia grows in nationhood as well as in numbers, and becomes really proud of her precious things, we shall find a steady market here for much of the opal we now export. Australia was very shy over her unique Black Opal, remember, till America had hall-marked it.

Between 1891, then, and 1901, White Cliffs was in full swing, and, with about 700 miners working, it hummed louder perhaps than any other spot of equal area in Australia, not even excepting Broken Hill, because the absence of many civilised restrictions and the general tunefulness of the sub-varieties of gouger, encouraged humming, and this small community had ten thousand a month to hum with. Fortunes were

made in a few weeks and dissipated even more rapidly, but now and then some shrewd spouse would clutch a bit of the booty and get away with it or even swallow it whole, and blaze a track back to civilisation which her good man could easily follow without getting bushed, if he felt that way inclined. Sometimes he preferred the mulga snakes and a dinner of herbs, with the chance of hitting another patch before the lady got her second wind (if we may put it that way), but old Paul, whose story is told at the end of the book, was not one of these.

IX.

BLACK OPAL.

In 1903, when the White Cliffs field was beginning to dwindle, Charlie Nettleton and his mate, prospectors at Lightning Ridge towards the head of the Darling, struck opal there, and as soon as possible I got in touch with the men. This was several hundred miles south from the nearest Queensland field at that time, and I was curious to see whether it was a new type of stone.

And this it proved to be; and has since made a world-wide name for itself.

Yet for several years it was uphill work indeed to create a demand and persuade the market to take the gem to its bosom, which goes to show how dull and unresponsive the heart can be which beats there.

But every precious thing comes into its own at last, and by degrees the rare beauty of the Black Opal triumphed. In fact, considering how large a part custom plays in the true appraisement of gems, as of other lovely things, by even those who ought to be, and think they are, free from its thraldom, it is perhaps astonishing that a modern stone should win its way on sheer merit to such a place of honour as that which Black Opal now occupies amongst gems.

And fifty years hence the finest specimens of it may

WORKINGS AT THE THREE-MILE, LIGHTNING RIDGE,
Where 60 feet of hard siliceous rock has to be pierced before the opal strata is met with.

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well prove to be the costliest gems on earth. Personally, I believe they will be.

But for the first three years after discovery Black Opals were sold in the rough, mostly unfaced, at a pound or two *per ounce*, and there was only one dealer whom my agents in London could discover who would handle them, and then only in small lots of £100 or so.

In 1906, however, I went to London and worked from that centre for nearly two years on this enterprise, and followed up the work done there by visits to America. Mr. E. F. Murphy, who transferred from White Cliffs to Lightning Ridge, held control at the mines for me during my absences. One enterprising jeweller in Fifth Avenue, New York, did much in the early days to stimulate the public taste, displaying Black Opals on an adequate scale in lovely settings with diamonds and the best enamels, and now these gems can be sold in almost every country; and if, say, in Lapland or Zanzibar you cannot sell for cash or the Exchange is against you, then you can still trade and barter Black Opal for reindeer hide in the one or hippo teeth in the other!

And other firms in New York like my good friends, at 14, Church Street, spread the gospel of Black Opal, till in 1910 it found steady and increasing sale, and for all the finer qualities the demand has continued up to the present time at ever higher rates.

As so many people seem puzzled over the name "Black" Opal, and as I was godfather at the christening, I feel I ought to try and justify it.

The body-ground of the normal type of opal is *practically colourless*, inclining to milkiness, as in

White Cliffs, and tinged with gold as in Queensland, so that if the dancing colours were eliminated you would have a piece of *white stone*. Well, if the glorious lights in typical Black Opal were quenched, the stone itself would be *jet black*. It was quite necessary to distinguish the new stone from the old type known for centuries, and as it was undeniably opal and the back-ground or body-ground was undeniably black, it seemed both simple and accurate to call it Black Opal. It also was arresting, it appears, and not too obviously appropriate. Anyhow, it is a good name, and will stay, in spite of the poetical efforts of one dealer who wished to saddle the innocent stone with a Greek name, which meant the moulting peacock or something equally outrageous.

And this to " make it fashionable!" It is quite fashionable enough, for the pity of it is the mines where this unique stone is found seem slowly petering out. The supply has been dwindling for a good while now, and a large proportion of the few stones found are won from the old dumps, and from pillars in the old workings which were left to save timbering. There are other deposits there no doubt, but to " pick up the lead " is the problem. There is a limit to the patience and big-heartedness that will keep on sinking shafts on the off-chance of doing it. While the " lead " is running, the men bunch round and get the depth and dip from the producing claim. Then the patch works out.

How, then, shall the field be kept alive?

" Trust to luck " seems to be the best counsel. At any rate, the idea of Government subsidies to

prospectors has nothing to recommend it. It attracts the wrong type of men, and is sheer waste of money.

While the price which the miners can demand remains so high there will always be fossickers, and some day another " Old Paul " (vide Part III.) will scuffle along and sink in the wrong place where opal has no business to be, and " strike it rich," and then—like ants that smell sugar—seamy old gougers scattered all over the Continent will sit up and listen and rub their feet together, and suddenly drop their shears and frying pans and bullock whips and trickle off to the Ridge with lively hope and a pair of snips in their bosoms. Then we may get some more Black Opals.

The mines are situated in the typical opal country, the Desert Sandstone, and the workings are for the most part shallow, as at White Cliffs—say from seven to twenty feet—with the exception of the three-mile, where a hard siliceous capping of 60 feet must be pierced before the opal bearing strata is met with.

* * * * *

Now, how is it possible to convey any adequate idea of the arresting loveliness of Black Opals to anyone who has never seen these amazing gems? The intensity of the colours, the surprising swiftness of their changes and the strangely interesting character of their diverse colour-lines or patterns within even a small stone, baffle description.

In the normal type (or *Light Opal* as we now call it) the colour patterns are in more or less regular spots and harlequin chequers and give the stone a quietly beautiful effect which will always attract some people most. There is a radiancy and restfulness about it,

which perhaps springs from the simple purity of the stone and its orderly constructed character.

But the colour patterns in Black Opals are infinite in their range and astonishing in their heavenly lawlessness. They are not of course patterns at all, but the gleeful spear-thrusts, the broken shining pathways of seraphic *Order* struggling out of chaos — Celestial Light, imprisoned through the centuries, panting to be free—or, better still, dear Human Love battling in the black grip of Fate, vivid and valiant, lit with stormy glory and flashing in splendid hope—or fitfully gleaming, and clouded over, and all but quenched, yet ever pulsing back into tenderness or rippling into sunny smiles!

Who, indeed, can hope to capture and describe this amazing, gladeyed, responsive thing, cribbed in its dark cage, yet exultant there beyond measure, and trembling with a gratitude which we thrill to watch? In one small stone what varying heaven-lit scenes—mountains and lakes and curtains of Arctic fire; there is Pilatus piercing through golden hail, against the dark storm cloud, his sacred summit agleam with molten emerald, and there the Rigi bristling with crimson daggers, and at foot that matchless lake, its shadowed greens slashed with brilliant bars of purple—the pathway of the King! Or surely this is *Kiluea*, fearful in mysterious beauty, its sleeping fires partly veiled over with sullen hues as of cooling iron till "Old Faithful" bursts out in sudden splendour and throws aloft his meteoric showers, while a surging wave of glory sweeps across the awesome pool!

Only in some such fashion—vain, indeed, though it

SUNDAY AT THE THREE-MILE—BLACK OPAL FIELD.

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be—can one attempt to express the strange emotion which these wondrous gems provoke in us as we slowly turn them in the light. In one half-inch of space are crowded all the deepest and divinest hues and mysteries of colour, whether of clouds or birds or butterflies or flowers or fish or beetles or other precious stones!

And in other ways this Black Opal is interesting and stimulating too. Like the Light Opal at White Cliffs, it is found replacing fossil shells and wood and the teeth and bones of animals. Its characteristic forms, known as "nobbies" and "flat nobbies" by the miners, are replacements of sponges and corals, we are told, which in sections of them exhibit strange threadlike divisions and markings and wheels of colour or fan-like radial lines, and along these fairy tram-rails the colours run and ripple in a delicious way, folding in as they run. What other gem will consent to irradiate the dull and dowdy tombs of the dead? Can you imagine a diamond or an emerald consenting to become a shark's tooth or a periwinkle?

And, as pointed out in "The Spirit of the Child," these opal pseudomorphs are exquisite symbols of that celestial body which man hopes shall be one day his. It may put a little colour into that hope when he notes the house of the "Sally" snail or the homely mussel—dull, opaque, and corruptible, replaced by a priceless jewel—radiant, palpitating, eternal!

X.

COBERPEDY.

Just as the Lightning Ridge field came to the rescue when White Cliffs began to slacken, so the Coberpedy field at Stuart's Range, South Australia, has arisen to carry on the supply of precious opal now that Black Opal seems petering out. Those fine hardy bushmen and prospectors, Jim and Dick O'Neill, were the lads who, with the help of a Printy, tracked the Coberpedy gem to its lair.

There is a very interesting report on this New Field by the Government Geologist of South Australia (Mr. L. Keith Ward, B.A., B.E.), which the Minister for Mines has kindly allowed me to use with accompanying map, and this is of great service :—

> " Stuart's Range is the name given to the ridge that constitutes the divide between two systems of surface drainage. The divide extends in a direction having a bearing nearly N.W.-S.E., and separates the basin of Lake Cadibarrawirracanna from that containing Lakes Woorong, Phillipson and Wirrida. These so-called ' lakes ' are typical ' playas ' or ' clay-pans ' of large size. They contain water only for a short time after heavy rain has fallen, and for the greater part of the year the silt-filled depressions are dry and smooth.

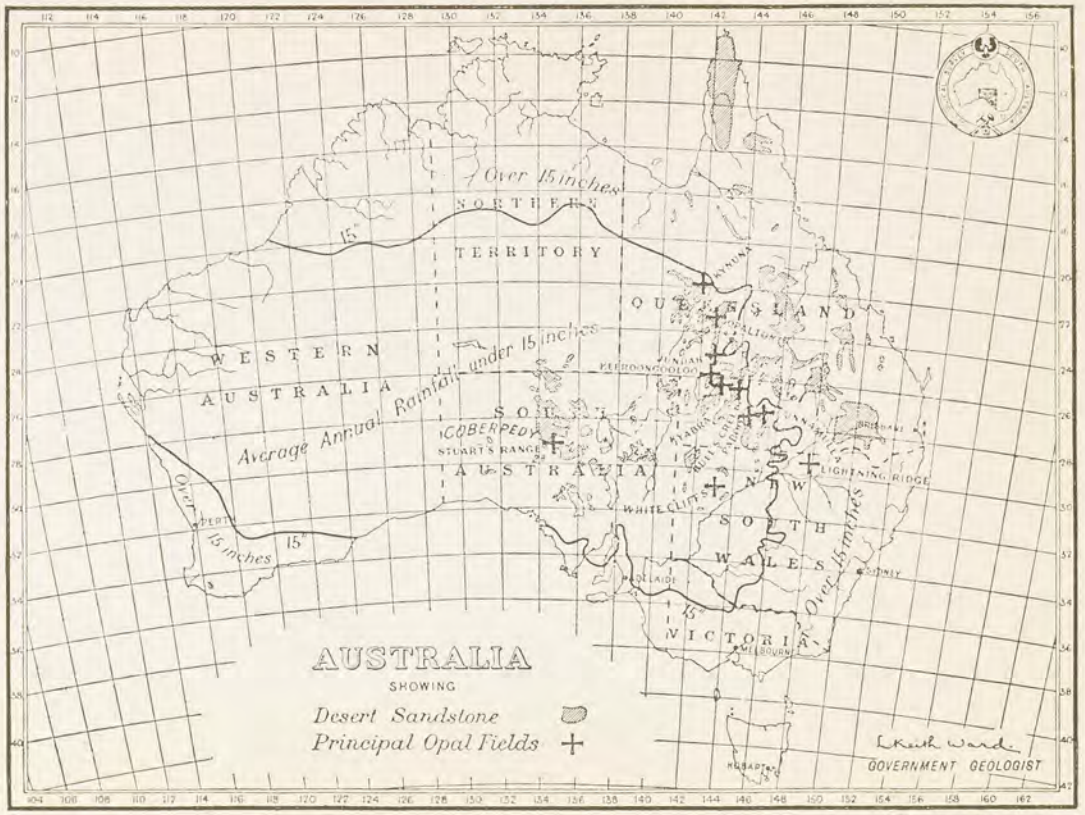
THE PRINCIPAL OPAL FIELDS OF AUSTRALIA.

This map shows the position of the principal Australian opal fields in which precious opal is won from the Desert Sandstone series of Upper Cretaceous age.

The area which receives an average annual rainfall of less than 15 inches is also indicated.

The shaded areas show the present extent of the Desert Sandstone, which was once continuous over a very large area in Central and North-Eastern Australia.

That the opal deposits indicated on this map may possibly be due to the reaction of arid climatic conditions on the Desert Sandstone formation has been suggested as a hypothesis. On this hypothesis all the developments of the Desert Sandstone in South Australia are worthy of the attention of prospectors searching for precious opal.



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"The newly-discovered opal field is situated approximately midway along the range, and its centre may be marked on a map of South Australia at latitude 29° 2′ S. and longitude 134° 48′ E."

* * * * *

GEOLOGICAL FEATURES.

"The central portion of Stuart's Range, where the opal discovery was made, is a remnant of a great tableland composed of almost horizontal beds of sandstone and claystone that were deposited in Upper Cretaceous time. These beds extend beyond the Lower Cretaceous shales that form the impervious cap confining the water of the Great Australian Artesian Basin to the underlying sands. At Stuart's Range the bluish shales of Lower Cretaceous age were not recognised. They may underlie the superficial cover to the northward of the range in the eastern portion of the broad valley through which run Giddi Gidinna and Oolgelima Creeks and their many tributaries. The most westerly springs that may be considered to owe their origin to the escape of the water existing under pressure in the Great Artesian Basin are known as Giddi Gidinna Springs, and are situated on the creek of the same name at the western extremity of Lake Cadibarrawirracanna. These springs, from which water of useful quality is said to be obtainable, are about thirty miles distant from the opal field in a straight line.

"The sediments laid down under marine conditions in Upper Cretaceous time have been elevated since the period of deposition, and have been greatly affected by erosion. The tableland formed by the elevation of

these marine sediments has been dissected by the agents of erosion in a very irregular manner.

"The rise northwards to the top of the range from Carringallana Creek is gradual; and, when the crest is reached, the abruptness of the scarp facing the N. is surprising to the traveller. The front of the range is deeply embayed, and many spurs and table-topped outliers remain to show the former northward extension of the plateau. When the front of the range is viewed from one of these outliers the skyline appears perfectly straight."

* * * * *

"This Upper Cretaceous formation, which is usually known by the name of Desert Sandstone, extends far beyond the limits of the country hitherto proved to be opal-bearing. The map of Australia printed with these notes shows its extent through Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. For purposes of reproduction on so small a map the smaller outcrops are necessarily grouped together, and many very small outliers have been omitted, but the map has been drawn in accordance with the latest available information."

* * * * *

Precious Opal: Its Nature, Occurrence and Origin.

"Precious opal, that is to say opal which exhibits the beautiful play of colours that creates its value as a gemstone, is a special variety of a rather remarkable mineral species. Opal assumes no crystalline form, and

is of variable composition. It consists of hydrated silica, and the water content varies between wide limits. These variations in chemical composition are attended by variations of the refractive index; and in the precious variety the play of colour is due to interference effects on white light traversing material that is not perfectly homogeneous. The colours are called by physicists the ' colours of thin plates,' and are due to the lamellar structure of the opal itself.

" The precious variety is found in most cases in the form of a band or bands enclosed within a larger bulk of common opal or ' potch.' In a few cases the seams are wholly composed of precious opal, but in these cases the seams are narrow. The bands of precious opal traversing the potch are very variable in thickness. some of them are continuous in a seam (and the stone is then said to be ' true '), others terminate abruptly or merge into the common opal. The bands of ' colour ' traversing the potch are not as a rule parallel to the surfaces of the tabular mass forming the seams when these are vertical, but cross from side to side at an acute angle. In the horizontally disposed seams the bands are in most cases parallel with the seams themselves, and the stone is more often ' true.'

" The thickness of the band of ' colour,' the minute internal structure of the band itself (determining the actual play of colour observed and the pattern exhibited by these colours), the transparency of the band in which the play of colour is observable, and the colour of the associated potch all have an influence on the value of precious opal.

" In all opal fields the proportion of stone of first

class quality to that of the total quantity of opal won is small.

" The opal at Stuart's Range occurs for the most part in irregular veins and patches, which are enclosed in the sandstone and claystone of the Upper Cretaceous formation."

* * * * *

" By far the greater part of the opal that has hitherto been won from the Desert Sandstone in New South Wales and Queensland has been mined from depths of less than twenty feet, and very little has been obtained from greater depths than 70 feet."

* * * * *

" When the mode of occurrence of precious opal in the Desert Sandstone of Australia is viewed in conjunction with its characteristic geographical distribution, the hypothesis that the opal owes its origin to the reaction of arid climatic conditions on a particular series of rocks suggests itself. Opal, like alunite, may be deposited from hot springs, but neither mineral is exclusively formed by hot solutions ascending from considerable depths.

" The Desert Sandstone series, carrying the precious opal in Queensland, New South Wales, and South Australia, includes similar rock types in all three States. Superficial silification is characteristic of the series, and is not restricted merely to isolated places. It is brought about by the redistribution of part of the silica in the rocks constituting the series, and in this rearrangement of material climatic influences probably play an important part."

* * * * *

" It, therefore, seems possible that the development of opal (hydrous silica) is a special phase of the silification of the upper portion of the Desert Sandstone that is more prominently shown by the jasperoid or porcellanite capping, and which is largely due to the arid climate of Central Australia."

I bought the first parcel from this new field early in 1915, and took samples to America in October, 1916, and although the war, of course, had upset trade, I found purchasers. The quality of the stone has steadily improved as the ground has been worked deeper and away from the effect of weathering.

The bulk of the stone is identical with White Cliffs—some is larger and finer, while some has a darker shade and occasionally approaches the Black Opal.

When any ordinary stability in trade is established through more settled conditions in Europe it is certain that the product of this new field will find a steady sale.

Manufacturers in America have been taking some all along, and will be glad to handle it in bulk, when prospects of regular business return. It can be matched and cut to gauge just as the old White Cliffs was. During the brief interlude of brisk trade after the Armistice, over £50,000 worth of this light opal was sold to one firm alone in Paris, and at the very time too that an amiable Australian " expert " declared they would not touch opal there. Well, I suppose it is necessary to know one's business.

Steady supply is the main factor to induce steady demand in opal, as in practically everything else. Merchants and manufacturers are shy of handling

materials which come in irregular supply. They exclude both feasts and famines.

The fact, then, that a steady supply of opal is again obtainable identical with White Cliffs, and suitable for cutting to gauge as well as for the very finest necklaces and single high priced gems, will be found to be the main factor in establishing and increasing the demand all over the world for this gem.

The field is roughly seven hundred miles from any other known mines, but the country is the typical opal bearing ground, and identical with the White Cliffs workings. It is in a very dry zone, and the water trouble will be the main difficulty, but the mines department is fully seized of the importance of the field, and has already put down trial bores, with, however, only qualified success, and I believe that dams and tanks are the surest and least expensive expedients. There is little or no timber for long stretches, the table lands being clothed with rough short herbage and our familiar friend, the gibber.

The wild life, too, seems conspicuous by its absence, on account of the dry conditions no doubt. Over on the adjacent clay-pans it would be different when rain fills them.

The " Printy," a large species of Iguana with large spots on him, is one of the few strange creatures occasionally seen, and, given the right master with no antagonistic aura, these rather terrifying looking beasts are surprisingly docile and intelligent.

There is a story current on the field relating to a tame one which will be found in Part III.

But before introducing these sketches, with which I propose to end my book, and in taking leave of this

fascinating stone, I feel compelled to confess that I have done it scant justice. Its endless variety of occurrence in the rock matrix, its adaptability beyond any other material for exquisite carvings which will more and more attract the refined and educated (not alone for wearing as jewellery, but as objects of precious interest for the drawing room and cabinet)—these and many other points I have hardly touched on.

It is not only fascinating in itself, and for us who handle and wear it, but for the miner too in its winning, and wherever his lot may be cast he clings back to the old gouging days, and is ready, whenever he gets his opportunity, to join up with some old mate and try his luck again. It is a pleasant and healthy life on the whole, though, of course, hard and somewhat monotonous away from civilisation, but all the healthier for that. The equipment he needs is simple and inexpensive—gad and bar and pick and shovel, axe and rope and calico tent, windlass and green hide buckets, which he can himself construct, and, finally, a bike, a brumby and a water bag—*and* opal snips!

He is free and can work when he feels inclined, and can spare time to make his dug-out or camp reasonably comfortable, which, however, he seldom does.

If Fortune smiles, as any day she may, he can take a trip south if not satisfied with field prices; or if he feels compelled to hear again the music of a skirt.

Some have tomato plots, some a patch of pumpkins, and others train bower birds and printies and mulga snakes. And they all have the stimulus of a new hope each day as they grip the pick! Good luck to them, these lads of the mulga, and to the bonny stone of the Never Never.

Part III

SKETCHES OF OPAL FIELD CHARACTERS

SKETCHES OF OPAL FIELD CHARACTERS

I.

CARNEY JIMMY.

A Famous West Queenslander.

Carney Jimmy was known all over Western Queensland, and wherever opallers did congregate there he was discussed — and many legendary tales gathered about his name, which in far distant opal and cattle camps and wayside shanties were told and retold, and embellished till he grew altogether out of character.

For, as a matter of fact, very little was known about Carney, and it was a tribute to his reticence and originality that he aroused so much interest.

To begin with, no one knew where he came from. He was simply there, one morning, with an old pair of moleskins, a blue shirt and a pick, and merely said, "Good-day." Then he went on picking. He made no remark about the weather, nor inquired about meat or water. He seemed entirely self-sufficient, volunteered nothing regarding himself and showed no curiosity to hear of other people. The first idea that crystallised and became a settled conviction was that he was Scotch—secondly, it became firmly established that he was educated and read "home papers."

Those two things were fixed points, and you could tether what you liked to them. He was fleeing from justice, was threatened by consumption, crossed in love, or he was a lunatic, a poet or a miser. And this last idea gradually grew and seemed to gather some evidence around it. A queer place to come, for a miser, where about the only thing one could mise would be mulga apples, but Jimmy was to teach the gouger a thing or two.

His name, Carney Jimmy, was pretty rapidly earned. It was not given him by his godmother in baptism, but by his contemporaries in the Never Never —after the article which they discovered formed his staple diet. This was the frilled Jew Lizard or Carney —plentiful in West Queensland. Now how did he come to know about it? Was he aware not only that this succulent reptile was good for food and very sustaining, but also that it abounded there in goodly numbers and was amenable to discipline? But know about it he did, or soon came to find out, because within a month or two carneys had been found tethered in the shade in several places round his camp, and they seemed perfectly resigned to their fate. Some said they were doped, others said the man was a scientist, and was starving the animals to death to see the effect on their " innerds," but after a day or two the carneys vanished and others took their places. Finally, the solution that he tethered them to " make them tender and bring out the flavour " was generally accepted, but no one seemed to have got the news first-hand. Certain it is, however, that carneys formed a large part of his diet, and a bag of rice once in six months was about

the only civilised food, besides tea, which he was ever known to buy. Pigweed, or bush cabbage, he often used, while pechilas (the big yellow grub in acacia wood) and goanna's eggs were the occasional delicacies which gave a riotous note to his otherwise frugal bill of fare.

So far, so good; he was industrious, quiet and frugal, and let his neighbours alone, and read "home papers." *But he never let on if he was getting opal*, and nobody seemed game to ask him.

After some months, however, there was an outside "show" near the Pinnacles, and Joe Bridle tackled Jimmy, and suggested they should go in partners and have a crack at it. And to everybody's surprise Jimmy consented, and for a brief space ate damper and lived the luxurious life of the ordinary gouger, just to see what it was like, perhaps—for it didn't last long. They dug out a nice little parcel, but Jimmy *did not want to sell*, and so they "divvy-ed" it—and Joe sold his "whack" for £140. But Jimmy sat tight. Then he went on his lonesome again—back to his tethered carneys.

Some said on moonlight nights he would follow up the wallabies with his pockets full of stones and wait till one scratched out a yam, and then he would toss a gibber at it and get the yam, but that, I think, is not properly authenticated. But one could go and *see* the carneys tethered up with a leather bootlace any day—under a needle-bush, so the hawks wouldn't get them.

Carney Jimmy was never known to sell a parcel of opal—except thirty-seven chips for 6s. when he wanted a water bag. He got one for 1s. from a half-caste and

had 5s. left, which would put his account in credit for a long time, as the banks didn't charge in those days for keeping one's account.

But the burning question arose, where did he plant his opal? And what was he hoarding it for? All gougers "plant" their opal pending sale, but whenever they can realise they do, and a man accumulating for years would be embarrassed, one would think, by the richness of his hoards, and worry himself to a skeleton when he must know scores of brains were at work, out of mere baffled curiosity, to "spring his plants."

Perhaps that very knowledge put the edge on his enjoyment, and gave him a keen relish for his job. These louts, poking their noses into other people's business, and thinking to turn him from his purposes and compel him to adopt their rotten methods—he would pit his wits against theirs, the whole box and dice of them, and live his own life in his own way—and be damned to them! That is more than likely, I think, though he never gave any sign that he knew he was the object of curiosity at all.

It was not as if they were merely *surmising* that he must have opal. He was known to have rich claims—the last one adjoining the "Little Wonder," from which over £20,000 was sold, and the "band" ran into his ground. Besides, we knew of the booty he divided up with Bridle.

It really seemed as if he were an opal miser, but for what purpose beyond mere possession could not be guessed.

Every gouger in that district had a theory as to

where his plants were hidden—some of them founded on actual data.

One miner, for instance, overtaken by nightfall while returning from prospecting, was obliged to camp in a stretch of tangled scrub and rough boulders. There was a deep water-hole or pool, black with boxleaves, in the rugged creek, and he camped on the higher ground to escape the mosquitoes a little. But he overlooked the pool. Far in the night he was aroused, he thought, by the wallabies or 'roos on the way to water—but he heard the cracking of twigs too, and the wild animals don't do that. He sat up, and saw quite plainly in the starlight a weird figure emerge from the wall of scrub and steal stealthily through the broken ground and peer into the pool. Long and critically the ape-like thing glared round, moving its shaggy scalp and twisting its head from side to side like a suspicious shag.

The watcher was in deep shadow of a rock, or he would have been spied.

Suddenly the strange thing, with a wriggling contortion, seemed to shed its skin and tumbled headlong into the black, mysterious pool.

The miner's impulse was to break away into the tangled scrub, and yet both curiosity and fear bound him.

As suddenly as the weird shape flopped into the water it flopped out again, with an action like a walrus, splashing the water over the rocks and heaving up some heavy object.

" It was a rum and 'orrible sight," said the gouger in telling the story, " when it stood like a big wet gorilla, and box leaves and blobs of mud dripping orf

of it. It was hugging somethin' in a bag, and was gone in a minnit before I c'd look twice, but I could hear crackin' mulga and 'oofs ringin' on the ridge."

"Why didn't you yell and scare this gorilla man at the start, and see what it would do?" I asked.

"I was too —— scared myself!" he said.

This could have been none other than Carney himself, but why should he want to spring his own plant? Where safer could it be? And was this horse some astral animal? Suddenly, when wanted, it was *there*—a misjointed affair with no brands—a sort of brumby come-back from a zebra or one of Darwin's primitive striped horses. It had a band from its wither to the butt of its tail, which was round and nearly hairless, but with a switch on the end—no one in the district had seen it before, but there it was now in the flesh, or rather in the bone, with no self-consciousness about it to speak of. It was simply there, like Carney, with the air of *always* having been there, and idly eating mulga.

There was something odd about it, and when I had a little personal experience I admitted the miners were not merely making up these tales.

I was sitting at "Little Wonder" camp fire one night when suddenly Joe said, "Did y'hear *that?*"

"Hear what?" I said.

"You listen," he answered.

"I can't hear anything—well, except that thumping."

"What's it like?" he asked.

"Sounds like a gouger picking," I said.

"—— rum, isn't it?" remarked Joe.

"How do you mean 'rum?'" I queried.

"Well, did ever you know gougers work at night?"

"Ratting another man's claim," I suggested.

"What! thump like that with a pick?"

I laughed, of course.

"Well, Joe, what is it?"

"Some —— mystery," he said, in a low queer voice, which seemed to indicate he had not lightly arrived at that conclusion.

"Tell me about it," I said, with a thrill of excitement, and filled my big needlewood pipe.

"There's something dead funny about Carney," he began, "there'll be trouble some day."

"Trouble?"

"He'll hang himself, or poison the water at the soak, or set fire to the scrub or do something to get us out of this."

"I'd encourage him in the first idea," I said; "but what rot are you talking, Joe?"

But Joe wouldn't argue, but returned to the knocking.

"There it is again," he said, listening.

"Let's go over," I proposed, "we'll soon puncture this old mystery."

"Come on, then," he agreed; "bring the gun from the tent."

"Get out," I said, "you want to get me scared."

And as we walked, picking our way as quietly as possible, he told me of the times he had stalked this mysterious night-gouger, and how he always returned baffled.

Nearer and nearer we drew to the sound—the ordinary thud of the pick, surely—and within a few dozen paces I expected to see the man wielding it, for it was moonlight—but suddenly it stopped, and we stooped in a bunch of spear-grass.

I watched " with all my eyes," but not a movement anywhere. Silence and the still trees and shadows.

" There! d'you hear *that?*" whispered Joe, as the pick rang out half a mile away. I felt the prickles climb up my back and scalp, but I merely said,

" Sound is very deceptive at night."

" Why at night?" said Joe.

" Well at any time," I said, laughing; " let's follow on."

And we did, and chased that phantom picking all over the landscape for miles, or so it seemed, till I was utterly wearied and convinced—and confessed it.

We had visited Carney's camp before we set out on our search, and his tent was still empty on our return.

Where was he? And if by some magic, only known to his horse, he was able to elude us, why should he *want* to be doing it?

" The whole thing's got me teetotally flambastigated," said Joe dejectedly, as we turned in, and I admitted that this description expressed my own sensations rather well.

But if Carney Jimmy was in his lifetime a mild enigma, he was equally mysterious in his latter end and final exit, and his horse seemed bitten by the same microbe. He generally kept the beast about twelve miles away or so, and it was supposed now and then

Carney would get a spasm or craving to inspect his mount, and would then lope off early and get the faithful thing into camp by nightfall. It was a tedious enterprise, because he had to *back* it home to camp—or lead it. When ridden it would jib every way but north-west—unless ridden at night. He would use it on those rare occasions when he dived off into the scrub on one of his mysterious excursions, when those who sometimes followed always came to grief. He would be away three or four days, and then come back as suddenly, generally keeping the moke in the clump of dogwood near the rock hole for a week, taking special care to cut kangaroo grass and mulga for his benefit—presumably to make amends for the super-equine exertions he had lately demanded of him. On one of these visits the horse died. No one saw the dead horse—only odd bits of him, and, of course, various tales sprang up, because Jimmy, in his usual mysterious way, did not explain how he got away with the carcase, or when. All that was ever seen was the tail, which was sun-dried and nailed to the upright of the caboose—and a few dozen odd strips of the meat were hung out on strings between two mulga trees, which Jimmy, when asked, said were dingo scalps.

So it was generally told, and believed, that Carney pickled his horse and planted it with his opal, or packed it down in the drives of his mine. And the fact that the tethered carneys were now no longer seen, lent colour to this statement.

Alick Frame said, "You see, he'll follow the old crock soon—he's got the wild eye now." And in less than a month, Peter Nurra, the half-caste (whom

Carney seemed to encourage more than anyone) came into Bridle's camp and said Jimmy was "going black."

Nothing much could be got out of Carney himself. He merely said he thought a snake had bitten him down the drive, but he was going to make some leopardwood tea and that would cure him. He was one whom you could not help. He lived his own life—neither giving nor asking for sympathy—and that is courting death. And presently they found him dead, huddled up in the clump of bushes where he used to tie the striped horse, his head resting on his arms and an empty bucket beside him.

And then began, with rather indecent haste, the scramble to spring his plants. Men from adjoining camps, station hands, swaggies of various colour and description, appeared on the scene, and everyone with a pet theory had a chance to play Sherlock Holmes. The whole area round his camp, and under his tent and bunk and galley fire, was turned over and explored; the headings of the mine shifted and every camp where at any time he had lived, and the water holes and hollow box trees and caves and blowholes, in the vicinity of each and all of them, searched and plumbed and scraped over with laborious care and cunning; but not a chip of opal was found anywhere, except only seven little lots in the drives he was working when he died, tied up in bits of rag and poked into odd corners and pockets as if by a magpie. . . .

Was he a lover after all, slaving in painful roughness for a great end? Was it a mother's kind old face, wrinkled with care, which he would smooth out into

smiles when he came back with the worth-while prize? Was it the employer whom his brother had robbed and whom he would reimburse? Was it a past of his own he would redeem and prove to that trusting girl his bitter sorrow and absolute surrender? Or was it that these lovely stones so compelled his homage that he even starved for their sakes?

Carney Jimmy's secret sleeps with him; and that of his smiling treasures too, twinkling there in the silence of the Never Never, safe perhaps for another century in the homes which he so cunningly found or fashioned for them.

II.

PAUL'S PATCH.

A Woman in the Case.

One day an old time fossicker was on his way out to the Mt. Brown diggings, a remote goldfield near the N.W. corner of New South Wales, which was fast flickering to its close. He had the Old Girl up in the cart with him, tough and determined, and the vehicle, the wheezy nag, and the rigging that bound them together were not inaptly described as a " battered trinity of freckled remnants," which seemed, however, a suitable framework for the elderly couple.

They themselves were not remnants by any means, though chipped about a good deal, but the whole turnout was in character, every unit being braced at some point with string, skewers, ropeyarn or wire. The marks of time were indubitably upon them, and Ruskin would have here discerned the subject of a noble picture.

" Good-day, boss—good-day, Missus," said Matt, the cook, meeting the couple at the Cliffs mail-change.

" Good-day," from both.

" Goin' far?"

" Mt. Brown."

" Fossikin'?"

"Um."

"Pretty hot."

"Um"—long pause.

"Oughter try y'luck over here," ventured Matt, jerking his thumb in the direction.

"Over where?" said the Old Girl suspiciously.

"White Cliffs, you know," said Matt.

"I *don't* know—what's White Cliffs?" she said, with a note of contempt.

"Why, the opal field," answered Matt in surprise. "Oughter try y'luck gouging."

The lady sniffed, as being, perhaps, a brief and non-committal mode of reply, and Paul asked with the same prejudice, "What's the good of opal if y'get any?"

"My oath, some's worth twenty—quid an ounce," declared Matt, with slow emphasis to let it soak in—but it bounced off the lady's mind like a pea off a drum.

She merely emitted a sound like a brumby does when it smells pig's blood.

But Matt was a bit of a sticker, like one of those soft friendly burrs, and once launched on the enterprise of bringing these scoffers to a state of grace, he moved up heavier guns every time he was rebuffed.

He began to recount the recent fortunes made, and where facts failed him he drew on his imagination. A Chinaman had dug one fortune out with a shear blade, he declared, in a few days; a collie pup scratched out a seven hundred pound parcel while his master was pegging out the claim, and a kingfisher fumbling in the side of an old shaft teased out a lovely gem which sold for £70. "But the rummiest thing was last month,"

continued Matt (seeing signs of the drought breaking). "It jest shows 'ow rich the place is—we had a thunderstorm, 84 points, and, by gum, all over the red flat mushrooms come up thick—thick as bees—an' every one 'ad a gem on top!"

Old Paul began to hoop-up as if he were getting the cramp. The vision of being up first after a shower and hiking the jewels off the mushrooms made a warm glow in his mind—but he knew it would be fatal to show any enthusiasm. The Old Girl was sitting bolt upright, looking rigidly north-east by north, and Paul wished for a moment she would get a partial stroke if nothing else would shift her.

"I s'pose you've heard smallpox is broke out at Mt. Brown," said wily Matt opportunely — "three deaths."

The Old Girl bounced round in an instant.

"Who told you?" she demanded, almost fiercely.

"That Russian chap who saw a million die, I b'lieve, in a week in 'is own country," said Matt.

"Don't believe a word of it," she declared, in angry tones — mainly because she did. The "Russian" was a happy fluke; there was one up there who had lately left and gone to Bourke, and, though Matt didn't know it, the Old Girl did.

Paul, with unusual swiftness, saw his chance, and, turning indifferently to the Angel of the Home, he said, "What say if we give the rubbishy old place a spin?"

"Any old excuse if y'want to waste time," she answered sulkily, but Paul knew that this was the beginning of surrender.

Finally they jerked along after Matt, Madam hedg-

ing all the way so that if the excursion failed, as she knew it would, she could soak it into Paul for all time.

"Y'not content with bein' a mildew'd freak y'self," she kept declaring, "but want me to be one too." It was vain for Paul to protest his innocence, so he silently accepted the responsibility.

But the strange thing happened, and old Paul, in his second week, struck the biggest patch of large fine opal ever won at White Cliffs by one man. When all was cleaned up and sold the parcel realised over £4,000, and Paul, being on 50/50 tribute, pocketed £2,000.

As he came along from the buyer's shack Paul whistled gaily to himself, but in a whisper—jerking his head from side to side, and making a cracking noise with his jaw. He had seldom done this since he was a boy. He knew now what people meant by walking on air. He felt he was walking on a water spout. The opal bushes and straggling mulga were all inclined to grin and giggle and rattle their seeds off, and some, he would swear, actually did it.

On one little red flat he paired off with a long mulga stick, and did a step dance, clicking his boots together and bowing low to the stick when he had finished.

The Old Girl was grimly watching him from the saddle of the ridge as he came along the pad back to the claim. She was taking no chances, and Paul thought *he* was on the same wicket and not taking any either, and that partly accounted for his unusual hilarity.

He had fixed it up with himself that he would get

his money in three cheques—one for a thousand, which he would not declare, and then two others of five hundred each. The Angel of the Home would hardly commandeer *both*, and if he made them unequal she'd collar the biggest, so five hundred each would be a fair thing. " Make it in one thou. and two fives," he told the opal buyer, and was secretly pleased with the sporty abbreviations. It showed he knew his mind and was used to big figures.

But so many little schemes miscarry, and in a lap or two nearer his camp when Paul, in a cunningly chosen clump of cassia, took his boot off, and inserted the guilty cheque, the wife of his bosom, who had with equal cunning chosen the same clump from the other side, was near enough to witness the whole performance.

So that when Paul rose with a slight crackle under his big toe, and ready to declare with Henley's splendid heathen that he was the Master of his Fate, his confidence was destined to receive a swifter and more fatal blow than he could ever have imagined.

For on his very first step forward from his bower the Captain of his Soul stood face to face with him, and on that corrugated old visage there was a smile which made the yam stick she carried look like a staff of comfort.

Paul, in spite of occasional brain waves, was not mentally alert. He never thought of trying to bluff or declare he had bought a cork sole, for instance, to put in his boot. Not a shot was fired. He surrendered on the spot, explaining, when taxed about the submerged half, that he was merely " spreading the risks " in case of sudden attack—which wasn't a bad defence by any

means. But the Old Girl smiled with a kind of sound like tearing calico, and said grimly, " It didn't spread the risks much !"

Next day, although Paul said the " lilt " had gone out of life, the missus didn't seem to notice it, but herself wired in the pensive brumby to the family gig. Then, with a bottle of gin under her arm, rolled in a wet bag, to smooth over jagged places with Paul, she firmly, if tactfully, ushered him into the place of honour, and, mounting with the reins, steered the freckled remnants off the field with the booty intact !

On the whole it was a wise bit of work, and although " the lilt had gone out of life " for Paul because it was made safe for him, yet the little joy-jig with the mulga stick on the red flat, remained a blessed memory, for once again the wine of youth had raced through his veins and he had seen trees as men dancing.

III.

JACK CRACKER.

A Robbery and a Joke.

The great sensation of the White Cliffs field was the Big Opal Robbery (with capitals), and, in the right hands, it could be made into a thrilling story, but the minor episode which happened several years later, and that tickled the back country, I can tell here.

One morning, before dawn, the mail coach was stuck up at the twelve-mile gate by a masked man, armed with a rifle, who crouched behind the gate post, and, as the coach drew up, he explained his wishes, and soon had the passengers and driver lined up. Then he went through the mails and parcels, and, when he had satisfied himself, made off into the scrub on the horse which was tied ready.

It was a very weak effort, as judged by the sequel, for the intrepid young ass was easily traced and arrested in the town the same day—the missing opal and some M/O's found under his bunk! If he thought that to bring the stolen stuff right into the town and under the very noses of the police was a subtle stroke—a cunning method to disarm suspicion — he crashed rather badly.

He might have been a mere cat's-paw, the instigator waiting in the shade, to make off with the spoil, as soon as the affair had blown over, but, unfortunately

for the daring robber, in blowing over it blew him into gaol. Then there were solemn meetings, and the Progress Committee was bombarded with suggestions for safeguarding the mails, and, as a final outcome, an armed police escort was provided by the Government for every out-going coach from the Cliffs.

Now Jack Cracker was just the lad to see here the heaven-sent opportunity for a bit of profitable fun, which would draw the plaudits of the crowd as well.

Registered parcels and valuable packets usually went into the " boot " if not too large and room could be found, but when the escort was provided, the boot was kept for wayside parcels and station bags, etc., and all the multitudinous small things which a mail coach habitually absorbs and scatters as it lurches along through the country.

Jack noticed pretty soon that besides the p/p crates, other mails were piled on the rack at the back also, over which the usual canvas covering was drawn and strapped at the bottom.

Now the coach in those days left White Cliffs at 8 p.m., travelled through the night, arriving at Wilcannia about noon next day, and, after dinner there, left again for Broken Hill, 150 miles distant. At about nine o'clock on the second night it would be traversing a stretch of deep red sand, walled in by mulga on both sides of the track.

After twenty-four hours of continuous travelling and thirty-six hours since the last sleep, even extraordinary men, like Homer, might nod, and fat policemen, topped up with rum and goat's milk, assuredly would and, at intervals, even snore.

Imagine the five-horse team well on in their stage, drooped down to a settled crawl, the passengers and driver likewise droopy in the extreme, unassailed by any sound, save the lulling swir of the wheels through the deep sand and the faint creak of the harness and leather springs—and no moving thing on this earth could present a more pathetically comatose picture.

Of course, Jack knew every inch of the track, and had chosen his spot.

His mount was tied far enough away from the track to be no menace, and he himself behind a thick tar-bush, three yards from the edge of the mulga, drew a full measure of quiet satisfaction from his pipe. He would chance his pipe. Any dopey passenger, sufficiently awake to smell smoke, would conclude it was his neighbour's pocket on fire, and sink back into sleep with a chuckle.

What a bit of fun life was, thought burly Jack, his blue eyes twinkling in the faint starlight, if only one kept awake—always something going on!

His thoughts ran over his last exploit, and how he had bamboozled his ancient friends—the enemy—over those stolen pigs! He could hear again the click of the surly trooper's jaw as plain as a gun hammer when, after two days' laborious tracking, and cunning collecting of "exhibits," he returned to barracks with his varied collection—horse shoes, torn shirt tail, goat's hair and pig's blood—only to find the very pigs in question leisurely rooting in the police garden, and champing the water melons which he himself had raised with such pride!

Jack Cracker chuckled aloud—and that moment he

pulled himself together and sat up like a wallaby, listening and leaning, his toes on scratch. Yes, it was the creaking old bus, sure enough, swirring along through the sand a few feet away and that weird Westinghouse-brake-whiffle—what was it?

It could only emanate, he concluded, from the capacious bosom of H.M. Escort.

As the dark lumbering old thorough-brace crawled past, Jack could see the three occupants, bunched on the box seat, against the sky—the driver with his head sunk on his chest in the usual safe fashion, the middle-man, a huddled blob of rag, and the burly limb of the law, securely strapped in, but his head lolling about like a big sunflower too heavy for its stalk. And his soprano whiffle struck Jack as odd, proceeding from such an ample sound-box.

As soon as the bus was past, Jack coolly stepped out behind it, unstrapped the rack cover, cut the ropes and gradually unloaded, deftly dropping the crates in the sand—there was no hurry; the night was young; and it was as easy and interesting as shelling green peas. When the bottom layer was safely unstripped, he drew himself up and pitched out the remainder.

It took a little while to collect the booty and carry it back to where his charger was, but, as he said, the night was young and the very earliest discovery would be at Topar—three hours ahead of the coach—and then—But Jack was of that optimistic nature which did not wear itself down in providing against too many contingencies.

He had ample time: he would boil his quart, screened from view of the road, and examine his catch

at leisure. His only regret was that the job had been too ridiculously easy. "Too soft a —— snap," he said aloud, in a disgusted tone, when he was sorting the pile by the embers—"like pinching a pie melon from a dead chow," and he rolled on his back, lighting his pipe with a coal and humming "Day wakes its sorrows."

Jack Cracker was always referred to as "a lad," "a card," or "a trick," names which expressed a certain measure of admiration and witnessed to the fact that he was popular. He had a certain charm of brightness, courtesy, and good-humour—he was plump without being coarse, his fair curly beard was thick but tidy, and suited his rosy cheeks and blue twinkling eyes. He had a strain of romance in him too, and would have delighted to rescue damsels or recover the Ark of the Covenant if, in doing so, he could have made a good joke of it at the expense of the other fellow. Lawlessness, pure and simple, did not attract him, but it did not deter him either, if it was necessary for his purpose.

The old coach sighed and creaked on towards Topar, and the bobby's head waggled rhythmically, and his lullaby rose and fell like the wind squeezing through a blow hole. Jack gathered his booty together, and packed it in his saddlebags, and built a cairn on the roadside with the crates and ordinary mails. Far be it from him to tamper with the public's letters, cheques, or money orders! Loose notes, postal notes, rough opal—why, these were unattached things, which could fade away and leave not a wrack behind, and therefore free to anyone who could use them properly and had any urgent need.

Life was full of fun, thought Jack again, as he stumbled across a bleached emu's shank on his way over with the last crate. This was the very thing! He would erect it on high as an indicator pointing to the cairn, and upon its white surface would scratch with a burnt stick the aphorism, "You be goided by me," which was a well-known and oft-quoted saying of the constable on the coach!

Then Jack removed the flat pieces of tin with which he was shod, swung into the saddle and went off at full tilt, leaving a fine fresh trail behind him.

It was only when the driver was hitching up again at Topar that the robbery was discovered, as Cracker had foreseen, and then for an hour or so there was a good deal of loose talk and tight liquid indulged in, for on such occasions men seem to congregate at the bar. The general consensus of opinion was that a robbery had been committed, and many cogent reasons were given, as, for instance, that if the crates and mails had just fallen off, as some maintained, how was it the ropes were cut?

They would all move out in a body and inspect the coach again, and the rack, and strike matches and look for tracks, and then surge back to the bar for a fresh impulse.

But the almost unanimous opinion was that the matter should be reported to the police. Then the little slavey came in, with her hair twisted up in curl-rags, and declared in an excited whisper, "There's a big fat bobby outside, ever so thick, why can't y'report to 'im?" But before anyone could answer, the ever-so-thick one loomed in himself, and spreading out

his enormous hand towards the bunch of befuddled men, as if coping with traffic, he lowered his voice almost to a whisper too, lest perhaps the robber might hear, and said, " You be goided by me—lie low—lie low, and I'll have 'im." They felt at once the situation had cleared, and the driver hitched up now and said he must push on, mail or no mail, and, as the fresh team bounced into the air with a rattle of swingle bars, the driver and his passenger, looking back, could see the " ever-so-thick " supported by a wavering mass of volunteers in the rear—all with lanterns or candles in bottles and tins, searching for tracks. Sometimes the thick 'un went on his hands and knees and peered into the sand. It was, of course, never questioned that the robbery *had taken place at Topar* while they were at their midnight supper, for the driver knew everything was in order at the last mail change, when he had restrapped the rack.

" The nerve of the swine," the thick 'un kept repeating, as he dodged about in the bushes, " but when I get on the trail, God help them."

Then someone came forward and suggested, " mightn't it be some cunning loafer at the pub, and perhaps the crates were in the tin harness room or in the goats' pens," and this made a diversion, and then dawn arrived, and all agreed it would be a capital idea to have breakfast *first* and *then* " get on the trail."

But it was easier said than done, this getting on the trail, and at ten o'clock pretty well everyone had collected again in the bar, the bobby included, and they were rather a subdued set. The thing seemed inexplicable. They were having the third drinks round,

when a Wesleyan parson, returning from Wilcannia to Broken Hill, drove up in his sulky and reported a peculiar pile of mail matter on the side of the road, nearly twenty miles back.

They all looked at each other in consternation—then the " thick 'un " blurted out, " That rotten driver ought to be fired, it's his —— carelessness."

" Didn't I say they'd just —— well fallen orf," said Leech triumphantly.

But the parson wouldn't have that—" they're all packed up neat and orderly, and the only curious thing is a big white bone rigged up on the edge of the road, pointing to the pile. It has some writing scratched on it, but I couldn't make it out. I thought the whole thing puzzling. What has happened?" he added.

And then, of course, there was much jabber and more liquid to sharpen the wits, and much mounting in hot haste, and mustering water bags and Winchesters, in case of a desperate scrap. The late escort was converted into the mounted trooper on the scent, and he had three drowsy old derelicts as voluntary bodyguard. And they went off like a whirlwind late for dinner.

By the time the " thick 'un " reached the cairn, he was alone, the others had fallen out long since and drifted back for a fresh impulse. The bobby wished he had one too! What an ass he had been! In the excitement he had only thought of water bags.

By slow and painful degrees the late escort uncoded the aphorism on the bone. He couldn't make sense of it for a long time, the third word baffled him—then suddenly he had it—and the blood surged up to his very temples!

"It's that —— Cracker!"

Poor old "thick 'un!" It wouldn't have mattered being thick in body, but, unfortunately, the thickness extended to his head. He was now a different man! He had a clue, a lead, an idea! And in a very few minutes, his bulky frame was glued to the saddle in an astonishing way. He swung to right and left and broke off dry branches of mulga like macaroni, as his good Topar cattle horse negotiated the scrub, following Jack's tracks.

But he must husband his horse's strength, unless, indeed, he could cut across to the mail change? No, he wouldn't chance it. The tracks he was following were two miles off the mail track, and at any moment might double and turn back—besides, he couldn't rely on getting a horse. It was folly to ride like Gilpin and knock his horse out, and so he steadied down and let his thickness relax.

It was a curious man and weary horse which drew up to the police yard at five o'clock that evening, and when the "thick 'un" dismounted and found, beyond doubt, that the big brown gelding in the yard was a *police horse*, he stood paralysed at the audacity of the deed! The horse was one which had been spelling for several months in a paddock five miles out, and here he was in the police yard, saddled and bridled, with clear evidence of having been furiously ridden, his hair being clued up with dry sweat and foam. Moreover, he had tracked the beast the whole way, and now fitted a near-side hind shoe, which he had picked up on the trail, to the animal's hoof. But a sudden gleam of hope made him pull his animal round sharply and walk

briskly over to examine the saddle and bridle on the horse. Here, if anywhere, he would get a lead, and he took them off and overhauled them on the ground. But, here again, Jack had made provision, and had merely returned a police outfit, which had been missing for over two years from the barracks. The robbery had been committed with a police horse, saddle and bridle, and the only " exhibits " possible were the two ends of a kerosene tin and the emu's shank.

A reward, of course, was offered, but there was no sign, and the whole back country rocked with laughter !

IV.

THE PRINTY.

Using the Intelligence of a Bush Animal.

There is an unusual story told of the intelligence and steadiness of a Printy at Coberpedy—a tale which rather strains credulity at some points, but which is vouched for by Mr. Tom O'Grady, who knew Wally Hoyle on the Bogen, where he had the wild turkeys so well under control.

Wally had one of those irrepressible natures which emit sparks at the wrong time, and unwittingly singed people when a little regulation would have avoided the trouble.

But often, too, his sparking was deliberate, as when he blew into the police barracks at Cunnamulla as softly as an evening zephyr and got away with a " hefty wad of clues " (the phrase is his) which were vital to the incrimination of his chief pal.

He thus became a centre of interest to the department, and eyes were on the watch for him all over Australia. One of the chief clues was a shark's tooth set as a pendant in 9 ct. gold, and which Wally, it was said, openly flaunted on his watch chain.

He knew the ropes pretty well, and could slip about the Continent without any extraneous aid. Greased

THE PRINTY.

From a photograph of a specimen in the Natural History Museum (S. Kensington).

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lightning was first and Wally came a good second, they said. Nothing came much amiss to him. He would roost up with a mob of gelars if necessity arose, and make the same noise as they did, and eat the same little burry seeds with the same evident relish; or curl up with the rock wallabies in the cool red sand-stone caves and collect enough asbestos while there to give snap to the tedium of his rest cure, and provide at the same time some means of grace if not much hope of glory.

But a sharp police officer at Kingoonyah (now out of the force) had got a whiff of Wally, by what means no one ever heard. Perhaps he had got the " straight mulga " *psychically*, for he was seen by not a few to be studying in a kind of comatosely alert attitude numerous weird chalk marks on Mrs. Hubbard's tank.

Anyhow, in the mysterious way of the bush, the news went up the track to the opal field, where it was whispered round that " Swab " was hot on Wally's trail.

Now Wally preferred to live, when in a fixed abode, in an elongated hole in the ground with a neck twisting up to the surface to serve as an air vent, something like the shape of a trombone.

It was really a miniature bottle-shaped dug-out on a gentle slope. It was cool, free from flies, mosquitoes, burrs, snakes, dust and ants, and had a soft floor, and, most important, it didn't take much digging. " Come inside " Wally would say in hospitable tones, " and make yourself at home," and dropping on his hands and knees, he would disappear under the fringe of a bran bag, and the guest would crawl in after him, and by a little deploying the two could gradually draw into

position, and bivouac side by side uninjured, smoking in peace by the light of a needle-bush seed soaked in fat.

Well, Wally had determined to make Coberpedy his summer headquarters, and had provided a dandy little dug-out, air fed by a natural blow-hole in the rock, which cork-screwed down as clean as a small gas pipe.

Anything curious and cute like this appealed to his imagination. It seemed to have been expressly made for him, predetermined possibly before the dawn of history with a view to satisfying his peculiar taste. No one could explain it; but then no one could explain why " Pithe " should pick Java, of all places, wherefrom to kick off for the whole human race. It tickled Wally's vanity, although he didn't know it, but he was a simple fellow, and did not get swelled head.

" Snug as a Pinkie," said Jim Peel, looking in. " Yes, and cradled in Mother Earth," added Wally triumphantly, bobbing out his head, but using a phrase he had borrowed from a parson at Moonta, who was referring to an earthworm.

But, as we have seen, his snugness was likely to be rudely menaced, and when the poor fellow got the news he was horribly cast down for the time.

This being hunted began to " get on his nerves," he said. Some day he would stand at bay, he thought, and take his chances. To be chased from pillar to post for stealing shark's teeth was humiliating.

But there was no time for self pity, and when Doughbanger Dick whispered in his ear, the old joyous spirit of adventure surged back. " To diddle Swab

right on the spot " appealed to his particular sense of fun.

So Wally was corked up in his bottle, or bottled up in his cork—and yet, strictly, it was neither of them. The bottom of the bottle was walled in and made natural, and a pile of mulga logs, that formed an old wood heap on the spot, was shifted a little, and dragged across, and the old axe was still left lying there. In other words, a wood heap was made over the top of Wally.

A junk of bread and meat and a tin of water were hastily shut in with him, and no one dreamed that Swab would linger more than a couple of days at most, and so no one foresaw the end.

It is hard to imagine it possible that anyone could consent to be entombed like that and not die of horror and panic. Any moment a spider might do down the spout and lay a couple of eggs in the fair-way, and one's fate would be sealed.

But men are as different from one another as angels are from men, and no one could pack on rattling Wally when it came to any experience with which the bush had made him familiar.

If you had asked him to go to London in a P. and O. liner he would have emphatically refused on the score of danger, as he did when I once suggested he should take the boat from Brisbane to Sydney. " No *fear*," he vehemently retorted, " I don't feel none too —— safe on them ships."

But he would be walled up in a hole in the ground and not turn a hair!

Well, he was " cradled in Mother Earth " with a

vengeance now, for Swab bounced along hot on the heels of rumour riding his upstanding bay, and dashed around the claims making inquiries. But all the boys had been primed and put wise, yet none outside the inner circle were told of the actual burial, and not very many knew of his dug-out at all.

" Swab's pretty glum to-night," said Dick, coming up from " The Harpoon " after supper—the shypoo shanty where a bunk had been fixed up for the constable.

" What's he glum about?" said Jim.

" Reckons the chaps are crooking his pitch, all firing off different lies. I told him that oughter make it interesting, but he got very sour, and began slinging off slurs all round, so I come away."

" I'm only afraid that rotten crowd at Cook's Rock may leak," said Jim.

" Certain to give the griffin Wally's here," assented Dick, " but Swab is pretty well sure of that already—do the Rock know, though, just where Wally's cubbie lies? I doubt it."

And so that night, I imagine, Swab and Wally and their chances were discussed in every camp on the field, and next day the speculation went on, and many rumours were started, and helped along by a friendly shove.

The constable was taken in by one of these tales, and was actually on the way to the twelve-mile on the quest, but, unluckily, met Stamper coming in from there, and that innocent lad pricked this promising bubble.

But it soon become apparent that Swab was a

sticker, and was in possession of information which made him sit tight. On the third day he made a demand on Camp 7 to search the dug-out, and at first this claim was resisted, and Jim and Dick were preparing for a scrap, but finally gave in, as he had the authority.

Nothing, of course, was found, and Swab was plainly disappointed, and viciously declared he would search every camp in Coberpedy.

But anxiety grew in Wally's circle when the constable moved down from "The Harpoon," and made a doss right on the site of the cubbie house, close against the wood heap. Some means must be found to shift him, or to feed Wally, or the game was up! At any ordinary time Jim and Dick Peel and Hake, and a few others in that mob, would have shot the trooper's horse and rescued Wally, and let the constable himself walk home, but they were on a good wicket with this claim, and shrank from throwing away such solid chances on the off-chance of earning that bauble—the broad arrow.

Then somebody said, "What white rabbits we are! Why, there's Wally's Printy. Now's the time for him to do his fancy stunts."

"Now's not the time for barrack," said another. "Wally's tough, but he can't live long on clay and stray beetles."

"You talk of what you know," said No. 1, "and then," he added aside, "you'll be as good as dumb."

Over Stuart Range and all that dry circle, with a radius, say, of forty miles from Coberpedy as centre, and confined thereto, the Giant Iguana ranges. Few in number, it has leisure and space to grow properly,

powerful in limbs, beautiful in skin, reaching, exceptionally, eight feet in length when its tongue is fully extended. The colour is gamboge yellow, netted over with blackish grey markings, and perfectly round spots as large as a shilling adorn the sides and neck like a pedigreed Ayrshire. It has a long head and brilliant eye, and when it stands up with stiffened legs and arched body and head bent forward, it looks a formidable beast, its black tongue shooting out at intervals.

Beel-gérak was the name of Wally's Printy, and it had been about the camp now, off and on, for nearly eighteen months. When Wally went East last time he took it over to some old workings and dropped it down a pit, which was a sign of freedom to come and go till he returned, and the queer beast seemed to understand, and seldom troubled the camp. But surely enough it figured out Wally's return pretty close, or made a mighty good fluke, for it came mincing along the same day in that odd way that goannas have, dragging its stiff legs by painfully slow degrees, as if it had uric acid in every joint.

Wally had taught it many tricks, which now and then he could get it to perform in company, but not often. But its "star-stunt" was to fetch and carry. It was a common thing to see it padding along up to Tom O'Grady's camp with a piece of blue potch in its mouth, which Tom used to buy for the Japanese market, and Wally said the Printy always got a better price than he could himself. It hung on to the stone like grim death till a fair price was put down by its nose. Then it would drop the opal and grab the coin, and

make off like murder. A strange beast, but Wally was mighty fond of it, and probably would have had it in his grave with him if he hadn't been so hurriedly bundled into it.

The difficulty now was to get Beel-gérak to understand what was expected of him. It seemed a forlorn hope certainly, till someone remembered he had seen the Printy carrying a salmon tin of water up to the grindstone where Wally sharpened his pick, and, getting up on the frame, he would tip the water into a small funnel tied so as to feed the stone.

Was it possible to get him to pour water down the air vent? But, even so, what about food? Salt pink wouldn't pour. Then some bright intellect suggested *soup*, and interest began to grow with the possibility of the thing. Yes, soup, with small pellets of concentrated meat in it and goat's milk—this was the task, and in imagination they could see Wally glued to the other end of the pipe taking it down as calmly as a broker would an orphan. But *how* to do it! That was the puzzle, for if anyone had to go to the spot to coach the beast—well, he might as well pour the soup in himself. It could only be done at night, and Swab was camped on the spot. No, the Printy was the boy to do it, if only they could give him the straight griffin—if only they could get him to do it *once*.

He went to the spot every night, it was thought, and smelt down the hole, and knew his master was there, but could one expect him to put the funnel in position and pour the liquid in. Well, they must try anyhow.

Swab hung around all day watching. Watching

everyone within the area. He was certain his quarry was hiding near, but he was baffled—there seemed so few places where he *could* be.

They had a full dress rehearsal in Jim's dug-out that evening. They had unearthed the same old flat salmon tin and the funnel which he knew, and by bribery and corrupt practices induced the intelligent beast to walk round with the tin and at last put it down and pull out the funnel. It was smeared with butter, and he was allowed to lick it clean. Then he must carry it round and find the hole in the rock which they had provided, and finally tip the liquid in. The whole difficulty lay in getting him started on the enterprise—sowing the idea in his cute little mind.

But the boys were enthusiastic. Hake said, "He knows a damned sight more than most of us." And Dick said "he'd need to, old nag."

When the moon set Beel-gérak had his red frilled choker put on, and was oiled all over, a sign for him that he was on some important mission. The flat salmon tin billy was full of savoury soup now, and the funnel was immersed in it, and Beel, firmly gripping the stiff wire handle in his mouth, and with chin held high to avoid bumping the tin on the ground, was ready to proceed. Dick whispered in his ear (what there was of it), and, setting him out on the top pad which passed his master's cubbie house, wished him good luck in the name of the Lord.

At 3.45 a.m. there was a little jerky rustle, such as lizards only make, and, slipping through the brush-wood that partly screened the air shaft in the dug-out, Beel-gérak ran down on to the floor, and, when Hake

struck a light, there he stood grinning with a comic gleam in his eyes, and lifting his feet as if marking time to some march tune. The boys were all up in a few moments, and one of them, going out, found, to the delight of all, both the billy and the funnel, and it really seemed possible that the wonderful thing had happened. How could they be sure? For it wouldn't do just to take it for granted, and in the end find Wally dead in his grave!

"Don't you worry any," said Hake, "Wally'll dig himself out if he gets tired camping, you bet." And there was general assent and relief.

And so for three days more that blessed creature fed his master twice every night as faithfully as the ravens fed Elijah, and the war of attrition went on, Swab growing perceptibly thinner every day.

But the end was drawing near.

Swab, with patient inquiry, a little bribery, and a little judicious "harpooning," had got pretty close to a solution, and the "rock push," it was felt sure, would stand at the back of the constable if he needed them, but probably not in the day and openly.

Wally's crowd, however, were not asleep by any means, and the two camps were watching each other, as far as that was possible, and if it came to a scrap in dead earnest the Printy boys would prove solid stuff to bump against.

It was a still, cloudy night, and very still. Swab had decided on the move he had been contemplating. He would wait till all was quiet, and then swiftly remove that wood-stack, keeping his men planted in the thick needle-bush down the hill in case of surprise. It

was only that morning that the tip had been given him that probably he was himself sitting on the mouth of the dug-out—and yet how could he believe it!—unless there was some other secret passage?

A late red moon was rising, and now and then threw a weird slanting light through the black clumps of cloud. Swab was swiftly moving the logs, peering in between them now and then to spy the opening to the dug-out. He could see nothing, but it was very dark. He worked on, and had most of the wood shifted aside, and then, getting in to the cleared space, he struck a match, covering the light in his thick fat hands. There was no opening at all—well, except a bit of a hole scratched out big enough for a 'possum.

He put his hand down a little way, but thought of snakes, and pulled it out swiftly again, and at that moment he heard a clink, and crouched flat on the wood he had laid aside. There was a vibration and a stillness, and—holy smoke! was it a beast or a man crawling along the crown of the ridge? Dark blobs of cloud obscured the moon, and now and then he would hear a clink. He strained his eyes in the darkness. He was no coward, but his heart thumped painfully. It was the eerie hour, the queer unusual job, the consciousness of lurking enmity and the vibrating growl of coming storm.

He could, he thought, hear padded feet now, and he felt for his revolver—it was coming down the pad, and *could* be only a naked man creeping down on all fours—there was no other beast so big; he had seen the blurred form of it against the moon for an instant, and it was as big as a leopard. He had half expected a

surprise, but it was coming in a surprising way. There again was the crawling sound—quite close now—slow, stealthy, and the clink of metal too, and the feeling of a hostile presence watching, waiting to strike! The goose flesh rose up his back and pricked his scalp, and he seemed for the moment paralysed. As the strain was becoming unbearable the moon suddenly climbed through a window of the thunder clouds, and his horrified gaze fell upon the most ghastly thing, not five yards away, that the mind of man could picture even in his dreams.

Never even in the horrors, which he had once suffered, had such a sinister spectre glared through his very bones! Its head—if it was a head, seemed haloed with coagulated blood, and its chin—if it was a chin—it laid down on the ground, and poked forth at him from the piece of face left, a frightful black tongue, two feet long! A cold sweat broke out on him, and before he could think or move, the moon ducked in again, and all was blackness! With a yell of panic he threw himself backward from the accursed thing, and, once clear of the logs, he fled down the slope, crashing through the needle-bush and brushwood like the demon-haunted man amongst the tombs.

Down amongst the rock-men crouching on guard he came thrashing, like a thirst-maddened steer with hydatids on the brain, wildly tossing his head in the air and swinging his arms like flails. His doughty guardsmen, scared to death by this apparition, and cowards anyway, scattered like a mob of brumbies, and, to complete the rout, the thunder now broke out in peals of derisive laughter!

Then all was still, and a dingo moaned away towards Lake Cadicanna.

* * * * *

When Swab got back to headquarters he reported that he had been bitten by a snake, and only for Mrs. Harper he would have succumbed. She cut out the bit with a shear blade, and kept up his strength on temperance drinks, and he recommended her for a licence.

No trace of Hoyle could be found in the district, which it was satisfactory to have proved.

"A Dingo moaned away towards Lake Cadicanna."

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V.

LITTLE JIM.

A Rumoured "Find."

In the summer of 1908, I received a telegram from a miner in West Queensland, reporting a rich discovery of opal, asking me to visit the field, and promising to hold the gems till my arrival.

That meant 6,000 miles to cover before I should reach home again in Adelaide, and, of course, the "find" might prove a failure, but it was all in the game, and so I got out on the long trail once more.

After leaving the railways far behind, and well up on the track, there was much talk of another discovery of opal, which we should actually pass in the coach, some distance south from the nearest fields, and in country not quite orthodox ground for the gem.

I listened to the gossip as we went along, and how Dan at the rabbit fence, not a miner at all, had pegged out a claim, and had bought tools and sunk a shaft close to the mail change and got good "colours"; and how, too, he had sold a part share in the claim to the mail driver.

This was tangible evidence which could be examined, but I decided to hold straight on to my main objective at Bulls Creek, Nickavilla, and test this place coming back.

But the thing floated about in my mind as the journey went on. What if that flattish country should prove another White Cliffs and I was going further and faring worse? So that when the Bulls Creek rich patch proved to be a ragged one, and, going on to Eurounghella, I got nothing there either, I was in the right frame of mind to give the alleged new find the benefit of any doubt I might have entertained.

The mail man, who owned the part share, found in me a ready listener, when he came along on his beat again, and I made up my mind to leave the coach at the mail change if the " colours " indicated saleable opal.

At the mail change, where he had dinner, there was a two-roomed hut. The couple who lived there had five children, the man was away on the rabbit fence. He was often away for a day or two. The woman, a quiet, neat, cheery little soul, did the battling for those five young ones — the eldest eleven — kept the place tidy, cooked and served the meals for the coach passengers up and down (the cooking all done in the open, at the galley fire), drew in wood, carried water from the clay-pan 300 yards away, and yet found time to teach the elder children to read!

The other passengers, having absorbed sufficient sustenance in seven minutes—as in the bush the custom is—pushed their plates away as accursed things—and filed out to sit on their haunches and smoke, while the new team was being yoked up, leaving the coast clear for me.

I had a few words with Mrs. Dan, and she showed me some of the " colours." They were of fair quality, but appeared to be merely chips from larger stones.

Her husband was away, and he had the larger pieces, she said, in response to my query, and as " all aboard " was called, I had to make a quick decision. So I pulled my swag off the coach and sent my grip forward to the rail head.

It meant either a week's delay, stuck in this faded wilderness, or I must carry a heavy swag twenty miles in grilling weather if I would catch the Adavale coach in time to take the mid-week train at Charleville—but I must chance it. The result might justify more inconvenience than that.

The coach swung off with a jangle of trace chains, and I went back into the hut to get any further particulars.

But Mrs. Dan had already told me what she knew, and as I was itching to have a bang at the ground, I asked for tools.

Did I mean to go *myself* and try the hole? she asked. " Why, certainly," I said, " that's what I stopped for."

" Well, the new shovel is in the corner in the bedroom, and the pick and bar are over there at the workings."

Jim, the little chap of eleven, with one cock-eye, looked up sharply, and I noted his eager little face, and said: " You will show me the workings?" and he trotted by my side, his nimble little bare feet twinkling amongst the gibbers.

As soon as we got to the pot-hole, about eight feet deep, I climbed down, but little Jim, who was following like my shadow, I told to stay above, as I could not work if cramped in too narrow a space.

I examined the ground carefully, but it did not strike me as promising, yet one never knows one's luck. I took the pick and had a good go, and went through the stuff as I broke it down before pitching up with the long-handled shovel. I couldn't find a trace of colour. It seemed more like wash or made-ground, and not settled ground at all.

I was fumbling through some of the broken dirt on the floor of the hole, when Jim slid down, eager to try his luck, and sure enough his keen young eyes were better than mine, and out of the debris he hooked out in triumph a little flake of shining opal!

It was good quality stone and marketable, if it should make a bit bigger in size. Jim watched and waited for the verdict.

But I had suddenly grown weary, and the little face fell, for I could hardly examine the stone at all, and climbed out of the pit, throwing the shovel up in front.

"I'm going, Jim," I said.

He clambered up then, and, without a word, we went back to the hut.

"Well," said the cheery little woman, "what do you think of it? You didn't stay long."

"No," I answered, "I don't much fancy the type of country—looks like made-ground from the little creek."

"Should Dan sink at another spot?" said she, "perhaps he's only getting what has been washed down."

"Well, we must have a yarn when he gets back," I replied. "I shall have to put in a week here, you know."

I was up against my tight little problem, and I wanted to think it out. Jim had hung on my words, but said nothing.

I filled my pipe and went out. "I'll take a turn in the scrub," I said, "I'm fond of birds, and may scare up some old nests," and, with this, I wandered off, not once looking back till I got well away into the bush.

I passed behind a thick Ti-tree, and sat down in its shade, peering through the branches to see if my float was dipping. Yes, the bait was all right.

I waited patiently, and the little chap drew warily closer and closer, not able to see me till he stood, with a little start, at my side.

"Sit down, Jim, and tell me about the birds," I said.

He looked up sharply again, with a half bewildered look, but squatted down, as bidden — a quaint little figure with his shapely bare legs and pretty hands, his short cotton shirt and knicks, his old land and water hat with holes in it, and his poor little cock-eye peeping from under. All my irritation was fading away and compassion taking its place, and now and then I chuckled to think how they had all been diddled.

"I shall tell you a story, first, Jim," I said, "but you are not to say a word till I have finished," and I lit my pipe, again leaning against the big Ti-tree butt.

And then I told the child of his own little life as I had pictured it. How lonely he was, and how he had heard tales of the opal mines, and how he longed for adventure and discovery, and how his make-believe with the opal chips had ended in a pitfall for him. How his father had taken up his tale all too swiftly,

and pegged claims and bought tools while he was under the spell of the excitement, and how he was scared to tell, and was obliged to keep up the deception.

I guessed a bottle of chips had been left by some drover and had been sneaked away to supply the "finds," and so it proved.

When I had finished, I said to him, "We've got to stand up to any wrong we do, Jim—you know that—and the sooner we do it the less it hurts. Will you tell your mother, or shall I?"

"You tell her," said the poor little chap in a whisper—and so we went back to the hut.

My heart was heavy at the thought of my task. Perhaps the reader can imagine it better than I can tell it. This brave little mother, keeping the flag of home flying out in that hopeless country; in utter isolation in their last place, where in two years she had only seen another woman once!

Nursing, clothing, feeding, educating—no amusement, no holidays, no music, no one to cheer her on; hard fare, dreary surroundings, eternal mulga, eternal goat, and too often an absent or moody or drunken husband—God, what heroines there are out there sometimes, unacclaimed! When I entered the hut, the mother was at the table, her little sewing machine humming like one thing.

"You'd like a cup of tea," she said, "the kettle'll be boiling in a minute," and she passed out to the galley fire.

Jim had remained outside, and inside I was trying to brace myself to say the right thing and find a way out.

I waited, wondering how I should begin, for the little woman had not the slightest suspicion, and the whole affair had been talked of all down the line, and the father would be furious.

At last she came back into the hut sobbing. The brave little chap had tackled the job himself and told her!

I was right glad that he had tuned himself up to do the hard thing.

Well, we fixed it up that I would condemn the show, and my verdict would blow it out, and I would talk to the husband when he got back and advise him to refund the £5 to the mail man, as there was no hope of getting valuable stuff there. The " colours " found were chance bits, and were not native there, and it would be better for all concerned just to let the matter fade out. It was understood that, later on, the father was to be told, when his wrath would not fall so heavily on the child.

I took Jim out next day, and we spent all day in the scrub.

I see him now glancing up with that quaint cock-eye, his dear little feet bleeding with the rough gibbers, but he minding it not at all—eager to talk of bush lore to one who knew it, too—of curlews, and bower birds, and the quaint bilby, of carneys and whip snakes and yippra berries and the bindeis (prickly-jacks), which he hated " worst of anything," wounding his little feet, Eager to hear of poetry too, for he knew whole poems, this child of eleven—of Gordon and Lawson and Patterson, and called the snowy thunder clouds by their sweet name of " Wool-packs."

I truly meant to keep in touch with that child—to send him some trifle now and then—a knife, a football, a little book of poems—something to break the loneliness and hold his interest in happy things, but, alas, I was swallowed up by a thousand competing claims, and, failing to do it at the moment, I did it not at all.

It seems that a little child was sent to me, in a way, by God, and I failed him—and though it is sixteen years ago, I often think of it and never without a pang.

DATE DUE

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