OPALS AND GOLD

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WANDERINGS & WORK
ON THE MINING
&
GEM FIELDS

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CHAPTER I

WITH THE MOLYBDENITE MINERS

THERE is a tract of land within the Empire which is probably the richest in mineral wealth on the earth's surface. Its vast treasure store is free to all who care to unlock the door and obey the simple laws which govern the country. Life is pleasant and free from the burdens attached to civilization, yet one can assume those burdens—and enjoy all they yield in exchange—by a day's journey to the coast, or to any centre of population. That tract of land stretches across the neck of the Cape York Peninsula and is in North Queensland. The writer knows from experience that most minerals of value exist in that table-land, and if any metallic substance were suddenly to become in demand, which he does not already know, he would go there to look for it with every confidence in his finding it.

The country itself is different from all other parts of the world, and its people are also possessed of several strange characteristics. The land surface is a jumbled mass of lime bluffs, granite blows, and iron stone hills, all covered from base to summit with ti-trees, "quinine," and other bush scrub, amongst which rise tall cedar trees, all varieties of gum or eucalyptus trees, and, near water, palms of various kinds. The people, who live a nomadic life amidst

such surroundings, wresting gold, silver, tin, lead, molybdenite, wolfram, and other minerals of unknown name from where nature placed them, are a happy-go-lucky lot of men gathered from all parts of the world, and of all callings, originally. Whatever they may have been in the past, and their previous joys and sorrows, are forgotten in this great upside-down land of almost untouched wealth. Its trackless depths of bush, hiding unknown possibilities, seem to cast a glamour over all men once they have experienced the delightful gamble of a day's work amidst its mineral-laden outcrops and gullies.

And to the prospector every day *is* a gamble, in which he pits his time and labour against his chances of striking a reef of gold or molybdenite or something else which will afford him all his requirements for the rest of his life. So he thinks while under the spell of the country, but usually, when he has stumbled across something good, the desire for wealth becomes secondary to the lure of the still unknown, and he will leave his sure modest fortune, after only replenishing his exchequer, and wander on again in the hope of finding some reef still more promising. The prospector lives in a mystical land of promise—but seldom stops long enough for fulfilment. He may reap a partial reward, and then, news reaching him of some new mineral having been found elsewhere, he packs up and steers for the latest land of promise—where he will probably work hard developing a " prospect " much poorer than the one he left.

Sometimes a man may leave the great northland of Queensland ; memories of former associations will

flit through his dream visions, a war may break out, or a girl of his youthful days call him, but he does not stay long away. An irresistible power recalls him, and sooner or later he gravitates back to that part of Queensland which lies inside Capricorn. He finds the country the same as when he left it, and the people with whom he fraternizes unchanged in nature. Labour troubles may have arisen in new townships built on the site of what was once his own domain, but that merely pushes him further out, for the genuine prospector is his own master. New minerals may have been discovered, some old ones may have become more valuable, some famous camps and townships may have been deserted and the tracks which once led to them overgrown with long spear grass. But he meets one or two old friends at the railway terminus who soon put him in touch with the latest developments, and after that, as speedily as a horse or other means of travel can enable him, he joins up once more with the nearest band of fortune seekers.

Recently, molybdenite has been greatly sought after by these men, that mineral having become of great value owing to the many uses for it found during the war. Some time ago it was passed by as not worth mining, but now most prospectors have abandoned the search for gold, copper, tin, and gem stones to seek for that flaky pearly-grey mineral, and camp and tiny townships are rapidly springing up everywhere.

Molybdenite is a combination of the metal molybdenum and sulphur, and is represented by the formula MoS_2. It is used for hardening steel and for rendering

it rustless and non-oxidizable. It is also in great demand for the making of high explosives, for the manufacture of valuable dyes, and for a variety of purposes known only to the Japanese and to other people who keep its uses secret. The Germans were aware of its great value in some directions before the war, but now most people possess all the knowledge they had, and probably the Sheffield steel makers know a great deal more.

But those who make the " getting " of it their present profession know little of its uses and care less. It is easily mined, has a high price and a waiting and ever-growing market, and in such a country of sunshine as North Queensland, he would be hard to please who wanted more. Molybdenite is found almost everywhere throughout the plateau, which stretches between the coastal ranges and the Gulf of Carpentaria. It occurs in quartz reefs in the form of thin flakes, which fall out when the rock is broken, and in veins or fissures in the quartz running downwards into the ground at various angles. In those lodes the mineral is more compact and is often found in solid masses, completely filling the small veins which permeate the ore body. The miners think that those veins or " stringers " either feed into or lead out of some larger body of mineral far down under constant water-level, and there are indications which seem to prove that this idea is correct. But molybdenite miners, as they are to-day, are not keen on hard work, and have little intention of sinking deep shafts to prove any theory, however rich the reward might be, when they can so easily obtain all their requirements

practically on the surface. Besides, deep sinking would mean developing a mine, and that would entail their staying longer in one place than would suit their irresponsible but freedom-loving natures, and also carry with it the necessity of conforming with mining laws, the use of machinery, and, in time, perhaps paying rent and taxes. They therefore break off from the surface outcrops all the richer material and, sometimes, sink a shallow shaft to enable them to tunnel underneath the length of the mineralized part of the " strike " or surface length of ore showing, and after excavating what they have thus " blocked out," they move on to pastures new. The molybdenite seekers like the companionship of their fellows, and although two men usually work a " show " together, there are invariably many other couples working near, and round the camp fires at night they meet and discuss events of importance, and criticize freely the world's various Presidents, Premiers, and Parliaments.

A fellow prospector and myself worked a claim near the Tate River, about twenty miles south of the mining township of Chillagoe on the Cairns railway. Another ten men also worked within a few hundred yards around, and perhaps another score were within a mile radius. We were all pleased with our prospects, and broke out molybdenite with little effort, which we intended to send away when our combined collections justified the use of horses and a wagon.

Big Sam, my companion, was one of the best-known prospectors in North Queensland. In fact, he was known fairly well on most mining fields of the world,

and his knowledge of minerals and gem stones was more than is found in any text-book. He and I had been together before, and I knew his ways well. He had made a fortune several times, but somehow had always contrived to lose it—a peculiarity not the sole possession of Sam. Our neighbours, a hundred yards down the same outcrop on our right, were Parson Joe and Old Tom, and on our left, Black Bill, who was an ex-stockbroker, and Scotty worked and played at getting all the molybdenite they could. Among the others near were a doctor, an ex-banker, and two who have been members of some Australian Parliament, known amongst us as Peter and Paul, although they really had other names. The remaining two were ordinary and, presumably, honest miners who had not yet distinguished themselves sufficiently to deserve any names but their own, and those, they said, were Tremain and Smith. They were the hardest workers, however, and usually showed results about double that of any other couple.

Big Sam and I had ideas of our own as to the best way of working, and so had all the others. Ours was to follow the main ore body in an " underlie " shaft sunk through the richest part and at whatever angle it happened to dip. This was not the professional mining method, but we reasoned that, as molybdenite did not behave as other minerals in its mode of occurrence, we would suit ourselves to it until we knew more about its peculiarities. Our shaft soon became more like a corkscrew than anything else, but as we thus kept in the heart of the richest ore and no labour was unproductive, we thought we were more than

compensated for our slower downward progress and the extra trouble in hauling the ore to the surface. Some of the others drove a shaft down at the average angle of the dipping lode, and certainly got down faster and with less hauling labour ; but as they were sometimes working in a barren zone, and had to raise all excavated material just the same, I think we had the best return for our work.

Of course, if the ore at any depth became more defined our shaft would be very inefficient, but we had no guarantee that our zigzag moving material would ever settle into a defined formation, and if it did we could with full confidence start another shaft to cut it at the most suitable depth. Meanwhile, we were not trying to develop a mine, but only to get as much molybdenite as possible to send for sale in time to provide funds for a fair-sized gamble in connection with the Melbourne Cup. Some may have wanted money for other purposes, but beyond Parson Joe's expressed desire to have some money to give to the Bush Brotherhood, the religious society which he represented, and my own intention of getting a portable, oil, winding engine, no one seemed to have any other use for money.

At length we decided we had enough first-class ore to make a good " parcel," and we employed a couple of Chillagoe teamsters to cart it to the railway, whence it would be sent about fifty miles down the line to the Government Reduction Works. During the next week we left our shafts alone and spent the time selecting the ore we had raised. The best only was considered worth the trouble and cost of transport

and treatment, and each mine soon had heaps of hand-picked ore, measuring four feet in length and width and five feet in height, piled up neatly beside its shaft. Each of those was estimated to contain five tons, and all were of the same grade, as far as I could judge. I made a rough assay and found that the molybdenite contents were about 3½ per cent., and as there were in all twenty heaps, of which Big Sam and I had contributed four, and Messrs. Tremain and Smith six, we calculated that a nice little cheque round about a thousand pounds would soon reach us.

While the teamsters were making, between them, six journeys a week with five ton loads, we turned our attention to the ore we had discarded, and broke up with hammers as much as possible. This action set free all the larger flakes contained, and those we collected and bagged, throwing the partly broken ore aside after it had shed them. This ore still contained innumerable minute specks of molybdenite which could not be extracted unless by a crushing battery and treatment plant, and it would not pay to send it away as we had done the first-class ore, the cost being more than it would return. We had about three hundred tons of discarded material, which we estimated contained about 0·5 per cent., or £600 worth, if we had had our own treatment plant. However, as we bagged, collectively, over a ton of solid metallic flakes from the lot, we felt we had done well enough. We sent the bags of pure molybdenite direct to the buying agents in Cairns, and by return mail received a cheque for £380 for them. But alas! when, later, the return for our first-class stuff

came from the Government Works, it only amounted to £450, and the parrots around the camp that night must have heard many words which puzzled them. Peter and Paul were furious. Tremain and Smith thought they would join some trade union and, through it, make the Government resign. The rest added nothing edifying to the discussion, except words expressive of deep feeling. Next day we decided that it would pay us better to break all our ore ourselves and save only the pure flakes, which we could sell direct without further treatment, or the trouble and cost of heavy freight.

During the next week most of us worked very hard tearing out all the ore showing in the sides of our shaft, thus spoiling them for further sinking, and breaking all the quartz along the entire outcrop. Tremain and Smith continued going down into the heart of Queensland however, and in about ten days announced that they had struck water and that their ore body was opening out and becoming solid. We wished them good luck and went on shattering our raised stone and collecting the flakes, and when the result of the Cup was known had amassed another two tons of the pure mineral. Incidentally, we lost all we had speculated on the great Melbourne event, but Parson Joe, who had taken four ten shilling tickets in Tattersalls instead, won fifty pounds.

The rainy season had now started and the grass was springing up everywhere, affording "feed" for our horses, and making it easy to travel away from permanent water. We knew too, from some aborigines who hung round our camp for the sake of

food, that several big " blows " of quartz existed away to the west, and pieces of rock which the natives had occasionally brought in from them looked very promising. Thus, one night when the tropical rain fell, as some one said, like the Barron Falls, and we had gathered under a bark shelter Peter and Paul had erected, Old Tom broke into some general conversation with the remark :

" Boys, I am tired of this place, I've been four months here, an' I have never been so long anywhere. I reckon I'll take root if I wait longer, so I'm going to see what lies beyond that range."

" And where Old Tom goes, I go," said Parson Joe. " I'm off duty for a year, and I hear that some men have already moved west. Perhaps a township may form there and I may be of service."

" I don't mind seeing what those blows the natives talk about are like," put in Black Bill, " but I think we might float a Limited Company down south to take over this place first. With a capital sufficient to provide pumps and a stamp battery we might, by retaining half the shares, make a fortune—— "

Scotty interrupted Bill by flinging a burning log at him, and for some minutes no one spoke, and the tobacco smoke hung in a dense cloud over all. Finally Tremain began. " We've gone in for deep sinking," he said, " our show is good and will likely be better. I'm a Cornishman, and I stick to what I know ; we're not leaving here."

" But unless you are willing to send your ore to the Government Battery for treatment," I said, " you can't do much more here. All the surface levels

ON THE BARRON RIVER—NORTH QUEENSLAND.

have been worked out, and deep sinking requires machinery and some form of power."

"We'll get that, and a treatment plant too, if we want it," put in Smith. "Anyhow we are staying; we are not here for fun."

Somehow, after hearing Tremain and Smith, the matter seemed to be decided, and next morning all the others got in their horses and packed up their few belongings. In the afternoon Big Sam led the pilgrimage westward, and, leaving about a thousand tons of broken ore containing perhaps nearly 1 per cent. molybdenite behind, we followed. Tremain and Smith wished us luck, but I fancied seemed glad we were going. Before sundown we had crossed the scrub-covered range, and were about to camp for the night at the base of a lime bluff which seemed suddenly to have jumped up two hundred feet into the air from nowhere, when Scotty thought he saw the quartz formation we were looking for gleaming in the setting sunlight just ahead. He was correct, as we proved ten minutes later, but we were not the first to find it out. About twenty men had already staked off what they fancied to be the best part of the outcrop, and having finished their day's work, were now engaged cooking at their various camps. Big Sam and I knew some of them, and probably Old Tom and Scotty were acquainted with them all. They welcomed us in true bush fashion, helped us to erect a couple of tents to shelter us from the rain for the night, and divided us amongst them as their guests for supper. Afterwards, we gathered round the common camp fire under a bark shelter and exchanged news. They

had been there only a week, and had previously been members of several camps.

" We'll have the biggest township in the north here, soon," said one known as the Mayor, because he had at one time been the mayor of some coastal town. " The *move on* feeling only begins to affect decent fellows like ourselves when the rainy season starts, and it has a long time to go yet."

" We are now twenty-eight of a population, and two Chinamen," announced someone. " I'll bet we'll number a hundred before long." He was correct.

Next day Big Sam and I pegged out our ground where the outcrop was cut by a creek. Most of the claim holders advised us against doing so, as there was nothing showing on the surface. We thought we knew a little bit more than the others, however, and rightly calculated to uncover the cap of the lode just underneath, in a line between the two points of the ridge outcropping on either side of the creek. Our old companions took up claims where they fancied along the line, and there were gaps left which any new-comer could take with equal chances of striking payable molybdenite. This camp was already known as Ligtown (for some reason I have not been able to discover molybdenite is known locally as " lig ") and was too big to send away its products pooled. As a result, an enterprising teamster found regular employment carting the picked ores from the various claims to the nearest railway point, where a siding was soon built. He got none of ours however, nor from the new men. We thought we could teach the others one or two things, and, including the Mayor

and one or two friends, we formed a little syndicate to treat our own products. We purchased in Cairns a suction gas plant and two small rock crushers, which we erected crudely on the creek on the ground held by Sam and myself. I was appointed to superintend the work of running the plant and the treatment of the ore, Black Bill was honorary business manager, and all hands had to utilize their spare time in burning charcoal to provide the gas plant with fuel. Of course, almost every man outside our special combine had ideas of his own for the saving of the precious lig, and some of them were certainly original. The actual getting of molybdenite was fairly easy, and now, secondary to its extraction, and in furtherance of our schemes of independence of the Government treatment plant so far away, we constructed a dam across the creek with a sluice gate at the bottom capable of adjustment to suit the inflow. Some additional Chinamen arriving in the camp utilized the water from the higher level created to irrigate some ground adjoining, and as a result the camp was soon revelling in the luxury of fresh vegetables which, under the Chinamen's magical hands, grew like mushrooms. But my idea of the dam was not conceived to assist vegetable production, although the stews made by Ah Sin, one of the gardeners whom Big Sam and I had engaged as our cook, were certainly events to be remembered. The dam was part of an ambitious scheme by which we hoped to save the extra half per cent. or so left in our discarded ore. The complete plan was not all mine. Every man knew or had heard of the principle of the

" flotation of metals," and every man had ideas of his own whereby that system of extraction could be applied. Our ideas were pooled, criticized, discarded or improved upon. Experiments eliminated all that were, although perhaps correct according to science, not possible of application in our case, and a month later this is what happened regularly: The partners of any " show " who belonged to our syndicate —and others if they cared—carted their ore to our rock breakers, which ran constantly. They fed their ore through the first, which broke the quartz to pieces of about an inch in size, and then passed the result through the second, which crushed down everything until it could pass through an eighth of an inch mesh. This could have been more easily and perhaps more efficiently done by a stamp battery or set of grinding rolls, but we were not professional engineers, nor did we care to erect heavy machinery on concrete bases which could not be readily removed, and which, according to law, would necessitate our employing skilled artificers to work, and thus bring us under Government and trade union supervision.

The crushers were erected higher up the creek than the dam, and the pulverized ore was discharged from the second machine into the creek, a part of the bed of which was lined with a bark channel removed from the trees with which we made charcoal. A ten gallon tank of kerosene or other cheap oil was fitted so that it could feed minute drops over the ore as it was swirled down to the dam, and we interrupted the water's passage with a sieve so as to ensure the ore and the oil coming in contact somewhere. The

particles of molybdenite, by reason of some law much discussed but, so far as I know, not yet fully understood, clung to the oil and when they reached the comparatively smooth surface of the dam floated with the oil, while the rest of the material sank and escaded through the sluice. The dam was always kept gently overflowing into the bark channels which supplied the Chinamen's gardens, and into those the black frothing mass of molybdenite and oil eventually found its way, where it was trapped and collected on a very fine sieve which allowed only the water and extremely fine grains to pass. Lower down another sieve collected what had passed the first, and it was only water that eventually reached the Chinamen. The saved mineral was removed at intervals and dried on a hot iron plate ; a lighted match flung on the mass set fire to the kerosene still present, and, finally, we bagged the result in suitably lined sacks, and sent them off, when opportunity offered, to the buying agents at Cairns.

We were well pleased with our work, and I regretted only that our plant was not of a capacity to treat all our ore irrespective of its mineral value. As it was, our crushers could not deal with the average quartz, and were used only for ore of the best quality, and hundreds of tons had therefore to remain untouched.

Before the end of the rainy season the camp had grown into a township. The high value of the molybdenite and the fame of our treatment plant had attracted men from all parts, although most of the outside workers were compelled to send their ore to the Government Battery, or save only the flakes

which they liberated by breaking with the hand. Parson Joe got a hall erected, which was used for all purposes. Someone opened a store, galvanized iron houses took the place of tents, and finally a post office was instituted in what had now become the main street. A good road was cut to the railway, and women began to arrive to supervise their husbands. Commercial travellers soon found that Ligtown was a profitable calling place, and one day a Government Mining Inspector came off the coach that now plied to and from the railway. His visit meant trouble, for we conformed with no mining laws, unless accidentally. Anyhow, a town was no place for a prospector, and the *move-on* feeling had come on again. The rain had now ceased for the year and our creek had stopped flowing, and although we might have contrived to pump water from some distance to keep our plant working, stacked the ore until next season, or sent it to the Government Battery, we didn't.

The day after the Government Inspector arrived nearly all the original prospectors left the field and scattered in parties to wander where their fancies led them. The Mayor took over our plant in trust for us, but of course, it was useless without flowing water.

Peter and Paul, Black Bill, Big Sam and I moved back only to the big lime buffs, to work some gold show one of the Chinamen had located there, but two days later the Inspector drove up with the Mayor and showed such an interest in our new discovery that we could see a rush would set in when he made his report, and this we did not like. We had made

our camp in an enormous cave recently discovered in the heart of the lime bluff and some day meant to explore its vast unknown depths; still, we couldn't very well lose the Government man in it, as Black Bill suggested, for he was a decent fellow and I had known him before he had become an Inspector.

Therefore, the next day we left the Mayor and him there with one or two Government satellites who had followed the great man, and moved on again. We rode past our first camp, now all overgrown with long grass, and found Tremain and Smith enjoying a smoke at the top of their shaft. They were doing exceedingly well, they informed us, and were pumping water out of their shaft with steam power. I suddenly had a desire to halt there, the idea occurring to me that their discharging water could run our late plant remarkably well, and by building a dam we could successfully treat all the old ore already on the surface. I think Big Sam read my thoughts, for he remarked, casually, to the couple; "Well, I reckon you'd better close down for a bit. There's a Government Mining Inspector over at Ligtown, and he'll raise trouble when he finds you using a steam boiler without a ticketed man in charge."

Smith thought he knew as much about boilers as any Government man, and both partners said they would take their chances of trouble, and we passed on.

We spent about a week sampling reefs here and there, finding promising molybdenite almost everywhere, and often finding wolfram and tin in fairly rich patches. Copper, too, was in evidence in massive blows of copper carbonate, but we had no desire to

start mining on any scale with its attendant worries. We could deal with molybdenite, and its price was sufficiently high to make its pursuit the most attractive. But one day we struck the railway, and a strange feeling seemed to come over all.

"We're only four miles from Lappa Station," remarked Paul reflectively, as we halted.

"I got a letter before we left Ligtown asking me to stand again for my old district this coming election," said Peter. "The Cairns train goes to-morrow morning."

"I think I could raise a lot of money in Melbourne to work some deep level propositions," put in Black Bill. "I haven't been in a city for two years."

Big Sam laughed, and I hurriedly completed my map of the various reefs we had located, linking all up with our present position on the railway, as shown by a rail milepost. Nothing more was said, but half an hour later we were alongside the building at Lappa station which alleged itself to be an hotel.

Next morning we disposed of our horses and boarded the coast-bound train. We were going to have a look at the sea, if nothing more. The first stopping place down the line was that monopolized by the Government Reduction Plant, and as the train drew up we saw its manager, whom we all knew, standing on the platform. We got out to have a word with him, but he was first.

"What have you fellows done with old H——?" he inquired, coming forward. "He hasn't come back down the line yet, and he didn't expect the cave to take him more than a day or two."

"We left when he arrived," Big Sam replied. "We didn't want to be worried with fussy Mining Inspectors."

"But H—— didn't go out to Ligtown to cause trouble over mining laws. The Government wants molybdenite too badly for that. He went out to report on that wonderful new cave you've got out there."

We looked at each other thoughtfully.

"Well, anyhow, decent fellows can never be sure of Government people," Sam went on. "What about that ore we sent you from our first camp?"

"I was just going to ask you about that. We sent you a cheque for half its estimated value, in advance, as per Government instructions, and the other cheque for the balance, due when it was sold, is ready for you now. I am sorry for the delay, but you are the gainers as we got a higher price."

Again we were very thoughtful.

"Just send that cheque along to Parson Joe," Peter said, as the train whistled, "he'll keep it in trust."

When we got into Cairns that night Peter, Paul and Black Bill went straight on board the *Aramac*, which was lying alongside the wharf ready to sail for Brisbane and the South. Our farewells were short, for instinctively we knew we should all meet again. Big Sam and I adjourned to an hotel where we dined, and then sat on the balcony looking out over the sea.

"I wonder what's doing in Sydney now?" spoke Sam after a long silence.

"Not much, but the climate in parts of England and Scotland is very fine in the summer time," I said.

Sam nodded.

"The Government people were not so bad after all," he ventured after another reflective silence.

I nodded, and at that moment the *Aramac's* preliminary warning whistle sounded.

"The train goes back up the line to-morrow," he said.

"And the *Aramac* goes to-night," I said.

"Let's toss——"

A coin spun in the air, and—we caught the *Aramac*.

CHAPTER II

OPAL

OPAL is a most mysterious gemstone. Analysis shows it consists of hydrous silica, yet hydrous silica is not necessarily opal any more than a piece of carbon is a diamond. The noble opal seems to *live ;* its translucent heart of coloured fire is ever changing and, in some uncanny way, the gem identifies itself with its possessor. It scintillates in magnificent splendour when worn by one in first-class health, but if illness overtakes its wearer it, too, becomes dull.

Compared with other gems opal is soft and can easily be ground and polished by anyone with very primitive grinding appliances, and yet it must have been formed under some sudden extreme pressure, at a period when the earth was in convulsions, and in which fire and water were the chief agents. No man can say in what manner the flashing gem was produced in nature's laboratory, but the writer advances the theory that sudden terrific heat acting upon an ocean bed of clay formed the hydrous silica, and an equally sudden contraction of the molten or gaseous material, brought about by intense cold, compressed the mass or volume into what is now known as opal. In this manner, in his opinion, opal was born.

But the seeker after opal does not often trouble himself with the opal's genealogy. He has a half

belief that on restoration to the sun's influence some opal comes back to life, although he sometimes wonders *why* the gem should be of every shade and colour and *why* not *all* opal pulsates with the living fire. Again the writer would presume to suggest that the presence of lime has something to do with the "liveliness" of the stone, and that that lime was derived from shells and bones of fishes. Opal is found in Mexico, in parts of Central Europe and in Australia. At least, slabs of coloured hydrous silica resembling plate glass in appearance occur in those parts of the world. But only in Australia do those pieces of translucent silica possess the quivering flames which seem to have an *actual being*, and only in the great South Land is the getting of opal an avocation followed seriously.

The town of White Cliffs in New South Wales is the chief opal mining centre in the world, but hundreds of opal mining camps exist throughout south-western Queensland beyond the railway's furthest-flung tentacles; and the camp or township known as Lightning Ridge, in New South Wales, near the Queensland border, is the only home, as far as is known, of the magical "black" opal. The opal is found in horizontal layers at various depths beneath the surface. There are seldom any surface indications to guide one where to sink, and two men working together usually determine this point by tossing a coin. The shaft goes down, but there are no signs, even while sinking, to tell that opal is near. Suddenly however, the opal-seeker's pick crashes through something brittle and he knows he has "struck it" in a

double sense. He now proceeds cautiously but continues to sink down through the opal seam into the soft but tough clay of the ancient ocean or lake bed. When about four feet under the layer he tunnels along beneath it, leaving the opal sheet as a roof, and when sufficient space has been dug out and the " mullock " hauled to the surface by means of a crude windlass, both men get below and carefully prize down their clay-encrusted roof, with knives or any other convenient tool. They may have fortune within their grasp, and, as the shimmering pieces fall, excitement runs high. But the opal may not be " alive," it may be only " potch," or dead opal, though of every conceivable colour. If it lacks the ever-moving, ever-changing flames it is valueless. Yet, a piece of something flashing with life may be nestling somewhere in the heart of the dead " potch " mass, and to find that precious gem—if it exists—the " potch " has to be examined with care.

The miners now know that they are on an opal-level, and continue driving underneath their glassy roof in high hopes. And those hopes may be realized at any moment, for the seam of " potch " may, without any reason that man knows, suddenly become transformed into a blinding furnace of shooting flames. The hearts of the fortune-seekers are now glad, and they break down the opalescent roof with great care, collecting and grading the pieces. Those known as " orange pin fire " are firsts, the " greens " with changing waves of colour are also very valuable, but pieces of " red flame " are only secondary and

anything blue in nature, although moving with internal fire, is thrown contemptuously into a sack for re-grading afterwards.

In White Cliffs there are resident gem-buyers, all of Palestine ancestry, and most of the fraternity visit the chief Queensland fields periodically. They have a league amongst themselves, and pay for the opal just what they like, but nevertheless there is a strenuous competition amongst them for what is known as "freak" opal, and then the opal miners who have anything to sell get some of their own back. Still, it is only fair to say that some of the Hebrew buyers are not really bad fellows.

The writer knows of one case in which, after the seller had been beaten down to fifty pounds for a parcel of opal, the buyer handed him another fifty pounds, "Shust for luck," he explained. In another instance, a buyer visiting a camp in Queensland found that its members had had no luck and, consequently, no first-class opal to sell. "I am sorry, shentlemen," Abraham Macpherson said, "but it has cost me a lot to come out here with four horses and a buggy, so I must do some business. I'll give you a hundred pounds for that heap of potch." The offer was accepted joyfully, but it was afterwards ascertained that in that heap of potch had been thrown a lot of discarded fiery blue stones which were eventually sold for five hundred pounds in Sydney.

Getting opal is truly a fascinating pursuit; it has all the elements of gambling, yet the gain of any man does not mean any loss to a fellow being. A man may be in debt for the price of the last month's

stores in the morning and, by sundown, be financially able to buy out the storekeeper. Worries never trouble the opal seeker, however ; he sheds them like discarded garments when once he arrives in the opal country. Soon the ups and downs of fortune cease to affect him in any way ; the spirit of the boundless bush has caught him and nothing matters.

The various fields of New South Wales and Queensland seem to exert different influences upon those who go opalling. Lightning Ridge is the resort of those who desire a peaceful life away from the cities, but still compelled to earn a living. They are happy here in search of the black opal amidst pleasant conditions and congenial company. Living expenses are not much and they can make ends meet by a minimum of effort. Lightning Ridge is only about eighty miles distant from the New South Wales western railway terminal at Walgett and is easily reached by coach, cycle or horse.

White Cliffs is a bit different. Its population is gathered from all corners of the earth, and is certainly more cosmopolitan in character than Port Said or Thursday Island. It is not so easy of access, being about a hundred and fifty miles from the famous silver-lead mining city of Broken Hill on the west, and about two hundred miles from the railway at Cobar on the east. The Darling River lies between in the latter case, and the pleasant oasis on its banks called Wilcannia affords a resting place which those visiting White Cliffs rarely pass in a hurry. White Cliffs is in some respects the strangest town in the world. It consists of innumerable drinking saloons called hotels, a number

of eating houses, Chinamen's stores, Afghan shops and Assyrian traders' dens. There is also a post office, a Warden's Court and a very fine prison. The last named is very popular as a place of residence.

But the population of White Cliffs does not live in the hot stuffy town. It dwells in the tunnels and excavated chambers of the mines in the hillside near, and in cool baked clay dumps formed by the "mullock" hauled up from the shafts. Those dumps are so close that a roof of galvanized iron or canvas is easily stretched between them, thus making it possible to walk for miles under cover through the various claims; incidentally passing through their owners' private dwelling-place while doing so. One's adjoining neighbours may be of nationalities as wide apart as Japan and Peru, but they all make money, and the Jew gem-buyers who live in the hotels in the town make more. All are good fellows because their interests are the same without being opposed in any way, and when any man makes a "pot" he leaves his ground to the first man who can reclaim it and goes to spend his profits in some more pleasant part of the world. There is no water in White Cliffs except that which is collected in tanks when rain falls, but there is an abundance of mosquitoes. White Cliffs is a nightmare of a place to the genuine prospector, but the world's greatest deposit of opal exists around it, and its constantly changing population of cave dwellers live a strenuous life while there. The cosmopolitan crowd of "opal gougers" however, are not real opal prospectors. Any man can find opal in White Cliffs simply by taking up any abandoned

claim and continuing to labour where the last man left off. He can't help finding opal of some kind, and in time he, too, passes on and the shaft or tunnel awaits another new tenant.

The real opal seeker has his home in Queensland and invariably he is of the Anglo-Saxon race, and everything is very different. Here the gem hunters are men who love the simple life but who have probably previously filled with credit other positions in the great cities of the world. They purposely lose their identity and, in the companionship of kindred spirits perhaps, forget that an active pulsating world of joys and sorrows, politics and tax-collectors exists "inside" the far distant railway terminus. Many may have "pasts," but the spell of the shadeless mulga seems to lull all into forgetfulness and only on rare occasions do the wandering opal seekers of Queensland speak of themselves.

CHAPTER III

WITH THE OPAL MINERS IN QUEENSLAND

When Big Sam and I landed from the *Aramac* at Sydney after our molybdenite experiences in the far north, we still had the intention of going home to the Old Country, but I fancy we were already half repenting that we had left the land of lime bluffs and minerals.

The first steamer due to sail, on which we could book passages, was the Blue Funnel Liner, *Anchises*, and its sailing date was indefinite because of some maritime labour troubles. Doubtless it was this delay which caused our enthusiasm to evaporate, but other circumstances helped. We soon grew tired of city life. Sydney to both of us was more attractive than any other city in the world, but it was just a seething vortex of humanity like any other great civilized centre of population, and we did not like to be crowded. Hotel life did not agree with us, and after the north, the climate to us was cold.

"The shipping people told me to-day that the sailing date of the *Anchises* has again been postponed," I remarked to big Sam dismally one night as, muffled in heavy coats, we walked up a thoroughfare off Pitt Street, which I think was Market Street.

"If it gets much colder than this the water might

freeze and we could ride all the way," Sam replied.

" London will be wrapped in a fog blanket when we get there," I went on dismally, " and Scotland will likely be covered with snow. Trade is bad at home, too, and everything will be very miserable."

" What are we going for ? " asked Sam with a shiver.

" To catch the first boat back, I expect. Of course we'll have a look at some of the shops and perhaps— What's wrong ? "

Sam had suddenly stopped before a jeweller's window and was gazing at a large exquisite opal reposing on a velvet cushion within. Silently he pointed to the noble gem and I was at once as much interested as he. A card lay beside the stone on which was written the information that the opal was a specimen of " boulder opal " cut from a boulder just arrived from far Western Queensland.

" That's the finest opal I've ever seen," said Sam. " There must be more where it came from."

" I like Queensland and I like opals," I volunteered, with an idea in my mind, as we entered the shop to ask for more particulars.

To our surprise, we recognized in the owner an old pioneer of the White Cliffs opal fields whom we had met elsewhere.

" Hullo, Murphy," said Sam. " I see you have found it a better paying business selling opals than mining them ? "

Mr. Murphy's delight on recognizing us was as great as our own. We adjourned to our hotel, and that night we knew all that he could tell us as to the

place of the wonderful opal's origin. But it was his parting words as we stood in the hallway that settled our destination; these words were, in effect:

"I have written to the sender of the boulder which contained that opal and offered a price, for all he can send me, that should cause a rush to the spot. I wish I were young again myself." Mr. Murphy went home, and Sam and I looked thoughtfully at each other.

"I don't care though the *Anchises* never sails," Sam said.

"I should like to have a try at opal-mining," I said evasively. "It is a peaceful life and there are no trade unions nor strikers to trouble one——" I was already studying a large map hanging in the hall.

"What is the route?"

"Brisbane Mail to Toowoomba. Change there into the Queensland Western train and go to sleep until we get as far as it goes. After that ride westerly, carefully, for we shall be in opal country."

"Let's toss," suggested Sam.

"It's too risky," I said. "The coin might come down wrong."

"We can't get a train to-night I suppose?"

"The only train went at five o'clock, and anyhow, we've packing to do and arrangements to make which will occupy part of to-morrow."

Nothing more was said on the subject, and one afternoon, some days later, we were rolling over the great Warrego plains of Queensland towards the far western terminus, Cunnamulla, in a wonderfully speedy train consisting of several goods wagons and

one carriage. We had suffered much on that monotonous railway journey westwards, but we were happy now. There was another man in the compartment besides ourselves. He was tall and thin and his upper lip was adorned with a well trained moustache. He was dressed in the latest style of city garments, but they did not seem to hang correctly upon his angular frame, and something in his manner suggested that he did not feel comfortable in them. This man had joined our compartment at Charleyville where the main line train from Brisbane had broken up. He had not said a word during the two hours since we had left Charleyville, but he somehow contrived to be agreeable by nodding his head, making gestures with his hands, and smiling in response to our attempts to draw him into the conversation.

Concluding that our friend was unable to speak we now only addressed him occasionally, and discussed our own plans as freely as if he had not been present, and soon he fell asleep.

In time the train stopped at a station which existed for nothing visible, except the erection named an hotel across the sandy track from the railway, although we knew that many sheep stations of enormous size were in the vicinity, and probably served by it. The name spelled Coongoola.

"Two hours to go yet," said Big Sam, stretching himself. "I wonder what kind of place Cunnamulla is, and if we'll be able to get half decent horses there——"

"Horses here!" spoke a voice. "Get out!——"

"Who spoke?" I cried, thinking that someone on

the platform had been overheard. But there was not a man in sight when I looked out, and I turned to Sam in amazement.

"Coongoola nearer opal fields than Cunnamulla. You can get horses here. Come along if you like."

This time we could make no mistake for we saw our friend's lips moving. We were too surprised to speak for a moment and the man went on :

"My handle out in the fields is Silent Ted, and you fellows will be welcome to our camp." He held out his hand and we gripped it in turn.

"Why in thunder didn't you speak before ?" growled Sam. "We thought you couldn't."

"No use speaking when you've nothing to say. Coming ?"

"We are," I replied, and next minute we and our luggage were out on the platform. We had no occasion to hurry, however, for we were sitting down to a meal in the hotel before the train resumed its journey to Cunnamulla.

Silent Ted seemed to be well known to the hotel proprietor, and answered all the inquiries as to the nature of the holiday he had evidently been having by nods and smiles only. Clearly he was a man of few words ! Afterwards, the proprietor informed me that Ted was one of the best known prospectors in Queensland ; that he was at present a member of an opal mining camp out between the Warrego and the Paroo Rivers, and that he spoke only on very rare occasions. Ted's face, however, was so expressive that he did not need to talk much to express his feelings.

But that night he did use his tongue frequently, and we became great friends. He had learned some things about us in the train and said he knew we would be valuable acquisitions to the camp of which he was a member.

Next day we purchased horses from the proprietor of the hotel and rode westwards across the Warrego with Ted. Our steeds were superior animals and fresh, so we rode fast along a track leading to some sheep station. The country was different from the north, being flat and featureless. Kangaroos and emus were very plentiful, but it was strange to Sam and me to see vast flocks of sheep grazing peacefully, for sheep were unknown north of Capricorn where we had been last prospecting, the spear grass being fatal to them. Ted was a first-class bushman and, soon realizing that we were not ignorant of bush ways, he signed that our route lay just south of the sun's shadow, and steered off the track right into the heart of the mulga scrub. We leaped one or two wire fences which, presumably, enclosed the home paddocks of some station, and when the sun was overhead and steering for the time impossible, halted for lunch beside a stream of hot artesian water issuing from a " bore " somewhere in the vicinity.

" We cut off twenty miles by bush riding," Ted told us. " The boys will not be expecting us to-night."

" Explain a bit, old man," said Big Sam. " How can they be expecting us at all ? They don't know even that you left Coongoola this morning."

Silent Ted smiled. " I sent an aboriginal out from the hotel last night with a message," he replied,

and we knew that if our companion was not very talkative he was thoughtful.

As soon as the sun had crossed the meridian far enough to cast a shadow we were off again, and presently became aware that we were rising slightly into some ranges which we could not see. The surface of the ground now consisted of a red iron-stained sand, and sometimes a reef of ironstone would rear itself, barely distinguishable from the many ant-bed structures which now were everywhere. We rode on in silence, for Ted had told us there was no water between us and camp, and we were still too fresh from the luxuries of Sydney to risk inducing thirst by talking.

The sun sank straight ahead of us, and the intense darkness immediately following rendered further progress highly dangerous, if not impossible. The ground was littered with fallen gidgya trunks, and unseen holes which would trip our horses were numerous. We dismounted and kindled a fire. Silent Ted signed not to unsaddle, and indicated that we could not be far away from camp. He also told us, without speaking as we sat round the fire, and smoked, that he did not recognize our surroundings but that we would ride on when the moon arose.

" Hadn't you better *speak* what you think, old man ? " Sam suddenly said to Ted. " Something is worrying you."

" Is it possible that we have passed north or south of the camp ? " I put in.

Ted shook his head and clearly indicated that the idea was untenable. He smote some festively-inclined

CHRISTMAS CAMP.

mosquitoes on his face and became very thoughtful. Suddenly his face lit up with a smile and he signed to us to listen. The night was silent and the air motionless, and presently there floated softly to our ears the strains of a violin. We sat spellbound and listened. The air being played was "Home Sweet Home," and the rendering was such that even Big Sam was visibly affected.

"That's Fiddling Peter," spoke Ted; "he'll be half killed directly."

Ted had spoken and the fact almost escaped our notice. "Come on," he continued. "Camp is only a half mile away."

We arose and catching our horses without a word, led them in the direction of the sound, and very soon other sounds seemed to suggest that the player was being roughly handled. We knew the reason of course, for in most camps, "Home Sweet Home" is taboo. Stumbling over obstacles we could not see, and brushing between the mulgas, we made our way forward, and suddenly the light of a camp fire heaped high with hard gidgya logs shone out in front. Some dogs barked, and our approach thus heralded, we broke out from the timber and into the zone of the camp firelight. Several men arose from reclining positions and advanced to meet us. Silent Ted put his fingers in his mouth and whistled a signal. Shouts of welcome burst out from the men, and next moment we were talking to fellow beings we had never met before as if we had known them for years. Some led our horses away and attended to them, and we accompanied the others to a bark erection

hidden in the flickering shadows beyond the fire. Here a distinguished-looking man who wore glasses, and who evidently was the acknowledged head of the camp, shook our hands, and officially welcomed us to Christmas Camp. After making ourselves as presentable as possible in a tent vacated by someone for our benefit, we found a meal set out for Ted and ourselves under the bark roof. We dined well, then joined the men round the fire. And here our vanity received a shock. Our names were not asked. No one seemed eager to know our business, nor cared where we came from, nor where we were going. All were courteously polite and saw to our comfort, but not a man asked *us* a single question.

"Had a good time, Ted?" a man whom we afterwards knew as Sydney Charlie asked abruptly, as Ted lit his pipe and began to fondle his moustache.

"Yank out something about what happened to you, you tongue-tied kangaroo," said another. "Is old Brisbane still in the same place? And what tailor fitted you with those trousers? Why are you back so soon, and did you bring me a poetry book?" This man was known simply as Dick, and I looked at him curiously.

Ted looked reproachfully at his two questioners, opened his mouth to speak, closed it again without uttering a word and produced from his pocket a nicely bound volume which he handed to the poetry lover. The latter muttered his thanks and retired to his tent to read the treasure, and a general conversation ensued.

"Is there much opal around here?" I began, when a chance offered.

"Any amount, but it is all one kind—green with fiery specks in it," a handsome young man answered. "Ted was down in Brisbane finding out its real value, but we'll have to wait until he feels inclined to tell us before we know whether it is worth working or not——"

"Ten pounds an ounce," broke in Ted. "The money I got for our parcel is in my saddle wallet."

"Then our fortunes are made, gentlemen," said the spectacled one, almost sadly, I thought. "There must be tons of that variety on the twenty-foot level."

I was conscious that some of the men were looking at Sam and me with a changed expression, and a feeling that something had gone wrong came over me.

"There will be a rush here, any day," murmured someone. "I reckon we'll have to move on again."

Sydney Charlie here brought forward Silent Ted's wallet and Ted signed to give it to the man with the glasses. The wallet was opened and two hundred pounds in notes counted out in silence.

"The fellow who bought them said he would take all we could send him," suddenly spoke Ted, "but I reckon the Professor himself will have to go with the next lot. I had three fights, and the policemen are tough fellows."

All were amazed at Ted's lengthy speech, but he would not say more and we could *then* only imagine what his experiences in Brisbane had been like. (We discovered later that Ted had been attacked by two

men and robbed, that he had followed the robbers and regained his money, but that in the second fight, policemen had come on the scene, and as he would rather fight again than explain, he had been dealt roughly with by them. How he finally got away from Brisbane we never knew.) While all were thinking what the value of the opal meant, a deluge of words broke out from Dick's tent and he came running forward.

" Here, you chunk of misery ! " he roared, addressing Ted, " what's this you've brought me ? I wanted a book of decent poetry like ' The Man from Snowy River,' and this is a book I'm darned if I can understand, by a fellow called Tennyson."

" I'll buy it from you," said a bearded man who sat on a log with a violin in his hands, and I guessed that he was Fiddling Peter.

When peace was restored, the Professor turned to me, saying half apologetically, " You must excuse the boys to-night. You see we are all a bit unsettled. We are glad to see strangers, but we dread a rush to this place. We'll show you the best ground we know, on which you can peg your claims if you wish, to-morrow."

" Just go slow for a minute, sir," broke in Big Sam. " We are obliged to you for your hospitality, but we didn't come here because of any rush, nor because we thought you might put us on to good ground. We are prospectors and can find anything we want for ourselves. We are neither law-breakers not law-agents, and——"

" And by thunder I know who you are," interrupted

the man who had been disappointed in his volume of poems. "You are the two fellows who used to work a molybdenite show on the Tate River, near Tremaine and Smith?"

"Yes," I laughed, "and you are Wolfram Dick; I thought I recognized you. You left the north rather hurriedly, didn't you, last year?"

"Boys, I'll answer for the two strangers," cried Dick. "The big fellow is——"

"Shut up!" growled Big Sam.

"And the other is the fellow who——"

"Why did you drop half your title?" I broke in, noting that we were now very much in the limelight.

"Because Biddy O'Flannigan wanted to marry me, and she could easily hunt up Wolfram Dick anywhere in Australia. I was opal-mining before I was north though, and knew she couldn't get me down here."

"Well, you can assume your full cognomen when you like, Dick," I said. "The lady you escaped from married someone in Cairns about a month ago."

"Strangers, we apologise," spoke Sydney Charlie, as Wolfram Dick sprang to his feet and performed a dance of joy. "Most men who come out here come to get away from a past of some kind, so we never ask the names of strangers. We welcomed you because we thought you were the same as some of us, and Ted brought you; but somehow, it grew on us that you had tricked Ted and were only out here as sort of spies——"

"They are not," jerked Ted; "I heard all their talk in the train while I was sleeping. Dick is right in what he says."

"Gentlemen, coffee is ready," exclaimed the Professor. "Let us drink the health of our new camp members."

And thus the strange strained feeling passed. Fiddling Peter played a selection from some opera and someone joined in with a flute. When turning-in time came all stood up and sang "God Save the King," and we were henceforth Fellows of the Christmas Camp Brotherhood. I have never regretted the fact.

Next morning, after a glorious sleep, Sam and I were shown round the workings by Wolfram Dick and Sydney Charlie. These consisted of about a dozen shafts sunk on both sides of a creek which, we were told, flowed after rains, but, as rain seldom reached out so far, that was not often, and crude dams had been built to conserve the water.

"There are three or four other camps down the creek," Sydney Charlie informed us, "and we bring out each other's stores in turn when a wagon goes in to Cunnamulla for stores. We get fresh meat any time anyone rides into the sheep station twenty miles back the track and, as you can see, we have more hens and goats around our camp than could supply a little township with eggs and milk. We live mighty well in Christmas Camp, I can tell you, and our cook, Wun Lung, is the best cook between here and Brisbane."

We were back in camp in time for breakfast, and Sam and I agreed that Wun Lung was first cousin, in his subtle art, to the last Chinese cook we had employed in the north. After breakfast we, acting

under the advice of all, pegged out a two men's claim next to the Professor's. All the men worked in couples, in separate two men's claims, so as to spread over more ground, but all the opal obtained was pooled and any man could draw his share of opal or available cash at any time.

Next day, Sam and I drove our shaft down through the six feet of surface drift sand and into the hard clay formation which, it is supposed, once formed the bed of an inland sea. During the next three days we sent our shaft down at record speed and erected a crude windlass made from a gidyga tree trunk, and on the fourth day we struck "bottom." Wolfram Dick, hitherto, had been the only man with practical mining knowledge in the party, and there had been no occasion for him to use his knowledge, as the opal existed under a horizontal belt of ironstone which was termed "bottom," and once that was broken through, any man could tunnel along underneath and extract the half-inch thick roof of opal without any knowledge other than that of the use of the pick. But we had a well-known habit of doing everything different from other peoples' methods and when we reached the ironstone band we promptly drilled a couple of holes in it and, having carried gelignite with us from Sydney, fired them off.

The explosion created a great sensation and all the men climbed out of their various shafts to see what had happened. It seemed that the shock was transmitted along the ironstone belt into all the claims, and a blasting shot's effects were unknown to all except, of course, Wolfram Dick.

"Dear me!" ejaculated the Professor, as he came running up to us and found us sitting at the mouth of our shaft smoking. "Has there been an earthquake?"

"A small one I hope, sir," answered Sam. "We put rather a heavy charge in the holes."

Silent Ted, who was the Professor's working-mate, next approached. He looked down into the smoke-filled shaft, then at us. His face looked his enquiry but he said nothing, and when I nodded in answer, he lit his pipe and sat down beside us. But now Fiddling Peter, Frenchy, Uncle Sam, Sydney Charlie, Dandy Dan and one or two others had joined us, all anxious to know what had caused the earth tremor. Wolfram Dick did not appear.

We explained that we had called into service the use of gelignite to assist us in breaking through the hard material, as we would by its aid accomplish in an hour what, we had been told, often required several days to effect.

"But you will have shattered any opal that may be beneath," said the Professor, almost reprovingly.

"Well, you never get it out in big pieces, anyhow," Sam replied, "and maybe there's none in this hole, in any case."

Sam slid into the shaft as he spoke and descended by means of the footholds cut in the sides, opposite each other. I lowered the hide bucket on the windlass and he filled it with the debris resulting from the shots. When hauled aloft the bucket's contents seemed only to be masses of vitrified clay faced on top with a six-inch slab of ironstone. Dandy Dan

SINKING FOR OPAL.

emptied the load on our mullock heap, and expressions of sympathy by all were voiced except Silent Ted.

He began picking at the lumps, separating the ironstone from the silicious mass.

"Hard luck," said Sydney Charlie. "Your shaft must be down just beyond the formation in the Professor's claim."

"Very strange," the Professor murmured, wiping his glasses. "I felt certain that the opal Ted and I are on ran right through. It was changing in nature somewhat; still it was going strong in this direction."

I had hauled up another bucket load by this time and it also went over the heap already excavated.

"Best come and peg out alongside me," suggested Uncle Sam, so named because he was of American origin. "The opal Fiddling Peter and I are getting is fairly good stuff, though there isn't very much of it—What's gone wrong with Ted?"

Silent Ted had pushed the others aside and come up to me at the windlass handle. He held something in his hand which he offered to me. I took it wonderingly, and next moment experienced a strange thrill. It was a mass of clay-encrusted opal half an inch thick and about two inches every other way! It was orange in colour where the broken edges showed through the clay and spots of fire seemed to dance deep down in its translucent heart.

"Speak, Ted," shouted all; but Ted only pointed to the mass of stuff he had broken up with his pick, and indicated that he had merely separated the ironstone from the clay and had found the opal layer between. Instantly every man was smashing the

lumps together in attempts to dislodge the under-burden of clay, and flakes of scintillating opal fell in showers amidst the powdered-mud cloud which enveloped everything around. The Professor said "dear me!" several times, and Fiddling Peter ceased work and looked on, indifferently.

"Come up, Sam!" I called down the shaft; and, perspiring and grimy, my comrade came aloft into daylight.

"Gentlemen," remarked the Professor, as I informed Sam that our shots had proved the continuance of the opal level; "I see rain clouds banking up from the north. I expect we may get some showers, so we had better see that all the catchment drains leading into our old shafts are clear. We must conserve every drop——"

"But is *that* opal worth anything?" asked Sam, surprised at the lack of excitement.

"It is the most valuable variety found in Queensland," the Professor answered. "I should say it is worth at least twenty pounds an ounce, but it has been there for some millions of years probably, and it will not dissolve into its elements now. You two should continue working however; you are new to the sensation of finding a fortune suddenly——"

Sam laughed. Memories made me smile. All the others departed.

"Our souls are not those of toads," I said quietly, "nor is the zenith of their desires to be found in earthly treasure."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the learned man, looking at me closely. "You have quoted the famous words

handed down throughout the ages, in the Mota tongue." (Mota is the learned language of the Pacific Islands.)

"Yes, Professor," said Sam; "these two little pilgrims are fairly well acquainted with the South Seas and we have *heard* of a man who translated Mota into English, although we never expected to meet him."

"The world is indeed small," the Professor murmured, blinking through his glasses. He was still a comparatively young man, and I knew he did not require glasses.

Without another word we joined our comrades and set about preparing to divert all the rain that might fall into some old disused shaft. We had barely finished when the storm burst, and, gathered under the bark roof, we listened to the pleasing sound of water pouring into the shafts prepared to receive it.

That night was one that will ever remain fixed in my memory. On that opal field in Western Queensland, in the space of a few hours, was crowded into my intelligence more knowledge of human life and the mysterious workings of Fate than I had amassed during the last several years. Members of some of the other camps had come over to enquire about the new opal strike before the rain had started; they had heard the news from some of the aborigines who kept up frequent communication between the camps, visiting relatives who were domiciled near each. The rain coming, it would not be a pleasant homeward journey for our visitors, as horses could not negotiate the sticky sodden soil without grave risk of breaking

limbs. All were therefore invited to stay the night, and all had accepted the invitation.

The Professor was very thoughtful as Fiddling Peter drew magic out of his beloved violin after tea under the bark shelter. The rain still fell in sub-tropical torrents, but we were comfortable.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said when one of the visitors asked what he was thinking about. "There is opal on these fields enough to satisfy the sordid wants of every man here—and more, but what is the use of it! The pleasures of life are evanescent, and in the chase of them only lies satisfaction——"

"Oh, put in the full stop," interjected a visitor. "It's our own thoughts that make us feel disappointed. We know we have failed in life, and memory does the rest."

"I reckon I must have a mighty bad memory," said Wolfram Dick. "I never remember anything not pleasant."

"I'm with the Professor," put in Uncle Sam. "A fortune is of no use to a man who cannot go back into the world. I don't want one, anyhow. Out here is blessed forgetfulness——" His voice trailed off and he became reflective.

"Yes," said Fiddling Peter. "This little bit of the earth's surface is a sanctuary which will be taken away if its wealth attracts the attention of the fortune-seekers." He took up his violin again and played some soft dreamy air no one knew.

"This is the strangest camp I have ever struck," commented Big Sam. "Every man sees ghosts of the past. Isn't there a single man here besides my

mate and myself, who is out here simply to get all the opal he can ? "

Not one answered.

" Opal is not much use to me," said Uncle Sam, " because I am dead. I was the captain of a ship that went down—on the west coast of America, and the world thinks I went with it." Deep silence followed. All had guessed Uncle Sam had been a sailor.

" My past is buried in London," whispered Fiddling Peter, " and it is sealed down under a heavy tombstone of sorrow and regret."

" I'm out here because of a girl," Dandy Dan volunteered, and two of our visitors cried simultaneously, " Same with me ! "

" What, Dandy Dan ! I am surprised at you," said the Professor. " I knew Fiddling Peter had a past—a glorious past—but that you could give up active life over a girl's fickleness is beyond my comprehension. Why did you not put up a fight ? "

" I did, sir ; that was the trouble. I killed the other man in the fight and, well—here I am."

Time fled on in a silence that seemed to hit one, but on my watch only a few seconds ticked off.

" That affair of yours happened in Edinburgh, didn't it ? " spoke one of the visitors.

" Yes," admitted Dandy Dan. " I suppose you know who I am, but I don't care now."

" If you are —— you can collect all the opal you can and catch the first boat home ; you didn't kill *my brother ;* and the last mail that reached me from him told me that the girl is still waiting for you." . . . .

Next day opal-getting was resumed and the bright

sun's influence made the life stories of the night appear only episodes to be forgotten. Indeed, I ventured to ask the Professor if every man really was regardless whether he found opal or not. The learned one actually laughed.

" By no means," he said ; " but all men who live out here for a time come under the influence of some subtle spell, which I am at present trying to study. Their imagination runs away with them, and their dreams become real. Men like Uncle Sam, Fiddling Peter and Dandy Dan, of course, come here, and certainly *they* do not care for opal. But anyone might know they had pasts. In fact, I knew Fiddling Peter was a world master of the violin, and I guessed Dandy Dan's story. You were shocked to find that everyone seemed to be hiding something ? They were *not*, but they were unable to break the spell that bound them sufficiently to speak. The opal fields are places where men can earn a living free from care and worry, and are pleasant places. The real Land of the Lost is on the Gum Fields of New Zealand. . . . "

Our " strike " opened out fairly well as the days went on, and although we had " bottomed " on the best patch, and the opal we obtained on " driving " underneath the iron roof not quite of the same quality, some hundreds of ounces of first-class gems were selected from out of the hundredweights of " potch," or inferior opal, which we raised to the surface. . . .

But we could not keep the place to ourselves. The news of our find leaked out when our parcels of opal were put on the market, and, in a few months, men

of all classes, drawn from all parts, were staking off claims everywhere in the vicinity. How they fared I do not know, because, about that time, Christmas Camp, as originally formed, broke up. Dandy Dan went home to Britain. Wolfram Dick went north to work some gold "show" he knew. Frenchy went down to Sydney with his money and, I believe, opened a restaurant in that city, and some others departed to carry out schemes of their own.

Thus, only the Professor, Uncle Sam, Fiddling Peter, Silent Ted, Sydney Charlie, Sam and I were left of the old members.

"How about that trip home, now, boy?" Sam said to me one day, as we sat dressing opal in our drive, under the ground.

"Is the sailing date announced yet?" I asked.

"I expect the *Anchises* will be going home her second trip since we booked."

"All right, Sam, we'll go; but as we never seemed to be able to get past Sydney, why not just imagine we have gone there and, having started out again after something new, have got this length?"

"What did we leave for, last time?"

"To find freak opal like that we saw in Murphy's window. It lies in the heart of ironstone boulders out near the Cooper River, about two hundred miles from here. Men who go there usually leave their bones there, I am told."

"The spirit of the west has got you, boy," laughed Sam. "We will go and find out where Murphy's stone came from, which was what we started out to do, and we'll not leave any bones to bleach."

Sam and I never took long to act on a decision. An hour afterwards, we had told our comrades of our intention.

"Glorious!" cried the Professor, when I had finished. "I'll come too."

"Any room for me?" asked Sydney Charlie anxiously.

Silent Ted looked his query, and I nodded an answer.

Two days later, five men were riding towards the setting sun with five pack horses running behind. Only Uncle Sam, Fiddling Peter and Wun Lung remained in Christmas Camp.

CHAPTER IV

THE BOULDER OPALS

The first explorers who forced their way westwards into the heart of Australia seldom returned, yet the country is not a desert, and underneath the surface sands is a soil capable of yielding anything that the cultivation of earth can produce. The sand is in most places merely a coating spread over the entire country and seems to be the result of the weathering of ranges which probably at one time reared above the surrounding sea. But even had the brave pioneers possessed that knowledge they could not have profited by it. A human being cannot exist long without water and, away from the rivers, which flow after rains in the far north where most have their sources, there is absolutely no water. Mulga scrub, a stunted growth with sky-pointing leaves, can flourish, notwithstanding, although its means of life is a mystery to others besides the writer. And on its shadeless fronds sheep can keep themselves in existence for many months. Most promising for the future development of the vast Australian interior is the fact that artesian water exists at depths which, although great, can be, and has been already, tapped. Where the magic fluid flows, after it bursts forth from its imprisoned conditions through a bore hole, land which was once desolate now

blooms with roses, orange trees and grape vines. But artesian water has not yet been brought into use in the far west where the silent bush merges into the grim desert of Central Australia, and it is beyond its present zone that the boulder opals lie awaiting the advent of the man who can successfully deal with them. Nature, here, still resents the intrusion of man, as of old.

One oppressively hot day five riders halted at a sluggishly flowing river, the water of which was the colour of mud. It was about four hundred yards wide, between the banks, but the water flowed only in the middle, and small scrub-covered patches which doubtless were islands in flood time, occupied the channel, promiscuously, between its wild fig-tree fringed sides. Parrots of the gilau variety, black cockatoos and other gaily plumaged birds chattered noisily on the islands, and kangaroos and emus bounded and raced in careless play along the banks on both shores.

"Well, gentlemen, this is one of the tributaries of the mystic Cooper, I suppose?" remarked the Professor. "I am glad there is water in it." He examined a map as he spoke.

"I calculate we've covered about two hundred miles since leaving Christmas Camp," said Sydney Charlie. "We crossed the Paroo early the first day, camped on that old abandoned opal field the second night, crossed the Bulloo two days after, and we've been three days' hard riding, since. But this should be the Wilson River for it is next to the west, after the Bulloo."

"We must be near the junction of this river with the main Cooper channel." I put in. "Our map is not a survey sheet, and, in any case, we can only guess the distance we've travelled."

"I can hardly breathe, boys; can there be anything going wrong with me?" said Big Sam. We all laughed. The idea of anything troubling Big Sam was funny; besides, we were all feeling most uncomfortably hot, and the air seemed to have gone out of the world.

Silent Ted had heard all our conversation but he made no comment. Instead, he caught the bridle reins of two horses and led them down the bank of the river. The other saddle-horses and the five pack animals followed and stood with dilated nostrils sniffing the atmosphere. Ted then began collecting logs of dead timber and speedily had a fire going beside a small detached pool at the base of the bank. We looked at Ted's face for an explanation; we knew he would not speak and had got into the habit of looking our own thoughts at him. In answer, he pointed to the east, and looking back we saw a black cloud which seemed to cut off our horizon at a remarkably short distance. And the cloud was moving toward us! As we looked, the birds ceased their chattering; the kangaroos and emus sought the river channel, and frightened wallabies also came leaping in from both sides of the stream.

"Dear me," the Professor exclaimed. "That must be a cyclone coming down upon us. It must have been very severe on the coast or it would not have reached so far into the interior. Nothing living will survive

if caught in its vortex." As he spoke, a filler-shaped column of sand seemed to form in advance of the on-coming cloud, and, gyrating like a spinning top from its apex near the ground up until its swelling diameter became lost in the dark cloud, it shrieked and thundered, and bore straight in our direction with incredible speed. We all recognized the dreaded "Willy Willy" of the aborigines, which is simply a desert sand-storm column shaped like a water spout; but this one was the largest and most deadly looking any of us had ever seen. As if hypnotized, the Professor gazed upon the advancing tornado, but Big Sam with scant ceremony pushed him down the embankment, and a few seconds later we were all lying flat under any projecting cover we could find. Minutes passed and, but for the growing intensity of swishing, whistling, shrieking sounds and the knowledge that we were living in almost a vacuum, there was nothing to indicate that the devastating "Willy Willy" was tearing up scrub, ant-beds, and everything in its line of approach, just over the bank. The shrill sounds merged into a deep roar, which swelled into a thunderous discord, a shower of hot sand fell around us, darkness enveloped us, some tree limbs rolled over the bank, or were dropped from somewhere, a current of hot air blew across our faces—and the "Willy Willy" had passed. We heard it uprooting the scrub on the islands—or imagined we did, heard the deep roaring sound mellow down into a hum which in turn died away beyond the far side of the waterway, and realized that we had been missed by the centre of the whirlwind by only a few yards. We knew,

nevertheless, that but for the sheltering influence of the bank, five other prospectors would have paid toll with their lives to the " devil devil " of the Cooper region.

We sat up in the darkness and crawled over beside Ted's fire. We were strangely cold but we knew the sensation was the result of air-suction and would not last long. Ted silently groped for the pool and filled a billy with water and in a few minutes we were drinking hot tea. The fire had burned brightly all through the disturbance, and Ted having, with a knowledge born of previous experience, thrown off the packs from the pack horses when he had first led them into the channel, we were well provisioned and had plenty of water, should the darkness last for any time. We hoped our horses were safe but we could not hear them, and we blessed the silent one for saving our stores.

" Our luck still holds good, old man," Big Sam laughed, addressing me. " I guess that *Anchises* trip would be a wash-out for ever if we hadn't struck this river just when we did."

I did not answer. We all knew that had we been a mile short of it, or the same distance beyond it, we should not now be drinking tea, safe and sound.

" Well, gentlemen, we are alive and well," spoke the Professor. " The Great First Cause has still a mission in life for us. I wonder how long this darkness will continue ? "

" I remember a sand storm in New South Wales that left the country dark for a week," said Sydney Charlie, cheerfully. " We lit torches and went from

camp to camp beating kerosene tins so that any stragglers could hear us and join us. When the "roll up" was complete we were three men short, but we got them afterwards at the bottom of old shafts and we found a couple of swaggies in the bush a couple of miles away."

"Dead?" queried the Professor.

"They didn't say so, but we buried them all the same."

"A good thing there are no old shafts out here which we might tumble down," Big Sam commented, "and I don't think there are any living men nearer than Noccundra township."

We flung more logs on the fire and, groping for our packs, now covered with the fine sand still falling, got out all the requirements for a good meal. Ted baked a damper while the Professor peeled potatoes and opened tins in preparation of a stew. Big Sam made himself comfortable and fell asleep, and Charlie and I felt our way along the bank in hopes of locating our horses. I do not think we had gone far when we heard hoofs crunching in the sand. We were delighted and Charlie shouted back to camp announcing our luck.

"Steady, Peer!" I spoke, reassuringly, knowing that my own horse would respond. Next moment a horse's head nestled against me, and I reached for the bridle. But the object I caught in my hand was a piece of ragged rope, and all our bridles had been of the very latest pattern! In some surprise I felt for the saddle. There was none! We had not unsaddled our horses, so I hastily lit a match to see what change

had taken place. The light disclosed a fine looking horse, but it was *not* one of ours ! As with a hammer blow came the impression that Sydney Charlie's story of the poor swaggies had again been enacted, and I informed my companion of my discovery. He did not speak, but lighting another match examined the hoof marks. The horse was not shod, but that it had been some man's faithful companion was evident from the manner in which it expressed its pleasure in being near us. Its tracks were rapidly being obliterated by the sand shower, but still distinguishable in match light. Hurriedly, we improvised torches with bunches of gummy eucalyptus growths which came to our hands, and followed the hoof marks up the channel, leading the horse with us, and shouting frequently.

I think we must have gone another three hundred yards or so when I suddenly became conscious that something was moving just ahead of the light cast by our expiring torches. I dropped my light and ran forward, silently and blindly. My sense of smell guided me unerringly, however, and presently, with a leap, I closed upon an odoriferous naked human being. Of course, I knew it was an aboriginal I held, but was surprised that he did not struggle. He merely muttered some unintelligible sounds and sat down. Charlie was beside me at once and with the aid of his torch we surveyed the grease-smeared son of the wilds. He carried one boomerang obviously meant for bringing down birds, but stuck in his hair was a large open clasp knife. Still muttering sounds which we could not recognize as being like any native

words we knew, but which were evidently meant to convey a lot, the man pointed upstream and gesticulated with effective meaning.

" I'll never growl at Silent Ted again," said Charlie. " Thanks to his teaching we can nearly read what this fellow is saying—Where did you get that knife, Tommy ? " Charlie pointed to the knife.

The aboriginal's wrinkled face became all smiles. He promptly handed me the knife and jumped to his feet. We had just light enough to enable us to decipher the letters " E. T." inscribed on the handle when the torch went out.

But we now understood what the black fellow was trying to tell us. The man who had given him the knife was lying helpless near ; it was his horse we had caught, and we must hurry. We did hurry. The native could see through the darkness and we followed him. I fancy we were about half a mile away from the camp when we found the original owner of the knife. He was lying beside a small " native " fire, perspiring and flushed with fever. He was the most dilapidated specimen of humanity I had ever seen. His bones showed through his white skin and he was little more than a skeleton. His face was hidden by hair, but two gleaming eyes shone out like stars from somewhere amidst the entanglement. The aboriginal knelt down beside him and began telling him in his own vernacular of how he had met us—at least, we guessed he was imparting that information. Charlie and I also bent over him tenderly and the horse stood patiently near.

" You've been having a rough time, old man," said Charlie. " Were you caught in the cyclone ? "

"I've been caught by the opal devils of the Cooper, but I'll cheat them soon; they don't know I'm pegging out." The words were murmured feebly and the speaker's eyes blazed while he spoke.

"Of course you'll cheat them," I put in. "We'll help you. We are opal hunters making for the Cooper."

"You're in the main channel of the Cooper now, and you'll never leave it," muttered the man as we lifted him on to his horse. "No man can get away from them."

"You'd wonder what our outfit can do," Charlie answered, soothingly, signing to the aboriginal to lead the way back over our tracks.

Our journey to the camp was easier than we anticipated. Once astride the bare back of his horse the fever-stricken derelict seemed to recover somewhat, and the native had little trouble in following the tracks previously made. When our camp fire loomed out before us we shouted out that we were bringing visitors, and soon afterwards, the sick man was lying comfortably on the sand and being ministered to by the Professor. Our watches told us it was now the time of sundown but no stars shone through the sand-filled atmosphere, so we heaped more dead gidgya trees on our fire and sat down on the sand to enjoy the Professor's stew and Ted's damper. Incidentally, the aboriginal got a square meal that night, and though his "table" manners were highly original, we did not mind. The nameless man was asleep now —almost peacefully.

We kept watch alternately during the night and gave

medicine as directed, and when the hour of sunrise came round the man's temperature was normal, and only weakness prevented him from assisting in our camp duties.

But darkness lay over the land all that day—and the next. Our guest was now nearly restored to health, but the aboriginal, his faithful servant, might have eaten us out of everything, had he not equalized the state of our stores by bringing in scrub turkeys, wild ducks, fat squatter pigeons, and even fish. How he got them I do not know, but I suppose his ability to see in the dark and his wonderful marksmanship with a stone had something to do with the matter.

The man had already told us his story. He had been one of a party prospecting for opal far out into the central Australian desert. They had found gold in several places, but had not seen any indication of opal after they had crossed the salt-encrusted beds of some dry lakes well over the South Australian border. Returning over their tracks they had camped on one of the Cooper's changing channels and tried to work a strange surface opal formation. But, one by one, all, except our friend, had been seized with some deadly fever, and cairns of boulders through which streaks of opal burst in scintillating splendour now marked their resting places.

"I would have pegged out too," the survivor said in course of his narrative, "had not a tribe of aborigines found me. I lived with them for about a year but the drought drove them north a month ago, and only Nulla Dulla stayed with me. Of course I wouldn't leave my mates, and I reckon I was starting

on the lone trail after them when you found me. I don't seem to remember what my name was, but my mates were Gordon, Mackenzie, and Charleton. Maybe mine was Thompson. . . ."

On the morning of the fourth day the sun climbed over the edge of the eastern plains with a very red face, and we promptly became sun-worshippers. In the first hour of sunlight Silent Ted cut and dressed Thompson's hair, and the combined resources of all enabled him to be garbed and equipped with everything we had ourselves, except a saddle. He said he never used a saddle, however, and we thought we could make some kind of substitute when the time came for the homeward ride—if we found our horses. If we did not find them the Cooper devils would have another six victims. Meanwhile Nulla Dulla had ridden out, bareback, on Thompson's horse to look for them.

"Well boys, I do not quite understand why we never saw the Wilson River," remarked the Professor as we washed up after breakfast. "Thompson says this is the Cooper——"

"Of course it is," said Thompson. "I reckon I should know because I've ridden it up and down for hundreds of miles. It flows towards some dry salt pans in South Australia but it never gets there. It is a mighty big river up at Windorah, though, for I was often near that township with the aborigines when I had the mulga (madness). The Wilson River joins the Cooper about a week's ride south from here, but it flows parallel and we should hit it where it should be in a two days' ride back over your tracks.

Often it isn't there, though, and I reckon it wasn't when you crossed it."

"You mean it had dried up?" I asked.

"I reckon so, and you would think the blue gums and the wild fig trees you saw were only growing round some water holes. But if you want opal you're in the middle of where it was made, now."

"I see the nigger coming with our horses," broke in Silent Ted. He certainly must have been excited! But he was correct, and presently all our steeds were gathered in beside us. They had gone *down* the creek and had been feeding on good grass on the banks not more than a mile away.

Soon afterwards, we had packed up and were on the move again, Nulla Dulla running alongside. Following Thompson, we crossed the river and rode in a north-westerly direction in the track of the cyclone. We seemed to have entered a dead world. Fallen gidgya trees littered the ground as if a forest had been uprooted, but we knew those tree trunks had lain there for a longer period than man could tell. They had been growing trees at one time but now were almost fossilized. The cyclone had swept over them and piled sand around them, but that was all its effect on them. Doubtless, many were buried deep in the sand deposits of past ages.

"There's a billabong (a backwater) of the Cooper behind that patch of living timber you see far ahead," said Thompson. "We used to carry the boulders in to it from nearly as far out as this, to break them."

We did not quite understand what Thompson meant by his reference to boulders and what his party had

done with them, but we rode on slowly over the trees, sinking deep in the soft sand at every step.

In the afternoon we reached the billabong and, acting under our leader's advice, camped. Nothing could be seen anywhere on the surface of the ground but enormous ant-beds, some of them reaching to about twenty feet in height. Those structures, too, formed a dead city, for they were all deserted. Probably the builders had been migrating, and having been brought to a halt by the billabong had built a city in which to rear a future generation with wings so that they might fly across, and then resume their journey—whither ?

The Professor waxed very eloquent on the subject, and Silent Ted screwed out some tears when we were told that an entire nation of ants would deliberately commit suicide so as to ensure their original purpose being carried out by descendants that would come to life only after their death. I fear, however, we were not over anxious for ant-knowledge at the time.

" Where are those opal boulders you said were here ? " Sydney Charlie asked Thompson, abruptly. " I see nothing but sand."

" They're *under* the sand now, but they'll be on top again by to-morrow," was the startling answer. " They are living things, and though every sand storm covers them over they always get back to the surface again when it passes."

Next morning, Thompson's statement proved to be correct, the ground was dotted with round ironstone boulders ranging in size from that of marbles to cannon balls. Their sudden appearance is beyond my power

to explain, but the Professor said they were probably meteorites, and that they, also probably, obeyed some law as yet not understood by man. We did not doubt him, nor did we listen to the learned words which poured forth when he opened his floodgates of wisdom. We never did.

" Mates," said Thompson, as we gazed at the brown ironstone nodules dotted over the surface as far as we could see. " You came here for opal. So did my mates and I, years ago. Well, every boulder you see has got an opal heart of some kind. Get it out if you can. We couldn't. We thought they might be cut out, but we couldn't bring cutting machinery out here, and we never heard anything about the boulder we sent in to Noccundra with some aborigines to post to Opal Murphy in Sydney. . . . "

Sam and I exchanged glances. Well we remembered the flashing gem in Murphy's window in Sydney that had sent us opal hunting.

" Murphy cut out the opal heart," my comrade said quietly, " we saw it ; it was worth sixty pounds. He wrote to you."

" I'll see what the hammer end of my pick says to one of them," Sydney Charlie remarked, walking over to the nearest boulder.

Our comrades had long been acquainted with our story of Murphy's boulder opal, but we were now getting more information regarding it in a way we had not anticipated.

" Roll up for breakfast," shouted Ted, and we knew he was excited. Nulla Dulla was still sleeping.

Sydney Charlie's pick swung in the air and as the

blow fell we were all around him. The boulder broke into half a dozen pieces and a shimmering mass of some coloured powdery substance lay on the sand where it had been.

"There goes sixty pounds worth of opal," commented Big Sam. "You really should be less extravagant, Charlie."

"Try another, and don't hit so hard," I advised.

Thompson and the Professor looked on, but said nothing. Silent Ted went back to his cooking fire. Again, Charlie raised his pick, but it came down with less force behind it. The boulder sank slightly in the sand, but otherwise it remained unaffected by the blow. Sam and I each tackled balls of about six inches in diameter while Charlie dealt again with his. From two, a quivering, scintillating powder was shed as the stones were broken, but not a fragment was large enough to pick up with the fingers. Charlie's boulder was barren ; it's heart was hollow. We left our picks beside our work and went back for breakfast. That meal was unusually silent. We were all thinking, perhaps on different lines of thought.

"You'd better clear out, mates, before the mulga gets a grip on you," Thompson advised, near the conclusion. "My mates are planted under those cairns among the ant-beds near that big blue gum tree over there, and I don't want to have to plant you."

"You are a very cheery sort of fellow, Thompson," Big Sam laughed. "We've got a month's stores with us and your nigger can add to them a lot."

Thompson smiled, wearily. "There will be nothing living around this billabong but crows, after to-day,"

he said, "and they will be waiting to feed on our bones. All the game that Nulla Dulla caught only came in to shelter from that last sand storm."

"But we can load up our pack horses with those cannon balls and take them in to the nearest township," said the Professor. "There, we might get them cut, or send them on to Brisbane or Sydney."

"You'll need to ride light to reach *any* township, and anyway, you might carry in boulders that held nothing inside, or only pieces of stuff that looks like broken crockery. I reckon it is only one in three that carries the real gem." Thompson certainly was a pessimist.

Soon, we had resumed our work of breaking the boulders. Nulla Dulla went out to hunt, and our horses found plenty of "feed" of a rather coarse variety by the banks of the billabong.

But our efforts continued to have disappointing results. When noon came round we had broken hundreds of stones and only a few chips of fiery red opal was our reward. The stone that contained no opal core always broke neatly in two pieces; that containing a white vitrified mass of silica resembling porcelain always shed its kernal whole, although the casing was smashed into many pieces. But no matter how the blow was struck, nor how the strange boulders broke, the one containing a precious opal heart always parted with its iron-bound treasure—only in fragments. The blow which shattered the outer casing always crushed to sparkling powder the more brittle gem within.

Sundown found us still at work. We had saved a

small sack of fragments barely large enough to be of any value, and we had not evolved any scheme of treatment which promised more success. We dined exceedingly well that night on a heavy scrub turkey Nulla Dulla had run down and which Silent Ted had cooked in the ashes of the fire, after encasing it in mud from the billabong.

"Gentlemen, I fear our quest of the boulder opal must be written down as a failure," the Professor observed as we sat round the fire and smoked, afterwards.

"I don't like being so far out as this," Sydney Charlie put in, "I'll be seeing ghosts soon."

"All right," I said. "I know the 'move on' symptoms. Suppose we pack up and ride for Noccundra, to-morrow?"

The suggestion was received with more enthusiasm than I had expected; but we did not all ride away in the morning, nor did we pack up. Thompson absolutely refused to leave the place where his old mates lay, so we left him and his faithful Nulla Dulla all our stores and equipment, including three horses, and, followed by two pack horses with loads of unbroken boulders, the five men who had originally set out to find the Cooper's grimly guarded treasure rode southwards and eastwards towards Noccundra, without it. "We didn't want it, anyhow," the Professor murmured some time during the day, voicing his own thoughts, which were not exactly Sam's nor mine, although we had been trying to think so.

We reached the quaint little township of Noccundra

at sundown on the third day, and hearing that a motor mail now plied between Thargomindah, about eighty miles eastward, and Cunnamulla, the railway terminus, we disposed of our horses and caught a connecting coach, next day.

In Thargomindah, the wonder city of the far west on the Bullo River, lit by electric light by power supplied by water from a bore, and the centre of a vast sheep-rearing area and a great opal mining district, we heard all the world's latest news. One item which interested us was to the effect that a new find of copper, silver-lead and some other mineral had been made down in New South Wales. Incidentally, we also learned that the cyclone, the tail of which we had encountered as a sand storm, had practically destroyed some of the coastal towns.

"I'd like to have a look at the White Cliffs opal fields," said Sam to me as we rolled along towards Cunnamulla on the motor mail after having had a day's rest in Thargomindah, "but this new find may be worth looking at."

"Mankind will ever pursue the shadow," smiled the Professor, "I am going home to New Zealand to write my book. But I fear I shall never be a city dweller again. . . ." He was not.

When we arrived in Cunnamulla the Professor entrained for Brisbane *en route* for New Zealand. Sydney Charlie and Silent Ted stayed with us for two days and then followed on the next train to Brisbane. They had received a telegram from Wolfram Dick inviting them to join him in the north, and they were going.

" It has taken us a long time to reach Cunnamulla and we came rather a round-about route," Sam said to me when we were once more alone, " but I would do a lot to avoid sitting in that train again while it wanders across Queensland, if we are leaving."

" There is a motor coach leaving for Bourke in New South Wales to-morrow," I said. " From Bourke it is only half a day's railway journey to the new find. We can send our boulders on to Murphy for cutting from here. . . ." Three days later we were on the scene of the new discovery, but we never saw the opals cut from the boulders. We were told, by letter, that they were unique, and gave our consent to their being sent to some exhibition in Britain. We did not want them.

CHAPTER V

WITH THE OPAL MINERS IN WHITE CLIFFS

White Cliffs in New South Wales is one of the strangest towns in the world. It lies sixty miles beyond the town of Wilcania on the Darling River and about two hundred miles from the nearest railway terminus. It has a cosmopolitan population of about four thousand and is the source of three-quarters of the world's opal supply. This last fact Big Sam and I knew when we alighted from the Wilcania coach one evening. We had been prospecting in the back blocks of New South Wales but a slump in the price of copper had made us determine to try our luck on the famous opal fields.

A crowd of miners had assembled to meet the coach, the arrival of which was the event which marked two days in the week, as mails, papers, and parcels, as well as passengers reached the town on those red letter days. The people seemed to be expecting some visitors of importance that evening, however, but as Big Sam and I were the only passengers they soon dispersed to enjoy themselves otherwise.

"Are you in good form, mate?" one stalwart miner asked Sam, as we made our way across the white dusty roadway to an hotel, carrying well worn suitcases.

"Never felt better, old man," Sam replied. "Why?"

"Oh, I just thought it was decent to inquire—I meant no offence—we're a tough lot in this place——"

I did not hear what my comrade answered because, just then, a young man of thoughtful countenance gently relieved me of my suitcase, saying: "Allow me, please. You'll find the boys are not really a bad lot if you stick things out for a bit. That is Turley's Hill you see behind the town, and there are a lot of decent fellows working claims there."

"Thank you," I responded, "we'll do our best; we usually manage to rub along somehow—why are you worrying about us?"

The man seemed surprised: "I—er—beg pardon," he muttered looking at Sam and then at me. "I didn't know you two fellows knew each other; of course you'll find each other a great help at times?"

"I should think so," I laughed, "Big Sam and I have roughed it together in most parts of the world—Have we much chance of finding opal here?" I did not quite understand my new friend.

"You can hardly miss striking opal of some kind anywhere around. I suppose it will be a new experience for you and your friend?"

"Not quite; we've been opal hunting in Queensland before and have hopes of going back there, but we simply had to see White Cliffs."

"I know the feeling; I have wandered a bit between the poles of this weary old spheroid myself—but this is the chief hotel in White Cliffs. If you get tired of it you'll be made welcome among our crowd on Turley's Hill. Ask for Mac, the Poet or the Doctor—they

call me the Doctor." My friend deposited my suit-case beside Big Sam's and disappeared before I could thank him. Sam's friend had already gone.

"We've struck a new kind of place," Sam remarked as we did our best to remove the dust from our persons in the room in which mosquitoes were very attentive and water non-existent. "That fellow who seemed to take to me is a local prize-fighter who has dreams of world fame; he works a claim on Turley's Hill and is called Battling Dick."

"My man has a claim there too," I said, "he was a very decent fellow."

That night we explored the town thoroughly. It consisted of a prison, a post office, half a dozen hotels or drinking saloons, innumerable "eating houses," about a dozen stores, most of which apparently were owned by Chinese and Afghans. There were also some galvanized iron dwelling-houses and other erections which we could not readily classify. The hot airless streets were lit by the acetylene gas flares outside the saloons and were thronged with people of all nationalities, but only those of Asiatic origin—Chinese, Afghans, Hindoos and Assyrians—were dressed otherwise than in shirt, belted trousers and boots. The saloons and cool drink shops did a roaring trade, and the Salvation Army band playing outside our hotel drew coins from the pockets of all with an ease as surprising as the strenuous nature of its playing.

Big Sam and I felt that we had dropped into an unreal town, but as we could scarcely breathe its hot atmosphere we made our way to the outskirts and found ourselves among the camps in which, as we

afterwards learned, almost the entire population dwelt. The camps consisted of tents, bark huts and other shelters, and extended all round the town for perhaps two miles. The huge white mounds of excavated material or "mullock" which, surmounted by a windlass, marked the mouths of the opal shafts, gleamed brightly in the moonlight, and the many camp fires round which groups of men smoked their pipes in absolute content were pictures suggestive of a dream world. We threaded our way amidst the mullock dumps and camp fires, speaking to members of many circles in passing, and finally reached the summit of the slope we had been ascending and found that we had passed through the zone of congested camps. Looking back we could see the flares of the town beneath us, and the melody the hard-worked band was playing struck our ears in waves of sound that needed no scientific application of "broadcasting."

We turned down the other side of the ridge and were hailed by some men sitting round a fire in the heart of a cluster of dumps which were a good way apart from any others.

"Have you seen the Parson and the Fighting Fellow, mates?" one man asked as we joined the party. "Have some coffee?"

We explained that we were strangers and did not know the celebrities of the place, but we accepted the coffee which was being handed round from a kerosene tin on the red ashes of the fire.

"Oh, they are not local celebrities, yet," laughed a slimly-built, curly-haired young man. "They are

two attractions brought here by the progress committee. They say one can preach a black man white, and the other is a famous boxer straight from Sydney. They were due to-night by the coach."

"We arrived by the coach this evening," I said, "but we were the only passengers, and we came here to look for opal."

The men surveyed us for a moment and the curly-haired youth nodded to a square-shouldered man with a closely cropped moustache who, evidently reading approval on the faces of the others, said: "We'll adopt you, if you like. You look two hardened sinners, but I expect your faces are the worst of you." The man's accent was slightly Scotch.

"We're just as tough as the hardest cases you can produce in White Cliffs," spoke Big Sam with some heat, "but if any man here thinks he can impress my face with his fists, I invite him to try now——"

"I spoke only in metaphor, my man," broke in the Scot. "Personally I think your facial expression is angelic. In fact that Grecian fellow Adonis would feel comparatively commonplace were he standing between you and my friend here, the Poet."

"Leave me out, Mac," implored the curly haired one, laughing. "I am a man of peace."

"And so is my friend," I added. "Only he requires me to go along with him to tell people that. We accept your offer." I said more, but my words may not be repeated here, and soon we had promised to keep the secret of that Turley's Hill's Camp and to make its general interests ours. I had guessed that we had accidentally found the camp the man who had

CHRISTMAS CAMP OPAL MINES.

carried my suitcase had told me about, and later in the evening this assumption was confirmed by the arrival of that individual and Sam's friend laden with stores. They greeted us cordially, said they were glad we had joined up with them, and told all of how they had met us already. The next hour was spent in explaining to us the peculiarities of opal mining on Turley's Hill, and in showing us specimens of opal in the rough obtained that day. We were greatly impressed with the quality of the gem stones for we knew opal better than our new friends imagined. About midnight we returned to the hotel in town and found some Hebrew gem-buyers classing the stones they had purchased that day. Evidently they thought we were harmless Government officials or school teachers on a visit, and they explained to us that the profession of gem buying demanded night work, as some particular kind of stones could only be classified by artificial light. They were good fellows and took to us kindly, but their ideas of honour and ours did not entirely coincide, although we stored up the knowledge they gave us.

After breakfast next morning we bought mining implements in a store and rejoined our friends of the previous evening. We did not require instructions as to the nature of the work of shaft sinking, but we were agreeably surprised to learn that preliminary labours in that direction were not necessary. It appeared that the group of claims held by our friends actually surrounded two old mines which could not legally be held by the number of men in the camp. Shafts had been sunk on all the mines by the first

finders of opal on Turley's Hill and, when the only known opaliferous level had been worked out, abandoned. Others had taken up the mines at a later period and had driven along the twenty foot level until all were connected underneath, and galleries cut out far beyond the surface limits of the claims. In time new finds elsewhere had attracted the second lot of claim holders, and only the huge dumps of white clay on top marked the old mining traditions and showed to all that the ground underneath had been worked out. But one day some new chum who, not knowing that opal was found only on a well defined "bottom," and not underneath it, took up one of the old claims and sank deeper. His pick crashed through another layer of opal after he had added ten feet to the depth. He made a fortune in a few days, but when the patch he had so luckily broken into became exhausted he, too, went away. He told his friends of his discovery, however, and as a result the old workings had been taken up again, but there was still a two men's hole not yet manned according to law, and it was this piece of ground in the midst of the group that Big Sam and I were now invited to make our own. We fully appreciated the compliment paid us. We knew what it implied, for we had been prospectors on most of the world's mineral fields, and had not always found it an easy matter to join with others or to find others whom we cared to ask to join us.

"You'll find opal of some kind when you sink another ten feet," said Mac as the Poet, the Doctor and he assisted us to put the old shaft in order and erect a

crude windlass. "We hope you'll strike a patch of pin-fire orange stuff but if it is only coloured potch you strike we'll all shift to new ground."

We thanked them for their help and they departed, and, taking turn about at the bottom of the shaft, we sank swiftly through the soft clay formation, pick and shovel being the only tools necessary, although the man at the windlass got a bit more than pleasant exercise in hauling up the excavated material. By sundown we had lowered the shaft six feet and could plainly hear the pick strokes in the drives of the neighbouring claims as their owners worked towards us. That night, assisted by all, we erected a tent on our ground, built a couple of bunks, constructed some weird furniture out of discarded candle boxes and jam and milk cases, and generally made ourselves very comfortable. We slept soundly.

Next day we renewed our shaft-sinking efforts with fresh energy and at noon, after sinking four feet, went for our mid-day meal with the others to a bark and brushwood erection near, run by some enterprising person who evidently found catering for hungry miners at a shilling per head as profitable as opal-getting.

"Don't despair, boys," the Doctor said to us during the meal when we told him of the work we had done, "opal comes and goes in one stroke of the pick."

"We are not the despairing kind, old man," Sam replied, and I fancy most who heard his words believed them.

After resuming our work a shout from Sam who was below interrupted my peaceful smoke at the shaft

mouth. "What did that fellow say about opal coming with one pick stroke?" Sam cried as I lay flat on the top and peered down.

"I think he suggested that it frequently disappeared with the next," I answered. "So just postpone that second stroke of your pick until I get down." I knew Sam well—almost as well as he knew me—and he did not need to tell me that he had broken into the opal layer. In a minute I had clambered down beside him by means of the footholds cut in the walls of the shaft as it had been sunk for the purpose of climbing up and down, unaided. Sam was sitting on the shaft bottom, smoking; a candle stuck in a "spider" in the walls provided light. Sam's pick was stuck in the ground where it had last struck.

"Where's the opal?" I asked.

"I expect you'll find the end of that pick is in the heart of a chunk of it," Sam replied. "The sound was like that of crashing glass anyhow."

"Well, why don't you take it out? It may only be potch (valueless "dead" opal)."

"I wanted you to get the first piece, old man. Just lever up the pick and prove the truth of the pick-stroke story one hears everywhere in connection with opal."

"You are getting superstitious, Sam," I laughed, suddenly remembering that the date was the anniversary of the most important event in my life, and feeling that few wanderers were blessed with mates like mine. I jerked the pick out in approved fashion and dislodged by the action a chunk of hard clay on the under side of which was attached a cracked mass

of coloured glass-like material. The lump of clay immediately crumbled into pieces and the broken under casing became alive with flashes of fire of ever-changing colour. The hole left also blazed with shooting flames and seemed to be a small well of molten metal through which green, blue, and orange coloured waves chased each other in endless succession.

Sam picked up one of the broken pieces; it was encrusted with clay, about half an inch in length and width and about a quarter of an inch in thickness, and looked, away from the candle light, exactly like a piece of glass. On bringing it under the influence of the light however, the jagged edges seemed to become alive with fire and we could not determine whether the stone was green, red, blue or yellow in colour, so confusing were the fleeting changes.

"That pick-stroke story is true, mate," Sam remarked, throwing down the stone and relighting his pipe, "I wonder what we'll be doing when your birthday comes round again?"

"We've got a year to go, Sam," I laughed, "but we have got to get this opal, now."

Sitting on the shaft bottom—the shaft was six feet by three—our backs to the different end walls and our nether limbs stretched apart, we dug out the intervening space with our knives and thus saved large pieces of the precious gem-stone which might otherwise have been shattered by the pick. We forgot all about time and had our hats filled with pieces of opal when a voice called down from the top and startled us into the knowledge that there were fellow mortals near us.

"Hullo, down there!" the man on top cried. "Have you fallen through to—to—where the opal comes from, or are you sleeping?"

"Come down and see, Tommy," Sam answered. "I think we've struck opal."

Singing Tommy's words were eloquent and expressive when he joined us on the congested shaft bottom, though hardly original in that part of the world, but when his vocabulary was exhausted he, without knowing it, became brilliant. "Tea is about ready," he said, "the boys have been preparing a spread in your honour and I have been sent to hunt you up."

"Why in *our* honour?" I inquired. "No one but you knows we have bottomed our shaft on opal?"

"Oh, we weren't thinking about your striking opal——"

"In luck again," murmured Big Sam. "I had forgotten I am hungry."

Singing Tommy did not feel called upon to make further comment and we followed each other aloft, and, to the surprise of Sam and myself, the stars were shining. A few words to the Doctor in our tent while we removed most of the grime from our faces made him acquainted with things, and when we joined the others round the common camp fire all knew that a great "strike" had been made, and we were received with an ovation which we did not understand and certainly did not deserve. Great preparations had been made for the banquet and the efforts to make it an imposing ceremony had resulted, with other things, in a long table constructed most skilfully out of mulga trees, with the spaces between their round

trunks filled in with crushed ant beds. That table top was like a block of ferro-concrete. Candles stuck in the necks of bottles and the glorious stars provided light, for the roof of our dining hall was high as the sky, and its walls the mullock dumps of the surrounding mines, while empty jam, milk and meat cases served as chairs. Several of the neighbouring claim holders had been invited to the feast, and Sam and I felt somewhat aggrieved that we had not been given sufficient notice to enable us to make ourselves more presentable.

But this feeling soon passed. We were introduced generally to all by Mac as the latest famous arrivals in White Cliffs, and then we took our places at the table. It was a meal to remember with other feasts in which we had participated under different circumstances elsewhere, although how it had been prepared was a mystery. We could easily guess that most of our friends had been members of other professions far removed from that of opal mining, but when one crosses the Darling River it is not etiquette to inquire into a man's history, and as none could possibly know what our record was, and none seemed in the slightest way anxious to know, we extended to them the same courtesy. Still, we could not help forming ideas—nor could they !

When the dinner neared its natural termination, Mac, who presided, said a few words relating to the actual pleasure of a conscious existence ; he mentioned one or two big words which I have no doubt were very expressive of his meaning, but as I became interested in watching what seemed to me a peculiar habit he

had of rubbing the back of his right leg at intervals, I feared I lost the sense of them. The Doctor spoke next and said nice things about visitors and their luck in finding opal, and some others also addressed the assembly. Then the Poet began reciting something of his own composition which I thought was very fine and almost equalled Kipling's best, but Battling Dick, who didn't seem to like it, carried him away forcibly from the table. Singing Tommy next entertained us. His voice when used in song—he only occasionally used it otherwise—was like the sound of a whistle. Probably he could have made a fortune on the music hall stage (I believe he is doing so now) but I at once understood why he had to work his claim alone! Finally the talk became general and soon resolved itself into a discussion as to the origin of opal, and the reasons why, although slabs of opal the size of sheets of plate glass could be found almost anywhere, only a small part of them were "noble" or gem opal. Many theories were propounded and Sam and I were amazed at the refreshing originality of some of them. Mac's idea was that the presence of lime gave "life" to the hydrous silica (opal is hydrous silica) and he drew a vivid picture of a mighty convulsion of nature in which a molten lake bed was transformed into opal: "When that fiery sea of clay came into being," he said, "shells, fishes and other organisms containing lime were instantly volatalized and only on the spot where that tragedy actually occurred did the silica absorb the calcium (lime) that gave it an eternal life."

"You have a fair imagination, Mac," someone

commented, "but your theory is faulty, I think. Analysis of gem opal and potch opal show no difference——"

"Man, it is no' patent pills nor whisky we're discussing," Mac interrupted. "I know the profundity of your wisdom is beyond the abilities of ordinary intellects to plumb, but can you tell me the difference in analysis between a tin of mutton and one of beef?"

The man shook his head. "I'm only a chemist, Mac," he observed humbly. "I suppose the only difference in most cases is the name on the labels."

"I had the idea that the living flashes in opal were just the result of minute cracks caused by enormous pressure when the silica contracted on cooling," I ventured. I remembered having read something to that effect, somewhere.

"Then why does not *all* opal flash and scintillate?" Mac asked, rubbing the back of his right leg, and showing by other signs that he was anticipating an argument with pleasure.

But I was not quite so simple as to allow myself to be drawn into a wordy duel with a man of Mac's calibre: "I don't know," I replied, "I didn't make it; but perhaps all that molten silica did not cool at the same speed. We know from our knowledge of metals that the molecular disturbances caused by expansion and contraction may apparently make one element assume the properties of another."

"Boys!"—broke in Big Sam—"he is my mate, and to-day's his birthday, so I can't hit him. But he is side-tracking you, and if you don't stop him you'll

be arguing on the Fourth Dimension or the Sixth Sense before you know."

Sam flattered me, but Mac's face lit up joyfully. "We might with advantage to our fellows discuss the Atomic Theory," he began, but Singing Tommy, prompted by someone, started making whistling sounds again and, when he had been suppressed, Sam passed round some pieces of the opal we had found that afternoon for inspection. All were greatly interested; the opal was declared to be "Orange pin-fire" and of the very best quality. It looked different from what Sam and I had imagined it to be at the bottom of the shaft, but we were informed that that particular kind of opal changed continually in different lights, though it would always be of an orange colour in sunlight.

In the early hours of morning the party broke up. It seemed that our find had finally established the fact that high-grade opal existed on deeper levels than had hitherto been proved, and hopes were high that Turley's Hill would once more be the chief gem-producing district in White Cliffs. All were happy, and the only point troubling anyone was the fear that the Jew gem-buyers would lower the price of first-class opal when they knew there was every prospect of a large supply from the new level. This fear was realized after breakfast when the Poet and the Doctor took in a trial parcel on our behalf. Those two individuals were both skilled in the art of selling opal because they could each assume in different ways an air of innocent ignorance which misled the Jews and made it very difficult for them to explain satisfactorily

the fiction they invariably told about the price of opal depending on the changing fashions in Europe and America. All gem-buyers seem to be more or less swindlers, and the price they pay is always the lowest they can get their victims, who usually need money, to accept, and seldom has any bearing on the real value of the stones—but despite the well schemed efforts of the Doctor and the Poet to obtain better terms, the Scotch-named Jews finally obtained possession of our parcel of orange pin-fire opal for forty pounds, which worked out at eight pounds an ounce. Mac and some experienced miners said the stones were worth at least twenty pounds an ounce, but we were well enough pleased as we had meanwhile dug out another parcel from the shaft bottom, and the gems were still showing in the walls on all sides.

Following the advice of our neighbours we sank our shaft another four feet, and then tunnelled along underneath the opal layer, breaking the roof down carefully each evening before ceasing work. Soon all the claims around us had bottomed on the same seam, but the ubiquitous potch sometimes rendered a day's work entirely unproductive. Still, all struck "pots," occasionally, which yielded several pounds weight of saleable opal, from which ounces of first-class gems could be extracted, and in a few days all the drives on the new level were connected. Almost daily men went in to sell their opal, and the price became lower and lower. Meanwhile, Big Sam and I became very popular along the miners, and nightly were invited to celebration feasts of some kind in

camps sometimes miles away. We did not understand our popularity, for neither of us had done anything special, and we did not shine particularly as entertainers.

One day Mac returned from town very much dissatisfied with everything. He flung ponderous words about which none understood, and could not be drawn into an argument even on such subjects as hydrostatics, transmutation, eschatology, the Origin of Man, or anything else.

"What has gone wrong, Mac?" I asked sympathetically. I had grown to like the grim, soft-hearted world wanderer.

"*I've* gone wrong, my boy," he answered. "The humiliation I have experienced this day at the hands of those Israelites who sit in the market places and deal in precious stones has imbued me with a hatred of people with a curved nose that my admiration for Moses, King Solomon and some prophets cannot overcome. The two chunks o' iniquity named Abraham Macpherson and Isaac Maclean would only give me twenty pounds for the eight-ounce parcel of opal I took into them, and after I had parted with it a new buyer, likewise of Jordan ancestry, just arrived, was offering twenty pounds an ounce for the same stuff."

"But the names you have mentioned sound Scotch, Mac," I observed.

"Man, that fact is troubling me more than the robbery of my opal. Just try to imagine how your ancestors would feel if they knew that their glorious old names were used to hide the origin of gem-buyers."

"My ancestors are dead, Mac, so I do not feel the insult as deeply as you, but if you have no particular objections, Big Sam and I will beard those Jordan lions in their dens this afternoon, and see what we can extract from them for our opal."

"All right; but don't take a cheque in payment, and don't lose time, because the two Hebrews I named are leaving to-night with their plunder." Mac's voice had changed suddenly, I thought.

That afternoon Big Sam and I entered the hotel where we had stayed the first night of our arrival and enquired for the gem-buyers who had bought Mac's opal. We were shown into the stuffy room they used as an office, and Abraham at once produced cigars, which we accepted.

"Oh, it is you!" exclaimed Isaac, all smiles, and we agreed. We could not very well argue on that point, nor could we imagine whom they thought we were, but, concluding they had recognized us as the two coach arrivals they had entertained about ten days previously, we got to business.

"We are opal sellers, now," I began, opening out our package. "What is a fair price for this lot?"

Abraham and Isaac handled the stones in professional manner, and placed them on the scales. "Well, we've been telling most men from Turley's Hill, where this stuff comes from, that orange pin-fire has become a glut on the market because the Emperor of China has died," Abraham laughed, "but a fellow came in to-day who told us that there was no Emperor of China, and hadn't been for a long time, so we cannot say that to you. He was a very rude man."

"So am I," said Sam. "I think I can give points to Mac any day."

"Tell us some other tale," I advised. "We appreciate imaginative people, and we know you have a living to make, and that the life of a poor opal-buyer is not a happy one. But your scales show you there are twenty ounces of pin-fire gems in that parcel."

The two Scotch Jews looked at each other and nodded, and somehow I felt *we* had scored.

"To be frank with you, those stones are worth a lot," said Abraham. "But as yet we do not know ourselves how much. We'll make you an offer, sporting, of course, of four hundred pounds for your parcel. We may lose on the deal, but sometimes even gem-buyers play the game."

"All right," I said. "They are yours, but don't cry; to be equally frank with you we did not expect to get that price."

The money was paid and we parted the best of friends, but we knew Messrs. Abraham and Isaac must have made a fortune by their other purchases if our stones really were worth the price they gave us. We interviewed the proprietor of the hotel and arranged for a celebration dinner that night, then went back to camp and told of our good fortune. To our great regret, Mac and Battling Dick said they had an engagement that night which could not be postponed, and therefore could not join in our celebrations unless they got home before they broke up. They had their horses in and were evidently preparing for a night ride.

Our dinner party included all our friends, and was

a great success. We had hired the Salvation Army Band to provide music on Turley's Hill for that evening, but what the performers said when they found that the population of that quarter had gone into town is, I believe, still a subject of comment in White Cliffs. About midnight, Mac and Battling Dick joined us, dusty, thirsty and tired. Nevertheless, Mac was in great spirits, and not until morning, when the hotel was eaten bare and drunk dry, did twenty happy opal-seekers return to their camps.

The next day was one of great excitement in the town, although we did not know until someone brought out the news. A special coach which had left the town the previous evening with our two gem-buying friends had been "held up" at Bunker's Creek, a few miles out, by two masked men, and two boxes of opal removed. Abraham and Isaac were both back in the town again, and they asserted that they had been robbed of thirty thousand pounds worth of gems. Their story did not get them much sympathy, it being known that it was only Turley Hill opal they were taking away, and also known that the total price they had paid for that opal was about a tenth of that figure. Mac rubbed his right leg thoughtfully when he heard the story.

Work on our group of claims proceeded with satisfaction to all concerned, but Sam and I were now the selling agents. We could get a price from the buyers that no one else could obtain, though we did not know why. In time, however, a spirit of unrest seized some of us. Chance visitors whom we entertained occasionally told strange tales of Queensland,

where they said that opal burst in streaks of splendour from every outcropping boulder, and although Sam and I told of our experience, that was enough. As a result, our camp-fire meetings had empty places, and when the vacant candle-box seats became more than those occupied, Sam and I got tired, too. We had interests elsewhere; White Cliffs was too much of a town for us, and the hospitality of its people more than our digestive arrangements could stand.

Thus, we boarded the coach one morning, and, near sundown, found ourself in Wilcania, that wonderful fairy city on the Darling River, whence we could go up or down the river by boat, or travel by another coach across the desert to the nearest railway. Almost the first man we saw as we stepped from the coach was a tall, athletic individual in bush clerical garb. He rushed at us with outstretched hands, and we were just as eager to greet him. He was our old comrade the Parson, who had been mining molybdenite with us in far North Queensland some months before.

"You two wandering sinners; where are you going now?" he asked, after all had expressed their feelings, tersely.

"We don't know and don't care," Big Sam answered. "We have just come from White Cliffs—where does your ticket carry you?"

"Oh, anywhere. I have now got a sort of roving commission from headquarters to wander among the back blocks townships, and illustrate the facts that exponents of Christianity are practical and—if need

be—fighting men. I am nearly a month overdue in White Cliffs."

"Yes, they are expecting you there," I said, "but the people evidently expect a fighter *and* a Parson, not a fighting Parson alone."

The Parson smiled. "I know what you mean," he said. "The papers just arrived here from Sydney are filled with stories of the doings of some fellows who have impersonated me on the opal fields. They did their work well, too. The fighter didn't fight, and the Parson didn't preach, but they worked together as miners, found a deep level of opal, converted the Jew gem-buyers and made them pay fair prices, and generally did my work better than I could have done myself. I only hope they didn't also hold up that coach—it was a sensational thing to do, but not exactly my line."

Sam and I looked at each other. Our late popularity was explained.

"No," said Sam, thoughtfully, "they did not hold up the coach, but I'll bet they could tell you who did. Ask Mac and Battling Dick about that affair, and make a friend of the Doctor if you want publicity in the Sydney Press."

Next morning, having changed our minds somewhat, we bought horses and rode across the western plains to Cobar, where we entrained for Sydney.

CHAPTER VI

WITH THE PEARLERS

FAR from the beaten tracks of globe-trotters, and unknown even to many adventure-loving wanderers, stretch the great pearling grounds of North-west Australia. Yet this lucrative belt of shallow waters, fringed by its hundreds of miles of sandy beach on the south, and by unexplored mountain ranges known to be rich in gold and other minerals at its northern extremity, is quite easy of access. From Fremantle, the chief port of West Australia, steamers run regularly to Broome, the centre of the pearling industry, and from Singapore there is also a monthly connection.

This land of ocean treasure, mineral wealth and mystery, was probably first seen by white man when the famous adventurer, Dampier, sailed down its haze-bound coast-line, thinking it was part of Asia; but intelligent Malays and natives of the Philippines say that their ancestors knew of the great *terra incognita* lying to the south of their lands from a time too far back in the misty ages to be fixed. Indeed, we now know that the rock-bound inlets penetrating the coastal spurs of the Leopold Ranges were regular haunts of the Malay pirates of old, and it is said that much treasure looted from Java, India and China still lies hidden somewhere along the shores of those stormless bays, visited now only by the chance pearling

lugger. Sometimes, however, an entire pearling fleet, when caught unawares by the monsoon, seeks shelter in those land-bound waters and passes the season there. On those occasions the lordly master pearlers spend their time, after repairing their vessels, exploring and prospecting the unknown country beyond, and, if the tales of its mineral wealth be only partly true, there are fortunes there for future generations. Meanwhile, the pearlers are the lords of their own domain. In their kingdom time passes, and with it, perhaps, empires ; but only in the case of a world war does it make any difference to them. Then they answer their call to a man—and the graves of Gallipoli prove that fact.

The foregoing summarizes all I knew about pearling and pearlers when Big Sam and I, after a prospecting trip across comparatively unknown country from Port Darwin on the north, during which we found diamonds, gold, copper, and other minerals, all impossible for two men to work, found ourselves in sight of the sea on the west. The galvanized iron roofs of houses glistened in the sunlight, and we guessed we were looking at Broome. That guess became a certainty at sundown, when the wind blew inland from the sea ; our horses objected to the odoriferous atmosphere, too, but they became used to it sooner than we did. We were certainly nomads, but the call of civilization sang out loudly in our five senses, so, after shaving at a water-hole and making ourselves look as presentable as possible in our spare Assamese silk garments, which we still carried somehow, rode into the town after dark. The place was crowded

with Chinese, Japanese, Manilamen and aborigines, but we did not see a single white man. Arriving at what seemed to be the chief hotel in the town, we gave our horses to a Japanese attendant and entered, wondering if we had dropped upon an *Arabian Nights* country.

The apparent owner was a black-skinned man whose nationality I could not place, but he had a very Scotch name, and his language was nearly perfect. And everything else in that hotel was perfect. We had our first iced drinks since leaving Darwin, and presently sat down to a dinner which reminded us of other far-away places.

"Are we dreaming?" Big Sam said, as some edible with a French name, which we had chosen from a typewritten menu without knowing its nature, was placed before us.

"I think we are," I answered. "We'll wake up presently and find ourselves back on the desert. We haven't seen a white man——"

"By Christmas! Here's one now," exclaimed Sam. "Find out what language he talks."

A pleasant-faced man entered the room and greeted us courteously. "I am sorry that none of us were here to meet you," he said. "We did not expect the steamer to get in until to-morrow, and most of us are at the Chinese theatre to-night."

We explained that we had not come by steamer, told him our names and where we had come from, and asked who were "us."

The man seemed a bit surprised. I am sure he did not believe we had crossed from Darwin, but he

laughed and replied: "I am afraid you will find 'us' a bad lot. We are the master pearlers of Broome; this is our club-house, and you are unanimously elected honorary members—by myself. My name is Chalmers."

Big Sam was indignant. "We thought this was an hotel," he said. "We are quite able to pay our way anywhere; and all we want at present is a boat to take us round to some civilized port——"

"Please pardon me if I have said anything to annoy you," Mr. Chalmers interrupted. "It is our custom to make things as pleasant as possible for visitors. The hotels in this sultry township are only drinking saloons, frequented by renegade white men and poor beach-combers. There isn't a boat leaving for anywhere inside a month. Ah, here are some of the boys now!"

How things might have developed I do not like to think, for Big Sam was sometimes slow about adapting himself to new conditions when angry. But all became harmony at once when one of the bronze-faced men who entered the dining-room called out to me by an old pet name, and, rushing forward, nearly wrenched my hand off. I recognized him instantly, in spite of his dressy veneer, as an old comrade adventurer in the South Seas—but wanderers hide their feelings.

"Hullo, Bob," I said. "You're a bit away from the Samoan Islands?"

"Yes, I had to leave Pago Pago. A native princess there wanted to marry me, and—well, I got away on one of the Spreckel's boats for Sydney, in Handsome

Harry's trunk, and now I am a bold bad pearler. . . . This is Handsome Harry, and the others are, as they grip your fist, Charlie Woods, a darned good fellow but nothing else; Tommy Boyd, a man of brains who can't use them; Captain Biddles, the father of the pearling fleet, whose history you can hunt up for yourself; and Andy Macalister, a real good bad man, who says he is Scotch, but is not believed." He turned to his friends. "Gentlemen pearlers," he said, "one of those two hard-faced specimens of humanity whose hands you have just shaken is the man who (not wise to say what followed), and if his mate is as hard a case as himself, we poor pearlers are in for a hustling time."

Big Sam modestly ventured to say that neither of us was really a hard case, but the laugh which followed equalized everything—and dinner was begun over again. Our new friends were strict prohibitionists—for the Manilamen, Chinese, Japanese, and aborigines, but not for themselves—and, as other master pearlers came into the club when tired of the Chinese performance, and Sam and I found more old friends in some of them, it was early in the morning before the party broke up. No white man sleeps inside walls in Broome, and the mosquitoes see that they cannot sleep outside, in the town; so all walked out along the jetty and made its sea end their resting-place. We were informed that the pearling schooners lying near would have been more comfortable, but, as the sharks were unusually hungry, and no niggers could be found at that hour to accompany us to satisfy that appetite—a shark prefers black men to white, the

latter being too salty for his taste !—and that, anyhow, as sunrise and another day would arrive soon, it wasn't worth the risk swimming out to them.

Sam and I agreed ; we were not used to sharks, but we were certainly experts in the art of sleeping where night found us.

In the morning the scorching sun awoke us, and at once every man was in the sea. It was glorious ! Sam and I had not experienced the delights of a swim in salt water for a long time.

After breakfast in the club-house we were taken round to see the sights. The cable station—Broome is the landing station of the Australian cable system—and the strongly-built prison were deemed to be the chief attractions, and we were told that the latter was easily the most comfortable place in town and, therefore, always well filled. I don't think the Malays, Chinese and coolies whom we saw in chains inside were extremely happy, all the same ; but as it was their custom to run " amok " and murder each other on their respective festival nights, perhaps the prison did exercise a soothing influence ! Incidentally, it may be said that some of the various races of mankind which compose the Broome pearling fleet have a festival every night when on shore, but the death-roll is never known, as the white troopers do not interfere in their pleasures unless they disturb the peace of the town proper.

When we saw through the town and the various outlying native quarters, we were taken to the pearl-opening sheds along the beach. We might have been led there first, but all our guides agreed that

the wind was not favourable. I think the sense of smell is not always an advantage! The sheds consisted of long lines of inclined tables with a receptacle ledge at the lower side containing water. Chinese attendants were piling up a cargo of shells just landed on the higher side of some of the tables, but a few other tables were in a further advanced stage, as the smell testified, and we were informed that the oysters on the latter tables were in course of "spitting" their pearls—if they contained any.

"It's a better game than mining," Big Sam commented, after we had been told that all the shells were placed on the tables when landed, and after spitting of their own accord in a few days, were cleaned by the workers and stored for shipment to Singapore, where they were sold at prices ranging round £200 per ton.

"Only that, for pearls?" exclaimed Sam, who sometimes really was obtuse.

"No; for the shells," someone explained. "The pearls are often worth hundreds of pounds each. Biddles got the Southern Cross pearl, by some stroke of luck, and it was sold last, I believe, for forty thousand pounds. Of course, it was a freak pearl, and I think the Pope now owns it."

"I fancy I should give most of my time to the pearls," observed Sam, and all laughed.

"We all thought that at one time or other," said Chalmers; "but a white man simply can't stick it. The smell makes you think you've got every disease ever invented, and no fellow-being will come near you. Macalister once tried to collect his own pearls

by soaking himself in whisky, and Charlie Gordon tried the same game after inoculating himself with every patent medicine advertised in the Perth papers. Both went to hospital, and the Chinese cleaners still get most of the pearls."

Big Sam was still eager for knowledge which he ought to have acquired already. "But why do you allow the Chinese to steal your pearls?" he asked.

"We don't," Captain Biddles answered. "They swallow them, and a Chinaman's anatomy is different from ours——"

"Some of the Chinamen storekeepers in town are millionaires," added my old comrade, Boston Bob, who was now supposed to be respectable and was known as Robert Cairns. "They buy all the stolen pearls and send them home to China in the coffins of dead Chinamen. A Chinkie dies in Broome as regularly as a boat for Singapore is due. Most are boxed up in coffins made of the sandal-wood which grows around here, and sent home. Broome sandal-wood is in great demand in China, I know, but if it gets there in the shape of a coffin the board's are worth more than pearl shell!"

"I understand," said Sam reflectively. "All oysters don't carry pearls! I think, after all, I prefer sinking holes in the ground, after gold or gems, to diving under the sea."

"We don't dive under the sea, old man," put in Handsome Harry. "We employ Manilamen and Japanese divers for that job. We just play poker, wind a gramophone, read the latest books, and drink

more than we should. The pearl shell comes to us and we sell it for filthy lucre. Most of us take a run up to Singapore or go south to Perth, Melbourne and Sydney occasionally, and one or two of us get over to S.F. at times, and even as far as New York and London—— "

"I see the *Electron* coming in," interrupted Macalister. "We'd better get back to meet her. Gentleman James will have a lot to say if he has struck anything up north."

The *Electron*, the palatial schooner on which the individual known as Gentleman James made his home, came into port in great style, and we all met its popular owner as he stepped on shore. He deserved his cognomen. As we sat at lunch, afterwards, in the club, he told us that he had discovered a new bank of pearling ground in Collier Bay, beyond the Buccaneer Archipelago. "It is only fifteen fathoms deep, boys," he said, "and is worth looking at. I came back in a hurry to tell you. We *may* load up all the luggers before the monsoon sets in; but there's a mangrove-fringed inlet we can make for, if caught, which opens out into a big land-locked bay I have never seen before. There are reefs of some mineral running through the shore rocks right down into the water, but I am not a mineralogist, and do not know what the stuff is. . . ."

The scene was changed. Sleepy Broome was galvanized into activity. Crews of Malays, Chinese, Manilamen, aborigines, and nondescripts were kicked up from their drink or drug-induced slumbers by their serangs and bundled on board the fleet of luggers

lying in Roebuck Bay. They could fight among themselves as much as they liked, but, by morning, they would be sober, and, if any were missing, their serangs, who were invariably the divers of the respective luggers, could easily replace them, and sharks leave no traces!

As a rule a lugger is in charge of its owner or a white man employed by him; but the actual work is seen to by the diver, who is always a very intelligent specimen of his race. He is always sober, because he receives a share of the profits, and hopes to return to his native land with his fortune, some day, and do what the wealthy people of that particular part of the world do. But once aboard the lugger, getting pearl shells is the business of all. The lugger itself is a craft that could not weather much of a storm, as, so as to allow of the diver being raised and lowered readily, it has only a few inches of freeboard. The white king of the ship reigns in the one cabin, aft, and, although he only makes his presence on board felt when necessary, his doing so fulfils his mission.

When the great assembly of luggers left port next morning for the new grounds, Broome was practically deserted. The expected steamer from Fremantle with mails and papers had not arrived, but no one cared. Some of the master pearlers owned several luggers and accompanied the fleet in their schooners, which served the double purpose of being a perfect floating home, where mosquitoes did not trouble, and for taking back to Broome the luggers' loads of shells, thus allowing them to continue working.

Big Sam and I were the guests of Gentleman James,

and some of the other master pearlers also made use of the *Electron* in preference to their own vessels. Life was very pleasant on the *Electron*. Its owner was a kind of mystery man, with cultured tastes, and the ship was replete with everything tending to comfort. Sailing over the sparkling blue waters under an awning, with the cool sea-breezes blowing in our faces, was a sensation novel to my comrade and myself after our monotonous desert experience, and we enjoyed it thoroughly. We crossed King Sound, threaded a maze of islands, and reached the new pearling banks on the evening of the second day; but the luggers under their one oddly shaped sail had nearly all arrived by daylight following. All preparations had already been made, and pearling operations were in full swing early in the forenoon. The sea seemed to be alive with sinuous creatures, pink in colour, somewhat resembling eels, but which, we were told, were known as sea-snakes. They were of all sizes, from six inches to about three feet in length, though more like a piece of animated cord than anything else, as far as their other proportions were concerned.

"Those creatures feed on oysters," Gentleman James explained to us. "Their presence is a sure index of a rich bed beneath; but, of course, if that bed is beyond sixteen fathoms we can't touch it, as, even with our latest diving dresses, that is the maximum depth a diver can stand."

"If that depth can be survived by those Japs and Manilamen, I reckon I could go a couple of fathoms more," said Big Sam thoughtfully, and I caught the

idea. We had dug under the dead ground for minerals, and it would be interesting to have a personal knowledge, also, of the depths of the living sea.

"We'll go round the luggers and see how they are doing," laughed our host. "Perhaps you'll get a chance to bring up shells if indications are favourable."

We put off in a dinghy and boarded the lugger *Mist*. The diver, a Manilaman, was below, and net-loads of shells were coming up regularly. The two men at the air pump worked and sang happily, and two other coolies stood by the raising gear. Others, comprising Chinese, Malays, aborigines and Kanakas, received the shells as they came up and piled them in the proper place.

"We're doing well," Chalmers, the owner of the lugger, remarked cheerfully. "We'll get all we can carry in three or four shifts if the niggers don't kick up. Mariano is below."

Mariano was the acknowledged best diver of the fleet, and Big Sam and I had already fraternized with him, in a way, in Broome.

"It is strange how a desire to accumulate wealth will make men take unnecessary risks," observed Gentleman James. "Every master pearler here knows that his crew may have some bottles of 'snake juice' hidden away, and that he ought to have given another day, at least, to ensure its being finished. The pearl beds could wait until the monsoon drives us away."

"That's all right for a hermit philosopher like you to say," laughed Chalmers, "but as long as I don't

lose Mariano I don't care how many of the niggers kill themselves or each other—— "

Big Sam uttered an unprintable exclamation and ran forward. We all looked after him in surprise.

" You are losing Mariano now, Chalmers," said Gentleman James, gaining Sam's side in a few seconds. Then Chalmers uttered some strange sounds resembling those frequently made by some people while under the influence of deep emotion and, with me, sprang at the two coolies who had been manning the air-pump a moment previously, but had now ceased and were trying to kill each other. Big Sam and Gentleman James had re-started the pump already, and Chalmers and I attended to the two pumpsmen in orthodox manner. Mariano was hauled aloft, and his helmet unscrewed : " Plenty much pearl down there," he murmured, then faded out into unconsciousness. He was carried aft and left to recover.

" Now is your chance of seeing what the pearl beds are like," said Gentleman James to us. " Chalmers will need a diver now, I expect."

" I'll go," volunteered Sam, " if you and my mate man the pump."

" I'll go," said I, " if you and my mate man the pump."

I won the toss, and presently was being encased in Mariano's dress. It was the very latest contrivance, but, apart from the helmet, which contained some mysterious valves and tubes, it seemed to me to be only a thickly padded suit of some rubber-like composition.

"Come out, boy," advised Sam. "I didn't mean to dare you to go down."

"You'd better let Chalmers go down himself, if he can't get another diver," added Gentleman James. "Diving isn't a white man's job."

"I am going down," I said, and the helmet was screwed on without another word. I thought this was abrupt treatment, until I remembered that I could not hear what anyone may have said afterwards. In a moment I felt myself being raised off the deck and dropped overboard. I was already sick, and the rubber-tainted air pumped into me seemed like chloroform. The world fell away from me, light went out, and I felt I had, somehow, turned a somersault. A blurred mass of seething green flashed past the glasses in the helmet, my ears seemed to burst, and my head felt as if it had swollen enormously. I think I must have been unconscious for a second or so, but I became myself again with the shock experienced on hitting the bottom. The buzzing in my ears had now ceased, the mist of green settled itself into a semi-transparent wall of sea water, and the rhythmic pulsations of the air-pump above sounded like hammer strokes. I perspired profusely—a new experience to me—and then realized that I was standing amidst a marine forest of giant coral, the delicate fronds of which were trembling as if in a breeze. I could see only a few yards around me, and even the objects inside my range of vision appeared like a picture out of focus. Shellfish of all kinds seemed to be resting among the coral branches, like birds on trees, and among them were varieties that

hitherto had only appeared to me in nightmares. Suddenly I remembered I was a diver in pursuit of pearl shells, and I looked around for them. They were everywhere. The ocean bed seemed to be paved with them, and crevices in coral ledges were filled with them. Remembering all I could of the instructions I had received, I filled the net hanging alongside me with the shells I gathered, not too easily, from their resting-places, and gave the signal to haul. The net shot up and a lot of fish followed it, and I began gathering more shells. This was not done exactly as one wished to do, because the lugger, continually drifting overhead, carried me away on the taut ropes, and often I could not reach the coveted spoil. But I filled the returned nets several times, then suddenly found myself swung off my feet and suspended in a gulf of blackness. My reason told me I had been pulled into a depth too deep for exploration, but presently, before I could signal, I struck ground again. I had crossed an ocean hole of some kind. Pearl shells were again plentiful around and I filled more nets, and thought I was doing well. But not for long. Without warning, from the depths of the hole just passed, lashed out some long whip-like tentacles. One or two touched me, I think, and my nerves failed me. After all, I was a prospector, and diving was not my line. I had feared only sharks and knew they were to be reckoned with ; but an octopus of the size the tentacles suggested was not in my contract, and I pulled the communication cord three times. I must have caused some alarm on top, for I instantly shot upwards, gyrating the while like

READY TO GO DOWN FOR PEARLS—WEST AUSTRALIA.

a spinning minnow. I again experienced a feeling of sickness, but the sudden dump I got when hauled on deck helped me to recover, and I was completely restored when the helmet was unscrewed, and I breathed the free untainted air of heaven once more. When I told of my experience with the octopus Chalmers and Gentleman James laughed. "They do grow to an enormous size in these parts," the latter said; "but your friend below was a good bit more frightened than you were when it felt what you were like. Mariano will go down and kill it when he gets better."

When the gentle-voiced diver was better, however, the lugger had drifted past the hole, beyond the reach of his life-line, and that octopus may be there still.

In the course of the day Big Sam went below from another lugger, called *The Dawn*. Of course, I stood by, on top, with others, ready to man the pump if the operating natives stopped working to settle any argument. But nothing happened, and Sam, after adding a fair amount to the growing cargo of shells, was hauled aloft, as thankful as I had been to breathe fresh air again. All day the fleet drifted slowly over the waters, dragging the divers after them on their long lines of tubes and ropes. No accident happened while we were with the party, but we were told that sometimes a jagged mass of coral or sharp rock cuts the slack air pipe as it is being dragged over it. On such occasions a diver's soul goes out on the "west" wind to fare according to its merits, and the fleet is sad. The divers are the only men the master

pearlers trust, and that trust is seldom betrayed.

In a few days every lugger was fully loaded, but a storm was working up from the south which, although not yet the monsoon, would render the journey to Broome on the laden awash-deck luggers suicidal. so at the general council it was decided to seek shelter in the land-locked bay which Gentleman James knew. Big Sam and I had become adepts in the art and science—and other things—pertaining to pearling. We had had a rough, though not a bad time, crossing the hinterland from Darwin, but now we were living in the lap of luxury among good fellows, and experiencing a new sensation. Floating on the sea, too, especially on the *Electron*, was somewhat different from sitting in the saddle all day looking for mineral outcrops, while our horses attended, more or less, to their own course. We felt we had become sailors. Still, pearling was a lazy life, and we sometimes thought of the camp-fire circle where there were no evil-smelling natives—nor pearl shells.

We sailed through the timber-clad opening of the inlet and, almost immediately, found ourselves in a deep-water channel amidst mountains which rose sheer from the shore. Tropical vegetation grew profusely in all the water-worn gullies which cut up the rocks and led into the heart of the unknown ranges behind, and in one or two fresh water still trickled. We were now safe from any storm, and shore-exploring parties were the order of the day. In this Big Sam and I were in our element, and when my comrade picked up a nugget of gold weighing nearly five ounces, excitement ran high. The serangs

were left to superintend the discharging and opening of shells, if the respective lugger owners desired that to be done, and a smelliferous camp, formed by some beached luggers and tarpaulin covers grew magically.

The shore parties found traces of gold everywhere, evidently emanating from a source beyond in the heart of the interior ranges, which, some of our aborigines said, was the home of fierce tribes of their people, who had never seen white men, and who still held the high corroboree at full moon. Gems of the sapphire variety, including zircons and topazes, were very plentiful in one of the valleys over the coastal range, and some stones which we thought belonged to the diamond family were also found by some Chinese when off duty, but where, they could not, or would not, tell.

One day it was reported that the storm had subsided outside, and the pearlers calculated they could make Broome in time to catch the Holt steamer for Singapore with their shells. In a few hours all parties were called in and the luggers ready for sea again.

"We've made good profits," said Chalmers to Big Sam and me, hesitatingly, as he and the other master pearlers examined about a hundred magnificent pearls saved by their chiefs of staff during the forcible opening of the shells. "Those pearls are worth a fortune, and our shells are worth another. The fact is—excuse my bad way of putting it—the boys have deputized me to ask you to join us as pearlers. Gentleman James has got a couple of spare luggers

down in Broome which we'll jointly buy for you and——"

"I am *giving* them, Chalmers," put in Gentleman James, quietly; and others then spoke.

Sam and I looked at each other. He was handling the nugget. I nodded to him.

"Then it's settled?" cried Handsome Harry, observing my sign.

"Yes, but not what you mean," answered Sam. "We are mighty grateful to you boys for the good time you've given us and for what you're now offering us, and we'd like to stay with you more than—Oh, darn it! My mate can explain better——"

"We are going through those mountains to find out where Sam's nugget came from," I said. "If the natives don't finish us we'll perhaps join you later. . . ."

The fleet sailed for Broome, and a dinghy-load of stores and tools was left on the beach for our use. As we watched the luggers glide out, a man leaped from the deck of one and swam ashore. It was my old chum, Boston Bob. "I'm coming with you," he said, as he reached the shore. And he came.

CHAPTER VII

WITH THE DRY-BLOWERS IN WEST AUSTRALIA

THERE is a tract of land which is actually golden on its surface. It lies north of the thirty-third south parallel and east of the hundred and eighteenth meridian. It is in West Australia, and, from the apex formed where the 33° and 118° cross, stretching north and east further into the great central desert than has yet been ascertained, gold exists everywhere in the surface sands. Any man who desires gold can get it throughout this vast domain by his own efforts, without capital or experience. But the men who spread themselves over this area, which includes the famous gold-fields towns of Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie, Mount Magnet, Cue, Nannine, Peak Hill and many other famous mining centres, are not necessarily gold miners. Those who care to work, seriously, invariably sink shafts in the hope of cutting the hidden reef or formation underneath which shed the surface gold, and they usually reap their reward, and new townships of galvanized iron and tents spring up around the discovery claims. But the careless nomads who seek gold simply because getting gold is so easy, or for other reasons they do not care to make known, do not trouble to "stab" the ground blindly with shafts. The surface provides all their requirements, and they can always move on to any new rich patch without

regret or loss. Those men are drawn from all parts of the world and from all professions. They are known as "dry-blowers." Time makes no difference to them. The outside world exists only when indigestion troubles them, or the news of some great event percolates through to their far flung camps.

The dry-blowers usually work in couples for the sake of companionship, but, as a rule, several couples work near each other so as to share a larger fellowship at night. Occasionally, a man finds a nugget which causes a mild sensation, and daily, nearly every man finds "slugs" weighing anything up to an ounce; but the smaller particles comprised of "pin-heads" of gold, and the dust collected by the dry-blowing operations, are the looked-for results of the day's work.

The working tools of a dry-blower are as simple or as complicated as the individual likes. The idea is to pass as much sand through a current of air as is possible. The wind blows the sand away and the gold contents, however fine, fall straight. This is the whole art of dry-blowing, and the contrivances in use to bring about the separation are often extremely original.

The simplest way is effective but limited in its scope. A man possesses himself of a couple of gold pans or tin wash-basins. He fills one with the surface sand, elevates it as high as his strength permits, and allows the sand to pour gently over the edge of the pan. Most of the fine sand is blown away but the gold and heavier particles of anything else fall into the second pan resting on the ground. The operator now discards, by hand, any stones visible and, reversing the

pans, repeats the process. In time the pan on the ground contains only the heavy dust, and then careful examination soon discloses any pin points of gold. Those are collected and the finer precious powder, now known to be mostly gold, is bagged for final treatment when rain falls. Then the dry-blower washes out his accumulation and considers from the results obtained whether or not he should pass on to another patch.

Every man soon gets ideas of his own as to how better returns might be secured, and hence the many weird inventions in active use on all the fields. The best ideas seem to be comprised in a machine called " The Dry-blower " now manufactured in the Australian cities in touch with the gold fields. All who purchase such a machine alter it according to their own special fancies, but most dry-blowers build their own apparatus.

" The dry-blower," as generally approved of, consists of a series of sieves mounted on an inclined plane on a frame which allows of their being shaken. A bellows attachment worked by every stroke of the " shaker " supplies wind, and a hopper is surmounted into which the sand is shovelled. The whole is usually fitted out as something resembling a wheelbarrow, for ease in transportation, and the owner of such a machine is indifferent to all earthly troubles from which the certainty of getting gold can relieve him. With such a machine, perfectly made, or one crudely constructed with rough timber tied together with string, and rendered portable by means of a wheel cut out roughly from a tree trunk, and with sapling handles, two men

can go where they like, live as they like, and—if gold means happiness—be extremely happy.

After wheeling their "shaker," as the dry-blowing machine is commonly termed, to the selected patch, or where other friends are working, the two partners set to work without any formalities or delay. One man sees that the hopper is kept full of sand and the other, by physical effort, shakes the arrangement of sieves and, incidentally, works the bellows attachment at the same time. The large stones which cannot pass through the top sieve roll down the inclined plane at which it is fixed and, jumping the "riffle" at the lower end, pile up in a heap on the ground. If a big nugget has been among them it will have been caught in the "riffle" because its weight prevents it jumping over. Meanwhile, material which is passing through the coarse top sieve is being subjected to the blowing current of air produced by the action of the bellows, and all the light sand is blown away in this operation. That which falls on the second sieve is now a concentrate of ironstone, quartz-studded gold, slugs or gold dust. The ironstone pebbles "jump the riffle," as before, the slugs or small nuggets, too large to pass the mesh, being caught, the wind from the bellows continually blowing away the rest of the valueless sand. The third level is seldom a sieve at all, and it catches anything heavy that has passed the first two, and in its "riffles" will be found all the gold dust and pin points of gold. After a time, the men cease their operations and examine the various "riffles" of the machine; one or two nuggets may be found in the top catch-bar, slugs weighing up to two or

three pennyweights in the second, and a thin streak of fine gold in the third. The total may be much or little, according to luck and the wealth of the patch of sand being worked. The partners now pull or push their dry-blower a few feet away from the waste material accumulated and begin all over again, leaving the furrow they have made flanked by the debris. When night approaches they are healthily tired and perhaps richer a lot than what they were in the morning. They retire to their tents, wash, if they have sufficient water for such a luxury, cook an elaborate meal which always includes enough for any chance visitor, and then join their fellow dry-blowers round a common camp fire and pass the glorious southern night in telling stories, singing, making new parts for their machines, or in discussing the affairs of the outside world.

It is not etiquette to ask questions when a stranger joins a camp of dry-blowers. He is made welcome and will be given material assistance in any way should he show the slightest signs that he desires, or is in need of such. Consequently, it seemed almost the most natural thing in the world that I should be fraternizing with the members of a camp of dry-blowers recently, near Kalgoorlie. I was looking for an abandoned mine which I had been told about in Queensland by the man who had found it, made a fortune out of it, and had moved on without registering his find. This man afterwards thought he had reason to be obliged to me, and one night in an hotel in Townsville, gave me a rough map showing the mine's location. Years and great events had flashed

by since that night in the tropical city of the north but—to cut out all explanations—I was now looking for that mine, and I was near it. The men round the dry-blowers' camp fire did not ask any questions when I rode up just on sundown, to ask for directions which might guide me to an old friend whom, I had reason to believe, was camped near.

"There isn't anyone who uses the name you mentioned around these parts," one man said, "but you can share my tent to-night, and I believe you'll get as good a feed as you'd get in town. We're celebrating to-night because Lucky Jack struck a new patch." The man's left eye seemed to have a constant tear in it.

We did celebrate. The night was cool and pleasant. The scent of the desert wild flowers was almost intoxicating and the company was congenial. No one, excepting myself, had a watch, and mine had stopped, but about half-past nine, according to the great starry clock overhead, a bearded man whom I had been watching curiously for some time left his seat on an empty kerosene tin and came over to me. "I'm not asking any questions," he said, "but I heard you mention a name to-night. Maybe if you could give a hint as to your business with the fellow who once wore that name, I might be able to put you on to him." The speaker's accent was slightly Scottish and he seemed to be studying my features intently.

I laughed. I had now recognized an old friend of White Cliffs opal fields. "That red beard of yours does make a difference, Mac," I said, "but you ought to have recognized me."

My old friend Mac laughed. "A beard has more individuality than a toothbrush moustache," was his reply. "There are hundreds of fellows, just like you, amongst us, more or less honest dry-blowers, and I don't know one from the other. Most of them haven't got names."

"Why don't you use your name, Mac? You are not hiding from anyone?"

"I'm looking for a lost gold mine, old man, and if the people around here knew my name they would not give me much chance of finding it—alone!" He banged an empty tin as he spoke and, on getting the attention his action called for he announced that I was a fit and worthy person to be a mate of the present members of the camp. All agreed seriously, and thus I became a dry-blower—for the time.

Mac was the owner of a machine he had constructed himself out of the parts of several others which had been discarded, and he and I worked together—when we did work—and daily obtained an amount of gold which was equal in currency to far more than our requirements. We were happy, but I made daily journeys into the surrounding bush in the hope of locating the mine I had come to find. Mac did the same, and so did others, for it seemed that the lost mine story, in various forms, was common to all. There were several old mine-workings, the shafts of which, having collected surface-water during the very infrequent rains, now served as wells to us. Those mines had evidently been worked in the early rush days, but only a casual glance at the decomposed dumps of excavated clay around them was enough to

show to any experienced gold miner that they had been "duffers." An inexperienced man might possibly have thought differently!

We worked near a happy young athlete with a Grecian god-like face known as Lucky Jack. He laboured alone because, as he laughingly said, "a mate might spoil the luck." He was an American, and certainly had a brief past of some kind which I am sure could not have been dishonourable. His luck was phenomenal, and he somehow imparted a feeling of cheeriness to all near him.

"Here, you two men of mystery," this man called out to us one afternoon as we were enveloped in a cloud of fine sand caused by our strenuous labours; "just slide along and have a look at the thing that has got caught in my top riffle. I'll bet it is gold."

In a minute we were by his side, and Mac was handling a heavy piece of spongy metal shaped like a small fish. It was dull yellow in colour and the sponge-like cells on its surface were filled with some soft white material. Mac dug out some of this substance with his knife. He was very thoughtful. "Another miracle has happened, young man," he remarked, balancing the mass in his hand. "This is a nugget of pure gold weighing maybe eight ounces; it is alluvial, yet we are working on the surface of a desert formed by the denudation of quartz reefs and sandstone ridges——"

"Well, moor up your shakers alongside me before the crowd comes," Jack laughed, lighting a cigarette. "This fellow must have brothers and sisters near and, anyhow, nobody but Miserable Peter cares

whether the gold we get is alluvial or not."

We moved our machines nearer to Lucky Jack and he went off to show his find to the other neighbours. By nightfall, all were working on the same patch, and Mac and I had collected two nuggets of four ounces, twenty slugs of about from three to seven pennyweights, and fully a couple of ounces of flour gold. Others had done well, too.

It was an excited crowd of men who assembled that night round Hopeful Harry's fire. Harry had prepared an unlimited amount of coffee in kerosene tins, and each man had brought his own utensils, and any tinned luxury he possessed. One man also had a violin, Mac had a flute. Miserable Peter brought his cornet and the perennial teardrop which gave him his name, and others were armed with weird instruments of musical torture, some invented and made by themselves, which could, somehow, produce much sound. And much sound was produced by that strange assembly round that camp fire. For the time all forgot the disappointments of sped years, the mental miseries perhaps of the fleeting present, and on the promise of gold on the morrow, had visions in which eternal hope found a fresh stimulant.

"I don't know why, boys," broke in Miserable Peter, wiping away his eternal tear during a lull, "but I have a feeling to-night that recalls this spot as it was a quarter of a century ago; I expect Lucky Jack's nugget is the cause." Miserable Peter was, I think, the most optimistic member of the camp!

"Go slow with Old Time, Peter," entreated Big

Thompson. "Twenty-five years is a big chunk to take out of life at one bite——"

"Well, I'll not swear to a year, Thompson, but it was just after Paddy Hannan found what is now Kalgoorlie. Some of us walked out here from Coolgardie and pegged our claims. A fellow named Winton and I worked as mates, and sunk a shaft near here—it might have been that very shaft we use as a water shaft for all I can tell now. But we struck gold on the bottom in a clay formation, that drove us nearly mad——"

"Was your mate known as Old Tom?" I enquired. I thought I could guess the story that was coming. Winton was the name of my old Queensland friend.

"He was afterwards, I believe," mused Miserable Peter. "He wasn't old then, though. Did you ever meet him?"

"Get on with your yarn, Peter; we've all heard of old Tom Winton," someone interrupted.

"There isn't much more to tell," Miserable Peter continued, wiping away another tear. "Down below, that gold fairly took your eyesight away. It wasn't that that spoiled my left eye though—it shone in the walls like the stars of the Milky Way in the sky, and we got any amount of good slugs and some nuggets very like that one Lucky Jack found to-day. Other fellows got down on to gold, too, and their shafts are all round about, but I can't locate those I ought to know. No man troubled about dry-blowing then——"

"But those shafts we see near must have been

barren ? " I said. " There are no auriferous indications in the dumps on top——"

" They weren't barren, my boy, but the darned gold seemed to disappear when we hauled the clay holding it on top. Of course we could always get the big chunks but we could not extract the flour gold by any process we knew. It hung into the clay like jam seeds in jam, and though we could dig out the big seeds underground, on top we couldn't see them. Well, just about then the Klondyke Rush broke out and most of us, gold-mad I suppose, went off to see what the Arctic Circle was like ; we found it mighty cold and we had to thaw out the gold from the frozen gravel, but we got gold all right." The speaker's voice tailed off into a dreamy silence and another tear glistened. Evidently he was visualizing past scenes. The silence was intense.

" Miserable Peter has spoken truly," at length a man known as Smith said. " I was in that rush from here to Klondyke too, but why I left the soft deep-sinkings around here, I don't exactly know ; I suppose it was the move-on feeling. I spent some time in the U.S. after leaving Dawson City, then made a fool of myself in Britain and cleared out for New Guinea. I couldn't help getting gold anywhere, but the pull of this old sand-groping country got me again and—well, I am here. Do you mind shaking, Peter ? I never knew you were one of the old boys like myself."

The two men reached over and shook hands. " I spotted you long ago, Charlie," Miserable Peter said, " but most dry-blowers gain their Nirvana in forgetfulness ; I thought you didn't want to be remembered,

and so you remained only a character in a dream to me."

"I am only an ordinary failure in life," Hopeful Harry chimed in after another space of silence. "I'm here trying to get gold so that I can have a good time in Sydney or Melbourne afterwards. What happened to those wonderful mines?"

"I suppose the new people who came along when the boom broke out after we left worked them out," answered someone I did not know; "but why worry? We're getting the gold on top now. I remember Miserable Peter and Tom Winton sinking that shaft which now gives us water."

"Yes, Bob; you've been a long time in declaring yourself," said Miserable Peter with his usual tear. "I wonder if you can still sing us that old swaggie's song? We'll join in——"

. . . . At midnight we were still singing.

Next day, the dry-blowers, working on the patch around Lucky Jack were extremely fortunate. In fact, every man could show at least a couple of ounces of pure gold for his day's work, and Lucky Jack himself had found another big nugget. Mac and I had absented ourselves when opportunity offered to re-study the water shaft and adjacent abandoned mines about two hundred yards away; but we could find no signs to show that they were anything but old duffered shafts.

That night the camp-fire circle broke up early; all were tired, and a gold parcel was to be sent into town in the morning. Mac and I were sitting in our candle-lit tent discussing matters in which dry-blowing was not concerned, when a man whom,

instinctively, I did not like, rolled up and was invited to enter.

"I came along to lay my cards on the table, face up," he began; "I know you fellows are not what you seem, and neither am I."

"Dryblowers don't advertise themselves much," growled Mac, who was sometimes inclined to be very frank in speech.

"Perhaps not; but I represent big capital interests and I want to locate those old gold mines. I know you are on the same game——"

"We're not," Mac snapped. "We shovel sand through sieves for the love of the thing and get enough gold in return to enable us to pass a peaceful existence far from the—the——"

"Turmoil of civilization," I helped, but Mac refused the suggestion and finished: "the—the police."

The man was a famous mining engineer—I had recognized him—but he was a bit of a fool to believe Mac. "I won't give you away," he said, "I know that some dry-blowers are not here merely to get gold. But that big nugget found yesterday and those found to-day are not of a nature one usually finds on a desert of denuded sandstone."

"You heard miserable Peter's story last night, and you also heard its corroboration," I said. "Old gold-producing mines are around you, but worked out long ago."

"Then what do you imagine Lucky Jack is doing out there now on the workings? He went home early to-night because he was off colour."

We looked through the flap of the tent. Out in the brilliant moonlight we could see a man, easily recognizable, working mysteriously. "He's sowing wild flower seeds, or maybe carrots or tomatoes, if not putting in some work in preparation for to-morrow," I ventured. "I like night-work myself."

"Maybe, but I'm of opinion he's found one of the lost mines and he's salting the dry-blowing patches with gold from it so as to hide the source of his wonderful luck. It is gold nuggets he is sowing out there now. I propose to you fellows that we watch Lucky Jack."

We turned the man down, but we guessed he was correct in his surmises. Next morning, when our neighbours were clustered around the finder of another fair-sized nugget, Mac and I got alongside Jack. He was weighing out gold dust from his lowest riffle. "What's the idea, Jack?" I asked. "We know that all those slugs come from deep levels and we saw you salting the ground last night."

Jack laughed. "I thought you fellows had tumbled to things long ago," he said. "I didn't broadcast what I knew because we don't want any second rush here. Of course, I've found one of the old mines, and I'll now expect you two to help me to dig out some more stuff to-night, to make sure that our mates will find it in the morning in their patches."

"But why don't you dispose of your gold direct?" Mac enquired. "You can always hold your own claim."

"But I'm looking for others, old man; and if I declare, as I must do, where my gold came from,

what hope could I have ? This dry-blowing patch of sand at present gets the blame of yielding most of the gold from the mine I have located, and that's why I'm known as Lucky Jack."

We understood, and we went back to our dry-blowing. Lucky Jack might have been known by any other title elsewhere, but he was playing the game. That night a team load of stores came out from the town and, while all were celebrating, Jack and I slipped away, carrying empty ore sacks, leaving Mac to explain our absence, if necessary, as best his extraordinary imaginative powers could. Jack led me to an old shaft which must have been sunk on the claim adjoining our water shaft but which was hidden from the camp by the dump of the latter. Foot-holes cut in the walls, and an old steel rope still in position, afforded a means of descent, and we were soon down to the level of the soakage water. Just at this point a drive opened off the shaft, and, lighting a candle, Lucky Jack led the way in. We were half immersed in water and I remember that the unusual sensation of water about one's person was very pleasant. Presently, ascending above the water slightly, we reached the " face," or end, of the drive, and it looked as barren a mass of white clay as I'd ever seen. A pick was lying at hand and Jack, indicating it, said : " You break down, straight ahead, and I'll bag the stuff. It's all rotten with gold but you can't see it until it is cleaned and separated in the dry-blower."

We put in two hours very hard work and then, with some trouble, brought our broken down " pug " aloft. How Jack had ever managed alone I do not

know. In repeated journeys we carried the heavy sacks over to the patch we were working, and scattered their contents on the sand. There was not a light in any tent and we worked silently. The sleeping dry-blowers would never know that Lucky Jack was also Fairy Jack.

"That white clay will all have disappeared by morning and only the gold will be left," Jack said as we reached our tents and found Mac awaiting us with a supper of his own marvellous preparation.

His words were true. Next day the dry-blowers found slugs and flour gold in the riffles which totalled so much that some kept on working into the night. The patch may have been rich on its own account, but I fear the night workers were disappointed, as the prepared ground had been exhausted during the day. But it was replenished again by Mac and Lucky Jack, and I had to tell the fairy tales to account for their absence.

The camp prospered ; every man was making money without worry, by the more or less pleasant exercise of rocking his own "shaker." The fine sand in which one is necessarily enveloped in working a dry-blowing machine makes one thirsty, and perhaps other things are unpleasant, but I calculate that the physical energy expended in working a shaker for two hours is equal to that of a round of an eighteen hole golf course. We did not play golf in that part of West Australia, however ; in our camp dry-blowers played for gold for six days in the week and on the seventh washed or "dry-blowed" their clothes, wrote letters, played cards and sang hymns, with an original orchestral

accompaniment!—Mac played the flute well.

One day news reached us that an enormous nugget had been found by a dry-blower in a camp about a mile away, and Jack, Mac and I knew from its description that someone else had re-discovered another of the deep-level workings of old times. The mining engineer man evidently came to the same conclusion for he left our camp and joined up with the others; but I don't think the new nugget-finder was of the same nature as Lucky Jack, for we never heard that the other dryblowers were earning anything like that of our people. In time some men left our camp with their wealth. A few had the "move-on" feeling; one or two probably thought they could now make good with their gold some errors of the past, and doubtless the others had got tired of their experience; or the causes of their being dry-blowers had been removed. New men continually arriving from parts unknown with labels on their suitcases—when they had any—which suggested all sorts of things, kept our number up to full strength, and soon by unanimous consent we named our group of tents: "Lucky Jack's Camp."

We told Miserable Peter and some others of the real source of our gold, and all agreed that the discovery of the old "pug" workings should be kept secret and the world allowed to think that all the gold from our camp was derived from the surface sands. One night, working secretly and strenuously, we broke through into our water shaft just above water level and Miserable Peter instantly recognized a recess in the old shaft he had cut out himself twenty-five

years before. He wiped the tear from his weak left eye as we flashed candles through the breach we had made and said: "Boys, that hole in the wall you're looking at, opposite, is where the biggest nugget ever found in W.A. came from. Tom Winton and I were frightened to show it anywhere, so we cut it up and sold the pieces to the bank in Coolgardie. There's gold everywhere along this level."

There was, but of that mysterious nature which rendered it invisible. Mac washed out a pan of the soft clay formation but it turned into a soapy mass in the pan and apparently was barren of gold. "Throw that stuff among the sand on top and we'll get the gold it holds in the dry-blower to-morrow," Lucky Jack said; and he was correct. The action of the air or the friction of the dry-blowers, or something else which I certainly do not know, brought about some circumstance which liberated the gold from its pug environment, and the riffles caught it.

Time passed, and most of us who were not mere gold-grubbers or "sand-gropers" got tired of the eternal monotony of getting gold, and news of some big silver finds in Canada drew away some of the men I had grown to like. Then suddenly one day the papers brought out from town announced a sensational wolfram find in North Queensland, and Mac, Jack and I got very restless. In North Queensland were flowing streams filled with fish. Mountain ranges hid all kinds of minerals, and green trees abounded. There, a man did not require to live only on tinned food in the sublime faith that he

was eating what the labels announced. And—well, I like North Queensland.

One night a trooper sergeant rode up to our camp and inquired if anyone bearing a certain name were known.

"We don't go in much for names in this camp," Miserable Peter said dropping tears from both eyes and looking at me. "What has the man done?"

I looked at Peter, then at Lucky Jack, who was nearest me. Mac was not present. I said nothing.

"Oh he hasn't done anything, but his old mates are the finders of the new Queensland wolfram show, and they want him badly. At anyrate they're advertising for him and we've been told he's here, somewhere. Some fellows get all the luck——"

"Then your man must be Lucky Jack," said Peter. "He's the luckiest man I know."

But it wasn't Lucky Jack this time. His luck is still talked about round the dry-blowers' camp fires in West Australia, but he and Mac came round to Queensland with *me*, and the auriferous old pug grounds are again awaiting re-discovery.

CHAPTER VIII

WITH THE GOLD SEEKERS IN NEW GUINEA

New Guinea or Papua, as the largest island in the world is variously called, promises to be the Klondyke of the future. New finds of gold are being made daily in its vast mysterious interior, and at present men from all parts of the world are converging on Port Moresby and Samarai and some south-eastern ports, whence they will proceed up the rivers to the scenes of its latest discoveries. Yet gold has been found in New Guinea for the past thirty years, and prospectors dared its fierce cannibalistic tribes and pierced the mighty mountain ranges in its heart before the news of the great wealth of the Alaskan fields startled the world. But prospectors, then as now, did not care to develop mines, and the early pioneers merely washed out the precious metal from the river beds and passed on, ever hoping to find deposits from which they might snatch a fortune in a day. And sometimes they nearly accomplished this feat, for on the famous Yodda Valley fields each man made over fifty ounces per day, and only the unreasoning hostility of the natives and deadly fevers made it impossible for them to continue working until their dreams were realized.

The Queensland Government, which administered the British part of the island, did not by any means

encourage the adventurous gold seeker. There were reasons for this attitude, some not easily understood, but some prompted by the highest motives. Chief of the latter was the desire to govern the country for its own peoples' good, and if possible, to allow the natives to develop it themselves, aided by such civilizing influences as education, trade and missionary enterprise. But this influence did not extend beyond the coast and it was left to the prospector who, despite warnings and very often strenuous opposition, forced his way inland, to teach the savage tribes to respect the white man. In time those inland tribes did learn to respect the white man and showed the fact on every possible occasion by eating him so as to inherit his virtues !

New Guinea is a land of enormous possibilities ; it is so well watered by rivers, is blessed with rich soil and contains, indigenous to the country, most natural tropical growths that are of value. The science of man has almost conquered the fevers which hang round the coastal belt and over the inland marshes, and the natives are becoming more tractable. Mining camps are expanding into townships, roads and telegraph lines are being made and possibly there may soon be railways. Samarai, on an island at the extreme south-east of the mainland, has already eclipsed Port Moresby as the chief port of the Possession and it is fast becoming in nature a second Port Said or Thursday Island. From its busy wharves coasting steamers run regularly to the mouths of the Mambare, Kumusi, Gira and Markham rivers on the east coast, and on the upper reaches and head waters of those rivers are the

great gold deposits now attracting the world's attention. The origin of the gold there baffles all explanation, as yet, but those who go there do not usually trouble themselves about that matter. Newcomers can always earn all their requirements easily around any existing camp, while those more daring and experienced can still find all the sensations they want in the more remote gorges and unknown creeks. The township of Tamata is the largest goldfields town, but the old Yodda Valley camp still rivals it closely in extent of population, and probably the camps on the scenes of the new rushes among the Albert Edward ranges and further north in the old German territory will soon outclass both. The prospector in those regions still trusts to his rifle for protection, quinine for health, and his luck for fortune, and if the first two do not fail him the third will not desert him.

Not very long ago a party of us set out from Tamata to prospect the foothills of the Owen Stanley ranges. Most of us had had experience on all the chief fields of the world, and we thought we could at least look after ourselves, although the news had just reached Tamata of the massacre of Macrae's party by the natives. We totalled seven and employed a dozen carrier "boys" belonging to a timid coastal tribe which had been half civilized by the missionaries. Our first week's journey was through country already known, but when we crossed the Ope River and the pestilential marshes left by its periodical overflows we broke fresh ground. We were now on the divide between the Ope and the Kumusi and were heading to hit the last-named river's headwaters further up among the

foot-hills. Birds of paradise of gorgeous plumage and noisy parrots of all descriptions flitted about everywhere. Wild pigs were abundant and fish were plentiful in all the streams. Native bees and leeches made life very unpleasant during the day, and at night mosquitoes and jigger fleas paid us unwelcome attention. The bee and "jigger" were the worst, however; the former does not sting but in its craving for salt it sucks deep into the perspiring skin and raises painful blisters thereon, and the latter playfully burrows under the toe nails when it gets a chance and deposits eggs which hatch as if by magic. Very drastic measures have to be taken when the jigger flea finds a home. But despite everything, and by making detours to avoid native villages, we forced our way ahead, and one day found ourselves on the bank of a swiftly flowing stream which, doubtless, joined the Kumusi somewhere. We sat that night in the smoke of our camp fire so as to escape the ravages of the night pests, and to discuss matters. We had crossed a native pad during the afternoon and knew that a village could not be far away, but we had also struck "good" gold in the bed of the waterway beside us, and we hoped to prove its value before we passed on.

"I fancy we are in the heart of the Papangi country now," said Big Sam as he kicked a centipede into the fire. "It was reported they were seeing red when we left Tamata."

"I suppose it is useless trying to make friends with them?" the Professor suggested.

Boston Bob laughed. "A Papangi likes a white

man," he said, "but he likes him best roasted."

"It was up about here that Macrae's party was wiped out," Sydney Charlie put in cheerfully.

"That is one reason why I am here," I said. "Mac was my dearest friend."

"Mac was everyone's friend," the Doctor added slowly. "The Papangis have got to give ten of their best to me—for him."

None of us had ever known the Doctor to be of a revengeful nature and his words surprised us. While we were thinking, each deep in his own thoughts, our chief carrier came forward from the "boys'" fire and signified he wished to speak.

"Fire away," someone told him and he began.

"Me John Livingstone Stanley Chalmers, mighty big chief down among Koitapu people in Port Moresby. Me Christian an' got good educate. Me no' eat white fellow nor any fellow——"

"Yes, John Livingstone Stanley Chalmers, we know all that," Sydney Charlie interrupted. "Cut out your family history and tell us what is troubling you."

"Well, me smell Papangi fellow now. Me know him's smell. Me been up here before, chief carrier with other gold-hunting fellows. They all gets heads stuck on poles by Papangi an' only me get away. Big village near here an' your heads will be on poles round the *tapu dubu* (sacred house) before mornin', if you no get away."

"I don't seem to fancy my handsome head gracing the top end of a bamboo pole," Boston Bob commented. "But I know you don't mean to be funny, John L. S. Chalmers, although your words are."

"We had better set about building a stockade," suggested Big Sam. "They could surround us among the trees and spear us without showing themselves."

"No!" Silent Ted ejaculated. "Papangis are water fighters; they'll come in their war canoes. We'll go to them——"

"Nonsense, Ted; we are not looking for trouble," the Professor broke in, much to our regret, for Ted had never been known to speak so much at a time before.

After some discussion, however, we saw that Ted's advice was good. We could leave our camp, with logs inside our mosquito nets and fires burning to show its position. The natives, as was their custom, would spear the camp from the water while we were nearer their village than they dreamt, and with luck we might be able to get hold of one of their *tapu* priests if any stayed behind the raiding party. He would be a hostage whose presence with us would mean a lot, for well we knew the strange tapu law of the natives. (He who touches anything tapu becomes tapu himself and this is often extremely awkward.) Of course we did not doubt that the people of the village were well aware of our proximity. Very soon we decided upon our plan of action and, leaving our fire heaped high with logs, we made towards the village, keeping among the dense vegetation and about a hundred feet away from the river. Our carriers—excepting the chief—were paralyzed with fear and ready to run at the first sign of danger.

We were greatly surprised at the silence, for usually

the sound of native drums, tom-toms and bamboo flute-like contrivances made the presence of a village known a long way off. We knew we were near, however, as pads were often interrupting our course, and we had to be very careful in avoiding sunken stake-traps. Suddenly we emerged from the forest and a glare of lights shone through a high bamboo stockade in front of us. We had arrived at the dreaded village. Our carriers were too frightened to wail, but they refused to follow us further, even their chief thinking it was up to the white men to do the rest themselves.

We peered through the stockade. Something was happening inside, but the silence was inexplicable. The village was much like any other native village but larger than any we had ever seen, its tapu house being a most imposing edifice, mounted on piles about ten feet off the ground, thatched artistically, and surmounted by a row of carved monstrosities fixed on the gable. Other houses were also large and formed a square, from which radiated lines of smaller dwellings surrounded by cultivated patches of yams, tobacco and other growths we did not know. Some tree-houses could be seen in the distance, but the shadows cast by a row of fires in the square prevented us from seeing the distant side of the village. The square was crowded with fierce-looking warriors silently performing some evolutions round a cluster of poles adorned with mummified human heads which occupied its centre. A number of grotesquely masked beings evidently were in charge of the proceedings, and they seemed to be very efficient in

giving silent directions. Their masks covered half of their bodies and were all of different designs, mostly tapering up to a point and giving them the appearance of pantomime giants. Fibre kilts were the lower garments of leaders and men, but long streamers fastened in their bushy hair, and necklets of teeth, were the only head adornments of the latter, but *they* were all armed with barbed spears, spiked clubs and dart blowpipes. They certainly looked capable of making short work of any prospector.

"I'll sell you my mosquito net cheap," said Boston Bob to me as we watched, but before I could reply Silent Ted touched me on the shoulder and whispered: "Watch that fellow—fourth in the centre row!"

"That is the chief tapu priest," I answered, but I obeyed Ted's injunction.

The warriors were now marching into the darkness on the other side of the village and most of the priests went with them. Soon all had gone and only women —recognized as such because of the flowers in their well-dressed hair—and the four central wizards were left. All were silent and presently the women departed.

"Now's our chance!" Big Sam (who was always impetuously inclined) called out, climbing the stockade, but the Professor and the Doctor both signed to delay operations and he slid down again.

"Surely my imagination is tricking me?" muttered the Doctor. "Do any of you fellows notice anything familiar?"

I started violently. The giant figure I had been watching was nervously scratching the back of his

right leg: "That is Mac!" I almost shouted, "I'd know him anywhere by that trick of his——"

The Doctor's face was bathed in perspiration. "It is!" he cried. "And look! There is proof!"

The masked man standing third had seemingly got into an argument with his neighbour and, as we were looking, the fourth man's fists shot out left and right and the third went down like a log, his mask smashed to fragments by the terrific blows.

"Come on, boys!" yelled the Professor, and we were over the stockade in less than a minute. If the three remaining priests saw us they made no sign, and the object of our interest strode after the warriors. As we approached, the first man suddenly turned on the second, tripped him up and sat upon him. Then he faced us. "Glad to see you boys," he drawled. "Excuse me not rising."

"Tommy Carstairs," we cried simultaneously. "We thought you had passed out?"

"Well, I haven't. I'm second tapu priest here and old Mac is first. Got a smoke about you? I don't care much for the home-grown tobacco."

We all crowded round our old friend with exclamations of joy, and Silent Ted pulled the enormous covering from his body.

"Carry those beggars into the priests' house and tie them to the sacrificing posts while I do my best to spread knowledge around," laughed Carstairs. "But say, Boston, you've lost that bet with old Murphy about the size of the biggest crocodile. He wasn't lying, for there are some sacred ones in a pool here more than twenty feet." . . . .

Tommy Carstairs informed us that Mac and he were survivors of Macrae's party and that they had been kept for a special feast. In the interval another tribe from down the river had attacked the village and Mac had saved the Chief from being carried off. The Chief had no love for the white men but, realizing the value of their presence, had made Mac and Carstairs priests, out of gratitude. They had since been able to work magic in curing a lot of the leading warriors by the use of pills made of soap which they had recovered from their packs, and now were somewhat popular. The natives had gone out that night to settle some old feud with a village upstream, and the silence which had surprised us was part of their usual ceremonies before undertaking such a venture. "We are free to clear out when we like—maybe!—but two white men could never get down to the Yodda alive," Carstairs added; "and anyhow, we've struck a patch of gold not far away, worth a lot of fortunes, and you fellows will come in very handy to help to work it."

"But where has Mac gone now?" I asked. "And what about those two fellows tied over there?"

"Oh, Mac has gone after the warriors to throw curses—with his rifle—at any deserters, and those two priests were jealous of our power and were getting nasty. They'll run for their lives down to the next village when we kick them out. We've made them break something about their tapu law by touching them, and they'll be the centrepieces of a big grill if ever they are caught."

After a lengthy discussion it was decided that we

should return to our camp and wait there until Mac and Carstairs came for us, in state, and took us to the village as their friends; then fresh plans could be arranged. We set the two priests free and they at once ran to the river, and tumbling into a canoe, pushed off down stream. We followed in a larger craft and our carriers ran alongside through the forest. The blazing camp fire soon shone through the trees and we beached our cleverly designed "dug-out" and found that we had been raided after all. Our nets were transfixed with dozens of spears, all thrown from the land side, and John L. S. Chalmers proclaimed them to be the weapons of some other tribe lower down.

"Evidently it is a bit exciting round about here at times," the Professor commented, and we all agreed, and set about preparing breakfast.

With the coming of the sun the spirits of our carriers revived and, to make amends for their conduct during the night, they helped to work the gold sand patch we had struck. Their methods were new to us at first; they stretched themselves on the sand and, thanks to marvellous eyesight, "specked" the minute points of gold and picked them up with their tongues. At the end of an hour they had collected more than we had with our pans, and the Professor checked the amount to their credit so as to give them a good reason to stay with us. But their system had disadvantages. Lying prostrate on the sand they could not "get a move on" very quickly, and when an enormous saurian suddenly rushed out of the water and seized one, those disadvantages became

apparent. Silent Ted and Sydney Charlie had seen the creature, however, and a moment before its great jaws had actually exerted full pressure through the native's fibre kilt they had each sent a bullet through its eyes into its brain. Paralyzed, but not yet dead, the monster relaxed its hold and Boston Bob and I pulled the man free. Another fusillade of bullets finished the creature, and the Doctor attended to the carrier, who was more frightened than hurt. This incident put an end to the gold-extracting work of the carriers and, while we were still talking over the matter, a fleet of war canoes swept down the river towards us, the occupants shouting " Begga-be-begga " (friends ; we are friends). Mac and Carstairs were in the first canoe, unadorned, and with them was a powerfully-built warrior with a ring in his nose and saucer-like appendages to his ears, whose necklet of teeth and hair streamers proclaimed him as the great War Chief. Our carriers disappeared at once.

" Hullo, you bold bad gold-hunters ! " cried Mac, as the first boat grounded. " Let me introduce you to my friend Pickhimsbones, the mighty War Chief. He doesn't know a word of English, so listen carefully to what I am saying, for I am sure he has already settled on which of you he'll have for dinner to-night. Don't trust him, but make a big show of being impressed by the ugly old sinner." Mac rubbed the back of his right thigh as he spoke, and we nearly spoiled the impressiveness of the introduction by laughing. We greeted Mac with a dignity that hid our real feelings and responded to the Chief's grunt of salutation in a manner suggestive of a meeting of

potentates. Pickhimsbones then rattled out a long jargon of words and made signs that he welcomed us as friends of his white priests. His warriors cheered lustily when he had finished, and Mac explained that he had been boasting of the fight during the night and of the number of slaves he would have in the spirit world—those slain in personal combat become the slaves of the victor in the after world—and that we had been invited to make his village our home while we were in the country.

We made suitable response and, at the same time, contrived to tell Mac that our camp had been attacked, that we had plenty of ammunition, and had found gold.

"You never can work here," Mac said when we had told everything and Carstairs was telling the Chief some tale supposed to be an interpretation of what we were saying, and some of the warriors were investigating our packs with doubtful intent. "You are between two of the most bloodthirsty tribes in New Guinea and I think the Chief is about to act treacherously now. Watch the warriors nearest you carefully, and be ready to shoot if need be; I am going to spring a risky trick." Mac turned to the Chief and apparently saw the dead crocodile for the first time. A look of horror came into his eyes and he ran over to the motionless monster and bent over it. The Chief eyed him strangely and followed. It seemed to me that he was thinking Mac was becoming too popular, and that the seven extra white men would be better with their heads on poles. But he got a shock. By some accident, apparently,

Silent Ted rightly interpreting Mac's signal, got in his way and tripped him. He fell on the dead body.

"Tapu! Tapu!" screamed Mac, pointing to a symbol burned into the crocodile's scales.

The words acted like magic and, after a moment's awed silence the warriors took them up. "Tapu! Tapu!" they yelled and rushed to the war canoes. The Chief picked himself up and hesitated, as if he would like to risk the awful fate in store for those who had been in contact, unlawfully, with anything tapu; but his men were leaving him, so with a sudden bound, he joined one of the boats. Mac still continued to shriek out the word and the Chief deliberately hurled a spear at him from the water. It missed, and while he was aiming a second, Sydney Charlie shattered his wrist with a bullet from his Winchester. With frenzied shouts the warriors paddled up stream, and Mac, rubbing his right leg, remarked: "That was a piece of luck, boys. This crocodile really *is* tapu. It must have got tired of the sacred pools in the village, or of the old men on which it was fed. It probably is the tomb of a lot of Papangis' ancestors."

Boston Bob measured the creature in paces and observed: "I think old Murphy has won that bottle of fruit salts, after all."

"I think that, for a quiet peaceful life, prospecting in New Guinea is ideal," I ventured. "But the law of tapu is a big factor in it."

"And the butterflies and the orchids are very beautiful——" began the Professor.

"We have no time to waste, boys," interrupted Mac,

as Big Sam came back with our carriers. "Lead on, Tommy. Cross the river and hit the pass leading through the divide."

Mac's tireless energy and enthusiasm was infectious, and hastily collecting our stores and gold we negotiated the river and cut through the dense undergrowth of the forest until we struck a well defined pad leading into the ranges. At nightfall we were among towering mountains, clad to their summits with dense flowering vegetation, but our compasses were useless, and we had to climb trees to view the stars before we could determine which way we were heading.

"I believe this pad leads through to a west coast river," said Mac. "That peak on our right is Mount Albert Edward, and the Papangis are afraid of the spirits that dwell beyond it."

"But we came here for gold," Big Sam said. "We're not afraid of spirits."

"You have been passing through the biggest gold formation that I know of in the world, this afternoon," Mac replied, "but we cannot work quartz reefs without plant, so we'll just have to be content with panning out sordid wealth in the gully just ahead of us."

We pushed on in the moonlight and presently, under Carstair's leadership, swung off to our right through a close-grown mass of scrubby entanglements, and found ourselves in a ravine completely shut off by the vegetation which grew across the entrance.

"Now, you sinners," spoke Mac, fondling his nether limb, "we have arrived. Eat well and sleep well to-night, for to-morrow the gold fever will be on.

You'll find gold everywhere where the sand is piled up against the hard quartz barriers which cross the bottom of this watercourse."

We were too tired to ask questions, and anyhow, no one had any worry when Mac was in charge; so, after dining on wild pig, cooked in the ashes of our camp fire, we stretched ourselves out for sleep in the smoke, each man taking an hour's turn on guard. Next morning we proved Mac to be correct. *Gold was everywhere*, and we "panned out" about three hundred ounces before night.

"How did the Papangis manage to catch you here?" the Professor asked our two new members, as we again sat smoking round our fire.

"They didn't get us here," Carstairs answered. "We were going down to the river, homeward-bound with our gold, when we ran into them. They've got our gold now."

"But they'll track us here this time," said Mac. "So always say your prayers at night."

"How did you find this place?" I asked. "You couldn't tell such a place was here from the pad outside?"

"We did not know the pad was there until the day before we left," Carstairs replied, while Mac, unconsciously, felt that his right leg was still where it should be. "We came in here over the top of the divide, from the Mambare watershed on the other side. We did not think we were going back by the Kumusi route when we left for home."

"I think we'll go back by the Mambare," I said. "I prefer sailing down a river among the gentle

crocodiles to cutting through the forest to avoid the Papangi and other villages."

"There is plenty of gold on the other side, too, among the Mount Scratchley foothills," Mac spoke thoughtfully.

"You are a regular glutton on gold, Mac," laughed the Doctor as he turned in for the night. "One would think you enjoyed being a Papangi tapu priest."

"I did, Doctor," Mac replied seriously. "I meant to kill old Pickhimsbones some day and start growing rubber in his kingdom; labour would be cheap, and the fat priests would last as food for a long time; and just think how well a name like 'the Papangi Rubber Company, Limited' would look on business paper——" Mac may have rambled on but all had fallen asleep.

Next day we repeated our first day's performance, and that night the Professor gave us a learned discourse on orchids and butterflies; but it was the Doctor who put us to sleep with his story of the life of the beri-beri microbe. The third day our enthusiasm eased off somewhat, for getting gold was now monotonous work, fit only for our carriers if they had not been so lazy. We constructed some crude labour-saving devices and, trusting to them to keep up the returns with lessened labour, went out hunting, and incidentally gained much knowledge of our surroundings. We were continually striking fresh deposits of auriferous sands and stumbling across rich quartz reefs on those short trips, but we knew it was useless attempting to develop any of our finds with the knowledge that sooner or later the natives would track us down.

By the end of a week we had secured nearly two thousand ounces of gold, and were thinking about going back to tell of our fortune and get reinforcements. We had piled up a mass of dry scrub around our camp and had laid several charges of gelignite in "pop" holes underneath, that would be fired, with more noise than anything else, when we set fire to the barricade. The Papangis were on our nerves and two men now kept guard during the night.

One day some of us climbed up the slopes of the mountain which formed one side of our gully and, on reaching the summit, beyond the zone of dense vegetation, got a magnificent view of the entire country, which stretched away beneath until lost in the hills. We could easily trace the course of all the rivers and waterways feeding them by the film of mist which hung over their channels in long serpentine lines, and we could even see the Papangi village quite distinctly, about ten miles down on our right. The Professor sketched in the lines of the rivers and prominent features, and on our descending journey collected some orchids which he said were unknown to the world. When we reached camp, Silent Ted and the Doctor had our evening meal ready and our "boys" had added more inflammable scrub to our surrounding wall. Silent Ted was a wonderful cook and his culminating efforts were in that never-to-be-forgotten dinner.

"I have half an idea that a restaurant in New York, where all meals were cooked in hot wood ashes, would be as good as a gold mine," Boston Bob remarked, as

he helped himself to another portion of wild pig.

"If you would throw in a camp fire, a New Guinea atmosphere, and hungry prospectors as guests, I shouldn't mind being your partner," said the Doctor. "But I fear——"

What the Doctor feared was never known, for as he uttered the last word a burst of yells startled us almost out of our senses, and a flight of poisoned spears stuck in our protecting barrier. The crashing of the undergrowth and the sound of bodies falling over the wild-vine-creeper rope guards we had fixed amidst the outlying trees, told us we were attacked in force, and the shrieks of our own "boys" added to the awful din.

"I guess, Doctor, I'm not having any of your New Guinea atmosphere for my New York restaurant," said Boston Bob, flinging a lighted brand on our brushwood guard. "But I'll have this bit of pig now, sure."

"Load up and run!" Big Sam cried to the carriers. "Lead them, Charlie; we'll follow."

Sam's words were the last heard in that camp; all other sounds were drowned in the roll of the flaming scrub, which crackled like thousands of whips, and next instant the gelignite charges went off like a battery of guns in action. A dense pall of smoke fell low and enveloped everything, and, seizing what we could of our late meal from the ashes, we picked up our rifles and departed towards the Mambare headwaters. What the savages thought we never knew. Probably they made night hideous with their frenzied shouts, but we did not hear them, and I fancy they

concluded that all the demons of the spirit world had been let loose on them. Looking back from the top of the divide, we could see that the forest had caught fire and were thankful that the slight breeze favoured us.

"The Paps are having a hot time," Sydney Charlie remarked as we turned away, "but we've left a lot of stuff behind."

"We'll not need it," growled Mac. "We've got our gold and our rifles—and our lives."

We stumbled on in the moonlight in the direction of the nearest waterway we had seen that day, and under the Professor's leadership soon reached it. Following it down, we joined a larger stream and found an easier passage along its crocodile-infested shallows. Before sunrise we struck a large river and our carriers smelled a village on the opposite side, although it was still too dark to see it.

"Our troubles are nearly over, now," said Mac, cheerily; "I know this village, and its people are quite decent. One of you come with me, and the rest of you kindle all the fires you can, to attract the crocodiles." Mac waded out into deep water as he spoke, and I followed, and presently we were swimming diagonally across towards a large structure, dimly discernible on piles in the water. Lashed alongside were several canoes of various sizes, with paddles inside, and, cutting out two large ones, we drifted down and back across the water in them. A few minutes later we had distributed ourselves, carriers, and gold, between the boats, and were heading down with the current. . . .

Four days later, near sundown, we were astonished to hear a voice hail us in English from the bank. "This way, boys," the owner of the voice called. "This way to the new Eldorado—Howling dingoes! It's Mac!"

"How far are we from Tamata, Murphy?" Boston Bob cried. "You've won your bottle of fruit salts, but what are you doing there?"

"Tamata is at present nearly deserted," Murphy answered. "This is the latest new find, discovered since you left; there are forty men here already, and more coming. We've got a second Yodda Valley and—but where on earth have you come from?"

We were now alongside. "From the land of gold, old man," Mac replied, gripping Murphy's hand. "From over the mountains of the moon, and from the land beyond the shadows; but we're hungry. . . ."

Safe among forty brother-prospectors, in the latest gold mining camp in New Guinea, we slept soundly that night and sent our gold on to Tamata by petrol launch, next day. With it went Boston Bob and the Doctor, the former down with fever and the latter to attend to him. We remained in the new camp meaning to return to Papangi land when they came back. But many things happened before we saw them again, and when we did meet it was in Queensland.

We returned the canoes with presents and apologies.

CHAPTER IX

WHERE GOLD AWAITS

From out the dark mists of time has come down to mankind the belief that the possession of gold renders one immune from all the worries and troubles which beset earthly existence. That belief is perhaps stronger to-day than ever, for it is evident that even a nation's credit depends upon its actual holding of gold—a metallic element of no particular value when compared with iron, copper, molybdenum, or many other substances—and, as mortals still value all they own of the earth's products in their gold equivalent, that metal is likely to remain king until transmuted in the final furnace.

Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand yet have their allurements for the gold-seeker; but it is now to New Guinea that the real prospector directs his attention, and in that great tropical island of unknown mountains and forests, of hostile natives and deadly fevers, he can still pan out from the sands of the rivers and creeks all his requirements. And the hope of sudden fortune is ever present.

There were forty of us working a patch on one of the fields on the Mambare River, and all were on "good" gold, as the term is when it is more than payable. The field grew into a sort of township, a Warden was appointed, and an attempt made to collect taxes for

the Commonwealth Government. The last reminded us too much of the alleged advantages of civilization, and the miners " rolled up " to protest against being civilized against their will. As a result, six of us left to see what was on the other side of a mountain range we could see from the tree-tops when we climbed aloft. Those six, including the writer, were known as Big Sam, the Professor, the Inventor Fellow, Silent Ted, Mac, and Sydney Charlie ; but the writer is not Mac, as, possibly, might be inferred. We were the remnant of a larger party that had already prospected in the far interior ; were well equipped, and were accompanied by eight " boys," picked from the best of the half-civilized natives who come up from the coast to sell their services wherever the white men gather. They bore names which they were proud of—their leader, for some reason or other, being known as the Archbishop.

A few hours after we set out the Warden issued orders that no white men were to go into the ranges, as the natives were hostile and conflict with them in their own domain must be avoided. He was acting under instructions from the Commonwealth Government of Australia, which certainly protects the interests of the natives, although it seldom gives any attention to the protests of the prospectors who suffer from their depredations. But, happening to know about the order in time, we were beyond recall when it was issued, and promptly forgot all that we wanted to concerning it.

Our first day's journey was through country fairly well known, but towards evening we had begun to cut

our way through the dense entanglements of wild vine creepers and other undergrowths. We could have followed a native pad, but as it would only lead us to the nearest native village, and it was gold, not trade, we were after, we prepared to break new ground. That night we camped on the bank of a fair-sized river, and endeavoured to evade the attentions of mosquitoes and other pests by sitting in the pungent smoke of our fire. The night was oppressively hot, and the impenetrable scrub around shut out the air. The Inventor Fellow, at length, went out to mid stream to some rocks and discovered that a current of air was blowing down the waterway. He had just announced this fact to his comrades when two large crocodiles, snapping at him from opposite sides of his foothold, caused him to rejoin those sweltering in the smoke, hurriedly. After that incident all sought the protection of their mosquito nets and did their best to sleep, some ashes carefully scattered around each net being the only guard against inquisitive snakes.

An hour before dawn the chattering of the birds awoke all who had slumbered unconscious of the attention of the diminutive jigger flea, and while breakfast was being prepared by the Professor and Silent Ted, Big Sam and Mac examined the sands of the river. A shout from them brought the Inventor Fellow and Sydney Charlie to their aid, and in half an hour about six ounces of gold were panned out from a few yards of sand. After breakfast, tests made up and down for about a hundred yards proved that the alluvial gravel was highly auriferous, but this fact only filled us with an intense desire to find out where

the gold originated, and we proceeded upstream.

A week later we were still following the twisting stream, but we were now in the heart of the ranges which formed the foothills of the Owen Stanleys, and the culminating summit of Mount Scratchley could be seen frequently from clearings and from the tree-tops. We could not get away from gold; it showed us a yellow "tail" in every pan we washed, and, occasionally, small specks about the size of a pin-head formed the major part, sure indication that we were nearing the mother lode.

One evening, after having camped early, Big Sam, who had gone out with the intention of replenishing our larder, returned with only one wild pig.

"It wasn't worth wasting a bullet on that," commented Sydney Charlie. "What's gone wrong with you?"

"I didn't shoot at all, Charlie; I got that fellow in a trap meant for us," Sam answered, lighting his pipe with a burning log. "I came back, quickly, to tell that we're just a few hundred yards off a stockaded village, and the people know we're coming and have set all the usual traps for us. There's a pad back there through the scrub which runs parallel with the river, and warriors have been following us all day on it."

"Anything for a quiet life," grunted Mac, examining his rifle; "it's a verra good thing we don't know anything about the Warden's orders to avoid conflict!"

"Discretion is really often the better part of valour," observed the Professor, "but we cannot leave this gold; we must get past the village, some way." He,

too, tried the mechanism of his Winchester, and then began to unscrew the joints of his butterfly net handle.

Silent Ted, as usual, said nothing, but he saw that his revolvers were in working order. All had been in trouble with the natives before, but we had imagined that by conforming to their laws, which we knew fairly well, we would not be molested.

"I see the Archbishop has just discovered that danger is near," the Inventor Fellow remarked; "I expect he thinks we'll all be eaten to-night. The tribes up here are really gluttons when they catch coast boys. They stuff them with yams and roast them slowly, alive, but they always kill a white man before eating him."

"Please stop!" cried the Professor; "you'll put me off my supper to-night. But I'll rather suffer from indigestion myself than be the means of causing the poor ignorant cannibals to experience unpleasant dreams. What is it, Archbishop?"

"Him tinks white fellows should make back tracks mighty quick and lively," the chief carrier said. "Him's boys no like make tucker for hungry warriors. Old Broken Nose their chief."

Much more was said, and it was clear that our carriers would desert us unless we acted promptly—fierce warrior tribes of the interior being the greatest terror known to the weaker civilization-spoiled coast boys. We knew, however, that we would not be rushed until the natives had worked themselves up into a frenzy, and that, we calculated, would allow us time for supper in peace. An hour later we had rigged up our

mosquito nets, piled on enough dry timber on our fire to last till morning, and crossed the river. The negotiation of the swiftly-flowing water was not effected easily, and we nearly lost two carriers who were swept off their feet ; but eventually we were all lying amidst some scrub, smoking, and awaiting things happening on the other side. The boys, meanwhile, repeated all the prayers they had been taught at their mission station, with strange embellishments not very appropriate had they understood what they were saying. In time four of us fell asleep, and Mac and Silent Ted kept watch. Some time about midnight Ted touched each sleeper and pointed across the water. Our fire was blazing and some surrounding undergrowths had also caught fire, and in the flickering shadows behind were a score or more war-bedecked savages, armed with clubs and spears. They were evidently surprised at finding the camp asleep without any guard, and they moved from tree to tree hesitatingly, as if suspecting some white men's magic to overwhelm them suddenly. But the white men, on the safe side of the river, were not the type to pull a trigger unless in absolute self-defence, and finally, growing bolder, some of the warriors advanced towards the fire and hurled spears into each net. Then, shrieking like demons, they fled, and the awakened birds made night hideous with their startled cries.

" Poor ignorant creatures ! " remarked the Professor. " They think they have killed us, and doubtless anticipate a celebration feast in the village to-morrow."

" Yes," laughed Big Sam ; " they fancy we'll go well

with yams and sweet potatoes, but I reckon they'll not need to send for us."

Nor did they; in the morning we packed up our belongings and followed the pad into the village, our boys following us simply because they were afraid of being left behind. When we climbed the bamboo stockade we were ready for trouble, but meant to show that we were friendly disposed and merely wished to pass through unmolested. We didn't get the chance of making friends, however; the village was deserted, and there were signs that its population had left in a hurry. The tapu house—the edifice regarded as sacred—was a very imposing-looking structure, with a carved and burnt-out wooden monstrosity surmounting its thatched roof which resembled no god we knew in the native calendar. There were about fifty other houses, some built on piles, and all with woven fibre walls. We feared a trap, but passed through, and over the stockade on the other side, safely, touching nothing, although greatly tempted to annex some hens, and help ourselves to vegetable produce from the gardens. We carried the white man's burden of responsibility for our actions, as most gold-seekers do.

When we joined the river again we found the gold in the sands even richer than before, but we did not care to wash out gold within spear-throw of the mysterious city, and passed on.

Progress was slow, and we expected to be rushed any moment; but night found us camped in a position we could easily defend, and, after settling our hours of keeping guard, we dined on tinned meat and the

water of the stream, dispensing with a cooking fire.

The Inventor Fellow and Mac explored around for a bit in the bright moonlight instead of sleeping, and suddenly came on a bark canoe drawn up on the bank. Then they had an idea, simultaneously. Pushing the canoe into the water, they drifted down stream to camp and told Ted, who was on guard, their plans, knowing he wouldn't tell unless necessary. Then they resumed their journey and floated down to the village. It was now alive with warriors and illuminated with torches, and some musicians were producing strange sounds from long tubular, wooden, snakeskin-covered drums. The two adventurers grounded their canoe and went ashore to pay their respects; their weapons were in thorough order. Mac shouted out a salutation, and the effect was miraculous. With yells of terror the mighty warriors, the musicians, and all others who could run, fled, and only the fat grotesquely-garbed tapu men (priests), who evidently had been dining very well and couldn't easily run, were left. They were frantic, but it was clearly not the fear of two men with rifles that was the cause. They stood huddled together, and shrieked out strange words and made signs which could not be mistaken as meaning "Go away!"—"Don't come near!"—"Take everything!"

Mac thought he would like some explanation, and he got it. High above the other words sounded the scream "Flu!"

The mystery was solved. The natives had heard of the dreaded influenza which was killing off the people on the coast, and they thought the white men carried

it as they did their magic. The chief now returned, apparently somewhat ashamed at leaving the tapu men to face the unknown danger, and the Inventor Fellow recognized him as a notorious character who had been caught while raiding the big gold-mining camp with his warriors. He had promised to be friendly in future, and was given presents and allowed to depart. He knew some English, having been partly civilized by the missionaries before he reverted to his evil ways and became a chief by killing those who stood in his way.

"Hullo, Broken Nose!" the Inventor Fellow called out. "We are friends—no' got flu—want tucker (food)—we pay for it."

Broken Nose believed that the gold-seeker does not lie—the natives discriminate between the gold-seeker and others!—and, shouting out reassuring words to his people, he rushed forward and gripped the fists of the intruders.

"Hims mighty glad to see you," he said. "What you give hims?"

"We'll give hims tobacco, matches, and a bottle of Eno's fruit salts," Mac answered; and all was well. Incidentally, the Inventor Fellow also gave the chief an old pipe which had been burnt out.

When morning broke two canoes, laden with native produce, were grounded about fifty yards below our camp, and the Inventor Fellow and Mac were carrying out their duties as guards. Their absence had not been detected, but the Professor and Big Sam were very angry when told about it, the latter because he had not been one of the visiting party. Silent Ted

never said a word. Our stores were replenished, and Broken Nose had imparted the information that "mighty big lot o' gold up river in ghost-mountain, but bad warriors there kill an' eat everybody."

We didn't fear ghosts, and we thought we could evade being the chief items of a banquet; and a few days later, after passing through forests of teak, seeing orchids the Professor couldn't name, and birds of paradise and parrots which seemingly did not fear us, we emerged from the dense vegetation and found ourselves flanked by high walls of fern-covered rock, and high up among the ranges. A trial of the sands at the gully entrance showed that Broken Nose had spoken truth, and we plunged into the cool dark ravine and forged ahead. The stream had now become much smaller, but deep, almost stagnant, pools occurred frequently which filled the entire passage, and which were alive with saurians of enormous size. Reptiles of other kinds, too, were very abundant, and some were too lazy to get out of our way; but bird life had almost ceased. The walls contracted still further, and in two days the channel between had narrowed down to only about a hundred feet, and the water had come to an end in a circular pool at the base of a sheer rock which closed in the gully. To proceed was impossible, and the only way out was by the route we had entered. But we did not desire to explore any more. We had located the reef which had shed the gold we had been following, and it promised well. It was a belt of iron-stained quartz about ten feet in width, which extended vertically up the rocky wall which closed us in as far as we could see. Doubtless

a waterfall denuded the quartz of its soft auriferous contents during the rainy season, and the stream we had followed, as its high level water-mark indicated, would then be a raging torrent which would carry the gold far in its downward course towards the Mambare or Kumussi rivers. We did not know which, and didn't particularly care.

We found a cave opening off a ledge in the rocks about twenty feet above the pool, and this we made our camp, after blasting a track to it which we could easily defend. Then we settled down to work systematically. We built a sluice box with bark, and the Inventor Fellow made riffles out of pieces of split bamboo, which he laid transversely across the long, inclined bark channel until it resembled a gigantic washing-board. Silent Ted and an intelligent boy attended to the cooking, and the Professor provided the wherewithal to cook, easily, with his rifle, although Big Sam and Sydney Charlie could always bring in a sufficiency of wild pigs and animals we did not know by the use of stones. They could not often be spared from the chief work in hand, however, and, with the Inventor Fellow, Mac, and the carrier boys, who had now become enthusiastic, shovelled the rich golden sands through the crude contrivance, and occasionally blasted out a few tons of the quartz lode, which was dollied by hand, direct. Our store of gold increased steadily, and we had dreams of bringing in a crushing plant and a petrol engine from Samarai, the chief town on the coast. We also had the wish to let some of our old friends down in our old camp know of our luck, but, although we calculated that the distance

was only about forty miles and might be accomplished by the use of a canoe in three days, we didn't care to run the risk of not being allowed to return ; and, of course, we didn't trust Broken Nose sufficiently to send messengers through his village. A new source of interest had arisen, too, which gave us much thought. The riffles were collecting some very heavy mineral substance in addition to the gold, and we could not determine what it was. It gave off a pungent odour when heated, streaked black, and was greasy to the touch. It was harder than the steel of our knives and much heavier than gold.

One night, as the Professor was testing this stuff on the ledge outside our cave, Sydney Charlie suddenly said " I located a couple of gully ghosts last night. They were natives ; they were coming down the rocks with lighted torches. I didn't fire at them, 'cos I didn't want to waken you fellows."

" Verra considerate of you, Charlie," Mac replied ; " I saw them, too ; in fact, I've been watching ghosts for some nights past. I expect we'll have some hundreds round us some night with spiked clubs and poisoned spears. Like Charlie, I didn't want to worry the Professor.

" You ought to have told," the Professor remonstrated, looking up from his work ; " but it so happens that to-day I found the way they came. That pool below is a sort of ceremonial place of some tribe near, and their priests come down nightly over the top by a fibre ladder which hangs in that fissure over there.

" There are a lot of soloists in this camp," the

Inventor Fellow said. "I saw that ladder a week ago, but didn't want to frighten you."

Big Sam yawned and signed to Silent Ted, who, without a word, drew in a string tied to a boulder. The bottom end of the ladder was at its other end!

All laughed.

"This stuff is osmiridium," announced the Professor abruptly. "It is worth somewhere about a hundred pounds per ounce. Mac, I *order* you, as the leader of this outfit, not to leave this camp to-night. The others have sense." Mac grumbled a bit, but soon all were asleep. The boys had been asleep hours before.

Some time later the Inventor Fellow and Big Sam rolled to the edge of the ledge and disappeared in the darkness. Silent Ted sat up and saw them go, but he said nothing, then.

"It's rough on old Mac," Sam remarked, as he led the way up the swinging ladder. His companion agreed, but couldn't afford to speak. When they reached the top they saw a big village a few hundred yards in front of them. A big river flowed past, forming one side of the clearing, while a mountain wall acted as another, the two remaining sides being stockaded. It was very dark, but fires were burning in front of the tapu house, which was built on piles in the river; and, entering the village where the stockade stretched over the water, they climbed to the floor of the sacred edifice. A light was flickering inside, and trussed up on the floor amidst some carved wooden idols—doubtless treasured loot from other villages—lay Broken Nose. Four fantastically-garbed

peg-nosed priests were asleep near, evidently his guards.

Some rough play ensued during the next five minutes, but the startled priests could utter no cry, as their tongues had been treated so as to ensure that they would be silent priests for all time—the Tugeris are fighters, and they don't think much of their spiritual advisers !

Possibly, too, some damage was done to the rare antique furniture of the apartment, for Big Sam was at times extremely careless ; but in the end Broken Nose was rescued and, half an hour later still, was telling his story to the angry Professor and the others, occasionally helped by the Archbishop as interpreter.

It appeared that his village had been raided by the ghost people, and those who had not escaped were treated in the usual drastic way common among Papuan victors. Broken Nose was carried off to provide a meal for the victorious chief, later.

" Ghost fellows wipe you fellows out night after to-morrow," he added. " They close up gully, an' go down kill you over top. Hims lost pipe you gave hims." The last words were addressed to the Inventor Fellow, who, however, had no other pipe to give away.

" Well, the gold-seekers' code of honour says we must not shoot down our fellow-men, even if they are cannibalistic savages," summed up the Professor. " So the order is, pack up and clear out ! "

There was some demur. Sydney Charlie argued that we need only shoot in self-defence, and the Inventor Fellow thought he could devise a way of

killing the savages without shooting them ; but the Professor would not listen to any reason, and soon after daylight we were moving down the gully, having smashed up the gold-washing contrivance. The boys, although heavily laden, made record speed—they did not desire to figure on any menu !—and thus, one afternoon, we walked into the famous goldfields township we had left two months before. We had rearranged the loads, and the Professor's butterfly net was very prominent, as were also some bamboo crates of orchids.

We met the Warden in the one and only street. He looked greatly worried. " Hullo, boys ! " he said ; " I'm very glad to see you. Had a good trip ? "

" Not bad," admitted the Professor ; " I've one or two rare specimens of butterflies, and other things. What's new ? "

" Oh ! there's been a massacre of some friendly natives, and I fear some of our men have been causing trouble up in the ranges. I am going out with an armed force to investigate. The town is full of homeless natives from Broken Nose's village, and they say that white men passed through—— "

" The natives will say anything," said Big Sam.

" Oh ! they were there all right. Here is a pipe one gave in barter. I annexed it as evidence. I wish I could find the man who once owned it ; I would make an example of him that would be remembered."

The Inventor Fellow handled his old pipe casually and glanced at his indecipherable initals on its stem. " I fancy I've seen it before," he remarked, passing it round, and at this point Silent Ted left the party.

"I am going to appoint you deputy Warden until my return, Professor," the Warden went on.

"I'd rather be excused, sir," said our chief. "You see, I've an appointment down in Brisbane I'd like to keep. Is there any launch going down the river soon?"

"Oh! we've cut out a road to the coast, and a motor mail runs regularly. It goes out to-morrow, I think; but it will likely be booked up." Some general conversation followed, in which the Warden enlarged on his troubles in keeping the white men in hand. "But the mail tells of a new rush down in N.S.W.," he went on, "and I expect some of our most restless men will clear out for it. Hullo! Here's Broken Nose! I thought he was cooked! Perhaps he knows who had the pipe."

The Inventor Fellow felt uncomfortable, and so did Mac, but Silent Ted rejoined the party and saved the situation by speaking! "I've booked the seats," he said; then his jaws clicked. Silent Ted seldom spoke, but when he did his words meant a lot. The Professor led the Warden aside, and Mac took Broken Nose out of the danger zone with the promise of a new pipe and plenty of tobacco. Sydney Charlie also made the hearts of the Archbishop and the boys glad in the big store just opened. . . .

Fifteen days later we sat at lunch in the Gresham Hotel, in Brisbane. The papers were filled with accounts of the new gold rush in N.S.W.

"Men will sell their very souls for gold," the Professor remarked, sadly. "They will brave all dangers—tell lies——"

"Catch butterflies, collect orchids—and give away pipes," broke in Mac. "Personally, I think it is just dross—when one knows where to get osmiridium."

"We'll go back for the osmiridium after we have a look at the new rush," said Big Sam.

But that osmiridium still lies in the golden sands of the far-off New Guinean gully. Some day some, but not all, of its original finders will return to the silent pool. Hope springs eternal.

CHAPTER X

PROSPECTING

THE prospector's life is surely the lordliest on earth. The prospector goes where he wishes, does what he likes, and lives a life of freedom unknown to the poor city-dwelling business millionaires. The usual worries of commercial existence do not trouble him, as he wrests his means of living from nature's treasure store, and not in competition with his fellow-man. And he can always earn all his requirements, though Eldorado may ever lie beyond the mountains of the moon. The glamour of the life and the hope that he will one day break through some grimly guarded mountain range or mysterious desert barrier lure him on, and sometimes he actually finds himself in a literal Eldorado. In such cases, after an ecstatic moment of paralyzed senses, the prospector realizes that his dream has ended, that he has fulfilled his mission, and that nothing now remains for him but to get back to civilized life and enjoy his wealth.

Then comes the feeling of awful discontent, for he is out of his natural element. The feeling that he has only grasped the shadow grows upon him ; city life is nothing to him. In the boundless bush and amidst mighty ranges he was healthy, and Nature sang joyfully in his ears ; now he suffers from indigestion, has nothing to do, finds his fellow-men almost quarrelling

over political matters which he does not understand, must conform to law, dodge motor cars and wear irksome garments. The Call of the Wild again sounds out to him, and sooner or later, he will once more burst the bonds of civilized tyranny and, in response, go forth in search of another Eldorado.

Big Sam and I were in the last stage of unrest in Brisbane after a fortnight's sojourn in that tropic-singed city on our return from a successful New Guinean prospecting trip. Our comrades had gone their several ways, and although we knew we should all meet again somewhere, some time, Big Sam and I —as had happened before—were left to our own resources. Brisbane is a very fine city. Excellent steamers leave its wharves, in the middle of the town, almost daily, and from its railway station trains go out to all points of the compass. But Queen Street to a prospector is more congested than Broadway or the Strand to their respective frequenters.

"I wish I had gone with Mac and the Professor," I said to Sam one day as we watched the west-bound mail depart. "I fancy they will be digging out fiery opals now."

"Opal mining is too slow for us, old man," Sam replied. "I've got the idea that we ought to go north. To-day's papers report a new silver find up near Chillagoe and it is described as being 'fabulously rich.'"

I expressed my readiness to go anywhere, and, somehow, it came about that we joined the Rockhampton express that night, and three days later found ourselves at a little township called Emerald. We had selected this railway junction place on the central line as our

"jumping off" point, because it was the farthest away town to which—according to the map—the railway could carry us towards the great mystic north. We could have chosen a more distant western terminal, or gone north, direct to Townsville or Cairns by steamer ; but we had no fixed destination, and wished only to get out prospecting—anywhere. In Emerald we bought horses, stores and general equipment, and in the afternoon rode out along a sandy, nor'-westerly track, once more in search of Eldorado. We did not know the nature of the country into which we had thrown ourselves, but we had our maps, and we knew that when we crossed the railway line leading westwards from Townsville we should be in our old favourite prospecting domain.

We rode fast, and camped that night by a water-hole in the bed of a creek which doubtless carried water in season, but which was then but a series of stagnant pools. It was the month of July, and I think our altitude was about two thousand feet ; consequently, although almost exactly on the line of Capricorn, owing to the rapid radiation of the day heat, we were comfortably cold, and as we watched the familiar constellations of the south ascending in the heavens once more we felt supremely happy. We dug out a hole in the bank of the creek so that the soakage into it would give us good water, kindled a blazing fire of hard logs, listened to the pleasing sound of our horses' bells, and prepared a supper fit for the gods. The feast was an easy matter, as we had two pack-horses laden with luxuries which hotels in Brisbane did not provide.

A PROSPECTOR STARTING A SHAFT.

"This is the life," remarked Sam, as he attended to the frying of ham and I saw to other things essential. "I wonder why people live in houses or hotels?" I did not answer, because at that moment a man slid down the bank of the creek beside us, hailing us as he did so in the usual bush fashion.

"Walk right in," Sam called out; "you're just in time for supper."

The man entered the fire-lit zone. He was a typical bushman of uncertain age, dressed, as we were, in belted trousers and shirt only. "Excuse me, mates," he said, "I saw you riding up at sundown but didn't know you had camped until I saw your fire. I'm working a claim a bit up the creek from here, and I thought I'd come along and ask you to share my bully beef and damper."

"We asked you first," I said. "Draw in your chair——"

"Ham!" the man gasped, sniffing. "Mates, I simply can't refuse your invitation. I haven't tasted ham since Christmas."

"Well, here are your tools," laughed Sam. "Get to work." He brought out another knife and fork from one of our packs, also an enamel plate and cup, and we started. We had provided ourselves with extra dining implements, because we knew that sometimes we were bound to meet fellow-wanderers and have the pleasure of entertaining them.

That meal was the simplest, crudest, and most enjoyable Sam and I had partaken of since our last camp-fire feast in New Guinea, and our guest was as pleased as we were. After washing-up we sat on logs

in the sandy creek bed and exchanged experiences. Our friend's name was John Wilson, and he told us that most people knew him as Sapphire Jack, because he had become an expert in grading sapphires.

"What are sapphires like?" Sam asked, after we had heard of some of our friend's finds of those gem-stones.

The man stared at us. "You fellows don't need to ask me," he said strangely. "You've got some of the best *blues* I've ever seen, and I reckon you've got on to a patch of zircons and topazes and, maybe, corundums worth a fortune——"

Sam and I looked at each other significantly. Sapphire Jack, evidently, was off his head. We had met his kind before.

"You needn't worry, mates; I'll not give your show away," Jack went on. "But I couldn't help seeing it——"

"Seeing what?" I asked.

"Your heap of stones behind you, of course. I can see some broken edges flashing in the fire-light. They're top-hole *blues*." The man indicated the debris around the small water-soak we had dug.

"Look here, old man," said Sam, as I reached back and gathered a handful of the sand and pebbles excavated from the hole, "that is a water-soak. We don't know anything about sapphires, or any other gem stones, except opal and——"

"There's a bluish gleam in some of these stones, Sam," I broke in, scraping a pebble with my pocket knife and disclosing an edge of a glowing furnace of

blue flames. "I—I—I think I'm dreaming. That ham has been too much for me."

"Dreaming be darned!" exclaimed Wilson. "You've struck a patch of stones worth twelve pounds an ounce, and there will be a rush here to-morrow. Great Queensland! Don't you fellows understand what you've got, or are you pretending to know nothing? Look at that!" He broke a pebble into fragments between two large stones, and a shimmering mass of something resembling very much the sparkling waters of the tropical Pacific flashed before us for a moment and then fell off into the ashes of our fire. "That stone was worth a ten pound note, anyhow," the man went on. "The trouble is you never know what a stone is worth until it is broken, on this field. Down south——"

"What field is this?" I asked. "Honestly we don't know; we are only passing through, bound north." I still had the impression that I should presently awake.

"You are on the Anakie sapphire field, of course. Where did you think you were? If you have no special objections I'll peg out a claim alongside you. Have you a piece of glass in your outfit?"

Sam handed over his folding shaving-mirror, and Wilson picked up another stone and drew it across the mirror's face. It made a deep scratch. "Corundum!" he ejaculated. "You fellows have made the find of the year."

"Well, we didn't know it," said Sam. "We're prospectors, not lucky-bag finders. We haven't even pegged a claim here, and you can do what you like to-morrow. We'll fill up a sack of that pebbly wash,

and if you find it has any value you can settle with us later. We'll pay two-thirds of expenses, and our address will be Chillagoe."

Sam was rather abrupt, I thought; but Wilson seemed to be pleased, and, about midnight, went up the creek to his own camp. We promptly forgot about the sapphires, and slept soundly until sunrise. Our horses were near, and breakfast did not detain us long, so, after collecting a few stones from our overnight soak-hole, we continued our journey north-westerly along the bank of the dry water-channel. We did not care much how fast we travelled, knowing that if our stores became exhausted we could easily ride to some township off our track in a day. We saw many indications of copper as we crossed a scrub-covered range, and the rough assay made of some outcropping arsenical formations on which we halted for our midday meal gave a gold value of over an ounce per ton, with about a hundred ounces of silver. We marked the locations very carefully on our map and passed on. We could return with our comrades any time if we found nothing better.

But it was very difficult to avoid finding minerals of some kind, and we worked up a grievance against the country. We were looking for something sensational, and nothing ordinary would satisfy us so far out of touch with the means of ore-treatment. Farther north things would be different, as we should be nearer the great government reduction works of Chillagoe, and be in a country well watered by flowing rivers, in which famous rush-causing finds had already been made, and were still happening frequently.

On the fourth day we ran into a camp of aborigines, and in return for the tobacco and provisions we gave them they told us of some wonderful opal country near, and showed us specimens of opal-studded iron-stone. We had not known that opal existed east of the supposed boundary of the elevated sea-bed, which, according to geologists, had once occupied the centre of Australia, and we were still in "inside country," as the vast grazing land between the railway's far-flung terminals and the coast is termed. The natives led us to the place, however—it seemed that it might have been a lake at one time—and, amidst the growths of shadeless mulga and dead gidgya scrub, the entire surface of the land scintillated in points of opal too small to be of value or even picked up. We camped on a bed of opalescent splendour that night, but, deciding that sinking a shaft to find out what lay beneath was a matter for the future, we again merely marked the location on our maps, and in doing so discovered that we were only a day's ride south of Hughenden, on the Townsville railway. We gave the half-sophisticated aborigines who had shown us the old lake bed all the stores still on our pack horses, and rode through the night into Hughenden.

This far western town is now but a passing-through station to the Cloncurry mineral fields, but the soil around it can grow anything that the earth produces, though sheep cannot live a day's ride farther north owing to the nature of the tropical grass. In Hughenden we heard more of the sensational find of silver-lead about a hundred miles farther north towards the Etheridge-Chillagoe railway. It was

reported to be of such a phenomenal nature that Sam and I thought we would have a look at it. The find was at "Twenty Miles," that being the name given to an old mining camp twenty miles distant from the northern railway. We were also informed that a notorious bush-ranger had escaped from prison down in Townsville and was committing great depredations along the north track towards the scene of the new rush.

We replenished our stores and headed north. We didn't give the bush-ranger much thought; we knew the old Twenty-Mile township, and had always believed that great mineral deposits existed in its vicinity, although we had always associated the place, in our minds, with gold, and certainly not with galena, as silver and lead in combination is called. We covered forty miles the first day, and might have done more had we not run up against a gigantic copper-carbonate outcrop at sundown which at first sight looked as if it might prove to be the biggest thing ever found in the north. Investigations and assays made next morning along the reef's two miles of "strike" showed that we had really struck something good, but, as we were still sixty miles from the nearest point on the Etheridge railway, and copper was low in price, we felt we could not then handle the proposition, and another mark on our maps was the only result.

We were now well within the tropics, and although the sun heat during the day was terrific the nights were actually cold; thus we were sitting round a blazing fire in a clump of pandanus palms the third night out from Hughenden when a rider rode up and

hailed us. We invited him to join us and have some tea.

"Thanks, mates," he responded, accepting the invitation and dismounting from his horse; "but aren't you skeered of me?"

We looked at the man in amazement. He didn't seem to have the smallpox or plague of any kind.

"The two little innocents you are speaking to can't be skeered by anything on this old planet," said Sam. "You're nothing special to look at in the dark, anyhow. Why should we be frightened of you?"

"I—I'm the bush-ranger!"

Sam and I laughed. "You don't look like a notorious prison-breaker," I said. "Why did you leave your comfortable quarters in the Townsville prison? There's not much doing in your line out here at present."

"I never was in prison, mate, and you needn't laugh so much for it's getting a very serious business for me; you see, I've found something good and I can't go anywhere for stores and tools to work the show."

"Haven't you a mate?" asked Sam. "A well organized bush-ranging business needs more than one man."

"Of course I've got a mate; he's the cause of all my trouble. He is the biggest chunk of imagination that ever wore trousers, and he started the story of me being a prison-breaking bush-ranger to keep people away from the big find we had made."

"Hard lines," I commented. "I suppose your innocent, youthful life is now blighted?"

"Not much, if I can keep away from trouble until the story gets knocked on the head down in

Townsville. But I'm hungry ; I daren't go anywhere for supplies, and I haven't had a smoke for three days. You bet I'll make old Dick pay for this—— "

" You surely don't mean that your mate is our old mate, Wolfram Dick ? " cried Sam, as he handed him pipe and tobacco and I opened a tin of something edible from which the label naming its contents had been lost. " He always was a first-class liar."

" Boys, I am mighty glad to know you," cried the man excitedly, reaching for our hands and dropping the tobacco. " Of course Wolfram Dick is my mate, and I'll bet you two are Big Sam and—— " He mentioned the name by which I was known among my friends.

We admitted our identity, and told him we were on the track of the new silver find. Then the man unburdened. " Don't worry about the new silver-lead find everybody's talking about," he said. " Come with me instead ; I've got the biggest thing ever found in the north. It's molybdenite, wolfram, gold, copper and silver, and a lot of other minerals I don't know, all jumbled up. We'll peg the whole place out, and you can send for all the decent old mates you know—— "

" But we came here after the new silver-lead strike," reiterated Big Sam. " And where is Wolfram Dick, anyhow ? "

" Old Wolfram Dick went into the railway to send for you. It was he and I who found the place I'm talking about."

" Prospecting is too easy a game for us now, old man," Sam said, addressing me. " Everything seems

to bump up against us like a Brisbane electric car. I feel I could do with a good sleep to-night."

I don't remember my answer, if I made any, but Riddell, as our friend was named, continued, "You'll get no sleep to-night if you're the men I take you to be. Our show is in a gully on the other side of that peak over which the moon is just rising. We can walk to it in an hour. But let me have a feed first."

The hungry man was eventually satisfied, and when the position of the Southern Cross indicated the hour of nine we armed ourselves with picks, shovels, and some plugs of gelignite and set out to see what lay beyond the mountain.

It would be easier to tell what minerals did *not* exist in that strange, waterless gully. The earth's internal furnace seemingly had found vent there at some remote period, and the contents of its great smelting-pot had boiled over and poured itself promiscuously down the stunted scrub-flanked ravine. Great blows of copper-carbonate reared themselves in a broken line of reef for at least a mile, and parallel strikes of some arsenical formation, in which gold could even be seen, outcropped, in places, forty feet in height. Flakes of molybdenite gleamed in the moonlight through cross reefs of quartz, and dark streaks of wolfram were visible in some of the other outcrops.

Sam, when thoughtful, was silent. He lit his pipe and commenced drilling into a quartz formation we thought carried gold, and, we could see, was rich in molybdenite. "This is a bubbling-up from Jimmie Squarefoot's place, sure enough," was his sole comment.

"We're only forty miles from the Etheridge railway," I said hopefully. "We might be able to send this stuff into Chillagoe by traction engine or teams, and rail, or we might build a dam across the creek and separate some of the stuff by flotation when the rainy season comes." I also began drilling a hole into a wall of copper-carbonate. Riddell meanwhile was running about from one reef to another and bringing us specimens of minerals he did not recognize—and in few cases could we tell him what they were.

The night was cool and pleasant, and the sound of our hammer-strokes rang out and re-echoed among the rocks, suggestive of terrific blows which might shatter the earth's formation. We understood the reason of this when Big Sam began to sing—as was his custom when he had solved some problem and was happy. Sam's voice was not *very* unpleasant amidst the roar of artillery or in a tropical thunderstorm, but in that peaceful moonlit gorge it was rendered out of place by the sound-intensifying properties of the various metallic reefs which threw back all sounds, and none of them corresponded with Sam's vocal wave-length. When Riddell got Sam stopped by some means, I fired off my "pop"-hole and disclosed a solid mass of hard, dark-bluish material which clearly formed the body of a lode going down at an angle of fifteen degrees from the horizontal. It was impossible to assay the substance by moonlight, as the colour, or burette test, is the most accurate for copper, and can only be applied in sunlight; but we did not require to make any assay to know that the dark-blue material was copper-carbonate of a value of at least thirty-five

per cent., whatever gold and silver it carried in addition.

"That's mighty fine stuff," Riddell commented, as we surveyed the result of the "pop." "I reckon that will make into azurite on water-level, and then form into the biggest lode of copper-sulphide in the world."

"Oh, give us a rest," growled Sam. "Since we started this trip we've done nothing but run up against the biggest things in the world. Do you know anything about sapphires?"

"No man knows much about them, mate. One never can tell, in the rough, whether they are zircons or Alexandrites, or, maybe, emeralds of a kind. I was once a partner with a fellow called Sapphire Jack down Anakie way, but he got killed in the war——"

"He didn't!" Sam and I interjected simultaneously. I added that we had seen him a week ago, and Sam produced some rough stones from his pocket and handed them to Riddell. "Your old mate said those stones were sapphires," said Sam. "We left him working a hole in the creek where we got those, thinking about filling carts with them."

Riddell's comments on the stones were not heeded, although I think, that while excitedly asking for more information about Sapphire Jack, he somehow expressed the opinion that they were extra special. Sam meanwhile had applied a match to the fuse inserted in the hole he had drilled, and we all ran for safety. After the explosion, investigations proved that the shot had been fired in a lode, or pipe, of molybdenite, which we estimated to have a value of five per cent. This was great, as molybdenite at four

hundred pounds per ton was payable at one per cent., and the richest mines in the world, as far as we knew, did not average even that. But the minute specks of gold disseminated through the quartz, in addition to the molybdenite flakes, and plainly discernible in the moonlight, caused us to think most furiously.

"This place is worth millions," said Sam. "Have you pegged out your claims or applied for leases yet?"

"I've done nothing," Riddell answered. "If I go into Chillagoe to apply for the ground I'll be arrested as a bush-ranger, and Wolfram Dick couldn't help giving the whole show away if he went in. I tell you, boys, I've been having a hard life——"

"Never mind," I consoled, "your reward will come after you are dead, perhaps. We'll go into Chillagoe and register all the ground we peg out, jointly, and you can be quite comfortable in prison for a few days if the troopers get you before the true story is known."

Riddell did not seem to derive much comfort from what I said. "It's all very well as a joke for you fellows," he said plaintively; "but I'm the son of a Scotch parson, and if the story of my being a bush-ranger gets home to Aberdeen——"

"The story of your find here will pass it on the road," I interrupted. "You've made a discovery which will startle the world. . . ."

We spent the rest of the night pegging out mineral leases, and, leaving our pack-horses and their burdens of stores with Riddell, caught our saddle-horses and rode on in the morning. We had a forty-mile ride to the nearest Etheridge railway point, and the train ran to Chillagoe only once a week. Incidentally, we

had to have a look at the Twenty Miles, now less than twenty miles ahead, but the importance of getting into Chillagoe to register our new claims at the first possible moment was quite obvious even to Riddell.

That afternoon we reached the old abandoned camp known as Twenty Miles. Huge weather-stained, oxidized, and decomposed dumps of mullock were the chief signs remaining to show that the place had once been a populous centre, although odd sheets of corrugated iron lying around, a few tattered tent remnants, heaps of empty bottles and bully beef tins were also evidence of a previous township's existence that would not require a Sherlock Holmes to recognize.

We saw no signs of any mines being in working order, and the existing heaps of mullock certainly did not look as if they had come from a silver-lead formation.

"This Twenty Mile rush has not drawn many people to it so far, it seems," Sam remarked as we dismounted. "I can't say I like the look of it."

"We travelled fairly fast," I reasoned. "Perhaps we're the first to arrive——"

"No, you're not," broke in a voice from behind a dump. "Half of Queensland's population has been here already, and I'm tired directing people to the nearest railway station where they can go home from. Excuse me not coming out; I'm sleeping and dreaming that I'm gathering shells on the seashore."

"Where's the silver-lead find?" I asked. "Don't awake from your dream; just whisper the information. We've come a long way."

"Howling kookaburras!" yelled the man who had

spoken, rushing round the dump. "I thought I knew that old voice! Where are the others?"

Wolfram Dick confronted us, and we knew, without speaking, that the great silver-lead find reported in all the papers, and which we had come so far to see, had no existence outside Dick's imaginative brain.

"You'll not feel so happy when your old mates do get here," growled Sam. "What do you mean by causing a rush to an old abandoned place like this?"

"Boys," groaned the man, "honestly, I didn't mean anything wrong. A newspaper fellow came down this way last week from Georgetown, and camped with me here. He was a decent fellow, and was looking for something to write about. I was sorry for him, and—well, you can't blame me for what he wrote afterwards. But come and have tea. I've a camp behind this dump. It is mighty cool and comfortable, and I've plenty of tucker. But there isn't any silver here that I know of."

We partook of Wolfram Dick's hospitality and said some very unkind things to him. He didn't worry, however, and said that, although there was no foundation for the rush to the Twenty Miles, any man who could have profited by the silver-lead, had it been there, would not fail to make good over the other minerals everywhere around. "And anyhow," he concluded, "I believe there is more silver and lead between here and Chillagoe than in any other part of the world, only the chief lode has not been struck yet."

We told Dick about the result of our previous night's work, but he evinced no surprise. "I know we are in the heart of the richest mineral belt in the world,"

he remarked, " and I expect Riddell and I, by accident, struck the furnace door through which the molten metals of the earth bubbled out. If only we could get our old mates up to share—— "

" They'll come, some time, Dick," I said ; " but big things are getting so common now that likely they are all working on something good at present. . . . "

Next morning we rode into the railway and caught the train for Chillagoe, where we registered a number of claims. In Chillagoe we found a telegram awaiting us when we called at the post office after finishing our business. It was from Sapphire Jack, and read :

" Old mates have arrived looking for you. We are holding claims, but big rush on. Your sapphires worth twenty pounds per ounce."

" I don't know that we could easily separate all that mass of gold, molybdenite, and other stuff down at Riddell's place," said Sam thoughtfully, after we had read the telegram.

" It wouldn't be so easy as getting sapphires," I responded. " I wonder how many of our old mates are down on the sapphire field ? "

" The train leaving this place in ten minutes connects at Cairns to-night with the south-bound steamer for Rockhampton," mused Sam. " We could be with our mates in five days—— "

We were.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE GULF COUNTRY

THERE is now no part of the world where the arm of the law does not reach, but there are still some odd corners where it is ineffective. Sometimes a wanderer stumbles into such a place and, after marvelling for a time why certain conditions are tolerated, concludes, often wrongly, that the law's representatives are not aware of the facts, and then promptly sets about breaking all laws that are irksome himself. The prospector, however, never sheds the white man's burden of responsibility, and the laws he ignores are invariably only those which conflict with the instinct of self defence. One part of the world where the influence of the law is scarcely felt is that stretch of land which extends westward from the great range in the heart of Cape York Peninsula in North Queensland down to the mangrove-fringed shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

This shore line is known as "Australia's Back Door," and much happens there that is known only to the prospector. The entire Peninsula is a veritable treasure store, almost every known mineral having already been found there, and if any new mineral came into demand it is there that the writer would go to look for it, and he knows fairly well the nature of all the world's mineral fields.

There were eight of us suffering a period of inactivity, called a holiday, in Townsville. We had got tired of the well-known fields of North Queensland, as townships always grew up around our finds and railways had a habit of throwing out their tentacles after us, and we liked neither towns nor railways. One day, when the mercury in the thermometer seemed to be trying to get out at the top of the tube, the Professor said: "I'm dead tired of this lazy life, boys; I've read all the latest books and all the last mail's papers from New York, London, Paris and Canton. I'll be forced to read those from Sydney and Melbourne if we stay here much longer."

"What about going north to the Malay States or Burmah?" suggested Miserable Peter, "I've never been in those parts." The tear in his left eye gave his face an expression of sorrow which was misleading.

"No good," Mac answered. "There's nothing but tin in the Straits Settlements, and big companies and Chinese have got it all in their hands already. How about Alaska?"

"Not for me, thank you," smiled Lucky Jack, "I've had enough of Nome and Dawson City."

"I propose we have a shot at Rhodesia," put in Boston Bob. "That's the only place I don't know."

"Too civilized," negatived the Inventor Fellow. "It's all deep-sinking there, and fancy Schools of Mines fellows from London run the country."

"We might go back to New Guinea," put in one who thought he was a poet and who was known by that title. Mac and the Inventor Fellow vetoed his proposal at once, for reasons best known to themselves,

and the Professor turned to Silent Ted, the last member of the party, for the writer, to escape the use of the personal pronoun—and for other reasons—has hidden himself amongst those already mentioned.

Silent Ted spoke only on very rare occasions and, on being addressed directly by the Professor, he slowly lit his pipe and then, while we anxiously waited for words of wisdom, opened the *Townsville Herald* and pointed to a paragraph therein. It read:

"Sensational Mineral Finds in the Peninsula.

"The Mitchell River Telegraph Station reports that a sensational find of gold has been made somewhere in the ranges on the Palmer Divide. The natives who brought the news cannot, or will not give much information, but they say that large numbers of men are working the river beds. The specimens include some fair-sized nuggets, and it is surmised that the natives found them themselves as, notwithstanding their statement, no white men are known to be in the country. The natives of the district consist of the only warlike tribes now existing in Australia."

"I guess the Professor should read the local papers sometimes as well as those from the little villages beyond the sea," commented Boston Bob. "The *Wyreema* sails for Cairns to-night, and we can get up the line from Cairns to Chillagoe on Friday, and outfit there."

The matter was settled at once, and that night we shook the dust of hot, stuffy Townsville from our feet—it required some shaking—and sailed for Cairns, only a sixteen hours' journey north, *en route* for the Peninsula. We caught the Friday morning train, according to schedule and, after climbing up over the

coastal ranges, through the spray of the mighty Barren Falls and out into the lime-bluff country, arrived in the mining metropolis of the north at night. We knew Chillagoe well, having left it only five weeks before, and by Saturday night had bought back our own horses and extra pack animals, stores, tools and explosives, and added two old comrades to our number —the Doctor and Wolfram Dick. The latter was known to local fame as being superior to Ananias, in his special line, but he was a first-class prospector, and a good fellow. We left Chillagoe that night, and rode fast in the brilliant starlight over a nor'west track we knew well, and by morning were beyond the Walsh River, and in country rich in mineral wealth and only partly prospected. We passed many old " shows " some of us had previously worked and abandoned for no particular reason. Probably, fortunes still lay at the bottom of the deserted vegetation-overgrown shafts, but we were not interested in anything so near civilization. The Unknown called and we were answering. We camped all day on Sunday and re-arranged our packs, which had been made up rather hurriedly, but at daylight on Monday started out again and forced the pace. We were still in the region of lime-bluffs, gaunt, bare, grey sentinels, honeycombed with caves, which rose from the surrounding sand to heights of about five hundred feet. All day we threaded our way amidst those inexplicable isolated hills, and occasionally, we had some pangs of regret on passing gigantic " blows " of copper carbonate, massive silver-lead (galena) formations, and promising quartz reefs in which

molybdenite gleamed in large flakes. Game was plentiful although limited in variety, scrub turkeys too heavy to fly, squatter pigeons that would not fly except from the ground to the branch of a tree and then from that branch back to the ground, and wild ducks, being the chief items on our menu, although parrots of all kinds, kangaroos and emus were plentiful, and dingoes occasionally heard at night. It was glorious being once again wandering at will through untrodden country, knowing not what the next hour might disclose.

On the fourth day out we struck the Mitchell River, and camped for a day to fill in our maps with the locations of the chief "shows" we had seen, and to assay some specimens taken from them. All those assays gave surprisingly good results, but the reefs from which they were picked are still awaiting our return. The Mitchell, where we crossed, was a broad, swiftly-flowing rocky stream, but a few hundred yards below our camp it contracted into a deep sullen waterway, teeming with hideous-looking fish and crocodiles. During the next three days we were oftener out of the saddle than was good for progress, but we added another half hundred marks to our maps representing antimony, bismuth, copper, silver, gold, wolfram, molybdenite, platinum, and many other minerals. We were now leaving the lime-bluff belt and entering the region of foothills which formed numerous divides between the tributary streams of the Mitchell, chief of which was the Palmer River, but we had not as yet seen a trace of any human being.

One day, after crossing the Palmer, our direct

nor'-westerly course led us up a small stream into some higher mountains than we had previously seen. We had found "good" gold in the sands of the creek and we had the idea that the promised land was not now far away. An approaching tropical rain-storm, however, made it wise to seek shelter in a large cave at the base of a solitary lime-bluff that seemed to have been flung off the main belt through which we had passed and, hastily gathering in timber and unloading our pack horses, we were comfortably camped in the cave when the storm burst. Silent Ted and the Professor set about preparing a meal that would make glad the heart of any prospector, the Inventor Fellow and the Poet lit candles and went off to see where a stream of clear water that flowed through the cave came from. Mac and another made war on the numerous bats and other winged creatures that challenged us for possession of the place, and Boston Bob and Lucky Jack, both Americans, became interested in some sand which filled irregular holes in the limestone bottom of the stream. The presence of the sand was certainly strange in a cave of pure limestone formation, but only the two Americans had noticed its significance. Miserable Peter sat on the floor and played rag-time tunes on his flute, the ever-present tears glistening in his weak eye meanwhile, and, generally, all found something to do. The cave was over a hundred feet in length, but its height was lost in the darkness overheard. The entrance was the stream's exit, and was large enough to allow our horses to pass in on either side of the sunken water channel. Of course it had been worn

out by the action of water, but the firelight playing on the enormous stalactites and stalagmites cast weird flickering shadows beyond, which made it impossible to see how far it extended into the heart of the bluff.

In about half an hour the Inventor Fellow and the Poet returned, and reported that the water passage was cut right through to the other side, and that the stream actually flowed in from sources in a valley beyond, between our bluff and a mountain of iron-stone.

"That accounts for this gold?" spoke Lucky Jack from a hole in the stream in which Boston Bob and he were working, stripped.

"What!" all cried, "What gold?"

"The sand is full of it," said Boston Bob, handing out his gold pan. "That mountain on the other side must be like the Dome in Dawson city, and this sand and gold has been carried in from it. There is a fortune here."

The pan showed a tail of gold comprised of small slugs and flour gold, and Lucky Jack's pan showed a similar result. Evidently we had "struck it." Ten men looked at each other in thoughtful silence until Silent Ted spoke. He had been lighting his pipe with a burning brand and, in his excitement, had thrown his pipe in the fire and placed the red ember in his mouth. He only said one word!

The Professor rubbed his glasses on his shirt sleeve, ejaculated, "Dear me!" and removed a stew-pan from the fire to prevent its contents burning. The Poet began to declaim something but the Inventor

Fellow pushed him into the water before he got far. Miserable Peter dropped pearls from both eyes, and the Doctor began making calculations about cubic measurements which no one understood. Then Wolfram Dick began to tell his latest lie, and when he joined the Poet all the excitement was over and we squatted round the fire to attend to more pressing matters, for we were hungry. Outside, the lightning flashed, the thunder roared, and the rain fell as it only does on the Gulf slope. Inside, reigned peace, content, and the wonderful sensation of bodily comfort. Probably the storm raged all night, but one, at least, did not know, and in the morning it was gone and forgotten.

The next few days were strenuous but profitable. The Inventor Fellow blasted away the exit of the stream and thus drained all but one of the deep pools which held the auriferous sands. He then applied the powers of gelignite to a small waterfall over which the stream—now in full flood—rushed into the one pool left in the main part of the cave, and transformed it into a long inclined plane which he interrupted with roughly split slabs intended to catch and collect any gold brought in by the new flush of water. The Professor went out hunting, Ted attended to the cooking, and the others concentrated on getting gold.

"I wonder where the other fellows are working?" said the Doctor one night. "My map shows that the overland telegraph station is only about twenty miles east from here, but we haven't seen a sign of man's work anywhere."

Mac was working by candle light in the bed of the

stream at the time. The spate of the waters had now ceased and only the normal stream was flowing. His shout drew attention away from an answer the Professor was making to the Doctor and all turned to him.

" There are more people near us than is good for our health," the Scot who had never seen Scotland, said, coming out from the water. (Mac hailed from New Zealand). " Look at this ! I caught it floating past me." He held aloft a small piece of pointed wood about four inches long ; its surface was roughly tarred with shorthand-like marks and some symbols were also burned into the wood. " It's a talking stick," he continued handing it to Miserable Peter who was an expert in matters pertaining to the aborigines.

Peter dried his eye and examined the stick : " I can't read it," he said after a bit, puzzledly. " It doesn't use the signs of any tribe I ever knew in Australia."

Silent Ted, likewise an authority on the natives, gave it up without a word, and the Inventor Fellow and Wolfram Dick were also unable to explain its meaning.

" Fine Australians you fellows are," snorted the Poet.

" Oh, I can read some of it," Wolfram Dick remarked airily, and we knew he was about to lie. " It says a grand corroboree and—— "

" Those symbols are Chinese characters, Dick," the Professor reproved.

" Well, anyhow, there are people of some kind where it came from and that must be somewhere up this stream," Wolfram Dick replied, and his words could not be disputed.

Thus it was that we set out to investigate, next morning. We ascended through the lime-bluff, crossed the valley beyond, and finally ran the stream up to its split-up sources amidst a dense cluster of pandanus palms at the base of the mountain already reported on by several of our members.

"Some niggers have been here, at any rate," Lucky Jack remarked as he picked up a broken spear lying amidst the palms. "Hullo! here's a boomerang—and another—and Christopher! there are dozens of broken spears here! There has been a fight!"

"Yes," spoke the Doctor, "and the men who were working here recently have probably been killed. What do you fellows make of this?" He picked up an old soft felt hat and a pair of trousers and displayed them, but by this time we were all finding evidences of a struggle, and were thinking many things.

"The mystery is solved, boys," cried the Professor who had entered a small gully, hidden from sight on the other side of the trees. "Here's a deserted camp!"

We were by his side in a moment; there were several tents, erected in a manner that seemed somewhat odd to us, and two windowless bark huts surmounted by a shade of sandalwood branches. Scores of shallow holes in the bed of the creek marked the abandoned workings, and mining tools and cooking utensils were lying haphazardly everywhere. There was nothing in any of the tents except some discarded garments, but a strange odour hung about them that caused the Professor and the Doctor to sniff, suspiciously. The doors of the huts were nailed up,

but Mac forced one open and went inside. He staggered back the next moment.

"There's a horrible smell in there," he gasped. "Give me a candle."

"Don't go in, Mac," the Doctor advised, "try the other house."

But Silent Ted had already broken into the other house and had lit a match. "Joss House!" he ejaculated, and clicked his jaws. And it was. A fantastically adorned and painted wooden idol of grotesque shape and appearance, and studded with pins, squatted on a rough wooden platform laid on a foundation of crushed ant beds. The odour of incense filled the apartment and some exquisite silk tapestry hung all round.

"It's a Chinkie's camp we've struck, right enough," said Miserable Peter, weeping copiously. "The aborigines must have killed the Chinks or they would have taken their Joss with them."

"Maybe a plague of some kind chased them away," suggested the Poet, and all shuddered and came out to the fresh air.

"They haven't been gone long, anyhow," Boston Bob put in, "I see a fire still burning."

"Come away, boys," the Doctor called, emerging from the first hut. "Three dead Chinamen lie in here, boxed up in sandalwood coffins ready for sending home to China. How they can be sent home from here is more than I know, but as this is Australia's back door I suppose they'll return the way they came."

"No one knows how Chinamen get smuggled into Australia," Wolfram Dick volunteered, "but they

land somehow, on the shores of the Gulf, come up the rivers and live up here on a handful of rice until they get enough gold to carry them anywhere they like throughout the country. There are thousands of Chinese in the Gulf country not on any register, and who never paid poll-tax." Dick was speaking the truth, as some of us were aware, but his reputation was such that only those few paid any attention to what he said. Of course, all now knew that it was the fumes of opium we had detected in the tents.

We gave little heed to the workings in the creek. Our own camp was much safer if the natives were in a bad mood, and we got back through the lime-bluff, speedily, all very thoughtful. But the knowledge that natives were near was disconcerting, and we decided to locate them on the morrow. When night fell, the Inventor Fellow and Lucky Jack climbed up the outside of the bluff to get a view from the top but they returned soon, to be laughed at by all for expecting to be able to see any distance in the dark. They said nothing then, but when the Professor and most others fell asleep they said to Mac and Silent Ted, "We saw the fires of a native camp from the top of the bluff, and we are going out now for a closer inspection——"

"I'm coming, too," broke in Mac, but they wouldn't hear of the idea and, having already artfully prevented him from warning the others by having taken him into their confidence—they knew Silent Ted would not speak—they felt free to indulge their tastes for adventure. Both were as fleet of foot as any aboriginal. They were the youngest couple of the

party, and perhaps, as Mac told them, were not overburdened with sense. Mac and Ted, however, helped to blacken their skins with charcoal, and garbed only in shirts to protect them, partly, from mosquitoes, and sandals taken from one of the Chinese tents, to preserve their feet, they raced off down the creek. carrying their revolvers and pipes in their shirt pockets. The moon was now full, the night was very hot, and sandflies and other night pests were out in full force, as they soon experienced.

When nearly two miles away from the cave they suddenly became aware—by the sense of smell—that some natives were near and, proceeding cautiously in the channel of the creek, they presently heard voices chattering excitedly, and next minute saw a party of gins (native women) clustered round a small fire on the creek bank.

"Those gins are supposed to be hiding," the Inventor Fellow whispered to Lucky Jack, as they crawled past. "There must be a big corroboree coming off." Almost as he imparted the information the wailing sound of a ghingi-ghingi (a fluted wooden disc which when swung round the head at the end of a thong emits sounds of varying cadence) cut the air like a knife, and the adventurers knew they were in for an exciting time if they did not retrace their steps.

But they did not, and soon the scrubby bush gave place to an open plain on which grew only one small patch of vegetation, well in front of them, and they could see, beyond it, a hazy circle of smoking fires. The pungent smoke hid what lay on the far side of the fires but some odoriferous gins rushing past them

as they wriggled forward gave them a fair idea. "Any gin found within sound of the ghingi-ghingi is speared," informed the Inventor Fellow, but his companion rudely told him to save his breath for original information. They had now reached the patch of scrub and were within a hundred feet of the smoke cloud, and crawling into the undergrowths of the "quinine" trees and wild vine interlacements they waited. They now knew why they had not seen any natives, previously. All had gathered for a grand corroboree and while it was pending the natives would not show themselves, being chiefly engaged in chewing pidcherie, (a peculiar pain-killing drug known only to the Australian aborigines) and sleeping. They had not long to wait. The smoke suddenly cleared away and disclosed a number of natives dressed in kangaroo and emu skins, running about inside a circle formed by about a hundred fires. They were throwing something on the fires which had the effect of driving off the smoke and causing them to burst into flames. One being, dressed in skins and feathers to resemble some fanciful demon of the aborigines' belief, stood in the centre of the fiery ring; spears, clubs and boomerangs lay around him and a ghingi-ghingi was in his hand. At a sign from the wizard-men or priests who were attending to the fires he began swinging the fateful disc and instantly, from the shadows on the other side of the fire, there bounded into the ring about two hundred natives, all with some pretence of being emus. They danced up to the great chief who represented the highest demon in their calendar and mimicked the actions of the emus,

a crowd of the older blacks in the shadows making drum-like sounds by beating their bare bodies with their palms. The chief retreated before the young emu-warriors, then advanced while they retreated, and finally became a pivot round which they circled. Suddenly he ceased swinging the ghingi-ghingi and, with its wails, the dance ceased also. The hidden men in the undergrowths were well aware that the emu-dance was only a preliminary, and patiently bore the combined attacks of the festive blood-sucking and stinging insects which penetrated their shirts, explored underneath, and gorged on their bare nether limbs.

"I can't stand this much longer, old fellow," Lucky Jack murmured. "I'll never go about without my trousers again."

"Maybe you'll soon be where I've heard asbestos trousers might be useful," the Inventor Fellow grunted.

"Talking of asbestos," began Lucky Jack, "did you note the length of the fibres in that asbestos show we passed down near the Mitchell?" The shrieks of the ghingi-ghingi interrupted a reply, and both again fixed their eyes in front. The priests had thrown more of some powdery substance on the fires and they were now glowing red, but not flaming. The warriors had re-formed into a long single line and, at a sign from a priest in the ring, they began a weird chant, and following the lead, walked straight into the fires and marched round *in* them. The chant was anything but musical, and the drum-sound accompaniment was the reverse of inspiring. But the performers were

now undergoing the "initiation to manhood" test of endurance, and those who passed would be fully fledged warriors. Those who did not—which meant those who had not been able to obtain sufficient pidcherie—would be deemed unfit to carry on the race, and treated accordingly by the priests. The Inventor Fellow had witnessed a grand corroboree in West Australia before, and knew what was coming, although it had been supposed by the authorities that there were no longer sufficient young aborigines in Australia to go through the highest rites of the Bora again.

Round and round circled the weird procession, keeping time to the ghingi-ghingi; the smell of scorching flesh permeated the air, but at times a whiff of burning pidcherie also was wafted to the hidden onlookers. Once or twice an unfortunate fire walker fell out of line and was immediately carried away by the priests. What happened to him was not seen, and his yells were drowned by the other sounds. At length, the chief's strength played out, and the ghingi-ghingi fell from his hands. The marchers stopped, stepped clear of the trodden embers, listened to a speech from one of the priests exhorting them to be worthy of their ancestors and carry on a race that was old when other races of the world began, and, seizing clubs from a heap, rushed off to look for the special gins they had already chosen, and whom they doubtless knew where to find. A blow from the club would complete the marriage ceremony. But all was not yet over. The priests now closed threateningly round the chief, and the old men came

from the shadows to watch. The chief picked up a nulla (a stout stick), and the priestly heads received blows which ought to have broken them. They shrieked and howled and the old men applauded, but they continued to press round the chief, and finally he was borne to the ground and pushed into a hole already dug. Without delay he was then covered up with scrub and some earth, and the priests sang a song of victory which apparently told how they had saved the people from the demons represented by the chief. Some sort of reincarnation seemed to be due, however, and presently, the old warriors arranged themselves into four parties and walked out in what was obviously meant to be, and probably was, north, south, east, and west directions, looking for something. One party almost rubbed up against the scrub in which the two unbidden spectators were concealed. Those two were not feeling particularly happy just then.

For a time, how long neither knew, all was quiet, except for the distant shouts of the young warriors, and the priests sang another doleful chant which synchronized with the return of the four parties, who, seemingly, had been unsuccessful in their quest. But with triumphant yells the young warriors and their gins were now returning and they asked the priests for their chief; and there could be no doubt about this demand, even had the Inventor Fellow not known most of what they said. With many signs expressive of sorrow, the priests told them they must find him for themselves as the old warriors had failed in their search. The young new warriors now began to wail—the stage management, prompting and

acting were excellent—and began looking around. They soon saw the covered hole, and with yells of fear, and some of delight, they threw aside the covering and raised the chief, *in a peculiar manner*. This was the culminating part of the performance and, with frenzied shouts, men and gins went mad with joy. The chief discarded his adornments and stood forth and addressed them, telling how in the underworld he had conquered all sorts of devils and was now ready to lead his new warriors to fame beyond their dreams. The shouts again broke out and pandemonium reigned. The grand corroboree was over. There might never be another.

"I guess this is where we had better say good-bye," said Lucky Jack, "those mad beggars will likely be looking for more Chinamen and won't have much hesitation about spearing white men if they come across them. I vote for home."

And they went home at a speed that not many runners could exceed. Mac and Silent Ted were waiting on them a hundred yards from the cave.

"Oh, you heart-breaking sinners," Mac reproached, after Ted and he had shown their joy at seeing them. "We thought when we heard the ghingi that you had gone prospecting on the Long Trail. I had a fine epitaph made up but now that you are back it is wasted——"

"Give a hand to clean our skins," the Inventor Fellow interrupted, abruptly, and, after a plunge in the creek and the application of much friction by Mac and Ted, the two black men regained their natural colour, and all entered the cave and lay down amidst

their sleeping comrades. It would soon be morning and they had not yet arranged a satisfactory tale to tell the Professor. When morning did come things were very unpleasant ! . . .

During the next two days we kept inside and worked, with our rifles at hand. We also called in our horses and fed them inside the cave. But nothing happened, and Wolfram Dick began to insinuate that some people in the camp whom he could mention had very vivid imaginations. He was jealous. On the third day we set our horses free again, calculating that the natives had gone further north in pursuit of Chinamen. That night we retired early and kept no guard, trusting for timely warning to a rope stretched across the cave's entrance which anyone entering would trip over and thus set in action an arrangement of horse bells which the Inventor Fellow had evolved. But our sleep *was* disturbed. Sometime during the night all awoke simultaneously and sat up. A peculiar noise had aroused us and we could not determine what it was. It was like something sliding on a glazed surface, then a muffled sound as if some soft object was striking against an obstacle, and this was followed by a splash. The sounds were repeated several times, mystifying us completely. In the cave, sound was distorted and difficult to locate.

" I've got it ! " at length Boston Bob exclaimed, gripping his rifle. " It is niggers coming in by our back door and sliding down the Inventor Fellow's plane. The big riffle at the bottom is catching them, but their momentum jerks them over into the pool."

" Come on, boys, but don't shoot unless in self

defence," the Professor said quietly. "I believe Bob is right."

"I've often trapped gold on a bar across a sluice," tearfully murmured Miserable Peter, "but I never heard of that way of collecting niggers." Before he had finished speaking we were round the pool at the back of the cave. Boston Bob *had* guessed correctly. A number of partly garbed black-faced men were climbing out of the pool, and more were tumbling in as they came down helplessly over the smooth limestone water chute. They were grunting, but were otherwise unusually silent for pidcherie-mad aborigines. As fast as they emerged from the water a crack on the head with a rifle stock sent them back, but still they continued to come. Silent Ted lit a torch and, aided by its light, the strange fight proceeded. The invaders were surprisingly skilful however, and when they got out of the pool and into grips with us, they ignored fearful punishment and seized tightly round our throats. They were small men but we never dreamt aborigines possessed such strength. However, except for one man whom Mac had carried off to inspect more closely, they were eventually all back in the pool and we drew our revolvers and fired some shots over them. We had won. They could not now climb out without facing certain death.

"Come here, some of you," cried Mac, "My man is a Chinaman——!"

"Me telly evelyting if no' killy. Me give plenty muchee gold. Me telly tluth——!" gasped Mac's victim.

" Out with it, then ! " ordered the Professor over his shoulder, " and speak your own language, I understand it."

While we herded the men in the pool the Chinaman began to speak and the Professor translated his words as he went on. They were in effect : " We did not mean to hurt you. We wished only to frighten you away as we have done other prospectors. We wanted you to think it was the black fellows who attacked you so that they would be blamed when you reported the affair. We are always fighting with them. We are working rich gold up the creek. We sent the talking stick down the creek to frighten you, but when you came up to our camp we hid, thinking you would go away when you saw the plague we had amongst us. Ten of us are already dead. We will clear out if you let us go away, but if you do not you will die yourselves. Our fellows in camp will put our dead men in the creek and otherwise spread the plague if we do not come back—— "

" Centipedes and corroborees ! " yelled Wolfram Dick. " I don't mind pegging out but I bar plague."

" Let them go," advised the Doctor. " I think it's bubonic they've got."

The Professor was silent for a moment , then he said : " Chase them away, boys ; we are not executioners."

They needed no chasing, and soon the cave was cleared of their pestilential presence. We went back to our sleeping place and held a council, but few spoke. Bubonic plague was in our minds. Some lit their pipes. Miserable Peter's tears fell like rain : " White men don't take bubonic readily," he said cheerfully.

Silent Ted opened his mouth and all waited expectantly: "Gold is no use to dead men," he said, "let's get back to Chillagoe. . . ."

Before morning, we were riding fast back over our tracks, leaving our tools and surplus stores untouched. We passed numbers of natives heading south and gave them tobacco. They told us that the big corroboree had been held to ward off the Chinese plague, but they were taking no risks. We reached Chillagoe exactly a month after we had left it and reported finding gold but, for obvious reasons, said nothing else. Quarantine Island would mean the end of any prospector. . . . There must be a lot of gold in the Chinamen's trap now.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE HEART OF AUSTRALIA

THE world has now but few unknown waste places into which the adventurer may stumble and discover something new or of value. The ice-bound Arctics and Antarctics are not yet fit for human habitation and their hidden wealth must remain hidden until the earth's axis again changes. Ancient civilizations existed throughout what is now know as the Sahara desert, and the vast plateaus of Asia were probably the scenes in which our first ancestors lived, moved and had their being. New Guinea, Borneo, and other large islands of the south may still conceal possibilities, and there may be potentialities in the dense forests of central South America as yet undreamt of.

But there is still a part of the earth's surface offering inducement and promise to the explorer, prospector, fortune seeker, and adventurer. This is the "Never Never Land" of Australia. The great heart of Australia is as yet comparatively unknown, but whether it is the oldest or the newest tract of dry land in the world is still a question upon which the world's most famous geologists disagree. The writer is not competent to give much elucidation on this point but he can say, with a knowledge derived from personal experience in the vast Australian interior, that its waterless sandy domain conceals more surprises and yields more

chances for the adventure-loving fortune seeker than any other part of the world he knows, and he does not write without knowing most latitudes and all meridians.

Australians love their country intensely and, perhaps, are even more patriotic than the people of the countries which gave them their ancestors, but they live mostly in the coast-fringe cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth and, while in thought, feeling and culture are very much like the citizens of London or New York, to them the far interior is but a dreamland of mystery and imagination —of wool and shadeless mulga scrub—of gold and silver and precious gems. And this dream is wonderfully correct, though incomplete. Away from the great towns along the coast, Australia is a land of upside down. The trees indigenous to the country are all hollow and their bark grows inside. Native fruits carry their stones outside. Heavy ironstone nodules litter the surface of the interior desert and, although frequently covered with sand after a sandstorm, always work their way back to the surface again. They seem to be immune from the law of gravitation and are thought by some people to be meteorites. The chief rivers of Australia have their sources in the mountain ranges near the sea, but they flow inland and only reach the ocean, if they ever do, after a course of many hundreds of miles, whereas twenty to thirty miles would be their lengths if they took the seemingly obvious routes. It does not appear to be generally known that from its source to the sea the waterway known by various names, but chiefly as the Darling and the Murray (like the Mississippi and

the Missouri) is one of the longest rivers in the world. The sources of the Darling are in Queensland, quite near the eastern coast, but they all flow inland until they unite in the main stream above Bourke. Thence, the Darling flows sluggishly between banks—except when rain falls in the far north—through the back blocks of New South Wales, forming oases in the desert which to the wanderer are pleasant resting places—Wilcannia and Wentworth are examples which can never be forgotten by anyone—until, after joining the Murray, it enters the sea in South Australia.

But the glamour of the Darling and the mysterious regions beyond, cannot be imparted in written words by one man to another. In the far-back blocks the influence of some other world seems to exist; men think differently, but only the stranger realizes that fact, and soon he, too, becomes enthralled by the subtle spell, and ceases to see anything unusual in the thoughts and doings of his fellows. While he retains his sanity, however, the intruder can perceive that the people who live in the great "Never Never Land" are in keeping with their environment. They, too, are upside down. Great events to them are of little importance, but they magnify the trivialities of life to a grotesque extent. They—and the stranger, after a time, too—believe in the occult, and the devils, demons, and other characters of the aborigines' imagination become real to them. Once beyond the Darling's western bank, or across the far back streams of Queensland, one is in the heart of this strange country, and then, only the man of strong mind and with a definite object in view can hope to

preserve his mentality. Many have reasons for being far out on the great central plains, which extend through Queensland and New South Wales right into the dead heart of Australia. Among those are prospectors, kangaroo or emu hunters, opal seekers, and fossil collectors ; and there are also the aborigines of the country, though they are gradually becoming fewer and soon their corroborees will be but memories of the past.

But, without unnecessary explanation, let the writer and his comrades ride into this half-dreamland in east central Australia—as they actually did recently—and tell of an experience there which will serve to illustrate the foregoing.

. . . . . .

Mac, Big Sam, and I had started to ride from a mining town in the north with the idea of crossing, eventually, to Adelaide in the south, but also with the intention of passing through the far back opal country of Queensland and investigating the truth of some reports of marvellous finds of other gems, *en route.* One night we were camped in the bed of a water-course which, doubtless, sometimes carried surface water, but which now afforded it only by the medium of a soakage hole. Our horses fed peacefully near on the vegetation which found life under the sun-sheltering branches of the wild fig trees on the creek's banks. Their bells tinkled pleasantly on the clear air and the stars shone overhead in full glory. We were far from any known camps of opal seekers, and, as far as we knew, were alone on the great central plains

except for any wandering aborigines. But for some inexplicable reason the environment was eerie and the brilliant light of the moon seemed actually to have a bluish tinge.

"I don't wonder that white men out here in time come to believe the niggers' stories of bunyips, bilya-bhacans, and other devils," Big Sam observed as we sat down to dine on the big scrub turkey we had cooked in the ashes of our fire. "Just listen to those kookaburras in the trees. A man out here alone might soon believe that they were reincarnations of the evil spirits the natives talk about."

"The devils of the aborigines' belief never die," said Mac, "but I feel I should like to try the effect of my Winchester upon that family of kookaburras aloft. I wonder how many hundreds of miles we are from the nearest white man?"

"This turkey is good," I put in, "and I saw lots of squatter pigeons and fat parrots just at sundown."

"Maybe they were ghosts, too," said Sam. "Hullo! what was that?—Something spoke——!"

Sam seized his rifle and gazed up into the overhanging branches. Mac and I were certainly surprised for something *had* spoken. We listened, rifles in hand. Our nerves had suddenly got the better of us.

"Hullo!" a voice sounded from somewhere. "We're white men."

"Come on," Mac shouted in reply, "we were white skinned ourselves originally; and we've got a turkey."

A minute later two men climbed down the creek embankment and stood beside us. They were both splendid specimens of manhood and nearly as unkempt

as ourselves. One was very tall and his cheery mobile face suggested that he was an optimist. The other was not so tall, but his wiry frame brought to mind a strip of finely tempered steel. He seemed very nervous. Both were dressed as we were in shirt and belted trousers.

"It's a fine night," the second man remarked casually, opening the conversation.

We showed no surprise but agreed with the assertion, and Mac asked seriously if the speaker didn't think it might rain or snow before morning. Our visitors did not quite grasp the subtlety of Mac's humour, but in course of sharing the turkey informed us that their names were Long Tom and Sydney Charlie and that they were out so far in the "Never Never" in search of pidcherie, that mysterious drug known only to the aborigines of the Australian interior, which has the effect of rendering them insensible to pain.

We at once became strangely interested in our friends. We had had, as comrades, men bearing the same cognomens, and we could not help experiencing a thrill of something that swept us back, in memory, to New Guinea, and other places. Of course, we had certainly not met our present companions before, and as all men in the far back-blocks of Australia are known by some endearing prefix to their names, relating to their personal appearance, their nature, or their place of origin, there was really nothing surprising in our falling in with a second Long Tom and Sydney Charlie.

"We can get almost any price for the stuff," Long Tom said, smiling strangely, "but we can't find out

what it is, or whether it grows, or is given to the niggers by their ancestors' ghosts. We've got some, though, and expect to get more after a big corroboree going to be held near here is over."

"We're only opal hunters," I told them. "We've heard of pidcherie, of course, but we don't believe all that is said about its powers."

"Well, you'll find plenty of opal everywhere around you," Long Tom replied, with a seraphic smile that seemed to be a feature of his, "but you didn't need to come out so far as this for opal. There are tons of rubies and other gems, though, in a deposit round some native wells about half a day's ride west from here. We always load up with them when we take a spell in near the towns. You'll excuse me doing all the talking? Sydney Charlie never speaks much when he has got anything on his mind. I reckon he's been too long beyond the Barcoo."

"What has he on his mind at present?" Big Sam inquired. "There can't be anything to worry a man out here?"

"Oh, isn't there? What about the bunyip in the waterhole just a few hundred yards down this creek. We're camped there," smiled Long Tom, but somehow that smile seemed incongruous. "We're mighty glad to see you, I can tell you. We came along when we saw your camp fire and heard your horses' bells. Charlie thinks, too, that the aborigines have got us marked out as some kind of sacrifice. He saw a ring of footprints round our camp last night." Again the smile expanded but we could not see any reason for it.

"I think, boys, we've taken the wrong track to Adelaide," Mac put in, in mock alarm. "I've got one or two things to do before I pass out, and every one knows that the sight of the bunyip means death. I don't like those footprint rings, either; we all know what they mean."

"Jacky Jacky told us the natives always put three rings round you before they spear you, if you are sleeping," spoke Sydney Charlie for the first time since his comment on the night.

"Who is Jacky Jacky?" I asked, suspiciously. I had known a notorious sophisticated native who bore that name.

"Jacky Jacky is a police-trained native and the best black tracker in Australia," Long Tom began after seeing that his mate was not disposed to speak further, "he has more brains than any white man I know, can play cricket, lie like a member of Parliament, steal like a bower bird, and cheat old Jimmy Squarefoot at cards. He's a bosker all right. We employed him to come with us in at railhead, somewhere, and it's on him we depend for getting the pidcherie."

"He must be a marvel for a nigger," commented Mac, but he knew as well as Sam and I that some half-civilized natives were able to add all the cunning of their race to the knowledge they gained from the white man.

"Look here, boys," suddenly broke in Sydney Charlie, "I've got the nerves badly, and Long Tom's eternal grin makes me mad. I must be doing something. I don't want to go back to camp to sleep and maybe find another ring of footprints round us in the morning—come out over the open country for half

a mile and Tom and I will show you opal which will blind you, even in the moonlight."

"Charlie wants to get away from the creek," explained Long Tom sympathetically, but smiling all over his face. "He'll see the bunyip, sure, even if we aren't ringed off——" About this time we began to understand that Long Tom's smile was a nervous affliction and that he was really as terrified as Charlie. We erected our mosquito nets over our saddles, foodstuffs and private belongings, our old trick, and walked out over the creek bank with our two friends. It was more pleasant working by night than in the scorching heat of the day and, in any case, the sunlight of the morrow would dispel the awful feeling of the unknown danger and we could then sleep in safety. We had not yet caught the influence of the place, but we knew it was infectious. We carried our rifles and some tools with us, and in about ten minutes saw a slight depression in the desert sand in front of us. The surface of this hollow glistened like coloured frost in the strange moonlight, because of a covering of salt crystals. Evidently we were looking at the dry bed of an ancient lake.

But we thought we had at length fallen under the spell of the spirits when we reached the edge of the basin. From our feet, receding far out over the sparkling sea of salt, swept wave after wave of varicoloured fire. Fascinated, we stood and watched the eternally changing undulations of flame, in ceaseless motion as if blown by a zephyr breeze, but there was not the faintest breath of air in that silent land. The parrots and other denizens of the trees back on

the creek had gone to sleep and we fancied we could even hear the stars moving. Then suddenly, an unearthly and prolonged wailing sound shattered the stillness of night, and we five white men shook with a feeling of dread. The sound was not that of any creature we knew. Sydney Charlie and Long Tom were nervous wrecks, but we still fought for our sanity. Long Tom fairly shrieked with apparent merriment.

"That's only some black fellow swinging a ghingi-ghingi," broke in Mac, abruptly. "Surely we've all heard that sound before? Let's get into the middle of this opal sea."

Mac strode into the shimmering mass of salt as he spoke and we all did likewise. The crystals broke into powder under our feet and the cheating wave-movement ceased where we trod. We were now looking down at innumerable pin-points of fire, resembling very much the phosphorescent water round a ship's hull as it cleaves through tropical oceans. We lifted some of the powder in our hands and the colour flashes died away; they came again into view, however, when we lit a match and soon, where we had trodden down the salt, nothing was visible except under matchlight.

We had now recovered from the idea that we were under some hallucination. We had seen streaks of surface opal before, although never in such profusion; nor had we imagined that opal would scintillate in moonlight. But the salt explained everything. The surface of the lake bed was studded with minute points of opal which probably would always be visible in sunlight, but the salt crystals had

magnified and reflected each pin-point so much that the quivering moonlight had brought about the wave effect we were still witnessing beyond the trodden limits. We forgot our feeling of depression and, clearing away the inch-thick salt crust, dug into the baked clay underneath which held the opal. It was surely the most marvellous formation of hydrous-silica man had ever seen. How it had come to exist we did not understand, for it is generally accepted now, that both fire and water play the chief parts in nature's laboratory in forming opal, and there were no signs anywhere indicative of any active agency.

"This is funny, boys," exclaimed Big Sam after a short space of silence, during which each man was collecting every solid particle of anything that flashed, "I've found a shell and it's simply living." He scraped away the hard mud-casing round an object in his hands and disclosed a perfect shell of exquisite opal.

"That's worth fifty pounds if it's worth a penny," Long Tom commented, clearing away the perspiration from his face with his shirt sleeves, "Opal shells fetch almost any price." The smile had gone, but a self-reliant expression had taken its place.

"I've got either a double-edged comb or a fish's skeleton," cried Sydney Charlie, holding up a piece of clay-covered something which sparkled like a cut diamond where a small piece had been broken. He proceeded to scrape off the silica, but Mac rescued the thing in time. "That's maybe been a fish a million or more years ago," Mac said. "Don't risk breaking it; a museum is where those bones should rest." (It is in a museum now).

ABORIGINES' CAMP IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

"Maybe it knew the bunyip, then," mused Charlie, "the bunyip lives for ever—— "

"It won't continue to drag out a miserable earthly existence if I can get my rifle sights on him," Mac grunted. "What's he like ? "

"My ! he's not like anything and he isn't a he—no man can tell what it's like, because the man who sees it dies. Jacky Jacky says the fellow in the hole near our camp has been there for ever—— "

"I'd advise you to get rid of Jacky Jacky," I put in. "Some of those ex-police trackers are almost devils themselves." I still had the idea that I knew Jacky Jacky. The native I had known bearing that name was a blood maniac of extraordinary mental powers, who would be shot at sight by any man in the north without compunction. Of course he had cunning enough to change his name, but that is just what an Australian aboriginal will not do. He loves to boast of his past exploits during periodical returns to his tribe. By some mysterious means not understood by white men the natives in the most remote parts get a surprising knowledge of everything that happens throughout the entire country, especially the doings of any of their own people, and the name of the hero is the only proof of his identity.

Again we worked in silence broken only as each man found something to show his fellows. We heard the awful shriek of the ghingi-ghingi at frequent intervals but as the sound produced by that instrument carries very far, especially on the desert, and is deceptive, we could not determine where it came from. When the stars began to gleam red in the sky, heralding the

approach of the sun, we had dug out several pounds weight of opal shells, opalized fish bones, and wood fossils transformed into opal by some magical metamorphosis. And Mac had gone far to solve the mystery of their occurrence, before a scientific society at any rate. He had sunk deep in preference to excavating over a large area and had bottomed his hole eighteen inches down on a hard bed of ironstone. Mac was no mean scientist himself, and both Sam and I were at least known on the subscription lists of several more or less learned organizations. We were interested and evidently showed that fact.

"What's wrong, mates?" Long Tom asked as we all packed up our collections in our shirts. I feared he was going to smile, but he did not.

"We've got some idea of how this place became opalized," explained Mac. "A volcanic eruption happened here a long time ago. This was a sea or a lake and everything was volatilized in the heat, and cooled back into opal. It's a pity you neglected science in your studies, Tom; it would tell you how evanescent human life is, what paltry objects we mortals are—and maybe, the winner of the Melbourne Cup."

"Wonderful!" ejaculated Sydney Charlie, who was now quite cheerful because of his companionship. "Could it tell if that new heavyweight fighter down in Melbourne or somewhere will knock out Dempsey?" Charlie was certainly interested.

"Science doesn't like being made a fool of, Charlie, common sense should tell you that the American fellow will remain the world's best knocker-out until—until——" Mac expanded his massive naked chest,

struck the empty air with his fists and generally did his best to look pugilistic. The sight was funny. Our two friends were greatly impressed; they took Mac seriously, but Sam and I laughed.

"Dempsey will need all his science when you meet him Mac," Sam said, "But you've got a lot of wrongs to right before we put up your tombstone."

We were now walking towards the creek, on the bank of which we could see our horses feeding contentedly. The sun was still below the edge of the eastern desert, but its projected rays were already lighting up a range of hills we had not previously seen.

"Our camp is just beside that big eucalyptus tree," said Long Tom. "Come along and have breakfast with us as soon as you can collect your own feeding tools; I don't think I'll laugh."

We accepted the invitation and headed for our own camp, Tom and Charlie diverging to theirs. The sun shot up as we descended the bank and the first things we saw in its dazzling light were three spears sticking through our three mosquito nets. We glanced at each other without speaking for a moment, then walked over and looked through the nets. The spears had stuck in the ground inside and nothing had been touched. Silently we all calculated where the spears had been thrown from, pulled them out and examined them. They were ferociously barbed gidgya wood spears and therefore poisonous in themselves.

"Rather odd visiting cards?" I ventured, laying down the one that had been meant for me. "I don't like them."

"It's the manner in which they were left I don't

care about," said Sam. "Some people are very abrupt in their social manners."

"Well, according to the laws of etiquette we'll have to return the call, boys," Mac's voice rang hard.

"Have you observed that each of those spears belonged to the same man and were thrown by one man?" I asked, and my companions nodded. They could read the symbols on the spear shafts as well as I could and the rest was easy of deduction. We replaced the spears in the holes they had made and went off to see how our friends were faring. We found them in a state of collapse. Sydney Charlie pointed to two distinct rings of footprints around their blankets. I studied them carefully. Long Tom was laughing.

"We've got our call, mates," groaned Charlie, "and the third ring will mean the end of us. I thought at first that Long Tom had made the first ring to frighten me——"

"And I thought Charlie had made it himself in his sleep," smiled Tom. "But none of us were here last night, as you know—and just look at the *two* rings."

"Well, you needn't wait for the third ring," Big Sam drawled. "Hurry up with some breakfast and ride towards the rising sun. You can be far away to-night."

"But we're waiting for Jacky Jacky to roll along with all the pidcherie he could get," wailed Charlie.

"Pidcherie may prevent your feeling pain," said Mac, "but it won't keep off poisoned spears."

"But we don't understand the niggers wanting to kill us," persisted Charlie. "They all know us, and they're not bad fellows."

"Their ideas of things are different from ours," I replied, and told of our experience. "We are going to get an explanation," I added, "so if you tell us where the rubies and other stones are, we'll perhaps get some of them, after we come to an understanding with the natives."

"You make me feel a man again, mate," exclaimed Charlie, and Long Tom ceased smiling and looked grateful. "We'll get in our horses and *take* you to the native wells where the rubies and other stones have boiled over from where the bunyip lives when he's not in this hole here."

For the first time we looked at the pool of deep water near us in which all sorts of birds, reptiles, kangaroos, emus, and other creatures were evidently enjoying themselves. The trees grew right over the creek, around the dark hole, and there were signs that it was of subterranean origin, but it was shallow at the edges where it overflowed.

"It's got no bottom," said Long Tom. "And you can find lots of coloured stones we don't know, but like those we'll take you to see, anywhere near it . . ."

Early that afternoon we were on the slope of the ridge we had seen at sunrise. We had left our pack horses behind, and most of our belongings. The hill seemed to be composed entirely of ironstone and was absolutely bare of vegetation. Dotted over the region near the summit were many irregular holes of various sizes, filled with water, which bubbled at times as if some gas were breaking through from underneath. Around the mouths of each were depositions of small pebbles, bound in a sort of ironstone cement or conglomeration,

and on breaking into this mass anywhere with a pick, dull fragments of red, blue, green, and white stones resulted, which we guessed included rubies or garnets, sapphires, emeralds, and zircons. (At least, we thought so, and we were not far wrong). A strange tea-like odour filled the air, which we thought was the smell of the gas from the bottomless native wells, but Long Tom told us that it was burning pidcherie we were inhaling, and that the pidcherie-drunk camp of harmless natives was asleep on the other side of the ridge. He did not smile.

We worked hard all afternoon and filled sacks with the unknown stones we broke out, having previously made a camp we could defend, behind a huge blow of ironstone.

"I feel living again, mates," spoke Charlie, toward sundown. "But"—he shuddered—"I don't want to see our old camp again, though I reckon we'll have to let Jacky Jacky know somehow we are here."

"Don't worry about Jacky Jacky," I said, as Mac went out to see what the other side of the ridge was like. "Wasn't he minus his big right toe?"

"I don't know if he were minus it or not, but he hadn't got one," Charlie reflected, and I did not push the subject further. Just at sundown Mac reappeared round a big bluff and, to our surprise, a fierce-looking native was walking with him, but he was not Jacky Jacky. The aboriginal's naked skin was deeply gashed with old scars, and streaks of white paint over his ribs made him look like a walking skeleton. He was thus in full-dress corroboree order. While we watched they passed behind our barricade and Tom

handed the savage a piece of tobacco with a kindly greeting to which the other responded.

"Jacky Jacky is just the duplicate of this fellow," Charlie explained, "but I expect he's lying low in the niggers' camp."

"Out with the yarn, Mac," said Big Sam, after we had exchanged glances. "Is it Adelaide by first train—— ?"

"No, I don't think we need be in any special hurry so far as the natives are concerned. This very intelligent gentleman whom I met over the hill, whose ancestry connects back to the time when the slimy ooze of the ocean crawled on shore and became alive, can explain much, without understanding himself. Light up your pipe, Shakespeare, and tell us about the coming corroboree."

Shakespeare's English had been acquired in a mining camp and, therefore, his words may not be repeated without very drastic censorship. Shorn of the unnecessary and lurid adjectives, as near as I can remember, they were: "Mighty big fool nigger from north tinks hims is big chief. Hims come alonga black fellows here and tell he kill lot white fellows. Hims say he call grand corroboree an' we walk fires—No fear! We no' want walk any fires. Hims say he kill white fellows but we laugh. No want kill white fellows. How black fellows get tucker if no white fellows out here? We play emu and other fool corroboree around hims last night for fun, an' he play big chief and swing ghingi-ghingi. Hims say hims fetch alonga white fellows' heads to-morrow morning to give to big devils, but we just laugh.

Hims big liar. Hims can walk fire himself."

The reader may not readily grasp the full purport of Shakespeare's words, but they were wonderfully illuminative to Mac, Sam and myself. . . .

That night we stretched ourselves out for sleep early. We were away from the gloomy creek, with its bunyips and ghosts, and mysterious footprints, and we were tired. But Mac, Sam and I had tossed a coin before retiring to rest, and, as a result, Sam and I arose silently, when the stars indicated the approach of midnight, caught our horses and rode swiftly towards our camp on the creek. We carried our rifles, and we rather fancied we could look after our own heads. In a couple of hours we had hobbled our horses under the trees beside our mosquito nets and climbed into the branches overhead. We wanted to see who was coming for our heads. We had not been perched aloft more than ten minutes when a naked, painted savage slid silently down the opposite bank and threw himself flat on the sand. He was watching the speared nets, yet fearful of something. For half an hour he lay motionless and we were just as still. We were in no hurry. Suddenly the warrior arose and ran down the dry channel of the creek. Evidently he had satisfied himself that the occupants of the nets would never cause him trouble again, and he could get their heads in daylight when the devils were not about.

But the white men were close on his tracks and, a few minutes later, watched him carefully impressing his feet in the sand as he walked round the logs rolled in the pidcherie-seekers' blankets. *He was making the third circle.* Of course, by this time, Sam and I had

grasped the scheme. The man thought he had killed us, but for reasons of his own, wished to frighten away Charlie and Tom, if possible. His inherited fear, however, had prevented him from making sure of his work in our case and, although armed with spears, boomerangs, and a long bone-dagger, he still seemed as if he were under the influence of some almost uncontrollable terror and would run at the slightest sign of movement of the blankets. It was impossible to recognize him in his ghastly, evil-smelling corroboree paint, but when he moved shudderingly towards the pool about a hundred feet away, and Sam and I crawled over to the footprints he had made, and found as I had expected, that the big toe of the right foot was missing, we knew who the would-be chief of the unknown tribe was. The fanatical maniac was addressing the volcanic pool in frenzied language, as we again got near him in the shadows. As nearly as I could make out his words were, in effect : " Great Dweller in the Waters ! I have obeyed thy call. The white sorcerers will be Thy dogs and I shall be Thy Great Chief as were my Ancestors. Be not angry because I have not killed the others. They have fed me but if they go not away to-night—— " A splash in the pool made him pause in alarm. But he continued : " Show not Thyself to Thy unworthy slave— Bilya ! ! " The last word was a shriek. A renewed splashing in the water had answered him and a something scrambled up the bank from the shallow part of the pool and disappeared amongst the trees. The man staggered, recovered himself and, turning to flee, still shrieking, saw us. His eyes were like electric

lamps and seemed to light up the awful expression of fear in his face. I don't think he recognized us. He stood still, shook violently, and shouting in English: "Shoot, white devils! I've seen the bunyip!" fell on the sand.

"Jacky Jacky," I said, coldly, "we're not ghosts and that was one of our pack horses you saw in the water hole——" Jacky Jacky made no response. An explanation of his conduct would never be given. He had obeyed the bunyip's call. . . .

At sunrise we were back on the range, but we could not make our two friends believe that the evil spirit which had influenced them would trouble them no longer. "Jacky Jacky saw the bunyip and *had* to die," said Charlie, "but the bunyip never dies."

"And we'll not get any more pidcherie," complained Long Tom, without smiling. He was now certainly practical. . . .

During the day we visited the native's camp and told the aborigines of Jacky Jacky's fate. They were all half dazed with pidcherie, but seemed pleased to know that they still were without a chief who would insist on a fire-walking corroboree. They were as harmless a band of natives as I had ever seen. They gave our friends all the pidcherie they possessed in exchange for tobacco, tea, and sugar, but would not tell what it was, nor where they got it.

A week later five riders and five pack horses, laden with opal and other gem-stones, said good-bye to the natives, and rode eastwards to the nearest railway and, like a certain famous character in history, Long Tom never smiled again!

CHAPTER XIII

THE NEW SILVER-LEAD FIELDS

THE wandering prospector sometimes works better than he knows; and the result makes history. Seldom, however, does he reap much reward for his pioneering labours, and the history, too often, is told on his tombstone. The news of a great new mineral discovery in North Queensland is now percolating through the world, and the Queensland Government experts have reported that the new field will yield a tonnage of extremely high-grade silver-lead ore for at least a century. Probably the Government people are correct. They usually are, as, not being company promoters, and having reputations, they are more inclined to make little of any discovery in which they have had no share than allow their imaginations any latitude—and a Government Official never has any imagination. . . .

Four men sat round a camp fire on the western slope of the Gregory Ranges in North Queensland. Their horses were hobbled near, and the tinkle of their bells was the only sound that startled the silence of the eternal bush. The men were seasoned prospectors who had already, though they were still comparatively youthful, chased illusive fortune in most parts of the world, and were known to their friends as the Professor, Mac, Big Sam, and the Inventor Fellow.

They, at the moment, were as happy as men of their temperaments could be; they were well equipped with stores, the creek beside them was rich in stream tin, the glorious stars shone overhead, and they had left all worries with their postal address in far-away Sydney. All smoked contentedly. Doubtless, all were thinking.

"We've got more than two tons of tin oxide in that heap over there," Mac said abruptly. "We'll soon have to arrange to get the stuff into the railway."

Mac's voice dispelled the fire visions of all, and the actualities of the present came back with an overwhelming rush.

"If we could only manage to find out how to extract the gold from that arsenical formation on the other side of the creek, the railway would soon be run out to us," the Inventor Fellow replied. "How about trying to make an ant-bed furnace and roasting off the arsenic?"

"Life is too short," the Professor interrupted, glaring at the Inventor Fellow, "and if you begin any of your experiments around here you'll make our lease of mortality still less. Arsenic fumes are not conducive to longevity. Dear me! I hear someone coming!"

Almost as he spoke a Chinaman staggered into the light of the fire and collapsed beside it; a canvas sack was strapped on his back. Mac lifted the slim figure and Big Sam administered some hot coffee from the billy on the fire ashes and, in time, the man revived. While a meal was being prepared he explained that he had lost his way and was still suffering from the effects of a "touch of the sun"

which had rendered him unconscious of his movements for an unknown period. All Chinamen are very much alike, but this one had a scar on his cheek which was familiar to the Inventor Fellow, and, when the Celestial suddenly recognized him, all five men dropped reserve and suspicion.

"I vely glad meety you fellows," the Chinaman said as he dined. "I puty you on to good thing. You takey bag flom my back an' looky."

The sack was unstrapped and its contents emptied on the ground. They were specimens of silver-lead ore, antimony and molybdenite, and were surprisingly rich.

"Plenty mo' whele they come flom," went on the Chinaman, delighted with the impression his specimens had made. "I one of fellows who found them an' I makey now fo' Chillagoe to gety mo' my countlymen come an' helpy digy out mole."

"That's all right, Ah King; but *where* did you run across this stuff?" asked the Inventor Fellow.

Ah King squatted on the sand and drew lines on its surface with his finger. "They livels," he explained, "fo'tnight nealel sety sun than hele. This big fellow flow into Gulf, but I no' know whele this odel big fellows go. Specimens come flom in hele between those two big livels, but anodel big cleek come outy this way an' plenty muchy go odel way. Cloncully down hele an' Cloydon upy thele." Ah King indicated the positions of the towns of Cloncurry and Croydon on his sand map, and the location was evident to all.

"You have shown us the promised land lying

between the Flinders and the Leichardt Rivers," the Professor commented. " I think, Mr. Ah King, the Queensland Government would appreciate you as a surveyor."

" But you fellows come alonga an' pegy out glound ? Chinamen no' can do that, an' muchy like white fellow fliends hold leases an' allow Chinamen to wolk on the surface."

Well we understood what Ah King meant. Chinese cannot legally hold a mining lease in Australia, but they can work surface formations as long as their presence is not against the interests of the white man. It was therefore important for Ah King and his fellows that friendly disposed white men should hold the ground on which they worked. And the four white men who saw the specimens thought they would like to do so.

Next day Mac and Big Sam rode into the terminus of the Etheridge railway with Ah King, and when they returned with additional stores and pack-horses the camp in the Gregory Ranges was ready to be moved westwards. Probably, by the time the Chinaman had reached his destination, the four prospectors were crossing the Gilliat River, a tributary of the Flinders, and, two days later they were negotiating the Flinders itself. They had ridden swiftly, knowing that the news Ah King had imparted could not be kept secret long, and that a rush would soon set in towards the new Eldorado.

After crossing the Flinders a camp of aborigines was struck, and its members told that some Chinese were working among the ranges now looming ahead. They

also added the information that several parties of white fellows were prospecting in the country. The latter news was not pleasing to the quartette who had ridden so far and so fast ; they did not like to be only second in any race.

But that night it seemed as if they *had* been beaten when a big camp fire shone out ahead in the heart of a clump of pandanus palms.

" We'll pretend we know nothing about any silver strike," suggested Mac as the four rode up. " This doesn't look like silver country, anyhow ; all the reefs we have seen outcropping have been copper."

The strains of a violin floated through the sultry night air as the camp was neared, and the party drew rein suddenly. Only one man in the world could transmit a soul's emotions through a shell of wood as it was finding expression now. That man had been a comrade on the opal fields in the other end of Queensland, and his name was Fiddling Peter.

" The world is really very small, gentlemen," remarked the Professor. " We wanderers, seemingly, cannot escape from each other."

Big Sam and the Inventor Fellow, recalling how they had once found Mac acting as a priest among a tribe of New Guinean cannibals, agreed, but made no comment, and presently four extra men found places round the camp fire. There, they also found Wolfram Dick, another old comrade ; he and Fiddling Peter had been prospecting on their own account and had only joined up with the other members of the party a few days before.

" We're glad to see you, mates," one of the men said

during the evening; "we've struck the biggest and richest copper formation in the Gulf Country: there's room along its length for a hundred decent fellows."

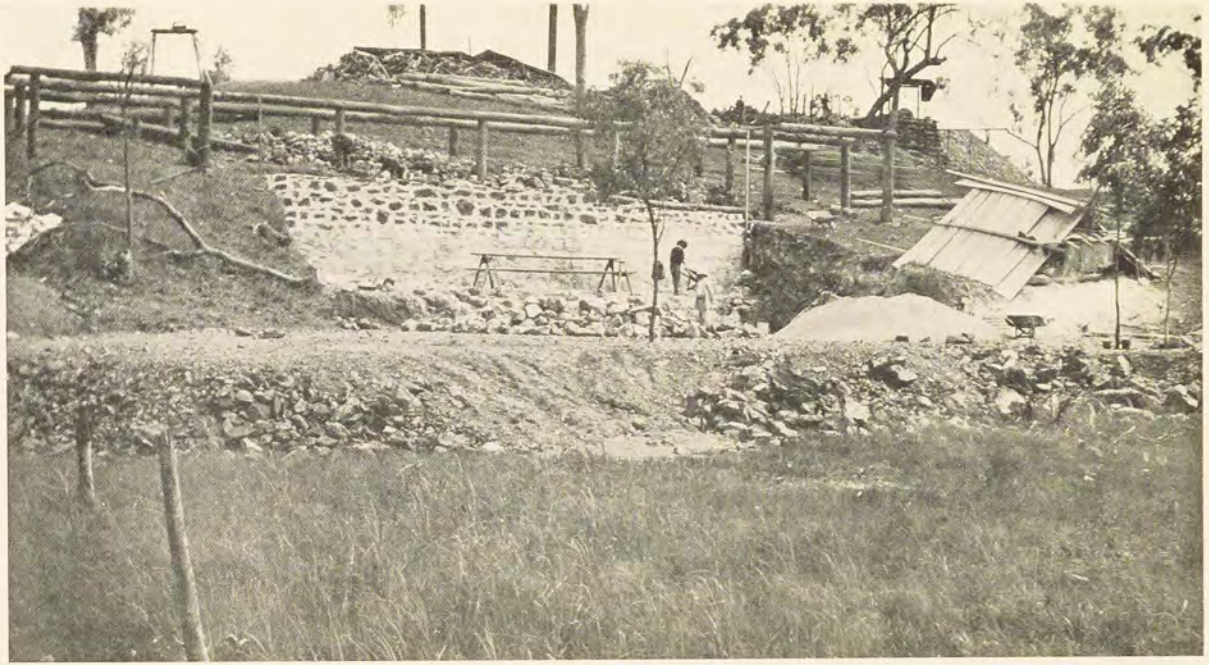
The invitation to throw in our lot with the others was sincere, and was appreciated, but it was not to mine copper that we had come out so far. Mac seemed worried; it was foreign to his nature to pretend anything, unless in a battle of wits, and our friends were not up against us in any way. He caught the Professor's eye and said: "We should like to camp alongside you fellows, but, you see, we came out here on the track of silver."

"There isn't any silver around here, old man. Nature forgot to plant silver when she was filling up the holes in the ground with almost everything else." The speaker was a famous prospector known as Old Riddell.*

"You fellows may not know about it yet," said the Professor, "but we have it on the word of a Chinaman that some specimens carrying, I should say, about a thousand ounces of silver to the ton, came from near here. A Chinaman, as you know, will not lie—to his friends."

"No, the Chinkie's word is as good as gold—unless he's a Christian of some kind, like ourselves," the old prospector admitted; "but I have been pretty well all over this country, and I know every sand patch for fifty miles around here. I fancy, too, I know silver ore when I see it, and I haven't seen any silver show much west of Chillagoe."

* This Riddell is still a well-known prospector in North Queensland, but has no relationship with Wolfram Dick's one time partner.



PREPARING THE SITE FOR A SMELTER—NORTH QUEENSLAND.

"There's a camp of Chinkies working on the other side of that ridge the moon is climbing over now," put in Wolfram Dick. "They must be getting something good, for their camp is well hidden."

"You've settled the matter, Dick," laughed Big Sam. "All Queensland knows you are not troubled with the Chinese affliction."

Wolfram Dick had a fame which was based upon his wonderful imaginative powers, but it was a little unfair of Big Sam to give him away among new friends.

"I'm talking straight, boy," the notorious one protested; "I didn't see their camp nor, as a fact, did I see any Chinamen, but I smelt them, yesterday, when Fiddling Peter and I were out rounding up our horses. Ask Peter."

"There was some bad odour in the atmosphere, Dick," Peter agreed; "but I thought it was only decaying vegetation."

"Get out, you old string tickler! If your nose were tuned up like your ears you'd have known it was burning opium that perfumed the ti-tree scrub and made the parrots silly. Did you not see, too, how our horses sniffed while we were riding along that dry creek bed?"

"You are right this time, Wolfram," Mac broke in. "We'll believe your horses if not yourself; they don't like opium. We'll visit those Chinamen and see if they know anything about silver, and, if they do, the men of this camp can come along and share in anything good."

At this the matter rested for the night, and next morning the original four resumed their journey,

accompanied by Wolfram Dick, Fiddling Peter, and another man who was known simply as Wilson. Through patches of sandalwood and "quinine" scrub, over great reefs which looked like ironstone, and sometimes passing gigantic blows of gleaming white quartz in which gold specks were plainly visible, good progress was made, and close on sundown the ridge had been crossed and the party well down on the Leichardt slopes.

Suddenly, as an unusually large dry creek was being negotiated, a whiff of some subtle odour floated through the atmosphere, and we drew rein. Very tall spear grass hid the nature of the country beyond.

"I apologize, Wolfram," murmured Big Sam. "Your Chinamen are here all right."

Wolfram Dick grinned. "It's great fun telling the truth sometimes," he said; "but a fellow can't risk doing that too often."

We unsaddled and hobbled our horses, and soon were dining on the only bare patch of ground we could find. A big reef rose like a wall beside us, and probably the arsenical or sulphury nature of the mineral it carried had something to do with the bareness of the spot, as the tall grass stretched away from the creek all around.

"That long grass might hide anything," the Professor remarked as the meal neared conclusion. "I observe that a slight current of air has just come into being."

Mac lit his pipe with a burning brand. "I remember reading of how the Chinese used to burn a house down when they wanted to roast a pig, inside," he said musingly. "Where are our horses?"

"Safe, Mac," Wolfram Dick answered promptly. "A good going bush fire about this part might roast some Chinamen." Dick's expressive face spoke a lot.

Mac stood up and swung his big fire lighter into flame. "You sinful perverter of the truth," he said, addressing the last speaker, "are you actually suggesting that we should burn out our fellow men?"

"No, Mac," answered Dick. "I was only going to bet you Big Sam's saddle that you couldn't throw that burning piece of timber in your hand from here to the edge of the grass."

"The fault is yours, Wolfram, if I break the law, and if a bush fire breaks out, but I want to see where the Chinamen are working." Mac flung his flaming log far into the grass, and all stood up to see the result. Prospectors are sometimes like children.

And, instantaneously, they saw what they were expecting. A tongue of flame shot heavenwards and, with a sound like the cracking of a thousand stock whips, the single tongue spread out into a blazing wall and rolled away in a long curling wave. The air became filled with falling soot, and birds, roused from their slumbers in the trees, screamed noisily and flew away in front of the devastating fire.

"I hope the poor little snakes and the kangaroos and the emus and any Chinese between here and the Leichardt, know the value of speed," Mac commented. "A bush fire is not a thing to be played with."

The mighty ever-extending wave of flame receded, now roaring like the boilers of many ocean liners blowing off steam, and a black expanse of bare ground,

on which only some charred trees stood, lay before the spectators. A number of reefs and detached blows of rock were also disclosed as the fiery ocean swept onwards, but in the darkness that followed in a cloud, their nature could not be determined.

"Where are your Chinamen now, Wolfram?" asked the Inventor Fellow. "Even the smell has has gone."

"I reckon I hear them," Dick laughed. "Listen!"

A series of excited cries broke out in the distance as he spoke, then frenzied yells and the rattle of picks and shovels, and finally the murmur of voices and the sounds of men scrambling down the banks of the creek.

The prospectors looked at each other. They had located the mysterious Chinamen, but they had not meant to harm them. To give any help possible was now the one idea, and all ran over the burnt ground towards the spot whence had come the sounds. The fire by this time had passed into unknown regions.

"Never again!" muttered Mac as they reached the place; "I've fired my last bush fire."

"Where are they?" cried Wilson. "They've *been* working here. See! there is a windlass, and there are trenches and holes everywhere around."

Wilson was correct. Evidence of mining work of a surface nature was everywhere, and picks, shovels and other tools lay around some heaps of mullock and in the shallow holes where men had been digging out some material. The Professor picked up a piece of ore from a pile by the side of one of the holes. It was very heavy. The moon had now got over the

edge of some distant ranges, and its bluish light showed that the ground had been turned up over a a very large area. It also made evident that the environments of the working had long ago been cleared of vegetation, and that therefore the fire had merely circled round and left everything intact.

"This is galena," the Professor spoke, after examining the piece of ore in his hands. "It is the same stuff as that Ah King showed us. Where on earth can the people who mined it have gone?"

But no answer was forthcoming to his question. The Chinamen had disappeared. A long pool of water in the creek was swarming with birds and reptiles that had sought safety in it from the fire which had passed along the banks, and pieces of tree bark, obviously parts of some crudely built apparatus, were scattered along the edges, promiscuously. One or two wooden pulleys, a bit of rope and a heap of crushed ant-beds also lay at one end of the pool, and Big Sam thought that another heap of grey sand, which had seemingly been emptied over the bank, was the tailings from a crushing battery. He was laughed out of his idea, however; crushing batteries and their necessary adjuncts could not exist without more evidence of their presence, and their heavy parts could not have been transported from Cloncurry by Chinamen.

At length the white men returned to their own camp, and soon after the tropical stars looked down upon seven prospectors sleeping peacefully. Next morning investigations were continued. It was found that the big reef on which the camp had been made

was a wonderfully rich formation of discoloured copper carbonate, and that it ran right through the country which had been burnt off. It certainly was the main reef of the district, and none of the other reefs which had been seen the previous night showed on examination the slightest trace of copper. But they carried other minerals in most bewildering confusion, though the presence of arsenic caused an assay of the contents to be very misleading. Most had been knapped throughout their lengths, and the pieces broken off were invariably found lying near. Those chips had the appearance of having been broken long ago, but it was clear that whoever *did* first sample the reefs was puzzled as to their nature. The Professor and the Inventor Fellow, both mineralogists of note, were likewise puzzled and, while the others hunted around, made further trial assays. Fiddling Peter shot a scrub turkey, and that, cooked in the ashes with an assortment of vegetables found growing wild in an old abandoned patch on a small tributary creek, provided an excellent lunch.

"We are not the first in this part of the world," the Professor announced, as all dined in the shade of a large wild fig-tree.

"Not by twenty-five years," said Wilson. "There is a date cut out on that cedar tree over there which says 'one-eight-nine-something'; the ants have eaten away the last figure, but the letters 'J.R.' are there too."

"Those letters are also burnt out on the windlass barrel of that old derelict still standing over that

shaft near the creek," said Mac. "I wonder who was the fellow that owned those initials ?"

"His is the fate of most pioneers," the Professor answered thoughtfully. "Traces of his work remain, but he himself is unknown. Perhaps, like some of us, he wished it to be so."

"Cut the rest out, old man," interrupted one of the others. "Tell the result of the assays."

"Oh ! the ore of these reefs is essentially silver, gentlemen, but the silver has leached out, or undergone some change brought about by the oxidizing influence of the surface. I expect that in depth the ore will prove to be an exceptionally rich galena (sulphide of lead) carrying high silver values—like Ah King's specimen and that piece of ore I picked up last night."

"Then this J.R. fellow thought the same as you and sank that shaft by the creek to test the theory ?" put in Big Sam. "Let's go and see what the bottom of the shaft is like."

After lunch the old shaft was visited ; the windlass had no rope and the white ants had eaten away the heart of the barrel and part of the stand, but the letters were quite clear. The shaft was only about twenty feet in depth and steps had been cut in its sides for ascending and descending purposes. It was in a remarkably fine state of preservation.

"J.R. must have had a mate," Mac commented. "A man couldn't sink twenty feet alone."

"He could get up and down by the footholds cut in the sides," Wolfram Dick pointed out.

"Those steps were not cut by him," Mac said. "They are fresh——"

Wolfram Dick swung himself into the shaft while Mac was speaking, and presently he reached the bottom. He stood for a moment, sniffing, then uttering a yell, he leaped at the footholds again and speedily was pulled over the surface edge by his friends. "There's a drive cut out in the bottom," he said breathlessly, "and it's full of bad gas; I felt it getting me——"

"It's half-burnt opium you smelled," grunted Mac; "the Chinese have been down there."

"Dear me!" the Professor ejaculated. "I had forgotten about the Chinamen."

And so, it seemed, had all.

Wilson remembered the rope lying in the creek bed, and while he went to fetch it the others sat down near the shaft and began another discussion. But they did not proceed far. Wilson reappeared on the creek bank and cried, "Come here, some of you; this creek has a tunnel in its bank!"

All moved over to see what new mystery was in the creek, but a voice behind made all turn again in surprise. A Chinaman was standing by the shaft mouth smoking a cigarette.

"Good day, gen'lemen," he repeated.

His salutation was responded to politely by everyone except Wolfram Dick; he was not noted for his courteous manners.

"We be honouled vely muchy if you gen'lemen will come an' takey tea alonga us. We vely solly no' see you allive."

"The honour will be ours," the Professor assured

him, " but we should greatly like to know where you came from? "

" Outy shaft ! Dlive cut alonga bottom to camp in cleek ! "

The white men's thoughts were not expressed in the words they answered, but when the Chinaman went on to tell of how a couple of riders who had passed the day before must have started a bush fire, Mac's indignation was something to see—and hear ! The others wondered who the two riders could be.

The afternoon tea with the Chinamen was enjoyed by all. How and where they got the genuine Chinese tea and the edibles which accompanied it was not explained, but most other things were. There were eight Chinese in the party, and their camp was cleverly concealed in the bank of the creek. They at first took us to be Government Officials and were very anxious that we should believe they were making only a living by tin-scratching and other surface work. When they were informed that their visitors had about as much love for the Government people as themselves, that Ah King had sent them along, and that two of them had prospected for wolfram and gems in south-western China, they dropped all fear and hailed the white men as beings their Joss had sent them.

They explained that they had stumbled across the old shaft while really looking for tin, and that they had discovered that the ore of all the cross and parallel reefs around was silver-lead, phenomenally rich in silver immediately beneath the surface. They had tried to keep the knowledge of the find secret, as they

could not, according to law, hold mining leases, and unless they had white men friends to claim the ground and allow them to work on it, they might be driven away any time. They had already erected a one-stamp crusher, made by a tree stem shod with iron, and worked by hand power, and a crude ant-bed furnace for smelting purposes. They knew a method of separating the bulk of the crushed mineral from the ore, which had been in vogue in China since the earliest times, and therefore they had no occasion to transport the crude ore to Cloncurry for treatment. Ah King had been sent to collect friends to assist in getting out all the silver possible before the place was discovered by other prospectors. They worked only at night and had been driven into their hidden camp in the creek bank the previous night by the bush fire. Their camp was on an upward-sloping ledge which had been laid bare by the creek when in flood; the ground above the ledge had also been hollowed out to a height of eight feet by the same agency, and the bank overhung the smooth flooring for at least three yards into the side. Scrub and mullock had been piled up to form a wall in front of the recess, but of course it would be carried away when the advent of the rainy season caused the creek to flow; but by that time the Chinamen would have made other camping arrangements. They had cut a drive through to the old shaft and had therefore means of exit even if their camp were suddenly to be flooded with storm waters.

That night Big Sam and the Inventor Fellow rode back over their tracks to the copper camp on the

Flinders. The men of that camp had offered us a share of what they had found, and we were now returning the compliment. The camp was roused from sleep about three o'clock in the morning to hear the news, and few of the men believed it until Old Riddell signified that he thought it might be quite correct. He said he knew such formations as had been described were in the locality, but had never thought silver-lead existed.

"Whose initials are the letters J.R. ?" the Inventor Fellow asked the old prospector pointedly.

"Mine; my name is John Riddell."

"Then come along and get back some of your own," said Big Sam. "It is your old find we've discovered."

"No; it is my brother's. James was his name. He went mad. He sent for me, telling that he had discovered another Broken Hill. I got here from Kalgoorlie just in time to bury him. You'll find his grave in a garden he planted on a creek. I go over sometimes, but some Chinese had reclaimed the garden the last time I was there. I suppose I'll be planted around here, too; this great Gulf Country has got a hold on me I can't throw off. . . ."

Fifteen white men pegged out leases on the new silver-lead field, and when Ah King with some friends returned via Cloncurry, which town they had reached by rail from Townsville on the coast, the Chinese totalled fourteen. The white men sank shafts, but the Chinese worked where they cared among the holdings on the surface. The entire country was a treasure box, but its wealth was hidden a few feet underneath the surface soil weathered during the

ages from the big ironstone-copper carbonate reef which dominated the place. The Chinese, assisted by the Inventor Fellow, who got more ideas from them than he ever got elsewhere, constructed several weird contrivances to separate all other minerals from the galena, except the silver, and as a result a concentrate was obtained which carried 35 per cent. lead and more than 2,000 ounces of silver per ton. Of course this was only about a 50 per cent. efficiency, as it was estimated that four tons of ore were required to yield one ton of concentrate, but it was a cheap and simple treatment which returned far more than the smelters in Cloncurry would have given after deducting transport charges and allowing for the extra labour entailed.

Meanwhile the country was gone over carefully for many miles in all directions, the idea being to determine the extent of the mineral-bearing area. No finality was reached. One reef traced by Mac and the Inventor Fellow for ten miles to the west appeared in parts as a gigantic blow from which most silver had leached. It would then disappear under the surface for perhaps a hundred yards and outcrop again. Between any two points, in a straight line, the cap of the lost reef could be found by sinking a few feet, and in all cases heavily impregnated with silver.

Wolfram Dick and Big Sam traced another parallel reef four miles eastwards and found conditions the same. Old Riddell, who was probably the most experienced prospector in Queensland, and his devoted companion Fiddling Peter, struck an outcrop of some

mineral they did not know one Sunday while out hunting anything on feet or wings that a Chinaman could charm into a stew. The spear grass completely overgrew the reef before they had followed far and they indulged in another bush fire. Over the sooty debris they then rode along on the cap of the formation, and were still doing so when, after about a ten-mile journey, they found themselves on a ridge which now formed a spur of the highest hills in the country. That was the biggest reef Old Riddell had ever seen, but its size frightened him. He told his companion that he was too old to begin shifting a mountain with pick and shovel, so they took samples and came home. The Professor's assays later gave 100 ounces of silver and ½ ounce of gold per ton! The presence of antimony had discoloured the reef so much that even Riddell had been unable to tell its nature by sight. Fiddling Peter did not count. He was not supposed to know the difference between carbonate of copper and baking powder!

But everything did not pan out according to expectations. The Professor made an elaborate calculation and announced that there was more silver-lead ore inside a radius of five miles than could be mined in the next hundred years, and asserted that every ten feet "proved," under water level would mean double that output.

"I reckon we'll have to go wandering again, then," remarked Big Sam when he heard what the Professor said. "Those lodes don't seem to live under water level, and if the stuff they carry above will only hold out a hundred years what's the use of them to us?"

"We'll all be prospecting where we won't need gelignite by that time," said Mac ambiguously. "But all the same, Sam is right. The lodes in all the shafts peter out as we get down, and even the hole sunk by J.R. is barren on bottom, and he hadn't struck water."

"His was a vertical shaft and ours are on the underlie" (following the lode at its dipping angle), reminded the Professor; but his face showed that he knew they all petered out and that his answer was not saying they did not.

A few days' further work proved that *they did*, although, as all were inclined to believe, there was every probability of the fissures opening out again when the constant zone, deeper still, was reached.

"We can easily make all the money we want inside the hundred years the top levels will last," Fiddling Peter said hopefully, but somehow the original four men showed no enthusiasm. They had got the eternal "move-on" feeling again.

A horse team had gone into Cloncurry with a load of concentrates a fortnight before and was expected back any day with waggons and stores and, pending the news of what price the metal had fetched, the entire camp was now wondering whether all should work the ore near the surface like the Chinamen, or set about installing boilers and pumps for deep-sinking purposes.

That night a rider reached camp in advance of the returning team, bearing letters, telegrams and news of the outside world. The concentrates had been bought by the buying agent of some big metal corporation and the price paid was a great deal higher

than had been expected. The camp was delirious with joy.

"But the secret is out," said the rider when he got a chance to say more. "The Chinkies in the town are showing specimens around and two white fellows have reported that they rode over some reefs up about here a month ago and picked up samples of the same stuff."

"That would be the two fellows who started that bush fire," put in Mac unblushingly.

"Anyhow," the man went on, "they don't know exactly where they picked up the samples, and our team is coming along dead slow, so that any followers will not get here until we've pegged out ground for all our friends. . . ."

But that rush did not materialize, and the pent-up rains burst over the land the night the returning team got into camp. The weather now made any rush unlikely for some months, but it also rendered the continuance of further surface work impossible. Incidentally, the first night's storm waters carried away the Chinamen's camp and all their unique treatment plant.

A week later, the four men who had met Ah King among the distant Gregory Ranges rode into Cloncurry. They had said goodbye to the others.

"If you strike things good in depth let the world know," they had said to those left behind; "we'll come back when we hear the news."

The four comrades went down the line to Townsville and thence shipped to Sydney. They had another idea in their minds, suggested by a cable one had

received from an old comrade in South Africa. But even prospectors strike worry when they visit civilization, and in Sydney one of them struck it badly. He came home to Britain and before him as he writes these lines is a current newspaper which announces in large letters that: "A cable from Australia announces that the Government mineralogist and other experts who have just visited the new silver-lead find near Cloncurry in North Queensland, report that the field is a second Broken Hill and will last at least a century." His stay at home will not be long.

THE END

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