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JOHN
ARMOUR



HODDER AND
STOUGHTON

BURNING AIR



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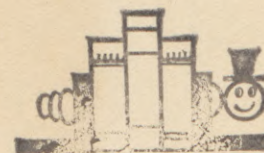


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BURNING AIR

By JOHN ARMOUR

AUTHOR OF
"THE SPELL OF THE INLAND"

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
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CONTENTS

ROY MITCHELL	CHAPTER I	PAGE
		7
JIM FISHER	CHAPTER II	11
ROBERT WRIGHT	CHAPTER III	19
THE MYSTERY OF YALO'	CHAPTER IV	28
THE LOST EXPEDITION	CHAPTER V	37
DI GILIO	CHAPTER VI	53
TOM SPARGO KNOWS SOMETHING	CHAPTER VII	58
THE TREE MARKED X	CHAPTER VIII	67
THE WONDER CHASM	CHAPTER IX	85
THE HATTER'S REEF	CHAPTER X	94
THE FORD JABBOK	CHAPTER XI	108
IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY	CHAPTER XII	116
THE MYSTERY DEEPENS	CHAPTER XIII	124
NEWS	CHAPTER XIV	132
SCHAFER AND HIS NIECE	CHAPTER XV	141
THE CHAMBER OF HORROR	CHAPTER XVI	149
THE DOCTOR IS NEEDED	CHAPTER XVII	161
RUTH AND DI GILIO	CHAPTER XVIII	171
"DEATH IN THE POT"	CHAPTER XIX	181

CONTENTS

JIM INTERPOSES	CHAPTER XX	PAGE
		193
THE FIRST IRREGULAR STEP	CHAPTER XXI	205
THE DEN OF THE "BUDLEEMUNDJA"	CHAPTER XXII	211
THE CAVE OF ADULLAM	CHAPTER XXIII	221
FACE TO FACE	CHAPTER XXIV	227
"PEGGOTTY FINDS HIS NIECE"	CHAPTER XXV	234
THE TABLES TURNED	CHAPTER XXVI	245
CHRISTMAS DINNER	CHAPTER XXVII	252
THE FLOATING SNAKE	CHAPTER XXVIII	263
A SURPRISE FOR MOOLOOLOO	CHAPTER XXIX	271
"BURNING AIR"	CHAPTER XXX	283
SHADOWS	CHAPTER XXXI	292
THE LIGHT BREAKS THROUGH	CHAPTER XXXII	303
WEDDING BELLS	CHAPTER XXXIII	309

CHAPTER I

ROY MITCHELL

SEPTEMBER had come again and the people of Melbourne were rejoicing in the first real touch of spring. Heavy coats had been discarded and men and women as they hurried to business rejoiced in the beautiful sunshine.

The glorious morning seemed to bring greater numbers to the trams and trains, and for many in the crowded compartments there was scarcely standing room. This was why Roy Mitchell, that morning, missed his early glance at the newspaper. He was so crammed in with his fellow-passengers that he was obliged to leave his paper folded. Consequently when he reached his office he spent a few moments on the morning news.

"I wonder if they are out," he thought as he opened the paper across his table and deliberately turned over the pages.

"Yes—at last."

Before his eyes appeared a number of figures. He read them over quickly. He read again and then quietly sank into his chair as though stunned by some blow. Surely his eyes were not deceiving him.

"The number is not there," he said aloud. "I'm sorry—sorry. Poor Jim. I hope he doesn't give up altogether, but it will be a hard blow for him. Probably he will call in to see me to-day, and I must coax him away for the week-end."

A knock at the door disturbed his reflections, and his typist entered with a number of documents for his immediate attention.

Roy Mitchell was a young man in his late twenties. He was tall and well built, with a wealth of black hair, through which he frequently pushed his fingers. His manner was calm and quiet, and it seemed that no accident or misfortune could alter the even tranquillity of his nature. From his early years he had been a great reader, but this did not prevent him from being an original thinker. He was "deep verst in books," yet he escaped the dread Miltonic censure of being "shallow in himself." Every scientific subject interested him, but chemistry and electricity received his special consideration. In the face of much adversity he had fought his own way in the world. By means of scholarships he had won his way to the University and with considerable distinction he had completed his science course. In addition he had studied metallurgy, and already had done much research work in that department. His few personal friends knew that he possessed a wide range of interests. As well as being a lecturer at the University, he was a writer on scientific subjects and adviser to several mining companies. It was known that he had recently acquired interests in several oil speculations and was engaged in some capacity by a large company that had undertaken boring operations in the Artesian basin.

Roy Mitchell's office was far from pretentious. There was the outer room where the typist usually worked and received callers. Then there was the inner room which Roy occupied when he was free from other engagements. It was partly an office, but it also served as a laboratory and study. Here he prepared his lectures, wrote articles for papers and performed various chemical experiments. As time went on his few chosen friends frequently gathered here. They conducted experiments

together and discussed possible further developments in the world of science.

On that beautiful September morning Roy had some work on hand which would keep him busy for an hour or more. He was not due at the University until the afternoon and could therefore spend most of the day at his rooms. This thought pleased him because he felt certain that his mate, Jim Fisher, would pay him a visit, and he did not want to be away when he called. Accordingly he tried to get his work well in hand so that, if need be, he could devote an hour or two with his friend.

The correspondence was completed. The typist went back to her own room and Roy was left to his pipe, his lecture notes and his own reflections. Scarcely had the girl left him when he reached out his hand for the paper and soon had it open before him.

"There may be some mistake," he said at length. "I made sure Jim would pass. He did work hard and he deserved to get through, but his number is missing. There may be a printer's error or a clerk's error, but I'm afraid poor Jim has missed his year."

At that moment a step was heard in the outer room. Somebody had entered. Roy put aside the paper, expecting the inner door to be thrown open to admit his friend. The door was opened, indeed, but Jim did not appear. Instead, the typist again entered and placed a telegram on his desk.

Now, telegrams concerning boring and mining operations frequently came to Roy. There was nothing unusual about one being placed on his desk, but somehow Jim was in his mind, and a strange apprehension suddenly possessed him that his friend had already done something rash. Perhaps he had embarked on some vessel and was putting out to sea. It would be like Jim to burn the bridges

behind him and then commence to repent when it was too late.

For a moment or two Roy sat in deep thought, nursing the strange foreboding that possessed him. His left hand played with his mass of hair while his right fumbled with the unopened telegram.

"I may as well open it," Roy thought. "Perhaps Grant has struck oil in Western Queensland. More likely his machinery is broken again. Something always breaks when he is a few yards from the oil. It makes a man suspicious."

He opened the envelope and got another surprise. The telegram read:

*Reaching Melbourne to-morrow. Promising news.
Be ready.*

Robert Wright.

"This is another shock," thought Roy. "The unexpected always happens. I wonder if he expects me to fulfil that old promise. Surely he will be reasonable when he hears that I have undertaken so much other work. I am tied down now. Two years make a difference. Success brings its responsibilities and also its disadvantages."

He read the telegram again, and his eyes rested on the words "Be ready."

"How can I be ready?" he thought. "But how persistent Bob is. I admire him. He is wonderful. If he has actually got a clue it would be mean to desert him now. He certainly will need help. How can I give it to him?"

Roy stood, and then for a few moments paced the room. Then like a flash the very solution of the problem presented itself.

"I might persuade Jim to take my place," he mused. "That is the very idea; it will appeal to

Jim in his present humour. In any case, he is held up until next March and will not want to be idle. Jim has studied both chemistry and geology, and Bob Wright will be very fortunate if he can enlist his services."

The phone bell rang, and the next instant Roy was listening to a familiar voice.

"Jim Fisher speaking."

"I am expecting you round," Roy replied.

"I'm coming, only I wanted to make sure you were in. You have seen this morning's paper?"

"I have."

"Then I will have no news for you."

"No; but I have news for you—exciting news. It will do you good to hear it."

"Nothing will do me good to-day. I'm giving up altogether, and I would like to have your opinion about a position that has been offered me."

"Come round, then, as soon as you can and tell me all about it."

"I will be with you in less than half an hour."

"Right! What news I have can wait till then."

Roy hung up the receiver and looked at his watch.

"I have nearly half an hour," he thought. "I must make certain of to-day's lecture."

JIM FISHER was up to time, and within the half-hour specified he was being taken up the lift to his friend's rooms. The typist knew him well, and she merely smiled as he passed through to the inner room and came face to face with Roy.

Jim was looking very downcast, and not without reason. The morning paper revealed the fact that he had failed in his final year. He was a medical student, and although he had worked very hard he had not been able to develop a love for medicine. Being an only son of a wealthy father, he had been given every advantage while at college and the University. His mother was proud and ambitious, and was satisfied with no other calling for her son but the medical profession. Even when a boy Jim had strong inclinations towards engineering, and the passing years could not quench those old yearnings. He never liked medicine, but out of respect for his parents and encouraged by his sisters he struggled on and tried to succeed for their sakes. Early in his college days he had made the acquaintance of Roy Mitchell, and as time went on the friendship had been steadily strengthened. Jim was the younger by several years, but they had very much in common. They made experiments together and followed up the latest developments in the world of electricity. They were both enthusiastic over wireless, and Jim was always happy if he had a motor-car or some machine to take to pieces. In many respects the two young men had temperaments diametrically opposed. Roy was calm and collected. No annoyance could ruffle him. He was always cool and genial even in the face of adversity. Jim, on the other hand, was impetuous. He was easily enthused and he was easily depressed. When he was disappointed his friends were easily able to read disappointment in his face. Consequently when he came face to face with Roy that morning failure was written on his countenance.

"Come in, old man," said Roy cheerfully. "I have been waiting for you."

"Waiting for me? I'm not worth it, Roy."

"Perhaps not; but hang your hat up. I want to talk to you."

Jim closed the door and threw his hat at a peg. Fortunately it caught and hung in position.

"Clever," exclaimed Roy. "See how you can hit the bull's-eye when you try. Now sit down and have a smoke."

Roy lit his pipe and waited for his friend to speak. He did not seem anxious, however, to start any conversation, so Roy paced the room and smoked vigorously. Jim was small beside him and appeared to be a contrast in form as well as in temperament. Roy was the taller by a couple of inches, and his dark hair was a contrast beside Jim's fair head. Roy was cool and patient, but Jim was nervous and petulant.

"I am planning a little trip for the week-end," said Roy at length. "I want to inspect a quarry that has been opened in the Ballarat district, so if you can get the use of your car we will motor up to-morrow."

"I am in no mood for a holiday, Roy. I'm at war with everybody—even with myself."

"I quite understand," Roy replied sympathetically, "but fellows have flopped in examinations before to-day. Surely you can do as others have done—try again. You are only a boy yet."

"But it all seems so hopeless. I wasn't made for study. My heart isn't in it, although my parents would have me go on and on. Nobody can say I didn't work hard, and you know I have always been loyal to my father. When I opened the paper this morning and found that my number was not up I determined to branch out on another track from this very day."

"You have a duty to your parents. Don't forget that. They have spent much on your education."

Would it be playing the game to throw all that money away?"

"What is the good of me going on when I feel I was never cut out for a doctor? But put me in the engineering world, and I shall do well enough. However, I'm going to make a change now. It will mean a fresh start, but in the long run it will be worth it."

"Think again, old chap. Take a run into the country for a few days and forget everything."

"Forget!" exclaimed Jim. "I do that very well when it comes to examinations."

"We will not mention examinations to-day," said Roy. "Come, tell me what you propose doing."

"The matter is already arranged," said Jim. "A good position has been offered me in an engineering business, and while I'm in the determined mood I mean to cross the Rubicon. If I can get where the wheels are going round I'm sure I shall yet make good."

"Of course you will make good, Jim. I'm not afraid of you; but stick to your medical course until you have it completed. It will not be a burden to carry even if you do alter your course."

"If I pass my final year it is almost certain that I will be doomed to the medical profession. No, the time has come for me to cross the Rubicon, and I'm going right over."

"How will you meet the parental displeasure?" Roy asked.

"I shall point to you. My father knows about your success. You got into the right groove to commence with. You like your work, and I can tell you it makes all the difference. There is something wrong with our ideas of education. Boys are pushed into callings by their parents who happen

to possess plenty of money. But all the money in the world cannot buy natural ability. If fellows all had to depend upon themselves, as you had to do, there would not be so many square pegs in round holes."

Roy let his friend speak on. It did him good. He realised also how different their paths had been. Jim had received every comfort and every help that money could buy, but even with such advantages he had by no means distinguished himself in his studies. How different was his own case. He had been obliged to earn his way through by scholarships, and when the scholarship money did not suffice he did private teaching, or any other work he could get, to make ends meet. Yet, the fact remained, he had completed a very difficult course and was now well on the road to distinction and success.

"I told you I had some news for you," said Roy, who was anxious now to change the subject. "I have received a telegram which may cause me to alter all my present plans."

"What has happened?"

"That is what I would like to know; but there is the telegram on the table. Read it for yourself." Jim did so, but he did not appear any wiser.

"Do you remember Bob Wright?" Roy inquired.

"I have heard you speak of him."

"He was in Melbourne about two years ago, and I was under the impression that you met him then."

"No, I didn't meet him, but I remember you speaking about him when he was here. He is an old friend of yours, is he not?"

"Yes; we were together as boys. He was clever and very resourceful. He often paid very dearly for his cleverness, because it got him into all kinds of mischief. There was nothing really bad in him, but he was high-spirited and full of energy. We

lived quite near to each other and grew up together. As boys we had a fight or two every day, made friends afterwards and then led each other again into every imaginable mischief. However, our fighting days passed away, and we found ourselves almost inseparable friends. He was energetic, daring and ambitious and grew up into a splendid young fellow. Much to his father's disgust, he showed no inclination to settle down to any trade or profession. He longed for adventure, and wanted to get away out on a cattle station where there would be plenty of rough riding and adventures with blacks. He read books on exploring, and his ambition was to get out into the wilds of Australia."

"A strange ambition."

"It was, certainly, and his father tried hard to check him; but Bob's mind was made up, and his father thought it best to give him one lesson that would cure him for good and all. I remember the time well. Mr. Wright had been away to Adelaide on business, and while there he had, quite accidentally, met in with a prospecting party that was secretly equipping an expedition for the north country. The leader of the expedition was a man named Wilson, and Mr. Wright asked this prospector to take his son with him into the back country. Wilson agreed. Thus it happened that shortly afterwards young Bob started for Adelaide, and later found his way into the far north.

"Wilson and his mate—a man named Blackwood—had both lived many years in the back country, and during their travels they got on the track of an old hatter who had discovered a golf reef. It was located in a small range of mountains, but the exact spot could not be determined. On one occasion Wilson tracked the hatter into the mountains and calculated that the reef must be within a certain

few square miles. This encouraged him to make further preparations. The hatter was secretly followed wherever he went. Wilson at last came right on to his tracks and hung on like a leech. He found him, too, but the old chap was dead. He died with his secret, and Wilson could do nothing but report the matter to the police. The trooper, who went out and buried the old chap, probably thought that no further inquiries were necessary. However, Wilson was determined to know all there was to know about the hatter's reef. Along with Blackwood he made extensive preparations for a prospecting expedition. Bob Wright went with them, and he was soon in the thick of amazing adventures. He told me about some of them, but I am pledged to secrecy."

"Surely you will tell me."

"I cannot, until Wright returns."

"Did they find the hatter's reef?"

"Yes, but it was lost again. Wilson and Blackwood both perished in the bush, and Bob Wright alone possesses certain secrets. He obtained employment out on a remote station called Moolooloo, near the country where his mates perished. He rose to be overseer of the station, and although he has had several managerships offered him, yet he remained on at Moolooloo so that he could follow up the search. There is some mystery, of course, about the whole business. Bob has never told me all he knows, but Moolooloo holds some astonishing secret. In a rash moment I made a promise that when Bob found some definite clue I would accompany him into the far interior and make a scientific examination."

"Is that what Mr. Wright means in the telegram when he says 'Be ready'?"

"Exactly."

"Do you mean to go?"

"I have made a promise, Jim, and with me a promise is sacred."

"How long will you be away?"

"I cannot afford to be away for more than a few weeks. In fact I don't want to go at all. I have more work on hand now than I can possibly get through this year. That is why I wanted to have a talk with you before Bob Wright reaches Melbourne. You need a change, Jim, and a little adventure for a few weeks would make you a new man. Now, I want you to take my place and go back with Wright to Central Australia. You know chemistry and geology, and if you are puzzled you can send samples back to me."

"Wright may not want me."

"He may not, but if he is agreeable, will you go?"

"The job certainly appeals to me, and if I can help you out of a difficulty it will give me pleasure."

"Right! We shall leave it at that. If Wright is willing to take you, I am sure it will be a great experience for you."

"I feel better already," said Jim. "Inactivity kills me. When will you see Wright?"

"I gather from the telegram that he will leave Adelaide to-night. Are you free to-morrow?"

"Absolutely."

"Then bring the car and we shall meet him at Spencer Street. I want to know at the earliest moment what promising news he has. Now put your hat on. It is too good a morning to be shut up indoors. Come along. I have a few preliminary arrangements to make. I suppose I had better be prepared for the possibility of Bob insisting upon me going."

Roy and Jim spent most of the day together. The element of mystery and the possibility of embarking on a strange excursion gave Jim a new interest, and by night he had partially recovered his spirits. Like many others, Jim Fisher quickly got discouraged but at the first glimmer of hope he soon recovered. Roy soon had him talking hopefully, and frequently the daring adventurer Bob Wright was the subject of the conversation.

Naturally Roy was anxious. Bob was not an alarmist, and it was quite apparent that some clue had been found to a baffling mystery. Perhaps his friend had come upon the hatter's reef. There were a thousand possibilities, and Roy tried to think of them in the light of the information he possessed. He was certainly waiting for Wright with strange curiosity.

Jim was impatient. He was out early next morning with the car and brought his father's driver. The express from Adelaide was up to time, and both Roy and Jim were waiting anxiously. The passengers streamed out and crowded along the platform. Roy watched carefully for a familiar face—a face tanned by the Central Australian sun—but it did not appear. He hurried from point to point. He watched. He waited, but Wright was not there. They had either missed him or he had not come. This meant further suspense, but nothing could be done but await developments. Jim sent the driver home with the car while he accompanied Roy to lunch. Both men were disappointed. However, they had lunch together and then went for a long walk.

It was well on in the afternoon when they returned to the rooms, and Roy was greeted by his typist, who remarked that a gentleman was waiting in his room to see him."

"Has he been waiting long?"

"Nearly an hour; but he said he would wait until you returned."

The inner door was opened, and as Roy and Jim entered, a thick-set man rose up leisurely and stepped forward.

"Bob!" exclaimed Roy in surprise.

"Glad to see you again, Roy. You look well."

"So do you, although you have changed. Allow me to introduce you to my medical friend, Jim Fisher."

"Delighted to meet you. I have heard Roy speak of you several times."

"Did you come by the Adelaide express?" Roy inquired.

"I did."

"Strange that we missed you. We watched very carefully at the station and had a car to meet you."

"I didn't expect you on the platform. In any case, it is fortunate that you did miss me. I will be able, later on, to explain the incident to your complete satisfaction. The fact is I have so much to explain that I hardly know where to begin."

At this stage Jim excused himself, saying that he would take a book and wait outside. Wright seemed relieved, and mentioned that his business was only a small matter. But small though it was, it certainly took up time, and Jim was obliged to wait in suspense for nearly half an hour before Roy came out and asked him to return.

Bob Wright was seated at the desk with maps and a varied assortment of stones before him. He

was carefully turning one specimen over in his fingers and scarcely noticed what was going on beside him. Jim observed his sun-burnt complexion and his determined countenance. He was well dressed, but his brown hands and face revealed the fact that he was a bushman from the hot interior. He was a man slightly over the average height and well built in proportion, with broad shoulders. His hair and eyes were very dark and he possessed a nose somewhat of the Roman type.

Jim prided himself on being able to read character, and Robert Wright's outward appearance impressed him greatly. He felt that he was face to face with a strong man of action—a man who could force his way through almost any difficulty. Yet he was also convinced that there was something distinctly wholesome and kind about his new acquaintance.

Roy was the first to speak.

"We have been talking matters over," he said.

"Bob is quite willing that you should be included in the expedition, but there is great need of absolute secrecy. Our friend has made a wonderful discovery, but the time is not opportune for giving it to the world. We shall do our best to hold the secret and push our investigations further."

"You can depend upon me," Jim replied. "My lips will be completely sealed."

"I have already given that assurance to Bob, and I knew you would understand that the need of secrecy arises from the enormous possibilities which are before us."

"I am glad you have volunteered," said Bob.

"We will need you, and Roy will be glad of your company."

"Is Roy going? I understood that I was to take his place."

"I'm going," replied Roy. "No power on earth

could stop me now. Bob's discovery presents the opportunity of a lifetime. A scientist would be mad to remain behind with the baggage when there are fields to be won."

"True," said Bob:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows, and in miseries."

"Shakespeare was right," Roy remarked. "And he also sounded the truth when he wrote:

;; Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once."

"We may all taste of death before our job is finished," said Bob. "There are a thousand perils along the lonely tracks. Make your wills before you follow me."

A cold chill passed down Jim's back. There was certainly danger in the enterprise, but this rather pleased than alarmed the young medical student.

"You are not afraid of hardships?" Wright inquired.

"No, I will welcome them by way of a change."

"There will be plenty of hardships," remarked Wright. "You may often go short of food and water. You may be half eaten every day by ants, flies and mosquitoes. You will have salt beef and damper three times a day and a continuous craving for ice-cream and water-melons. Life in the interior is altogether different from life in the settled south, but I can assure you that there is a big prize to be won. Australia is a big country, and unsuspected wealth is still awaiting discovery in this great land of ours. I am glad you have studied chemistry,

for I believe I have made the biggest discovery in chemistry that has ever been made."

"I love chemistry and engineering," replied Jim, "and I shall be delighted to assist you. I confess I have no knowledge of the bush, but I am young enough to learn."

"You will be under a good teacher when you are with Bob," said Roy. "Concerning the back country, there is not much he doesn't know."

"I know the bush, but I don't understand science," replied Wright. "That is why I have come here for help. I'm certain that I'm on the track of a big discovery, but by myself I can get no further. I'm completely beaten. For years I grappled with a fearful mystery. Day and night it haunted me, but at last I have found something. A little light is streaming through, and it is coming from an unexpected quarter. Have you ever felt gripped by a power almost supernatural? Have you ever felt that all the forces of nature and all the powers in the world were at war with you?"

"I felt that way yesterday," replied Jim, "but your return to Melbourne and the prospect of a trip into Central Australia has given me fresh hope."

"Then you are ready to face the bush?"

"I am."

"Good! I shall need you. If the three of us can get together for a week or two at the back door of Moolooloo I can promise some surprising news for our city friends. In a few weeks Australia will be ringing with the magic word 'oil.'"

"Oil?"

"Yes, I have found it. Soon the lonely tracks I know so well will be alive with fortune-hunters. We must be there before them, boys. We must go quietly and secretly, or we will have thousands

following us—lured on by the magic word 'oil.' Not a hint concerning this expedition can be whispered to another living soul. Don't mention my name, and I shall not speak of you. In a day or two we shall all disappear, but the public will believe that Roy is busy at some quarry at Ballarat. Now let us sit round this table and arrange our plan of campaign. When could you get away, Roy?"

"That is a difficult question. If I could secure Mr. Locke as my *locum tenens* I could get away within a few days."

"Then by all means secure Mr. Locke. We cannot afford to lose a day. Our success will depend upon rapid action. It will now be a race against time, and we are running for a great stake."

"Why do you say race?"

"Because the field is not our own. For a month or two I have been under the impression that some other human being has some knowledge of my secret. Strange things have happened. I have been secretly robbed. My movements have become known. I have been followed, and several times, both by day and by night, in solitary places I have felt some enemy near me. I shudder now when I think of it, but the feeling was, on one occasion, so desperately real that I was tempted to draw my revolver and fire. Since then I have taken every precaution, but I am convinced, beyond all shadow of doubt, that I am being tracked. How much this fellow knows remains to be seen, but we must act quickly, or we will lose the prize."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, and I know his name, but I know nothing about him. However, we need not trouble about that at present. It is sufficient for you to know that I move about in disguise, and that explains certain circumstances."

"It does," said Roy. "I can understand now why we missed you at the railway station."

"I wanted to miss you. We must play for safety. This strange fellow is playing the same game with me that Wilson played with the old hatter. However, I don't intend to be caught, and I don't want him to know that you are in any way associated with me. This fellow that has been dogging my steps must know that I was associated with Wilson, and Wilson was the man who found the bones of the old hatter."

"Did the hatter have a mate who might know the location of the gold reef?"

"That is hardly likely. I never knew the old fellow. He was dead before I went into the back country, but I have often heard bushmen speak of him. He was a lonely figure, and only came into a homestead to get provisions. His wants were few, and he consistently avoided company. One thing is certain—he had discovered gold. Somewhere among the mountains he had located a rich deposit of the yellow metal and could produce nuggets of gold whenever he desired. A few bushmen in the north can still remember him coming in with his pockets full. Wilson had frequently met him and was one of the first to become suspicious."

"Strange that the hatter did not make his discovery known," said Jim.

"I don't think there is anything strange in that," replied Wright. "You see, hatters are always strange. In fact many of them are nearly mad. Wealth would be of no use to them, and they are always suspicious of other people. Consequently the old chap felt it a sacred duty to keep his secret to himself. Several others had attempted to follow him before Wilson tried the job. The old fellow

was fearfully cunning. He knew where every water-hole was situated. He had cleverly concealed tracks through the most difficult country, and he always seemed to know when somebody was in pursuit. One or two men lost their lives while trying to follow him. He seemed to possess remarkable cunning, and it took Wilson a long time to locate the country where he always disappeared. Quite by accident he found the old fellow when he was apparently making for his gold reef and managed to conceal the fact that he was following. Wilson hung on day and night. He could track like a black fellow, and was considered the best bushman in the north. Nothing frightened him, and no privation could stop him. On and on he went—right to the back of beyond, and at last came up with the hatter; but the old chap was dead. How he died nobody will ever know. His secret perished with him, but Wilson knew approximately where the reef must be located. Ever since it has been a matter of hanging on. When Wilson and Blackwood perished, I alone remained to continue the job. For years a terrible burden has weighed upon me, and at last a solution is coming of a mystery that has baffled me. Your scientific knowledge can now settle all. I have practically found the hatter's reef. What is more, I am on the track of oil. Now to business."

"I would like to know all about Wilson and what you have done all these years," said Jim.

"You will hear in a few days. Wait until our journey commences. Let us arrange how we are to proceed. We must all assume disguise. When could you leave Melbourne, Jim?"

"I could come with you at once. My time is my own."

"That is fortunate, but we must travel separately

and meet eventually at Moolooloo. I am overseer at that station, and the manager, Mr. Maxwell, gives me a free hand."

"Does he know you are at present in Melbourne?" Roy asked.

"No; he thinks I am in Adelaide, and so I am officially. However, that does not matter. I am travelling incognito."

The time came for Roy to proceed to the University. Wright had also some urgent business on hand and rose to leave.

"You are both free to-night?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Then I want you to dine with me at the 'Royal.' I have several matters to attend to, and you, Roy, have to arrange for a locum tenens to take over at once. Let us see how quickly our plans can be completed. I will be in the hotel lounge at six o'clock. During dinner we can report progress. Now, let me get away first. It will not be wise for us to be seen together."

So the man from the far country passed out of the rooms and disappeared in the crowd below.

"What do you make of him, Roy?" asked Jim when they were alone.

"He is on the track of something, but he is in difficulties. He always said he would let me know if he couldn't do without me. Poor fellow, I fear he has had a rough time. But come, let us hurry, for the race has begun."

CHAPTER IV THE MYSTERY OF YALO'

ROBERT WRIGHT was true to his word. At six o'clock he was seated in a corner of the hotel lounge reading the evening paper. He noticed Roy and Jim enter and rose to greet them.

"I trust you have your business all completed," he said.

"I have," replied Roy. "Fortune is favouring us. Mr. Locke is prepared to act for me, and he is ready to commence almost at once. I will inspect that quarry at Ballarat and then move on from there. Jim has consulted his father, and he is quite pleased with the proposal that his son should do a few weeks' research work with me."

"Very good," said Bob. "Matters will now move rapidly. I have completed my business and can commence my return trip to-morrow."

A few moments later the three men had entered the dining-room and had selected a quiet corner where they could talk freely. There was still much food for conversation. Their plans must be formulated, and Wright had many instructions to give.

"To begin with," he said, "I want you both to get quite familiar with your new names. Be ready to respond quickly to them. When you leave Victoria, Roy, your name will be Ben Cook. Unfortunately you have developed a spot on your right lung and the doctor has ordered you to live somewhere out in Central Australia, where the air is dry and hot. For the time being you are going to visit an old friend who is manager of Moolooloo station. If the climate proves to be beneficial you

will endeavour to get some kind of light employment out in the bush and settle there. Fabricate some story to suit yourself, but in the meantime develop a cough. It will be valuable to you.

"As for you, Jim, you are going out as a jackaroo with a large pastoral company. You will be meeting the general manager when you go north, but at present you don't know which station you will be put on. Your name is Harry Ford, and you mean to have a station of your own inside ten years. Don't profess to know anything about inland life. You are going out to learn.

"My plan is that you will meet on the 'Up North' train. After you have been journeying together for a couple of hours, get into conversation; but don't strike up a conversation too quickly. You will leave the train at Wooleena and take the motor mail to Moolooloo. I want you to keep together, but it will be necessary for me to find my way to Moolooloo by another method. The bushmen all know me, and they would become curious if they saw us together."

"You seem to be taking exceptional precautions, Bob," remarked Roy. "Is it possible that you are being shadowed while here in Melbourne?"

"I am taking no risks," Wright replied. "Safety first, that must be our policy. It is more than likely that an enemy is trying to shadow me even at the present moment."

"Did you say you have seen this fellow who you think is trying to follow?"

"Yes, I have seen him several times."

"And you know his name?"

"Yes."

"That is fortunate. Had you not better mention that fact to the police?"

"Not yet, Roy. I prefer to remain silent and

shake him off. His name is Di Gilio, and I found it out by mere accident. Further, I know his headquarters in Adelaide. Already some of his papers have come into my possession. In future he will find that I can hang on to him quite as easily as he follows me."

"Is he a foreigner?"

"He speaks good English, but probably he is of Italian descent."

"Have you ever seen him in Melbourne?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-day!"

"He is here now?"

"Yes; he followed me from Adelaide. That is why I am anxious that we should not be seen together."

"Whatever can be his object in following you here?"

"I cannot imagine what his idea is, but I must admit the fact that an enemy is following me. Perhaps he regards me as a hatter who has made a big discovery and owing to some insane notion I am not publishing it."

"Have you ever seen this Di Gilio in Central Australia?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"That is remarkable."

"Certainly it is. Where you would expect to find him he does not appear. Still, I have thought on different occasions that he was quite near. I have felt him. Strange presentiments have sometimes possessed me. Moreover my private belongings have been frequently interfered with. Personal letters have mysteriously disappeared. Twice I prepared faked maps illustrating the location of a gold reef. Both times the maps were found and

opened, and there was evidence that somebody had taken copies from them."

"Did that happen at Moolooloo?" Roy inquired.

"It did."

"Are you sure of all your men?"

"They are all trustworthy fellows that I have known for a long time; but there is some mystery."

"Have you many visitors?"

"A few, but they are mostly cattle men. Di Gilio could not visit Moolooloo without being recognised. I am certain of that."

"He may have a confederate."

"That is possible, and consequently I have of late been taking extraordinary precautions, and when you reach Moolooloo do the same."

"Perhaps more than one man is after you," suggested Jim.

"Quite likely. Many men followed the old hatter. Some regard me as being half mad. I am frequently spoken of as Cranky Wright. This has rather helped me, because little attention is paid to my prolonged bush trips."

"When did you first realise that somebody was after you?"

"I have been aware of it for more than a year now. About six months ago I had a few spare days while out mustering, and made a dash into the Yalorigina country. Rain had fallen a day or two before, and I felt comparatively safe because there was water in many of the pools. That trip gave me the clue, and, strangely enough, from that day I have been conscious of the presence of Di Gilio. I saw him once in Quorn, several times in Adelaide, and to-day here in Melbourne. He is a dangerous man, and the way he turns up at unexpected times and places is uncanny."

"We must go carefully; that is certain," said

Roy. "But let us forget about Di Gilio for a time. I'm anxious to know more of that clue."

The three men had been left very much alone. Apart from the waitress, no one came near them. The other men in the dining-room could not possibly hear the conversation, so they freely talked on.

"Well, about that clue," said Wright after a slight pause. "The story is a long one. In the meantime I will not burden you with it all. We will have plenty of time later on to discuss the whole matter. The mystery deepened with the death of Blackwood. He perished early in 1915. I happened to find him only a few moments before he died. He made a big effort to tell me something, but I could only catch a few words. Several times he murmured 'burning air.' Then he said in a very broken way other words that have been puzzling my mind for years."

"Do you remember all he said?" Roy asked.

"I think so. I wrote the words down shortly after he died, and will always remember them. It is all as clear in my mind as if it were yesterday. 'Burning air,' he repeated several times. Then he murmured with tragic earnestness: 'Oil . . . gold . . . tree marked X . . . lowest limb . . . Schafer carried us off. . . . Find Rae.'

"Some other time I shall tell you all about Rae and Wilson, but until quite recently that dying statement was all I had to go by."

"Were you able to make anything out of the words?"

"I concluded that gold and oil had both been found. But 'burning air' puzzled me. So did 'Schafer' and the 'tree marked X.' However, daylight is streaming through at last. I was telling you how I made a dash for Yalorigina. It is an aboriginal name, and means 'water running between

stones.' Out in the bush we cut the name short and call it Yalo'. A small mountain range runs through this country, and it seems to be left entirely alone both by white men and blacks. The mountains rise in the midst of a huge waterless plain, and even the expert bushman admits that the country is very dangerous. The mountains, although small, are very rugged, and the aborigines regard the range as some sacred place where they must not go. I have listened to their extravagant legends concerning the locality, and they believe that a marvellous flying kangaroo lives among the hills. This strange animal they call the 'budleemundja.' If you want an old black-fellow to tell you anything, listen to him with open mouth. Make out you believe him whether you do or not. When I got a few old blacks together I used to listen with rapt attention, and from what I could gather the 'budleemundja' was part emu and part kangaroo, and spent its time roaring among the hills. Its breath was fire and its cries were like the wind. I often asked some of the blacks to take me to the hills where this terrible monster lived, but none of them could be induced to do so. There seemed to be a genuine fear among them concerning the 'budleemundja.'

"Well, after a trying ride I reached the Yalo' hills. I found water and determined to camp for a few days. I could not get the 'budleemundja' out of my mind, and was anxious to explore the country. For two days I rambled among the mulga and wild pine. Strangely enough, I did hear a peculiar throbbing sound, and at times it was so real that I actually looked up to see if an aeroplane was passing overhead. Several times I tried to follow the sound, but never seemed to come any nearer to it. A peculiar fear came over me when, in the dead of night, the strange sound would break

around me. Every movement in the bush made me think an enemy was close at hand.

"My second night at Yalo' was spent in a dry watercourse. Having securely hobbled the mule I was riding, I made a camp in a sandy hollow. Day was breaking when I finally awoke, and for a few minutes I amused myself watching a cheeky crow perched in a tree above me. Perhaps the old rascal thought I was dead, for he was letting pieces of twig and leaves fall upon me to see if I stirred. As I was watching him something else caught my eye. It was a cross under the very limb the bird was on. I sprang to my feet like a flash and saw quite clearly the cross. It had evidently been scratched very deeply in the bark, and under the cross were the initials W.B. Nearly all that day I searched about in the neighbourhood, but could find nothing more. Yet I was certain I had found the 'tree marked X,' for Blackwood's initials were plainly visible.

"Two months ago I was able to make another dash to Yalo'. I found the tree quite easily, for I had carefully located the spot. After spending a whole day in fruitless search I camped again at the very spot where I had camped some months before. In the morning it occurred to me that I should make a closer examination of the marked tree. I did so, and to my great surprise I noticed what had escaped my eyes all along. Another small cross was on one of the roots of the tree and beside it a small arrow pointing along the watercourse. For some moments I gazed at the marks, trying to puzzle out their meaning. That Blackwood had carved them was practically certain. Then the truth dawned upon me. There must be something under that root at the very spot marked by the arrow. The only tool I had with me was a knife, and working

with it and a flat stone, I scraped away the earth. Fortunately the tree was growing on a bank of the dry watercourse, and consequently was safe from the action of water when heavy showers fell. To my joy I found a bottle carefully concealed under the root. It was tightly corked and contained a note. In my eagerness I broke the bottle, and here is the very note I found. For nearly ten years it was buried under the tree. You see how yellow it is."

"Is the writing still legible?"

"Quite, and I can easily recognise it as Blackwood's hand, although it must have been written in great haste. This is how it reads:

"Follow creek for three miles. Take Dead Finish Creek to the right another mile. Go down bank at mulga patch into chasm. Oil at this spot. Reef due north from chasm, over three hills, about two miles. Schafer in hot pursuit. May perish before reaching camp.

W. Blackwood.

"With the finding of this note all my old hopes revived. I quickly mounted the mule and rode along the creek. The rough directions were easily followed till I came to the mulga patch. Then, tying up the mule in a shady spot, I searched on foot. The mulga was very dense and there was also a lot of bullock bush and tar bush, but after searching for a few minutes I received a staggering surprise. I found the chasm which Blackwood had mentioned. It is the most remarkable place I have ever seen, and there is a great surprise for you later on when you see it. I didn't have a camera with me, or I would have taken photographs. The canyon is very deep and proved to be an enormous

crack between two giant rocks. With considerable difficulty I crawled down into the ravine and came at last among the stones and undergrowth at the bottom. A few wild pine trees are growing up the sides of the gorge, but for the most part all that is showing is a perpendicular face of rock. I have never heard anybody speak about the place, and probably Wilson and Blackwood were the only two other white men who have ever seen it. Perhaps I am the only living white man who knows of its existence.

"Needless to say, I made a careful examination for traces of oil. A peculiar feeling was starting to come over me that I was going to be disappointed, when to my surprise I noticed what appeared to be steam emerging from the crevice at the point where the hills came together again. I went nearer to examine, and was astonished at the warmth of the temperature. A peculiar heat came forth and sent a sensation through me as though I were receiving a current from a galvanic battery. I took the precaution to cover my face, but the burning sensation passed through my clothing. I felt strangely faint and expected to fall when I was suddenly brought to my senses by a dismal roar beside me, followed by that strange throbbing sound. It was the dreadful 'budleemundja' so feared by the blacks. But where was it? Again and again the sound came to my ears and puzzled me beyond description. No wonder the aborigines were afraid, because the sound was so uncanny that it made me shudder.

"However, as nothing terrible happened, I gradually pulled myself together and made a search for the gold reef. I found traces of the yellow metal and a few small nuggets, but so far I have not been able to locate the reef. An exhaustive

exploration of the canyon will need to be made, and I will leave that to you, Roy. My examination seemed to centre on that portion of the chasm where the strange heat seemed to come forth. I thought of Blackwood's dying words, 'burning air.' Here at all events was a clue to the great mystery. Whether there is oil there or not I cannot say, but I am certain I have found something which will richly repay our investigations.

"On returning to Moolooloo homestead I determined to find competent help. I thought of you, Roy, from the very start, and I am sure you will be able to solve the mystery.

"We have strange mysteries to unravel, but we have clues to go on. What did Blackwood mean by 'Schafer'? What is the secret of 'burning air'? A big job confronts us. We must bring light to bear on all these dark things. But let us sit down for a time in the lounge."

CHAPTER V THE LOST EXPEDITION

EARLY next morning Robert Wright left for Ballarat. The details of their plans had been carefully thought out, and an hotel selected as their head-quarters. A few days elapsed before Roy and Jim were ready to follow. Each had peculiar difficulties to overcome, and neither wished to show signs of undue haste. Definite arrangements had been made with Mr. Locke, who had agreed to carry on until Roy's return. Jim's parents were under the impression that their son had gone off on a research expedition. He was in good company and they were not anxious.

On reaching Ballarat, Roy examined the quarry

and made a considerable show of gathering specimens. His report was furnished in due course and no suspicions were aroused.

Eventually the three men gathered at their hotel. Bob was partially disguised and was feeling safer than he had felt for a long time. The mysterious Di Gilio had not been noticed for several days, and Bob was hopeful that he had been left behind for good. Consequently there did not appear to be any necessity for elaborate precautions, although the three men were careful not to be seen very much in each other's company. They had agreed to push on from Ballarat at the earliest moment. Their passages were booked through to Adelaide and everything was in readiness for the day following Roy's arrival at Ballarat.

When the evening meal was over the three men collected in Wright's bedroom and completed the arrangements for the journey. When this was done they were glad to sit back and smoke and talk. Jim soon seized the opportunity of bringing up a matter upon which he was very eager to receive additional information.

"How about relating some more of your experiences, Mr. Wright?" he said. "I am sure Roy is as eager as I am to know more about Wilson and Blackwood."

"Yes, I promised to tell you more, didn't I? And there is no time like the present; but let me remark, to begin with, that a bushman likes to hear his Christian name. Call me Bob. It sounds more friendly."

"Well, I have many experiences to relate, as I have been a wanderer nearly all my life. Roy knows a good deal of my history, but I suppose you are anxious to know what has been happening to me in Central Australia. When I was a lad of

sixteen I started out on a prospecting expedition with two bushmen named Wilson and Blackwood. I had little idea of what was before me, and thought that the expedition was going to be a kind of picnic. However, I was soon sadly disillusioned. After we left the railway line there was a long, tedious journey with a mule team. My mates, of course, were expert bushmen, and they took great delight in explaining matters to me. I couldn't have been with better fellows, but still the terrible loneliness soon made me feel homesick. Wilson and Blackwood had contracted to do dogging work at the back of a great station called Moolooloo. This was really only a blind to explain our presence in that part of the country. We established a camp near a waterhole. The dingoes were very numerous, and we soon made a start at trapping and poisoning them. The station paid us so much a head for each dingo killed and kept us supplied with provisions. Wilson and Blackwood were very clever at catching the wild dogs, with the result that we soon had a big heap of scalps collected. Our provisions were brought out as far as a well-keeper's hut, some twenty-five miles from where we were camped. It was my job every month or two to go over to this hut for mail and supplies and to leave there a number of dingo scalps for the manager to collect. Moolooloo only had a few fenced paddocks. The most of the station was open country. Our work was to attack the dogs in the open plains so as to make their incursions upon the sheep stations less frequent. We earned good money and had no opportunity of spending it. Wilson and Blackwood soon found time to do some prospecting, but although they often got a 'colour,' nothing startling happened for some time.

"We had quite a neat camp constructed close to

the waterhole. Our tents were covered with ti-tree and there were a number of spreading gums in the vicinity. Rough yards were made for the mules, but it was quite safe to let them graze outside, as they had to keep near the waterhole or perish from thirst.

"After a couple of months I got accustomed to the life, and we were getting on so well that Blackwood arranged for his wife and little daughter to come out and join us. They came by rail and coach as far as Moolooloo homestead. From there Blackwood brought them on with his mule team to our camp, which was situated some seventy miles farther on.

"We were soon a very happy family. Blackwood and I continued dogging operations, while Wilson frequently went out on extensive prospecting trips. Mrs. Blackwood was a very bright little woman, and her daughter Rae, a girl of eight years of age, was the very essence of mischief and delight. As I was recently from college, I was installed as tutor, but it required all the persuasive ability at my command to induce little Rae to master the mysteries of the English tongue. She much preferred to romp with the dogs or climb the gum trees around the waterhole. Still, I think I did teach her a little. Her father played an accordion, and at night we often sat by the camp fire and drove away the cares of the day by filling the night with music.

"Another important event in the history of our camp was the arrival of two black boys. They attached themselves to our staff without any dispute or award with regard to wages or hours. Our intense respect for politics prompted us to call them Joe and Billy. They became in time very useful to us, and were a source of great interest and joy to little Rae.

"We had established our camp very quietly in the year 1912. We never had any visitors, and the only other human being we occasionally saw was the keeper of the well where our provisions were left. You will think it was a jolly monotonous life, but somehow it wasn't. We were all happy and we got on splendidly together.

"At first my father was expecting me back every day, but after I had been in the 'Never-Never' for a few months and did not complain, he became quite interested in our expedition and looked forward to my letters. I used to fill the letters with glowing accounts of our possibilities, but I had no idea that we were on the eve of such big events.

"When we had been out for nearly a year we scored our first big success. Wilson, returning from one of his trips in the hills, brought back a gold nugget and informed us that he had located what seemed to be an extensive gold reef. Naturally we were very excited. It was then agreed that I should remain at the camp with the black boys and carry on the dogging work as best I could. Blackwood and Wilson set out almost at once to explore the reef. This meant that for days at a time Mrs. Blackwood and little Rae were left alone at the camp. The loneliness must have been very trying for them, but we all had the gold fever, and the chance of finding something big seemed to occupy all our thoughts.

"Once on my return from a dogging trip I was alarmed to find Mrs. Blackwood very ill. Rae had been trying to do what she could for her mother, but judging by her eyes and face, I think the poor kid had been crying most of the time.

"Fortunately that very night Blackwood and Wilson returned. So far they had not located any

big reef, but had found traces of gold in several places.

"We got the mules in and the buggy ready. If Mrs. Blackwood was no better by next day it was arranged that she should be taken down to the station homestead and from there down to the railway line. However, when morning came she was much better, and then continued so for three or four days. My mates were making preparations to start out on another trip, when Mrs. Blackwood suddenly took bad again. We made an attempt to shift her, but after travelling for a mile or two we were obliged to turn back. She was too ill to continue the journey, and after getting back to the camp she never seemed to rally. Quite suddenly, she died early next morning. Blackwood and little Rae were completely overcome by grief. The whole life seemed to go out of the expedition. It fell to my lot to keep little Rae away from the camp while a rude coffin was made. My heart went out for the poor little kid as she cried and cried and refused to be comforted.

"Next morning we buried our dead under a spreading gum. A little cross was put up, and we carved the name on the bark of the gum tree. Wilson wrote a full account for the police and sent away black Joe with it to the station homestead.

"For several days we all remained about the camp, but none of us was in the mood to do anything. Then at last, being utterly tired of inactivity, we got ready for the bush again. Wilson and I had talked matters over a bit during our days together at the camp, and we had agreed to push on with the enterprise as quickly as possible; and then if success didn't come very soon we would give up the expedition. Blackwood, however, wanted to be done with the whole business there

and then, but Wilson persuaded him to make one last effort.

"We meant to wait until Joe returned, but the boy took his own time over the trip. We found out later that he fell in with some other blacks, who persuaded him to have a holiday with them.

"Anyhow, we waited a few days longer for him to appear; then we could endure it no longer. Wilson asked me to take charge of the camp and not to go very far from it. The rest of our party, taking a heavy pack on our remaining mule, started out in the direction of the supposed reef. They all carried bundles on their shoulders as well. Even little Rae insisted upon carrying a small bag of belongings. I felt very sad and lonely as they started out, and watched the party till they were out of sight. I think it was one of the saddest sights I ever saw to see Rae walking along beside her father and leaving me in charge of her mother's grave. She had planted there a white geranium, and her last request was that I should be sure to water it. Well, I did water it—many and many a time—for it seemed to remind me of the poor lonely kid. How little Rae lived at all in that rough country I often wondered. It tested me very severely, and I often felt as if I were going out of my mind.

"After my mates left me I never saw a human face for some weeks. I was afraid to go very far from the camp in case somebody from the station should come out to see us. Then again I wanted to be about when Joe got in. I thought that if he found the camp deserted he might break away altogether, and I needed the mule and the provisions he was to bring along. However, he came along at last after a few anxious weeks of waiting, and it wasn't before my rations were getting very short.

"Joe and I went trapping for a week or two and killed time in any way we could. We were both lonely. I was hungry for a white face and Joe was hungry for a black one. I've been among our blacks a good deal, and I'm certain that the cruellest way you can punish them is to separate them for a long time from other blacks. I could see that Joe was getting dissatisfied, and, try as I would, my company did not seem to please him. Every morning I fully expected to find him missing, but fortunately one morning I found myself with two black boys instead of one. Billy had returned, and he coolly gave me a note from Wilson. I had been very depressed, but the mere thought of a letter from another white man cheered me immensely. I was very anxious to hear how little Rae and her father were getting on, and I also had the hope now that the expedition would be given up.

"I opened the note, and the first word which caught my eye was 'gold.' Wilson started by telling me that they had by a very strange accident found the hatter's reef. The position where they were working must be kept a deadly secret—even the black boy had no idea of the discovery, and both the aboriginals must be kept in ignorance of it. They were picking up a good deal of loose gold, and when they had collected a small fortune they would return to the camp and decide what was to be done. Blackwood and little Rae were well and the change of scene and new interests had in every way been good for them. I was instructed to send one or two of the black boys back with provisions and then hug the camp very closely myself. I also received the strict order to see that no white man was given any information concerning the part where they were working. My job then was to be guardian of the track and keep other men off while my mates

made their fortune. The thought of gold, of course, cured all my depression, and I was soon working away with a fresh enthusiasm. I decided to send both the black boys with the mules. Then one could travel backwards and forwards as occasion demanded. The boys were far better pleased when I said they were both to go back to Wilson.

"I gathered a lot of information about little Rae from Billy. She was installed as cook at the new camp and was standing the rough food very well. She and her father had a tent, but Wilson camped in a kind of wurlie.

"Needless to say, I got very lonely again after I had been left to myself for a few days. To make matters worse, I had nothing to read, but I amused myself often by writing a diary of the expedition.

"I was feeling wretched one day, and had half made up my mind to set out on foot for Wilson's camp, when I was surprised to see a camel train approaching. There were four camels, and the first one was ridden by a little black boy and the last one carried a white man. I was so pleased that I went forward gladly to meet them. They seemed just as pleased to see me, and the white man asked if he could camp near the waterhole. He did not introduce himself, but I took him to be some government official. I soon had the fire going, and we had a rough meal together. The white man seemed to be very agreeable, and I was soon at my ease with him. We talked away during the meal-time, and then, to my great surprise, my new companion opened up a big bundle of books and magazines and gave me quite a number.

"I thanked him and mentioned how hard up I had been for reading matter. Then he told me that when I was finished with the present supply

I could send them into Moolooloo homestead and he would see that I got further supplies.

" 'I suppose you are a policeman?' I said at length.

" The stranger smiled.

" 'No,' he said, 'I'm only a humble parson.'

" 'Well, you have saved my life, anyhow,' I said with thankfulness. " 'These books will be a goldmine to me.'

" The parson told me that his name was Bruce, and having been informed at Moolooloo station that we were camped out on the open country, he decided not to pass on without paying us a visit. He had heard of the tragedy at our camp, and was very anxious to see Blackwood and little Rae. I told him they were camped a long way out. The dogs were far more numerous farther back, and we were keen on doing as much execution as possible before we got back into civilisation again.

" 'I'll camp with you for to-day,' said Bruce. 'Then if you will give me some rough directions I will find my way out to them to-morrow.'

" Now, this put me in a bit of a fix. I didn't want to be rude to Mr. Bruce, but at the same time he must not get any hint of what was going on. He seemed a very cute fellow, who could easily put two and two together, so I made up my mind not to take any risks. I explained to Mr. Bruce that my mates would be shifting camp every few days, and it would be almost impossible to locate them.

" 'Don't worry,' said Mr. Bruce. 'I'll find them all right. My camels won't need water for a few days, so I can take my time and track them down.'

" 'But you could never find their tracks,' I persisted. 'A terrible sandstorm raged a few days ago, and their tracks will be gone except in the hard ground. I don't think I could find them even with

my black boys, so I think it would be positively dangerous for you to make the attempt.'

" 'I believe you are right,' said Mr. Bruce at length; 'but it is a jolly shame that I can't see them, especially as I may be able to cheer them up a bit. Have you any idea when they will be back at your camp?'

" 'Not for sometime,' I replied. 'They have enough rations to keep them going for over a month, so if they are catching dogs I suppose they will work on.'

" 'Well, I can't wait that long,' said Bruce, 'so I will write a letter and you can give it to Mr. Blackwood when he gets in.'

" Mr. Bruce wrote a long letter and left some picture books for little Rae. He stayed with me until next day, and then made back towards Moolooloo. Needless to say, I was desperately lonely again after he left, but I had a few books to read, which helped me greatly.

" About a fortnight after Bruce's visit the black boys returned to my camp, bringing, of course, another note from Wilson. That letter was so important and mysterious that I have carried it safely with me ever since. Wilson told me in a few sentences how they had got right on the track of the hatter's reef. There was gold in abundance, almost showing on the surface, but they had made a more remarkable discovery still. A few miles from the reef there was a wide crack in the ground out of which powerful gases were coming. For more than a chain around the heat was very great. My mates told me that they intended to visit the spot again and make a fuller investigation. When this was done they would come back to my camp and decide how best to secure the gold and make known the discovery. The last sentence in the note informed me that they would be back within two weeks.

"Of course I was again in a fever of excitement. I thought and dreamt of untold wealth. What would my father say? If my mates were to give me a share in the gold find I must certainly be a very wealthy man.

"I kept busy, so that the time would pass more quickly. I often went out shooting and trapping with the black boys, and day by day the fortnight passed. I knew I could not hear from them again, so I had to wait patiently for their arrival. Towards the end of the second week we never went very far from the camp, for I wanted to be about when my mates got in. I looked all round the camp from time to time, greedy to catch the first glimpse of them, but day by day went by, and still they did not return. When three weeks passed I became very anxious. Suspense is a terrible thing, and I admire anybody who can be patient in the face of difficulties. I was driven nearly mad with anxiety, and I jumped at the slightest noise, day or night. I pictured my mates appearing with bags of gold. I pictured my return to Melbourne with untold wealth, but, alas, the weeks passed on. I sent the black boys back to Wilson with fresh provisions. Nearly a week later they returned with the staggering news that they could find no trace of them. Their camp was pulled up and scarcely a mark remained to identify the spot. Rain had fallen and all tracks were obliterated, and the boys were unable to find which way they had gone.

"A fearful suspicion came over me that my mates had deserted me. Perhaps they had returned to Adelaide to claim all the gold for themselves. I didn't know what to do. The wild thought occurred to me to break camp at once and hurry down south. Then it seemed to me to be impossible for them to get back to Moolooloo without the mules and buggy.

I was somewhat comforted by that thought. Still, an ugly suspicion lurked at the back of my mind.

"I remained about the camp a few days longer in case my mates were returning from an additional prospecting tour. Then the torture of suspense forced me into activity. I left Joe at the camp, and after placing a letter for Wilson in a secure place, started out with Billy in search of my mates. The black boy took me to the spot where the others had been camped. In a fever of excitement I searched both for my mates and for the gold, but could find neither. I was afraid to stay away too long, and I could see that Billy was restless and lonely. Having been more than a week out in the bush, I was in great hopes of finding, on my return, that my mates were there. So when I got near the camp my heart began to beat very wildly—but, alas, my hopes were all again dashed to the ground. Nobody was about. My letter remained unopened, and, further, I could see no trace of black Joe. A feeling of utter wretchedness and helplessness came over me. I was so tired I wanted to sleep and forget my worry. My mind refused to think, and I fancy I must have been going about in a kind of stupor for over a week. Still my mates did not make their appearance. Their provisions must now be exhausted, and surely that would drive them back—but no.

"Billy had been very quiet for some days, and one morning I found that he had broken camp and had ridden off during the night on one of the mules. I was now absolutely alone, and I was at my wits' end to know what to do. One mule remained and my provisions were almost gone. I felt that if I remained at the camp I would go mad, so I got on the mule and determined to make another rapid search. With nobody to talk to for so long and

knowing that the nearest human being was at least twenty-five miles away, a terrible feeling came over me. I was overpowered with fear and frequently yelled out at the top of my voice. My calls rumbled away in the distance, but no reply ever came back.

"For several days I searched and searched. Time after time I was nearly bushed. My yells sounded out every day, but over the salt bush and the mulga there hung a deathly silence. At last my supplies of food and water were all gone, and I must return to the camp or perish. I urged on the mule again, hoping that my mates had by now returned. I was a few miles from the camp and was watching ahead of me for any sign of life, when, to my amazement, I saw below me the footprints of a man.

" 'Tracks,' I yelled, 'and making for the camp, too.'

"I could see them quite plainly from the back of the mule, and was able to follow them without dismounting. It surprised me to notice only one trail, so I rode backwards and forwards in the hope of picking up further tracks, but none were visible. However, I soon decided to follow up the one track and find the human being, whoever he was.

"About a mile from the camp I found him—stretched upon the ground. He seemed to be only taking a rest, so I trotted up to surprise him. But—shall I ever forget the sight? He was the very picture of death. His face was swollen and strangely charred, as though he had come through fire. I sprang from the mule and pulled aside the hat that was covering his eyes. It was Blackwood—little Rae's father. I called him by name and shook him. Then, to my great joy, his eyes, which were nearly blind, moved slightly.

" 'Water! water!' he said in a faint whisper.

"O God!—and I didn't have a drop! I raised

his head and spoke to him. He looked at me earnestly through his swollen eyelids and then recognised my voice. The poor fellow was very far gone. His lips moved and he made an effort to speak, but all I could make out was 'Rae—find Rae.' He held my arm and tried to make a dying appeal. If I could only have read the unearthly yearning of his heart it would have saved me years of agony. I seemed to lose my senses during those dreadful moments, and all I did was to stare at him and wait for other words. Then the poor fellow, after a desperate struggle, uttered those words which I have already mentioned—'Burning air—oil—gold—tree marked X—lowest limb—Schafer carried us off—find Rae.'

"I fanned the poor fellow for a moment with my hat, but he said no more. I sprang on to the mule and galloped to the camp. Nobody was about. I filled my water-bag and galloped back to Blackwood. After throwing water on his face and hands and pouring some over his body, he came to again for a moment and said four words: 'Oil—Schafer—find Rae.' I couldn't get him to speak again, and he died a few moments later.

"I examined his body and found it strangely burnt. Peculiar sores, which must have given him great pain while he lived, covered him from head to foot. How he came by them I could not in the least imagine. I searched his pockets, but did not find anything at all—not even a nail or a piece of paper. This was all the more remarkable to me because Blackwood had a great habit of always having his pockets filled with various articles.

"What to do puzzled me greatly. I was all alone with the dead, and the nearest human being that I knew of was at least twenty-five miles away. However, I carried the dead body back to the camp

and made a rough coffin out of boxes, bark and bags. All night long I sat up beside the camp fire with my loaded rifle beside me and spoke to the dogs for company. A terrible fear possessed me, but I felt braver with the daylight. I buried the mortal remains of Blackwood beside his wife, left a note for Wilson at the camp and rode off as fast as I could for the well-keeper's hut. He knew the black boys had left us, and was wondering how we were getting on. Next day I rode on to Moolooloo homestead and reported the death to the manager. The police came out and made a search, but finding no trace of Wilson or Rae, they were given up as lost. I had no definite information to give concerning the gold reef, and as there still was a possibility that I might be able to find it myself, I decided to say nothing.

"On returning to Melbourne I told the whole story to my father. He actually encouraged me to return and commence an independent search for the gold and oil. I did so, and the manager of Moolooloo gladly gave me a job at the station. I could not do very much by myself in the way of prospecting, but I kept my ears open. Several times I went back, identified the old haunts and made excursions to the neighbourhood of the lost camp. Everything was quiet and there was no sign of life anywhere. I kept the secret of the lost wealth entirely to myself, and I don't think anyone guessed the object of our expedition. Men sometimes spoke of Wilson and Blackwood. The mystery pertaining to the loss of Wilson and the little girl was the starting point of many extravagant legends. One story was that Wilson had murdered Blackwood and then carried off little Rae. A bushman once startled Moolooloo by bringing in the news that he had found the skeletons of a man and a child far out in the mulga.

Several of us rode out to inspect the bones, but to the best of our knowledge they were skeletons of aboriginals. A rumour that has persisted is that Blackwood and his mate were both killed by the natives who carried off the little girl and brought her up as a member of their tribe. Different bushmen emphatically declare that they have seen a white girl with the aboriginals. Some still maintain that little Rae is with the aboriginals, but I could never get any definite information, and the general opinion is that Wilson and little Rae both perished at the time of Blackwood's death.

"Well, you have heard my story. What happened when the war broke out you know. How I explored the Yalo' ranges and found the mighty chasm with the 'burning air' has already been told. I have found the tree marked X. I have found the canyon with the gold and oil and 'burning air.' We have yet to find Schafer and solve all the mysteries of Yalo'."

CHAPTER VI

DI GILIO

THE Adelaide express was steaming away westward. At Ballarat three men had boarded the train, and after keeping apart for some time they eventually found themselves seated in the same compartment. Roy and Jim were both responding well to their new names and Roy had developed a consumptive cough.

As there were only two ladies besides themselves in the compartment, it was possible for them to talk freely. The details of the expedition, however, were practically completed and each man knew

what was required of him and the part he was to play.

Bob had made extensive arrangements before he left Moolooloo. A "dogging" encampment was to be established at the tree marked X. There was permanent water near by, and a "dogging" party going out into the back country would occasion no surprise or curiosity. The North train from Adelaide would be taken as far as Wooleena Siding. From there they intended to travel by the motor mail as far as Moolooloo homestead. Roy and Jim received full instructions concerning the place where they were to stay in Adelaide. A separation was to be made as soon as that city was reached. Bob preferred to travel alone and meet his mates again at Moolooloo.

The journey had proceeded a few hours and the passengers were settling down for the night, when a man passed along the corridor and looked deliberately into the compartment where the three men were seated. Bob pretended to be asleep until the man had moved on. Then, touching Roy's arm, he whispered that the curious man was none other than Di Gilio.

"How he has managed to follow I cannot tell, but there will be no sleep for me to-night. He will probably try to steal my papers. However, he will find that I can follow him quite as easily as he follows me. It will be possible for me to hold him in Adelaide while you two chaps go north. If I get a chance I will suddenly leave this train at Murray Bridge and proceed in another way."

"Shall we alter our plans too?" Roy asked.

"Certainly not. You have full instructions. Remember the address of that café in King William Street. Ask there for Eric Hall, and he will direct you to Graceburn House. It will not be safe for

me to stay with you, but if you are at Graceburn House I can always reach you by phone. While in Adelaide get a copy of 'David Copperfield.' Know the characters of that story well, for I may at any moment assume one of them. Di Gilio does not mean to give us any quarter, so we must try and beat him at his own game. All this makes me more certain that we are on the track of some big discovery. Why should a man spend money in following me? There is some mystery, and we must get to the bottom of it."

At that moment Di Gilio again appeared at the door, and catching a glance of the vacant seat, strolled into the compartment. He appeared to be perfectly at his ease, and in the most matter-of-fact way possible turned over the pages of his paper. Later he commenced to talk.

Roy and Jim both felt very anxious. There was something in the quiet daring of the stranger which seemed to indicate that Wright and his companions had been recognised.

All night long the express rolled on. In the face of danger Wright was indefatigable. Before midnight he managed to obtain a little sleep, and then he deliberately kept guard until morning.

When the train was nearing Murray Bridge the passengers commence to crowd along the corridors. Di Gilio rose, and was stepping out in front of Wright. Part of a letter was showing out of the stranger's pocket, and like a flash Wright put out his fingers, and, unseen by any eye except Roy's, had coolly taken possession of it.

Breakfast was obtained and the passengers were taking their seats again. Wright indeed boarded the train, but as it commenced to move off he stepped back on to the platform. Di Gilio had not expected such a move, and the train had travelled some

distance before he became restless and commenced to walk up and down through the train. This, of course, gave Roy and Jim another opportunity of discussing their own affairs, which they quickly took advantage of.

When Adelaide was reached the young men collected Wright's luggage as well as their own and secured a car. They were driven quickly to Hall's Café and a little later they were quietly installed at Graceburn House. They both felt greatly relieved that Di Gilio had been left behind and that they were no longer watched. After lunch they were glad of the opportunity of having several hours' sleep.

Next morning, among the letters which were handed in was one addressed to Mr. Ben Cook. Roy claimed it at once and went upstairs with Jim to read it in the quiet of their room. As they had guessed, the letter was from Wright and contained interesting news. He stated that the letter which had reached him so "mysteriously" had given him much food for thought. It contained several names and mentioned a certain meeting place. Wright further stated that he intended to remain for a few days in Adelaide in the hope of being able to enter the camp of the Philistines. Roy and Jim, however, were instructed to travel next day by the Up North train and proceed to Moolooloo station. The letter was signed D. C., which indicated very clearly that Wright was taking every precaution.

"This means that we must travel north by ourselves," said Roy.

"Well, we are quite capable of that," replied Jim.

"Quite true, but Di Gilio has seen us. We must not forget that. However, it was a piece of good fortune the way Bob managed to get that letter. Quite likely it was written by Schafer, and Bob would therefore get many points to work on."

"The job seems to be getting more complicated every day," said Jim.

"So it appears, but we are in this business now and there can be no turning back."

"Certainly not. The job suits me and I have almost forgotten about my exams."

* * * * *

The day passed quietly. Roy and Jim went out in different directions and secured what they needed for the journey, and returned separately in the evening. Roy had purchased a copy of "David Copperfield" which he intended to read again on the journey northward.

Before the young men retired for the night, the 'phone bell rang and Ben Cook was asked for. Bob was waiting to speak and had both news and instructions to give. He remarked that "Peggotty" was still "in search of his niece" and that even "Wilkins Micawber" was "expecting something to turn up."

"I'm glad to hear that," said Roy, "and we will await further developments with keen interest."

"There must be no further waiting," said Bob. "In short, you must catch the train to-morrow morning and proceed without delay. You will probably reach Moolooloo a week before me. Find Harry Lewis and get him to convey you and your luggage to the site for our new camp. He will know the way. Leave my luggage behind you at Graceburn House. If you are in doubt about anything ask Will Barr or Harry Lewis."

"About that letter which came into your hands—was it written by your friend S——?"

"Yes, and it was my best find for some time. It has cleared up a lot of points. S—— is a real man, a German, but he writes good English. The

most of the letter was dealing with machinery. Words here and there are written in German and several sentences are given in a code. There is also a reference made to a certain Professor Zinzenburg—whoever he is."

"Did you see S——?"

"Yes, and I even got into conversation with him. I have also seen Di Gilio with him. I will remain here for a few days and 'mark time' on them. I may be able to secure further information. Don't worry about me. I can reach Moolooloo several ways. You go straight ahead according to our plans. Good night and good luck."

Early next morning Roy and Jim rose early and travelled separately to the railway station. They were both partially disguised and travelled in different compartments as far as Quorn, where they spent a peaceful night.

CHAPTER VII

TOM SPARGO KNOWS
SOMETHING

VERY quietly, Roy and Jim boarded the North train next morning. Jim had his seat picked and was standing outside the carriage when Roy came down from the station with his luggage and quietly stepped past his friend and coolly took a seat. A few minutes later the train was continuing its tedious journey towards the heart of the Australian continent.

An hour or two passed before Roy and Jim commenced a conversation. They began by asking each other various questions and both pleaded ignorance concerning the ways of the back country

They were soon exchanging "smokes" and intentions.

Men of various types were seated in the carriage. Some were shearers going north to another shed. Others were bushmen from the far off cattle runs. They all seemed strong and resourceful chaps and were as brown as their scorched native earth. The seats ran the full length of the carriage, parallel to the line itself. So a number of men were thus gathered together in the one compartment. Some were smoking or drinking and others were sleeping. Roy and Jim tried to sum up the various men in the carriage, and at the same time they tried to obtain more information about the strange country to which they were going. For a time they were very interested in two Afghans and a half-caste who were sitting at the opposite end of the carriage. A man in the corner seat was explaining to Jim that in the back country most of the work among camels was done by Afghans. Jim, of course, was very interested and was asking further questions when a man opposite who had been trying to sleep for the past hour roused himself up and looked around him. At the same time Roy had another bad fit of coughing which instantly drew the attention of the drowsy passenger.

"You have a bad cough, mate," he said.

"Yes," said Roy. "I'm troubled a bit that way. Dr. Anderson has ordered me 'north' to shake it off."

"Good shooting," said the stranger. "Our climate will tan your outside and our bush beer will tan your inside. The fact is I've been jolly crook myself."

"Bad luck—chest?"

"Yes, chest and heart and liver and head."

"Never mind, mate," said Roy. "You're not dead yet."

"Far from it," said the stranger. "It takes a lot of microbes to kill a bushman. But I've had to blow down and see a doctor."

"Anything serious?" asked Roy sympathetically.

"Nothing so far," he says, "but he tells me I'll have to be careful what I eat."

"'Dash it all,' I said, 'isn't every bushman particular what he eats and drinks, too?'"

"'Well, what do you eat?' asked the doctor."

"'Salt beef and damper when I can get it,' says I, 'but when I can't, a fresh bit of sleepy lizard goes well.'"

"'Can you get any milk or cream?' he asked."

"'I had to laugh in the fellow's face. Then he asked me if I could get fruit.'"

"'Only paddy melons,' says I."

"'Then,' says he, 'you better go back and eat anything you can get and drink plenty of beer.'"

"'Good shooting, I agree with you,' says I. 'So here I am and I intend to carry out the doctor's instructions. He understands my case thoroughly. But, if it's a fair question, where do you intend to get a camp in the back country?'"

"'I know the manager up at Moolooloo and I intend to put in a few weeks with him. If he can't fix me up with something to do he will perhaps advise me what part to make for.'"

"'Wonders never cease,' said the stranger. 'I'm making straight back to Moolooloo.'"

"'How fortunate,' said Roy. 'I suppose you are the overseer?'"

"'No, no. I'm only the handy man. A chap known as Cranky Wright is overseer but the fellow is more than half mad and is more than half his time away from the station.'"

"'I suppose there are a few thousand acres in the Moolooloo run,' said Roy."

"A trifle over three million if you count in the horse paddock."

"Surely, never?" said Roy.

"Three million is the figure as sure as my name is Tom Spargo."

"Do you ever get lost crossing the paddocks?"

"Sometimes; but when a fellow has lived in this country as long as I have, he gets either bush sense or white ants. That chap Cranky Wright has some of both. Yes, Wright is the boy to go wrong."

"What happens him?"

"He strays out bush sometimes hunting for quartz and then, after a few weeks, he crawls back into camp looking as miserable as a drought-stricken sheep. The poor beggar has got the white ants very badly; still he knows his job on the station."

"Leave Wright alone," put in another man who had been listening close by. "I was with him in the trenches and, let me tell you, he is the whitest man I know. I'll take off my hat any day to Bob Wright."

"Of course, the poor beggar is to be pitied," replied Spargo. "He had a rough time in the bush when he was a kid, and losing his mates all in a heap cracked his skull, and his head has been leaking ever since."

"How did he happen to lose his mates?" asked Roy.

"Nobody seems to have the faintest idea," replied Spargo, "but they disappeared somehow. As a kid he went out with a dogging party and they were making good money when suddenly they all disappeared except Wright. The body of one of the chaps was found some time afterwards by the police, and it is generally supposed that the others perished in the bush."

"Well, if they were still alive they would have showed up by now," put in the other man.

"Most chaps reckon they are dead but Tom Spargo has his private opinion." And Tom lit his pipe with the air of one who had inside knowledge.

"Wasn't Wright's mate a chap named Wilson?" the bushman asked.

"Yes, Wilson was one, and Blackwood was the other. It was Blackwood's body that was found but not the slightest trace of Wilson has ever been discovered."

"There was a little girl in the party, too, was there not?"

"Yes," continued Spargo. "The mother died and Blackwood kept his little girl at the camp. However, she too has entirely disappeared. The party were dogging at the back of Moolooloo when the tragedy happened. The police, of course, made a prolonged search but could find no clue to the mystery. Still, Old Peter at the station is positive that he saw the girl three years ago."

"Alive?"

"Yes, alive and nearly grown up."

"Queer," said the bushman.

"Yes, the whole mystery is queer," continued Spargo; "but then, so is Old Peter. He can frame up a lie for every hour of the day."

"Then you don't believe Old Peter's story?"

"I repeat that Tom Spargo has his private opinion."

"Well, I reckon it's worth over one hundred pounds to Old Peter when he finds a chap who will believe a single word he says," replied the bushman; "but my opinion is that the bones of Wilson and his party are covered by about six feet of sand."

"I'm not saying they are not—still I've got my private opinion."

* * * *

The journey slowly proceeded till Wooleena was reached. Then the passengers for the Moolooloo track, after a night spent in killing mosquitoes at the bush hotel, started out for the far-off runs in a motor-buckboard.

This journey lasted more than two days, during which time a number of station homesteads and boundary riders' huts were visited. Roy and Jim had many opportunities of conversation and freely gave each other their impressions of the country. Tom Spargo and another man had fortified themselves with plenty of liquor and they did not seem to worry very much how long the journey took.

The country for the most part was uninteresting. There were odd dry watercourses, sandy stretches and never-ending salt bush and mulga. Fences were few and far apart and the old buckboard passed continually across huge paddocks, some of which were hundreds of square miles in size. This was wild Australia, yet all seemed strangely quiet. Nothing broke the silence save the throbbing of the car and the cries of cockatoos. The motor-buckboard struggled on across great salt-bush plains, around giant sandhills, through dry creeks and between rocky hills. The sun glared upon the sand, upon the stones and the shadeless lands and created in the travellers that thirst for which Central Australia is noted.

At every boundary rider's hut or fencing camp the travellers were obliged to pull up and partake of tea. Some of the men who were met along the track had ridden many miles across dreary country to see other human beings and hear a little of what was going on in that great outer world which lay far beyond the sandhills.

At last Moolooloo was reached. The front gate was made of barbed wire and netting, with some

camel bones near by. The path leading down to the "front door" consisted of a sandy track over thirty miles long.

Tom Spargo sobered up as the homestead came in view and grumbled about having to start work again. But Roy and Jim were pleased that the very trying journey was over and were anxious to get a glimpse of those scenes which were so familiar to their friend Robert Wright. They scanned the horizon for a glimpse of the hills where a mystery remained unsolved. But all was hidden behind haze and dust.

At the homestead all was excitement. It was mail day, so why shouldn't everybody cease work until letters and papers were read?

Tom Spargo was greeted by his mates and took his luggage down to the men's quarters. Roy and Jim were very tired after their long journey and, in addition, their faces were badly burnt with the inland breezes. However the cheerful face of the station manager buoyed them up.

"What have you done with Bob Wright?" he inquired.

"We cannot understand it at all," replied Roy with grave concern. "We thought he would be catching the same train that we were travelling by, but when the train steamed away he had not put in an appearance."

"Probably there will be a wire or a letter in the mail bag but I'm jolly sorry he is not here. The station needs him. It will be another fortnight now before he can get along. But in the bush, Mr. Cook, we all must learn to wait."

"I suppose a few days' rest will not hurt me," said Roy, as he gave a muffled cough, which seemed to call Jim Fisher's attention to the serious business which they had on hand.

"Yes, you will both need rest," said the manager. "By the way, I forget your friend's name."

"Harry Ford," said Roy.

"Certainly, certainly," said the manager. "And my name is Maxwell. I hope you will not object to my superiority."

"I suppose Mr. Wright told you we would be along by this mail?"

"Yes, I was expecting you. I did try to remember your names from the fact that we have a station cook and also an implement down in the shed which goes by the name of your friend. However, I forgot for the moment."

The mail car was unloaded. Letters and papers were read and gradually work was resumed. Roy and Jim were taken up to "Government House," and after being introduced to Mrs. Maxwell and the governess were shown into Wright's room. In a few hours both young men were feeling quite at home and even Roy's cough was improving.

Station life is usually very free and easy, and the two young men soon became acquainted with the various characters about the homestead, and asked many questions about the number of dingoes at various parts of the run.

The next morning, as Roy and Jim were assisting Mr. Maxwell to shift some machinery in the wool shed, they mentioned the name of Harry Lewis and inquired if he were still on the station.

"Yes," replied Mr. Maxwell, "he is still in our employ, but he is most of his time now out near the back of the run."

"Does he ever come into the homestead?"

"About once a month for provisions. He may be in almost any day now."

"I think Wright mentioned that Lewis would

take us out to a dogging camp, and help to fix it up for us," said Roy.

"Yes, Lewis could do that, but somehow he and Spargo have changed places lately."

"If you could spare Lewis for a few days," said Roy, "I will be glad of his assistance. I don't suppose it will take long to fix up the camp."

"What is the hurry?" asked Mr. Maxwell. "Wright cannot get back for a fortnight, and a couple of weeks' spell will not hurt either of you. Let the dingoes alone for a little while longer."

"We don't mind having a rest," said Roy, "but I don't wish to inconvenience you in any way."

"Don't let that trouble you," said Mr. Maxwell in a hearty manner. "I am very pleased to have your company, but are you both intending to go dogging?"

"Perhaps we will for a time," said Roy. "My mate here rather likes the idea of it."

"Well, there is no accounting for the various likings of people," replied the station manager. "For my part, the more men I can get out dogging the better. We can't get young fellows now to take it on—too lonely, but some of the old hands will do nothing else. There is an element of sport in it. It is an independent life and the chaps are not bothered with other human beings around them. I'll be glad, of course, to get additional doggers out, but in the meantime I could easily find something for you both to do about the homestead."

"We'll wait then until Wright comes back," said Roy. "He mentioned a likely place for the camp, and said that Lewis knew the spot."

"Very well," said Mr. Maxwell. "We will wait until Wright and Lewis appear. Then you can get to business."

And so it was agreed.

CHAPTER VIII THE TREE MARKED X

As the days passed by Roy and Jim settled down at the homestead. Station life was new to them both and they were soon deeply interested in all they saw around them. This was the homestead and station which was so familiar to their friend Robert Wright. Some of the station hands were strange characters but they all spoke well of Wright. Even Tom Spargo, when his supply of liquor ran out, became very agreeable and frequently aired his superior knowledge of bush matters. A number of aborigines were camped in a hollow below the homestead. All night long the dogs of the black men waged a howling warfare against the superior dogs of the white men. All on the station took this warfare as a matter of course save Roy and Jim, who alone had their slumbers disturbed by these faithful companions of men.

Fortunately Roy and Jim were both able to ride and they often accompanied different station hands to various parts of the run. These long rides together helped them to catch the spirit of the bush, and without asking any deliberate questions they were often able to lead the conversation along lines specially interesting to themselves.

The strange disappearance of Wilson and little Rae was still a favourite topic with the old bushmen. Around the camp fires and within the huts all that was known of the affair was told and retold. The aborigines, too, had surrounded the whole affair with all the mystery their minds could imagine. Some of the old blacks were very "wise" and had seen strange sights in the neighbourhood of the old camp. A belief was common among them that a terrible flying kangaroo lived near the spot, whose

howls were like thunder. This dreadful monster breathed out fire and carried off its victims and devoured them in the hills.

Roy and Jim, of course, were very interested in the story and spoke often to the old blacks about it. Their great interest and apparent fear greatly encouraged the old natives, who explained all the legends that had come down to them. The blacks were certain that whitefellows couldn't live long out longa Yalorigina. "Blackfellow never sit down that country."

It was quite certain that a strange fear possessed the minds of the aborigines and it was very evident to Roy and Jim that some mystery was at the back of the fear.

A black man does not often open his heart to a white man. The possibility of being laughed at keeps him silent. Then the white men could not be frightened by some imaginary flying kangaroo. They were quite superior to such foolish notions.

So for years the blacks lived in dread of this unknown monster and their fear was a subject for jest among the whites. But Roy and Jim talked the matter over and agreed that there must be some cause for the fears. At all events they determined to find out as much as possible from the black men. As the days went by different opportunities came, and they fortunately discovered that the "wise old blacks" were more inclined to talk if they pretended to be really afraid. So many hours were spent with the blacks, and Roy and Jim became certain that, rightly or wrongly, the dark men were afraid to go near the hills spoken of by Bob Wright.

A fortnight went by and still there was no sign of Lewis. Roy and Jim were both impatient and were anxious to get farther out. They realised that

every moment may be of importance and they were anxious to see for themselves that strange hollow with the "burning air" near the tree marked X. Mr. Maxwell, however, told the boys not to worry and if they were in a hurry they were to wait until the hurry wore off.

Mail day came again and the young men were comforted somewhat by the thought that their friend Robert Wright would soon be with them. The buckboard was seen at last in the distance and that was the signal for all hands to stop work. Roy was standing with Mr. Maxwell near the station store when the car emerged from the dry creek below and drew near the homestead. Both men looked at each other with disappointment written on their faces, for in the car was the driver only.

"Wright is not there," said Maxwell.

"Strange—very strange," replied Roy, who was bitterly disappointed.

"Sometimes when Wright gets away he never knows when to come back," continued the manager. "If it wasn't that he is such an exceptional bushman I would tell him to stay away altogether."

The car turned round by the station store and came to a standstill.

"Where is Wright?" asked Maxwell.

"No sign of him in Wooleena," replied the driver.

"No letter from him either, so he can't have finished his holiday yet."

"Hang the fellow," said Maxwell. "This will mean that I'll have to do the Willippa muster myself."

The car was soon unloaded and Maxwell sorted out the mail. Roy waited near by in the hope that a letter might have come from his friend, but the last letter was at length examined and nothing

appeared. Roy tried hard to conceal his disappointment and went on sorting out the papers and to his surprise he found a paper addressed to himself. It was the *Worker* and the address was typed. Most of the men on the station got copies of this paper, and it seemed only right that Roy should get one too.

It so happened that Tom Spargo was near by while the letters were being given out. Besides his paper he was fortunate enough to get several letters, and as he carelessly read them he seemed to keep one eye on Roy.

"No letter from the missus this trip?" Tom inquired.

"Haven't got one," replied Roy, who seemed very surprised at Tom's question.

"Cheer up then," said Tom. "You may get a dozen letters next time and I mightn't get one."

Roy walked off with his paper and Tom looked hard after him.

"Strange fellow that," muttered Tom. "Up to no good, I reckon."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Maxwell. "That chap Cook has more brains than all you fellows on the station put together."

"Perhaps—but on that score Tom Spargo has his private opinions."

Later Roy and Jim found themselves together in their room. They were both smarting under the delay and wondering what was the cause of Wright's silence. They were perplexed and also afraid lest their friend had met with misfortune.

Roy was stroking his knee with the folded paper and was deep in thought. Presently he tore away the wrapper—scarcely knowing what he was doing. Then, as the paper was opened out, something fell to the floor. It was a typewritten note. Jim soon

had it picked up and with great eagerness they both read:

My dear Copperfield,

I am at present facing temporary embarrassments of a pecuniary nature, still I am delighted to add that I have now an immediate prospect of something turning up (I am not at liberty to say in what direction), which I trust will enable me to provide, permanently, both for myself and for others in whom I have an unaffected interest. Certain ones express their dissatisfaction at this state of things but I repel such an exhibition of feeling with scorn and defiance. However, in your wisdom you will go forward, trusting in the wisdom of your old friend,

W. Micawber.

Several times the young men read this letter before its meaning started to dawn upon them. There was some good reason for the non-appearance of Wright. There must also be a very good reason for the strange secrecy that was being observed. It seemed to be a very clear warning that great caution must be observed at every step.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Jim inquired.

"A lot can be made of it," replied Roy, "but we will have to examine very carefully to get its full meaning. To begin with, it appears to me that either Wright is being followed and watched in an unmerciful manner or we are."

"How could we be followed or watched?" asked Jim. "Is there a chap here worrying his head about us?"

"That is so," replied Roy. "Still, when men are after big things they must not take any risks

—especially when Wright says he has an immediate prospect of something turning up."

"Then you conclude that Wright is on the eve of some big find?"

"I would say so, and I think he means us to push forward with the business on our own. 'In your wisdom you will go forward, trusting in the wisdom of your old friend.' What does he mean by that?"

"I think he means us to dig up Harry Lewis and get him to take us out to the tree marked X."

"Yes, I think that is quite clear. We must start out on our own account at once and take every precaution as we go."

For the next few days Roy and Jim were busy with Mr. Maxwell at the Willippa muster. The work at times was exciting, but it was a hard job for them to possess their souls in patience. They were not sorry when the muster was finished and their mules were heading back towards the homestead. During the days spent out-bush they had found out, quite by accident, that Harry Lewis was camped about twenty miles across country. On the return journey Roy mentioned this to Mr. Maxwell, and he promptly suggested that they all should take a ride across and see how he was living. This meant another day or two "out-bush," but the prospect of seeing Harry Lewis cheered both Roy and Jim.

It was a long ride across very difficult country from Willippa to the hut where Lewis was camped, but the windmill came in sight at last, and then, to the joy of the travellers, smoke was seen coming out of the hut chimney.

Harry had only got in a few minutes before his visitors and his horse was still beside the water-trough. Thousands of cockatoos were screeching

in some trees near by before they went to rest for the night.

"It never rains but it pours," said Harry as his visitors rode up.

"Yes, this is a surprise visit," said Mr. Maxwell; "but it is a warm night and we will not need much nap. So don't worry."

"Jolly lucky I've got some tucker," said Harry as he lit his pipe.

"I was wondering how you were off for rations," said Mr. Maxwell. "That was partly why I came across."

"Good business," said Harry; "but I'm O.K. Tom Spargo brought out rations to-day."

"Very well, as we have something to eat," said Mr. Maxwell, "we will hobble our horses and camp here."

It was a warm evening, so when the rough meal was over the men sat outside and smoked and yarned far into the night. Harry had many questions to ask, and the news of the last few months was given to him.

For some strange reason Harry had taken a dislike to the homestead and preferred to be out-bush by himself. Maxwell assured him that he would soon be a "hatter" and that would be a good thing for the station.

"It always pleases me to see you chaps becoming hatters," continued the manager. "You will then stick to lonely places like decent bushmen and be content with one spree in ten years."

Harry made no answer. He was evidently thinking hard and enjoying his pipe. It was Roy who broke the silence by asking how far it was to the Yalorigina ranges.

"Couldn't get across from here," said Maxwell. "The only track is out past Dead Man's Well."

"Don't tackle that trip on your own, whatever you do," remarked Harry.

"Why not?"

"Well, we have the bones of several men out there already and there is no limelight on a chap who dies out at Yalorigina."

"We have been thinking of starting a dogging camp out there."

"Every man to his taste, of course."

"Are there many dogs out in that direction?" was Roy's next question.

"About two or three to the square yard," replied Harry as he puffed away vigorously at his pipe.

"The country out there will be free of rabbits, then?"

"Not at all. Rabbits everywhere. Thousands of them between the dogs."

"Valuable country," was Roy's only comment.

"Valuable in some respects and interesting in others."

"You have been out to Yalorigina many times, I suppose?" inquired Jim.

"Only once, and I made up my mind that I would never go out there again. I went out with the overseer during one of his fits of insanity. It's a terrible place—no water—no bush—only gibbers and sand mixed up with flies, ants and mosquitoes. Better keep away from there, whatever you do."

"Bob Wright told us the place is alive with dingoes," said Roy, "and if that is the case, Yalorigina is the place for us."

"As I said before, every man to his taste."

"We mean to try a dogging camp there," continued Roy, "so you had better make up your mind for one more trip to Yalorigina. Wright told us you knew the track and would pilot us out."

"Well, Wright's wrong. You don't get Harry

Lewis into that country again. I have more respect for my bones."

"Wright told us we could be sure of you taking us out. Surely you will not turn us down now?"

"Yes, I will. I gave Wright no promise, and why should I? Anyhow, why should I be taken away from my camp here? Other chaps know the Yalo' track."

"Wright said you knew the country best."

"Don't you believe it. Spargo knows all about the Yalo' ranges. Get him on the job. He'll fix you up."

"But I believe Wright showed you the very spot where he wanted us to make the dogging camp."

"He didn't show me the very spot," Harry protested. "He pointed out the mountain and told me there was a gum creek at the foot of it where there was water. But Spargo has seen that mountain and could easily take you to it."

It was quite evident that Harry was not keen on leaving his camp. So after further discussion, it was arranged that Spargo should be asked to go and Maxwell promised to put him at Roy's service for a week or two.

When the others had fallen off to sleep for the night, Harry sat down to his rough table and wrote a letter to Spargo giving him some directions concerning the track.

* * * * *

The bush has a way of its own. One would imagine that the lonely folk would always be delighted to see other human beings. As they have so few visitors, we naturally suspect that they like to keep as long as possible the visitors

they have. This is true in most cases, especially at the lonely homesteads where a family is settled ; but when a man has kept a hut for a long time and grown accustomed to his own company he does not relish prolonged visits. He is glad to see a visitor, especially if the visitor knows which horse won the Melbourne Cup, or is liable to give some news of the outside world, but is often inwardly glad when he sees him ride away again. Visitors upset the camp and cause a lot of unnecessary talk.

So it came about that Harry Lewis was reaching that stage when he preferred to be alone. As his visitors rode away next morning he smoked and watched them go. Inwardly he was glad. He had got his rations and something to read and something to smoke. He was right for another month.

"Neatly done," he thought. "I have got out of that trip to Yalo'. They will think me a coward, like the blacks, but they won't guess my real reason. Spargo will, perhaps."

After another long ride, Roy and Jim reached the Moolooloo homestead. They were starting to adapt themselves to bush conditions and were now looking forward eagerly to the journey to Yalorigina.

Mail day came again, with its interests and its peculiar uncertainty. They had decided to wait for one more mail day and see if Wright would appear. Spargo had agreed to drive Roy and Jim, with all their equipment, out to Yalo', and with that in view was making the necessary preparations. The mules had been brought in and given a bit of handling, while the buggy was in the hands of the station blacksmith.

It is an interesting time on a station when the mail car is heard approaching. It had a peculiar interest that day to Roy and Jim. Would Wright

be in the car ? If not, would he have some message ? Even Maxwell was anxious. He wanted to see the overseer back. But, alas, disappointment was again in store. It was soon evident that Wright had not come. Maxwell lost his temper, and Roy and Jim were considerably depressed.

"Didn't you pick up Wright ?" Maxwell inquired.

"Didn't pick up anybody," replied the driver, "but a mad Afghan, who nearly frightened my life out, and left the car yesterday without paying me a cent."

"And didn't you hear from Wright ?"

"Not a word."

"Hang the fellow."

* * * * *

Roy and Jim both got letters this time, but what was of more use to them was the *Worker* newspaper. With the other men they opened and read their letters, which were all from home. But later, in the quiet of their room, they opened the paper, and were delighted to find what they expected—a typewritten note. It proved to be a letter from "David," and ran as follows :

Expectations at last coming true. Something is turning up for Wilkins Micawber, and we must dream of work and bread for all. Since my accident I have not been able to move about much, but I am now out of the doctor's hands and, in consequence, making up for lost time. I am convinced that it is folly to waste time. My motto is, "Go ahead. Do it now." This I am determined to do at the present time. I'm sure it pays in the long run. I have started out on my holiday. My friends left Adelaide over a week ago and, feeling lonely without them, I have moved on. When you read this

I may not be very far from you and will be thinking of you. I understand that you will be reaching X with all possible speed. You will have much to tell me when I meet you in about three weeks. Uriah Heep is as 'umble as ever. At all events, he is keeping low. As he may be near you, don't give him a job.—D. C.

"Good," said Roy when he had read it. "We are at work again. A few more weeks of suspense and then perhaps the whole mystery will be cleared up."

"It is quite clear that Wright is moving—but where and how?" asked Jim.

"We must use our common sense. I think Wright has put matters very clearly."

"As clear as a glass of tar," said Jim.

"I know Wright, and you can take it from me that he would not write this note unless he had good reasons for doing so. He is in danger and so are we."

"Well, what do you make of it all?"

"Events are moving rapidly," replied Roy. "Schafer and Di Gilio have come north and Bob is in pursuit. He tells us he is not far away at the present moment. If that is so, he is as slippery as an eel and has thrown dust in the eyes of everybody from here to Quorn."

"Then I think it is quite clear he wants us to act upon his motto—'Go ahead.'"

"If, in three weeks' time, we are to meet him at the tree marked X, we will need to go ahead."

"Exactly," said Roy. "I will try and persuade Spargo to move off to-morrow."

"What is the idea about Uriah Heep?"

"The sting of a wasp is in its tail," was Roy's comment. "Evidently Bob has lost sight of Di Gilio and wants us to be particularly careful."

"He needn't worry," said Jim. "Di Gilio could not disguise himself from me. You remember his dark eyes?"

"Yes."

"And his bent nose?"

"Yes."

"And his black hair and moustache?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't you pick him out of a thousand?"

"I think I could, Jim. I made it my business to examine his face very carefully."

"Don't worry, I say. Di Gilio hasn't a hope of prowling about where I am without being noticed. We are quite safe. Still, I admit we must move on without any further delay."

"Certainly, Jim. No more time can be lost. Perhaps Bob is already at the camp and waiting for us. It is quite likely that he has secret ways of getting to Yalorigina."

"Quite likely—and I fancy he has not told us all he knows. Try and get Spargo off to-morrow."

"I hope I can. Anything may happen if the expedition is held up much longer."

"You are not getting nervous, are you?"

"I've been nervous all along. You remember how we were tracked and how Wright was watched?"

"I do and I liked the fun," said Jim. "It seems dead slow now that we have left that part of the business behind."

"We may be in it again sooner than we expect. There is serious cause for great caution. Bob would not take the precautions he does if it were not absolutely necessary."

After tea that night Spargo told Roy that he had all "his gear fixed up" and was ready to make a start for Yalo' next morning.

"Good," said Roy. "Then we will be ready. The sooner we get off, the worse it will be for the dingoes."

"Yes, and the sooner I will get back from that haunted, forsaken hole," returned Spargo.

* * * * *

It was a clear morning, with a keen breeze blowing from the east. The mules had been kept in a small paddock over night and shortly after daylight they were driven into the yards at the men's quarters. Fortunately they had all been handled recently and no trouble from them was expected. The buggy had been packed the night before, and when breakfast was over Spargo was ready for the track.

Roy and Jim were delighted with the thought of moving forward. Maxwell gave them all sorts of advice, and every man at the homestead told them the correct way of catching dingoes.

"Have you got your directions, Spargo?" Maxwell asked.

"Which ones?"

"Why, the note Harry Lewis sent you."

"Not the letter itself, but a copy. Couldn't be bothered reading Harry's bad writing all the time, so I made a copy."

"Very good—but see and read your own writing."

"Come back before you are hatters," said the storekeeper, who was also seeing them off.

"You will see us again in three months if we have caught the last dingo at Yalo' by that time."

"Good luck and a good trip," said Maxwell.

"So long," called Roy and Jim.

The whip cracked and four mules pulled the buggy forward.

* * * * *

A car journey across the "Never-Never" is considered wearisome. Both Roy and Jim thought so on the way out to Moolooloo. However, after three days in a buggy across sandy country, with mules in front, they were agreed that there was something worse than a rattling car. Each day they had watched for the Yalorigina hills, but it was the third day of the journey when they caught their first glimpse of them. The sight gave them fresh hope, and they tried to forget their burned faces and their aching backs.

The mules had not travelled fast, as the load was too heavy and the sandy stretches made very hard pulling. The last fence had been left behind and they were now in the open country, where the emus, kangaroos and dingoes were numerous.

"To-morrow will bring us to the foot of the hills," said Spargo as they halted for the night at a clay pan.

"I'll not be sorry when I get there," said Jim.

"You'll soon want to get back," returned Spargo.

"Guess I will if the country is no better than this about here."

"If a fellow doesn't like the bush he should keep out of it," said Spargo.

"Nothing like experience," said Jim.

"Dashed costly."

"Nothing like this back country for a chap with weak lungs," put in Roy. "I feel better every day."

"Good," said Spargo; "you want to stay out here as long as you can."

"I intend to."

"See and don't get a set-back."

"I'll go cautiously," said Roy, "and not overdo things."

"Good again," said Spargo. "Be careful. It will pay you."

That night dingoes came round the buggy. Jim

was the first to wake up and called to Spargo, who was wrapped up in a blanket and bags on the other side of the vehicle. Spargo reached for his rifle and a shot rang out. Nothing more was heard or seen of the dingoes, who made off as fast as they could go.

"I was just dreaming of dingoes," said Spargo. "I dreamt you chaps caught one hundred the first night."

"I hope your dream comes true," said Jim. "If they come at us looking for lead it might."

"I wouldn't mind making a bet with you chaps," continued Spargo as he put the rifle down.

"What is it?"

"I've been thinking I will stay with you for a few days and if I do, I'll bet you my old mule that I will be the first to catch a couple of dogs."

"That is a bargain," said Jim, "but probably your old mule is quite safe."

"I think I'm betting on a certainty," replied Spargo as he turned over and went off to sleep again.

By next evening the party had reached the foot of the hills and Spargo was seeking the best track in and out of the boulders. Roy and Jim preferred to walk and, going forward, were able to find the safest ground. The mules were tired and were more anxious to camp than to go forward. They had gone without water all that day and they had no prospect of getting a drink until they reached the site of the new camp. One hill followed on after another and the country was a marked contrast from the gibber and sandy plain from which they had emerged. Mulga and bullock bush grew on the slopes, and in the valleys there was tar bush and "dead finish." Kangaroos were not so plentiful as they were on the plain but there were many emus.

They camped for the night in a valley where a lot of green herbage was growing. A rough yard was constructed among some black oak trees and after the mules had been eating for an hour or two they were put into this yard for the night, so that an early start could be made next morning.

Before dark three dingoes passed across the slope and looked curiously at the human beings who were coming out to exterminate them. They evidently thought themselves perfectly safe as they moved across the top of the hill and appeared for a little time along the skyline. Jim quickly got out his rifle and had a shot but the three dingoes still walked on.

"I thought we were going to get the old mule," said Roy.

"Quite safe," said Spargo. "Those three and all their relatives still remain to be caught. They will probably follow us to-morrow, and perhaps bring their mates along with them."

Before the sun was up next morning Spargo had the mules yoked into the buggy and the party moved off on the last stage of the journey. By keeping along a dry watercourse Spargo made the work of the mules easier. At last they reached the gum creek which was spoken of by Wright. This was followed for a few miles which brought them into very difficult country. Great gorges came down on each side of the valley and the slopes were studded with wild pine. So steep and rocky were the faces of the hills that it seemed almost impossible for human beings to pass over them.

About noon Spargo looked at his directions and calculated that the site of Wright's proposed camp was another half-mile farther on, so they agreed to reach it before camping for dinner.

For another half-hour the mules struggled forward. Their shoulders were repeatedly jarred by the wheels striking big stones. Spargo stuck to his post on the buggy seat and slowly guided the vehicle to the longed-for destination. Suddenly he gave a yell.

"There it is," he shouted.

"What?" asked Jim.

"The waterhole," replied Spargo. "We are quite safe now. I was not far out in my calculation, was I?"

A number of emus were near the water and, after lifting their heads in the air to get a better view of the new-comers, they made off farther up the valley.

The mules were brought to a halt close by the waterhole and the thirsty brutes nearly pulled the buggy into it. However they were soon unharnessed, and were allowed to have a small drink before they were hobbled.

During the afternoon a rough fence was constructed around the waterhole and Spargo remarked that the mules were as safe as any bank. They would have to come into the yard for water—which they would willingly do when they were thirsty. Then it was a simple matter to catch them.

While Spargo was finishing the fence, Roy and Jim commenced cutting pegs for the tent. With his axe Jim was starting to bring down a low-lying branch of a gum tree that was growing near the bank of the creek about three chains above the waterhole. Roy had taken hold of the branch and was trying to pull it off when his eyes rested upon another branch. In the bark there appeared clearly a cross and the two small letters W. B. In another moment he was at the foot of the tree. Several large stones had been placed beside one of the

roots. These were turned. First an arrow appeared, then a cross. The adventurers had reached their first goal. It was the tree marked X.

CHAPTER IX THE WONDER CHASM

THE next two days brought many surprises to the young men from Melbourne. Dingoes were frequently heard around the camp but in reality the wild dogs did not have much interest for Roy or Jim, and it was hard for them to conceal that fact from Spargo. However they were instructed how to set the traps and then decided to follow up the gum creek and set traps along it.

Spargo was the first on his feet next morning, and after breakfast he determined to go eastward in search of good places to set traps.

This left Roy and Jim free to take their own course, and with the most careless air they could assume they set out northward. They set two or three traps as they went and took careful note of the country. Here they were at last in the land they had set out to reach. It seemed years since they had left Melbourne, but the burden of waiting was now over. They were all alone, and right before them were the hills of Yalorigina. Who could tell what the next few days would bring forth? Was some big discovery before them or would the expedition leave the mystery still unsolved? Each step they took they became more excited and every moment they expected to see and hear the dreaded "budleemundja" so often spoken of by the blacks.

"Can you remember Blackwood's directions?" asked Roy.

"Quite well," replied Jim. "I took a shorthand note of them at the time and have since written them out in my notebook, using Greek letters."

Both men had learned the directions by heart, and as they moved on they repeated them to each other.

"Follow creek for three miles. Take Dead Finish Creek to the right another mile. Go down bank at mulga patch into chasm. Oil at that spot. Reef due north from chasm over three hills, about two miles."

Those directions had become a part of their lives. They could say them over backwards. Now they were on the very ground where they had to follow them closely.

"Follow creek for three miles."

But how could they judge a mile in such difficult country. Great boulders were scattered like pebbles along the dry watercourses. Spreading gum trees were growing in the hollows and rocky hills rose up on both sides. It was hard to walk along and the weight of dog-traps made progress still slower.

At last they concluded that they had walked three miles but they saw no break in the bank of the creek. On the right the hill rose up like a wall, which convinced them that they must go on farther. For another hour they struggled forward and then, to their great joy, they saw a break in the hill which revealed a mountain beyond. The country was very difficult, yet Roy and Jim both thought it resembled the gold-bearing land around Bendigo. Would it be possible that in the years to come another Bendigo or another Ballarat would rise up in the continent? If the reef were located what a stir it would cause throughout Australia. It could

only have one result—another epidemic of "gold fever."

All kinds of thoughts rushed through their minds, and various fanciful speculations were discussed as they struggled on. They reached the gap and, true enough, clumps of "dead finish" were growing along the hollow which led away to the right. Roy and Jim were both getting tired and so they agreed to leave their traps and other baggage at the entrance to the gap, and then continue their search unhampered.

A mile proved hard to judge. Most men have ideas of distance which is peculiarly their own. When travellers have to struggle over rocky ground and through prickly bushes a mile is a long way. However the men from the city did not wish to make any mistake, so they advanced carefully, trying to count the chains as they went. They searched for the mulga patch which pointed into the chasm below, but mulga was growing at different places and the question was, which mulga patch. At last the difficulty solved itself. The Dead Finish Creek fizzled out and all around there seemed to rise up a wall of rock. It was quite evident that they had gone too far, so the only thing to be done was to retrace their steps. This was done and after a tedious return trip, which taxed them more than the forward journey, they came back to their starting point, only to find that ants had found their food bag.

"The joys of the bush," said Jim as he sat down wearily. "Even a man's food is stolen if he leaves it for five minutes."

"Are we downhearted?" called Roy.

"Never," said Jim, "but I'm starting to realise what bush chaps have to put up with. It is enough to break a man's heart."

"One half of the world does not know how the other half lives, boy."

"You're right. These bush chaps that live in this country have earned their week's wages before the city chap has read Monday morning's paper."

"Yet the city man often laughs at the man from outback."

"And when he does he is like a dog barking at the moon. But suppose we have some lunch."

"Good idea, Jim. We might as well have what the ants have left."

"Yes, and you had better eat quickly and drink quickly or the ants will be eating us."

Jim was right. The ants were coming up from all quarters and the young men found it best to eat their lunch as they walked.

Slowly they again struggled along the Dead Finish Creek. This time they watched almost every bush. Perhaps Blackwood in his haste and in his excitement had made a mistake in his calculations. At all events they were very near the scene of Blackwood's supposed oil discovery.

When they had left the ants behind they felt that it was possible to sit down and have a rest. There was scarcely a breath of wind and the wild pines which grew here and there upon the mountainsides stood silently in the sun. It was a pleasing scene, yet Roy thought, as he gazed upon it, that it was the most unlikely place in the world to find oil. However he remembered that Blackwood and Wilson had located a gold reef, and he felt certain that they had a better chance of finding gold than oil.

"We will go right to the end of this hollow," said Roy, when they were about to continue the search. "If we have no success this time we will go back and try farther up the gum creek. Perhaps we have got into the wrong hollow."

"I guess it will be rather warm here in a few more weeks," said Jim, as he rose to his feet.

"I think it is warm enough now."

"It is, but we will have it a lot worse before we get out of this country. Can you believe it is only a couple of months till Christmas?"

"If we could only find the hatter's reef," thought Roy, "we will get a Christmas present worth having."

They were again approaching the end of the hollow, and were feeling very disappointed when they were both suddenly attracted by two long sticks. One was across the other and, on examination, it seemed very probable that they had been deliberately put in that position. They were in the shape of a cross and a thin strip of bark held them together at the point of intersection.

"This is certainly a landmark," said Roy, "and it has been put here either by Blackwood or Wright."

"Then that will be the mulga patch," said Jim, as he pointed to some mulga trees growing on the ridge above.

"Good! we are getting on the track of something now. But where is the bank we must go down?"

On the left a lot of tar bush and bullock bush was growing which hid the view beyond. As one of the sticks was pointing in that direction the young men were eager to search there first. At a bound they sprang among the bullock bush and heeded not the scratches. The ground dipped slightly, and what appeared to be a wash-away ran down from the Dead Finish Creek. For several chains they followed the wash and then came again among pine trees. It was now easier to move forward, and pressing on for some distance they reached the top of a sharp rise. Jim was the first to reach the

top. Like a flash he saw the scene beyond and below. He drew back in utter astonishment. Roy ran up beside him and then instinctively stepped back. They stared at one another and then at the scene before them. Below was a yawning chasm. The edge of the precipice was right at their feet and a strange giddiness came over them as they looked down into the valley far below.

"What a gorge!" said Jim in great surprise. "This must be the chasm spoken of by Blackwood."

"It must be," said Roy. "We are on the right track now. Wright said there was a surprise for us."

"How do you like the oil prospects?"

"I had almost forgotten about oil. Who knows what may be found at the bottom of such a gap. Probably only one or two white men have ever seen it."

"Shall we tell Spargo?"

"Not a word. We will let him catch dogs. We will catch something more valuable."

"How are we to get down?"

"That is the next difficulty. Still Wright must have gone down to the bottom and where he has gone we must try to follow."

"Come on then. I feel fit for anything."

They crept along the edge of the gorge and examined the face of rock which in places was as straight as the wall of a house. Farther round the gorge was not nearly so steep, so they gradually crept along to that point, descending step by step as they went. By holding on to stones and bushes they were able to make the descent in comparative safety. Then they came again to a very rocky face which got steeper and steeper as it descended.

"We can't get down here," said Roy.

"No chance," replied Jim, "unless we leave our bones at the bottom."

"That will not help Wright to solve the mysteries."

They walked along the edge of the precipice in the hope that an easy way down would be found. But every ridge revealed fresh walls of stone and it seemed that the only way was to walk round to the very foot of the hill and, once on the low ground, they could work their way gradually into the chasm and explore it. This would take a long time and darkness might be upon them before they could get back to the camp.

They were beginning to despair of finding a way down when Roy noticed a pine tree growing in a crevasse of the gorge. In a few moments they had worked round to the spot and were lowering themselves on to the tree. The crevasse was narrow and only two or three feet deep, which made it possible for them to creep down, while holding on to the sides. Fortunately this crevasse did not run straight down but twisted away across the face of the gorge and made a descent possible. After following it for about one hundred feet they found themselves crawling under a large face of rock which jutted out into the precipice. As they crawled on they were pleased to find a wide ledge upon which they could walk quite easily. This in itself was a veritable wonderland. Right behind was a cave, some twenty feet deep, which opened into a smaller one. From this second cave there was a sloping ledge which led down for nearly fifty feet and brought them out to a sloping face upon which it was possible to climb down.

At last the bottom was reached, and they were able to look up at the amazing walls of rock which reached up all around them. Indeed it was an

awe-inspiring sight, and had not something else been pressing in upon their minds they could have sat down and admired the grandeur of the scene.

The bottom of the chasm, in places, was not more than a chain wide, so it would not take them long to examine the whole of it. Naturally their excitement was becoming more intense every step they took. Suddenly, as they climbed round a big boulder, they saw before them what they had frequently seen in their imagination. From several places vapour was rising from the ground.

Both men shouted for joy and rushed forward, but suddenly they were conscious of a burning sensation on their faces and hands. There was certainly real heat, for they could not get very near the rising vapour. Each time they tried to approach they were compelled to turn their faces and go back.

"The indications do not seem to be right for oil," said Jim. "There is no smell, and besides, this heat would have it on fire long ago."

Roy shook his head.

"No, I do not see how oil can be here, but what causes the heat?"

"I suppose this is an old volcano," Jim suggested.

"We would have other indications if it were," replied Roy. "Then the heat would be all over, and not at one spot only."

"Well, Wright said we had some mysteries to clear up. This is evidently one of them."

"Yes, here is work for many days," said Roy; "and it is a good thing that we are camped near by. We won't start investigations in earnest, though, until Spargo goes back. He may see more than we want him to see."

"I hope he doesn't stumble on this chasm."

"I hardly think he will. In any case, we will keep with him to-morrow and not leave him until he moves away for good."

They searched about in various portions of the chasm and were amazed beyond measure by the strange scenes which this mysterious wonderland presented. Here was work for a geologist, and it was indeed strange that this remarkable place was not known to scientists. Evidently it was known to the aborigines, and it might even be possible that the fears concerning the place were grounded upon some real terror long known to them.

As the afternoon was wearing on the young men agreed that their safest plan was to ascend the cliff and get back to the camp in daylight. It was even a harder job getting up than it was getting down, but they had the advantage of knowing the track, so after a hard struggle they again stood at the top of the gorge and looked down into the dark depths below.

Evening was now coming on, so they hastened back to the camp. Their feet were very sore, and they were desperately weary; still they were glad at heart. They had located the scene of Blackwood's supposed oil discovery. That was a very important point. They had yet to find the gold reef and solve the mystery of the "burning air," but there were other days coming. When they were left to themselves in these regions they would search the chasm yard by yard and find out what was there.

The camp was reached at last, and Spargo was sitting near the fire. The quart pots were boiling and tea was all ready. Tom had much to talk about and mentioned that he had traps set in many likely places, and was certain that he would have a score to-morrow.

THE night was very calm and warm. The fire was kept burning and the men talked far into the night. Occasionally Spargo would get up and drag some more wood on to the fire.

"No need of a fire," Roy once remarked as Spargo was stoking up.

"I'm a bit of a blackfellow," said Spargo. "I always like a fire when I'm camping. It's company. Besides, it scares the dingoes away."

Before sunrise next morning the men were having some breakfast and preparing for the day's work. Roy mentioned that they would leave their traps alone for a day or two and go with Spargo.

"Just as well," said Jim. "We may as well learn as much as we can while Spargo is with us. He says he is an expert at catching dogs."

"Good!" returned Spargo. "I can teach you a thing or two about catching dingoes."

And Spargo was as good as his word. He knew a lot about the dogging business, and he spent much time in explaining how a cunning dingo could be caught.

It was a very peaceful day, with no excitement at all. All the traps were visited, but no dogs were found, and Spargo confessed that he was very disappointed. The evening was coming on when they returned to the camp, and Spargo commenced to get the buggy ready for the return journey. The tent, tools and provisions had already been unloaded and only materials required for the return trip were put back into the vehicle.

Spargo seemed very sulky and remarked that the sooner he got out of this hole the better. The

mules were getting restless, and some more work would not hurt them.

"Are you meaning to leave in the morning?" Jim inquired cautiously.

"Yes, first thing," said Spargo.

"Then you will not wait until you have a few scalps to take back?"

"I'm sick of the word 'dingo,'" said Spargo. "You are welcome to all you catch. Somebody will come out in a few weeks' time to bring you back. You will have had enough of the bush by then."

"Not at all," said Jim. "I'm liking the bush better every day."

"I like to hear you say it, but Spargo has his private opinion. I reckon that in a few weeks' time you will be wishing you never saw this wretched country."

"Don't be down-hearted," said Jim with a smile. "Somebody must live out in the back country if we are ever going to develop Australia."

"Most chaps can live on patriotism for a month or two," said Spargo—"provided there is plenty of excitement. But there is not enough petrol in the bush. Loneliness is the thing to kill all your enthusiasm."

* * * * *

Two mules were left behind for the use of Roy and Jim. If they ran out of provisions they could ride back to the homestead. Spargo was certain that there was no other watering-place for miles, and the mules could not wonder very far. They would need to come into the camp every day or two for a drink.

The other two animals were yoked into the empty buggy, and at an early hour next morning Spargo

commenced the return journey. Roy and Jim went with him for a mile or two and guided him through some very difficult country, and at last, when the travelling became easier, the young men decided to turn back and get their camp established. Spargo gave them a rough map with directions in case they were compelled to return.

"I'll be out to see you again in about six weeks, if not before," said Spargo. "See and have a harvest of scalps ready for me. So long!"

Roy and Jim both felt sad as they watched the buggy move away. They were being left to themselves in the heart of the Australian wilds. The nearest known human being would be fifty or seventy miles away. What would they do in case of accident? What if Spargo never returned and they were left to themselves in the bush? What if the waterhole dried up? Suppose the mules made off and they were left at Yalorigina without any means of getting back? In their excitement they had not thought of these things, but they were now face to face with many dangers, and in bush matters they were both very inexperienced.

However they felt that a tremendous prize was very near to them, and with their scientific knowledge they should be able to solve the mysteries that baffled Wright. If left to themselves for six weeks they would have plenty of time to explore the chasm and make a thorough investigation of its mineral possibilities. They felt certain that the gold reef was there, and if they carefully followed Blackwood's directions it would surely be found.

On returning to the camp they again boiled up their quart pot and made another drink of tea. They seemed to be badly sunburnt, and they could not understand a strange stinging sensation which persisted both in their hands and faces.

However, when some provisions and water were got together, another start was made for the chasm. This time the track was known, and some time later Roy and Jim were again climbing down the face of the gorge by the same path that they had taken two days before. Spargo was now gone, so there was no fear of him seeing them or finding the gorge. Indeed, it was glorious for them to be alone and working upon the real job which brought them into the "Never-Never." Dingoes and dogging were forgotten, and with the light hearts of boys liberated from school they climbed about in the chasm, seeking out its wonders. Jim, quite naturally, was anxious to find the gold reef, but Roy lingered by the spot where the warm vapour came from the ground. This puzzled the young scientist. He broke stones and examined them. He studied the face of the gorge and tried to calculate what forces must have been at work to bring the great chasm into being.

At the spot where the vapour appeared there was quite a recent landslide. Huge stones from the side of the gorge had given way and had crashed to the bottom. Roy frequently tried to get very near the spot, but the great heat time after time compelled him to go back.

"Burning air."

That is how Blackwood had described it. He, too, had been puzzled. Poor fellow, if he had only lived a little longer what a story he would have related! Still, it was very fortunate that he had taken the precaution to bury that note at the tree marked X. It had given Wright something to work upon.

"Strange thing," said Jim. "This underground fire has been burning for years."

"Why do you say fire, and why do you say years?"

"I say it is a fire of some sort because there is heat—such mysterious heat. Do you notice how it stings your face?"

"Yes—'burning air.' Blackwood described it well. But why did you say years?"

"Over ten years ago Blackwood knew of this spot. He certainly noticed the heat and called it 'burning air.' Then Wright found it."

"You're right, lad. This is indeed a mountain burning but not consumed. We have come out here in search of gold and oil, but I'm inclined to think we have something that will bring to Australia scientists from all parts of the world."

"We certainly have found something that will make splendid newspaper copy when we go back," replied Jim. "I fancy I can see the reporters coming round us like ants round honey. Our reports should be worth more than the price of our trip, so we will not be returning empty-handed."

"Yes," said Roy, "we have found this remarkable chasm. This alone will make our expedition famous. But come, we are going to push on now we have made such a good start. Perhaps there is oil here, and we may find it. At all events Blackwood and his party found gold. They could not have made any mistake there, so before we are much older we want to find the right colour."

"Another brain-wave," remarked Jim. "We will start our search for gold at once. Our scientific inquiry could be continued at a later stage, but, as Spargo would say, I have my private opinion."

"What's that, Jim?"

"Only this—a gold reef under your feet is worth more than a possible oil-well somewhere."

"Very true. Then let us get back to Blackwood's directions. What did he say?"

"Reef due north from chasm, over three hills, about two miles."

"Not very definite, is it?" said Roy. "Still, to begin with, let us travel due north."

This was done, and it led the young men along the bottom of the chasm. Then the chasm opened out and the face of the gorge disappeared away to the eastward. After a difficult climb they got to the top of the ridge on the north side, and were able to see ridge after ridge dipping away in the distance.

"This will be the first hill," said Roy.

"It must be."

"Then we will need to climb over two more."

"Yes; but the distance is not great and the hills in front do not seem to be so steep."

"Quite true. Then let us carry on."

Their eagerness spurred them on, and in a little more than half an hour they had climbed over the third hill and were descending into the valley below. Shining white quartz began to show here and there on the surface, and the young men became very excited.

"Indications look very promising," said Roy. "Bendigo could not look better."

They reached the bottom of the valley and searched along it. Big water-worn stones were scattered about in heaps and small pieces of quartz were showing among them. The valley itself did not seem to be so promising as the faces of the hills, so they climbed the slopes again and gazed among the rocks for the precious yellow metal. They expected every moment to see the yellow spots glittering beneath their feet. Each moment their excitement became more intense as Roy examined the stones and pointed out granite, mica and quartz, and many other signs of gold.

At last they were attracted to a large piece of

white stone and quartz jutting out of the hill on the opposite side. They hurried across and climbed the other slope. Jim was the first to reach the spot, and gave a shout of rejoicing.

"This is the reef," he cried. "And here are some of Blackwood's marks."

Pieces of quartz had been broken off and were scattered about the ground. Hammers had been at work. Big stones had been turned over and broken.

"Somebody has been here before us," said Roy. "It might have been Blackwood and Wilson, or it might have been the old hatter that Wright told us about."

The young men carefully examined the stone. It was white and clear, and only in places was there the faintest sign of colour. Stones were turned over and broken, but it was quite clear that no gold was showing.

They moved around the face of the hill, turning over great boulders and sending them rolling into the valley below.

"Strange how the gold can keep itself hidden," remarked Jim.

"Yes; we have every sign of it here, yet we cannot find a colour. But according to Blackwood's directions we are on the wrong side. Let us get back again to the other hill."

Two hours later they had pushed their search into almost every corner of the valley. They were not expert prospectors, but Roy's scientific knowledge told him that right before his eyes was every indication of gold.

"Gold is here, Jim, I'm certain, but we had better take a little rest and eat our lunch. Do you know what time it is?"

"Why, it's nearly four. No wonder I felt hungry. Will we boil the quart pot?"

"No; we will need to be moving back to the camp soon. We have a long way to go."

They sat down beside a number of large stones, opened their lunch-bag and started to devour some of the bread they had brought from the homestead.

"We will need to do some baking to-morrow," said Roy. "We are nearly down to flour now."

"We will be ready for a day at camp by to-morrow. I guess we will both be stiff and sore in the morning."

"Very well, Jim, we will have a day 'at home' to-morrow. I'll take back a few specimens and make some experiments while you make some pancakes and damper."

"These stones are hard," said Jim as he got up and tried to find a softer seat.

"You don't expect cushions out here, do you?"

"No, but I wouldn't mind some ordinary soft ground to sit on."

"I guess we will have to put up with a lot of hard things before we get back to Melbourne."

"We can stand a lot of hard things if we can take back oil or gold."

Suddenly Roy stood up.

"That's strange," he said, "very strange."

"What is?"

"I was looking at these stones."

"Well, what about them?"

"Don't you notice anything peculiar?"

"No, nothing."

"Well, you see, you are not a geologist, Jim. If you were you would ask yourself what they are doing here. The fact is they have been washed by water."

"Well?"

"At one time, then, they were down in the

bottom of the valley. They must have been carried here—but by whom?"

"Yes, they seem to be put here in a bit of a heap."

"Look—why, I do believe they are covering up a hole. Let us turn them over."

They were soon at work. Stone after stone was thrown aside. Then under the large stones were a number of smaller ones. Slowly they were lifted out and a hole, several feet wide and deep, appeared.

As men in a dream, they made the hole bigger by throwing the stones over their shoulders. Some did not stop as they touched the surface above, but rolled down into the valley below.

"Ah—what is this?" cried Jim.

It was a bag carefully rolled round some objects. A sharp pull brought the bag to the surface. Inside it was a pick, a hammer and several other tools, but not a word how they came to be there.

Roy looked from the tools to the hole from whence they had come. He saw something which made his heart jump.

"Quartz!" said Jim.

Yes, below the loose stones was a solid mass of quartz, and studded in this were veins of glittering yellow matter.

"Gold!" shouted Roy. "Gold! Gold!"

Jim took up the cry, and piercing yells rang through the valley.

"Eureka! Eureka! Gold! Gold!"

Other loose stones were thrown out and the reef was laid bare. Roy seized the hammer, broke off a large piece of the quartz and raised it to the light. Yes, there was the gold beyond all possible doubt. Like wattle blossom, it was sparkling in the sunlight.

"Why, it is nearly half gold!" cried Jim.

"Eureka! Eureka!" yelled Roy as he threw the piece into the air, catching it like a cricket ball.

Then he grasped Jim's hand and shook it and and shook it. "Jim, you are a wealthy man."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"You are wealthier than your father. We are standing on a hill of gold. Our discovery will startle Australia. It will startle the whole world. In a few weeks this valley will be a hive of industry. Men will be hurrying here from all parts of the world. This is the greatest find since '51. It will make Inland Australia the richest jewel in Briton's crown."

"Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"You hills and pine trees, shout out the message. Send the tidings round the world. Gold! Gold!"

Time had been creeping on unnoticed. The sun was sinking to the horizon. Old Sol would set this day as on other days. It was nothing to him that gold had been discovered at Yalorigina.

"Oh, for the tongue of Joshua," said Roy, "That I may say, 'Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon.'"

"One miracle is sufficient for to-day," said Jim. "Is it not enough that in a few hours we have found the long lost hatter's mine? No wonder he could always get gold when he wanted it. A handful of this quartz will pay many bills. But come, let us break off some pieces to take back. Then we had better cover up the reef again."

A comfortable load of quartz was soon in the bag. The tools were put back into the hole and the great secret was again temporarily covered over. Two big stones were rolled into the hole and all seemed as before.

Evening was coming on, and it was now a race to get back before dark. The breeze that had started to blow during the day was rising into a strong wind. Clouds and dust were coming up and there seemed to be every indication of rain.

When they got back into the chasm Roy could not resist the temptation of making one more examination of the spot where the "burning air" emerged. During their excitement over the discovery of gold they had almost forgotten about the mystery of the "burning air." With their recollection of it they remembered also the dull, smarting sensation on their faces and hands.

Roy crept up to the spot, covering his face with his hands, quickly picked up a few stones and hurried back.

"I'll examine these by the camp fire," said Roy. "But let us get back now as quickly as we can, or we will be in the dark. But what was that?"

A rumbling noise broke upon them. Harder blew the wind and a few drops of rain started to fall. Louder came the roar, like a shriek around them. The young men looked up, thinking every moment that the great chasm would fall in. They both turned pale and wondered. It was so uncanny—like the wail of a thousand black men. Sometimes it came as a low moan. Then it came as a piercing shriek, ending with a number of throbbing notes.

For a moment both men stood speechless. It was Roy who broke the silence.

"Ah, that is the 'budleemundja.' No wonder the blacks are frightened. You remember Wright also heard it."

"I think we had better get back to the camp," said Jim.

All thoughts of gold had gone from their minds. One idea only was before them—that was to get out of the chasm before it fell in upon them. They scrambled back, carrying their load of quartz and stone, and climbed up on the face of the gorge as fast as they could go. The cave half-way up was reached, and both men let themselves fall down

upon its floor in exhaustion. As they struggled for breath the piercing roar once more broke round them. Again and again it roared through the valley.

"That sound is hideous to us," said Roy. "No wonder it fills unscientific black minds with terror. Ah!—"

At that moment Roy's eyes saw something else. Close by his hand was the end of a cigarette.

"Did you throw that cigarette there, Jim?"

"I'm certain I didn't. I only smoked one cigarette to-day, and that was over at the heap of quartz."

"Were you smoking yesterday?"

"Not here."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely. You must have thrown it there yourself."

"That I did not. I doubt if I have smoked a cigarette for over a week. I've been keeping to the pipe."

"Then this is a strange business."

"It is bad, Jim—very bad. It proves that there is another man in this neighbourhood."

"Perhaps Spargo threw it there."

"If he did, then it follows that Spargo has found this chasm and said not a word to us about it."

"I don't think that is likely" said Jim. "Spargo is one of those talkative chaps who couldn't keep a secret."

"I think so too and that makes the matter still worse—but I wonder—"

"What?"

"Perhaps Wright has reached the camp."

"Perhaps he has. I never thought of him. He said he would not be far away."

"Come along, then; we may find him waiting for us."

Again came the roar—louder and more terrible. The young men struggled up the crevasse, not daring to look behind them. They reached the pine tree and paused for breath. They were emerging from the chasm richer men than they had entered it. The burden of gold and stones became heavier at each step.

Darkness was creeping into the chasm and hiding for the night the mysteries that were far below them. For thousands of years this place had held its secrets, but now man had come with the knowledge of centuries. In a few weeks the secrets would be known, and men from all parts of the world would be hurrying to find the long lost hatter's mine.

On the opposite side of the precipice the jagged edges of rock lost their brightness in the fading light. What grandeur there was in the steep, steep cliffs, which lost themselves in the darkness far, far below! In a few short years science and industry would transform those hills. Around them roads would run. Motor-cars would dash to and fro. The merry voices of children would be heard playing among the stones. Then above the stones—above the cliffs—above the trees on the hills, would be bridges, towers and buildings and the whole life of a city. On these hills and valleys a city must spring up—a city that would claim the best from the rest of the world; because beneath the slopes and the valleys there was gold: more—a river of gold.

Dragging themselves up the pine tree, the young men again reached the safe ground on top and hurried back to the camp. It was dark when they reached it and, as they groped forward along the stony bed of the creek, they strained their eyes, expecting every moment to see a fire and their old

friend Bob Wright seated beside it. But—alas!—their hopes fell to the ground. The camp was quiet and deserted. Rain was starting to fall, so they found some dry sticks and bark, and soon a fire was burning. A strong wind fanned the flames and lit up the valley. But above the wind the mysterious roar broke in again and again upon their ears. Surely nature itself was crying out and mourning because the treasured secrets of the chasm had been found by man.

The rain was now falling heavily. With difficulty they boiled the quart pot, had supper in haste and crawled into their tent. They were extremely tired, but by the light of the hurricane lamp they opened their bag and looked again at the gold. The yellow metal was showing thickly in every piece of quartz. If the reef was extensive, as every indication seemed to show that it was, the mine when developed must prove to be one of the richest ever worked in Australia.

Truly the day had been a wonderful one. If they only had Wright with them now they felt certain that the rest of their work would soon be done. The chasm had been located. They had noticed and felt the "burning air" mentioned by Wright. They had found gold sufficient to make them wealthy men for the rest of their lives. But, hark!—the roar of the "budleemundja."

There was a vivid flash of lightning.

Bang! Bang!

All was darkness and the rain fell in torrents.

WATER soon started to run under the tent. With difficulty the blankets were rolled up and kept dry. The piercing shrieks of the "budleemundja" were now drowned by the louder roaring of thunder. For half an hour the rain streamed down, and very soon the dry watercourse became a rushing stream.

"We can't get away from here now for a few weeks," said Roy as the rain subsided.

"Why so?"

"We cannot walk back to Moolooloo."

"But there are the mules."

"I'm afraid we may not see the mules for a long time. They will find water in many places and will not come back to us."

"Let them stay away," said Jim. "We have discovered gold, so we had better stay here and hold it."

"No, Jim. I think we will need to get back to civilisation and get our legal right to the claim. Then we could get a company together to work the mine. That will be easy, for as soon as the quartz is seen everybody in the country will be wanting shares."

"Probably Wright will show up in a week or two. Then we can decide what is to be done. In the meantime, we can make an extensive search of the chasm and see what else it may reveal."

"Yes, there will be plenty of work there for me, Jim. We have located the 'burning air'—but what is it and whence does it come?"

"That is our next job. We may find oil yet. One discovery usually leads on to others."

"Yes, but it is marvellous how a discovery becomes known—especially a gold discovery. We have a limited time at our disposal, and I am sorry that Spargo is not still with us so that we could get back to Moolooloo at once. It may be weeks or months before we see the mules again."

"Never mind, Roy. We can make sure of the gold, even if we have to pitch our tent at the spot and guard it with our rifles."

"We can always fall back upon that, but starvation will drive us away in time. But no need of meeting troubles half-way. See, the rain has stopped. We had better dig a drain round the tent and go to sleep."

"Never thought it possible, Roy, that I could go to sleep after having discovered gold—but, dear me, I could fall asleep this minute."

Jim was quite exhausted. The excitement of the day had been too much. This wonderful discovery had left them for the time unconscious of human fatigue, but now reaction set in.

When the tent was made secure for the night they made their beds again, and Jim was soon fast asleep. But tired as Roy was, he felt that he could not sleep. Wild dreams and strange speculations were rushing through his mind. One moment his mind was on the gold—the next he was trying to think round the "burning air." He seemed to be moving as one in a dream. The events of the day had moved so rapidly that they had left him staggered. His mind refused to take rest. He was living again the events of the day and he was trying to make plans for the morrow. A few yards below the tent the water from the tropical shower was rushing along the stony watercourse. Stars were showing through and everything was still save for the murmur of the waters.

In the tent the hurricane lamp was out, and Roy stood near the bank of the stream watching the water and gazing out into the night. He was struggling with many propositions. What was best to be done? Should they make a bold dash back to Moolooloo and return at the earliest moment to Adelaide? Then it occurred to him that Wright was on his way out and if they shifted from the camp they might miss him. But what if Wright were being followed by Di Gilio. He might have to keep his enemies at bay while Roy and Jim made a thorough investigation of the Yalorigina mountains.

Thought after thought rushed through Roy's mind. Various alternatives crowded before him. He was exceedingly tired, but he could not rest. His limbs were aching and sore, but his mind was rushing on from one thought to another and sleep was impossible. He sat on a stone and tried to quieten his mind by listening to the murmur of the waters. In the darkness before him he saw something move. Was it a kangaroo? Surely not. Yes, something was creeping along the top of the hill. Roy stood and strained his eyes. Before him, on the skyline, was the form of a man. For a few seconds the figure was seen, then disappeared and all was silent as before.

Roy stood motionless, glued, as it were, to the spot where he was standing. Was it possible that another human being was living at Yalorigina? Was it the ghost of the hatter who once knew these regions? Or was Wilson still alive and living as a hatter in the neighbourhood?

Many thoughts had been rushing through Roy's mind, and the mysterious appearance of a man in the dead of the night left his heart beating violently. Every movement near him made him jump. Dark

figures seemed to rise up around him. The stones near by suddenly appeared to him as lurking men ready at any moment to spring. He turned, thinking to go into the tent and light the lamp, but from under the canvas came the peaceful breathing of Jim which told him that his mate was fast asleep. The poor fellow must be very tired, he thought. It would be a shame to disturb him, so Roy sat down again and tried to think of the water that was rushing by, but it was all in vain. He seemed to be gripped by some strange presence. He was struggling for peace of mind but he could get no peace. He was beside some mysterious antagonist that refused to let him sleep. He tried to persuade himself that it was all imagination, that he had not seen a man and that his mind was overwrought with undue excitement. But—another thing came back to his mind. It was the cigarette they had seen in the chasm. How did it get there? Was that not clear proof that some other man had been in the chasm? This was cause for serious alarm. In the darkness Roy thought he heard a voice. He seemed to see forms before him, and he became conscious of some strange presence. Again he wanted to move back into the tent, but like one in a dream, he felt he could not move from the spot where he was sitting. He shuddered again and again and wanted to scream, but by a powerful effort he managed to check himself.

Then another thought occurred to him. Perhaps Wright was in the neighbourhood. They understood from his last message that he was on his way out. Quite likely he would have secret ways of moving about. But, if it were Wright, why did he not show up at the camp?

Then suddenly fresh light seemed to dawn upon Roy. Wright would not show up till he was

certain they were alone. He had been followed so much that he would wait about until he was perfectly satisfied that Roy and Jim were alone. Probably he had been looking for them during the day.

"Of course," thought Roy, "who else could have left that cigarette in the chasm but Bob Wright? I was mad not to have thought of him before."

The thought that Wright was near came as a soothing balm to Roy. The more he thought of it, the more he was convinced that his old friend was near by and only waiting for the opportune moment to make his presence known. This comforted him greatly, and he knew that Wright would be immensely pleased with the rapid progress that they had made. He thought of kindling a fire in the hope that it would signal his friend to the camp. But it would be impossible to find any dry wood and, further, Roy knew that not even a fire would tempt Wright to disclose himself until he was ready to do so.

It was now late in the night. The waters were still roaring by the camp, but at last Roy felt sleepy. His excitement was subsiding, so he quietly crept back into the tent and went to bed. Beside him Jim was sleeping peacefully. The great adventures of the day were past and he was now safe in the arms of nature's nurse.

Utter weariness at last triumphed and Roy, too, fell off to sleep. In his dream he saw again the terrible chasm, with all its wonders and all its secrets. He saw again the hatter's reef, with all its sparkling gold. The hatter was there in his quaint attire and was telling how for so long he had kept the marvellous secret. Now that another human being had found it, he was prepared to hand

it over. But who was the first to find it? To whom was he to give it? Blackwood was there and was making his claim. Wright, too, was there, and so was Wilson. Each man made his claim, and the old man was bewildered. Then other men came on the scene, and among them was Di Gilio. Even in his sleep a strange wave of jealousy swept over him as he saw Di Gilio there. He, too, was in the race and knew of the remarkable secrets. Each man put forth his claim and the latter was being persuaded by Di Gilio. Wright stood back, his eyes flashing. The next moment all were involved in a hopeless scramble. Men were fighting and yelling. Even the ground seemed to move. The great chasm was shaking and falling in. Somehow Roy felt himself in the midst of the scrimmage. Vicious men were holding him and dragging him into the chasm. With a desperate effort he tried to free himself and was gripped as in a vice. He woke with a start and saw a stream of light shining into the tent. He tried to sit up, but strong hands held him down.

"What— Who are you?" Roy demanded as he tried to disentangle dream from reality.

"Move a limb and we will blow your brains out on the spot," came from a gruff voice.

Several men were in the tent with torches and revolvers. Roy thought of his rifle, but—alas!—it was secure in one of the boxes away from the wet. A foot or two away was another brief tussle. Jim was struggling violently, but he was soon overpowered.

"What do you mean?" Roy again demanded.

"You are our prisoners," again came from the gruff voice. "Light that hurricane lamp."

This was done, and with the light came a fearful revelation. Roy and Jim were bound hand and

foot. They looked first at each other with terror in their faces, and then at their captors.

Four men were in the tent. All were armed and prepared for any emergency. One was a thick-set man with a long moustache. He was evidently the chief of the party, for he gave orders and the others quickly obeyed him.

The position of Roy and Jim was utterly hopeless. They were scarcely able to move and were surrounded by men who were armed to the teeth. The attack had been so sudden that resistance was impossible. How they had been found on such a night in such a terrible and lonely place, baffled the young men beyond description. Who the attackers were and what their object was could scarcely be imagined. Rapid as the seizure had been, calling Roy from the midst of a dream, yet like lightning many thoughts flashed through his mind. He remembered the cigarette—the mysterious man who had walked across the hill, and the old hatter who had lived in these regions years ago. Was the gold reef known to other men, and were they determined to make short work of everyone who dared come near it? But how had the tent and camp been found on such a dark night?

They were not kept long in ignorance. A man who had been keeping his back turned swung round and fixed his eyes upon Roy. A horrible grin was on his face. He stepped a little nearer and the light fell on his features. Instantly Roy and Jim both recognised the man.

"Tom Spargo!"

"Glad to see you know me. I told you I would come back, and I always keep my word."

Spargo laughed as he looked from Roy to Jim.

"You crawling sneak," said Jim.

"Cut that out, youngster, and let us get to

business. What about our bet? Didn't I tell you that I would be the first to catch a couple of dogs."

"You are a scoundrel, Spargo," said Roy.

"Enough of that name. I own a better."

Then came another surprise. Spargo drew himself up, brushed aside his hair and, like magic, changed the whole expression of his face. Even his body seemed to be changed. The transformation was sudden and staggering, and Roy at once recognised the new character. Di Gilio stood before them.

Roy wondered if he was still dreaming, but, no—he was face to face with reality. They were prisoners in the hands of desperate men, who would perhaps stop at no crime. Instead of outwitting Di Gilio as they thought they had done, he had completely outwitted them. Their steps had been dogged from Adelaide. Every move they had taken had been watched by the remarkable man who had followed them in disguise.

Roy and Jim could see that they were utterly undone. They were prisoners beyond all hope of rescue. The chasm, with its secrets, must be known to Di Gilio and his men, and in the face of all their precautions the young men had fallen into a terrible trap.

Fortunately Roy was always at his best when he was facing some big difficulty. At first, by the suddenness of the attack, his mind was left a blank, but he rapidly recovered himself and determined not to go down without a terrible struggle.

"Get on your feet at once," said Di Gilio, who was still laughing at his success.

Roy and Jim both stood, although much against their wills.

"I'm going to take you two chaps for a walk," continued Di Gilio. "I know you are tired, but

you have a few miles ahead of you yet. But allow me first to introduce you to Captain Schafer."

The thick-set man with the moustache sneered at his victims, and in a gruff voice commanded them to be searched.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE HANDS OF
THE ENEMY

Roy could not see a glimmer of hope. Another fearful thought came into his mind. Here was the explanation of the strange disappearance of Wilson and Blackwood. Schafer and his party had captured them immediately after they had discovered gold. What had happened then? Perhaps Wilson and little Rae had been cruelly murdered. Blackwood, evidently, had escaped from their clutches, but perished before he was able to make his story known.

A cold chill passed down Roy's back as he thought of all this. A new meaning now came into the words Blackwood had written—"Schafer in hot pursuit."

Roy and Jim exchanged glances as they were compelled to stand up. They saw no mercy in the faces of their captors, who had perhaps thought out some dark way to murder them. Men who had committed one murder would not stop at another.

The search began, and Schafer watched his men as they closely examined everything in the tent. A couple of revolvers and a rifle were found and Di Gilio smiled as he threw them aside. Every article of clothing, every box and bag was ransacked. Presently, from under Jim's bunk, a heavy

sack was dragged out and its contents were thrown upon the tent floor.

Di Gilio and Schafer both stared at the heap of quartz and then picked up some pieces and examined them with utter amazement.

"Gold!" they both exclaimed.

"Tell me where you got this and I will save your lives," said Schafer.

Roy said not a word and glanced rapidly at Jim, indicating that he too was to remain silent.

"Speak instantly, or I will shoot you," demanded Schafer.

Roy drew himself up and tried to speak very calmly.

"Go cautiously," said he. "We may not be able to prove other murders, but if you kill us you will be caught red-handed. You think you have trapped us, but you yourselves are trapped."

"Tell me how, or I drive a bullet through you."

By way of emphasis Schafer held up his revolver.

"You have forgotten our wireless outfit."

"Wireless?"

"Yes, wireless," said Roy, seeking in a dramatic way to follow up his success. "For the last few days we have been in touch with the police, both at Port Augusta and at Adelaide. They know our exact position and they know of our discoveries."

Schafer was taken by surprise. He did not expect such a statement and the news cowed him.

"And where is your wireless gear?"

"I'm like you, Mr. Schafer. I do not put all my cards on the table."

"Tell me where it is, or I will smash your teeth out!"

"Buried—until the police come."

Schafer's hand fell by his side. The mention of police startled him. Evidently he had much to

conceal and Roy, by good fortune, had hit upon the correct defence.

Schafer turned upon Di Gilio.

"Didn't you search their belongings when you brought them up?"

"I did, captain."

"Did you see a wireless outfit?"

"No, they had none."

Roy laughed.

"It was strapped under the buggy and you were looking at it for nearly a week. That was a joke against you, Di Gilio."

"Who told you my name was Di Gilio?"

"The police."

It was now Di Gilio's turn to look surprised.

"I have told you to do nothing rash," Roy continued. "We know who you are, and a good deal about you. You may shoot us because we have found out your secrets, but if you do you will be caught and hung for a certainty."

"What secrets have we?"

"Not gold," coolly replied Roy, "but Blackwood and Wilson found more than gold."

"What do you know about Blackwood or Wilson?"

"Enough to secure your conviction. Besides, we have Blackwood's maps of this locality and his last letters."

"If that is so, they will soon be our property."

"Go ahead, then. They will be as hard to find as my wireless set."

Schafer interrupted the dialogue by telling two men to continue the search. He then beckoned to Di Gilio to come with him out of the tent.

A few moments of terrible suspense followed, and then Schafer with his lieutenant returned. Evidently their minds were made up and they fixed their eyes on their prisoners.

"We have decided to offer you your lives on one condition," said Schafer very sternly.

Roy smiled and asked him to make his offer.

"You live if you agree to become one of us and take your share of the risks involved. Refuse, and you will be dead before dawn."

"Then if you shoot us you lose everything. We have found the hatter's reef, remember. We have the gold and you have not."

This was a random shot but it was very successful. Schafer said not a word, but Roy could see that he was right in his guess. Whoever Schafer and his party were they had not discovered gold.

"What is gold?" asked Di Gilio. "We have not bothered to look for it."

"You mean you looked hard for it but failed to find it. However, we have found it very quickly and are prepared to negotiate with you, but our position must be secure. We intend to get some little advantage from our discovery."

"We are prepared to admit you into our secrets if you will admit us into yours," said Schafer. "That is all we can offer and we will only offer that on condition that you remain with us and take your share of our risks."

"Then if you give us time we may consider your proposal."

"But you must decide at once. You are playing with fire and taking desperate risks. Hand over your maps and your wireless kit and you will become partners with us in a bigger enterprise than you could dream of."

"Our secrets are securely buried and will remain so until we have absolute proof of your sincerity."

"For the last time," said Schafer, with a savage glare, "hand your maps over at once."

"We could not possibly do so without daylight," Roy coolly replied.

"That is final," said Schafer. "Blindfold the prisoners and take them away."

Roy's coolness in the face of such great danger had inspired Jim with confidence, and neither of the young men made any protest as their eyes were being covered.

A few seconds later they were being led out into the night. Apparently Schafer himself was to be one of the conductors for he called out instructions to the other men how they were to make a thorough search of the camp and then destroy everything.

"That is your plan, is it?" thought Roy. "You will wipe out all traces of our whereabouts and then murder us." But Roy felt certain that Schafer would not resort to murder until he found out the secret of the gold. As long as that secret could be kept from their captors their lives were comparatively safe. It was fortunate that they had covered up the reef. The rain that had fallen, also, would obliterate their tracks.

As they were led along, it was quite evident that they were following the stream. The roaring of the waters seemed right at their feet. Their arms were tied securely behind them but their feet were free. Being blindfolded they had not the least idea where they were going. Then, to make matters worse, they were led or half dragged into the stream. A terrible journey followed, during which they were splashing through the water and tripping over big stones on the bed of the creek. The wind was rising again and the rumbling of thunder could be heard away in the distance.

Roy tried hard to think, but it was not easy as he had to keep his attention upon the stones in the water. He frequently fell and not having hands to

save himself, he had a hard job to regain his footing. He was wet from head to foot and his temper was not the best. However it was useless to struggle, so he tried to go forward as best he could and await events. But even in the midst of his difficulties thoughts did come into his head. If the wind had not changed they were travelling northward. Then, as the stream was flowing from the north towards the south, and they were keeping in it, he concluded that they must be travelling northward. The force of the stream against him and the wind helped him in this conclusion.

Roy was thinking along this line when suddenly the dismal roar of the "budleemundja" again broke upon their ears. That was proof that they were journeying towards the great chasm and the higher hills beyond.

Again came the piercing roar.

"What is that sound?" Roy inquired from Di Gilio who happened to be leading him.

"You will know more about it before we are finished with you," was the cool reply.

"I'm glad to hear it," Roy remarked, "because I have been very curious about it."

For hours they seemed to be struggling on. Their feet were sore and bruised and they were so utterly exhausted that they felt at any moment that they would drop dead.

At last they scrambled out of the creek and over a hill. Then came the order to go cautiously. Each step seemed to bring them lower. They were apparently dropping steadily into a valley. Now and then came the roar of the "budleemundja" which revealed to the two prisoners their approximate position.

Schafer and Di Gilio said scarcely a word, except at intervals, bidding them to step down with

extreme care. But even in the face of the caution of their guides the young men frequently lost their footing and crashed to the ground. Not having the use of their hands they were unable to save their faces from the stones and tar bush. So each fall meant additional scratches and bruises.

At last they were ordered to stop. Jim was told to sit down while Schafer took Roy alone. After they had gone on a few yards they seemed to reach a kind of narrow staircase.

"Now," said Schafer, "if you value your life, be careful. Keep your feet. For, believe me, if you fall, you fall to your death."

Roy felt that he was about to descend into the great chasm. Far below he could hear the roaring of water which told him that some of the recent rain was emptying itself into the valley. Schafer evidently had a secret and carefully prepared entrance into the chasm.

Going down was a slow job and Roy felt carefully for the step in front before he ventured forward. The air was becoming cooler and the roar of the water was getting louder with each step. Roy crept down like one in a dream. Only the thought of the terrible chasm below kept him awake. He was utterly exhausted and aching from head to foot, yet he tried to force his mind to work so that, if need be, he could reconstruct the events of the night.

At last the bottom was reached and they were obliged again to walk in water. Fortunately it was not for long. The stream was crossed and they were again struggling among stones. For several chains they seemed to be struggling in and out among huge boulders. Then, to Roy's great surprise, at the bottom of another staircase they bumped up against a wall. Next minute a key

turned in a heavy lock. An iron bolt grated and a door opened.

"Go in," said Schafer.

Roy was half led and half pushed into a room. The door closed behind him and the key turned in the lock. He was a prisoner. Being blindfolded it was impossible for him to tell what kind of room he was in but he felt, rather than saw, walls around him. The darkness was intense and loneliness hung like a burden upon him. His clothes were soaking wet. His face was sore and bleeding and the ropes which held his hands together seemed to be eating into his flesh. Whatever fate may be ahead of him, he felt utterly unable to do anything to save himself. Darkness, pain and utter weariness paralysed him and in spite of his danger and despair he dozed off to sleep.

He must have slept for an hour or more but at length he was disturbed by voices near him. The door was opening and another human being was pushed into the room. To his surprise the prison was flooded with light and the bandage removed from his eyes.

A strange sight met his gaze. He was inside a strongly built hut. Jim was sitting close by, looking the picture of despair. Above them an electric light was burning which greatly surprised the young man as it went to show that Schafer was securely established in these strange parts. Their captors were near by, looking at their prisoners with scorn.

"You will find this shed rather more comfortable than your tent," said Schafer. "You will find some dry bags, so try and be as cheerful as you can. We will allow you the run of this room, but don't waste time trying to get out, for I can assure you that it is impossible."

Di Gilio then undid the cords which bound them,

ordering them at the same time to stand up and stretch themselves.

"We will see you in the morning," said Schafer, as he opened the door to go. "Use as much light as you need. It will cost you nothing and it costs us less."

Schafer and his lieutenant passed through the open door and locked it securely behind them. Roy and Jim sat gazing at each other, both waiting for the other to speak.

"This is a bad business," said Roy.

"Spargo should be hanged," replied Jim.

"Quite true, but he has us now in his power. We have evidently run ourselves into a trap."

"It's terribly bad luck, but if they only leave us alone we may find a way out."

"I hope so, but I really can do nothing now, Jim. I am too tired. Neither my brain or arms will act. Let us try and dry ourselves a bit and get to sleep."

With difficulty this was done and presently they were rolled up in dry bags and were getting off to sleep when a hideous roar broke upon their ears. The "budleemundja" was right beside them.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MYSTERY
DEEPENS

ALL too soon morning came. Roy was the first to crawl out from among the bags. A little light was trying to get into the building through small cracks in the wall, and through one of these Roy tried to get a glimpse of the surrounding country. At first, all he could see before him was a wall which proved

to be the side of a large building. Then, peering through a crack on the opposite side of his prison, a strange sight met his gaze. Right before him rose up the side of the great chasm. So high was the wall of rock that it was impossible to see to the top of it.

Jim now crawled out from his bed of bags and viewed the scene through another crack. Both men were puzzled and naturally their first thought was how they might escape.

"We must be right inside the chasm," said Jim.

"I thought the same last night," replied Roy.

"You remember we came down long steps."

"But what part of the chasm can this be?"

"That is the curious point. We must have walked right by these buildings and not seen them."

"That would be quite impossible. We must have missed some corner or crevasse and quite likely Schafer was watching us all the time."

"No wonder Wright was so cautious. We should have been more careful when we saw the care he was taking."

"It is too late now to think of what we ought to have done. The fact is we have been up against clever scoundrels who know every inch of this country and have known it for some time."

"Still they have reasons for keeping quiet. While they keep quiet there is still hope for us, provided we can keep alive. That may be a hard job, but we must hold the secret of the gold and bluff our way out inch by inch."

"I think your wireless joke put the fear of death into Schafer's German head."

"We must keep Schafer thinking," continued Roy. "I guess he thought matters over very carefully after he left us last night. He is not likely to act rashly."

"Suppose he offers us another tempting bribe?"

"I think that is what will happen. He certainly could see that we have discovered gold, and gold is always worth having. If he makes his offer good enough I will ask for time to consider. In the meantime we must do anything to gain a few more days. But if the worst comes to the worst we may be compelled to share our find with them."

"I wonder if Schafer has found anything."

"Certainly he has, and it may pay us to bargain with him. He may have oil or diamonds. He certainly has something he considers worth guarding."

Roy and Jim got dressed and waited, both wondering what the day would bring forth. Naturally their thoughts turned upon their friend Robert Wright. Once again he would be disappointed. He would reach the tree marked X only to find the ruins of the camp. How utterly dejected and distressed he would be to learn that another tragedy had happened. Once again he would see his hopes dashed to the ground and another mystery would hang over Yalorigina. Worse than that, he may himself be captured should he again approach the mysterious valley.

After talking over the situation for more than an hour the young men agreed that the outlook was extremely black. Wright's plans had failed, and if he escaped from the clutches of Schafer he would need to begin his task again. His opponents were without doubt very clever men and probably they were watching Wright as they had watched Roy and Jim.

"What do you think of Spargo now?" Jim inquired.

"I admit his cleverness," replied Roy. "A man who can so thoroughly conceal his identity is to be feared."

"I thought I would have known Di Gilio anywhere," said Jim. "You remember how sure I was about that, but how easily he deceived us."

"Yes, in Di Gilio we are up against a very difficult character. It is possible that he will yet succeed in deceiving Wright as he deceived us."

"But why did he leave Wright and follow us?"

"He must have thought we were dangerous. Now that we are in his possession he will probably turn his attention elsewhere."

"Surely if he stays away very long, Maxwell will become suspicious. But, listen, there is somebody coming."

Footsteps were heard approaching. Then a key turned in a lock. A small sliding door opened and some food and water was handed in. Evidently they were to be kept close prisoners, so when their breakfast was finished they tried again to look out upon the world around them by peering through the cracks of their prison. Men were heard working in a shed some distance away and once Schafer and Di Gilio were seen passing from one shed to another.

Nothing of interest occurred during the day. Roy and Jim had carefully examined their prison in the hope of finding a way out, but the shed was built of solid timber and without tools it would be impossible to force away the strong boards from the wall. They were therefore compelled to remain inactive and content themselves with talk.

Towards evening they were again given food, but they did not see or speak a word to their jailer. Night came on and each passing hour left the young men more depressed.

Next day brought no change. Except when food was brought they were left severely alone. They had talked about the situation from every angle

until they were tired. They had searched among the bags in the hope of finding something that would enable them to force a way out of their prison. But their efforts were all in vain. They possessed nothing that would make the faintest impression on the hard walls of the room, so after many attempts they were obliged to be contented with their lot.

They had been prisoners for more than a week, when one morning the door was opened and Schafer and Di Gilio entered. Evidently they meant to take no risks for they were armed with revolvers.

"We have come to settle a few matters with you," said Schafer, "and it will pay you to be reasonable."

"Put your cards on the table then," said Roy.

"Our cards go down with yours beside them."

"Very well," said Roy. "We can show gold: what can you put beside it?"

"We can show something more valuable than gold, and we are prepared to share our treasure with you if you become a member of the company."

"You make a good offer and we will consider the matter."

"We cannot allow time for consideration. Your answer, at once, must be 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Then our answer is 'no.' You can see for yourself that we have gold. We could take you to the very spot, but that gold is ours. You may kill us if you wish, but that does not give you the gold."

"We do not intend to kill you," said Schafer with a fierce look in his eyes, "but if you do not of your own free will become one of our party, then we will compel you. Don't forget we know how to torture."

"You may show your hand by torturing us, but you will be making a rod for your own backs. Your

secrets and ours cannot be kept very much longer, and, remember, the police know the exact spot where I was working. If you want to bargain, bid high before the law appears."

"When the police appear we will be police associating with them," said Schafer. "I have my watch-dogs. They were all around you as you came out. They are all around Wright now, and he will be with you in this prison in a few days. They were all around Wilson and Blackwood years ago, and you need not think I am going to be caught by your Australian police. We went everywhere in the war years, and we are not going to be stopped now."

"Perhaps so," replied Roy; "but a gold reef is worth something. We will show you where the reef lies, but you must first arm us and give us our liberty."

"You will have your liberty, of course, and arms, too, if you want them, but if you know our secrets you must remain with us as partners in our company."

"Very good," said Roy. "We will accept your terms, and when you bring Wright here and we know that his life is safe, we are prepared to finalise the bargain."

"Then you may walk out and go where you wish," said Schafer.

Roy and Jim looked at their jailers in amazement.

"Why do you look surprised?" continued Schafer. "Get up and walk outside. You are free men."

Roy thought events were taking a strange turn, but, following his captors, he stepped forward, out into the daylight. For a moment his eyes were dazed, and he tried to see around him.

Schafer and Di Gilio stood near by and sneered at their prisoners.

"We will give you some work to do directly," said Di Gilio. "That will help to keep your minds occupied. But don't waste time trying to get away."

Schafer and Di Gilio walked away in the coolest manner possible, leaving Roy and Jim looking after them in utter amazement. Then all at once the prisoners saw why they were left alone. Around them on every side were walls of rock. For a moment they thought that they were in the terrible chasm they had discovered, but no—it was another chasm, smaller and deeper than the one they had located. In some places the rock stretched without a break for more than a hundred feet above them. How anybody could get into the chasm was a mystery, and how building material was brought into it was a greater puzzle still.

For some minutes the young men gazed at the enormous walls of their terrible prison, which reached far, far above them. To get out of such a place seemed to be a sheer impossibility, and, what was more marvellous, there did not seem to be any way by which Schafer or his men could pass in or out. It was quite evident that their prison was part of the same formation as the great chasm, but in some way was separated from it by a great barrier of rock. Here were mysteries that would take a long time to solve, and probably, if Roy and Jim were to remain prisoners, they would have much to talk about and puzzle over.

After they had recovered from the first shock which the nature of their prison had caused, they tried to make further investigations. Several buildings were within the chasm, and in some of them machinery was working. What did it all mean?

Was Schafer secretly manufacturing some article of great value? It was quite clear that the machinery was not used to extract gold. Stone was not being shifted or crushed, and the rocks all round may have looked the same a thousand years before. But Schafer and his friends had not gone to all this trouble for nothing. They were in possession of some great secret which at all costs must be kept from the world. And how kind Nature had been to them in supplying such a secret workshop and strong room. They were doubly protected. On every side of them were great stretches of unoccupied territory. Yalorigina mountain was hardly known to white men, and the aborigines were so afraid of the place that they never came near it. Perhaps for years Schafer had been carrying on his trade, using Di Gilio, that master of the art of disguise, as his agent. But how were provisions and materials brought out to them? The whole affair seemed to be one network of mystery.

Several men were working about the buildings, and between them the movements of the prisoners were closely watched. The sheds were not large, but Roy and Jim were always motioned away whenever they attempted to go inside.

The day passed away, and with the evening the prisoners were again locked up. They talked far into the night and tried to determine what secret Schafer possessed. Now they had received partial liberty they were more despondent than before. They did not see how they could possibly escape, and, what was worse, they did not think Wright or the police could ever find them.

SEVERAL days passed away and Schafer made no further attempt to compel his prisoners to disclose their secret. They possessed a certain amount of freedom by day, but were locked up each night. They were given work to do which consisted mostly of cleaning boxes and bags and doing other odd jobs. Occasionally they got glimpses of what was inside some of the sheds. Strange machines were at work, and they could not see by what means they were driven. One shed apparently was always kept locked, except when Schafer or one of his men were right at the doorway. Roy and Jim were naturally very interested in this building, and made several attempts to hang about it, but they were always warned away.

Days went by, and then weeks. One morning Schafer told Roy he was prepared to give him further consideration as soon as he indicated the exact spot where the reef was situated. Roy coolly replied that he would think the matter over.

"Very well," said Schafer; "but unless you make up your mind quickly and show me the reef within two weeks from now, I cannot promise that you will see Christmas."

The work which Roy and Jim were obliged to do during the day kept their minds occupied, but when night came on and they were locked up by themselves, they talked over the situation and tried to find a way out. They were very much concerned about the safety of Robert Wright. As long as he was at large they had a hope of being rescued, but there was over them all the time the dreadful fear that Di Gilio would have a trap set for him. So they lived constantly in the fear that their old

friend would be caught and thrown with them into Schafer's prison. However, as each day passed and Wright did not appear, Roy and Jim were inclined to take fresh courage.

But, alas, one night as they were being locked up, Schafer told them "to cheer up" because they would soon be seeing their friend Wright!

"We have got the cunning dog at last," said Schafer, "and Di Gilio will bundle him in beside you before morning."

It was a night of agony. So great was the suspense that they were unable to sleep. Each moment they expected to hear footsteps. With Wright captured they considered that all hope of rescue was gone. Unless some bargain could be made by which Schafer would get possession of the reef, it seemed very likely that they would languish in prison or be put to a cruel death.

The long night passed and the light started to stream through the cracks in the wall, but Di Gilio had not appeared with Wright. If their friend was held a prisoner, Schafer must have changed his mind and decided to keep him by himself. This upset a plan which Roy was trying to formulate—a plan by which they would hand over the gold reef and agree to remain with Schafer for a certain length of time. But now perhaps they would be tortured singly and compelled to disclose everything without obtaining anything in return. Roy was feeling very downcast when footsteps were heard near the prison door. The key turned, and once again they were allowed to move out into the wider prison.

During the morning, strange to say, Roy and Jim were separated. Roy was ordered to shift away a large heap of stones, while Jim was shown into a small machinery-room and ordered to clean

a great number of wheels and vessels that were heaped in a corner of the room. Now Jim was always interested in wheels, and the sight of machinery was like medicine to him. So it was not long before his mind was centred upon the wheels and the machinery within the room. He turned each piece over as he cleaned it and wondered what all the articles could be used for. Occasionally the dark thought would cross his mind that he was separated from Roy and perhaps in future they would be kept apart. However the wheels kept him amused, and slowly he became more venturesome. Through the wall from where he was working there seemed to be a large machinery-room. One or two men were there, and Jim could hear them speaking and moving about. Now and then he stopped work and listened, but even the machines moved in a mysterious manner. But in such a place what was the need of machinery? What was Schafer doing in this hidden chasm in the Australian wilderness?

Jim became more daring. He closed the door of the room in which he was and tried to peep through the cracks in the wall. He could not see much, only a few moving wheels and belts. No door opened between the two rooms, but after closely examining the walls all round he was fortunate enough to detect on the end wall a wide board, which seemed to be loose. It was an upright slab and different to the other boards. Jim became more curious. He felt around carefully, and then, to his surprise, he found that by pressing it at the bottom it slipped out quite easily. When it was removed there was a gap nearly a foot wide. In another minute Jim had passed through the opening and had fastened the slab again into its place.

After inspection it was clear that he was still

not in the machinery-shed. He was in a room full of boxes and shelves. It appeared to be a general store-room. On some of the shelves there were bottles of chemicals, and on others were boxes full of screws, bolts and pieces of machinery. Very silently Jim proceeded to search among the various materials in the hope of finding another opening which might lead out to where the machines were placed. He was handicapped by the darkness, but he did not mind that as it kept him well concealed. For about five minutes he was cautiously creeping along among boxes and casks and wondering at all he saw around him.

Suddenly he heard voices, and they were approaching. He crept back behind some casks and fell to the floor. A cold shiver passed through him, and he waited, thinking that the men had detected him. Presently two men walked past. A door opened a few yards away and the men entered what seemed to be an office. The electric light was turned on, and through the open door Schafer and Di Gilio were clearly seen as they sat down on each side of the office table. Jim scarcely knew what to do. His first impulse was to creep away as quietly as he could. He tried to move his foot back, but the cask beside him commenced to crack, and he dared not move again.

For a few moments Schafer and Di Gilio looked at each other across the table. Jim eyed them closely, and as he did so he remembered that although he could see them plainly because the office was lighted, yet they were unable to see him. This fact gave him fresh courage, so he decided to keep quiet and listen. He had not long to wait.

"This is a bad business," said Schafer. "I cannot understand how you missed him."

"You don't know Wright," was Di Gilio's reply.

"I have watched him now for a long time, and the fellow is clever. We must admit it."

"He is clever, but you had the advantage."

"I think Wright had the advantage of night."

"But you know the country better than he does."

"I will admit that, but still, the fact remains—he got away."

"Unfortunately."

Schafer got up and walked backwards and forwards.

"What do you propose doing now?" he at length asked his lieutenant.

"I will return to Moolooloo and pick up the latest news and put Lewis again on guard."

"But where is Wright gone?"

"Most likely he is at Moolooloo," said Di Gilio.

"If he is, I'll have a chat with him."

"It is a pity you were so certain that he was at the camp the night when we made the attack."

"And he must have been there, for I saw his tracks leading there."

"He is the only man that ever gave us trouble. While he is at large we are not safe. You must think out a fresh trap for him."

"Fortunately he is not taken seriously. I have got him well talked down, and the police regard him only as a madman."

"That may be so, but if he lurks about these hills long enough he will stumble upon something."

"He better not lurk about too much, or we will have him."

"Well, the sooner you get to work now the better. Bring him in as soon as you can, and then we will wipe out every trace of him and his crew."

"I have a couple of traps set along the creek, and perhaps he may drop into one of them to-night. But if I miss him again I will make back to Moolooloo."

"When do you expect the camels?"

"Ali promised to land the goods here to-morrow."

"Then you wait and help me to take delivery. We will load him as quickly as we can and get him away again. Then you will be free."

Schafer rose and went away by the way he came. A door opened some yards away, and Schafer was again in his machinery-room.

Di Gilio sat for a few minutes and entered something into a notebook. Then he drew out a drawer from the desk and carefully looked for something. Not finding it easily, he commenced to lift out the contents and placed them on the desk. Jim watched him with much curiosity. Among other things that were brought out was a revolver. It rested on the desk for a few seconds, then, when Di Gilio had found what he was after, he carefully returned all the articles to the drawer. Like a flash Jim was seized with the desire to possess the revolver. He noted the drawer it was in and kept his eyes riveted upon it. Then suddenly Di Gilio switched off the light and moved out of the room. The door closed behind him and he passed away in the same direction which Schafer had taken.

No sooner had Jim heard the other door close farther along than he crept from his hiding-place and felt for the door of the office. To his joy it was not locked. In another second he was in the office, feeling for the top drawer of the desk. He found it, and it responded to his pull. The revolver was easily found and was soon in his pocket. The desk was left as he found it, and Jim, on tiptoe, hurried back to his work. After a little searching

he again found the slab entrance, and in a state of great excitement resumed his cleaning operations.

The words he had heard were still ringing in his ears. Wright for the time being was safe. He would know now that his mates had again disappeared, but he was quite capable of getting word through to the police. Still, Jim knew that it was an unfortunate fact that Wright was not taken seriously by the police and by the bushmen. He was regarded by many as having a touch of "white ants" and intelligent people concluded that the lost expedition had become a "King Charles's head" to him.

However Jim rejoiced to think that he had comforting news to bring to Roy, and in addition he had a revolver. This was a special delight to him, and when he was certain that nobody was near he took the weapon out and examined it. The revolver proved to be fully loaded and was all ready for instant action. Jim could now defend himself, and if need be he would sell his life very dearly. He felt safer now.

Contrary to expectations, when evening came on Roy and Jim were locked up together. They both had much to speak about, and when they were left alone Roy was the first to speak.

"I've had a grand day, Jim—the best for a long time."

"What have you been doing?"

"Thinking."

"Well, I have been acting," said Jim.

"You were always of an acting nature," said Roy, "but I am of opinion that it pays to think before you act."

"Depends on how long you think. But come, tell me what you have been thinking, and I will tell you what I have been doing."

"Well, I have been thinking about Plato."

"But he is dead."

"So is Shakespeare, but they both live in what they have left behind. Plato was right in saying that the world we see is a world of illusions. He was also right when he said that mankind was living in a narrow underground cave in which there entered only a feeble glimmer of light from the real world."

"It strikes me that we are living in a wretched underground cave."

"Don't laugh, Jim. It is not a laughing matter. But foolish people do laugh at the man of science who tries to see real things as they really are. The fact is, Jim, the thing we do not see is more wonderful than the thing we do see. In reality we only see the outside of a thing; but the garment is not the man, neither is the hat the mind."

"That may be, Roy, but it doesn't get us out of this confounded prison."

"Yet there is something greater than getting out of this prison. My aim is to get all humanity out of its prison."

"You are not going mad, are you?"

"No, Jim; but I have thought of something to-day and I have found out something as well. Schafer is on the right track, and what Di Gilio said is quite true. He is after something more valuable than gold."

"And what is it?"

"He has found the secret of electrical energy. His discovery will make the earth a playground, and it will make mankind rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

"You are quite enthusiastic over the old brute."

"Not exactly—only I mean to go one better if I get a chance. Perhaps he does not know the

greatness of his own discovery. Anyhow, I don't think Schafer is the scientific brain. He is only organising the scheme; but I saw a man to-day walking from one shed to another that I took for a professor. Without doubt Schafer has some clever scientist here."

"Well, I think Wright guessed there was something big in the wind, so he brought a scientist out. You have a tough job, Roy, but I am sure that if you only get time you will puzzle your way through."

"I will, Jim, and I am on the right track now. My job to-day was lifting stones. Perhaps Shakespeare would have found sermons in them, but I found in them the latest book on science. I tell you, Jim, the stones were warm and my face was stinging all day. Do you remember Blackwood's 'burning air'? Do you remember Wright telling us about finding Blackwood when he was dying?"

"His body was badly burnt."

"Exactly—well, Schafer or his scientific friend, has solved the mystery of the 'burning air.' That is what he is after—not gold."

"What could he do with a bit of heat?"

"Everything, Jim. There is a tremendous field before him. That is why he is taking such precautions. Nature indeed has been kind in providing him with this secret laboratory."

"But he has put himself beyond the pale of the law," replied Jim, "and he cannot have the advantage both ways. Anyhow, I feel a little safer now that I possess this."

Jim pulled out his revolver.

"Where did you get that?"

"You see, I was acting while you were thinking," replied Jim with a laugh. "I made a raid upon Schafer's office and took what I thought would be

most useful to me. It is fully loaded, too, and if Schafer means murder, then I will get in first."

Roy was greatly cheered by the sight of the weapon, and when Jim's story was related they thought out ways by which they could carry the revolver and keep it concealed.

CHAPTER XV

SCHAFER AND HIS
NIECE

It gave great satisfaction to Roy to know that Wright was still at large, but it depressed him to think that there was no possible way by which information could be got to his old friend. It would be useless to attempt a smoke column or to fire shots. No signal that they could think of would penetrate the silence of the mountains. However they agreed that their safest plan was to assume an attitude of non-resistance. Schafer might threaten, but he would stop short of murder when he knew that Wright might appear at any moment with police. By remaining peaceful, there was always the possibility of finding out more about Schafer's secrets. With six bullets only in the revolver they did not see how they could overcome all their enemies and make their escape.

* * * * *

For another week nothing of importance occurred. Both Roy and Jim succeeded in making further investigations. They got glimpses of machines and instruments which they could not understand. At different times they heard the roar of the "budleemundja," and they wondered

if it were some gigantic machine which Schafer had constructed. They also noticed that Di Gilio had disappeared, and they guessed that he had returned to Moolooloo to find out what Wright was doing.

One morning Schafer came himself and released his prisoners. He seemed quite friendly and announced that he was about to reveal some of his secrets.

"Then we are prepared to show you where the gold reef is," said Roy, "when you give us proof of your sincerity."

"Then follow me," said Schafer. "I will show you the only road out. It is quite simple."

Roy and Jim followed, and at length reached the secret shed which they had often been warned away from. The door was opened and they passed into it.

"You must keep away from this room unless we give you permission," said Schafer. "This is our generator for the most poisonous gas known to science. Had we possessed this during the war days we could have destroyed London in ten hours. The slightest particle of this gas is certain and instant death. So keep away from this shed unless we are with you."

A cold shiver passed down Roy's back. Could it be possible that Schafer and his party were enemy spies engaged in deadly work against Australia. Schafer's words threw a flood of light upon the mysterious sheds. Perhaps German scientists were preparing to make another secret onslaught upon humanity. However Roy had not long to reflect. They found themselves in a room containing tables, cupboards and numerous strange instruments. Another small room was entered and then they moved through a large, strong door into a dark passage.

"Follow me carefully," said Schafer, "and don't

touch the walls or you will drop dead. It is a network of live wires."

Roy and Jim wondered if they were dreaming. It seemed as if they were moving into the underworld. Another door appeared before them, which was securely bolted and locked, but Schafer produced the key and it swung open. The prisoners were astonished to notice only fearful darkness ahead, as if they were about to tumble into a terrible pit.

Schafer touched a button, flooding the place with light, and they found they were gazing into a cave, large enough to hold two hundred people. It was about twenty feet high in the centre, but sloped away on every side. Opposite to where they had entered, a stone wall had been built up to fill in what seemed to be an opening into the cave. In this wall a strong door had been built, which Schafer approached, beckoning his prisoners to follow. In another minute the door was unlocked and opened.

"I will now show you some more of our secrets," said Schafer. "This is the opening to our invisible railway. You will learn something about it later, if you prove yourself worthy. We carry on a big trade and a very profitable one too."

They now entered a small room and from it into a large shed, in which there were bales of wool, wire, skins of animals, and a great variety of stores. The sun was shining through windows, and Roy and Jim, to their surprise, observed that they had passed out of the great chasm where for some weeks they had lived. The cave through which they had passed was evidently a natural doorway into Schafer's secret haunts. This entrance he had cleverly built in and had erected sheds, which fitted into the hill-side, completely hiding the natural doorway.

"Now you are at our station homestead," said Schafer. "We are only known as station people, and not well known as that. Now you are station hands and I have a job here for you."

Schafer opened the last door and they passed out into a valley, which gradually widened and sloped away to a great plain, which extended far beyond. Right behind them and near by were high cliffs, which gradually disappeared as the valley widened out.

About half a mile down the valley there was a small station homestead with a windmill, sheds and yards. Hundreds of cockatoos were screeching about the water-troughs and covering the surrounding trees with a mantle of whiteness. A high vermin-proof fence ran across the valley and then followed along the rocky slopes of the hills on each side.

"This will be your job for to-day," said Schafer, as he pointed at some heaps of stores that were piled in different places. "I want you to carry these into the shed. Now take your coats off and get to work. If I am satisfied with you by to-morrow I will show you more. Then I will expect you to produce your gold reef."

Schafer moved away in the direction of the homestead, leaving his prisoners marvelling at all that had happened. Their first thoughts were that they were outside the dreadful chasm with a loaded revolver. Surely this was their chance to climb the cliffs and escape. Jim thought so and pointed out the opportunity to Roy.

"No, no," said Roy. "Schafer wants the gold reef, and I am sure he has not yet made his best offer. In any case there must be big difficulties in the way of escape, or Schafer would not have allowed us out here—but look!"

"Camels!"

"Yes," said Roy, "and they seem to warn us of the dry stages. It would be too risky to rush away and not know where we can get water."

"Very well, then, let us get to work and keep our eyes open."

A number of camels were herded in a yard some distance away, and an Afghan driver was busy among them. There seemed to be several men about the homestead, and presently a man was noticed coming across with a couple of mules in a wagonette. He passed through a gate in the vermin-proof fence and brought the vehicle across to where Roy and Jim were working.

"You two chaps can give me a hand," was the man's salutation as he brought the wagonette to a halt.

The new-comer happened to be one of the men that had been frequently seen inside the chasm. He soon made it clear what he wanted. The vehicle was loaded with various materials, which they were soon busily engaged lifting off. When this was done, the wagonette was again loaded with what appeared to be bags of stones, which were stored in the shed.

"This is some of our copper," said the man. "We are sending it down to be treated."

When the load was on, the driver told Jim to follow him across to the homestead and help him unload. Roy was left behind, but he became very curious. He seized a suitable opportunity and tore open one of the bags. True enough it was full of stones, but only the faintest signs of copper were shewing. However there was another kind of stone in large quantities—somewhat similar to stones he had seen inside the chasm. Here was another mystery. What was Schafer's object in

bagging up stones? Roy made as careful an examination as he could in the limited time at his disposal, but he was puzzled. Perhaps, after all, this was only one of the deceptions being practised by Schafer. It was concealing some other object.

In the meantime Jim had gone over to the homestead. An Afghan was busy arranging the loading into heaps and shifting boxes and bags from one place to another. He eyed Jim carefully for a few seconds—perhaps realising that he had not seen him about before, but then took no further notice.

Jim was obliged to assist with several loads. The job was fresh and he worked willingly enough. The Afghan moved away and the scene was peaceful save for the growling of the camels.

Suddenly, as Jim was lifting a box, he saw something which almost made his heart stand still. Pressed under a wire which surrounded the box was a *Worker* newspaper. His eyes were riveted on it instantly and he could see "David Copperfield" written upon it. In another instant the paper was placed inside his shirt and he was waiting in considerable excitement for a chance to open it. That opportunity did not come for several hours. In the meantime there was another surprise for Jim.

The last box was about to be lifted into the wagonette when the man looked round as if seeking additional help.

"Where has that 'ghan gone?" he said. "We will need his help to shift this last box. It is weighty. Old Ali had some sense, but this new chap is a fearful idiot and can scarcely speak a word of English. However, we must try and get on without him."

They made several attempts, but it was a very difficult task, and it was only after a desperate

struggle that the box reached the top of the vehicle. At that moment other hands came to their assistance and the heavy box was pushed into position. Jim looked round and, to his surprise, saw Schafer and beside him a sweet young lady of about twenty years. For a moment Jim thought an angel had suddenly come to earth. She smiled, and made some comment about the load and then pointed to a can of tea and some cakes which she had brought out.

Very politely the man thanked her as she moved away arm-in-arm with Schafer.

Naturally Jim was very curious to know who the young lady was. His fellow worker seemed quite friendly and volunteered the news that she was a niece of the "boss."

"She lives a long way in the bush."

"She does, and she has been here for some years. Schafer is very fond of her, but he never takes her away."

The rest of the day passed without further incident, but it was not until Schafer had taken his prisoners back into the chasm and locked them up for the night that Jim had an opportunity of taking the *Worker* from his shirt and telling Roy his secret. A little light still entered the shed, and they were soon examining the paper. Jim's heart was beating violently as he turned over the pages. Then to their great joy they found what seemed to be a concealed note. It was written in pencil across one of the pages and read as follows:

Dear Dave,

You will be pleased to hear that something has turned up. Peggotty is still in search of his niece and hopes very soon to have her in his keeping again. His road back is very long and dry, so in

the meantime everybody should be content to stay where they are.

*Yours sincerely,
Wilkins.*

"However did Wright get this paper through?"

"Another mystery," said Jim.

"Without doubt he must be very near us. It is certainly his writing, and he seems to have written it in great haste."

"Then Wright is still at large and that is good news."

"I think Wright knows too much for Schafer," continued Roy. "Evidently he knows all about the homestead, and quite likely he has discovered Schafer's haunts."

"I think that is what he meant when he wrote, 'something has turned up.'"

"Yes, he wants us to know that he is on Schafer's tracks and is planning some scheme of rescue. How it will come about I don't know, but in the meantime he wants us to stay where we are."

"But I would like to be able to help him. It hurts me to stay here and keep cool while Wright is fighting desperately on his own."

"Our chance might come, Jim, and we are finding out more every day. I have gone another step in solving Schafer's secrets. He has found a cheap way of generating electricity. He seems to have endless electric power here—and where does it come from?"

"It is not generated in the usual way—that is plain."

"Neither could it be brought here."

"Not very easily—unless there is a big waterfall near by."

"Water is too scarce here, Jim. But if I could

only get into the sheds and examine the machines I would forget that I was a prisoner."

"That will come, Roy. Don't worry. We've got Wright on our side, so we can't very well go wrong."

CHAPTER XVI

THE CHAMBER OF
HORROR

IN the next few days events moved rapidly. The prisoners were cheered beyond measure by their communication from Wright. The fact that their old friend was waiting outside Schafer's den was a great comfort to them. Sooner or later he would choose a fitting moment to strike.

It was quite apparent to them also that Schafer had become more friendly. He kept a guard always near them, but he ceased to treat them exactly as prisoners. Evidently Schafer had a wholesome fear of Wright, and the fact that his old enemy was still at large made him wonderfully civil.

A couple of days after Jim had found the *Worker* Schafer came to his prisoners, evidently seeking a conversation. He was very solemn and mentioned that he had something very serious to communicate.

"Your old companion, Wright, is dead."

Roy and Jim turned pale, but said nothing. They felt that the news might be true or it might be a hoax.

"We thought we could pull him round, but in spite of all we could do he slowly sank and died last night."

"What happened to the poor chap?"

"We trapped him some time ago, but unfortunately he showed fight with the result that he got badly wounded. Di Gilio was with him to the last and buried him this morning."

"This is another murder, then, to your record."

"When we are fired at we must stand upon our defence," replied Schafer. "You would have done the same thing."

"I am sorry," said Roy; "but, believe me, sooner or later murder will out."

"Dead men tell no tales," said Schafer. "Now you know the worst; but I want to tell you further, that we are all very pleased with you. We are satisfied that you would be suitable partners, and we are prepared to offer you wealth unlimited and our station property, provided that you will maintain absolute secrecy and give us your pledge that you will remain with us for six months."

"You will allow me to take part in all your experiments?"

"Certainly."

"And you will explain the working of your machines?"

"Yes—but our machines are all so simple that as soon as you see them you will at once see what our secrets are."

"And what about our gold reef?"

"That will be our property for six months. Then it will revert to you, with these hills and all they contain. The fact is, we will only be in Australia for another six months. We will be taking our secrets to Europe, but you will be at liberty to continue the trade in this country. We captured you because it was very important that the world should not know our discovery until we are in Europe."

"Then we will have no objection to entering your company," said Roy. "As I am a metallurgist I may be of some use to you. When it is convenient we can show you where the gold reef is located."

"Very good," said Schafer, "and when I get that 'ghan away with the loads, I'll go out with you personally. In the meantime you will be allowed a little more freedom."

* * * * *

The Afghan was very slow. He lost some camels and it took a few days to find them. Schafer became impatient. The loading was due at the railway by a certain time and the delay annoyed him.

In the meantime Roy and Jim had various tasks to perform, but they had greater liberty and many opportunities for discussion. They refused to believe that their old friend was dead and they felt certain that Schafer's liberal offer was only so much dust in their eyes. However, they were determined to take every inch Schafer gave them, and they also inwardly hoped that the Afghan's camels would prove still more troublesome.

* * * * *

Roy had been put to work in a small room near the secret chamber, and Jim had been taken out of the chasm and put to work in the homestead farm.

When by himself Jim again felt the impulse to make a dash for liberty. He looked around and tried to plan some way, but he remembered how Schafer had warned him that any attempt at escape would be almost instant death. He remembered also that Wright in his secret way had given the command to remain.

When he had been working for an hour or two a most agreeable diversion took place. Footsteps were heard behind him and when he looked round he came face to face with the young lady he had seen a few days before.

"Will you have a drink of tea?" she said with a smile. "So glad you are doing up my garden for me."

"Thank you very much," said Jim. "I am glad to be of assistance to you, but I am not very good at gardening."

"I hate it," said the girl. "I like flowers though, but digging is such hot work and uncle never seems to let anybody help me."

"I suppose the men are always very busy."

"They say they are, but I never can see what they do."

"Have you been here long?" Jim asked.

"Yes, Uncle brought me here a long time ago. I was very sick when I came and aunt had to nurse me for months."

"Mr. Schafer is your uncle, is he not?"

"Yes he is, but I wish he wasn't."

"Why so?" asked Jim with a smile as he sipped at his tea.

"Because he won't take me away for a holiday. He goes himself but he never takes me."

"That's not fair, is it?"

"No, but men are all the same. They think they have hard times but women have harder."

At that moment the house door opened and a woman's voice called out:

"Ruth."

The girl answered to the name and smiling at Jim she tripped back into the house.

"What a miserable life for a girl," thought Jim. "To think that she never gets a holiday. If Schafer

is doing as well as he says he is, he should let his niece live in civilisation."

The incident was all too short and Jim thought of a hundred other questions he should have asked her. She seemed such a charming young lady yet in many ways Jim thought she looked sad and lonely. Her face was not browned at all by the sun, which went to show that she lived largely indoors.

Later in the day Jim went up to the tank at the house for a drink. To his surprise he heard heated words coming from an adjoining room. He crept in among some myrtle bushes that were growing beside the window, and from this place of concealment he was able to see through the open window right into the room.

Schafer and his niece seemed to be at dagger's drawn. A middle-aged woman was seated in a chair at the opposite side of the room and occasionally adding a word.

Schafer was quite close to the window and although he was speaking in a somewhat subdued voice yet Jim could plainly hear every word that was said. Ruth had her hands over her face and appeared to be crying. Her uncle was bending over her with a fierce look in his face.

"This is your last chance, Ruth," he was saying.

"I will stand no more nonsense. I have given a promise to Di Gilio and you shall certainly marry him."

"I will do no such thing," cried Ruth.

"Then tell me your objection."

"I don't like him. He has never spoken a kind word to me. I would sooner marry a blackfellow."

"Nonsense, Di Gilio has no time to speak kind words to anybody. He is fearfully busy."

"Yet he has time to speak sneering words to everybody."

"You are rash, child, but I have no time to waste upon foolish talk. I have given you my last word on that subject and you are to marry Di Gilio when and where I tell you."

With that Schafer turned and in a furious temper left the room. Jim quickly crept back to his work with many other thoughts rushing through his mind. Surely something could be done to rescue this poor unfortunate girl. As a last resort he could shoot Di Gilio—and he felt like doing so—but it might not be the wisest step under the circumstances. However, Wright might appear with the police any day and there would not then be need of desperate remedies.

* * * * *

In the meantime Roy had also been having an exciting time. He was instructed to "tidy up" a small room and put up additional shelves across one of the walls.

Another man was working near him and occasionally he went in and out of the secret chamber. Once when Roy noticed that he had moved within, a daring idea came into his mind. He had noticed the type of lock which was on the door, and Roy sprang after his guard as he entered the forbidden room and was able to plug the lock to prevent it from shutting tightly. By good fortune his action had not been noticed and when the man returned Roy was busy at his work.

The trick acted splendidly. The man in his haste did not notice that the door had not locked in response to his slam. Shortly afterwards Schafer entered the small room and took his man away on some other important business.

This was Roy's opportunity and he was quick to seize it. The door that was supposed to be locked

yielded to a very slight pressure and Roy found himself in the forbidden, secret room. But another wall was ahead and another door. Roy took the precaution of locking the first door behind him. He could easily open it again from the inside and anyone coming into the small room would imagine that the secret chamber was fully locked.

Fortunately the next door was not locked. Strangely enough it was very thick and well padded and the wall also was very thick. However, Roy was easily able to open the door and he passed inside. The next moment he felt a smarting sensation over his face and hands. The heat also was great and he was instantly compelled to withdraw. Although the door was closed, yet he felt the smarting sensation in his flesh. When had he felt that feeling before? Yes, it was in the great chasm, before they discovered gold. It was the same sensation exactly as he experienced when he first became acquainted with Blackwood's "burning air."

Surely he was not to be beaten now that he was so near. What was Schafer doing with this "burning air"? How did he handle it? Roy felt again that he was right on the eve of a tremendous discovery. He forgot about the danger he was in and there came over him the determination to get to the bottom of Schafer and his secrets. He quickly covered his face and hands with a bag and made another attempt to break through into the mystery chamber. The bag gave him some protection and he was able to see a little through it. There was a network of wires as though the room was a huge battery. On one side was a number of earthenware cylinders and it seemed as though the great heat came from them. The room was too dark to get a clear view and the heat could not

be endured. Roy felt faint and was only able to stagger back and slam the door behind him. Having thrown aside the bag and fanned himself he felt better.

He was annoyed to think that he could not remain long enough in the room to make any investigations. However when he was able to breathe more freely he searched along the wall in the hope of finding something further which might help him to solve the mystery. Then he noticed what had escaped his eyes at first. There was another door a little farther along and it was slightly open. A few steps brought him to it and he looked into a workshop. There were a number of benches and a great assortment of tools. Right through the workshop there was another door which opened into a small apartment containing tins of oil.

Roy became more daring and hurried through in the hope of finding the desired clue. A hasty glance did not reveal anything and Roy was about to return by the way he came when a strange sound fell upon his ears. He thought he heard a human being moaning. Yes, the sound came again and again and it could not be fancy.

Roy's first thought was to hurry back to a place of safety but his curiosity made him daring. Again the dismal wail came to his ears followed by a rattle of chains. A human being was on the opposite side of the wall—but how could he live in the midst of the heat of the secret chamber? Here was another mystery.

Roy dared not make a noise lest the human being should prove to be one of Schafer's followers. So with his excitement increasing every instant he searched about as quickly as he could. In one corner of the room Roy noticed that the tins and

boxes were stacked a foot or two away from the wall and wondering what the reason of this might be he pressed into the narrow passage. It was very dark and dusty and as Roy tried to peep into the darkness his fingers touched an iron bolt. It was the lock of a trap door but the bolt pulled back quite easily as there was no padlock upon it. A slight pull and the door opened towards him but the boxes and tins prevented it from opening its full width. However, Roy was able to push his way through, but it did not admit him as he expected into the secret chamber, but rather into a fairly well lighted room where a great variety of articles were thrown.

The thick wall of the secret room was on the right with nothing but the bare stones showing. All was quiet so Roy determined to push his investigations as far as possible. To his surprise he could see no human being, so believing the way was quite clear he scrambled across to the wall of the secret room. As he did so there was a movement quite near him followed by a moan. Something moved from under a bag rug.

Roy stood back, staggered by surprise, for the rug was thrown aside and a strange looking old man struggled to his feet. He stroked his long whiskers and took a few short steps towards his visitor.

"You have come in search of the oracles?" he said.

"Yes," Roy replied in a tone of surprise.

"There are two oracles worked from here. I shall tell you one of them. It is the oracle of the floating snake. It is all the time giving off tons of poison for the destruction of dingoes. Let men wait and they shall yet see the salvation of the country. But, hark,

what brings you here, you white winged grass-hopper?"

"Hush," said Roy. "I'm sneaking on a beetle."

"This place is full of cockroaches," said the old man as he rubbed his eyes and stared at Roy.

"But have I not met you before?"

"Never."

The old man suddenly brought down both his hands heavily on Roy's shoulders and held him tightly while he stared into his face.

"You deceive me," he said. "Don't you remember when we were both sentenced to fifty years in jail for ringbarking pumpkins?"

Roy didn't know whether to laugh or to make a dash for safety. The man was evidently a lunatic.

"Yes," continued the old man. "You ringbarked those pumpkins but you died before your sentence was half up and now you come here to torment Satan."

Just then Roy noticed what had escaped his eyes at first. Thick chains were fastened to the strange man's legs and he could not move more than a few yards from where he was tied. He noticed also that the man was not very old but he had been badly looked after. His whiskers had been allowed to grow long and his hair had not been cut. Whoever the unfortunate man could be, he was sadly neglected by Schafer and his men. Roy wondered if it could be possible to find out who this strange character was.

"Who are you?" Roy asked.

The poor fellow stepped back and rubbed his brow as if he were trying to remember something.

"I've got a name, but I can't remember what it is. If I only knew who I was I would know why I am here, but the floating snake has carried me away and left some other man in my clothes."

"That is unfortunate," said Roy. "Have you been here long?"

"I came here with Napoleon when he was brought to St. Helena and I have been here ever since."

"Do they keep chains on you all the time?"

"Yes, they are to keep me from floating away with the snake."

"What is in the next room there?"

"That is where Satan boils his quart pot."

"Do you know Schafer?"

"Bad—bad," said the poor fellow with great emphasis. "I have killed him three times, but he still comes back to torment me. He lives in with Satan—next door."

Roy was puzzled. Evidently the strange individual had fallen a victim to Schafer and perhaps long imprisonment and ill treatment had driven him mad.

The poor fellow sat down and looked around the room. A different expression came into his eyes as he looked more steadily at his visitor.

"I don't know who you are," he said at length, "but I have something to tell you. There, I believe I have forgotten it again."

"Do try to remember," said Roy with great sympathy.

The poor fellow rubbed his head again and suddenly an intelligent expression came into his eyes as something dawned upon his troubled mind.

"Blackwood," he said. "Bring Blackwood."

"Why Blackwood?"

"Because—because," and the troubled soul struggled again to remember something.

"Because his little Rae is here."

"Rae Blackwood here?" asked Roy in astonishment.

"Yes, Rae is here. I heard her voice that night."

I have heard it since. But go—tell Blackwood, Rae is here.”

“Oh, the horror of it,” thought Roy. “Could Rae Blackwood be held in some dark cell of Schafer’s terrible prison.”

The very thought of it seemed to make Roy’s blood boil, but the same time another thought flashed into his mind. He looked hard at the poor chained lunatic. Their eyes met.

“You are Wilson,” he said.

“Yes—yes—that is my name,” said the man. “Schafer thought he had stolen my name, but I have got it back. I’ve got it back. You are beaten, Schafer. You scoundrel, you are beaten. I will now float away through the blowhole. Bring the snake.”

“Where is the blowhole?”

“We found it—yes we did. Schafer cannot hide it from us. But bring the snake and we will fly through the blowhole.”

“The blowhole,” thought Roy. Whatever could the poor fellow mean. Could it be some secret road into the chasm. Roy felt that he could give everything if Wilson could be sane for a few moments. He humoured him and spoke of Blackwood and Robert Wright. Now and then his eyes would brighten when some gleam of recognition crossed his mind but for the most part Roy was listening to wild and disconnected words. Knowing that time was passing and that he might be discovered any moment he made one last desperate effort to help Wilson to remember something further. However the poor fellow was exhausted and kept rambling on about the floating snake, so Roy quietly crept away. He dared not attempt any further investigations, but was content to go back to his work and await further developments.

CHAPTER XVII THE DOCTOR IS NEEDED

SCHAFER had almost exhausted all his patience with the Afghan. One accident happened after another: camels got lost, packs would not stay on; but after many hindrances the Afghan at last got away with his loading, and Schafer breathed a sigh of relief when the camels disappeared along the valley. If he kept his animals going he might be able to reach the railway line by the appointed time. Schafer had spoken very sharply to him but the Afghan had almost worn out the patience of his employer by shaking his head as if he were unable to understand a single word.

However there was to be another disappointment. Not many miles from the homestead the Afghan again got into difficulties. One of the younger camels got out of hand, threw off its load and broke nearly all the strappings. This accident under normal conditions would not stop an Australian bushman or even an ordinary camel driver, but for some reason this Afghan did the last thing that was expected from him. He unloaded all his camels and hobbled them out. Then selecting a very quiet animal he rode back with the broken harness to the homestead. Schafer flew into a terrible rage when he saw him but the Afghan took it very quietly and merely remarked that “boss plenty growl worse than camel.”

* * * * *

Roy and Jim had been locked up for the night. They had much to talk about. Roy had found Wilson and had forced his way into the secret chamber. He was full of what he had found.

Dozens of theories had flashed through his mind, and he had been busy making all kinds of calculations. The "burning air" which Blackwood had spoken of was certainly known to Schafer. He was evidently able to extract it and utilise it.

Jim, of course, was very interested in all that Roy had done but he was mad with Schafer for trying to compel his niece to marry Di Gilio. He was glad of the information he had been able to gather concerning the quarrel and he felt sure the time would come when he would be able to make use of it, and perhaps win the girl over to their side. Ruth was miserable; that was certain, and further, there was very little love lost between Schafer and his niece. His determination to compel her to marry Di Gilio proved that he had the cold heart of a fish. If Ruth could be won over very valuable information could be secured, and perhaps she could help them to make their escape.

Then they thought of Wilson. The poor fellow must have been treated with terrible cruelty, and his mind had given way under the strain. It would be impossible to rescue him without having complete possession of the chasm and even if he were rescued and they made a wild dash for liberty his state of mind would prove a tremendous hindrance.

"Better leave him alone altogether for the time," said Jim. "If we try to help him we may make matters ten times worse."

"I think so too," replied Roy. "He couldn't possibly be of much use to us unless he became sensible for a time, and then he may be able to tell us a lot more about little Rae. Perhaps the poor kid is held in another secret room. What untold misery she may be suffering at this very minute!"

"Do you think the old chap knew what he was talking about?"

"I think so. A sensible look came into his eyes now and then, and I believe that he could be made quite rational again."

"That will be work for later on. In the meantime we must try and find little Rae. If she is suffering as Wilson is I'm afraid I will do something desperate."

"She may be dead, poor child; but we must keep our eyes open and our ears too. I hardly think it possible that she could be alive in one of those sheds."

"Perhaps Schafer or Di Gilio took her away to some orphanage or convent."

"If that is so we may never find her. However as Wilson is here, perhaps Rae has also been kept near at hand. The old fellow seemed very certain that he heard her voice."

* * * * *

Later in the evening Roy and Jim tried to agree upon a plan of action if they were compelled by Schafer to disclose the position of the gold reef. They would endeavour to get Schafer to accompany them. He was sure to have other men with him. Jim would have his revolver all ready. When they were moving down into the chasm a suitable moment could be chosen, and a couple of their warders could be pushed from the ledge of rock. The other one or two could be instantly covered by the revolver and taken prisoners. The ones who were rolled down the valley would not be worth much and perhaps give no further trouble. Even if they were outnumbered to begin with they would have the advantage of surprise. Once clear of their keepers they could make a bold dash for liberty. If the stroke were completely successful and their position perfectly secure they might be able to

return to Schafer's stronghold and deprive him of his car and enough supplies to carry them on their way. However they were determined to keep Schafer away from the gold as long as possible, and they further agreed to insist upon both going together. Their excuse for this was to be that neither one was absolutely certain of the exact place but between them they could find the reef.

"Quite likely Schafer will want us to go out in the morning," said Roy. "If he has got rid of the camel man he will be free now to turn his attention to the gold."

"The sooner the better," said Jim. "I am quite taken up with our plan. At a critical time, with a loaded revolver we may be more than a match for Schafer and all his men."

"There is another point," said Roy in a whisper. "We must not forget that Wright is outside. This yarn that he is dead is only so much dust for our eyes. Depend upon it, he will be watching, and he will be following with his rifle well loaded. He will pick his time and will be near at hand when he is wanted."

* * * * *

Roy and Jim had fallen asleep at last. Their plans had been formulated and in whispers they had gone over the entire situation. However, weariness at last triumphed and they both fell into a deep sleep.

Jim was first to wake. The moon was shining brightly and the light was streaming in through cracks in the wall. Footsteps and voices were heard outside as though men were in consultation. Jim's first thought was of Wright, and he was afraid that Schafer and Di Gilio had captured him

and were about to lock him up with their other prisoners.

A key was thrust into the lock and the door was pushed open. Next moment the electric light was turned on and Di Gilio, with one of his assistants, stood in the doorway. Jim peered through the open door, thinking that Wright might be without, but it was soon quite evident that his fears were groundless.

"Get up!" Di Gilio sternly demanded.

Roy suddenly awoke and sat up.

"I don't mean you," continued Di Gilio. "I am speaking to Doctor Fisher. There is a case of sickness in the camp and we need your assistance at once. Get up and dress."

Jim obeyed, wondering who the patient was, and how Di Gilio had found out his name and profession.

It was quite clear something serious had happened, and Di Gilio watched Jim as if his stare would hurry him up. Roy sat up and tried to understand the situation but he dared not ask any questions for fear of being snubbed.

Jim was soon ready and Di Gilio beckoned him to follow. The door was again locked and Roy was left to his own reflections.

A few moments later Jim had been taken through the many doors and the secret cave which led out of the chasm, and before him was the light at the homestead. He wondered who the sick person was. Could it be Wright? Had he been wounded and brought in? Then another suspicion came into his mind. Had some domestic tragedy happened in Schafer's own household?

However, Jim was not kept long in suspense. Di Gilio took him into the house, leaving the other man outside. They were in what appeared to be a little sitting-room and deep moans were coming

through the open door, telling only too plainly that some human being was in desperate pain.

"Our captain is very ill," said Di Gilio. "He took bad suddenly about half an hour ago and has gradually been getting worse. None of us know much about medicine but I am inclined to suspect foul play. I think there must be a traitor in the camp."

"What do you mean by foul play?" asked Jim.

"That will be for you to find out," remarked Di Gilio. "We do not suspect you or your mate, so your minds can be quite at ease, but we do suspect somebody. We know you have received some medical training and we want you to attend the captain. Do all you can for him but say nothing. If you want help let me know instantly. I will be in this room. Now come and see the patient."

Jim was soon in the sick-room. Schafer was in bed—pale, and apparently in great agony. He did not notice the entrance of the two men but was struggling hard for breath in the midst of a violent paroxysm. His eyes were very much inflamed and he was shivering. The middle-aged woman that Jim had previously noticed was standing by the bed rubbing the sick man. Ruth was also there, vigorously using a fan and stroking her uncle's forehead.

One word flashed into Jim's mind as he noticed the invalid. It was the word "poison." He was in a very difficult position. He was anxious to save the man's life but equally anxious to give Di Gilio no satisfaction. However, he was also on his trial as a medical man, and he knew he had to act quickly and at the same time throw Di Gilio off the scent. He stepped up quickly to the sick man and began by inspecting his mouth. Then the pulse was taken which proved to be feeble.

Jim's mind was made up and he hastily prepared and administered an emetic. Then he mentioned certain other medicines and asked the woman to prepare hot water. Di Gilio seemed most anxious and watched every movement made by the medical man.

"If you have a medicine chest in the house," said Jim, "bring it quickly."

So it happened Di Gilio was obliged to leave the room in search of what was wanted. Jim was thus left alone with the sick man and had a moment to collect his thoughts. Schafer was in serious danger and Jim knew that he must make a desperate effort to save him. Yet if he could be kept ill for some days it might be to their decided advantage. Jim had a great opportunity and he decided to make the most of it.

The medicine chest was produced and Jim found what he wanted, with the result that half an hour later Schafer was feeling very much easier and the young doctor announced that danger was passed.

"What do you make of it?" asked Di Gilio in a whisper when they were left together.

"Heart," quickly replied Jim, "but the pulse is getting very much better now."

"You have not been treating him for his heart?"

"Certainly I have, but he has been eating bad meat which has been the start of the trouble. It will take some days to get the poison out of his system."

"Are you sure it was bad meat?"

"I will not commit myself without a careful examination, but he certainly has eaten bad meat. However, the developments of the next few hours will tell us all we want to know."

Di Gilio bit his lip and gave a searching glance at the young doctor, but Jim assumed an attitude

of calm indifference and was quietly gazing at his patient.

"Then you think it is only meat," persisted Di Gilio.

"I have other suspicions," Jim replied, "but I cannot make a complete examination before daylight. In the meantime it is necessary for Mr. Schafer to be kept perfectly quiet. I will sit by him and let you know if I need your assistance."

Di Gilio looked angry, but suppressing himself, walked quietly from the room.

There was some mystery about Schafer's illness. That he had been poisoned could not be disputed. Jim examined the medicine chest and found certain poisons in it, but the poison he suspected was not there. From the various drugs that were at his hand Jim prepared a mixture which would keep Schafer indisposed for a day or two and was satisfied when his patient had drunk it all.

The clock on the mantelpiece revealed the fact that it was two o'clock in the morning. When the young doctor announced that danger was passed, Ruth and her aunt had retired, leaving Di Gilio in the little sitting-room. Now and then the lieutenant got up and peeped into the sick-room, but each time he found Jim either standing over his patient or sitting near by.

Day dawned at last. Schafer was easier but, as Jim expected, he was still far from well. Di Gilio came in before breakfast and had a few words with his captain but Schafer was dazed and in no mood to talk.

It was quite clear that the whole affair had entirely upset Di Gilio's plans. Jim felt safe for the time being. No stern demands would be made to reveal the location of the gold reef and time was

a very important factor. There was no doubt also concerning Wright. He must still be at large and every moment gained gave him greater chances of success.

Jim was given something to eat in the sick-room, but as Schafer was dozing he was fortunately able to overhear Di Gilio speaking at the breakfast table. Thinking that he might gather some information he became as daring as he thought prudent under the circumstances.

During the night Di Gilio had been drinking and his talk was becoming wild. Words and sentences fell upon Jim's ear and he gathered that his opponent was in a towering rage. Through the slightly open door it was possible to get a glimpse of the party at the breakfast table. Mrs. Schafer apparently was impressed with the seriousness of the situation and remained very quiet. Ruth waited upon her aunt and Di Gilio and tried to be cheerful although Jim calculated that the girl was sad at heart.

Presently Ruth left the table and came to see how Jim was faring. Schafer had fallen off to sleep.

"How is uncle?" Ruth quietly asked.

"Still far from well."

"You will not let him die."

"I don't think he will, but why are you so anxious, seeing he is cruel to you?"

"He was cruel to me, but how did you know?"

"You look so miserable," said Jim.

"I am miserable, but I don't want him to die. I would be worse off with Di Gilio."

"Must you depend upon Di Gilio?"

"No, I could work. I could do a thousand things, but Di Gilio is going to take me away and make me marry him."

"He cannot make you marry him."

"But he is so strong and I have nobody to protect me. Oh, I wish I could leave this terrible place. They will drive me mad."

Jim glanced at Schafer and then down into that sweet young face before him. His heart went out to Ruth in her despair and he felt he must speak.

"I am only a prisoner," he said very tenderly. "I am hemmed in far more than you are, but if Di Gilio tries to take you away I will kill him."

"You really mean that?"

"I do."

"Oh, thank you so much."

And Ruth darted from the room.

* * * *

For some time afterwards Jim was in a fever of excitement. What if it came to the worst and he was obliged to carry out his promise! All their plans would be upset. Schafer's men would have no mercy on him and Roy would be left alone to suffer the same fate that befell Wilson. However, the thought of his enemy ill-treating Ruth maddened him, but he must be cautious. After all, Ruth might be leading him into a trap. He had to remember that blood was thicker than water and it was unlikely that Ruth would trust him. Not only was he a complete stranger but he was her uncle's enemy. Still this charming young girl had a peculiar fascination for him and if a suitable opportunity occurred he might induce her to impart some useful information. Then there was always the additional possibility that a serious quarrel in the camp would mean more freedom for Roy and Jim, and there were sure to be ways of turning Schafer's weakness to their profit. After taking all these matters into consideration Jim decided to adopt 'the policy of Asquith.'

CHAPTER XVIII RUTH AND DI GILIO

As Jim expected, Schafer did not make a very rapid recovery. His wife and Ruth frequently came into the room and this enabled Jim on several occasions to move out into the fresh air. Somebody was hammering in a shed a little distance away. Jim concluded that Di Gilio was there, until to his surprise he noticed the lieutenant in the kitchen trying to brighten the situation with whisky.

At the rate he was drinking he would soon reach the fighting stage. However Jim endeavoured to keep out of his way, and was trying hard to think out some way of saving Ruth and making a dash for liberty.

In a galvanised iron shed near the house was a somewhat dilapidated motor-car. Fresh wheel marks leading into the shed revealed the fact that the car was frequently used. If he could choose the right moment and get possession of that car he might turn the tables very quickly upon Schafer. Here was another possibility. If Di Gilio went on drinking he would soon be helpless, then surely an effort could be made to overpower all at the homestead, seize the car and make off. The only trouble was Roy. How would he fare? Perhaps Schafer would wreak his vengeance upon him and his life would be in grave danger. Then, of course, even if he got possession of the car there was no guarantee that he could get safely away. To begin with, Jim fancied that all he had to do was to get possession of the car, but the more he thought about the matter the more difficulties there seemed to be. Could he get petrol? Could he find the track away

from Yalorigina? Had Schafer another car by which he could follow?

Jim could see that the dangers would be very great; nevertheless, if there were an open breach with Di Gilio, he would make the venture and endeavour to get Ruth away to Moolooloo. As there was so little to do in the house, Jim found the gardening tools and tried to aid his thinking by a little work. Mrs. Schafer saw him in the garden and was content to let him be thus employed.

The man who had been hammering in a shed close by now came out into the open for a few moments and Jim recognised him as the Afghan camel man. This poor fellow was still in difficulties but was trying to make the best of things and get on the track again. Earlier in the morning Di Gilio had poured forth upon him a torrent of abuse but the troubled Afghan had only muttered a few strange words as he showed his teeth. The thoughts of Di Gilio were now centred upon whisky, so the camel man was left to himself for a season.

Jim occasionally went into the sick-room and had a glance at his patient but he was always glad to get out into the fresh air again. The whole atmosphere of the house depressed him and Mrs. Schafer was inclined to sneer at him and treat him as so much dirt under her feet.

On leaving the house on one occasion he was considerably surprised to notice Ruth watching the Afghan as he worked. She was trying to speak to him and seemed much amused at his nods and gestures. When she noticed Jim she tripped along to him as though she was pleased to have somebody to talk to.

"Has aunt been asking after me?" she inquired.

"No, not that I'm aware of."

"That's good. I hope she forgets all about me."

She is in one of her raging moods and everything I do is wrong."

"Your aunt is sure to be anxious. You will have to excuse her."

"I do, because I know she is worried, but I have everybody against me now and Di Gilio threatened me the last time I went into the kitchen."

"He has not drunk himself asleep yet?"

"Not he—but is there no way of finishing him off with some medicine?"

A sudden thought flashed into Jim's mind. Yes, it could be done while Di Gilio was drunk. The whisky could be drugged and both Schafer and his lieutenant could be kept incapacitated. It was too good a chance to miss. Ruth and her private troubles could be used to great advantage.

"You really mean," said Jim, "that you don't care for Di Gilio?"

"Care for him—I hate him."

"Then would you like me to tell you how you could defeat all his plans?"

"I would love to know. Have you thought out a way to help me?"

"I have."

"Tell me all about it."

"Then you must keep it a secret."

"Of course I will. Surely you will trust me to protect myself. I'm getting desperate. Do tell me what I can do."

"You know where Di Gilio keeps the whisky?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want you to mix a little powder in it. I'll get it all ready and when you get a chance mix it in the drink he will be taking. It will not kill him but it will keep him quiet for a day or two. Then when he is getting better we could give him some more and keep him ill. Now, will you do it?"

"Of course I will," said the girl eagerly, as she looked into Jim's face. "I'm so thankful to you."

"Then I will prepare the powder the next time I go inside and leave it in a match box on the small table by the door. Be on the look out and get it quickly. Wait a favourable moment and then put it all in the drink. Di Gilio will soon be ill."

"I'm so thankful to you—doctor. You really are a doctor?"

"Nearly so."

"Then why did you come away out here?"

"We were prospecting for gold when your uncle and Di Gilio captured us. We have been kept prisoners ever since."

"Well, uncle is cruel to me, so I suppose he is cruel to everybody. Never mind, when they are both sick you will be able to escape."

"Will you help me to escape?"

"Yes, but I want you to take me with you."

"I hope I may be able to help you," said Jim, "but we must go very carefully. Don't let anybody see you putting the powder in the drink."

"Trust me," said Ruth, and a smile again came into her face.

* * * * *

It was time again for Jim to enter the house. There was now a fresh interest in going inside. He found great pleasure in talking to Ruth. She was quaint and old fashioned. There was a merry sparkle in her eyes, and Jim realised that she was entirely different from every girl he had ever met. Her sad and lonely life, with all the strange difficulties and mysteries around her, made a strong appeal to Jim's boyish heart. He tried to think of ways and means of effecting a rescue. The situation certainly was looking brighter, although

the difficulties before him still seemed wellnigh insurmountable.

It was quite apparent that when Jim entered the sick-room further difficulties had been gathering round the lonely girl. Schafer was flushed as though he had given way to temper. His wife was in the room, looking very stern; while poor Ruth had tears in her eyes and her face was flushed as though she had been crying.

Jim said not a word, but sponged the sick man's face, gave him a cool drink, and for some time made himself busy with a fan. In the next room a subdued argument was proceeding which could be partially heard. Mrs. Schafer and her niece were still disputing some point.

With perfect calm the young doctor gave his patient some further medicine and coolly prepared the powder that would render Di Gilio harmless. Taking advantage of a suitable moment, he left the little package at the place arranged. For nearly half an hour he kept himself busy in the sick-room, and then, thinking all was calm, he quietly returned to his work in the garden. He had left the spade he was using beside a myrtle bush, and as he stooped down to pick it up his eyes rested upon something which sent a thrill through his very soul. Near the handle of the spade was a copy of the *Worker*. It was neatly wrapped up and was partly covered by a piece of saltbush. How long it had been there he could not tell. Whether it was there before he went inside he could not say. Quite likely it was, for he had dropped the spade hurriedly without taking particular notice where it fell.

For a moment he stood gazing at the paper, scarcely daring to move. He looked carefully around, but not a being was stirring. Who could have placed the paper in such a strange spot? Perhaps it was a trap. Jim

worked on in an endeavour to conceal his excitement. The thought occurred to him that he might be watched, so he worked on for some moments before he felt that all was clear. Then while he was picking up some rubbish he quickly picked up the *Worker*, too, and saw D. C. written in lead pencil.

Only one man could have concealed the paper at that spot. It proved that Robert Wright was very near and watching his movements. As he placed the paper securely within his shirt he felt that his old friend might be looking down from the surrounding hills. It gave him an added sense of security. Should he attempt any dash for liberty, Wright would be near at hand to help.

It was impossible to read the paper and get any message it might contain until he was in some place of absolute security. Perhaps he would need to wait until nightfall, and then he would like to have the pleasure of reading it along with Roy.

Jim tried to work on and calm his mind, and as he did so he heard voices from within. Evidently Ruth and her aunt were continuing their argument. Jim moved nearer the house and listened. Mrs. Schafer was speaking very sternly, and Ruth was trying to defend herself as best she could. Then another voice was heard joining in. Di Gilio, in a half drunken state, was making some demands. The situation was certainly bad, and Jim wondered if he could take advantage of it in any way and make a rush for the car. This idea was again thrown out of his mind when he looked across the valley and saw two men at work some few chains away. They were Schafer's men on the watch, and it would be impossible to get past them.

For some time the conversation inside was more or less subdued, but gradually it got louder, and the swearing of Di Gilio was heard above the other voices.

Jim took advantage of the argument and crept into the house. He waited outside Schafer's room and listened. His entrance had not been noticed, and the words were becoming more heated every moment.

"You gave him the poison," said Di Gilio with a drunken laugh. "I know that, and I'm not going to be beaten by a bit of a girl. You better own up to what you did, or it will be all the worse for you."

"I tell you again," said Ruth, "I didn't give him poison. I didn't give him anything. Why should I?"

"Well, if you won't tell," said Di Gilio, "so much the worse for you. We will make you tell. Do you hear me?"

"You can't make me tell something I don't know."

Ruth was crying, and Jim heard her sobs as he stood in the hall near by. He was strongly tempted to rush in and take Ruth's part, but a second's thought told him it would be madness. He felt his revolver in his pocket, but holding his eager spirit in check, he continued to wait and listen.

It was not long before he heard more.

"I know a little bit about poison," continued Di Gilio, "and I know its effects. Schafer had poison, and there is only one person in this house that could have given it to him. Don't think you can bluff me, for I'm going to get to the very bottom of it."

"You can do what you like," again sobbed Ruth, "but you will never make me say I gave uncle poison."

"We will see about that," again laughed Di Gilio. "Very soon, young woman, you will be my property. Whether Schafer lives or dies, you are mine. My own property, do you hear?"

Di Gilio swung round, and the next minute held the young girl fast in his arms.

Ruth struggled to free herself, but Di Gilio had her arms held tightly. Mrs. Schafer, seeing the sudden peril of the situation, tried to come to her niece's help. She held on to Di Gilio and tried to pull him away. Ruth cried and kicked and struggled as her assailant pulled her about the room.

Jim clutched his revolver, and was about to rush in when a better thought came into his mind. The revolver fell back into his pocket, and with head erect he walked along the hall and into the room where the struggle was taking place.

"Excuse me," he said in a sharp tone, "I bring bad news. Mr. Schafer has taken a turn for the worse. He is now in very grave danger, and the only hope is quietness."

Di Gilio let his arms drop and stood almost paralysed. Ruth, being set free, hurried out of the room, while her aunt, with a cry of despair, hurried to the sick man.

Jim had stepped back after making the announcement and succeeded in reaching the door of the sick-room before the frantic Mrs. Schafer. The young doctor told her to be very quiet and not disturb the patient. Complete quietness and rest was his only hope.

Fortunately the effects of the drug had kept Schafer asleep, and he did not move as they entered.

"He does not seem to have changed," Mrs. Schafer whispered.

By way of an answer Jim shook his head and tapped his own heart.

"Is it serious?"

"Very. We must keep him quiet."

Ruth came in and glanced at her uncle and then

stepped back. She had tears in her eyes and was in a very distressed state.

Di Gilio also entered with a drunken sneer upon his face. He staggered up to the bed and stood there, gazing at his captain.

Jim glanced quickly at Ruth. She caught his eye and he nodded to the table at the door. In her despair Ruth quickly took the hint, picked up the little parcel and hurried from the room.

Jim's mind was now a little easier. Ruth now had her opportunity, and if she was a girl of resource she would take full advantage of Di Gilio's absence from the kitchen. Meantime Jim drew the lieutenant and Mrs. Schafer back from the bed and spoke quietly to them of the seriousness of the case. Every moment gained was of importance. Jim was playing his cards very well, and the fear which he instilled into his hearers had the effect of giving Ruth instant protection. He was now playing for a great stake, and if his scheme were successful he might be able to turn the tables on his captors.

Half an hour afterwards Di Gilio went out of the house. His captain made no effort to talk. Jim gave him no satisfaction, and Ruth had locked herself in her room. The lieutenant was getting into a fighting mood, and Jim was pleased to see him walk off. He spoke for some time to the men across the valley and then he moved through the sheds into the secret chasm.

For the rest of the day Jim remained in the sick-room. Mrs. Schafer also watched very closely and gently fanned her husband. Ruth came into the room several times and brought whatever articles were required, but to his disappointment Jim had no further opportunities of conversation with her. He was also smarting under another difficulty. He felt the paper close by his heart, and he dared not

face the risk of opening it. Perhaps the message from Wright was urgent. Still, it would never do to be seen opening a paper and reading it.

The hours of the day crept slowly away—too slowly for Jim. Surely with the night an opportunity would come to read the message.

A dozen plans ran through the young man's mind, and to him it seemed that he was again on the eve of big events. That strange feeling that had come over him when he was face to face with the wonders of the great chasm and the gold was again upon him. A presentiment took possession of him that a chance was coming. With Wright so near and his enemies smitten with illness, something could be done.

Mrs. Schafer brought Jim some food into the sick-room, and this prevented him from having a further chat with Ruth. Jim had hoped that it might be possible for him to exchange a few more sentences with her at meal-time, but evidently Mrs. Schafer was determined to prevent the young people from being together. She either kept with Jim or Ruth and so prevented further conversation between them.

Meantime Schafer dozed on. Jim had succeeded in keeping him down, and he could not be roused.

Darkness was coming on, when a fresh development took place. Di Gilio returned with two other men. He staggered into the room and swore at Jim in a frightful manner. Mrs. Schafer asked him to be quiet, but Jim was inwardly wondering if the lieutenant had found him out. However, he kept very cool and said not a word.

Di Gilio had a long look at his captain, and then turned again upon Jim.

"He is better now," said the lieutenant, "and we won't want you with him to-night. You can go

off now. Pfitzner will lock you up. If we want you during the night we will bring you."

Jim was not sorry to hear his dismissal. He was yearning to see Roy again and have a chat with him. There was also the unopened paper and the news it would probably contain.

Some minutes later Jim had been taken back into the chasm and locked up for the night. Roy had been brought in some time before, and had been wondering how his mate had been faring. Now they were together again and were free to relate their various experiences.

CHAPTER XIX "DEATH IN THE POT"

A KEEN wind had been blowing during the day and it had now risen to almost hurricane force. Out beyond the hills of Yalorigina the sand was being churned up and the dust was being swept across into the great chasm. The strange "budleemundja," which had remained silent for many days, again broke forth into new life. Its dismal roars sounded out above the howling of the wind and above the rattling of the roof as if it seemed determined to make itself heard above the storm:

"That night, a child might understand,
The Deil had business on his hand."

Presently Jim felt certain that no enemies were within hearing, so in a few whispered sentences he tried to tell his mate what had happened, and produced from his shirt the precious *Worker*.

All aglow with excitement, the men searched the pages for some trace of a pencilled message, but to their keen disappointment and surprise not a

mark was to be seen. They looked again with no better result, and were starting to feel dejected when Jim suddenly looked down and noticed something on the prison floor which had fallen from the paper. It was a leaf torn from a notebook on which several sentences were written in pencil. Instantly Jim had it picked up, and the prisoners read :

Dear David,

Matters connected with my return are somewhat complicated, still I rejoice with Peggotty because he has found his niece. He hopes a favourable opportunity will soon present itself, as he is anxious to take her back to London.

Peggotty also informs me that the two young men who are held by the blacks are still alive. He has seen them and is very anxious that they should arise and return to their fathers. Too long they have tarried in a far country. Now the mode of arising is by five irregular steps. Each step has its key, and the traveller must possess each in turn. The first step will lead you out of the building. The key will be an axe or bar hidden within. Under cover of darkness seek the extreme western corner. Choose your own method of getting on top of buildings. Look well for overhanging rock with large pine growing at back. Steps commence from immediately under this rock. Follow ledge by ledge and you will be brought to the blowhole. Fear not the darkness, but creep through and you will be brought out into the light. Climb then to the top and make for the nearest pine trees. Go steadily. Follow top of cliff and you will be met ! This is the last irregular step. I shall wait three more days, but if you fail to appear, Wilkins Micawber will return by the way he came.

Yours ever,

W. M.

Twice they read the note. It was certainly in Wright's hand. That was beyond all doubt by the various flourishes which their friend had purposely put in. Both Roy and Jim were in a fever of excitement. Wright was ready and the time of action had come. It seemed almost inconceivable that Wright had found little Rae, yet from the wording of the letter that was the only construction they could put upon it. Further, the message left the impression that Wright was impatient to get away. He was prepared to wait for three days, and he expected his friends to make good their escape within that time. Moreover Wright had clearly stated the way of escape and the means that were to be employed. From the information it was apparent that Wright had secretly crept into the chasm and found a possible means of escape.

"If Wright has found his way in here and out again," said Jim, "I don't think we need to worry any further about him."

"Wright takes some beating. He can stand all sorts of knocks, but always comes through smiling. I can't for the life of me think how he has managed it, but I'm sure he is getting the best of Schafer."

"I wish I knew how to help him."

"He tells us how," said Roy. "We must guard that letter carefully, for Bob has taken more risks than usual."

"I've got it," said Jim suddenly. "Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Think of what?"

"The blowhole—the blowhole. I see it, Roy. The blowhole is the 'budleemundja.' It is only on windy days that you can hear the roar."

"That is so, Jim. I believe you have it. This chasm that we are in must be a continuation of the great chasm where we found the 'burning air' and

the gold. The blowhole must be a small crevasse from one to the other. When the wind tears along the big chasm it is forced through the blowhole, and that causes the hideous trumpet-like roar we hear right beside us."

"Then Wright must have found the blowhole."

"That is certain, for he tells us how we may find it and get out."

"Perhaps that was the path Schafer brought us through when we first entered this prison."

"More than likely; but being blindfolded we will not be able to benefit very much by that trip."

"Only to this extent, that where we could go blindfolded and with arms tied we should be able to go as free men with comparative ease."

"Well, that is the next job before us, Jim. Tomorrow we must look well into the western corner and note every tree and stone. If it is windy we may be able to locate where the air comes through, and that will give us the information we want. We will need a rope, a ladder and some spikes if we can find them."

"Don't forget an axe or a bar. I think it should be a fairly easy matter hiding them in bags and concealing them within our own prison shed."

"And we will need matches, water, food—but, hush! I hear footsteps."

Yes, men were approaching. Roy quickly folded up Wright's note and thrust it in his pocket. Jim pushed the *Worker* under a box, and in another second both were stretched out upon the floor.

The key was thrust into the lock and the prison door was thrown open. Two men entered and looked about them. One was Pfitzner, and he had news to communicate.

"The doctor is needed again," said Pfitzner.

"Is the captain worse?" asked Jim as he sprang to his feet.

"The captain is no worse. He sleeps on; but Di Gilio is poisoned. You must come at once."

"Poisoned!"

"Yes, poisoned—foul play somewhere."

"Then we must be quick," said Jim as he threw on his coat and hurried out.

Pfitzner turned the key on Roy and the three men scrambled off in the darkness.

* * * * *

Di Gilio was in great pain. One glance was sufficient to tell Jim what had happened. Ruth had succeeded. She stood in the room near her aunt as the three men entered. She was pale and frightened, and she gave a hurried glance at Jim as he walked to the bedside. Yet the young girl did not betray herself. She was doing all she could for the sick man and only stepped back and left the room when the young doctor took control.

Di Gilio was in a serious condition, but Jim was soon at work. He knew what the sick man had taken, and he had previously worked out the treatment. The lieutenant would not die, but Jim had won his point. As long as he was trusted to act as medical man he could keep his chief enemies inactive and give Wright every opportunity to complete his plans.

Naturally Jim demanded quietness for his patient. Pfitzner and his men were glad to get away, and were content to smoke their pipes and talk in the kitchen.

Mrs. Schafer retired to her husband's room and watched over him. Ruth came back when she saw Jim alone and stood near him as he watched the suffering lieutenant.

"Will he die?" she whispered.

"I don't think so, but he will not worry you again for some days."

"Will he be sick for a long time?"

"For several days."

"For more than two days?"

"Yes."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure. But why do you ask?"

"Please don't ask me. You have been so kind to me. I do hope the day will come when I will be able to thank you, but I am so sad and sleepy I really must go to bed."

"Then go, child. I really will not need you, and you must have sleep if you are to face your tyrants again."

"Face them again—never—never."

Ruth threw up her hands and, in a fit of hysterical laughter, fled from the room.

What did it mean? Surely the girl's actions were strange, but the trying ordeal through which she had gone must have unnerved her. Jim was sorry she had left, for there was something about this lonely, persecuted young woman that attracted him. He felt he could even endure his imprisonment if Ruth were near, but there was something about the girl he could not fathom. Was she really lonely and persecuted, or was the whole affair a trap? Yet what was the need of a trap? He was a prisoner, and Schafer's men had him in their power. Then another thought occurred to him. Perhaps Schafer knew of Wright's movements and was using this girl to draw him into the net. There were a thousand possibilities, but still the fact remained that both Schafer and Di Gilio were ill. Ruth must have given Di Gilio the drug he had prepared for him, and perhaps she had

even attempted to poison her uncle. Who else could have done it?

Jim was puzzled and he longed to question Ruth further. Yet it was no concern of his. The enemies could quarrel among themselves. His business was to escape from their clutches. Tomorrow night, if all were ready, they would break out of prison and away. With Schafer and Di Gilio ill, they would have two less to deal with, and if they succeeded in meeting in with Wright and he had firearms they might be more than a match for all their enemies.

Meanwhile Di Gilio was sinking into an artificial sleep. Jim meant to keep him sleeping for some time, and was working with his patient with that end in view. When all was done that could be done Jim remained restless. He stood out in the corridor and listened. A light was burning in Schafer's room, but quietness reigned there. In the kitchen the three men were busy playing cards and helping themselves to the drink which Di Gilio had brought to light.

Another thought flashed into Jim's mind. Would it be possible to drug them also and take possession of the house? It was too early yet to risk such an adventure, but if they kept on drinking a suitable opportunity might occur.

Outside the wind was still blowing fiercely. From time to time the "bundlemundja" roared above the storm. It had no terrors now, and Jim wondered how he had not thought of a blowhole before. Beyond all doubt, that must be the solution of the mystery.

"Ah," thought Jim, "Di Gilio said on that terrible night of capture that we would know more about it before he was done with us. Thank goodness the time is coming when we

will know more about it than will please Di Gilio."

As he stepped past Schafer's room he glanced in. A lamp was burning and the sick man's wife was keeping a lonely vigil. Jim walked softly into the room and up to the bedside. Mrs. Schafer nodded to him as he felt the sick man's pulse.

"Good," he said at length. "Your husband will soon be himself again. Let him sleep on. It will do more for him than I could."

"I thought he was sleeping too much."

"Oh, no, don't be afraid of that. It will take a few days for the effects of the poison to pass away."

"Then he was poisoned?"

"Certainly."

"And by whom?"

"I suspect his food. Did he eat any bad meat?"

"No."

"Then he must have got it somehow. He may have drunk it by mistake."

"My husband could not make such a mistake."

"Can you trust all your men?"

"Everyone—the only suspect is my niece."

"Why do you suspect her?"

"Become she has become bitterly hostile to her uncle."

Jim shook his head.

"This is not the work of a girl," he said. "If you are certain of all the men, then my belief is that your husband has blundered. I knew a chemist who poisoned himself."

"But my husband is not that chemist. What do you make of Di Gilio?"

This question came like a bullet at Jim, but fortunately he was ready. He looked quickly into the face of Mrs. Schafer and said:

"Alcoholic poisoning—nothing serious."

"I'm glad to hear it, doctor. I was beginning to think that we had two similar cases."

"Oh, no—the cases are quite different."

By way of changing the subject Jim picked up a cup, mentioning that he would go outside and get Di Gilio some rain water.

"The tank is under the pepper tree at the side," said Mrs. Schafer. "Go out the front door and round to your left."

"Thank you. I noticed it there yesterday."

Jim thought he was being fully trusted now. Perhaps Mrs. Schafer regarded him as a partner in the entire business. At all events she did not seem worried by the possibility of him escaping.

The creaking of the door as it opened was drowned by the gale that was blowing. Jim crept round the house and was about to put the cup under the tap when he noticed a white figure only a yard or two away. Instantly he stood still. There was a little moon, but the night was cloudy and the pepper tree threw a shadow across the tank. Jim's first impulse was to speak, but on second thoughts he stood perfectly still and listened. Near by was a wooden fence, with several myrtle bushes along it. The white figure was close into one of these bushes and leaning over the fence. Jim looked closely and detected the features. It was Ruth.

Jim thought that the poor girl was weeping and had chosen that quiet spot that she might not be disturbed. But, to his surprise, he heard voices. At first only a murmur—then some words said a little louder.

"The three men are in the kitchen," thought Jim. "Who could the girl be speaking to?"

His imprisonment had taught him to be constantly on the alert and if possible overhear any conversation which might be helpful to him.

Satisfying himself that Ruth had not heard him, he stepped a little nearer until he almost touched the myrtle bush by which the girl was standing. The wind was blowing towards him, which enabled him to catch the words and at the same time prevented the speakers from hearing him.

Through a gap in the fence Jim caught a glimpse of Ruth's companion and, to his utter amazement, he perceived that it was the Afghan camel driver. He was speaking in broken English and endeavouring to emphasise his words with various gestures. Jim leaned still nearer and then was able to hear the words.

"Den you say de boss Schaf' plenty sick."

"He is very sick," replied Ruth.

"And the fellow Gil', he sick too."

"Yes, they are both sick."

"Den you tell dem I leave to-morrow—I go when de sun up."

"Couldn't you wait till night-time?"

"Why wait I for de night? De traveller must go when de sun does shine. Tink of de sand."

"But, Mr. Raska, I—I want to go with you."

"Why travel with de camel, when dere is de car?"

"I could not go by car. I cannot drive and they would not take me. Oh, I'm so miserable here. I must get away. Won't you take me away with you? I can trust nobody else. They are all bad."

"I take de lil' woman and I pro—tec de lil' woman," said the Afghan with enthusiasm.

"Oh, you are so good. When I get away, then I will reward you. If I get as far as Moolooloo, then I will be safe."

"My lil' woman, you will be safe when you come

with me. I take plenty care. I have strong de arm—plenty knife and de shoot."

"Then you will really take me with you?"

"I take you—course. Plenty risk, but I take you. Come along now and we make de plan."

Ruth got through the fence and walked away in the direction of the work-shed.

Jim gazed after them—anxious to hear further and know what their plans were. He knew not why he clenched his teeth and burned with hatred against the Afghan.

For some moments he stood beside the tank and watched the figures disappearing in the night. The affair had shocked him and he shuddered to think of this young girl running away with an Afghan. Surely Ruth was desperate and her wild scheme must be stopped. Was it not his duty to tell Schafer? But, alas, neither Schafer nor Di Gilio would be sensible for some hours yet. He would need to tell Mrs. Schafer and perhaps he would be entrusted with the work or rescuing the girl from such a terrible fate.

After quenching his own thirst at the tank, he took a cupful of water inside and sat down in Di Gilio's room. Would he tell Mrs. Schafer at once and Ruth could be caught in the company of the Afghan? He was almost shaking with excitement. Jim felt that he should be the one to rescue the persecuted girl. Why did she thrust herself upon a foreigner? The whole matter was repulsive to him. An Afghan was preferred before him, and it filled him with unutterable rage. Yes, he would relate the incident to Mrs. Schafer and in that way win favour. He would show that no Australian girl could run off with an Afghan.

But there were further considerations. Jim tried

to be calm and think. Was the rescue of Schafer's niece the only reason why he was in his present position? Had he not discovered gold and why should he worry about Ruth? If she decided to run away, as she proposed, then the Afghan was in reality antagonistic to Schafer. A man, even an Afghan, could not run away with Ruth and remain friendly to her uncle. It was certain to mean an open breach, and that again would further weaken Schafer. If the uncle could not go himself, he was certain to send men in pursuit of Ruth, and perhaps if he could get away with Roy at the critical moment he might be able to work a surprise that would completely turn the tables.

Why, when Jim looked with calmer judgment, it seemed that everything was happening for his special benefit. A dozen alternatives came into his mind, and he really felt that his prospects were brighter than they had been for a long time. With serious illness at the homestead, he had suddenly become a valuable man and he was sure to gain additional influence as the days went by.

Then Wright, although lingering in the neighbourhood, was defying capture. If other means failed, he would bring the police and the rescue of his mates was certain.

Slowly Jim came to himself. He determined to keep the matter a secret and, like Wilkins Micawber, wait for something to turn up. However, try as he would, he could not entirely forget the incident. He wondered if it were possible to give Ruth the slightest hint of what might happen. Perhaps he could warn her. She might be reasonable and he could tell her of the great risks she was facing when a better chance was almost beside her.

No doubt the poor girl was desperate. She was

badly treated and she had a perfect right to act as she thought best. Ruth knew that the Afghan was about to move off. She knew of no other way of escape and probably regarded him as her only hope.

Jim sat and thought and thought, and the more he considered the matter the more convinced he was that it would be folly to interfere; still, if a suitable opportunity occurred, he would drop Ruth a hint.

The young medical student was sorely perplexed. He was facing another crisis in his life. A strong presentiment was upon him that one false step now might mean disaster. He wanted Ruth to get away and be free, but he hated the thought of her going off with the Afghan. Perhaps he was jealous, but, at all events, this strange, helpless young girl made a tremendous appeal to his generous nature. She was a fellow human being in distress and somehow Jim felt he should be the one to save her.

PRECIOUS moments went by. Jim could not make up his mind to do anything definite. His patient slept soundly. Pfitzner and the other men were still playing cards and drinking. Only once had they troubled to inquire how the lieutenant was progressing. Evidently Di Gilio was not very popular with them.

Outside the wind howled and the "budlie-mundja" roared in sympathy. The sound no longer had any terrors for Jim. He could see now how Schafer had used the blowhole for his own advantage. It had frightened away the blacks—

the only beings who frequented the neighbourhood. This fear had been handed down from one generation of blacks to another. So the blacks dared not investigate the matter, but accepted the legends that had been handed down by their grandfathers. White men could not get blacks to live in the Yalo' ranges, or show them the tracks through. The country was extremely rough and it was considered to be waterless and useless for pastoral purposes. This enabled Schafer to work on in comparative safety, and probably he carried on his sheep and cattle station under an assumed name. Everything had been in his favour, and when the Blackwood-Wilson expedition had gone out into the Yalo' country he picked his time and method, with the result that the party had been obliterated.

It was easy now to see how it had all happened. Schafer was a clever villain and had some precious secrets to hide. Moolooloo and the people of the surrounding stations were ignorant of his real identity. So, for years, he had kept his secrets.

After a long wait which sorely taxed Jim's patience, Ruth crept back into the house. She went first into her own room and then a few moments later walked briskly into where Jim was sitting. She was perfectly calm and collected, and as she stood near Jim's chair she coolly asked after the sick man.

"He is as well as we can expect," said Jim as he stood and offered the girl his chair. "Probably he will be sick for a few days."

"You are sure he won't die?"

"Quite sure."

"I really wouldn't like him to die. If he did, I would always feel that I was a murderer."

"Don't be afraid of that, Ruth—but there is something that I am afraid of."

"What is that?" asked Ruth, who was surprised at Jim's serious voice.

"You must excuse me speaking," Jim replied, "but certain facts have come to my hearing and I am greatly shocked. I have seen you with the Afghan, and I am not ignorant of the cunning and deception of his race. Surely you are not appealing to him to take you away?"

Ruth drew herself up and flushed with anger.

"I will thank you, doctor, if you will mind your own business."

"Surely I can take an interest in you, Ruth. A little while ago you asked me to help you, and I am always willing to help you. Have I not already done so?"

"You have and I thank you for it, but I have a chance now of getting right away and I must go."

"Ruth," said Jim with great determination, "you must not go with the Afghan. You will not—"

The girl coloured in anger and then laughed.

"I will not be commanded by you, doctor. Remember that you are only a prisoner. How dare you speak to me. You cannot help me and you would hinder one who can."

"I don't wish to hinder you, Ruth, but I must stop you when you try to do something I know to be foolish."

"How can you stop me?"

"I could mention this matter to your aunt."

"You will do that?"

"Only as a last resource."

"Then I will tell uncle that you poisoned him and repeated the trick on Di Gilio."

"He knows I did not do that, and you will make it all the worse for yourself."

"Then I will tell uncle that you have stolen a revolver and have it in readiness to shoot him."

It was Jim's turn to look surprised.

"How did you know that?" he asked.

"You told me yourself by the promise you made to me. Don't flatter yourself that you can hide much from me, but I would like to know how you came to think that I might be running off with the Afghan?"

"It is sufficient that I know of your plans and I think it my duty to warn you."

"Take a poor girl's advice and know nothing. It will be much safer for you."

"Whatever I may do will be for your good, Ruth. I think you are taking a desperate chance. You may get safely away, but can you trust an Afghan? Perhaps he is only deceiving you."

"I can trust Raska."

"Have you known him long?"

"Not long, but I will pay him well if he gets me safely back to Moolooloo. It is my only chance, and I must get away while uncle and Di Gilio are sick."

"But why go with an Afghan when you can go with white men?"

"How can I go with white men?"

"Ruth, we have a plan of escape and it will soon be carried out."

"How will you travel?"

"That I don't know."

"You have no car and no camels."

"But I can drive a car. I can ride mules and my mate is good with camels."

"Then, if the Afghan fails, I will fall back upon you. It will give me two chances."

"If you are determined to go," said Jim, "then you must, but I will alter my plans accordingly. I don't want to do that, because the least alteration now may mean failure."

"You need not worry about me," said Ruth. "I have had to look after myself now for a long time and many hardships have come my way, but I would rather trust that Afghan than many white men. What have you got against him?"

"Nothing, only I don't want you to run any risks. Do be patient for a little longer, and I'm sure you will never regret it."

Ruth was silent for some moments and Jim stood near the door and listened. The conversation, although somewhat heated, had been conducted in subdued tones. The men in the kitchen had not stirred, and neither had Di Gilio, who now was ignorant of all that was going on.

At last Ruth stood and walked towards the door. Her eyes met Jim's as she gave him an angry look.

"I will think about this matter," she said, "but don't interfere with my quarrel, or you will come off second."

Ruth walked proudly away and silently disappeared into her own room. Jim remained at his post, and all through the night kept his lonely vigil. Pfitzner and his companions had drunk themselves to sleep. It was not often they had the right of access to their master's cupboard, so they made the most of their opportunities.

The dawn came at last, and with it new fears and fresh dangers. Would Ruth persist in going with the Afghan? If so, how would Schafer act, and what new opportunities would be opened up? Jim felt a heavy responsibility resting upon him. The next few days would decide big issues. He was playing a leading part in a big game. Outside the chasm in some strange place Wright was at work. He had defied all the energy and skill of Di Gilio to track him down. Both Di Gilio and Schafer were now brought low, and Wright no

longer had serious opposition to contend with. The way indeed was clearing, but one false step might ruin all their schemes.

Di Gilio scarcely moved. Probably he would sleep on for a few more hours, so when the daylight came Jim looked through the window and tried to observe all that went on. To his satisfaction he perceived that Raska's camel was still hobbled and grazing down the valley. All at the homestead was quiet save for the mournful calls of crows and the screeching of cockatoos. Jim gazed out the window and tried to make his plans, but his mind seemed to be a blank. Whatever scheme he tried to puzzle out was always spoiled by one thought which seemed to possess his soul. In his imagination he saw Ruth going off with the Afghan—taking a desperate chance in a mad attempt for freedom—throwing her life away and becoming the slave of the foreigner. Jim could only think of one thing. It was a King Charles's head which got into all his reasoning and spoiled his plans. Jim's fears were real, and he felt certain that if Ruth went away with Raska she would be his slave, his property for ever. So the young doctor was in a strait betwixt two. He perceived a divided duty. He owed much to Roy. He owed much to Wright. Yet he was a white man, and as such he felt he must do all in his power for this young, defenceless, unthinking white girl.

Mrs. Schafer had also fallen into a deep sleep, and the first to move about the household was Ruth. To begin with, she made her way to the kitchen and kindled a fire. Her presence there disturbed the men who sought more congenial quarters out at one of the sheds. She soon paid visits to the sick-rooms—first to her uncle's, then to where Di Gilio was still slumbering. She had a strange, sad expression, and Jim thought she must

have spent the night weeping. Her first glance was toward the lieutenant, and then, nodding her head in satisfaction, she smiled at the young doctor.

"May he sleep on," she said.

"I hope he will," said Jim. "How is your uncle?"

"Much the same—but aunt thinks he is improving. Will they be able to get about to-day?"

"They may try to do so, but I will try and persuade them by every means in my power to keep in bed."

"You can let them get well at once if you like, because I don't care now what happens."

"Have you changed your mind about Raska?"

"I have. He will go without me. I stay here till you are ready to take me away."

"Have you spoken again to the Afghan?"

"No—there was no need. He will know now that I have changed my mind. We were to have gone last night. Instead of acting, I wept till I fell asleep. Then it was too late."

Jim breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm sure you will never regret your decision," he said. "I cannot tell you all I know, but it is more than likely that you will reach Moolooloo quicker with me than if you had decided to go with the Afghan."

"I can only throw myself upon your mercy," said Ruth. "I have no protection here. I'm completely at uncle's mercy, and it is his will that I be handed over to Di Gilio."

"I will make a desperate effort to prevent that. You may rely upon me."

"I will rely upon you," said Ruth with a smile. "For my sake you must rise to the occasion."

Jim smiled as this new responsibility was placed upon him, and grasped the young girl's hand.

"I will rise to the occasion, Ruth," said Jim earnestly. "You may depend upon me."

* * * *

Breakfast was prepared as quickly as possible, and the men were given their meal in the kitchen. Afterwards they went their several ways, and the work of the day commenced. It was quite clear that Pfitzner had definite instructions and was acting upon them. For in the absence of his chiefs he went about his work as usual and was not unduly concerned about the new situation.

Jim had his breakfast with Mrs. Schafer and Ruth, and the conversation naturally turned to the patients. Jim confidently declared that both men were progressing well, and he expected them to be about again in a day or two.

"I hope so," was Mrs. Schafer's comment. "You have no idea how this illness has inconvenienced us."

Jim inwardly suspected as much, and hoped that the inconvenience would yet take on fresh aspects. However he outwardly sympathised with Mrs. Schafer and inquired if he could do anything to help.

"We have been worried about the Afghan. He is now many days late, and we are afraid his load will be late for the ship."

"What has delayed him?"

"Accidents—one after the other. Everything has gone wrong at a time when we are in a special hurry."

"I can't say I'm very fond of Afghans," said Jim; "but I suppose you cannot get white men to work the camels."

"Usually Afghans are very reliable," replied Mrs. Schafer. "They work away well in their own way and are content with small profits, but this fellow

Raska seems to be a worthless creature. He is stupid and cowardly. He is frightened of the camels and frightened of the tracks, and I really believe he wants one of our men to go with him."

Jim laughed.

"Well, if that's all he wants, I'm willing to go with him. I'll guarantee that the load will be delivered safely and in time."

"We need you for other work," was Mrs. Schafer's guarded reply. "While my husband is ill I couldn't think of letting you go very far away."

* * * *

As the day went on the men returned to their various jobs, and work went on quietly as though Schafer and Di Gilio were still moving about. Jim gave close attention to his patients and succeeded in administering further drugs, but in the face of the continued watchful presence of Mrs. Schafer he had to act with extreme caution.

Ruth had little to say, although she frequently ventured into the sick-room. She seemed quite resigned to whatever fate was in store, but once when Jim was passing the kitchen he noticed tears in her eyes, and he knew that beneath the apparent indifference the girl was very sad and troubled.

It was nearly ten o'clock when Raska had his camel yarded. From Di Gilio's room Jim watched his movements. Slowly and deliberately he set the harness and saddle in order. Then, bringing the camel up to the loading, he uttered a gruff "oushta" and the animal growled and went down on its knees. The Afghan was in no hurry to be off. He carefully looked over all the straps, and then threw the saddle over the camel's back. With great care he strapped on his water-bag and belongings and made them all secure. As Jim watched

he thought the fellow would never be done. He was anxious for him to be off—quite as anxious as Mrs. Schafer. Di Gilio was sleeping, but the young doctor was afraid that his patient would suddenly wake up and find him so intensely interested in what was going on outside.

Occasionally the Afghan, in a sly way, lifted his eyes from the camel and took a glance at the house. Was he still waiting for Ruth to come? At all events it seemed to be his object to waste as much time as possible, hoping that the girl would come out and make some new arrangement. However, time moved on and Ruth made no appearance.

At last all was ready. Raska seated himself upon the camel's back and poured forth another gruff "oushta." The animal slowly rose to its feet and strode off. For a moment or two the Afghan looked back and watched the house, but then, as if bitterly disappointed, he looked ahead, down the valley, and rode on.

Jim smiled. At last his mind was at rest. He had beaten the Asiatic, yet he was furious at the fellow for daring to carry off the white girl. Ruth had shown good sense. Better to endure a few more miseries with her own people than place herself beyond the pale by going off with an Afghan.

"Now, if I can only break from the chasm," Jim thought, "and take possession of the car, all may be well."

But he sighed when he thought of how much work was to be done. Wright had to be found. The car had to be seized, and that desperate track down the mountains and across the dreary plains had to be negotiated. When he thought of his prospects his heart almost failed him, but he remembered that Ruth was depending upon him, and that thought somehow made him more determined

to win through, no matter how great the hardships might be.

Noticing that Di Gilio was sleeping, he quietly moved from the room and stepped into the passage. The dining-room was adjoining, and through the slightly opened door Jim caught a glimpse of a white figure standing near the window. It was Ruth. She was gazing through the curtains and her eyes were fixed upon some object far down the valley. Jim realised only too well that she had been carefully following the Afghan's movements. Tears were streaming down her cheeks and her eyes were feasting upon the retreating figure.

Jim turned away, feeling he had no right to see her thus. Still the sight angered him. Fires of jealousy burned afresh. This Afghan, with his foreign ways, his foreign dress and his poverty, was preferred to him. For the moment it left Jim almost unbalanced.

Raska at last disappeared from view, and Ruth turned from the window and dried her eyes. She soon regained control of herself, and after taking a glance in the mirror she walked swiftly to the door and came face to face with Jim.

"Raska has gone," he said.

"Yes; I have watched him go—poor fellow."

"Are you sorry he is gone?"

"Yes, I am—I have been unfair to him."

"You will think differently later on."

"No—I have been cruel and you have made me cruel."

"You will not always think so, Ruth. You do not see clearly yet."

"I cannot help myself." And the tears again came into her eyes. "Raska was always kind to me, and I like him—I like him—so much."

Ruth dashed away, and the next moment she

had closed herself in the kitchen. Jim was surprised beyond measure. In some strange way this Asiatic had cast his spell over the girl, and the young doctor felt that it was a great mercy he had not succeeded in taking his victim away with him.

* * * * *

Slowly the day passed. Both patients improved and Di Gilio commenced to speak a little. Ruth avoided conversation and kept very much to herself. Jim was altogether puzzled by her attitude and wondered if he had made a mistake in persuading her to remain. He did not know what might happen, and if they were making a dash for liberty how could they get Ruth away with them? Added to this the patients were fast recovering, and having a suspicion that he was being watched, he did not give them any further drugs.

When the evening meal was over Pfitzner stopped Jim as he was going into the sick-room.

"Do what you have to do for the patients as soon as possible," he said. "Then when you are ready I want you to come with me."

An hour of suspense followed. What had Pfitzner on hand? Was someone else ill? Was some expedition contemplated, or was Wright captured? All kinds of ideas flashed through Jim's mind, but at last Pfitzner appeared again and without any explanations asked the doctor to follow. A few moments later Jim was taken back into the chasm and locked up.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST IRREGULAR STEP

WHEN the prison door closed behind Jim he was pleased to see Roy seated on a box reading a magazine. He took a pipe from his mouth and smiled a greeting. Needless to say, both men were pleased to see each other, and only waited until the retreating footsteps of Pfitzner had died away so that they could speak freely without being overheard. Jim was the first to begin and quickly made his mate aware of what had happened at the homestead during the previous twenty-four hours. It was an interesting story, and Roy smoked on, but stopped Jim occasionally to ask a few questions. Many points were not clear, but Roy was very pleased that both Di Gilio and Schafer were out of the fight.

"Schafer is the villain with the brains," Roy said. "The other men will be at a disadvantage without their leaders. How long are they likely to remain ill?"

"I'm afraid they will both be about again in a day or two. It was too dangerous to take further risks, so I was compelled to stand by and see them both improve."

"Will they be able to get about to-morrow?"

"Not much. They will be weak for a few days."

"Well, that will be two less to reckon with because—we start to-night."

"Good—the sooner we move the better pleased I will be. Have you made all ready?"

"I have been fortunate. We may succeed, but we are taking a terrible risk."

Jim did not stress the domestic quarrels at the

homestead. He was afraid that his friend may be very searching in his questions, and perhaps, too, there was a slight suspicion that Roy would guess the truth that Jim had fallen in love with their enemy's niece. Fortunately Roy did not regard the matter seriously, for he smoked on, and his only comment was that the Afghan should have been allowed to get off with the girl because Schafer would have sent a couple of men in pursuit and his forces would have been divided at the critical moment.

"I thought of that," replied Jim, "but it was repugnant to me to see a young girl, even if she were Schafer's relative, going off with a repulsive, dirty foreigner. Besides, I was afraid that if Schafer's forces were seriously weakened they would take special precautions and keep us securely locked up."

"How did they guard you at the homestead?"

"They let me do as I liked. I had a wonderful amount of freedom."

"Well, if we make a dash for liberty," said Roy, "how many men could Schafer bring against us?"

"I have been trying to calculate, but I question if all Schafer's men know his secrets. I have seen two or three different men lately, but I think they must be boundary riders from his enormous run. I have come to the conclusion, also, that if anybody has a claim to Yalorigina it is Schafer—although he will be known in the pastoral world by some other name."

"Well, if it came to a fight, how many men could he rely on?"

"I think we should count every man an enemy if we have seen him inside the chasm."

"Those will be certain enemies, and all other human beings about will be more or less hostile. So let us count up everybody."

"Schafer and Di Gilio will not be worth much."

"That's two."

"There is Pfizner and his two mates."

"Five."

"There is the Afghan and two other men I have seen a few times."

"Eight."

"I think that is all."

"No," said Roy, "there is the old man who looks like a professor. He may be very dangerous."

"That will make nine all told and eleven with the two women."

"Well, that is Schafer's full strength as far as we know it, but we need hardly count the women, although they might cause a lot of trouble."

"We can also rule out Schafer and his lieutenant. That brings the number down to seven."

"The Afghan is gone."

"Then there are two other men I have not seen for days. So we can bring the number down to four."

"That gives us a good chance. If we can escape and meet Wright we may be strong enough to attack Schafer in his den."

"Now, about to-night," said Jim. "What are your plans?"

"I have all ready—look at my weapons."

Roy lifted up some bags, and underneath there were cleverly concealed an iron bar, an axe, some rope and several other tools.

"Good," said Jim with satisfaction. "This means business. To-night we should start in earnest."

"I got very daring to-day," continued Roy. "I acted upon the principle that the boldest course was the safest. However, I was left almost to myself all day. I guessed that something might be happening over at the homestead, so I took

advantage of my measure of freedom. I was only afraid that you might not be brought back to-night and our attempt be delayed. Now when shall we start?"

"Better wait till about midnight."

"But what if your patients take worse in the meantime and you are sent for again?"

"I hardly think it likely. They are both well on the improve, and I don't suspect either of them will take poison of his own free will."

"Then they were both poisoned?"

"Yes."

"Before you commenced to attend them?"

"Yes—but I aided the process in each case. I can account for Di Gilio's sickness, and I know where and how he got the poison, but I haven't the slightest idea how Schafer was poisoned."

"Could it have been an accident?"

"Very unlikely. The poison was difficult to handle."

"Perhaps one of the gang has turned traitor."

"I suspect as much, but Di Gilio blames the young woman."

"You are certain he is wrong?"

"Quite certain. It was the work of a man well up in drugs. The whole affair has puzzled me because it has given us an advantage," said Jim.

"Yes, it appears that Schafer has a traitor somewhere, and if that is the case, I would like to get a hint of who he is."

"The numbers against us may be further decreased. If we succeed in getting out and finding Wright, I will be game to tackle every man Schafer can bring against us," Jim further remarked.

"While I was left very much to myself this afternoon I made an examination of the chasm wall in the corner beside the store sheds. There is

quite a neat little staircase from the top of one of the sheds to one of those projecting ledges of rock. You have to get right into the corner and look closely before you can see that the stones have been built up. I'm sure there is a little track there, leading up to the blowhole, and further, I'm inclined to think that we were first brought into this chasm by that way."

"Could we get on top of the shed?"

"It is very high, but I have put out some rope and there are several long pieces of timber I can put my hands on. If we are reasonably fortunate I think we should find a way of getting on the shed roof. We should be able to get up the chasm wall a considerable distance. Then if it is too dangerous to go on in the darkness, we can easily wait for daylight. We should have an hour's daylight before Schafer's men are about."

"What if we are discovered before we get beyond the roof?"

"There will be nothing for it but stand and fight it out. We will have the advantage of surprise and if I knew where Pfitzner or his men were sleeping I would risk an attempt at capturing them."

"Better not risk it. They will be armed and I have only six shots in all. Besides, I don't think I could hit a house with a revolver."

* * * * *

It was nearly midnight. Jim and Roy were all ready. For several hours they had been waiting in feverish excitement. Within the chasm there was silence and darkness. At last the moment came to strike.

Very quietly the weapons had been brought out. Pieces of bags had been wrapped round them to

deaden the sound. The door was securely locked and they commenced to feel with the bar for weak spots. The darkness was intense and they could not see where to strike. They had tried the door all round with the blade of the axe, but it seemed as firm as a rock. A grip could not be got for the iron bar that would give sufficient leverage and they were afraid to strike hard with the axe because the slightest tap seemed to ring out in the still night air.

"We had better stick to the one point," said Roy. "Cut away a bit round the bottom hinge and I may be able to get the bar through."

Jim tried to do so but it was slow work. The wood was as hard as a rock. The axe was blunt and in the darkness no two blows seemed to hit the same spot. Every few blows Jim could feel the blade strike the bolt of the hinge and he knew he was keeping somewhere near his mark.

Roy pressed on the door to keep it from rattling, fearing lest the tapping of the axe should disturb some of Schafer's men. He thought he heard a door open over at the sheds and he held Jim back and listened.

A few moments of dreadful suspense followed. Jim covered up some of the weapons and then felt for his revolver. However nobody appeared, and when they were certain that all was quiet they commenced work again. Jim had a hole cut beside the bolt, and by forcing the bar through it, they found that the grip held. Both men pulled at the bar with all their strength and after much tugging they were pleased to feel the hinge giving way. Another desperate pull followed and the hinge came away from the woodwork. The rest was easy. The bottom of the door was forced away from the wall and Roy commenced to crawl through.

THE DEN OF THE BUDLEEMUNDJA 211

"Pass the rope and tools through," he said. "All is clear."

"Have you matches?"

"Yes."

"How about water?"

"I have a big bottle buried among the rocks."

"And food?"

"Plenty in my pack. Come on and don't waste a minute."

Jim quickly followed Roy and soon they had crawled through the forced door. The tools and provisions were pulled out after them and as noiselessly as possible they forced the door back into its old position, making it appear safely locked. A few minutes later they had crept across the chasm and were waiting by the sheds in dreadful suspense lest Pfizner should suddenly appear and call on them to stop.

CHAPTER XXII

THE DEN OF THE BUDLEEMUNDJA

FOR over five minutes they waited. Keeping very near the wall they listened for the slightest sound, but all was silent and they concluded that so far their escape had not been detected.

Getting on the roof of the shed was no easy task. It was over twenty feet from the ground and the walls were of corrugated iron. This meant that it would be almost impossible to climb up without making a considerable noise. Roy found the poles and the timber he expected to use but, unfortunately, the longest pole did not come within four feet from the roof. The iron wall fitted into the chasm walls and the side of rock was impassable.

To make matters worse there was nothing to throw a rope over. The walls of iron and rock seemed to defy them. The men stood a little back and wondered. They were both feeling a little downhearted but their courage was rising as the difficulties presented themselves. Jim felt like smashing a way through at whatever cost. He thought hard for a few minutes and then a sudden thought occurred to him.

"I have it!" he exclaimed.

"Have what?"

"The idea for us. You have some matches, Roy?"

"What do you mean to do?"

"Fire," said Jim with a grin. "We will set fire to one of the sheds and wait for Pfitzner."

"I don't see how that will help us."

"But I do. As soon as Pfitzner appears we will cover him and bind him with the rope. It is almost certain they will come singly and unarmed. We will capture them as they come and then the chasm will be ours."

"Your remedy is drastic, Jim; I don't think we should attempt it except as a last resource."

"I think it would come off well and it would save us a lot of trouble. The element of surprise would give us the advantage."

"Yes, there is much to be said in its favour and probably all may go well. But then you never know what damage you are going to do by putting a fire here. Perhaps the very machines we want will be burnt. Perhaps the clue to all the mysteries will be burnt up. Then you may burn Wilson, or if Rae Blackwood is still alive within these walls she may be endangered. No, Jim. Let us go steadily. Fire and shooting must be only last resources."

"Very well, Roy. Let us try some other way

of getting on to the roof from the inside. There may be a trap-door. If there is not we may be able to force a sheet of iron off. Keep cool, there are several hours before daylight."

"I'm not frightened, Jim, but I'll feel more satisfied when we get up the rocks a bit."

"Then let us try the door."

Getting down on their hands and knees they crawled round the shed. Another building was a few yards away and fortunately the door was in a very dark corner. Roy felt across the wall and at last he touched the wooden framework of the door, but, alas, it was very secure, with a strong padlock upon it. Several attempts were made to force the lock but it proved too strong and could only be broken by heavy blows which they were afraid to give.

Then another idea occurred to Roy. He forced the bar under the door and to his satisfaction he found he could lift it. A better grip was taken and both men pulled at once with the result that the door was lifted off its hinges. In another minute Roy and Jim had forced their way into the shed and succeeded in lifting the door back into its position again. The room seemed to be full of materials and whichever way they moved they seemed to come up against something.

"Is it safe to strike a match?" Jim inquired.

"I think so. It would scarcely show from outside."

A lighted match revealed a room full of boxes with a couple of small machines. A ladder was in the corner and it reached to the roof. This was what Roy had half expected. The secret entrance up the cliffs was through this shed. Another match revealed the fact that the ladder led up to a trap-door in the roof. When the match went out they felt in the darkness for the ladder and scrambled up.

Roy went first and found that the trap-door was locked. So there was still another barrier. Schafer evidently gave no chances and by his calculations escape was impossible. However Roy had held on on to the iron bar, and fortunately he was able to get a grip and, by pulling the bar downward, he succeeded in forcing the lock. The trap-door was slowly forced back and they gently placed all their belongings on the roof.

"We had better make the doors fast behind us," said Jim.

"I was thinking of that," replied Roy. "If Pfitzner happens to follow us we must try and make the job as difficult as possible for him."

They climbed down into the shed and for a few moments they were very busy packing heavy boxes of materials up against the door. When they were satisfied that it could not be easily forced they again scaled the ladder and crawled through the trap-door on to the roof. Fortunately the ladder was not a fixture and to make assurance doubly sure the ladder was drawn up and placed gently on the roof. The trap-door was fastened down and a heavy stone put upon it.

"All well, so far," said Roy. "really I believe we have not been heard. Now for the track."

While they had been in the shed the wind had commenced and could be heard among the trees far up the walls of the chasm. There was still a little moon and by its aid Roy picked out the track and the two men were able to crawl along in comparative safety. Their loads were considerably lightened by discarding much of the equipment they had brought.

It was quite evident that the little winding track had been carefully prepared. Stones had been thrown aside and others had been put into position. Slowly they climbed higher around the jagged

points and along ledges until at last they came among enormous boulders. The higher they went the lighter it seemed to become and they were still able to distinguish a pathway. They crawled for a few moments along another defile between two giant stones. The track steadily narrowed in, and to their surprise the rocks came together overhead. Total darkness came upon them and only by looking back could they get a glimmer of light. The breeze which could only be heard farther down was now coming into their faces and before them they could hear a low moan and a faint throbbing sound.

"This must be the entrance to the blowhole," said Jim. "Have you got a match? We will have to feel our way very carefully."

A match was struck and they saw before them what seemed to be the opening into the tunnel. The faces of rock at the entrance were as smooth as if they had been carefully prepared by man. Farther on inky darkness reigned.

"What a pity we haven't a torch," said Roy. "It will be dangerous going in there without a light."

"We can feel our way," replied Jim. "Make sure your foot is on firm rock before you put all your weight on it. But is the air likely to be bad?"

"I hardly think so. The wind we feel must be coming right through and stagnant air could not very well lodge within."

"Then let us carry on. No need to be afraid now of the terrors of the 'budleemundja.'"

Step by step they crawled forward into the fearful blackness. Behind them was the faintest streak of light but that disappeared when they moved round a bend in the blowhole.

"How many matches have you, Roy?"

"The box is about half full."

"How about striking a few so that we could hurry forward in the light?"

"A good suggestion. You be ready to rush forward while I nurse the match."

This was done and much better progress was made. There were several sharp turns in the tunnel-like blowhole and there were also a few very dangerous places which might have meant disaster if it were not for the lighted matches. Here and there great cracks appeared. Some of these were so deep that to have stumbled into them would certainly have meant death. Nearly a chain from the entrance, the blowhole widened out into a cave with a yawning pit in the centre of it. The atmosphere got very warm and then the men felt again that strange, stinging sensation on their faces and hands. Instinctively they covered themselves for protection but it took them a few moments to crawl round the cave and by that time they were both feeling somewhat burnt and exhausted. However the blowhole narrowed down again to a small passage between the rocks and then they were able to make better progress. They carefully struggled round a few more danger spots and then, to their great joy, they saw light ahead. Another few minutes brought them out into the fresh air again, but they were face to face with a fresh danger. Right below them was the terrible chasm they had first discovered. The face of rock all round seemed to go straight up and down and the track did not appear to go any farther. Far, far below was the chasm with its "burning air" and farther on was the gold. The moon was still capping the tops of the hills with a faint light, but the great hollow was shrouded in darkness so terrible that the men shuddered as they gazed into it.

Several matches were struck in an endeavour to find a foothold farther up but, try their hardest, they found no way of swinging out and grasping anything above or below them. They had reached a dead end.

"I believe we will have to wait for daylight," said Roy. "It looks very ugly."

"Yes, but there must be a way out. I think this is the way we were brought in. Besides, Wright has evidently found a way in and out by the blowhole."

"What a pity we left all that rope behind."

"I don't see that rope could help us."

"We may be able to lower ourselves and get right down to the bottom. If we could do that we could find a way out again."

"Well, suppose we sit down and have a smoke? That was Maxwell's remedy when he got into difficulties."

"Good plan. We have still about a dozen matches left. I think we can spare one for a smoke."

So a smoke was agreed upon and a few moments later both men were puffing away at their pipes. The wind was steadily rising and the throbbing sound changed to a dismal roar. In a peculiar way the full force of the wind seemed to catch them as it hurried into the blowhole.

"One would think there was a magnet here to attract every breath of wind," said Jim.

"We get the full force of it, don't we? I think that is because the chasm narrows towards this end, and all the air being forced into a narrow space, it has to get an outlet through the blowhole. Then those turns we have crawled along will act as a bugle and produce that horrible noise."

"The 'budleemundja'—how simple it is now to

us, but I suppose it puzzled the natives for centuries and led to the belief that some fearful debbil-debbil lived here?"

"We must give Schafer credit for his cleverness in sheltering behind the superstitions of the blacks. The 'budleemundja' has been a good friend to him."

"Come to think of it," said Jim, after a brief silence, "there is a jolly lot of humour in a situation like this."

"Yes, I believe my dad would say things could be worse."

"Yes, and a lot worse. We have food and water enough for three days. We could stand a bit of a siege. What is more, we could pick Schafer and his men off one by one if they tried to follow us here."

"I don't think they would follow us up. They would let starvation and thirst compel us into submission."

"But a lot could happen in three days. Anyhow I don't think they would risk leaving us to die of thirst. Depend upon it we shall be followed, and if it comes to a fight we could have an ugly trap set back at the turn near the cave. With that bar we could push them into the pit one by one."

"Yes, I'm sure Schafer will have an awkward nut to crack if he rushes in here to capture us."

"He can't afford to have many men pushed down that pit, I'm certain of that."

"Well, we can't go forward, that is certain; but when we have finished our smoke we will go back a bit and prepare a good defence."

A few moments later they were retracing their steps and feeling for loose stones by which they could make a barricade. Having gone back about ten yards, Roy, who was leading the way, was

surprised to find that the passage at that point suddenly became wider. He felt round in the darkness but could not touch the walls. His curiosity having been aroused he struck a match. Jim came up at the same moment and both noticed what had escaped them before. Another crevasse led off sharply to their right and ascended rather abruptly. When they had first gone along they had been attracted by the light coming in at the end of the blowhole and so had missed this other way. By the aid of a few more matches they succeeded in climbing rapidly a very crude stairway. In places the crevasse was so narrow that they had to squeeze through it. At last, to their great joy, they could see a faint glimmer of light ahead and it told them that there was another way out from the terrible blowhole.

The climb became steeper as they neared the light, but at length they came out again into the fresh air and to their intense satisfaction they could discern a rough stairway which followed a narrow ledge round the face of the gorge. In their eagerness they stepped out on to it, feeling sure that it would lead them right to the top. On their left there was a sheer drop of some hundreds of feet, and with the wind against them they had the feeling that the great gorge was falling in. For safety they went down on their hands and knees and were content to crawl along.

"I think this must be the spot," said Roy, "where Schafer cautioned us that night he brought us in. You remember he told us that if we slipped we would fall to death."

"I can remember him cautioning us several times. What I remember best is how tired and sore and wet I felt."

"Never mind, it will be a bit of fun to look back

on, and if we succeed in getting right out, we will soon make Schafer look foolish."

"I don't know how Wright means to get us away. More than likely we will have to fight for it."

"Wright is a good bushman and if we can meet him I think we will be safe enough."

So they struggled on and gradually the path widened out and then, almost before they realised it, they found themselves bearing away from the wall of the chasm and stumbling among the bushes.

"We are right out," said Jim, "and we have only a little farther to go and then we will be at the top of the hill."

The wind steadily rose, and wail after wail came forth from the "budleemundja." The moon was setting, so Roy and Jim calculated that they should make a last effort and get right to the top of the hill before darkness set in.

This meant a climb for a few more chains, but at last they reached the summit and could gaze down into a valley on the other side of the hill.

"We had better hide among these bushes and wait for daylight," said Jim.

"Wright said we would be met."

"But how could he find us here in the darkness?"

"Suppose we whistle."

"Too dangerous. Schafer may have someone lurking in the neighbourhood. Besides, Pfitzner may be following on our heels this very moment. Better wait for daylight and we will see what we are doing."

"I think you are right. We won't have a very comfortable bed, but we will be free. I'll watch for an hour or two while you have a sleep. Then you can take a turn."

Both men sank to the hard ground. Roy was almost asleep, and as Jim sat up and watched he

thought he heard bushes moving a few yards away. He looked intently into the night, and to his amazement he saw on the skyline two crouching figures coming round towards him.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CAVE OF
ADULLAM

A cold shiver passed down Jim's back and he felt for his revolver. Instinctively his hand went out and he felt Roy, and the next moment both were keeping very still and were peering into the darkness.

Again the figures appeared on the skyline. They were human beings and they continued to come nearer.

"Pfitzner must be on our tracks already," said Roy. "We will have to fight for it."

"Had we better not creep farther on? We may be able to lose them yet. They are easily two or three chains away."

"That's what we'll do to commence with. Come, let us crawl around those bushes ahead."

With a terrible fear upon them they started to creep on their hands and knees. The ground was very hard and the bushes were prickly. To make matters worse, they found it almost impossible to go forward without making a noise.

After having gone a few chains, Jim stood up behind a bush to see if he could get a glimpse of his pursuers. To his disappointment he noticed that the mysterious figures had gained upon them. They were crouching a little, but could be easily seen against the skyline. Evidently they were not much afraid and seemed to be hurrying as if eager to come up with the escaping men.

"Quick," said Roy. "Let us double round to the right here and they might pass us by."

Roy led the way and they crept along quickly for about a chain and hid among some tar bush. Their pursuers reached the spot where they had turned, and suddenly halted. For a moment they examined the ground, and then, dropping to their hands and knees, they crept along in the direction of the clump of tar bush.

"This is uncanny," said Roy. "How did the brutes know we turned at that spot?"

"They must be able to scent us like dogs."

"Come on," said Roy; "if we have to fight for it let us find some stones that will shield us."

Again they crept on among the undergrowth and turned behind a ridge of rock. Going on some distance they selected a spot that was protected on one side by stones and on the other by tar bush.

"We will wait here," Roy remarked, "and see what happens."

Jim had his revolver ready and was covering the clear ground along the ridge of rock. They saw the dark figures creep up, and then they disappeared. Evidently they had not turned along the rock, and were probably going off in a different direction.

The suspense of the next few moments was very severe. Both men peered out into the darkness and imagined every second they could hear footsteps near them or could see figures approaching. How long they crouched by the rock in the darkness they knew not, but it seemed like hours. Every moment they expected to see a torch flash in their faces, but the moments slowly went by and nothing happened.

"We will stay here until daylight," said Roy.

"Good," replied Jim. "There is plenty of shelter here."

Scarcely had he uttered the words when both men were amazed to hear a little whistle almost beside them. They drew long breaths in anticipation of the dreadful moment of encounter. The pursuers evidently were right upon them, and one was whistling to the others to come up.

A moment of terrible suspense followed. Then a whistle sounded out again rather louder than before, followed by another moment of dreadful silence.

Jim raised his revolver in the direction of the sound, expecting every moment that the light would stream into his face, but instead he heard a deep voice whisper:

"Micawber!"

Both Roy and Jim were so surprised that they were left speechless. Again there was a low whistle, and after a short interval the deep voice repeated:

"Micawber—Micawber!"

The fugitives could scarcely believe their ears. Could Pfizner have discovered the password? For some strange reason Roy and Jim felt at first that one of their pursuers was Di Gilio's right-hand man, but they were soon to be enlightened.

The man with the low voice after having called, "Micawber," commenced to crawl forward.

"Are you there, Bob Wright?" Roy asked.

"Cripe, no," came the response as a dark figure rose from among the tar bush and came a little nearer.

"Stand," said Jim, as he raised the revolver.

"Who are you?"

"By cripe, you plenty lucky," continued the stranger. "We hunt long time for de fella Mitch' and de fella Fish'. S'pose you come longa us."

The man was certainly an aboriginal, and as he spoke another black man also appeared from among the bushes.

"Who are you?" Jim again demanded.

"By cripe, boss, you one blind fella."

Both black men laughed and came nearer.

"Do you live about here?"

"Yalorigina, Moolooloo all belonga me," said the black. "We belonga one fella Wright, and he say go and meet de Mitch' and de Fish'. So you come longa us."

"Do you know Wright?" asked Roy.

"Cripe, we do, boss. Him one fella bonza."

"Has he sent you for us?"

"Yeh, boss, and he say, 'Give dem dis talking stick. Dat will fetch dem.'"

The black held out a piece of stick which Jim took, and by the aid of a match both examined. Upon the wood these words were scratched in pencil:

*Follow the blacks. They will bring you to me
and to safety.*

Wilkins Micawber.

Roy and Jim both beamed with delight as they read the message, and smiled their greetings to the faithful natives.

"Cripe, dat funny," said one of the blacks. "Boss say, watch 'em. Stick make 'em laugh, you see. By cripe, boss one bonza."

"Very well, boys," said Roy. "You lead us to your boss. You know the way."

"Cripe, yes. You laugh when you see him. He clever like the devil."

And both the aboriginals broke forth into a hearty laugh.

A tremendous burden was thus suddenly lifted from the minds of Roy and Jim. Evidently Wright was very near and in safety, and this filled them

with intense joy. The fear which for so long possessed them, melted away, and the laughter of their black guides was music in their ears. Truly their friend Wright was a superman. For weeks he must have lived beside Schafer's stronghold, and although Di Gilio and others were hot after him, he defied capture. No wonder the blacks regarded him as "clever like the devil." His cleverness must soon be rewarded, for surely he was now on the high-road to success.

The blacks scarcely spoke a word, but Roy and Jim were both content to follow their guides, feeling sure that there would be plenty to talk about when they met their old friend. After scrambling along among tar bush and rocks for about a quarter of a mile they came in again close to the edge of the chasm, and were led into a secluded hollow surrounded by large rocks.

"You plenty safe here," said one of the blacks. "Plenty tucker, plenty water, plenty gun. Boss Wright come soon. We go back, keep watch. See if other fella follow."

"Will you be away long?"

"Come back daylight. You not go 'way. No light fire. Sit down longa here, see."

"Very well, we will do what you say," said Roy.

"But where is Wright?"

"Cripe, he come soon. You not fear. He clever like the devil."

So the blacks crept away, leaving the rescued men to themselves. They could not understand the absence of Wright, and they failed to see how their friend could have concealed himself in safety at such a spot. They were almost looking down into Schafer's chasm. Although Wright from this point could follow the movements of his enemies, yet it would be impossible to remain

there if Di Gilio was searching in the neighbourhood.

After the aborigines had moved off almost as mysteriously as they had appeared, Roy felt round to see what Wright's camp contained. There was a can of water and a bag of provisions, and near by a couple of rifles. What pleased them more was to find a couple of old blankets. They soon had themselves rolled in these and, knowing that they were comparatively safe, they felt overcome by sleep.

Nothing could be done until daylight, and it was impossible for their enemies to find them in the darkness. The aborigines were away keeping guard, and their keen eyes and ears would detect the approach of any white man.

Far down in the chasm below them all seemed quiet. There was no sign of light or movement, and a real sense of security came over them, and with it they fell into a deep sleep.

It was broad daylight when Roy again opened his eyes. Jim was still sound asleep close by. For a moment Roy scarcely realised where he was or what had happened. Then he came to himself and sat up realising that no more precious moments were to be wasted in sleep.

In a few more seconds he had disentangled dream from reality and was struggling to his feet as two men appeared from behind the rocks. They were the two natives.

"You plenty long fella sleep," said one, and the other grinned a greeting.

"Has Wright got back yet?" Roy asked.

"Cripe, no. He come sometime. He never in too quick a hurry."

"Are you sure he is quite safe?"

"He plenty safe and plenty clever—like the devil."

"Are you going to keep us here all day, or what do you mean to do?"

"Boss come soon. He knows."

"Yes, but I want to know too."

"Cripe, you soon find out. Boss come all right. We go back keep plenty watch out. You stay here, see."

"Did Wright say we were not to move from here?"

"Cripe, he did. He say you plenty watch out and keep 'um at camp till I come."

"Then we must wait for him here."

"Cripe, yes. Stay here. Plenty tucker in bag. We go longa keep plenty watch out, see."

With a biscuit in each hand and a smile on their faces, the two aborigines stole out again among the tar bush.

BEING left alone, Roy commenced to search the camp. Jim dragged himself out from his blanket and looked out over the rocks. The black boys were creeping away, but there was no other sign of movement. The homestead could be seen far down in the valley below, and already a little smoke was coming from one of the chimneys.

Jim wondered how the two patients were faring. The homestead seemed so peaceful in the distance, yet he was glad to be beyond its control. However it gave him pleasure to think that the place was still in sight, for the poor helpless Ruth was there.

Roy had found the food bag, and beside it a tin

of water, and calling Jim down from his look-out, they partook of a few hard, dry biscuits.

"I don't care how soon Wright turns up," said Roy. "Even the blacks are very silent about his affairs."

"I'm thinking," said Jim, "that if it comes to a fight we will now give Schafer the fright of his life."

"Yes, we are stronger than I thought we would be. Look at those two lovely rifles."

Both men looked at the weapons with satisfaction.

"What is still better," said Jim, "we now have hands to use them. With the two blacks and Wright we are five strong. We will give a good account of ourselves, I am sure, when we sweep down on Schafer's den."

"I do wish Wright would hurry up and come. The moment we three join hands again victory is certain."

"If we could only attack now, while Schafer and Di Gilio are both ill, we might snatch a very easy victory."

"I'm too excited and anxious to eat," said Roy. "Besides, a man may as well chew bark as eat these biscuits."

"Well, I feel I could live for a week on my sense of freedom," said Jim. "To think that we are out of that chasm and know something about Schafer's secrets. What a story we will have to tell! I can almost see the big head-lines in the Melbourne papers."

"Yes, we will turn the tables on Di Gilio before he is much older, and we will make that bully Schafer look foolish."

"I hope Wright has his plans all arranged," said Jim, "for I'm keen to get at Di Gilio. I could rope him down or blacken his eyes with pleasure."

And the young doctor again peeped over the rocks. His escape filled him with joy, and he felt that a tremendous burden was lifted from his soul. In the midst of his excitement he did not forget Ruth. Now he would have an opportunity of keeping his promise and rescuing her. How he would love to take her away before the very eyes of Di Gilio! In a strange way Jim had been thrown into her company, and now that he had leisure to think he found it impossible to drive her from his mind. There was a strange charm about the girl which fascinated him, and he longed for the moment to come when he could snatch her from the clutches of Di Gilio. He wondered what Wright's plans were. When he appeared, would he immediately advise a hasty return to Moolooloo? If that course was decided upon, could he endure the suspense of leaving Ruth behind? All these thoughts occurred to him and he wondered also how Wright or even Roy would entertain any proposal for rescuing the girl.

Meanwhile Roy was busy examining the rifles and other articles in the camp. There were no papers and only a few bare necessities in the way of equipment. What was also very strange, Roy could not distinguish tracks of any kind either leading in or out of the camp. If Wright had lived for weeks among these rocks it was quite apparent that he was very skilful in concealing his tracks.

It did not take long to search the camp, and then Roy too commenced to peep out over the rocks. Around them stretched the tar bush with odd patches of mulga and bullock bush. The country was very rough and great boulders were scattered all along the face of the hill. There were no signs of life near at hand, and it required a great effort to keep the young men in their place of

concealment. Every moment the suspense became more terrible, and they eagerly watched and listened for any sign of the approach of Wright.

The sun rose and the flies came in swarms. To make matters worse, thousands of ants seemed to rise up by magic and invade the hollow. They quickly crowded round every crumb of biscuit that had fallen, and also swarmed over the food bag which had been left open. Roy was able to rescue the provisions before they were completely polluted by the little black intruders. It seemed almost incredible that such a number of ants could have appeared in a few minutes, and the attention of the two men was taken up for some time in protecting themselves.

At last all the crumbs were gone and the rush seemed to lose its enthusiasm. In the meantime the sun had appeared over the hill at the other side of the chasm, and the morning was wearing on. Still there was no appearance of their old friend, and Roy and Jim were both becoming anxious. The blacks, too, kept away and all was strangely quiet.

"I move we go out and have a look round," said Jim. "Crouching here in this useless way is knocking the very life out of me."

"It is hard, but have patience, old chap. Remember we are free again."

"We may be, but it requires the patience of Job to remain here in this wretched state of inactivity. Let us take the rifles and prowls around a bit."

"Better not. The blacks were anxious that we remain here. Wright will have his plans. Don't fear."

"Well, you can stay if you wish, but I'm going to crawl round the hill a bit."

Roy tried to persuade his friend not to do so, but to no purpose. Jim was daring and determined. He took up one of the rifles which was loaded, and crept out from the hiding-place. Roy felt very angry, but at the same time he realised that they must keep together. So, picking up the other rifle, he proceeded to follow his venturesome mate. However they were comparatively safe, for there was plenty of cover among the stones and tar bush. There was no sign of the blacks, and Jim's idea was to make a rapid sortie and return quickly to the hiding-place. He was anxious to look down upon Schafer's stronghold and see how it appeared from above. So after moving a few chains around the top of the hill, they slowly crept towards the edge of the yawning chasm. Even Jim realised at last that it was not safe to venture too near the sharp descent. There were many loose stones which required only a touch and they would go rolling down, alarming the enemy below.

At length a point of vantage was found by which Jim could see a portion of Schafer's stronghold. Little more than the roofs of the building could be seen and no human beings could be distinguished. What was of more interest to Jim was the homestead at the head of the valley. His eyes lingered upon the spot in the hope of seeing Ruth come out into the garden.

Disappointment, however, was in store. Neither man nor woman could be seen.

"We had better move back," Roy said at last.

Scarcely had he uttered the words when they heard, a little distance away, the noise of a stick breaking. With one impulse they crawled back among the tar bush. Again the noise came to their ears, proving beyond all doubt that some living

creature was near at hand Was it man or animal ?
Was it friend or foe ?

Roy peeped through the tar bush in the direction of the sound, dreading lest Pfitzner and his men should appear. Again the sound was heard and both men noticed something move between bushes. Without doubt a human being was approaching. Was it possible that Wright was coming ?

Their hearts beat wildly at the prospect of greeting their friend. The noise came nearer and they were both almost paralysed with excitement. Rising slightly among the tar bush, Jim again peeped in the direction of the sound. The next moment he drew back, uttering a moan of horror. The sight which met his gaze turned him almost to stone. A man was approaching but it was not the friend they expected.

"What is the matter, Jim ?" Roy asked.

"Matter! Curse the fellow! Come here and look."

Jim could scarcely speak and almost lost control of himself. He clutched his rifle and stared as though he was possessed by some power beyond himself. Roy was alarmed and hurried forward on his hands and knees till he came up to his mate.

"Look," said Jim, as his eyes flashed with fury.

Roy did look and then instinctively lifted up his rifle. Only a chain away was the crouching figure of an Afghan. He moved slowly among the stones and bush and was carrying in his arms what appeared to be the lifeless form of a woman.

"That is the villain Raska," said Jim.

"Who is the woman ?"

"Can't you see he has stolen Ruth ? God help the poor kid ! She is either insensible or dead."

"Have your rifle and revolver both ready," said Roy. "Don't fire if you can possibly avoid it.

Let us try bluff first. We must take that girl from him."

"But the scoundrel deserves a dozen bullets."

"He does ; but let that pass for the present. A shot would instantly bring our enemies upon us."

Never had Jim been so shaken by rage. He was white with fury. To think that the Afghan had succeeded after all, and had completely beaten him. Jim's pride was wounded and he was determined to make Raska pay very dearly for his impudence.

The unsuspecting Afghan was now less than a dozen yards away, little dreaming that rifles were covering him. Roy nodded to Jim and both men suddenly sprang up and with one impulse rushed at the Asiatic.

Raska stood still and gazed at his adversaries.

"Stop!" said Jim. "Put down that girl at once or I will blow your brains out."

Being taken by surprise and finding himself covered by firearms, the Afghan realised that his position was hopeless. Gently he placed his frail burden upon the ground and, straightening up again, a smile covered his face.

"You villain," cried Jim. "How dare you carry away a white girl ?"

But the Afghan still smiled and stretched out his hands.

"We win at last!" he said in good English.

"How are you, Roy ? I'm dashed glad to see you both."

Instantly Jim's rage was turned to joy, for Robert Wright was shaking him by the hand. All three became speechless as they gripped each other's hands. The friends had met again and they knew that success was certain.

"But the girl," said Jim. "The girl—why—?"

"Oh, yes," said Wright. "Excuse my bad

manners. You have seen her before and heard much of her, but now let me introduce you to my long lost little Rae."

Ruth sat up and smiled as both Roy and Jim held her hand.

"It was so good of you all to come," she said sweetly, and the next moment she had fainted away.

CHAPTER XXV "PEGGOTTY FINDS HIS NIECE"

Roy and Jim had been so taken by surprise that they could scarcely realise what had happened. The rescued girl apparently was completely exhausted, and for a few moments demanded the attention of the men. Fortunately Jim had medical knowledge but no nurse could have been more devoted and gentle than the man known as Raska the 'ghan.

It all seemed like a dream and the revelation had come with such dramatic suddenness that the men hardly knew what question to ask first.

"The poor child has reached breaking point," said Wright at last. "The strain of the last few days has been too much for her, but we must get back to the camp. Bring the rifles and follow me."

Rae had come to herself a little and Wright picked her up in his strong arms and led the way.

Jim watched him with a curious eye, but no longer was jealousy burning within him. A few moments had wrought a wonderful transformation. Now he was thrilled with admiration for the man he hated. His disguise was wonderful. Every detail had been carefully considered. No wonder his cleverness appealed to the blacks.

The camp was soon reached for it was only a few chains away, and Rae was provided with as comfortable a bed as the hard ground would afford. The men were all anxious to help, and after a further rest the long lost girl was able to look around and ask questions.

Roy and Jim still seemed to be like men in a dream. They were almost paralysed by the success and cleverness of their friend who, at the risk of his life, had penetrated Schafer's homestead and recovered his long lost maid.

"However did it all happen?" Roy asked, when he was unable any longer to restrain his curiosity.

"I will tell you all about it later on," said Wright. "In the meantime there is only one note in my soul. That is unutterable gratitude. I have been very fortunate. After years of disappointment I accidentally got on the track and never looked back. Boys, this hour makes up for years of waiting."

"Where did you get on the track?"

"In Adelaide—shortly after I left you; but that is a long story and it must wait. There is stern work still ahead. We must follow up our advantage and force the chasm."

"Good," said Jim. "We will bring Wilson out and complete the job."

"What, is Wilson there, too?" asked Wright.

"He is," said Roy. "I have seen him. He is completely mad and is chained in one of the sheds."

"Then we shall liberate him before the day is out," said Wright. "And that villain Schafer will be black and blue when I'm finished with him. He didn't like my poison but he has yet to feel the weight of my fist."

"Poison," said Jim, with a start. "What do you mean?"

"I drugged his tea. It was a lucky stroke and came off splendidly. Sorry Rae got the blame though."

"Never mind about that now," said Rae cheerfully. "We have all had to suffer. Why shouldn't I have my share?"

"You had more than your share," said Jim. "I blamed one of the men."

"It was one of the men," said Wright, "but not the one you expected. I knew you were hard pressed and calculated that our greatest need was a few extra days. I also realised that Schafer was the brain of the party and that it would mean much if the leader was out of the way when we were making a bold dash. Consequently I took a big risk but Schafer took the poison."

"You had a dangerous job."

"I had, but I was almost desperate. I could see staggering success ahead, but I could also see lamentable failure. Your lives were in great peril so I took a terrible chance. It was my only hope. Fortune favoured me at the critical moment. Schafer was at supper. He was sitting at a table right beside the window which was open, and the breeze was blowing the curtain back into the room. I helped the wind until the blind was over the teacup. I only needed two seconds. The poison went into the tea and I waited till I saw him drink it off. I knew then that the life of the doctor was safe for a few more days, and I trusted you to make the most of your time and opportunity."

"I did manage to do a little," said Jim proudly. "Di Gilio is down and I think he and his captain will be harmless for a day or two."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Not positive—but they were both very sick men last night."

"Let's hope they are still very sick, but I'm afraid they will both be in the field against us to-day. Never mind, we are now six, all told. You haven't forgotten how to shoot, have you, Rae?"

"No," said the girl. "I was sometimes allowed a gun."

"Do you remember me teaching you how to shoot?"

"No, I can't remember."

"Surely you remember the crows around the old camp. You were only a little girl then, but you could shoot with the little Winchester rifle."

A strange expression came over Rae's face as if she were trying hard to recall something, but it would not come.

"I can't remember," she again repeated.

"It was a long time ago, I know," said Wright, "but you really haven't altered very much since that last day I saw you. It was a sad day, wasn't it, and it lingered with me for years. Do you remember the order you gave me that morning?"

Rae shook her head and again looked bewildered. Wright was puzzled and looked hard at the girl he had rescued. Then his face beamed again.

"No, no," he said. "I have made no mistake. But surely, Rae, you can remember something about that time before you came here with Schafer?"

"I can remember being sick, or rather, I can remember getting better."

"But I knew you before you were sick, and your name was then Rae Blackwood. Your father was Will Blackwood and his mate was Alex Wilson."

A slight gleam of recognition came into the girl's eyes as she looked from one to the other.

"It's all a mystery to me," she said at length.

"I don't know who I am or how I came to be with

Schafer, but I'm sure you have come to save me. You are so good and I will trust you. Only take me away from this terrible place."

And the tears came in her eyes.

"There, there," said Wright, "that will never do. I have such a lot to tell you, but we must wait for another day. Come, take another drink of water and try to eat a biscuit."

Roy was standing near by and whispered in his mate's ear.

"You are sure there is no mistake?"

"I have made none," said Wright in a confident tone. "I would know Rae Blackwood among ten thousand. Her eyes are the same and her face has not altered. Besides, there is that brown birth-mark on her left wrist. I have never seen another girl with such a mark, so let your fears be gone. I have found my little maid."

Wright sat down beside Rae and gently taking her left hand he slowly rubbed at the little brown mark.

"It won't come off," she said, with a smile.

"No, my lass, it won't come off. It never will. Years ago when you were a little girl we played together and I tried to rub it off. I used to call it your little brown bear. Do you remember?"

A distant look came into her eyes and she thought for a moment.

"I should remember," she said. "I often call it my brown bear. But I must have been very little when you knew me."

"You were little, but it was not so very long ago. I was your father's friend. I was with him when he died, and I was the last to hear him speak."

"I would like so much to hear all about him. You must tell me some time. Did he keep cattle?"

"No, your father was a discoverer. Schafer was jealous and afraid of him. He killed your father and kept you a prisoner. He dared not let you go away. He is our greatest enemy—your father's murderer."

"I seem to be all mixed up somehow," said Rae. "I thought I was Schafer's niece and would some day be very rich. Then I thought you were a good Afghan but your voice has changed."

"You will soon understand," Wright replied, as he held her hand in his. "I will tell you the whole story. I wasn't always an Afghan but I became one for your sake."

At that moment a little laugh was heard a few yards away. All looked up suddenly and saw two shining black faces grinning from ear to ear.

"Cripe, boss, close up marry, I tinkit," said one. And both laughed again.

Wright beckoned to his faithful companions to come nearer and received them with a cheering smile.

The blacks were shy, but they did come closer and looked at their master with evident satisfaction. He was certainly their hero and they did not disguise the fact.

"You have seen my boys, I know," said Wright, as he winked at Roy, "but you had no idea of their political importance. Let me introduce you to William Hughes and Joseph Cook."

Roy and Jim greeted the boys with distinct approval and, like his namesake, Billy soon found words suitable for the occasion.

"Cripe, didn't I tell you, boss one fella bonza?"

"You did, Billy," said Roy. "And I know it."

"Didn't I say he clever—like the devil?"

"You did, and we believed you."

"Cripe, he go sleep whitefella—wake up blackfella—wake up 'ghan. Same fella all time, make Schafer mad."

And the black laughed again and gave an inquiring look at the tucker bag.

"It's all right, Billy," said Wright. "We will have Schafer's tucker bag soon. You will have plenty to eat before dark. You deserve it, too, because you were clever boys in bringing these other fellows along to our camp. Have a spell, boys, for a few minutes; then I have some real fun in store for you."

"Yes, I think we had better fix upon some plans," said Roy.

"Exactly," replied Wright. "We must move very quickly. I have a scheme all thought out, and if we can carry it safely through we will be in possession of Schafer's head-quarters before night-fall."

"Do you mean to attack?"

"No, I believe in a policy of safety. We may be able to gain our ends without firing a shot. But we will need to act very quickly for Schafer, by now, will know that Rae and his two prisoners have disappeared."

"What is your plan?"

"We will go into it in detail as we go along."

"Good, then let us start."

"Yes, we had better begin at once," continued Wright. "All our belongings must be shifted. I will feel safer when we all get down there."

In a few moments they had agreed upon the articles each was to carry. The black boys were instructed to go on ahead and to look out for Schafer's men. They were keen to lead the way and were evidently expecting some fun.

The whites took the matter more seriously. They knew there was stern work ahead, so they picked up their various burdens and proceeded to follow the blacks.

Rae was greatly refreshed by the rest and was able to stand up and walk.

"I can carry something," she said bravely.

"Not yet," said Wright with a smile. "You will do very well to carry yourself."

As she followed the men out from the hiding-place she caught a little glimpse down into the valley below and seemed anxious to go a little nearer the edge of the chasm.

"Whatever is down there?" she inquired.

"You must be very careful," was Wright's reply, "but come along with me behind these bushes and I will show you Schafer's real stronghold."

Rae eagerly followed and suddenly clutched at Wright's arm as a full view of the terrible depths below met her gaze.

"All Schafer's secrets are down there," said Wright.

Rae could only stare in utter astonishment. A strange expression came into her eyes as she let them survey the marvellous scene. Suddenly she gave a little shriek as though some terrible thought had flashed upon her.

"You didn't expect to see such a chasm," said Wright.

"Not so near," she replied. "But I have seen it before. I am sure I have."

"I suppose Schafer took you into it?"

"No, he never did; but I have been in it. I remember someone carrying me down the side. It must have been a long time ago. Yet the place seems different."

"In what way?"

"I remember a sharp, round mountain, but I don't see it here."

"There is another chasm, Rae. You have not seen half yet."

"Why do you persist in calling me Rae? I have always been called Ruth."

"Because it is your real name, girl, and I will soon prove it. However, let that pass for the time. Now, tell me, did Schafer ever speak to you about that chasm?"

"Never. I didn't know it was there. Are you sure Schafer knows?"

"He knows all about it. Those white patches you see are the roofs of his sheds. He has many secrets which he stole from others, including your father, but we are now on his tracks, and I hope to square accounts with him before the day is out. Years ago your father possessed the secrets of these valleys but Schafer robbed him of all and took his life."

"You must tell me all about it some time."

"I will, but come along now. We must hurry to our new camp."

* * * * *

The blacks had led the way. They appeared to be as familiar with the country as the dingoes that roamed among the tar bush. Rae walked bravely for a time but the big stones hurt her feet and Wright picked her up in his strong arms and carried her gently along. The new camp was right at the bottom of the first mountain ridge and was quite near the track which led up the valley to Schafer's homestead. There was a thick patch of bullock bush and wild pines which would prevent anyone who happened to pass along the road from seeing them.

"I think this is a more dangerous position than the other," said Roy, when they had put their burdens down.

"A dangerous position is often the safest," replied Wright. "At all events it fits in with my plans. Schafer may be able to get near to us, but we hold the road. He certainly cannot escape us now. Remember, we are the attacking party."

"Then what is our next move?"

"I have my plans all ready. I move off at once, single-handed."

"Surely not. Let us keep together for goodness sake."

"It will be much safer and easier for me to be alone. From the bend yonder you will be able to watch the road leading up to the homestead. Should I not return in reasonable time, creep up in full strength and rush the homestead. However, I think I will be quite safe. Schafer doesn't suspect me. To him I am only a harmless Afghan camel-man. I will report to him that my camels have been stolen. Two white men suddenly rushed upon me and robbed me of everything. They have a young white girl with them and are making off as fast as the poor camels can travel. I will indicate the way they are going and what weapons they possess. If my calculations are correct, the motor will soon be brought out and Schafer will have every available man away in the direction I say. Now, my plan will be to get into the car myself with the others. When we are passing through these trees I will contrive to have the car stopped. Be ready, close to the track with your rifles. When the car stops and we get out, cover us and rush the car. If my plan works, Schafer's men will be caught without arms."

"But you take a tremendous risk in going back to Schafer."

"Not as great as you think. I am certain he does not suspect me. If he does, I am ready with my six-shooter and will probably get in first. If I don't return within an hour, you may guess my plan has miscarried. However, I feel that the boldest plan is the safest. It will have this advantage, that we may secure all our enemies in one hit."

"Your plan is bold and clever, but he may have seen you going off with Rae."

"Don't worry. We were not seen together. Now to business. Let the dejected, robbed Afghan go back and report a serious disaster."

Wright adjusted his turban, drew forth a little looking-glass and repaired his disguise. His revolver was inspected and was close at hand in case of emergency. A few final instructions were given. Hands were shaken all round. Then Robert Wright once more became Raska the 'ghan, and moved forth to venture his life in the midst of his bitterest enemies.

Rae was uneasy without him, but she was no more uneasy than Roy and Jim. The only confident ones were the blacks, who felt that somehow their master was irresistible.

The bend was only a few chains away. Jim remained with Rae and the blacks, while Roy went along with Wright and took up his position at the place indicated. A spur from the mountain dwindled away at the bend. Trees were growing on the slope and Roy had no difficulty in finding a place of concealment, and from his vantage point he nervously watched his friend trudging wearily along the rough track until he disappeared at last among the buildings of the homestead.

CHAPTER XXVI THE TABLES TURNED

SCHAFER was still far from well, but he was up and was conferring with Di Gilio and Pfitzner. The lieutenant was in bed when he received the news that the two prisoners had escaped. The tidings suddenly transformed him from a poor weakling to a man of great courage and action. He was soon up and dressed. With Pfitzner, he rushed into the chasm to make certain that the news was correct, and when his worst fears were confirmed he flew into a towering rage. Then, equipping himself with a rifle, he called upon Pfitzner and another man to follow where he led. Using every ounce of his strength, he struggled to the shed roof and located the way his prisoners had fled. It was soon proved beyond all doubt that the blow hole had been located and used as a means of escape. As quickly as possible they hurried through the mysterious passage, but it was not safe to go too fast. They suspected that their enemies might lie in wait for them and if they came upon them there was sure to be a fight. However, they came out again into the daylight without any further adventure.

There was a desperate climb to the top of the hill, and Di Gilio hoped against hope that he would come upon them before they reached the summit. Alas, they were doomed to disappointment. The tracks of the escaped men disappeared among the tar bush and stones, and it was impossible to say which way they had gone.

"Curse the fellows," said Di Gilio when he found that immediate pursuit was hopeless.

"We better go back for the mules," thought Pfitzner.

"Yes, and the sooner the better. Neither of them know anything about the bush, and with reasonable luck we should have them back before the day is out. This time I will deal with them in my own way. They will be as mad as Wilson when I am finished."

It took a little time to get back to the homestead, where they found Schafer eagerly planning and where they heard that a further loss had been sustained.

Fortunately for Wright, the homestead had slept in that morning. The two sick men were not inclined to stir, and Mrs. Schafer, feeling weary and relieved by the progress of the patients, was not anxious to wake early. Naturally, the men felt that if others were resting there was no need of them being about early. Consequently the morning was creeping on when Pfizner went in to the chasm and found that the prisoners had escaped.

No one suspected that Ruth was gone, and Di Gilio could scarcely believe the news when he returned from his fruitless search. A little time had been spent in searching the buildings, but neither in the house nor out of it could the slightest trace be found of the missing girl. That she had the courage, all alone in the dead of night, to break away was something that Di Gilio could scarcely believe. He was certain that the prisoners and Ruth had cleverly helped each other to escape. His opinion was confirmed that she had succeeded in poisoning them and then had matured her plans for a desperate leap. He was nearly mad with rage and almost felt like dropping with sheer weakness but he summoned all his reserve forces and, swearing in a violent manner, he vowed vengeance on the three of them.

Outside the mules were being brought in and prepared. The car had been run out and was being overhauled. The captain, Di Gilio and Pfizner, were seated in a small room which served as a kind of office and they were holding the most serious council of war they had held for many a day.

Di Gilio was in the act of pouring out some spirits by way of consolation when Mrs. Schafer came hurrying in with further news. Raska the 'ghan had come back. He was fearfully agitated and wanted the boss at once.

"What the d— is wrong now?" Schafer asked.

"Dear only knows. Some accident has happened, for he is so upset he can hardly speak."

"Curse the fool!" said Di Gilio. "All our plans will be ruined now."

The three men were soon outside and they came face to face with Raska. The 'ghan was trembling and wringing his hands as though he was overpowered by some terrible misfortune.

"What brings you back, you lazy, useless cur!" demanded Schafer.

Raska tried to speak, but could only say a few foreign words.

"Speak, you black dog," roared Di Gilio.

"Camels—camels—"

"What about them? Where are they?"

"Stolen!"

"Stolen—who has taken them?"

"Three men come on me plenty quick. Knock me down. Kick me all over. Then go off with camel."

"Curse them! What were they like?"

"I see two men before. See dem here."

Schafer and Di Gilio exchanged glances. With-

out doubt their enemies had struck boldly and had captured provisions, water and camels. They were now in a position to make a dash for Moolooloo.

"Three men," said Di Gilio. "Then that crawling sneak Wright is with them and he knows the country. Have they taken all the camels?"

"Every one, boss—and makum go hard. One ride on fast. Two other men and girl follow on."

"Is there a girl with them?"

"Yes—white girl."

"Then Ruth is with them. That clever fox, Wright, has worked the mischief. We must follow at once."

"How far are they ahead?"

"Long way, boss. Near Gum Creek."

"Curse them! They have a good start. Did you see any fire-arms?"

"Rifle, boss—two."

"Then we must take no chances."

"Certainly not," said Schafer. "And we must not waste another minute. Pfitzner, tell Bunn to hurry round with the car and have sufficient petrol put in. Muster all hands instantly and we will crowd into the car. Bring revolvers, rifles and ammunition. Raska, stay here, for we will need you with us."

There was a desperate rush in all directions. The car whirled round to the front of the house. Arms and a few provisions were thrown on board. The men quickly assembled and soon all was ready. Schafer and Di Gilio got in the front seat with Bunn, while Pfitzner, Raska and another man scrambled into the buckboard portion.

The car was cranked and they were about to start off when another man appeared on the scene. It was quite evident that he did not mean to join

in the pursuit. He stood near Mrs. Schafer and spoke rapidly in a strange tongue.

"Hold the fort, doctor," Di Gilio called out to him as the car moved away. "We may not be back till nightfall."

* * * * *

The car was speeding along the track away from the homestead. Schafer and his lieutenant were both alarmed at the sudden turn of events and were rapidly trying to form plans for the seizure and punishments of the runaways.

Suddenly a cry of pain was heard from the buckboard. Raska had his hand across his heart. His mouth was open and he was struggling for breath. An expression of fearful agony came across his face.

"What's the matter?" said Pfitzner.

"Pain," was the only answer.

"Slow down," Schafer ordered.

"Better now," said Raska. "Soon goes."

The car was now nearing the bend. Bunn was commencing to speed up again when Raska's eyes rolled again. His face twisted as the car swung round the curve over a rough piece of track. Again he uttered a piercing cry. His hand clutched at his heart and he gasped for breath.

Bunn pulled up as quickly as he could and the car came to a standstill among the bullock bush and pines.

"Lift him out quickly," Schafer ordered. "Pull out the water-can and throw some over him."

Raska was soon lifted out and carried into the shade of a bullock-bush. Pfitzner poured water on his face. Another fanned him with his hat, while Di Gilio stood by and expressed the belief that the poor devil was going to "peg out."

All had left the car and were standing round the unfortunate 'ghan.

Suddenly there was a little movement among the bushes. A shrill whistle rang out and the next instant four men and a girl sprang out and covered the entire party.

"Hands up!" Roy called. "The first man who moves will be shot instantly."

Schafer and his men were taken completely by surprise. Their arms were left in the car, and Jim like a flash dashed across and took possession.

Di Gilio's sharp eye looked around as though he expected to see another man among the attackers. Not seeing him, he drew back his right hand and was quickly feeling for his revolver when he was suddenly seized from behind and the weapon wrenched from his grasp. In a fit of maddened rage, he turned upon his fresh assailant and was confronted by Raska the 'ghan, who held the revolver to his face.

"Villain," gasped Di Gilio. "You crawling traitor. Dog, you will yet suffer for this. Wright has bought you, you miserable cur."

"No! I have not been bought. No one could buy me, for I am Wright."

All the pent-up fury and disappointment of years was put into the shout of triumph as Wright pulled off his turban and snapped it in his victim's face.

Raska was no longer ill. He was no longer the cringing Afghan. He was Robert Wright again and was the master of the situation.

Schafer, Pfitzner, and Di Gilio exchanged glances as they held their hands in the air. Their worst fears were confirmed. The game was up and they were beaten now.

"Come, Billy and Joe, tie these fellows up so

that they can't move," Wright commanded. "They can have a rest here while we find Wilson."

"Yeh, boss, we settle 'em quick," was Billy's response.

Rope and straps had been previously prepared, and one by one the men were made fast and tied to pine trees close by. Wright's scheme had worked splendidly and his enemies had been captured without bloodshed.

Wright's masterful stroke and dramatic revelation of himself had proved a terrific bombshell to Schafer and his lieutenant. That the man whom they had shadowed for years had found his way into their employ in the disguise of a handless Afghan camel driver was a fact they could scarcely believe. Mysterious tracks had been located in the bush. They felt that Wright was near at hand, but they never seemed to get any nearer to him. All the time he was right beside them and was maturing his plans. They realised also that the tracks in the bush were those of the blacks. Wright had secured the services of native trackers who were able to carry on a campaign of systematic deception. Over and over again this had thrown Schafer and Di Gilio completely off the scent and removed all suspicion from Raska the 'ghan.

But Schafer and his men were no more surprised than Rae was. She had looked on at the brief encounter with amazement written across her face, and breathed a sigh of relief when there was no shooting. For days the kindness of the Afghan towards her was the only bright spot in her life, and was a marked contrast to the cruelty and suspicion of the white men. Raska seemed so gentle and different to every other Afghan she had ever known, that her interest in him had increased from day to day. His meeting with Roy

and Jim and their greeting as old friends was another surprise. However, she was overpowered by weariness and her mind refused to work until Wright had gone forth on his daring errand. Then she tried hard to think, and somehow she felt that she should know Raska better than she did, that somewhere she had seen him before. But where? A cloud hung over her memory and refused to lift. She felt unable to speak and waited in silence the dread moment of encounter. The clash came even sooner than she had expected. When Raska was lifted out she felt that the poor fellow was going to be killed. In the anguish of that moment the cloud started to lift. Roy's voice rang out. Then there was the dash and the complete triumph. Instantly Raska was another man. His turban was off. He was a conqueror and he was a white man. The anguish, the dread, the surprise of the moment changed the entire outlook. Rae and Wright looked at each other. Their eyes for a second met and in that second memory returned.

CHAPTER XXVII CHRISTMAS DINNER

THE prisoners were securely tied and all danger was past. The blacks were showing their white teeth as they looked from Schafer to Roy and Jim.

"Cripe, didn't I tell you," said Billy as he grinned at Roy. "Didn't I tell you boss clever like the devil."

"Not too much talk yet," said Wright. "The job isn't finished. There are one or two more at the homestead to be bagged. Then it will be dinner-time—eh, boys?"

"Yeh, boss. Close up dinner-time now."

"It is, Billy, but there is plenty of splendid tucker over at the house. We'll have heaps to eat soon. Come along now with me. There is more fun yet. Roy, you had better keep guard. Joe will help you. Jim and Billy will come with me. You don't mind staying behind, do you, Rae? There are some provisions in the car. So you had better make morning tea—only don't send up smoke."

Wright spoke quickly and it was quite clear that he did not intend to waste time, but follow up his victory at once. He was brimful of delight and he seemed anxious to hurry on with the next stunt while his spirit was buoyant with excitement. Rest was impossible until the job was finished. Roy and Jim followed the example of their leader and investigated the contents of the car.

In the meantime Rae had kept her eyes riveted upon Wright. He had thrown off the Afghan coat and was rapidly making himself into a white man again.

"I will soon be a bushman again," he said with a smile as Rae at last stepped over to him.

"I do want to thank you, Mr. Wright, for all you have done for me," she softly said as she took hold of his strong arm with her gentle fingers. "Words will not come—only tears. But I do thank you, because you risked your life for me."

"Now, now, little girl, you must sit down and rest," was Wright's reply. "Never mind about thanking me. Wait until I have finished my job."

"Your work is nearly finished, my brave friend. I want you so much to sit down and talk with me. I have so many questions to ask, for I have suddenly remembered who you are. Surely this is not a dream?"

"No, Rae, you are safe at last. You are not dreaming and I have such a lot of news for you. In a little while we will sit down together and talk about old times and how you ran away from your teacher, played with the dogs and climbed the gum trees."

"Yes, I can remember now," said Rae. "though I didn't at first. But don't frighten Mrs. Schafer too much, Bob. She really was kind to me."

"It's a long time since you called me Bob."

"Yes; I wonder how many years?"

"Wait a little longer and then we will try to count up. But I must strike on now while I have the advantage. For your sake I will be kind to them all at the homestead."

* * * * *

Wright had taken Jim and Billy with him and the last daring stroke was about to be carried out. Jim felt highly honoured as he followed his leader among the pines. The plan of campaign was very simple. They were to creep up to the homestead and rush the place. Neither Mrs. Schafer nor the Doctor would be expecting the men to return so quickly and Wright was hoping for a complete surprise.

As they approached the homestead all was quiet. The dogs were sleeping in the shade of the pepper tree, and were not disturbed by the approach of human beings. The attackers kept entirely concealed as they crept up and were able at last to get into a shed which stood a couple of chains from the house. From here they were able to make a close observation and to mature their plans. Mrs. Schafer was in the kitchen and could not notice their approach, while the one called Doctor was asleep in the sitting-room.

"It seems hard to disturb such a peaceful scene," said Wright, "but fortune has favoured us once again. Let us creep right up. Jim, you make for the back door and capture the woman. Billy and I will square accounts with the man."

The door of the house was reached without them being observed. Wright gave a whistle and, followed by Billy, rushed into the sitting-room. The doctor woke up suddenly and looked into the mouth of the revolver.

"Hands up," said Wright, "and not a word or you will frighten Mrs. Schafer. Billy keep him covered while I go after Jim."

In the meantime Jim had walked quietly into the kitchen.

Mrs. Schafer could scarcely believe her eyes. Her first impression was that there must be some mistake and that Jim had not gone off at all. Her next thought was that he had come back to give himself up.

"How are the patients?" Jim said in a matter-of-fact way.

"They are better, but no thanks to you."

"I think some of the credit belongs to me."

"You can think what you like—only wait till Schafer sees you."

"I don't intend to do any more waiting," said Jim very calmly. "I have already done more than my share of that. As you have said, I can think what I like, so I think you had better come along with me for this homestead has changed hands."

"How?"

"Because we are no longer Schafer's prisoners. He is our prisoner. We have got him at last and all his crew."

At that moment Wright also walked into the kitchen with a revolver still in his hand.

"This is my friend, Robert Wright," said Jim proudly. "In future he will have something to say in the management of this station."

Wright nodded and then quietly asked Mrs. Schafer to step into the sitting-room. The poor woman was struck speechless. She had heard of Wright and shared her husband's fear of him. What had happened or what was to happen she knew not. Hardly daring to speak, she quietly followed where Wright led and soon found herself seated by Doctor Zinzenburg.

The door leading from the sitting-room into the passage was locked and Jim was posted at the door leading outside.

"You keep guard here, Jim," was Wright's command. "Billy and I will go back and bring the other prisoners in. We will hold them all here till the police come."

A chain or two from the homestead, Wright and Billy soon had a fire going. Green leaves and twigs were heaped on and soon a smoke column was going up.

This was the signal Roy had been anxiously waiting for. When he noticed it he sprang into the car with Rae and dashed off towards the house. Rae was left with Jim and seeing that her services were not required as a guard she hurried off to the kitchen and was soon busy preparing a meal.

The matter of bringing in the prisoners was not a long job. Two trips were made with the car and all had reached the homestead. Near the kitchen was a small detached room which was used as a meat-house. The men were kept tied up and placed in this room. Billy and Joe, with loaded rifles and plenty of food mounted guard over them.

Mrs. Schafer was allowed to sit under a pepper tree and watch the aboriginals enjoying themselves.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Rae had been busy. The table was spread and eatables of various kinds were heaped upon it.

"This looks like Christmas," said Wright.

"It is Christmas," said Rae.

"Bless my soul, I believe you are right," said Roy.

"Lost count long ago," said Wright. "It is good enough for Christmas, anyhow. But will the pudding wait until I slip over and bring out old Wilson."

"No," said Rae firmly. "You must sit down and eat now. Wilson has waited for years, and he will not mind waiting a little longer. Surely you are all starving, so sit down at once."

"Wilson is another serious problem," said Roy.

"We will need time to manage him."

"Very well, Rae," said Wright. "We must not keep Christmas dinner waiting. Come, boys, we will take half an hour off. Who says we have not earned it?"

They were soon a very merry party, and had plunged into the spirit of Christmas. Whether the right day was being observed none of them could say for sure but Wright remarked that as they all felt like Christmas it would be a pity not to keep it up.

Now that the suspense was over all wanted, in some way to give vent to their feeling of gratitude. They had played a strenuous game and their victory was complete. They had won the big prize. Soon Australia would be ringing with the story.

Around the table they gathered and were children once more. They had many new toys and a new world before them to investigate. Rae was too excited to eat much but the men had their appetites

whetted by many privations and were ready for a good meal.

The prisoners were all given something to eat but it was a bad Christmas for them. Their conversation and mood was a marked contrast to their captors. Joe and Billy tried to cheer them up by discussing various methods of execution. Billy held that there was a "bonza" limb on a gum tree down the track, while Joe was all for tying the prisoners on a big ant heap.

At the table inside, Wright was as resourceful as he was in the bush. Tinned meat and preserves flew open at the magic touch of his pocket knife. The best of everything was brought out and Wright explained that one of the rules of war was to feed your army on the enemy's country. All agreed that Schafer was a real sport in providing them with such a meal.

Some extra choice wine was found and the first toast was to Rae. Then Roy called them all to get ready, for the toast was to "Raska the 'ghan."

"He is dead now," said Wright.

"Yes, but not forgotten—come, here's to the man who has saved us all."

With enthusiasm the toast was honoured, and then the men settled down to smoke and to talk.

"We have breathing room at last," said Roy, "and a big load has been lifted from our minds. Now by way of an after dinner speech we must get Bob to tell us his story. Come along, old boy, you should be in the humour for it now."

"I am, but it would take too long. I think I shall have to write a book."

"You can do that later. Give us a few of your adventures now."

"Then I suppose I had better start from where I left you chaps and that was at Graceburn House,

Adelaide. I hung on to Di Gilio and Schafer after I once got the scent. Those letters I snatched gave me some splendid information. I was able to locate Schafer's agent and by peculiar good fortune I knew a man who was acquainted with him. By paying well I soon had friends 'listening in.'

"Startling news soon came in and I was able very quickly to put together the scraps of information until I saw clearly how Schafer's deep scheme worked. Di Gilio, however, beat me and got through. You know how he managed it, and I am the first to give him credit for cleverness. I knew Spargo, and never worried about him. He certainly played his cards well, but I had a feeling that you would be watched, so I gave you a message from 'Micawber.'"

"Yes, we got the *Workers*," said Roy, "and were careful. The chaps all seemed to be well known, and we put Spargo down as a poor unfortunate drunkard."

"That was my impression too, but then I was regarded by Schafer as a poor unfortunate 'ghan. You see we both judged the book by the cover. However I was so elated by my success that I rushed from one daring step to another. From papers and other information in my possession it was possible for me to identify Schafer with a certain Müller who was slightly known as a remote pastoralist of the North. I then had the key and very soon was able to get the strength of Schafer's communications. When a man has the right keys he is able to open any safe. I knew it was necessary for me to move quickly before Schafer had time to change his plans. You would hardly be settled at Moolooloo before I was hard on your heels."

"How did you get out?"

"I boarded the train at Peterborough dressed as an Afghan, and kept very much to myself. Knowing the 'ghans as I do I was able to get my disguise nearly perfect. As a matter of fact the mail driver, Will Barr, gave me a lift and although we were together for a few days he never had the slightest suspicion. The driver, of course, knows me well, and if I could pass that test I knew I would baffle Schafer and Di Gilio. At Lindo Downs I parted company with Barr and made for the Afghan camp. After a few days' patient detective work I located the 'ghan who did Müller's work. Here again fortune favoured me. The old chap was ill and had arranged with another 'ghan to do the trip to Müller's station. This suited me because Müller's 'ghan was a fellow I could not approach. He was cunning, and being well paid by Schafer's gang took every precaution. The 'ghan that had been commissioned for the trip was a much simpler proposition. I soon got in touch with him and let him see the colour of my money. As I expected, he was quite content to be paid for sitting down while I did the work and received no pay. We took the loading on some distance together, and then I left the 'ghan with some of his mates at a camp. Giving the fellow a handful of money I got him to promise to remain in hiding until my return. Still another surprise was in store. I had hardly started out alone when I passed by several blacks camped in a hollow. They were not far from the 'ghans and probably did some work for them. One face attracted my attention at once. It was Billy whom I had lost sight of for a long time. Making a sign for him to approach we soon started a long talk. His surprise was great when I revealed myself and for a time he thought I was some debil-debil. When he felt certain that he was really talking to

Bob Wright he called to Joe who was also in the camp. Then calling out a few words of farewell to their mates they both came along with me. I was delighted to have them for I was not feeling very happy with the camels. Besides, if I could keep the boys, I knew they would be a great help in tracking down Schafer. I promised them all kinds of presents if they kept with me, and by persistent effort I was able to scare away many of their fears regarding the 'Budleemundja.'

"We came at last within a few miles of Schafer's homestead. Darkness was coming on so we hobbled the camels and then crept forward to spy out the land. Neither of the black boys had ever been to Müller's station although both had heard of it. We spent several hours prowling near the homestead, and I got some idea of Schafer's strength.

"Next morning we located a good hiding place and the boys agreed to keep near it by night, and by day spy upon Schafer. They both seemed to regard it as good fun and being expert trackers they watched and waited and kept themselves concealed as only a black man can. I saw them nearly every night and got detailed accounts of all that went on.

"A strange feeling came over me as I led the camel string up to the homestead. Di Gilio came out to meet me, and looked both surprised and annoyed. I shook my head as though I couldn't understand a word he was saying; then pulled out a letter of explanation which Müller's 'ghan had given to the fellow he was sending in his place. After reading the note Di Gilio seemed satisfied and brought out Schafer for a consultation. I was near enough to hear the conversation, but at the same time I had to appear as though I did not understand a word. It was a peculiar position, and I was not sorry when

I was left to the camels. Fortunately for me my credentials were not questioned. I was allowed to camp in an old shed some distance away, and Raska the stupid 'ghan soon gathered information. By night I compared notes with the black boys and we estimated accurately the number of men and the strength of Schafer's position. Several times I almost entered the secret chasm through the blowhole. I found out what had happened at the tree marked X. I knew you were prisoners and were hard pressed, so by various accidents and hindrances I contrived to gain time.

"But my greatest success was finding Rae. I had not been about the homestead more than a few days when I became suspicious, and at every opportunity I had the glasses on the young girl that lived there. One day she came very near to where we were working and my eyes rested on the brown mark. It was a slow and dangerous job gaining the confidence of Ruth and her loss of memory almost disheartened me. You can guess now how I worked those days and Jim here was right up against me."

"I'm sorry, old man."

"Don't apologise. Your opposition served me well, and Ruth told me all I wanted to know about the both of you. Di Gilio was the man I had to watch. Somehow he seemed to know that I was in the neighbourhood and he set all kinds of traps but my black boys were wonderful. They fooled him time after time and kept him hurrying from one place to another, but I always beat him. It was then I realised what an advantage I had in the possession of the black trackers."

"My plans for carrying off Rae were at last ready, but Jim nearly beat me at the last moment. However, I had several strings to my bow. Raska

moved quietly away, but returned at night, and carried off his long lost maid. At first Rae did not want to go and it required all my bush persuasion to convince her that I intended to hand her over at once to white people. The rest you know, and here we are on top at last. I will tell you more as we move along. Come, we must go now and find Wilson."

CHAPTER XXVIII THE FLOATING SNAKE

RAE knew where Schafer kept his keys, and by their aid the work of getting into the chasm and the various sheds was simplified. Roy could scarcely realise that he was free to go where he liked and to examine the various machines. Rae had accompanied the men and each door that opened disclosed further wonders. All was new and she had not the faintest idea that Schafer was working in such a way.

Roy led the way to the secret chamber where he had felt the great heat, and by trying many keys the right one at last was found and the road in lay open.

"Heat," said Wright, "and the same sort of heat. It stings your face like the 'burning air' in the valley."

"Yes, we have found it," said Roy, "and it is Schafer's greatest secret. Give me a free hand for a few days and I hope to be able to tell you something about it."

"You will have a free hand soon, old boy, but we must find Wilson first."

"He is in a room at the back. Let me go first."

Roy led the way and soon the party had crawled into the dungeon. A fearful sight met their eyes. A form hideous to look upon crawled out from a heap of bags and stared at the intruders. He had long hair and whiskers and chains rattled upon his hands and feet.

"Water," he murmured as he looked from one to the other.

"How are you, Alex?" Wright inquired. "I have been a long time finding you, but better late than never."

"Do you seek cockroaches?"

"No, I seek Alex Wilson. I am your old friend, Bob Wright, and I have come at last to your rescue."

"You are too late, for the floating snake has caught me. It dragged me down its hole and made me somebody else, but come along and sit down by Satan's fire-place."

"We have come to take you away. So cheer up, Alex."

"But the snake is in the blowhole. We can't get through."

"We have cleared the way. Bob Wright has come to save you. Don't you know Bob Wright?"

Wilson pulled his hair as if that would aid his thinking. Meanwhile the men went over to him and after some difficulty broke off his chains. The poor fellow seemed troubled by the invasion of so many strangers, and looked from one to the other as they led him out of prison. His clothes were in rags and his eyes could not face the sunlight, so he was left for some time in an outer shed. Jim and the black boys had been left in charge of the prisoners but Roy was quite content to be alone and strolled off to inspect the various machines, while Wright and Rae remained with the unfortunate Wilson. A brief examination quickly

revealed the misery of the once famous bushman. For years he had been enduring a living death. His mind was gone. His health was wrecked, and he couldn't remember who he was. But Wright was very gentle and spoke to him of days long gone by. Rae sat near Bob as he poured forth his stories. All seemed so wonderful to her and the old times really began to live again in her memory. She pictured her father as Wright described him, and she did have some dim recollections of the man spoken of as Alex Wilson.

The rescued man stared first at Bob and then at Rae. He made several attempts to get back into his prison. Wright let him return once, and then gently brought him back and placed him in a different position, but nothing seemed to settle his restless spirit. Suddenly he put out his hand and held Rae by the arm. Naturally the poor girl was frightened, and wanted to break away, but Bob persuaded her that there was no danger and then tried to tell his old friend who the young lady was. Occasionally a faint light of recognition seemed to come into his eyes but in a minute or two afterwards the poor fellow would go rambling on about the "floating snake."

Roy returned to the homestead and quickly returned with some hot tea and food which was greedily devoured by the old man. Wright then got busy with soap and water and scissors, and Wilson soon took on a new appearance. Better clothes were found and a comfortable bed provided in a room adjoining which it seemed some other man had occupied. Wilson soon became very sleepy. Light, fresh air, food and water, brought about a very desirable effect, and the poor fellow was soon sound asleep in his new bed.

Meantime Rae and Roy had been hurrying through

the various sheds. Keys were found for most of the doors and easy entrances were effected. Roy was in his glory as he rushed from one new thing on to another. He was suddenly plunged into a new world, and each moment he lived now was bringing him closer to Schafer's secret. Each day, while a prisoner, his mind had been working and he had long come to the conclusion that Schafer had something more wonderful than gold. His inquisitive spirit had yearned to get behind the scenes. Now he was free to do so, and his pent up curiosity urged him on from one new thing to another. To Rae all was strange, but the most marvellous thing of all was the chasm itself. It was so near the homestead yet she had not the faintest suspicion of its existence. What a day it had been for her. A burden like lead had been lifted. No wonder she never liked Schafer. He was not her uncle but a clever rogue. Small wonder also that Di Gilio was so repulsive to her, seeing that he was a criminal and perhaps her father's murderer.

* * * * *

A whistle sounded out. Rae and Roy hurried out into the open air fearing some change of fortune, but saw Wright moving leisurely from one shed to another. He signalled for them to approach, and then the cause was apparent. Wilson was awake and had walked out of the room. Finding himself free he sent a shrill whistle ringing through the chasm. He looked at his new clothes, and felt his arms and legs as though he missed something.

"Gone," he said as he broke into a strange laugh. "Nothing holds me. Let me fly away," and he spread out his arms as though he would mount into the air.

His antics were amusing to Rae, who smiled as

she came up. Wilson noticed her and stood motionless. Wright stepped forward and cheerfully told his old friend that the chains were all gone and he could fly away if he wished. But the old man's eyes were fixed upon the girl, and he heeded nothing else. His fingers were dragged through his shortened hair, and then he felt again for the chains that were gone. Suddenly he gave a desperate yell and turned upon Wright.

"Where is he?" raved the madman. "You have killed him, and I'll kill you."

Wright was seized by both arms, but he did not resist—only cheerfully explained that he was Bob Wright and that Schafer and his men were prisoners.

Slowly Wilson's fury abated, and he fixed his eyes again upon Rae. The sight of her caused him once more to break forth:

"You have killed him. Where is he? Where is Blackwood?"

"This is Blackwood's daughter," explained Wright. "Don't you remember little Rae? But she is now grown up."

Again Wilson fixed his eyes upon the girl, who became somewhat embarrassed by the close scrutiny. However, Bob quietly held her arm and whispered that there was no danger. Meantime, Wilson came nearer and felt Rae's face with his withered fingers.

"Mrs. Blackwood," he said at last.

"She is very like Mrs. Blackwood," Wright again explained. "But Mrs. Blackwood died. Don't you remember? This is her daughter Rae."

Wilson clutched at his forehead and his eyes and mouth opened wide. For a few moments he stood motionless, and then again he felt the face and arms of the girl. Suddenly his eyes rested upon Rae's hand. He felt out for it and held it in his shaking fingers while he rubbed at the brown

birthmark. For some time he stood there, still clinging to the girl with one hand and with the other rubbing his own troubled head.

Wright and Rae were both speaking gently to him now. The poor fellow seemed to be dropping back into his old state of insanity and was mumbling something about the floating snake, when suddenly he uttered a piercing yell and held the girl's face with both his hands.

"Rae Blackwood," he called. "Yes—yes. I knew you were here. I heard your voice that night."

Very gently and very patiently Wright and Rae continued to speak to him. They told him who he was and how Schafer had captured them. The poor fellow struggled to remember as his friends walked him about in the fresh air. For a moment or two he was quite sane, and then his mind lapsed again into a state of confusion.

Presently sleep came and Wilson gladly rested on his new bed. Relieved in this way, for a little, of their added responsibility, Wright was able to make additional arrangements. Time was passing and there was still need of great haste. What were they to do with their prisoners? How was the Government to be informed?

"To begin with," said Wright, "we will bring the prisoners into this chasm. I have found a strong room to lock them in. They will be safer over here and will not need so many guards. Then I propose starting off by car for Moolooloo."

"You intend to advise the police?" Roy said.

"Yes. We cannot take the law into our own hands any further. Maxwell will come to our help and we will have our claims 'pegged' out without delay."

"Will you go alone?"

"Jim will come with me, and we will take Di Gilio and hand him over. Maxwell will be convinced when he sees him. Now let us get to work. Lock Wilson in his room and come away."

* * * * *

The work of transferring the prisoners to their new quarters was not a long job, and when it was completed Wright remarked that he could go away feeling certain that there was no possibility of Schafer again getting the upper hand.

The car was made ready for the long trip to Moolooloo. Di Gilio was surprised when he found himself singled out and strapped to a seat in the buckboard.

"What is the game now?" he inquired as they proceeded to make his arms and feet fast.

"No game at all," said Wright. "The fact of the matter is that the overseer of Moolooloo wants to see you at the office. My private opinion is that Tom Spargo will be paid off."

The black boys mounted guard over the prisoners. They had received their instructions from Wright, and as the job consisted very largely of sitting down in the shade, smoking and eating, both Billy and Joe were agreed that at last they had reached the perfect state.

The afternoon was wearing on when at last Wright had all in readiness for the trip. Roy and Rae were standing near the car when it was about to start out. In the meantime Wright had been quite transformed. His skin was no longer brown and every trace of the Afghan was gone. Rae certainly liked him much better as a white man.

"We will travel on without camping," said Wright. "So we will not be away an hour longer than necessary. Do as much experimenting as you

like, but in case of accident keep very near the chasm."

"We will," said Roy. "There is enough to interest me here. How long will you be away?"

"Hope to start the return trip to-morrow."

* * * * *

The sun had set. An hour before a puncture had caused a little delay, but they were glad of the rest. Jim overhauled the car and put all in order while Wright prepared tea. Di Gilio could not be induced to talk much, but he ate his share of the meal and then, pleading illness, he begged Wright to camp for the night. However, other plans had been decided upon, and the car was soon racing forward again. Darkness slowly came down and a small moon commenced to show up. The mountains of Yalo' were far behind. Before them loomed gigantic sandhills, and it took all the skill and bush knowledge which Wright possessed to keep the car on the low ground and heading in the right direction. Jim was at the wheel, and his driving was often furious. Several times Bob cautioned him, but Jim was not in the mood to go slowly.

"Hang it all," he said, "the bus doesn't belong to us; besides, I'm making up for lost time."

"We will steer for the John Brown dam," said Bob. "There is water there, and we may reach it by midnight."

"How far will that be from Moolooloo?"

"About fifty miles."

"Ah, here is a level patch. Let us do forty."

"Be careful; there is a big wash away somewhere here."

Di Gilio's ride did not improve his temper. After every bad bump he would find his voice and pour

forth some language, but Jim would respond by a little additional speeding.

Sometimes they could only crawl along. Bob frequently had to jump out and give the car an additional push. As the night wore on, progress became slower and slower. They were in the midst of a great sand-drift, and the wheels often sank down as far as the axles and brought the car to a standstill. Jim let the air out and then crawled forward with the tyres nearly flat.

Bob was a wonderful bushman, and his sense of direction was marvellous. Obstacle after obstacle had to be overcome, and it was impossible to take the shortest track through the great sandhills. Instead of reaching the dam by midnight it was after three before the water was reached.

"We'll camp here till daylight," said Bob.

"Good," replied Jim. "I have had enough."

Di Gilio was taken out and allowed to stretch himself on the sand. A fire was made, and after a drink of tea all were content to sleep.

Before sunrise next morning the car was again moving forward. They now had a slight track to follow, and three hours later the Moolooloo homestead came in view.

THE station folk at the homestead had long given Wright up as lost. Maxwell had sent many urgent telegrams. The police were making inquiries, but the overseer had vanished. Neither had any news been heard from the dogging camp. For some reason which the manager couldn't explain, Spargo

and the mule team had not returned. When several weeks had passed and no news could be obtained of the doggers, Maxwell determined to send out a search party. Two black boys and one white man had gone in the direction of Yalo', and after making an extensive search they had returned without having found any trace of the missing men.

The situation was now serious. Maxwell became alarmed. Police troopers and trackers were sent for and complete preparations were made for a dash into the waterless country lying far beyond. The disappearance of Wright for the time was forgotten. A temporary overseer had been appointed, and when it was realised that three men were in great peril arrangements were pushed forward with the greatest possible speed.

The old bushmen recalled the exciting days when they had searched for Wilson and Rae Blackwood, and the fact that three other men were lost in the same neighbourhood gave rise to much wild speculation. Maxwell was inclined to take a hopeless view. Most of the Yalo' country was waterless, and in his opinion only the bones of the missing men would be found. The station blacksmith was an old Scotchman who had the highest opinion of Spargo's bush sense. He jaloused that the mules had broken away and that the men would be found hugging some waterhole. Spargo had often been lost before—sometimes for weeks at a time—but didn't he always come back like a black cat?

A thousand things might have happened. The mules might have broken loose or perished. Without their animals they could not cross the waterless belt. One of the men might be injured or sick. They might have been lost and overpowered in a sand storm and all their tracks obliterated. The great open spaces seemed to be very silent and lonely

now, but the bushmen all felt sure that something terrible had happened.

The police trooper from Wooleena had hurried out to Moolooloo, and with his camel team had gone out into the great sandhill country, but as he did not succeed in finding water he was compelled to return to the homestead.

Far out in the empty waterless spaces three men were missing, and the bushmen were gathering for a systematic search. There were camels and mules and a couple of dilapidated cars ready to make a dash into the dangerous "Never-Never."

Maxwell had gone out himself for Harry Lewis. He was the only man who knew the Yalo' country and his services were needed. Harry did not believe in leaving his camp. If city men came out into the back country and got lost, that was their look-out. Why didn't they stay in the city, where they could follow the tram tracks? But this time Maxwell could not be put off. He spoke with authority, and very reluctantly Harry was obliged to accompany his master to the homestead.

It was mail day again, and as more policemen were expected by the car the station folk were somewhat excited. The search parties were all ready to start out. A plan of campaign had been agreed upon. Some men mounted on mules and camels had already pushed forward. It was agreed that if additional troopers arrived they would follow up in the cars and a depot would be made in the neighbourhood of the Yalo' range.

Someone heard a car away in the distance and called out that the mail was coming. Work ceased and the men collected at the store-room to get the news of the great outside world.

"False alarm," said Maxwell after listening for a moment. "The mail car never takes that top track."

"Only visitors," said another.

"Somebody from Cordillo, perhaps."

"He is travelling at a great pace and must be wanting to break his neck."

The car at last appeared from behind the mulga and swung up the track leading to the homestead.

"It's a Ford buckboard."

"Yes, and the driver knows the short cut through the yards. He is no stranger."

A moment later the car dashed up to the store and, as it came to an abrupt standstill, a sturdy bushman with a smiling face sprang to the ground.

"Bob Wright!" several exclaimed at once.

"My apologies for being late," said the overseer, "but I had to find Spargo and bring him in. Here he is, but leave the straps on him, for he is a robber and a murderer."

"A murderer?"

"Yes, he is a murderer, so keep him securely."

Harry Lewis was standing close by, and was dumbfounded by the dramatic turn events had taken. Creeping back, he tried to avoid Wright's gaze, but the overseer had already noticed him.

"So you are here, Harry," he said. "I didn't expect to catch you so easily. Constable, I accuse Lewis of being an accomplice. He has been bribed by a murderer. There has been foul play, and that fellow Lewis knows all about it."

Here was a further surprise. Men quickly gathered, and they were all anxious for news. Maxwell, however, quickly took in the situation and gave his orders. The trooper secured both Spargo and Lewis and took them into the office. The manager followed with Wright and Jim and the door closed behind them.

"Now, Bob, give us your story," said Maxwell.

"That is impossible," said the overseer. "It

will take too long. Besides my story is my own property. However we have found Wilson and Rae Blackwood. They have been held as prisoners by Müller, whose real name is Schafer. He is a German spy, and this man Spargo, whose real name is Di Gilio, is his right-hand man. Years ago Wilson and Blackwood discovered gold, but Müller robbed them of their discovery and murdered Blackwood. Müller has a stronghold in the mountains at Yalo', and for a long time he has been secretly shipping his treasure to Germany. I have been chasing him for years, but a few months ago I got right on his tracks. This accounts for my long absence, but I had to follow up quickly or lose the prize. Müller is now our prisoner, and Roy Mitchell holds the stronghold until we return."

"Who is Mitchell?"

"My mate," said Jim. "You knew him as Ben Cook. He is a well-known metallurgist. I am a medical man, and my name is Fisher. Excuse us both coming to you in disguise, but there was method in our madness."

"Wonders never cease," replied Maxwell. "Anyhow, we are glad you have all turned up. A big search expedition was about to start out."

"No need of any more searching," said Wright. "The men are all safe, but we had better make back to Yalo' with the police. Müller and Wilson are both seriously ill."

"Any shooting?" asked the constable.

"No; we bagged the lot without a shot."

"Why did you bring Spargo?"

"We were afraid to let him out of our sight. He is a dangerous man."

"What have you against Lewis?"

"He is one of Müller's agents and supplied information. He and Spargo worked together. I

have the facts, but let him make his own statement."

Lewis was soon speaking. He tried to make a statement, but he was soon tangled up.

"Better not say any more," said the constable. "I will get a written statement from you directly."

"Good," said Maxwell. "Now let us get ready for Yalo'. But not a word about this matter outside. I don't want all my men rushing away after gold."

"Another car coming," someone called from outside.

"It's the mail," said the book-keeper, who was also in the office. The men outside soon had other interests. Handcuffs were put upon Di Gilio and the straps were taken off. He was then allowed to sit in a corner of the office. Lewis was locked in an adjoining room with paper and pen. He could write a statement if he wished.

Meanwhile the mail-car had reached the store-room. Three men who proved to be police stepped out. Another man was also in the car, and when the men saw him they mostly pretended to get very busy. The new-comer was Mr. Brodie, the chief director of the pastoral company. He was paying a surprise visit to Moolooloo so he took the opportunity of coming out with the police. Maxwell received him kindly, and after he had entered the office he was acquainted with the outstanding facts of the case. The director was a very cute man, and it did not take him long to sum up the situation, and a few moments later he had called Wright and Jim aside. As a business man, he had a proposition to put before them.

"If this chasm is where you indicate," said Mr. Brodie, "it must be on Moolooloo. At all events, our company will claim it, and matters will be

simplified. You and your mates will get the full benefit of your discovery and your courage, but it takes a lot of money to work a gold reef. We can supply the money and we will be glad to have you chaps as partners."

"Thanks, Mr. Brodie," said Wright. "I have always admired your fairness. As a matter of fact, I was going to suggest that we come to some such arrangement. I don't know the strength of Müller's claims."

"Hang his claims. We will claim the lot, and I will get the machinery in motion at once. His rights can be inquired into after we have established our claims."

"Good," said Wright. "I will leave you to adjust the matter while I return to Yalo'."

"I would like to go with you, but I'm afraid my old bones could not endure it. Maxwell will go, but keep the location of the gold field a secret. I will notify the Government and protect our rights."

* * * * *

While arrangements were being made for the dash to Yalo', Bob and Jim succeeded in snatching a few hours' sleep. The police had their plans. One constable would remain at Moolooloo while the other three, together with Wright, Jim and Maxwell, would proceed with two cars to Yalo'.

Late in the afternoon the expedition started out. Wright's knowledge of the country enabled them to travel quickly until the great sandhill country was reached. At midnight they decided to camp till daylight. A big fire was kindled, and they were soon all asleep in the sand.

Morning came all too soon, but the few hours' sleep in the open air had worked wonders. They were fresh again and ready for another big day.

Every piece of stick was so dry that in a few minutes a strong fire was blazing around the quart pots and breakfast was soon over.

All day long the cars struggled on. The constables were certain that they were lost. Even Maxwell was afraid that this short cut across the country which Wright was taking would land them in serious difficulty, but the overseer was perfectly calm. He knew the track and he knew where he was, and was not at all concerned.

"I don't want other bushmen following me," was his comment. "That is why I am taking the shortest but the hardest way."

"He will be a good man that will follow you here," said Maxwell.

"Spargo could, so that is why I made sure of him."

* * * * *

In the meantime affairs had moved smoothly at Yalo'. The blacks were good guards, and by way of amusement they would peep through the little window and pull faces at the prisoners.

As yet Rae did not fully understand all that had happened. One revelation had come upon another with perplexing suddenness. Her mind was unable to take it all in. She bravely tried to find relief in work and, installing herself as cook, she saw that all were well fed. Yet in the midst of her work she was as one dreaming. Her mind constantly lingered upon Bob Wright and how for so long he had searched for her. Would she ever be able to repay such great kindness? Rae wondered, too, what was to become of her when the police arrived. She would have no home and the great outside world was to her almost unknown. She felt certain that Bob wanted to be kind to her, but could she

reasonably expect him to do any more? He had already suffered much for her sake and now that she was found he might feel that she had no further claim upon him. She was also troubled with the fact that she had no property or money. Seeing that Schafer was not her uncle and a thief she had no claim upon anything that belonged to him. Poor Rae felt like a little slave girl who had suddenly been set at liberty without a penny in the world. How she wished Roy would come and talk with her more. She wanted to know more about Bob, for he had said some strange things to her and she imagined she saw his beaming [face gazing at her all the time. However Roy had interests in other directions. At last he was free to think and act, and was seeking to puzzle out the secrets of the chasm. While a prisoner he had speculated along certain lines and as he now investigated them in detail he seemed to stand at the threshold of a new world.

So it happened that he was quietly examining a little instrument, with Rae chattering away to Wilson who was seated near by, when suddenly Billy, the black boy, ran towards them.

"Cripe, I hear one fella Ford comin'," he called, "roarin', too, like debbil-debbil."

True enough, the cars were coming, and Roy and Rae hurried out to meet them. Without stopping at the homestead the cars speeded across the paddock and came to a standstill close to the shed at the chasm's mouth. Wright was the first to spring out, and with a smiling face was soon greeting both Rae and Roy.

"We are glad to see you back again," said Rae shyly, and then she felt unable to say any more, but only looked in wonder at the men stepping out of the cars.

"I hope you have not been frightened," said Bob.

"Only a little."

"Good, and are the prisoners all secure?"

"They are quite safe," said Roy.

"Then we have managed splendidly and we can hand them all over now to the police."

Mr. Maxwell now came forward and was introduced to the long lost maid.

"I'm delighted to renew your acquaintance, Miss Blackwood," said the manager. "I knew you as a little child and we are all so glad you have been found."

"Are you really certain that I am Miss Blackwood?"

"Well, you are different to the little Rae I used to know, but that is only to be expected. Your eyes have not changed; neither has your face. You have simply grown up and that is what we all do."

Maxwell had the keen eye of a bushman. He glanced quickly at Rae's hand and then turned to Wright. Both men nodded.

"Would you swear to her identity?" a trooper asked.

"Yes," replied Maxwell without hesitation. "I am prepared to do that for you at any time and in any court."

The new-comers were soon taken into the chasm and most of them became speechless as they were shown the wonders of Schafer's stronghold.

"No wonder the blacks have kept away from this place," said Maxwell.

"We have found out what frightens the blacks," Bob replied. "I think they can be excused, because I was alarmed myself."

A rapid examination was made of the contents

of the chasm and then the prisoners were handed over. At the sight of the police Billy and Joe were afraid they would lose their jobs, but they were more than delighted when the sergeant told them to carry on.

Schafer and Pfitzner both protested but the police put handcuffs on them all and had them arrested on various charges.

"We are only station hands," said Bunn. "We know nothing about what the boss did."

"Yet by force of arms you robbed Mitchell and Fisher and held other free citizens as prisoners," replied the sergeant. "You had better wait and make your defence in the proper place."

* * * * *

Wilson had considerably improved with rest and freedom. Both Roy and Rae had spent much time with him, and the sight of Billy and Joe had also helped him. He remembered both boys and their merry laughter carried his mind back to the old days when he roamed with them in the bush. Rae was kindness itself to the poor fellow and she sat for hours at a time trying to smooth out his difficulties and to recall his mind to his real self.

Once they had allowed him to peep through the door and gaze upon the prisoners. Like a flash the sight of Schafer made him mad. The pent-up fury of years stirred within him. Breaking from friendly hands he rushed upon his enemy and it required the combined efforts of Roy and the blacks to prevent disaster.

The experiment was not repeated but it had the effect of making Wilson talk about his enemy. Rae listened while he raged on. Sometimes she heard her father's name mentioned and she was glad to pick up every scrap of information.

Maxwell was specially interested in the man he had known years before. With the police sergeant he had carefully examined and questioned him. Wilson, however, was not able to give any complete story but he remembered some events and this enabled Wright and Maxwell to put two and two together.

* * * * *

It was a merry party that gathered in the homestead dining-room that night. All anxiety was now over. The responsibility of the prisoners rested with the officers of the law and Wright felt at last that he could sit back. He was obviously tired. So was Jim, but gratitude was in their hearts. The expedition had proved successful and a dark mystery was solved.

For years Bob Wright had thought of the little maid who had mysteriously disappeared. She was often in his dreams. During the weary years a strange certainty that the girl was still alive possessed him. In lonely places he seemed to hear her voice. Then he would remember again the terrible scene of Blackwood's death and hear once more the dying appeal—"Find Rae."

Neither time nor war changed Bob's opinion that the girl was still alive. He often pictured her and sometimes he allowed his imagination to drift on to the day when he would actually find her.

So it was that night that Bob felt contented as he sat back and smoked. Occasionally he glanced at the maid who for years had lived in his dreams. She was no longer a little girl but had quite grown up. Yet something of the old sparkling manner remained. She was flushed with excitement, but in the bright electric light Bob thought she was beauty personified. Maxwell insisted upon her

sitting next to him and he told many a story which brought forth peal after peal of laughter. Rae seemed very nervous and shy among so many men but she did speak a little to the manager and to Roy, but poor Bob appeared to be quite forgotten. She scarcely paid him any attention but it pleased Bob to see her happy. So he smoked on and felt like Wellington on the night of Waterloo.

CHAPTER XXX

"BURNING AIR"

EARLY next morning the police began to make a thorough examination of the homestead and the sheds within the chasm. The sergeant obtained elaborate statements from the prisoners and encouraged his men to push on rapidly with the investigations, for he was anxious to return to headquarters and give the startling news to the continent. Jim volunteered to remain with the police while Roy, Maxwell and Bob made another examination of the gold reef.

The officers of the law were not told more than was absolutely necessary. They knew, of course, that the chasm contained many secrets but they were not told that a greater chasm and a gold reef lay beyond.

The sun was well up when Bob Wright, accompanied by Roy and Maxwell, led the way up the cliff by the secret passage. As they ascended Roy was able to explain how they had broken from their prison and located the blowhole. In turn, Bob mentioned that he had several times crawled down nearly as far as the top of the shed in the hope of being able to locate where his friends were imprisoned.

Maxwell was soon initiated into the mysteries of the "budleemundja." A strong breeze was blowing and occasionally a weird moan came to their ears.

"That mournful roar has served Schafer well," said Bob. "It has frightened all the blacks away from these mountains. They think it is the cry of some wild beast or devil."

"What is the cause of it?" asked Maxwell.

"The wind rushes up the great valley beyond and is forced through the narrow blowhole. That causes the throbbing sound you hear."

"No wonder I couldn't get my black boys to go out into the Yalo' country."

Thus another mystery was cleared up.

The party was soon crawling through the blowhole and the manager of Moolooloo felt for the first time the stinging sensation from head to foot.

"My word, it is hot here!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, there is a bottomless pit on ahead and the heat streams up from it. Be careful you don't slip

Naturally Maxwell was very interested and at the same time he was slightly nervous, but he felt more secure when he saw the daylight again appearing. However he was rendered almost speechless when he peeped down into the terrible depths below

"Did you know of this gorge, Bob?" he inquired.

"Yes, I have long known of it."

"When did you first see it?"

"After the war."

"And you never reported your discovery?"

"I was not the original discoverer. Many years ago Blackwood and Wilson went down into that chasm and found gold. The old hatter's reef is buried down that valley."

"And you hung on in silence all that time?"

"Yes, from the day I saw Blackwood die. I was only a boy then, but his dying words are still ringing in my ears."

"I always understood that Blackwood was dead when you found him."

"So I reported, but the statement was not strictly correct. After I found him, he lived for about an hour, but he only said a few words. Those words were very disconnected but they gave me the only clue I had for years. He mentioned that Schafer had carried them off. He spoke of gold and 'burning air' and implored me to find Rae."

"What did he mean by 'burning air'?"

"Perhaps he was referring to that heat we felt in the blowhole."

"Well, Bob, you are a dark horse, and I hope you reap the full reward of your secrecy and patience. We must try and conclude all these adventures with a wedding."

"I think it is time we moved on," was Bob's comment.

"Yes, come along," said Roy. "There is something down this valley that I am anxious to see again."

In a few moments they had scrambled up the face of the cliff and along the Dead Finish Creek. The three men were desperately eager. Bob knew the best way down into the chasm which, was very similar to the way first taken by Roy and Jim.

The mighty walls of rock were again around them. On reaching the bottom, Roy hurried to the spot where they had first noticed the mysterious vapour emerging from the rocks. As he expected, the heat was still there, but he perceived what had escaped his eyes at first. The gas issued from a large crack between two rocks.

"Don't go near," Roy cautioned his companions.

"More heat," said Maxwell.

"There must be a very deep vent at this point," Roy explained.

"What causes all the heat?" Maxwell inquired.

"This is what Blackwood called 'burning air,'" said Bob. "Do you feel the strange stinging sensation as though your skin was commencing to burn?"

"I do."

"And did you feel it in the blowhole?"

"Yes—but I was too excited to think much about it. I only wanted to see the daylight again."

"Well, it is somewhat stronger here because we are a long way deeper down."

"What causes the heat? Are we on a volcano or on a lime pit, or is this a part of the next world?"

"I haven't the slightest idea where the heat comes from," said Bob, "but I'm sure Roy will be able to explain it all directly."

"I don't know so much about that," was Roy's reply. "I'm afraid this 'burning air' has got me properly puzzled. About three years ago I saw something a little like it. They were extending an old mine in the Bendigo district and when some of the stone from a great depth was brought to the surface it gradually warmed up and set fire to some of the old timbering of the mine. Several of us made experiments with the stone, but we couldn't account for the strange way it acted. Still, I remember that the matter caused considerable speculation at the time."

"Perhaps that same kind of stone is to be found here," said Maxwell.

"The other stone warmed up and gave off heat; but there is more than heat here. That stinging sensation is caused by emanations of some kind,

and I have already calculated that this 'burning air' would kill you instantly."

"But it hasn't killed us?"

"That is because we have not received the full force of the emanations. In fact I don't think we have yet come in contact with the actual emanations, but only the effects of them."

"I remember when I found Blackwood, he was badly burnt," said Bob.

"These emanations or rays killed Blackwood," was Roy's comment. "He must have come into closer contact with them than we have yet done. You told us he had a scientific mind, so I suppose he ran into danger while experimenting?"

"Did you do any experimenting while we were away?"

"I have not pushed very far yet, but I notice that many of Schafer's machines are surrounded by lead and other materials. Consequently, my opinion is that the emanations will penetrate almost anything. Even at a considerable distance the slightest sensation causes pain. I am certain that we are right on the threshold of some great discovery, but I am afraid that this new element will take a terrible toll of human lives before it is harnessed and used either as power or medicine."

"Do you think this 'burning air' can be used?" Bob asked in surprise.

"Certainly it can. Schafer has already made it work, and it is a million times more powerful than steam. The element which produces the 'burning air' is present in very rare quantities in some of the stone in this place. Schafer found the stone that contained it, and for years he has been collecting it, and since the war he has been quietly shipping it away."

"That throws more light on the mystery," said

Bob. "I examined some of the material he was sending away, but I was unable to locate the slightest trace of gold or opal."

"Schafer was not bothering about gold or opal. He was on the track of something infinitely more valuable but, in the main, he missed the mark. He has been searching on the surface where the energy is almost exhausted. We will need to go down a mile or two in the earth to get the untouched material."

"Then you conclude that this 'burning air' comes from enormous radium deposits far down in the earth?"

"To begin with, I was inclined to think that we had found a radium deposit, but I'm afraid that my first impression was incorrect. There is some element here which possesses nearly all the characteristics of radium but, in addition, it seems to have the peculiar power of making everything it touches radio-active. However, I am sure it will yet prove to be equally as valuable as radium."

"Have you seen it, Roy?"

"To see the real element would be certain death, but we see its effects and I have already guessed how it works. It gives off heat, light and energy. That is certain. Further, I believe there is sufficient power here to drive all the machinery in Australia. I am wildly optimistic about this new element, for I am certain that when we find how to handle it coalfields will be out of date. Steam engines that have held sway for one hundred years will be obsolete. Coal mines and oil-wells and wood fires will be unnecessary. We will have more power than we know what to do with. This discovery will make electricity almost as cheap and plentiful as the air we breathe."

"Don't make us enthusiastic and then drop us,"

said Bob. "Tell us what you think this burning air is."

"I have an idea, Bob, but I have not pushed my experiments very far and perhaps we will need to work away all our lives before we solve all the mysteries of this chasm. You notice the great crack from which the vapour seems to be emerging?"

"Yes."

"Well, I would not be surprised if that crack were a mile or more deep."

"What difference would that make?"

"A lot, if my hypothesis is correct. My idea is that this new element is affected by the air. When it is deeply covered it remains partially dormant, but as soon as it comes into contact with the air it warms up and becomes radio-active. Of course this is only a possibility, but I can see that Schafer has been making some experiments along these lines."

"There seems to be plenty for you to do yet, Roy," was Bob's remark. "I hope you are not sorry you have come to Central Australia."

"Bob, you have given me the greatest opportunity a scientist ever possessed," said Roy earnestly. "You have given me the right of entrance into a field of investigation, the magnitude of which is far beyond my wildest dreams. This chasm is to me a pathway into the invisible world. I dare not speculate upon what wonders will here be revealed to the patient man of science. To a great extent we have been living in a world of illusions. We have only come into contact with the shadow of real things, but I feel at last that we are starting to escape from Plato's underground cave of illusions. This marvellous element that gives off 'burning air' opens up for us an entirely new world of investigation."

"Well, I know nothing about it," said Maxwell, who had been listening to the conversation as one who had gone beyond his depth. "However, I may know something about a gold reef and I am anxious to see how that looks."

"Come along, then," said Roy. "It is a little distance from here, but we had better peg out our claims at once."

Roy made no mistake. The location of the reef had been too well impressed on his memory, and at length the three men stood around a number of stones.

"The reef is here," said Roy.

"Then it is well covered up."

"It is. This must be the spot where the old hatter got his gold. He certainly concealed it well before he died."

"Perhaps Wilson covered it up."

"I am inclined to think Wilson must have tapped the reef at another point. The stones had not been disturbed for years. Probably gold will show up in different parts of this valley."

"Do you think Schafer knows of it?" Maxwell inquired.

"He may have tapped the reef at some other place, but this is our claim so let us get to work."

At first Maxwell seemed disappointed, but his hopes revived as the stones were thrown aside. The tools were found. Another moment of excitement followed. Then all eyes were staring at the stone. The yellow metal had appeared.

"You are right, Roy Mitchell," Maxwell shouted.

"This is certainly the old hatter's mine. We must be standing on a mountain of gold."

Quickly they shook hands all round and a moment later they had formed the Company to work the claim. Maxwell was all eagerness now and so was

Wright. They grasped the old broken tool and tore up the ground as though they had suddenly become possessed of supernatural power. Earth was thrown aside. Stones rolled away and the men worked like giants. At several points the reef was exposed, and was proved to be of considerable size.

"I think we will go back now," said Roy.

"No," returned Maxwell. "We must stick here like glue. Before long men will be streaming here from all parts and nobody must be let jump our claim."

"But we will need to return to Schafer's den."

"You two return and send back Jim Fisher. I stick here night and day. I'm a gold miner now. Tell Jim to bring rifles, food and water."

Maxwell was true to his word and nothing could shift him from the gold reef. Jim came to him from time to time and brought him what he needed. A rough fence was put round the whole face of the hill, and claimed as a mining site.

Events now moved rapidly. The police, having taken possession of Schafer's homestead and chasm, conveyed the prisoners as quickly as possible to Moolooloo, and from there they were removed to safe keeping at Port Augusta.

In the meantime Mr. Brodie had been very busy. Mining engineers were sent for, and were soon on the road out. After a day's rest at Moolooloo they hurried on to Yalo'. Rough sheds were quickly constructed and mining operations were soon in progress.

RAE BLACKWOOD remained on at Yalo'. She was strangely shy and lonely among so many men. The police were anxious to remove her to the south, but there were no charges against her, and being of age she pleased herself. Rae took up house at the homestead. It was the only home she had ever known and she knew nothing about the outside world. Mr. Maxwell very thoughtfully had his wife brought out to keep her company, and this kind lady did her best to cheer the lonely girl. Rae soon became very fond of Wilson and spent hours in his company trying to get him to recall some of the events which had happened years ago. This provided a constant interest for her, and it was good for Wilson too.

Bob Wright and his mates were all very busy. Each day brought forth fresh difficulties and further surprises. As Maxwell had anticipated a gold rush set in and men hurried from distant parts, lured on by the strange rumours they heard. A few made money very quickly. Others were doomed to disappointment and were obliged to content themselves by working for the successful Yalorigina Mining Company that had come into existence. Mr. Brodie had acted very promptly with the result that the rights of the new company were fully recognised and their interests protected. Before prospectors had, in any great numbers, reached Yalo' the company was firmly established and operations were begun.

Jim and Roy took a hurried trip back to Melbourne. Roy succeeded in resigning from all his appointments and then arranged with several

chemists and engineers to accompany him to Central Australia. He was determined to solve completely the mystery of "burning air" and his intention was to institute at Yalo' a Board of Research.

Jim's parents were astonished at their son's great fortune. Already his interest in the mine was worth many thousands of pounds and, if the reef proved to be as extensive as many thought, it would be difficult to calculate its value. To please his mother Jim consented to return to Melbourne the following year and complete his medical course.

Bob Wright remained at his post at Yalo'. He worked hard from daylight to dark. He did not seem to rest a moment and men said he was killing himself. Several times Maxwell pleaded with him to go slower, but Bob always replied that he was happy when he was going full steam ahead. So he toiled on with the same energy that he had put into the search for his lost mates. But there is a limit to every man's endurance. Slowly his face became careworn. He grew haggard and sick. Maxwell noticed that he fell asleep at his work and insisted upon him resting for a few days.

"I cannot rest now, and it would be misery for me to keep quiet," said Bob.

"You are killing yourself," said Maxwell sternly. "And I will not allow anybody to kill himself before my very eyes. We all owe our splendid fortune to you, and it is about time we made you sit down and watch us work."

"I will take a little holiday when Roy and Jim return."

"You will not wait until then. You must stop work at once. I insist upon it, and there is an easy job I want you to do. Look after old Wilson for a few days. It will do you both good to sit down and talk about old times."

"Rae is watching him, and she does the job well."

"She does, but you go and help her."

"Perhaps I ought to talk more to poor Wilson," said Bob. "He suffered much for us all. I shall keep him company for the remainder of the day."

Bob Wright could scarcely understand himself. When dressed as an Afghan he had spoken freely with Rae and begged her to desert Schafer. Now he was dressed as an Australian he felt unable to converse with her. He often wanted to do so but somehow words refused to come. He was super-sensitive, and always thought he was making a fool of himself. Moreover he often felt that Rae, for some strange reason, was avoiding him. This perplexed him beyond measure, and he often felt that the young maid he had rescued was purposely slighting him. Why her attitude changed so suddenly he knew not, but his faithful heart was wounded and he tried to find peace in work.

Bob thought it remarkable that Maxwell should advise him to talk more to Wilson. Yet Maxwell was right and Bob felt that he had not been quite fair to his old mate. However he would now try to make amends and he determined to seek out a cool spot and sit down with Wilson all day.

Poor Rae was also very lonely. Her little world had been turned completely upside down. The once quiet homestead was now the centre of a busy little settlement. All the men she met seemed to gaze upon her as though she were an object of curiosity. She did not realise that their peculiar interest in her arose from her remarkable experiences and her dramatic rescue. Naturally all this tended to increase her shyness. She tried to avoid company and strange thoughts occupied her mind. Sometimes she would sit down and try to think of her position. What was to become of her? She

had no claim upon Schafer's property. Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell were very kind but they would not want to stay always at Yalo'. When they returned to Moolooloo how could she carry on? Over and over again she felt she ought to speak to Bob Wright. He had been so good to her, and surely she ought to thank him for all he had done. However her resolutions, good as they were, always seemed to break down when she was in his company. She wanted to tell Bob many things but when an opportunity presented itself a strange shyness possessed her and words would not come. On other occasions, fearing that Bob would observe her weakness, she intentionally evaded him. In the meantime Bob thought she was deliberately slighting him so he did not press his company upon her but kept hard at his work.

Mrs. Maxwell, the kind, thoughtful soul, read between the lines. She often noticed Rae's blushes and also observed how interested Bob was in all that Rae did, yet he seemed to keep himself away.

On one occasion when Bob had been at the homestead consulting Maxwell, Rae had kept to her room. Mrs. Maxwell had left the girl to herself but when Bob was leaving she noticed Rae looking through her window at the retreating figure. It was the same window through which, weeks before, she had gazed upon Raska the 'ghan as he moved off with his camels. She wept then because she felt that a kind, sympathetic heart was leaving her and she had not been fair to him. Again as Rae looked from the window the tears came to her eyes. Perhaps she was thinking that once more she had been unkind to a brave, faithful heart.

Mrs. Maxwell seizing upon some pretext hurried

into the room. Rae tried to dry her tears, but she was unable to conceal her grief.

"What ails you, child?" asked the manager's wife.

"I am not ill."

"Perhaps not, but you are sad."

"I have been sad for a long time. I think I always will be sad."

"But you should be happy. You are young and free, and think what a wonderful place we are living in."

"Dear Mrs. Maxwell, tell me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Why is Bob Wright angry with me? Why does he always keep away? Is he ashamed of me now he has found me?"

"I'm sure Bob is neither angry nor ashamed of you."

"Then why does he hate me. He never comes near me now and I have so much to tell him. I feel I ought to thank him but somehow I can't."

"Rae, I'm sure you are mistaken. Bob often speaks of you and when he does his words are all kindness. I don't think you give him many chances of speaking, and Bob Wright never goes where he is not wanted. For years he searched for you and suffered much. I think you ought to be very kind to him."

"I would like to be kind to him," said Rae as the tears again filled her eyes. "I was thinking of him as he came to me dressed as an Afghan. I didn't know then that he was my father's friend but I felt he was kind to me. Now he seems so cold."

"Some day he will speak to you more. But here is Mr. Wilson and I'm sure he is looking for you."

It was a few days after this incident that Bob Wright decided to take a little rest and talk to his old friend, Wilson. With strange feelings he left the mine and scrambled round the cliffs. He was utterly weary. The long struggle through the years culminating in the Herculean efforts of the last few months had brought him very low. In addition there was a hurt at his heart which no physician's hand could heal. He was harassed with the bitter thought that all his patient endeavour had not brought him peace of mind, but had rather plunged him into a deeper abyss of misery. When he reached the top of the cliffs he was glad of a lift in a mule-drawn wagonette and so was conveyed to the homestead.

On that very morning a very interesting incident was taking place inside Schafer's chasm. Rae was sitting with Wilson outside one of the sheds and amusing him by reading and talking. Of late she had spent more time in his company, and the good progress he was making was largely due to her patient efforts. Wilson had been wandering in his thought and Rae was trying to coax him back into peaceful channels.

"Come," she said, "you must now tell me all about my father."

"And who was your father?"

"Mr. Blackwood."

"Not Will Blackwood?"

"Yes, of course. He was your friend."

"I know Will Blackwood well. Is he here?"

"No, he will never come here."

"Then he should come because I have something to tell him—something good."

"Can't you tell me?"

"Ah no, that will never do. I must tell Blackwood himself."

"But you cannot do that. My father is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Was there an accident?"

"There must have been, but it happened a long time ago and I don't know much about it."

Wilson tried hard to think. Something was troubling him and for a moment he held his head in his hands.

"I have something to tell Blackwood," he persisted. "I should have told him years ago. It has all been my mistake—but stop, here comes one of Schafer's men. He must not see you talking to me."

Rae thought he was still wandering and was trying to explain that Schafer's men were all in prison when she heard footsteps behind her and quickly looking round she came face to face with Bob Wright. He touched his hat respectfully and she blushed and became nervous.

"How are you to-day, Alex?" Bob inquired in his old cheerful voice.

"Are you Blackwood?" was Wilson's reply.

"No, I'm Bob Wright, and I've come to talk to you all day."

"We are glad to have you with us. Mrs. Blackwood was telling me that there has been an accident."

"You are not quite right, Alex," said Bob with a smile. "This is little Rae, and she certainly is her mother over again. Don't you remember little Rae?"

"Yes, I know Rae."

"Well, this young lady is Rae Blackwood grown up."

"Of course—of course. I was forgetting."

"I suppose you have been telling Rae about our old camping days."

"I have been telling her a little," said Wilson with a smile. "But I have something very important to tell you and can't remember what it is."

"Then let us sit down together and talk. Perhaps you will think of it in a moment or two. I am taking the day off, so let us have a long yarn about old times."

"We have not seen much of you lately," said Rae shyly.

"I have been very much tied down at the mine but I hope to have more leisure when Roy and Jim return."

"Are you expecting them back soon?"

"I hope to see them next week. Then it will be my turn for a holiday. In a month or two I may be able to start out on a trip to America and the Old Country."

Rae did not reply. She looked closely at her knitting but a strange lump came into her throat. However she struggled hard and controlled herself.

"I must run back now and help Mrs. Maxwell with the dinner," she said, by way of an excuse. "You and Mr. Wilson will have plenty to talk about."

"Surely you are not leaving us?" said Bob.

"I'll be back again soon."

"Then see that you do."

So Rae tripped away and was soon out of the chasm. Bob watched her for a moment. Why was she so anxious to leave as soon as he had appeared. Naturally he felt irritated but he tried to suppress his feelings and in a few moments he was leading Wilson to recall the old days before his captivity. Bob was agreeably surprised that his friend did remember, and his memory had recovered to such an extent that he was able to recollect many past events. Suddenly, in the

midst of a conversation Wilson arose and, beckoning Bob to follow, led the way into the shed that had once been his prison. Bob followed as a matter of course, but he could see that his friend was strangely excited.

"I have something to show you," said Wilson. "I know what it is, and a long time ago I hid it here."

Bob was perplexed, but he aided his friend as he feverishly threw aside bags and other rubbish. What he was searching for Bob could not imagine. Eager questions brought forth no replies. Wilson, under some strange obsession, rushed about the room and peeped into every corner and crevice.

Bob at last grew tired of the fruitless search and tried to coax his old friend back to the open air, but to his surprise Wilson was an idiot again. He felt for the chains on his feet. He kicked and struggled as though some force was holding him down. Bob tried to calm him, but the unfortunate fellow spoke wildly about Schafer and the "floating snake." At last, as if exhausted by his efforts, he fell to the floor and did what he had so often done during the terrible days of his imprisonment. He pulled the bags over his trembling body and called upon the powers of darkness to hurl Schafer and his crew into the bottomless pit. Bob could see that it was useless to talk with him. The sight of his old prison had turned his mind, and he was living again in the associations of that terrible place. Bob was unable to endure any more and sought refuge in the open air. He was utterly depressed and saddened. Instead of helping Wilson he had unconsciously allowed him to lapse into his old mood. His good resolve had only led to disaster. Now what was to be done? Rae had not returned and Bob felt that she did not intend to do so. He had

not locked Wilson in. He was too sad and too weary to form any plan. He could only stand in the shade and gaze at the shed where the unfortunate Wilson lay huddled in his bags. Suddenly the shed seemed to tremble. The chasm grew dark. His legs refused to hold him, and he only saved himself from fainting by stretching himself upon the ground. The turn quickly passed away, but he was left very sleepy, and in a few moments he dozed off. How long he slept he knew not, but he was soon in the midst of dreams. Again he wandered among the salt bush and trapped the dogs. Again he moved off with his camel team. Again he hid from Di Gilio and fought with Schafer. All around him was confusion, but one face he saw amid the storm. He saw once more his little Rae as she raced about the camp. The dogs barked and she shouted with joy. Then he saw her with the white geranium beside her mother's grave. Then again the scene was changed. Rae was in the chasm, coming towards him. She did not bow her head or turn away. She saw him and smiled and came running to greet him. She looked so beautiful that Bob smiled in his dream and called out loudly, "Rae, Rae, I'm so glad you have come, I want you. I want you." As he spoke she vanished, leaving him sad as before. Then the dream melted away. His eyes opened and he saw only the shed where Wilson had lapsed into insanity. He felt crushed in spirit, but at that very moment, though he knew it not, Rae Blackwood stood close beside him. She had indeed returned, only to find Wilson gone and Bob asleep. She was about to disturb him when she was suddenly alarmed by hearing the sound of her own name. Bob was certainly asleep. He had not seen her approach, yet he called her—and how he called her. The very tone of his voice amazed

her, and she drew back, scarcely knowing what she was doing. Bob had called her in a voice full of pity and full of sincerity. In that call the mists of doubt seemed to rise and a new hope was born.

Bob at last sat up and looked around. Great was his surprise when he saw Rae stepping towards him.

"Dinner is ready," she said. "You must both be starving."

"Rae," said Bob earnestly, "something terrible has happened. I'm sure you will never forgive me. I let Wilson go back to his old prison, and all your good work is spoilt. He is mad again. The room seemed to bring it all back."

In the emergency Bob had recovered his speech and spoke freely out of a full heart. He tried to tell her how it all had happened. He wanted her to be cross with him for his neglect, but she did not speak. She only blushed as Bob talked on.

"Rae," he said again, "I cannot make him listen, but I know he will speak to you. Let us bring him out from that fearful place."

"Yes, we must, but be careful. He may strike you."

Scarcely had she uttered the words when a loud yell was heard from within, followed by a laugh. The shed door was thrust open and Wilson, holding a package in his hand, came quickly towards them.

"I've found it," he shouted. "This will tell you all."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LIGHT BREAKS THROUGH

WILSON had apparently recovered himself. His lapse had only been momentary, and he now stood before Bob and Rae with an intelligent sparkle in his eyes.

"Schafer did not find it," he exclaimed.

"Find what?"

"This roll," said Wilson as he tried to unravel the package.

"What is it?"

"A diary—I wrote it years ago and hid it away from Schafer. I could not remember where I had put it, but I found it at last buried under one of the flagstones of the floor. I wrote the diary when the events were fresh in my mind. It will tell you all."

Bob took the package and opened it. Wilson was right. It was his long-lost diary. The pages were faded, as the writing was in lead pencil, but here and there were long passages that could be easily read.

"This will give the key to many a mystery," said Bob. "Wilson's mind may be a blank, but these pages will tell us much."

Rae and Bob bent over the faded paper and traced out the writing. They were wildly excited as the mysterious past was revealed to them, and they read the doings of the lost expedition. They read how Wilson, Blackwood and Rae had lived together in the bush till the great day when the chasm with its wonders had been discovered. The narrative moved quickly on from one startling statement to another. It related how the gold

had been found and how the reef had been carefully hidden again till they were able to claim the great prize. Judging from the breaks in the account, it was apparent that Wilson had secretly written his story and kept it concealed from Schafer. Probably before his mind had gone he had taken the precaution to hide it in a safe place and then he had forgotten all about it.

Bob and Rae were standing beside each other and commenting freely upon the narrative. In the face of this new discovery their shyness disappeared. They had a fund of interesting information to think about, and their minds were carried far back.

Bob's eyes rested upon an important section, and he read aloud :

“ ‘When we were certain that we had at last found the old hatter's long lost reef, we carefully covered up our work and our tracks. Blackwood was anxious to explore the great gorge into which we had descended. The height of the rock walls amazed us, and as we crept along we concluded that we were the only white men living who had ever visited the spot. At the end of the great valley we found what appeared to be steam emerging from the rocks. Blackwood soon proved that it was not steam, and remarked that the air seemed to be burning. He then called the mysterious vapour ‘burning air’ and proceeded to make closer investigations. As there was water in the great gorge we decided to camp in it for a day or two and make a complete examination. Blackwood worked with great eagerness, but he soon complained of pains all over his body. His eyes became inflamed and sores broke out all over him. Each day he became worse, and the poor fellow suffered agony. Leaving little Rae in the gorge

to care for her father, I endeavoured to get back to our old camp for some medicine. I climbed out of the valley, and had not proceeded more than a mile when I came upon the tracks of a mule. This excited my interest, and I followed the track. I thought at first it must be some animal that had broken into the open country and gone wild, but then several things made me suspicious. The track went on in orderly manner. The animal was not feeding, as there were no breaks in the track. I concluded that the mule was being ridden, so I followed for a mile or two, and, to my complete surprise, I found a fence. I went on a little farther, and I was astonished beyond measure when I saw in the distance a station homestead. Here was unexpected help, so I returned quickly and brought Blackwood and little Rae around to what I felt sure would be a haven of refuge. As we approached the house, dogs came forward to greet us, but we did not see any human beings until we were almost at the door. Suddenly several disguised men sprang out and covered us with firearms. We were quickly overpowered and held as prisoners. Our enemies were led by a man named Schafer, who took the little girl into his house. She had been sick for some time, and I heard afterwards that she nearly died of some severe fever. Schafer gave out that the girl was to be known henceforth as his niece, and she was cared for by his wife. I saw the girl several weeks afterwards, and she didn't seem to know who I was. Her mind was completely gone. In the meantime Blackwood did not improve. His sores caused him great pain and made him desperate. One day, noticing a saddled mule tethered near him, he suddenly sprang to its back and galloped off. Schafer and his men fired several shots after him and set out in pursuit. The mule was hit, but

Blackwood kept on, and what came of him later I never heard. From the secrecy which Schafer maintained I concluded that Blackwood had been murdered.' "

The narrative came to an abrupt termination, and it was quite clear that nothing had been added for many years.

"I'm so glad Mr. Wilson wrote something about my father," said Rae.

"Yes, this will be valuable evidence for the police," Bob replied. "I can now guess how it all happened. The wounded mule must have carried your father out of Schafer's reach, but thinking that he might be recaptured, he took the precaution to hide the instructions at the tree marked X. I suppose the mule gave out before he had gone many miles. How he got as far as he did before he finally collapsed will remain for ever one of the dark mysteries of this country."

"What a pity father did not remain a prisoner," thought Rae sadly. "He might have been living still."

"Perhaps—but you would not like to think that your father had been tortured as poor Wilson has been."

"No. I am thankful he was spared such suffering. I suppose one had to die."

"Yes, one had to die—and the best one."

"You are kind to say so."

"Your father died for his mates. He fought a desperate battle to bring word to me, and his dying message was all I had to go on."

"What did he say, Bob?"

The sound of his name upon her lips seemed to make him shy again. Yet she was talking freely, and talking to him as she had not done for a long time. Bob struggled and replied calmly:

"I found your father when he was on the point of death, and I held him in my arms for a few moments. As he opened his lips I heard him say: 'Burning air—Schafer—find Rae.' Since that day his dying words have been ringing in my ears. It has taken me long years to puzzle out that message, but without it I could not have done what I have done. Your father was a good friend. He saved others; himself he could not save."

Tears commenced to glisten in Rae's eyes, and she gently raised her handkerchief.

Wilson, who had stood by nervously during the conversation, now turned and walked away in the direction of the homestead.

"You have been so good," Rae said at length.

"I have only done my duty," was Bob's reply.

"How could I have acted otherwise? Every day and every night I seemed to hear your father's voice commanding me afresh, and he always seemed to say, 'Find Rae—Find Rae.'"

"And you have found me, Bob."

"Yes, I have, and I am delighted."

"It is all so like a dream. I know I should thank you, but words will not come. I have tried over and over again to thank you, but I have been so nervous and shy that I could not speak. Then I thought you were avoiding me because you were ashamed of me."

"Don't worry yourself, Rae. Why should I be ashamed of you? I'm proud of you, and I'm so sorry if I have appeared cruel. I am only a bushman, and you must excuse me if I have been quiet. But I did long to find you, and—are you glad that I did find you?"

"So glad, Bob. I feel safe when you are near, and I want you to tell me what I ought to do."

Surely it is time I tried to do something for myself."

"Well, if you will allow me I will be only too pleased to help you with your future plans."

"I hate to think that you are going away. Must you go?"

"There is no compulsion, but I am feeling very tired, and a good long holiday is what I need."

"Will you be away long?"

"I really cannot say. I was thinking of going abroad for a couple of years."

Rae was disappointed, and looked towards the ground.

"I wish you wouldn't go," she said.

There was a little quivering in her voice which seemed to express herself more than her words. Bob looked at her tenderly and placed his hand on hers. He had suddenly become bold.

"Will you come with me?" he asked.

"However could I do that?"

Bob held her hand more closely and she looked up at him.

"Rae, will you let me tell you something? Your father was my chum and the best chum I have ever had. I loved him, but I loved his little daughter far more. Your father commanded me to find Rae. I tried so hard to find her, because I loved her. I loved you as a little girl, but I love you far more now you are grown up. Rae, will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

"Oh, Bob!"

Rae could say no more. Tears came to her eyes, but they were tears of happiness. Bob looked into her sweet little face and understood. The next moment his strong arms encircled her, and he held her tightly. They cared not now who saw them. Bob had found his little maid, and she was going

to be his wife. Thus it was that Rae's heart and Bob's heart both found peace, but they were both late for dinner.

CHAPTER XXXIII WEDDING BELLS

It was a great day for Moolooloo. Decorations were along the wide verandas. Flags were flapping and frightening every horse and mule that came near. All the boundary riders and station hands for miles around had come into the homestead. Although Mr. Brodie was sitting on the veranda and looking down upon the station buildings and the yards, yet the men stood about in groups. There was to be no work that day. All were in holiday mood because it was Bob Wright's wedding day. Rae and Bob had talked it all over with their friends and agreed that the marriage should take place near the scenes of their remarkable struggles. Both Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell insisted that the event should take place at Moolooloo homestead. Arrangements were quickly made and the day arrived.

Never before had a marriage been celebrated at Moolooloo. Some of the men had never seen a wedding, so the event was going to be one of the great landmarks in the history of the station.

Bob Wright came down to the store to have a chat with Mr. Maxwell and Roy. A number of men standing by gave him a rousing cheer. It was his wedding day, and why shouldn't they cheer him. They had changed their attitude towards him. He was no longer regarded as Cranky Wright, but was the hero of the hour. The story of how the mysterious Afghan had won his way through

had been told and retold around the camp fires. The man who could stick to his mates and search for them for so many weary years was worth cheering. He was a dinkum Anzac, and whether the boss liked it or not, the men were determined to take a holiday in his honour.

Never had so many cars been seen about the homestead. Friends from far distant stations were present. Roy and Jim had returned from Melbourne. Mr. Maxwell made a capable general, and had all arrangements well in hand.

The blacks had sent out mulga wires, and for days the natives had been gathering. Their instinct told them that the white men were preparing for a big dinner. Several fat bullocks were going to be killed—and fat sheep, and fowls, and turkeys. The white men could not eat it all, and the dark men knew that Maxwell never forgot the blacks. Besides, Bob Wright was another favourite. They always trusted Bob for he treated them well. His marriage was certainly popular. Both whites and blacks agreed that he deserved the girl he had fought so hard for.

The minister had arrived, and who should he be but Mr. Bruce who once visited Wright during his lonely days at the old camp. Bob had searched him out and found him in Adelaide, where he was the pastor of a large church. Very cheerfully he had consented to travel north and celebrate the marriage. All the way up he had been meeting old friends and identifying old haunts. It was indeed a joy for him to feel again the spell of the inland.

Rae had paid a brief visit to Port Augusta. She had travelled in a real train and seen the great sea. She had suddenly come into a new world where there were crowds and crowds of people she didn't

know. Yet she was told that Port Augusta was a very small place. What would she say when she actually saw Adelaide?

The big station bell was ringing. Never had it rung so furiously before. The drawing-room was crowded, and many had to stand outside and along the veranda. Bob Wright stood with Roy, his best man. Moments seemed like hours. To him it was worse than facing the German guns or the Turkish trenches. Yes, he was really nervous and there was no good of him denying it.

At last Rae appeared. Many tried to stand on their tiptoes and peep over the ones in front. Through the window the sun was shining, and the light seemed to stream down upon the happy couple. Never had the old drawing-room looked so well. It was the greatest day Moolooloo had ever had.

The service commenced and every sound and voice was still save that of Mr. Bruce. All too soon came the solemn Benediction, and amid general rejoicing the entire party sat down to a long table which extended the full length of the homestead veranda.

Although this wedding was celebrated in the far interior, yet nothing was lacking. Everything was of the best from the poultry to the speeches. In fact there was such an array of speakers that the time limit had to be applied so that the happy couple could move away by the time appointed.

At last all was ready for the departure. Jim was to drive the car for the first stage. Then Bob and his young wife would travel in his own car right on to Adelaide—and to Melbourne—and to Sydney. It was a day of glorious sunshine, and the car was soon loaded with bags, old boots and good things, while the outside was covered with ribbons and placards. The station boys stood round with loaded guns, and as the engine started up and the wheels

moved round a volley rang out in farewell, silencing for a moment the cheers of the others. Farther along the track the blacks had formed themselves up as a guard of honour, and as the car speeded through them the boys yelled their greetings and good wishes.

Meanwhile Bob and Rae held each other closely, and as the cheering died away in the distance Rae looked into her husband's face and smiled.

"Do you remember the days when you used to teach me, Bob?"

"I do, Rae." Could I ever forget them?"

"Well, Bob, my dear, I want you to teach me again. I have so much to learn. I want you to teach me now, and I will promise not to run away."

"Yes, my darling, I will teach you, and I never want you to run away. We are partners now and for ever."

They held each other more closely, and the super-six speeded on through the mulga.

THE END

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

A full-length "Bull-Dog Drummond" Novel by "SAPPER"

Author of *Bull-Dog Drummond*, *The Black Gang*, etc.

Carl Petersen was dead and the account between him and Bull-Dog Drummond appeared settled, but an important factor was missing from the balance sheet—Irma, Petersen's lovely relict! Irma's desire for vengeance bordered on madness, but her wits were sharp, and no crude methods would satisfy her. Bull-Dog Drummond and the lovely Irma met, and Bull-Dog Drummond did, indeed, realise that "the female of the species is more deadly than the male."

THE RUNAGATES CLUB

By JOHN BUCHAN

Author of *Witch Wood*, *The Dancing Floor*, etc.

Mr. Buchan's new volume is a record of the stories told at the Runagates Club, a group of fifteen men who had queer tasks during the War. Among the members are old friends like Richard Hannay, Lord Lamancha, and Sandy Arbuthnot. One or two of the chapters deal with War experiences, but the collection covers a wide area, both geographical and spiritual. All are stories of adventure.

ELIZA FOR COMMON

By O. DOUGLAS

Author of *Penny Plain*, *Pink Sugar*, etc.

O. Douglas's new novel, "Eliza for Common," is, like her other books, a story of modern Scottish life. It is a study in temperament—of a girl who begins with revolt against her environment and ends by the appreciation and the acceptance of it which come from increased wisdom and humanity. The story is laid in Scotland, both city and country, in Oxford, and in London, and a host of delightful characters fill the different stages.

AGAIN SANDERS

By EDGAR WALLACE

Author of *Again the Three*, *The Crimson Circle*, etc.

Commissioner Sanders, "dear old Captain" Hamilton, and the one and only "Bones"—here they are again; just as perfectly good-humoured as ever when all's well, and just as terrifyingly efficient as ever when His Britannic Majesty's prestige in their particular corner of his African domain demands it. Sanders is the stuff of which heroes and empires are made. So, for that matter, is friend "Bones," though he doesn't know it. And it is impossible not to be thrilled by Edgar Wallace.

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

DAVID AND DIANA

By CECIL ROBERTS

Author of Sagusto, Little Mrs. Manington, etc.

Mr. Cecil Roberts, in his new novel, has come home, and has written a great London novel, in which he tells the very human story of a young girl from the provinces and her London lover. Their romance is symbolised by two statues, that of "Diana" in Hyde Park, and of "David" in Grosvenor Place. In such a setting delightful Diana and young David work out, through disastrous events, their story amid the bricks of London. It would not be Mr. Cecil Roberts if he did not carry his readers abroad once, and so the author of "Scissors" and "Sails of Sunset" shows us Diana on the Riviera for a brief time, a setting that calls forth the colour and descriptive power which has made his work famous. "David and Diana" is a delectable story of London lovers.

THE FORTUNATE WAYFARER

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Author of Miss Brown of X.Y.O., The Light Beyond, etc.

Crossing the cobbled street of a cathedral town, Martin Barnes, commercial traveller, is invited to enter an impressive dwelling with a secluded air, whose owner, Lord Ardrington, believing himself at the point of death, presents this fortunate wayfarer with notes to the value of £80,000. Ardrington, however, recovers, and Barnes, seeking him out at Ardrington Park to refund the money, is confronted with a twelve-foot spiked wall. What is it that inspires Ardrington with such terror? Why does he urge Barnes to marry Laurita, Ardrington's lovely South American step-daughter? And how does the timid ex-commercial traveller deport himself when confronted with Laurita's villainous father, Victor Porle? To answer these questions would be to reveal the plot of one of the most ingenious of mysteries which the prince of storytellers has ever written.

PERISHABLE GOODS

By DORNFORD YATES

Author of Blind Corner, etc.

Mr. Dornford Yates has found further adventure for the protagonists of his brilliantly successful novel, "Blind Corner." Because Mansel, Hanbury and Chandos had made a fortune, "Rose" Noble had lost one. He returned to the charge in a letter addressed to Mansel: "The stolen goods will be returned on the receipt of five hundred thousand pounds. . . . No time should be lost, for the goods are

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

perishable." The "goods" are Mansel's beloved friend Adele Pleydell, between whom and Mansel "there never was so gentle a relation." The three friends, and Tester, the Sealyham, journey to Carinthia where Adele is imprisoned in the almost impregnable Castle of Garth. The tense, grim struggle that was waged in and around the castle was to the death; and when "Rose" fell, shot through the head, Mansel, his task accomplished, lay close to death upon the bed of kings.

THE CROUCHING BEAST

A "Clubfoot" Novel by VALENTINE WILLIAMS

Author of The Eye in Attendance, Mr. Ramosi, etc.

The Man with the Clubfoot makes a sensational re-entry upon the stage of fiction. The scene is pre-war Germany; the period, those hot summer weeks of 1914 immediately preceding the clash of arms. In the shadow of the glittering panoply of military Prussia lurks a dim figure, awe-inspiring, ruthless, all-powerful, guarding the secret of the War Party's coming bid for world dominion, ready to pounce upon and destroy those who would reveal the truth to Europe sunk in peace. Of the strange adventure that came to Olivia Dunbar one summer night in the Kommandanten-Haus at Schlitz, and of the merciless march of events that drew her into the long duel of wits between the British Secret Service and the Kaiser's Master Spy, hobbling, grim and forbidding, among the brilliant figures of the Imperial Court, the story tells, and its breathless unfolding is interwoven with the charming romance of a British ex-officer who sought and won rehabilitation in the Secret Service of his country.

SURRENDER

By J. C. SNAITH

Author of Thus Far, Time and Tide, etc.

Two men—one English, one American—desert from the French Foreign Legion. They escape into the African desert. After years of terrible hardship and incredible adventure in places where no white man has trod, they reach Cairo, and thence return to the civilisation of the West. Each owes his life over and over again to the exercise of the other's will. But a woman of great beauty and magnetic personality enters the life of both. She is already pledged to the one, but the other learns that she is vital to his existence. The problem of their future seems insoluble; and it finally involves an act of supreme self-sacrifice on the part of the one which the other is forced to accept.

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

LIFE STEPS IN

By RUBY M. AYRES

Author of Broken, The Luckiest Lady, etc.

When selfish Mollie Hambledon came home from Rhodesia, she invited her old school friend, Diana, to play nurse to Mollie's lame child, "the Little General." Then Anthony Hambledon came back too. Anthony and Ana fight against their love beneath the watchful eye of the philandering Mollie, who eventually deserts Anthony, leaving him free. And down to the sea goes Ana, with her friend Jessica and "the Little General"—to await Anthony's coming. And once more Life steps in. . . . Ruby M. Ayres has written nothing finer than this poignant story of a woman's happiness, snatched away in the moment of fulfilment.

THE FLUTES OF SHANGHAI

By LOUISE JORDAN MILN

Author of In a Shantung Garden, Ruben and Ivy Sen, etc.

This is Mrs. Miln's new novel of the real China. John Cadell was a power in Shanghai, a power in China, whose people he understood and loved. In troubled 1927, with the loyal help of Hing Mee-yin, the flute-girl of the Flutes of Shanghai, he dared death at Chinese hands and calumny from European tongues, for the ultimate benefit of both the White and the Yellow races, and risked all to save the posthumous honour of his friend. Ruth Blake travels, with her rich aunt, to China, and helps to unravel the tangled skein and finds her own happiness. Not a laboured account of international differences—a story of human hearts; not a historical treatise, yet it throws a powerful searchlight on China's present poignant dilemma and on the consequent peril to British interests in China.

ROOFS OFF

By RICHMAL CROMPTON

Author of The Wildings, The Thorn Bush, etc.

Richmal Crompton in her new novel takes the roofs off houses—Rosslyn, and Sunnymede, Mentone, The Limes, Balmoral, Glen House, Hess Bank, The Little House, The Beeches, and The Hall—and looks at the folk inside, with ruthless clarity, verity and authenticity, and tells their story. It is a new idea for a novel, and the kind of idea that can only be turned into a big novel—and this is a big novel—by an artist with the sheer ability and skill of craftsmanship of the author of "Millicent Dorrington."

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

ACCESSORY AFTER THE FACT

By MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

Author of The Gift in the Gauntlet, The Spell of Sarnia, etc.

Gilda Franklin, attractive and financially independent, had led the comfortable, care-free life of the English professional classes until the day when, lonely and disappointed, she crossed from Lausanne to Evian, on her way to the Green Lake. From that moment, adventures thronged her. The mysterious red-headed man with the heavy bag, who turned out to be the chauffeur at the Hotel du Lac, first aroused her attention. That same evening, when the valley thrilled to the news of the murder on the lonely Pass, and she found to her horror that she had seen the victim's face before, she realised that no course was open to her but to keep her knowledge secret, and remain wholly outside the police investigations. But fate decreed otherwise, and her accidental discovery of the hidden ashes on the mountain-side had unforeseen and startling results.

JUGGERNAUT

By ALICE CAMPBELL

"Juggernaut," by Alice Campbell, is a most remarkable first novel. The story deals with the strange experiences of a nurse employed by an English family living in the South of France, and, although it reaches such dramatic intensity, the logical procession of incidents, in a setting outwardly normal, lends it an air of reality which is so often missing in the realm of books. It is this attribute, coupled with the author's ability to make her characters live the atmosphere which she infuses into her work, which will place "Juggernaut" and Alice Campbell in very high company in their first season.

ONE OF THE CHORUS

By BERTA RUCK

Author of Her Pirate Partner, The Mind of a Minx, etc.

Here is a new romance by Berta Ruck as fresh and scintillating as its title. It is the story of one Melody Wynne, a chorus dancer of good family, and with a temperament which causes her to treat the whole of life as a joy-ride or escapade. When her devoted lover, Keith Cartwright, proposes to her, she tosses up as to whether she shall marry him and go off to India, or continue her profession. The job wins, but only for the time being, and the end of the story shows why it was that Love, this time, got the better of Profession.

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

THE GOLDEN ROOF

An Historical Novel by MARJORIE BOWEN

Author of The Pagoda, The Countess Fanny, etc.

The title is taken from the Golden Roof (of copper tiles, gilded) on the Imperial Palace at Innsbrück, one of the few tangible memorials left of the greatness of Maximilian I of Habsburg, 1459-1519, Holy Roman Emperor, who dreamed once to roof the whole world with the gold of his achievements. The characters in the tale are all historic, the Emperor himself, Ludovico Sforza, Louis XII of France, Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII of England, Charles Egmont, Duke of Guelders, and the scene is the Tyrol, Vienna, Auysburg, Flanders, Guelders, and France. The love interest is provided by the love story of Maximilian himself with his first wife, Mary of Burgundy.

A TALE THAT IS TOLD

By S. L. BENSUSAN

Author of A Countryside Chronicle, etc.

In "A Tale That is Told" S. L. Bensusan presents his first novel, after more than thirty years of literary activity in many parts of the world in the service of nearly all the leading papers. The story is written in part round the marshlands of the East Coast, and for the rest is laid in the London of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. The book introduces many of the country types that have appeared in the author's sketches of East Anglia, books like "Village Idylls" and "A Countryside Chronicle," that have achieved noteworthy success.

AS A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

A Dr. Thorndyke Novel by R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

Author of The Red Thumb Mark, A Certain Dr. Thorndyke, etc.

This latest of all stories of Thorndyke, the ace of detectives, has an added interest in that the author deals with a subject usually avoided in his previous works—the crime of the poisoner. It opens with the arrival home of Barbara Monkhouse, who has been summoned by a telegram and arrives to find her husband dead. Dr. Thorndyke is commissioned to investigate the case, and the story is then occupied with the gradual emergence of the obscure and contradictory evidence, the real meaning of which no one but Thorndyke grasps. Just when it has been decided that the mystery will have to be given up as insoluble, Thorndyke comes suddenly into the open with a complete case for a prosecution.

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

THE JUDAS TREE

By ALMEY ST. JOHN ADCOCK

Author of Master Where He Will, etc.

Miss Almey St. John Adcock has captured the eye of every discerning critic of the younger school of novelists. Her new book, like the last, "Master Where He Will," has for a setting the cherry orchards, beech woods and chalky uplands of South Buckinghamshire.

THE FOREIGNER

By JOHN TRAVERS (Mrs. G. H. Bell)

Author of Safe Conduct, etc.

Here is a great historical novel of India—of George Thomas who lived in days when there was chaos in India, and war in Europe, when both Mohammedan and Hindu chiefs employed European officers to train and command troops.

THE MYSTERY MAKER

By "SEAMARK"

Author of The Master Mystery, The Man They Couldn't Arrest, etc.

Colonel John Stayne, after gaining a remarkable reputation in the Secret Service, suddenly resigns his position. But from time to time—though always vaguely on the outskirts—this discredited Secret Service emissary is heard of in connection with some great crime. But never did he come up against a harder bunch of crooks than those implicated in the theft of the Demorval diamonds.

TIGER CLAWS

By FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of The Red Ledger, Running Special, etc.

Packard, king of yarn-spinners of the Underworld, goes himself one better in "Tiger Claws." Sailing on their trading schooner, the *Malola*, in the Far East, Keith and Alan Wharton are decoyed ashore by a signal fire on a small and unknown island, and are there treacherously attacked in the darkness by four men. Alan and two native members of the crew are murdered, and Keith is left for dead. He recovers and finds on the island the murdered body of an old man. The only clue to the mystery is a page in this man's diary, in which it is stated that the four men have taken from him "the mahogany box." With the co-operation of "Canary Jim" (who is not what he seems), Keith assumes the character of "Rookie Dyke," an Underworld lag, and starts to run down the four cutthroats. The rest of the story deals with the mysterious mahogany box, a mysterious girl, and a mysterious and elusive criminal figure in the Underworld—and ends with the solution of all the mysteries.

SOME OF HODDER & STOUGHTON'S NEW NOVELS

THE SIX PROUD WALKERS

By FRANCIS BEEDING

Author of The House of Dr. Edwardes, The Seven Sleepers, etc.

As a compendium of the strangest mysteries and the finest thrills nothing more engrossing than "The Six Proud Walkers" has arrived since John Buchan's "Greenmantle." This is an absolutely up-to-date romance of love and adventure, concerned with celebrities of European reputation, and with immediate political situations. It abounds in amazing perils and hair-breadth escapes, without overstepping the bounds of possibility.

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

By LOUIS TRACY

Author of One Girl in a Million, etc.

Had details concerning the disappearance of Lady Alisia, the finding of her body near the sinister house at Putney and the real identity of "Colonel Montgomery" reached the public, other lives, as innocent as that of the "criminal," would have been wrecked beyond repair.

TIDE OF EMPIRE

A Novel of the Gold Camps by PETER B. KYNE

Author of Kindred of the Dust, etc.

The creator of "Cappy Ricks" gives us another superb story—this time a romance of early California which includes a glowing, thoroughly realistic picture of the famous gold rush of '49. Dermot D'Arcy, adventurous and Irish, Josepha Guerrero, a Spanish señorita, and Pathfinder, the thoroughbred, figure chiefly in this tale of the lawless, perilous existence in the gold camps and of the courage brought by a man to a love always in danger.

STONE BLUNTS SCISSORS

By GERARD FAIRLIE

Author of The Man Who Laughed, Scissors Cut Paper, etc.

Passing through Paris on his way home from his travels, Bill Wilson heard a familiar, high-pitched laugh, and found himself face to face with Vic Caryll, gayer and thirstier than ever, and with something, all the same, on his mind. So Wilson got no further than Paris—for the moment. Somebody with a predilection for pale green notepaper had abducted three rich girls, one of them an American, and was keeping the Paris Sureté fully occupied. And Caryll, who had good reason to suspect that it was his old friend Derek Sinclair with whom they were competing again, was hand-in-glove with the Paris Sureté, a situation, it goes without saying, not without its humours.

