THE BLACK OPAL

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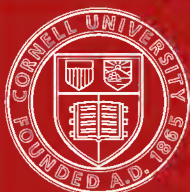

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The Black Opal

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The Black Opal

BY

KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD

AUTHOR OF "THE PIONEERS," "WINDLESTRAWS," ETC.

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THE BLACK OPAL

PART I

CHAPTER I

A STRING of vehicles moved slowly out of the New Town, taking the road over the long, low slope of the Ridge to the plains.

Nothing was moving on the wide stretch of the plains or under the fine, clear blue sky of early spring, except this train of shabby, dust-covered vehicles. The road, no more than a track of wheels on shingly earth, wound lazily through paper daisies growing in drifts beside it, and throwing a white coverlet to the dim, circling horizon. The faint, dry fragrance of paper daisies was in the air; a native cuckoo calling.

The little girl sitting beside Michael Brady in Newton's buggy glanced behind her now and then. Michael was driving the old black horse from the coach stables and Newton's bay mare, and Sophie and her father were sitting beside him on the front seat. In the open back of the buggy behind them lay a long box with wreaths and bunches of paper daisies and budda blossoms over it.

Sophie knew all the people on the road, and to whom the horses and buggies they had borrowed belonged. Jun Johnson and Charley Heathfield were riding together in the Afghan storekeeper's sulky with his fat white pony before them. Anwah Kaked and Mrs. Kaked had

the store cart themselves. Watty and Mrs. Frost were on the coach. Ed. Ventry was driving them and had put up the second seat for George and Mrs. Woods and Maggie Grant. Peter Newton and Cash Wilson followed in Newton's newly varnished black sulky. Sam Nancarrow had given Martha M'Cready a lift, and Pony-Fence Inglewood was driving Mrs. Archie and Mrs. Ted Cross in Robb's old heavy buggy, with the shaggy draught mare used for carting water in the township during the summer, in the shafts. The Flails' home-made jinker, whose body was painted a dull yellow, came last of the vehicles on the road. Sophie could just see Arthur Henty and two or three stockmen from Warria riding through a thin haze of red dust. But she knew men were walking two abreast behind the vehicles and horsemen—Bill Grant, Archie and Ted Cross, and a score of miners from the Three Mile and the Punti rush. At a curve of the road she had seen Snow-Shoes and Potch straggling along behind the others, the old man stooping to pick wild flowers by the roadside, and Potch plodding on, looking straight in front of him.

Buggies, horses, and people, they had come all the way from her home at the Old Town. Almost everybody who lived on Fallen Star Ridge was there, driving, riding, or walking on the road across the plains behind Michael, her father, and herself. It was all so strange to Sophie ; she felt so strange in the black dress she had on and which Mrs. Grant had cut down from one of her own. There was a black ribbon on her old yellow straw hat too, and she had on a pair of black cotton gloves.

Sophie could not believe her mother was what they called " dead " ; that it was her mother in the box with flowers on just behind her. They had walked along this very road, singing and gathering wild flowers, and had waited to watch the sun set, or the moon rise, so often.

She glanced at her father. He was sitting beside her, a piece of black stuff on his arm and a strip of the same material round his old felt hat. The tears poured down his cheeks, and he shook out the large, new, white

handkerchief he had bought at Chassy Robb's store that morning, and blew his nose every few minutes. He spoke sometimes to Michael; but Michael did not seem to hear him. Michael sat staring ahead, his face as though cut in wood.

Sophie remembered Michael had been with her when Mrs. Grant said. . . . Her mind went back over that.

"She's dead, Michael," Mrs. Grant had said,

And she had leaned against the window beside her mother's bed, crying. Michael was on his knees by the bed. Sophie had thought Michael looked so funny, kneeling like that, with his head in his hands, his great heavy boots jutting up from the floor. The light, coming in through the window near the head of the bed, shone on the nails in the soles of his boots. It was so strange to see these two people whom she knew quite well, and whom she had only seen doing quite ordinary, everyday things, behaving like this. Sophie had gazed at her mother who seemed to be sleeping. Then Mrs. Grant had come to her, her face working, tears streaming down her cheeks. She had taken her hand and they had gone out of the room together. Sophie could not remember what Mrs. Grant had said to her then. . . . After a little while Mrs. Grant had gone back to the room where her mother was, and Sophie went out to the lean-to where Potch was milking the goats.

She told him what Mrs. Grant had said about her mother, and he stopped milking. They had gazed at each other with inquiry and bewilderment in their eyes; then Potch turned his face away as he sat on the milking-stool, and Sophie knew he was crying. She wondered why other people had cried so much and she had not cried at all.

When Potch was taking the bucket of milk across the yard, her father had come round the corner of the house. His heavy figure with its broad, stooping shoulders was outlined against the twilight sky. He made for the door, shouting incoherently. Sophie and Potch stood still as they saw him.

Catching sight of them, he had turned and come towards them.

"We're on opal," he cried; "on opal!"

There was a feverish light in his eyes; he was trembling with excitement.

He had pulled a small, washed oatmeal bag from his pocket, untied the string, tumbled some stones on to the outstretched palm of his hand, and held them for Potch to look at.

"Not a bad bit in the lot. . . . Look at the fire, there in the black potch! . . . And there's green and gold for you. A lovely bit of pattern! And look at this . . . and this!" he cried eagerly, going over the two or three small knobbies in his hand.

Potch looked at him dazedly.

"Didn't they tell you——?" he began.

Her father had closed his hands over the stones and opal dirt.

"I'm going in now," he said, thrusting the opals into the bag.

He had gone towards the house again, shouting: "We're on opal! On opal!"

Sophie followed him indoors. Mrs. Grant had met her father on the threshold of the room where her mother was.

"Why didn't you come when I sent for you?" she asked.

"I didn't think it could be as bad as you made out—that she was really dying," Sophie could hear her father saying again. "And we'd just struck opal, me and Jun, struck it rich. Got two or three stones already—great stuff, lovely pattern, green and orange, and fire all through the black potch. And there's more of it! Heaps more where it came from, Jun says. We're next Watty and George Woods—and no end of good stuff's come out of that claim."

Mrs. Grant stared at him as Potch had done. Then she stood back from the doorway of the room behind her.

Every gesture of her father's, of Mrs. Grant's, and of Michael's, was photographed on Sophie's brain. She could see that room again—the quiet figure on the bed,

light golden-brown hair, threaded with silver, lying in thin plaits beside the face of yellow ivory; bare, thin arms and hands lying over grey blankets and a counterpane of faded red twill; the window still framing a square of twilight sky on which stars were glittering. Mrs. Grant had brought a candle and put it on the box near the bed, and the candle light had flared on Mrs. Grant's figure, showing it, gaunt and accusing, against the shadows of the room. It had showed Sophie her father, also, between Michael and Mrs. Grant, looking from one to the other of them, and to the still figure on the bed, with a dazed, penitent expression. . . .

The horses jogged slowly on the long, winding road. Sophie was conscious of the sunshine, warm and bright, over the plains, the fragrance of paper daisies in the air; the cuckoos calling in the distance. Her father snuffled and wiped his eyes and nose with his new handkerchief as he sat beside her.

"She was so good, Michael," he said, "too good for this world."

Michael did not reply.

"Too good for this world!" Paul murmured again.

He had said that at least a score of times this morning. Sophie had heard him say it to people down at the house before they started. She had never heard him talk of her mother like that before. She looked at him, sensing vaguely, and resenting the banality. She thought of him as he had always been with her mother and with her, querulous and complaining, or noisy and rough when he had been drinking. They had spent the night in a shed at the back of the house sometimes when he was like that. . . .

And her mother had said:

"You'll take care of Sophie, Michael?"

Sophie remembered how she had stood in the doorway of her mother's room, that afternoon—How long ago was it? Not only a day surely? She had stood there until her mother had seen her, awed without knowing why, reluctant to move, afraid almost. Michael had nodded without speaking.

" As though she were your own child ? "

" So help me, God," Michael said.

Her mother's eyes had rested on Michael's face. She had smiled at him. Sophie did not think she had ever seen her smile like that before, although her smile had always been like a light on her face.

" Don't let him take her away," her mother had said after a moment. " I want her to grow up in this place . . . in the quiet . . . never to know the treacherous . . . whirlpool . . . of life beyond the Ridge."

Then her mother had seen and called to her.

Sophie glanced back at the slowly-moving train of vehicles. They had a dreary, dream-like aspect. She felt as if she were moving in a dream. Everything she saw, and heard, and did, was invested with unreality; she had a vague, unfeeling curiosity about everything.

" You see, Michael," her father was saying when she heard him talking again, " we'd just got out that big bit when Potch came and said that Marya . . . that Marya. . . . I couldn't believe it was true . . . and there was the opal! And when I got home in the evening she was gone. My poor Marya! And I'd brought some of the stones to show her."

He broke down and wept. " Do you think she knows about the opal, Michael ? "

Michael did not reply. Sophie looked up at him. The pain of his face, a sudden passionate grieving that wrung it, translated to her what this dying of her mother meant. She huddled against Michael; in all her trouble and bewilderment there seemed nothing to do but to keep close to Michael.

And so they came to the gate of a fenced plot which was like a quiet garden on the plains. Several young coolebahs, and two or three older trees standing in it, scattered light shade; and a few head-stones and wooden crosses, painted white or bleached by the weather, showed above the waving grass and wild flowers.

Sophie held the reins when Michael got down to open the gate. Then he took his seat again and they drove in

through the gateway. Other people tied their horses and buggies to the fence outside.

When all the people who had been driving, riding, or walking on the road went towards an old coolebah under which the earth had been thrown up and a grave had been dug, Michael told Sophie to go with her father and stand beside them. She did so, and dull, grieving eyes were turned to her; glances of pitiful sympathy. But Snow-Shoes came towards the little crowd beside the tree, singing.

He was the last person to come into the cemetery, and everybody stared at him. An old man in worn white moleskins and cotton shirt, an old white felt hat on his head, the wrappings of bag and leather, which gave him his name, on his feet—although snow never fell on the Ridge—he swung towards them. The flowers he had gathered as he came along, not only paper daisies, but the blue flowers of crowsfoot, gold buttons, and creamy and lavender, sweet-scented budda blossoms, were done up in a tight little bunch in his hand. He drew nearer still singing under his breath, and Sophie realised he was going over and over the fragment of a song that her mother had loved and used often to sing herself.

There was a curious smile in his eyes as he came to a standstill beside her. The leaves of the coolebah were bronze and gold in the sunshine, a white-tail in its branches reiterating plaintively: "Sweet pretty creature! Sweet pretty creature!" Michael, George Woods, Archie Cross, and Cash Wilson, came towards the tree, their shoulders bowed beneath the burden they were carrying; but Snow-Shoes smiled at everybody as though this were really a joyous occasion, and they did not understand. Only he understood, and smiled because of his secret knowledge.

CHAPTER II

In a week or two Mrs. Rouminof's name had dropped out of Ridge life almost as if she had never been part of it.

At first people talked of her, of Paul, of Sophie, and of Michael. They gossiped of her looks and manner, of her strange air of serenity and content, although her life on the Ridge was, they surmised, a hard one, and different from the life she had come from. But her death caused no more disturbance than a stone thrown into quiet water, falling to the bottom, does. No one was surprised when it was known Paul and Sophie had gone to live with Michael. Everyone expected Michael would try to look after them for a while, although they could not imagine where he was going to find room for them in his small house filled with books.

It was natural enough that Michael should have taken charge of Sophie and Rouminof, and that he should have made all arrangements for Mrs. Rouminof's funeral. If it had been left to Paul to bury his wife, people agreed, she would not have been buried at all; or, at least, not until the community insisted. And Michael would have done as much for any shiftless man. He was next-of-kin to all lonely and helpless men and women on the Ridge, Michael Brady.

Every man, woman, or child on the Ridge knew Michael. His lean figure in shabby blue dungarees, faded shirt, and weathered felt hat, with no more than a few threads of its band left, was as familiar as any tree, shed, or dump on the fields. He walked with a slight stoop, a pipe in his mouth always, his head bent as though he were thinking hard; but there was no hard thought in

his eyes, only meditativeness, and a faint smile if he were stopped and spoken to unexpectedly.

"You're a regular 'cyclopædia, Michael," the men said sometimes when he had given information on a subject they were discussing.

"Not me," Michael would reply as often as not. "I just came across that in a book I was reading the other day."

Ridge folk were proud of Michael's books, and strangers who saw his miscellaneous collection—mostly of cheap editions, old school books, and shilling, sixpenny, and penny publications of literary masterpieces, poetry, and works on industrial and religious subjects—did not wonder that it impressed Ridge folk, or that Michael's knowledge of the world and affairs was what it was. He had tracts, leaflets, and small books on almost every subject under the sun. Books were regarded as his weakness, and, remembering it, some of the men, when they had struck opal and left the town, occasionally sent a box of any old books they happened to come across to Michael, knowing that a printed page was a printed page to him in the long evenings when he lay on the sofa under his window. Michael himself had spent all the money he could, after satisfying the needs of his everyday life, on those tracts, pamphlets, and cheap books he hoarded in his hut on shelves made from wooden boxes and old fruit-cases.

But there was nothing of the schoolmaster about him. He rarely gave information unless he was asked for it. The men appreciated that, although they were proud of his erudition and books. They knew dimly but surely that Michael used his books for, not against, themselves; and he was attached to books and learning, chiefly for what they could do for them, his mates. In all community discussions his opinion carried considerable weight. A matter was often talked over with more or less heat, differences of opinion thrashed out while Michael smoked and listened, weighing the arguments. He rarely spoke until his view was asked for. Then in a couple of minutes he would straighten out the subject of

controversy, show what was to be said for and against a proposition, sum up, and give his conclusions, for or against it.

Michael Brady, however, was much more the general utility man than encyclopædia of Fallen Star Ridge. If a traveller—swagman—died on the road, it was Michael who saw he got a decent burial; Michael who was sent for if a man had his head smashed in a brawl, or a wife died unexpectedly. He was the court of final appeal in quarrels and disagreements between mates; and once when Martha M'Cready was away in Sydney, he had even brought a baby into the world. He was something of a dentist, too, honorary dentist to anyone on the Ridge who wanted a tooth pulled out; and the friend of any man, woman, or child in distress.

And he did things so quietly, so much as a matter of course, that people did not notice what he did for them, or for the rest of the Ridge. They took it for granted he liked doing what he did; that he liked helping them. It was his sympathy, the sense of his oneness with all their lives, and his shy, whimsical humour and innate refusal to be anything more than they were, despite his books and the wisdom with which they were quite willing to credit him, that gained for Michael the regard of the people of the Ridge, and made him the unconscious power he was in the community.

Of about middle height, and sparely built, Michael was forty-five, or thereabouts, when Mrs. Rouminof died. He looked older, yet had the vigour and energy of a much younger man. Crowsfeet had gathered at the corners of his eyes, and there were the lines beneath them which all back-country men have from screwing their sight against the brilliant sunshine of the north-west. But the white of his eyes was as clear as the shell of a bird's egg, the irises grey, flecked with hazel and green, luminous, and ringed with fine black lines. When he pushed back his hat, half a dozen lines from frowning against the glare were on his forehead too. His thin, black hair, streaked with grey, lay flat across and close to his head. He had a well-shaped nose and the sensitive nostrils of a

thoroughbred, although Michael himself said he was no breed to speak of, but plain Australian—and proud of it. His father was born in the country, and so was his mother. His father had been a teemster, and his mother a storekeeper's daughter. Michael had wandered from one mining field to another in his young days. He had worked in Bendigo and Gippsland; later in Silver Town; and from the Barrier Ranges had migrated to Chalk Cliffs, and from the Cliffs to Fallen Star Ridge. He had been one of the first comers to the Ridge when opal was discovered there.

The Rouminofs had been on Chalk Cliffs too, and had come to the Ridge in the early days of the rush. Paul had set up at the Cliffs as an opal buyer, it was said; but he knew very little about opal. Anybody could sell him a stone for twice as much as it was worth, and he could never get a price from other buyers for the stones he bought. He soon lost any money he possessed, and had drifted and swung with the careless life of the place. He had worked as a gouger for a while when the blocks were boughtup. Then when the rush to the Ridge started, and most of the men tramped north to try their luck on the new fields, he went with them; and Mrs. Rouminof and Sophie followed a little later on Ed. Ventry's bullock wagon, when Ed. was taking stores to the rush.

Mrs. Rouminof had lived in a hut at the Old Town even after the township was moved to the eastern slope of the Ridge. She had learnt a good deal about opal on the Cliffs, and soon after she came to the Ridge set up a cutting-wheel, and started cutting and polishing stones. Several of the men brought her their stones, and after a while she was so good at her work that she often added a couple of pounds to the value of a stone. She kept a few goats too, to assure a means of livelihood when there was no opal about, and she sold goats' milk and butter in the township. She had never depended on Rouminof to earn a living, which was just as well, Fallen Star folk agreed, since, as long as they had known him, he had never done so. For a long time he had drifted between the mines and Newton's, cadging drinks or borrowing

money from anybody who would lend to him. Sometimes he did odd jobs at Newton's or the mail stables for the price of a few drinks; but no man who knew him would take up a claim, or try working a mine with him.

His first mate on the Ridge had been Pony-Fence Inglewood. They sank a hole on a likely spot behind the Old Town; but Paul soon got tired of it. When they had not seen anything but bony potch for a while, Paul made up his mind there was nothing in the place. Pony-Fence rather liked it. He was for working a little longer, but to oblige his mate he agreed to sink again. Soon after they had started, Paul began to appear at the dump when the morning was half through, or not at all. Or, as often as not, when he did decide to sling a pick, or dig a bit, he groaned so about the pains in his back or his head that as often as not Pony-Fence told him to go home and get the missus to give him something for it.

The mildest man on the fields, Pony-Fence Inglewood did not discover for some time what the boys said was correct. There was nothing the matter with Rum-Enough but a dislike of shifting mullock if he could get anyone to shift it for him. When he did discover he was doing the work of the firm, Pony-Fence and Paul had it out with each other, and parted company. Pony-Fence took a new mate, Bully Bryant, a youngster from Budda, who was anxious to put any amount of elbow grease into his search for a fortune, and Paul drifted. He had several mates afterwards, newcomers to the fields, who wanted someone to work with them, but they were all of the same opinion about him.

"Tell Rum-Enough there's a bit of colour about, and he'll work like a chow," they said; "but if y' don't see anything for a day or two, he goes as flat as the day before yesterday."

If he had been working, and happened on a knobby, or a bit of black potch with a light or two in it, Paul was like a child, crazy with happiness. He could talk of nothing else. He thought of nothing else. He slung his pick and shovelled dirt as long as you would let him, with a devouring impatience, in a frenzy of eagerness. The

smallest piece of stone with no more than sun-flash was sufficient to put him in a state of frantic excitement.

Strangers to the Ridge sometimes wanted to know whether Rouminof had ever had a touch of the sun. But Ridge folk knew he was not mad. He had the opal fever all right, they said, but he was not mad.

When Jun Johnson blew along at the end of one summer and could not get anyone to work with him, he took Paul on. The two chummed up and started to sink a hole together, and the men made bets as to the chance of their ever getting ten or a dozen feet below ground; but before long they were astounded to see the old saw of setting a thief to catch a thief working true in this instance. If anybody was loafing on the new claim, it was not Rouminof. He did every bit of his share of the first day's hard pick work and shovelling. If anybody was slacking, it was Jun rather than Paul. Jun kept his mate's nose to the grindstone, and worked more successfully with him than anyone else had ever done. He knew it, too, and was proud of his achievement. Joking over it at Newton's in the evening, he would say:

"Great mate I've got now! Work? Never saw a chow work like him! Work his fingers to the bone, he would, if I'd let him. It's a great life, a gouger's, if only you've got the right sort of mate!"

Ordinarily, of course, mates shared their finds. There was no question of what partners would get out of the luck of one or the other. But Jun—he had his own little way of doing business, everybody knew. He had been on the Ridge before. He and his mate did not have any sensational luck, but they had saved up two or three packets of opal and taken them down to Sydney to sell. Old Bill Olsen was his mate then, and, although Bill had said nothing of the business, the men guessed there had been something shady about it. Jun had his own story of what happened. He said the old chap had "got on his ear" in Sydney, and that "a couple of spielers had rooked him of his stones." But Bill no longer noticed Jun if they passed each other on the same track on the Ridge, and Jun pretended to be sore about it.

"It's dirt," he said, "the old boy treating me as if I had anything to do with his bad luck losin' those stones!"

"Why don't you speak to him about it?" somebody asked.

"Oh, we had it out in Sydney," Jun replied, "and it's no good raking the whole thing up again. Begones is bygones—that's my motto. But if any man wants to have a grudge against me, well, let him. It's a free country. That's all I've got to say. Besides, the poor old cuss isn't all there, perhaps."

"Don't you fret," Michael had said, "he's all right. He's got as much there as you or me, or any of us for that matter."

"Oh well, you know, Michael," Jun declared. He was not going to quarrel with Michael Brady. "What you say goes, anyhow!"

That was how Jun established himself anywhere. He had an easy, plausible, good-natured way. All the men laughed and drank with him and gave him grudging admiration, notwithstanding the threads and shreds of resentments and distrusts which old stories of his dealings, even with mates, had put in their minds. None of those stories had been proved against him, his friends said, Charley Heathfield among them. That was a fact. But there were too many of them to be good for any man's soul, Ridge men, who took Jun with a grain of salt, thought—Michael Brady, George Woods, Archie Cross, and Watty Frost among them; but Charley Heathfield, Michael's mate, had struck up a friendship with Jun since his return to the Ridge.

George Woods and the Crosses said it was a case of birds of a feather, but they did not say that to Michael. They knew Michael had the sort of affection for Charley that a man has for a dog he has saved from drowning.

Charley Heathfield had been down on his luck when he went to the Ridge, his wife and a small boy with him; and the rush which he had expected to bring him a couple of hundred pounds' worth of opal at least, if it did not make

his fortune, had left him worse off than it found him—a piece of debris in its wake. He and Rouminof had put down a shaft together, and as neither of them, after the first few weeks, did any more work than they could help, and were drunk or quarrelling half of their time, nothing came of their efforts.

Charley, when his wife died, was ill himself, and living in a hut a few yards from Michael's. She had been a waitress in a city restaurant, and he had married her, he said, because she could carry ten dishes of hot soup on one arm and four trays on the other. A tall, stolid, pale-faced woman, she had hated the back-country and her husband's sense of humour, and had fretted herself to death rather than endure them. Charley had no particular opinion of himself or of her. He called his youngster Potch—"a little bit of Potch," he said, because the kid would never be anything better than poor opal at the best of times.

Michael had nursed Charley while he was ill during that winter, and had taken him in hand when he was well enough to get about again. Charley was supposed to have weak lungs; but better food, steady habits, and the fine, dry air of a mild summer set him up wonderfully. Snow-Shoes had worked with Michael for a long time; he said that he was getting too old for the everyday toil of the mine, though, when Michael talked of taking on Charley to work with them. It would suit him all right if Michael found another mate. Michael and Charley Heathfield had worked together ever since, and Snow-Shoes had made his living as far as anybody knew by noodling on the dumps.

But Charley and Michael had not come on a glimmer of opal worth speaking of for nearly twelve months. They were hanging on to their claim, hoping each day they would strike something good. There is a superstition among the miners that luck often changes when it seems at its worst. Both Charley and Michael had storekeeper's accounts as long as their arms, and the men knew if their luck did not change soon, one or the other of them would have to go over to Warria, or to one of the

other stations, and earn enough money there to keep the other going on the claim.

They had no doubt it would be Michael who would have to go. Charley was not fond of work, and would be able to loaf away his time very pleasantly on the mine, making only a pretence of doing anything, until Michael returned. They wondered why Michael did not go and get a move into his affairs at once. Paul and Sophie might have something to do with his putting off going, they told each other; Michael was anxious how Paul and his luck would fare when it was a question of squaring up with Jun, and as to how the squaring up, when it came, would affect Sophie.

Some of them had been concerning themselves on Paul's account also. They did not like a good deal they had seen of the way Jun was using Paul, and they had resolved to see he got fair play when it was time for a settlement of his and Jun's account. George Woods, Watty Frost, and Bill Grant went along to talk the matter over with Michael one evening, and found him fixing a shed at the back of the hut which he and Potch had put up for Sophie and her father, a few yards from Charley Heathfield's, and in line with Michael's own hut at the old Flash-in-the-Pan rush.

"Paul says he's going away if he gets a good thing out of his and Jun's find," George Woods said.

"It'll be a good thing—if he gets a fair deal," Michael replied.

"He'll get that—if we can fix it," Watty Frost said.

"Yes," Michael agreed.

"Can't think why you're taking so much trouble with this place if Paul and Sophie are going away soon, Michael," George Woods remarked at the end of their talk.

"They're not gone yet," Michael said, and went on fastening a sapling across the brushwood he had laid over the roof of the shed.

The men laughed. They knew Paul well enough to realise that there was no betting on what he would or would not do. They understood Michael did not approve of his plans for Sophie. Nobody did. But what was to

be done? If Paul had the money and got the notion into his head that it would be a good thing to go away, Sophie and he would probably go away. But the money would not last, people thought; then Sophie and her father would come back to the Ridge again, or Michael would go to look for them. Being set adrift on the world with no one to look after her would be hard on Sophie, it was agreed, but nobody saw how Rouminof was to be prevented from taking her away if he wanted to.

CHAPTER III

THE unwritten law of the Ridge was that mates pooled all the opal they found and shared equally, so that all Jun held was Rouminof's, and all that he held was Jun's. Ordinarily one man kept the lot, and as Jun was the better dealer and master spirit, it was natural enough he should hold the stones, or, at any rate, the best of them. But Rouminof was like a child with opal. He wanted some of the stones to handle, polish up a bit, and show round. Jun humoured him a good deal. He gave Paul a packet of the stuff they had won to carry round himself. He was better tempered and more easy-going with Rouminof, the men admitted, than most of them would have been; but they could not believe Jun was going to deal squarely by him.

Jun and his mate seemed on the best of terms. Paul followed him about like a dog, referring to him, quoting him, and taking his word for everything. And Jun was openly genial with Paul, and talked of the times they were going to have when they went down to Sydney together to sell their opal.

Paul was never tired of showing his stones, and almost every night at Newton's he spread them out on a table, looked them over, and held them up to admiration. It was good stuff, but the men who had seen Jun's package knew that he had kept the best stones.

For a couple of weeks after they had come on their nest of knobbies, Jun and Paul had gouged and shovelled dirt enthusiastically; but the wisp fires, mysteriously and suddenly as they had come, had died out of the stone they moved. Paul searched frantically. He and Jun

worked like bullocks; but the luck which had flashed on them was withdrawn. Although they broke new tunnels, went through tons of opal dirt with their hands, and tracked every trace of black potch through a reef of cement stone in the mine, not a spark of blue or green light had they seen for over a week. That was the way of black opal, everybody knew, and knew, too, that the men who had been on a good patch of fired stone would not work on a claim, shovelling dirt, long after it disappeared. They would be off down to Sydney, if no buyer was due to visit the fields, eager to make the most of the good time their luck and the opal would bring them. "Opal only brings you bad luck when you don't get enough of it," Ridge folk say.

George and Watty had a notion Jun would not stick to the claim much longer, when they arranged the night at Newton's to settle his and Paul's account with each other. Michael, the Crosses, Cash Wilson, Pony-Fence Inglewood, Bill Grant, Bully Bryant, old Bill Olsen, and most of the staunch Ridge men were in the bar, Charley Heathfield drinking with Jun, when George Woods strolled over to the table where Rouminof was showing Sam Nancarrow his stones. Sam was blacksmith, undertaker, and electoral registrar in Fallen Star, and occasionally did odd butchering jobs when there was no butcher in the township. He had the reputation, too, of being one of the best judges of black opal on the fields.

Paul was holding up a good-looking knobby so that red, green, and gold lights glittered through its shining potch as he moved it.

"That's a nice bit of stone you've got, Rummy!" George exclaimed.

Paul agreed. "But you should see her by candle light, George!" he said eagerly.

He held up the stone again so that it caught the light of a lamp hanging over the bar where Peter Newton was standing. The eyes of two or three of the men followed the stone as Paul moved it, and its internal fires broke in showers of sparks.

"Look, look!" Paul cried, "now she's showin'!"

" How much have you got on her ? " Sam Nancarrow asked.

" Jun thinks she'll bring £50 or £60 at least."

Sam's and George Woods' eyes met : £50 was a liberal estimate of the stone's value. If Paul got £10 or £15 for it he would be doing well, they knew.

" They're nice stones, aren't they ? " Paul demanded, sorting over the opals he had spread out on the table. He held up a piece of green potch with a sun-flash through it.

" My oath ! " George Woods exclaimed.

" But where's the big beaut. ? " Archie Cross asked, looking over the stones with George.

" Oh, Jun's got her," Paul replied. " Jun ! " he called, " the boys want to see the big stone."

" Right ! " Jun swung across to the table. Several of the men by the bar followed him. " She's all right," he said.

He sat down, pulled a shabby leather wallet from his pocket, opened it, and took out a roll of dirty flannel ; he undid the flannel carefully, and spread the stones on the table. There were several pieces of opal in the packet. The men, who had seen them before separately, uttered soft oaths of admiration and surprise when they saw all the opals together. Two knobbies were as big as almonds, and looked like black almonds, fossilised, with red fire glinting through their green and gold ; a large flat stone had stars of red, green, amethyst, blue and gold shifting over and melting into each other ; and several smaller stones, all good stuff, showed smouldering fire in depths of green and blue and gold-lit darkness.

Jun held the biggest of the opals at arm's length from the light of the hanging lamp. The men followed his movement, the light washing their faces as it did the stone.

" There she goes ! " Paul breathed.

" What have you got on her ? "

" A hundred pounds, or thereabouts."

" You'll get it easy ! "

Jun put the stone down. He took up another, a smaller piece of opal, of even finer quality. The stars were strewn over and over each other in its limpid black pool.

" Nice pattern," he said.

" Yes," Watty Frost murmured.

" She's not as big as the other . . . but better pattern," Archie Cross said.

" Reckon you'll get £100 for her too, Jun ? "

" Yup ! " Jun put down the stone.

Then he held up each stone in turn, and the men gave it the same level, appraising glance. There was no envy in their admiration. In every man's eyes was the same worshipful appreciation of black opal.

Jun was drunk with his luck. His luck, as much as Newton's beer, was in his head this night. He had shown his stones before, but never like this, the strength of his luck.

" How much do you think there is in your packet, Jun ? " Archie Cross asked.

Jun stretched his legs under the table.

" A thou' if there's a penny."

Archie whistled.

" And how much do you reckon there is in Rum-Enough's ? " George Woods put the question.

" Four or five hundred," Jun said ; " but we're evens, of course."

He leaned across the table and winked at George.

" Oh, I say," Archie protested, " what's the game ? "

They knew Jun wanted them to believe he was joking, humouring Paul. But that was not what they had arranged this party for.

" Why not let Rum-Enough mind a few of the good stones, Jun ? "

" What ? "

Jun started and stared about him. It was so unusual for one man to suggest to another what he ought to do, or that there was anything like bad faith in his dealings with his mates, that his blood rose.

" Why not let Rum-Enough mind a few of the good stones ? " George repeated, mildly eyeing him over the bowl of his pipe.

" Yes," Watty butted in, " Rummy ought to hold a few of the good stones, Jun. Y' see, you might be run into by rats . . . or get knocked out—and have them shook off you, like Olly did down in Sydney—and it'd be hard on Rummy, that——"

" When I want your advice about how me and my mate's going to work things, I'll ask you," Jun snarled.

" We don't mind giving it before we're asked, Jun," Watty explained amiably.

Archie Cross leaned across the table. " How about giving Paul a couple of those bits of decent pattern—if you stick to the big stone ? " he said.

" What's the game ? " Jun demanded, sitting up angrily. His hand went over his stones.

" Wait on, Jun ! " Michael said. " We're not thieves here. You don't have to grab y'r stones."

Jun looked about him. He saw that men of the Ridge, in the bar, were all standing round the table. Only Peter Newton was left beside the bar, although Charley Heathfield, on the outer edge of the crowd, regarded him with a smile of faint sympathy and cynicism. Paul leaned over the table before him, and looked from Jun to the men who had fallen in round the table, a dazed expression broadening on his face.

" What the hell's the matter ? " Jun cried, starting to his feet. " What are you chaps after ? Can't I manage me own affairs and me mate's ? "

The crowd moved a little closer to him. There was no chance of making a break for it.

George Woods laughed.

" Course you can't, Jun ! " he said. " Not on the Ridge, you can't manage your affairs and your mate's . . . your way . . . Not without a little helpful advice from the rest of us. . . . Sit down ! "

Jun glanced about him again ; then, realising the intention on every face, and something of the purpose at the back of it, he sat down again.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed. "I see—you believe old Olsen's story. That's about the strength of it. Never thought . . . a kid, or a chicken, 'd believe that bloody yarn. Well, what's the advice . . . boys? Let's have it, and be done with it!"

"We'll let bygones be bygones, Jun. We won't say anything about . . . why," George remarked. "But the boys and I was just thinking it might be as well if you and Rum-Enough sort of shared up the goods now, and then . . . if he doesn't want to go to Sydney same time as you, Jun, he can deal his goods here, or when he does go."

No one knew better than Jun the insult which all this seemingly good-natured talking covered. He knew that neither he, nor any other man, would have dared to suggest that Watty, or George, or Michael, were not to be trusted to deal for their mates, to the death even. But then he knew, too, they were to be trusted; that there was not money enough in the world to buy their loyalty to each other and to their mates, and that he could measure their suspicion of his good faith by his knowledge of himself. To play their game as they would have played it was the only thing for him to do, he recognised.

"Right!" he said, "I'm more than willing. In fact, I wouldn't have the thing on me mind—seein' the way you chaps 've taken it. But 'd like to know which one of you wouldn't 've done what I've done if Rum-Enough was your mate?"

Every man was uneasily conscious that Jun was right. Any one of them, if he had Paul for a mate, would have taken charge of the most valuable stones, in Paul's interest as well as his own. At the same time, every man felt pretty sure the thing was a horse of another colour where Jun was concerned.

"Which one of us," George Woods inquired, "if a mate'd been set on by a spieler in Sydney, would 've let him stump his way to Brinarra and foot it out here . . . like you let old Olsen?"

Jun's expression changed; his features blenched, then a flame of blood rushed over his face.

"It's a lie," he yelled. "He cleared out—I never saw him afterwards!"

"Oh well," George said, "we'll let bygones be bygones, Jun. Let's have a look at that flat stone."

Jun handed him the stone.

George held it to the light.

"Nice bit of opal," he said, letting the light play over it a moment, then passed it on to Michael and Watty.

"You keep the big stone, and Paul'll have this," Archie Cross said.

He put the stone beside Paul's little heap of gems.

Jun sat back in his chair: his eyes smouldering as the men went over his opals, appraising and allotting each one, putting some before Rouminof, and some back before him. They dealt as judicially with the stones as though they were a jury of experts on the case—as they really were. When their decisions were made, Jun had still rather the better of the stones, although the division had been as nearly fair as possible.

Paul was too dazed and amazed to speak. He glanced dubiously from his stones to Jun, who rolled his opals back in the strip of dirty flannel, folded it into his leather wallet, and dropped that into his coat pocket. Then he pushed back his chair and stood up.

Big and swarthy, with eyes which took a deeper colour from the new blue shirt he had on, Jun stood an inch or so above the other men.

"Well," he said, "you boys have put it across me to-night. You've made a mistake . . . but I'm not one to bear malice. You done right if you thought I wasn't going to deal square by Rum-Enough . . . but I'll lay you any money you like I'd 've made more money for him by selling his stones than he'll make himself—Still, that's your business . . . if you want it that way. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm just where I was—in luck. And you chaps owe me something. . . . Come and have a drink."

Most of the men, who believed Jun was behaving with better grace than they had expected him to, moved off

to have a drink with him. They were less sure than they had been earlier in the evening that they had done Rouminof a good turn by giving him possession of his share of the opals. It was just on the cards, they realised as Jun said, that instead of doing Rouminof a good turn, if Jun had been going to deal squarely by him, they had done him a rather bad one. Paul was pretty certain to make a mess of trading his own stones, and to get about half their value from an opal-buyer if he insisted on taking them down to Sydney to sell himself.

"What'll you do now your fortune's fixed up, Rummy?" George Woods asked, jokingly, when he and two or three men were left with Paul by the table.

"I'll get out of this," Paul said. "We'll go down to Sydney—me and Sophie—and we'll say good-bye to the Ridge for good."

The men laughed. It was the old song of an outsider who cared nothing for the life of the Ridge, when he got a couple of hundred pounds' worth of opal. He thought he was made for life and would never come back to the Ridge; but he always did when his money was spent. Only Michael, standing a little behind George Woods, did not smile.

"But you can't live for ever on three or four hundred quid," Watty Frost said.

"No," Paul replied eagerly, "but I can always make a bit playing at dances, and Sophie's going to be a singer. You wait till people hear her sing. . . . Her mother was a singer. She had a beautiful voice. When it went we came here. . . . But Sophie can sing as well as her mother. And she's young. She ought to make a name for herself."

He wrapped the stones before him in a piece of wadding, touching them reverently, and folded them into the tin cigarette box Michael had given him to carry about the first stones Jun had let him have. He was still mystified over the business of the evening, and why the boys had made Jun give him the other stones. He had been quite satisfied for Jun to hold most of the stones, and the best ones, as any man on the Ridge would

be for his mate to take care of their common property. There was a newspaper lying on the table. He took it, wrapped it carefully about his precious box, tied a piece of strong string round it, and let the box down carefully into the big, loose pocket of his shabby coat.

CHAPTER IV

WATTY and George were well satisfied with their night's work when they went out of the bar into the street. Michael was with them. He said nothing, but they took it for granted he was as pleased as they were at what had been done and the way in which it had been done. Michael was always chary of words, and all night they had noticed that what they called his "considering cap" had been well drawn over his brows. He stood smoking beside them and listening abstractedly to what they were saying.

"Well, that's fixed him," Watty remarked, glancing back into the room they had just left.

Jun was leaning over the bar talking to Newton, the light from the lamp above, on his red, handsome face, and cutting the bulk of his head and shoulders from the gloom of the room and the rest of the men about him. Peter Newton was serving drinks, and Jun laughing and joking boisterously as he handed them on to the men.

"He's a clever devil!" George exclaimed.

"Yes," Michael said.

"Shouldn't wonder if he didn't clear out by the coach to-morrow," George said.

"Nor me," Watty grunted.

"Well, he won't be taking Paul with him."

"Not to-morrow."

"No."

"But Rummy's going down to town soon as he can get, he says."

"Yes."

"Say, Michael, why don't you try scarin' him about losing his stones like Bill Olsen did?"

"I have."

"What does he say?"

"Says," Michael smiled, "the sharks won't get any of his money or opal."

Watty snuffed contemptuously by way of exclamation.

"Well, I'll be getting along," Michael added, and walked away in the direction of his hut.

George and Watty watched his spare figure sway down the road between the rows of huts which formed the Fallen Star township. It was a misty moonlight night, and the huts stood dark against the sheening screen of sky, with here and there a glow of light through open doorways, or small, square window panes.

"It's on Michael's mind, Rum-Enough's going and taking Sophie with him," George said.

"I don't wonder," Watty replied. "He'll come a cropper, sure as eggs. . . . And what's to become of her? Michael 'd go to town with them if he had a bean—but he hasn't. He's stony, I know."

Even to his mate he did not say why he knew, and George did not ask, understanding Watty's silence. It was not very long since George himself had given Michael a couple of pounds; but he had a very good idea Michael had little to do with the use of that money. He guessed that he would have less to do with whatever he got from Watty.

"Charley's going over to Warria to-morrow, isn't he?" he asked.

Watty grunted. "About time he did something. Michael's been grafting for him for a couple of years . . . and he'd have gone to the station himself—only he didn't want to go away till he knew what Paul was going to do. Been trying pretty hard to persuade him to leave Sophie—till he's fixed up down town—but you wouldn't believe how obstinate the idiot is. Thinks he can make a singer of her in no time . . . then she'll keep her old dad till kingdom come."

Michael's figure was lost to sight between the trees

which encroached on the track beyond the town. Jun was singing in the hotel. His great rollicking voice came to George and Watty with shouts of laughter. George, looking back through the open door, saw Rouminof had joined the crowd round the bar.

He was drinking as George's glance fell on him.

"Think he's all right?" Watty asked.

George did not reply.

"You don't suppose Jun 'd try to take the stones off of him, do you, George?" Watty inquired again. "You don't think——?"

"I don't suppose he'd dare, seein' we've . . . let him know how we feel."

George spoke slowly, as if he were not quite sure of what he was saying.

"He knows his hide 'd suffer if he tried."

"That's right."

Archie Cross came from the bar and joined them.

"He's trying to make up to the boys—he likes people to think he's Christmas, Jun," he said, "and he just wants 'em to forget that anything's been said—detrimental to his character like."

George was inclined to agree with Archie. They went to the form against the wall of the hotel and sat there smoking for a while; then all three got up to go home.

"You don't think we ought to see Rummy home?" Watty inquired hesitatingly.

He was ashamed to suggest that Rouminof, drunk, and with four or five hundred pounds' worth of opal in his pockets, was not as safe as if his pockets were empty. But Jun had brought a curious unrest into the community. Watty, or Archie, or George, themselves would have walked about with the same stuff in their pockets without ever thinking anybody might try to put a finger on it.

None of the three looked at each other as they thought over the proposition. Then Archie spoke:

"I told Ted," he murmured apologetically, "to keep an eye on Rummy, as he's coming home. If there's rats about, you never can tell what may happen. We ain't

discovered yet who put it over on Rummy and Jun on the day of Mrs. Rouminof's funeral. So I just worded Ted to keep an eye on the old fool. He comes our track most of the way . . . And if he's tight, he might start sheddin' his stones out along the road—you never can tell."

George Woods laughed. The big, genial soul of the man looked out of his eyes.

"That's true," he said heartily.

Archie and he smiled into each other's eyes. They understood very well what lay behind Archie's words. They could not bring themselves to admit there was any danger to the sacred principle of Ridge life, that a mate stands by a mate, in letting Rouminof wander home by himself. He might be in danger if there were rats about; they would admit that. But rats, the men who sneaked into other men's mines when they were on good stuff, and took out their opal during the night, were never Ridge men. They were new-comers, outsiders, strangers on the rushes, who had not learnt or assimilated Ridge ideas.

After a few minutes George turned away. "Well, good-night, Archie," he said.

Watty moved after him.

"'Night!" Archie replied.

George and Watty went along the road together, and Archie walked off in the direction Michael had taken.

But Michael had not gone home. When the trees screened him from sight, he had struck out across the Ridge, then, turning back on his tracks behind the town, had made towards the Warria road. He walked, thinking hard, without noticing where he was going, his mind full of Paul, of Sophie, and of his promise.

Now that Paul had his opal, it was clear he would be able to do as he wished—leave the Ridge and take Sophie with him. For the time being at least he was out of Jun Johnson's hands—but Michael was sure he would not stay out of them if he went to Sydney. How to prevent his going—how, rather, to prevent Sophie going with him—that was Michael's problem. He did not know what he was going to do.

He had asked Sophie not to go with her father. He had told her what her mother had said, and tried to explain to her why her mother had not wanted her to go away from the Ridge, or to become a public singer. But Sophie was as excited about her future as her father was. It was natural she should be, Michael assured himself. She was young, and had heard wonderful stories of Sydney and the world beyond the Ridge. Sydney was like the town in a fairy tale to her.

It was not to be expected, Michael confessed to himself, that Sophie would choose to stay on Fallen Star Ridge. If she could only be prevailed upon to put off her departure until she was older and better able to take care of herself, he would be satisfied. If the worst came to the worst, and she went to Sydney with her father soon, Michael had decided to go with them. Peter Newton would give him a couple of pounds for his books, he believed, and he would find something to do down in Sydney. His roots were in the Ridge. Michael did not know how he was going to live away from the mines; but anything seemed better than that Sophie should be committed to what her mother had called "the treacherous whirlpool" of life in a great city, with no one but her father to look after her.

And her mother had said:

"Don't let him take her away, Michael."

Michael believed that Marya Rouminof intended Sophie to choose for herself whether she would stay on the Ridge or not, when she was old enough. But now she was little more than a child, sixteen, nearly seventeen, young for her years in some ways and old in others. Michael knew her mother had wanted Sophie to grow up on the Ridge and to realise that all the potentialities of real and deep happiness were there.

"They say there's got to be a scapegoat in every family, Michael," she had said once. "Someone has to pay for the happiness of the others. If all that led to my coming here will mean happiness for Sophie, it will not have been in vain."

"That's where you're wrong," Michael had told her.

"Looking for justice—poetic justice, isn't it, they call it?—in the working out of things. There isn't any of this poetic justice except by accident. The natural laws just go rolling on—laying us out under them. All we can do is set our lives as far as possible in accordance with them and stand by the consequences as well as we know how."

"Of course, you're right," she had sighed, "but——"

It was for that "but" Michael was fighting now. He knew what lay beyond it—a yearning for her child to fare a little better in the battle of life than she had. Striding almost unconsciously over the loose, shingly ground, Michael was not aware what direction his steps were taking until he saw glimmering white shapes above the grass and herbage of the plains, and realised that he had walked to the gates of the cemetery.

With an uncomfortable sense of broken faith, he turned away from the gate, unable to go in and sit under the tree there, to smoke and think, as he sometimes did. He had used every argument with Paul to prevent his taking Sophie away, he knew; but for the first time since Michael and he had been acquainted with each other, Paul had shown a steady will. He made up his mind he was "going to shake the dust of the Ridge off his feet," he said. And that was the end of it. Michael almost wished the men had let Jun clear out with his stones. That would have settled the business. But, his instinct of an opal-miner asserting itself, he was unable to wish Paul the loss of his luck, and Jun what he would have to be to deprive Paul of it. He walked on chewing the cud of bitter and troubled reflections.

"Don't let him take her away!" a voice seemed to cry suddenly after him.

Michael stopped; he snatched the hat from his head.

"No!" he said, "he shan't take her away!"

Startled by the sound of his own voice, the intensity of thinking which had wrung it from him, dazed by the sudden strength of resolution which had come over him, he stood, his face turned to the sky. The stars rained their soft light over him. As he looked up to them, his

soul went from him by force of will. How long he stood like that, he did not know; but when his eyes found the earth again he looked about him wonderingly. After a little while he put on his hat and turned away. All the pain and trouble were taken from his thinking; he was strangely soothed and comforted. He went back along the road to the town, and, skirting the trees and the houses on the far side, came again to the track below Newton's.

Lights were still shining in the hotel although it was well after midnight. Michael could hear voices in the clear air. A man was singing one of Jun's choruses as he went down the road towards the Punti Rush. Michael kept on his way. He was still wondering what he could do to prevent Paul taking Sophie away; but he was no longer worried about it—his brain was calm and clear; his step lighter than it had been for a long time.

He heard the voices laughing and calling to each other as he walked on.

"Old Ted!" he commented to himself, recognising Ted Cross's voice. "He's blithered!"

When he came to a fork in the tracks where one went off in the direction of his, Charley's, and Rouminof's huts, and the other towards the Crosses', Michael saw Ted Cross lumbering along in the direction of his own hut.

"Must 've been saying good-night to Charley and Paul," he thought. A little farther along the path he saw Charley and Paul, unsteady shadows ahead of him in the moonlight, and Charley had his arm under Paul's, helping him home.

"Good old Charley!" Michael thought, quickly appreciative of the man he loved.

He could hear them talking, Rouminof's voice thick and expostulatory, Charley's even and clear.

"Charley's all right. He's not showin', anyhow," Michael told himself. He wondered at that. Charley was not often more sober than his company, and he had been drinking a good deal, earlier in the evening.

Michael was a few yards behind them and was just going to quicken his steps and hail Charley, when he saw

the flash of white in Charley's hand—something small, rather longer than square, a cigarette box wrapped in newspaper, it might have been—and Michael saw Charley drop it into the pocket of his coat.

Paul wandered on, talking stupidly, drowsily. He wanted to go to sleep there on the roadside ; but Charley led him on.

"You'll be better at home and in bed," he said. "You're nearly there now."

Instinctively, with that flash of white, Michael had drawn into the shadow of the trees which fringed the track. Charley, glancing back along it, had not seen him. Several moments passed before Michael moved. He knew what had happened, but the revelation was such a shock that his brain would not react to it. Charley, his mate, Charley Heathfield had stolen Paul's opals. The thing no man on the Ridge had attempted, notwithstanding its easiness, Charley had done. Although he had seen, Michael could scarcely believe that what he had seen, had happened.

The two men before him staggered and swayed together. Their huts stood only a few yards from each other, a little farther along the track.

Charley took Paul to the door of his hut, opened it and pushed him in. He stood beside the door, listening and looking down the track for a second longer. Michael imagined he would want to know whether Paul would discover his loss or just pitch forward and sleep where he lay. Then Charley went on to his own hut and disappeared.

When the light glowed in his window, Michael went on up the track, keeping well to the cover of the trees. Opposite the hut he took off his boots. He put his feet down carefully, pressing the loose pebbles beneath him, as he crossed the road. It seemed almost impossible to move on that shingly ground without making a sound, and yet when he stood beside the bark wall of Charley's room and could see through the smeared pane of its small window, Charley had not heard a pebble slip. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, the stub of a lighted candle

in a saucer on the bed beside him, and the box containing the opals lying near it as if he were just going to cut the string and have a look at them. The wall creaked as Michael leaned against it.

"Who's there ?" Charley cried sharply.

He threw a blanket over the box on the bed and started to the door.

Michael moved round the corner of the house. He heard Potch call sleepily :

"That you ?"

Charley growled :

"Oh, go to sleep, can't you ? Aren't you asleep yet ?"

Potch murmured, and there was silence again.

Michael heard Charley go to the door, look out along the road, and turn back into the hut. Then Michael moved along the wall to the window.

Charley was taking down some clothes hanging from nails along the inner wall. He changed from the clothes he had on into them, picked up his hat, lying where he had thrown it on the floor beside the bed when he came in, rolled it up, straightened the brim and dinged the crown to his liking. Then he picked up the packet of opal, put it in his coat pocket, and went into the other room. Michael followed to the window which gave on it. He saw Charley glance at the sofa as though he were contemplating a stretch, but, thinking better of it, he settled into an easy, bag-bottomed old chair by the table, pulled a newspaper to him, and began to read by the guttering light of his candle.

Michael guessed why Charley had dressed, and why he had chosen to sit and read rather than go to sleep. It was nearly morning, the first chill of dawn in the air. The coach left at seven o'clock, and Charley meant to catch the coach. He had no intention of going to Warria. Michael began to get a bird's-eye view of the situation. He wondered whether Charley had ever intended going to Warria. He realised Charley would go off with the five pound note he had made him, Michael, get from Watty Frost, as well as with Paul's opals. He

began to see clearly what that would mean, too—Charley's getting away with Paul's opals. Paul would not be able to take Sophie away. . . . .

In the branches of a shrub nearby, a white-tail was crying plaintively: "Sweet pretty creature! Sweet pretty creature!" Michael remembered how it had cried like that on the day of Mrs. Rouminof's funeral.

Whether to go into the hut, tell Charley he knew what he had done, and demand the return of the opals, or let him get away with them, Michael had not decided, when Charley's hand went to his pocket, and, as it closed over the package of opals, a smile of infantile satisfaction flitted across his face. That smile, criminal in its treachery, enraged Michael more than the deed itself. The candle Charley had been reading by guttered out. He stumbled about the room looking for another. After a while, as if he could not find one, he went back to his chair and settled into it. The room fell into darkness, lit only by the dim pane of the window by which Michael was standing.

Michael's mind seethed with resentment and anger. The thing he had prayed for, that his brain had ached over, had been arranged. Rouminof would not be able to take Sophie away. But Michael was too good a Ridge man not to detest Charley's breach of the good faith of the Ridge. Charley had been accepted by men of the Ridge as one of themselves—at least, Michael believed he had.

George, Watty, the Crosses, and most of the other men would have confessed to reservations where Charley Heathfield was concerned. But as long as he had lived as a mate among them, they had been mates to him. Michael did not want Rouminof to have his stones if having them meant taking Sophie away, but he did not want him to lose them. He could not allow Charley to get away with them, with that smile of infantile satisfaction. If the men knew what he had done there would be little of that smile left on his face when they had finished with him. Their methods of dealing with rats were short and severe. And although he deserved all he

got from them, Michael was not able to decide to hand Charley over to the justice of the men of the Ridge.

As he hesitated, wondering what to do, the sound of heavy, regular breathing came to him, and, looking through the window, he saw that Charley had done the last thing he intended to do—he had fallen asleep in his chair.

In a vivid, circling flash, Michael's inspiration came to him. He went across to his hut, lighted a candle when he got indoors, and took the black pannikin he kept odd pieces of opal in, from the top of a bookshelf. There was nothing of any great value in the pannikin—a few pieces of coloured potch which would have made a packet for an opal-buyer when he came along, and a rather good piece of stone in the rough he had kept as a mascot for a number of years—that was all. Michael turned them over. He went to the corner shelf and returned to the table with a cigarette box the same size as the one Rouminof had kept his opals in. Michael took a piece of soiled wadding from a drawer in the table, rolled the stones in it, and fitted them into the box. He wrapped the tin in a piece of newspaper and tied it with string. Then he blew out his candle and went out of doors again.

He made his way carefully over the shingles to Charley's hut. When he reached it, he leaned against the wall, listening to hear whether Charley was still asleep. The sound of heavy breathing came slowly and regularly. Michael went to the back of the hut. There was no door to it. He went in, and slowly approached the chair in which Charley was sleeping.

He could never come to any clear understanding with himself as to how he had done what he did. He knew only a sick fear possessed him that Charley would wake and find him, Michael, barefooted, like a thief in his house. But he was not a thief, he assured himself. It was not thieving to take from a thief.

Charley stirred uneasily. His arm went out; in the dim light Michael saw it go over the pocket which held the packet of opal; his hand clutch at it unconsciously. Sweating with fear and the nervous tension he was

under, Michael remained standing in the darkness. He waited, wondering whether he would throw off Charley's hand and snatch the opal, or whether he would stand till morning, hesitating, and wondering what to do, and Charley would wake at last and find him there. He had decided to wrench Charley's arm from the pocket, when Charley himself flung it out with a sudden restless movement.

In an instant, almost mechanically, Michael's hand went to the pocket. He lifted the packet there and put his own in its place.

The blood was booming in his ears when he turned to the door. A sense of triumph unnerved him more than the execution of his inspiration. Charley muttered and called out in his sleep as Michael passed through the doorway.

Then the stars were over him. Michael drew a deep breath of the night air and crossed to his own hut, the package of opal under his coat. Just as he was entering he drew back, vaguely alarmed. A movement light as thistledown seemed to have caught his ear. He thought he had detected a faint shifting of the shingle nearby. He glanced about with quick apprehension, went back to Charley's hut, listened, and looked around; but Charley was still sleeping. Michael walked back to his own hut. There was no sight or sound of a living thing in the wan, misty moonlight of the dawn, except the white-tail which was still crying from a wilga near Charley's hut.

The package under his coat felt very heavy and alive when he returned to his own hut. Michael was disturbed by that faint sound he had heard, or thought he had heard. He persuaded himself he had imagined it, that in the overwrought state of his sensibilities the sound of his own breath, and his step on the stones, had surprised and alarmed him. The tin of opals burned against his body, seeming to scar the skin where it pressed. Michael sickened at the thought of how what he had done might look to anyone who had seen him. But he put the thought from him. It was absurd. He had looked;

there was no one about—nothing. He was allowing his mind to play tricks with him. The success of what he had done made him seem like a thief. But he was not a thief. The stones were Rouminof's. He had taken them from Charley for him, and he would not even look at them. He would keep them for Paul.

If Charley got away without discovering the change of the packets, as he probably would, in the early morning and in his excitement to catch the coach, he would be considered the thief. Rouminof would accuse him; Charley would know his own guilt. He would not dare to confess what he had done, even when he found that his package of opal had been changed. He would not know when it had been changed. He would not know whether it had been changed, perhaps, before he took it from Rouminof.

Charley might recognise the stones in that packet he had done up, Michael realised; but he did not think so. Charley was not much of a judge of opal. Michael did not think he would remember the few scraps of sun-flash they had come on together, and Charley had never seen the mascot he had put into the packet, with a remnant of feeling for the memory of their working days together.

Michael did not light the candle when he went into his hut again. He threw himself down on the bed in his clothes; he knew that he would not sleep as he lay there. His brain burned and whirled, turning over the happenings of the night and their consequences, likely and unlikely. The package of opal lay heavy in his pocket. He took it out and dropped it into a box of books at the end of the room.

He did not like what he had done, and yet he was glad he had done it. When he could see more clearly, he was glad, too, that he had grasped this opportunity to control circumstances. A reader and dreamer all his days, he had begun to be doubtful of his own capacity for action. He could think and plan, but he doubted whether he had strength of will to carry out purposes he had dreamed a long time over. He was pleased, in

an odd, fierce way, that he had been able to do what he thought should be done.

"But I don't want them. . . . I don't want the cursed stones," he argued with himself. "I'll give them to him—to Paul, as soon as I know what ought to be done about Sophie. She's not old enough to go yet—to know her own mind—what she wants to do. When she's older she can decide for herself. That's what her mother meant. She didn't mean for always . . . only while she's a little girl. By and by, when she's a woman, Sophie can decide for herself. Now, she's got to stay here . . . that's what I promised."

"And Charley," he brooded. "He deserves all that's coming to him . . . but I couldn't give him away. The boys would half kill him if they got their hands on to him. When will he find out? In the train, perhaps—or not till he gets to Sydney. . . . He'll have my fiver, and the stones to go on with—though they won't bring much. Still, they'll do to go on with. . . . Paul'll be a raving lunatic when he knows . . . but he can't go—he can't take Sophie away."

His brain surged over and over every phrase: his state of mind since he had seen Charley and Paul on the road together; every argument he had used with himself. He could not get away from the double sense of disquiet and satisfaction.

An hour or two later he heard Charley moving about, then rush off down the track, sending the loose stones flying under his feet as he ran to catch the coach.

CHAPTER V

WATTY was winding dirt, standing by the windlass on the top of the dump over his and his mates' mine, when he saw Paul coming along the track from the New Town. Paul was breaking into a run at every few yards, and calling out. Watty threw the mullock from his hide bucket as it came up, and lowered it again. He wound up another bucket. The creak of the windlass, and the fall of the stone and earth as he threw them over the dump, drowned the sound of Rouminof's voice. As he came nearer, Watty saw that he was gibbering with rage, and crying like a child.

While he was still some distance away, Watty heard him sobbing and calling out.

He stopped work to listen as Paul came to the foot of Michael's dump. Ted Cross, who was winding dirt on the top of Crosses' mine, stopped to listen too. Old Olsen got up from where he lay noodling on Jun's and Paul's claim, and went across to Paul. Snow-Shoes, stretched across the slope near where Watty was standing, lifted his head, his turning of earth with a little blunt stick arrested for the moment.

"They've took me stones! . . . Took me stones!" Watty heard Paul cry to Bill Olsen. And as he climbed the slope of Michael's dump he went on crying: "Took me stones! Took me stones! Charley and Jun! Gone by the coach! Michael! . . . They've gone by the coach and took me stones!"

Over and over again he said the same thing in an incoherent wail and howl. He went down the shaft of

Michael's mine, and Ted Cross came across from his dump to Watty.

"Hear what he says, Watty?" he asked.

"Yes," Watty replied.

"It gets y'r wind——"

"If it's true," Watty ventured slowly.

"Seems to me it's true all right," Ted said. "Charley took him home last night. I went along with them as far as the turn-off. Paul was a bit on . . . and Archie asked me to keep an eye on him. . . . I was a bit on meself, too . . . but Charley came along with us—so I thought he'd be all right. . . . Charley went off by the coach this morning. . . . Bill Olsen told me. . . . And Michael was reck'ning on him goin' to Warria to-day, I know."

"That's right!"

"It'll be hard on Michael!"

Watty's gesture, upward jerk of his chin, and gusty breath, denoted his agreement on that score.

Ted went back to his own claim, and Watty slid down the rope with his next bucket to give his mates the news. It was nearly time to knock off for the midday meal, and before long men from all the claims were standing in groups hearing the story from Rouminof himself, or talking it over together.

Michael had come up from his mine soon after Paul had gone down to him. The men had seen him go off down the track to the New Town, his head bent. They thought they knew why. Michael would feel his mate's dishonour as though it were his own. He would not be able to believe that what Paul said was true. He would want to know from Peter Newton himself if it was a fact that Charley had gone out on the coach with Jun and two girls who had been at the hotel.

Women were scarce on the opal fields, and the two girls who had come a week before to help Mrs. Newton with the work of the hotel had been having the time of their lives. Charley, Jun Johnson, and two or three other men, had been shouting drinks for them from the time of their arrival, and Mrs. Newton had made up her

mind to send the girls back to town by the next coach. Jun had appropriated the younger of the two, a bright-eyed girl, and the elder, a full-bosomed, florid woman with straw-coloured hair, had, as the boys said, " taken a fancy to Charley."

Paul had already told his story once or twice when Cash Wilson, George, and Watty, went across to where he was standing, with half a dozen of the men about him. They were listening gravely and smoking over Paul's recital. There had been ratting epidemics on the Ridge; but robbery of a mate by a mate had never occurred before. It struck at the fundamental principle of their life in common. There was no mistaking the grave, rather than indignant view men of the Ridge took of what Charley had done. The Ridge code affirmed simply that " a mate stands by a mate." The men say: " You can't go back on a mate." By those two recognitions they had run their settlement. Far from all the ordinary institutions of law and order, they had lived and worked together without need of them, by appreciation of their relationship to each other as mates and as a fraternity of mates. No one, who had lived under and seemed to accept the principle of mateship, had ever before done as Charley had done.

" But Charley Heathfield was never one of us really," Ted Cross said. " He was always an outsider."

" That's right, Ted," George Woods replied. " We only stuck him on Michael's account."

Paul told George, Watty, and Cash the story he had been going over all the morning—how he had gone home with Charley, how he remembered going along the road with him, and then how he had wakened on the floor of his own hut in the morning. Sophie was there. She was singing. He had thought it was her mother. He had called her . . . but Sophie had come to him. And she had abused him. She had called him " a dirty, fat pig," and told him to get out of the way because she wanted to sweep the floor.

He sobbed uncontrollably. The men sympathised with him. They knew the loss of opal came harder on

Rouminof than it would have on the rest of them, because he was so mad about the stuff. They condoned the abandonment of his grief as natural enough in a foreigner, too; but after a while it irked them.

"Take a pull at y'rself, Rummy, can't you?" George Woods said irritably. "What did Michael say?"

"Michael?" Paul looked at him, his eyes streaming.

George nodded.

"He did not say," Paul replied. "He threw down his pick. He would not work any more . . . and then he went down to Newton's to ask about Charley."

Two or three of the men exchanged glances. That was the way they had expected Michael to take the news. He would not have believed Paul's story at first. They did not see Michael again that day. In the evening Peter Newton told them how Michael had come to him, asking if it was true Charley had gone on the coach with Jun Johnson and the girls. Peter told Michael, he said, that Charley had gone on the coach, and that he thought Rouminof's story looked black against Charley.

"Michael didn't say much," Peter explained, "but I don't think he could help seeing what I said was true—however much he didn't want to."

Everybody knew Michael believed in Charley Heathfield. He had thought the worst that could be said of Charley was that he was a good-natured, rather shiftless fellow. All the men had responded to an odd attractive faculty Charley exercised occasionally. He had played it like a woman for Michael, and Michael had taken him on as a mate and worked with him when no one else would. And now, the men guessed, that Michael, who had done more than any of them to make the life of the Ridge what it was, would feel more deeply and bitterly than any of them that Charley had gone back on him and on what the Ridge stood for.

All they imagined Michael was suffering in the grief and bitterness of spirit which come of misplaced faith, he was suffering. But they could not imagine the other considerations which had overshadowed grief and bitterness, the realisation that Sophie's life had been

saved from what looked like early wreckage, and the consciousness that the consequences of what Charley had done, had fallen, not on Charley, but on himself. Michael had lived like a child, with an open heart at the disposal of his mates always; and the sense of Charley's guilt descending on him, had created a subtle ostracism, a remote alienation from them.

He could not go to Newton's in the evening and talk things over with the men as he ordinarily would have. He wandered over the dumps of deserted rushes at the Old Town, his eyes on the ground or on the distant horizons. He could still only believe he had done the best thing possible under the circumstances. If he had let Charlie go away with the stones, Sophie would have been saved, but Paul would have lost his stones. As it was, Sophie was saved, and Paul had not lost his stones. And Michael could not have given Charley away. Charley had been his mate; they had worked together. The men might suspect, but they could not convict him of being what he was unless they knew what Michael knew. Charley had played on the affection, the simplicity of Michael's belief in him. He had used them, but Michael had still a lingering tenderness and sympathy for him. It was that which had made him put the one decent piece of opal he possessed into the parcel he had made up for Charley to take instead of Paul's stones. It was the first piece of good stuff he had found on the Ridge, and he had kept it as a mascot—something of a nest egg.

Michael wondered at the fate which had sent him along the track just when Charley had taken Paul's stones. He was perplexed and impatient of it. There would have been no complication, no conflict and turmoil if only he had gone along the track a little later, or a little earlier. But there was no altering what had happened. He had to bear the responsibility of it. He had to meet the men, encounter the eyes of his mates as he had never done before, with a reservation from them. If he could give the stones to Paul at once, Michael knew he would disembarrass himself of any sense of guilt. But he

could not do that. He was afraid if Paul got possession of the opals again he would want to go away and take Sophie with him.

Michael thought of taking Watty and George into his confidence, but to do so would necessitate explanations—explanations which involved talking of the promise he had made Sophie's mother and all that lay behind their relationship. He shrank from allowing even the sympathetic eyes of George and Watty to rest on what for him was wrapped in mystery and inexplicable reverence. Besides, they both had wives, and Watty was not permitted to know anything Mrs. Watty did not worm out of him sooner or later. Michael decided that if he could not keep his own confidence he could not expect anyone else to keep it. He must take the responsibility of what he had done, and of maintaining his position in respect to the opals until Sophie was older—old enough to do as she wished with her life.

As he walked, gazing ahead, a hut formed itself out of the distance before him, and then the dark shapes of bark huts huddled against the white cliff of dumps at the Three Mile, under a starry sky. A glow came from the interior of one or two of the houses. A chime of laughter, and shredded fragments of talking drifted along in the clear air. Michael felt strangely alone and outcast, hearing them and knowing that he could not respond to their invitation.

In any one of those huts a place would be eagerly made for him if he went into it; eyes would lighten with a smile; warm, kindly greetings would go to his heart. But the talk would all be of the stealing of Rouminof's opal, and of Charley and Jun, Michael knew. The people at the Three Mile would have seen the coach pass. They would be talking about it, about himself, and the girls who had driven away with Charley and Jun.

Turning back, Michael walked again across the flat country towards the Ridge. He sat for a while on a log near the tank paddock. A drugging weariness permeated his body and brain, though his brain ticked ceaselessly. Now and again one or other of Rouminof's

opals flashed and scintillated before him in the darkness, or moved off in starry flight before his tired gaze. He was vaguely disturbed by the vision of them.

When he rose and went back towards the town, his feet dragged wearily. There was a strange lightness at the back of his head, and he wondered whether he were walking in the fields of heaven, and smiled to think of that. At least one good thing would come of it all, he told himself over and over again—Paul could not take Sophie away.

The houses and stores of the New Town were all in darkness when he passed along the main street. Newton's was closed. There were no lights in Rouminof's or Charley's huts as he went to his own door. Then a low cry caught his ear. He listened, and went to the back door of Charley's hut. The cry rose again with shuddering gasps for breath. Michael stood in the doorway, listening. The sound came from the window. He went towards it, and found Potch lying there on the bunk with his face to the wall.

He had not heard Michael enter, and lay moaning brokenly. Michael had not thought of Potch since the people at Newton's told him that a few minutes after the coach had gone Potch had come down to the hotel to cut wood and do odd jobs in the stable, as he usually did. Mrs. Newton said he stared at her, aghast, when she told him that his father had left on the coach. Then he had started off at a run, taking the short cut across country to the Three Mile.

Michael put out his hand. He could not endure that crying.

"Potch!" he said.

At the sound of his voice, Potch was silent. After a second he struggled to his feet, and stood facing Michael.

"He's gone, Michael!" he cried.

"He might have taken you," Michael said.

"Taken me!" Potch's exclamation did away with any idea Michael had that his son was grieving for Charley. "It wasn't that I minded——"

Michael did not know what to say. Potch continued:

"As soon as I knew, I went after him—thought I'd catch up the coach at the Three Mile, and I did. I told him he'd have to come back—or hand out that money. I saw you give it to him the other night and arrange about going to Warria. . . . Mr. Ventry pulled up. But *he* . . . set the horses going again. I tried to stop them, but the sandy bay let out a kick and they went on again. . . . The swine!"

Michael had never imagined this stolid son of Charley's could show such fire. He was trembling with rage and indignation. Michael rarely lost his temper, but the blood rushed to his head in response to Potch's story. Restraint was second nature with him, though, and he waited until his own and Potch's fury had ebbed.

Then he moved to leave the hut.

"Come along," he said.

"Michael!"

There was such breaking unbelief and joy in the cry. Michael turned and caught the boy's expression.

"You're coming along with me, Potch," he said.

Potch still stood regarding him with a dazed expression of worshipful homage and gratitude. Michael put out his hand, and Potch clasped it.

"You and me," he said, "we both seem to be in the same boat, Potch. . . . Neither of us has got a mate. I'll be wanting someone to work with now. We'd better be mates."

They went out of the hut together.

CHAPTER VI

MICHAEL and Potch were at work next morning as soon as the first cuckoos were calling. Michael had been at the windlass for an hour or thereabouts, when Watty Frost, who was going along to his claim with Pony-Fence Inglewood and Bully Bryant, saw Michael on the top of his dump, tossing mullock.

" Who's Michael working with ? " he asked.

Pony-Fence and Bully Bryant considered, and shook their heads, smoking thoughtfully.

Snow-Shoes, where he lay sprawled across the slope of Crosses' dump, glanced up at them, and the flickering wisp of a smile went through his bright eyes. The three were standing at the foot of the dump before separating.

" Who's Michael got with him ? " Pony-Fence inquired, looking at Snow-Shoes.

But the old man had turned his eyes back to the dump and was raking the earth with his stick again, as if he had not heard what was said. No one was deafer than Snow-Shoes when he did not want to hear.

Watty watched Michael as he bent over the windlass, his lean, slight figure cut against the clear azure of the morning sky.

" It's to be hoped he's got a decent mate this time—that's all," he said.

Pony-Fence and Bully were going off to their own claim when Potch came up on the rope and stood by the windlass while Michael went down into the mine.

" Well ! " Watty gasped, " if that don't beat cock-fighting ! "

Bully swore sympathetically, and watched Potch set

to work. The three watched him winding and throwing mullock from the hide buckets over the dump with the jerky energy of a new chum, although Potch had done odd jobs on the mines for a good many years. He had often taken his father's turn of winding dirt, and had managed to keep himself by doing all manner of scavenging in the township since he was quite a little chap, but no one had taken him on as a mate till now. He was a big fellow, too, Potch, seventeen or eighteen; and as they looked at him Watty and Pony-Fence realised it was time someone gave Potch a chance on the mines, although after the way his father had behaved Michael was about the last person who might have been expected to give him that chance—much less take him on as mate. Like father, like son, was one of those superstitions Ridge folk had not quite got away from, and the men who saw Potch working on Michael's mine wondered that, having been let down by the father as badly as Charley had let Michael down, Michael could still work with Potch, and give him the confidence a mate was entitled to. But there was no piece of quixotism they did not think Michael capable of. The very forlornness of Potch's position on the Ridge, and because he would have to face out and live down the fact of being Charley Heathfield's son, were recognised as most likely Michael's reasons for taking Potch on to work with him.

Watty and Pony-Fence appreciated Michael's move and the point of view it indicated. They knew men of the Ridge would endorse it and take Potch on his merits. But being Charley's son, Potch would have to prove those merits. They knew, too, that what Michael had done would help him to tide over the first days of shame and difficulty as nothing else could have, and it would start Potch on a better track in life than his father had ever given him.

Bully had already gone off to his claim when Watty and Pony-Fence separa ed. Watty broke the news to his mates when he joined them underground.

" Who do y' think's Michael's new mate ? " he asked.

George Woods rested on his pick.

Cash looked up from the corner where he was crouched working a streak of green-fired stone from the red floor and lower wall of the mine.

"Potch!" Watty threw out as George and Cash waited for the information.

George swept the sweat from his forehead with a broad, steady gesture. "He was bound to do something nobody else'd 've thought of, Michael!" he said.

"That's right," Watty replied. "Pony-Fence and Bully Bryant were saying," he went on, "he's had a pretty hard time, Potch, and it was about up to somebody to give him a leg-up . . . some sort of a start in life. He may be all right . . . on the other hand, there may not be much to him. . . ."

"That's right!" Cash muttered, beginning to work again.

"But I reck'n he's all right, Potch." George swung his pick again. His blows echoed in the mine as they shattered the hard stone he was working on.

Watty crawled off through a drive he was gouging in.

At midday Michael and Charley had always eaten their lunches in the shelter where George Woods, Watty, and Cash Wilson ate theirs and noodled their opal. They wondered whether Michael would join them this day. He strolled over to the shelter with Potch beside him as Watty and Cash, with a billy of steaming tea on a stick between them, came from the open fire built round with stones, a few yards from the mine.

"Potch and me's mates," Michael explained to George as he sat down and spread out his lunch, his smile whimsical and serene over the information. "But we're lookin' for a third to the company. I reck'n a lot of you chaps' luck is working on three. It's a lucky number, three, they say."

Potch sat down beside him on the outer edge of the shelter's scrap of shade.

"See you get one not afraid to do a bit of work, next time—that's all I say," Watty growled.

The blood oozed slowly over Potch's heavy, quiet face. Nothing more was said of Charley, but the men who saw

his face realised that Potch was not the insensible youth they had imagined.

Michael had watched him when they were below ground, and was surprised at the way Potch set about his work. He had taken up his father's gouging pick and spider as if he had been used to take them every day, and he had set to work where Charley had left off. All the morning he hewed at a face of honeycombed sandstone, his face tense with concentration of energy, the sweat glistening on it as though it were oiled under the light of a candle in his spider, stuck in the red earth above him. Michael himself swung his pick in leisurely fashion, crumbled dirt, and knocked off for a smoke now and then.

"Easy does it, Potch," he remarked, watching the boy's steady slogging. "We've got no reason to bust ourselves in this mine."

At four o'clock they put their tools back against the wall and went above ground. Michael fell in with the Crosses, who were noodling two or three good-looking pieces of opal Archie had taken out during the afternoon, and Potch streaked away through the scrub in the direction of the Old Town.

Michael wondered where he was going. There was a purposeful hunch about his shoulders as if he had a definite goal in view. Michael had intended asking his new mate to go down to the New Town and get the meat for their tea, but he went himself after he had yarned with Archie and Ted Cross for a while.

When he returned to the hut, Potch was not there. Michael made a fire, unwrapped his steak, hung it on a hook over the fire, and spread out the pannikins, tin plates and knives and forks for his meal, putting a plate and pannikin for Potch. He was kneeling before the fire giving the steak a turn when Potch came in. Potch stood in the doorway, looking at Michael as doubtfully as a stray kitten which did not know whether it might enter.

"That you, Potch?" Michael called.

"Yes," Potch said.

Michael got up from the fire and carried the grilled steak on a plate to the table.

"Well, you were nearly late for dinner," he remarked, as he cut the steak in half and put a piece on the other plate for Potch. "You better come along and tuck in now . . . there's a great old crowd down at Nancarrow's this evening. First time for nearly a month he's killed a beast, and everybody wants a bit of steak. Sam gave me this as a sort of treat; and it smells good."

Potch came into the kitchen and sat on the box Michael had drawn up to the table for him.

"Been bringing in the goats for Sophie," he jerked out, looking at Michael as if there were some need of explanation.

"Oh, that was it, was it?" Michael replied, getting on with his meal. "Thought you'd flitted!"

Potch met his smile with a shadowy one. A big, clumsy-looking fellow, with a dull, colourless face and dingy hair, he sat facing Michael, his eyes anxious, as though he would like to explain further, but was afraid to, or could not find words. His eyes were beautiful; but they were his father's eyes, and Michael recoiled to qualms of misgiving, a faint distrust, as he looked in them.

It was Ed. Ventry, however, who gave Potch his first claim to the respect of men of the Ridge.

"How's that boy of Charley Heathfield's?" was his first question when the coach came in from Budda, the following week.

"All right," Newton said. "Why?"

"He was near killed," Mr. Ventry replied. "Stopped us up at the Three Mile that morning I was taking Charley and Jun down. He was all for Charley stopping . . . getting off the coach or something. I didn't get what it was all about—money Charley'd got from Michael, I think. That's the worst of bein' a bit hard of hearin' . . . and bein' battered about by that yaller-bay horse I bought at Warria couple of months ago."

"Potch tried to stop Charley getting away, did he?" Newton asked with interest.

"He did," Ed. Ventry declared. "I pulled up, seein' something was wrong . . . but what does that god-

damned blighter Charley do but give a lurch and grab me reins. Scared four months' growth out of the horses—and away they went. I'd a colt I was breakin' in on the off-side—and he landed Potch one—kicked him right out, I thought. As soon as I could, I pulled up, but I see Potch making off across the plain, and he didn't look like he was much hurt. . . . But it was a plucky thing he did, all right . . . and it's the last time I'll drive Charley Heathfield. I told him straight. I'd as soon kill a man as not for putting a hand on me reins, like he done—on me own coach, too ! "

Snow-Shoes had drifted up to them as the coach stopped and Newton went out to it. He stood beside Peter Newton while Mr. Ventry talked, rolling tobacco. Snow-Shoes' eyes glimmered from one to the other of them when Ed. Ventry had given the reason for his inquiry.

" Potch ! " he murmured. " A little bit of potch ! " And marched off down the road, a straight, stately white figure, on the bare track under the azure of the sky.

CHAPTER VII

" GIVE y' three," Watty said.

" Take 'em." George Woods did not turn. He was carefully working round a brilliantly fired seam through black potch in the shin cracker he had been breaking through two or three days before.

It was about lunch time, and Watty had crawled from his drive to the centre of the mine. Cash was still at work, crouched against a corner of the alley, a hundred yards or so from George ; but he laid down his pick when he heard Watty's voice, and went towards him.

" Who d'you think Michael's got as third man ? "

" Snow-Shoes ? "

" No."

" Old Bill Olsen ? "

Watty could not contain himself to the third guess.

" Rum-Enough ! " he said.

" He would." George chipped at the stone round his colour. " It was bound to be a lame dog, anyhow—and it might as well've been Rummy as anybody."

" That's right," Cash conceded.

" Bill Andrews told me," Watty said. " They've just broke through on the other side of that drive I'm in. . . ."

" It would be all right," he went on, " if Paul'd work for Michael like he did for Jun. But is Michael the man to make him ? Not by long chalks. Potch is turning out all right, the boys say. . . . Michael says he works like a chow . . . has to make him put in the peg . . . but they'll both be havin' Rum-Enough on their hands before long—that's a sure thing."

Watty's, George's, and Cash's mine was one of the best worked and best planned on the fields.

Watty and Cash inspected the streak George was working, and speculated as to what it would yield. George leaned his pick against the wall, eager, too, about the chances of what the thread of fire glittering in the black potch would lead to. But he was proud of the mine as well as the stone it had produced. It represented the first attempt to work a claim systematically on the Ridge. George himself had planned and prospected every inch of it; and before he went above ground for the midday meal, he glanced about it as usual, affirming his pride and satisfaction; but his eyes fell on the broken white stone about his pitch.

"As soon as we get her out, I'll shift that stuff," he said.

When they went up for their meal, Michael did not join Watty, George, and Cash as usual. He spread out his lunch and sat with Paul and Potch in the shade of some wilgas beside his own mine. He knew that Rouminof would not be welcome in George and Watty's shelter, and that Paul and Potch would bring a certain reserve to the discussions of Ridge affairs which took place there.

Potch saw Michael's eyes wander to where George was sitting yarning with his mates. He knew Michael would rather have been over there; and yet Michael seemed pleased to have got his own mine in working order again. He talked over ways of developing it with Paul, asking his opinion, and explaining why he believed the claim was good enough to stick to for a while longer, although very little valuable stone had come out of it. Potch wondered why his eyes rested on Paul with that faint smile of satisfaction.

The Ridge discussed Michael and his new partnership backwards and forth, and back again. Michael knew that, and was as amused as the rest of the Ridge at the company he was keeping. Although he sat with his own mates at midday, he was as often as not with the crowd under Newton's veranda in the evening, discussing and

settling the affairs of the Ridge and of the universe. After a while he was more like his old self than he had been for a long time—since Mrs. Rouminof's death—people said, when they saw him going about again with a quiet smile and whimsical twist to his mouth.

The gossips had talked a good deal about Michael and Mrs. Rouminof, but neither she nor he had bothered their heads about the gossips.

Michael and Mrs. Rouminof had often been seen standing and talking together when she was going home from the New Town with stores, or when Michael was coming in from his hut. He had usually walked back along the road with her, she for the most part, if it was in the evening, with no hat on; he smoking the stubby black pipe that was rarely out of his mouth. There was something in the way Mrs. Rouminof walked beside Michael, in the way her hair blew out in tiny strands curling in the wind and taking stray glints of light, in the way she smiled with a vague underlying sweetness when she looked at Michael; there was something in the way Michael slouched and smoked beside Mrs. Rouminof, too, which made their meeting look more than any mere ordinary talking and walking home together of two people. That was what Mrs. Watty Frost said.

Mrs. Watty believed it was her duty in life to maintain the prejudices of respectable society in Fallen Star township. She had a constitutional respect for authority in whatever form it manifested itself. She stood for washing on Monday, spring-cleaning, keeping herself to herself, and uncompromising hostility to anything in the shape of a new idea which threatened the old order of domesticity on the Ridge. And she let everybody know it. She never went into the one street of the township even at night without a hat on, and wore gloves whenever she walked abroad. A little woman, with a mean, sour face, wrinkled like a walnut, and small, bead-bright eyes, Mrs. Watty was one of those women who are all energy and have no children to absorb their energies. She put all her energy into resentment of the Ridge and the conditions Watty had settled down to so comfortably

and happily. She sighed for shops and a suburb of Sydney, and repeatedly told Watty how nice it would be to have a little milk shop near Sydney like her father and mother had had.

But Watty would not hear of the milk shop. He loved the Ridge, and the milk shop was an evergreen bone of contention between him and his wife. The only peace he ever got was when Mrs. Watty went away to Sydney for a holiday, or he went with her, because she would rarely go away without him. She could not be happy without Watty, people said. She had no one to growl to and let off her irritation about things in general at, if he were not there. Watty grew fat, and was always whistling cheerily, nevertheless. Mrs. Watty cooked like an archangel, he said; and, to give her her due, the men admitted that although she had never pretended to approve of the life they led, Mrs. Watty had been a good wife to Watty.

But everybody, even Mrs. Watty, was as pleased as if a little fortune had come to them, when, towards the end of their first week, Michael and his company came on a patch of good stone. Michael struck it, following the lead he had been working for some time, and, although not wonderful in colour or quality, the opal cut out at about ten ounces and brought £3 an ounce. Michael was able to wipe out some of his grocery score, so was Paul, and Potch had money to burn.

Paul was very pleased with himself about it. The men began to call him a mascot and to say he had brought Michael luck, as he had Jun Johnson. There was no saying how the fortunes of the new partnership might flourish, if he stuck to it. Paul, responding to the expressions of good-will and the inspiration of being on opal, put all his childish and bullocky energy into working with Michael and Potch.

He still told everybody who would listen to him the story of the wonderful stones he had found when he was working with Jun, and how they had been stolen from him. They grew in number, value, and size every time he spoke of them. And he wailed over what he had been

going to do, and what selling the stones would have meant to him and to Sophie. But the partnership was working better than anybody had expected, and people began to wonder whether, after all, Michael had done so badly for himself with his brace of dead-beat mates.

CHAPTER VIII

In a few weeks thought of the robbery had ceased greatly to disturb anybody. Michael settled down to working with his new mates, and the Ridge accepted the new partnership as the most natural thing in the world.

Life on the Ridge is usually as still as an inland lake. The settlement is just that, a lake of life, in the country of wide plains stretching westwards for hundreds on hundreds of miles, broken only by shingly ridges to the sea, and eastwards, through pastoral districts, to the coastal ranges, and the seaboard with its busy towns, ports, and cities.

In summer the plains are dead and dry; in a drought, deserts. The great coolebahs standing with their feet in the river ways are green, and scatter tattered shade. Their small, round leaves flash like mirrors in the sun, and when the river water vanishes from about their feet, they hold themselves in the sandy shallow bed of the rivers as if waiting with imperturbable faith for the return of the waters. The surface of the dry earth cracks. There are huge fissures where the water lay in clayey hollows during the winter and spring. Along the stock routes and beside the empty water-holes, sheep and cattle lie rotting. Their carcasses, disembowelled by the crows, put an odour of putrefaction in the air. The sky burns iron-grey with heat. The dust rises in heavy reddish mist about stockmen or cattle on the roads.

But after the rains, in the winter or spring of a good season, the seeds break sheath in a few hours; they sprout over-night, and a green mantle is flung over the old earth which a few days before was as dead and dry as

a desert. In a little time the country is a flowering wilderness. Trefoil, crow's-foot, clover, mallow, and wild mustard riot, tangling and interweaving. The cattle browse through them lazily; stringing out across the flowering fields, they look in the distance no more than droves of mice; their red and black backs alone are visible above the herbage. In places, wild candytuft in blossom spreads a quilt of palest lavender in every direction on a wide circling horizon. Darling pea, the colour of violets and smelling like them, threads through the candytuft and lies in wedges, magenta and dark purple against the sky-line, a hundred miles farther on. The sky is a wash of pale, exquisite blue, which deepens as it rises to the zenith. The herbage glows beneath it, so clear and pure is the light.

Farther inland, for miles, bachelor's buttons paint the earth raw gold. Not a hair's breadth of colour shows on the plains except the dull red of the road winding through them and the blue of the sky overhead. Paper daisies fringe the gold, and then they lie, white as snow, for miles, under the bare blue sky. Sometimes the magenta, purple, lavender, gold and white of the herbage and wild flowers merge and mingle, and a tapestry of incomparable beauty—a masterpiece of the Immortals—is wrought on the bare earth.

During the spring and early summer of a good season, the air is filled with the wild, thymey odour of herbs, and the dry, musky fragrance of paper daisies. The crying of lambs, the baa-ing of ewes, and the piping of mud-larks—their thin, silvery notes—go through the clear air and are lost over the flowering land and against the blue sky.

Winter is rarely more than a season of rains on the Ridge. Cold winds blow from the inland plains for a week or two. There are nights of frost and sparkling stars. People shiver and crouch over their fires; but the days have rarely more than a fresh tang in the air.

The rains as often as not are followed by floods. After a few days' steady downpour, the shallow rivers and creeks on the plains overflow, and their waters stretch out over the plains for thirteen, fourteen, and sometimes

twenty miles. Fords become impassable; bridges are washed away. Fallen Star Ridge is cut off from the rest of the world until the flood waters have soaked into the earth, as they do after a few days, and the coach can take to the road again.

As spring passes into summer, the warmth of the sunshine loses its mildness, and settles to a heavy taciturnity. The light, losing its delicate brilliance, becomes a bared sword-blade striking the eyes. Everything shrinks from the full gaze and blaze of the sun. Eyes ache, the brain reels with the glare; mirages dance on the limitless horizons. The scorched herbage falls into dust; water is drawn off from rivers and water-holes. All day the air is heavy and still; the sky the colour of iron.

Nights are heavy and still as the days, and people turn wearily from the glow in the east at dawn; but the days go on, for months, one after the other, hot, breathless, of dazzling radiance, or wrapped in the red haze of a dust storm.

Ridge folk take the heat as primitive people do most acts of God, as a matter of course, with stiff-lipped hardihood, which makes complaint the manifestation of a poor spirit. They meet their difficulties with a native humour which gives zest to flagging energies. Their houses, with roofs whitened to throw off the heat, the dumps of crumbling white clay, and the iron roofs of the billiard parlour, the hotel, and Watty Frost's new house at the end of the town, shimmer in the intense light. At a little distance they seem all quivering and dancing together.

Men like Michael, the Crosses, George Woods, Watty, and women like Maggie Grant and Martha M'Cready, who had been on the Ridge a long time, become inured to the heat. At least, they say that they "do not mind it." No one hears a growl out of them, even when water is scarce and flies and mosquitoes a plague. Their good spirits and grit keep the community going through a trying summer. But even they raise their faces to heaven when an unexpected shower comes, or autumn rains fall a little earlier than usual.

In the early days, before stations were fenced, Bill M'Gaffy, a Warria shepherd, grazing flocks on the plains, declared he had seen a star fall on the Ridge. When he went into the station he showed the scraps of marl and dark metallic stone he had picked up near where the star had fallen, to James Henty, who had taken up Warria Station. The Ridge lay within its boundary. James Henty had turned them over curiously, and surmised that some meteoric stone had fallen on the Ridge. The place had always been called Fallen Star Ridge after that; but opal was not found there, and it did not begin to be known as the black opal field until several years later.

In the first days of the rush to the Ridge, men of restless, reckless temperament had foregathered at the Old Town. There had been wild nights at the shanty. But the wilder spirits soon drifted away to Pigeon Creek and the sapphire mines, and the sober and more serious of the miners had settled to life on the new fields.

The first gathering of huts on the clay pan below the Ridge was known as the Old Town; but it had been flooded so often, that, after people had been washed out of their homes, and had been forced to take to the Ridge for safety two or three times, it was decided to move the site of the township to the brow of the Ridge, above the range of the flood waters and near the new rush, where the most important mines on the field promised to be.

A year or two ago, a score or so of bark and bag huts were ranged on either side of the wide, unmade road space overgrown with herbage, and a smithy, a weather-board hotel with roof of corrugated iron, a billiard parlour, and a couple of stores, comprised the New Town. A wild cherry tree, gnarled and ancient, which had been left in the middle of the road near the hotel, bore the news of the district and public notices, nailed to it on sheets of paper. A little below the hotel, on the same side, Chassy Robb's store served as post-office, and the nearest approach to a medicine shop in the township. Opposite was the Afghan's emporium. And behind the

stores and the miners' huts, everywhere, were the dumps thrown up from mines and old rushes.

There was no police station nearer than fifty miles, and although telegraph now links the New Town with Budda, the railway town, communication with it for a long time was only by coach once or twice a week; and even now all the fetching and carrying is done by a four or six horse-coach and bullock-wagons. The community to all intents and purposes governs itself according to popular custom and popular opinion, the seat of government being Newton's big, earthen-floored bar, or the brushwood shelters near the mines in which the men sit at midday to eat their lunches and noodle—go over, snip, and examine—the opal they have taken out of the mines during the morning.

They hold their blocks of land by miner's right, and their houses are their own. They formally recognise that they are citizens of the Commonwealth and of the State of New South Wales, by voting at elections and by accepting the Federal postal service. Some few of them, as well as Newton and the storekeepers, pay income tax as compensation for those privileges; but beyond that the Ridge lives its own life, and the enactments of external authority are respected or disregarded as best pleases it.

A sober, easy-going crowd, the Ridge miners do not trouble themselves much about law. They have little need of it. They live in accord with certain fundamental instincts, on terms of good fellowship with each other.

"To go back on a mate," is recognised as the major crime of the Ridge code.

Sometimes, during a rush, the wilder spirits who roam from one mining camp to another in the back-country, drift back, and "hit things up" on the Ridge, as the men say. But they soon drift away again. Sometimes, if one of them strikes a good patch of opal and outstays his kind, as often as not he sinks into the Ridge life, absorbs Ridge ways and ideas, and is accepted into the fellowship of men of the Ridge. There is no formality

about the acceptance. It just happens naturally, that if a man identifies himself with the Ridge principle of mateship, and will stand by it as it will stand by him, he is recognised by Ridge men as one of themselves. But if his ways and ideas savour of those the Ridge has broken from, he remains an outsider, whatever good terms he may seem to be on with everybody.

Sometimes a rush leaves a shiftless ne'er-do-well or two for the Ridge to reckon with, but even these rarely disregard the Ridge code. If claims are ratted it is said there are strangers about, and the miners deal with rats according to their own ideas of justice. On the last occasion it was applied, this justice had proved so effectual that there had been no repetition of the offence.

Ridge miners find happiness in the sense of being free men. They are satisfied in their own minds that it is not good for a man to work all day at any mechanical toil; to use himself or allow anyone else to use him like a working bullock. A man must have time to think, leisure to enjoy being alive, they say. Is he alive only to work? To sleep worn out with toil, and work again? It is not good enough, Ridge men say. They have agreed between themselves that it is a fair thing to begin work about 6.30 or 7 o'clock and knock off about four, with a couple of hours above ground at noon for lunch—a snack of bread and cheese and a cup of tea.

At four o'clock they come up from the mines, noodle their opal, put on their coats, smoke and yarn, and saunter down to the town and their homes. And it is this leisure end of the day which has given life on the Ridge its tone of peace and quiet happiness, and has made Ridge miners the thoughtful, well-informed men most of them are.

To a man they have decided against allowing any wealthy man or body of wealthy men forming themselves into a company to buy up the mines, put the men on a weekly wage, and work them, as the opal blocks at Chalk Cliffs had been worked. There might be more money in it, there would be a steadier means of

livelihood; but the Ridge miners will not hear of it.

"No," they say; "we'll put up with less money—and be our own masters."

Most of them worked on Chalk Cliffs' opal blocks, and they realised in the early days of the new field the difference between the conditions they had lived and worked under on the Cliffs and were living and working under on the Ridge, where every man was the proprietor of his own energies, worked as long as he liked, and was entitled to the full benefit of his labour. They had yarned over these differences of conditions at midday in the shelters beside the mines, discussed them in the long evenings at Newton's, and without any committees, documents, or bond—except the common interest of the individual and of the fraternity—had come to the conclusion that at all costs they were going to remain masters of their own mines.

Common thought and common experience were responsible for that recognition of economic independence as the first value of their new life together. Michael Brady had stood for it from the earliest days of the settlement. He had pointed out that the only things which could give joy in life, men might have on the Ridge, if they were satisfied to find their joy in these things, and not look for it in enjoyment of the superficial luxuries money could provide. Most of the real sources of joy were every man's inheritance, but conditions of work, which wrung him of energy and spirit, deprived him of leisure to enjoy them until he was too weary to do more than sleep or seek the stimulus of alcohol. Besides, these conditions recruited him with the merest subsistence for his pains, very often—did not even guarantee that—and denied him the capacity to appreciate the real sources of joy. But the beauty of the world, the sky, and the stars, spring, summer, the grass, and the birds, were for every man, Michael said. Any and every man could have immortal happiness by hearing a bird sing, by gazing into the blue-dark depths of the sky on a starry night. No man could sell his joy of these things.

No man could buy them. Love is for all men: no man can buy or sell love. Pleasure in work, in jolly gatherings with friends, peace at the end of the day, and satisfaction of his natural hungers, a man might have all these things on the Ridge, if he were content with essentials.

Ridge miners live fearlessly, with the magic of adventure in their daily lives, the prospect of one day finding the great stone which is the grail of every opal-miner's quest. They are satisfied if they get enough opal to make a parcel for a buyer when he puts up for a night or two at Newton's. A young man who sells good stones usually goes off to Sydney to discover what life in other parts of the world is like, and to take a draught of the gay life of cities. A married man gives his wife and children a trip to the seaside or a holiday in town. But all drift back to the Ridge when the taste of city life has begun to cloy, or when all their money is spent. Once an opal miner, always an opal miner, the Ridge folk say.

Among the men, only the shiftless and more worthless are not in sympathy with Ridge ideas, and talk of money and what money will buy as the things of first value in life. They describe the Fallen Star township as a God-forsaken hole, and promise each other, as soon as their luck has turned, they will leave it for ever, and have the time of their lives in Sydney.

Women like Maggie Grant share their husband's minds. They read what the men read, have the men's vision, and hold it with jealous enthusiasm. Others, women used to the rough and simple existence of the back-country, are satisfied with the life which gives them a husband, home, and children. Those who sympathise with Mrs. Watty Frost regard the men's attitude as more than half cussedness, sheer selfishness or stick-in-the-mudness; and the more worthy and respectable they are, the more they fret and fume at the earthen floors and open hearths of the bark and bagging huts they live in, and pine for all the kick-shaws of suburban villas. The discontented women are

a minority, nevertheless. Ridge folk as a whole have set their compass and steer the course of their lives with unconscious philosophy, and yet a profound conviction as to the rightness of what they are doing.

And the Ridge, which bears them, stands serenely under blue skies the year long, rising like a backbone from the plains that stretch for hundreds of miles on either side. A wide, dusty road crosses the plains. The huts of the Three Mile and Fallen Star crouch beside it, and everywhere on the rusty, shingle-strewn slopes of the Ridge, are the holes and thrown-up heaps of white and raddled clay or broken sandstone—traces of the search for that "ecstasy in the heart of gloom," black opal, which the Fallen Star earth holds.

CHAPTER IX

DARLING pea was lying in purple and magenta patches through the long grass on the tank paddock when Sophie went with Ella and Mirry Flail to gather wild flowers there.

Wild flowers did not grow anywhere on Fallen Star as they did in the tank paddock. It was almost a place of faery to children of the Ridge. The little ones were not allowed to go there by themselves for fear they might fall into the waterhole which lay like a great square lake in the middle of it, its steep, well-set-up banks of yellow clay, ruled with the precision of a diagram in geometry. The water was almost as yellow as the banks, thick and muddy looking; but it was good water, nothing on earth the matter with it when you had boiled it and the sediment had been allowed to settle, everybody on Fallen Star Ridge was prepared to swear. It had to be drawn up by a pump which was worked by a donkey engine, Sam Nancarrow, and his old fat roan draught mare, and carted to the township when rainwater in the iron tanks beside the houses in Fallen Star gave out.

During a dry season, or a very hot summer, all hands turned out to roof the paddock tank with tarpaulins to prevent evaporation as far as possible and so conserve the township's water supply. On a placard facing the roadway a " severe penalty " was promised to anyone using it without permission or making improper use of it.

Ella and Mirry were gathering sago flower—" wild sweet Alice," as they called candytuft—yellow eye-

bright, tiny pink starry flowers, bluebells, small lavender daisies, taller white ones, and yellow daisies, as well as Darling pea; but Sophie picked only long, trailing stalks of the pea. She had as many as she could hold when she sat down to arrange them into a tighter bunch.

Mirry and Ella Flail had always been good friends of Sophie's. Potch and she had often gone on excursions with them, or to the swamp to cart water when it was scarce and very dear in the township. And since Potch had gone to work Sophie had no one to go about with but Mirry and Ella. She pleased their mother by trying to teach them to read and write, and they went noodling together, or gathering wild flowers. Sophie was three or four years older than Mirry, who was the elder of the two Flails; she felt much older since her mother's death nearly a year ago, and in the black dress she had worn since then. She was just seventeen, and had put her hair up into a knot at the back of her head. That made her feel older, too. But she still liked to go for walks and wanderings with Ella and Mirry. They knew so much about the birds and flowers, the trees, and the ways of all the wild creatures: they were such wild creatures themselves.

They camc running to her, crying excitedly, their hands filled with flowers, shedding them as they ran. Then, collapsing in the grass beside Sophie, Mirry rolled over on her back and gazed up into the sky. Ella, squatting on her thin, sunburnt little sticks of legs, was arranging her flowers and glancing every now and then at Sophie with shy, loving glances.

Sophie wondered why she had nothing of her old joyous zest in their enterprises together. She used to be as wild and happy as Mirry and Ella on an afternoon like this. But there was something of the shy, wild spirit of a primitive people about Mirry and Ella, she remembered, some of their blood, too. One of their mother's people, it was said, had been a native of one of the river tribes.

Mirry had her mother's beautiful dark eyes, almost

green in the light, and freckled with hazel, and her pale, sallow skin. Ella, younger and shyer, was more like her father. Her skin was not any darker than Sophie's, and her eyes blue-grey, her features delicate, her hair golden-brown that glinted in the sun.

" Sing to us, Sophie," Mirry said.

Sophie often sang to them when she and Ella and Mirry were out like this. As she sat with them, dreaming in the sunshine, she sang almost without any conscious effort; she just put up her chin, and the melodies poured from her. Hearing her voice, as it ran in ripples and eddies through the clear, warm air, hung and quivered and danced again, delighted her.

Ella and Mirry listened in a trance of awe, reverence, and admiration. Sophie had a dim vision of them, wide-eyed and still, against the tall grass and flowers.

" My! You can sing, Sophie! Can't she, Ella ? "

Ella nodded, gazing at Sophie with eyes of worshipping love.

" They say you're going away with your father . . . and you're going to be a great singer, Sophie," Mirry said.

" Yes," Sophie murmured tranquilly, " I am."

A bevy of black and brown birds flashed past them, flew in a wide half-circle across the paddock, and alighted on a dead tree beyond the fence.

" Look, look ! " Mirry started to her feet. " A happy family ! I wonder, are the whole twelve there ? "

She counted the birds, which were calling to each other with little shrill cries.

" They're all there ! " she announced. " Twelve of them. Mother says in some parts they call them the twelve apostles. Sing again, Sophie," she begged.

Ella smiled at Sophie. Her lips parted as though she would like to have said that, too; but only her eyes entreated, and she went on putting her flowers together.

As she sang, Sophie watched a pair of butterflies, white with black lines and splashes of yellow and scarlet

on their wings, hovering over the flowered field of the paddock. She was so lost in her singing and watching the butterflies, and the children were so intent listening to her, that they did not hear a horseman coming slowly towards them along the track. As he came up to them, Sophie's rippling notes broke and fell to earth. Ella saw him first, and was on her feet in an instant. Mirry and she, their wild instinct asserting itself, darted away and took cover behind the trunks of the nearest trees.

Sophie looked after them, wondering whether she would follow them as she used to; but she felt older and more staid now than she had a year ago. She stood her ground, as the man, who was leading his horse, came to a standstill before her.

She knew him well enough, Arthur Henty, the only son of old Henty of Warria Station. She had seen him riding behind cattle or sheep on the roads across the plains for years. Sometimes when Potch and she had met him riding across the Ridge, or at the swamp, he had stopped to talk to them. He had been at her mother's funeral, too; but as he stood before her this afternoon, Sophie seemed to be seeing him for the first time.

A tall, slightly-built young man, in riding breeches and leggings, a worn coat, and as weathered a felt hat as any man on the Ridge wore, his clothes the colour of dust on the roads, he stood before her, smiling slightly. His face was dark in the shadow of his hat, but the whole of him, cut against the sunshine, had gilded outlines. And he seemed to be seeing Sophie for the first time, too. She had jumped up and drawn back from the track when the Flails ran away. He could not believe that this tall girl in the black dress was the queer, elfish-like girl he had seen running about the Ridge, bare-legged, with feet in goat-skin sandals, and in the cemetery on the Warria road, not much more than a year ago. Her elfish gaiety had deserted her. It was the black dress gave her face the warm pallor of ivory, he thought, made her look staider, and as if the sadness of all it symbolised had not

left her. But her eyes, strange, beautiful eyes, the green and blue of opal, with black rings on the irises and great black pupils, had still the clear, unconscious gaze of youth; her lips the sweet, sucking curves of a child's.

They stood so, smiling and staring at each other, a spell of silence on each.

Sophie had dropped half her flowers as she sprang up at the sound of someone approaching. She had clutched a few in one hand; the rest lay on the grass about her, her hat beside them. Henty's eyes went to the trees round which Mirry and Ella were peeping.

"They're wild birds, aren't they?" he said.

Sophie smiled. She liked the way his eyes narrowed to slits of sunshine as he smiled.

"Are you going to sing again?" he asked hesitatingly.

Sophie shook her head.

"My mother's awfully fond of that stuff," Henty said, looking at the Darling pea Sophie had in her hand. "We haven't got any near the homestead. I came into the paddock to get some for her."

Sophie held out her bunch.

"Not all of it," he said.

"I can get more," she said.

He took the flowers, and his vague smile changed to one of shy and subtle understanding. Ella and Mirry found courage to join Sophie.

"Where's Potch?" Henty asked.

"He's working with Michael," Sophie said.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, and stood before her awkwardly, not knowing what to talk about.

He was still thinking how different she was to the little girl he had seen chasing goats on the Ridge no time before, and wondering what had changed her so quickly, when Sophie stooped to pick up her hat. Then he saw her short, dark hair twisted up into a knot at the back of her head. Feeling intuitively that he was looking at the knot she was so proud of, Sophie put on her hat quickly.

A delicate colour moved on her neck and cheeks. Arthur Henty found himself looking into her suffused eyes and smiling at her smile of confusion.

"Well, we must be going now," Sophie said, a little breathlessly.

Henty said that he was going into the New Town and would walk along part of the way with her. He tucked the flowers Sophie had given him into his saddle-bag, and she and the children turned down the track. Ella, having found her tongue, chattered eagerly. Arthur Henty strolled beside them, smoking, his reins over his arm. Mirry wanted to ride his horse.

"Nobody rides this horse but me," Henty said. She'd throw you into the middle of next week."

"I can ride," Mirry said; "ride like a flea, the boys say."

She was used to straddling any pony or horse her brothers had in the yard, and they had a name as the best horse-breakers in the district.

Henty laughed. "But you couldn't ride Beeswing," he said. "She doesn't let anybody but me ride her. You can sit on, if you like; she won't mind that so long as I've got hold of her."

The stirrup was too high for Mirry to reach, so he picked her up and put her across the saddle. The mare shivered and shrank under the light shock of Mirry's landing upon her, but Arthur Henty talked to her and rubbed her head soothingly.

"It's all right . . . all right, old girl," he muttered. "Think it was one of those stinging flies? But it isn't, you see. It's only Mirry Flail. She says she's a flea of a rider. But you'd learn her, wouldn't you, if you got off with her by yourself?"

Ella giggled softly, peering at Mirry and Henty and at the beautiful golden-red chestnut he was leading. Ed. Ventry had put Sophie on his coach horses sometimes. He had let her go for a scamper with Potch on an old horse or a likely colt now and then; but she knew she did not ride well—not as Mirry rode.

They walked along the dusty road together when they

had left the tank paddock, Mirry chattering from Beeswing's back, Sophie, with Ella clinging to one hand, on the other side of Henty. But Mirry soon tired of riding a led horse at a snail's pace. When a sulphur-coloured butterfly fluttered for a few minutes over a wild tobacco plant, she slid from the saddle, on the far side, and was off over the plains to have another look at the butterfly.

Ella was too shy or too frightened to get on the chestnut, even with Henty holding her bridle.

"How about you, Sophie?" Arthur Henty asked.

Sophie nodded, but before he could help her she had put her foot into the stirrup and swung into the saddle herself. Beeswing shivered again to the new, strange weight on her back. Henty held her, muttering soothingly. They went on again.

After a while, with a shy glance, and as if to please him, Sophie began to sing, softly at first, so as not to startle the mare, and then letting her voice out so that it rippled as easily and naturally as a bird's. Henty, walking with a hand on the horse's bridle beside her, heard again the song she had been singing in the tank paddock.

Ella was supposed to be carrying Sophie's flowers. She did not know she had dropped nearly half of them, and that they were lying in a trail all along the dusty road. . .

Henty did not speak when Sophie had finished. His pipe had gone out, and he put it in his pocket. The stillness of her audience of two was so intense that to escape it Sophie went on singing, and the chestnut did not flinch. She went quietly to the pace of the song, as though she, too, were enjoying its rapture and tenderness.

Then through the clear air came a rattle of wheels and jingle of harness. Mirry, running towards them from the other side of the road, called eagerly:

"It's the coach. . . . Mr. Ventry's got six horses in, and a man with him!"

Six horses indicated that a person of some importance

was on board the coach. Henty drew the chestnut to one side as the coach approached. Mr. Ventry jerked his head in Henty's direction when he passed and saw Arthur Henty with the Flail children and Sophie. The stranger beside him eyed, with a faint smile of amusement, the cavalcade, the girl in the black dress on the fine chestnut horse, the children with the flowers, and the young man standing beside them. The man on the coach was a clean-shaved, well-groomed, rather good-looking man of forty, or thereabouts, and his clothes and appearance proclaimed him a man of the world beyond the Ridge. His smile and stare annoyed Henty.

"It's Mr. Armitage," Mirry said. "The young one. He's not as nice as the old man, my father says—and he doesn't know opal as well—but he gives a good price."

They had reached the curve of the road where one arm turns to the town and the other goes over the plains to Warria. Sophie slipped from the horse.

"We'll take the short cut here," she said.

She stood looking at Arthur Henty for a moment, and in that moment Henty knew that she had sensed his thought. She had guessed he was afraid of having looked ridiculous trailing along the road with these children. Sophie turned away. The young Flails bounded after her. Henty could hear their laughter when he had ridden out some distance along the road.

From the slope of a dump Sophie saw him—the chestnut and her rider loping into the sunset, and, looking after him, she finished her song.

* "Caro nome che il mio cor festi primo palpitar,
Le delizie dell' amor mi dei sempre rammentar!
Col pensier il mio desir a te sempre volerà,
A fin l'ultimo sospir, caro nome, tuo sarà!"

* Dear name forever nursed in my memory thou shalt be,
For my heart first stirred to the delight of love for thee!
My thoughts and my desire will always be, dear name, toward thee,
And my last breath will be for thee, dear name.

The long, sweet notes and rippled melody followed Arthur Henty over the plains in the quiet air of late afternoon. But the afternoon had been spoilt for him. He was self-conscious and ill at ease about it all.

CHAPTER X

"Mr. Armitage is up at Newton's!" Paul yelled to Michael, when he saw him at his back-door a few minutes after Sophie had given him the news.

"Not the old man?" Michael inquired.

"No, the young 'un."

Word was quickly bruited over the fields that the American, one of the best buyers who came to the Ridge, had arrived by the evening coach. He invariably had a good deal of money to spend, and gave a better price than most of the local buyers.

Dawe P. Armitage had visited Fallen Star Ridge from the first year of its existence as an opal field, and every year for years after that. But when he began to complain about aches and pains in his bones, which he refused to allow anybody to call rheumatism, and was assured he was well over seventy and that the long rail and sea journey from New York City to Fallen Star township were getting too much for him, he let his son, whom he had made a partner in his business, make the journey for him. John Lincoln Armitage had been going to the Ridge for two or three years, and although the men liked him well enough, he was not as popular with them as his father had been. And the old man, John Armitage said, although he was nearly crippled with rheumatism, still grudged him his yearly visit to the Ridge, and hated like poison letting anyone else do his opal-buying.

Dawe Armitage had bought some of the best black opal found on the Ridge. He had been a hard man to deal with, but the men had a grudging admiration for

him, a sort of fellow feeling of affection because of his oneness with them in a passion for black opal. A grim, sturdy old beggar, there was a certain quality about him, a gruff humour, sheer doggedness, strength of purpose, and dead honesty within his point of view, which kept an appreciative and kindly feeling for him in their hearts. They knew he had preyed on them; but he had done it bluntly, broadly, and in such an off-with-the-gloves-lads-style, that, after a good fight over a stone and price, they had sometimes given in to him for sheer amusement, and to let him have the satisfaction of thinking he had gained his point.

Usually he set his price on a stone and would not budge from it. The gougers knew this, and if their price on a stone was not Dawe Armitage's, they did not waste breath on argument, except to draw the old boy and get some diversion from his way of playing them. If a man had a good stone and did not think anyone else was likely to give him his figure, sometimes he sold ten minutes before the coach Armitage was going down to town by, left Newton's. But, three or four times, when a stone had taken his fancy and a miner was obdurate, the old man, with his mind's eye full of the stone and the fires in its dazzling jet, had suddenly sent for it and its owner, paid his price, and pocketed the stone. He had wrapped up the gem, chuckling in defeat, and rejoicing to have it at any price. As a rule he made three or four times as much as he had given for opals he bought on the Ridge, but to Dawe Armitage the satisfaction of making money on a transaction was nothing like the joy of putting a coveted treasure into his wallet and driving off from Fallen Star with it.

A gem merchant of considerable standing in the United States, Dawe Armitage's collection of opals was world famous. He had put black opal on the market, and had been the first to extol the splendour of the stones found on Fallen Star Ridge. So different they were from the opal found on Chalk Cliffs, or in any other part of the world, with the fires in jetty potch rather than in the clear or milky medium people were accustomed to,

that at first timid and conventional souls were disturbed and repelled by them. "They felt," they said, "that there was something occultly evil about black opal." They had a curious fear and dread of the stones as talismans of evil. Dawe Armitage scattered the quakers like chaff with his scorn. They could not, he said, accept the magnificent pessimism of black opal. They would not rejoice with pagan abandonment in the beauty of those fires in black opal, realising that, like the fires of life, they owed their brilliance, their transcendental glory, to the dark setting. But every day the opals made worshippers of sightseers. They mesmerised beholders who came to look at them.

When the coach rattled to a standstill outside the hotel, Peter Newton went to the door of the bar. He knew John Armitage by the size and shape of his dust-covered overalls. Armitage dismounted and pulled off his gloves. Peter Newton went to meet him.

Armitage gripped his hand.

"Mighty glad to see you, Newton," he said, "and glad to see the Ridge again. How are you all?"

Newton smiled, giving him greeting in downright Ridge style.

"Fine," he said. "Glad to see you, Mr. Armitage."

When he got indoors, Armitage threw off his coat. He and Peter had a drink together, and then he went to have a wash and brush up before dinner. Mrs. Newton came from the kitchen; she was pleased to see Mr. Armitage, she said, and he shook hands with her and made her feel that he was really quite delighted to see her. She spent a busy hour or so making the best of her preparations for the evening meal, so that he might repeat his usual little compliments about her cooking. Armitage had his dinner in a small private sitting-room, and strolled out afterwards to the veranda to smoke and yarn with the men.

He spent the evening with them there, and in the bar, hearing the news of the Ridge and gossiping genially. He had come all the way from Sydney the day before, spent the night in the train, and had no head for business

that night, he said. When he yarned with them, Fallen Star men had a downright sense of liking John Armitage. He was a good sort, they told each other; they appreciated his way of talking, and laughed over the stories he told and the rare and racy Americanisms with which he flavoured his speech for their benefit.

When he exerted himself to entertain and amuse them, they were as pleased with him as a pack of women. And John Lincoln Armitage pleased women, men of the Ridge guessed, the women of his own kind as well as the women of Fallen Star who had talked to him now and then. His eyes had a mild caress when they rested on a woman; it was not in the least offensive, but carried challenge and appeal—a suggestion of sympathy. He had a thousand little courtesies for women, the deference which comes naturally to "a man of the world" for a member of "the fair sex." Mrs. Newton was always flattered and delighted after a talk with him. He asked her advice about opals he had bought or was going to buy, and, although he did not make use of it very often, she was always pleased by his manner of asking. Mrs. George Woods and Mrs. Archie Cross both confessed to a partiality for Mr. Armitage, and even Mrs. Watty agreed that he was "a real nice man"; and when he was in the township Mrs. Henty and one of the girls usually drove over from the station and took him back to Warria to stay a day or two before he went back to Sydney on his return journey to New York.

Armitage was very keen to know whether there had been any sensational finds on the Ridge during the year, and all about them. He wanted to know who had been getting good stuff, and said that he had bought Jun's stones in Sydney. The men exclaimed at that.

"I was surprised to hear," John Armitage said, "what happened to the other parcel. You don't mean to say you think Charley Heathfield——?"

"We ain't tried him yet," Watty remarked cautiously, "but the evidence is all against him."

Rouminof thrust himself forward, eager to tell his story. Realising the proud position he might have been

in this night with the opal-buyer if he had had his opals, tears gathered in his eyes as he went over it all again.

Armitage listened intently.

" Well, of all the rotten luck!" he exclaimed, when Paul had finished. " Have another whisky, Rouminof? But what I can't make out," he added, " is why, if he had the stones, Charley didn't come to me with them. . . . I didn't buy anything but Jun's stuff before I came up here . . . and he just said it was half the find he was showing me. Nice bit of pattern in that big black piece, eh? If Charley had the stones, you'd think he'd 've come along to me, or got Jun, or somebody to come along for him. . . ."

" I don't know about that." George Woods felt for his reasons. " He wouldn't want you—or anybody else to know he'd got them."

" That's right," Watty agreed.

" He's got them all right," Ted Cross declared. " You see, I seen him taking Rummy home that night—and he cleared out next morning."

" I guess you boys know best." John Armitage sipped his whisky thoughtfully. " But I'm mad to get the rest of the stones. Tell you the truth, the old man hasn't been too pleased with my buying lately . . . and it would put him in no end of a good humour if I could take home with me another packet of gems like the one I got from Jun. Jun knew I was keen to get the stones . . . and I can't help thinking . . . if he knew they were about, he'd put me in the way of getting them . . . or them in my way—somehow. You don't think . . . anybody else could have been on the job, and . . . put it over on Charley, say. . . ."

His eyes went over the faces of the men lounging against the bar, or standing in groups about him. Michael was lifting his glass to drink, and, for the fraction of a second the opal-buyer's glance wavered on his face before it passed on.

" Not likely," George Woods said dryly.

Recognising the disfavour his suggestion raised, Armitage brushed it aside.

"I don't think so, of course," he said.

And although he did not speak to him, or even look at him closely again, John Armitage was thinking all the evening of the quiver, slight as the tremor of a moth's wing, on Michael's face, when that inquiry had been thrown out.

CHAPTER XI

ARMITAGE was busy going over parcels of stone ar bargaining with the men for the greater part of tl next day. He was beginning to have more of Dav Armitage's zest for the business; and, every time th met, Ridge men found him shrewder, keener. H manner was genial and easy-going with them; but the was a steel band in him somewhere, they were sure.

The old man had been bluff, and as hard as nails; b they understood him better than his son. John Arn tage, they knew, was only perfunctorily interested opal-buying at first; he had gone into it to please the o man, but gradually the thing had taken hold of him. I was not yet, however, anything like as good a judge opal, and his last buying on the Ridge had displeased h father considerably. John Armitage had bought sever parcels of good-looking opal; but one stone, which ha cost £50 in the rough, was not worth £5 when it was cu A grain of sand, Dawe Armitage swore he could have se a mile away, went through it, and it cracked on tl wheel. A couple of parcels had brought double what ha been paid for them; but several stones John had given good price for were not worth half the amount, his fath had said.

George Woods and Watty took John Armitage couple of fine knobbies during the morning, and tl Crosses had shown him a parcel containing two goo green and blue stones with rippled lights; but they ha more on the parcel than Armitage felt inclined to pa remembering the stormy scene there had been with t old man over that last stone from Crosses' mine whi

had cracked in the cutter's hands. Towards the end of the day Mr. Armitage came to the conclusion, having gone over the stones the men brought him, and having bought all he fancied, that there was very little black opal of first quality about. He was meditating the fact, leaning back in his chair in the sitting-room Newton had reserved for him to see the gougers in, some pieces of opal, his scales and microscope on the table before him, when Michael knocked.

Absorbed in his reflections, realising there would be little to show for the trouble and pains of his long journey, and reviewing a slowly germinating scheme and dream for the better output of opal from Fallen Star, John Armitage did not at first pay any attention to the knock.

He had been thinking a good deal of Michael in connection with that scheme. Michael, he knew, would be his chief opponent, if ever he tried putting it into effect. When he had outlined his idea and vaguely formed plans to his father, Dawe Armitage would have nothing to do with them. He swept them aside uncompromisingly.

"You don't know what you're up against," he said. "There isn't a man on the Ridge wouldn't fight like a pole-cat if you tried it on 'em. Give 'em a word of it—and we quit partnership, see? They wouldn't stand for it—not for a second—and there'd be no more black opal for Armitage and Son, if they got any idea on the Ridge you'd that sort of notion at the back of your head."

But John Armitage refused to give up his idea. He went to it as a dog goes to a planted bone—gnawed and chewed over it, contemplatively.

He had made this trip to Fallen Star with little result, and he was sure a system of working the mines on scientific, up-to-date lines would ensure the production of more stone. He wanted to talk organisation and efficiency to men of the Ridge, to point out to them that organisation and efficiency were of first value in production, not realising Ridge men considered their methods both organised and efficient within their means and for their purposes.

Michael knocked again, and Armitage called:

"Come in!" When he saw who had come into the room, he rose and greeted Michael warmly.

"Oh, it's you, Michael!" he said, with a sense of guilt at the thoughts Michael had interrupted. "I wondered what on earth had become of you. The old man gave me no end of messages, and there are a couple of magazines for you in my grip."

"Thank you, Mr. Armitage," Michael replied.

"Well, I hope you've got some good stuff," Armitage said.

Michael took the chair opposite to him on the other side of the table. "I haven't got much," he said.

"I remember Newton told me you've been having rotten luck."

"It's looked up lately," Michael said, the flickering wisp of a smile in his eyes. "The boys say Rummy's a luck-bringer. . . . He's working with me now, and we've been getting some nice stone."

He took a small packet of opal from his pocket and put it on the table. It was wrapped in newspaper. He unfastened the string, turned back the cotton-wool in which the pieces of opal were packed, and spread them out for Armitage to look at.

Armitage went over the stones. He put them, one by one, under his microscope, and held them to and from the light.

"That's a nice bit of colour, Michael," he said, admiring a small piece of grey potch with a black strain which flashed needling rays of green and gold. "A little bit more of that, and you'd be all right, eh?"

Michael nodded. "We're on a streak now," he said. "It ought to work out all right."

"I hope it will." Armitage held the piece of opal to the light and moved it slowly. "Rouminof's working with you now—and Potch, they tell me?"

Michael nodded.

"Pretty hard on him, Charley's getting away with his stones like that!"

John Armitage probed the quiet eyes of the man before him with a swift glance.

"You're right there, Mr. Armitage," Michael said. "Harder on Paul than it would have been on anybody else. He's got the fever pretty bad."

Armitage laughed, handling a stone thoughtfully.

"I gave Jun a hundred pounds for his big stone. I'd give the same for the other—if I could lay my hands on it, though the boys say it wasn't quite as big, but better pattern."

"That's right," Michael said.

Silence lay between them for a moment.

"What have you got on the lot, Michael?" Armitage asked, picking up the stones before him and going over them absent-mindedly.

"A tenner," Michael said.

Usually a gouger asked several pounds more than he expected to get. John Armitage knew that; Michael knew he knew it. Armitage played with the stones, hesitated as though his mind were not made up. There was not much more than potch and colour in the bundle. He went over the stones with the glass again.

"Oh well, Michael," he said, "we're old friends. I won't haggle with you. Ten pounds—your own valuation."

He would get twice as much for the parcel, but the price was a good one. Michael was surprised he had conceded it so easily.

Armitage pulled out his cheque-book and pushed a box of cigars across the table. Michael took out his pipe.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Armitage," he said, "I'm more at home with this."

"Please yourself, Michael," Armitage murmured, writing his cheque.

When Michael had put the cheque in his pocket, Armitage took a cigar, nipped and lighted it, and leaned back in his chair again.

"Not much big stuff about, Michael," he remarked, conversationally.

"George Woods had some good stones," Michael said.

Armitage was not enthusiastic. "Pretty fair. But the old man will be better pleased with the stuff I got from Jun Johnson than anything else this trip. . . . I'd give a good deal to get the almond-shaped stone in that other parcel."

Michael realised Mr. Armitage had said the same thing to him before. He wondered why he had said it to him—what he was driving at.

"There were several good stones in Paul's parcel," he said.

His clear, quiet eyes met John Armitage's curious, inquiring gaze. He was vaguely discomfited by Armitage's gaze, although he did not flinch from it. He wondered what Mr. Armitage knew, that he should look like that.

"It's been hard on Rouminof," Armitage murmured again.

Michael agreed.

"After the boys making Jun shell out, too! It doesn't seem to have been much use, does it?"

"No," Michael said.

"And they say he was going to take that girl of his down to Sydney to have her trained as a singer. She can sing, too. But her mother, Michael—I heard her in *Dinorah* . . . when I was a little chap." Enthusiasm lighted John Armitage's face. "She was wonderful. . . . The old man says people were mad about her when she was in New York. . . . It was said, you know, she belonged to some aristocratic Russian family, and ran away with a rascally violinist—Rouminof. Can you believe it? . . . Went on the stage to keep him. . . . But she couldn't stand the life. Soon after she was lost sight of. . . . I've often wondered how she drifted to Fallen Star. But she liked being here, the old man says."

Michael nodded. There was silence between them a moment; then Michael rose to go. The opal-buyer got up too, and flung out his arms, stretching with relief to be done with his day's work.

"I've been cooped in here all day," he said. "I'll

come along with you, Michael. I'd like to have a look at the Punti Rush. Can you walk over there with me ?"

"'Course I can, Mr. Armitage," Michael said heartily.

They walked out of the hotel and through the town towards the rush, where half a dozen new claims had been pegged a few weeks before.

Snow-Shoes passed then going out of the town to his hut, swinging along the track and gazing before him with the eyes of a seer, his fine old face set in a dream, serene dignity in every line of his erect and slowly-moving figure.

Armitage looked after him.

"What a great old chap he is, Michael," he exclaimed. "You don't know anything about him . . . who he is, or where he comes from, do you ?"

"No," Michael said.

"How does he live ?"

"Noodles."

"He's never brought me any stone."

"Trades it with the storekeepers—though the boys do say"—Michael looked with smiling eyes after Snow-Shoes—"he may be a bit of a miser, loves opal more than the money it brings."

Armitage's interest deepened. "There are chaps like that. I've heard the old man talk about a stone getting hold of a man sometimes—mesmerising him. I believe the old man's a bit like that himself, you know. There are two or three pieces of opal he's got from Fallen Star nothing on earth will induce him to part with. We wanted a stone for an Indian nabob's show tiara—something of that sort—not long ago. I fancied that big knobby we got from George Woods ; do you remember ? But the old man wouldn't part with it ; not he ! Said he'd see all the nabobs in the world in—Hades, before they got that opal out of him !"

Michael laughed. The thought of hard-shelled old Dawe Armitage hoarding opals tickled him immensely.

"Fact," Armitage continued. "He's got a couple of stones he's like a kid over—takes them out, rubs them, and plays with them. And you should hear him if I try

to get them from him. . . . A packet of crackers isn't in it with the old man."

"The boys'd like to hear that," Michael said.

"There's no doubt about the fascination the stuff exercises," John Armitage went on. "You people say, once an opal-miner, always an opal-miner; but I say, once an opal-buyer, always an opal-buyer. I wasn't keen about this business when I came into it . . . but it's got me all right. I can't see myself coming to this God-forsaken part of the world of yours for anything but black opal. . . ."

That expression, whimsical and enigmatic, which was never very far from them, had grown in Michael's eyes. He began to sense a motive in Armitage's seemingly casual talk, and to understand why the opal-buyer was so friendly.

"The old man tells a story," Armitage continued, "of that robbery up at Blue Pigeon. You know the yarn I mean . . . about sticking up a coach when there was a good parcel of opal on board. Somebody did the bush-ranging trick and got away with the opal. . . . The thief was caught, and the stuff put for safety in an iron safe at the post office. And sight of the opals corrupted one of the men in the post office. . . . He was caught . . . and then a mounted trooper took charge of them. And the stuff bewitched him, too. . . . He tried to get away with it. . . ."

"That's right," Michael murmured serenely.

Armitage eyed him keenly. He could scarcely believe the story he had got from Jun, that the second parcel of stones had been exchanged after Charley got them, or that they had been changed on Paul before Charley got them from him.

Michael guessed Armitage was sounding him by talking so much of Rouminof's stones and the robbery. He wondered what Armitage knew—whether he knew anything which would attach him, Michael, to knowledge of what had become of Paul's stones. There was always the chance that Charley had recognised some of the opal in the parcel substituted for Paul's, although none of the

scraps were significant enough to be remembered, Michael thought, and Charley was never keen enough to have taken any notice of the sun-flash and fragments of coloured potch they had taken out of the mine during the year. The brown knobby, which Michael had kept for something of a sentimental reason, because it was the first stone he had found on Fallen Star, Charley had never seen.

But, probably, he remarked to himself, Armitage was only trying to get information from him because he thought that Michael Brady was the most likely man on the Ridge to know what had become of the stones, or to guess what might have become of them.

As they walked and talked, these thoughts were an undercurrent in Michael's mind. And the undercurrent of John Lincoln Armitage's mind, through all his amiable and seemingly inconsequential gossip, was not whether Michael had taken the stones, but why he had, and what had become of them.

Armitage could not, at first, bring himself to credit the half-formed suspicion which that quiver of Michael's face, when he had spoken of what Jun said, had given him. Yet they were all more or less mad, people who dealt with opal, he believed. It might not be for the sake of profit Michael had taken the stones, if he had taken them—there was still a shadow of doubt in his mind. John Armitage knew that any man on the Ridge would have knocked him down for harbouring such a thought. Michael was the little father, the knight without fear and without a stain, of the Ridge. He reflected that Michael had never brought him much stone. His father had often talked of Michael Brady and the way he had stuck to gouging opal with precious little luck for many years. The parcel he had sold that day was perhaps the best Michael had traded with Armitage and Son for a long time. John Armitage wondered if any man could work so long without having found good stuff, without having realised the hopes which had materialised for so many other men of the Ridge.

They went over the new rush, inspected "prospects,"

and yarned with Pony-Fence Inglewood and Bu
Bryant, who had pegged out a claim there. But
Armitage and he walked back to the town discussing
outlook of the new field and the colour and potch some
the men already had to show, Michael found himself
the undertow of an uneasy imagination. He protes
to himself that he was unnecessarily apprehensive, t
all Armitage was trying to get from him was any inf
mation which would throw light on the disappeara
of Paul's stones. And Armitage was wondering whet
Michael might not be an opal miser—whether the m
terious fires of black opal might not have eaten into
brain as they had into the brains of good men before h

If they had, and if he had found the flaw in Micha
armour, John Armitage realised that the way to f
filment of his schemes for buying the mines and work
them on up-to-date lines, was opened up. If Mich
could be proved unfaithful to the law and ideals of
Ridge, John Armitage believed the men's faith in
fabric of their common life would fall to pieces.
envisaged the eating of moths of doubt and disappoi
ment into the philosophy of the Ridge, the disinteg
tion of ideas which had held the men together, and ma
them stand together in matters of common interest a
service, as one man. He had almost assured hims
that if Michael was not the thief and hoarder of the l
opals, he at least knew something of them, when a rip
of laughter and gust of singing were flung into the
not far from them.

To Armitage it was as though some blithe spirit w
mocking the discovery he thought he had made, and
fruition it promised those secret hopes of his.

" It's Sophie," Michael said.

They had come across the Ridge to the back of the hu
The light was failing ; the sky, from the earth upwa
where the sunset had been, the frail, limpid gre
of a shallow lagoon, deepening to blue, darker th
indigo. The crescent of a moon, faintly gilded, swu
in the sky above the dark shapes of the huts which st
by the track to the old Flash-in-the-pan rush. T

smoke of sandal-wood fires burning in the huts was in the air. A goat bell tinkled. . . .

Potch and Sophie were talking behind the hut somewhere; their exclamations, laughter, a phrase or two of the song Sophie was singing went through the quietness.

And it was all this he wanted to change! John Armitage caught the revelation of the moment as he stood to listen to Sophie singing. He understood as he had never done what the Ridge stood for—association of people with the earth, their attachment to the primary needs of life, the joyous flight of youthful spirits, this quiet happiness and peace at evening when the work of the day was done.

As he came from the dumps, having said good-night to Michael, he saw Sophie, a slight, girlish figure, on the track ahead of him. Her dress flickered and flashed through the trees beside the track; it was a wraithlike streak in the twilight. She was taking the milk down to Newton's, and singing to herself as she walked. John Armitage quickened his steps to overtake her.

CHAPTER XII

The visit of an opal-buyer ruffled ever so slightly the still surface of life on the Ridge. When Armitage had gone, he was talked of for a few days; the stones he had bought, the prices he had given for them, were discussed. Some of his sayings, and the stories he had told, were laughed over. Tricks of speech he had used, tried at first half in fun, were adopted and dropped into the vernacular of the mines.

"Sure!" the men said as easily as an American; and sometimes, talking with each other: "You've got another think coming to you"; or, "See, you've got your nerve with you!"

For a night or two Michael went over the books and papers John Armitage had brought him. At first he just glanced here and there through them, and then he began to read systematically, and light glimmered in his windows far into the night. He soaked the contents of two or three reviews and several newspapers before giving himself to a book on international finance in which old Armitage had written his name.

Michael thrilled to the stimulus of the book, the intellectual excitement of the ideas it brought forth. He lived tumultuously within the four bare walls of his room, arguing with himself, the author, the world at large. Wrong and injustice enthroned, he saw in this book describing the complexities of national and international systems of finance, the subtle weaving and interweaving of webs of the money-makers.

This was not the effect Dawe Armitage had expected his book to have; he had expected to overawe and

daze Michael with its impressive arraignment of figures and its subtle and bewildering generalisations on credit and foreign exchange. Michael's mind had cut through the fog raised by the financier's jargon to the few small facts beneath it all. Neither dazed nor dazzled, his brain had swung true to the magnetic meridian of his faith. Far from the book having shown him the folly and futility of any attempt against the Money Power, as Dawe Armitage, in a moment of freakish humour had imagined it might, it had filled him with such an intensity of fury that for a moment he believed he alone could accomplish the regeneration of the world; that like St. Michael of old he would go forth and slay the dragon, this chimera which was ravaging the world, drawing the blood, beauty, and joy of youth, the peace and wisdom of age; breaking manhood and womanhood with its merciless claws.

But falling back on a consciousness of self, as with broken wings he realised he was neither archangel, nor super-man, but Michael Brady, an ordinary, ill-educated man who read and dreamed a great deal, and gouged for black opal on Fallen Star Ridge. He was a little bitter, and more humble, for having entertained that radiant vision of himself.

John Armitage had been gone from the Ridge some weeks when Michael went over in his mind every phase and phrase of the talk they had had. His lips took a slight smile; it crept into his eyes, as he reviewed what he had said and what John Armitage had said, smoking unconsciously.

Absorbed in his reading, he had thought little of John Armitage and that walk to the new rush with him. Occasionally the memory of it had flickered and glanced through his mind; but he was so obsessed by the ideas this new reading had stirred, that he went about his everyday jobs in the mine and in the hut, absent-mindedly, automatically, because they were things he was in the habit of doing. Potch watched him anxiously; Rouminof growled to him; Sophie laughed and flitted and sang, before his eyes; but Michael had

been only distantly conscious of what was going on about him. George Woods and Watty guessed what was the matter; they knew the symptoms of these reading and brooding bouts Michael was subject to. The moods wore off when they put questions likely to draw information and he began to talk out and discuss what he had been reading with them.

He had talked this one off, when suddenly he remembered how John Armitage's eyes had dived into his during that walk to the new rush. He could see Armitage's eyes again, keen grey eyes they were. And his hands. Michael remembered how Armitage's hands had played over the opals he had taken to show him. John Lincoln Armitage had the shrewd eyes of any man who lives by his wits—lawyer, pickpocket, politician, or financier—he decided; and the fine white hands of a woman. Only Michael did not know any woman whose hands were as finely shaped and as white as John Armitage's. Images of his clean-shaven, hot-house face of a city dweller, slightly burned by his long journey on land and sea, recurred to him; expressions, gestures, inflections of voice.

Michael smiled to himself in communion with his thoughts as he went over the substance of Armitage's conversation, dissecting and shredding it critically. The more he thought of what Armitage had said, the more he found himself believing John Armitage had some information which caused him to think that he, Michael, knew something of the whereabouts of the stones. He could not convince himself Armitage believed he actually held the stones, or that he had stolen them. Armitage had certainly given him an opportunity to sell on the quiet if he had the stones; but his manner was too tentative, mingled with a subtle respect, to carry the notion of an overt suggestion of the sort, or the possession of incriminating knowledge. Then there was the story of the old Cliffs robbery. Michael wondered why Mr. Armitage had gone over that. On general principles, doubting the truth of his long run of bad luck—or from curiosity merely, perhaps. But Michael did

not deceive himself that Armitage might have told the story in order to discover whether there was something of the miser in him, and whether—if Michael had anything to do with the taking of Paul's opals—he might prefer to hold rather than sell them.

Michael was amused at the thought of himself as a miser. He went into the matter as honestly as he could. He knew the power opal had with him, the fascination of the search for it, which had brought him from the Cliffs to the Ridge, and which had held him to the place, although the life and ideas it had come to represent meant more to him now than black opal. Still, he was an opal miner, and through all his lean years on the Ridge he had been upheld by the thought of the stone he would find some day.

He had dreamed of that stone. It had haunted his idle thoughts for years. He had seen it in the dark of the mine, deep in the ruddy earth, a mirror of jet with fires swarming, red, green, and gold in it.

Dreams of the great opal he would one day discover had comforted him when storekeepers were asking for settlement of long-standing accounts. He did not altogether believe he would find it, that wonderful piece of black opal; but he dreamed, like a child, of finding it.

As he thought of it, and of John Armitage, the smile in his eyes broadened. If Armitage knew of that stone of his dreams, he would certainly think his surmise was correct and believe that Michael Brady was a miser. But he had held the dream in a dark and distant corner of his consciousness; had it out to mood and brood over only at rare and distant intervals; and no one was aware of its existence.

Black opal had no more passionate lover than himself, Michael knew. He trembled with instinctive eagerness, reverence, and delight, when he saw a piece of beautiful stone; his eyes devoured it. But there was nothing personal in his love. He might have been high priest of some mysterious divinity; when she revealed herself he was consumed with adoration. In a vague, whimsical way Michael realised this of himself, and yet, too, that if

ever he held the stone of his dreams in his hands, he would be filled with a glorious and flooding sense of accomplishment; an ecstasy would transport him. It would be beyond all value in money, that stone; but he would not want to keep it to gaze on alone, he would want to give it to the world as a thing of consummate beauty, for everybody to enjoy the sight of and adore.

No, Michael assured himself, he was not a miser. And, he reflected, he had not even looked at Paul's stones. For all he knew, the stones Paul had been showing that night at Newton's might have been removed from the box before he left Newton's. Someone might have done to Paul what he, Michael, had done to Charley Heathfield, as Armitage had suggested. Paul's little tin box was well enough known. He had been opening and showing his stones at Newton's a long time before the night when Jun had been induced to divide spoils. It would be just as well, Michael decided, to see what the box did contain; and he promised himself that he would open it and look over the stones—some evening. But he was not inclined to hurry the engagement with himself to do so.

He had been glad enough to forget that he had anything to do with that box of Paul's: it still lay among the books where he had thrown it. The memory of the night on which he had seen Charley taking Paul home, and of all that had happened afterwards, was blurred in an ugly vision for him. It had become like the memory of a nightmare. He could scarcely believe he had done what he had done; yet he knew he had. He drew a deep breath of relief when he realised everything had worked out well so far.

Paul was working with him; they had won that little bit of luck to carry them on; Sophie was growing up healthily, happily, on the Ridge. She was growing so quickly, too. Within the last few months Michael had noticed a subtle change in her. There was an indefinable air of a flower approaching its bloom about her. People were beginning to talk of her looks. Michael had seen eyes following her admiringly. Sophie walked with a

light, lithe grace; she was slight and straight, not tall really, but she looked tall in the black dress she still wore and which came to her ankles. There was less of the eager sprite about her, a suggestion of some sobering experience in her eyes—the shadow of her mother's death—which had banished her unthinking and careless childhood. But the eyes still had the purity and radiance of a child's. And she seemed happy—the happiest thing on the Ridge, Michael thought. The cadence of her laughter and a ripple of her singing were never long out of the air about her father's hut. Wherever she went, people said now: "Sing to us, Sophie!"

And she sang, whenever she was asked, without the slightest self-consciousness, and always those songs from old operas, or some of the folk-songs her mother had taught her, which were the only songs she knew.

Michael had seen a number of neighbours in the township and their wives and children sitting round in one or other of their homes while Sophie sang. He had seen a glow of pleasure transfuse people as they listened to her pure and ringing notes. Singing, Sophie seemed actually to diffuse happiness, her own joy in the melodies she flung into the air. Oh, yes, Sophie was happy singing, Michael could permit himself to believe now. She could make people happy by her singing. He had feared her singing as a will-o'-the-wisp which would lead her away from him and the Ridge. But when he heard her enthralling people in the huts with it, he was not afraid.

Paul sometimes moaned about the chances she was missing, and that she could be singing in theatres to great audiences. Sophie herself laughed at him. She was quite content with the Ridge, it seemed, and to sing to people on their verandas in the summer evenings or round the fires in the winter. She might have had greater and finer audiences, the Ridge folk said, but she could not have had more appreciative ones.

If she was singing in the town, Michael always went to bring her home, and he was as pleased as Sophie to hear people say:

"You're not taking her away yet, Michael? The

night's a pup!" or, "Another . . . just one more song, Sophie!"

And if she had been singing at Newton's, Michael liked to see the men come to the door of the bar, holding up their glasses, and to hear their call, as Sophie and he went down the road:

"Sophie! Sophie!"

"Skin off y'r nose!"

"All the luck!"

"Best respecks, Sophie!"

When Sophie did not know what to do with herself all the hours Michael and Potch and her father were away at the mines, Michael had showed her how to use her mother's cutting-wheel. He taught her all he knew of opals, and Sophie was delighted with the idea of learning to cut and polish gems as her mother had.

Michael gave her rough stones to practise on, and in no time she learnt to handle them skilfully. George, Watty, and the Crosses brought her some gems to face and polish for them, and they were so pleased with her work that they promised to give her most of their stones to cut and polish. She had two or three accidents, and was very crestfallen about them; but Michael declared they were part of the education of an opal-cutter and would teach her more about her work than anyone could tell her.

To Michael those days were of infinite blessedness. They proved again and again the right of what he had done. At first he was vaguely alarmed and uneasy when he saw younger men of the Ridge, Roy O'Mara or Bully Bryant, talking or walking with Sophie, or he saw her laughing and talking with them. There was something about Sophie's bearing with them which disturbed him—a subtle, unconscious witchery. Then he explained it to himself. He guessed that the woman in her was waking, or awake. On second thoughts he was not jealous or uneasy. It was natural enough the boys should like Sophie, that she should like them; he recognised the age-old call of sex in it all. And if Sophie loved and married a man of the Ridge, the future would be clear, Michael thought. He could give Paul the opals, and her husband

could watch over Sophie and see no harm came to her if she left the Ridge.

The uneasiness stirred again, though, one afternoon when he found her walking from the tank paddock with Arthur Henty beside her. There was a startled consciousness about them both when Michael joined them and walked along the road with them. He had seen Sophie talking to Henty in and about the township before, but it had not occurred to him there was anything unusual about that. Sophie had gone about as she liked and talked to whom she liked since she was a child. She was on good terms with everyone in the countryside. No one knew where she went or what she did in the long day while the men were at the mines. Because the carillon of her laughter flew through those quiet days, Michael instinctively had put up a prayer of thanksgiving. Sophie was happy, he thought. He did not ask himself why; he was grateful; but a vague disquiet made itself felt when he remembered how he had found her walking with Arthur Henty, and the number of times he had seen her talking to Arthur Henty at Chassy Robb's store, or on the tracks near the town.

Fallen Star folk knew Arthur better than any of the Hentys. For years he had been coming through the township with cattle or sheep, and had put up at Newton's with stockmen on his way home, or when he was going to an out-station beyond the Ridge.

His father, James Henty, had taken up land in the back-country long before opal was found on Fallen Star Ridge. He had worked half a million square acres on an arm of the Darling in the days before runs were fenced, with only a few black shepherds and one white man, old Bill M'Gaffy, to help him for the first year or two. But, after an era of extraordinary prosperity, a series of droughts and misfortunes had overwhelmed the station and thrown it on the tender mercies of the banks.

The Hentys lived much as they had always done. They entertained as usual, and there was no hint of a

wolf near the door in the hearty, good-natured, and liberal hospitality of the homestead. A constitutional optimism enabled James Henty to believe Warria would ultimately throw off its debts and the good old days return. Only at the end of a season, when year after year he found there was no likelihood of being able to meet even the yearly interest on mortgages, did he lose some of his sanguine belief in the station's ability to right itself, and become irritable beyond endurance, blaming any and everyone within hail for the unsatisfactory estimates.

But usually Arthur bore the brunt of these outbursts. Arthur Henty had gone from school to work on the station at the beginning of Warria's decline from the years of plenty, and had borne the burden and not a little of the blame for heavy losses during the droughts, without ever attempting to shift or deny the responsibilities his father put upon him.

"It does the old man good to have somebody to go off at," he explained indifferently to his sister, Elizabeth, when she called him all the fools under the sun for taking so much blackguarding sitting down.

Although James Henty's only son and manager of the station under his father's autocratic rule, Arthur Henty lived and worked among Warria stockmen as though he were one of them. His clothes were as worn and heavy with dust as theirs; his hat was as weathered, his hands as hard—sunburnt and broken with sores when barcoo was in the air. A quiet, unassuming man, he never came the "Boss" over them. He passed on the old man's orders, and, for the rest, worked as hard as any man on the station.

He had never done anything remarkable that anyone could remember; but the men he worked with liked him. Everybody rather liked Arthur Henty, although nobody enthused about him. He had done man's work ever since he was a boy, with no more than a couple of years' schooling; he had done it steadily and as well as any other young man in the back-country. But there was a curious, almost feminine weakness in him somewhere. The men did not understand it. They thought he was

too supine with his father; that he ought to stand up to him more.

Arthur Henty preferred being out on the plains with them rather than in at the home station, the men said. He looked happier when he was with them; he whistled to them as they lay yarning round the camp-fire before turning in. They had never heard anything like his whistling. He seemed to be playing some small, fine, invisible flute as he gave them old-fashioned airs, ragtime tunes, songs from the comic operas, and miscellaneous melodies he had heard his sisters singing. No one had heard him whistling like that at the station. Out on the plains, or in the bar at Newton's, he was a different man. Once or twice when he had been drinking, and a glass or two of beer or whisky had got to his head, he had shown more the spirit that it was thought he possessed—as if, when the conscious will was relaxed, a submerged self had leapt forth.

Men who had known him a long time wondered whether time would not strengthen the fibres of that submerged self; but they had seen Arthur Henty lose the elastic, hopeful outlook of youth, and sink gradually into the place assigned him by his father, at first dutifully, then with an indifference which slowly became apathy.

Mrs. Henty and the girls exclaimed with dismay and disgust when they returned to the station after two years in town, and saw how rough and unkempt-looking Arthur had become. They insisted on his having his hair and beard cut at once, and that he should manicure his finger-nails. After he had dressed for dinner and was clipped and shaved, they said he looked more as if he belonged to them; but he was a shy, awkward boor, and they did not know what to make of him. In his mother's hands, Arthur was still a child, though, and she brought him back to the fold of the family, drew his resistance—an odd, sullen resentment he had acquired for the niceties of what she called "civilised society"—and made him amenable to its discipline.

Elizabeth was twice the man her brother was, James Henty was fond of declaring. She had all the vigour

and dash he would have liked his son to possess. "My daughter Elizabeth," he said as frequently as possible, and was always talking of her feats with horses, and the clear-headed and clever way she went about doing things, and getting her own way on all and every occasion.

When the men rounded buck-jumpers into the yards on a Sunday morning, Elizabeth would ride any Chris Este, the head stockman, let her near; but Arthur never attempted to ride any of the warrigals. He steered clear of horse-breaking and rough horses whenever he could, although he broke and handled his own horses. In a curious way he shared a secret feeling of his mother's for horses. She had never been able to overcome an indefinable apprehension of the raw, half-broken horses of the back-country, although her nerve had carried her through years of acquaintance with them, innumerable accidents and misadventures, and hundreds of miles of journeys at their mercy; and Arthur, although he had lived and worked among horses as long as he could remember, had not been able to lose something of the same feeling. His sister, suspecting it, was frankly contemptuous; so was his father. It was the reason of Henty's low estimate of his son's character generally. And the rumour that Arthur Henty was shy of tough propositions in horses—"afraid of horses"—had a good deal to do with the never more than luke-warm respect men of the station and countryside had for him.

CHAPTER XIII

SOPHIE often met Arthur Henty on the road just out of the town. Usually it was going to or coming from the tank paddock, or in the paddock, on Friday afternoons, when he had been into Budda for the sales or to truck sheep or cattle. They did not arrange to meet, but Sophie expected to see Arthur when she went to the tank paddock, and she knew he expected to find her there. She did not know why she liked being with Arthur Henty so much, or why they were such golden occasions when she met him. They did not talk much when they were together. Their eyes met; they knew each other through their eyes—a something remote from themselves was always working through their eyes. It drew them together.

When she was with Arthur Henty, Sophie knew she was filled with an ineffable gaiety, a thing so delicate and ethereal that as she sang she seemed to be filling the air with it. And Henty looked at her sometimes as if he had discovered a new, strange, and beautiful creature, a butterfly, or gnat, with gauzy, resplendent wings, whose beauty he was bewildered and overcome by. The last time they had been together he had longed to draw her to him and kiss her so that the virgin innocence would leave her eyes; but fear or some conscientious scruple had restrained him. He had been reluctant to awaken her, to change the quality of her feeling towards him. He had let her go with a lingering handclasp. In all their tender intimacy there had been no more of the love-making of the flesh than the subtle interweavings of instincts and fibres which this handclasp gave.

Ridge folk had seen them walking together. They had seen that subtle inclination of Sophie's and Arthur's figures towards each other as they walked—the magnetic, gentle, irresistible swaying towards each other—and the gossips began to whisper and nod smilingly when they came across Arthur and Sophie on the road. Sophie at first went her way unconscious of the whispers and smiles. Then words were dropped slyly—people teased her about Arthur. She realised they thought he was her sweetheart. Was he? She began to wonder and think about it. He must be; she came to the conclusion happily. Only sweethearts went for walks together as she and Arthur did.

"My mother says," Mirry Flail remarked one day, "she wouldn't be a bit surprised to see you marrying Arthur Henty, Sophie, and going over to live at Warria."

"Goodness!" Sophie exclaimed, surprised and delighted that anybody should think such a thing.

"Marry Arthur Henty and go over and live at Warria." Her mind, like a delighted little beaver, began to build on the idea. It did not alter her bearing with Arthur. She was less shy and thoughtful with him, perhaps; but he did not notice it, and she was carelessly and childishly content to have found the meaning of why she and Arthur liked meeting and talking together. People only felt as she and Arthur felt about each other if they were going to marry and live "happy ever after," she supposed.

When Michael was aware of what was being said, and of the foundation there was for gossip, he was considerably disturbed. He went to talk to Maggie Grant about it. She, he thought, would know more of what was in the wind than he did, and be better able to gauge what the consequences were likely to be to Sophie.

"I've been bothered about it myself, Michael," she said. "But neither you nor me can live Sophie's life for her. . . . I don't see we can do anything. His crowd'll do all the interfering, if I know anything about them."

"I suppose so," Michael agreed.

"And, as far as I can see, it won't do any good our butting in," Mrs. Grant continued. "You know

Sophie's got a will of her own . . . and she's always had a good deal her own way. I've talked round the thing to her . . . and I think she understands."

"You've always been real good to her, Maggie," Michael said gratefully.

"As to that"—the lines of Maggie Grant's broad, plain face rucked to the strength of her feeling—"I've done what I could. But then, I'm fond of her—fond of her as you are, Michael. That's saying a lot. And you know what I thought of her mother. But it's no use us thinking we can buy Sophie's experience for her. She's got to live . . . and she's got to suffer."

Busy with her opal-cutting, and happy with her thoughts, Sophie had no idea of the misgiving Michael and Maggie Grant had on her account, or that anyone was disturbed and unhappy because of her happiness. She sang as she worked. The whirr of her wheel, the chirr of sandstone and potch as they sheared away, made a small, busy noise, like the drone of an insect, in her house all day; and every day some of the men brought her stones to face and fix up. She had acquired such a reputation for making the most of stones committed to her care that men came from the Three Mile and from the Punti with opals for her to rough-out and polish.

Bully Bryant and Roy O'Mara were often at Rouminof's in the evening, and they heard about it when they looked in at Newton's later on, now and then.

"You must be striking it pretty good down at the Punti, Bull," Watty Frost ventured genially one night. "See you takin' stones for Sophie to fix up pretty near every evenin'."

"There's some as sees too much," Bully remarked significantly.

"What you say, you say y'rself, Bull." Watty pulled thoughtfully on his pipe, but his little blue eyes squinted over his fat, red-grained cheeks, not in the least abashed.

"I do," Bull affirmed. "And them as sees too much . . . won't see much . . . when I'm through with 'em."

"Mmm," Watty brooded. "That's a good thing to know, isn't it?"

He and the rest of the men continued to "sling off," as they said, at Bully and Roy O'Mara as they saw fit, nevertheless.

The summer had been a mild one; it passed almost without a ripple of excitement. There were several hot days, but cool changes blew over, and the rains came before people had given up dreading the heat. Several new prospects had been made, and there were expectations that holes sunk on claims to the north of the Punti Rush would mean the opening up of a new field.

Michael and Potch worked on in their old claim with very little to show for their pains. Paul had slackened and lost interest as soon as the fitful gleams of opal they were on had cut out. Michael was not the man to manage Rummy, the men said.

Potch and Michael, however, seemed satisfied enough to regard Paul more or less as a sleeping partner; to do the work of the mine and share with him for keeping out of the way.

"Shouldn't wonder if they wouldn't rather have his room than his company," Watty ventured, "and they just go shares with him so as things'll be all right for Sophie."

"That's right!" Pony-Fence agreed.

The year had made a great difference to Potch. Doing man's work, going about on equal terms with the men, the change of status from being a youth at anybody's beck and call to doing work which entitled him to the taken-for-granted dignity of being an independent individual, had made a man of him. His frame had thickened and hardened. He looked years older than he was really, and took being Michael's mate very seriously.

Michael had put up a shelter for himself and his mates, thinking that Potch and Paul might not be welcome in George and Watty's shelter; but George and Watty were loth to lose Michael's word from their councils. They called him over nearly every day, on one pretext or another. Sometimes his mates followed Michael. But Rouminof soon wearied of a discussion on anything

except opal, and wandered off to the other shelters to discover whether anybody had struck anything good that morning. Potch threw himself on the ground beside Michael when Michael had invited him to go across to George and Watty's shelter with him, and after a while the men did not notice him there any more than Michael's shadow. He lay beside Michael, quite still, throwing crumbs to the birds which came round the shelter, and did not seem to be listening to what was said. But always when a man was heatedly and with some difficulty trying to disentangle his mind on a subject of argument, he found Potch's eyes on him, steady and absorbing, and knew from their intent expression that Potch was following all he had to say with quick, grave interest.

Some people were staying at Warria during the winter, and when there was going to be a dance at the station Mrs. Henty wrote to ask Rouminof to play for it. She could manage the piano music, she said, and if he would tune his violin for the occasion, they would have a splendid band for the young people. And, her letter had continued: "We should be so pleased if your daughter would come with you."

Sophie was wildly excited at the invitation. She had been to Ridge race balls for the last two or three years, but she had never even seen Warria. Her father had played at a Warria ball once, years before, when she was little; but she and her mother had not gone with him to the station. She remembered quite well when he came home, how he had told them of all the wonderful things there had been to eat at the ball—stuffed chickens and crystallised fruit, iced cakes, and all manner of sweets.

Sophie had heard of the Warria homestead since she was a child, of its orange garden and great, cool rooms. It had loomed like the enchanted castle of a legend through all her youthful imaginings. And now, as she remembered what Mirry Flail had said, she was filled with delight and excitement at the thought of seeing it.

She wondered whether Arthur had asked his mother

to invite her to the dance. She thought he must have; and with naïve conceit imagined happily that Arthur's mother must want to know her because she knew that Arthur liked her. And Arthur's sisters—it would be nice to know them and to talk to them. She went over and over in her mind the talks she would have with Polly and Nina, and perhaps Elizabeth Henty, some day.

A few weeks before the ball she had seen Arthur riding through the township with his sisters and a girl who was staying at Warria. He had not seen her, and Sophie was glad, because suddenly she had felt shy and confused at the thought of talking to him before a lot of people. Besides, they all looked so jolly, and were having such a good time, that she would not have known what to say to Arthur, or to his sisters, just then.

When she told Mrs. Woods and Martha M'Cready about the invitation, they smiled and teased her.

"Oh, that tells a tale!" they said.

Sophie laughed. She felt silly, and she was blushing, they said. But she was very happy at having been asked to the ball. For weeks before she found herself singing "Caro Nome" as she sat at work, went about the house, or with Potch after the goats in the late afternoon.

Arthur liked that song better than any other, and its melody had become mingled and interwoven with all her thoughts of him.

The twilight was deepening, on the evening a few days before the dance, when Bully Bryant and Roy O'Mara came up to Rouminof's hut, calling Sophie. She was washing milk tins and tea dishes, and went to the door singing to herself, a candle throwing a fluttering light before her.

"Your father sent us along for you, Sophie," Bully explained. "There's a bit of a celebration on at Newton's to-night, and the boys want you to sing for them."

Sophie turned from them, going into the house to put down her candle.

"All right," she said, pleased at the idea.

Michael came into the hut through the back door. From his own room he had heard Bully calling and then explaining why he and Roy O'Mara were there.

"Don't go, Sophie," Michael said.

"But why, Michael?" Disappointment clouded Sophie's first bright pleasure that the men had sent for her to sing to them, and her eagerness to do as they asked.

"It's not right . . . not good for you to sing down there when the boys 've been drinking," Michael said, unable to express clearly his opposition to her singing at Newton's.

"Don't be a spoil-sport, Michael," the boys at the door called when they saw he was trying to dissuade Sophie.

"Come along, Sophie," Roy called.

She looked from Bully and Roy to Michael, hesitating. Theirs was the call of youth to youth, of youth to gaiety and adventure. She turned away from Michael.

"I'm going, Michael," she said quickly, and swung to the door. Michael heard her laughing as she went off along the track with Bully and Roy.

"Did you know Mr. Armitage is up?" Roy stopped to call back.

"No," Michael said.

"Came up by the coach this evening," Roy said, and ran after Bully and Sophie.

It was a rowdy night at Newton's. Shearing was just over at Warria sheds, and men with cheques to burn were crowding the bar and passages. Sophie was hailed with cheers as she neared the veranda. Her father staggered out towards her, waving his arms crazily. Sophie was surprised when she found the crowd waiting for her. There were so many strangers in it—rough men with heavy, inflamed faces—hardly one she knew among them. A murmur and boisterous clamour of voices came from the bar. The men on the veranda made way for her.

Her heart quailed when she looked into the big earthen-floored bar, and saw its crowd of rough-haired,

sun-red men, still wearing the clothes they had been working in, grey flannel shirts and dungarees, blood-splashed, grimy, and greasy with the "yolk" of fleeces they had been handling. The smell of sheep and the sweat of long days of shearing and struggling with restless beasts were in the air, with fumes of rank tobacco and the flat, stale smell of beer. The hanging lamp over the bar threw only a dim light through the fog of smoke the men had put up, and which from the doorway completely obscured Peter Newton where he stood behind the bar.

Sophie hung back.

"I'm not going in there," she said.

"Did you know Mr. Armitage was up ?" Roy asked.

"No," she said.

He explained how Mr. Armitage had come unexpectedly by the coach that evening. Sophie saw him among the men on the veranda.

"I'll sing here," she told Bully and Roy, leaning against a veranda post.

She was a little afraid. But she knew she had always pleased Ridge folk when she sang to them, so she put back her head and sang a song of youth and youthful happiness she had sung on the veranda at Newton's before. It did not matter that the words were in Italian, which nobody understood. The dancing joyousness and laughing music of her notes carried the men with them. The applause was noisy and enthusiastic. Sophie laughed, delighted, yet almost afraid of her success.

Big and broad-shouldered, Bully Bryant stood at a little distance from her, in front of everybody. Arthur Henty, leaning against the wall near the door of the bar, smiled softly, foolishly, when she glanced at him. He had been drinking, too, and was watching, and listening to her, with the same look in his eyes as Bully.

Sophie caught the excitement about her. An exhilaration of pleasure thrilled her. It was crude wine which went to her head, this admiration and applause of strangers and of the men she had known since she was a child. There was a wonderful elation in having them

beg her to sing. They looked actually hungry to hear her. She found Arthur Henty's eyes resting on her with the expression she knew in them. An imp of recklessness entered her. Her father beat the air as if he were leading an orchestra, and she threw herself into the Shadow Song, singing with an abandonment that carried her beyond consciousness of her surroundings.

She sang again and again, and always in response to an eager tumult of cheers, thudding of feet, joggling of glasses, chorus of broken cries: "En-core, encore, Sophie!" An instinct of mischief and coquetry urging, she glanced sometimes at Arthur, sometimes at Bully. Then with a glance at Arthur, and for a last number, she began "Caro Nome," and gave to her singing all the glamour and tenderness, the wild sweetness, the aria had come to have for her, because she had sung it so often to Arthur when they met and were walking along the road together. She was so carried away by her singing, she did not realise what had happened until afterwards.

She only knew that suddenly, roughly, she was grasped and lifted. She saw Bully's face flaming before her own, gazed with terror and horror into his eyes. His face was thrown against hers—and obliterated.

"Are you all right?" someone asked after a moment.

Awaking from the daze and bewilderment, Sophie looked up.

John Armitage was standing beside her; Potch nearby. They were on the outskirts of the crowd on the veranda.

"Yes," she said.

The men on the veranda had broken into two parties; one was surging towards the bar door, the other moving off down the road out of the town. Michael came towards her.

"Thank you, Mr. Armitage," he said.

"Oh, Potch looked after her. I couldn't get near," John Armitage said.

An extraordinary quiet took possession of Sophie. When she was going down the road with Potch and Michael, she said:

" Did Bully kiss me, Michael ? "

" Yes," he replied.

" I don't know what happened then ? "

" Arthur Henty knocked him down," Michael said.

She looked at him with scared eyes.

" They want to fight it out . . . but they're both drunk. The boys are trying to stop it."

" Oh, Michael ! " Sophie cried on a little gasping breath ; and looking into her eyes he read her contrition, asking forgiveness, understanding all that he had not been able to explain to her. She did not say, " I'll never sing there, like that, any more." Her feeling was too deep for words ; but Michael knew she never would.

CHAPTER XIV

"It's what I wore, meself, white muslin, when I went to me first ball," Mrs. George Woods said, standing off to admire the frock of white muslin Sophie had on, and which she had just fastened up for her.

Sophie was admiring her reflection in Mrs. Woods' mirror, a square of glass which gave no more than her head and shoulders in brilliant sketchy outlines. She moved, trying to see more of herself and the new dress. Maggie Grant, who had helped with the making of the dress, was also gazing at her and at it admiringly.

When it was a question of Sophie having a dress for the ball at Warria, Mrs. Grant had spoken to Michael about it.

"Sophie's got to have a decent dress to go to the station, Michael," she said. "I'm not going to have people over there laughing at her, and she's had nothing but her mother's old dresses, cut down—for goodness knows how long."

"Will you get it?" Michael inquired anxiously.

Mrs. Grant nodded.

"Bessie Woods and I were thinking it might be pinspot muslin, with a bit of lace on it," she said. "We could get the stuff at Chassy Robb's and make it up between us."

"Right!" Michael replied, looking immensely relieved to have the difficulty disposed of. "Tell Chassy to put it on my book."

So the pinspot muslin and some cheap creamy lace had been bought. Mrs. Woods and Sophie settled on a style they found illustrating an advertisement in a newspaper

and which resembled a dress one of the Henty girls had worn at the race ball the year before. Maggie Grant had done all the plain sewing and Mrs. Woods the fixing and finishing touches. They had consulted over and over again about sleeves and the length of the skirt. The frock had been fitted at least a dozen times. They had wondered where they would put the lace as a bit of trimming, and had decided for frills at the elbows and a tucker in the V-shaped neck of the blouse. They marvelled at their audacity, but felt sure they had done the right thing when they cut the neck rather lower than they would have for a dress to be worn in the daytime.

Martha M'Cready, insisting on having a finger in the pie, had pressed the dress when it was finished, and she had washed and ironed Mrs. George Woods' best embroidered petticoat for Sophie to wear with it.

And now Sophie was dressing in Mrs. Woods' bedroom because it had a bigger mirror than her own room, and the three women were watching her, giving little tugs and pats to the dress now and then, measuring it with appraising glances of conscious pride in their workmanship, and joy at Sophie's appearance in it. Sophie, her face flushed, her eyes shining, turned to them every now and then, begging to know whether the skirt was not a little full here, or a little flat there; and they pinched and pulled, until it was thought nothing further could be done to improve it.

Sophie was anxious about her hair. She had put it in plaits the night before, and had kept it in them all the morning. Her hair had never been in plaits before, and she had not liked the look of it when she saw it all crisp and frizzy, like Mirry Flail's. She had used a wet brush to get the crinkle out, but there was still a suggestion of it in the heavy dark wave of her hair when she had done it up as usual.

"Your hair looks very nice—don't worry any more about it, Sophie," Martha M'Cready had said.

"My mother used to say there was nothing nicer for a young girl to wear than white muslin," Mrs. Woods

remarked, "and that sash of your mother's looks real nice as a belt, Sophie."

The sash, a broad piece of blue and green silk shot like a piece of poor opal, Sophie had found in a box of her mother's, and it was wound round her waist as a belt and tied in a bow at the side.

"Turn round and let me see if the skirt's quite the same length all round, Sophie," Mrs. Grant commanded.

"Yes, Maggie," Bessie Woods exclaimed complacently. "It's quite right."

Sophie glanced at herself in the glass again. Mrs. Woods had lent her a pair of opal ear-rings, and Maggie Grant the one piece of finery she possessed—a round piece of very fine black opal set in a rim of gold, which Bill had given her when first she came to the Ridge.

Sophie had on for the first time, too, a necklace she had made herself of stones the miners had given her at different times. There was a piece of opal for almost every man on the fields, and she had strung them together, with a beautiful knobby Potch had made her a present of for her eighteenth birthday, a few days before, in the centre.

Just as she had finished dressing, Mrs. Watty Frost called in the doorway: "Anybody at home?"

"Come in," Mrs. George Woods replied.

Mrs. Watty walked into the bedroom. She had a long slender parcel wrapped in brown paper in her hand, but nobody noticed it at the time.

"My!" she exclaimed, staring at Sophie, "we are fine, aren't we?"

Sophie caught up her long, cotton gloves and pirouetted in happy excitement.

"Aren't we?" she cried gaily. "Just look at my gloves! Did ever you see such lovely long gloves, Mrs. Watty? And don't my ear-rings look nice? But it does feel funny wearing ear-rings, doesn't it? I want to be shaking my head all the time to make them joggle!"

She shook her head. The blue and green fires of the stones leapt and sparkled. Her eyes seemed to catch

fire from them. The women exchanged admiring glances.

"Where's my handkerchief?" Sophie cried. "Father's late, isn't he? I'm sure we'll be late! How long will it take to drive over to Warria?—An hour? Goodness! And it'll be almost time for the dance to begin then! Oh, don't my shoes look nice, Maggie?"

She looked down at her feet in the white cotton stockings and white canvas shoes, with ankle straps, which Maggie Grant had sent into Budda for. The hem of her skirt came just to her ankles. She played the new shoes in and out from under it in little dancing steps, and the women laughed at her, happy in her happiness.

"But you haven't got a fan, Sophie," Mrs. Watty said.

"A fan?" Sophie's eyes widened.

"You should oughter have a fan. In my young days it wasn't considered decent to go to a ball without a fan," Mrs. Watty remarked grimly.

"Oh!" Sophie looked from one to the other of her advisers.

Mrs. George Woods was just going to say that it was a long time since Mrs. Watty's young days, when Mrs. Watty took the brown paper from the long, thin parcel she was carrying.

"I thought most likely you wouldn't have one," she said, "so I brought this over."

She unfurled an old-fashioned, long-handled, sandalwood fan, with birds and flowers painted on the brown satin screen, and a little row of feathers along the top. Mrs. George Woods and Mrs. Grant exchanged glances that Mrs. Watty should pander to the vanity of an occasion.

"Mrs. Watty!" Sophie took the fan with a little cry of delight.

"My, aren't you a grown-up young lady now, Sophie?" Mrs. Woods exclaimed, as Sophie unfurled the fan.

"But mind you take care of it, Sophie," Mrs. Watty said, stiffening against the relaxing atmosphere of goodwill and excitement. "Watty got it for me last trip he

made to sea, before we was married, and I set a good deal of store by it."

"Oh, I'll be ever so careful!" Sophie declared. She opened the fan. "Isn't it pretty?"

Dropping into a chair, she murmured: "May I—have this dance with you, Miss Rouminof?" And casting a shy upward glance over her fan, as if answering for herself, "I don't mind if I do!"

Martha and Mrs. Woods laughed heartily, recognising Arthur Henty's way of talking in the voice Sophie had imitated.

"That's the way to do it, Sophie," Mrs. Woods said; "only you shouldn't say, 'Don't mind if I do,' but, 'It's a pleasure, I'm sure.'"

"It's a pleasure, I'm sure," Sophie mimed.

"Is she going to wear the dress over?" Mrs. Watty asked anxiously.

"Yes," Maggie Grant said. "Bessie's lending her a dust-coat. I don't think it'll get crushed very much. You see, they won't arrive until it's nearly time for the dance to begin, and we thought it'd be better for us to help her to get fixed up. Everybody'll be so busy over at Warria—and we thought she mightn't be able to get anybody to do up her dress for her."

"That's right," Mrs. Watty said.

There was a rattle of wheels on the rough shingle near the hut.

"Here's your father, Sophie," Martha called.

"And Michael and Potch are in the kitchen wanting to have a look at you before you go, Sophie," Maggie Grant said.

"Oh!" Sophie took the coat Mrs. Woods was lending her, and went out to the kitchen with it on her arm.

Michael and Potch were there. They stared at her. But her radiant face, the shining eyes, and the little smile which hovered on her mouth, held their gaze more than the new white dress standing out in slight, stiff folds all round her. The vision of her—incomparable youth and loveliness she was to Michael—gripped him so that a

moisture of love and reverence dimmed his eyes. . . . And Potch just stared and stared at her.

Paul was bawling from the buggy outside :

" Are you ready, Sophie ? Sophie, are you ready ? "

Mrs. Woods held the dust-coat. Very carefully Sophie edged herself into it, and wrapped its nondescript buff-coloured folds over her dress. Then she put the pink woollen scarf Martha had brought over her head, and went out to the buggy. Her father was sitting aloft on the front seat, driving Sam Nancarrow's old roan mare, and looking spruce and well turned out in a new baggy suit which Michael had arranged for him to get in order to look more of a credit to Sophie at the ball.

" See you take good care of her, Paul," Mrs. Grant called after him as they drove off.

CHAPTER XV

The drive across the plains seemed interminable to Sophie.

Paul hummed and talked of the music he was going to play as they went along. He called to Sam Nancarrow's old nag, quite pleased to be having a horse to drive as though it belonged to him, and gossiped genially about this and other balls he had been to.

Sophie kept remembering what Mrs. Grant and Mrs. George Woods had said, and how she had looked in those glimpses of herself in the mirror. "I do look nice! I do look nice!" she assured herself.

It was wonderful to be going to a ball at Warria. She had never thought she could look as she did in this new frock, with her necklace, and Mrs. Woods' ear-rings, and that old sash of her mother's. She was a little anxious, but very happy and excited.

She remembered how Arthur had looked at her when she met him on the road or in the paddock sometimes. She only had on her old black dress then. He must like her in this new dress, she thought. Her mind had a subtle recoil from the too great joy of thinking how much more he must like her in this pretty, new, white frock; she sat in a delicious trance of happiness. Her father hummed and gossiped. All the stars came out. The sky was a wonderful blue where it met the horizon, and darkened to indigo as it climbed to the zenith.

When they drove from the shadow of the coolebahs which formed an avenue from the gate of the home paddock to the veranda of the homestead, Ted Burton, the station book-keeper, a porky, good-natured little

man, with light, twinkling eyes, whose face looked as if it had been sand-papered, came out to meet them.

"There you are, Rouminof!" he said. "Glad to see you. We were beginning to be afraid you weren't coming!"

Sophie got down from the buggy, and her father drove off to the stables. Passing the veranda steps with Mr. Burton, she glanced up. Several men were on the steps. Her eyes went instinctively to Arthur Henty, who was standing at the foot of them, a yellow puppy fawning at his feet. He did not look up as Sophie passed, pretending to be occupied with the pup. But in that fleeting glance her brain had photographed the bruise on his forehead where it had caught a veranda post when Bully Bryant, having regained his feet, hit out blindly.

Potch had told Sophie what happened—she had made him find out in order to tell her. Arthur and Bully had wanted to fight, but after the first exchange of blows the men had held them back. Bully was mad drunk, they said, and would have hammered Henty to pulp. And the next evening Bully came to Sophie, heavy with shame, and ready to cry for what he had done.

"If anybody'd 've told me I'd treat you like that, Sophie, I'd 've killed him," he said. "I'd 've killed him. . . . You know how I feel about you—you know how we all feel about you—and for me to have served you like that—me that'd do anything in the world for you. . . . But it's no good trying to say any more. It's no good tryin' to explain. It's got me down. . . ."

He sat with his head in his hands for a while, so ashamed and miserable, that Sophie could not retain her wrath and resentment against him. It was like having a brother in trouble and doing nothing to help him, to see Bully like this.

"It's all right, Bully," she said. "I know . . . you weren't yourself . . . and you didn't mean it."

He started to his feet and came to stand beside her. Sophie put her hand in his; he gripped it hard, unable to say anything. Then, when he could control his voice, he said:

" I went over to see Mr. Henty this morning . . . and old him if anybody else 'd done what I did, I'd 've done what he did."

Potch had said the men expected Bully would want to ght the thing out when he was sober, and it was a big hing for him to have done what he had. The punishing ower of Bully's fists was well known, and he had taken his way of punishing himself. Sophie understood that. he was grateful and reconciled to him.

" I'm glad, Bully," she said. " Let's forget all bout it."

So the matter ended. But it all came back to her as he saw the broken red line on Arthur Henty's forehead.

She did not know that because of it she was an object f interest to the crowd on the veranda. News of rthur Henty's bout with Bully Bryant had been very oon noised over the whole countryside. Most of the nen who came to the ball from Langi-Eumina and other tations had gleaned varied and highly-coloured versions, nd Arthur had been chaffed and twitted until he was ore and ashamed of the whole incident. He could not nderstand himself—the rush of rage, instinctive and nreasoning, which had overwhelmed him when he hit ut at Bully.

His mother protested that it was a shame to give rthur such a bad time for what was, after all, merely the hivalrous impulse of any decent young man when a girl vas treated lightly in his presence; but the men and he girls who were staying at the station laughed and eased all the more for the explanation. They pretended e was a very heroic and quixotic young man, and asked bout Sophie—whether she was pretty, and whether it vas true she sang well. They redoubled their efforts, nd goaded him to a state of sulky silence, when they new she was coming to the ball.

Arthur Henty had been conscious for some time of an ndercurrent within him drawing him to Sophie. He was fraid of, and resented it. He had not thought of loving er, or marrying her. He had gone to the tank paddock n the afternoons he knew she would be there, or had

looked for her on the Warria road when she had been to the cemetery, with a sensation of drifting pleasantly. He had never before felt as he did when he was with Sophie, that life was a clear and simple thing—pleasant, too; that nothing could be better than walking over the plains through the limpid twilight. He had liked to see the fires of opal run in her eyes when she looked at him; to note the black lines on the outer rim of their coloured orbs; the black lashes set in silken skin of purest ivory; the curve of her chin and neck; the lines of her mouth, and the way she walked; all these things he had loved. But he did not want to have the responsibility of loving Sophie: he could not contemplate what wanting to marry her would mean in tempests and turmoil with his family.

He had thought sometimes of a mediæval knight wandering through flowering fields with the girl on a horse beside him, in connection with Sophie and himself. A reproduction of the well-known picture of the knight and the girl hung in his mother's sitting-room. She had cut it out of a magazine, and framed it, because it pleased her; and beneath the picture, in fine print, Arthur had often read:

> "I met a lady in the meads,
> Full beautiful—a fairy's child;
> Her hair was long, her foot was light,
> And her eyes were wild.
>
> "I set her on my pacing steed,
> And nothing else saw all day long;
> For sideways would she lean, and sing
> A faery's song."

As a small boy Arthur had been attracted by the picture, and his mother had told him its story, and had read him Keats' poem. He had read it ever so many times since then himself, and after he met Sophie in the tank paddock that afternoon she had ridden home on his horse, some of the verses haunted him with the thought of her. One day when they were sitting by the track and she had been singing to him, he had made a daisy

ıain and thrown it over her, murmuring sheepishly, a caprice of tenderness :

> " I made a garland for her head,
> And bracelets too, and fragrant zone ;
> She looked at me as she did love
> And made sweet moan."

Sophie had asked about the poem. She had wanted › hear more, and he had repeated as many verses as he ›uld remember. When he had finished, she had looked ; him " as she did love" indeed, with eyes of sweet ›nfidence, yet withdrawing from him a little in shy and ıppy confusion that he should think of her as anyone ke the lady of the meads, who was " full beautiful—a ıiry's child."

But Arthur did not want to love her ; he did not ant to marry her. He did not want to have rows with s father, differences with his mother. The affair at ewton's had shown him where he was going.

Sophie was " a fairy's child," he decided. " Her hair as long, her foot was light, and her eyes were wild " ; ıt he did not want to be " a wretched wight, alone and ılely loitering " on her account ; he did not want to ıarry her. He would close her eyes with " kisses four," e told himself, smiling at the precision of the knight of ıe chronicle ; " kisses four "—no more—and be done ith the business.

Meanwhile, he wished Sophie were not coming to the all. He would have given anything to prevent her ›ming ; but he could do nothing.

He had thought of escaping from the ball by going to ıe out-station with the men ; but his mother, foreseeing ›mething of his intention, had given him so much to do t the homestead for her, that he could not go away. Vhen the buggy with Sophie and her father drove up to ıe veranda, there was a chorus of suppressed exclama-ons among the assembled guests.

" Here she is, Art ! "

" Buck up, old chap ! None but the brave, etc."

Sophie did not hear the undertone of laughter and

raillery which greeted her arrival. She was quite unconscious that the people on the veranda were interested in her at all, as she walked across the courtyard listening to Mr. Burton's amiable commonplaces.

When Mr. Burton left her in a small room with chintz-covered chairs and dressing-table, Sophie took off her old dust-coat and the pink scarf she had tied over her hair. The mirror was longer than Mrs. Woods'. Her dress looked very crushed when she saw it reflected. She tried to shake out the creases. Her hair, too, was flat, and had blown into stringy ends. A shade of disappointment dimmed the brightness of her mood as she realised she was not looking nearly as nice as she had when she left the Ridge.

Someone said: " May I came in ? " and Polly Henty and another girl entered the room.

Polly Henty had just left school. She was a round-faced, jolly-looking girl of about Sophie's own age, and the girl with her was not much older, pretty and sprightly, an inch or so taller than Polly, and slight. She had grey eyes, and a fluff of dry-grass coloured hair about a small, sharp-featured, fresh-complexioned face, neatly powdered.

Sophie knew something was wrong with her clothes the moment she encountered the girls' curious and patronising glances as they came into the room. Their appearance, too, took the skin from her vanity. Polly had on a frock of silky white crêpe, with no lace or decoration of any kind, except a small gold locket and chain which she was wearing. But her dress fell round her in graceful folds, showing her small, well-rounded bust and hips, and she had on silk stockings and white satin slippers. The other girl's frock was of pale pink, misty material, so thin that her shoulders and arms showed through it as though there were nothing on them. She had pinned a pink rose in her hair, too, so that its petals just lay against the nape of her neck. Sophie thought she had never seen anyone look so nice. She had never dreamed of such a dress.

" Oh, Miss Rouminof," Polly said; " mother sent

me to look for you. We're just ready to start, and your father wants you to turn over his music for him."

Sophie stood up, conscious that her dress was nothing like as pretty as she had thought it. It stood out stiffly about her: the starched petticoat crackled as she moved. She knew the lace should not have been on her sleeves; that her shoes were of canvas, and creaked as she walked; that her eotton gloves, and even the heavy, old-fashioned fan she was carrying, were not what they ought to have been.

"Miss Chelmsford—Miss Rouminof," Polly said, looking from Sophie to the girl in the pink dress.

Sophie said: "How do you do?" gravely, and put out her hand.

"Oh! . . . How do you do?" Miss Chelmsford responded hurriedly, and as if just remembering she, too, had a hand.

Sophie went with Polly and her friend to the veranda, which was screened in on one side with hessian to form a ball-room. Behind the hessian the walls were draped with flags, sheaves of paper daisies, and bundles of Darling pea. Red paper lanterns swung from the roof, threw a rosy glare over the floor which had been polished until it shone like burnished metal.

Polly Henty took Sophie to the piano where Mrs. Henty was playing the opening bars of a waltz. Paul beside her, his violin under his arm, stood looking with eager interest over the room where men and girls were chatting in little groups.

Mrs. Henty nodded and smiled to Sophie. Her father signalled to her, and she went to a seat near him.

Holding her hands over the piano, Mrs. Henty looked to Paul to see if he were ready. He lifted his violin, tucked it under his chin, drew his bow, and the piano and violin broke gaily, irregularly, uncertainly, at first, into a measure which set and kept the couples swaying round the edge of the ball-room.

Sophie watched them at first, dazed and interested. Under the glow of the lanterns, the figures of the dancers looked strange and solemn. Some of the dancers were

moving without any conscious effort, just skimming the floor like swallows; others were working hard as they danced. Tom Henderson held Elizabeth Henty as if he never intended to let go of her, and worked her arm up and down as if it were a semaphore.

Sophie had always admired Arthur's eldest sister, and she thought Elizabeth the most beautiful-looking person she had ever seen this evening. And that pink dress—how pretty it was! What had Polly said her name was—the girl who wore it? Phyllis .... Phyllis Chelmsford. . . . Sophie watched the dress flutter among the dancers some time before she noticed Miss Chelmsford was dancing with Arthur Henty.

She watched the couples revolving, dazed, and thinking vaguely about them, noticing how pretty feet looked in satin slippers with high, curved heels, wondering why some men danced with stiff knees and others as if their knees had funny-bones like their elbows. The red light from the lanterns made the whole scene look unreal; she felt as if she were dreaming.

"Sophie!" her father cried sharply.

She turned his page. Her eyes wandered to Mrs. Henty, who sat with her back to her. Sophie contemplated the bow of her back in its black frock with Spanish lace scarf across it, the outline of the black lace on the wrinkled skin of Mrs. Henty's neck, the loose, upward wave of her crisp white hair, glinting silverly where the light caught it. Her face was cobwebbed with wrinkles, but her features remained delicate and fine as sculpturings in ancient ivory. Her eyes were bright: the sparkle of youth still leapt in them. Her eyes had a slight smile of secret sympathy and amusement as they flew over the roomful of people dancing.

Sophie watched dance after dance, while the music jingled and jangled.

Presently John Armitage appeared in the doorway with Nina Henty. Sophie heard him apologising to Mrs. Henty for being late, and explaining that he had stayed in the back-country a few days longer than usual for the express purpose of coming to the ball.

Mrs. Henty replied that it was "better late than never," and a pleasure to see Mr. Armitage at any time; and then he and Nina joined the throng of the dancers.

Sophie drew her chair further back so that the piano screened her. The disappointment and stillness which had descended upon her since she came into the room tightened and settled. She had thought Arthur would surely come to ask her for this dance; but when the waltz began she saw he was dancing again with Phyllis Chelmsford. She sat very still, holding herself so that she should not feel a pain which was hovering in the background of her consciousness and waiting to grip her.

It was different, this sitting on a chair by herself and watching other people dance, to anything that had ever happened to her. She had always been the centre of Ridge balls, courted and made a lot of from the moment she came into the hall. Even Arthur Henty had had to shoulder his way if he wanted a waltz with her.

As the crowd brushed and swirled round the room, it became all blurred to Sophie. The last rag of that mood of tremulous joyousness which had invested her as she drove over the plains to the ball with her father, left her. She sat very still; she could not see for a moment. The waltz broke because she did not hear her father when he called her to turn the page of his music; he knocked over his stand trying to turn the page himself, and exclaimed angrily when Sophie did not jump to pick it up for him.

After that she watched his book of music with an odd calm. She scarcely looked at the dancers, praying for the time to come when the ball would end and she could go home. The hours were heavy and dead; she thought it would never be midnight or morning again. She was conscious of her crushed dress and cotton gloves, and Mrs. Watty's big, old-fashioned fan; but after the first shock of disappointment she was not ashamed of them. She sat very straight and still in the midst of her finery; but she put the fan on the chair behind her, and took off her gloves in order to turn over the pages of her father's music more expertly.

She knew now she was not going to dance. She understood she had not been invited as a guest like everybody else; but as the fiddler's little girl to turn over his music for him. And when she was not watching the music, she sat down in her chair beyond the piano, hoping no one would see or speak to her.

Mrs. Henty spoke to her occasionally. Once she called pleasantly:

"Come here and let me look at your opals, child."

Sophie went to her, and Mrs. Henty lifted the necklace.

"What splendid stones!" she said.

Sophie looked into those bright eyes, very like Arthur's, with the same shifting sands in them, but alien to her, she thought.

"Yes," she said quietly. She did not feel inclined to tell Mrs. Henty about the stones.

Mrs. Henty admired the ear-rings, and looked appreciatively at the big flat stone in Mrs. Grant's brooch. Sophie coloured under her attention. She wished she had not worn the opals that did not belong to her.

Looking into Sophie's face, Mrs. Henty became aware of its sensitive, unformed beauty, a beauty of expression rather than features, and of a something indefinable which cast a glamour over the girl. She had been considerably disturbed by Arthur's share in the brawl at Newton's. It was so unlike Arthur to show fight of any sort. If it had not happened after she had sent the invitation, Mrs. Henty would not have spoken of Sophie when she asked Rouminof to play at the ball. As it was, she was not sorry to see what manner of girl she was.

But as Sophie held a small, quiet face before her, with chin slightly uplifted, and eyes steady and measuring, a little disdainful despite their pain and surprise, Mrs. Henty realised it was a shame to have brought this girl to the ball, in order to inspect her; to discover what Arthur thought of her, and not in order that she might have a good time like other girls. After all, she was young and used to having a good time. Mrs. Henty heard enough of Ridge gossip to know any man

on the mines thought the world of Sophie Rouminof. She had seen them eager to dance with her at race balls. It was not fair to have side-tracked her about Arthur, Mrs. Henty confessed to herself. The fine, clear innocence which looked from Sophie's eyes accused her. It made her feel mean and cruel. She was disturbed by a sensation of guilt.

Paul was fidgeting at the first bars of the next dance, and, knowing the long programme to go through, Mrs. Henty's hand fell from Sophie's necklace, and Sophie went back to her chair.

But Mrs. Henty's thoughts wandered on the themes she had raised. She played absent-mindedly, her fingers skipping and skirling on the notes. She was realising what she had done. She had not meant to be cruel, she protested: she had just wished to know how Arthur felt about the girl. If he had wanted to dance with her, there was nothing to prevent him.

Arthur was dancing again with Phyllis, she noticed. She was a little annoyed. He was overdoing the thing. And Phyllis was a minx! That was the fourth time she had slipped and Arthur had held her up, the rose in her hair brushing his cheek.

"Mother!" Polly called. "For goodness' sake . . . what are you dreaming of?"

The music had gone to the pace of Mrs. Henty's reverie until Polly called. Then Mrs. Henty splashed out her chords and marked her rhythm more briskly.

After all, Mrs. Henty concluded, if Arthur and Phyllis had taken a fancy to each other—at last—and were getting on, she could not afford to espouse the other girl's cause. What good would it do? She wanted Arthur to marry Phyllis. His father did. Phyllis was the only daughter of old Chelmsford, of Yuina Yuina, whose cattle sales were the envy of pastoralists on both sides of the Queensland border. Phyllis's inheritance and the knowledge that the interests of Warria were allied to those of Andrew Chelmsford of Yuina, would ensure a new lease of hope and opportunity for Warria. . . . Whereas it would be worse than awful if Arthur con-

templated anything like marriage with this girl from the Ridge.

Mrs. Henty's conscience was uneasy all the same. When the dance was ended, she called Arthur to her.

"For goodness' sake, dear, ask that child to dance with you," she said when he came to her. "She's been sitting here all the evening by herself."

"I was just going to," Sophie heard Arthur say.

He came towards her.

"Will you have the next dance with me, Sophie?" he asked.

She did not look at him.

"No," she said.

"Oh, I say——" He sat down beside her. "I've had to dance with these people who are staying with us," he added awkwardly.

Her eyes turned to him, all the stormy fires of opal running in them.

"You don't *have* to dance with me," she said.

He got up and stood indecisively a moment.

"Of course not," he said, "but I want to."

"I don't want to dance with you," Sophie said.

He turned away from her, went down the ball-room, and out through the doorway in the hessian wall. Everyone had gone to supper. Mrs. Henty had left the piano. Paul himself had gone to have some refreshment which was being served in the dining-room across the courtyard. From the square, washed with the silver radiance of moonlight which she could see through the open space in the hessian, came a tinkle of glasses and spoons, fragments of talking and laughter. Sophie heard a clear, girlish voice cry: "Oh, Arthur!"

She clenched her hands; she thought that she was going to cry; but stiffening against the inclination, she sat fighting down the pain which was gripping her, and longed for the time to come when she could go home and be out in the dark, alone.

John Armitage entered the ball-room as if looking for someone. Glancing in the direction of the piano, he saw Sophie.

"There you are, Sophie!" he exclaimed heartily. "And, would you believe it, I've only just discovered you were here."

He sat down beside her, and talked lightly, kindly, for a moment. But Sophie was in no mood for talking. John Armitage had guessed something of her crisis when he came into the room and found her sitting by herself. He had seen the affair at Newton's, and knew enough of Fallen Star gossip to understand how Sophie would resent Arthur Henty's treatment of her. He could see she was a sorely hurt little creature, holding herself together, but throbbing with pain and anger. She could not talk; she could only think of Arthur Henty, whose voice they heard occasionally out of doors. He was more than jolly after supper. Armitage had seen him swallow nearly a glassful of raw whisky. His face had gone a ghastly white after it. Rouminof had been drinking, too. He came into the room unsteadily when Mrs. Henty took her seat at the piano again; but he played better.

Armitage's eyes went to her necklace.

"What lovely stones, Sophie!" he said.

Sophie looked up. "Yes, aren't they? The men gave them to me—there's a stone for every one. This is Michael's!"—she touched each stone as she named it—"Potch gave me that, and Bully Bryant that."

Her eyes caught Armitage's with a little smile.

"It's easy to see where good stones go on the Ridge," he said. "And here am I—come hundreds of miles . . . can't get anything like that piece of stuff in your brooch."

"That's Mrs. Grant's," Sophie confessed.

"And your ear-rings, Sophie!" Armitage said. "'Clare to goodness,' as my old nurse used to say, I didn't think you could look such a witch. But I always have said black opal ear-rings would make a witch of a New England spinster."

Sophie laughed. It was impossible not to respond to Mr. Armitage when he looked and smiled like that. His manner was so friendly and appreciative, Sophie was thawed and insensibly exhilarated by it.

Armitage sat talking to her. Sophie had always interested him. There was an unusual quality about her; it was like the odour some flowers have, of indescribable attraction for certain insects, to him. And it was so extraordinary to find anyone singing arias from old-fashioned operas in this out-of-the-way part of the world.

John Lincoln Armitage had a man of the world's contempt for churlish treatment of a woman, and he was indignant that the Hentys should have permitted a girl to be so humiliated in their house. He had been paying Nina Henty some mild attention during the evening, but Sophie in distress enlisted the instinct of that famous ancestor of his in her defence. He determined to make amends as far as possible for her disappointment of the earlier part of the evening.

"May I have the next dance, Sophie?" he inquired.

Sophie glanced up at him.

"I'm not dancing," she said.

Her averted face, the quiver of her lips, confirmed him in his resolution. He took in her dress, the black opals in her ear-rings swinging against her black hair and white neck. She had never looked more attractive, he thought, than in this unlovely dress and with the opals in her ears. The music was beginning for another dance. Across the room Henty was hovering with a bevy of girls.

"Why aren't you dancing, Sophie?" John Armitage asked.

His quiet, friendly tone brought the glitter of tears to her eyes.

"No one asked me to, until the dance before supper—then I didn't want to," she said.

The dance was already in motion.

"You'll have this one with me, won't you?"

John Armitage put the question as if he were asking a favour. "Please!" he insisted.

Putting her arm on his, Armitage led Sophie among the dancers. He held her so gently and firmly that she felt as if she were dancing by a will not her own. She and he glided and flew together; they did not talk, and when

the music stopped, Mr. Armitage took her through the doorway into the moonlight with the other couples. They walked to the garden where the orange trees were in blossom.

"Oh!" Sophie breathed, her arm still on his, and a little giddy.

The earth was steeped in purest radiance; the orange blossoms swam like stars on the dark bushes; their fragrance filled the air.

Sophie held up her face as if to drink. "Isn't it lovely?" she murmured.

A black butterfly with white etchings on his wings hovered over an orange bush they were standing near, as if bewildered by the moonlight and mistaking it for the light of a strange day.

Armitage spread his handkerchief on a wooden seat.

"I thought you'd like it," he said. "Let's sit here—I've put down my handkerchief because there's a dew, although the air seems so dry."

When the music began again Sophie got up.

"Don't let us go in yet," he begged.

"But——" she demurred.

"We'll stay here for this, and have the next dance," Armitage said.

Sophie hesitated. She wondered why Mr. Armitage was being so nice to her, understanding a little. She smiled into his eyes, dallying with the temptation. John Armitage had seen women's eyes like that before; then fall to the appeal of his own. But in Sophie's eyes he found something he had not seen very often—a will-o'-the-wisp of infinite wispishness which incited him to pursue and to insist, while it eluded and flew from him.

When she danced with John Armitage again, Sophie looked up, laughed, and played her eyes and smiles for him as she had seen Phyllis Chelmsford do for Arthur. At first, shyly, she had exerted herself to please him, and Armitage had responded to her tentative efforts; but presently she found herself enjoying the game. And Armitage was so surprised at the charm she revealed as she exerted herself to please him, that he responded with

an enthusiasm he had not contemplated. But their mutual success at this oldest diversion in the world, while it surprised and delighted them, did not delight their hosts. Mr. and Mrs. Henty were surprised; then frankly scandalised. Several young men asked Sophie to dance with them after she had danced with John Armitage. She thanked them, but refused, saying she did not wish to dance very much. She sat in her chair by the piano except when she was dancing with Mr. Armitage, or was in the garden with him.

CHAPTER XVI

"See Ed. means to do you well with a six-horse team this evening, Mr. Armitage," Peter Newton said, while Armitage was having his early meal before starting on his all-night drive into Budda.

Newton remembered afterwards that John Armitage did not seem as interested and jolly as usual. Ordinarily he was interested in everything, and cordial with everybody; but this evening he was quiet and preoccupied.

"Hardly had a word to say for himself," Peter Newton said.

Armitage had watched Ed. bring the old bone-shaking shandrydan he called a coach up to the hotel, and put a couple of young horses into it. He had a colt on the wheel he was breaking-in, and a sturdy old dark bay beside him, a pair of fine rusty bays ahead of them, and a sorrel, and chestnut youngster in the lead. He had got old Olsen and two men on the hotel veranda to help him harness-up, and it took them all their time to get the leaders into the traces. Bags had to be thrown over the heads of the young horses before anything could be done with them, and it took three men to hold on to the team until Ed. Ventry got into his seat and gathered up the reins. Armitage put his valise on the coach and shook hands all round. He got into his seat beside Ed. and wrapped a tarpaulin lined with possum skin over his knees.

"Let her go, Olly," Ed. yelled.

The men threw off the bags they had been holding over the horses' heads. The leaders sprang out and swayed; the coach rocked to the shock; the steady old wheeler

leapt forward. The colt under the whip, trying to throw himself down on the trace, leapt and kicked, but the leaders dashed forward; the coach lurched and was carried along with a rattle and clash of gear, Ed. Ventry, the reins wrapped round his hands, pulling on them, and yelling:

"I'll warm yer. . . . Yer lazy, wobblin' old adders—yer! I'll warm yer. . . . Yer wobble like a cross-cut saw. . . . Kim ovah! Kim ovah, there! I'll get alongside of yer! Kim ovah!"

Swaying and rocking like a ship in a stormy sea, the coach turned out of the town. Armitage thought its timbers would be strewn along the road at any moment; but the young horses, under Mr. Ventry's masterly grip, soon took the steady pace of the old roadsters; their freshness wore off, and they were going at a smart, even pace by the time the Three Mile was reached.

"Seemed to have something on his mind," Ed. Ventry said afterwards. "Ordinarily, he's keen to hear all the yarns you can tell him, but that day he was dead quiet."

"'Not much doin' on the Ridge just now, Mr. Armitage,' I says.

"'No, Ed,' he says.

"'Hardly worth y'r while comin' all the way from America to get all you got this trip?'

"'No,' he says. But, by God—if I'd known what he got——"

It was an all-night trip. Ed. and Mr. Armitage had left the Ridge at six o'clock and arrived in Budda township about an hour before the morning train left for Sydney. There was just time for Armitage to breakfast at the hotel before he went off in the hotel drag to the station. The train left at half-past six. But Ed. Ventry had taken off his hat and scratched his grizzled thatch when he saw a young, baldy-faced gelding in the paddock with the other coach horses that evening.

"Could've swore I left Baldy at the Ridge," he said to the boy who looked after the stables at the Budda end of his journey.

"Thought he was there meself," the lad replied, imitating Ed.'s perplexed head-scratching.

At the Ridge, when he made his next trip, they were able to tell Mr. Ventry how the baldy-face happened to be at Budda when Ed. thought he was at Fallen Star, although Ed. heard some of the explanation from Potch and Michael a day or two later. Sophie had ridden the baldy-face into Budda the night he drove Mr. Armitage to catch the train for Sydney. No one discovered she had gone until the end of next day. Then Potch went to Michael.

"Michael," he said; "she's gone."

During the evening Paul had been heard calling Sophie. He asked Potch whether he had seen her. Potch said he had not. But it was nothing unusual for Sophie to wander off for a day on an excursion with Ella or Mirry Flail, so neither he nor Michael thought much of not having seen her all day, until Paul remarked querulously to Potch that he did not know where Sophie was. Looking into her room Potch saw her bed had not been slept in, although the room was disordered. He went up to the town, to Mrs. Newton and to the Flails', to ask whether they had seen anything of Sophie. Mirry Flail said she had seen her on one of the coach-stable horses, riding out towards the Three Mile the evening before. Potch knew instinctively that Sophie had gone away from the moment Paul had spoken to him. She had lived away from him during the last few months; but watching her with always anxious, devout eyes, he had known more of her than anyone else.

Lying full stretch on his sofa, Michael was reading when Potch came into the hut. His stricken face communicated the seriousness of his news. Michael had no reason to ask who the "she" Potch spoke of was: there was only one woman for whom Potch would look like that. But Michael's mind was paralysed by the shock of the thing Potch had said. He could neither stir nor speak.

"I'm riding into Budda, to find out if she went down by the train," Potch said. "I think she did, Michael. She's been talking about going to Sydney . . . a good deal

lately. . . . She was asking me about it—day before yesterday . . . but I never thought—I never thought she wanted to go so soon . . . and that she'd go like this. But I think she has gone. . . . And she was afraid to tell us—to let you know. . . . She said you'd made up your mind you didn't want her to go . . . she'd heard her mother tell you not to let her go, and if ever she was going she wouldn't tell you. . . ."

Potch's explanation, broken and incoherent as it was, gave Michael's thought and feeling time to reassert themselves.

He said: "See if Chassy can lend me his pony, and I'll come with you, Potch."

They rode into Budda that night, and inquiry from the station-master gave them the information they sought. A girl in a black frock had taken a second-class ticket for Sydney. He did not notice very much what she was like. She had come to the window by herself; she had no luggage; he had seen her later sitting in a corner of a second-class compartment by herself. The boy, a stranger to the district, who had clipped her ticket, said she was crying when he asked for her ticket. He had asked why she was crying. She had said she was going away, and she did not like going away from the back-country. She was going away—to study singing, she said, but would be coming back some day.

Michael determined to go to Sydney by the morning train to try to find Sophie. He went to Ed. Ventry and borrowed five pounds from him.

"That explains how the baldy-face got here," Ed. said.

Michael nodded. He could not talk about Sophie. Potch explained why they wanted the money as well as he could.

"It's no good trying to bring her back if she doesn't want to come, Michael," Potch had said before Michael left for Sydney.

"No," Michael agreed.

"If you could get her fixed up with somebody to stay with," Potch suggested; "and see she was all right for

money . . . it might be the best thing to do. I've got a bit of dough put by, Michael. . . . I'll send that down to you and go over to one of the stations for a while to keep us goin'—if we want more."

Michael assented.

"You might try round and see if you could find Mr. Armitage," Potch said, just before the train went. "He might have seen something of her."

"Yes," Michael replied, drearily.

Potch waited until the train left, and started back to Fallen Star in the evening.

A week later a letter came for Michael. It was in Sophie's handwriting. Potch was beside himself with anxiety and excitement. He wrote to Michael, care of an opal-buyer they were on good terms with and who might know where Michael was staying. In the bewilderment of his going, Potch had not thought to ask Michael where he would live, or where a letter would find him.

Michael came back to Fallen Star when he received the letter. He had not seen Sophie. No one he knew or had spoken to had seen anything of her after she left the train. Michael handed the letter to Potch as soon as he got back into the hut.

Sophie wrote that she had gone away because she wanted to learn to be a singer, and that she would be on her way to America when they received it. She explained that she had made up her mind to go quite suddenly, and she had not wanted Michael to know because she remembered his promise to her mother. She knew he would not let her go away from the Ridge if he could help it. She had sold her necklace, she said, and had got £100 for it, so had plenty of money. Potch and Michael were not to worry about her. She would be all right, and when she had made a name for herself as a singer, she would come home to the Ridge to see them. "Don't be angry, Michael dear," the letter ended, "with your lovingest Sophie."

Potch looked at Michael; he wondered whether the thought in his own mind had reached Michael's. But

Michael was too dazed and overwhelmed to think at all.

"There's one thing, Potch," he said; "if she's gone to America, we could write to Mr. Armitage and ask him to keep an eye on her. And," he added, "if she's gone to America . . . it's just likely she may be on the same boat as Mr. Armitage, and he'd look after her."

Potch watched his face. The thought in his mind had not occurred to Michael, then, he surmised.

"He'd see she came to no harm."

"Yes," Potch said.

But he had seen John Armitage talking to Sophie on the Ridge over near Snow-Shoes' hut the afternoon after the dance at Warria. He knew Mr. Armitage had driven Sophie home after the dance, too. Paul had been too drunk to stand, much less drive. Potch had knocked off early in the mine to go across to the Three Mile that afternoon. Then it had surprised Potch to see Sophie sitting and talking to Mr. Armitage as though they were very good friends; but, beyond a vague, jealous alarm, he had not attached any importance to it until he knew Sophie had gone down to Sydney by the same train as Mr. Armitage. She had said she was going to America, too, and he was going there. Potch had lived all his days on the Ridge; he knew nothing of the world outside, and its ways, except what he had learnt from books. But an instinct where Sophie was concerned had warned him of a link between her going away and John Armitage. That meeting of theirs came to have an extraordinary significance in his mind. He had thought out the chances of Sophie's having gone with Mr. Armitage as far as he could. But Michael had not associated her going with him, it was clear. It had never occurred to him that Mr. Armitage could have anything to do with Sophie's going away. It had not occurred to the rest of the Ridge folk either.

Paul was distracted. He made as great an outcry about Sophie's going as he had about losing his stones. No one had thought he was as fond of her as he appeared to be He wept and wailed continuously about her having gone

away and left him. He went about begging for money in order to be able to go to America after Sophie; but no one would lend to him.

"You wait till Sophie's made a name for herself, Paul," everybody said, "then she'll send for you."

"Yes," he assented eagerly. "But I don't want to spend all that time here on the Ridge: I want to see something of life and the world again."

Paul got a touch of the sun during the ferment of those weeks, and then, for two or three days, Michael and Potch had their work cut out nursing him through the delirium of sun-stroke.

A week or so later the coach brought unexpected passengers—Jun Johnson and the bright-eyed girl who had gone down on the coach with him—and Jun introduced her to the boys at Newton's as his bride. He had been down in Sydney on his honeymoon, he said, that was all.

When Michael went into the bar at Newton's the same evening, he found Jun there, explaining as much to the boys.

"I know what you chaps think," he was saying when Michael entered. "You think I put up the check-mate on old Rum-Enough, Charley played. Well, you're wrong. I didn't know no more about it than you did; and the proof is—here I am. If I'd 'a' done it, d'y'r think I'd have come back? If I'd had any share in the business, d'y'r think I'd be showin' me face round here for a bit? Not much. . . ."

Silence hung between him and the men. Jun talked through it, warming to his task with the eloquence of virtue, liking his audience and the stage he had got all to himself, as an outraged and righteously indignant man.

"I know you chaps—I know how you feel about things; and quite right, too! A man that'd go back on a mate like that—why, he's not fit to wipe your boots on. He ain't fit to be called a man; he ain't fit to be let run with the rest."

He continued impressively: "I didn't know no more

about that business than any man-jack of you—no more did Mrs. Jun. . . . Bygones is bygones—that's my motto. But I tell you—and that's the strength of it—I didn't know no more about those stones of Rummy's than any man here. D'y' believe me ?"

It was said in good earnest enough, even Watty and George had to admit. It was either the best bit of bluff they had ever listened to, or else Jun, for once in a way, was enjoying the luxury of telling the truth.

"We're all good triers here, Jun," George said, "but we're not as green as we're painted."

Jun regarded his beer meditatively ; then he said :

"Look here, you chaps, suppose I put it to you straight : I ain't always been what you might call the clean potato . . . but I ain't always been married, either. Well, I'm married now—married to the best little girl ever I struck. . . ."

The idea of Jun taking married life seriously amused two or three of the men. Smiles began to go round, and broadened as he talked. That they did not please Jun was evident.

"Well, seein' I've taken on family responsibilities," he went on—"Was you smiling, Watty ?"

"Me ? Oh, no, Jun," the offender replied, meekly ; "it was only the stummick-ache took me. It does that way sometimes. You mightn't think so, but I always look as if I was smilin' when I've got the stummick-ache."

George Woods, Pony-Fence Inglewood, and some of the others laughed, taking Watty's explanation for what it was worth. But Jun continued solemnly, playing the reformed blackguard to his own satisfaction.

"Seein' I've taken on family responsibilities, I want to run straight. I don't want my kids to think there was anything crook about their dad."

If he moved no one else, he contrived to feel deeply moved himself at the prospect of how his unborn children were going to regard him. The men who had always more or less believed in him managed to convince themselves that Jun meant what he said. George and

Watty realised he had put up a good case, that he was getting at them in the only way possible.

Michael moved out of the crowd round the door towards the bar. Peter Newton put his daily ration of beer on the bar.

"'Lo, Michael," Jun said.

"'Lo, Jun," Michael said.

"Well," Jun concluded, tossing off his beer; "that's the way it is, boys. Believe me if y'r like, and if y'r don't like—lump it.

"But there's one thing more I've got to tell you," he added; "and if you find what I've been saying hard to believe, you'll find this harder: I don't believe Charley got those stones of Rummy's."

"What?"

The query was like the crack of a whip-lash. There was a restive, restless movement among the men.

"I don't believe Charley got those stones either," Jun declared. "'Got,' I said, not 'took.' All I know is, he was like a sick fish when he reached Sydney . . . and sold all the opal he had with him. He was lively enough when we started out. I give you that. Maybe he took Rum-Enough's stones all right; but somebody put it over on him. I thought it might be Emmy—that yeller-haired tart, you remember, went down with us. She was a tart, and no mistake. My little girl, now—she was never . . . like that! But Maud says she doesn't think so, because Emmy turned Charley out neck and crop when she found he'd got no cash. He got mighty little for the bit of stone he had with him . . . I'll take my oath. He came round to borrow from me a day or two after we arrived. And he was ragin' mad about something. . . . If he shook the stones off Rum-Enough, it's my belief somebody shook them off of him, either in the train or here—or off of Rummy before he got them. . . ."

Several of the men muttered and grunted their protest. But Jun held to his point, and the talk became more general. Jun asked for news of the fields: what had been done, and who was getting the stuff. Somebody

said John Armitage had been up and had bought a few nice stones from the Crosses, Pony-Fence, and Bully Bryant.

" Armitage ? " Jun said. " He's always a good man —gives a fair price. He bought my stones, that last lot . . . gave me a hundred pounds for the big knobby. But it fair took my breath away to hear young Sophie Rouminof had gone off with him."

Michael was standing beside him before the words were well out of his mouth.

" What did you say ? " he demanded.

" I'm sorry, Michael," Jun replied, after a quick, scared glance at the faces of the men about him. " But I took it for granted you all knew, of course. We saw them a good bit together down in Sydney, Maud and me, and she said she saw Sophie on the *Zealanida* the day the boat sailed. Maud was down seeing a friend off, and she saw Sophie and Mr. Armitage on board. She said——"

Michael turned heavily, and swung out of the bar.

Jun looked after him. In the faces of the men he read what a bomb his news had been among them.

" I wouldn't have said that for a lot," he said, " if I'd 've thought Michael didn't know. But, Lord, I thought he knew . . . I thought you all knew."

In the days which followed, as he wandered over the plains in the late afternoon and evening, Michael tried to come to some understanding with himself of what had happened. At first he had been too overcast by the sense of loss to realise more than that Sophie had gone away. But now, beyond her going, he could see the failure of his own effort to control circumstances. He had failed ; Sophie had gone ; she had left the Ridge.

" God," he groaned, " with the best intentions in the world, what an awful mess we make of things ! "

Michael wondered whether it would have been worse for Sophie if she had gone away with Paul when her mother died. At least, Sophie was older now and better able to take care of herself.

He blamed himself because she had gone away as she

had, all the same; the failure of the Ridge to hold her as well as his own failure beat him to the earth. He had hoped Sophie would care for the things her mother had cared for. He had tried to explain them to her. But Sophie, he thought now, had more the restless temperament of her father. He had not understood her young spirit, its craving for music, laughter, admiration, and the life that could give them to her. He had thought the Ridge would be enough for her, as it had been for her mother.

Michael never thought of Mrs. Rouminof as dead. He thought of her as though she were living some distance from him, that was all. In the evening he looked up at the stars, and there was one in which she seemed to be. Always he felt as if she were looking at him when its mild radiance fell over him. And now he looked to that star as if trying to explain and beg forgiveness.

His heart was sore because Sophie had left him without a word of affection or any explanation. His fear and anxiety for her gave him no peace. He sweated in agony with them for a long time, crying to her mother, praying her to believe he had not failed in his trust through lack of desire to serve her, but through a fault of understanding. If she had been near enough to talk to, he knew he could have explained that the girl was right: neither of them had any right to interfere with the course of her life. She had to go her own way; to learn joy and sorrow for herself.

Too late Michael realised that he had done all the harm in the world by seeking to make Sophie go his own and her mother's way. He had opposed the tide of her youth and enthusiasm, instead of sympathising with it; and by so doing he had made it possible for someone else to sympathise and help her to go her own way. Opposition had forced her life into channels which he was afraid would heap sorrows upon her, whereas identification with her feeling and aspirations might have saved her the hurt and turmoil he had sought to save her.

Thought of what he had done to prevent Paul taking

Sophie away haunted Michael. But, after all, he assured himself, he had not stolen from Paul. Charley had stolen from Paul, and he, Michael, was only holding Paul's opals until he could give them to Paul when his having them would not do Sophie any harm. . . . His having them now could not injure Sophie. . . . Michael decided to give Paul the opals and explain how he came to have them, when the shock of what Jun had said left him. He tried not to think of that, although a consciousness of it was always with him. . . . But Paul was delirious with sun-stroke, he remembered; it would be foolish to give him the stones just then. . . . As soon as that touch of the sun had passed, Michael reflected, he would give Paul the opals and explain how he came to have them. . . .

PART II

CHAPTER I

The summer Sophie left the Ridge was a long and dry one. Cool changes blew over, but no rain fell. The still, hot days and dust-storms continued until March.

Through the heat came the baa-ing of sheep on the plains, moving in great flocks, weary and thirsty; the blaring of cattle; the harsh crying of crows following the flocks and waiting to tear the dead flesh from the bones of spent and drought-stricken beasts. The stock routes were marked by the bleached bones of cattle and sheep which had fallen by the road, and the stench of rotting flesh blew with the hot winds and dust from the plains.

It was cooler underground than anywhere else during the hot weather. Fallen Star miners told stockmen and selectors that they had the best of it in the mines, during the heat. They went to work as soon as it was dawn, in order to get mullock cleared away and dirt-winding over before the heat of the day began.

In the morning, here and there a man was seen on the top of his dump, handkerchief under his hat, winding dirt, and emptying red sandstone, shin-cracker, and cement stone from his hide buckets over the slope of the dump. The creak of the windlass made a small, busy noise in the air. But the miner standing on the top of his hillock of white crumbled clay, moving with short, automatic jerks against the sky, or the noodlers stretched across the slopes of the dumps, turning the rubble thrown up from the shafts with a piece of wood,

were the only outward sign of the busy underground world of the mines.

As a son might have, Potch had rearranged the hut and looked after Paul when Sophie had gone. He had nursed Paul through the fever and delirium of sun-stroke, and Paul's hut was kept in order as Sophie had left it. Potch swept the earthen floor and sprinkled it with water every morning; he washed any dishes Paul left, although Paul had most of his meals with Potch and Michael. Michael had seen the window of Sophie's room open sometimes; a piece of muslin on the lower half fluttering out, and once, in the springtime, he had caught a glimpse of a spray of punti—the yellow boronia Sophie was so fond of, in a jam-tin on a box cupboard near the window. Potch had prevailed on Paul to keep one or two of the goats when he sold most of them soon after Sophie went away, and Potch saw to it there was always a little milk, and some goat's-milk butter or cheese for the two huts.

People at first were surprised at Potch's care of Paul; then they regarded it as the most natural thing in the world. They believed Potch was trying to make up to Paul for what his father had deprived him of. And after Sophie went away Paul seemed to forget Potch was the son of his old enemy. He depended on Potch, appealed to, and abused him as if he were his son, and Potch seemed quite satisfied that it should be so. He took his service very much as a matter of course, as Paul himself did.

A quiet, awkward fellow he was, Potch. For a long time nobody thought much of him. "Potch," they would say, as his father used to, "a little bit of potch!" Potch knew what was meant by that. He was Charley Heathfield's son, and could not be expected to be worth much. He had rated himself as other people rated him. He was potch, poor opal, stuff of no particular value, without any fire. And his estimate of himself was responsible for his keeping away from the boys and younger men of the Ridge. A habit of shy aloofness had grown with him, although anybody who wanted

help with odd jobs knew where they could get it, and find eager and willing service. Potch would do anything for anybody with all the pleasure in the world, whether it were building a fowl-house, thatching a roof, or helping to run up a hut.

"He's the only mate worth a straw Michael's had since God knows when, 't anyrate," Watty said, after Potch had been working with Paul and Michael for some time. George and Cash agreed with him.

George and Watty and Cash had "no time," as they said themselves, for Rouminof; and Potch as a rule stayed in the shelter with Paul when Michael went over to talk with George and Watty. He was never prouder than when Michael asked him to go over to George and Watty's shelter.

At first Potch would sit on the edge of the shelter, leaning against the brushwood, the sun on his shoulder, as if unworthy to take advantage of the shelter's shade, further. For a long time he listened, saying nothing; not listening very intently, apparently, and feeding the birds with crumbs from his lunch. But Michael saw his eyes light when there was any misstatement of fact on a subject he had been reading about or knew something of.

Soon after Sophie had gone, Michael wrote to Dawe Armitage. He and the old man had always been on good terms, and Michael had a feeling of real friendliness for him. But the secret of the sympathy between them was that they were lovers of the same thing. For both, black opal had a subtle, inexplicable fascination.

As briefly as he knew how, Michael told Dawe Armitage how Sophie had left Fallen Star, and what he had heard. "It's up to you to see no harm comes to that girl," he wrote. "If it does, you can take my word for it, there's no man on this field will sell to Armitages."

Michael knew Mr. Armitage would take his word for it. He knew Dawe Armitage would realise better than Michael could tell him, that it would be useless for John

Armitage to visit the field the following year. George Woods had informed Michael that, by common consent, men of the Ridge had decided not to sell to Armitage for a time; and, in order to prevent an agent thwarting their purpose, to deal only with known and rival buyers of the Armitages. Dawe Armitage, Michael guessed, would be driven to the extremity of promising almost anything to make up for what his son had done, and to overcome the differences between Armitage and Son and men of the Ridge.

When the reply came, Michael showed it to Watty and George.

"DEAR BRADY," it said, "I need hardly say your letter was a great shock to me. At first, when I taxed my son with the matter you write of, he denied all knowledge or responsibility for the young lady. I have since found she is here in New York, and have seen her. I offered to take her passage and provide for her to return to the Ridge; but she refuses to leave this city, and, I believe, is to appear in a musical comedy production at an early date. Believe me overcome by the misfortune of this episode, and only anxious to make any reparation in my power. Knowing the men of the Ridge as I do, I can understand their resentment of my son's behaviour, and that for a time, at least, business relations between this house and them cannot be on the old friendly footing. I need hardly tell you how distressing this state of affairs is to me personally, and how disastrous the cutting off of supplies is to my business interests. I can only ask that, as I will, on my part, to the best of my ability, safeguard the young lady—whom I will regard as under my charge—you will, in recognition of our old friendship, perhaps point out to men of the Ridge that as it is not part of their justice to visit sins of the fathers upon the children, so I hope it may not be to visit sins of the children upon the fathers.

"Yours very truly,

"DAWE P. ARMITAGE."

"The old man seems fair broken up," Watty remarked.

"Depends on how Sophie gets on whether we have anything to do with Armitage and Son—again," George replied. "If she's all right . . . well . . . perhaps it'll be all right for them, with us. If she doesn't get on all right . . . they won't neither."

"That's right," Watty muttered.

The summer months passed slowly. The country was like a desert for hundreds of miles about the Ridge in every direction. The herbage had crumbled into dust; ironstone and quartz pebbles on the long, low slopes of the Ridge glistened almost black in the light; and out on the plains, and on the roads where the pebbles were brushed aside, the dust rose in tawny and reddish clouds when a breath of wind, or the movement of man and beast stirred it. The trees, too, were almost black in the light; the sky, dim, and smoking with heat.

Paul had not done any work in the mine since he had been laid up with sun-stroke. When he was able to be about again he went to the shelter to eat his lunch with Michael and Potch. He was extraordinarily weak for some time, and a haze the sun-stroke had left hovered over his mind. Usually, to stem the tide of his incessant questions and gossiping, Potch gave him some scraps of sun-flash, and colour and potch to noodle, and he sat and snipped them contentedly while Potch and Michael read or dozed the hot, still, midday hours away.

When he had eaten his lunch, Potch tossed his crumbs to the birds which came about the shelter. He whistled to them for a while and tried to make friends with them. As often as not Michael sat, legs stretched out before him, smoking and brooding, as he gazed over the plains; but one day he found himself in the ruck of troubled thoughts as he watched Potch with the birds.

Michael had often watched Potch making friends with the birds, as he lay on his side dozing or dreaming. He had sat quite still many a day, until Potch, by throwing

crumbs and whistling encouragingly and in imitation of their own calls, had induced a little crested pigeon, or white-tail, to come quite close to him. The confidence Potch won from the birds was a reproach to him. But in a few days now, Michael told himself, he would be giving Paul his opals. Then Potch would know what perhaps he ought to have known already. Potch was his mate, Michael reminded himself, and entitled to know what his partner was doing with opal which was not their common property.

When Sophie was at home, Michael had taken Potch more or less for granted. He had not wished to care for, or believe in, Potch, as he had his father, fearing a second shock of disillusionment. The compassion which was instinctive had impelled him to offer the boy his goodwill and assistance; but a remote distrust and contempt of Charley in his son had at first tinged his feeling for Potch. Slowly and surely Potch had lived down that distrust and contempt. Dogged and unassuming, he asked nothing for himself but the opportunity to serve those he loved, and Michael had found in their work, in their daily association, in the homage and deep, mute love Potch gave him, something like balm to the hurts he had taken from other loves.

Michael had loved greatly and generously, and had little energy to give to lesser affections, but he was grateful to Potch for caring for him. He was drawn to Potch by the knowledge of his devotion. He longed to tell him about the opals; how he had come to have them, and why he was holding them; but always there had been an undertow of resistance tugging at the idea, reluctance to break the seals on the subject in his mind. Some day he would have to break them, he told himself.

Paul's illness had made it seem advisable to put off explanation about the opals for a while. Paul was still weak from the fever following his touch of the sun, and his brain hazy. As soon as he had his normal wits again, Michael promised himself he would take the opals to Paul and let him know how he came to have them.

All the afternoon, as he worked, Michael was plagued y thought of the opals. He had no peace with himself or accepting Potch's belief in him, and for not telling 'otch how Paul's opals came into his possession.

In the evening as he lay on the sofa under the window, eading, the troubled thinking of his midday reverie ecame tangled with the printed words of the page efore him. Michael had a flashing vision of the stones s Paul had held them to the light in Newton's bar. uddenly it occurred to him that he had not seen the ones, or looked at the package the opals were in, since e had thrown them into the box of books in his room, ne night he had taken them from Charley.

He got up from the sofa and crossed to his bedroom to e whether Paul's cigarette tin, wrapped in its old ewspaper, was still lying among his books. He plunged is hand among them, and turned his books over until e found the tin. It looked much as it had the night he rew it into the box—only the wrappings of newspaper ere loose.

Michael wondered whether all the opals were in the ox. He hoped none had fallen out, or got chipped or racked as a result of his rough handling. He untied ie string round the tin in order to tie it again more curely. It might be just as well to see whether the ones were all right while he was about it, he thought.

He went back to the sitting-room and drew his chair to the table. Slowly, abstractedly, he rolled the ewspaper wrappings from the tin; and the stones ttled together in their bed of wadding as he lifted them the table. He picked up one and held it off from the ndle-light. It was the stone Paul had had such pride —a piece of opal with a glitter of flaked gold and red e smouldering through its black potch like embers of a irning tree through the dark of a starless night.

One by one he lifted the stones and moved them before e candle, letting its yellow ray loose their internal lendour. The colours in the stones—blue, green, gold, nethyst, and red—melted, sprayed, and scintillated fore him. His blood warmed to their fires.

"God! it's good stuff!" he breathed, his eyes dark with reverence and emotion.

With the tranced interest of a child, he sat there watching the play of colours in the stones. Opal always exerted this fascination for him. Not only its beauty, but the mystery of its beauty enthralled him. He had a sense of dimly grasping great secrets as he gazed into its shining depths, trying to follow the flow and scintillation of its myriad stars.

Potch came into the hut, brushing against the doorway. He swung unsteadily, as though he had been running or walking quickly.

Michael started from the rapt contemplation he had fallen into; he stood up. His consciousness swaying earthwards again, he was horrified that Potch should find him with the opals like this before he had explained how he came to have them. Confounded with shame and dismay, instinctively he brushed the stones together and, almost without knowing what he did, threw the wrappings over them. He felt as if he were really guilty of the thing Potch might suspect him guilty of: either of being a miser and hoarding opal from his mate, or of having come by the stones as he had come by them. One opal, the stone he had first looked at, tumbled out from the others and lay under the candle-light, winking and flashing.

But Potch was disturbed himself; he was breathing heavily; his usually sombre, quiet face was flushed and quivering with restrained excitement. He was too preoccupied to notice Michael's movement, or what he was doing.

"Snow-Shoes been here?" he asked, breathlessly.

"No," Michael said. "Why?"

He stretched out his hand to take the opal which lay winking in the light and put it among the others.

Potch's excitement died out.

"Oh, nothing," he said, lamely. "I only thought I saw him making this way."

The sound of a woman laughing outside the hut broke

the silence between them. Michael lifted his head to listen.

"Who's that?" he asked.

Potch did not reply. The blue dark of the night sky, bright with stars, was blank in the doorway.

"May I come in?" a woman's voice called. Her figure wavered in the doorway. Before either Potch or Michael could speak she had come into the hut. It was Maud, Jun Johnson's wife. She stood there on the threshold of the room, her loose, dark hair wind-blown, her eyes laughing, the red line of her mouth trembling with a smile. Her eyes went from Michael to Potch, who had turned away.

"My old nanny's awful bad, Potch," she said. "They say there's no one on the Ridge knows as much about goats as you. Will you come along and see what you can do for her?"

Potch was silent. Michael had never known him take a request for help so ungraciously. His face was sullen and resentful as his eyes went to Maud.

"All right," he said.

He moved to go out with her. Maud moved too. Then she caught sight of the piece of opal lying out from the other stones on the table.

"My," she cried eagerly, "that's a pretty stone, Michael!" She turned it back against the light, so that the opal threw out its splintered sparks of red and gold.

"Just been noodlin' over some old scraps . . . and came across it," Michael said awkwardly.

It seemed impossible to explain about the stones to Maud Johnson. He could not bear the idea of her hearing his account of Paul's opals before George, Watty, and the rest of the men who were his mates, had.

"Well to be you, having stuff like that to noodle," Maud said. "Doin' a bit of dealin' myself. I'll give you a good price for it, Michael."

"It's goin' into a parcel," he replied.

"Oh, well, when you want to sell, you might let me know," Maud said. "Comin', Potch?"

She swung away with the light, graceful swirl of a dancer. Michael caught the smile in her eyes, mischievous and mocking as a street urchin's, as she turned to Potch, and Potch followed her out of the hut.

CHAPTER II

Days and months went by, hot and still, with dust-storms and blue skies, fading to grey. Their happenings were so alike that there was scarcely any remembering one from the other of them. The twilights and dawns were clear, with delicate green skies. On still nights the moon rose golden, flushing the sky before it appeared, as though there were fires beyond the Ridge.

Usually in one of the huts a concertina was pulled lazily, and its wheezing melodies drifted through the quiet air. Everybody missed Sophie's singing. The summer evenings were long and empty without the ripple of her laughter and the music of the songs she sang.

"You miss her these nights, don't you?" Michael said to Potch one very hot, still night, when the smoke of a mosquito fire in the doorway was drifting into the room about them.

Potch was reading, sprawled over the table. His expression changed as he looked up. It was as though a sudden pain had struck him.

"Yes," he said. His eyes went to his book again; but he did not read any more. Presently he pushed back the seat he was sitting on and went out of doors.

Michael and Potch were late going down to the claim the morning they found George and Watty and most of the men who were working that end of the Ridge collected in a group talking together. No one was working; even the noodlers, Snow-Shoes and young Flail, were standing round with the miners.

"Hullo," Michael said, "something's up!"

Potch remembered having seen a gathering of the men, like this, only once before on the fields.

" Ratting ? " he said.

" Looks like it," Michael agreed.

" What's up, George ? " he asked, as Potch and he joined the men.

" Rats, Michael," George said, " that's what's up. They've been on our place and cleaned out a pretty good bit of stuff Watty and me was working on. They've paid Archie a visit . . . and Bully reck'ns his spider's been walking lately, too."

Michael and Potch had seen nothing but a few shards of potch and colour for months. They were not concerned at the thought of a rat's visit to their claim ; but they were as angry and indignant at the news as the men who had been robbed. In the shelters at midday, the talk was all of the rats and ratting. The Crosses, Bill Grant, Pony-Fence, Bull Bryant, Roy O'Mara, Michael, and Potch went to George Woods' shelter to talk the situation over with George, Watty, and Cash Wilson. The smoke of the fires Potch and Roy and Bully made to boil the billies drifted towards them, and the men talked as they ate their lunches, legs stretched out before them, and leaning against a log George had hauled beside the shelter.

George Woods, the best natured, soberest man on the Ridge, was smouldering with rage at the ratting.

" I've a good mind to put a bit of dynamite at the bottom of the shaft, and then, when a rat strikes a match, up he'll go," he said.

" But," Watty objected, " how'd you feel when you found a dead man in your claim, George ? "

" Feel ? " George burst out. " I wouldn't feel—except he'd got no right to be there—and perlitely put him on one side."

" Remember those chaps was up a couple of years ago, George ? " Bill Grant asked, " and helped theirselves when Pony-Fence and me had a bit of luck up at Rhyll's hill."

" Remember them ? " George growled.

"They'd go round selling stuff if there was anybody to buy—hang round the pub all day, and yet had stuff to sell," Watty murmured.

The men smoked silently for a few minutes.

"How much did they get, again?" Bully Bryant asked.

"Couple of months," George said.

"Police protect criminals—everybody knows that," Snow-Shoes said.

Sitting on the dump just beyond the shade the shelter cast, he had been listening to what the men were saying, the sun full blaze on him, his blue eyes glittering in the shadow of his old felt hat. All eyes turned to him. The men always listened attentively when Snow-Shoes had anything to say.

"If there's a policeman about, and a man starts ratting and is caught, he gets a couple of months. Well, what does he care? But if there's a chance of the miners getting hold of him and some rough handling . . . he thinks twice before he rats . . . knowing a broken arm or a pain in his head'll come of it."

"That's true," George said. "I vote we get this bunch ourselves."

"Right!" The Crosses and Bully agreed with him. Watty did not like the idea of the men taking the law into their own hands. He was all for law and order. His fat, comfortable soul disliked the idea of violence.

"Seems to me," he said, "it 'd be a good thing to set a trap—catch the rats—then we'd know where we were."

Michael nodded. "I'm with Watty," he said.

"Then we could hand 'em over to the police," Watty said.

Michael smiled. "Well, after the last batch getting two months, and the lot of us wasting near on two months gettin' 'em jailed, I reck'n it's easier to deal with 'em here—But we've got to be sure. They've got to be caught red-handed, as the sayin' is. It don't do to make mistakes when we're dealin' out our own justice."

" That's right, Michael," the men agreed.

" Well, I reck'n we'd ought to have in the police," Watty remarked obstinately.

" The police ! " Snow-Shoes stood up as if he had no further patience with the controversy. " It's like letting hornets build in your house to keep down flies—to call in the police. The hornets get worse than the flies."

He turned on his heel and walked away. His tall, white figure, straighter than any man's on the Ridge, moved silently, his feet, wrapped in their moccasins of grass and sacking, making no sound on the shingly earth.

Men whose claims had not been nibbled arranged to watch among themselves, to notice exactly where they put their spiders when they left the mines in the afternoon, and to set traps for the rats.

Some of them had their suspicions as to whom the rats might be, because the field was an old one, and there were not many strangers about. But when it was known next day that Jun Johnson and his wife had " done a moonlight flit," it was generally agreed that these suspicions were confirmed. Maud had made two or three trips to Sydney to sell opal within the last year, and from what they heard, men of the Ridge had come to believe she sold more opal than Jun had won, or than she herself had bought from the gougers. Jun's and Maud's flight was taken not only as a confession of guilt, but also as an indication that the men's resolution to deal with rats themselves had been effective in scaring them away.

When the storm the ratting had caused died down, life on the Ridge went its even course again. Several men threw up their claims on the hill after working without a trace of potch or colour for months, and went to find jobs on the stations or in the towns nearby.

The only thing of any importance that happened during those dreary summer months was Bully Bryant's marriage to Ella Flail, and, although it took everybody by surprise that little Ella was grown-up enough to be married, the wedding was celebrated in true Ridge

fashion, with a dance and no end of hearty kindliness to the young couple.

"Roy O'Mara's got good colour down by the crooked coolebah, Michael," Potch said one evening, a few days after the wedding, when he and Michael had finished their tea. He spoke slowly, and as if he had thought over what he was going to say.

"Yes?" Michael replied.

"How about tryin' our luck there?" Potch ventured.

Michael took the suggestion meditatively. Potch and he had been working together for several years with very little luck. They had won only a few pieces of opal good enough to put into a parcel for an opal-buyer when he came to Fallen Star. But Michael was loth to give up the old shaft, not only because he believed in it, but because of the work he and his mates had put into it, and because when they did strike opal there, the mine would be easily worked. But this was the first time Potch had made a suggestion of the sort, and Michael felt bound to consider it.

"There's a bit of a rush on, Snow-Shoes told me," Potch said. "Crosses have pegged, and I saw Bill Olsen measurin' out a claim."

Michael's reluctance to move was evident.

"I feel sure we'll strike it in the old shaft, sooner or later," he murmured.

"Might be sooner by the coolebah," Potch said.

Michael's eyes lifted to his, the gleam of a smile in them.

"Very well, we'll pull pegs," he said.

While stars were still in the high sky and the chill breath of dawn in the air, men were busy measuring and pegging claims on the hillside round about the old coolebah. Half a dozen blocks were marked one hundred feet square before the stars began to fade.

All the morning men with pegs, picks, and shovels came straggling up the track from the township and from other workings scattered along the Ridge. The sound of picks on the hard ground and the cutting down of scrub broke the limpid stillness.

Paul came out of his hut as Potch passed it on his way to the coolebah. Immediately he recognised the significance of the heavy pick Potch was carrying, and trotted over to him.

" You goin' to break new ground, Potch ? " he asked.

Potch nodded.

" There's a bit of a rush on by the crooked coolebah," he said. " Roy O'Mara's bottomed on opal there . . . got some pretty good colours, and we're goin' to peg out."

" A rush ? " Paul's eyes brightened. " Roy ? Has he got the stuff, Potch ? "

" Not bad."

As they followed the narrow, winding track through the scrub, Paul chattered eagerly of the chances of the new rush.

Roy O'Mara had sunk directly under the coolebah. There were few trees of any great size on the Ridge, and this one, tall and grey-barked, stood over the scrub of myalls, oddly bent, like a crippled giant, its great, bleached trunk swung forward and wrenched back as if in agony. The mound of white clay under the tree was already a considerable dump—Roy had been working with a new chum from the Three Mile for something over a fortnight and had just bottomed on opal. His first day's find was spread on a bag under the tree. There was nothing of great value in it ; but when Potch and Paul came to it, Paul knelt down and turned over the pieces of opal on the bag with eager excitement.

When Michael arrived, Potch had driven in his pegs on a site he had marked in his mind's eye the evening before, a hundred yards beyond Roy's claim, up the slope of the hill. Michael took turns with Potch at slinging the heavy pick ; they worked steadily all the morning, the sweat beading and pouring down their faces.

There was always some excitement and expectation about sinking a new hole. Michael had lived so long on the fields, and had sunk so many shafts, that he took a new sinking with a good deal of matter-of-factness ; but even he had some of the thrilling sense of a child with a surprise packet when he was breaking earth on a new rush.

Neither Michael nor Paul had much enthusiasm about the new claim after the first day or so; but Potch worked indefatigably. All day the thud and click of picks on the hard earth and cement stone, and the shovelling of loose earth and gravel, could be heard. In about a fortnight Potch and Michael came on sandstone and drove into red opal dirt beneath it. Roy O'Mara, working on his trace of promising black potch, still had found nothing to justify his hope of an early haul. Paul, easily disappointed, lost faith in the possibilities of the shaft; Michael was for giving it further trial, but Potch, too, was in favour of sinking again.

CHAPTER III

LYING under the coolebah at midday, after they had been burrowing from the shaft for about a week, and Michael was talking of clearing mullock from the drives, Potch said:

"I'm going to sink another hole, Michael—higher up."

Michael glanced at him. It was unusual for Potch to put a thing in that way, without a by-your-leave, or feeler for advice, or permission; but he was not disturbed by his doing so.

"Right," he said; "you sink another hole, Potch. I'll stick to this one for a bit."

Potch began to break earth again next morning. He chose his site carefully, to the right of the one he had been working on, and all the morning he swung his heavy pick and shovelled earth from the shaft he was making. He worked slowly, doggedly. When he came on sandstone he had been three weeks on the job.

"Ought to be near bottoming, Potch," Roy remarked one day towards the end of the three weeks.

"Be there to-day," Potch said.

Paul buzzed about the top of the hole, unable to suppress his impatience, and calling down the shaft now and then.

Potch believed so in this claim of his that his belief had raised a certain amount of expectation. His report, too, was going to make considerable difference to the field. The Crosses had done pretty well: they had cut out a pocket worth £400 as a result of their sinking, and it remained to be seen what Potch's new hole would bring. A good prospect would make the new field, it was reckoned.

Potch's prospect was disappointing, however, and of no sensational value when he did bottom; but after a few days he came on a streak or two of promising colours, and Michael left the first shaft they had sunk on the coolebah to work with Potch in the new mine.

They had been on the new claim, with nothing to show for their pains, for nearly two months, the afternoon Potch, who had been shifting opal dirt of a dark strain below the steel band on the south side of the mine, uttered a low cry.

"Michael," he called.

Michael, gouging in a drive a few yards away, knew the meaning of that joyous vibration in a man's voice. He stumbled out of the drive and went to Potch.

Potch was holding his spider off from a surface of opal his pick had clipped. It glittered, an eye of jet, with every light and star of red, green, gold, blue, and amethyst, leaping, dancing, and quivering together in the red earth of the mine. Michael swore reverently when he saw it. Potch moved his candle before the chipped corner of the stones which he had worked round sufficiently to show that a knobby of some size was embedded in the wall of the mine.

"Looks a beaut, doesn't she, Michael?" he gasped.

Michael breathed hard.

"By God——" he murmured.

Paul, hearing the murmur of their voices, joined them. He screamed when he saw the stone.

"I knew!" he yelled. "I knew we'd strike it here."

"Well, stand back while I get her out," Potch cried.

Michael trembled as Potch fitted his spider and began to break the earth about the opal, working slowly, cautiously, and rubbing the earth away with his hands. Michael watched him apprehensively, exclaiming with wonder and admiration as the size of the stone was revealed.

When Potch had worked it out of its socket, the knobby was found to be even bigger than they had thought at first. The stroke which located it had chipped one side so that its quality was laid bare, and

the chipped surface had the blaze and starry splendour of the finest black opal. Michael and Potch examined the stone, turned it over and over, tremulous and awed by its size and magnificence. Paul was delirious with excitement.

He was first above ground, and broke the news of Potch's find to the men who were knocking off for the day on other claims. When Michael and Potch came up, nearly a dozen men were collected about the dump. They gazed at the stone with oaths and exclamations of amazement and admiration.

"You've struck it this time, Potch!" Roy O'Mara said.

Potch flushed, rubbed the stone on his trousers, licked the chipped surface, and held it to the sun again.

"It's the biggest knobby—ever I see," Archie Cross said.

"Same here," Bill Grant muttered.

"Wants polishin' up a bit," Michael said, "and then she'll show better."

As soon as he got home, Potch went into Paul's hut and faced the stone on Sophie's wheel. Paul and Michael hung over him as he worked; and when he had cleaned it up and put it on the rouge buffer, they were satisfied that it fulfilled the promise of its chipped side. Nearly as big as a hen's egg, clean, hard opal of prismatic fires in sparkling jet, they agreed that it was the biggest and finest knobby either of them had ever seen.

Potch took his luck quietly, although there were repressed emotion and excitement in his voice as he talked.

Michael marvelled at the way he went about doing his ordinary little odd jobs of the evening, when they returned to their own hut. Potch brought in and milked the goats, set out the pannikins and damper, and made tea.

When Michael and Potch had finished their meal and put away their plates, food, and pannikins, Michael picked up the stone from the shelf where Potch had put it, wrapped in the soft rag of an oatmeal bag. He threw

himself on the sofa under the window and held the opal to the light, turning it and watching the stars spawn in its firmament of crystal ebony. Potch pulled a book from his pocket and sprawled across the table to read.

Michael regarded him wonderingly. Had the boy no imagination? Did the magic and mystery of the opal make so little appeal to him? Michael's eyes went from their reverent and adoring observation of the stone in his hands, to Potch as he sat stooping over the book on the table before him. He could not understand why Potch was not fired by the beauty of the thing he had won, or with pride at having found the biggest knobby ever taken out of the fields.

Any other young man would have been beside himself with excitement and rejoicing. But here was Potch slouched over a dog-eared, paper-covered book.

As he gazed at the big opal, a vision of Paul's opals flashed before him. The consternation and dismay that had made him scarcely conscious of what he was doing the night Potch found him with them, and Maud Johnson had come for Potch to go to see her sick goat, overwhelmed him again. He had not yet given the opals to Paul, he remembered, or explained to Potch and the rest of the men how he came to have them.

Any other mate than Potch would have resented his holding opals like that and saying nothing of them. But there was no resentment in Potch's bearing to him, Michael had convinced himself. Yet Potch must know about the stones; he must have seen them. Michael could find no reason for his silence and the unaltered serenity of the affection in his eyes, except that Potch had that absolute belief in him which rejects any suggestion of unworthiness in the object of its belief.

But since—since he had made up his mind to give the opals to Paul—since Sophie had gone, and there was no chance of their doing her any harm; since that night Potch and Maud had seen him, why had he not given them to Paul? Why had he not told Potch how the opals Potch had seen him with had come into his possession? Michael put the questions to himself,

hardly daring, and yet knowing, he must search for the answer in the mysterious no-man's land of his subconsciousness.

Paul's slow recovery from sun-stroke was a reason for deferring explanation about the stones and for not giving them back to him, in the first instance. After Potch and Maud had seen him with the opals, Michael had intended to go at once to George and Watty and tell them his story. But the more he had thought of what he had to do, the more difficult it seemed. He had found himself shrinking from fulfilment of his intention. Interest in the new claim and the excitement of bottoming on opal had for a time almost obliterated memory of Paul's opals.

But he had only put off telling Potch, Michael assured himself; he had only put off giving the stones back to Paul. There was no motive in this putting off. It was mental indolence, procrastination, reluctance to face a difficult and delicate situation: that was all. Having the opals had worried him to death. It had preyed on his mind so that he was ready to imagine himself capable of any folly or crime in connection with them.... He mocked his fears of himself.

Michael went over all he had done, all that had happened in connection with the opals, seeking out motives, endeavouring to fathom his own consciousness and to be honest with himself.

As if answering an evocation, the opals passed before him in a vision. He followed their sprayed fires reverently. Then, as if one starry ray had shed illumination in its passing, a daze of horror and amazement seized him. He had taken his own rectitude so for granted that he could not believe he might be guilty of what the light had shown lurking in a dark corner of his mind.

Had Paul's stones done that to him? Michael asked himself. Had their witch fires eaten into his brain? He had heard it said men who were misers, who hoarded opal, were mesmerised by the lights and colour of the stuff; they did not want to part with it. Was that what Paul's stones had done to him? Had they mesmerised

him, so that he did not want to part with them? Michael was aghast at the idea. He could not believe he had become so besotted in his admiration of black opal that he was ready to steal—steal from a mate. The opal had never been found, he assured himself, which could put a spell over his brain to make him do that. And yet, he realised, the stones themselves had had something to do with his reluctance to talk of them to Potch, and with the deferring of his resolution to give them to Paul and let the men know what he had done. Whenever he had attempted to bring his resolution to talk of them to the striking-point, he remembered, the opals had swarmed before his dreaming eyes; his will had weakened as he gazed on them, and he had put off going to Paul and to Watty and George.

Stung to action by realisation of what he had been on the brink of, Michael went to the box of books in his room. He determined to take the packet of opals to Paul immediately, and go on to tell George and Watty its history. As he plunged an arm down among the books for the cigarette tin the opals were packed in, he made up his mind not to look at them for fear some reason or excuse might hinder the carrying out of his project. His fingers groped eagerly for the package; he threw out a few books.

He had put the tin in a corner of the box, under an old Statesman's year-book and a couple of paper-covered novels. But it was not there; it must have slipped, or he had piled books over it, at some time or another, he thought. He threw out all the books in the box and raked them over—but he could not find the tin with Paul's opals in.

He sat back on his haunches, his face lean and ghastly by the candle-light.

"They're gone," he told himself.

He wondered whether he could have imagined replacing the package in the box—if there was anywhere else he could have put it, absent-mindedly; but his eyes returned to the box. He knew he had put the opals there.

Who could have found them? Potch? His mind turned from the idea.

Nobody had known of them. Nobody knew just where to put a hand on them—not even Potch. Who else could have come into the hut, or suspected the opals were in that box. Paul? He would not have been able to contain his joy if he had come into possession of any opal worth speaking of. Who else might suspect him of hoarding opal of any value. His mind hovered indecisively. Maud?

Michael remembered the night she had come for Potch and had seen that gold-and-red-fired stone on the table. His imagination attached itself to the idea. The more he thought of it, the surer he felt that Maud had come for the stone she had offered to buy from him. There was nothing to prevent her walking into the hut and looking for it, any time during the day when he and Potch were away at the mine. And if she would rat, Michael thought she would not object to taking stones from a man's hut either. Of course, it might not be Maud; but he could think of no one else who knew he had any stone worth having.

If Maud had taken the stones, Jun would recognise them, Michael knew. By and by the story would get round, Jun would see to that. And when Jun told where those opals of Paul's had been found, as he would some day—Michael could not contemplate the prospect.

He might tell men of the Ridge his story now and forestall Jun; but it would sound thin without the opals to verify it, and the opportunity to restore them to Paul. Michael thought he had sufficient weight with men of the Ridge to impress them with the truth of what he said; but knowledge of a subtle undermining of his character, for which possession of the opals was responsible, gave him such a consciousness of guilt that he could not face the men without being able to give Paul the stones and prove he was not as guilty as he felt.

Overwhelmed and unable to throw off a sense of shame and defeat, Michael sat on the floor of his room, books thrown out of the box all round him. He could not

understand even now how those stones of Paul's had worked him to the state of mind they had. He did not even know they had brought him to the state of mind he imagined they had, or whether his fear of that state of mind had precipitated it. He realised the effect of the loss more than the thing itself, as he crouched beside the empty book-box, foreseeing the consequences to his work and to the Ridge, of the story Jun would tell—that he, Michael Brady, who had held such high faiths, and whose allegiance to them had been taken as a matter of course, was going to be known as a filcher of other men's stones, and that he who had formulated and inspired the Ridge doctrine was going to be judged by it.

CHAPTER IV

MICHAEL and Potch were finishing their tea when Watty burst in on them. His colour was up, his small, blue eyes winking and flashing over his fat, pink cheeks.

"Who d'y' think's come be motor to-day, Michael?" he gasped.

Michael's movement and the shade of apprehension which crossed his face were a question.

"Old man Armitage!" Watty said. "And he's come all the way from New York to see the big opal, he says."

There was a rumble of cart wheels, an exclamation and the reverberation of a broad, slow voice out-of-doors. Watty looked through Michael's window.

"Here he is, Michael," he said. "George and Peter are helping him out of Newton's dog-cart. And Archie Cross and Bill Grant are coming along the road a bit behind."

Michael pushed back his seat and pulled the fastenings from his front door. The front door was more of a decoration and matter of form in the face of the hut than intended to serve any useful purpose, and the fastening had never been moved before.

Potch cleared away the litter of the meal while Michael went out to meet the old man. He was walking with the help of a stick, his heavy, colourless face screwed with pain.

"Grr-rr!" he grunted. "What a fool I was to come to this God-damn place of yours, George! What? No fool like an old one? Don't know so much about

that. . . . What else was I to do? Brrr! Oh, there you are, Michael! Came to see you. Came right away because, from what the boys tell me, you weren't likely to slip down and call on me."

"I'd 've come all right if I'd known you wanted to see me, Mr. Armitage," Michael said.

The old man went into the hut and, creaking and groaning as though all his springs needed oiling, seated himself on the sofa, whipped out a silk handkerchief and wiped his face and head with it.

"Oh, well," he said, "here I am at last—and mighty glad to get here. The journey from New York City, where I reside, to this spot on the globe, don't get any nearer as I grow older. No, sir! Who's that young man?"

Mr. Armitage had fixed his eyes on Potch from the moment he came into the hut. Potch stood to his gaze.

"That's Potch," Michael said.

"Potch?"

The small, round eyes, brown with black rims and centres, beginning to dull with age, winked over Potch, and in that moment Dawe Armitage was trying to discover what his chances of getting possession of the stone he had come to see, were with the man who had found it.

"Con—gratulate you, young man," he said, holding out his hand. "I've come, Lord knows how many miles, to have a look at that stone of yours."

Potch shook hands with him.

"They tell me it's the finest piece of opal ever come out of Ridge earth," the old man continued. "Well, I couldn't rest out there at home without havin' a look at it. To think there was an opal like that about, and I couldn't get me fingers on it! And when I thought how it was I'd never even see it, perhaps, I danged 'em to Hades—doctors, family and all—took me passage out here. Ran away! That's what I did." He chuckled with reminiscent glee. "And here I am."

"Cleared out, did y', Mr. Armitage?" Watty asked.

"That's it, Watty," old Armitage answered, still

chuckling. "Cleared out. . . . Family'll be scarrifyin' the States for me. Sent 'em a cable when I got here to say I'd arrived."

Michael and George laughed with Watty, and the old man looked as pleased with himself as a schoolboy who has brought off some soul-satisfying piece of mischief.

"Tell you, boys," he said, "I felt I couldn't die easy knowing there was a stone like that about and I'd never clap eyes on it. . . . Know you chaps'd pretty well turned me down—me and mine—and I wouldn't get more than a squint at the stone for my pains. You're such damned independent beggars! Eh, Michael? That's the old argument, isn't it? How did y' like those papers I sent you—and that book . . . by the foreign devil—what's his name? Clever, but mad. Y'r all mad, you socialists, syndicalists, or whatever y'r call y'rselves nowadays. . . . But, for God's sake, let me have a look at the stone now, there's a good fellow."

Michael looked at Potch.

"You get her, Potch," he said.

Potch put his hand to the top of the shelf where, in an old tin, the great opal lay wrapped in wadding, with a few soft cloths about it. He put the tin on the table. Michael pushed the table toward the sofa on which Mr. Armitage was sitting. The old man leaned forward, his lips twitching, his eyes watering with eagerness. Potch's clumsy fingers fumbled with the wrappings; he spread the wadding on the table. The opal flashed black and shining between the rags and wadding as Potch put it on the table. Michael had lighted a candle and brought it alongside.

Dawe Armitage gaped at the stone with wide, dazed eyes.

"My!" he breathed; and again: "My!" Then: "She was worth it, Michael," fell from him in an awed exclamation.

He looked up, and the men saw tears of reverence and emotion in his eyes. He brushed them away and put out his hand to take the stone. He lifted the stone, gently and lovingly, as if it were alive and might be

afraid at the approach of his wrinkled old hand. But it was not afraid, Potch's opal; it fluttered with delight in the hand of this old man, who was a devout lover, and rayed itself like a bird of paradise. Even to the men who had seen the stone before, it had a new and uncanny brilliance. It seemed to coquet with Dawe Armitage; to pour out its infinitesimal stars—red, blue, green, gold, and amethyst—blazing, splintering, and coruscating to dazzle and bewilder him.

The men exclaimed as Mr. Armitage moved the opal. Then he put the stone down and mopped his forehead.

"Well," he said, "I reckon she's the God-damnedest piece of opal I've ever seen."

"She is that," Watty declared.

"What have you got on her, Michael?" Dawe Armitage queried.

A faint smile touched Michael's mouth.

"I'm only asking," Armitage remarked apologetically. "I can tell you, boys, it's a pretty bitter thing for me to be out of the running for a stone like this. I ain't even bidding, you see—just inquiring, that's all."

Michael looked at Potch.

"Well," he said, "it's Potch's first bit of luck, and I reck'n he's got the say about it."

The old man looked at Potch. He was a good judge of character. His chance of getting the stone from Michael was remote; from Potch—a steady, flat look in the eyes, a stolidity and inflexibility about the young man, did not give Dawe Armitage much hope where he was concerned either.

"They tell me," Mr. Armitage said, the twinkling of a smile in his eyes as he realised the metal of his adversary—"they tell me," he repeated, "you've refused three hundred pounds for her?"

"That's right," Potch said.

"How much do you reck'n she's worth?"

"I don't know."

"How much have you got on her?"

Potch looked at Michael.

"We haven't fixed any price," he said.

"Four hundred pounds?" Armitage asked.

Potch's grey eyes lay on his for the fraction of a second.

"You haven't got money enough to buy that stone, Mr. Armitage," he said, quietly.

The old man was crestfallen. Although he pretended that he had no hope of buying the opal, everybody knew that, hoping against hope, he had not altogether despaired of being able to prevail against the Ridge resolution not to sell to Armitage and Son, in this instance. Potch remarked vaguely that he had to see Paul, and went out of the hut.

"Oh, well," Dawe Armitage said, "I suppose that settles the matter. Daresay I was a durned old fool to try the boy—but there you are. Well, since I can't have her, Michael, see nobody else gets her for less than my bid."

The men were sorry for the old man. What Potch had said was rather like striking a man when he was down, they thought; and they were not too pleased about it.

"Potch doesn't seem to fancy sellin' at all for a bit," Michael said.

"What!" Armitage exclaimed. "He's not a miser—at his age?"

"It's not that," Michael replied.

"Oh, well"—the old man's gesture disposed of the matter. He gazed at the stone entranced again. "But she's the koh-i-noor of opals, sure enough. But tell me"—he sat back on the sofa for a yarn—"what's the news of the field? Who's been getting the stuff?"

The gossip of Jun and the ratting was still the latest news of the Ridge; but Mr. Armitage appeared to know as much of that as anybody. Ed. Ventry's boy, who had motored him over from Budda, had told him about it, he said. He had no opinion of Jun.

"A bad egg," he said, and began to talk about bygone days on the Ridge. There was nothing in the world he liked better than smoking and yarning with men of the Ridge about black opal.

He was fond of telling his family and their friends, who were too nice and precise in their manners for his

taste, and who thought him a boor and mad on the subject of black opal, that the happiest times of his life had been spent on Fallen Star Ridge, "swoppin' lies with the gougers"; yarning with them about the wonderful stuff they had got, and other chaps had got, or looking over some of the opal he had bought, or was going to buy from them.

"Oh, well," Mr. Armitage said after they had been talking for a long time, "it's great sitting here yarning with you chaps. Never thought . . . I'd be sitting here like this again. . . ."

"It's fine to have a yarn with you, Mr. Armitage," Michael said.

"Thank you, Michael," the old man replied. "But I suppose I must be putting my old bones to bed. . . . There's something else I want to talk to you about though, Michael."

The men turned to the door, judging from Mr. Armitage's tone that what he had to say was for Michael alone.

"I'll just have a look if that bally mare of mine's all right, Mr. Armitage," Peter Newton said.

He went to the door, and the rest of the men followed him.

"Well, Michael," Dawe Armitage said when the men had gone out, "I guess you know what it is I want to talk to you about."

Michael jerked his head slightly by way of acknowledgment.

"That little girl of yours."

Michael smiled. It always pleased and amused him to hear people talk as if he and not Paul were Sophie's father.

"She"—old Armitage leaned back on the sofa, and a shade of perplexity crossed his face—"I've seen a good deal of her, Michael, and I've tried to keep an eye on her—but I don't mind admitting to you that a man needs as many eyes as a centipede has legs to know what's coming to him where Sophie's concerned. But first of all . . . she's well . . . and happy—at least, she appears to be; and she's a great little lady."

He brooded a moment, and Michael smoked, watching his face as though it were a page he were trying to read.

"You know, she's singing at one of the theatres in New York, and they say she's doing well. She's sought after—made much of. She's got little old Manhattan at her feet, as they say. . . . I don't want to gloss over anything that son of mine may have done—but to put it in a nutshell, Michael, he's in love with her. He's really in love with her—wants to marry her, but Sophie won't have him."

Michael did not speak, and he continued:

"And there's this to be said for him. She says it. He isn't quite so much to blame as we first thought. Seems he'd been making love to her . . . and did a break before. . . . He didn't mean to be a blackguard, y' see. You know what I'm driving at, Michael. He loved the girl and went—She says when she knew he had gone away, she went after him. Then—well, you know, Michael . . . you've been young . . . you've been in love. And in Sydney . . . summer-time . . . with the harbour there at your feet. . . .

"They were happy enough when they came to America. How they escaped the emigration authorities, I don't know. They make enough fuss about an old fogey like me, as if I had a harem up me sleeve. But still, when I found her they were still happy, and she was having dancing lessons, had made up her mind to go on the stage, and wouldn't hear of getting married. Seemed to think it was a kind of barbarous business, gettin' married. Said her mother had been married—and look what it had brought her to.

"She's fond of John, too," the old man continued. "But, at present, New York's a side-show, and she's enjoying it like a child on a holiday from the country. I've got her living with an old maid cousin of mine. . . . Sophie says by and by perhaps she'll marry John, but not yet—not now—she's having too good a time. She's got all the money she wants . . . all the gaiety and admiration. It's not the sort of life I like for a woman myself . . . but I've done my best, Michael."

There was something pathetic about the quiver which took the old face before him. Michael responded to it gratefully.

"You have that, I believe, Mr. Armitage," he said, "and I'm grateful to you."

"Tell you the truth, Michael," he said, "I'm fond of her. I feel about her as if she were a piece of live opal—the best bit that fool of a son of mine ever brought from the Ridge. . . ."

His face writhed as he got up from the sofa.

"But I must be going, Michael. Rouminof had a touch of the sun a while ago, they tell me. Never been quite himself since. Bad business that. Better go and have a look at him. Yes? Thanks, Michael; thanks. It's a God-damned business growing old, Michael. Never knew I had so many bones in me body."

Leaning heavily on his stick he hobbled to the door. Michael gave him his arm, and they went to Rouminof's hut.

Potch had told Paul of Dawe P. Armitage's arrival; that he had come to the Ridge to see the big opal, and was in Michael's hut. Paul had gone to bed, but was all eagerness to get up and go to see Mr. Armitage. He was sitting on his bed, weak and dishevelled-looking, shirt and trousers on, while Potch was hunting for his boots, when Michael and Mr. Armitage came into the room.

After he had asked Paul how he was, and had gossiped with him awhile, Mr. Armitage produced an illustrated magazine from one of the outer pockets of his overcoat.

"Thought you'd like to see these pictures of Sophie, Rouminof," he said. "She's well, and doing well. The magazine will tell you about that. And I brought along this." He held out a photograph. "She wouldn't give me a photograph for you, Michael—said you'd never know her—so I prigged this from her sitting-room last time I was there."

Michael glanced at the photographer's card of heavy grey paper, which Mr. Armitage was holding. He would know Sophie, anyhow and anywhere, he thought; but he agreed that she was right when, the card in his hands,

he gazed at the elegant, bizarre-looking girl in the photograph. She was so unlike the Sophie he had known that he closed his eyes on the picture, pain, and again a dogging sense of failure and defeat filtering through all his consciousness.

CHAPTER V

Potch had gone to the mine on the morning when Michael went into Paul's hut, intending to rouse him out and make him go down to the claim and start work again. It was nearly five years since he had got the sun-stroke which had given him an excuse for loafing, and Michael and Potch had come to the conclusion that even if it were only to keep him out of mischief, Paul had to be put to work again.

Since old Armitage's visit he had been restless and dissatisfied. He was getting old, and had less energy, even by fits and starts, than he used to have, they realised, but otherwise he was much the same as he had been before Sophie went away. For months after Armitage's visit he spent the greater part of his time on the form in the shade of Newton's veranda, or in the bar, smoking and yarning to anybody who would yarn with him about Sophie. His imagination gilded and wove freakish fancies over what Mr. Armitage had said of her, while he wailed about Sophie's neglect of him—how she had gone away and left him, her old father, to do the best he could for himself. His reproaches led him to rambling reminiscences of his life before he came to the Ridge, and of Sophie's mother. He brought out his violin, tuned it, and practised sometimes, talking of how he would play for Sophie in New York.

He was rarely sober, and Michael and Potch were afraid of the effect of so much drinking on his never very steady brain.

For months they had been trying to induce him to go down to the claim and start work again; but Paul would not.

"What's the good," he had said, "Sophie'll be sending for me soon, and I'll be going to live with her in New York, and she won't want people to be saying her father is an old miner."

Michael had too deep a sense of what he owed to Paul to allow him ever to want. He had provided for him ever since Sophie had left the Ridge; he was satisfied to go on providing for him; but he was anxious to steer Paul back to more or less regular ways of living.

This morning Michael had made up his mind to tempt him to begin work again by telling him of a splash of colour Potch had come on in the mine the day before. Michael did not think Paul could resist the lure of that news.

Potch had brought Paul home from Newton's the night before, Michael knew; but Paul was not in the kitchen or in his own room when Michael went into the hut.

As he was going out he noticed that the curtain of bagging over the door of the room which had been Sophie's was thrown back. Michael went towards it.

"Paul!" he called.

No answer coming, he went into the room. Its long quiet and tranquillity had been disturbed. Michael had not seen the curtain over the doorway thrown back in that way since Sophie had gone. The room had always been like a grave in the house with that piece of bagging across it; but there was none of the musty, dusty, grave-like smell of an empty room about it when Michael crossed the threshold. The window was open; the frail odour of a living presence in the air. On the box cupboard by the window a few stalks of punti, withered and dry, stood in a tin. Michael remembered having seen them there when they were fresh, a year ago.

He was realising Potch had put them there, and wondering why he had left the dead stalks in the tin until they were as dry as brown paper, when his eyes fell on a hat with a long veil, and a dark cloak on the bed. He gazed at them, his brain shocked into momentary stillness by the suggestion they conveyed.

Sophie exclaimed behind him.

When he turned, Michael saw her standing in the doorway, leaning against one side of it. Her face was very pale and tired-looking; her eyes gazed into his, dark and strange. He thought she had been ill.

"I've come home, Michael," she said.

Michael could not speak. He stood staring at her. The dumb pain in her eyes inundated him, as though he were a sensitive medium for the realisation of pain. It surged through him, mingling with the flood of his own rejoicing, gratitude, and relief that Sophie had come back to the Ridge again.

They stood looking at each other, their eyes telling in that moment what words could not. Then Michael spoke, sensing her need of some commonplace, homely sentiment and expression of affection.

"It's a sight for sore eyes—the sight of you, Sophie," he said.

"Michael!"

Her arms went out to him with the quick gesture he knew. Michael moved to her and caught her in his arms. No moment in all his life had been like this when he held Sophie in his arms as though she were his own child. His whole being swayed to her in an infinite compassion and tenderness. She lay against him, her body quivering. Then she cried brokenly, with spent passion, almost without strength to cry at all.

"There, there!" Michael muttered. "There, there!"

He held her, patting and trying to comfort and soothe her, muttering tenderly, and with difficulty because of his trouble for her. The tears she had seen in his eyes when he said she was a sight for sore eyes came from him and fell on her. His hand went over her hair, clumsily, reverently.

"There, there!" he muttered again and again.

Weak with exhaustion, when her crying was over, Sophie moved away from him. She pushed back the hair which had fallen over her forehead; her eyes had a faint smile as she looked at him.

"I am a silly, aren't I, Michael?" she said.

Michael's mouth took its wry twist.

" Are you, Sophie ?" he said. " Well . . . I don't think there's anyone else on the Ridge'd dare say so."

" I've dreamt of that smile of yours, Michael," Sophie said. She swayed a little as she looked at him ; her eyes closed.

Michael put his arm round her and led her to the bed. He made her lie down and drew the coverlet over her.

" You lay down while I make you a cup of tea, Sophie," he said.

Sophie was lying so still, her face was so quiet and drained of colour when he returned with tea in a pannikin and a piece of thick bread and butter on the only china plate in the hut, that Michael thought she had fainted. But the lashes swept up, and her eyes smiled into his grave, anxious face as he gazed at her.

" I'm all right, Michael," she said, " only a bit crocky and dead tired." She sat up, and Michael sat on the bed beside her while she drank the tea and ate the bread and butter.

" Tea in a pannikin is much nicer than any other tea in the world," Sophie said. " Don't you think so, Michael ? I've often wondered whether it's the tea, or the taste of the tin pannikin, or the people who have tea in pannikins, that makes it so nice."

After a while she said :

" I came up on the coach this morning . . . didn't get in till about half-past six. . . . And I came straight up from Sydney the day before. That's all night on the train . . . and I didn't get a sleeper. Just sat and stared out of the window at the country. Oh ! I can't tell you how badly I've wanted to come home, Michael. In the end I felt I'd die if I didn't come—so I came."

Then she asked about Potch and her father.

Michael told her about the ratting, and how Paul had had sun-stroke, but that he was all right again now ; and how Potch and he were thinking of putting him on to work again. Then he said that he must get along down to the claims, as Potch would be wondering what had become of him ; and Paul might be down there, having heard of the colours they had got the night before.

"I'll send him up to you, if he's there," Michael said. "But you'd better just lie still now, and try to get a little of the shut-eye you've been missing these last two or three days."

"Months, Michael," Sophie said, that dark, strange look coming into her eyes again.

They did not speak for a moment. Then she lay back on the bed.

"But I'll sleep all right here," she said. "I feel as if I'd sleep for years and years. . . . It's the smell of the paper daisies and the sandal-wood smoke, I suppose. The air's got such a nice taste, Michael. . . . It smells like peace, I think."

"Well," Michael said, "you eat as much of it as you fancy. I don't mind if Paul doesn't find you till he comes back to tea. . . . It'd do you more good to have a sleep now, and then you'll be feelin' a bit fitter."

"I think I could go to sleep now, Michael," Sophie murmured.

Michael stood watching her for a moment as she seemed to go to sleep, thinking that the dry, northern air, with its drowsy fragrance, was already beginning to draw the ache from her body and brain. He went to the curtain of the doorway, dropped it, and turned out into the blank sunshine of the day again.

He lit his pipe and smoked abstractedly as he walked down the track to the mine. He had already made up his mind that it would be better for Sophie to sleep for a while, and that he was not going to get anyone to look for Paul and send him to her.

She had said nothing of the reason for her return, and Michael knew there must be a reason. He could not reconcile the Sophie Dawe Armitage had described as taking her life in America with such joyous zest, and the elegant young woman on the show-page of the illustrated magazine, with the weary and broken-looking girl he had been talking to. Whatever it was that had changed her outlook, had been like an earthquake, devastating all before it, Michael imagined. It had left her with no

more than the instinct to go to those who loved and would shelter her.

Potch was at work on a slab of shin-cracker when Michael went down into the mine. He straightened and looked up as Michael came to a standstill near him. His face was dripping, and his little white cap, stained with red earth, was wet with sweat. He had been slogging to get through the belt of hard, white stone near the new colours before Michael appeared.

" Get him ? " he asked.

Michael had almost forgotten Paul.

" No," he said, switching his thoughts from Sophie.

" What's up ? " Potch asked quickly, perceiving something unusual in Michael's expression.

Michael wanted to tell him—this was a big thing for Potch, he knew—and yet he could not bring his news to expression. It caught him by the throat. He would have to wait until he could say the thing decently, he told himself. He knew what joy it would give Potch.

" Nothing," he said, before he realised what he had said.

But he promised himself that in a few minutes he would tell Potch. He would break the news to him. Michael felt as though he were the guardian of some sacred treasure which he was afraid to give a glimpse of for fear of dazzling the beholder.

The concern went from Potch's face as quickly and vividly as it had come. He knew that Michael had reserves from him, and he was afraid of having trespassed on them by asking for information which Michael did not volunteer. He had been betrayed into the query by the stirred and happy look on Michael's face. Only rarely had he seen Michael look like that. Potch's thought flashed to Sophie—Michael must have some good news of her, he guessed, and knew Michael would pass it on to him in his own time.

He turned to his work again, and Michael took up his pick. Potch's steady slinging at the shin-cracker began again. Michael reproached himself as the minutes went by for what he was keeping from Potch.

He knew what his news would mean to Potch. He

knew the solid flesh of the man would grow radiant. Michael had seen that subtle glow transfuse him when they talked of Sophie. He pulled himself together and determined to speak.

Dropping his pick to take a spell, Michael pulled his pipe from the belt round his trousers, relighted the ashes in its bowl, and sat on the floor of the mine. Potch also stopped work. He leaned his pick against the rock beside him, and threw back his shoulders.

"Where was he?" he asked.

"Who—Paul?"

Potch nodded, sweeping the drips from his head and neck.

"Yes."

Michael decided he would tell him now.

"Don't know," he said. "He wasn't about when I came away."

Potch wrung his cap, shook it out, and fitted it on his head again.

"He was showin' all right at Newton's last night," he said. "I'd a bit of a business getting him home."

"Go on," Michael replied absent-mindedly. "Potch . . ." he added, and stopped to listen.

There was a muffled rumbling and sound of someone calling in the distance. It came from Roy O'Mara's drive, on the other side of the mine.

"Hullo!" Michael called.

"That you, Michael?" Roy replied. "I'm comin' through."

His head appeared through the drive which he had tunnelled to meet Potch's and Michael's drive on the eastern side of the mine. He crawled out, shook himself, took out his pipe, and squatted on the floor beside Michael.

"Where's Rummy?" Roy asked.

Michael shook his head.

"You didn't get him down, after all—the boys were taking bets about it last night."

"We'll get him yet," Potch said. "The colour'll work like one thing."

Michael stared ahead of him, smoking as though his thoughts absorbed him.

"He was pretty full at Newton's last night," Roy said, "and talkin'—talkin' about Sophie singing in America, and the great lady she is now. And how she was goin' to send for him, and he'd be leavin' us soon, and how sorry we'd all be then."

"Should've thought you'd about wore out that joke," Michael remarked, dryly.

Roy's easy, good-natured voice faltered.

"Oh, well," he said, "he likes to show off a bit, and it don't hurt us, Michael."

"That's right," Michael returned; "but Potch was out half the night bringing him home. You chaps might remember Paul's our proposition when you're having a bit of fun out of him."

Potch turned back to his work.

"Right, Michael," Roy said. And then, after a moment, having decided that both Michael's and Potch's demeanours were too calm for them to have heard what he had, as if savouring the effect of his news, he added:

"But perhaps we won't have many more chances—seein' Rummy 'll be going to America before long, perhaps——"

Michael, looking at Roy through his tobacco smoke, realised that he knew about Sophie's having come home. His glance travelled to Potch, who was slogging at the cement stone again.

"Saw old Ventry on me way down to the mine," Roy said, "and he said he'd a passenger on the coach last night. . . . Who do you think it was?"

Michael dared not look at Potch.

"He said," Roy murmured slowly, "it was Sophie."

They knew that Potch's pick had stopped. Michael had seen a tremor traverse the length of his bared back; but Potch did not turn. He stood with his face away from them, immobile. His body dripped with sweat and seemed to be oiled by the garish light of the candle which outlined his head, gilded his splendid arms and torso against the red earth of the mine, and threw long shadows

into the darkness, shrouding the workings behind him. Then his pick smashed into the cement stone with a force which sent sharp, white chips flying in every direction.

When Roy crawled away through the tunnel to his own quarters, Potch swung round from the face he was working on, his eyes blazing.

"Is it true?" he gasped.

"Yes," Michael said.

After a moment he added: "I found her in the hut this morning just before I came away. I been tryin' all these blasted hours to tell you, Potch . . . but every time I tried, it got me by the neck, and I had to wait until I found me voice."

CHAPTER VI

THE sunset was fading, a persimmon glow failing from behind the trees, its light merging with the blue of the sky, creating the faint, luminous green which holds the first stars with such brilliance, when Sophie went out of the hut to meet Potch.

The smell of sandal-wood burning on the fireplace in the kitchen she had just left, was in the air. Such soothing its fragrance had for her! And on the shingly soil, between the old dumps cast up a little distance from the huts, in every direction, the paper daisies were lying, white as driven snow in the wan light. Sophie went to the goat-pen, strung round with a light, crooked fence, a few yards from the back of the house.

As she leaned against the fence she could hear the tinkling of a goat-bell in the distance. The fragrances, the twilight, and the quiet were balm to her bruised senses. The note of a bell sounded nearer. Potch was bringing the goats in.

Sophie went to the shed and stood near it, so that she might see him before he saw her. A kid in the shed bleated as the note of the bell became harsher and nearer. Sophie heard the answering cry of the nanny among the three or four goats coming down to the yard along a narrow track from a fringe of trees beyond the dumps. Then she saw Potch's figure emerge from the trees.

He drove the goats into the yard where two sticks of the fence were down, put up the rails, and went to the shed for a milking bucket. He came back into the yard, pulled a little tan-and-white nanny beside a low box on which he sat to milk, and the squirt and song of milk in

the pail began. Sophie wondered what Potch was thinking of as he sat there milking. She remembered the night—Potch had been sitting just like that—when she told him her mother was dead. As she remembered, she saw again every flicker and gesture of his, the play of light on his broad, heavy face and head, with its shock of fairish hair; how his face had puckered up and looked ugly and childish as he began to cry; how, after a while, he had wiped his eyes and nose on his shirt-sleeve, and gone on with the milking again, crying and sniffling in a subdued way.

There was a deep note of loving them in his voice, rough and burred though it was, as Potch spoke to the goats. Two of them came when he called.

When he had nearly finished milking, Sophie moved away from the screen of the shed. She went along to the fence and stood where he could see her when he looked up.

The light had faded, and stars were glimmering in the luminous green of the sky when Potch, as he released the last goat, pushed back the box he had been sitting on, got up, took his bucket by the handle, and, looking towards the fence, saw Sophie standing there. At first he seemed to think she was a figure of his imagination, he stood so still gazing at her. He had often thought of her, leaning against the rails there, smiling at him like that. Then he remembered Sophie had come home; that it was really Sophie herself by the fence as he had dreamed of seeing her. But her face was wan and ethereal in the half-light; it floated before him as if it were a drowned face in the still, thin air.

"She's very like my old white nanny, Potch," Sophie said, her eyes glancing from Potch to the goat he had just let go and which had followed him across the yard.

"Yes," Potch said.

"She might almost be Annie Laurie's daughter," Sophie said.

"She's her grand-daughter," Potch replied.

He put the bucket down at the rails and stooped to get through them. Before he took up the bucket

again he stood looking at her as though to assure himself that it was really Sophie in the flesh who was waiting for him by the fence. Then he took up the bucket, and they walked across to Michael's hut together.

Potch dared scarcely glance at her when he realised that Sophie was really walking beside him—Sophie herself—although her eyes and her voice were not the eyes and voice of the Sophie he had known. And he had so often dreamed of her walking beside him that the dream seemed almost more real than the thing which had come to pass.

Sophie went with him to the lean-to, where the milk-dishes stood on a bench under the window outside. Michael's hut. She watched Potch while he strained the milk and poured it into big, flat dishes on a bench under the window.

Paul came to the door of their own hut. He called her. Sophie could hear voices exclaiming and talking to Paul and Michael. She supposed that the people her father had said were coming from New Town to see her had arrived. She dreaded going into the room where they all were, although she knew that she must go.

" Are you coming, Potch ? " she asked.

His eyes went from her to his hands.

" I'll get cleaned up a bit first," he said, " then I'll come."

The content in his eyes as they rested on her was transferrred to Sophie. It completed what the fragrances, those first minutes in the quiet and twilight had done for her. It gave her a sense of having come to haven after a tempestuous journey on the high seas beyond the reef of the Ridge, and of having cast anchor in the lee of a kindly and sheltering land.

CHAPTER VII

IICHAEL had lit the lamp in Rouminof's kitchen; in-
umerable tiny-winged insects, moths, mosquitoes,
nidges, and golden-winged flying ants hung in a cloud
bout it. Martha M'Cready, Pony-Fence Inglewood, and
leorge Woods were there talking to Paul and Michael
vhen Sophie went into the kitchen.

"Here she is," Paul said.

Martha rose from her place on the sofa and trundled
cross to her.

"Dearie!" she cried, as George and Pony-Fence
alled:

"H'llo, Sophie!"

And Sophie said: "Hullo, George! Hullo, Pony-
'ence!"

Martha's embrace cut short what else she may have
ad to say. Sophie warmed to her as she had when she
vas a child. Martha had been so plump and soft to rub
gainst, and a sensation of sheer animal comfort and
ejoicing ran through Sophie as she felt herself against
Iartha again. The slight briny smell of her skin was
weet to her with associations of so many old loving and
mpulsive hugs, so much loving kindness.

"Oh, Mother M'Cready," she cried, a more joyous note
n her voice than Michael had yet heard, "it is nice to see
ou again!"

"Lord, lovey," Martha replied, disengaging her arms,
' and they'd got me that scared of you—saying what a
off you were. I thought you'd be tellin' me my place
f I tried this sort of thing. But when I saw you a
ninute ago, I clean forgot all about it. I saw you were

just my own little Sophie back again . . . and I couldn't 've helped throwing me arms round you—not for the life of me."

She was winking and blinking her little blue eyes to keep the tears in them, and Sophie laughed the tears back from her eyes too.

"There she is!" a great, hearty voice exclaimed in the doorway.

And Bully Bryant, carrying the baby, with Ella beside him, came into the room.

"Bully!" Sophie cried, as she went towards them, "And Ella!"

Ella threw out her arms and clung to Sophie.

"She's been that excited, Sophie," Bully said, "I couldn't hardly get her to wait till this evening to come along."

"Oh, Bully!" Ella protested shyly.

"And the baby?" Sophie cried, taking his son from Bull. "Just fancy you and Ella being married, Bully, and having a baby, and me not knowing a word about it!"

The baby roared lustily, and Bully took him from Sophie as Watty Frost, the Crosses, and Roy O'Mara came through the door.

"Hullo, Watty, Archie, Tom, Roy!" Sophie exclaimed with a little gasp of pleasure and excitement, shaking hands with each one of them as they came to her.

She had not expected people to come to see her like this, and was surprised by the genial warmth and real affection of the greetings they had given her. Everybody was laughing and talking, the little room was full to brimming when Bill Grant appeared in the doorway, and beside him the tall, gaunt figure of the woman Sophie loved more than any other woman on the Ridge—Maggie Grant, looking not a day older, and wearing a blue print dress with a pin-spot washed almost out of it, as she had done as long as Sophie could remember.

Sophie went to the long, straight glance of her eyes as to a call. Maggie kissed her. She did not speak;

but her beautiful, deep-set eyes spoke for her. Sophie shook hands with Bill Grant.

"Glad to see you back again, Sophie," he said simply.

"Thank you, Bill," she replied.

Then Potch came in; and behind him, slowly, from out of the night, Snow-Shoes. The Grants had moved from the door to give him passage; but he stood outside a moment, his tall, white figure and old sugar-loaf hat outlined against the blue-dark wall of the night sky, as though he did not know whether he would go into the room or not.

Then he crossed the threshold, took off his hat, and stood in a stiff, gallant attitude until Sophie saw him. He had a fistful of yellow flowers in one hand. Everybody knew Sophie had been fond of punti. But there were only a few bushes scattered about the Ridge, and they had done flowering a month ago, so Snow-Shoes' bouquet was something of a triumph. He must have walked miles, to the swamp, perhaps, to find it, those who saw him knew.

"Oh, Mr. Riley!" Sophie cried, as she went to shake hands with him.

"They still call me Snow-Shoes, Sophie," the old man said.

The men laughed, and Sophie joined them. She knew, as they all did, that although anyone of them was called by the name the Ridge gave him, no one ever addressed Snow-Shoes as anything but Mr. Riley.

He held the flowers out to her.

"Punti!" she exclaimed delightedly, holding the yellow blossoms to her nose. "Isn't it lovely? . . . No flower in the world's got such a perfume!"

Michael had explained to the guests that Sophie was not to be asked to sing, and that nothing was to be said about her singing. Something had gone wrong with her voice, he told two or three of the men.

He thought he had put the fear of God into Paul, and had managed to make him understand that it distressed Sophie to talk about her singing, and he must not bother

her with questions about it. But in a lull of the talk Paul's voice was raised querulously:

"What I can't make out, Sophie," he said, "is why you can't sing? What's happened to your voice? Have you been singing too much? Or have you caught cold? I always told you you'd have to be careful, or your voice'd go like your mother's did. If you'd listened to me, now, or I'd been with you. . . ."

Bully Bryant, catching Michael's eye, burst across Paul's drivelling with a hearty guffaw.

"Well," he said, "Sophie's already had a sample of the fine lungs of this family, and I don't mind givin' her another, and then Ella and me'll have to be takin' Buffalo Bill home to bed. Now then, old son, just let 'em see what we can do." He raised his voice to singing pitch:

"For-er she's a jolly good fellow, for-er——"

All the men and women in the hut joined in Bully's roar, singing in a way which meant much more than the words—singing from their hearts, every man and woman of them.

Then Bully put his baby under his arm as though it were a bundle of washing, Ella protesting anxiously, and the pair of them said good-night to Sophie. Snow-Shoes went out before them; and Martha said she would walk down to the town with Bully and Ella. Bill Grant and Maggie said good-night.

"Sophie looks as if she'd sleep without rocking to-night," Maggie Grant said by way of indicating that everybody ought to go home soon and let Sophie get to bed early.

"I will," Sophie replied.

Pony-Fence and the Crosses were getting towards the door, Watty and George followed them.

"It's about time you was back, that's what I say, Sophie," George Woods said, gripping her hand as he passed. "There's been no luck on this field since you went away."

Sophie smiled into his kindly brown eyes.

"That's right," Watty backed up his mate heartily.

"But," Sophie said, "they tell me Potch has had all the luck."

"So he has," George Woods agreed.

"It's a great stone, isn't it, Sophie?" Watty said.

"I haven't seen it yet," Sophie said. "Michael said he'd get Potch to show it to me to-night."

"Not seen it?" George gasped. "Not seen the big opal! Say, boys"—he turned to Pony-Fence and the Crosses—"I reck'n we'll have to stay for this. Sophie hasn't seen Potch's opal yet. Bring her along, Potch. Bring her along, and let's all have another squint at her. You can't get too much of a good thing."

"Right," Potch replied.

He went out of the hut to bring the opal from his own room.

"Reck'n it's the finest stone ever found on this field," Watty said, "and the biggest. How much did you say Potch had turned down for it, Michael?"

"Four hundred," Michael said.

"What are you hangin' on to her for, Michael?" Pony-Fence asked.

Michael shook his head, that faint smile of his flickering.

"Potch's had an idea he didn't want to part with her," he said. "But I daresay he'll be letting her go soon."

He did not say "now." But the men understood that. They guessed that Potch had been waiting for this moment; that he wanted to show Sophie the stone before selling it.

Potch came into the room again, his head back, an indefinable triumph and elation in his eyes as they sought Sophie's. He had a mustard tin, skinned of its gaudy paper covering, in his hand. A religious awe and emotion stirred the men as, standing beside Sophie, he put the tin on the table. They crowded about the table, muscles tightening in sun-red, weather-tanned faces, some of them as dark as the bronze of an old penny, the light in their eyes brightening, sharpening—a thirsting, eager expression in every face. Potch screwed off the lid of the tin, lifted the stone in its wrappings, and

unrolled the dingy flannel which he had put round it. Then he took the opal from its bed of cotton wool.

Sophie leaned forward, her eyes shining, her breath coming quickly. The emotion in the room made itself felt through her.

"Put out the lamp, Michael, and let's have a candle," George said.

Michael turned out the lamp, struck a match and set it to the candle in a bottle on the dresser behind him. He put the candle on the table. Potch held the great opal to the light, he moved it slowly behind the flame of the candle.

"Oh!"

Sophie's cry of quivering ecstasy thrilled her hearers. She was one of them; she had been brought up among them. They had known she would feel opal as they did. But that cry of hers heightened their enthusiasm.

The breaths of suppressed excitement and admiration, and their muttered exclamations went up:

"Now, she's showin'!"

"God, look at her now!"

Sophie followed every movement of the opal in Potch's hand. It was a world in itself, with its thousand thousand suns and stars, shimmering and changing before her eyes as they melted mysteriously in the jetty pool of the stone.

"Oh!" she breathed again, amazed, dazed, and rapturous.

Potch came closer to her. They stood together, adoring the orb of miraculous and mysterious beauty.

"Here," Potch said, "you hold her, Sophie."

Sophie put out her hand, trembling, filled with child-like awe and emotion. She stretched her fingers. The stone weighed heavy and cold on them. Then there was a thin, silvery sound like the shivering of glass. . . . Her hand was light and empty. She stood staring at it for a moment; her eyes went to Potch's face, aghast. The blood seemed to have left her body. She stood so with her hand out, her lips parted, her eyes wide. . . .

After a while she knew Potch was holding her, and that he was saying:

"It's all right! It's all right, Sophie!"

She could feel him, something to lean against, beside her. Michael lifted the candle. With strange intensity, as though she were dreaming, Sophie saw the men had fallen away from the table. All their faces were caricatures, distorted and ghastly; and they were looking at the floor near her. Sophie's eyes went to the floor, too. She could see shattered stars—red, green, gold, blue, and amethyst—out across the earthen floor.

Michael put the candle on the floor. He and George Woods gathered them up. When Sophie looked up, the dark of the room swam with galaxies of those stars—red, green, gold, blue, and amethyst.

She stood staring before her: she had lost the power to move or to think. After a while she knew that the men had gone from the room, and that Potch was still beside her, his eyes on her face. He had eyes only for her face: he had barely glanced at the floor, where infinitesimal specks of coloured light were still winking in the dust. He took her hands. Sophie heard him talking, although she did not know what he was saying.

When she began to understand what Potch was saying, Sophie was sitting on the sofa under the window, and Potch was kneeling beside her. At first she heard him talking as if he were a long way away. She tried to listen; tried to understand what he was saying.

"It's all right, Sophie," Potch kept saying, his voice breaking.

Sight of her suffering overwhelmed him; and he trembled as he knelt beside her. Sophie heard him crying distantly:

"It's all right! It's all right, Sophie!"

She shuddered. Her eyes went to him, consciousness in their blank gaze. Potch, realising that, murmured incoherently:

"Don't think of it any more. . . . It was yours, Sophie. It was for you I was keeping it. . . . Michael knew that, too. He knew that was why I didn't want to sell. . . .

It was your opal . . . to do what you liked with, really. That was what I meant when I put it in your hand. But don't let us think of it any more. I don't want to think of it any more."

"Oh!" Sophie cried, in a bitter wailing; "it's true, I believe . . . somebody said once that I'm as unlucky as opal—that I bring people bad luck like opal. . . ."

"You know what we say on the Ridge?" Potch said; "The only bad luck you get through opal is when you can't get enough of it—so the only bad luck you're likely to bring to people is when they can't get enough of you."

"Potch!"

Sophie's hands went to him in a flutter of breaking grief. The forgiveness she could not ask, the gratitude for his gentleness, which she could not express any other way, were in the gesture and exclamation.

On her hands, through his hot, clasped hands, the whole of Potch's being throbbed.

"Don't think of it any more," he begged.

"But it was your luck—your wonderful opal—and . . . I broke it, Potch. I spoilt your luck."

"No," Potch said, borne away from himself on the flood of his desire to assuage her distress. "You make everything beautiful for me, Sophie. Since you came back I haven't thought of the stone: I'd forgotten it. . . . This hasn't been the same place. I'm so filled up with happiness because you're here that I can't think of anything else."

Sophie looked into his face, her eyes swimming. She saw the deep passion of love in Potch's eyes; but she turned away from the light it poured over her, her face overcast again, bitterness and grief in it. She hung so for a moment; then her hands went over her face and she was crying abstractedly, wearily.

There was something in her aloofness in that moment which chilled Potch. His instincts, sensitive as the antennæ of an insect, wavered over her, trying to discover the cause of it. Conscious of a mood which excluded him, he withdrew his hand from her. Sophie

groped for it. Then the sense of sex and of barriers swept from him, by the passion of his desire to comfort and console her. Potch put his arm round her and drew Sophie to him, murmuring with an utter tenderness, "Sophie! Sophie!"

Later she said:

"I can't tell you . . . what happened . . . out there, Potch. Not yet . . . not now. . . . Perhaps some day I will. It hurt so much that it took all the singing out of me. My heart wouldn't move . . . so my voice died. I thought if I came home, you and Michael wouldn't mind . . . my being like I am. But you've all been so good to me, Potch . . . and it's so restful here, I was beginning to think that life might go on from where I left it; that it might be just a quiet living together and loving, like it was before. . . ."

"It can, Sophie!" Potch said, his eyes on her face, wistful and eager to read her thought.

"But look what I've done," she said.

Potch lifted her hand to his lips, a resurge of the virile male in him moving his restraint.

"I've told you," he said, "what you've done. You've put joy into all our hearts—just to see you again. Michael's told you that, too, and George and the rest of them."

"Yes, but, Potch . . ." Sophie paused, and he saw the shadow of dark thoughts in her eyes again. "I'm not what you think I am. I'm not like any of you think."

Potch's grip on her hand tightened.

"You're you—and you're here. That's enough for us!" he said.

Sophie sighed. "I never dreamt everybody would be so good. You and Michael I knew would—but the others . . . I thought they'd remember . . . and disapprove of me, Potch. . . . Mrs. Watty"—a smile showed faintly in her eyes—"I thought she'd see to that."

"I daresay she's done her best," Potch said, with a memory of Watty's valiant bearing and angry, bright eyes when he came into the hut. "Watty was vexed . . . she wouldn't come with him to-night."

"Was he?"

Potch nodded. "What you didn't reck'n on," he said, "was that all of us here . . . we—we love you, Sophie, and we're glad you're back again."

Her eyes met him in a straight, clear glance.

"You and Michael," she said, "I knew you loved me, Potch. . . ."

"You know how it's always been with me," Potch said, grateful that he might talk of his love, although he had been afraid to since she had cried, fearing thought of it stirred that unknown source of distress. "But I won't get in your way here, Sophie, because of that. I won't bother you . . . I want just to stand by—and help you all I know how."

"I love you, too, Potch," Sophie said; "but there are so many ways of loving. I love you because you love me; because your love is the one sure thing in the world for me. . . . I've thought of it when I've been hurt and lonely. . . . I came back because it was here . . . and you were here."

Potch's eyes were illumined; his face blazed as though a fire had been engendered in the depths of his body. He remained so a moment, curbed and overcome with emotion. The shadow deepened in Sophie's eyes as she looked at him; her face was grave and still.

"I do love you, Potch," she said again; "not as I loved someone else, once. That was different. But you're so good to me . . . and I'm so tired."

CHAPTER VIII

THE days which followed that night when Sophie had dropped the great opal were the happiest Potch had ever known. They were days in which Sophie turned to smile at him when he went into Rouminof's hut; when her eyes lay in his serenely; when he could go to her, and stand near her, inhaling her being, before he stooped to kiss her hair; when she would put back her head so that he might find her lips and take her breath from them in the lingering kiss she gave.

When she had laid her head back on his shoulder sometimes, closing her eyes, an expression of infinite rest coming over her face, Potch had gazed at it, wondering what world of thought lay beneath that still, sleep-like mask as it rested on his shoulder; what thought or emotion set a nerve quivering beneath her skin, as the water of some still pool quivers when an insect stirs beneath it.

Sophie had no tricks of sex with Potch. She went to him sometimes when ghosts of her mind were driving her before them. She went to him because she was sure that she could go to him, whatever her reasons for going. With Potch there was no need for explanations.

His quiet strength of body and mind had something to do with the rest and assurance which his very presence gave her. It was like being a baby and lying in a cradle again to have his arm about her; no harm or ill could reach her behind the barrier they raised, Sophie thought. She knew Potch loved her with all the passion of a virile man as well as with a love like the ocean into which all her misdeeds of commission and omission

might be dropped. And she had as intimate and sympathetic a knowledge of Potch as he had of her. Sophie thought that nothing he might do could make her care less, or be less appreciative of him. She loved him, she said, with a love of the tenderest affection. If it lacked an irresistible impulse, she thought it was because she had lost the power to love in that way; but she hoped some day she would love Potch as he loved her—without reservations. For the time being she loved him gratefully; her gratitude was as immense as his love.

Potch divined as much; Sophie had not tried to tell him how she felt about him, but he understood, perhaps better than she could tell him. His humility was equal to any demand she could make of him. He had not sufficient belief in himself or his worth to believe that Sophie could ever love him as he loved her: he did not expect it. The only way for him to take with his love was the way of faith and service. "To love is to be all made of faith and service." He had taken that for his text for life, and for Sophie. He could be happy holding to it.

Sophie's need of him made Potch happier than he had ever hoped to be; but he could not help believing that the life with her which had etched itself on the horizon of his future would mist away, as the mirages which quiver on the long edges of the plains do, as you approach them.

The days were blessed and peaceful to Sophie, too; but she, also, was afraid that something might happen to disturb them. She wanted to marry Potch in order to secure them, and to live and work with him on the Ridge. She wanted to live the life of any other woman on the Ridge with her mate. Life looked so straight and simple that way. She could see it stretching before her into the years. Her hands would be full of real things. She would be living a life of service and usefulness, in accordance with the ideal the Ridge had set itself, and which Michael had preached with the zeal of a latter-day saint. She believed her life would shape itself to this

future; but sometimes a wraith in the back-country of her mind rose shrieking: "Never! Never!"

It threw her into the outer darkness of despair, that cry, but she had learned to exorcise its influence by going to Potch and lifting her lips for him to kiss.

"What is it?" he asked one day, vaguely aware of the meaning of the movement.

Before the reverence and worship of his eyes the wraith fled. Sophie took his face between her hands.

"Oh, my dear," she murmured, her eyes straining on his face, "I do love you . . . and I will love you, more and more."

"You don't have to worry about that," Potch said. "I love you enough for both of us. . . . Just think of me"—he lifted her hand and kissed the back of it gently—"like this—your hand—a sort of third hand."

When he came back from the mine in the afternoon Potch went to see Sophie, cut wood for her, and do any odd jobs she might need done. Sometimes he had tea with her, and they read the reviews and books Michael passed on to them. In the evening they went for a walk, usually towards the Old Town, and sat on a long slope of the Ridge overlooking the Rouminofs' first home—near where they had played when they were children, and had watched the goats feeding on green patches between the dumps.

They had awed talks there; and now and then the darkness, shutting off sight of each other, had made something like disembodied spirits of them, and their spirits communicated dumbly as well as on the frail wind of their voices.

They yarned and gossiped sometimes, too, about the things that had happened, and what Potch had done while Sophie was away. She asked a good deal about the ratting, and about Jun and Maud. Potch tried to avoid talking of it and of them. He had evaded her questions, and Sophie returned to them, perplexed by his reticence.

"I don't understand, Potch," she said on one occasion. "You found out that Maud and Jun had something to

do with the ratting, and you went over to Jun's . . . and told them you were going to tell the boys. . . . They must have known you would tell. Maud——"

Potch's expression, a queer, sombre and shamed heaviness of his face, arrested her thought.

"Maud——" she murmured again. "I see," she added, "it was just Maud——"

"Yes," Potch said.

"That explains a good deal." Sophie's eyes were on the distant horizon of the plains; her fingers played idly with quartz pebbles, pink-stained like rose coral, lying on the earth about her.

"What does it explain?" Potch asked.

"Why," Sophie said, "for one thing—how you grew up. You've changed since I went away, Potch, you know. . . ."

His smile showed a moment.

"I'm older."

"Older, graver, harder . . . and kinder, though you always had a genius for kindness, Potch. . . . But Maud——"

Potch turned his head from her. Sophie regarded his averted profile thoughtfully.

"I understand," she said.

Potch took her gaze steadily, but with troubled eyes.

"I wish . . . somehow . . . I needn't 've done what I did," he said.

"You'd have hated her, if you had gone back on the men—because of her."

"That's right," Potch agreed.

"And—you don't now?"

"No."

"I saw her—Maud—in New York . . . before I came away," Sophie said slowly. "She was selling opal. . . ."

"Did she show you the stones?"

"That's just what Michael asked me," Sophie said.

"Michael?" Potch's face clouded.

"She didn't show them to me, but I know who saw them all—he bought them—Mr. Armitage."

"The old man?"

"No, John."

After a minute Sophie said:

"Why are you so keen about those stones Maud had, Potch? Michael is, too. . . . Most of them were taken from the claims, I suppose—but was there anything more than that?"

"It's hard to say." Potch spoke reluctantly. "There's nothing more than a bit of guesswork in my mind . . . and I suppose it's the same with Michael. I haven't said anything to Michael about it, and he hasn't to me, so it's better not to mention it."

"There's a good deal changed on the Ridge since I went away," Sophie remarked musingly.

"The new rush, and the school, the Bush Brothers' church, and Mrs. Watty's veranda?"

"I don't mean that," Sophie said. "It's the people and things . . . you, for instance, and Michael——"

"Michael?" Potch exclaimed. "He's wearing the same old clothes, the same old hat."

Sophie was too much in earnest to respond to the whimsey.

"He's different somehow . . . I don't quite know how," she said. "There's a look about him—his eyes—a disappointed look, Potch. . . . It hurt him when I went away, I know. But now—it's not that. . . ."

As Potch did not reply, Sophie's eyes questioned him earnestly.

"Has anything happened," she asked, "to make Michael look like that?"

"I . . . don't know," Potch replied.

Answered by the slow and doubtful tone of his denial, Sophie exclaimed:

"There is something, Potch! I don't want to know what it is if you can't tell me. I'm only worried about Michael. . . . I'd always thought he had the secret of that inside peace, and now he looks—— Oh, I can't bear to see him look as he does. . . . And he seems to have lost interest in things—the life here—everything."

"Yes," Potch admitted.

"Only tell me," Sophie urged, "is this that's bothering

Michael likely to clear, and has it been hanging over him for long?"

Potch was silent so long that she wondered whether he was going to answer the question. Then he said slowly:

"I . . . don't know. I really don't know anything, Sophie. I happened to find out—by accident—that Michael's pretty worried about something. I don't rightly know what, or why. That's all."

The even pace of those days gave Sophie the quiet mind she had come to the Ridge for. There was healing for her in the fragrant air, the sunshiny days, the blue-dark nights, with their unclouded, starry skies. She went into the shed one morning and threw the bags from the cutting-wheel which had been her mother's, cleared and cleaned up the room, rearranged the boxes, put out her working gear, and cut and polished one or two stones which were lying on a saucer beside the wheel, to discover whether her hand had still its old deftness. Michael was delighted with the work she showed him in the evening, and gave her several small stones to face and polish for him.

Every day then Sophie worked at her wheel for a while. George and Watty, Bill Grant and the Crosses brought stuff for her to cut and polish, and in a little while her life was going in the even way it had done before she left the Ridge, but it was a long time before Sophie went about as she used to. After a while, however, she got into the way of walking over to see Maggie Grant or Martha M'Cready in the afternoon, occasionally; but she never talked to them of her life away from the Ridge; they never spoke of it to her.

Only one thing had disturbed her slightly—seeing Arthur Henty one evening as she and Martha were coming from the Three Mile.

He had come towards them, with a couple of stockmen, driving a mob of cattle. Dust rose at the heels of the cattle and horses; the cattle moved slowly; and the sun was setting in the faces of the men behind the cattle. Sophie did not know who they were until a man on a

chestnut horse stared at her. His face was almost hidden by his beard; but after the first glance she recognised Arthur Henty. They passed as people do in a dream, Sophie and Martha back from the road, the men riding off the cattle, Arthur with the stockmen and cattle which a cloud of dust enveloped immediately. The dark trees by the roadside swayed, dipped in the gold of the sunset, when they had passed. The image of Arthur Henty riding like that in the dust behind the cattle, his face gilded by the light of the setting sun, came to Sophie again and again. She was a little disturbed by it; but it was only natural that she should be, she thought. She had not seen Arthur since the night of the ball, and so much had happened to both their lives since then.

She saw him once or twice in the township afterwards. He had stared at her; Sophie had bowed and smiled, but they had not spoken. Later, she had seen him lounging on the veranda at Newton's, or hanging his bridle over the pegs outside Ezra Smith's billiard saloon, and neither her brain nor pulse had quickened at the sight of him. She was pleased and reassured. She did not think of him after that, and went on her way quietly, happily, more deeply content in her life with Michael and Potch.

As her natural vigour returned, she grew to a fuller appreciation of that life; health and a normal poise of body and soul brought the faint light of happiness to her eyes. Michael heard her laughing as she teased Paul sometimes, and Potch thrilled to the rippled cadenza of Sophie's laughter.

"It's good to hear that again," Michael said to him one day, hearing it fly from Rouminof's hut.

Potch's glance, as his head moved in assent, was eloquent beyond words.

Sophie had a sensation of hunger satisfied in the life she was leading. Some indefinable hunger of her soul was satisfied by breathing the pure, calm air of the Ridge again, and by feeling her life was going the way the lives of other women on the Ridge were going. She expected

her life would go on like this, days and years fall behind her unnotieed ; that she and Potch would work together, have children, be splendid friends always, live out their days in the simple, sturdy fashion of Ridge folk, and grow old together.

CHAPTER IX

TENDERS had been called for, to clear the course for the annual race meeting. A notice posted on the old, wild cherry tree in the road opposite Newton's, brought men and boys from every rush on Fallen Star to Ezra Smith's billiard-room on the night appointed; and Ezra, constituted foreman by the meeting, detailed parties to clear and roll the track.

A paddock at the back of the town, with several tall coolebahs at one side, was known as the race-course. A table placed a little out from the trees served for a judge's box; and because the station folk usually drew up their buggies and picnicked there, the shade of the coolebahs was called the grand-stand. Farther along a saddling-paddock had been fenced off, and in it, on race-days, were collected a miscellaneous muster of the show horses of the district—rough-haired nags, piebald and skewbald; rusty, dusty, big-boned old racers with famous reputations; wild-eyed, unbroken youngsters, green from the plains; Warria chestnuts, graceful as greyhounds, with quivering, scarlet nostrils; and the nuggety, deep-chested offspring of the Langi-Eumina stallion Black Harry.

People came from far and near for the races, and for the ball which was held the same evening in the big, iron-roofed shed opposite Newton's. Newton's was filled to the brim with visitors, and there were not stables enough for the horses. But Ridge stables are never more than railed yards about the size of a room, with bark thatches, and as many of them as were needed were run up for the occasion.

Horses and horsemen were heroes of the occasion. The merits of every horse that was going to run were argued; histories, points, pedigrees, and performances discussed. Stories were told of the doings of strange horses brought from distant selections, the out-stations of Warria, Langi-Eumina, or Darrawingee; yarns swopped of almost mythical warrigals, and warrigal hunting, the breaking of buck-jumpers, the enterprises and exploits of famous horsemen. Ridge meetings, since the course had been made and the function had become a yearly fixture, were gone over; and the chances of every horse and rider entered for the next day debated, until anticipation and interest attained their highest pitch.

Everybody in the township went to the races; everybody was expected to go. Race-day was the Ridge gala day; the day upon which men, women, and children gave themselves up to the whole-hearted, joyous excitement of an outing. The meeting brought a bookmaker or two from Sydney sometimes, and sometimes a man in the town made a book on the event. But nobody, it was rumoured, looked forward to, or enjoyed the races more than Mrs. Watty Frost, although she had begun by disapproving of them, and still maintained she did not "hold with betting." She put up with it, however, so long as the Sydney men did not get away with Ridge money.

Potch was disappointed, and so was Michael, that Sophie would not go to the races, which were held during the year of her return. They went, and Rouminof trotted off by himself, quite early. Sophie did not want to see all the strangers who would be in Fallen Star for race-day, she said—people from the river selections, the stations, and country towns. Late in the afternoon, as she was going to see Ella Bryant, to offer to mind the baby while Ella and Bully went to the ball, she saw Martha was at home, a drift of smoke coming from the chimney of her hut.

Sophie went to the back door of the hut and stood in the doorway.

"Are you there, Martha?" she called.

"That you, Sophie?" Martha queried. "Come in!"

Sophie went into the kitchen. Martha had a big fire, and her room was full of its hot glare. She was ironing at a table against the wall, and freshly laundered, white clothes were hanging to a line stretched from above the window to a nail on the inner wall. She looked up happily as Sophie appeared, sweat streaming from her fat, jolly face.

"I was just thinking of you, dearie," she exclaimed, putting the iron on an upturned tin, and straightening out the flounces of the dress she was at work on. "Lovely day it's been for the races, hasn't it? Sit down. I'll be done d'reckly, and am going to make a cup of tea before I go over to help Mrs. Newton a bit with dinner. My, she's got her hands full over there—with all the crowd up! . . . Don't think I ever did see such a crowd at the races, Sophie."

Martha's iron flashed and swung backwards and forth. Sophie watched the brawny forearm which wielded the iron. Hard and as brown as the branch of a tree it was, from above the elbow where her sleeve was rolled back to the wrist; the hand fastened over the iron, red and dappled with great golden-brown freckles; the nails of its short, thick fingers, broken, dirt lying in thick, black wedges beneath them. As her other hand moved over the dress, preparing the way for the iron, Sophie saw its work-worn palm, the lines on it driven deep with scouring, scrubbing, and years of washing clothes, and cleaning other folks' houses. She thought of the work those hands of Martha's had done for Fallen Star; how Martha had looked after sick people, brought babies into the world, nursed the mothers, mended, washed, sewed, and darned, giving her help wherever it was needed. Always good-natured, hearty, healthy, and wholesome, what a wonderful woman she was, Mother M'Cready, Sophie exclaimed to herself.

Martha was as excited as any girl on the Ridge, ironing her dress now, and getting ready for the ball. Sophie wondered how old she was. She did not look any older than when she first remembered her; but people said

Martha must be sixty if she was a day. And she loved a dance, Sophie knew. She could dance, too, Mother M'Cready. The boys said she could dance like a two-year-old.

"What are you going to wear to the ball, Sophie?" Martha asked. "I suppose you've got some real nice dresses you brought from America."

"I'm not going," Sophie said.

"Not going?" Martha's iron came down with a bang, her blue eyes flashed wide with astonishment. "The idea! Not goin' to the Ridge ball—the first since you came home? I never heard of such a thing. . . . 'Course you're going, Sophie!"

Sophie's glance left Martha's big, busy figure. It went through the open doorway. The sunshine was garish on the plains, although the afternoon was nearly over.

"Why aren't you goin'?" Martha pursued. "Why? What'll your father say? And Michael? And Potch? We'd all been looking forward to seein' you there like you used to be, Sophie. And . . . here was me doin' up my dress extra special, thinkin' Sophie'll be that grand in the dresses she's brought from America . . . we'll all have to smarten a bit to keep up with her. . . ."

Tears swam in Sophie's eyes at the naïve and genial admiration of what Martha had said.

"It'll spoil the ball if you're not there," Martha insisted, her iron flashing vigorously. "It just won't be—the ball—and everything looking as if it were goin' to be the biggest ball ever was on the Ridge. Everybody'll be that disappointed——"

"Do you think they will, Martha?" Sophie queried.

"I don't think; I know."

A little smile, sceptical yet wistful, hovered in Sophie's eyes.

"And it don't seem fair to Potch neither."

"Potch?"

"Yes . . . you hidin' yourself away as if you weren't happy—and going to marry the best lad in the country." The iron came down emphatically, Martha working it as vigorously and intently as she was thinking.

"There's some says Potch isn't a match for you now, Sophie. Not since you went away and got manners and all. . . . They can't tell why you're goin' to marry Potch. But as I said to Mrs. Watty the other day, I said: 'Sophie isn't like that. She isn't like that at all. It's the man she goes for, and Potch is good enough for a princess to take up with.' That's what I said; and I don't mind who knows it. . . ."

Sophie had got up and gone to the door while Martha was talking. She was amused at the idea of Mrs. Watty having forgiven her sufficiently to think that Potch was not a good enough match for her.

"Besides . . . I did want you to go, Sophie," Martha continued. "They're all coming over from Warria—Mr. and Mrs. Henty and the girls, and Mrs. Arthur. They've got a party staying with them, up from Sydney . . . and most of them have put up at Newton's for the night. . . ."

She glanced at Sophie to see how she was taking this news. But no flicker of concern changed the thoughtful mask of Sophie's features as she leaned in the doorway looking out to the blue fall of the afternoon sky.

"They're coming over to see how the natives of these parts amuse theirselves," Martha declared scornfully. "They'll have on all the fine dresses and things they buy down in Sydney . . . and I was lookin' to you, Sophie, to keep up our end. I've been thinkin' to meself, 'They think they're the salt of the earth, don't they? Think they're that smart . . . we dress so funny . . . and dance so funny, over at Fallen Star. But Sophie'll show them; Sophie'll take the shine out of them when they see her in one of the dresses she's brought from America.'"

As Martha talked, Sophie could see the ball-room at Warria as she had years before. She could see the people in it—figures swaying down the long veranda, the Henty girls, Mrs. Henty, Phyllis Chelmsford—their faces, the dresses they had worn; Arthur, John Armitage, James Henty, herself, as she had sat behind the piano, or turned the pages of her father's music. She could hear the music he and Mrs. Henty played;

the rhythm of a waltz swayed her. A twinge of the old wrath, hurt indignation, and disappointment, vibrated through her. . . . She smiled to think of it, and of all the long time which lay between that night and now.

"I'd give anything for you to be there—looking your best," Martha continued. "I can't bear that lot to think you've come home because you weren't a success, as they say over there, or because. . . ."

"Mr. Armitage wasn't as fond of me—as he used to be," Sophie murmured.

Martha caught the mocking of a gleam in her eyes as she spoke. No one knew why Sophie had come home; but Mrs. Newton had given Martha an American newspaper with a paragraph in it about Sophie. Martha had read and re-read it, and given it to several other people to read. She put her iron on the hearth and disappeared into the bedroom which opened off her kitchen.

"This is all I know about it, Sophie," she said, returning with the paper.

She handed the paper to Sophie, and Sophie glanced at a marked paragraph on its page.

"Of a truth, dark are the ways of women, and mysterious beyond human understanding," she read. "Probably no young artist for a long time has had as meteoric a career on Broadway as Sophie Rouminof. Leaping from comparative obscurity, she has scintillated before us in revue and musical comedy for the last three or four years, and now, at the zenith of her success, when popularity is hers to do what she likes with, she goes back to her native element, the obscurity from which she sprang. Some first-rate artists have got religion, philanthropy, or love, and have renounced the footlights for them; but Sophie is doing so for no better reason, it is said, than that she is *écœuré* of us and our life—the life of any and all great cities. A well-known impresario informs us that a week or two ago he asked her to name her own terms for a new contract; but she would have nothing to do with one on any terms. And now she has slipped back into the darkness of space and time, like one

of her own magnificent opals, and the bill and boards of the little Opera House will know her name and fascinating personality no more."

The faint smile deepened in Sophie's eyes.

"It's true, isn't it, Sophie?" Martha asked, as Sophie did not speak when she had finished reading.

"I suppose it is," Sophie said. "But your paper doesn't say what made me *écœuré*—sick to the heart, that is—of the life over there, Martha. And that's the main thing. . . . It got me down so, I thought I'd never sing again. But there's one thing I'd like you to tell people for me, Martha: Mr. Armitage was always goodness itself to me. He didn't even ask me to go away with him. He did make love to me, and I was just a silly little girl. I didn't know then men go on like that without meaning much. . . . I wanted to be a singer, and I made up my mind to go away when he did. . . . Afterwards I lost my voice. My heart wouldn't sing any more. I wanted to come home. . . . That's all I knew. . . . I wanted to come home. . . . And I came."

Martha went to her. Her arms went round Sophie's neck.

"My lamb," she whispered.

Sophie rested against her for a moment. Then she kissed one of the bare arms she had watched working the iron so vigorously.

"We'd best not think of it, Mother M'Cready," she said.

"All right, dearie!"

Martha withdrew her arms and went back to the hearth. She lifted another iron, held it to her face to judge its heat, and returned to the table. She rubbed the iron on a piece of hessian on a box there, dusted it with a soft rag, and went on with the ironing of her dress.

"I wish I was as young as you, Martha," Sophie said.

"Lord, lovey, you will be when you're my age," Martha replied, with a swift, twinkling glance of her blue eyes. "But you're coming . . . aren't you? I won't have the heart to wear my pink stockings if you don't,

Sophie. Mrs. Newton gave them to me for a Christmas-box . . . and I'm fair dying to wear them."

Sophie smiled at the pair of bright pink stockings pinned on the line beside a newly-starched petticoat.

"You will, won't you?"

Sophie shook her head.

"I don't think so, Martha."

Sophie went out of the doorway. She was going home, and stood again a moment, looking through scattered trees to the waning afternoon sky. A couple of birds dashed across her line of vision with shrill, low, giggling cries.

She heard people talking in the distance. Several men rode up to Newton's. She saw them swing from their horses, put the reins over the pegs before the bar, and go into the hotel. Two or three children ran down the street chattering eagerly, excitedly. Roy O'Mara went across to the hall with some flags under his arm. From all the huts drifted ejaculations, fragments of laughter and calling. Excitement about the ball was in the air.

Sophie remembered how happy and excited she used to be about the Ridge balls. She thought of it all vaguely at first, that lost girlish joy of hers, the free, careless gaiety which had swept her along as she danced. She remembered her father's fiddling, Mrs. Newton's playing; how the music had had a magic in it which set everybody's feet flying and the boys singing to tunes they knew. The men polished the floor so that you could scarcely walk on it. One year they had spent hours working it up so that you slipped along like greased lightning as you danced.

Sophie smiled at her reminiscences. The high tones of a man's voice, eager and exultant, shouting to someone across the twilight; the twitter of a girl's laughter—they were all in the air now as they had been then. Her listlessness stirred; everybody was preparing for the ball, and getting ready to go to it. Excitement and eager looking forward to a good time were in the air. They were infectious. Sophie trembled to them—they tempted her. Could she go to the ball, like everybody

: ? Could she drift again in the stream of easy and ial intercourse with all these people of the Ridge whom loved and who loved her ?

Martha came to the door. Her eyes strained on brooding young face, trying to read from the nging expressions which flitted across it what Sophie s thinking.

" You're coming, aren't you, dearie ?" she begged.

Sophie's eyes surprised the old woman, the brilliance tears and light in them, their childish playing of hope yond hope and fear, amazed her.

" Do you think I could, Martha ?" she cried. " Do u think I could ?"

" Course you could, darling," Martha said.

Sophie's arms went round her in an instant's quick essure ; then she stood off from her.

" Won't it be lovely," she cried, " to dance and sing— d to be young again, Martha ?"

CHAPTER X

It was still light; the sky, faintly green, a tinge as of stale blood along the horizon, as Sophie and Potch walked down the road to the hall. At a little distance the big building showed dark and ungainly against the sky. Its double doors were open, and a wash of dull, golden light came out from it into the twilight, with the noise of people laughing and talking.

"It's like old times, isn't it, Potch"—Sophie's fingers closed over Potch's arm—"to be going to a Ridge dance?"

There was a faint, sweet stirring which the wind makes in the trees within her, Sophie realised. It was strange and delightful to feel alive again, and alive with the first freshness, innocence, and vague happiness of a girl.

Potch looked down on her, smiling. He was filled with pride to have her beside him like this, to think they would go into the hall together, and that people would say to each other when they saw them: "There's Sophie and Potch!"

That using of their names side by side was a source of infinite content to Potch. He loved people to say: "When are you and Sophie coming over to see us, Potch?" or, "Would you mind telling Sophie, Potch?" and give him a message for Sophie. And this would be the first time they had appeared at an assembly of Ridge folk together.

He walked with his head held straight and high, and his eyes shone when he went down the hall with Sophie. What did it matter if they called him Potch, the Ridge folk, "a little bit of potch," he thought, Sophie was going to be Mrs. Heathfield.

"Here's Sophie and Potch," he heard people say, as he had thought they would, and his heart welled with happiness and pride.

Nearly everybody had arrived when they went into the hall; the first dance was just beginning. Branches of budda, fleeced with creamy and lavender blossom, had been stuck through the supports of the hall. Flags and pennants of all the colours in the rainbow, strung on a line together, were stretched at the end of the platform. On the platform Mrs. Newton was sitting at the piano. Paul had his music-stand near her, and behind him an old man from the Three Mile was nervously fingering and blowing on a black and silver-mounted flute. Women and girls and a few of the older men were seated on forms against the walls. Several young mothers had babies in their arms, and children of all ages were standing about, or sitting beside their parents. By common consent, Ridge folk had taken one side of the hall, and station folk the upper end of the other side.

Sophie's first glance found Martha, her white dress stiff and immaculate, her face with its plump, rosy cheeks turned towards her, her eyes smiling and expectant. Martha beamed at her; Sophie smiled back, and, her glance travelling on, found Maggie and Bill Grant, Mrs. George Woods and two of her little girls; Mrs. Watty, in a black dress, its high neck fastened by a brooch, with three opals in, Watty had given her; and Watty, genial and chirrupy as usual, but afraid to appear as if he were promising himself too much of a good time.

Warria, Langi-Eumina, and Darrawingee folk had foregathered; the girls and men laughed and chattered in little groups; the older people talked, sitting against the wall or leaning towards each other. Mrs. Henty looked much as she had done five years before; James Henty not a day older; but Mrs. Tom Henderson, who had been Elizabeth Henty, had developed a sedate and matronly appearance. Polly was not as plump and jolly as she had been—a little puzzled and apprehensive expression flitted through her clear brown eyes, and there were lines

of discouragement about her mouth. Sophie recognised Mrs. Arthur Henty in a slight, well-dressed woman, whose thin, unwrinkled features wore an expression of more or less matter-of-fact discontent.

The floor was shining under the light of the one big hanging lamp. Paul scraped his violin with a preliminary flourish; Mrs. Newton threw a bunch of chords after him, and they cantered into a waltz tune the Ridge loved. Roy O'Mara, M.C. for the occasion, shouted jubilantly: "Take y'r partners for a waltz!" Couples edged out from the wall, and in a moment were swirling and whirling up and down on the bared space of the hall. There were squeals and little screams as feet slipped and skidded on the polished floor; but people soon found their dancing feet, got under way of the music, and swung to its rhythms with more ease, security, and pleasure. Sophie watched the dance for a while. She saw Martha dancing with Michael. Every year at the Ridge ball Michael danced the first dance with Martha. And Martha, dancing with Michael—no one on the Ridge was happier, though they moved so solemnly, turning round and round with neat little steps, as if they were pledged to turn in the space of a threepenny piece!

Sophie smiled at Martha's happy seriousness. Arthur Henty was dancing with his wife. Sophie had not seen him so clearly since her return to the Ridge. When she had passed him in the township, or at Newton's, he had been riding, and she had scarcely seen his face for the beard which had overgrown it and the shadow his hat cast. She studied him with unmoved curiosity. His beard had been clipped close, and she recognised the moulding of his head, the slope of his shoulders, a peculiar loose litheness in his gait. Her eyes followed him as he danced with his wife. Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Henty were waltzing in the perfunctory, mechanical fashion of people thoroughly bored with each other.

Then Sophie swung with Potch into the eddying current of the dancers. Potch danced in as steady and methodical a fashion as he did everything. The music did not get him; at least, Sophie could not believe it did.

His eyes were deep and shining as though it were a great and holy ceremony he were engaged in, but there was no melting to the delight of rhythmic movement in his sober gyrations. Sophie felt him a clog on the flow of her own action as he steered and steadily directed her through the crowd.

"For goodness' sake, Potch, dance as if you meant it," she said.

"But I do mean it, Sophie," he said.

As he looked down at her, his flushed, happy face assured her that he did mean dancing, but he meant it as he meant everything—with a dead earnestness.

After that dance all her old friends among men of the Ridge came round Sophie to ask her to dance with them. Bully and Roy sparred for dances as they did in the old days, and Michael and George and Watty threatened to knock their heads together and throw them out of the room if they didn't get out of the way and give some other chaps a chance to dance with Sophie. Between the dances, Sophie went over to talk to Maggie Grant, Mrs. Watty, Mrs. George Woods, and Martha. She had time to tell Martha how nice her dress and the pink stockings looked, and how the opals in her bracelet flashed as she was dancing.

"You can see them from one end of the hall to the other," Sophie whispered.

"And you, lovey," Martha said. "It's just lovely, the dress. You should have seen how they stared at you when you came in. . . . And Potch looking so nice, too. He wouldn't call the King his uncle to-night, Sophie!"

Sophie laughed happily as she went off to dance with Bully, who was claiming her for a polka mazurka.

The evening was half through when John Armitage appeared in the doorway. Sophie had just come from dancing the quadrilles with Potch when she saw Armitage standing in the doorway with Peter Newton. Potch saw him as Sophie did; their eyes met. Michael came towards them.

"Mr. Armitage did come, I see," Sophie said quietly,

as Potch and Michael were looking towards the door. "I had a letter from him a few weeks ago saying he thought he would be here for the ball," she added.

"Why has he come?" Michael asked.

"I don't know," she said. "To see me, I suppose . . . and to find out whether the men will do business with him again."

Michael's gesture implied it was useless to talk of that.

Sophie continued: "But you know what I said, Michael. I can't be happy until it has been arranged. I owe it to him to put things right with the men here. . . . You must do that for me, Michael. They know I'm going to marry Potch . . . and if they see there's no ill feeling between John Armitage and me, they'll believe I was more to blame than he was—if it's a question of blame. . . . I want you and Potch to stand by me in this, Michael."

Potch's eyes turned to her. She read their assurance, deep, still, and sure. But Michael showed no relenting.

Armitage left his place by the door and came towards them. All eyes in the room were on him. A whisper of surprise and something like fear had circled. He was as aware of it, and of the situation his coming had created, as anyone in the hall; but he appeared unconscious and indifferent, and as if there were no particular significance to attach to his being at the ball and crossing to speak to Sophie.

She met him with the same indifference and smiling detachment. They had met so often before people like this, that it was not much more for them than playing a game they had learned to play rather well.

Sophie said: "It is you really?"

He took the hand she held to him. "But you knew I was coming? You had my letter?"

"Of course . . . but——"

"And my word is my bond."

The cynical, whimsical inflection of John Armitage's voice, and the perfectly easy and friendly terms Sophie and he were on, surprised people who were near them.

Michael was incensed by it; but Potch, standing beside Sophie, regarded Armitage with grave, quiet eyes.

"Good evening, Michael! Evening, Potch!" Armitage said.

Michael did not reply; but Potch said:

"Evening, Mr. Armitage!" And Sophie covered the trail of his words, and Michael's silence, with questions as to the sort of journey Armitage had made; a flying commentary on the ball, the races, and the weather. Michael moved away as the next dance was beginning.

"Is this my dance, Sophie?" Armitage inquired.

Sophie shook her head, smiling.

"No," she said.

"Which is my dance?" The challenge had yielded to a note of appeal.

Sophie met that appeal with a smile, baffling, but of kindly understanding.

"The next one."

She danced with Potch, appreciating his quiet strength, the reserve force she felt in him, the sense that this man was hers to lean on, hold to, or move as she wished.

"It's awfully good to have you, Potch," she murmured, glancing up at him.

"Sophie!"

His declarations were always just that murmuring of her name with a love and gratitude beyond words.

While she was dancing with Potch, Sophie saw Armitage go to the Hentys; he stood talking with them, and then danced the last bars of the waltz with Polly Henty.

When she was dancing with Armitage, Sophie discovered Arthur Henty leaning against the wall near the door, looking over the dancers with an odd, glowering expression. He had been drinking heavily of late, she had heard. Sophie wondered whether he was watching her, and whether he was connecting this night with that night at Warria, which had brought about all there had been between herself and John Armitage—even this dancing with him at a Ridge ball, after they had been lovers, and were no longer anything but very good friends.

She knew people were following her dancing with John Armitage with interest. Some of them were scandalised that he should have come to the Ridge, and that they should be meeting on such friendly terms. She could see the Warria party watching her dancing with John Armitage, Mrs. Arthur Henty looking like a pastel drawing against the wall, and Polly, her pleasant face and plump figure blurred against the grey background of the corrugated iron wall.

Armitage talked amiably, easily, about nothing in particular, as they danced. Sophie enjoyed the harmonious rhythm and languor of their movement together. The black, misty folds of her gown drifted out and about them. It was delightful to be drifting idly to music like this with John, all their old differences, disagreements, and love-making forgotten, or leaving just a delicate aroma of subtle and intimate sympathy. The old admiration and affection were in John Armitage's eyes. It was like playing in the sunshine after a long winter, to be laughing and dancing under them again. And those stiff, disapproving faces by the wall spurred Sophie to further laughter—a reckless gaiety.

"You look like a butterfly just out of its chrysalis, and . . . trying its wings in the sun, Sophie," Armitage said.

"I feel . . . just like that," Sophie said.

After that Armitage had eyes for no one but her. He danced with two or three other people. Sophie saw him steering Martha through a set of quadrilles; but he hovered about her between the dances. She danced with George Woods and Watty, with the Moffats of Langi-Eumina, and some of the men from Darrawingee. Men of the station families were rather in awe of, and had a good deal of curiosity about this Fallen Star girl who had "gone the pace," in their vernacular, and of whose career in the gay world on the other side of the earth they had heard spicy gossip. Sophie guessed that had something to do with their fluttering about her. But she had learned to play inconsequently with the admiration of young men like these; she did so

without thinking about it. Once or twice she caught Potch's gaze, perplexed and inquiring, fixed on her. She smiled to reassure him; but, unconsciously, she had drawn an eddy of the younger men in the room about her, and when she was not dancing she was talking with them, laughingly, fielding their crude witticisms, and enjoying the game as much as she had ever done.

As she was coming from a dance with Roy O'Mara she passed Arthur Henty where he stood by the door. The reek of whisky about him assailed Sophie as she passed. She glanced up at him. His eyes were on her. He swung over to her where she had gone to sit beside Martha M'Cready.

"You're going to dance with me?" he asked, a husky uncertainty in his voice.

"No," Sophie said, looking away from him.

"Yes."

The low growl, savage and insistent, brought her eyes to his. Dark and sunbright, they were, but with pain and hunger in their depths. The unspoken truth between them, the truth which their wills had thwarted, spoke through their eyes. It would not be denied.

"There's going to be an extra after supper," he said.

"Very well."

What happened then was remote from her. Sophie did not remember what she had said or done until she was dancing with Arthur Henty.

How long was it since that night at Warria? Was she waiting for him as she had waited then? But there were all those long years between. Memories brilliant and tempestuous flickered before her. Then she was dancing with Arthur.

He had come to her quite ordinarily; they had walked down the room a few paces; then he had taken her hand in his, and they had swung out among the dancers. He did not seem drunk now. Sophie wondered at his steadier poise as she moved away with him. The butterfly joy of fluttering in sunshine was leaving her, she knew, as she went with him. She made an effort to recapture it. Looking up at him, she tried to talk

lightly, indifferently, and to laugh, but it was no good. Arthur did not bother to reply to anything she said; he rested his eyes in hers, possessing himself of her behind her gaze. Sophie's laughter failed. The inalienable, unalterable attraction of each to the other which they had read long before in each other's eyes was still there, after all the years and the dark and troubled times they had been through.

Sophie wondered whether Arthur was thinking of those times when they had walked together on the Ridge tracks. She wondered whether he was remembering little things he had said . . . she had said . . . the afternoon he had recited:

> "I met a lady in the meads
> Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
> Her hair was long, her foot was light,
> And her eyes were wild."

Sophie wished she had not begun to think back. She wished she had not danced with Arthur. People looking after her wondered why she was not laughing; why suddenly her good spirits had died down. She was tired and wanted to cry. . . . She hoped she would not cry; but she did not like dancing with Arthur Henty before all these people. It was like dancing on a grave.

Henty's grip tightened. Sophie's face had become childish and pitiful, working with the distress which she could not suppress. His hand on hers comforted her. Their hands loved and clung; they comforted each other, every fibre finding its mate, twined and entwined; all the little nests of nerves were throbbing and crooning to each other.

Were they dancing, or drifting through space as they would drift when they were dead, as perhaps they had drifted through time? Sophie wondered. The noises of the ball-room broke in on her wondering—voices, shouting, and laughter; the little cries of girls and the heavy exclamations of men, the music enwrapping them. . . .

Sophie longed for the deep, straight glance of his

s; yet she dared not look up. Arthur's will, working inst hers, demanded the surrender. Through all her ly, imperiously, his demand communicated itself. r gaze went to him, and flew off again.

As they danced, Arthur seemed to be taking her into p water. She was afraid of getting out of her depth but he held her carefully. His grasp was strong and eyes hungry. Sophie could not escape that hungry k of his eyes. She told herself that she would not k up; she would not see it. They moved unsteadily; breath, hot and smelling of whisky, fanned her. She kened under it, loathing the smell of whisky and the k tobacco he had been smoking. His grasp tightened. was afraid of him—afraid of all the long, old dreams might revive. Her step faltered, his arm trembled inst her. And those hungry, hungry eyes. . . . She ld not see them; she would not.

A clamour of tiny voices rose within her and dinned her ears. She could hear the clamour of tiny voices ng on in Henty, too; his voices were drowning her ces. She looked up to him begging him to silence m . . . begging, but unable to beg, terrified and iling to the implacable in him—the stark passion l tragedy which were in his face. She was helpless ore them.

Arthur had given her his arm before the open door; y had moved a little distance from the door. Dark-s was about them. There was no hesitancy, no ment of consideration. As two waves meeting in l-ocean fall to each other, they met, and were lost in oblivion of a close embrace. The first violence of ir movement, failing, brought consciousness of time l place. They were standing in the slight shadow of e trees just beyond the light of the hall. A purring music came to them in far-away murmurs, and nge, distant ejaculations, and laughter.

Sophie tried to withdraw from the arms which held her.
"No, no," she breathed; but Henty drew her to him in.

He murmured into her hair, and then from her lips

again took a full draught of her being, lingeringly, as though he would drain its last essence.

A shadow loomed heavy and shapeless over them. It fell on them. Sophie was thrown back. Dazed, and as if she were falling through space, for a moment she did not realise what had happened. Then, there in the dark, she knew men were grappling silently. The intensity of the struggle paralysed her; she could see nothing but heavy, rolling shapes; hear nothing but stertorous breathing and the snorting grunts as of enraged animals. A cry, as if someone were hurt, broke the fear which had stupefied her.

She called Michael.

Two or three men came running from the hall. The struggling figures were on their feet again; they swung from the shadow. Sophie had an instant's vision of a hideous, distorted face she scarcely recognised as Potch's . . . she saw Henty on the ground and Potch crouched over him. Then the surrounding darkness swallowed her. She knew she was dragged away from where she had been standing; she seemed to have been dragged through darkness for hours. When she wakened she could see only those heavy, quiet figures, struggling and grappling through the darkness.

CHAPTER XI

SOPHIE went into the shed where her cutting-wheel was soon after eight o'clock next morning. She took up a packet of small stones George Woods had left with her and set to work on them.

The wheel was in a line with the window, and she sat on the wooden chair before it, so that the light fell over her left shoulder. On the bench which ran out from the wheel were a spirit lamp and the trays of rough opal; on the other side of the bench the polishing buffers were arranged one against the other. A hand-basin, the water in it raddled with rouge, stood on the table behind her, and a white china jug of fresh water beside it.

Sophie lighted the spirit lamp, gathered up a handful of the slender sticks about the size of pen-holders which Potch had prepared for her, melted her sealing-wax over the flame of the lamp, drew the saucer of George's opals to her, and fastened a score of small stones to the heated wax on the ends of the sticks. She blew out the lamp.

She was working in order not to think; she worked for awhile without thinking, details of the opal-cutting following each other in the routine they had made for themselves.

The plague of her thoughts grew as she worked. From being nebulæ of a state of mind which she could not allow herself to contemplate, such darkness of despair there was in it, they evolved to tiny pictures which presented themselves singly and in panorama, flitting and flickering incoherently, incongruously.

Sophie could see the hall as she had the night before. She seemed to be able to see everything at once and in

detail—its polished floors, flowering boughs, and flags, the people sitting aginst the iron walls in their best clothes . . . Mrs. Watty, Watty and George, Ella and Bully . . . Bully holding the baby . . . the two little Woods' girls in their white embroidered muslin dresses, with pink ribbons tied round their heads. . . . Cash Wilson dancing solemnly in carpet slippers; Mrs. Newton at the piano . . . the prim way her fat little hands pranced sedately up and down over the keys. . . . Paul enjoying his own music . . . getting a little bit wild over it, and working his right leg and knee as though he had an orchestra to keep going somehow. . . . Mrs. Newton refusing to be coaxed into anything like enthusiasm, but trying to keep up with him, nevertheless. . . . Mrs. Henty, Polly, Elizabeth . . . Mrs. Arthur . . . the Langi-Eumina party . . . the Moffats . . . Potch, Michael . . . John Armitage.

Images of New York flashed across these pictures of the night before. Sophie visualised the city as she had first seen it. A fairy city it had seemed to her with its sky-flung lights, thronged thoroughfares, and jangling bells. She saw a square of tall, flat-faced buildings before a park of leafless trees; shimmering streets on a wet night, near the New Theatre and the Little Opera House; a supper-party after the theatre . . . gilded walls, Byzantian hangings, women with bare shoulders flashing satin from slight, elegant limbs, or emerging with jewel-strung necks from swathings of mist-like tulle, the men beside them . . . a haze of cigarette smoke over it all . . . tinkle of laughter, a sweet, sleepy stirring of music somewhere . . . light of golden wine in wide, shallow-bowled glasses, with tall, fragile stems . . . lipping and sway of tides against the hull of a yacht on quiet water . . . a man's face, heavy and swinish, peering into her own. . . .

Then again, Mrs. Watty against the wall of the Ridge ball-room, stiff and disapproving-looking in her high-necked black dress . . . Michael dancing with Martha . . . Martha's pink stockings . . . and the way she had danced, lightly, delightedly, her feet encased in white canvas

shoes. Sophie had worn white canvas shoes at the Warria ball, she remembered. Pictures of that night crowded on her, of Phyllis Chelmsford and Arthur . . . Arthur. . . .

Her thought stopped there. Arthur . . . what did it all mean ? She saw again the fixed, flat figures she had seen against the wall when she was dancing with Arthur—the corpse-like faces. . . . Why had everybody died when she was dancing with Arthur Henty ? Sophie remembered that people had looked very much as usual when she went out to dance with Arthur; then when she looked at them again, they all seemed to be dead—drowned—and sitting round the hall in clear, still water, like the figures she had seen in mummy cases in foreign museums. Only she and Arthur were alive in that roomful of dead people. They had come from years before and were going to years beyond. It had been dark before she realised this; then they had been caught up into a light, transcending all consciousness of light; in which they had seemed no more than atoms of light adrift on the tide of the ages. Then the light had gone. . . .

They were out of doors when she recognised time and place again. Sophie had seen the hall crouched heavy and dark under a starry sky, its windows, yellow eyes. . . . She was conscious of trees about her . . . the note of a goat-bell not far away . . . and Arthur. . . . They had kissed, and then in the darkness that terror and fear—those struggling shapes . . . figures of a nightmare . . . light on Potch's hair. . . . She heard her own cry, winging eerie and shrill through the darkness.

With a sudden desperate effort Sophie threw off the plague of these thoughts and small mind-pictures; she turned to the cutting-wheel again. It whirred as she bent over it.

"Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!" the wheel purred. "Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!"

Her brain throbbed as she tried not to listen or hear that song of the wheel; "Arthur, Arthur, Arthur!" the blood murmured and droned in her head.

Her hand holding an opal to the wheel trembled, the opal skidded and was scratched.

"Oh, God," Sophie moaned, "don't let me think of him any more. Don't let me. . . ."

A mirror on the wall opposite reflected her face. Sophie wondered whether that was her face she saw in the mirror: the face in the mirror was strangely old, withered and wan. She closed her eyes on the sight of it. It confronted her again when she opened them. The eyes of the face in the mirror were heavy and dark with a darkness of mind she could not fathom.

Sophie got up from her chair before the cutting-wheel. She went to the window and stood looking through its small open space at the bare earth beyond the hut. A few slight, sketchy trees, and the broken earth and scattered mounds of old dumps were thrown up under a fall of clear, exquisite sky, of a blue so pure, so fine, that there was balm just in looking at it. For a moment she plunged into it, the tragic chaos of her mind obliterated.

With new courage from that moment's absorption of peaceful beauty, she went back to the wheel, the resolution which had taken her to it twice before that morning urging her. She sat down and began to work, took up the piece of opal she had scratched, examined it closely, wondering how the flaw could be rectified, if it could be rectified.

The wheel, set going, raised its droning whirr. Sophie held her mind to the stone. She was pleased after a while. "That's all right," she told herself. "If only you don't think. . . . If only you keep working like this and don't think of Arthur."

It was Arthur she did not want to think of. "Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!" the wheel mocked. "Arthur! Arthur! Arthur!"

Her head went into her hands. She was moaning and crying again. "Don't let me think of him any more . . . if only I needn't think of him any more. . . ."

She began to work again. There was nothing to do

but persist in trying to work, she thought. If she kept to it, perhaps in the end the routine would take her; she would become absorbed in the mechanism of what she was doing.

A shadow was thrown before her. In the mirror Sophie saw that John Armitage was standing in the doorway. Her feet ceased to work the treadles of the cutting-wheel; her hands fell to her lap; she waited for him to come into the room. He walked past her to the window, and stood with his back to it, facing her. Her eyes went to him. She let him take what impression he might from her face, her defences were down; vaguely, perhaps, she hoped he would read something of her mind in her face, that he would need no explanation of what she had no words to express.

There had been a smile of faint cynicism in his eyes as he looked towards her; it evaporated as she surrendered to the inquisition of his gaze.

"Well?" he inquired gravely.

"Well?" she replied as gravely.

They studied each other quietly.

John Armitage had changed very little since she had first seen him. His clean-shaven face was harder, a little more firmly set perhaps; the indecision had gone from it; it had lost some of its amiable mobility. He looked much more a man of the world he was living in—a business man, whose intelligence and energies had been trained in its service—but his eyes still had their subtle knowledge and sympathy, his individuality the attraction it had first had for her.

He was wearing the loose, well-cut tweeds he travelled in, and had taken off his hat. It lay on the window-sill beside him, and Sophie saw that there was more silver in his hair where it was brushed back from his ears than there used to be. His eyes surveyed her as if she were written in an argot or dialect which puzzled him; his hands drifted and moved before her as he smoked a cigarette. His hands emphasised the difference between John Lincoln Armitage and men of the Ridge. Sophie thought of Potch's hands, and of Michael's, and the smile

Michael might have had for Armitage's hands curved her lips.

Armitage, taking that smile for a lessening of the tension of her mood, said:

"You'd much better put on your bonnet and shawl, and come home with me, Sophie. We can be married en route, or in Sydney if you like. . . . You know how pleased the old man'll be. And, as for me——"

Sophie's gaze swept past him, fretted lines deepening on her forehead.

Armitage threw away his cigarette, abandoning his assumption of familiar friendliness with the action, and went to her side. Sophie rose to meet him.

"Look here, Sophie," he said, taking her by the shoulders and looking into her eyes, "let's have done with all this neurotic rot. . . . You're the only woman in the world for me. I don't know why you left me. I don't care. . . . Come home . . . let's get married . . . and see whether we can't make a better thing of it. . . ."

Sophie had turned her eyes from his.

"When I've said that before, you wouldn't have anything to do with it," he continued. "You had a notion I was saying it because I ought—thought I had to, or the old man had talked me into it. . . . It wasn't true even then. I came here to say it . . . so that you would believe I—want it, and I want you—more than anything on earth, Sophie."

There was no response, only an overshadowing of troubled thought in Sophie's face.

"Is there anything love or money can give you, girl, that I'm not eager to give you?" Armitage demanded. "What is it you want? . . . Do you know what you want?"

Sophie did not reply, and her silence exasperated him.

Taking her face in his hands, Armitage scrutinised it as though he must read there what her silence held from him.

He realised how wan and weary-looking it was. Shadows beneath her eyes fell far down her cheeks, her lips lay together with a new, strange sternness. But

he could not think of that yet. His male egoism could only consider its own situation, fight imperiously in its own defence.

"You want something I can't give you?"

His eyes held her for the fraction of a second; then, the pain of knowledge gripping him, his hands fell from her face. He turned away.

"Which is it . . . Potch or—the other?" He spoke with cruel bitterness. "It's always a case of 'which' with you—isn't it?"

"That's just it," Sophie said.

He glanced at her, surprised to hear a note of the same bitterness in her voice.

"I didn't mean that, Sophie," he said. "You know I didn't."

She smiled.

"It's true all the same."

"Tell me"—he turned to her—"I wish you would. You never have—why you left New York . . . and gave up singing . . . everything there, and came here."

Sophie dropped into her chair again.

"But you know."

"Who could know anything of you, Sophie?"

She moved the stones on the bench absent-mindedly. At length she said:

"You remember our big row about Adler, when I was going to the supper on his yacht?"

Armitage exclaimed with a gesture of protest.

"I know," Sophie said, "you were angry . . . you didn't mean what you said. But you were right all the same. You said I had let the life I was leading go to my head—that I was utterly demoralised by it. . . . I was angry; but it was true. You know the people I was going about with. . . ."

"I did my best to get you away from them," Armitage said.

Sophie nodded. "But I hadn't had enough then . . . of the beautiful places and things I found myself in the midst of . . . and of all the admiration that came my way. What a queer crowd they were—Kalin, that Greek boy

who was singing with me in *Eurydice*, Ina Barres, the Countess, Mrs. Youille-Bailey, Adler, and the rest of them. . . . They seemed to have run the gamut of all natural experiences and to be interested only in what was unnatural, bizarre, macabre. . . . Adler in that crowd was almost a relief. I liked his—honest Rabelaisianism, if you like. . . . I hadn't the slightest intention of more than amusing myself with him . . . but he, evidently, did not intend to be merely a source of amusement to me. The supper on the yacht. . . . I kept my head for a while, not long, and then——"

" Then ? " Armitage queried.

" That's why I came home," Sophie said. " I was so sick with the shock and shame of it all . . . so sick and ashamed I couldn't sing any more. I wouldn't. My voice died. . . . I deserved what happened. I'd been playing for it . . . taking the wine, the music, Adler's love-making . . . and expecting to escape the taint of it all. . . . Afterwards I saw where I was going . . . what that life was making of me. . . ."

" I don't know how you came to have anything to do with such a rotten lot," Armitage cried, sweating under a white heat of rage.

" Oh, they're just people of means and leisure who like to patronise successful young dancers and singers for their own amusement," Sophie said.

" Because you fell in with a set of ultraæsthetics and degenerates, is no reason to suppose all our people of means and leisure are like them," Armitage declared hotly.

" I don't," Sophie said ; " what I felt, when I began to think about it, was that they were just the natural consequences of all the easy, luxurious living I'd seen—the extreme of the pole if you like. I saw the other when I went to live in a slum settlement in Chicago."

" You did ? " Armitage exclaimed incredulously.

" When I got over the shock of—my awakening," she went on slowly, " I began to remember things Michael had said. That's why I went to Chicago . . . and worked in a clothing factory for a while. . . . I saw there why Adler's a millionaire, and heard from girls in a Youille-Bailey-

M'Gill factory why Connie Youille-Bailey has money to burn. . . ."

" Old Youillé-Bailey had fingers in a dozen pies, and he left her all he'd got," Armitage said.

" But people down in the district where most of their money is made are living like bugs under a rotten log," Sophie exclaimed wearily. " They're made to live like that . . . in order that people like William P. Adler and Mrs. Youille-Bailey . . . may live as they do."

Armitage's expression of mild cynicism yielded to one of concerned attentiveness. But he was concerned with the bearing on Sophie of what she had to say, and not at all with its relation to conditions of existence.

" After all, life only goes on by its interests," she went on musingly; " and Mrs. Youille-Bailey's not altogether to blame for what she is. When people are bored, they've got to get interest or die; and if faculties which ought to be spent in useful or creative work aren't spent in that work, they find outlet in the silly energies a selfish and artificial life breeds. . . ."

" I admit," Armitage said, trying to veer her thoughts from the abstract to the personal issue, " that you went the pace. I couldn't keep up with it—not with Adler and his mob! But there's no need to go back to that sort of life. We could live as quietly as you like."

Sophie shook her head. " I want to live here," she said. " I want to work with my hands . . . feel myself in the swim of the world's life . . . going with the great stream; and I want to help Michael here."

Armitage sat back against the window-sill regarding her steadily.

" If I could help you to do a great deal for the Ridge," he said; " if I were to settle here and spend all the money I've got in developing this place.—There's nothing innately immoral about a water-supply or electric power, I suppose, or in giving people decent houses to live in. And it would mean that for Fallen Star, if the scheme I have in mind is put into action. And if it is . . . and I build a house here and were to live here most of my time . . . would you marry me then, Sophie ?"

Sophie gazed at him, her eyes widening to a scarcely believable vision.

"Do you mean you'd give up all your money to do that for the Ridge?" she asked.

"Not quite that," he replied. "But the scheme would work out like that. I mean, it would provide more comfort and convenience for everybody on the Ridge—a more assured means of livelihood."

"You don't mean to buy up the mines?"

"Just that," he said.

"But the men wouldn't agree. . . ."

"I don't know so much about that. It would depend on a few——"

"Michael would never consent."

"As a matter of fact"—John Armitage returned Sophie's gaze tranquilly—"I know something about Michael—some information came into my hands recently, although I've always vaguely suspected it—which will make his consent much more likely than you would have imagined. . . . If it does not, giving the information I hold to men of the Ridge will so destroy their faith and confidence in Michael that what he may say or do will not matter.

Sophie's bewilderment and dismay constrained him. Then he continued:

"You see, quite apart from you, my dear, it has always been a sort of dream of mine—ambition, if you like—to make a going concern of this place—to do for Fallen Star what other men I know have done for no-count, out-of-the-way towns and countries where natural resources or possibilities of investment warranted it. . . . I've talked the thing over with the old man, and with Andy M'Intosh, an old friend of mine, who is one of the ablest engineers in the States. . . . He's willing to throw in his lot with me. . . . Roughly, we've drawn up plans for conservation of flood waters and winter rains, which will alter the whole character of this country. . . . The old man at first was opposed—said the miners would never stand it; but since we've been out with the Ridge men, he's changed his mind rather. I mean, that when

he knew some of the men would be willing to stand by us—and I have means of knowing they would—he was ready to agree. And when I told him Michael might be reckoned a traitor to his own creed——"

"It's not true," Sophie cried, her faith afire. "It couldn't be! . . . If everybody in the world told me, I wouldn't believe it!"

Armitage took a cigarette-case from his vest pocket, opened it, and selected a cigarette.

"I'm not asking you to believe me," he said. "I'm only explaining the position to you because you're concerned in it. And for God's sake don't let us be melodramatic about it, Sophie. I'm not a villain. I don't feel in the least like one. This is entirely a business affair. . . . I see my way to a profitable investment—incidentally fulfilment of a scheme I've been working out for a good many years.

"Michael would oppose the syndicate for all he's worth if it weren't for this trump card of mine," Armitage went on. "He's got a Utopian dream about the place. . . . I see it as an up-to-date mining town, with all the advantages which science and money can bring to the development of its resources. His dream against mine—that's what it amounts to. . . . Well, it's a fair thing, isn't it, if I know that Michael is false to the things he says he stands for—and he stands in the way of my scheme—to let the men know he's false? . . . They will fall away from the ideas he stands for as they will from Michael; two or three may take the ideas sans Michael . . . but they will be in the minority. . . . The way will be clear for reorganisation then."

Not for an instant did Sophie believe that Michael had been a traitor to his own creed—false to the things he stood for, as John Armitage said,—although she thought he may have done something to give Armitage reason for thinking so.

"I'll see Michael to-morrow, and have it out with him," John Armitage said. "I shall tell him what I know . . . and also my plans. If he will work with me——"

Sophie looked up, her smile glimmering.

"If he will work with me," Armitage repeated, knowing she realised all that would mean in the way of surrender for Michael, "nothing need be said which will undermine Michael's influence with men of the Ridge. I know he can make things a great deal easier by using his influence with them—by bending their thoughts in the direction of my proposition, suggesting that, after all, they have given their system a trial and it has not worked out as satisfactorily as might have been expected. . . . I'll make all the concessions possible, you may be sure—give it a profit-sharing basis even, so that the transaction won't look like the thing they are prejudiced against. But if Michael refuses . . ."

"He will . . ."

"I am going to ask the men to meet me in the hall, at the end of the month, to lay before them a proposition for the more effective working of the mines. I shall put my proposition before them, and if Michael refuses to work with me, I shall be forced to give them proofs of his unworthiness of their respect. . . ."

"They won't believe you."

"There will be the proofs, and Michael will not—he cannot—deny them."

"You'll tell him what you are going to do?"

"Certainly."

Sophie realised how far Armitage was from understanding the religious intensity and simplicity with which Ridge folk worked for the way of life they believed to be the right one, and what the break-up of that belief would mean to those who had served it in the unpretentious, unprotesting fashion of honest, downright people. To him the Ridge stood for messy sentimentalism, Utopian idealism. And there was money in the place: there was money to be made by putting money into it—by working the mines and prospecting the country as the men without capital could not.

John Armitage was ready to admit—Sophie had heard him admitting in controversy—that the Fallen Star mines which the miners themselves controlled were as

well worked and as well managed within their means as any he had ever come across ; that the miners themselves were a sober and industrious crowd. What capital could do for them and for the Fallen Star community by way of increasing its output and furthering its activities was what he saw. And the only security he could have for putting his capital into working the mines was ownership of them. Ownership would give him the right to organise the workers, and to claim interest for his investment from their toil, or the product of their toil.

The Ridge declaration of independence had made it clear that people of Fallen Star did not want increased output, the comforts and conveniences which capital could give them, unless they were provided from the common fund of the community. Ultimately, it was hoped the common fund would provide them, but until it did Ridge men had announced their willingness to do without improvements for the sake of being masters of their own mines. If it was a question of barter, they were for the pride and dignity of being free men and doing without the comforts and conveniences of modern life. Sophie felt sure Armitage underestimated the feeling of the majority of men of the Ridge toward the Ridge idea, and that most of them would stand by it, even if for some mysterious reason Michael lost status with them. But she was dismayed at the test the strength of that feeling was to be put to, and at the mysterious shame which threatened Michael. She could not believe Michael had ever done anything to merit it. Michael could never be less than Michael to her—the soul of honour, the knight without fear, against whom no reproach could be levelled.

Armitage spoke again.

" You see," he said, " you could still have all those things you spoke of, under my scheme—the long, quiet days ; life that is broad and simple ; the hearth, home, children—all that sort of thing . . . and even time for any of the little social reform schemes you fancied. . . ."

Sophie found herself confronted with the fundamental

difference of their outlook again. He talked as if the ideas which meant so much to her and to people of the Ridge were the notions of headstrong children—whimsical and interesting notions, perhaps, but mistaken, of course. He was inclined to make every allowance for them.

"The only little social reform I'd have any time for," she murmured, "would be the overthrowing of your scheme for ownership of the mines."

John Armitage was frankly surprised to find that she held so firmly to the core of the Ridge idea, and amused by the uncompromising hostility of her attitude. Sophie herself had not thought she was so attached to the Ridge life and its purposes, until there was this suggestion of destroying them.

"Then"—he stood up suddenly—"whether I succeed or whether I don't—whether the scheme goes my way or not—won't make any difference to you—to us."

"It will make this difference," Sophie said. "I'm heart and soul in the life here, I've told you. And if you do as you say you're going to . . . instead of thinking of you in the old, good, friendly way, I'll have to think of you as the enemy of all that is of most value to me."

"You mean," John Armitage cried, his voice broken by the anger and chagrin which rushed over him, "you mean you're going to take on Henty—that's what's at the back of all this."

"I mean," Sophie said steadily, her eyes clear green and cool in his, "that I'm going to marry Potch, and if Michael and all the rest of the men of the Ridge go over to you and your scheme, we'll fight it."

CHAPTER XII

"ARE you there, Potch?" Sophie stood in the doorway of Michael's hut, a wavering shadow against the moonlight behind her.

Michael looked up. He was lying on the sofa under the window, a book in his hands.

"He's not here," he said.

His voice was as distant as though he were talking to a stranger. He had been trying to read, but his mind refused to concern itself with anything except the night before, and the consequences of it. His eyes had followed a trail of words; but he had been unable to take any meaning from them. Sophie! His mind hung aghast at the exclamation of her. She was the storm-centre. His thoughts moved in a whirlwind about her. He did not understand how she could have worn that dress showing her shoulders and so much of her bared breast. It had surprised, confused, and alarmed him to see Sophie looking as she did in that photograph Dawe Armitage had brought to the Ridge. The innocence and sheer joyousness of her laughter had reassured him, but, as the evening wore on, she seemed to become intoxicated with her own gaiety.

Michael had watched her dancing with vague disquiet. To him, dancing was rather a matter of concern to keep step and to avoid knocking against anyone—a serious business. He did not get any particular pleasure out of it; and Sophie's delight in rhythmic movement and giving of her whole being to a waltz, amazed him. When Armitage came, her manner had changed. It had lost some of its abstract joyousness. It was as if she were

playing up to him. . . . She had been much more of his world than of the world of the Ridge; had displayed a thousand little airs and superficial graces, all the gay, light manner of that other world. When she was dancing with Arthur Henty, Michael had seen the sudden drooping and overcasting of her gaiety. He thought she was tired, and that Potch should take her home. The old gossip about Arthur Henty had faded from his memory; not the faintest recollection of it occurred to him as he had seen Sophie and Arthur Henty dancing together.

Then Sophie's cry, eerie and shrill in the night air, had reached him. He had seen Potch and Arthur Henty at grips. He had not imagined that such fury could exist in Potch. Other men had come. They dragged Potch away from Henty. . . . Henty had fallen. . . . Potch would have killed him if they had not dragged him away. . . . Henty was carried in an unconscious condition to Newton's. Armitage had taken Sophie home. Michael went with Potch.

Michael did not know exactly what had occurred. He could only imagine. . . . Sophie had been behaving in that gay, light manner of the other world: he had seen her at it all the evening. Potch had not understood, he believed; it had goaded him to a state of mind in which he was not responsible for what he did.

Sophie was conscious of Michael's aloofness from her as she stood in the doorway; it wavered as his eyes held and communed with hers. The night before he had not been able to realise that the girl in the black dress, which had seemed to him almost indecent, was Sophie. He kept seeing her in her everyday white cotton frock—as she sat at work at her cutting-wheel, or went about the hut—and now that she stood before him in white again, he could scarcely believe that the black dress and happenings of the ball were not an hallucination. But there was a prayer in her eyes which came of the night before. She would not have looked at him so if there had been no night before; her lips would not have quivered in that way, as if she were sorry and would like to explain, but could not.

Potch had staggered home beside Michael, swaying and muttering as though he were drunk. But he was not drunk, except with rage and grief, Michael knew. He had lain on his bunk like a log all night, muttering and groaning. Michael had sat in a chair in the next room, trying to understand the madness which had overwhelmed Potch.

In the morning, he realised that work and the normal order of their working days were the only things to restore Potch's mental balance. He roused him earlier than usual.

"We'd better get down and clear out some of the mullock," he said. "The gouges are fair choked up. There'll be no doing anything if we don't get a move on with it."

Potch had stared at him uncomprehendingly. Then he got up, changed his clothes, and they had gone down to the mine together. His face was swollen and discoloured, his lip broken, one eye almost hidden beneath a purple and blue swelling which had risen on the upper part of his left cheek. He had dragged his hat over his face, and walked with his head down; they had not spoken all the morning. Potch had swung his pick stolidly. All day his eyes had not met Michael's as they usually did, in that glance of love and comradeship which united them whenever their eyes met.

In the afternoon, when they stopped work and went to the top of the mine, Potch had said:

"Think I'll clear out—go away somewhere for awhile, Michael."

From his attitude, averted head and drooping shoulders, Michael got the unendurable agony of his mind, his pain and shame. He did not reply, and Potch had walked away from him striking out in a south-easterly direction across the Ridge. Michael had not seen him since then. And now it was early evening, the moon up and silvering the plains with the light of her young crescent.

"He says—Potch says . . . he's going away," Michael said to Sophie.

Her eyes widened. Her thought would not utter itself, but Michael knew it. Potch leaving the Ridge! The Ridge without Potch! It was impossible. Their minds would not accept the idea.

Sophie turned away from the door. Her white dress fluttered in the moonlight. Michael could see it moving across the bare, shingly ground at the back of the hut. He thought that Sophie was going to look for Potch. He had not told her the direction in which Potch had gone. He wondered whether she would find him. She might know where to look for him. Michael wondered whether Potch haunted particular places as he himself did, when his soul was out of its depths in misery.

Instinctively Sophie went to the old playground she and Potch had made on the slope of the Ridge behind the Old Town.

She found him lying there, stretched across the shingly earth. He lay so still that she thought he might be asleep. Then she went to him and knelt beside him.

"Potch!" she said.

He moved as if to escape her touch. The desolation of spirit which had brought him to the earth like that overwhelmed Sophie. She crouched beside him.

"Potch," she cried. "Potch!"

Potch did not move or reply.

"I can't live . . . if you won't forgive me, Potch," Sophie said.

He stirred. "Don't talk like that," he muttered.

After a little time he sat up and turned his face to her. The dim light of the young moon showed it swollen and discoloured, a hideous and comic mask of the tragedy which consumed him.

"That's the sort of man I am," Potch said, his voice harsh and unsteady. "I didn't know . . . I didn't know I was like that. It came over me all of a sudden, when I saw you and—him. I didn't know any more until Michael was talking to me. I wouldn't 've done it if I'd known, Sophie. . . . But I didn't know. . . . I just saw him—and you, and I had to put out the sight of it . . . I had to get it out of my eyes . .

what I saw. . . . That's all I know. Michael says I didn't kill him . . . but I meant to . . . that's what I started to do."

Sophie's face withered under her distress.

"Don't say that, Potch," she begged.

"But I do," he said. "I must. . . . I can't make out . . . how it was . . . I felt like that. I thought I'd see things like you saw them always, stand by you. Now I don't know. . . . I'm not to be trusted——"

"I'd trust you always, and in anything, Potch," Sophie said.

"You can't say that—now."

"It's now . . . I want to say it more than ever," she continued. "I can't explain . . . what I did . . . any more than you can what you did, Potch. But I'm to blame for what you did . . . and yet . . . I can't see that I'm altogether to blame. I didn't want what happened —to happen . . . any more than you."

She wanted to explain to Potch—to herself also. But she could not see clearly, or understand how the threads of her intentions and deeds had become so crossed and tangled. It was not easy to explain.

"You remember that ball at Warria I went to with father," she said at last. "I thought a lot of Arthur Henty then. . . . I thought I was in love with him. People teased me about him. They thought he was in love with me, too. . . . And then over there at the ball something happened that changed everything. I thought he was ashamed of me . . . he didn't ask me to dance with him like he did at the Ridge balls. . . . He danced with other girls . . . and nobody asked me to dance except Mr. Armitage. I wanted to go away from the Ridge and learn to look like those girls Arthur had danced with . . . so that he would not be ashamed of me. . . . Afterwards I thought I'd forgotten and didn't care for him any more. . . . Last night he was not ashamed of me. . . . It was funny. I felt that the Warria people were envying me last night, and I had envied them at the other ball. . . . I didn't want to dance with Arthur . . . but I did . . . and, somehow, then

—it was as if we had gone back to the time before the ball at Warria. . . ."

A heavy, brooding silence hung between them. Sophie broke it.

"Michael says you're going away?"

"Yes," Potch replied.

Sophie shifted the pebbles on the earth about her abstractedly.

"Don't leave me, Potch," she cried, scattering the pebbles suddenly. "I don't know what will become of me if you go away. . . . I wanted us to get married and settle down."

Potch turned to her.

"You don't mean that?"

"I do," Sophie said, all her strength of will and spirit in the words. "I'm afraid of myself, Potch . . . afraid of drifting."

Potch's arms went round her. "Sophie!" he sobbed. But even as he held her he was conscious of something in her which did not fuse with him.

"But you love him!" he said.

Sophie's eyes did not fail from his.

"I do," she said, "but I don't want to. I wish I didn't."

His hands fell from her. "Why," he asked, "why do you say you'll marry me, if you . . . if——"

Despair and desperation were in the restive movement of Sophie's hands.

"I'm afraid of him," she said, "of the power of my love for him . . . and there's no future that way. With you there is a future. I can work with you and Michael for the Ridge. . . . You know I do care for you too, Potch dear, and I want to have the sort of life that keeps a woman faithful . . . to mend your clothes, cook your meals, and——"

Potch quivered to the suggestions she had evoked. He saw Sophie in a thousand tender associations—their home, the quiet course their lives might have together. He loved her enough for both, he told himself.

His conscience was not clear that he should take this

happiness the gods offered him, even for the moment. And yet—he could not turn from it. Sophie had said she needed him; she wanted the home they would have together; all that their life in common would mean. And by and by—he stirred to the afterthought of her " and "—she wanted the children who might come to them. . . . Potch knew what Sophie meant when she said that she cared for him. Whatever else happened he knew he had her tenderest affection. She kissed him familiarly and with tenderness. It was not as Maud had kissed him, with passion, a soul-dying yearning. He drove the thought off. Maud was Maud, and Sophie Sophie; Maud's most passionate kisses had never distilled the magic for him that the slightest brush of Sophie's dress or fingers had.

Sophie took his hand.

" Potch," she said, " if you love me—if you want me to marry you, let us settle the thing this way. . . . I want to marry you. . . . I want to be your loving and faithful wife. . . . I'll try to be. . . . I don't want to think of anyone but you. . . . You may make me forget—if we are married, and get on well together. I hope you will. . . ."

Potch took her into his arms, an inarticulate murmur breaking his voice.

CHAPTER XIII

POTCH had looked towards Michael's hut before he went into his own, next evening. There was no light in its window, and he supposed that Michael had gone to bed. In the morning, as they were walking to the mine, Potch said:

"He's back; did you know?"

Michael guessed whom Potch was speaking of. "Saw him . . . as I was walking out along the Warria road yesterday afternoon," he said; "and then at Newton's. . . . He looks ill."

Potch did not reply. They did not speak of Charley again, and yet as they worked they thought of no one else, and of nothing but the difficulties his coming would bring into their lives. For Potch, his father's return meant the revival of an old shame. He had been accepted on his merits by the Ridge; he had made people forget he was Charley Heathfield's son, and now Charley was back Potch had no hope of anything but the old situation where his father was concerned, the old drag and the old fear. The thought of it was more disconcerting than ever, now too, because Sophie would have to share the sort of atmosphere Charley would put about them.

And Michael was dulled by the weight of the fate which threatened him. Every day the consciousness of it weighed more heavily. He wondered whether his mind would remain clear and steady enough to interpret his resolve. For him, Charley's coming, and the enmity he had gauged in his glance the night before, were last straws of misfortune.

John Armitage had put the proposition he outlined for Sophie, to Michael, the night before he left for Sydney. He had told Michael what he knew, and what he suspected in connection with Rouminof's opals. Michael had neither defended himself nor denied Armitage's accusation. He had ignored any reference to Paul's opals, and had made his position of uncompromising hostility to Armitage's proposition clear from the outset. There had not been a shadow of hesitation in his decision to oppose the Armitages' scheme for buying up the mines. At whatever cost, he believed he had no choice but to stand by the ideas and ideals on which the life of the Ridge was established and had grown.

John Armitage, because of his preconceived notion of the guilty conscience Michael was suffering from, was disappointed that the action of Michael's mind had been as direct to the poles of his faith as it had been. He realised Sophie was right: Michael would not go back on the Ridge or the Ridge code; but the Ridge might go back on him. Armitage assured himself he had a good hand to play, and he explained his position quite frankly to Michael. If Michael would not work with him, he, John Armitage, must work against Michael. He would prefer not to do so, he said. He described to several men, separately, what the proposals of the Armitage Syndicate amounted to, in order that they might think over, weigh, and discuss them. He was going down to Sydney for a few weeks, and when he came back he would call a meeting and lay his proposition before the men. He hoped by then Michael would have reconsidered his decision. If he had not, Armitage made it clear that, much as he would regret having to, he would nevertheless do all in his power to destroy any influence Michael might have with men of the Ridge which might militate against their acceptance of the scheme for reorganisation of the mines he had to lay before them. Michael understood what that meant. John Armitage would accuse him of having stolen Paul's opals, and he would have to answer the accusation before men of the Ridge.

His mind hovered about the thought of Maud Johnson.

He could not conceive how John Armitage had come to the knowledge he possessed, unless Maud, whom he was aware Armitage had bought stones from in America, had not showed or sold them to him. But Armitage believed Michael still had, and was hoarding the stones. That was the strange part of it all. How could Armitage declare he had one of the stones, and yet believe Michael was holding the rest? Unless Maud had taken that one stone from the table the night she came to see Potch? Michael could not remember having seen the stone after she went. He could not remember having put it back in the box. It only just occurred to him she might only have taken the stone that night. Jun had probably recognised the stone, and she had told Armitage what Jun had said about it. Jun might have gone to the hut for the rest of the stones, but then Maud would not have told Armitage they were still on the Ridge. Maud would be sure to know if Jun had got the stones on his own account, Michael thought.

His brain went over and over again what John Armitage had said, querying, exclaiming, explaining, and enlarging on fragments of their talk. Armitage declared he had evidence to prove Michael Brady had stolen Rouminof's stones. He might have proof that he had had possession of them for a while, Michael believed. But if Armitage was under the impression he still had the opals, his information was incomplete at least, and Michael treasured a vague hope that the proof which he might adduce would be as faulty.

But more important than the bringing home to him of responsibility for the lost opals, and the "unmasking" to eyes of men of the Ridge which Armitage had promised him, was the bearing it would have on the proposition which was to be put before them. Michael realised that there was a good deal of truth in what Armitage had said. A section of the younger miners, men who had settled on the new rushes, and one or two of the older men who had grown away from the Ridge idea, would probably be willing enough to fall in with and work under Armitage's scheme. George, Watty,

Pony-Fence Inglewood, Bill Grant, Cash Wilson, and most of the older men were against it, and some of the younger ones, too; but Archie and Ted Cross were inclined to waver, although they had always been staunch for the Ridge principle, and with them was a substantial following from the Punti, Three Mile, and other rushes.

A disintegrating influence was at work, Michael recognised. It had been active for some time. Since Potch's finding of the big stone, scarcely any stone worth speaking of had been unearthed on the fields, and that meant long store accounts, and anxious and hard times for most of the gougers.

The settlement had weathered seasons of dearth, and had existed on the merest traces of precious opal before; but this one had lasted longer, and had tried everybody's patience and capacity for endurance to the last degree. Murmurs of the need for money to prospect the field and open up new workings were heard. Criticisms of the ideas which would keep out money and money-owners who might be persuaded to invest their money to prospect and open up new workings on Fallen Star, crept into the murmurings, and had been circulating for some months. Bat M'Ginnis, a tall, lean, herring-gutted Irishman, with big ears, pointed like a bat's, was generally considered author of the criticisms and abettor of the murmurings. He had sunk on the Coolebah and drifted to the Punti rush soon after. On the Punti, it was known, he had expatiated on the need for business men and business methods to run the mines and make the most of the resources of the Ridge.

M'Ginnis was a good agent for Armitage, before Armitage's proposition was heard of. Michael wondered now whether he was perhaps an agent of Armitage's, and had been sent to the Ridge to prepare the way for John Armitage's scheme. When he came to think of it, Michael remembered he had heard men exclaim that Bat never seemed short of money himself, although if he had to live on what his claim produced he would have been as hard up as most of them. Michael wondered whether

Charley's home-coming was a coincidence likewise, or whether Armitage had laid his plans more carefully than might have been imagined.

Michael saw no way out for himself. He could not accept Armitage's bribe of silence as to his share in the disappearance of Paul's opals, in order to urge men of the Ridge to agree to the Armitages' proposition for buying up the mines. If he could have, he realised, he would carry perhaps a majority of men of the Ridge with him; and those he cared most for would stand by the Ridge idea whether he deserted it or not, he believed. He would only fall in their esteem; they would despise him; and he would despise himself if he betrayed the idea on which he had staked so much, and the realisation of which he would have died to preserve. But there was no question of betraying the Ridge idea, or of being false to the teaching of his whole life. He was not even tempted by the terms Armitage offered for his co-operation. He was glad to think no terms Armitage could offer would tempt him from his allegiance to the principle which was the corner-stone of life on the Ridge.

But he asked himself what the men would think of him when they heard Armitage's story; what Sophie would think, and Potch. He turned in agony from the thought that Sophie and Potch would believe him guilty of the thing he seemed to be guilty of. Anything seemed easier to bear than the loss of their love and faith, and the faith of men of the Ridge he had worked with and been in close sympathy with for so long—Watty and George, Pony-Fence Inglewood, Bill Grant and Cash Wilson. Would he have to leave the Ridge when they knew? Would they cold-shoulder him out of their lives? His imagination had centred for so long about the thing he had done that the guilt of it was magnified out of all proportion to the degree of his culpability. He did not accuse himself in the initial act. He had done what seemed to him the only thing to do, in good faith; the opals had nothing to do with it. He did not understand yet how they had got an ascendancy over him; how when he had intended just to look at them, to see they

were well packed, he had been seduced into that trance of worshipful admiration.

Why he had not returned the stones to Paul as soon as Sophie had left the Ridge, Michael could not entirely explain to himself. He went over and over the excuses he had made to himself, seeing in them evidence of the subtle witchery the stones had exercised over him. But as soon as he was aware of the danger of delay, he tried to assure himself, and the appearance it must have, he had determined to get rid of the stones.

Would the men believe he had wanted to give the stones to Paul—even that he had done what he had done for the reasons he would put before them ? George and Watty and some of the others would believe him—but the rest ? Michael could not hope that the majority would believe his story. They would want to know if at first he had kept the stones to prevent Sophie leaving the Ridge, why he had not given them to Paul as soon as she had gone. Michael knew he could only explain to them as he had to himself. He had intended to ; he had delayed doing so ; and then, when he went to find the stones to give them to Paul, they were no longer where he had left them. It was a thin story—a poor explanation. But that was the truth of the situation as far as he knew it. There was nothing more to be said or thought on the subject. He put it away from him with an impulse of impatience, desperate and weary.

When Potch returned from the mine that afternoon, he went into Michael's hut before going home. Michael himself he had seen strike out westwards in the direction of the swamp soon after he came above ground. Potch expected to see his father where he was ; he had seen him so often before on Michael's sofa under the window. Charley glanced up from the newspaper he was reading as Potch came into the room.

"Well, son," he said, "the prodigal father's returned, and quite ready for a fatted calf."

Potch stood staring at him. Light from the window bathed the thin, yellow face on the faded cushions of Michael's couch, limning the sharp nose with its curiously

scenting expression, all the hungry, shrewd femininity and weakness of the face, and the smile of triumphant malice which glided in and out of the eyes. Michael was right, Potch realised; Charley was ill; but he had no pity for the man who lay there and smiled like that.

"You can't stay here," he said. "Michael's coming."

Charley smiled imperturbably.

"Can't I?" he said. "You see. Besides . . . I want to see Michael. That's what I'm here for."

Potch growled inarticulately. He went to the hearth, gathered the half-burnt sticks together to make a fire. He would have given anything to get Charley out of the hut before Michael returned; but he did not know how to manage it. If Charley thought he wanted him to go, nothing would move him, Potch knew.

"What do you want to see Michael about?" he asked.

"Nice, affectionate son you are," Charley murmured. "Suppose you know you are my son—and heir?"

"Worse luck," Potch muttered, watching the flame he had kindled over the dry chips and sticks.

"You might've done worse," Charley replied, watching his son with a slight, derisive smile. "I might've done worse myself in the way of a son to support me in my old age."

"I'm not going to do that."

Charley laughed. "Aren't you?" he queried. "You might be very glad to—on terms I could suggest. And you're a fine, husky chap to do it, Potch, my lad. . . . They tell me you've married Rouminof's girl, and she's chucked the singing racket. Rum go, that! She could sing, too. . . . People I know told me they'd seen her in America in some revue stunt there, and she was just the thing. Went the pace a bit, eh? Oh, well, there's nothing like matrimony to sober a woman down—take the devil out of her."

Potch's resentment surged; but before he could utter it, his father's pleasantries were flipping lightly, cynically.

"By the way, I saw a friend of yours in Sydney couple of months ago. Oh, well, several perhaps. Might have

been a year. . . . Maud ! There's a fine woman, Potch. And she told me she was awfully gone on you once. Eh, what ? . . . And now you're a married man. And to think of my becoming a grandfather. Help ! "

Potch sprang to his feet, goaded to fury by the jeering, amiable voice.

" Shut up," he yelled, " shut up, or——"

The doorway darkened. Potch saw Charley's face light with an expression of curious satisfaction and triumph. He turned and discovered that Michael was standing in the doorway. Irresolute and flinching, he stood there gazing at Charley, a strange expression of fear and loathing in his eyes.

" You can clear out now, son," Charley remarked, putting an emphasis on the " son " calculated to enrage Potch. " I want to talk to Michael.

Potch looked at Michael. It was his intention to stand by Michael if, and for as long as, Michael needed him.

" It's all right, Potch," Michael said ; but his eyes did not go to Potch's as they usually did. There was a strange, grave quality of aloofness about Michael. Potch hesitated, studying his face ; but Michael dismissed him with a glance, and Potch went out of the hut.

CHAPTER XIV

The sky was like a great shallow basin turned over the plains. No tree or rising ground broke the perfect circle of its fall over the earth; only in the distance, on the edge of the bowl, a fringe of trees drew a blurred line between earth and sky.

Potch and Sophie lay out on the plains, on their backs in the dried herbage, watching the sunset—the play of light on the wide sweep of the sky—silently, as if they were listening to great music.

They had been married some days before in Budda township, and were living in Potch's hut.

Sophie and Potch had often wandered over the plains in the evening and watched the sunset; but never before had they come to the sense of understanding and completeness they attained this evening. The days had been long and peaceful since they were living together, an anodyne to Sophie, soothing all the restless turmoil of her soul and body. She had ceased to desire happiness; she was grateful for this lull of all her powers of sense and thought, and eager to love and to serve Potch as he did her. She believed her life had found its haven; that if she kept in tune with the fundamentals of love and service, she could maintain a consciousness of peace and rightness with the world which would make living something more than a weary longing for death.

All the days were holy days to Potch since Sophie and he had been married. He looked at her as if she were Undine making toast and tea, cooking, washing dishes, or sweeping and tidying up his hut. He followed her every movement with a worshipful, reverent gaze.

Soon after Sophie's return, Potch had gone to live in the hut which he and his father had occupied in the old days. He had put a veranda of boughs to the front of it, and had washed the roof and walls with carbide to lessen the heat in summer. He had turned out the rooms and put up shelves, trying to furnish the place a little for Sophie; but she had not wanted it altered at all. She had cleared the cupboard, put clean paper on the shelves, and had arranged Potch's books on them herself.

Sophie loved the austerity of her home when she went to live in it—its earthen floor, bare walls, unvarnished furniture, the couch under the window, the curtains of unbleached linen she had hemstitched herself, the row of shining syrup-tins in which she kept tea, sugar, and coffee on shelves near the fireplace, the big earthenware jar for flowers, and a couple of jugs which Snow-Shoes had made for her and baked in an oven of his own contrivance. She had a quiet satisfaction in doing all the cleaning up and tidying to keep her house in the order she liked, so that her eyes could rest on any part of it and take pleasure from the sense of beauty in ordinary and commonplace things.

But the hut was small and its arrangements so simple that an hour or two after Potch had gone to the mines Sophie went to the shed into which he had moved her cutting-wheel, and busied herself facing and polishing the stones which some of the men brought her as usual. She knew her work pleased them. She was as skilful at showing a stone to all its advantage as any cutter on the Ridge, and nothing delighted her more than when Watty or George or one of the Crosses exclaimed with satisfaction at a piece of work she had done.

In the afternoon sometimes she went down to the New Town to talk with Maggie Grant, Mrs. Woods, or Martha. She was understudying Martha, too, when anyone was sick in the town, and needed nursing or a helping hand. Martha had her hands full when Mrs. Ted Cross's fourth baby was born. There were five babies in the township at the time, and Sophie went to Crosses' every morning to fix up the house and look after the

children and Mrs. Ted before Martha arrived. When Martha found the Crosses' washing gaily flapping on the line one morning towards midday, she protested in her own vigorous fashion.

"I ain't going to have you blackleggin' on me, Mrs. Heathfield," she said. "And what's more, if I find you doin' it again, I'll tell Potch. It's all right for me to be goin' round doing other people's odd jobs; but I don't hold with you doin' 'em—so there! If folks wants babies, well, it's their look-out—and mine. But I don't see what you've got to do with it, coming round makin' your hands look anyhow."

"You just sit down, and I'll make you a cup of tea, Mother M'Cready," Sophie said by way of reply, and gently pushed Martha into the most comfortable chair in the room. "You look done up . . . and you're going on to see Ella and Mrs. Inglewood, I suppose."

Martha nodded. She watched Sophie with troubled, loving eyes. She was really very tired, and glad to be able to sit and rest for a moment. It gave her a welling tenderness and gratitude to have Sophie concerned for her tiredness, and fuss about her like this. Martha was so accustomed to caring for everybody on the Ridge, and she was so strong, good-natured, and vigorous, very few people thought of her ever being weary or dispirited. But as she bustled into the kitchen, blocking out the light, Sophie saw that Martha's fat, jolly face under the shadow of her sun-hat, was not as happy-looking as usual. Sophie guessed the weariness which had overtaken her, and that she was "poorly" or "out-of-sorts," as Martha would have said herself, if she could have been made to admit such a thing.

"It's all very well to give folks a helping hand," Martha continued, "but I'm not going to have you doin' their washin' while I'm about."

Sophie put a cup of tea and slice of bread and syrup down beside her.

"There! You drink that cup of tea, and tell me what you think of it," she said.

"But, Sophie," Martha protested. "It's stone silly

for you to be doing things like Cross's washing. You're not strong enough, and I won't have it."

"Won't you?"

Sophie put her arms around Martha's neck from behind her chair. She pressed her face against the creases of Martha's sunburnt neck and kissed it.

Martha gurgled happily under the pressure of Sophie's young arms, the childish impulse of that hugging. She turned her face back and kissed Sophie.

"Oh, my lamb! My dearie lamb!" she murmured.

She recognised Sophie's need for common and kindly service to the people of the Ridge. She knew what that service had meant to her at one time, and was willing to let Sophie share her ministry so long as her health was equal to it.

Mrs. Watty, and the women who took their views from her, thought that Sophie was giving herself a great deal of unnecessary and laborious work as a sort of penance. They had withdrawn all countenance from her after the disaster of the ball, although they regarded her marriage to Potch as an endeavour to reinstate herself in their good graces. Mrs. Watty had been scandalised by the dress she had worn at the ball, by the way she had danced, and her behaviour generally. But Sophie was quite unconcerned as to what Mrs. Watty and her friends thought: she did not go out of her way either to avoid or placate them.

When she went to the Crosses' to take charge of the children and look after the house while Mrs. Cross was ill, the gossips had exclaimed together. And when it was known that Sophie had taken on herself odds and ends of sewing for other women of the township who had large families and rather more to do than they knew how to get through, they declared that they did not know what to make of it, or of Sophie and her moods and misdemeanours.

Potch heard of what Sophie was doing from the people she helped. When he came home in the evening she was nearly always in the kitchen getting tea for him; but if she was not, she came in soon after he got home, and he

knew that one of these little tasks she had undertaken for people in the town had kept her longer than she expected. Usually he hung in the doorway, waiting for her to come and meet him, to hold up her face to be kissed, eyes sweet with affection and the tender familiarity of their association. Those offered kisses of hers were the treasure of these dream-like days to Potch.

He had always loved Sophie. He had thought that his love had reached the limit of loving a long time before, but since they had been married and were living, day after day, together, he had become no more than a loving of her. He went about his work as usual, performed all the other functions of his life mechanically, scrupulously, but it was always with a subconscious knowledge of Sophie and of their life together.

"You're tired," he said one night when Sophie lifted her face to his, his eyes strained on her with infinite concern.

"Dear Potch," she said; and she had put back the hair from his forehead with a gesture tender and pitiful.

Her glance and gesture were always tender and pitiful. Potch realised it. He knew that he worshipped and she accepted his worship. He was content—not quite content, perhaps—but he assured himself it was enough for him that it should be so.

He had never taken Sophie in his arms without an overwhelming sense of reverence and worship. There was no passionate need, no spontaneity, no leaping flame in the caresses she had given him, in that kiss of the evening, and the slight, girlish gestures of affection and tenderness she gave as she passed him at meals, or when they were reading or walking together.

As they lay on the plains this evening they had been thinking of their life together. They had talked of it in low, brooding murmurs. The immensity of the silence soaked into them. They had taken into themselves the faint, musky fragrance of the withered herbage and the paper daisies. They had gazed among the stars for hours. When it was time to go home, Sophie sat up.

"I love to lie against the earth like this," she said.

"We seem to get back to the beginning of things. You and I are no more than specks of dust on the plains . . . under the skies, Potch . . . and yet the whole world is within us. . . ."

"Yes," Potch said, and the silence streamed between them again.

"I'll never forget," Sophie continued dreamily, "hearing a negro talk once about what they call 'the negro problem' in America. He was an ordinary thick-set, curly-haired, coarse-featured negro to look at—Booker Washington—but he talked some of the clearest, straightest stuff I've ever heard.

"One thing he said has always stayed in my mind: 'Keep close to the earth.' It was not good, he said, to walk on asphalted paths too long. . . . He was describing what Western civilisation had done for the negroes—a primitive people. . . . Anyone could see how they had degenerated under it. And it's always seemed to me that what was true for the negroes . . . is true for us, too. . . . It's good to keep close to the earth."

"Keep close to the earth?" Potch mused.

"In tune with the fundamentals, all the great things of loving and working—our eyes on the stars."

"The stars?"

"The objects of our faith and service."

They were silent again for a while. Then Sophie said:

"You . . ." she hesitated, remembering what she had told John Armitage—"you and I would fight for the Ridge principle, even if all the others accepted Mr. Armitage's offer, wouldn't we, Potch?"

"Of course," Potch said.

"And Michael?"

"Michael?" His eyes questioned her in the dim light because of the hesitation in her question. "Why do you say that? Michael would be the last man on earth to have anything to do with Armitage's scheme."

"He comes back to put the proposition to the men definitely in a few days, doesn't he?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," Potch said.

"Have you talked to Michael about it?"

"To tell you the truth, Sophie," Potch replied slowly, conscience-stricken that he had given the subject so little consideration, "I took it for granted there could only be one answer to the whole thing. . . . I haven't thought of it. I've only thought of you the last week or so. I haven't talked to Michael; I haven't even heard what the men were saying at midday. . . . But, of course, there's only one answer."

"I've tried to talk to Michael, but he won't discuss it with me," Sophie said.

Potch stared at her.

"You don't mean," he said—"you can't think——"

"Oh," she cried, with a gesture of desperation, "I know John Armitage is holding something over Michael . . . and if it's true what he says, it'll break Michael, and it'll go very badly against the Ridge."

"You can't tell me what it is?"

Sophie shook her head.

Potch got up; his face settled into grave and fighting lines. Sophie, too, rose from the ground. They went towards the track where the three huts stood facing the scattered dumps of the old Flash-in-the-Pan rush.

"I want to see Michael," Potch said, when they approached the huts. "I'll be in, in a couple of minutes."

Sophie went on to their own home, and Potch, swerving from her, walked across to the back door of Michael's hut.

CHAPTER XV

Charley was sitting on the couch, leaning towards Michael, his shoulders hunched, his eyes gleaming, when Potch went into the hut.

"You can't bluff me," Potch heard him say. "You may throw dust in the eyes of the men here, but you can't bluff me. . . . It was you did for me. . . . It was you put it over on me—took those stones."

"Well, you tell the boys," Potch heard Michael say.

His voice was as unconcerned as though it were not anything of importance they were discussing. Potch found relief in the sound of it, but its unconcern drove Charley to fury.

"You know I took them from Paul," he shouted. "You know—I can see it in your eyes . . . and you took them from me. When . . . how . . . I don't know. . . . You must 've sneaked into the house when I dozed off for a bit, and put a parcel of your own rotten stuff in their place. . . . How do I know? Well, I'll tell you. . . ."

He settled back on the sofa. "I hung on to the best stone in the lot—clear brown potch with good flame in it—hopin' it would give me a clue some day to the man who'd done that trick on me. But I couldn't place the stone; I'd never seen it on you, and Jun had never seen it either. I was dead stony when I sold it to Maud . . . and I told her why I'd been keeping it, seeing she was in the show at the start off. She sold the stone to Armitage in America, and first thing the old man said when he saw it was: 'Why, that's Michael's mascot!'"

"Remembered when you'd got it, he said," Charley continued, taking Michael's interest with gratified malice. "First stone you'd come on, on Fallen Star, and you wouldn't sell—kept her for luck. . . . Old Armitage wouldn't have anything to do with the stone then—didn't believe Maud's story. . . . But John Lincoln got it. He told me. . . ."

"I see," Michael murmured.

"Don't mind telling you I'm here to play Armitage's game," Charley said.

Michael nodded. "Well, what about it?"

"This about it," Charley exclaimed irritably, his excitement and impatience rising under Michael's calmness. "You're done on the Ridge when this story gets around. What I've got to say is . . . you took the opals. You've got 'em. You're done for here. But you could have a good life somewhere else. Clear out, and——"

"We'll go halves, eh?" Michael queried.

"That's it," Charley assented. "I'll clear out and say nothing—although I've told Rummy enough already to give him his suspicions. Still, suspicions are only suspicions—nothing more. When I came here I didn't even mean to give you this chance. . . . But 'Life is sweet, brother!' There's still a few pubs down in Sydney, and a woman or two. I wouldn't go out with such a grouch against things in general if I had a flash in the pan first. . . . And it'd suit you all right, Michael. . . . With this scheme of Armitage's in the wind——"

"And suppose I haven't got the stones?" Michael inquired.

Charley half rose from the sofa, his thin hands grasping the table.

"It's a lie!" he shrieked, shivering with impotent fury. "You know it is. . . . What have you done with 'em then? What have you done with those stones—that's what I want to know!"

"You haven't got much breath," Michael said; "you'd better save it."

"I'll use all I've got to down you, if you don't

come to light," Charley cried. "I'll do it, see if I don't."

Potch walked across to his father. He had heard Charley abusing and threatening Michael before without being able to make out what it was all about. He had thought it bluff and something in the nature of a try-on; but he had determined to put a stop to it.

"No, you won't!" he said.

"Won't I?" Charley turned on his son.

"No." Potch's tone was steady and decisive.

Charley looked towards Michael again.

"Well . . . what are you going to do about it?"

"I've told you," Michael said. "Nothing."

"Did y' hear what I've been calling your saint?" Charley cried, turning to Potch. "I'm calling him what everybody on the fields'd be calling him if they knew."

Michael's gaze wavered as it went to Potch.

"A thief," Charley continued, whipping himself into a frenzy. "That's what he is—a dirty, low-down thief! I'm the ordinary, decent sort . . . get the credit for what I am . . . and pay for it, by God! But he—he doesn't pay. I bag all the disgrace . . . and he walks off with the goods—Rouminof's stones."

Potch did not look at Michael. What Charley had said did not seem to shock or surprise him.

"I've made a perfectly fair and reasonable proposition," Charley went on more quietly. "I've told him . . . if he'll go halves——"

"Guess again," Potch sneered.

Charley swung to his feet, a volley of expletives swept from him.

"I've told Rummy to get the law on his side," he cried shrilly, "and he's going to. There's one little bit of proof I've got that'll help him, and——"

"You'll get jail yourself over it," Potch said.

"Don't mind if I do," Charley shouted, and poured his rage and disappointment into a flood of such filthy abuse that Potch took him by the shoulders.

"Shut your mouth," he said. "D'y' hear? . . . Shut your mouth!"

Charley continued to rave, and Potch, gripping his shoulders, ran him out of the hut.

Michael heard them talking in Potch's hut—Charley yelling, threatening, and cursing. A fit of coughing seized him. Then there was silence—a hurrying to and fro in the hut. Michael heard Sophie go to the tank, and carry water into the house, and guessed that Charley's paroxysm and coughing had brought on the hemorrhage he had had two or three times since his return to the Ridge.

A little later Potch came to him.

"He's had a bleeding, Michael," Potch said; "a pretty bad one, and he's weak as a kitten. But just before it came on I told him I'd let him have a pound a week, somehow, if he goes down to Sydney at once. . . . But if ever he shows his face in the Ridge again . . . or says a word more about you . . . I've promised he'll never get another penny out of me. . . . He can die where and how he likes . . . I'm through with him. . . ."

Michael had been sitting beside his fire, staring into it. He had dropped into a chair and had not moved since Potch and Charley left the hut.

"Do you believe what he said, Potch?" he asked.

Michael felt Potch's eyes on his face; he raised his eyes to meet them. There was no lie in the clear depths of Potch's eyes.

"I've known for a long time," Potch said.

Michael's gaze held him—the swimming misery of it; then, as if overwhelmed by the knowledge of what Potch must be thinking of him, it fell. Michael rose from his chair before the fire and stood before Potch, his mind darkened as by shutting-off of the only light which had penetrated its gloom. He stood so for some time in utter abasement and desolation of spirit, believing that he had lost a thing which had come to be of inexpressible value to him, the love and homage Potch had given him while they had been mates.

"I've always known, too," Potch said, "it was for a good enough reason."

Michael's swift glance went to him, his soul irradiated by that unprotesting affirmation of Potch's faith.

He dropped into his chair before the fire again. His head went into his hands. Potch knew that Michael was crying. He stood by silently—unable to touch him, unable to realise the whole of Michael's tragedy, and yet overcome with love and sympathy for him. He knew only as much of it as affected Sophie. His sympathy and instinct where Sophie was concerned enabled him to guess why Michael had done what he had.

"It was for Sophie," he said.

"I intended to give them back to Paul—when she was old enough to go away, Potch," Michael said after a while. "Then she went away; and I don't know why I didn't give them to him at once. The things got hold of me, somehow—for a while, at least. I couldn't make up my mind to give them back to him—kept makin' excuses. . . . Then, when I did make up my mind and went to get them, they were gone."

Potch nodded thoughtfully.

"You don't suspect anybody?" he asked.

Michael shook his head. "How can I? Nobody knew I had them, and yet . . . that night . . . twice, I thought I had heard someone moving near me. . . . The memory of it's stayed with me all these years. Sometimes I think it means something—that somebody must have been near and seen and heard. Then that seems absurd. It was a bright night; I looked, and there was no one in sight. There's only one person besides you . . . saw . . . I think—knew I had the stones. . . ."

"Maud?"

Michael nodded. "She came into the room with you that night. You remember? . . . And I've wondered since . . . if she, perhaps, or Jun . . . At any rate, Armitage knows, or suspects—I don't know which it is really. . . . He says he has proof. There's that stone I put in Charley's parcel—a silly thing to do when you come

to think of it. But I didn't like the idea of leaving Charley nothing to sell when he got to Sydney; and that was the only decent bit of stone I'd got. Making up the parcel in a hurry, I didn't think what putting in that bit of stuff might lead to. But for that, I can't think how Armitage could have proof I had the stones except through Maud. And she's been in New York, and——"

"She may have told him she saw you the night she came for me," Potch said.

"That's what I think," Michael agreed.

They brooded over the situation for a while.

"Does Sophie know?" Michael's eyes went to Potch, a sharper light in them.

"Only that some danger threatens you," Potch said slowly. "Armitage told her."

"You tell her what I've told you, Potch," Michael said.

They talked a little longer, then Potch moved to go away.

"There's nothing to be done?" he asked.

Michael shook his head.

"Things have just got to take their course. There's nothing to be done, Potch," he said.

They came to him together, Sophie and Potch, in a little while, and Sophie went straight to Michael. She put her arms round his neck and her face against his; her eyes were shining with tears and tenderness.

"Michael, dear!" she whispered.

Michael held her to him; she was indeed the child of his flesh as she was of his spirit, as he held her then.

He did not speak; he could not. Looking up, he caught Potch's eyes on him, the same expression of faith and tenderness in them. The joy of the moment was beyond words.

Potch's and Sophie's love and faith were beyond all value, precious to Michael in this time of trouble. When he had failed to believe in himself, Sophie and Potch

believed in him; when his life-work seemed to be falling from his hands, they were ready to take it up. They had told him so. In his grief and realisation of failure, that thought was a star—a thing of miraculous joy and beauty.

CHAPTER XVI

THE men stood in groups outside the hall, smoking and yarning together before going into it, on the night John Armitage was to put his proposition for reorganisation of the mines before them. Each group formed itself of men whose minds were inclined in the same direction. M'Ginnis was the centre of the crowd from the Punti rush who were prepared to accept Armitage's scheme. The Crosses, while they would not go over to the M'Ginnis faction, had a following—and the group about them was by far the largest—which was asserting an open mind until it heard what Armitage had to say. Archie and Ted Cross and the men with them, however, were suspected of a prejudice rather in favour of, than against, Armitage's outline of the new order of things for the Ridge since its main features and conditions were known. Men who were prepared at all costs to stand by the principle which had held the gougers of Fallen Star Ridge together for so long, and whose loyalty to the old spirit of independence was immutable, gathered round George Woods and Watty Frost.

"Thing that's surprised me," Pony-Fence Inglewood murmured, "is the numbers of men there is who wants to hear what Armitage has got to say. I wouldn't 've thought there'd be so many."

"I don't like it meself, Pony," George admitted. "That's why we're here. Want to know the strength of them—and him."

"That's right," Watty muttered.

"Crosses, for instance," Pony-Fence continued. "You wouldn't 've thought Archie and Ted'd 've even listened

to guff about profit-sharin'—all that. . . . But they've swallowed it—swallowed it all down. They say——"

George nodded gloomily. "This blasted talkin' about Michael's done more harm than anything."

"That's right," Pony-Fence said. "What's the strength of it, George?"

"Damned if I know!"

"Where's Michael to-night?"

Their eyes wandered over the scattered groups of the miners. Michael was not among them.

"Is he coming?" Pony-Fence asked.

George shrugged his shoulders; the wrinkles of his forehead lifted, expressing his ignorance and the doubt which had come into his thinking of Michael.

"Does he know what's being said?" Pony-Fence asked.

"He knows all right. I told Potch, and asked him to let Michael know about it."

"What did he say?"

"Tell you the truth, Pony-Fence, I don't understand Michael over this business," George said. "He's been right off his nest the last week or two. It might have got him down what's being said—he might be so sore about anybody thinkin' that of him, or that it's just too mean and paltry to take any notice of. . . . But I'd rather he'd said something. . . . It's played Armitage's game all right, the yarn that's been goin' round, about Michael's not being the man we think he is. And the worst of it is, you don't know exactly where it came from. Charley, of course—but it was here before him. . . . He's just stoked the gossip a bit. But it's done the Ridge more harm than a dozen Armitages could 've——"

"To-night'll bring things to a head," Watty interrupted, as though they had talked the thing over and he knew exactly what George was going to say next. "I reck'n we'll see better how we stand—what's the game—and the men who are going to stand by us. . . . Michael's with us, I'll swear; and if we've got to put up a fight . . . we'll have it out with him about those yarns. . . .

And it'll be hell for any man who drops a word of them afterwards."

When they went into the hall George and Watty marched to the front form and seated themselves there. Bully Bryant and Pony-Fence remained somewhere about the middle of the hall, as men from every rush on the fields filed into the seats and the hall filled. Potch came in and sat near Bully and Pony-Fence. As Newton, Armitage, and the American engineer crossed the platform, Michael took a seat towards the front, a little behind George and Watty. George stood up and hailed him, but Michael shook his head, indicating that he would stay where he was.

Peter Newton, after a good deal of embarrassment, had consented to be chairman of the meeting. But he looked desperately uncomfortable when he took his place behind a small table and an array of glasses and a water bottle, with John Armitage on one side of him and Mr. Andrew M'Intosh, the American engineer, on the other.

His introductory remarks were as brief as he could make them, and chiefly pointed out that being chairman of the meeting was not to be regarded as an endorsement of Mr. Armitage's plan.

John Armitage had never looked keener, more immaculate, and more of another world than he did when he stood up and faced the men that night. Most of them were smoking, and soon after the meeting began the hall was filled with a thin, bluish haze. It veiled the crowd below him, blurred the shapes and outlines of the men sitting close together along the benches, most of them wearing their working clothes, faded blueys, or worn moleskins, with handkerchiefs red or white round their throats. Their faces swam before John Armitage as on a dark sea. All the weather-beaten, sun-red, gaunt, or full, fat, daubs of faces, pallid through the smoke, turned towards him with a curious, strained, and intent expression of waiting to hear what he had to say.

Before making any statement himself, Mr. Armitage said he would ask Mr. Andrew M'Intosh, who had come

with him from America some time ago to report on the field, and who was one of the ablest engineers in the United States of America, to tell what he thought of the natural resources of the Ridge, and the possibilities of making an up-to-date, flourishing town of Fallen Star under conditions proposed by the Armitage Syndicate.

Andrew M'Intosh, a meagrely-fleshed man, with squarish face, blunt features, and hair in a brush from a broad, wrinkled forehead, stood up in response to Mr. Armitage's invitation. He was a man of deeds, not words, he declared, and would leave Mr. Armitage to give them the substance of his report. His knees jerked nervously and his face and hands twitched all the time he was speaking. He had an air of protesting against what he was doing and of having been dragged into this business, although he was more or less interested in it. He confessed that he had not investigated the resources of Fallen Star Ridge as completely as he would have wished, but he had done so sufficiently to enable him to assure the people of Fallen Star that if they accepted the proposition Mr. Armitage was to lay before them, the country would back them. He himself, he said, would have confidence enough in it to throw in his lot with them, should they accept Mr. Armitage's proposition; and he gave them his word that if they did so, and he were invited to take charge of the reorganisation of the mines, he would work whole-heartedly for the success of the undertaking he and the miners of Fallen Star Ridge might mutually engage in. He talked at some length of the need for a great deal of preliminary prospecting in order to locate the best sites for mines, of the necessity for plant to use in construction works, and of the possibility of a better water supply for the township, and the advantages that would entail.

The men were impressed by the matter-of-factness of the engineer's manner and his review of technical and geological aspects of the situation, although he gave very little information they had not already possessed. When he sat down, Armitage pushed back his chair and confronted the men again.

He made his position clear from the outset. It was a straightforward business proposition he was putting before men of the Ridge, he said; but one the success of which would depend on their co-operation. As their agent of exchange with the world at large, he described the disastrous consequences the slump of the last year or so had had for both Armitage and Son and for Fallen Star, and how the system he proposed, by opening up a wider area for mining and by investigating the resources of the old mines more thoroughly under the direction of an expert mining engineer, would result in increased production and prosperity for the people of the Ridge and Fallen Star township. He saw possibilities of making a thriving township of Fallen Star, and he promised men of the Ridge that if they accepted the scheme he had outlined for them, the Armitage Syndicate would make a prosperous township of Fallen Star. In no time people would be having electricity in their homes, water laid on, rose gardens, cabbage patches, and all manner of comforts and conveniences as a result of the improved means of communication with Budda and Sydney, which population and increased production would ensure.

In a nutshell Armitage's scheme amounted to an offer to buy up the mines for £30,000 and put the men on a wage, allowing every man a percentage of 20 per cent. profit on all stones over a certain standard and size. The men would be asked to elect their own manager, who would be expected to see that engineering and development designs were carried out, but otherwise the normal routine of work in the mines would be observed. Mr. Armitage explained that he hoped to occupy the position of general manager in the company himself, and engaged it to observe the union rates of hours and wages as they were accepted by miners and mining companies throughout the country.

When he had finished speaking there was no doubt in anyone's mind that John Lincoln Armitage had made a very pleasant picture of what life on the Ridge might be if success attended the scheme of the Armitage Syndicate,

as John Armitage seemed to believe it would. Men who had been driven to consider Armitage's offer from their first hearing of it, because of the lean years the Ridge was passing through, were almost persuaded by his final exposition.

George Woods stood up.

George's strength was in his equable temper, in his downright honesty and sincerity, and in the steady common-sense with which he reviewed situations and men.

He realised the impression Armitage's statement of his scheme, and its bearing on the life of the Ridge, had made. It did not affect his own position, but he feared its influence on men who had been wavering between prospects of the old and of the new order of things for Fallen Star. In their hands, he could see now, the fate of all that Fallen Star had stood for so long, would lie.

" Well," he said, " we've got to thank you for puttin' the thing to us as clear and as square as you have, Mr. Armitage. It gives every man here a chance to see just what you're drivin' at. But I might say here and now . . . I've got no time for it . . . neither me nor my mates. . . . It'll save time and finish the business of this meeting if there's no beatin' about the bush and we understand each other right away. It sounds all right—your scheme—nice and easy. Looks as if there was more for us to get out of it than to lose by it. . . . I don't say it wouldn't mean easier times . . . more money . . . all that sort of thing. We haven't had the easiest of times here sometimes, and this scheme of yours comes . . . just when we're in the worst that's ever knocked us. But speakin' for myself, and "—his glance round the hall was an appeal to that principle the Ridge stood for—" the most of my mates, we'd rather have the hard times and be our own masters. That's what we've always said on the Ridge. . . . Your scheme 'd be all right if we didn't feel like that, I suppose. But we do . . . and as far as I'm concerned, we won't touch it. It's no go.

" We're obliged to you for putting the thing to us.

We recognise you could have gone another way about getting control here. You may—buy up a few of the mines perhaps, and try to squeeze the rest of us out. Not that I think the boys'd stand for the experiment."

"They wouldn't," Bill Grant called.

"I'm glad to hear that," George said. He tried to point out that if Fallen Star miners accepted Armitage's offer they would be shouldering conditions which would take from their work the freedom and interest that had made their life in common what it had been on the Ridge. He asked whether a weekly wage to tide them over years of misfortune would compensate for loss of the sense of being free men; he wanted to know how they'd feel if they won a nest of knobbies worth £400 or £500 and got no more out of them than the weekly wage. The percentage on big stones was only a bluff to encourage men to hand over big stones, George said. And that, beyond the word being used pretty frequently in Mr. Armitage's argument and documents, was all the profit-sharing he could see in Mr. Armitage's scheme. He reminded the men, too, that under their own system, in a day they could make a fortune. And all there was for them under Mr. Armitage's system was three or four pounds a week—and not a bit of potch, nor a penny in the quart pot for their old age.

"We own these mines. Every man here owns his mine," George said; "that's worth more to us just now than engineers and prospecting parties. . . . We'll have them on our own account directly, when the luck turns and there's money about again. . . . For the present we'll hang on to what we've got, thank you, Mr. Armitage."

He sat down, and a guffaw of laughter rolled over his last words.

"Anybody else got anything to say?" Peter Newton inquired.

M'Ginnis stood up.

He had heard a good deal of talk about men of the Ridge being free, he said, but all it amounted to was their being free to starve, as far as he could see. He didn't see

that the men's ownership of the mines meant much more than that—the freedom to starve. It was all very well for them to swank round about being masters of their own mines; any fool could be master of a rubbish heap if he was keen enough on the rubbish heap. But as far as he was concerned, M'Ginnis declared, he didn't see the point. What they wanted was capital, and Mr. Armitage had volunteered it on what were more than ordinarily generous terms. . . .

It was all very well for a few shell-backs who, because they had been on the place in the early days, thought they had some royal prerogative to it, to cut up rusty when their ideas were challenged. But their ideas had been given a chance; and how had they worked out? It was all very well to say that if a man was master of his own mine he stood a chance of being a millionaire at a minute's notice; but how many of them were millionaires? As a matter of fact, not a man on the Ridge had a penny to bless himself with at that moment, and it was sheer madness to turn down this offer of Mr. Armitage's. For his part he was for it, and, what was more, there was a big body of the men in the hall for it.

"If it's put to the vote whether people want to take on or turn down Mr. Armitage's scheme, we'll soon see which way the cat's jumping," M'Ginnis said. "People'd have the nause to see which side their bread's buttered on—not be led by the nose by a few fools and dreamers. For my part, I don't see why——"

"You're not paid to," a voice called from the back of the hall.

"I don't see why," M'Ginnis repeated stolidly, ignoring the interruption, "the ideas of three or four men should be allowed to rule the roost. What's wanted on the Ridge is a little more horse sense——"

Impatient and derisive exclamations were hurled at him; men sitting near M'Ginnis shouted back at the interrupters. It looked as if the meeting were going to break up in uproar, confusion, and fighting all round. Peter Newton knocked on the table and shouted himself hoarse trying to restore order. The voices

of George, Watty, and Pony-Fence Inglewood were heard howling over the din:

"Let him alone."

"Let's hear what he's got to say."

Then M'Ginnis continued his description of the advantages to be gained by the acceptance of Mr. Armitage's offer.

"And," he wound up, "there's the women and children to think of." At the back of the hall somebody laughed. "Laugh if you like"—M'Ginnis worked himself into a passion of virtuous indignation—"but I don't see there's anything to laugh at when I say remember what those things are goin' to mean to the women and children of this town—what a few of the advantages of civilisation——"

"Disadvantages!" the same voice called.

"—Comforts and conveniences of civilisation are goin' to mean to the women and children of this God-forsaken hole," M'Ginnis cried furiously. "If I had a wife and kids, d'ye think I'd have any time for this high-falutin' flap-doodle of yours about bread and fat? Not much. The best in the country wouldn't be too good for them—and it's not good enough for the women and children of Fallen Star. That's what I've got to say—and that's what any decent man would say if he could see straight. I'm an ordinary, plain, practical man myself . . . and I ask you chaps who've been lettin' your legs be pulled pretty freely—and starvin' to be masters of your own dumps—to look at this business like ordinary, plain, practical men, who've got their heads screwed on the right way, and not throw away the chance of a lifetime to make Fallen Star the sort of township it ought to be. If there's some men here want to starve to be masters of their own dumps, let 'em, I say: it's a free country. But there's no need for the rest of us to starve with 'em."

He sat down, and again it seemed that the pendulum had swung in favour of Armitage and his scheme.

"What's Michael got to say about it?" a man from

the Three Mile asked. And several voices called: "Yes; what's Michael got to say?"

For a moment there was silence—a silence of apprehension. George Woods and the men who knew, or had been disturbed by the stories they had heard of a secret treaty between Michael and John Armitage, recognised in that moment the power of Michael's influence; that what Michael was going to say would sway the men of the Ridge as it had always done, either for or against the standing order of life on the Ridge on which they had staked so much. His mates could not doubt Michael, and yet there was fear in the waiting silence.

Those who had heard Michael was not the man they thought he was, waited anxiously for his movement, the sound of his voice. Charley Heathfield waited, crouched in a corner near the platform, where everyone could see him, Rouminof beside him. They were standing there together as if there was not room for them in the body of the hall, and their eyes were fixed on the place where Michael sat—Charley's eager and cruel as a cat's on its victim, Rouminof's alight with the fires of his consuming excitement.

Then Michael got up from his seat, took off his hat; and his glance, those deep-set eyes of his, travelled the hall, skimming the heads and faces of the men in it, with their faint, whimsical smile.

"All I've got to say," he said, "George Woods has said. There's nothing in Mr. Armitage's scheme for Fallen Star. . . . It looks all right, but it isn't; it's all wrong. The thing this place has stood for is ownership of the mines by the men who work them. Mr. Armitage 'll give us anything but that—he offers us every inducement but that . . . and you know how the thing worked out on the Cliffs. If the mines are worth so much to him, they're worth as much, or more, to us.

"Boiled down, all the scheme amounts to is an offer to buy up the mines—at a 'fair valuation'—put us on wages and an eight-hour day. All the rest, about making a flourishing and up-to-date town of Fallen Star, might

or mightn't come true. P'raps it would. I can't say. All I say is, it's being used to gild the pill we're asked to swallow—buyin' up of the mines. There's nothing sure about all this talk of electricity and water laid on; it's just gilding. And supposing the new conditions did put more money about—did bring the comforts and conveniences of civilisation to Fallen Star—like M'Ginnis says—what good would they be to the people, women and children, too, if the men sold themselves like a team of bullocks to work the mines? It wouldn't matter to them any more whether they brought up knobbies or mullock; they'd have their wages—like bullocks have their hay. It's because our work's had interest; it's because we've been our own bosses, life's been as good as it has on Fallen Star all these years. If a man hasn't got interest in his work he's got to get it somewhere. How did we get it on the Cliffs when the mines were bought up? Drinking and gambling . . . and how did that work out for the women and children? But it was stone silly of M'Ginnis to talk of women and children here. We know that old hitting-below-the-belt gag of sweating employers too well to be taken in by it. By and by, if you took on the Armitage scheme, and there was a strike in the mines, he'd be saying that to you: 'Remember the women and children.'"

Colour flamed in Michael's face, and he continued with more heat than there had yet been in his voice.

"The time's coming when the man who talks 'women and children' to defeat their own interests will be treated like the skunk—the low-down, thieving swine he is. Do we say anything's too good for our women and children? Not much. But we want to give them real things—the real things of life and happiness—not only flashy clothes and fixings. If we give our women and children the mines as we've held them, and the record of a clean fight for them, we'll be giving them something very much bigger than anything Mr. Armitage can offer us in exchange for them. The things we've stood for are better than anything he's got to offer. We've got

here what they're fighting for all over the world . . . it's bigger than ourselves.

"M'Ginnis says he's heard a lot of 'the freedom to starve on the Ridge'—it's more than I have. It's a sure thing if he wants to starve, nobody'd stop him . . ."

A wave of laughter passed over the hall.

"But most of us here haven't any fancy for starving, and what's more, nobody has ever starved on the Ridge. I don't say that we haven't had hard times, that we haven't gone on short commons—we have; but we haven't starved, and we're not going to. . . .

"This talk of buying up the mines comes at the only time it would have been listened to in the last half-dozen years. It hits us when we're down, in a way; but the slump'll pass. There've been slumps before, and they've passed. . . . Mr. Armitage thinks so, or he wouldn't be so keen on getting hold of the mines.

"And as to production of stone and development of the mines, it seems to me we can do more ourselves than any Proprietary Company, Ltd., or syndicate ever made could. Didn't old Mr. Armitage, himself, say once that he didn't know a better conducted or more industrious mining community than this one. 'Why d'y' think that is?' I asked him. He said he didn't know. I said, 'You don't think the way the men feel about their work's got anything to do with it?' 'Damn it, Michael,' he said, 'I don't want to think so.'

"And I happen to know"—Michael smiled slightly towards John Armitage, who was gazing at him with tense features and hands tightly folded and crossed under his chin—"that the old man is opposed even now to this scheme because he thinks he won't get as much black opal out of us as he does under our own way of doing things. He remembers the Cliffs, and what taking over of the mines did for opal—and the men—there. This scheme is Mr. John Armitage's idea. . . .

"He's put it to you. You've heard what it is. All I've got to say now is, don't touch it. Don't have anything to do with it. . . . It'll break us . . . the spirit of the men

here . . . and it'll break what we've been working on all these years. If it means throwing that up, don't let us see which side our bread's buttered on, as Mr. M'Ginnis says. Let us say like we always have—like we've been proud to say: 'We'll eat bread and fat, but we'll be our own masters!'"

"We'll eat bread and fat, but we'll be our own masters!" the men who were with Michael roared.

He sat down amid cheers. George and Watty turned in their seats to beam at him, filled with rejoicing.

Armitage rose from his chair and shifted his papers as though he had not quite decided what he intended to say.

"I'm not going to ask this meeting for a decision," he began.

"You can have it!" Bully Bryant yelled.

"There's a bit of a rush at Blue Pigeon Creek, and I'm going on up there," John Armitage continued. "I'm due in Sydney at the end of the month—that is, a month from this date—and I'll run up then for your answer to the proposition which has been laid before you. I have said all there is to say about it, except that, notwithstanding anything which may have been asserted to the contrary, I hope you will give your gravest consideration to an enterprise, I am convinced, would be in the best interests of this town and of the people of Fallen Star Ridge. I think, however, you ought to know——"

"That Michael Brady's a liar and a thief!" Charley cried, springing from his corner as if loosed from some invisible leash. "If you believe him, you're believing a liar and a thief. Mr. Armitage knows . . . I know . . . and Paul knows——"

"Throw him out."

"He's mad!"

The cries rose in a tumult of angry voices. When they were at their height M'Ginnis was seen on his feet and waving his arms.

"Let him say what he's got to!" he shouted. "You chaps know as well as I do what's been going the rounds, and we might as well have it out now. If it's

not true, Michael'd rather have the strength of it, and give you his answer . . . and if there is anything in it, we've got a right to know."

"That's right!" some of the men near him chorused.

Newton looked towards George, and George towards Michael.

"Might as well have it," Michael said.

Charley, who had been hustled against the wall by Potch and Bully Bryant, was loosed. He moved a few steps forward so that everyone could see him, and breathlessly, shivering, in a frenzy of triumphant malice, told his story. Rouminof, carried away by excitement, edged alongside him, chiming into what he was saying with exclamations and chippings of corroboration.

When Charley had finished talking and had fallen back exhausted, Armitage left his chair as if to continue what he had been going to say when Charley took the floor. Instead, he hesitated, and, feeling his way through the silence of consternation and dismay which had stricken everybody, said uncertainly:

"Much as I regret having to do so, I consider it my duty to state that Charley Heathfield's story, as far as I know it, is substantially correct. Some time ago I was sold a stone in New York. As soon as he saw it, my father said, 'Why, that's Michael's mascot.' I asked him if he were sure, and he declared that he could not be mistaken about the stone. . . .

"I told him the story I had got with it. Charley has already told you. That stone came from a parcel Charley supposed contained Rouminof's opals—the one Paul got when Jun Johnson and he had a run of luck together. The parcel did not contain Rouminof's opals, and had been exchanged for the parcel which did, either while Rouminof and Charley were going home together or after he had taken them from Rouminof. My father refused to believe that Michael Brady had anything to do with the business. I made further inquiries, and satisfied myself that the man who had always seemed to me the soul of honour and a pattern of the altruistic

virtues, I must confess, was responsible for placing that stone in the parcel Charley took down to Sydney . . . and also that Michael had possession of Rouminof's opals. Mrs. Johnson will swear she saw Rouminof's stones on the table of Michael Brady's hut one evening nearly two years ago.

" I approached Michael myself to try to discover more of the stones. He denied all knowledge of them. But now, before you all, and because it seems to me an outrageous thing for people to ruin themselves on account of their belief in a man who is utterly unworthy of it, I accuse Michael Brady of having stolen Rouminof's opals. If he has anything to say, now is the time to say it."

What Armitage said seemed to have paralysed everybody. The silence was heavier, more dismayed than it had been a few minutes before. Nobody spoke, nobody moved. Michael's friends sat with hunched shoulders, not looking at each other, their gaze fixed ahead of them, or on the place where Michael was sitting, waiting to see his face and to hear the first sound of his voice. Potch, who had gone to hold his father back when Charley had made his attack on Michael, stood against the wall, his eyes on Michael, his face illumined by the fire of his faith. His glance swept the crowd as if he would consign it to perdition for its doubt and humiliation of Michael. The silence was invaded by a stir of movement, the shuffle of feet. People began to mutter and whisper together. Still Michael did not move. George Woods turned round to him.

" For God's sake speak, Michael," he said. Michael did not move.

Then from the back of the hall marched Snow-Shoes. Tall and stately, he strode up the narrow passage between the rows of seats wedged close together. People watched him with an abstract curiosity, their minds under the shadow of the accusation against Michael, waiting only to hear what he would say to it. When Snow-Shoes reached the top of the hall he turned and faced the men. He held up a narrow package wrapped in newspaper

and before them all handed it to Rouminof, who was still hovering near the edge of the platform.

"Your stones," he said. "I took them." And in the same stately, measured fashion he had entered, he walked out of the hall again.

Cheers resounded, cheers on cheers, until the roof rang. There was no hearing anything beyond cheers and cries for Michael. People crushed round him shaking his hand, clinging to him, tears in their eyes. When order was achieved again, it was found that Paul was on the platform going over the stones with Armitage, Newton looking on. Paul was laughing and crying; he had forgotten Charley, forgotten everything but his joy in fingering his lost gems.

When there was a lull in the tempest of excitement and applause, Armitage spoke.

"I've got to apologise to you, Michael," he said. "I do most contritely. . . . I don't yet understand—but the facts are, the opals are here, and Mr. Riley has said——"

Michael stood up. His mouth moved and twisted as though he were going to speak before his voice was heard. When it was, it sounded harsh and as if only a great effort of will drove it from him.

"I want to say," he said, "I did take those stones . . . not from Paul . . . but from Charley."

His words went through the heavy quiet slowly, a vibration of his suffering on every one of them. He told how he had seen Charley and Paul going home together, and how he had seen Charley take the package of opals from Rouminof's pocket and put them in his own.

"I didn't want the stones," Michael cried, "I didn't ever want them for myself. . . . It was for Paul I took them back, but I didn't want him to have them just then. . . ."

Haltingly, with the same deadly earnestness, he went over the promise he had made to Sophie's mother, and why he did not want Paul to have the stones and to use them to take Sophie away from the Ridge. But she

had gone soon after, and what he had done was of no use. When he explained why he had not then, at once, returned the opals he did not spare himself.

Paul had had sun-stroke; but Michael confessed that from the first night he had opened the parcel and had gone over the stones, he had been reluctant to part with them; he had found himself deferring returning them to Paul, making excuses for not doing so. He could not explain the thing to himself even. . . . He had not looked at the opals except once again, and then it was to see whether, in putting them away hurriedly the first time, any had tumbled out of the tin among his books. Then Potch and Maud had seen him. Afterwards he realised where he was drifting—how the stones were getting hold of him—and in a panic, knowing what that meant, he had gone for the parcel intending to take it to Paul at once and tell him how he, Michael, came to have anything to do with his opals, just as he was telling them. But the parcel was gone.

Michael said he could not think who had found it and taken it away; but now it was clear. Probably Snow-Shoes had known all the time he had the stones. The more he thought of it, the more Michael believed it must have been so. He remembered the slight stir on the shingly soil as he came from the hut on the night he had taken the opals from Charley. It was just that slight sound Snow-Shoes' moccasins made on the shingle. Exclamations and odd queries Snow-Shoes had launched from time to time came back to Michael. He had no doubt, he said, that Mr. Riley had taken the stones to do just what he had done—and because he feared the influence possession of them was having on him, Michael, since they should have been returned to Paul long ago.

"That's the truth, as far as I know it," Michael said. "There's been attempts made to injure . . . the Ridge, our way of doing things here, because of me, and because of those stones. . . . What happened to me doesn't matter. What happens to the Ridge and the mines does matter. I done wrong. I know I done wrong

holding those stones. I'd give anything now if I—if I'd given them to Paul when Sophie went away. But I didn't . . . and I'll stand by anything the men who've been my mates care to say or do about that. Only don't let the Ridge, and our way of doing things here, get hurt through me. That's bigger—it means more than any man. Don't let it! . . . I'd ask George to call a meeting and get the boys to say what they think about all this—and where I stand."

Michael put on his hat, dragged it down over his eyes, and walked out of the hall.

When the slow fall of his footsteps no longer sounded on the wooden floor, George Woods rose from his place on the front bench. He turned and faced the men. The smoke from their smouldering pipes had created such a fog that he could see only the bulk of those on the near rows of forms. With the exception of M'Ginnis and half a dozen Punti men who had the far end of one of the front seats, the mass of men in the hall, who a few moments before had been cheering for Michael, were as inert as blown balloons. Depression was in every line of their heavy, squatted shapes and unlighted countenances.

"Well," George said, "it's been a bit of a shock what we've just heard. It wasn't easy what Michael's just done . . . and Snow-Shoes, if he'd wanted it, had provided the get-out. But Michael he wouldn't have it. . . . At whatever cost to himself, he wanted you to have the truth and to stand by the Ridge . . . he'd stand by it at any cost. . . . If there's a doubt in anyone's mind as to what he is, what he's just done proves Michael. I don't say, as he says himself, that it wouldn't have been better if he had handed the stones over to Paul when Sophie went away . . . but after all, what does that amount to as far as Michael's concerned? We've got his record, every one of us, his life here. Does anybody know a mean or selfish thing he's ever done, Michael?"

No one spoke, and George went on:

"Michael's asked for trial by his mates—and we've got to give it to him, if it's only to clear up the whole of

this business and be done with it. . . . I move we meet here to-morrow night to settle the thing."

There was a rumbling murmur, and staccato exclamations of assent. Men in back seats moved to the door; others surged after them. Armitage and his proposals were forgotten.

CHAPTER XVII

When Michael got back to his hut he found Martha there.

"Oh, Michael," she said, "a dreadful thing has happened."

Michael stared at her, unable to understand what she said. It seemed to him all the terrible things that could happen had happened that evening.

"While you were away Arthur Henty came here to see Sophie," Martha said. "She hasn't been feeling well . . . and I came up to have a look at her. She's been doing too much lately. Things haven't been too right between her and Potch, either, and that's her way of taking it out of herself. Arthur was here when I got here, Michael, and—you never heard anything like the way he went on. . . ."

Michael had fallen wearily into his chair while she was talking.

Martha continued, knowing that the sooner she got rid of her story the better it would be for both of them.

"It's an old story, of course, this about Arthur Henty and Sophie. . . . When he was ill after the ball he talked a good bit about her. . . . He always has . . . to me. I was with his mother when he was born . . . and he's always called me Mother M'Cready like the rest of you. He told me long ago he'd always been fond of Sophie. . . . He didn't know at first, he said. He was a fool; he didn't like being teased about her. . . . Then she went away. . . . He doesn't seem to know why he got married except that his people wanted him to.

"After the ball he'd made up his mind they were

going away together, Sophie and he. But while he was ill . . . before he was able to get around again, Sophie married Potch. Then he went mad, stark, starin' mad, and started drinking. He's been drinking hard ever since. . . . And to-night when he came, he just went over to Sophie. . . . She was lying on the couch under the window, Michael. . . . He said, 'I've got a horse for you outside.' Sophie didn't seem to realise what he meant at first. Then she did. I don't know how he guessed she wouldn't go . . . but the next minute he was on his knees beside her . . . and you never heard anything like it, Michael—the way he went on, sobbing and crying out—I never want to hear anything like it again. . . . I couldn't 've stood it meself. . . . I'd 've done anything in the world if a man'd gone on to me like that. And Sophie . . . she put her arms round him, and mothered him like. . . . Then she began to cry too. . . . And there they were, both crying and sayin' how much they loved each other . . . how much they'd always loved each other. . . .

"It fair broke me up, Michael. . . . I didn't know what to do. They didn't seem to notice me. . . . Then he said again they'd go away together, and begin life all over again. Sophie tried to tell him it was too late to think of that. . . . They both had responsibilities they'd ought to stand by. . . . Hers was the Ridge and the Ridge life, she said. . . . He didn't understand. . . . He only understood he wanted her to go away with him, and she wouldn't go. . . ."

Michael was so spent in body and mind that what Martha was saying did not at first make any impression on his mind. She seemed to be telling him a long and dolorous tale of something which had happened a long time ago, to people he had once known. In a waking nightmare, realisation that it was Sophie she was talking of dawned on him.

"He tried to make her," Martha was saying when he began to listen intently. "He said he'd been weak and a fool all his days. But he wasn't any more. He was strong now. He knew what he wanted, and he

meant to have it. . . . Sophie was his, he said. Nothing in the world would ever make her anything but his. She knew it, and he knew it. . . . And Sophie hid her face in her hands. He took her hands away from her face and dragged her to her feet. He asked her if he was her mate.

"She said 'Yes.'

"'Then you've got to come with me,' he said.

"But she wouldn't go, Michael. She tried to explain it was the Ridge—what the Ridge stood for—she must stay to work for. She'd sworn to, she said. He cursed the Ridge and all of us, Michael. He said that he wouldn't let her go on living with Potch—be his wife. That he'd kill her, and himself, and Potch, rather than let her. . . . I never heard a man go on like he did, Michael. I never want to again. Half the time he was raging mad, then crying like a child. But in the end he said, quite quietly:

"'Will you come with me, Sophie?'

"And she said, quiet like that, too, 'No.'

"He went out of the hut. . . . I heard him ride away. Sophie cried after him. She put out her arms . . . but she couldn't speak. And if you had seen her face, Michael—— She just stood there against the wall, listening to the hoof-beats. . . . When we couldn't hear them any more, she stood there listening just the same. I went to her and tried to—to waken her—she seemed to have gone off into a sort of trance, Michael. . . . After a while she did wake; but she looked at me as if she didn't know me. She walked about for a bit, she walked round the table, and then she went out as though she were goin' for a walk. I told her not to go far . . . not to be long . . . but I don't think she heard me. . . . I watched her walking out towards the old rush. . . . And she isn't back yet. . . ."

"It's too much," Michael muttered.

He sat with his head buried in his hands.

"What's to be done about it?" he asked at last.

Martha shook her head.

"I don't know. Sophie'll go through with her part, I suppose . . . as her mother did."

Michael's face quivered.

"He's such an outsider," he groaned. "Sophie'd never give up the things we stand for here, now she understands them."

"That's just it," Martha said. "She doesn't want to—but there's something stronger than herself draggin' at her . . . it's something that's been in all the women she's come of—the feeling a woman's got for the man who's her mate. Sophie married Potch, it's my belief, to get away from this man. She wanted to chain herself to us and her life here. She wants to stay with us. . . . She was kept up at first by ideas of duty and sacrifice, and serving something more than her own happiness. But love's like murder, Michael—it must out, and it's a good thing it must. . . ."

"And what about Potch?" Michael asked.

"Potch?" Martha smiled. "The dear lad . . . he'll stand up to things. There are people like that—and there're people like Arthur Henty who can't stand up to things. It's not their fault they're made that way . . . and they go under when they have too much to bear."

"Curse him," Michael groaned. "I wish he'd kept out of our lives."

"So do I," Martha said; "but he hasn't."

Potch came in. He looked from Martha to Michael.

"Where's Sophie?" he asked.

"She . . . went out for a walk, a while ago," Martha said.

At first Martha believed Potch knew what had happened. In his eyes there was an awe and horror which communicated itself to Martha and Michael, and held them dumb.

"Henty has shot himself down in the tank paddock," he said at length.

Martha uttered a low wail. Michael looked at Potch, waiting to hear further.

"Some of the boys going home to the Three Mile heard the shot, and went over," Potch said. "I wanted

to tell Sophie myself. . . . They were looking for you in the town, Martha."

"Oh!" Martha got up and went to the door.

"He's at Newton's," Potch said. "Which way did Sophie go?"

"She went towards the Old Town, Potch," Martha said.

The chestnut Arthur Henty had brought for Sophie, still standing with reins over a post of the goat-pen, whinnied when he saw them at the door of the hut. Potch looked at him as if he were wondering why the horse was there—a vague perplexity defined itself through the troubled abstraction of his gaze. His eyes went to Martha as if asking her how the horse came to be there; but she did not offer any explanation. She went off down the track to Newton's, and he struck out towards the Old Town.

Potch wandered over the plains looking for Sophie. She was not in any of her usual haunts. He wandered, looking for her, calling her, wondering what this news would mean to her. Vaguely, instinctively he knew. From the time of their marriage nothing had been said between them of Arthur Henty.

"Sophie! Sophie!" he called.

The stars were swarming points of silver fire in the blue-black sky. He wandered, calling still. Desolation overwhelmed him because he could not find Sophie; because she was in none of the places they had spent so much time in together. It was significant that she should not be in any of them, he felt. He could not bear to think she was eluding him, and yet that was what she had done all her life. She had been with him, smiling, elfish and tender one moment, and gone the next. She had always been elusive. For a long time a presentiment of desolation and disaster had overshadowed him. Again and again he had been able to draw breath of relief and assure himself that the indefinable dread which was always with him was a chimera of his too absorbing, too anxious love. But the fear, instinctive, prophetic, begotten by consciousness of the slight grasp he had of her, had remained.

That morning even, before he had gone off to work, she had taken his face in her hands. He had seen tenderness and an infinite gentleness in her eyes.

"Dear Potch," she had said, and kissed him.

She had withdrawn from him before the faint chill which her words and the light pressure of her lips diffused, had left him. And now he was wandering over the plains looking for her, calling her. . . . He had done so before. . . . Sophie liked to wander off like this by herself. Sometimes he had found her in a place where they often sat together; sometimes she had been in the hut before him; sometimes she had come in a long time after him, wearily, a strange, remote expression on her face, as if long gazing at the stars or into the darkness which overhung the plains had deprived her of some earthliness.

He did not know how long he walked over the plains and along the Ridge, looking for her, his soul in that cry:

"Sophie! Sophie!"

He wandered for hours before he went back to the hut, and saw Michael coming out to meet him.

"She knows, Potch," Michael said.

Potch waited for him to continue.

"Says nobody told her. . . . She heard the shot . . . and knew," Michael said.

Potch exclaimed brokenly. He asked how Sophie was. Michael said she had come in and had lain down on the sofa as though she were very tired. She had been lying there ever since, so still that Michael was alarmed. He had called Paul and sent him to find Martha. Sophie had not cried at all, Michael said.

She was lying on the sofa under the window, her hair thrown back from her face when Potch went into the hut. He closed his eyes against the sight of her face; he could not see Sophie in the grip of such pain. He knelt beside her.

"Sophie! Sophie!" he murmured, the inarticulate prayer of his love and anguish in those words.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE men met to talk about Michael next evening. The meeting was informal, but every man on the fields had come to Fallen Star for it. The hall was filled to the doors as it had been the night before, but the crowd had none of the elastic excitement and fighting spirit, the antagonisms and enthusiasms, which had gone off from it in wave-like vibrations the night before. News of Arthur Henty's death had left everybody aghast, and awakened realisation of the abysses which even a life that seemed to move easily could contain. The shock of it was on everybody; the solemnity it had created in the air.

George Woods, elected spokesman for the men, and Roy O'Mara deputed to take notes of the meeting because he was reckoned to be a good penman, sat at a table on the platform. Michael took a chair just below the platform, facing the men. He was there to answer questions. No one had asked him to be present, but it was the custom when men of the Ridge were holding an inquiry of the sort for the man or men concerned to have seats in front of the platform, and Michael had gone to sit there as soon as the men were in their places.

"This isn't like any other inquiry we've had on the Ridge," George Woods said. "You chaps know how I feel about it—I told you last night. But Michael was for it, and I take it he's come here to answer any questions . . . and to clear this thing up once and for all. . . . He's put his case to you. He says he'll stand by what you say—the judgment of his mates."

Anxious to spare Michael another recital of what had happened, he went on:

"There's no need for Michael to repeat what he said last night. If there's any man here wasn't in the hall, these are the facts."

He repeated the story Michael had told, steadily, clearly, and impartially.

"If there's any man wants to ask a question on those facts, he can do it now."

George sat down, and M'Ginnis was on his feet the same instant, his bat-like ears twitching, his shoulders hunched, his whole tall, thin frame strung to the pitch of nervous animosity.

"I want to know," he said, "what reason there is for believing a word of it. Michael Brady's as good as admitted he's been fooling you for goodness knows how long, and I don't see——"

"Y' soon will, y'r bleedin', blasted, fly-blown fool," Bully Bryant roared, rising and pushing back his sleeves.

"Sit down, Bull," George Woods called.

"The question is," he added, "what reason is there for believing what Michael says?"

"His word's enough," somebody called.

"Some of us think so," George said. "But there's some don't. Is there anyone else can say, Michael?"

Michael shook his head. He thought of Snow-Shoes, but the old man had refused to be present at the inquiry or to have anything to do with it. He had pretended to be deaf when he was asked anything about Paul's opals. And Michael, who could only surmise that Snow-Shoes' reasons for having taken the stones in a measure resembled his own when he took them from Paul, would not have him put to the torture of questioning.

George had said: "It might make a lot of difference to Michael if you'd come along, Mr. Riley."

But Snow-Shoes had marched off from him as if he had not heard anyone speak, his blue eyes fixed on that invisible goal he was always gazing at and going towards.

George had not seen him come into the hall; but when he was needed, his tall figure, white clad and straight as a dead tree, rose at the back of the hall."

"It's true," he said. "I wanted to be sure of Michael;

I shadowed him. I saw him with the stones when he says. I did not see him with them any other time."

He sat down again; his eyes, which had flashed, resumed their steady, distant stare; his features relapsed into their mask of impassivity.

M'Ginnis sprang to his feet again.

"That's all very well," he cried, sticking to his question. "But it's not my idea of evidence. It wouldn't stand in any law court in the country. Snow-Shoes——"

"Shut up!"

"Sit down!"

Half a dozen voices growled.

Because of the respect and affection they had for him, and because of a certain aloof dignity he had with them, no man on the Ridge ever addressed Snow-Shoes as anything but Mr. Riley. They resented M'Ginnis calling him "Snow-Shoes" to his face, and guessed that he had been going to say something which would reflect on Snow-Shoes' reliability as a witness. They admitted his eccentricity; but they would not admit that his mental peculiarities amounted to more than that. Above all, they were not going to have his feelings hurt by this outsider from the Punti rush.

Broad-shouldered, square and solid, Bill Grant towered above the men about him. "This doesn't pretend to be a court of law, Mister M'Ginnis," he remarked, with an irony and emphasis which never failed of their mark when he used them, although he rarely did, and only once or twice had been heard to speak at any gathering. "It's an inquiry by men of the Ridge into the doings of one of their mates. What they want to know is the rights of this business . . . and what you consider evidence doesn't matter. It's what the men in this hall consider evidence matters. And, what's more, I don't see why you're butting into our affairs so much: you're not one of us—you're a newcomer. You've only been a year or so in the place . . . and this concerns only men of the Ridge, who stand by the Ridge ways of doing things. . . . Michael's here to be judged by his mates . . . not by you and your sort. . . . If you'd the

brain of a louse, you'd understand—this isn't a question of law, but of principle—honour, if you like to call it that."

"Does the meeting consider the question answered?" George Woods inquired when Bill Grant sat down.

"Yes!"

A chorus of voices intoned the answer.

"If you believe Michael's story, there's nothing more to be said," George continued. "Does any man want to ask Michael a question?"

No one replied for a moment. Then M'Ginnis exclaimed incoherently.

"Shut up!"

"Sit down!"

Men cried out all over the hall.

"That's all, I think, Michael," George said, looking down to where Michael sat before the platform; and Michael, pulling his hat further over his eyes, went out of the hall.

It was the custom for men of the Ridge to talk over the subject of their inquiry together after the man or men with whom the meeting was concerned had left the hall, before giving their verdict.

When Michael had gone, George Woods said:

"The boys would like to hear what you've got to say, I think, Archie."

He looked at Archie Cross. "You and Michael haven't been seein' eye to eye lately, and if there's any other side in this business, it's the side that lost confidence in Michael when we were fed-up with all that whispering. You know Michael, and you're a good Ridge man, though you were ready to take on Armitage's scheme. The boys'd like to hear what you've got to say, I'm sure."

Archie Cross stood up; he rolled his hat in his hands. His face, hacked out of a piece of dull flesh, sun-reddened, moved convulsively; his hair was roughed-up from it; his small, sombre eyes went with straight lightnings to the men in the hall about him.

"It's true—what George says," he said after a pause,

as if it were difficult for him to express his thought. "I haven't been seein' eye to eye with Michael lately . . . and I listened to all the dirty gossip that mob"—he glanced towards M'Ginnis and the men with him—"put round about him. It was part that . . . and part listening to their talk about money invested here making all the difference to Fallen Star . . . and the children growing up . . . and gettin' scared and worried about seein' them through . . . made me go agin you boys lately, and let that lot get hold of me. . . . But this business about Michael's shown me where I am. Michael's stood for one thing all through—the Ridge and the hanging on to the mines for us. . . . He's been a better Ridge man than I have. . . . And I want to say . . . as far as I'm concerned, Michael's proved himself. . . . I don't reck'n hanging on to opals was anything . . . no more does Ted. It's the sort of thing a chap like Michael'd do absent-minded . . . not noticin' what he was doin'; but when he did notice—and got scared thinkin' where he was gettin' to, and what it might look like, he couldn't get rid of 'em quick enough. That's what I think, and that's what Ted thinks, too. He hasn't got the gift of the gab, Ted, or he'd say so himself. . . . If there's goin' to be opposition to Michael, it's not comin' from us. . . . And we've made up our minds we stand by the Ridge."

"Good old Archie!" somebody shouted.

"What have you got to say, Roy?" George Woods faced his secretary who had been scratching diligently throughout the meeting. "You've been more with the M'Ginnis lot, too, than with us, lately."

Roy flushed and sprang to his feet.

"I'm in the same boat with Archie and Ted," he said. "Except about the family . . . mine isn't so big yet as it might be. But it's a fact, I funked, not having had much luck lately. . . . But if ever I go back on the Ridge again . . . may the lot of you go back on me."

Exclamations of approbation and goodwill reverberated as Roy subsided into his chair again.

"That's all there is to be said on the subject, I think," George Woods remarked.

" Michael wanted his mates to know what he had done—and why he had done it. He's asked for judgment from his mates. . . . If he'd wanted to go back on us he could have done it; he could have done it quite easy. Armitage would have shut up on his suspicions about the stones. Charley could have been bought. Michael need never 've faced all this as far as I can see . . . but he decided to face it rather than give up all we've been fightin' for here. He'd rather take all the dirt we care to sling at him than anything they could give him . . . and that's why M'Ginnis has been up against him like he has. Michael has queered his pitch, and most of us have a notion that M'Ginnis has been here to do Armitage's work . . . work up discontent and ill-feeling amongst us, and split our ranks; and he came very near doing it. If Michael hadn't 've stood by us, like he's always done, we'd have the Armitage Syndicate on our backs by now."

" To tell you the truth, boys," George went on, after a moment's hesitation, and then as if the impulse to speak a secret thought were too strong for him, " I've always thought Michael was too good. And if those stones did get hold of him for a couple of weeks, like he says, all it proves, as far as I can see, is that Michael isn't any plaster saint, but a man like the rest of us."

" That's right!" Watty called, and several men shouted after him.

Pony-Fence moved out from the crowd he was sitting with.

" I vote this meeting records a motion of confidence in Michael Brady," he said. " And when we call Michael in again we'd ought to make it clear to him . . . that so far from its being a question of not having as much confidence in him as we had before—we've got more. Michael's stood by his mates if ever a man did. . . . He's come to us . . . he's given himself up to us. He'll stand by what we say or do about him. And what are we goin' to do? Are we goin' to turn him down . . . read him a bit of a lecture and tell him to go home and be a good boy and not do it another time . . . or are we going to let him know once and for all what we think of him?"

Exclamations of agreement went up in a rabble of voices.

Bully Bryant rose from one of the back forms with a grin which illuminated the building.

" I'll second that motion," he said, pushing back the sleeve on his left arm. " And his own mother won't know the man who says a word against it—when I've done with him."

Watty was sent to bring Michael back to the meeting. They walked to the end of the hall together; and George Woods told Michael as quietly as he could for his own agitation, and the joy which, welling in him, impeded his speech, that men of the Ridge found nothing to censure in what he had done. His mates believed in him; they stood by him. They were prepared to stand by him as he had stood by the Ridge always. The meeting wished to record a vote of confidence. . . ."

Cheers roared to the roof. Michael, shaken by the storm of his emotion and gratitude, stood before the crowd in the hall with bowed head. When the storm was quieter in him, he lifted his head and looked out to the men, his eyes shining with tears.

He could not speak; old mates closed round to shake hands with him before the meeting broke up. Every man grasped and wrung his hand, saying:

" Good luck! Good luck to you, Michael!" Or just grasped his hand and smiled with that assurance of fellowship and goodwill which meant more to Michael than anything else in the world.

CHAPTER XIX

It was one of those clear days of late spring, the sky exquisitely blue, the cuckoos calling, the paper daisies in blossom, their fragrance in the air; they lay across the plains, through the herbage, white to the dim, circling horizon.

Horses and vehicles were tied up outside the grey palings of the cemetery on the Warria road. All the horses and shabby, or new and brightly-painted carts, sulkies, and buggies of Fallen Star and the Three Mile were there; and buggies from Warria, Langi-Eumina, and the river stations as well. Saddle horses, ranged along one side of the fence, reins over the stakes, whinnied and snapped at each other.

The crowd of people standing in the tall grass and herbage on the other side of the fence was just breaking up when Sophie and Potch appeared, coming over the plains from the direction of the tank paddock, Sophie riding the chestnut Arthur Henty had left behind her house, and Potch walking beside the horse's head. Sophie had been gathering Darling pea, and had a great sheaf in one hand. Potch was carrying some, too: he had picked up the flowers Sophie let fall, and had a little bunch of them. She was riding astride and gazing before her, her eyes wide with a vision beyond the distant horizon. The wind, a light breeze breathing now and then, blew her hair out in wisps from her bare head.

All the men of Warria were in the sombre crowd in the cemetery. Old Henty, red-eyed and broken by the end

of his only son, whom he found he had cared for now that he was dead; the stockmen, boundary-riders, servants, fencers, shearers from Darrawingee sheds who, a few weeks before had been on the Warria board, and men from other stations near enough to have heard of Arthur Henty's death. None of the Henty women were there; but women of the Ridge, who were accustomed to pay last respects as their menfolk did, were with their husbands as usual. They would have thought it unnatural and unkind not to follow Arthur Henty to his resting-place; not to go as friends would to say good-bye to a friend who is making a long journey. And there was more than the ordinary reason for being present at Arthur Henty's funeral. He was leaving them under a cloud, circumstances which might be interpreted unkindly, and it was necessary to be present to express sympathy with him and sorrow at his going. That was the way they regarded it.

Martha had driven with Sam Nancarrow, as she always did to functions of the sort. No one remembered having seen Martha take a thing so to heart as she did Arthur Henty's death. She was utterly shaken by it, and could not restrain her tears. They coursed down her cheeks all the time she was in that quiet place on the plains; her great, motherly bosom rose and fell with the tide of her grief. She tried to subdue it, but every now and then the sound of her crying could be heard, and in the end Sam took her, sobbing uncontrollably, back to his buggy.

People knew she had seen further into the cause of Arthur Henty's death than they had, and they understood that was why she was so upset. Besides, Martha had always confessed to a soft corner for Arthur Henty: she had been with his mother when he was born, had nursed him during a hot summer and through several slight illnesses since then. And Arthur had been fond of her too. He had always called her Mother M'Cready as the Ridge folk did. Old Mr. Henty had driven over to see Martha the night before, to hear all she knew of what had happened, and Ridge folk had gathered some-

thing of the story from her broken exclamations and the reproaches with which she covered herself.

She cried out over and over again that she could not have believed Arthur would shoot himself—that he was the sort of man to do such a thing—and blamed herself for not having foreseen what had occurred. She had never seen him like he was that night—so strong, so much a man, so full of life and love for Sophie. He had begged Sophie to go with him as though his life depended on it—and it had.

If she had been a woman, and Sophie, and had loved him, Martha said, she would have had to go with him. She could never have withstood his pleading. . . . But Sophie had been good to him; she had been gentle—only she wouldn't go. Neither Sophie nor she believed, of course, he would do as he said—but he had.

Martha could not forgive herself that she had done nothing to soothe or pacify Arthur; that she had said nothing, given him neither kindly word nor gesture. But she had been so upset, so carried away. She had not known what to do or say. She abused and blackguarded herself; but she had sensed enough of the utter loneliness and darkness of Henty's mind to realise that most likely she could have done nothing against it. He would have brushed her aside had she attempted to influence him; he would not have heard what she said. She would have been as helpless as any other human consideration against the blinding, irresistibly engulfing forces of despair which had impelled him to put himself out of pain as he had put many a suffering animal. It was an act of self-defence, as Mother M'Cready saw it, Arthur Henty's end, and that was all there was to it.

As Sophie and Potch approached the cemetery, people exclaimed together in wonderment, awe—almost fear.

James Henty, when he saw them, turned away from the men he was talking to and walked to his buggy; Tom Henderson, his son-in-law, followed him. Although he would have been the last to forgive Sophie if

she had done as Arthur wished, even to save his life, old Henty had to have a whipping-post, and he eased his own sense of responsibility for what had blighted his son's life, by blaming Sophie for it. He assured himself, his family and friends, that she, and she alone, was responsible for Arthur's death. She had played with Arthur; she had always played with him, old Henty said. She had driven him to distraction with her wiles—and this was the end of it all.

Sophie rode into the cemetery: she rode to where the broken earth was; but she did not dismount. The horse came to a standstill beside it, and she sat on him, her eyes closed. Potch stood bare-headed and bowed beside her. He put the flowers he had picked up as Sophie let them fall, on the grave. Sophie thrust the long, purple trails she was carrying into the saddle-bag where Arthur had put the flowers she gave him that first day their eyes met and drank the love potion of each others' being.

People were already on the road, horses and buggies, dark, ant-like trains on the flowering plains, moving slowly in the direction of Warria and of Fallen Star, when Sophie and Potch turned away from the cemetery.

The shadow of what had happened was heavy over everybody as they drove home. Arthur Henty had been well enough liked, and he had had much more to do with Fallen Star than most of the station people. He had gone about so much with his men they had almost ceased to think of him as not one of themselves. He was less the "Boss" than any man in the back-country. They recognised that, and yet he was the "Boss." He had lived like a half-caste, drifting between two races and belonging to neither. The people he had been born among cold-shouldered him because he had acquired the manners and habits of thought of men he lived and worked with; the men he had lived and worked with distrusted and disliked in him just those tag-ends of refinement and odd graces which belonged to the crowd he had come to them from.

The station hands, his work-mates—if he had any—

had had a slightly contemptuous feeling for him. They liked him—they were always saying they liked him—but it was clear they never had any great opinion of him. As a boy, when he began to work with them, to cover his shyness and nervousness, he had been silent and boorish; and he had never had the courage of his opinions—courage for anything, it was suspected. It had always been hinted that he shirked any jobs where danger was to be expected.

The stockmen told each other they would miss him, all the same. They would miss that wonderful whistling of his from the camp fires; and they were appalled at what he had done to himself. "The last man," Charley Este said, "the last man you'd ever 've thought would 've come to that!" Most of them believed they had misjudged Arthur Henty—that, after all, he had had courage of a sort. A man must have courage to blow out his light, they said. And they were sorry. Every man in the crowd was heavy with sorrow.

Ridge people gossiped pitifully, sentimentally, to each other as they drove home. Most of the women believed in the strength and fidelity of the old love between Sophie and Arthur Henty. But straight-dealing and honest themselves, they had no conception of the tricks complex personalities play each other; they did not understand how two people who had really cared for each other could have gone so astray from the natural impulse of their lives.

They recalled the dance at Warria, and how they had teased Sophie when they thought she was going to marry Arthur Henty, and how happy and pleased she had looked about it. How different both their lives would have been if Sophie and Arthur had been true to that instinct of the mate for the mate, they reflected; and sighed at the futility of the thought. They realised in Arthur Henty's drinking and rough ways of late, all his unhappiness. They imagined that they knew why he had become the uncouth-looking man he had. They remembered him a slight, shy youth, with sun-bright, freckled eyes; then a man, lithe, graceful, and good to

look at, with his face a clear, fine bronze, his hair taking a glint of copper in the sun. When he danced with them at the Ridge balls, that occasionally flashing, delightful way of his had made them realise why Sophie was in love with him. They remembered how he had looked at Sophie; how his eyes had followed her. They had heard of the Warria dance, and knew Arthur Henty had not behaved well to Sophie at it. They had been angry at the time. Then Sophie had gone away . . . and a little later he had married.

His marriage had not been a success. Mrs. Arthur Henty had spent most of her time in Sydney; she was rarely seen on the Ridge now. So women of the Ridge, who had known Arthur Henty, went over all they knew of him until that night at the race ball when he and Sophie had met again. And then his end in the tank paddock brought them back to exclamations of dismay and grief at the mystery of it all.

As she left the cemetery, Sophie began to sing, listlessly, dreamily at first. No one had heard her sing since her return to the Ridge. But her voice flew out over the plains, through the wide, clear air now, with the pure melody it had when she was a girl:

> "Caro nome che il mio cor festi primo palpitar,
> Le delizie dell' amor mi dei sempre rammentar!
> Col pensier il mio desir a te sempre volerà,
> E fin l'ultimo sospir, caro nome, tuo sarà!"

Ella Bryant, driving home beside Bully, knew Sophie was singing as she had sung to Arthur Henty years before, when they were coming home from the tank paddock together. She wondered why Sophie was riding the horse Arthur had brought for her; why she had ridden him to the funeral; and why she was singing that song.

Sophie sang on:

> "Col pensier il mio desir a te sempre volerà,
> E fin l'ultimo sospir, caro nome, tuo sarà!"

Looking back, people saw Potch walking beside her as

Joseph walked beside Mary when they went down to Nazareth.

"It's hard on Potch," somebody said.

"Yes," it was agreed; "it's hard on Potch."

The buggies, carts, sulkies, and horsemen moving in opposite directions on the long, curving road over the plains grew dim in the distance.

The notes of Sophie's singing, with its undying tenderness triumphing over life and death, flowed fainter and fainter.

When she and Potch came to the town again, the light was fading. Through the green, limpid veil of the sky, stars were glittering; huts of the township were darkening under the gathering shadow of night. A breath of sandal-wood burning on kitchen hearths came to Sophie and Potch like a greeting. The notes of a goat-bell clanking dully sounded from beyond the dumps. There were lights in a few of the huts; a warm, friendly murmur of voices went up from them. For weeks troubled and disturbed thinking, arguments, and conflicting ideas, had created a depressed and unrestful atmosphere in every home in Fallen Star. But to-night it was different. The temptations, allurements and debris of Armitage's scheme had been swept from the minds—even of those who had been ready to accept it. Hope and pride in the purpose of the Ridge had been restored by Michael's vindication and by reaffirmation of the principle he and all staunch men of the Ridge stood for as the mainstay of their life in common. Thought of Arthur Henty's death, which had oppressed people during the day, seemed to have been put aside now that they had seen him laid to rest, and had returned to their homes again.

Voices were heard exclaiming with the light cadence and rhythm of joy. The crisis which had come near to shattering the Ridge scheme of things, and all that it stood for, had ended by drawing dissenting factions of the community into closer sympathy and more intimate relationship. In everybody's mind were the hope and enthusiasm of a new endeavour. As they went through

the town again, neither Sophie nor Potch were conscious of them for the sorrow which had soaked into their lives. But these things were in the air they breathed, and sooner or later would claim them from all personal suffering; faith and loving service fill all their future—the long twilight of their days.

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