

THE LOST EXPLORERS

ALEXANDER MACDONALD



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The Lost Explorers: A Story of the Trackless Desert**

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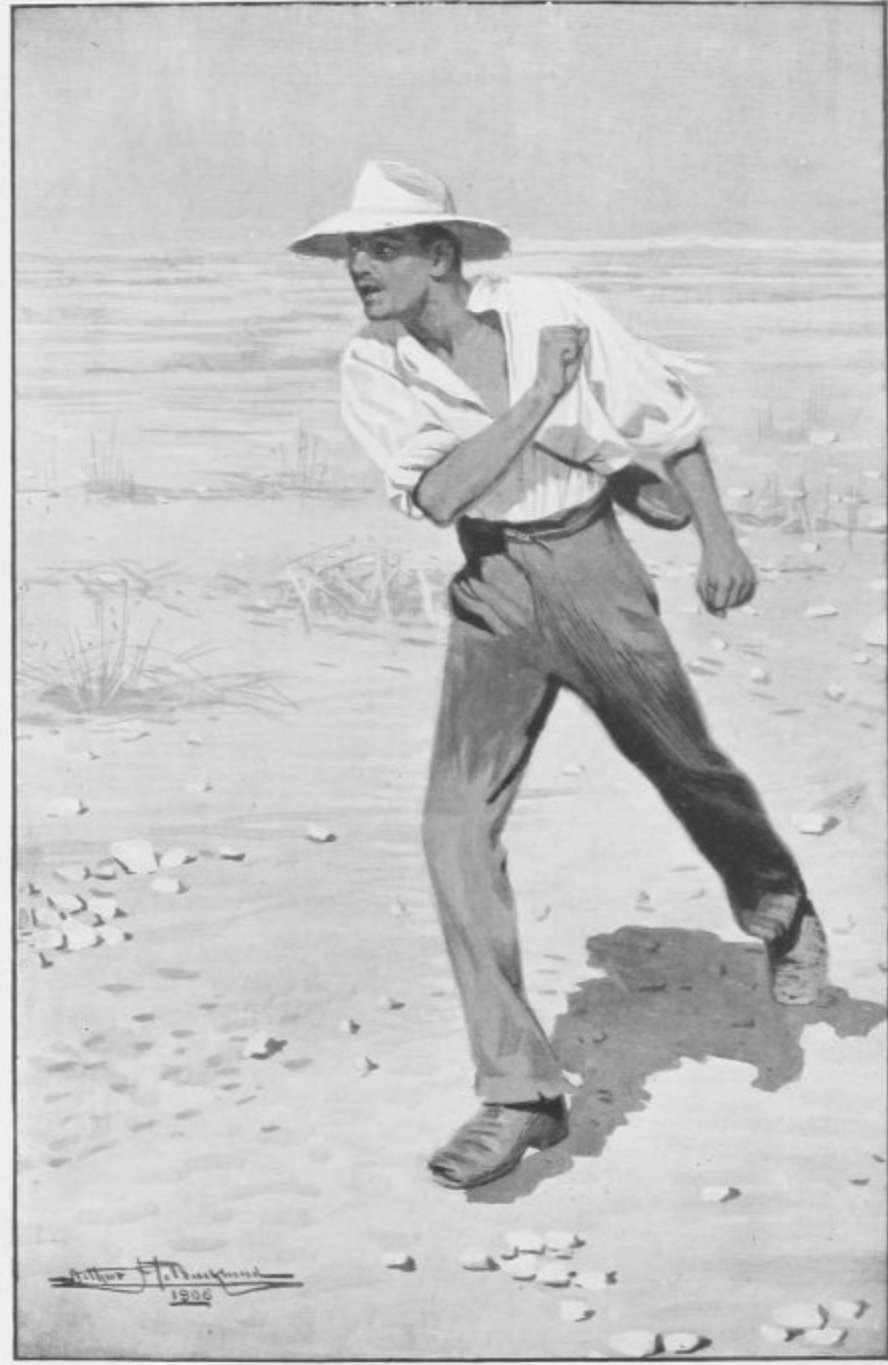
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EXPLORERS: A STORY OF THE TRACKLESS DESERT ***

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Obvious typographic errors have been corrected.

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**"AND ALL THIS TIME THE HAPPY-GO-LUCKY SHADOW WAS
PLUGGING ALONG OVER THE THIRSTY DESERT SANDS"**

THE LOST EXPLORERS

A STORY OF THE TRACKLESS DESERT

BY

ALEXANDER MACDONALD

F.R.G.S., F.R.S.G.S., F.R.C.I.

Author of

“In Search of El Dorado”

“The Trail of the Pioneer”

“Pioneering in Klondike”

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR H. BUCKLAND

BLACKIE AND SON LIMITED

LONDON GLASGOW DUBLIN BOMBAY

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DEDICATED TO

B. B.

PREFACE

In this work I have endeavoured to portray a phase of life in a far-away land, a land concerning which we have only too little knowledge at the present time, though it is one of our Empire's greatest colonies. I am aware that to make a book composed largely of real happenings—especially when one writes for the youth of the nation—is a somewhat unusual thing to do. In *The Lost Explorers* I have given a tale of gold-digging and of exploration—a tale, for the most part, of events that have actually happened. My characters are all drawn—however crudely—from life; my descriptions are those of one who has seen and felt in a similar environment. My boys in the story were real boys, and they dared and suffered and accomplished together. As for Mackay, he is still a power in the land, ready and willing always, as he said to his young companions, "to shed the light of his great knowledge abroad for the benefit of mankind in general".

The last few chapters of the book are based on an explorer's natural deductions. We all, who have forced a painful path over Central Australia's arid sands, hope—ay, believe—in the existence of a wonderful region in the vague mists of the Never Never Land. Perhaps the very strenuousness of the wish brings about the belief. Who can say? My descriptions of the strange aborigines beyond the mystic mountains are not altogether fanciful. In my own wanderings I have encountered more than one tribe whose mental development was far in advance of that usually credited to the untutored savage of the great Island Continent. What I have written, I have written faithfully, and to the best of my ability. If *The Lost Explorers* gives pleasure to my readers, I shall indeed be more than content.

ALEXANDER MACDONALD.

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THE LOST EXPLORERS

CHAPTER I

A Momentous Decision

"I'm full up of this ceaseless grind, Jack," suddenly broke out Robert Wentworth, a tall, slenderly built young man of about eighteen years of age, throwing down the paper he had been reading with unnecessary energy.

Jack Armstrong aroused himself from a reverie, and looked up with an amused gleam in his grey eyes. He was a medium-sized, squarely built youth about two years the junior of the first speaker.

"I believe I have heard you say that before, Bob," he said; "but all the same you echo my sentiments exactly. Still, what can we do? Our munificent salaries do little more than pay for our board in these digs"—he waved his hand comprehensively around the little room which they shared together—"and consequently we haven't saved enough to buy our steam yacht yet!" He laughed with affected cheerfulness.

Wentworth's strong, studious-looking face clouded momentarily.

"That's all very well, Jack," he answered severely; "but you know that there is little chance of our present positions improving to any extent. Engineering is good enough for the few; but I can plainly see that life is too short for us to make a fortune at the game. The fact is," he added, in a more moderate tone, "this country is too crowded for us, and too old. Everything is standardized so accurately that we are little more than machines; and we must exist on our paltry pittance, seeing nothing but grime and smoke and rain and fogs, until we become old and brain-sodden, with never a hope beyond the morrow. No, I am tired of it—absolutely full up of it." He picked up the discarded paper once more, and directed Armstrong's attention to a paragraph under the heading of General News, and this was what the younger man read—

"Mr. James Mackay, who was the only survivor of the ill-fated Bentley Exploring Expedition in Central Australia, arrived in the city last night, and is staying at the Central Hotel. It will be remembered that Mr. Bentley's

party was massacred by the blacks some months ago, the only man escaping being Mr. Mackay, chief bushman to the expedition, who, fortunately, was not with the others when they were attacked. It is generally supposed that the unknown tracks in Western and Central Australia hold vast treasure of gold and gems in their keeping, and they provide the incentive which sends the explorer across these trackless wastes."

"So that's the country you would like to go to, Bob," he said quizzically, "where explorers get killed by the natives?"

"Not exactly," replied Wentworth; "but it attracts me all the same. My only uncle went out to Australia about ten years ago, and we never heard of him again; I suppose that has given me an interest in the country, for I remember him well as one of the finest men one could wish to meet. Anyhow, there can be no gain without risk, Jack, and I have often thought of trying my luck at the goldfields in Australia, though I don't suppose there can be much danger from the natives where they are."

"But there is time enough yet," ventured Armstrong. "We are not so very old——"

"All the more reason," returned his companion, quickly, "that we should decide on our future while our brains are fresh. If we continue on in the same groove here, we'll get so accustomed to it that we won't want to leave it. No, Jack, I am in earnest. I have decided to get out of it."

"You can't get out of it without me, Bob," said Armstrong, quietly. "You know I go with you. We haven't been chums these two years for nothing. And," he added proudly, "I am as strong as most men, and able to take care of myself in any part of the world."

Wentworth laughed grimly. "We'll face it together, Jack," said he.

"And we'll carve our way in it successfully, too," cried the boy, enthusiastically, now completely won over. "Hurrah for Australia, the land of gold!"

They arose and clasped hands, Wentworth's face expressing determined resolve, Armstrong's shining with the light of eagerness and hope.

Robert Wentworth and Jack Armstrong were chums in the truest sense of the word. They had been attracted to each other from their first day of meeting, when Armstrong, whose father had just died leaving him an orphan, homeless and well-nigh penniless, arrived at the Clyde Engineering Works, to take up the post secured for him by a thoughtful friend who understood the boy's independent spirit. Wentworth had by this time served a year at his profession, but had made few friends, being too reserved and distant by nature to please the other apprentices; indeed, these unthinking, though well-meaning, individuals had grown inclined to misconstrue his quiet demeanour, until they got a rude awakening. A few of the rowdier spirits had surrounded Armstrong during the luncheon hour of his first day among them, and were endeavouring to get as much fun as they could at the new-comer's expense; and he, poor fellow, fresh from his sad bereavement, was in no mood to appreciate their witticisms.

"Can't you let the youngster alone?" said Wentworth, approaching the group.

They turned in amazement at his interruption; and one of them, a thick-set, pugnacious lad, inquired contemptuously, if irrelevantly—

"Well, and what could you do, anyhow, Mr. Philosopher? I didn't think you would care to risk a fight."

"Didn't you?" came the cool response, as the young engineer calmly doffed his coat. "You will think differently in a few minutes."

And when he had polished off his antagonist in a scientific manner that delighted the hearts of the beholders, even the defeated champion could not forbear his tribute.

"You are too much for me, Wentworth," he said feelingly, when he had recovered himself. "But I think it was mighty mean of you deceiving us so long."

After that Wentworth and Armstrong were always together; a bond of sympathy had sprung up between them, and before long they were sharing the same room, and were known as David and Jonathan by their engineering associates. Wentworth's history was none of the brightest. His father had been a sea captain, and though ten years had elapsed since he and

his ship had gone to the bottom in the China seas, Bob's memory easily carried him back to their last parting; and he recalled how, childlike, he had volunteered to take care of his mother until the captain came back—and he never came back. The widowed mother, left with her two children—Bob, and his sister Lucy, two years younger than himself—knowing how the roaming nature of the father had been repeated in the son, sought a home as far away from the sea as possible, and did her utmost on the scanty income left her to give them both the best of education. But Bob, old beyond his years, knew more of his mother's struggle than she guessed, and at fourteen he quietly seized an opportunity that offered, and apprenticed himself to the well-known firm of engineers already mentioned—and told his mother afterwards. And the discontent which he felt with his somewhat grimy surroundings, though hidden from his mother and sister, was often and often poured into the ears of his companion, whose sympathy was ever ready and sincere, and found culmination in the expression which opens this chapter.

And now that they had decided on a definite plan of action, they lost no time in carrying it into effect. So, a few days later, having called on their employer and explained their reasons for leaving his service, they directed their steps towards a general shipping office in order to procure full information concerning the vessels and routes of sailing to Australia.

When they entered the doorway there were no intending voyagers engaging the attention of the clerk; but while Wentworth was making inquiries, some one entered and stood a little way behind the pair, and beguiled his time while he waited by whistling, most horribly out of tune, that familiar ballad, "Home, Sweet Home!"

"You can go to Australia by P. and O. or Orient Line, *via* the Suez Canal," the clerk reeled off glibly. "Or you may avoid the heat of the Red Sea by travelling round the Cape in a Shaw Savill, or New Zealand Shipping Company's boat. To what port do you wish to sail?"

"I think," said Bob, after a hurried consultation with Armstrong, "I think the port nearest the goldfields."

"That will be Melbourne," said the spruce shipping clerk, after some consideration. "Melbourne is the port for Ballarat."

"Go awa' and bile your held or study geography," came a gruff voice from behind. "You're an old fossil, you are, or you would ken that the laddies mean Western Australia. Ballarat has seen its day, but the West is still a land o' promise."

The two boys turned abruptly, while the clerk endeavoured to cough down his discomfiture. They saw beside them a burly middle-aged man with a deeply bronzed face, over which the shadow of a smile was stealing. Even at that moment, as they admitted afterwards, they both thought they had never seen a more kindly countenance, in spite of the grim lines around the mouth, which were only half concealed by a spiky red moustache. But immediately the interrupter saw the elder lad's face he started back as if shot, and a tremor seemed to run through his stalwart frame. "As like as twa peas," he muttered hoarsely, and only Armstrong, who was close beside him, heard the words.

"And have ye decided to go out to Australia, my lads?" he inquired kindly, after a moment's pause. "Now, dinna get your backs up," he reproved mildly, as Wentworth seemed about to resent his interference, "I like you the better for your independence, but Australia's a place that is no very weel kent even at this period o' civilization, and maist certainly ye'll get nae reliable information from that wooden-headed mummy—ye'll pardon the gentle inseasonation," he said, with elaborate politeness, nodding to his victim behind the desk. "Now, I should ken Australia better than maist men," he continued, "an' it's my weakness that I should wish to shed my information abroad for the benefit o' mankind in general, but mair particularly"—here he laid a hand on each of the young men's shoulders—"would I like to assist young laddies like yoursels wha are about to venture on so long a journey."

"We are obliged to you, sir," said Wentworth, gravely and distantly. "We certainly should like to know something of Australia."

"We would, indeed," supplemented Armstrong, impulsively holding out his hand.

The brawny Scot returned the grip; then, addressing himself more directly to Wentworth, said—

"I can see, my lad, that your head's screwed on the richt way, and I admire you for it; but you're a vera bad judge o' character, I'm thinkin', if ye canna distinguish between the spontaneous flow o' the milk o' human kindness, and the fause remarks o' an interested indiveedual. My name is Mackay," he concluded with dignity, "Big Mackay they call me in Australia." He paused, and gazed searchingly at Wentworth. "Now," he added, and strangely enough there was no trace of the Doric in his language, "you may come and lunch with me at the Central if you wish, and I'll tell you about Australia, and if you prefer otherwise, why, there's no harm done."

He wheeled quickly and strode to the door, but the boys were by a common impulse at his side before he was half a dozen yards down the street.

"I am sorry if I appeared to doubt your good intentions, Mr. Mackay," said Wentworth, "but we are ignorant of the bigger world which you know so well, and kindnesses from strangers have not often come our way. But we have heard of you, sir; why, I believe it was through reading of you in the *Herald* some days ago that we decided to go to Australia."

The big man laughed good-naturedly. "You were quite right, my boy," said he, "but you may ken me better in future. It's no' so long since I was young mysel'," he concluded with a sigh.

By this time they were entering the hotel, and the boys were much impressed to observe the many tributes of respect which greeted their guide. Evidently his strange personality had become well known during his brief sojourn in the land of his fathers. Soon they were seated in the dining-room at a table conveniently remote from the others, and before the meal was finished Mackay was in possession of the lads' brief histories, and had been informed of their uncontrollable longing to get away to a new country.

"And your uncle went oot to Australia ten years ago?" he repeated musingly, when Wentworth told him his story. "Well, well, Australia is a big country, and it's no likely ye'll meet him there. Why canna ye content yersel's where ye are?" he demanded brusquely.

"We can never hope for much if we remain here," argued Wentworth. "And we should like to have a chance——"

"Just so," gravely said Mackay, "just so, my young shavers. Well, I can tell ye this, some folk can do well in any part o' this wee planet, and others—and they are in the majority—are never much good. Energy and enterprise are what is wanted, and nae whining after hame——"

"I thought," interjected Armstrong, slyly, "that I heard you whistling 'Home, Sweet Home!' in the shipping office?"

Mackay beamed. "It's very kind of ye to say so," he replied. "Maist o' my acquaintances asseverate that my whistle is like a deein' dug's lament, an' no fit to be translated into any tune whatsoever. But, all the same, Jack, my man, that's a tune I can only whistle when I am at hame; it makes me think things are no' as meeserable as they seem. Why, you young scamps, a man should be at hame anywhere. As for me I'm maist at hame when I'm awa' from hame, which is what I call a paradoxical statement o' fact for ye to moralize on. Many years ago," he went on, "I sailed oot o' the Clyde as chief engineer on one o' the finest boats that was ever launched, but when I got to Australia and fell in touch wi' Bentley's exploring expedition, my good resolutions for a quiet ordinar' existence squelched oot o' me like the wind frae a punctured bicycle tyre. 'I want ye, Mac,' said Bentley, 'to cross the Never Never wi' me.' He had another rusty-heided Scotsman in his company, an auld friend o' mine, an' I said, 'Well, if it's only to keep that gorilla-faced Pharisee oot o' mischief, I'll come.' An'—an' I went, an' I've been living like an aboriginal ever since; an' now that I've come back to look at my ain country, I feel like a pelican in the wilderness. I came awa' to try and forget about things an'—an' it's no' possible."

Mackay ceased; his eyes seemed to gaze into the distance, and his good-humoured countenance for the moment became drawn and haggard. His eager listeners too, felt the spell of his sadness, and for some minutes there was a sympathetic silence; then Armstrong spoke. "Will you tell us about it, Mr. Mackay," he asked gently, and without a word of introduction the big man began his story—

"We were three months oot on our exploring journey into Central Australia, and had come through the usual amount o' hardships—suffering from want o' water, occasional skirmishes wi' the niggers, and other similar trifles, and at this time the Chief was considerin' that we had a good chance o' cuttin'

through a maist promisin' lookin' tract o' country which had never before been reached. As it was, we were further into the heart o' Australia than any explorer had ever penetrated, and every one o' us was fu' o' enthusiasm about our prospects, and dreamed o' findin' a new Eldorado in this far back country we were enterin' upon. But one morning, when we were east o' the 125th longitude, one of the pack camels grew obstreperous, and broke away into the bush to the nor'-east. We couldn't afford to lose the cantankerous animal; besides, he carried a fair amount o' our stores on his back. To make a long story short, I volunteered to track him up and fetch him back. 'Don't go too far, Mac,' said Bentley to me as I was starting out, 'I'm none too sure of this district, there may be natives about.'

"But what did I care about a when niggers? 'Ye needna wait for me,' I shouted back, 'I'll fetch the beastie a' richt, and cut your trail afore you've travelled a dozen miles.'" Mackay stopped and sighed deeply.

"And what happened?" asked Wentworth and Armstrong almost with one breath.

"Heaven only knows, my lads. I never saw any of the party again. I tracked up Misery—that was the camel's name—but he took me a gey long travel, and it was late at night when I started to go back, but though I pushed hard to the south'ard until well into the next day, I couldna pick up a sign o' a track. A camel's pad is no easily missed, and though the ground was more broken and hilly than usual, I felt sure I couldna have crossed their route o' march. Back I went again, examining the ground maist carefully, then a' at once I got a sair shock. I came on a soft patch o' sand, and every bit o' it was marked wi' natives' footprints. I could see the marks o' their big, flat feet everywhere round aboot, and they telt me as plainly as if I had seen the niggers themselves that they had come in from the east, and had gone back over their ain tracks within the last half-dozen hours. I needna tell ye what I feared then. Though I hadna had a drink o' water nor a bite to eat since I left the camp, a' thought o' hunger or thirst left me, as I traced the nigger tracks backwards to the west. They took me straight to our old camp where Misery had broken away, and what do you think I saw there?"

The boys shook their heads wonderingly.

"Only bones; bones, in the middle o' a lot o' ashes which were still warm, and the smell o' burnin' was like the stench o' a nigger corroboree. I turned again on their tracks. I must have been mad, for one man could do little against a tribe that had wiped out one of the finest expeditions that ever ventured into the Never Never Land, but I was desperate, and I tracked the skunks like a bloodhound. My throat was parched, my tongue was too big for my jaws, but I felt that I would gang under wi' pleasure if I could only get my rifle sights on the brutes first. But I couldna get even that satisfaction. Before I had gone far I was stopped by a mountain that seemed to rise like a wall straight from the flats. I hadn't seen it before, so I may have followed further than I thought, or maybe the sand haze had hidden it from our view. No one has ever believed that a mountain like it exists in that country, and I'm the only white man that knows it to be there. I was too weak to climb it, and after three or four tries I sat at the bottom and just raved.

"How I returned beats me yet to understand. The water-bag on Misery's back was empty, and our last spring charted was fifty miles to westward, wi' five hundred miles beyond that again to a mining camp. I'm no navigator, only a bushman, but somehow I got back, the only survivor of the party, and I felt like a murderer comin' in alone. I was the Chief's righthand man for ten years, my lads, and a straighter or better-hearted leader never lived. Then there was my old comrade Stewart wi' the red hair, wha I used to misca' so sairly; Pioneer Bill the bushman, and young Morris the geologist—they're a' gone, and I'm the puir unfortunate that's left.... I came home here wi' the intention o' stoppin' if I could; but the bush draws me back and I must go."

"I am very, very sorry," said Wentworth, breaking the pause that followed; "I can appreciate your feelings most deeply. It must be a vast country, that Never Never Land."

"It has claimed many a victim, my boy," answered Mackay. "But Western Australia is not all the same," he hastened to add cheerfully. "Around Kalgoorlie and north into Pilbarra the richest gold mines in the world have been found, and it's the thought that there's a treasure-house o' gold and gems in the far-back land that makes explorers risk their lives in that awful desert. It's the chance o' striking Eldorado that sends us wanderers into such

out o' way corners o' the world. But I didna ask ye here to tell ye my experiences. If you have really made up your minds to go to Australia, an' I honestly believe it's the best country for any young man, I'll no' only advise you, but I'll accompany you, and I can say this, that what I dinna know about gold mining is no' worth knowing. I have never made a fortune at the game, but there's no denyin' that fortunes have been made. I've taken a fancy to you, my laddies, and I'll see that you come to no harm. If ye're short o' lucre," he continued, "I'll advance ye anything ye need."

Even Wentworth's reserve utterly broke down after this speech.

"How can we thank you for your goodness?" he said gratefully. "I for one shall be glad to go with you——"

"And I feel that I could follow you anywhere, Mr. Mackay," broke in Armstrong, eagerly.

The elder man smiled grimly. "Maybe ye'll think more seriously o' these words some day," he replied enigmatically. "Meanwhile, get awa' hame and make your arrangements without any unnecessary delay, for we must catch the P. and O. *Mongolia* at London next Friday. Like enough," he concluded, with a laugh, "we'll hae mutual cause for congratulation over our partnership." He shook hands heartily with each of the lads, and accompanying them downstairs, watched them disappear into the street.

"Poor young fellows," he said musingly, as he turned away, "I was just the same mysel' at that age, discontented, ambitious.... But the likeness canna be doubted. Ah, well, I've just done what the Chief himsel' would have done had he been here."

"Well, Jack, what do you think of him?" asked Wentworth, as he and his companion walked homewards.

"I think he is the kindest-hearted man I have ever met," was Armstrong's enthusiastic response.

"I like him, too," admitted Wentworth, "and I expect to like him more when I know him better. What a strong man he must be; why, his chest measurement must be nearly fifty!"

"Only a strong man could have endured what he has suffered, Bob," said Armstrong, "and," with boyish delight, "he must be a real beauty in a scrimmage. His wrists seemed like bars of steel."

"He just bears out my opinion," spoke Wentworth, thoughtfully, "that travel broadens the mind more than is generally allowed, and destroys all trace of parochialism in a man's nature. I don't think, for instance," he declared, "that that man would care two straws whether we were Scotch, English, or Irish; it's humanity that counts with him——"

"Please don't wander me with philosophical reasoning just now, Bob," pleaded Armstrong. "All I can say is, that I liked the man immediately I saw him, and I think we were very lucky in meeting him."

Never for a moment did these two think of drawing back from the projected journey. It was characteristic of them to accept their first decision as final, and the nearness of the day for sailing, as fixed by Mackay, in no wise appalled them. Neither of them was given to noisy exuberance.

"Environment has done it, Jack," said Wentworth, sagely. "You see we have been so much together, and have had so little time for amusement; then my temperament was always a bit studious, and, consequently, you have suffered——"

"Don't, Bob," interjected Armstrong; "you talk like an old man, and you are not nineteen yet. When we get under the sunny skies of Australia, we'll view things differently, and, who knows, we may come back with a fortune in a year or two."

"Who knows, indeed?" repeated Wentworth, absently gripping the boy's arm, and in this way they proceeded until they arrived at their little room on the top flat of No. 590, Great Southern Road.

That evening they broke the news of their early departure to their amiable landlady, Mrs. Campbell, much to that worthy woman's dismay.

"Eh, but, laddies, ye canna mean it!" she exclaimed. "Ye would gang to that awfu' country whaur the black bodies live——"

"But they are not all black, Mrs. Campbell," said Wentworth, soothingly. "In fact, the aborigines are becoming an extinct race."

"I dinna care what sort o' race they are becoming," moaned she, beginning to apply her apron to her eyes. "An' forbye, what dae ye want to gang oot there for? Ye baith are daein' sae weel in the engineerin' office, and in time ye might be managers."

"That's a period too far distant for us to calculate on, Mrs. Campbell," said Armstrong, cheerily, though he was much distressed by the good woman's genuine emotion. "And our ambitions are giving us a shove along——"

"Ambitions, ambitions," wailed poor Mrs. Campbell. "And what should ye want wi' ambitions, at your age? They are nae guid to ye; in fact it's doonricht wrang for ye to hae them; they've never brocht happiness to ony man yet!" And she rushed from the room much affected.

"She's a real good sort," said Wentworth, "but very unreasonable," with which mature reflection he reached down a copy of "Raper's Navigation" from a shelf, and began to read assiduously, while Armstrong, with a whistle of relief, started to overhaul his wardrobe in preparation for their ocean trip.

The following day was a very busy one for the boys. After packing their most necessary belongings, they called on Mr. Mackay to receive his advice as to the outfit required. That gentleman met them, genial as ever.

"Ocean travel is no the same as it used to be," said he; "an' a' you'll need is twa or three light suits for the tropics. It's no' as if you were to be months at sea," he explained, "an' you may leave your West Australian wardrobe to take care o' itself—it will no be much o' a consideration."

But he was not satisfied, nevertheless, until he went round the shops with them, and saw them fitted out with all that was needful.

"And now, my lad," he said, when they had finished, addressing himself to Wentworth, "if you'll tak' my advice, you'll gang hame and break the news as gently as ye can to your mother, for I can see ye havena telt her o' yer new plans yet. I'm a great believer in young fellows shouldering their ain responsibilities as early as possible, but ye can never get a truer friend than

yer mother, an' I hope ye'll no forget that. I'm a rough hand at preaching, being mair used wi' other sort o' language, and, and——" Here Mackay's usually eloquent verbiage failed him, and he floundered hopelessly. "Be back in good time to leave wi' me for London on Thursday morning," he finished, recovering himself quickly, and they turned to go. But Mackay suddenly seemed to remember something, and he called them back.

"I was thinkin' o' buyin' you some books to read on the ship," said he, "and I was wondering how your tastes might lie. I don't mean novels," he hastened to add, "but books that might serve as a study."

"We'll leave the choice to you, Mr. Mackay," said Wentworth, with a smile; and again they departed, yet once more they were called back. Mackay was evidently ill at ease, for he hesitated in his speech, and, if possible, his bronzed cheeks became a shade deeper in colour.

"I've arranged aboot the tickets," he said at length; "so you'll hae no need to trouble in that direction."

Without waiting for a reply he wheeled suddenly, and strode down the street, leaving the boys rooted to the spot wholly overcome by the generous speech.

"He must have guessed our one great difficulty," said Wentworth, flushing deeply. "Well, Jack, our obligations to Mr. Mackay will take some wiping out."

Later on in the evening, when the boys were talking over the events of the day in their little room, the landlady entered with a heavy parcel of books.

"A messenger has just brocht these," said she, "wi' Mr. Mackay's compliments."

"He is a gem," spoke Jack, emphatically, as he cut the string of the package, whereupon half a dozen handsome volumes were disclosed, three for Bob, and three for himself. They seized their possessions with avidity.

"'Leckie's Navigation,' 'Nautical Almanac,' and 'Burns's Poems,'" announced Wentworth, gleefully, gazing at his treasures. "Now, how could he have known that I wanted these so much?"

"'Mining Engineer's Handbook,' 'Metallurgy of Gold,' and 'Shakespeare,'" read out Jack, handling the volumes reverently. "Now, how could he have guessed our pet studies?"

"It beats me," said Bob. "I won't be surprised at anything Mackay knows after this. He is a conundrum."

"He is the decentest sort we have ever met," cried Jack, warmly.

"We agree on that," concurred Bob, gravely.

CHAPTER II

Outward Bound

The few days preceding the sailing of the *Mongolia* passed very quickly; Wentworth, accompanied by Armstrong, spent most of the time at Mrs. Wentworth's home in Lincolnshire. Strangely enough, Bob's mother did not, in any way, try to dissuade them from their journey.

"You have the roving instinct of your father, Robert," she said, with pensive calmness. "I have expected this, and can only pray that you may be kept safe in the guiding care of the All Wise Providence which watches over the wanderer on land as on sea."

But his sister had not the same restraint, and it made Armstrong's tender heart sore to witness the grief of the girl.

"You may be killed—you may both be killed," she sobbed.

"There is no fear of that, Lucy," laughed Bob.

"I'll take care of him, Miss Lucy," said Jack, hesitatingly, almost equally affected.

"Why, you are just a boy," she exclaimed, smiling at him through her tears.

"I'm only a year younger than Bob," he protested stoutly, drawing himself up to his full height of five feet seven and a half inches, and looking at her reproachfully; at which, to Jack's dismay, she gave way again to her emotion, her beautiful brown hair falling over her face like a glorious mantle.

"It's for you, too," she murmured brokenly. "Oh, Jack, you are Bob's chum, and I shall miss you too." Whereupon the usually light-hearted boy seemed to become a man at once.

"I have no other friends," he said quietly; then he stammered, "I did not think any one could miss me," he concluded, with just a trace of pathos in

his voice. And at that moment his friendship for Bob seemed to be riveted afresh, so keenly did the kindly word of sympathy from the girl appeal to his generous nature.

Prompt to the advertised hour, the P. and O. *Mongolia* cast off her moorings and steamed out of Tilbury Docks, and on the upper deck of the splendid vessel, among the assembled crowd of passengers, stood Mackay and the two youthful adventurers. They had arrived in London the night before, and had spent a very pleasant evening listening to a classic concert in the Queen's Hall which Mackay had insisted on them hearing. Bob thought their patron and friend was once more sacrificing himself to what he imagined was their particular taste; but, to his surprise, that worthy individual had taken a strong interest in the entire programme, and especially applauded the young soprano who sang so magnificently a very difficult Italian aria.

"It's no because I'm a singer mysel'," he explained apologetically, "and I dinna understan' a word o' the song, but I'm a wonderfu' lover o' guid music all the same. I think it's sort o' soothing to my mental faculties."

Jack grinned and looked incredulous, but at that moment the young lady reappeared in answer to the vociferous demand for an encore, and soon the haunting strains of "Home, Sweet Home!" filled the vast hall. Again the doubting youngster looked at his stalwart neighbour, and lo! the eyes of the ex-bushman were wet.

Now all three watched the receding shores of England with somewhat sad eyes, and when at last night had fallen, and the vessel was cautiously feeling her way towards the Bay of Biscay through a murky fog, they descended to their cabin and began to arrange their baggage and make preparations for dinner. The next three days were uneventful, though Jack insisted that his sufferings in the dreaded Bay were severe enough to warrant mention in the ship's log. He only of the trio was affected by the rolling and pitching of the ship, though he had goodly company among the rest of the passengers. As for Bob and Mackay, they walked the deck through it all. But even sea-sickness comes to an end, and before the *Mongolia* reached Gibraltar Jack was feeling himself again, and his boisterous spirits did much to infuse a sympathetic cheerfulness among the

rest of the passengers, whose reserve was beginning to break away as they entered the sunny waters of the blue Mediterranean. Bob had found endless interest in watching the various headlands sighted on the Portuguese and Spanish coasts, and when the frowning Rock of Gibraltar was in sight, his eagerness became intense. To him history became almost a living thing when he gazed at the grim monuments of a glorious past. And Mackay was ever near to instruct and to interest by the narration of more or less personal experiences of his own in the various ports visited. Indeed, Mackay's knowledge was little short of marvellous, and the boys saw many phases of his character during their first week at sea. The general passengers too soon became interesting to them. The *Mongolia* had on board a very representative community. Some were going to India, not a few to China and Japan, while the remainder comprised principally Australians from the different states of the Commonwealth returning home after a visit to the Old Country. Before Aden had been reached, owing to the genial influence of the captain, a feeling of good fellowship pervaded the ship, and the entire company became as one huge family. Deck sports were a daily occurrence, and concerts and dances took place every other evening. The sea was calm as glass, flying fish rose in scattering clouds from the surging wavelets created by the ship's bows, and porpoises played merrily around the vessel as it dashed on its unerring course. But on the upper deck the double awning scarcely obscured the penetrating rays of the scorching sun, and the close sweltering heat in the cabins below was almost unbearable. At Aden all the India bound passengers disembarked and changed into an awaiting vessel which connected with Bombay, and the time allowed before the *Mongolia* resumed her course was amply sufficient to permit of Mackay and his *protégés* going ashore.

There is not much to attract at this port. It is simply a military barracks and coaling-station, with an enormous importance, of course, as a British naval base. Mackay explained this at length to Jack, who was always eager for information.

"It's the key o' the Red Sea," he announced, "just in the same degree as Gib. is the key o' the Mediterranean."

"But the Red Sea is not of very much interest to Britain, is it?" said Bob, questioningly.

"Maybe no, though I canna allow that any part o' His Majesty's ocean is without its due importance; but, ye see, Aden protects India by watching the ships that come through the Red Sea, and forby there's no vessel o' war belonging to another nation could steam past withoot comin' in for coal ——" This in a burst of patriotic fervour. "Why, when the German Emperor's brother went oot to China, a year or so back, in his big gunboat, he touched at nothing but British ports all the way." Mackay chuckled with amusement at the recollection. "There used to be a tree growing at Aden," he said again, when they recovered themselves, "but some one that doesn't believe in oddities has evidently cut it down."

Nothing but sand and bare rocks could be seen all around, so his surmise was probably quite accurate.

"Aren't there some huge tanks near here?" asked Bob. "I heard that they were the only sight worth seeing in Aden."

"You're quite richt; they're no exactly in Aden, being about five miles back in the hills. But we have just time to visit them."

He called a waiting garry at once, and directing the Somali driver, they set out to view the giant reservoirs which date their origin away back in the mists of antiquity. Bob and Jack looked very different individuals from what they were a few weeks before. Dressed in whites, and wearing sun-helmets, they seemed already to be quite accustomed to the heat; the old tired look had vanished from their faces, and the light of awakening interest was in their eyes. As for Mackay, under his big, umbrella-shaped head-covering, the same kindly face was visible, perhaps a little redder than it was before, but, as he said himself, it was regaining its natural tan.

"I believe in harmony o' colour," he gravely said, "and there should be nae contrast between my moustache and its surrounding beauties."

When they reached the tanks, which in appearance were as huge caverns graven out of the solid rock, the engineering training of the boys was at once evident by their remarks.

"What a mighty work it must have been," mused Bob.

"King Solomon's Tanks," announced Mackay, taking upon himself the onus of dispensing knowledge, "were built, or rather excavated, about three thousand years ago. You will observe that they are so situated as to catch the natural drainage o' the surrounding country, and when rain fell, which was seldom, the tanks got filled, and—and when it didna fall—of course, they remained empty!"

"Of course," agreed they both, promptly.

Mackay looked pained.

"Ye shouldna concur wi' my statements so sudden like," said he. Then he endeavoured to get on to the rails again. "They got silted up wi' the sand after long disuse," he continued, "and they were only discovered and re-excavated some years back; but they are of service to show what an old civilization could do, and to prove that the climate was different then, for now ye could hardly droon a mosquito in a' the water they collect." He ceased, then murmured blandly, "This country is too hot for me to wax eloquent wi' ony modicum o' pleasure, or I wad go into geo-logical details concerning it."

"Is there anything you don't know, Mr. Mackay?" inquired Bob, with a smile.

"No' a thing. I'm a walkin' Encyclopædia—just burstin' wi' knowledge. No, I'm wrang; there's ane or twa metapheesical matters that beat me. I'll own to that frankly."

Then they returned to the ship, and amused themselves watching the dusky patriarchal vendors of ostrich feathers who had come on board, endeavouring to sell their wares. It particularly interested them to notice how cheerfully these dealers accepted finally less than a half of their first demands. The Somali diving boys with the strange yellow hair and the glistening teeth also attracted their attention. These youngsters, some of them maimed in horrible fashion, appealed to the sympathy of the passengers by singing in raucous chorus an aged and once popular London song. The authorities by this time had forbidden their wonted occupation owing to the multitudes of sharks infesting the exposed harbour. Early in

the evening the *Mongolia* once more got under way, and, with her reduced passenger-list, headed for Colombo, the port of the spicy Isle of Ceylon.

Among the passengers bound for Australia was a middle-aged, wiry-looking personage named Carew, whose deeply browned face bore the unmistakable evidence of long years' sojourn in the tropics. Mackay had recognized him on the day of embarkation, but had studiously avoided him ever since.

"He's a famous New Guinea explorer," he informed Bob and Jack, "but he's a terrible talker, and I'm no vera willin' to be afflicted wi' his remarks."

Several times, nevertheless, the boys noticed that Carew always gazed doubtfully at Mackay when they chanced to meet on deck, and on each occasion that individual would reply with a stare of studied nonchalance. However, after leaving Aden, the passengers were so much reduced that they were all thrown into daily contact with each other, and occasionally Mackay found himself on the same side as Carew in the course of a cricket-match. But it was after they had left the Island of Socotra two days astern that any definite conversation passed between them. A match had just been concluded between the "Weary Wayfarers" and "The New Chums," two delightfully named opposing teams made up from the greatest travellers on board and the more or less untravelled community, and the "Weary Wayfarers" had been summarily defeated. Bob and Jack were shining lights at such contests, and Bob's bowling had on this occasion been mainly responsible for the downfall of the Wayfarers, while Jack on his part had made the top score of his side. Carew and Mackay were making a straight course for the smoke-room when the former gentleman broke out abruptly

"I've been trying a long time to remember, Mackay, where I met you before, and now I've got it. There couldn't be another phiz like yours in the whole of this wretched planet."

"I ken my personal adornments are a rare gift," placidly returned the Scot, "and, to return the compliment, I may say I've never been surprised at your many marvellous escapes from the New Guinean cannibals."

"And why so?" queried Carew, much pleased.

"Because a sight o' your figure-head would destroy any nigger's appetite, an'——"

"I give you best, Mackay; I give you best," hastily interposed the other. "But weren't you with Bentley's Expedition in New Guinea four years ago? Oh, I'm sure of you now. Where did you leave Bentley?"

By this time they were snugly ensconced in a corner of the smoke-room. Mackay solemnly rang the bell.

"He went under on the last expedition in the West," he said grimly, when the steward had attended to their requests,— "I was the only one that escaped."

Carew gave a cry of genuine pain. "Poor Bentley," he muttered brokenly, "another one gone in that accursed country, and I never knew. We pioneers don't get much of an obituary notice, Mackay."

Mackay silently agreed. "Don't speak about it before these youngsters of mine," he said. "They're going out to the West with me, and I don't want them to be discouraged."

He rose to go, but just then Bob appeared. "There's a small island on the port bow, Mackay," he announced. "Can you tell me anything about it? I can't find it on the chart."

"It's the coral isle called Minacoy," volunteered Carew, looking out. "It's the most southerly atoll of the Laccadive group of islands, and when the sea is rough it is almost invisible."

They all went out to have a look. The *Mongolia* passed quite close to the coral beach, and though the sea was calm the roar of the surge beating on the shallows was plainly heard. A tall lighthouse with a background of palms was observable, and a solitary watcher came out while they gazed and waved a friendly greeting.

"What a lonely life the lighthouse keeper's must be!" said Jack, and he expressed the sentiments of all.

The next day the *Mongolia* arrived at Colombo, and here the boys saw much to interest them. The spacious harbour with its huge artificial breakwater was in itself a great attraction, and they watched the clouds of

spray that dashed full fifty feet into the air all along the guarding barrier with keen delight. But on shore the rickshaw rides surpassed all other forms of amusement. They visited the far-famed Cinnamon gardens in these strange vehicles, they tried races along the Galle Face road, and lastly rickshawed with Mackay to Mount Lavinia some five miles distant from the town. The Cingalese gem merchants who swarmed everywhere were a source of wonder to them. They marvelled how so many seemingly needy individuals possessed such stores of rubies, diamonds, sapphires, and pearls, and which, according to their demands, were worth a prince's ransom. Mackay only laughed when Jack mentioned his surprise at their apparent affluence.

"You want to develop your powers o' observation, my laddie," said he, enigmatically; and Jack, not quite understanding the rebuke, was in no wise edified. Bob, too, was rather impressed by the courtesy of the same fraternity.

"Master," an odd-looking personage in flowing garb and with plaited hair would say, "Master, you buy goodie ruby from me?" and at once a string of somewhat similarly attired merchants would gather round and watch the expected process of bargaining silently. But they were not quite as innocent and free from guile as they looked.

"What do you think of this, Bob?" cried Jack, holding up a huge crystal, which a smiling Cingalee with a strange little basket for a cap had proffered him for sale. They were sitting under the revolving fans in the Hotel Bristol, watching the gay panorama of colour that constantly flitted before them. Mackay had left them to their own devices for an hour or so, and they were now awaiting his return.

Bob examined the gaudy crystal with pretended keenness.

"No good; it's only glass," he said shortly, never dreaming that his idle statement was correct.

"No glass! no glass!" earnestly asserted the Cingalee. "White sapphire, goodie stone. You try," he added, as a final proof of his honesty; "you tramp so." He placed the stone under his slippered foot, and pressed ever so

lightly. "You try," he implored, handing the stone to Bob, whom he now regarded as the one obstacle to the sale of his treasure. "If glass it break."

"The poor beggar seems honest," said Jack, feeling quite sorry for the man. "How much?" he asked.

"Five pounds, master."

"I don't want the stone," said Jack, "and anyhow I haven't got five pounds in my pocket. I'll give you one pound for it," he concluded jokingly. Before he had fully realized it the gem was his, and the late owner was exhorting him to secrecy concerning the sacrificial price it had commanded. "Other men no like me selling so cheap," he explained, then vanished hurriedly as Mackay entered.

"And so you've bought a sapphire," he said with a chuckle, when Jack proudly displayed his purchase. "How much did ye gie for it? Sixpence?"

"Isn't it genuine?" asked Bob. "I said it was glass; but he asked me to stamp on it."

"Ay, ay, that's an old trick; he chanced ye no' takin' him at his word." He placed the doubtful stone beneath the toe of his shoe, and in an instant nothing remained but powdered glass. Jack's dismay was great, and noting it, Mackay patted the boy cheerily on the back. "It's a grand thing to have faith in human nature," he said kindly. "And I'd rather see you mak' a mistake that way than the other way. A' the same when you go oot into the world it's surprising how much deceit you see."

After a stay of a day and a half the *Mongolia* entered upon the longest phase of her journey across the equator and down by the north-western coast of Australia to Fremantle. Several more passengers had been left at Colombo including those bound for the farther East, who continued their journey by connecting boat, so that the ship's party was now very small indeed. To the boys' surprise the heat experienced when crossing the line was nothing compared with that already felt in the Red Sea; but Mackay was not wanting with his explanation.

"The desert sands on both sides o' the Red Sea absorb the heat and intensify it," explained he, "so that the winds that blow from either east or west are

like blasts oot o' a furnace, while here the winds are tempered by passing over hundreds o' miles o' sea."

"In any case," added Carew, who was standing near, "there are no sandy stretches in this part of the world, and the prevailing breezes blow in from the sweet-scented islands of Java and New Guinea."

"I was o' the opinion," began Mackay, after some thought, severely eyeing the last speaker, "that this information bureau was my funeral. I was about to send oot twa or three chunks o' knowledge when you interrupted, and noo my inspiration's vanished."

Carew laughed good-naturedly. "Never mind, Mackay," said he; "I will relieve you for a bit, and entertain Wentworth and Armstrong by spinning them a true yarn. Get your deck-chairs all, and prepare for something thrilling."

By the time Carew was ready to start nearly every passenger on board was clustered round him in eager expectation.

"Two years ago," he began, in reminiscent tones, "I was camped on a tributary of the Fly River in New Guinea, which was a most unhealthy district to camp in, owing to the fact that two rival cannibal tribes had their quarters close handy. However, I wanted to prospect for gold and gems in the surrounding country, and so decided to take all risks. But in order to minimize these risks as much as possible, I paid a visit to the chief or Mamoose of what I imagined to be the more powerful of the two tribes, and presented him with the only article in my camp I had no use for—an alarm clock. The old boy was quite delighted with it, and promptly insisted on wearing it hung from a chain around his neck; not only that, but when I showed him how to wind it up and ring the alarm, he immediately informed his warriors that it was a charm which would ensure success in all battles. Indeed, he wanted to start right then and march against the Tugeris, his warlike neighbours, but while I was arguing the point with him—I didn't want any circus in the vicinity at that time—the 'Che-ep! Che-ep!' of these wretched Tugeris sounded through the trees. They had evidently anticipated attack at this period and so were taking time by the forelock. On they came, shouting that peculiar battle-cry of theirs which gets on one's nerves so quickly. The old Mamoose, with the clock anchored firmly round his neck,

sailed in to meet them at the head of his warriors, and I made lightning tracks in the opposite direction. All next day I waited down the river with my canoe in readiness. If the clock Mamoose won, I was safe as a house; if he didn't I was as good as cold meat if I didn't get out lively. I was getting mighty nervous, and couldn't quite see how I was to know which side won, when, all of a sudden, a huge crocodile hove out of the water close beside me, and at that instant the noise of an alarm clock going off sounded out of his gaping mouth like a piano prelude through a gramophone trumpet. That fixed it, gentlemen. I won't go into my theories as to how the clock got there. They were strong enough for me, and I scooted, and a good job too, for when I was at Port Moresby some weeks later I was told that the Tugeris had fairly swept the country."

"Ye certainly had a maist providential warning," spoke Mackay, dryly, breaking the dubious silence that followed.

"Come on, Mackay," said Carew, leading the way to the smoke-room.

"Right you are," retorted the other; and they departed arm in arm, much to the amusement of the assembly.

Three days later they sighted the Cocos group of islands on the horizon, and in a very short time were passing quite close to the largest of them. Nothing but a forest of palms could be seen at first, then a slight indentation on the coast line revealed a schooner and several smaller craft lying at anchor in front of a row of native dwellings.

"The first king of these islands," Mackay informed the lads, "was a Glasgow Scotsman. Old King Ross did a wonderful amount o' pioneering work in these seas, and hoisted the British flag here without the assistance of a gunboat. He was a strange man, and knew well how to handle the natives."

"But what do they do?" asked Jack.

"They grow cocoanuts and make copra, my lad; they find a good market for it in Colombo and Singapore."

"Are all the islands in this part of the Indian Ocean of coral formation?" asked Bob, looking at the white low-lying shores with interest.

"Oh no," laughed Mackay, "there's Christmas Island, for instance, about five hundred odd miles east of these, and it is nothing short of a mountain, and its shores go down into the water almost as steep as the side of a house _____"

"I say, Mackay," interrupted Carew, petulantly, "how do you know anything about Christmas Island? It's the most ungetatable place on the face of the earth, and I've heard that very few white men have ever been there."

"I'm one of the few," imperturbably answered Mackay. "I sailed there from North Australia in a pearling lugger," he condescended to explain.

"And do they grow copra there too?" inquired an interested bystander.

"Oh no; it's a guano island and belongs to the Christmas Island syndicate. A very fine paying concern it is too, though the island is not more than twenty miles or so in circumference."

"I didn't think guano islands were much good to any one," hazarded Bob.

"Didn't you? Well, that's no' surprisin', seein' that we don't hear much about them; but I know a man who has a steam yacht, and he keeps constantly explorin' the ocean for guano islands. It's a good payin' business right enough, though I wouldna care much about diggin' phosphates mysel', gold bein' more my attraction."

To the boys the idea of unknown islands in these latitudes was distinctly pleasing. The world to them was taking on a less crowded aspect. The smiling sea still held her unknown Crusoe islands. The romance had not all gone from the earth. The days were passing very quickly now, soon Fremantle would be reached, and then—who knew what good fortune might speedily be theirs? Bob and Jack looked into the future with unhesitating eyes. Theirs had been no boyish whim, and as they neared Australia's coast their pulses quickened, the sense of freedom was in their blood, the spirit of conquest surged through their hearts; and Mackay, noting their steady courage, felt strangely cheered. On the evening before the *Mongolia* was expected to reach Fremantle a concert was held in the saloon, in order to bring together for the last time the entire assembly, for quite a number were disembarking at Fremantle; and Bob and Jack were singled out for special adulation by the chairman—none other than Mr.

Carew—who warmly wished them Godspeed in the new country they were entering upon.

"They, like us all," he said in his laudatory address, "seek their Eldorado. To them it is something real, tangible; to us who have chased the elusive phantom it has somewhat lost its zest. But youth and courage shall conquer where the weary wanderer must fail, and I fully expect our boys to attain their ambition by sheer manly grit before they have time to grow weary of the pioneer's life. They are especially fortunate," he continued, looking towards Mackay, "in having the guiding care of an old and experienced traveller—one whose deeds always speak louder than his words, but whose speech when occasion demands is forcible and conclusive. Only an explorer can fully appreciate a brother explorer's work; I take off my hat to you, Mackay——" his hat was already off, but that didn't matter—"and when we meet again, I trust it may be in some cheerful spot in this little planet and not in the wilds of an unknown land."

CHAPTER III

Golden Flat

The small settlement of Golden Flat was situated away out on the desert's fringe beyond Kalgoorlie, and beyond the reach of any civilizing railway. It was essentially a pioneer's field, for no deep lodes had yet been discovered; indeed, at this time the history of Golden Flat was but a few days old. Nuggety Dick, a roving prospector and miner, had been lucky enough to find rich specimens of the coveted metal on the surface of the flat during one of his perambulating journeys through the silent bush, and instead of wildly rushing back to Kalgoorlie to proclaim his "strike," he had quietly taken a note of the place and gone his way to inform his old associates, who were toiling with but little success on a worked-out alluvial patch near Coolgardie.

Such is the spirit of the bush; comradeship comes before all, and happy-go-lucky Dick had never once thought of applying for the standing reward which a shrewd Government had promised for discoveries of gold in such remote districts. Had he claimed it, a rush would have been the immediate consequence, and the chances of Dick's companions securing a favourable claim would have been reduced to a minimum; so he set out on his high-backed camel and rounded up the "boys," as he affectionately called them, and steered them back to the ironshot plain among the mulga scrub, which he had euphoniously, if ambitiously, termed "Golden Flat." And now, within a week after their arrival, the Flat presented every appearance of industrious energy. Further nuggets had been found all along the line of a scarcely perceptible depression in the land surface, which, nevertheless, most evidently marked the course of a very ancient waterway, long since silted up.

"It'll be an alluvial wash, boys," remarked Dick, with happy satisfaction.

"It certainly looks mighty promising," agreed a lanky and lean individual, who rejoiced in the cognomen of the Shadow. The Shadow, so called because of his rather fine outline, was the youngest of the party; indeed, he

was little more than a boy in years, yet his reputation as a skilled bushman and rough rider was great, and the strength concealed in his spare figure was marvellous.

"I say, mates," broke out another typical bushman, Never Never Dave by name, popping his head out of a shaft near by, "I do believe I've struck the stuff on the ten-foot level."

He clambered out of his excavation and approached the party, who were at this moment assembled for the purpose of preparing lunch, displaying in his hand a white sugary-looking substance which he had evidently broken from the supposed wash. The Shadow gave a whoop of delight, but was immediately checked by an old miner beside him, whose keen eyes and heavily furrowed face bespoke the hardy pioneer.

"Don't yell out so soon, young 'un," he reproved sternly. "Gold is a most deceitful phantom, and it's when you're sartin you've got it, that it ain't there."

"Eight O!" sang out the irrepressible one, rushing to get a pan of water from the soak near by. "Eight O, Dead Broke."

"When he reappeared he found them all examining the sample wash with critical interest; and as it was handed round for inspection, not a word was spoken; not a trace of joy or emotion showed in the rugged features of the men who depended so much on the result, and even the Shadow, when he handled the specimen, felt constrained to copy the tactics of his neighbours. The conglomerate stone was literally studded with gold; it required neither the pan test nor the magnifying glass to prove that.

"It's too good to last, boys," commented Nuggety Dick, with a sigh.

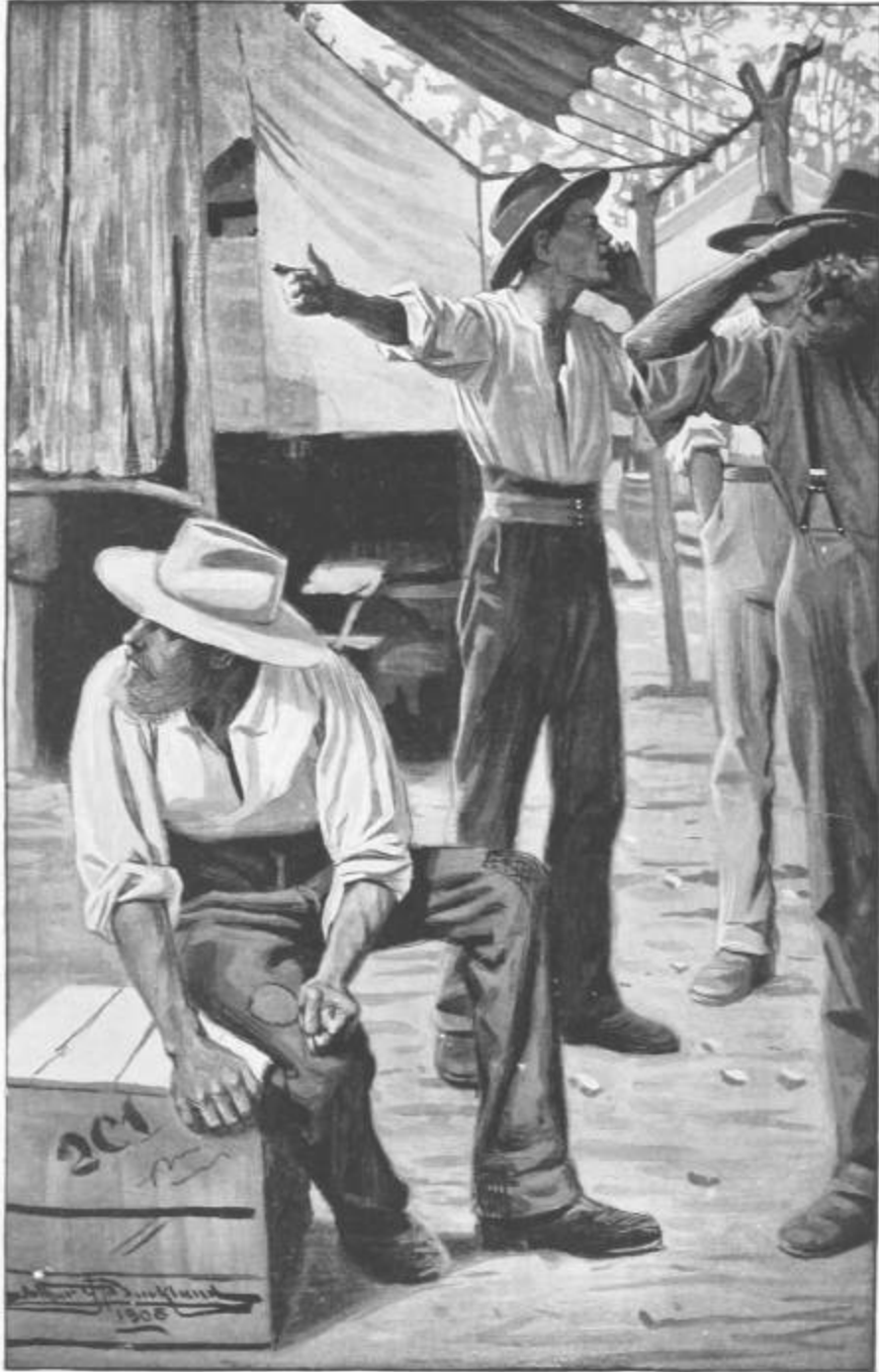
That broke the spell.

"I've never seen anything like it," grunted Dead Broke Dan, blinking furiously.

"Hoorah for Golden Flat!" broke out the Shadow, tossing his tattered hat into the air. "Hip, hip, hip, hoorah!"

And, taking his lead, the silent group of a few minutes before broke into a lusty cheer that echoed and re-echoed over the plains. But it had scarcely died away when Emu Bill, a somewhat silent member of the party, astonished his associates by giving vent to a groan of deep disgust.

"Look what's coming, boys," said he, nodding his head toward the west.
"Hang me if it isn't the beginning of a regular rush!"



"LOOK WHAT'S COMING, BOYS!"

All looked in the direction indicated, and sure enough there appeared to be ample reason for annoyance. Cresting a slight eminence surrounding the Flat, three figures hove into sight, pacing slowly alongside a heavily laden

camel, and that they were coming to Golden Flat camp there could be no room for doubt.

"After me bein' so careful, too," complained Dick, sorrowfully. "Now I suppose we'll have all Kalgoorlie sprinting up before sundown."

"Look to your boundary-pegs, mates," warned Dead Broke Dan, "an' stick up your miners' rights on the corner posts. They may be bush-lawyers for all we know."

In an instant the camp awoke to action, axes and spades were seized, measuring tapes were run along the boundary lines of their holdings, new pegs were driven into position, and miners' rights flaunted in the sunshine, marking a fluttering course of six hundred yards along the auriferous bed. In the midst of the confusion the three travellers arrived, and one of them, a strongly built individual, whose entire wardrobe consisted only of an open-necked shirt, and nether garments held in position by a well-filled cartridge belt, leaving his companions by the camel, stepped forward.

"Hullo, boys," he grunted affably, addressing every one in general who was disposed to hear. "I said 'Hallo,'" he repeated sternly, after a moment's pause.

The rebuke was too much for Emu Bill, who had been calmly and leisurely engaged cutting his initials in his corner boundary-peg. He came forward quickly.

"Hallo, mate," he said, eyeing the new-comer keenly. "Mebbe ye'll excoose the boys for attendin' to Government regulations afore rushin' to say how mighty glad they are to see ye——"

"Ye insignificant son o' a gun," came the prompt interruption, "if ye dinna modify your insinuations, I'll—I'll, swipe the head off ye, an' it would hurt me sair to destroy ane o' my old comrades in cauld blood."

Bill, at the dire threat against his person, had languidly begun to prepare for mortal combat, but on hearing the last part of the aggressive speech, he gazed at the stranger in incredulous amazement.

"By the Great Howling Billy it's Mackay!" he yelled, seizing his erstwhile enemy's hand and shaking it vigorously. "I thought you had gone home to the old country, you tough old rooster."

"I did have a trip home," said Mackay, for it was he, smiling grimly. "But I discovered that civilization didn't agree wi' me, so I came back."

By this time the rest of the miners had hastened up, and Emu Bill addressed them excitedly.

"Boys, it's Mackay!" he cried.

Nuggety Dick and his satellites hesitated a moment, then rushed forward with outstretched hands.

"What have you done with your whiskers, Mac?" they cried almost in unison.

"That's it," roared Emu Bill, looking questioningly into the now welcome visitor's face, "and it nearly caused a funeral. Hang it all, why didn't ye say who ye was? We thought you was the beginning of a rush, we did. Fetch your mates along and let us have lunch at once. After that you may stake out where you like."

"Beggin' your pardon, Emu," broke in Nuggety Dick, "I has a double-barrelled-nineteen-carat-pleasant dooty to perform." He turned to Mackay, and with grave dignity proceeded. "As discoverer o' this here Golden Flat, an' representin' the interests o' every scarecrow present, I say we welcome you and your mates wi' tearful emotion. Am I right, boys?" he demanded confidently, looking at his companions.

"Hoo-rah!" came the unanimous response.

Mackay smiled just a trifle strangely, and beckoned to Bob and Jack, who had been watching the trend of events with somewhat anxious eyes.

It would have been hard to recognize in the two who now came forward the same young men who had inveighed so strongly against their restricted lot in the Old Country. Dressed in the negligent attire of the bush, with broad brimmed hats shading their eyes from the scorching sun, they looked like young Colonials fresh and fit for any effort that might be required of them.

Their journey from the coast to Kalgoorlie had interested them exceedingly; the wide tracts of lonely bush land which stretched to north and south of the single line, gave them an impression of boundless scope which was dear to their hearts. Here surely was a country where no man need jostle his neighbour. Coming as they did from a tightly packed centre of commerce, it was little wonder that a sense of freedom entered their beings. And when they arrived at the strange hustling gold-mining city of the plains, their enthusiasm was great. Mackay had been wonderfully reticent as to his immediate plans. "Even here nothing stands still," said he, "and there may have been new gold discoveries since I left." But his inquiries in Kalgoorlie seemed to please him greatly. "It's all right, my lads," he announced to them with great good humour when he returned to the Exchange Hotel where they were staying pending his investigations.

"The fact is," he whispered mysteriously, drawing the boys aside, "I found gold on one o' our last expeditions before we tackled the Never Never, a good bit to the east o' this, and though we never said a word about it to any one when we got back, I was afraid some sandgroping fossicker had bumped across the place while I was awa'. Hooever, I've made judicious inquiry, and find there's been nary a rush in that direction, so we'll outfit at once and get a move on. I've been lucky enough to buy back my old camel, Misery, for the journey."

So they arrived at Golden Flat, Mackay never once hesitating in his course, though there were no landmarks to guide. The bushman's instinct was strong, unerringly it lead them to their goal; and now that they had reached the scene they had been picturing in their minds, the unexpected meeting with earlier arrivals disconcerted them not a little. They advanced at Mackay's call somewhat sharply; they had not quite understood the wordy discourses of the miners, and they were aggressively prepared to stand by their friend should occasion arise.

"Boys," said Mackay, addressing the odd assembly, "allow me to introduce two young friends of mine from old England—Robert Wentworth and Jack Armstrong, Bob and Jack for short—they've come out here to make their fortune, and by the Lord Harry! they'll do it or I'm a Dutchman."

With honest welcome beaming in their eyes, the rugged miners advanced one by one to greet their visitors, but Nuggety Dick must needs call them to order.

"Can't ye wait fur me to interdooce ye in civilized manner, ye howlin' galoots," he admonished severely. "I hiv to blush fur yer ignorance, I has." Then he hitched up his nether garments, ejected a quid of tobacco from his mouth, coughed discreetly, and began—

"As discoverer o' this 'ere Golden Flat——"

"You stop right there, Nuggety," interjected Mackay. "If ye'll take the trouble to look at the side o' that tree ahint your tent you'll observe that my autograph is carved thereon, together with the date of discovery. Now, while you go and satisfy yoursel', I'll dae the introducin'. Emu Bill"—the tall bushman stepped forward and shook hands with the lads—"is a very decent sort o' individual. A bit cantankerous, saving wi' his speech, and I would hae some hope for him if he wasna sae perneeciously given to makin' poetry ——"

"Get out, Mac——"

"Dead Broke Dan!" The veteran of the camp strode forward. "A guid solid and straight man who has done his best to mak' every man's fortune but his ain. Never Never Dave"—that individual with the Shadow had already anticipated the formal introduction, and was listening with delight for his qualifications—"is a weary wanderer, like mysel', only withoot my unquestionable abilities. And the Shadow"—that guileful youth suddenly became engaged in earnest conversation with Bob—"the Shadow, I say, is a youth wha's greatest misfortune is his extraordinar' habit o' neglectin' the commandment which says, youngsters should be seen but never heard. For a' that he's a guid laddie——"

"Say, boss," ejaculated the victim, smilingly, "if ye'll write that down I'll send it to my Sunday-school teacher in Melbourne."

At this point Nuggety Dick returned somewhat crestfallen.

"You were quite right, Mackay," said he. "Is there any other place in the whole country you hasn't struck your name on?"

Mackay's face relaxed into a broad smile.

"We'll divide the honours, Nuggety, my man," he answered magnanimously; and with one accord they all made their way to the tree behind Nuggety's tent to gaze at the symbol which justified Mackay's claim. There it was, cut deeply into the hard wood, and almost obliterated with enclustering moss, "J. M. 1898."

Bob examined the letters with something akin to awe. Jack laughed gleefully; the others crowding round seemed ill at ease. Mackay guessed their thoughts intuitively.

"My claim has lapsed, boys," he said quietly.

"Not by a single peg," protested Nuggety Dick. "We don't need no Government to tell us what to do. We know the ground is yours by the all-fired right o' discovery, a right which touches us right down on our most tender feelings."

"We've just struck it rich, but we'll git all the same," said Never Never Dave; and a sympathetic murmur of approval greeted his words. The bushman's code of honour is Spartan in its simplicity.

Again Mackay smiled, and all trace of hardness had gone out of his voice when he made answer.

"Boys, ye have spoken as I knew ye would speak, and it does my heart good to look at you all again, and feel that the same old sympathies are with us still. But the true discoverer of Golden Flat was the leader of the expedition who piloted his party so well until the end, and I ken he wouldna have me turn you away. No, boys, there's room enough for us all; my mates an' me will peg out claims at the end o' the lead; the chances o' strikin' the wash are a' equal." He paused, and gazed sadly at the half-obliterated inscription on the tree, unheeding of the deep appreciation with which his words were received. "If it's my good fortune to make a rise on Golden Flat," he continued, with grave solemnity, "I mean to devote it a' on an expedition into the Never Never. I want to see again that mountain which kept me back. I want to have a word with the tribe that lives behind it...."

"I'll be with you, Mac," quietly spoke Emu Bill.

"And me, fur a dead cert!" said Nuggety Dick.

"Put Never Never Dave's name on the programme," grunted that worthy.

"And mine," echoed Dead Broke Dan.

"You can bet your shirt I'll be with you," cried the Shadow.

"There's only you and me left, Jack," said Bob. "But we'll be there too."

"And now let us have lunch, boys," suggested Nuggety Dick, breaking the odd silence that ensued; and they walked away, leaving Mackay still gazing at the fateful tree with unseeing eyes.

"Poor old Mac," muttered the Shadow, sympathetically.

"Did you know him before?" asked Jack.

"I should say I did. Why, he put me on to the only paying gold show I ever worked. That was two years back. He was one o' the Coolgardie pioneers too, and, of course, every one who was there knows him."

"Ah, that was a great old time," mused Emu Bill, entering into the conversation. "Mackay made a bit o' a rise then, and he might have been a rich man now if he hadn't taken the Never Never fever."

"I'll tell you what, boys," said Nuggety Dick, hastily adding a handful of tea to the boiling billy, "Mackay is the straightest man that ever chased nuggets, and this here camp will see that he doesn't tackle that miserable desert again without us skirmishin' alongside."

"Let us drink good luck to Golden Flat, boys," cried the individual in question cheerily, coming up from behind, and seizing a pannikin of tea.

"Good luck to Golden Flat—and to its discoverer!" replied they all, standing up and drinking the toast heartily.

Shortly afterwards the three new-comers set off to peg out their claims on the golden channel, and erect their tent. The others would have accompanied them in a body to assist in the work, but Mackay, while thanking them, firmly refused their services.

"I want to initiate my partners into the rules o' the business," he explained, "an' the best way to teach them is by showing the way and watching them do it. No, no, boys, you had better go and burrow in your shafts, we'll engineer our own funeral."

The slight depression which indicated the presence of the golden channel below, ran in a north and southerly direction, and could be traced without difficulty for fully five hundred yards, after which it merged into the open plain, but the line of workings did not extend much more than halfway down this length.

"These old water-courses," said Bob, who had been thinking deeply, "must have belonged to a very ancient period, when the whole aspect of the country was different."

"And how so?" queried Mackay.

"Because," returned Bob, hesitatingly, "there are no mountains here now, no water-sheds at all, and the gold must have been carried by a flow of water from somewhere. The whole country must have been sunk under the sea, then, after a long time, upheaved again higher than it was before. The volcanic disturbances must have destroyed all its original features."

"Do you ken, Bob, my lad," said Mackay, earnestly, "I like to hear you speak like that. It shows ye've got some pro-fundity o' thought, an' I quite agree wi' your argument."

A cry of delight from Jack broke in on their geological discussion. That very eager youth had unconsciously adopted the tactics of the experienced prospector by eyeing the ground closely as he walked, and his keenness had not gone unrewarded, for he now displayed a dull yellow specimen between his finger and thumb.

"Ay, it's gold, sure enough," was Mackay's verdict, when he had glanced at it, "and it weighs fully an ounce if I'm any judge. Jack, my boy, ye'll beat us a' at this game yet. That's five pounds ye've made in the time it would take to blink an eye. You'll mak' a grand prospector, Jack. Put that bit in your pocket, and keep it aye as a memento; you'll think a lot o' it afterwards."

"But it's really yours," said the lad, refusing to take it back. "I'm not going to take everything of yours and keep all I get too."

Poor Jack was embarrassed. His was one of those generous natures which can never forget a kindness, and Mackay had behaved more like a brother than a mere friend.

"I agree with you, Jack," ventured Bob.

"Tut, tut, laddies," grunted Mackay, "we're goin' to be partners wi' equal shares—and from what I can see already I think I'm vera fortunate in having you wi' me—but first specimens should be outside the arrangement altogether. Take the bittie gold, Jack, and I hope I'll live to see it in your ain home years after this."

They had by this time reached the end of the channel, at least so far as surface indications were concerned, and Bob once more propounded a theory.

"Is it not right to assume," said he, "that though we cannot trace the water-course any further on the surface, it must be there all the same?"

"Quite correct," answered Mackay; "but it may have changed its direction, an' it may have divided into smaller channels."

"But just here where it apparently disappears," persisted Bob, "may not some obstacle have deflected the current, or made the sand pile up and so raised the true bed upwards, making the original sides of the gully shallower at this point, and accounting for its being filled up level with the surrounding country before the deeper parts got wholly silted up?"

"Go on, my lad," prompted Mackay, patting the young man's shoulder, "allowin' what ye say to be right; what sort o' deduction do you arrive at?"

"I should think," said Bob, with growing eagerness, "that the gold would stick on the rise more than on the level, and that if we sank our shaft just over the apparent break of the channel we would most likely strike it rich."

"It seems good sound logic, Bob," commented Mackay, in reflective mood, "but as I'm a practical man and no' much o' a theorist, I'll no' venture to say whether ye are richt or wrang. One matter, however, must be determined

afore I can completely side wi' ye, and that is in what direction was the creek flowing?"

Bob was for the moment nonplussed, and observing his hesitation, the man of practice seemed to be suddenly amused.

"That appears to be a tough proposition, doesn't it?" said he.

"It does," agreed Bob, still pondering over a solution to the question.

"Well, it isn't, my lad. The creek just flowed as you first allowed, in orthodox manner, from north to south. I'm vera pleased to notice how quickly you have got a grip o' things, an' I only asked the question so as to direct your attention to what must be the base o' your theory, for if the flow had been in the opposite direction the bottom would have been completely knocked oot o' your argument."

"But how can you tell how it was flowing?" asked Bob, still somewhat mystified.

"Easily enough; I had a look at Never Never Dave's shaft and paid particular attention to the nature o' the gold wash below. Every pebble o' the conglomerate stuff was water worn and mair or less wedge-shaped wi' the blunt ends facing in this direction. Now do you savvy? Observation is a grand virtue, Bob——"

"I am afraid you have been laughing at me," spoke the young man, gravely.

"I'll prove to you that I havena," came the quick response. "Jack, come here and do your geometry lesson."

Jack had been industriously searching for further treasure, but he hastened up at once.

"Now," said his mentor, "I want you to mark out a rectangle five feet six inches by two feet six inches just on the break o' that meeserable apology for a creek. We'll start sinkin' our shaft there in the mornin'."

So it came about that Bob planned the position of their first shaft, with Jack assisting; and Mackay walking a little way apart surveyed the pair with deep satisfaction.

"I can see," he soliloquized, "that my young friend, Bob, is goin' to be a vera useful acquisition, and if Jack develops along the lines in which his tastes lie, I have much need to congratulate myself. Who would have thought it?..."

Next after the lining out of the projected shaft came the pegging of the claims. For this four stout posts were required, thick enough when faced with an axe to present a surface at least four inches square. These were soon forthcoming, the mulga shrubs growing around being just of sufficient girth to meet with official requirements.

"And now, my lads," said Mackay, in sprightly tones, "we're going to mark out three men's ground, a hundred feet by a hundred is the allowance per man, so that means we can take a hundred yards along the creek and one hundred feet across." He began to pace off the ground as he spoke. "We can check it with a tape after," said he, "but I have done this so often that I'm no' likely to be faur oot in my calculations."

Soon the four pegs were sunk into position by Jack and Mackay, Bob at the same time scooping out with pick and shovel short rectangular trenches at each corner to indicate plainly to any subsequent observer the position of the outlying boundaries. This done they gazed at their handiwork with serene contentment. The mercurial Mackay was once more in the clutches of the gold fever, and his companions were no whit less affected.

"Let us call it Mackay's Reward," cried Jack, at length.

That gentleman shook his head. "This claim shall henceforth be known as The Golden Promise," he said.

Next on the afternoon's programme was the erection of the tent, and Jack at once volunteered to search the scrub for the two forked upright posts required to support the ridge or roof pole of the calico structure, Mackay and Bob meanwhile arranging the various stores and mining implements which they had unloaded from the camel. That wiry animal itself was not far off assiduously chewing clumps of saltbush and spinifex grass, varying this somewhat monotonous fare by occasional mouthfuls of the mulga twigs within its reach. Five minutes, ten minutes passed, and no Jack reappeared,

nor was the sound of his axe heard in the near distance. Mackay became uneasy.

"I do hope the laddie hasna gone far," he muttered, throwing down the pick handle he was fitting to the steel and looking around anxiously.

"But he'll know how to get back," reassured Bob.

Mackay grunted unbelievably. "That's aye the way wi' new chums in the bush," he declared. "They never remember that everything is alike in this country, an' that only the sun can be taken as a guide." Seizing his rifle he set off in the direction Jack had taken, Bob hastening at his heels; but they had not gone far before they were gazing at a most extraordinary spectacle. There was the delinquent indulging in fierce chase after a great yellow ungainly creature which scrambled around in a narrow circle, turning at intervals to snap savagely at its tormentor, who was aiming numerous but ineffective blows at his quarry with the axe he carried. Round and round they went, and Jack's energy seemed all but spent when Mackay's hearty laugh attracted his attention.

"Ho! ho! ho!" he chuckled, walking leisurely forward and interrupting the performance. Bob at the moment could not see any reason for this display of humour, and certainly Jack did not.

"It attacked me when I was cutting a tree," explained the baffled warrior, "and every time I stopped chasing it, it turned and chased me. I suppose the brute's tired now, or it would be at me again." He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, and eyed his enemy malevolently. The object of his wrath was a peculiar crocodile-like creature with an enormously long tail, short thick-set legs, and a narrow venomous-looking head. It must have measured fully five feet in length, and was certainly ugly enough to disconcert any one who did not know the nature of the beast. Now it rested calmly by the foot of a tree, its head swaying gently and its abnormally elongated tongue shooting out and in with lightning rapidity.

"It's only a poor wee iguana, Jack," consoled Mackay. "It would dae you no harm, though I will admit it doesna look as peaceably inclined as it might; but watch me whistle to it." He strode forward, and kneeling beside the huge iguana—but as the boys noticed, beyond the reach of its sturdy claws

—whistled unmelodiously a selection from a popular opera, and lo! ere the first two bars had been negotiated, Jack's recent enemy's head began to nod rhythmically with the music! and its whole body took on an attitude of satisfied repose.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" was all that Jack could say, while Bob exploded into uncontrollable mirth. Then the musician ceased his labours.

"I'm no sayin' that anybody could charm the beastie like me," he admitted with exceeding modesty. "My whistle's got a wonderfu' movin' element in it——"

"It has," agreed the pair, with unanimous promptitude, shuddering with painful emotion. The big man laughed.

"I was sure ye would coincide wi' my statement," he blandly said. "And now let us get the happy home fixed afore sundown. The darkness will be on in two shakes o' a kangaroo's tail."

On returning with the necessary saplings to the clearing they had prepared as a site for their future dwelling, they found the Shadow awaiting them somewhat anxiously.

"I was wondering where ye had got to," he remarked, apparently much relieved, "I saw some nigs in the district a couple o' days ago, and I was afraid they had scooped ye in."

"Niggers, here?" cried Mackay.

"They were both out watching me try to kill an iguana," said Jack, with a laugh.

"But you shouldn't kill iguanas," reproved the Shadow. "They never mean no harm, and they does wonderful good around a camp, killing snakes and centipedes and other crawlers."

"Oh, I'll remember next time," assured Jack; "I'll remember to run like smoke when I see one like the brute I tackled to-day. An ugly wobbly monster over five feet long, harmless!" It was clear that Jack was by no means convinced.

That evening the entire population of Golden Flat gathered around the newcomers' camp fire, and did much to entertain the boys with their various anecdotes and reminiscences. Desperate encounters with natives, thrilling tales of the early Coolgardie days, and narratives of prospecting journeys through the waterless bush regions followed each other in quick succession. The intense heat of the day had now given place to an extraordinarily chill atmosphere, which was the more noticeable because of the sudden change, and all huddled closely to the glowing logs. But it soon became apparent that the cheerful warmth of the fire was attracting other and by no means welcome visitors, and though no one seemed to be in any way concerned, Jack viewed the innumerable pests and crawling creatures that kept forcing their way into the flames with some apprehension. The conversation had narrowed down to a wordy discussion on the possibilities of gold being found in the far interior.

"Every bushman believes that there's bound to be gold in the Never Never," reiterated Emu Bill, assisting a large-sized centipede into the fire with a *sang froid* that aroused Jack's horror. But he was yet to be more surprised.

"Don't move, Jack," said the Shadow's voice from somewhere behind him. "There's a black snake trying to snuggle into your trousers pocket. I'll spifflicate him in a jiff;" and he promptly gripped the intruding reptile by the tail, swung it once round his head, then cracked it as one might the lash of a whip, breaking its back in an instant.

"I suppose I'll get accustomed to it," said Jack, with a shudder.

"I'll show you how to slaughter them yourself to-morrow," comforted the Shadow.

"I say, Mackay," said Nuggety Dick, from his distant corner, "ye haven't told us about your trip to the old country yet! How did ye take to it after your ten years' Australian experience?"

But Mackay would only commit himself to one statement. "It's a grand country, Nuggety," said he, with impressive earnestness; "but it belongs to too few folk." Which enigmatical reflection seemed to give his hearers some food for thought.

CHAPTER IV

The Treasure of the Mine

During the week that followed, the work at Golden Flat proceeded apace. Sinking operations were being conducted all along the line of the auriferous wash from Never Never Dave's shaft down to the Golden Promise Claim, and red-coloured flags were almost daily making their appearance on the various windlass heads, indicating that the fortunate owners of the claims had bottomed on gold. Never Never Dave's excavation, as has been already mentioned, struck the pay gravel at the ten-foot level, and that easy-going individual was leisurely engaged scooping out the rich conglomerate-looking cement while his neighbours were yet industriously seeking for the golden channel. Nuggety Dick was the next to reach it; his ground was directly adjacent to Dave's, yet his shaft was down fifteen feet before the welcome red symbol showed at his workings, thus indicating the gradual dip of the ancient waterway. Before the week was out, however, every shaft had bottomed on the golden gravel excepting that which Mackay, Bob, and Jack were sinking. But this delay in reaching the longed-for stratum in no way disconcerted Mackay.

"The chances are," said he, "that, when we do strike it at the lower level, the wash itself will be deeper and wider."

This thought was a wonderful incentive to them all, for the gold-carrying gravel laid bare in the other workings was scarcely two feet in thickness, and, though its richness was unquestionable, its limited nature was only too apparent. Bob and Jack took their turns in the shaft with great good humour and enthusiasm, and though at first their efforts to penetrate the flinty formations encountered were almost unavailing, they quickly acquired the science of the work under the constant guidance of Mackay, who also taught them how to temper their tools for the different kinds of strata, how to drill holes for the gelignite charges so as to obtain the most efficient results. Their early training especially fitted them for this kind of tuition, and they proved very apt pupils. Mackay, though such a strong man himself, was no advocate of the supremacy of muscle even in shaft-sinking.

"Science beats it every time," said he. "Of course, I'm no denyin' that, where baith strength and science are combined there's a wonderfu' advantage, but it doesna often happen that a strong man physically is blessed wi' a superabundity o' mental gifts——"

Jack, of course, could not resist the interruption. "We can't allow that from you, sir," in his most sedate tones.

Mackay smiled. "I'm vera pleased to have your implied testimonial, Jack," he returned, with twinkling eyes; "but then I was about to remark that an exception was needed to prove any rule, an' I was to assume mysel' to be the exception in this case. No, no, mind conquers matter, and that is why you two are just as fitted to pit doon a shaft as the strongest navvy in the country." All of which the boys found to be quite in accordance with facts when they got accustomed to wielding the pick, hammer, and drill.

"Observe any cracks in the formation," their kindly instructor would call down to them; "attack everything in the lines o' least resistance." And by following his advice to the letter they quickly discovered that gold-mining was by no means as difficult as they had imagined.

Now, just when the first week of their labours had concluded, the shaft was sunk twenty feet; a few more feet would decide whether or not Bob's theory would prove correct.

"I tell you what, mates," said Nuggety Dick that evening, "you were just a bit venturesome in sinking so far from the main workings."

"I don't think so," returned Bob, confidently. "We'll get there all right, Nuggety. Another five feet should do it." And another five feet did do it. Two days later Mackay's pick broke through the covering layer of diorite in the bottom of the shaft, and with a grunt of satisfaction he called on Jack, who was at the windlass, to lower the bucket.

"I'm sending up some specimens," he cried.

Jack gave a howl of delight; hearing which, Bob, who had been reading in the tent, rushed out, and with eyes gleaming with suppressed excitement, hurried to the shaft mouth. He was just in time to assist in the raising of the heavily laden bucket. Nearer and nearer it came to the surface. Would the

wash be gold-bearing or would it be barren? The boys' agitation was intense. Their limbs trembled and their hands could scarcely retain their grip on the windlass arms. Down below stood Mackay, perspiring with his arduous toil, watching the bucket ascend with somewhat anxious eyes. The glare of the sun across the shaft's mouth made everything apparent to him, while he himself was obscured from view in the shadows. The bucket had almost reached the top; already Bob had stretched out his hand to grasp it, when a stentorian shout from below arrested the movement, and, for a space, the fateful harbinger of good or evil tidings hung motionless.

"Keep a good grip o' your nerves—an' the windlass, lads. Heave away!"

The caution came in time. It suddenly flashed upon them both that a single slip on their part, a momentary hesitation, might prove disastrous to their friend below. Again Bob stretched out his hand, his eyes caught the glisten of gold, but his grip was sure. Next instant he and Jack were gazing at a whitish mass, through which shone myriad dazzling particles of the yellow metal. A few minutes later Mackay was jerked to the surface; there was no hesitancy in the movement of the windlass now; the moment of extreme tension had come and gone. Together they sat down on the sand and examined the specimens one by one without speaking. Then Mackay rose to his feet.

"The theory was right, Bob," he said calmly. "This is the richest stuff on the lead. I don't know how much there is of it yet, but there's enough to make you glad you came out to Australia, anyhow. Run up the flag, Jack," he directed, turning to that youth, who was still joyously examining his treasures. "Let Golden Flat know that we three are right here every time." He spoke jovially, yet so quietly, that his words exercised a kind of restraint over his hearers, which he was quick to notice.

"Never mind me, my lads," he said. "You've got every reason to rejoice, but you must remember that I'm an old hand at gold digging, an' the yellow dirt doesna mak' me enthuse like it aince did." Truly enough, to this strange Scot of many moods, the excitement and risk attending discovery was everything; he viewed the rich reward likely to be his with almost stoical indifference. Indeed, he was engaged in a deep philosophical argument with Bob concerning the uses and abuses of gold as a factor in the world's

history, when the population of Golden Flat arrived in a body to tender their congratulations.

"But in these days," Bob was saying, "not to have gold is held to be almost a proof of one's inferiority. The world does not judge from an intellectual standpoint. It demands wealth. No matter what brains a young man may have at home, the chances are against his ever coming to the front unaided. Gold——" Bob stopped suddenly, having become aware of a growing audience behind him.

From the group old battered Dead Broke made grave utterance.

"I believe your ideas are kerect, Bob; but from what I sees here you can thank your lucky stars that the gold has come to you early in life. Look at me an' Nuggety——"

"An' me," broke in the youthful Shadow, with affected mournfulness.

At this stage Jack came forward with a handful of fine gold slugs and coarse dust.

"I've just dollied a few samples," said he, handing his treasure to Mackay. "That should go about twenty ounces to the ton, shouldn't it?"

"Nearer two hundred, Jack," returned Mackay, smiling at his eagerness.

"We're jolly glad to know you've struck it, boys," said Nuggety Dick, earnestly. "And we hopes it will be a thicker patch than ours, for, from what I sees, we can work out our claims in less than a month."

"Well, we sunk here on the spec. o' striking it bigger on the rise," said Mackay. "But whether or no we've been successful I canna say just yet."

"I'm going to sink for a deeper patch," growled Emu Bill. "I believe we've only got a floater in our claims, an' the true bottom should be further down."

"I'd advise you to work out all the shallow ground first," said Mackay. "You never know when a rush may come sailin' along. Keep stackin' the stuff until we get a battery up; don't trouble dollyin' it—it's only wasting time."

His advice was sound, and was greeted with murmurs of assent. The water supply at the camp was daily becoming less and less; no doubt more could be tapped by sinking a deep shaft, but this would involve considerable delay, and the citizens of Golden Flat were by no means anxious to leave their congenial occupation at so early a period. By roughly grinding the cement-like wash, and rinsing off the lighter sands, fairly accurate assays could be obtained from sample specimens; but to continue such a work on a large scale would drain the soak within a week. The only feasible plan was to excavate as much of the gravel as possible in anticipation of a crushing battery arriving on the ground, which would surely be there immediately news of the Flat's richness spread abroad. And so the days passed, and the sun beat down fiercely on the toiling band who strove with grim Nature for her treasure. Ever and anon the dull roar of exploding gelignite indicated how man was using the utmost help civilization could give in order to shatter the many refractory obstacles in his path.

At the Golden Promise Mine sinking operations were going on very successfully; three feet of the golden conglomerate had been penetrated, and still there were no signs of the dreaded barren pipe-clay formation appearing. Bob's theory had already been proved to be correct. Tons upon tons of rich stone had been raised to the surface. The actual width of the channel was but eight feet; but the amount of cubic contents held in the claim was bound to be several hundred of tons at least, even supposing the drift went no deeper than the already known three feet.

Covered with dust and grime, and blackened by powder smoke, Bob and Jack were working together one morning in the large chamber they had made in the lower workings, and Mackay stood patiently by the windlass awaiting the call to raise the boys from the danger below, for they were firing a difficult charge. They had grown quite accustomed to the use of gelignite by this time, and, as Mackay proudly informed Emu Bill, they never once had had a misfire.

On this occasion, however, some delay had occurred owing to the fuse which Mackay had sent down becoming detached from the cap. He always arranged the charges on the surface, calculating the number of plugs required, and the length of fuse necessary, when he finished drilling the holes below, leaving the boys to insert the charges and see them properly

fired. At last came the warning from Jack—"All ready!"—as he slipped his foot in the loop of the wire rope which was hanging in readiness. In a few seconds he was on the surface, while the rope was again rapidly lowered for Bob, who was even then lighting a match to apply to the fuse. The two on top heard the match scratch on the box, and immediately thereafter the familiar sputtering of the fuse echoed to their ears, but still no sound from Bob! Yet the faint, insidious odour of the burning fuse crept up to their nostrils, and they knew that something had happened. Mackay's face grew livid.

"It's only a sixty seconds' fuse," he muttered hoarsely. "Stand by the windlass, Jack. I'll slide down the rope."

Jack seemed to awake from a stupor. "I'm lightest," he cried; and threw himself at the rope without waiting for Mackay to brake the windlass barrel.

The iron arms of the windlass spun round, a few more loose coils only remained on the barrel. The brawny Scot hesitated not an instant. He rushed at the gyrating bar, and received the shock of the descending steel on his bared chest. The windlass rope held firm. Another revolution, and it would have run off the barrel and dashed the boy who clung to its strands to a certain death beside his companion. It was all over in a few seconds. Not knowing how his impetuous action had nearly caused certain disaster, Jack slid down the rope with lightning speed, and almost immediately his steady call—"Heave away!"—was heard. And now came the trial of strength where all the science in the world could not assist; only twenty seconds' grace, a double load on the windlass, and twelve plugs of one of the most powerful explosives known beneath! But Mackay was equal to the task. The windlass arm spun round once again, and on the fifteenth second Jack swung into view, his foot resting in the loop, one lacerated hand grasping tightly at the rope, and supporting in his right arm the blood-dripping form of Bob, his comrade. Mackay reached out his strong arm, and drew them both to safety just as a thunderous explosion occurred which hurled tons of massive rocks to the shaft mouth and beyond.

Five minutes later all three were seated in the tent repairing their bruises, and making sundry comments on the occurrence. Bob's face was almost deathly pallid, and the blood still trickled from a deep gash in the back of

his head; it appeared that just after he had applied the match to the fuse a portion of the iron roof of the excavation had given way, hurling him unconscious to the ground.

"I remembered no more," said he, "until I found myself in the tent here."

"It was a vera close shave, my lad," said Mackay, with suppressed emotion. "I'm no goin' to expatiate on Jack's quick action in the matter, but he maist certainly saved your life. It needed some nerve to gang doon on top o' a burnin' charge o' dynamite."

Bob smiled affectionately at his companion, and reached out his hand; and Jack, flushing almost guiltily, was forced to show his cruelly torn fingers.

"And, Bob," said he, almost tearfully, "it was Mackay——"

"You stop, right there, youngster," interrupted that gentleman, "I'll tak' nane o' the credit from you. You deserve it a', my lad. I'm proud o' you, I am. Now, I think you'd both be the better o' a rest. I'll go up and see how the other boys are getting on. I hope none o' the grinning hyenas noticed anything."

But the "grinning hyenas" had noticed, and Mackay met them in a body immediately he went out of the tent. There was the Shadow, Nuggety, Emu Bill, and company hastening forward, dismay showing plainly on their features.

"What's happened, Mac? Any one killed?" they shouted.

"Calm yoursel's, boys, calm yoursel's," adjured Mackay, "there's been no serious damage done. But I'll need to timber the roof o' the drive before we do any more work below; a bit o' it fell and gave young Bob a nasty crack on the cranium just as he fired a heavy charge. Jack got him out a' richt, but it vera nearly was a funeral."

Very sincere were the sympathetic expressions of the group. The unassuming attitude of Mackay's mates, as the boys were called, their happy temperament, had endeared them to the dwellers on Golden Flat, and now they trooped into the tent, and, in their rough kindly way, congratulated the pair on their escape, much to Jack's confusion. No truer-hearted men could

be found than those battered pioneers of the desert land. Their life amid Nature's grim solitudes is one filled with unceasing cares, unseen dangers lurk for ever in their lonely path, their stern, set faces are but the result of bush environment which insidiously yet surely marks its victims with her stamp of immobility.

"You'll be all right in a day or so, Bob," spoke Nuggety Dick, cheerily, after examining the wound.

"If ye'll let me, I'll take your shift until ye're better," said the Shadow, hesitatingly; "I can't do much in my own shaft now without a mate, it's too deep for me to work alone."

Bob thanked him gratefully. "I hate to keep things back," said he, "and if Mackay has no objections——"

"Don't worry about that, Bob," broke in Mackay; "I'll mak' use o' the Shadow until ye are well again, unless he misbehaves vera badly."

That same afternoon a new discovery was made by Emu Bill, which had the effect of raising the excitement of the camp to fever heat. Having continued his shaft down through the supposed bottom of the golden wash in his claim, he suddenly came upon a strange soapy grey deposit, not unlike putty in appearance.

"That proves we hasn't struck bottom yet," was his verdict, as he examined the odd formation keenly; "there's no pipeclay about that, there isn't." Then his eyes blinked and stared and blinked again. "Howlin' blazes," he murmured gently to himself, "this will give the boys a shock, it will." He had carelessly broken a piece of the clayey mass between his finger and thumb, and behold, the line of fracture showed golden yellow, and in the dim candle-light innumerable dazzling pin-points of colour gleamed throughout the entire specimen. In a few moments he was on the surface, bearing the cherished find in his hand. "I have got something, Nuggety," said he, addressing his partner, "that shid make ye gasp."

Nuggety gasped in anticipation, then uttered a yell of delight as his eyes beheld the glittering specimen.

"Is it a new level, Emu?" he asked eagerly.

Emu Bill nodded. "Round up the boys," said he. "It'll give them mighty encouragement to hiv' a look at this here bonanza." Nuggety rushed away at once, and Bill ventured another gaze at his treasure. But somehow he did not seem to derive as much satisfaction from this observation. "Hang it," he growled, closing his hands tightly over the specimen, "I could ha' sworn I saw more gold than that in it at first."

In a few short minutes he was surrounded by an enthusiastic throng.

"Nuggety says you've struck a new level, Bill," they cried almost with one voice.

"I hiv' that," said Bill, with calm satisfaction, "an' from what I can see, there'll be thousands o' tons o' the stuff in our grounds, an' it's just crammed wi' gold."

He cautiously unclosed his hand, and proffered the wonderful stone to Never Never Dave, who examined it keenly, then passed it on to his next neighbour without a word, eyeing Emu Bill reproachfully the while. Strangely enough, no one seemed to appreciate Emu's find but himself; but he smiled and chuckled enough for them all. The last man to examine the specimen was Mackay; he was the latest arrival, having been down below, timbering the tunnel in the shaft which had given way so inopportunately, when the great news reached him.

"An' what's this ye've got, Bill?" he said, receiving the fateful fragment from old Dead Broke Dan, who sighed deeply as he handed it over. "What is it you're playin' at?" he demanded, after a first cursory glance.

"It's all straight, Mac," broke in Bill, eagerly. "It's a fair sample, an' there' lots more o' it, too."

Mackay eyed the speaker with fast-rising disgust. "Dae you ken, Emu," said he, slowly, "if it werena for the fact that I got a' the wind squelched oot o' me the day, I would lay violent hands on ye for puttin' up such a meeserable joke on your friends."

Poor Emu Bill looked dazed. "Why, what's wrong wi' the gold?" he asked feebly. "Surely you ain't goin' to tell me I doesn't know gold from iron pyrites——"

"Poor old Emu must ha' got a touch o' the sun to-day," grunted Never Never, sympathetically.

With a snort of indignation, Bill clutched back his specimen from Mackay, gave one glance at it, then subsided in the sand.

"You're right, boys," he announced from his lowly position in weary dejected tones; "I'm as mad as a hatter."

Not a trace of the yellow metal showed in the stone he now held in his hand.

"I would ha' sworn I saw gold in that stuff," he continued pathetically. "No, no, Emu Bill's finished. Crack me on the head, boys, for Heaven's sake, an' bury me quick."

"An' me too," groaned Nuggety. "I saw the gold, as I'm a livin' sinner, I did."

A glint of joy flashed into Bill's eyes at the words, and he struggled to his feet.

"Come down into the shaft, Mackay, and have a look for yourself," he said. "I do believe the curious stuff is so delicate it can't stand the light."

Still somewhat dubious about Emu Bill's professed honesty of purpose, Mackay was not slow to avail himself of the opportunity of judging for himself whether or not the new formation really did carry visible gold. Then, noting the truly distressed countenance of his old acquaintance, he relented.

"I believe ye did think ye saw gold, Emu," said he, before placing his foot in the sling preparatory to descending the shaft, "an' though I dinna expect to see any glittering bonanza down below here, I'm sort o' convinced *you* saw it right enough. It's the sun, Emu, my man; that's what it is."

Bill shook his head feebly; it was all beyond his comprehension.

"I'll come down after you, Mac," he said. "It's a mighty funny stuff, and you need to break it before it shows colour."

By this time every man in the camp was around the windlass; even Bob, with his bandaged head, had put in appearance, and Jack and the Shadow were also there. Quickly the windlass ran out, and deposited Mackay at the new level exposed, and while the rope went up again for Bill he lit a candle and peered cautiously around. He was looking for snakes, the bite of a certain variety of which induces strange hallucinations. Observing nothing in the shape he dreaded, he heaved a sigh of relief, and turned his attention to the soapy-like stratum from which Bill had broken his wonderful specimen. Only a dull grey muddy deposit was visible. With a jerk and a rattle the haulage rope came down again, and Emu Bill arrived at his side.

"I see nothing, Bill, my man," grunted Mackay.

Bill said not a word, but, taking his pick, smote furiously at the deceiving substance, and as it became disintegrated great gleaming streaks and sheets and scintillating points of gold seemed to show all over it.

"Can ye see anything, Mac?" inquired the wielder of the pick, pausing in his labours, and glancing eagerly at his companion.

"I'm simply flabbergasted," came the slow response. "There seems to be enough gold there to stock a second Bank o' England."

He picked up a piece of the strange formation which showed dazzling yellow lines across its newly broken face, and examined it closely and intently; he rubbed it with his finger, and the brilliance vanished.

"We'd better take up some o' the best-looking bits," he suggested.

Bill laughed. "Why, the hanged stuff won't show a colour on top," he said.

But they decided to chance it all the same, and accordingly Mackay arrived on the surface bearing the result of his investigations tightly wrapped in an old handkerchief, and when the package was opened up a cry of admiration broke from all beholders, so beautiful, indeed, did the specimens appear.

A hoarse call from the underground interrupted their scrutiny.

"For Heaven's sake, boys, put a chain on that there mirage, until I get a look at it."

And while two men went to the windlass and began to haul Bill to the surface, a gradual change began to take place in the nature of the specimens. The yellow sheen grew darker and darker until it shone like bronze, and in this state Bill viewed them on his arrival. Slowly yet surely the bronze shades merged into a strangely variegated purple hue, and, while the onlookers stared aghast, this gradually evolved into the original clayey aspect of the formation surrounding it.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" ejaculated the Shadow.

"It's just a mirage," said Bill, grimly.

The rest of the miners did not care to place on record the state of their feelings, their usually fluent enough speech failed them on this trying occasion. Mackay broke the silence.

"There can be no doubt about the gold being there, boys," said he, "an' in sufficient quantities to make a' oor fortunes—if we could only catch it before it vanished." He stopped, absolutely nonplussed.

Bob, who had not yet spoken, advanced and scrutinized the now wholly dulled ore fragments with alert eyes.

"I don't know that I can help you," he said quietly, "but I should like to try. Anyhow, it's more in my line than yours, for I've studied chemistry a bit."

"What do you make of it, Bob?" asked Mackay, quickly.

The reply came promptly from the lips of the thoughtful student.

"The formation contains gold in an unstable state, but more so gold in solution, both of which oxidize on contact with the air."

To say that Bob's words created extreme interest would be a very mild statement of fact. His audience was comprised of gold-miners of very varied experience and knowledge, yet none of them had ever heard of such a tantalizing deposit as that they had now encountered.

"I may be wrong," continued Bob, "but I don't think there was any mistaking the colours on the stones before they regained their normal aspect. I've seen the same thing often in the laboratory. It was simply Purple

of Cassius, and you'll get the same result by dissolving a small piece of gold in nitric and hydrochloric acids."

"But what about the real gold which was there at first?" inquired Emu Bill. "It was yellow enough, or I'm colour blind."

Bob looked a trifle puzzled. "I should say it was an unstable chloride or sulphide of the metal," he ventured at length. "A combination which very seldom occurs in Nature."

"I'm o' the opinion that Bob's right," spoke Mackay. "This country's full o' odd formations and no one has ever bothered studying them yet."

"If you can save this stuff afore it melts, Bob," grunted Nuggety Dick, "there's bound to be a fortune waiting for you right here; for the clay most likely covers the whole flat."

"I'll take these specimens with me now," decided Bob, "and try some experiments with them;" and he gathered up the deceptive samples and made his way back to the tent, leaving the wondering assembly still in a maze of doubt.

"I do believe he can do it," grunted Emu Bill.

"He's got the finest balanced brain-box I've seen since I struck this howling wilderness," commented Never Never Dave.

"Bob can do anything with chemistry," said Jack, proudly. Then they went their several ways, all pondering deeply.

No more work was done that day: it would have seemed like tempting Providence to continue further operations after two such thrilling happenings had taken place. Bob quietly set about his task of analyzing the troublesome specimens, then quickly discovered that he required a stock of various acids and alkalis to aid him in his efforts.

"We're a' running short of stores anyhow," said Mackay. "We'd better send some one into the township with the camels, and you could get the chemicals required at the same time."

He straightway went and broached the matter to Nuggety Dick and his satellites, and it was promptly arranged that old Dead Broke Dan should be despatched with the team at once. It was by this time near the hour of sundown, and the various camel bells of the party could be heard faintly tinkling in the eastward distance.

"I'll round them up in a jiff," volunteered the Shadow, starting off at a jog trot.

"I'm coming too, Shad!" shouted Jack, and together they entered the scrub, and were soon lost to sight. They had not gone far, however, before the Shadow stopped and listened with something like dismay showing in his face. The bells seemed to be receding into the distance rather than coming nearer.

"I've never heard o' them brutes travelling so fast," he said discontentedly, and they increased their pace to a determined run, which they kept up for fully ten minutes. The bells sounded distinctly nearer now, but that the camels were on the march was plainly evident to the Shadow, whose ear was acutely trained to judging distances by sound.

"I reckon I know what's wrong, Jack," said he. "Some wretched niggers have got them in tow. It's very lucky we came out to-night."

"Is it?" asked Jack, doubtfully.

The Shadow laughed joyously. "We'll have a grand circus on our own to-night, if there ain't too many of them."

"But," said Jack, "we haven't even a rifle with us, and they'll have their spears and boomerangs, won't they?"

"I've got something that will skeer the beggars quicker than any shooting-iron," replied the Shadow. "See, look at this——"

He extracted from some secret recess in his meagre wardrobe a small curiously shaped piece of wood, about six inches long and two inches or so broad, tapering to a fine edge all round.

"That's a ghingi, Jack; I just hitch a bit o' string on to the end, and whizz it round in the air, an' it howls like a dyin' dingo."

"But what good does that do?" Jack persisted, by no means enlightened.

"What good does it do?" echoed the Shadow. "Why, when they hear the screech o' the ghingi-ghingi, they'll either vanish right away or come to hear what it says. The ghingi is their devil, you know, but only the sorcerers o' the tribes can make it speak. I made this here ghingi myself, and, by thunder! it can yell like a good 'un, it can."

The Shadow was evidently quite delighted at the prospect of making use of his handiwork, and as they strode along he managed to infuse Jack with a considerable amount of his enthusiasm. It was now as dark as an Australian night could be, but the steadfast radiance of the myriad stars somewhat neutralized the gloom of the shadows and reflected an eerie sort of half light over the motionless tips of the mulga scrub. At last they were almost up on the clanging bells, and if there had been any doubt in Jack's mind concerning the accuracy of his companion's surmise as to their unusual clangour it disappeared utterly when he heard the droning chant of the aborigines mingle with the rhythmic peals. They had reached a small clearing in the scrub which permitted an uninterrupted line of vision for nearly half a mile, but before leaving the sheltering timber they hesitated, and peered anxiously across the intervening sand plain, and there in the midst of it, darkly discernible, moved the ghostly camel train.

"Now for it," muttered the Shadow, getting the ghingi ready for action. "We must round up them camels afore they get into the bush country again."

He whirled his device quickly around his head, and at once a strange moaning broke upon the air. Faster and faster he spun it round, and the moaning increased to a weird wailing shriek which penetrated across the plain with shivering intensity. At once the bells ceased their clamour and vague cries of alarm echoed back to the boys.

"Let us chase 'em up with it," exclaimed the Shadow, throwing all caution aside. "When they hear the ghingi comin' nearer they won't wait to argue long."

Together they made a wild burst over the ironshot flat, the ghingi sending forth varying notes of wailing terror as they ran. In their excitement they had not calculated on the nearness of the natives, the silence of the bells

perhaps somewhat confused them, but they halted when they found themselves almost on the tail of the last camel, a huge animal which the Shadow had no difficulty in recognizing by its unusual size. All this time the harsh unmusical cries of the disquieted aborigines rent their ears, but apparently the dusky band had not yet decided to give up their stolen charges.

"Judging from the volume o' music let loose there must be 'bout half a dozen o' the beggars," whispered the Shadow. "Here, Jack, take this blooming ghingi, and let her rip. My arms are about busted. I'll do a bit o' a yell myself and see what happens."

Jack seized the string of the syren and whirled with a will, and from the lips of the Shadow there issued a most lugubrious groan, which seemed to combine in it all the horrors that any demon of darkness could have conjured up. That seemed to decide matters; with screams of terror seven or eight stalwart blacks broke away from a point where they had been huddled ahead of the camels; their dark forms were just visible as they fled, and they made a somewhat ghost-like spectacle. Jack gave a low chuckle of delight.

"Your voice fetched them, Shadow," said he.

"Keep the ghingi whizzing, Jack, keep it whizzing!" came the agonized reply. "I couldn't do it again for all the gold in Australia. My throat's burst, it is."

Their concerted action was now prompt and effective. In a trice the Shadow had a grip of the nose-rope of the leading camel, and had turned the unwieldy train on a backward course. Once more the bells rang out their noisy clamour, yet still the ghingi sounded loud and shrill, and still the jarring cries of the stricken warriors echoed in reply from a not too remote distance. The adventuresome pair were not yet out of all danger. Indeed it soon became evident to them that the mystified aborigines were not altogether willing to accept the warning call of the ghingi as a reason for the total abdication of their plunder. Their discordant cries were just a bit too close to be pleasant.

"If they rush us, Jack," the Shadow hoarsely whispered, as he tugged at Misery's nose-rope, "we'll have to make a bolt for it."

Jack grunted a sympathetic affirmative. "I can't swing this wretched old ghingi much longer," he said.

Even while he spoke the savages seemed to decide on a definite course of action; their yells suddenly grew louder and nearer. It was very probable they had observed the boys through the gloom, and were thus awakened to a knowledge of the ruse by which they had been deceived. Anyhow there could be no doubt as to their intentions; they meant to recapture the camels, and that right speedily, and yet the Shadow was loth to leave his charges.

"They'll get us when we enter the scrub," said he, with dismal resignation. "The beggars won't tackle us in the open. I reckon we'll have to do a scoot, Jack."

Jack had already arrived at that conclusion; but now, as he rested from his labours for an instant, a bright idea seized him. They were scarcely a hundred yards from the edge of the timber; whatever was to be done must be done quickly. Without a word he rushed back to the rearmost camel, and hastily secured the tongue of the bell encircling its neck by passing it through a loop in the leathern thong which hung loose for that purpose. Moving hurriedly on he silenced each of the jangling bells in the same way, and for a short space the cumbrous train proceeded in absolute quiet.

"They'll think we've stopped, and it may keep them back for a bit," Jack whispered.

The Shadow nodded comprehensively. It had come as a shock to him that this new chum companion of his should have thought of the simple plan first, and he felt somewhat aggrieved in consequence. Surely enough the yells of the natives seemed to recede into the distance; the silence of the bells had certainly confused them.

"They'll be with us in a jiff," calmly said the Shadow, as they entered the scrub, in which prognostication he was quite correct.

A chorus of fiercer yells than before suddenly broke upon the still air, then came the angry beating of spears upon shields, and the pat-pat of many feet on the sand. But now came another unexpected diversion. Away in the distance a heavy report boomed out; again and again the thunderous echoes of exploding cordite crashed through the night.

The Shadow chuckled long and joyously. "That's Mackay's new rifle," he said. "I would know the crack of it anywhere."

Other and varying discharges quickly followed, making it plain that the entire community at Golden Flat had grown alarmed at the prolonged absence of the boys, and were signalling in order to guide their return in the darkness. The yelling horde at the first ominous sound had ceased their clamour, but soon they broke out afresh and with renewed energy. They meant to make one more effort to recover their prize before it was hopelessly beyond their reach. With appalling shouts they quickly drew near.

"It's hard luck to be forced to clear out now," complained Jack, marvelling much at his companion's unsubdued joy.

That wily youth quietly unhitched the bells from the necks of the three leading camels.

"I think we'll best the niggers after all, Jack," he said. "I wasn't exactly willing to let you risk it before; but you can steer by the gunshots, can't you?"

"Of course," replied Jack, clutching at the nose-rope of Misery which the Shadow had relinquished.

"Well, you take the team into camp, and I'll run the niggers a bit o' a circus dance." He was gone at once, but not an instant too soon; the blacks were already within a hundred yards of them.

Jack continued his course guided by the reports which now rang out at regular intervals, and he smiled quietly to himself when a confused jangle of bells sounded away to the southward, and his smile developed into a hearty laugh when, with howls presumably of delight, the warrior band stampeded in that direction.

"I think the Shadow knows how to take care of himself," he reflected contentedly, as he continued his course in peace.

The Shadow's trick was certainly effective. It was also risky, but that feature seemed rather enjoyable than otherwise to the impetuous young Australian.

Far to the south he sped, jangling the bells at intervals to draw his pursuers on, and when their noisy yelling sounded too close for his liking, he silenced the tell-tale alarms and veered off in a different direction, always taking care to work in towards the camp. A veritable will-o'-the-wisp he was, and the baffled natives soon tired of their hopeless chase, no doubt marvelling much at the extraordinary activity shown by the fleeing camel train!

At the camp considerable consternation was felt over the non-return of the camel hunters. They had been gone over two hours, before Mackay ventured to express his fears for their safety.

"The Shadow must have got twisted in his bearings," he said. "The bells were within a couple o' miles off when they started, and they seem to have gone further away instead o' comin' nearer."

"Mebbe the cantankerous brutes bolted," suggested Nuggety Dick. "The Shadow couldn't bush hissel' in creation wi' the old Cross showin' in the sky."

So, indeed, they all thought, but each of them felt strangely anxious nevertheless, and when Mackay fetched his rifle from his tent and began to blaze away methodically, they were not long in following his lead. The bells had been some time out of range when the first shot was fired, but suddenly their harsh jangling burst afresh on their ears, and to their surprise and dismay they seemed to be heading towards the south.

"Keep your popguns going," said Mackay. "The Shadow must have lost his nerve and got slewed."

So was the young bushman condemned and abused while he pursued his erratic course, and Jack came in for more sympathy than he would have appreciated had he been within hearing.

"What in thunder can the howlin' idiot mean by zig-zagging like that?" exclaimed Never Never Dave, listening to the intermittent peals of the bells with deep concern. Then faintly over the mulga scrub came the yells of the discomfited blacks, and at once Golden Flat camp was aroused to strenuous action; scarcely a word was spoken, each man gripped his rifle, and almost as one body, they made a wild burst in the direction from which the

alarming sounds had come. And Bob, though almost in a high fever from the effects of the wound in his head, entirely forgot his weakness, and kept pace with Mackay.

Silent and grim, like a raging Nemesis, the small company hurried on their vengeful way; but they had not gone far when they became aware of a slight commotion in the bush directly in their path, and almost before they could realize it, the great hulking forms of the camels loomed out through the darkness, with Jack at their head.

"Well, I'll be kicked! And why isn't ye slaughtered, young feller?" demanded Nuggety Dick, in helpless amazement. "We never dreamt o' seein' ye alive again——"

"Where's the Shadow, Jack?" interrupted Mackay.

Jack laughed. "He's acting decoy for the blacks," he said.

The big man seemed to tremble with suppressed emotion.

"And I was blaming him for getting bushed!" he said, in a tone of deep self-reproach.

A harsh jangle of bells close at hand interrupted further speech, and a cheery voice spoke from the gloom.

"Say, boss, ye needn't ever be skeerd 'bout me gettin' bushed; but them camel bells are mighty heavy, an' I'm just about blown out waltzing them around."

The Shadow approached, gave the bells a final shake, then flung them with a clatter to the ground. A few words served to explain matters, and it was with a feeling of devout thankfulness that the party returned slowly to camp.

"You must never run risks like that again, my laddies," Mackay admonished quietly, in the midst of the general rejoicings over the plucky rescue of the camel train.

"Jack and me didn't take no risks," came the gay reply. "We always knew by their howling when the beggars were coming too close. It's been a grand

picnic for us both, hasn't it, Jack?"

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," answered Jack, with a chuckle of keen delight.

CHAPTER V

The Rush at Golden Flat

Dead Broke Dan had been gone a week from Golden Flat on his errand for stores, and in this time the extent of the "pay gravel" in the different mines had been fairly accurately estimated. Developments all along the line proved the existence of a rich but limited layer of the gold-carrying wash from end to end of the workings. At the Golden Promise mine the auriferous deposit, as had been anticipated, had occurred in a considerably deeper drift than in any of the others, the reason of course, being in accordance with Bob's theory that the sudden uprise of the old channel would cause an accumulation of the wash directly on the incline, and so it had happened; the thickness of the stratum was here nearly four feet, or almost twice that in all the other claims. Beyond this, however, no direct trace of the ancient waterway could be discovered; a broad lagoon-like mass of the tantalizing clay which had so mystified Emu Bill intervened, sparkling and gleaming in its deceptive beauty until raised to the surface when it unfailingly relapsed into its muddy, sordid state, to the disgust of all beholders. This odd formation was found to underlie the genuine gold-carrying cement in all the shafts, and its presence provided a topic for much vituperative language.

Until the various chemicals arrived Bob was unable to make any analysis of the much-abused deposit, but he was never tired of examining samples of it, powdering them up and applying the fire test in the hope that whatever refractory gas or element was present, and binding the gold in an invisible state, might be driven off. He never cared to say much concerning the results of these experiments, but that he received undoubted satisfaction from his labours was very evident. He was engaged roasting some of the fine grains of the clay in a crucible when Mackay entered the tent on this morning in search of a pick-handle he had mislaid.

"Well, Bob," said he, "an' are ye gettin' any nearer a solution to that mystery of Nature?"

Bob silently pointed to the crucible on the small Primus stove from which dense yellow fumes were issuing.

"Smell that," he said.

Mackay sniffed right heartily, and nearly choked in consequence.

"An' what sort o' a perfume do ye call that?" he demanded, when he had regained his composure.

"Chlorine," smilingly returned the chemist. "The clay is soaked in it, and any text-book will tell you that chlorine has a great affinity for gold."

Mackay became interested at once. "Let me hear your line o' argument, Bob," he grunted. "This is a matter o' vera considerable importance, an' I'll be the last to discourage ye in your efforts."

Bob smiled just a trifle sadly. "I haven't been able to work in the shaft for a week," he began.

"An' ye'll no work in the shaft until that head o' yours is richt better," interrupted Mackay. "I'm no' so sure," he continued, "whether I should alloo ye to worry as you're doin' aboot that wretched stuff."

The young man looked gratefully at the speaker, then turned his gaze once more to the smoking crucible.

"I think I have discovered how to treat it," he said slowly. "The chlorine must be brought into contact with another gas offering a greater affinity than gold: on their combination the gold will be set free in a metallic state, and can be saved in the ordinary way. All we have to do is to pump hydrogen gas into a vat containing a solution of the clayey mixture, keep emptying off the slimes, and in time the residue must be a highly concentrated gold wash. It's not very difficult, is it? I only need those acids to prove the practical working of the scheme."

Mackay remained silent for a moment, apparently deep in thought.

"You'll do it, Bob," he broke out eagerly. "Dead Broke should be back wi' the acids any time now, an' you'll be able to finish your tests; but I hae no

doubt ye'll accomplish what we all wish, an' ye'll deserve your reward, my laddie."

About noon of the same day Dead Broke Dan was sighted in the distance, returning with the camel team, much to the relief of all in camp, for he was already a full day overdue.

"I was a bit skeert that ole Dead Broke had anchored himself in the township," growled Nuggety Dick, as they all congregated at his shaft to watch the lumbering train approach.

"If he drove the animals like that all the way," hazarded Never Never Dave, "he could hiv been here two days ago. Why, the old heathen *is* forcing the pace."

The camels were certainly travelling at an unusually rapid rate; heavily laden as they were, they were actually ambling over the sand, and old Dead Broke Dan was running energetically alongside, plying his long whip with a will.

"I can't make it out," said Mackay. "Dead Broke knows well enough that it's dangerous to rush those brutes in that fashion. There must be something wrong."

Something apparently was wrong, for when the great hulking beasts staggered into camp, their flanks were heaving convulsively, and their mouths were flecked with foam. Their driver, too, seemed in the last stage of collapse.

"There's a rush comin', mates," he panted. "Macguire's gang followed me out from Kalgoorlie. I tried to shake them off an' doubled back on my own tracks, but they've got horses and buggies, an' I couldn't lose them, no matter how I dodged. They camped less'n a mile from me last night; but I didn't unload the camels, an' scooted about one o'clock in the morning so as to get in ahead to tell you."

"We couldn't have kept it quiet much longer anyhow, boys," said Nuggety Dick. "An' I don't think we'd have minded a decent crowd comin' to the flat, but Macguire's a holy terror, and his gang are a tough party to handle."

"There's one howlin' satisfaction, mates," laughed Emu Bill. "They'll get nothin' but that miserable miradgy clay outside our pegs. I kin just fancy I hear Macguire's words when he sees his gold vanish." He grinned delightedly at the thought.

Mackay did not say much, he knew that a rush was inevitable, but Macguire was not exactly the kind of man he would care to have as a near neighbour. He was a noted bully, card-sharper, and mine-jumper, though he ostensibly kept an hotel in the township where men of a similar fraternity were wont to congregate.

"How many are in the crowd, Dead Broke?" he asked.

"'Bout a dozen, I calc'late."

"And we are only eight," mused Mackay.

"You don't think the sneakin' thief will try to jump this here circus?" ejaculated Nuggety Dick.

"You may just bet your boots the same individual'll no work himsel' if he can find it already done for him," came the answer. "I shouldna wonder a bit if we have some trouble. What are you grinning at, you young baboon?" he demanded, turning to the Shadow, who appeared to find much cause for merriment in the doubtful state of things.

The Shadow subsided at once. "Man boss," he complained reproachfully, "does ye think we is a gentle little Sunday-school party, just waiting to be swallowed?"

Mackay snorted in disgust. "If it werena for these laddies," he said to himself, "I would dearly enjoy a scrimmage; but I seem to have become mair cautious since they've been wi' me. It's no richt that they should see the wickedness o' human nature in its worst aspect a' at aince."

"I see them coming!" cried Bob, who was scanning the horizon closely, and a dim sand cloud in the far eastward distance was sure enough evidence that the rush would ere long be in their midst. Soon the various outlines of horsemen and buggies could be traced amid the enveloping dust; quickly the frenzied gold-seekers drew near, and wild halloos mingled with the

cracking of whips, and the laboured plunging of horses' hoofs on the ironshot sand plain. Ahead of the main party, mounted on a powerful bay horse, which he was cruelly spurring on to its last effort, rode Macguire, a tall, awkward brute of a man, whose heavy countenance as he came near, bore the exulting leer of the professional braggart and bully. At a mad gallop he forced his jaded beast right up to Nuggety Dick's shaft, then halted with a vicious jerk on the curb rein, and surveyed the awaiting group with a triumphant grin.

"So you thought you were goin' to run this show yourselves," he sneered from his position in the saddle.

"I guess you've struck it plumb first shot," calmly returned Emu Bill, rolling his quid in his mouth with evident relish, and ejecting a streak of tobacco juice which came dangerously near to finding a resting-place on the new-comer's boots.

Macguire snarled, and looked round to see if his satellites were near at hand, and, noting their close proximity, he jumped from his horse, threw the reins carelessly over a mulga sapling, and examined the stacked wash on the surface with unconcealed joy.

"An' who was the discoverer o' this bonanza?" he demanded, aggressively, addressing every one in general.

Nuggety Dick gave a snort of annoyance. "For a mean impertinent swab ye beat anything I've ever met," said he, in his politest tones. "An' if ye doesn't take yer miserable carcase clear o' my pegs instanter, ye'll find what ye're lookin' for in about two shakes o' a muskittie's eyelid."

At that moment the rest of Macguire's Rush appeared on the scene, and with boisterous laughter hurried to range themselves by their chief's side. They were a motley crew, comprising the very worst product of the goldfields, and they glared at the owners of Golden Flat with uncontrolled malevolence. Macguire eyed his choice associates with satisfaction, before responding to Nuggety Dick's peremptory request, then he turned the flood-gates of his wrath loose on that amiable gentleman, who listened with dangerous *sang froid*. War was certainly imminent, but before the actual

outbreak had occurred, Mackay left his position beside Jack, and stepped forward.

"This is my quarrel, Nuggety," said he. "The gentleman was looking for the discoverer o' the flat, an' I should be sorry if he went away before makin' my acquaintance."

The tone was quiet almost to mildness, and Jack and Bob marvelled much thereat; but the Shadow laughed softly to himself.

"Oh, it was you, was it?" blustered Macguire. "An' why in thunder didn't ye report to me? We might have come peaceably at first, but now we mean to boost ye out of it. I know ye hasn't registered yer find, for I has watched the Warden's office ever since you an' them youngsters passed through the township, an' there's been no notices posted. Now I calc'late we'll just begin where you leave off, an' we are obliged to ye for doin' so much work for us. Ain't that right, boys?"

A yell of approbation greeted his words.

"You've made a vera serious error," said Mackay, with unruffled serenity. "You've neglected to consider that we keep guns in camp, an' there's twa or three o' them lookin' at ye now. Furthermore, we were just dyin' for a scrimmage when you popped your ugly head along, an', though ye beat us by two in numbers, I dinna just feel tremblin' wi' anxiety over the finish o' the circus. No, no, Macguire, ye canna bluff this crowd——"

"Does ye know who I am?" howled Macguire. "I'm the champion bruiser o' the fields, I is."

"And ye look it every time," retorted Mackay. "But before we gang in for wholesale bloodshed, we'd better settle our personal differences. I hae objected strongly to your unmannerly inceevelity——"

"Ho! ho! ho!" roared the bruiser, rolling up his shirt-sleeves with professional exactitude. "Now, boys, the funeral is off until I knock this rooster out."

"Right O!" came the ready response from the hired ruffians, who never doubted for a moment the all-conquering prowess of their chief.

Nuggety Dick, Emu Bill, Jack, the Shadow, and Bob, quietly ranged themselves on one side, their hands gripping the butts of the revolvers in their belts. In the near distance, beyond the windlass, with rifles resting on the timber for greater steadiness, Never Never Dave and Dead Broke Dan kept the deadly tubes gazing at Macguire's band, much to these warriors' disquietude. It had been Mackay's idea to have them thus prepared; the wisdom of it was already clearly evidenced.

And now Bob and Jack trembled for the safety of their friend. Macguire was both taller and broader than Mackay, and his short bull neck and bloated features gave him a decidedly repulsive appearance. But to their astonishment Mackay's face betrayed not the slightest trace of concern, though his eyes shone with a strange light. He had taken upon himself the battle of the entire camp, and he knew it.

With a yell Macguire rushed to the attack, and his right hand lunged ponderously forward, only to find itself warded lightly aside. Wildly he attempted to guard with his left; but Mackay's blow came like a lightning stroke, straight from the shoulder, and was not to be denied. Macguire staggered under the shock of the concussion, but recovered himself, and with savage rage struck blindly again and again at his antagonist's head, only to find his great fists beat the empty air. Mackay simply warded off the vain strokes, and stood his ground, a grim smile beginning to dawn on his features. He had discovered the weakness of his opponent; Macguire's strength was his whole support—one of his terrible blows would have proved fatal to most men—and so had his reputation grown! But Mackay's anger burned fierce within him, and he waited his chance; it soon came. Macguire, aroused to an extraordinary pitch of ferocity, made again a desperate swinging stroke at his enemy's head with the usual futile result; but ere he could recover from the impetus of his foolish action Mackay's great fists caught him full in the face, one after the other, with a force that hurled the bully over in the sand. But all was not over yet; the bruiser had evidently no lack of animal courage. He picked himself up slowly, peered through his fast closing eyes to locate his enemy, and leaped like a demoniacal savage once more to the fray. Disdaining to strike the half-blind wretch, Mackay stood unmoved, and so gave the cunning trickster the chance he desired. The long, octopus arms of Macguire gripped him tight, and his breath spurted forth in fierce gasps. A groan of dismay broke from

Jack, and a yell of delight from Macguire's supporters greeted this action. Now, indeed, it was to be a trial of strength. Backwards and forwards they swayed, bending, twisting, writhing, stumbling, but through it all the Shadow noticed with joy how gradually, yet surely, Mackay's brawny arms were tightening over the great bulk of his antagonist. For a moment there was a lull, the crucial point had come, and the combatants stood immovable; the muscles of Mackay's arms strained out like whipcords. Crack! crack! something seemed to have given way. Mackay relaxed his hold, and with a groan and a shiver the towering form of Macguire subsided in the sand and lay inert. Both sides had watched the last struggle of the giants with breathless interest; and the final collapse of Macguire aroused from his supporters only a hushed exclamation of awe. The victor stepped forward to them at once.

"Now, boys," he said pleasantly, "if you like, we'll begin the circus. Your leader has got a couple or so ribs broken, so you'd better not count on him much——"

"No! no!" they shouted in unison; and one of them, constituting himself spokesman for the party, gave vent to their impressions.

"After that," he said weakly, "we don't want no more fight. Let us peg alongside somewheres. We promise to act straight with you."

A shuddering murmur of approval followed his words. Mackay had indeed done battle for the entire camp that day.

Then the Shadow broke out. "Didn't I tell you, Jack?" cried he, prancing around gleefully.

"By the Great Howlin' Billy, I've never seen a fight like that—no, never," impressively spoke Never Never, coming forward.

Neither Bob nor Jack said a word, their hearts seemed too full for speech; but Mackay guessed their thoughts.

"It had to be done, my laddies," said he, kindly. "I thought my fighting days were over; but it wasna to be—it wasna to be."

After that order reigned. Some of Macguire's gang sullenly went off to peg out claims beyond the Golden Promise Mine; others busied themselves erecting a huge tent into which their fallen chief was carried, groaning and cursing by turns. Then the holders of Golden Flat returned to their labours with buoyant energy, and continued excavating the golden wash as if nothing untoward had happened to mar the even tenor of their way. Bob having received the acids he had so eagerly awaited, was soon lost in the mazes of calculative experiments beside his crucibles and test-tubes. The Shadow and Jack slogged away with steady persistency at the bottom of the shaft. Mackay calmly smoked the pipe of peace at the windlass head, now and again breaking out into unmelodious song to the great discomfort of all within hearing distance. Indeed, since his desperate encounter he seemed to have become unusually cheerful; and Bob, hearing the distracting strains, laughed softly to himself and pondered deeply on this further illustration of a many-sided nature. That evening, however, he was destined to be further surprised, for Mackay, having finished his tea, went quietly to a small mysterious-looking box which he kept under his bunk, and which neither of the boys had ever seen him open before, and from a recess within the lid he extracted—a flute.

"Heavens!" feebly murmured the Shadow, who was present, glaring at the instrument with exaggerated horror.

Jack laughed outright, but checked himself suddenly when the big man began to play. Never had he heard sweeter music; the mellow notes rang out with exceeding softness as the great and somewhat battered fingers of the musician strayed over the keys. No paltry tune was this, no music-hall ditty; it was the "Miserere" from Il Trovatore he played, and with such haunting sweetness that Bob rubbed his eyes and looked at him in amazement. It was no joke, then, this strange man's professed love of music, and his thoughts went back to the evening they had spent in London. The last long-drawn-out note trembled to a finish; and Mackay's voice broke in on his reverie.

"What do you think o' that, Bob?"

"It was beautiful," said Bob, soberly.

"Ah, my ain whistle canna compare wi' the flute," sighed Mackay, dolorously, applying his mouth once more to his treasure. Then he hesitated.

"I think I'll play ye that bonnie tune we heard at the Queen's Hall," said he, reflectively. "D'ye mind what it was, Jack?"

"Of course I do," responded that youth, with alacrity. "It was 'Home, Sweet Home!'"

The questioner looked grieved. "That sang doesna come into my *repertoire* when I'm oot in the bush," he reproved sternly.

"You meant, 'Lo, hear the gentle lark,'" said Bob.

The flautist nodded. "One, two, three, and off she goes," said he; and at once the liquid strains of Bishop's wonderful music echoed through the tent, with its trills and cadenzas, and with, it must be confessed, many variations from the original melody. Ere he had finished nearly all the camp were clustered at the door; even Macguire's party was represented. Then the spell was broken. Evidently the volume of sound created by the flute did not quite satisfy the player's desire for a fuller burden of song. He laid down the flute. "Watch me catch that top note," said he, and, with grim desperation, he opened his mouth and began, "'Lo! hear the gentle la-a-a-a-ark——'"

A yell of horror from the doorway, and a sudden trampling of feet intimated that the bulk of his audience had taken flight. The Shadow squirmed in agony, Jack shuddered, and Bob looked pained.

"Ah, weel," grunted the singer apologetically, pausing in his valiant effort, "I couldna expect ye to appreciate such vera high-class music, but haud on a bit an' I'll gie ye a verse o' my ain construction, set to music o' my vera ain composition; it is called 'The Muskittie's Lament.'"

Straightway he started, and bellowed out this touching little story, in a voice so raucous that even the parrots fluttering in the scrub around screamed out noisily in protest.[\[A\]](#) When he had finished, the Shadow and Jack had vanished, and Bob alone was left to thank him as best he could.

But he was happily spared this call on his prevaricative powers, for the vocalist did not give him an opportunity of expressing his opinion.

"Ye dinna look exactly overjoyed wi' my singin'," said he, quizzically, "but ye must admit it's vera effective."

Bob laughed, but did not venture to disagree.

"Ay," continued Mackay, with a chuckle, "my voice has wonderfu' movin' powers, though, like my whistle, it's mebbe a wee bit trying at close quarters." He proceeded to the box once more, and, to Bob's surprise, extricated a sextant from its depths. He gazed at it tenderly for a few moments, then handed it to his companion, who seized it eagerly, and examined it with deep interest. It was an instrument which had, apparently, seen considerable service, for the handle was grooved by much fingering, and the lacquer on the framework was blistered by the sun's rays, and altogether bare in places. But the silvered arc itself was in perfect condition, and the thin coating of vaseline over it showed that its present owner knew how to take care of the delicate fabric. Mackay gazed curiously on during the young man's work of inspection. It was almost dark now in the tent, the last glimmering rays of the setting sun alighted on the reflecting glasses of the sextant and danced thereon joyously for a moment, then the heavy gloom of night fell, and still Bob clutched the symbol of his unuttered desire, while Mackay seemed wrapt in silent meditation. At length the elder man spoke.

"That was the chief's sextant, Bob," said he, gravely. "It was the only thing I found near the camp where he and his expedition were murdered."

"I almost guessed that," answered Bob; then he hesitated. "I wish you would let me try an observation with it," he concluded with earnestness.

"Let you?" cried Mackay. "I want you to do it. Do ye remember," he continued musingly, "o' me sending you a book on navigation; well, that was because I wanted to influence your studies in that direction. I canna say whether I have succeeded or no'——"

Bob laughed grimly. "My father was a sailor," said he. "His brother was a navigator; and I—I would dearly like to be able to steer a course as well."

"My lad," said Mackay, "you'll maybe get your wish sooner than you expect. I brought out the sextant just to sound you, for nae man can say that Mackay persuaded him against his will; but I see that the same blood runs in the family. Take the sextant, Bob; I give it to you, though it is my dearest

possession. Handle it carefully; it has proved true on mony a long weary journey. But mind, I may ask ye to use it in earnest soon."

Without another word he arose and walked from the tent, leaving Bob alone in the darkness, his mind filled with rushing thoughts. When Jack came in, about half an hour later, and lit a candle, he found him in the same place. Truly the touch of the mystic emblem had aroused in him the uncontrollable indefinite longing which is the sure birthright of the wanderer. The call of the bush seemed to echo through his brain, the boundless horizon beckoned him.

Jack's entry helped to throw off the spell which had gripped him. He arose and placed the sextant carefully back in its case beside the flute.

"What on earth is that, Bob?" asked Jack, anxiously. "Not another musical instrument, surely."

"We'll have a look at it to-morrow, Jack," answered Bob. "It's a sextant which Mackay has given me."

"Great Scot!" ejaculated the irrepressible youth, "can he use a sextant too?"

Bob smiled. "I don't know," said he, "but I wouldn't be too sure."

"He is a regular daisy," commented Jack, enthusiastically. "Why, up at Nuggety's camp, he's explaining to them the theories of music, and I'm hanged if he hasn't got them half convinced that it is their uncultivated ear that is at fault when they don't appreciate his singing."

A commotion from without the tent interrupted them, and the Shadow's voice shouted loudly on Jack.

"I've just rounded up a real beauty o' a snake at my camp," said he, when they appeared. "Come along, an' I'll show ye how to crack him like a whip." And the three departed.

On the following morning Macguire's followers considered it advisable that their damaged leader should be taken, without further delay, to the township hospital, and shortly after daybreak a buggy and a couple of horses were waiting in readiness for the journey. This sudden decision on the matter was

by no means agreeable to Mackay, and he hastily called a meeting of the claim-holders in order to state his fears.

"You know, boys," said he, "we've never registered these mines at the Warden's office, as that bully Macguire seems to know, an' our miners' rights are only good enough so long as we are the strongest party."

"Well, we don't need to try and keep the Flat a secret now," growled Emu Bill. "We're bound to have half Kalgoorlie alongside us in a day or so."

"Ye don't seem to catch on to our difficulty, boys," continued Mackay. "If Macguire gets into the Warden's office first, he can simply register these mines in his own ugly name, along wi' his partners, of course, an' then, all they've got to do is swear *we* jumped them, an' we'll get fired out o' our own claims wi' a squad o' mounted police!"

Simple and open-minded bushmen, they had never thought of this.

"By Jupiter! I believe you're right," cried old Dead Broke Dan.

"But what in thunder is we to do?" complained Nuggety Dick. "If we had a horse we could beat him; but the camels are too mighty slow."

"Ah, now you've struck it," agreed Mackay. "But ye must remember it's a seventy-mile dry stretch from here to Kalgoorlie, an' their horses are pretty well knocked up now. It should take them a good two days to do it, even if they force for all they're worth."

At this stage the Shadow pushed his way forward. "I knows what Mackay is thinking," said he; "but I'm the man for the job, an' I'm goin' to do it too."

"Do ye think ye could manage, Shad?" asked Mackay, earnestly. "I'm no goin' to mak' a single remark aboot your bushmanship, for you've well proved your abilities in that direction, but, my lad, it's a job for a strong man, an' I meant to tak' it on mysel'."

"Ye doesn't know how powerful I is on the trot," said the lithe young bushman; "an' if it comes to strength, I reckon I is no chicken, either."

He bared his right arm proudly, and showed the swelling muscles which his tattered shirt-sleeve covered.

"Why, what does ye mean to do?" demanded Nuggety, like his near neighbours, somewhat bewildered. "Does ye mean to walk?"

"Give me a water-bag in my fist, and I'll pretty soon show you," came the quick retort. "I'll bet a tug at old Dead Broke's whiskers that I'm in before the buggy all right."

It seemed a hopeless plan, yet, owing to the arid and sandy nature of the country to be traversed, it was not as hopeless as it looked.

"If we let them get away first," said Mackay, "they won't think there's any need to hurry. Go an' swallow as much water as you can, an' get your water-bag primed up to the muzzle. Jack, you'd better make enough sandwiches from that damper of yours to carry the Shadow a couple o' days."

"Couldn't I go too, Shad?" said Jack, anxiously.

"You're a bit too fresh yet, Jack; you'd want too much water," was the sententious reply.

Jack turned away without a word to prepare the sandwiches.

A few minutes later the buggy containing Macguire and one of his chosen associates drove up, and stopped opposite the party, so that the departing bully might get rid of some of his vituperative eloquence. When he saw Mackay, his raging madness was painful to witness. Clearly his enmity, instead of dissolving, had been magnified tenfold by his humiliation.

"I'll get even with you for this," he yelled, shaking his fist at the object of his fury; "an' ye won't live long before ye knows it too."

Mackay stepped menacingly towards the buggy. "I ought to have killed ye, ye meeserable thief," he said; but the man holding the reins was too terrified to wait longer. With a wild slash of the whip he set the horses plunging madly across the sand on the back track to the township, and Macguire, leaning back with livid face, hurled his last shot.

"This country won't be big enough to hold us two!" he bellowed.

Mackay smiled a hard smile. "Then I reckon ye'd better get out of it while you're healthy," he murmured, as he turned to rejoin his companions.

FOOTNOTE:

[A]

"THE MUSKITTIE'S LAMENT.

"A bright wee muskittie sat on a tree,
An' O, it was hungry as hungry could be,
An' the tears drappit doon frae its bonnie blue ee,
As it sighed and looked sad for Australia."

CHAPTER VI

The Shadow's Great Effort

The grinding rush of the wheels in the sand had scarcely died away when the Shadow appeared ready for his journey. He carried a water-bag in his hand, and his meagre commissariat outfit was tied up in a glazed cloth slung over his shoulder. He was not impeded by a superabundance of garments; a torn shirt flung open at the neck, a much frayed soft hat turned down all around the brim to keep the scorching sun from his eyes, and a light pair of much-worn khaki pants, held in position by a narrow belt, completed his sartorial glory. His sockless feet were thrust loosely into shoes that had, by their appearance, seen considerable service; he had chosen them because of their once heavy soles being ground down to comparative lightness. He waited impatiently while Mackay drew out a rough sketch of the mines and their position, which was to give the Warden the necessary information for registration.

"And mind, Shadow," said Mackay, handing him the paper amid an impressive silence, "ye must steer in by the south; it will mean a longer journey, but if you don't go wide o' Macguire to the extent o' five miles or so, he's bound to see you, and you could never hope to get in afore him then."

The Shadow tucked the note carefully away in a lurking corner of his flowing shirt.

"You leave the circus to me, an' don't worry," he said, with a grin. "Ta, ta, boys, I'm off. How's this for the Flying Dutchman?" He set his face to the west and dashed away into the desert at an odd uneven trot.

"He can't keep that up, surely?" said Bob, watching the runner in astonishment.

"I'll bet he jig-jogs like that all day," said Emu Bill. "He's got the real bushman's style o' gettin' over ground, he has."

Mackay watched the fleeing figure doubtfully for a time, then a satisfied look lit up his face as he noted the unerring course the Shadow was making.

"He'll hit the township straight as a die," said he. "That ugly sinner, Macguire, was heading too far to north'ard or I'm very much mistaken."

Macguire's associates at the end of the Flat were now observed to be in a state of considerable confusion. They could not fail to realize that the mission had been dispatched for one purpose, and they glared after the disappearing messenger with anger and dismay on their hardened countenances.

"Keep an eye on them, boys," warned Mackay. "We'll soon know whether we were right in our ideas."

He walked back to the tent with Bob, and when they arrived there two of the suspected gang approached apparently in deep sorrow.

"Why didn't you give your message to Hawkins?" said one. "Though he's driving Macguire, he'd have done anything you wanted in the township. We doesn't bear no grudge, we don't."

"The fact is, we don't trust you worth a cent," answered Mackay, shortly.

At this stage Emu Bill hurried up in a state of some perturbation. Wholly ignoring the presence of the innocent twain, he burst out—

"There's wan o' them cusses just dodged into the bush carrying a saddle an' bridle!"

At this the protesting pair seemed to realize that their cunning ruse was up.

"An' ye can bet," cried the one who had not yet spoken, "that Harkins'll catch up on the boss afore sundown, an' they'll be in Kalgoorlie by mornin'. He's goin' to ride Macguire's Furious, he is," he snarled triumphantly.

He hopped out of the way just in time to avoid being gripped in the clutches of the man he so wholesomely dreaded; but his neighbour was not quite so alert, and, as he turned to run, a well-directed kick lent impetus to his flight.

"I suppose the skunks'll beat us, after all," said Mackay, grimly, "Their horse bells are sounding quite close. Where's Jack?"

Emu Bill grinned. "I think the young'un anticipated you, Mac," said he. "He vanished into the bush when he noticed the cuss walking off wi' the saddle."

"If he can unhitch the bells and drive the horses north a bit, it'll take friend Harkins a day to find them," grunted Mackay, in great good humour.

"You can rely on Jack," said Bob, decisively; and just then a confused jangling of the horse bells rang out, followed by an absolute stillness.

A few moments later the crackling of the bush in the far distance, and the thudding of many hoofs in the sand, intimated that Jack knew his work to the letter.

"By thunder!" roared Emu Bill, excitedly. "The youngster has taken off their hobbles."

So it turned out. Jack had grasped the situation at once when he saw the man slink off with saddle and bridle in the direction of the horses. His intuitive powers were wonderfully bright, and his actions followed quickly on his thoughts.

"I've got to get there first," he muttered to himself, as he dashed impetuously through the bush.

He found the horses clustered together under the shade of a coolibah tree. Poor animals, their owners had hobbled their forefeet very tightly in order to keep them from straying far, and after vainly trying to find some edible substance amid the inhospitable sands, they huddled together in a piteous group, and bit nervously at the parched eucalyptus twigs over their heads. It was a country for camels only—these wiry brutes can eat anything; but for horses it was a barren wilderness. Jack had no difficulty in approaching them, and he quickly undid their bell straps and flung the noisy tell-tales on the ground, but when he attempted to drive the tired creatures they simply would not move, their hobble straps were too closely fixed to allow of them even making much of an effort. There was little time for delay, already the confident whistle of Harkins sounded perilously near. Jack would have no

half measures, unhesitatingly he undid the binding thongs, and at once the entire mob with wild neighs galloped off.

"As Mackay would say, it won't be judicious for me to wait here long," the wily youth soliloquized. "Let me see, the sun was on my right hand when I left camp; that means I've got to keep it on my left now." And he vanished speedily, missing Harkins, the horse hunter, by but a few yards. His welcome when he returned was hearty in the extreme.

Nuggety Dick laughed uproariously. "Why, look at the brutes," said he, pointing westward across the plain where the still galloping horses were visible. "They're right off home, they are. Blow me tight, Jack, I'll give you one of my best nuggets for that when the battery comes along."

Mackay's tribute was characteristic. "Your power o' observation is developing real well, my laddie," he said, "an' your calculative propensities are grand. It's a great thing to hae the gift o' initiative, Jack. You see, if you had waited to tell me about your plan, it would hae been too late to act on it. I'll gie ye a tootle on the flute for that the nicht, I will." And Jack felt more than amply repaid for his adventure.

Ere long the weary Harkins returned to his associates, still carrying the saddle and bridle, and feeling very wroth indeed. The disgust and chagrin of the checkmated crew was full and deep, and they sulked in their tent all day, nor once again ventured to approach their smiling neighbours.

And all this time the happy-go-lucky Shadow was plugging along over the thirsty desert sands, looking neither to the right nor left, yet instinctively steering a straight course for his goal beyond the distant horizon. Mile after mile he traversed with dogged determination, nor did he once falter in his peculiar ambling gait. And the sun rose high in the heavens, and the burning rays smote fiercely on the crown of the Shadow's dilapidated hat, while the roasting sands scorched through his flimsy shoes. Yet still he never halted.

"I'll show them what I kin do," he repeated to himself as he ran, with savage joy. "I'll show them that the knockabout, hard-up, down-on-his-uppers Shadow can keep his end up wi' any one." Then the finer trait would show itself in his musings. "It's Mackay's last rise. I knows he is all broke up since Bentley went under, an' he's been good to me. Hang it! I must get in

before that cross-eyed, lop-eared bully," and his lithe body would spring forward with renewed energy. A long pull at the water-bag, and a hasty bite at the unpalatable damper he carried in his little wallet, delayed him scarce five minutes. But when, crossing a dry gully, a long sand snake wriggled across his path, he could not resist the temptation of slaying it. "There's two things I never sees use for in this world," he ruminated, as he set down to work again, "an' these is snakes an' muskitties. I wonder what old Noah meant by putting them in the ark.... I must have covered 'bout thirty miles by now. I wonder if I kin keep it up all night, an'—an' I wonder if my boots'll hold out."

At sundown he halted to fix his bearings afresh. "I'm afraid I is gettin' too far north," said he, "an' Mackay warned me to keep to south'ard. I'd better wait till the Cross gets up. I feel sort o' bushed without the sun, an' them hanged little stars never seem to be in the same place. No, I'd be safer to sit tight an' wait for the Cross." He had another drink from the water-bag, and munched contentedly at his hard damper for a while; then his head began to nod drowsily, and in a few moments the Shadow was fast asleep in the sand, his face upturned to the myriad stars which now began to twinkle in the sky.

How long he slept he knew not, but he awoke with a start, vaguely conscious of some disturbing element in the air. The Southern Cross shone radiantly far over the horizon, and the constellation of Orion glittered placidly in the eastern sky. "I ought to be kicked," said the Shadow, in intense disgust with himself. "I calc'late it must be after midnight now, an' I has lost four hours; bother my sleepy old hide." He arose wearily, and gripped the precious water-bag, but he was no sooner on his feet than he dropped again with alacrity, and lay flat on the sand, the muffled sound of hoof-beats had reached his ear, and coming in his direction.

"I'm a gone coon if they see me," he murmured. "Why in blazes didn't I keep further to the south?" The Shadow did not doubt for a moment that it was Macguire and his buggy which was approaching. "The miserable sweep must have camped to give the horses a spell," he reasoned with sinking heart. Nearer and nearer came the ghost-like echoes, then suddenly they stopped, and a plaintive whinny rang out through the night. It was answered by another, and yet another, but no sound of voices came to the

eager listener's ears. "That is mighty strange," thought he. "Macguire should be cursing like a bullock-driver by now. I wonder what's happened?" He raised himself cautiously on hands and knees and peered into the eerie gloom, and as he gazed, half a dozen or so riderless horses came forward at a gentle trot. "Brumbies!" grunted the Shadow. "Wo-ah, my beauties!" To his surprise they halted, and whinnied feebly, and the Shadow continued addressing endearing words to them while he cautiously struggled to his feet. They were not brumbies, that was certain, or they would have shied off in affright at once; but the weary youth was not long in discovering what they were, and a chuckle of huge delight issued from his lips as he at last got his hand on the mane of one of his midnight visitors, and patted its trembling nostrils. Indeed he could scarcely contain himself, so deep was the joy he felt; he wanted to roll over in the sand and howl in his ecstasy, but he could not very well do that and still keep a grip of his charger's mane, so he contented himself by indulging in a running commentary on his extraordinary luck while he quickly unslipped the thin belt from his waist and deftly insinuated the same into the wondering animal's mouth. "I wonder how they managed to break their hobbles," said he. Then a light seemed to dawn on him. "I'll swear Mackay had something to do wi' it. Or Jack—Jack's got some savvy, he has. The animals was goin' straight home, they was. Well, I reckon Macguire's Furious will carry the poor weary blown-out Shadow, whether he wants to or no."

To his annoyance his improvised bridle proved too short to join over the high arched neck of the commandeered steed, and with a rueful sigh the resourceful lad proceeded to rip off the sleeves of his shirt and cut them into ribbons. This operation was conducted under great difficulties, for Furious now seemed to regret his former weakness, and was making strenuous efforts to justify its name. He plunged and reared and kicked viciously, with the result that he startled the other horses into flight. Then ensued a tug of war; in vain the frantic horse strove to follow its neighbours; the Shadow's grip on the leathern thongs was vice-like in its tenacity. Round and round they struggled, but the odd bridle held fast, and at length the fiery steed was brought to a standstill. In a trice a thick stranded cord of shirt ribbons was added to the novel reins, then with a whoop of triumph the daring youngster leaped to Furious's back and clutched like a limpet.

To ride an intractable horse, bareback, is at no time a very easy matter, and to ride a noted buckjumper like Furious with a makeshift bridle and no saddle was a feat which few of the finest horsemen in Australia would have cared to attempt. But lightly reined the Shadow of disaster. Born and brought up on a far back station in Victoria, he had been accustomed to horses since his childhood, and no more daring rider could be found throughout the length and breadth of the land. Down went Furious's head between his knees, and his high back curved convulsively, as he strove by all his fiery tactics to rid himself of his encumbrance. But the Shadow rocked easily in his perch throughout it all; then, suddenly asserting the mastery, he took his battered hat from his head, and with it smote the beast lightly across the ears. For a moment the infuriated animal stood stock still, trembling in every fibre, then, with a snort of rage, he stretched out his long neck and, like an arrow from the bow, darted off across the desert, taking the interposing gullies at a leap, and crashing through narrow timber belts like a thing possessed. The Shadow did not once attempt to break its headlong pace, he knew the weakness of his bridle too well for that; gently, insidiously, he tightened the pressure on the off rein and brought his charger round on to the course he wished to go.

"Now I reckon I'm on the rails all right," he said at length, when the Southern Cross shone brightly on his left, and slightly behind; "but blow me for a cross-eyed jackass if I haven't forgotten the water-bag!"

His annoyance at this neglect was keen, though he did not seem to consider that he could not have carried it with him in any case, both of his hands having been very much occupied at the start in controlling his unwilling mount. They had cleared the softer desert country now, and had entered upon the hard-baked, ironshot plains which frequently intervene in these latitudes, and now Furious showed signs of failing in his stride, his unshod hoofs were ill able to bear the pressing contact of the rounded diorite pebbles. Then for the first time the Shadow tested the strength of the doubtful reins, and pulled steadily and strongly. They held firm, and the weary steed slowed down to an easy canter, and finally to a walk.

"Whew!" ejaculated the reckless rider, mopping his damp brow. "I reckon this one-man circus is a bit trying on the nerves. If the hanged brute had tripped on a stump, or dived into a snag hole, it would have been 'Good-

bye, Shadow, and the crows will weep for ye in the morning.' But it's a jolly long sight better'n walkin'. Hillo, hillo! what has we struck now? Wo-ah, my pet lamb, wo-ah."

Out of the darkness, almost straight ahead, the red glow of hot ashes had become visible. While he watched the gentle night breezes fanned the dying embers into feeble momentary flame, and there, silhouetted against the blackness, was the buggy which had left Golden Flat immediately in advance of the Shadow. The two horses were dimly observable standing motionless and asleep among the sparse scrub some little way off, while, wrapped in their blankets beside the fire lay the huddled figures of Macguire and Hawkins evidently also in deep slumber. The watcher whistled softly to himself.

"By smoke," he murmured, "them beggars must have covered fifty miles yesterday. The howlin' sneak has been skeert o' some one comin' after. Gee whiz! What a be-eautiful shock he'll get——"

His reflections were arrested by a sudden movement of one of the reclining men, and the harsh voice of Macguire reached his ears as he strove to awaken his associate.

"Get up, ye dreamin' idiot, an' see if the horses are keepin' handy. I want to get in when the Warden's office opens in the mornin'."

A drowsy protesting murmur was all the Shadow could hear of the reply. Then Macguire's unmusical accents were raised in angry abuse.

"Ye doesn't think we can do it?" he snarled. "But I say we shall, though the horses drop dead when we get there. I'll show that infernal Scotsman what it means to run up agin Macguire. We'll get a move on by sunrise, that'll give us three hours to get in by nine o'clock."

He arose painfully to throw some brushwood on the fire, while Hawkins, grumbling heartily, went in search of the horses. Silently the Shadow swung Furious's head round, and made a wide detour.

"I reckon ye'll get left this time, ye yelping baboons," he muttered, when he considered himself well out of range of the now spreading firelight. "Ye'll move out by sunrise, will ye? I wonder what time it is now." He surveyed

the heavens intently; then his gaze rested on a star of exceeding brilliance which had made its appearance just over the horizon. "I calc'late that there shiner is the star Mackay called Canopus," he said, "an' that means I've just an hour afore the old sun pops his head up. Now, old thunder and lightning, ye bold bad quadruped, ye hustled along fur yer own pleasure, I reckon ye can do a bit of a spurt for mine." He leaned forward and dug his heels into Furious's flanks; with a bound the noble animal started forward, and once again the twain proceeded on their headlong course.

The stars one by one vanished from the sky, and a wonderful rosy glow gradually enveloped the silent bushland; it heralded the approach of dawn. And now far in the western sky the watchful rider began to perceive the smoke of the ever active smelters near the township, and soon the white-roofed houses of the settlement were plainly visible. Sure enough the Shadow had steered an unerring course. He slowed down to a walk, and looked cautiously all round. Nothing in the shape of man or beast was observable in the near distance, but far off in the township the little street was crowded with miners coming from and going to their work in the shafts.

"Shadow," murmured the contemplative youth, "I reckon ye'd better get off an' walk if ye doesn't want to get collared for horse stealing."

He prepared to slide down from his perch, but just then Furious, having recognized his own stable so comparatively close at hand, felt imbued with fresh energy. He pricked up his ears, gathered his feet together for one ferocious buck, and was off like the wind. The Shadow sat in the sand where he had been unceremoniously deposited, still gripping fast the broken ribbons of the bridle which had served him so well, and gazed reproachfully at the departing steed.

"Ye're a mean, ungrateful hoss," he cried after it, severely. "After me takin' ye back to your own stable, too, an'—an' I didn't think there was a kick left in you." Words failed him, and he gathered himself up, and weary and sore and stiff walked slowly into the township.

It was about eight o'clock when he entered the main street which was still an hour before the Warden's office opened; but the Shadow had no intention of delaying his mission an instant longer than he could help. A lively

memory of Macguire's emphatically spoken resolve to arrive at nine compelled him to adopt unusual tactics. Heedless of the strange glances cast at him by the ultra respectable gold-mining fraternity, he made his way to the Exchange Hotel, where, as every one knew, the Warden was in the habit of breakfasting, and hesitating not an instant, he entered the doorway and turned into the fashionable room reserved for the cream of the goldfields' aristocracy.

But his dilapidated attire and general aspect was too much for the proprietor of the establishment, for it must be remembered that the Shadow's shirt had already been largely used in the manufacture of bridle reins. His toes, too, were peeping from sundry crevices in his boots, and from head to foot he was covered with the grime and dust of his long desert journey.

"What do ye want in here, ye young scarecrow?" demanded that important personage, laying an unfriendly grasp on his visitor's shoulder.

The Shadow sidled round, leaving another part of his unfortunate garment in the hands of the spoiler.

"I want to see the Warden," he cried loudly, his temper considerably ruffled, "an' I'll flatten ye out if ye try to stop me.... It's a matter o' life an' death," he added impressively.

"I am the Warden, my lad," spoke a kindly voice from the end of the room, "but I'm not a doctor. Let the boy come up, Jackson"—this to the proprietor. "Good honest sand won't hurt any one, and you know water is scarce in this drought-stricken country. Why, the man's hurt!" The kindly official was gazing at a nasty gash on his visitor's bare arm from which the blood was slowly trickling.

The Shadow looked and noticed his wound for the first time.

"It must have been that buster I got that did it," he reflected quickly; "but I can't very well bring the horse into this here conversation." Aloud he said, "Oh, that's nothin'; I tripped on a stump in the dark, that's all."

The Warden examined the rent again closely and smiled incredulously.

"All right, young man," said he; "now fire along with your story, for I must be over at the office in half an hour."

There was no one else in the room at the moment, so pulling Mackay's sketch plan of the mines from its hiding-place and putting it on the table before the Warden, he reeled off the story of the finding of Golden Flat and the attempted jumping of the mines by Macguire and his party. The Warden listened patiently through it all, nor did he once interrupt the narrator.

"So that's where the redoubtable Macguire went the other day," he commented, when the Shadow had finished. "And Mackay dished him at his own game, did he? I tell you what, young fellow, I'd have given a fiver to see that fight, I would."

"An' it would hiv been worth it," agreed the Shadow, complacently. "But say, is ye goin' to make the claims right for the boys at Golden Flat? Macguire'll be along in a minute——"

"Stop right there, my lad. You've done your mates a great service by getting in first, for if Macguire had seen me before you I would have had no option but to make out the leases in his name. But when you come to me from men like Mackay, Emu Bill, and Nuggety Dick, pioneers every one, and tell me the story you have done, I feel that my language won't be full enough to express my feelings when I see that scoundrelly trickster, Macguire. But come, tell me how you managed to get in ahead of him. You know I can scarcely swallow that yarn about walking all the way. Why, it must be close on an eighty-mile trail!"

Then the Shadow unburdened himself. "I was a bit skeert o' bein' boosted up for horse stealin'," he explained finally, "so I climbed off the savage critter 'bout half a mile back, an' blow me, if he didn't do a buck at the last minute an' landed me on my back instead o' my feet. I reckon that's how I got this here scratch."

The Warden rang a small handbell on the table, and in due course the landlord appeared.

"Jackson, let this young man have breakfast. He's come a long way, and I guess he needs it." Then, when the man departed, "How were you to know they weren't brumbies?" said he, quizzically.

A noisy demonstration in the street now attracted their attention, and looking out through the window, behold, there was Macguire's buggy proceeding past at a walk, though the lather of foam on the horses' heaving flanks showed at what pace they had been driven. Round the slowly moving conveyance several men were clustered, and to them Macguire was talking eagerly, and apparently much to their satisfaction, for at intervals they broke into lusty cheers.

"These are some more of the loafers and deadbeats of the place," said the Warden. "Macguire will be telling them of his new discovery. Well, it's nearly nine o'clock, I must be off. Just sign your name across this plan of yours; yes, that's right. Now I'll just scribble a line underneath." He took a blue pencil from his pocket and wrote hastily, "Handed to me, the Warden of the Eastern Goldfields District, duly certified, at 8 a.m., August —th, 1899." This he signed. "Now, I guess that's all right," he said cheerily, reaching for his hat, "and I don't suppose I need tell you, young man, that some one may be thirsting for your gore before long."

The Shadow grinned. "Let him thirst," said he. "I reckon I kin bounce any man o' the crowd exceptin' the boss bruiser hissel', and I calc'late Mackay's fixed him safe enough for a day or so."

The Warden departed, and the light-hearted youth attacked the breakfast which was brought to him with the ardour borne of a long fast and an extremely hearty appetite.

While he was thus engaged, his erstwhile enemy, in the shape of Jackson the hotel proprietor, came in and sat down beside him.

"I say, young 'un," he began in amiable tones, "did I hear you say you were one of Mackay's party?"

"You didn't, unless you were listening at the door," came the quick response.

Jackson's brows contracted; but he laughed not unpleasantly.

"There's no call for you to be so mighty slick wi' your speech," he said. "I was in the passage way, and heard you mention the name of an old friend of mine, but I was not listening at the door. Why, Mackay stayed with me a

night when he passed through about a month or so ago. He and I were mates in the good old roaring days."

The Shadow's face assumed an expression of grave concern.

"I climbs down, boss," said he, contritely. "I thought you might have been trying to pump me for Macguire's benefit."

Jackson uttered an expression of deep disgust. "Why, that skunk! I wouldn't be seen dead alongside o' him. He's the meanest, rottenest——"

The Shadow bolted the final portion of his breakfast in a hurry, and held out a grimy paw. "Shake, boss," he said laconically. They shook; and the now refreshed youth went once more into the history of Golden Flat, retailing with gusto the wonderful encounter between Macguire and Mackay. "His silly old bones cracked like pipe shanks," he concluded, with reminiscent accurateness.

"By thunder!" ejaculated the appreciative listener, aroused to a sudden sense of duty. "That broken-ribbed bruiser will have your life if he sees you now. How do you mean to get back?"

"Walk," answered the Shadow, shortly.

"Walk be hanged. I'll lend you a horse; but you must look slippy an' get away. I will come out myself an' see if I can get a decent claim before the whole population rushes you; I can fetch the horse back when I come." He arose hurriedly, evidently intent on seeking out a steed right away, but at the door he stopped and looked back. "What was that life-and-death racquet you worked on my tender feelings?" he asked sternly.

"Dead sure thing," returned the Shadow, unabashed. "If Macguire had got ahead o' me, Mackay would have squelched the life outen him first chance. See?"

Jackson evidently saw, for he departed on his quest, laughing heartily.

Left to himself the Shadow carelessly walked out into the street, and as luck would have it blundered right into the trouble his friends had been so anxious for him to avoid. Returning from the Warden's office came Macguire and his aide-de-camp driving furiously, and the roar of pent-up

anger which burst from the bully's lips on seeing the imperturbable Shadow step forth from the hotel would have done credit to a full-grown grizzly bear that had just been cheated of its supper. The buggy stopped with a jerk, and as if by magic a motley throng crowded round.

"That's him! that's the young demon!" howled the discomfited man in a perfect paroxysm of rage. "He stole my horse, he—he—get out and kill the young cub, Hawkins. Get out I say!"

"If I were you I reckon I'd sit tight," advised the Shadow, serenely. "I could pretty well squash you in one act, I could."

And Hawkins was evidently of the same opinion, for he absolutely refused to make any movement. With a baleful glitter in his bloodshot eyes, Macguire himself stepped down; had the great hulking brute but known it, he was at that moment no match for his lithe and muscular adversary, who, in his conscious strength, stood his ground unafraid. But there came a sudden interruption from the outside of the interested crowd.

"None of that, Macguire, or I'll be forced to explain some things you won't like."

It was a sharp authoritative warning, and it issued from the Warden who now pushed his way to the front.

"He stole my horse," began the baulked ruffian in a voice hoarse with suppressed passion.

"That's too thin, sir. From what I have heard, all your horses returned home of their own accord this morning. In any case, if you have a complaint to make, the public street is not a court house."

A suppressed cheer broke from some of the bystanders, who had no cause to love Macguire. He scowled fiercely at them as he climbed back to his seat.

"I'll get even with you, you young thief, when there are no interferin' Wardens about," he cried as he drove away, glaring with impotent rage at the object of his exceeding wrath.

The Shadow smilingly waved him a polite adieu.

CHAPTER VII

Bob's Triumph

It was three days after the Shadow's departure. The sun was shining fiercely on Golden Flat, and its scintillating rays reflected from the white mullock heaps at the various workings caused the eyes of the miners when they came to the surface to quiver and close painfully. The air was filled with dancing sand particles, and they shimmered kaleidoscope-like in the intense heat haze which rose and fell on the surface of the land like the waters of a boundless ethereal sea. The regular thud, thud of picks resounded loudly from the end of the lead where Nuggety Dick and his brawny compatriots were doggedly digging out the golden gravel, and away at the other end of the field Macguire's satellites made noisy din as they busied themselves sinking several shafts over the supposed trend of the mysterious channel.

The weather had been excessively hot since the Shadow left, and this fact had done much to restore the spirits of the gang, for, judging from their own feelings, they considered that the energy of Mackay's messenger would be spent long before he could hope to reach the township. At the Golden Promise the windlass was deserted, and the red symbol hung limp overhead. But it was not lack of energy that had occasioned this apparent lapse of duty. Mackay and Jack had been in the tent all morning watching Bob's final experiments with the refractory clay formation which were to decide whether or no the great bulk of the Flat's treasure could be saved to them. Bob's head was now quite better, but prolonged study in a clime which is not adapted for acute mental effort had made his young face appear drawn and haggard, yet his eyes shone with the light of enthusiasm as he busied himself with his rather crude appliances and set them in order for a last conclusive test. Mackay had hastily constructed a small vat for him, made from the hardest wood to be found in the bush, with an overflow tap some halfway up its height. This the young chemist now quarter filled with the crushed compound to be tested, and made up the level with water, to which he afterwards added some salt.

"It will ensure its conductivity," he explained; but neither Mackay nor Jack were much enlightened, so they held their peace. Next a rubber tube, with an oddly-conceived wooden shield on its exposed extremity was thrust into the receptacle, then a small bottle containing some liquid which bubbled and effervesced alarmingly, was brought forward, and its loose nozzle connected to the free end of the tube.

"A simple method of generating hydrogen," said Bob dreamily, "just iron pebbles and very dilute sulphuric acid." Mackay ventured a non-committal grunt, but Jack's face now showed keen appreciation. Lastly the two wires of a very small electric battery—Bob's own manufacture—were connected to corresponding metallic sheets lining the opposing ends of the vat. "That is merely as an added assistance to help the decomposing of the stuff into its elements," muttered Bob; then he fixed the nozzle of the hydrogen generator tightly and stepped back.

At once a gurgling boiling sound arose from the vat, and its contents swelled up in bubbling circles of slime and soapy ooze. Mackay, obeying a motion from Bob, hastily pulled out the overflow tap, and so caused the more solid matter within to subside. Again Bob loaded the vat, and again Mackay allowed the foaming mass to overflow, and never a word was spoken. The operation was repeated until fully a hundredweight of the refractory substance had been utilized, and by this time the floor of the tent was aswim with the dense oily scum let loose.

"That should be enough to calculate on," said Bob. "And now comes the crucial point." He undid all connections and handed the muddy box to Mackay, who took it silently, and emptied the coarse sandy residue into an awaiting gold-pan.

"It's lost its puggy nature, anyway," he commented, pouring on it some water from a kerosene tin. He gave the pan a rapid swirl, then an oblique turn, and gasped. The bottom of the basin was literally covered with a thin film of the finest imaginable golden grains, which blazed and sparkled in the penetrating sunlight!

Bob looked and heaved a sigh of profound thankfulness. Jack looked, and celebrated his joy by whooping like a red Indian. Mackay looked and

looked, indeed, he did not once take his eyes off the dazzling spectacle. Bob guessed his fears, and at once dispersed them.

"It's the genuine article this time," he said with assurance. "If it was going to melt away it would have done so in the acid solution; but the fact is it has just been set free from the solution, and so is now as stable and tangible as the sands of the desert."

The rough, horny handed pioneer set the pan down on the floor, and wiped the beaded perspiration from his forehead, then he reached out his great fist and took Bob's hand in a fervent grasp.

"It's no' often I have to acknowledge a better man than mysel'," he said grimly; "but I must admit you've knocked the wind clean out o' me wi' this grand process o' yours. Why, my laddie, it means fortune for you in the years to come, an ever growin' fortune, for ye can charge what ye like for your discovery. An' you little mair than a youngster, too! Man, Bob, you've got a held that any professor might well envy."

Bob laughed right heartily as he returned the elder man's grip. The tension on his nerves had gone, and he felt almost constrained, like Jack, to shout in his gladness.

"If it means fortune, I shall refuse to take more than my third of it," he said, with grave emphasis. "This is a partnership affair. I'd rather break the whole concern up now than make a halfpenny that you two didn't share." Then he gave utterance to a firm, fixed belief, which had done much to sustain him during his intricate studies of the deceptive formation. "As for my youth," he continued, with a smile, and addressing himself more directly to Mackay, "I won't allow that that should entitle me to any credit, for the same brain is with us always, and, surely, when it is young, and fully developed, it should be able to grasp and evolve theories which, when older, it would hesitate to accept. The beaten track is so hard to forsake when one grows old in text-book experience. If the ordinary science professor came along here now and examined my theories concerning this stuff and its treatment, without being shown their proof in practice, he would call them absurd and irrational. And why? Because I have gone wide of all precedent and text-book knowledge, and treated the compound for gold in an unstable state, and in that unstable state it is not supposed to exist." The young man

spoke clearly and logically, yet with an unusual twinkle in his keen blue eyes.

When he had finished, Mackay ventured a word of admonition.

"Too much study when the brain is young, Bob," said he, "is vera dangerous indeed, though I quite agree wi' you in your line o' argument. Young genius, hooever, blossoms an' dees like the flowers of the spring—they never reach their summer; so the auld fossilized, follow-my-leader blockheads exist and flourish an' are aye wi' us. But I'll see that ye dinna work oot any more scientific problems for a bit. It'll be a grand relaxation after this for you to study the beauties o' Nature as shown in the Never Never country back here." He laughed sardonically, and waved his hand towards the unknown east.

"I'll be with you whenever you are ready," answered Bob, eagerly.

"And I'll bet you won't shake me out of it," spoke up Jack; and Mackay was comforted.

The sound of approaching footsteps was now heard outside the tent. Mackay hastily seized the gold pan, and placed it out of sight.

"Not a word about the discovery," he advised. "It will keep for a bit, until we hear what Macguire's tactics are."

A second more, and Emu Bill popped his head inside. "Hang ye, Mac," said he, "I've nearly burst myself hollerin' down that shaft o' yours. I didn't think you'd be loafin' round at this time o' day, I didn't."

"What's that you've got in your fist?" asked Mackay, evading all explanations, and glancing at a huge, greyish fragment which Emu Bill was carrying abstractedly about.

"Oh—that? That's another specimen I wanted to show ye. The gold in it fairly howled at me down the shaft; but there ain't enough in it now to fill a muskittie's eye. All my wash has made into the humbuggin' stuff now. I'll have to give it best, boys, I will."

The resigned melancholy of his voice worked strangely on the feelings of Bob and Jack, and they gazed questioningly at Mackay, who nodded.

"Ay, show it to him, Bob," said he. "I think the Emu kens well enough hoo to haud his tongue."

"My goodness, mates," faltered Bill, in an awed whisper, when he saw the pan, "that is an almighty fine prospect. I reckon it must be twenty-ounce stuff. Where in thunder did ye get it?"

"It came from your shaft, Emu," said Bob. "It's the same deceiving miradgy humbugging material as that you've got in your hand. I've just found out how to bring back the gold after it fades away."

Emu Bill stared in amazement. "Will somebody kindly kick me?" he murmured feebly. "Is my sight goin' back on me again, or is it a real honest fact that hits me on the optic nerve?"

But he was soon led to understand that the gold in the pan was no delusion of the senses—that it was indeed a solid, substantial quantity.

"I takes off my hat to you, Bob," he said, with a little catch in his usually strong voice; and he suited the action to the word. "This'll mean new life to the whole Flat; an' I hope it'll spell fortune to you, my lad. What a pity Macguire's crowd got hitched on alongside the Golden Promise. They'll hit it every time, most likely; an', hang me! if they deserve it."

"We'll keep quiet aboot this discovery until we see how the bold Macguire tackles on to the mirage," said Mackay. "The meeserable thief may have jumped our ground in the Warden's office, for a' we know."

Emu Bill grasped the situation at once. "I'm a thick-head," said he. "Of course that bounder doesn't know; an' he won't know from me nuther. Mums the word, it is; an' what a howlin' joy it will be to see Macguire clutch on to the mirage. But I'll bet my boots, Mac, that the Shadow has busted up his claim-jumping game. I knows the young beggar, I does."

"An' so do I," said Mackay. "But I'll no blame him all the same if he canna accomplish the impossible."

It was now well after midday, and Emu Bill departed to prepare his lunch.

"I guess it's about time we had something to eat too," said Jack, who had been of that opinion for over an hour, and the three sallied out.

Jack was an expert at boiling the billy and making tea, and Mackay had a wonderful knowledge of the art of bush cookery, so that between them they always contrived to make a fairly palatable repast, notwithstanding the unvaried nature of their stores. Bob generally carried the water, or unearthed from their hiding-place the few enamelled cups and plates necessary; but, as he said himself, his assistance in matters culinary would never have been missed. On this occasion he amused himself taking altitudes of the sun with his cherished sextant, while his companions attended to the more practical affairs. In one direction—slightly north of west from the camp—the open desert could be traced without interruption in the shape of scrub or hillocks, until it merged into the distant horizon. Bob had discovered this two days before, when he first endeavoured to make use of Mackay's gift, and he knew that it was just about one o'clock in the afternoon that the sextant reflectors would bring the sun down to this level line, and so give a true declination without the use of an artificial horizon. He ogled away in this direction now, keeping time by Mackay's old but trusty chronometer which lay on the sand before him, until Jack's call of "tucker"—which is the bush synonym for all sorts and conditions of meals—caused him to seek his wonted place at the open-air table.

"There is a dot or speck on the sky-line which I can't make out," he said, placing the sextant down carefully at his side. "I don't remember of it being there yesterday."

"Perhaps it's a tree grown up like Jonah's gourd," laughed Jack. "Have some more tea, Bob; and you'll see two trees next time you look!"

A little later Mackay lolled back in lazy satisfaction. "I believe," he said with a chuckle, "that I'm just in the mood to gie ye another verse o' 'The Muskittie's Lament.' I see Jack's no feenished, so I'll be sure o' him listening to my masterpiece this time." He lifted up his voice and sent forth a doleful wail as a preliminary; then, noting the grieved countenances of his audience, he relented. "I'll get my flute an' play ye a bit frae the 'Bohemian Girl' instead. I'm no' so sure that I could tackle that high note in 'The Muskittie's Lament' on a fu' stomach."

He arose and walked to the tent, returning almost immediately with his instrument. But before he sat down his eye happened to glance over the

unbroken track towards the west, and a frown settled over his features.

"Your obstruction on the sky-line was a man on horseback, Bob," said he; "I hope he's no' another professional fighter, wha wants me to chastise him into a humbler spirit."

Since the arrival of Macguire's party a further influx from the outside world had been daily expected, for news of gold "strikes" travels quickly, and the sudden exodus of nearly a dozen men from a comparatively small centre could only be construed in one way. Therefore, little more than passing interest was paid to the approaching horseman, who was yet a considerable way off, and Mackay, squatting down on the sand, blew at his flute right merrily, and promptly forgot all about him. The boys, too, quickly became enthralled with his melody, though with them there was always the shivering dread that the flautist would burst into song, and so break the spell that bound them. Many and various were the airs he played, but at last he sought solace in the old Scotch song, "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon," and the feeling which he managed to infuse into the instrument was simply wonderful.

"Ay, my lads," said Mackay, when he had finished, "there's naething like the auld Scots sangs for awakenin' kindly memories o' the land we're aye so glad to get away from. I'm no so sure, mind you, that it isna good fur us whiles to have a wholesome, tender sentiment gruppin' at the strings o' oor cauld hearts, an' playing strange music thereon; it straightens oor backs, an' gies us a grander sympathy——"

He ceased his flow of eloquence, and assumed a listening attitude of intense eagerness. Faintly over the plains had come the sound of a voice raised in cheerful song.

"Our visitor seems in a happy mood," said Bob, turning to look.

Mackay grunted, Jack laughed outright, for distinctly through the still air came the staccato refrain—

"A—bright—wee—muskittie—sat—on—a—tree."

The horseman was coming forward at an easy trot, jerking out the plaintive strains of Mackay's pet ditty to the novel time of his steed's clattering hoof-beats. As yet he was too far distant to be plainly distinguishable, but the song was enough for Mackay.

"It's that confounded Shadow wha's murderin' that bonnie verse," said he; "but how in the name o' goodness can he be back already? An' he's got a horse, too. A good hundred and fifty miles in three days. Well, well——"

At this stage, Nuggety Dick, Emu Bill, Dead Broke Dan, and Never Never Dave made their hasty appearance, all in a state of extreme excitement.

"I do believe it's the Shadow!" cried Nuggety.

"It's the Shad, right enough," grinned Jack; "don't you hear him?"

Louder swelled the melancholy chorus—

"A bright wee muskittie——"

"Confound that pestilential muskittie!" roared Mackay, in high dudgeon, amid the laughter of his companions. "My poetic inspiration will be fair destroyed after hearin' my gem o' beauty abused in such a manner."

But his wrath simmered down speedily as the redoubtable Shadow rode up, travel-stained and weary, his sole upper vestment still further torn and bedraggled, so that it clung to him only in shreds and patches.

"I reckon I has had a daisy time," he said lightly, slipping from the saddle. But the effort of his long journey had told on his numbed limbs, and he staggered and would have fallen had not Mackay's ready grip supported him.

"Come and have something to eat, you young rascal," said the aggrieved composer. "You can tell us your news afterwards."

Jack even now had tea ready for the wayfarer, but the wiry youth refused to be pampered.

"Well, boss," said he, "I'm only a bit stiff, that's all. Everything's all right. I got in ahead o' Macguire by an hour, an' fixed up with the Warden like a streak. I has had a great time——" And he would have begun a narration of his experiences right then, had not Jack insisted on his having his tea while it was warm.

It would be difficult to express the satisfaction that was felt over the Shadow's successful journey, and when the lad had finished his meal, and told of his numerous adventures on the route and in the township, not one among them but felt that the young bushman had proved his worth in no uncertain degree. But it was Mackay's hearty "Well done, my laddie," that seemed to give him greatest pleasure, and he cast about him for some means of showing his gladness.

"I was practisin' your song as I came along," he announced brightly. "It's a rattlin' fine song, it is. I like it best where the muskittie——"

He opened his mouth for a preparatory howl, then, noting the stern glance cast at him by the man he desired to propitiate, he subsided in dismay.

"Ye dinna need to intensify your original offence, young man," quoth the aggrieved one, solemnly. "I heard ye slaughterin' that pair wee muskittie about a mile off. There's an auld and true proverb which says: 'Fools rush in whaur angels fear to pit doon their feet.' Are ye no aware that that song is set for an angelic tenor voice like mine, an' no at a' suited for that bark o' yours, which is like the laboured croak o' a burst bassoon? Never mind," he continued magnanimously, "I'll forgie ye, an' I'll mak' ye up a touching wee song for yersel' some o' these days."

The culprit shuddered at the terrible threat, then hastily departed with Bob and Jack to talk of subjects more pleasing to their common fancy.

All this time Macguire's motley crew had been eyeing the group from the vantage-point of one of their shafts, and that their feelings were anything but pleasurable was very plainly evident. They could not understand the early return of the messenger, but they guessed correctly enough that he must in some way have baulked their chief's plans, and their disappointment was keen.

Events in the history of Golden Flat happened quickly now. Early next morning, Jackson, of the Exchange Hotel, weighed in with several horses and a buggy. He was accompanied by three well-known prospectors, whom Mackay and his companions welcomed heartily.

"We need a few decent miners here badly," said he to them. "Just peg out at the end o' the lead; your chances are pretty good there yet." To Jackson he whispered a word of advice. "I've an idea," said he, mysteriously, "that the ground next the Golden Promise will be abandoned in a day or so. I should like to do ye a good turn, if only because o' your kindness to the Shadow, so I'm givin' ye the hint."

A suggestion on such an important matter connected with a new field was as good as a law unto Jackson.

"I'll wait about then, Mac," said he, "and if I can do anything in your interest afterwards, you can bet your shirt it shall be done."

Another day brought a fresh number of excited gold-seekers to the Flat, and then they came so regularly that a plainly marked track quickly connected the camp with Kalgoorlie. Before the week was out, the population of Golden Flat had increased to a hundred, and still gaunt, bearded miners came trooping in, and spread themselves promiscuously throughout the surrounding country in the hope of being able to catch on to the invisible channel. Some arrived on foot, many having merely the uppers of their boots left to them, on reaching their destination; and to see these men marching stubbornly onward over the burning desert, carrying their entire paraphernalia on their backs, and their eyes agleam with hungry desire, affected Bob strangely. His extremely sensitive nature quailed at the thought of such indomitable energy being rewarded only by bitter disappointment, for he knew well that only a small proportion of their number could hope to benefit. Buggies, bicycles, and horses all rolled up; and then came a great heavy waggon, drawn by a tugging, straining camel team. It stopped opposite the Golden Promise mine, and one of the twain who accompanied it, a lean and lanky corrugated-faced individual, stepped forward and interviewed Mackay.

"Any use stickin' up a battery here, mate?"

"Well, I calculate between us we can give you nearly a thousand tons o' wash, but I couldn't promise what more."

"That's good enough for us," responded the sprightly battery owner, and he turned to his awaiting companion. "Up she goes, Jim," said he.

They sought a suitable site some little way off, where the chances of striking water at no great depth promised favourably, and before the day was done Golden Flat battery was almost ready to begin work.

"They'll get a bit o' a shock when they tackle the miradgy clayey stuff," Mackay murmured, as he watched the enterprising builders, "but I don't suppose they'd believe me if I told them about it. Anyhow, we can realize now on what we've got on the surface. For the rest, we must trust to Bob's discovery."

It would be difficult to imagine the metamorphosis the quiet Flat underwent in that short week. Tents scattered everywhere, and the air was never free from the shattering roar of exploding gelignite, which indicated how earnestly the new-comers were endeavouring to bottom on their claims.

During this strenuous period in the life of the Flat, work at the Golden Promise mine proceeded surely and steadily, and the wash-dirt was accumulating in great piles at the shaft head. In view of the watchful eyes of a section of the community given to legitimate claim jumping, the Shadow had gone back to his own workings, where, by the occasional assistance of Emu Bill, he succeeded in excavating his ground to excellent purpose. Bob now took his old place in the subterranean chamber of the mine, though Mackay was loth indeed to permit it.

"I would rather see ye riggin' up the process on a big scale," he said. "Still, it's maybe just as well to keep it quiet for a bit, until we see what happens when the loafing gang next us bottoms on the mirage."

Bob thought so too. His sympathies were all indeed with the hard-working miners who were battling away so persistently at the remote ends of the Flat; but to confer a benefit on the men who would so meanly have stolen his own and companions' holdings! It was scarcely natural that he should view such an idea with any favour, especially when there were many honest toilers around who might have a chance to secure a portion of the ground

held by the gang should they decide to abandon it, for their pegs confined a nine-man allotment, an area which, with the claims of their own party, practically covered the known auriferous ground of the Flat.

"If the beggars once bottomed on that deceptive compound," said he, grimly, to himself, "I don't think they would wait much longer. The gold that vanisheth would be too much for them."

But Macguire's satellites in no way hurried the sinking of their many shafts, indeed, it soon became apparent that they were rather retarding operations for a purpose. Jack was one of the first to notice this odd dilatoriness.

"They've had three misfires in the shaft next to us to-day," said he, as Mackay and Bob emerged from their labours one evening. Jack had been on windlass duty, and so from his high post could not fail to observe the progress made during the day on the mines in his near vicinity.

"I wonder what they are up to?" remarked Bob, thoughtfully. "They ought to have bottomed some days ago, judging by the level and trend of the drift in the Golden Promise."

But their scheme was simple enough, as it turned out. Jackson unconsciously explained it away that same night while he was talking to Bob by the camp-fire.

"Your neighbours have offered to sell me one of their claims for £1000," said he. "They haven't struck the wash yet, but they say, judgin' from your ore on the surface, theirs must be as good, if not better, when they hit it."

"Oh, that's their idea, is it?" commented Mackay, who had been listening. "I'm no' denyin' that it's a good plan in some cases for both sides, an' I believe they are perfectly honest accordin' to their calculations, but——"

He shook his head decisively.

"Why, what do you think is the matter?" asked Jackson. "Haven't they a good chance of striking the channel?"

Mackay laughed. "They'll hit the channel plumb enough," said he; then he hesitated. "You haven't been down our shaft yet?" he added. "But I'll take you below in the morning, and show ye something that'll surprise you."

You're no' half a bad sort, Jackson, and you and me have worked together before, otherwise I wouldna say a single word about the concern, though I admit freely I have no goodwill towards the meeserable crowd next to us."

The tactics of the objectionable party were, after all, but the tactics of the non-mining element on all goldfields, who invariably prefer to sell a chance rather than take even remote risk of disaster. The true gold-miner is built differently; to him his chance is everything, the whole glamour of his life lies in its tantalizing uncertainty, and poor and needy though he may be, he must pursue Nature's elusive treasure to the end, be it bitter or sweet.

A fortnight had elapsed since the Shadow's return, and Golden Flat thrived and grew apace. The crashing rattle of the ever-active stamping-battery made day and night alike hideous. A saw-mill, too, had appeared on the scene, and its characteristic din was added to the prevailing discords. Deep wells had been sunk, tapping only strongly brackish water, but a condensing plant was almost immediately established to purify this sufficiently for culinary purposes, and the far-seeing proprietor was reaping a goodly harvest from the sale of the warm fluid, sparingly dispensed at a shilling a gallon.

From the Golden Promise mine, nearly two hundred tons of the valuable wash had been raised to the surface and this was being regularly conveyed to the greedy battery, which consumed it at the rate of twenty tons a day, and rendered the resultant bullion to the happy owners of the mine. But the partners of the Golden Promise knew well that their claim would yield little more of the same material; another fifty tons at the utmost was Mackay's computation, and then—then the deceptive under-stratum would have to be considered. Meanwhile, the news of the Golden Promise's richness spread like wildfire throughout the Flat; the battery returns on the first day of treatment gave the exceptionally high result of one hundred and twenty ounces of gold from the twenty tons of ore crushed.

"That means, wi' gold at £4 an ounce, £480 between the three o' us, my lads," said Mackay, when he heard the news. "An' we can calculate on twelve times that amount afore we're on to the mirage stuff."

"How does that compare with our home earnings, Jack?" laughed Bob.

"I think the steam yacht is coming a bit nearer," admitted that youth, lightly. "But," and his voice grew sorrowful, "isn't it a pity that we haven't two or three thousand tons——"

"Now, now, young 'un," Mackay interrupted sternly, "you must never give way to useless reflections. What is, is, and let us be thankful. The future is before ye, my lad, look to it for your Eldorado."

"After all," reasoned Bob, "we are never really contented. Our ideas of happiness seem to change so much; we are always seeking what we imagine to be a definite object, and when we reach it, another and apparently far greater incentive beckons us on—on to what?"

"There you go," grumbled Jack, "preaching a first-class sermon when we ought to be slogging away down in the shaft."

Bob started to his feet at once. "I clean forgot, Jack," said he; "your mention of the steam yacht which we used to talk about in the old days set me thinking."

They disappeared together, engaged in earnest conversation. A rough ladder-way had been fixed in the shaft by this time, so that it was not necessary for the windlass to be called into requisition every time an ascent or descent was made. Mackay, who had just been returning from his labours below when he received the information about the battery results, sat musing on the edge of his bunk for some minutes after the boys had departed. Bob's words had aroused in him a strange feeling of restlessness and discontent, which, try as he might, he could not shake off.

"It's the call of the Never Never gripping me again," he muttered hoarsely. "I wonder what great secret that terrible country holds as a recompense for all the lives it has taken. Is it only a shadow that attracts, after all?"

He arose wearily, and went back to the shaft he had so recently vacated, and, notwithstanding the protests of his young associates, took up his pick and worked with fierce energy.

"It's a wee bit o' mental depression that's dropped on me sudden-like," explained he; "an' there's nothing like hard graft for bringing the balance true quickly."

The time passed, and still he smote away with untiring persistency. Then Jack seized the pick from his hand.

"It's time to go aloft and have supper," said he, "then I want to hear you play the flute for a bit. I'm just dying to hear some decent music."

Mackay smiled kindly at the boy. "You've hit me on my tender spot," he made reply. "Do you think you could appreciate 'The Muskittie's Lament' the night?"

"Even 'The Muskittie's Lament,'" Jack added valorously.

CHAPTER VIII

Macguire's Threat

It was about this time that Macguire thought it necessary to return to the scene of his discomfiture, and view for himself the progress made by his worthy confrères. His arrangement with his men was the not uncommon one of "grubstaking" for half the profits; that is, he kept them in food, and supplied them with all necessary tools in return for a half interest in the wealth of the mines so worked. It is a sufficiently equitable understanding when made between an honestly intentioned capitalist and a down-on-his-luck miner over the development of a wholly questionable prospect; but it is rarely successful on a proved mineral area, and when it is attempted in such a case, it invariably leaks out that those so employed are strongly in the clutches of the "grubstaker," who is usually the local publican. There was a curious rude kind of honour among these men. They respected their chief principally because of his great bodily strength, and if there was an element of fear mixed with this respect, who could blame them? But they admired his sharpness, too; few men could get the better of Macguire; and so these wretched creatures chuckled at the fact that their patron was a power in the land, and could do much to influence their several careers when he wished. Nevertheless, their leanings towards hard manual labour were not of the strongest; their usual routine in the past had been "jumping" mines when the bulk of the work thereon had been done, but on this occasion their amiable intentions in that direction had received a rude check, and base toil must now be their portion, unless some purchaser for their claims could be found. So it happened that their excavations progressed with exceeding slowness, and Macguire, growing wroth at their failure to strike the wash in a reasonable time, and having now recovered his wonted energy, determined to proceed again to the Flat and direct operations in person. He arrived at a very early hour in the morning, riding Furious. Few of the camp were about, but the ubiquitous Shadow was of course in evidence, seated at his solitary breakfast outside his tent door.

"Blow me," murmured that gentle youth, "if it ain't Macguire."

The recognition was mutual.

"So you got back, you young ruffian?" came the new-comer's greeting, and the Shadow's ire was aroused at once.

"I hope the Warden didn't say nothin' unkind to you when you called on him that morning," said he, with exaggerated solicitude. "I should just hate to think yer feelin's had been hurt."

The horseman's eyes blazed angrily; then, all of a sudden, he threw himself from the saddle and made a rush at his enemy, who agilely dodged at the last moment, with the result that Macguire's great bulk hurled itself against the tent.

"I reckon that's as good as house-breakin', it is," protested the Shadow, in injured tones.

With rage in his heart, Macguire made another wild dash at the mocking youngster, who took refuge behind the windlass on his shaft, and eyed his panting aggressor cheerfully. In this position of antagonism, Emu Bill, who had been awakened from his slumbers by the strange sounds without, found them. He took in the scene at a glance, but his set bronzed face did not move a muscle.

"I reckon you has just about met your match this time, Macguire," said he, calmly. "A boy is about your size every time, he is."

Without a word Macguire got back on his horse. "I'll settle you too," he hissed. "You won't know what's struck you when I'm done with you——"

"A bit o' rock, most likely, if you are about," retorted Emu Bill, with grave contempt.

Macguire galloped off.

"Despite his faults, the man's a born hustler," Mackay remarked that same day to his two companions.

They were engaged on the surface, levelling off their ore dump from the shaft mouth, and could scarcely fail to note the unwonted activity shown on the adjoining claim.

"He certainly does make them shift around," agreed Bob. "I suppose long experience has taught him how to handle his type of followers."

Very shortly afterwards it became evident that some unusual excitement prevailed at Number 2 shaft, which adjoined the Golden Promise towards the south. The official numbers of the various claims ran consecutively north and south of the Golden Promise, which was known as the Discovery shaft, though, indeed, Nuggety Dick's excavation, which was now called Number 4 above Discovery, should have claimed that honour.

This Number 2 was the main hope of Macguire's party, for by it alone could they hope to trace the direction of the golden leader. Now it seemed as if they had at last broken through to the golden stratum, men rushed hither and thither carrying gold-pans and dollying-hammers, some clustered around the shaft mouth, then Macguire himself was seen to descend the workings. A hushed air of expectation spread over the whole Flat, and for a brief space all work was suspended. A few minutes passed in anxious silence, then a bellow of joy from Macguire reached the surface; at once one of his waiting aides-de-camp extracted a red flag of huge proportions from a convenient niche near the windlass, where it had been lying in readiness, and its dropping folds soon flaunted in the sunshine, proclaiming to all whom it might concern that Number 2 had bottomed on gold. Almost immediately Macguire ascended to the surface, carrying a large-sized specimen in his hand, the sight of which caused Jack to be convulsed with inward laughter, for its greyish colour proclaimed it at once to be of the same deceptive material which had first been discovered in Emu Bill's claim.

"I'm half inclined to be sorry for the man," spoke Mackay, with some feeling.

Bob had been experiencing a pang or two himself. "It does seem hard lines," he said.

Yet even while they were considering on a magnanimous course of action, the object of their sympathy turned his leering eyes upon them.

"I'll best ye yet!" he cried triumphantly, holding his treasure at arm's length that all might look. "I've got as much of this stuff as'll keep the battery

going for six months. I'll see that Roxton closes down on your wash to-night, I will. I'll starve you out o' the Flat like rats, quick an' lively too."

Now Roxton, the battery owner, was like many other humbler men, heavily in debt to the publican, who along with his other duties acted the part of money-lender in the township. It was quite possible therefore that Macguire could make good his threat about the closing down of the battery, though had he known it, that would at this time scarcely have affected the partners of the Golden Promise to any extent, the bulk of their visible wash having been already treated. Still, the brutal malignancy of the man's intentions was unmistakable, and a shudder of disgust seized Bob, nipping effectually the finer sentiments he had harboured but a moment before. Mackay eyed the jeering man with a look in which a just anger and a wholesome contempt were struggling for mastery.

"You're nothing but a sneaking thief, Macguire," he said, with forced calmness. "An' for twa pins I'd come doon an' burst in a few mair o' your ribs. I'll certainly hae to settle you when I am forced to tackle you again. But what are ye makin' a' the fuss aboot, anyhow? You're clutching to a bit o' clay as if it were a golden nugget. Your battery wouldna thrive vera weel on that sort o' stuff, I'm thinkin'."

Macguire was on the point of launching out into further invective, when his eye happened to glance at his treasure. He hesitated, stammered, and his rotund face grew livid.

"Put the water you have ready on your heid instead o' into the gold-pan," advised Mackay, kindly, "it'll maybe keep ye from gettin' apoplexy."

An inarticulate yell of mingled dismay and fury broke from the lips of the too-previous exulter. Hurling the stone from him, he turned and rushed blindly into his tent. Eagerly his followers picked up the rejected specimen; it was dull and dead clay, showing no trace of the precious metal. Muttering maledictions, they fled after their leader.

It quickly became whispered about that all was not as had been hoped at Number 2 shaft, and despite the reticence of those principally concerned, strange rumours were soon current regarding the extraordinary phantom gold formation which had just been struck. Then Macguire raved more

wildly than ever, for his chances of disposing of the mine on a sight valuation to some innocent buyer were now hopelessly ruined. He railed savagely against Nature, and all mankind in general; even his own alike suffering and yet sympathetic followers were not spared the flood of his abuse. A trial parcel of the ore was sent to the battery in the hope that whatever free gold contained in the substance might be saved by the mercury, but only further disappointment resulted. Its cohesive nature was such that the stamps merely flattened it like putty, and the whole went over the sluice-box in a dense mass of coagulated slimes, leaving not a trace of gold behind in the riffles.

When Mackay heard this he was filled with misgivings; he had never doubted the efficacy of the stamps as a crushing agency, and he feared for the working of Bob's process on a large scale when hand manipulation would be impossible. Bob, however, seemed in no way disturbed.

"Crushing is unnecessary with the process," said he. "The ore will dissolve in the vat; indeed, it would reduce itself to slime in ordinary water if puddled occasionally, or it would disintegrate very rapidly on exposure to the sun, though that plan would be rather risky, owing to the excessive oxidization which might take place. But in every case the slimes would remain unaffected by battery treatment, and for this one reason which was the basis of all my experiments—the clayey material is a chemical compound, and not a mechanical mixture like ordinary alluvial wash, consequently it will only answer to chemical treatment."

"But," interjected Jack, "there is most likely free gold in the stuff as well as the—the other kind."

"Probably enough, but, as you see, even that cannot be saved by ordinary methods; the soapy nature of the composition, I imagine, is the cause. Oily globules will form around the gold particles and insulate them, so that the mercury on the plates never really gets a chance to exert its power."

Apparently Bob's studies had been complete and exhaustive; his knowledge of his subject impressed Mackay deeply.

"I can follow your reasoning there, Bob," said he, "for the overflow even of the small vat in the tent was more like engine-grease than anything else, an'

I can testify that the residue I washed in the pan was a pure and free sand."

The Shadow here broke in on their conversation; he had been away at the other end of the Flat on a tour of investigation, for it was known that several shafts were nearing the dreaded bottom.

"The whole circus is goin' to break up," he announced sorrowfully. "There's nothin' but Emu Bill's miradgy stuff down there, an' the miners are thinkin' o' giving it best."

The Shadow was not aware that Bob's experiment had proved successful; Emu Bill alone of the original group had been informed, and he certainly had not spoken of it.

"I'll go down and advise them to hang on for a bit," said Mackay, after some deliberation. "An' Bob, you can tell the Shadow anything you like, provided he promises to keep his mouth shut."

"Say boss, does I deserve that?" complained the injured youth, reproachfully.

Jack hastened to assuage his grief. "No one knows yet," said he, "but Emu Bill and ourselves; we didn't want Macguire's crowd to hear that Bob could tackle the mirage."

"An' did ye think that I would give it away?" murmured the Shadow, with emotion, and for a long time he refused to be comforted.

That day six shafts penetrated into the refractory formation, and loud were the lamentations that arose throughout the camp. Surely never was a more scurvy trick played by Dame Fortune upon her toiling votaries. Macguire laughed heartily at the misfortunes of his neighbours; it was as balm to his soul that others should experience the pangs of disappointment as he did, and in the evening he gave the lead to the others by dismantling his windlasses and preparing for departure, having done not a stroke of work on his claims since the eventful day of his own bitter chagrin. On the following morning he and his associates took their leave of the Flat, and almost as soon as they were out of sight, the abandoned claims were being taken up afresh by a number of hard-working miners, who had before been sinking vain shafts well without the auriferous belt. Jackson had quietly annexed

Number 2 shaft, though he was somewhat dubious about it proving of any service to him, and fully a dozen honest toilers swarmed over the remainder of the ground vacated. There was no need to keep the secret longer, and before noon all the Flat had been made aware of Bob's discovery, and excitement was again raised to fever heat. A deputation from among the miners was formed at once to make inquiry into the matter, for news of a scheme of such far-reaching importance could not be received lightly.

They approached the Golden Promise mine shortly after midday, followed *en masse* by the entire population of the camp.

"We wants to see the inventor o' the process," said the spokesman, addressing Mackay, who was at the windlass, "we wants to ask him if it are a fact that he can save the gold in this stuff." He displayed a piece of the refractory ore in his hand.

Mackay gazed at the speaker kindly, then at the sea of upturned faces in the background.

"I reckon you've come to the right street for your information, boys," he replied, and he shouted down to his companion in the depths below: "Bob, there's a few gentlemen wi' some interest in the welfare o' Golden Flat wanting to speak to you."

A minute later and Bob arrived on the surface, and at his appearance a faint cheer swept over the awaiting crowd. The young man started in amazement; he could not understand this demonstration, but he quickly recovered himself, and then the speaker of the deputation began his oration afresh, ending with the earnest words: "We are miners every one o' us, with not much to spare in the way o' cash; but if you can help us, and ain't unwilling to help us, you may ask what you like from the returns o' the mines, an' we won't refuse."

Bob was touched, and for the first time a surging feeling of his power came over him, yet when he spoke his voice was calm and even. Briefly he recounted his experiments with the tantalizing material, concluding with the results of the last and final test; then, suddenly, he entered upon a keen technical description of the ore and its peculiarities, dealing with its scientific aspect at critical length. Jack nudged Mackay, who coughed

loudly, and Bob, interrupted, lost the theme of his argument, and incidentally remembered that he was not addressing a class of trained mineralogists. He hesitated, and turned to Mackay.

"You can make them understand better," he said.

"I can that," responded that individual, promptly; and he disappeared into the tent, issuing forth immediately with the gold-pan, which still contained the results of the important experiment. He thrust the pan with its gleaming treasure into the hands of one of the deputation. "I saw that go through mysel'," said he. "There's no much o' a phantom about that, is there?"

The crowd behind caught a glitter of the gold as the pan was passed round, and now there was no mistake about the energy of their cheer—a hundred throats echoed it forth. When it had subsided, Mackay again made felicitous utterance.

"We'll have a ten-ton vat rigged up within a couple o' days," he announced, in stentorian tones. "An' Bob, here, wishes me to say that the charges for treatment will no' be in any way extravagant."

A yell of approval rewarded his effort, yet still the assembly showed no signs of departing.

"I think you should sing the 'Muskittie' to them," suggested Jack, "then you'd see them run."

He had to run himself after that, and when he returned, the conclusion of the meeting was near. The leader of the deputation was making strenuous endeavour to justify his position. He harangued the congregated miners with forceful eloquence, pointing out what an inestimable service the young inventor would confer upon the country and themselves.

"And now, boys," he concluded, "let her go again. Three cheers for the discoverer of the process. Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!" And the Flat thundered with their hearty applause.

When they had gone, Mackay heaved a hearty sigh of relief.

"You're far too open-hearted for this pairt o' the world, Bob," he said dryly. "If there had been one among that crowd wha kent anything about

chemistry, he would have got as big a knowledge o' your process as you have yourself."

Bob flushed. "I forgot," said he, "that there was any reason for keeping it secret."

The elder man laughed grimly. "My laddie," he began, with grave earnestness, "are ye no' aware that there should be a fortune in this for you. There may be tens o' thousands o' tons o' the stuff in this Flat, and allowin' ye made a charge of, say, £2 a ton—which is little more than battery price—don't you see what a tremendous profit would be made? You canna patent a discovery, Bob; and your only safety is in keeping it secret. The great danger lies in the simplicity o' the process. We must be vera careful, my lad, vera careful indeed."

"But did I really tell them everything?" said Bob, abashed; for in truth he had forgotten the presence of his audience, so wrapped up had he been in the interest of his subject.

"Oh yes, you telt them richt enough; but you clothed your observations in such elegant scientific language that I'm sure not a man among them kent what ye were talkin' about."

"You did give them a pretty bad time," grinned Jack. "It was a treat to see them wrestling with hydrocarbonaceous compounds, and electrolytical principles; but didn't they howl when they saw the gold!"

"I reckon that talks every time," said Mackay.

No time was now lost in erecting the vat and other appliances necessary for the bulk treatment of the strange deposit. Wood was obtained from the saw mill, and Mackay, assisted by Jack and the Shadow, started to build the giant trough for the retention of the ore. Only half-sawn, rounded timber was used, for that alone could support the strain that must finally be put upon the structure; a movable bottom was also fixed to allow of the ultimate residue being drawn off easily, and the whole was mounted on a stout standard of logs raised about five feet from the ground.

As may be imagined, a constant stream of visitors came to view the peculiar erection before it was nearly half completed; but when Bob's important

chemical and electrical arrangements were ready to be fitted, Mackay, much to the disgust of the beholders, screened the entire plant from their gaze by building a tall canvas wall around it. By the end of the week everything was in readiness for the trial, which was given out to take place in the evening, and a vast assembly gathered to witness the inauguration of what was now known as the "Hope of Golden Flat." So speedily had the news travelled concerning it, and so vastly interested had even the outside world become in the problematical future of the Flat's odd formation, that by Saturday morning quite a number of men from Kalgoorlie and far outlying townships made their appearance, and a steady stream of buggies and horsemen poured in along the track all day. Indeed, it seemed as if a fresh rush had set in, so keen was the excitement.

But Mackay was ill at ease. Among the throng of new-comers he had recognized several of the cleverest mining engineers in the State, and none of them had reputations for being over-scrupulous.

"There'll be a careful eye kept on us to-night, Bob," said he. "An' I'm just a wee bit dubious o' the intentions o' some o' our visitors."

Bob looked thoughtful. "I'll fix up a dummy battery and an extra generator for their special benefit," he suggested.

"A good idea, my lad, and I'll see that Emu Bill and the boys are close handy in case o' accident. Jack can stand by an' help you. I'll attend to the dumping o' the ore, and the overflow arrangements, an' flatten out any man wha's troubled wi' an excess o' inquisitiveness."

"An' I," spoke the Shadow, "I reckons I'll keep my blinkers open for any suspicious-lookin' cusses, an'—— Howlin' centipedes! there's one now! Blow me if it ain't that pestiferous son o' a gun back again."

They looked and saw Macguire in close conversation with a short, nattily dressed man of about middle age. Then the crowd closed up again, and hid the plotters—for such they undoubtedly were—from view.

The trial had been arranged to take place at seven o'clock in the evening, chiefly because the great heat of the sun at an earlier period would have been most trying for the spectators and experimentalists alike, but Mackay had also the idea that at such a time the working arrangements would be

less visible to the onlookers, and though he did not then think that any danger was likely to arise in this respect, he now congratulated himself on his cautionary scruples. Indeed, if the three partners could have foreseen that so many outsiders were to be present, no public exhibition of the process would have been promised. But it was too late now to alter their plans; the test must go on, come what may; and though Bob was confident of success, his mind was somewhat troubled by the appearance on the scene of so many strangers, and the arrival of Macguire added much to his apprehensions. An hour before the stated time all was in readiness for the ordeal. The gas generators and batteries were placed behind the vat and loosely covered by some old ore-bags, then the enclosing canvas screen was pulled away. A number of oil lamps hung around gave ample light, while at the same time their reflectors were so arranged as to cast a deep shadow over the lowly placed chemical plant. Every safeguard against prying eyes had been employed before the curtain was taken down, and now the interested spectators gazed curiously on the huge wooden structure which revealed itself to them. Ten tons of the ore to be treated rested on a platform built at the top of the vat; it was all neatly arranged in bags, each of ten claims having provided a ton, while an extra half-dozen tons taken from the Golden Promise lay conveniently near at hand.

Bob stepped with apparent carelessness to the concealed batteries and made the connections secure; Mackay mounted the platform to tip in the ore, and Jack casually stood guard in front of the hidden plant. Then Macguire's harsh voice cackled out in protest—

"We want to see the inside o' the concern before you start; you may have salted it for all we knows."

Bob's lips compressed tightly at the words. "I am not a professional conjurer," he said with dignity, "and I have nothing to gain one way or another from any of you. If you represent the feelings of the miners here, I shall go no further."

A cry of dissent at once arose, and Macguire's safety seemed for the moment imperilled; but in the midst of the uproar, Bob calmly unscrewed the bottom from the vat and pulled it forth for inspection, and he noted that those who came forward at his request were without exception the men

whose good intentions Mackay had so much doubted. The interruption did not delay matters for more than a minute or so, then Mackay began to load the vat, and in a short space the onlookers were listening to its turbulent outbursts in amazed silence. At this stage, Macguire, accompanied by the man he had been seen with earlier in the evening, pushed his way forward until he was almost touching the foaming caldron. But they did not escape the lynx eyes of Emu Bill and the Shadow, whose stern grips were on their shoulders at once.

"Let them stay, Bill, if they want," said Bob, quietly.

"I should just reckon we would, young feller," rasped Macguire, though even as he spoke his companion was whisked abruptly to the rear by the inflexible Shadow.

Bob smiled, and nodded to Mackay, who at once opened the overflow tap, and a spouting rush of oily slimes descended on the bully's head, saturating him in an odoriferous flood. The bystanders roared with glee, and made way hurriedly to allow the dripping man an open passage for his now frenzied retreat. The suddenness of the deluge had utterly taken away his power of speech, and the smarting pain of the saline fluid in his eyes made him howl like a dingo. However, he recovered himself somewhat when he got clear of the jeering crowd. "I'll pay ye back for this!" he snarled; "I'll—I'll——" Then his more fortunate companion took him by the arm and led him away.

The drastic lesson had considerable effect on several other over-inquisitive individuals, and their haste to retire whenever they saw Mackay's hand reach towards the tap was ludicrous in its earnestness.

Again and again the overflow belched out, until it seemed as if nothing solid could have remained. And all this time the assembled miners looked on in silent wonder. At last Bob intimated that the operation was completed.

"The vat was built to hold ten tons," he said, "but it could treat fifty tons in a day easily enough——"

"How do you make that out?" interrupted a mining engineer close at hand.

"Why, all you have to do is to keep filling up the vat as the overflow exhausts it. The gold will always be found at the bottom."

Mackay and Jack now busied themselves unscrewing the movable bottom, and the crowd surged round in breathless expectation. Quickly the screws relaxed, a stream of yellow ooze gurgled out, but the only solid matter retained was that which lay encompassed within the flanged edges of the detached wood. It was not inspiring to look upon, merely a layer about two inches deep of a dull gravelly sediment.

Then Bob spoke again. "If the process were kept going long enough," said he, "there would be scarcely any residue other than the gold itself."

"An' does ye think thar's any gold there, mate?" asked a stalwart miner, anxiously.

Bob nodded with easy confidence, "You'll very soon see," he replied.

Mackay was already engaged in the work of demonstration. Raising the shallow receptacle until it lay at a easy incline, he next gently tilted the contents of a kerosene tin full of water over the slope, and behold the muddy casing dissolved away, revealing a rich spangling yellow underneath. A roar of fierce joy burst from nigh on two hundred throats, and for about a minute pandemonium reigned. Hats were tossed into the air, and huzzahs long and loud echoed over the plains. The success of the process had been established beyond all doubt.

One of the first to congratulate the young discoverer was Nuggety Dick, but Never Never Dave and old Dead Broke were at his heels.

"You've saved the Flat, Bob!" cried Nuggety.

"An' you've saved us too," murmured Dead Broke, with emotion.

"What I want to know, young man, is by what means do you bring about the expulsion of the oily matter in the compound?"

The voice was patronizing in the extreme: the speaker was the erstwhile associate of Macguire.

Then Mackay's pent-up rage broke forth. "An' are ye sure that is all ye would like to know?" he stormed. "You mean, snivelling sneak, do ye think I don't know who ye are an' what ye're here for? Get out o' my sight, afore I do you damage."

To Bob's surprise, the man fled at once. Emu Bill laughed.

"I'd have liked a word with the skunk myself," said he. "He's one of the measliest rats in the West, he is."

Then Jack added his testimony. "He's been dodging around trying to get a look at the battery all evening."

The sound of a strenuous scuffle from behind the vat at this moment drew their attention. With a bound Mackay rushed to investigate, and there he beheld the Shadow engaged in silent conflict with the man they had just been discussing. The crowd had by this time drawn away from the scene of operations, and were talking excitedly among themselves over their now rosy future prospects.

Mackay snorted savagely. "Let me get a crack at him, Shadow," he said, hastening to the fray. But the struggling man, already safe in the Shadow's sinewy grip, on hearing the new-comer's voice, made a desperate effort to free himself, and literally tore himself from his enemy's grasp, and sped off into the night.

The Shadow gazed ruefully after the vanishing figure. "It was your fault," he said reproachfully to Mackay. "When you chased him away 'bout a minute ago I was watching him, an' saw him do a slide round by the back, so I just sat tight an' waited for the dodger. He was pulling the cover from that there fizzing concern when I gripped him by the neck."

"But who is he, anyhow?" asked Bob, who, with the others, had come to inquire the cause of the disturbance.

"He's a most dangerous man, Bob," answered Mackay, grimly. "His name is Wynberg, an' he's the chief chemist and assayer o' one o' the crookest mining companies in Australia, a clever man in his way, no doubt, but his cleverness seems aye to develop in the wrong direction, as the shareholders o' the company he represents should well ken by this time. He came here

wi' that thief Macguire on purpose to steal your brains, Bob—for nothing else."

"Well, I scarcely think he has succeeded," laughed Bob.

The crowd was by this time beginning to disperse, and a number of the miners came up to say good night.

"Why," exclaimed Jack, "we haven't weighed the gold yet!" And neither they had; so keen had been the excitement at seeing the welcome metal that no one had given a thought to estimating its quantity.

"We'll soon make that right," said Mackay, seizing the pair of gold-scales, that had been lying in readiness beside the generator. He quickly emptied the gleaming dust on to a sheet of calico, which Jack hastily drew forward, and commenced weighing it carefully in ounces.

"I reckon," said one of the men, who had sent a ton for treatment, "I reckon if it goes an ounce we should be mighty well pleased."

"In that case there should be ten ounces saved, then," said Bob, "allowing for no loss."

"There's three times that here," said Mackay, "or my judgment is very far oot." And, indeed, so it proved. Mackay filled the tiny scales exactly thirty-one times, and yet there were some grains over. "Thirty-one ounces," said he, "an' belted out o' the deceivin' stuff inside an hour." A murmur of astonishment ran through the group. This result surpassed even their wildest hopes.

"That means that each man who sent along a ton is entitled to three odd ounces," reflected Bob. "Better weigh it off and let them have it now."

The ten men concerned held a hurried consultation, then one of their number advanced, and laid his hand kindly on Bob's shoulder.

"There's nary one o' us will take an ounce o' the stuff," said he. "Keep the gold, my boy; you're heartily welcome to it. It's the first return o' the discovery, an' it's yours by right. We only hopes you'll get oceans more o' it afore very long."

A babel of concurring voices answered for his comrades, and before Bob could reply the men had gone. Mackay gravely handed a well-filled gold-bag to the hesitating youth.

"They're quite right, Bob," he commented quietly. "The gold is yours by right—by right o' discovery. Keep it, my laddie—keep it and treasure it, as Jack treasures the first nugget he found. In after years, if you're spared, ye'll maybe remember this night as a vera wonderful experience."

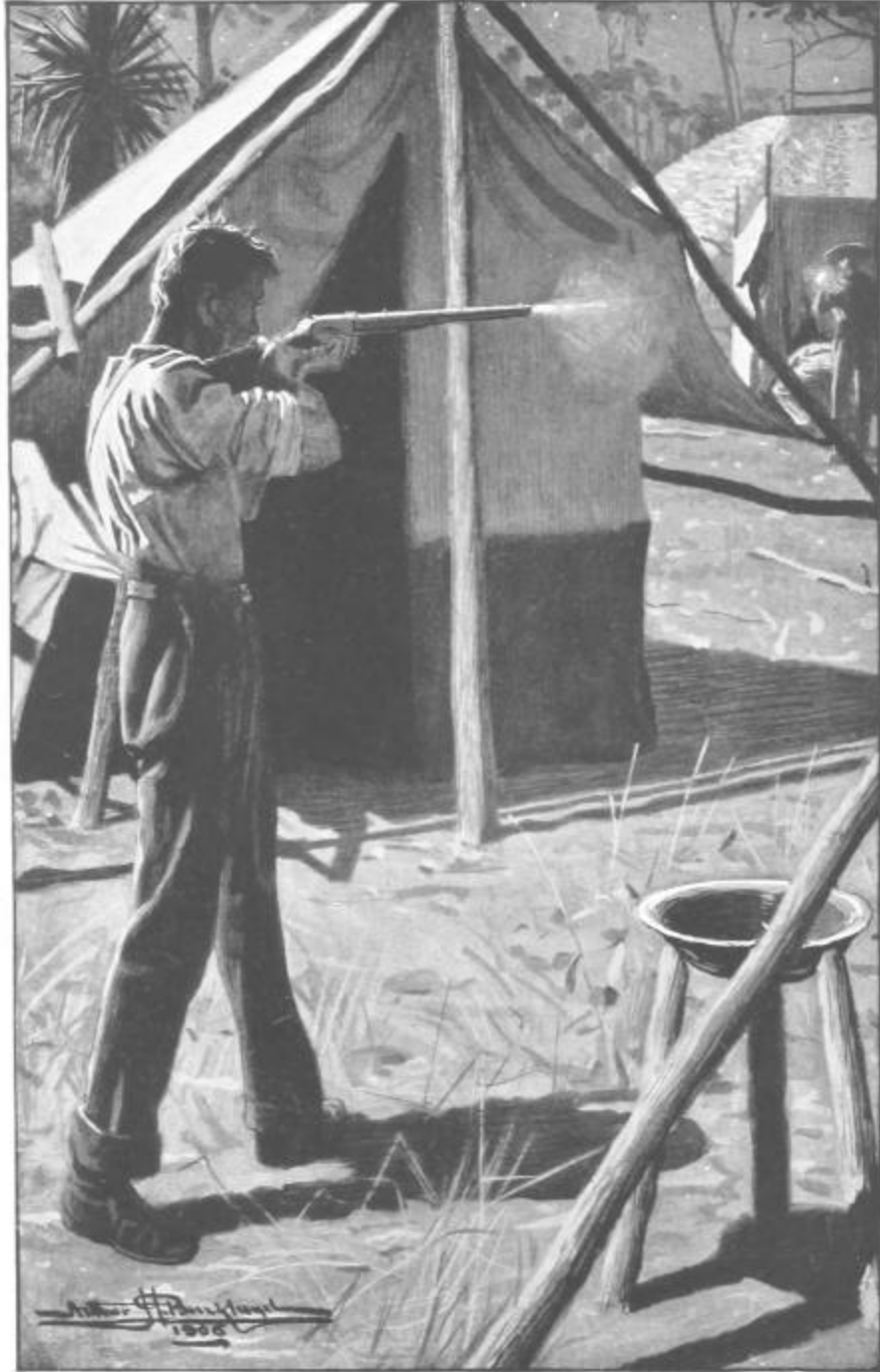
Bob was silent; somehow his companion's words affected him deeply. There was a note of foreboding in them, as if the speaker saw into the future clearly, and was saddened by what he saw. Together they joined the camp-fire circle, where the rest of their acquaintances were gathered; then Mackay appeared to remember something, and hastened back to the vat, and when Jack and the Shadow went in search of him, they found him quietly refixing the canvas wall around the whole structure.

That night Bob and Mackay slept deeply; the strain of the evening and of the preceding days had told upon them. Jack, on the other hand, tossed about restlessly; his active brain refused to be still, and the events of the last crowded epoch in his life flitted before his unseeing gaze. He awoke from a troubled sleep shortly after midnight, and a vague uneasiness seemed to take possession of him. The moon had just risen, and her pale eerie light penetrated into the tent and illumined it with a ghostly radiance; it shone on the faces of the two recumbent figures near, and Jack for the moment became interested in watching the different expressions of the sleepers. Bob slept deep and peacefully, a restful smile on his clear-cut features, but Mackay's rugged visage looked grim and careworn, and ever and anon a faint groan broke from his lips, while his breath came in quick, laboured gasps. Jack was amazed. To him the brawny bushman was still somewhat of an enigma, and each new phase of his startled, even while it interested him. "He'll be back in the Never Never again," thought he, pityingly. Then all at once his heart gave a violent bound. A shadow had suddenly fallen aslant the tent; some moving body had intervened to shut out the rising rays of the moon. He glanced around with an almost imperceptible movement through his half-closed eyelids, and there at the door stood a bulky figure gazing in on them intently. For fully a minute he stood thus, then he turned silently, and the moon shone on his face, revealing the hateful features of Macguire;

it shone also on something which glittered brightly in his upraised hand: it was a revolver.

Almost at the same instant Jack became conscious of another intruder being near; his sensitive ear caught the sound of light shuffling footsteps in the sand, and a dark form loomed up briefly by the side of the tent; the image reflected plainly through the thin calico wall, then quickly disappeared. Immediately afterwards there came a sharp rasping tear from the near vicinity, followed by a muttered curse. A cold sweat broke out on the boy's forehead; some one had cut the canvas screen enclosing the vat and batteries! At the disturbing sound the watcher at the door started slightly, then his demoniacal face peered again into the tent, and the shining barrel of his weapon was levelled straight at Mackay's heaving chest; but apparently satisfied that the man whom he so much dreaded was still asleep, he hastened to join his marauding companion.

Jack's action was prompt and impulsive; he leaped up, seized his Winchester repeater, which was lying on the ground at his side, and without a moment's hesitation rushed after Macguire. As in a dream he saw two dark figures lifting something out from the torn curtain surrounding the secret process; at his approach they dropped their encumbrance, there came a loud report, and Jack felt a ball graze his temple; then his own rifle spoke, and a yell of pain answered its heavy discharge. A perfect fusillade of revolver-shots now echoed through the night, and Jack felt the leaden messengers whistle about his ears. With a just rage in his heart he dashed right at the ruffianly pair; almost before he knew, he was on top of them, and his clubbed rifle whirled through the air, descending with a crash on Macguire's head. So severe was the stroke that the stock of his weapon shivered into fragments; but Macguire's skull was like iron; though the blow felled him like a stricken ox, he struggled to his feet at once and staggered off into the night, just as Mackay and Bob appeared on the scene. It had all happened in a few moments, and when his comrades arrived, the boy was standing with the shattered rifle still in his hands, gazing with dazed eyes all around.



**"JACK FELT A BALL GRAZE HIS TEMPLE; THEN HIS
OWN RIFLE SPOKE"**

"Well done, Jack!" said Mackay, heartily, guessing at once what had happened.

"But—but where's the other one?" faltered Jack. "There were two of them a minute ago. Look for the battery, Bob; look——"

"It's gone," said Bob, quietly.

And so it was. Macguire's villainous associate had disappeared, and with him the battery. He had left his hard-headed partner to bear the brunt of Jack's vengeful blow, probably by a preconceived arrangement, and, as Macguire most likely reasoned, a crack on the head with a rifle was better for him than the bullet which he would assuredly have received had he ventured flight at the same moment. They had trusted to the boy's unwillingness to shoot—after emptying their own firearms with deadly intent. They had pitted their murderous cunning against the lad's humane judgment, and they had succeeded in their nefarious plan.

"I ought to have fired; I ought to have killed them," muttered Jack, despairingly. "I knew their revolvers were empty at the last, only I didn't—like—to—shoot——"

"You did well, my lad," spoke Mackay, encouragingly. "I wouldna have cared for the blood o' even twa such scoundrels to be on your young heid, though had they killed you, I would have chased them up an' choked the breath oot o' them baith afore morning."

Very few of the tent dwellers around appeared to have been disturbed by the heavy firing. Only the Shadow and Emu Bill made their appearance to investigate the cause, and when they learned what had taken place, their language was full and eloquent.

"I'll twist that dandy chemist's neck in the morning," quoth the Shadow, with earnestness.

Mackay laughed mirthlessly. "They'll both probably stay in hiding for a bit," he said, "and the first thing we'll know is another process being stuck up on the Flat. They'll crowd us out, right enough, and we'll get nothing but what's in our own claims to put through."

"But won't the miners stand by us?" suggested Jack, hopefully.

"The miners, my laddie! The miners, especially on a new field such as this is, are like sheep. They'll gang the way o' least resistance, an' we canna afford to run a philanthropic concern for their benefit altogether. It's Bob I'm sorry for—Bob whose brain has done the work——"

"We'll let that go," said Bob, gently. "As you said last night, I'll have at least a vivid experience to remember."

Next morning news of the theft of Bob's secret appliances spread rapidly over the Flat. Mackay considered it advisable to let the affair be known ere some "new" discovery became heralded abroad by the perpetrators of the outrage.

"It will at least ensure the laddie's name as that o' the true inventor o' the process," he reasoned, and so the report became noised about.

At first the miners were indignant, and aggressively disposed towards the two men who had so meanly defrauded a mere boy, yet soon they calmed down.

"If there's more than one plant on the field we'll get the work done cheaper," argued some one, and of course this placed the matter in a new light as far as they were concerned.

There was no doubt as to the personality of the thieves. Early that same morning, Macguire and Wynberg, the chemist, had been seen driving off towards Kalgoorlie, and it had been observed also that the publican's head was swathed in bandages, while his companion's left arm was secured in a sling. Jack had certainly given them more than they bargained for, and the knowledge was a source of much joy to that youth, whose keen regret now was that he had not done them greater hurt.

The days slipped by, and the incident was almost forgotten before a week had passed; but the owners of the Golden Promise mine knew well what to expect. They continued their work in the shaft, digging out the refractory ore which now alone was left to them, and regularly each evening Bob kept pace with results by treating in the vat the entire amount raised in the day, and the exploitation of the mine proceeded; a little more than another week would suffice to exhaust the stratum within their boundary pegs, and then—Bob wondered vaguely whether, after all, the process had baffled the

discerning powers of the chemist, and so would allow them to profit by the discovery on a larger scale.

"You need scarcely hope for that, Bob," said Mackay, "as I said before, the danger o' the discovery lay in its simplicity, and Wynberg is a man wha has had a' the qualifications his university in Germany could give him. They're vera smart mineralogists, those Germans, Bob, and nothing much will pass them. A' the same, when I get a grip o' the man I'll alter the state o' his health for a week or so. I'll——"

Mackay's anger overcame him, and he turned away abruptly to hide his annoyance.

Events soon proved how clearly he had foreseen the plans of the conspirators. That very night, Rockson, the battery proprietor, came over to the Golden Promise evidently much perturbed.

"I've got a letter from Macguire, boys," he said hesitatingly. "An' he gives me instructions to fit up a twenty-ton vat close to my stamping-mill. He says Wynberg will be out in a day or so to see it completed. I feel inclined to throw up the sponge, boys, I do; I know it is your discovery he means to work. If the blackguard didn't own so much o' the battery, I'd have nothing more to do with him; but I'm in his power, an' I must either throw everything up or do what he says."

"Don't worry about my feelings, Rockson," replied Bob, with an effort, for indeed the news had hurt him deeply. "I know you have been straight with us from the first, and if I have to lose the process I'd sooner see you work it than any one else on the Flat."

"But say the word, an' I'll fix the thing up for you," Rockson exclaimed eagerly, "there'll be next to nothing for the mill to do after this, and I might as well have it out with Macguire now as afterwards. You know the secret, and there's room for two plants on Golden Flat."

Bob pondered for a moment, then slowly shook his head. "I'll share my rights with no man unwillingly," he said firmly. "Macguire can set up my process, but I, the inventor of it, will not compete against him. I'm not commercial enough to beat him in the struggle for popular favour. Besides, he owns a hotel, and I don't. Why, he would get all the trade if only because

of that. No, I won't strive with him for what should surely be my own, but I'll make every man on the field his rival. I'll give the secret away so that each individual may work it for himself. Put up the vat, Rockson; it may hurt me, but I'll see that it doesn't help him."

A quiet chuckle broke from the lips of Mackay, who had been listening in silence. He had never seen Bob thoroughly angry before, and the lad's display of temper on this occasion met with his full approval.

"You have spoken well, Bob," he said; "we didna come out to Australia to run a cut-price establishment alongside a gorilla-faced purveyor o' bad whisky an' a thievin' German Jew. The country is wide, Rockson, and there are more Golden Flats than one in it. Anyhow, a golden mountain will serve us just as well, and we may even be contented wi' diamonds an' rubies for a change."

He spoke lightly, but Rockson thought he saw something other than mere banter in his words, and he departed wondering much what new scheme Mackay had in view.

Bob and Jack too were rather surprised at their comrade's strange remark, and noting their look of interrogation, Mackay gave a rather reluctant explanation.

"I was thinking o' the Never Never land," he admitted, with a far-away expression in his eyes. "You know every kind of wealth is supposed to be hidden out there."

"Then why shouldn't we go?" asked Bob, promptly.

"Yes, why not?" Jack supplemented with ill-concealed eagerness.

The big man gazed into the burning logs of the camp-fire, around which they were seated, for several minutes before he made answer.

"I've thought o' it often," said he, at length, "and Bob kens that it is my dearest wish to go back on the old track ... back to the mountain ... and beyond. But there's danger in it, laddies; many a strong man has gone under wi' thirst while crossin' the great desert. Then there's the natives, savage and bloodthirsty, an' filled wi' the awfulest cunning. It's a' vera well for me to

go. My interest in life was crushed clean out o' me when I had to come back alone last year, an' I havena much to lose now——"

"You can't dissuade me by picturing the dangers of the trail," interrupted Bob, quietly. "I know you want to go, you've said as much to me many times; and I tell you frankly I'm going with you. What did you give me the sextant for?"

"I'm to blame, Bob; vera much to blame. I forgot whiles that Jack an' you were young, wi' a' the world before ye, but the reaction when I saw that I was infusing into you only my ain restless spirit was cruel, cruel."

Mackay's emotion overcame him, and he buried his face in his hands. Bob spoke again with forced calmness, "A restless spirit was my birthright, and I am thankful for it. Why," he continued passionately, "without it I might never have known you. I might never have seen this great country where out of your goodness Jack and I have made as much money in a few months as we could hope to make in a lifetime at home. Let dangers come, you will find us at your side ready and eager to meet them. No, we simply won't let you go without us."

"Bob speaks for me every time," added Jack, promptly.

Mackay arose, straightened out his stalwart figure, and eyed the boys with an expression of mingled gravity and happy appreciation.

"So be it," he said, and there was an inflection of finality in his tones. Then his voice became cheerful, almost joyous. "The fact is, my lads," he added, "I have aye unconsciously been considering your vera tender youth, an' feelin' that I was like the bold bad giant in the story-books wha enticed wee bairns awa' to their doom in the desert. No, Jack, I canna exactly say what book it was, my memory is gettin' a bit defective, I'm thinkin'. However, Bob has shown that he is a man every inch o' him, baith in brain and muscle development, while you, Jack, you've got savvy enough for anything, and did ye no' nearly kill twa o' the maist desperate men in the country the other night, single handed? I'll no' say another word against you goin' into the Never Never wi' me. I have wished it from the first, an' though I tried no' to influence ye, there were times when I couldna help mysel', when the spirit o' the lonely desert sent her uncanny cry ringin' through my brain—that cry

which I ken so well by this time, 'Mackay come back to your comrades; they wait for you by the mountain....' Ay, they wait for me, their bleaching bones wait for me to hide them from the carrion crows. But Mackay comes—he comes.... Get me the flute, Jack, an' let me play something cheery. I think I'll gie ye a selection from the 'Geisha' for a change."

"And I reckon I'll sing 'The Muskittie's Lament,' or burst," said the Shadow, who just then approached. "I reckon my voice has stretched a bit taller since I tackled it last."

Shortly afterwards the residents of Golden Flat had cause to marvel at the unwonted music, and succeeding outbursts of hilarity which emanated from the head of the field.

A few days later Rockson's vat was completed, and that evening Wynberg arrived by the mail coach, which now connected with Kalgoorlie twice weekly, to arrange the final fixtures. He was accompanied by three of Macguire's satellites, a most truculent trio indeed they were, whose presence no doubt was for the purpose of safeguarding Wynberg from being roughly handled by the men he had wronged, but the dapper little German seemed nevertheless very ill at ease. He alighted from the conveyance, which stopped just beside Nuggety Dick's claim, and gazed around him anxiously, then suddenly catching a glimpse of Mackay in the near distance, he made a wild break for Rockson's camp, and never stopped until he was safe in the manager's assay office, which was the only wooden structure in the district that boasted a lock and key. His three followers, grinning broadly, proceeded after him at a much more leisurely pace. After that nothing was seen of the chemist for two full days, in which time a heavily logged hut was erected beside the huge vat, presumably for the purpose of containing the secret appliances; assuredly Macguire and Wynberg intended to run no risks of having the stolen process in turn stolen from them.

Then when he observed that the partners of the Golden Promise were paying little attention towards his movements a feeling of extreme bravery swelled in the little German's heart, and he boldly made his appearance in the open, and swaggered about most manfully when he noticed that Mackay was not in sight. His hearty fear of the one man made him forget that there were others who bore him no good will, and this oversight soon brought

about the calamity which he had daily dreaded. It happened late in the afternoon when Bob and Jack were busy on the surface preparing the battery and gas generator for their final effort, for the Golden Promise Mine had at last cut out, and only ten tons of ore now remained to be treated. Mackay was on the platform above the vat, shovelling in the clayey mixture with great gusto, and whistling merrily to himself the while. Indeed, from the happy countenances of the three partners, it might have been judged that they had only at this period struck the auriferous wash instead of having exhausted it.

The Shadow, looking somewhat melancholy, stood a little way off, his hands deep in his pockets, and his eyes fixed on the distant horizon. He knew very well that Mackay's plans for journeying across into the Never Never land would soon be put into action, and yet the matter had not been mentioned to him. The Shadow felt forlorn and miserable at the prospect of being left alone. "It's all owing to that wretched German thief," he muttered savagely, "Macguire was too fat-headed to do anything on his own." Unconsciously, he turned his gaze in the direction of the newly erected process, and a gleam of unholy joy lit up his features. Wynberg stood there alone fondly surveying a legend which had just been painted on the huge wooden tank. So large was the lettering that the Shadow could read it without difficulty, "Wynberg's Discovery."

"I don't see any o' his policemen around, I reckon I'll risk it," he murmured, and he strolled carelessly over as if it were his intention to view the inscription at closer range.

The unsuspecting man turned as he approached; at that moment his pride and delight in himself left no room for other emotions. "Ha, ha!" he cried; "so you have come over to pay your respects to the discovery, have you? Well, well, you are quite right. Honour brains, young fellow, honour brains," he tapped his little bald cranium significantly, and struck an attitude as dignified as his rotund carcass would permit. Then he began again, "There ees none other process like mine; that young man—what's his name?—could never do what I, Carl Wynberg, of the Heidelbrughen University, have accomplished. I—— Ah! Ough! Murder! Police! Thieves!"

The Shadow had suddenly gripped him by the back of the neck, and lending impetus to his forward movement by a hearty application of his heavily booted pedal extremities, he impelled him forward at a run in the direction of the Golden Promise Mine. "I reckon you ain't far out when you yell thieves," commented the Shadow, "for you are about the worst thief in the country, you are; you wanted me to pay my respects to the discovery, did you? Well, I reckon you is now on the road to pay your respects to the discoverer."

In vain the German shrieked and expostulated; his captor's grip was as a vice, and an honest indignation lent added strength to his long sinewy arms. The din let loose drew the attention of Rockson, who was in his assay office, and he bounded out.

"Come and pull this savage man away! Come at once, Rockson!" cried Wynberg, twisting his head round appealingly.

"Not much, I don't," came the quick response; "you fight your own quarrels," and he turned calmly and went back to his work. But now Macguire's policemen came speeding up from the bottom of the Flat, and as they came nearer and saw that the Shadow only was to be pitted against them, their warlike threats against that young man's person filled the air, and Wynberg, hearing their coming, struggled and kicked and raved the more. But the Shadow did not once relax his hold; he had by this time got his prisoner halfway towards the camp, and he knew that prompt assistance from that quarter would soon reach him.

Nor was he mistaken. Bob and Jack had been watching the affray with keen amusement, and Mackay, who had observed the whole scene from his elevated position, laughed so heartily that he had difficulty in keeping his footing, but immediately Macguire's followers hove in sight he checked his merriment, and made as if to go to the Shadow's assistance. He thought better of it, however; "I might brak' the mannie's back if I grippit him ower hard," said he. "You go, Bob, and help the Shadow to bring him in."

Bob was off on that mission before the words were spoken, and Jack too; but Mackay called the latter back before he had gone far. "Two's enough, Jack," he said. "I want the beggar brought to me hale, no' in scattered bits, an' Bob has a right to the job."

In a brief space the raging Teuton was dragged alongside the vat, while the three fire-eaters, whose duty it was to protect him from such ungentle treatment, contented themselves by hurling defiance at Mackay and his companions from a conveniently remote distance. But their wordy vapourings fell on deaf ears. The chief object of their wrath seemed wholly unconscious of their presence.

"An' so you've come to see the working arrangements of the process again," he said to his unwilling visitor with a grim smile; but there was a steely glitter in his eyes which alarmed Wynberg amazingly.

"I'll have you put in prison for this!" he yelled. "To prison you shall go!"

His enemy was unimpressed. "Humph!" he snorted. "Hoch der Kaiser! Ease him up an' let me get a nice canny grip o' him somewhere, my lads. Ay, that's near enough. Up she goes!" He swooped down his great paw, seized the unfortunate man by the slack of his wide riding-breeches, and, with scarcely an effort, hoisted him up struggling like a sportive fish on a hook, and yelling loud enough to waken the seven sleepers, over the ore platform, then he calmly dumped him into the vat amid the bubbling slimes.

"You'll be in a position to observe a' the working arrangements now," he bellowed. "Mak' the maist o' yer chance, you yelpin' hyena."

The shrieks of Wynberg had by this time caused a large number of miners to hasten up. "Great centipedes! ye ain't murderin' any one, are ye, Mackay?" cried the foremost of them.

Mackay smiled blandly, and descended from his perch, leaving the dripping specimen of humanity to crawl out from his unpleasant environment as best he could. "I'm merely givin' the discoverer o' Wynberg's Process an inside knowledge o' the work, an' he's howlin' wi' joy an' gratitude, that's a'."

Then a great roar of laughter broke forth as a bedraggled figure scrambled over the edge of the vat, shaking the clinging ooze from his head like a water dog, and sputtering out mouthfuls of saline fluid. Seeing the crowd assembled, and feeling safe from further molestation, he gathered courage, and sitting down on the platform he shrilled forth his denunciation of Mackay in the choicest vituperative phrases of two languages. When sheer

lack of breath had pulled him up, Bob began to address the miners in even dispassionate tones—

"Men, you know that I am the discoverer of the original process, and you also know that my batteries and generator were stolen on the night of the public trial by two men. Jack surprised them while they were carrying them away, and they tried their best to murder him. I say this man," and he pointed contemptuously at Wynberg, "was one of the thieves."

"It's a lie! It's a lie!" screamed the German.

"Get the beggar to roll up his sleeves," spoke Jack. "I guess he's got the mark of my rifle bullet somewhere on his left arm."

"Yes, roll them up, Wynberg," came the stern chorus from the crowd.

But this the muddy little man absolutely refused to do. "I'm not on my trial," he sneered insolently.

"I reckon that's just where you is wrong," growled the deep voice of Never Never Dave. "This here is a regular roll up, an' in the absence o' official representatives from the township, we, the miners o' Golden Flat, stand for the law every time. When we says hitch up your sleeves, then by the howlin' wilderness you've got to do it, quick an' lively too!"

Yet still the request of the multitude remained unobeyed. Then Mackay reached forth his hand and grasped the dangling legs of the "Discoverer of Wynberg's Process," and hauled him ingloriously to the earth. In a trice the slime-covered sleeve was pulled back, and there slantwise across the forearm was the long red graze mark of a bullet. The wound, though slight, was unmistakable.

Only a smothered expression of disgust showed the feelings of the mining tribunal; they had never doubted Wynberg's complicity in the theft, and by this time had almost forgotten about the affair which indeed they had partly condoned as being a probable development in their favour.

That matter settled, Bob continued his remarks: "The erecting of Wynberg's Process, which of course is just my process, will certainly serve the purpose intended in one sense. It destroys our chance of making more than just a

trace over cost price for treating your ores, though I know well you would not have grudged paying a small tribute extra for the inventor——" A unanimous shout of assent here greeted the speaker. "All the same, I cannot blame you for welcoming another plant on the ground, but I do blame the methods of the men who stole the idea, although I do not feel nearly as bitter towards this man as I do towards the one who prompted the action, and who has schemed against us from the first. And now, after considering the matter over with my companions, I have decided to give up my right to the discovery in your interest; for the welfare of the country generally, and in the cause of justice, I cannot allow Wynberg's Process to remain alone on the field to make wealth for Macguire and Wynberg. No, I will defeat their ends in a way they least expect. I will make the secret public property!"

There was absolute silence for an instant, then came a roaring tumult of applause. The miners could scarce realize for the moment the magnitude of what had been promised; it staggered them, and aroused their better feelings, but as the full meaning of what had been said dawned on them, cheer upon cheer rent the air, in the midst of which clamour Wynberg slunk off unobserved.

"By Jove! young man," cried one burly miner, "you've planted your name on this here Flat for all time, for blow me if there's any other title than Wentworth's Process'll get leave to live here. You may not make wealth o' your discovery, but I reckon you'll have a name in the gold-mining history o' Australia that wealth couldn't buy."

That the speaker represented the feelings of the multitude was evidenced by the rousing appreciation with which the speech was received.

"Let's go and wipe out Wynberg's Process," cried some one, and at once there was a rush in the direction of the flaunting sign.

But Mackay restrained them. "Leave the miserable man's property alone, boys," he said. "You have promised a' that I wished, an' I'll hold you to your promise that the young laddie will aye get the credit o' his own discovery. We're goin' away vera soon on a new trail, an' may never see any o' ye again, but Wentworth's Process will be wi' ye in oor absence to make you remember how much you owe to a laddie's energy an' brains."

Then the crowd broke up amid noisy protestations of everlasting good will, and the original group who held Golden Flat were left alone. It was apparent that Emu Bill, Nuggety Dick, and their boon comrades, Never Never Dave and Dead Broke Dan, were considerably exercised over Mackay's statement about going away in the near future.

"I reckon you hasn't given us too much notice," complained old Dead Broke, reproachfully; "it'll take us a bit o' time to clean up yet."

"But I don't want you to come with me, boys," remonstrated Mackay. "I didna expect——"

"Well, I calc'late you made a mistake if you thought you were to leave me," hastily interjected Emu Bill.

"An' me! an' me!" came the cry. The Shadow alone made no remark. He knew that all present could not go, and he naturally reasoned that he, as the youngest next to Jack, would be left.

Mackay, after a pause, appealed to them in logical language. "You can't all leave your claims for the sake o' comin' wi' me on what may be only a wild-goose chase," he said, "an' besides, six in the party is quite enough. I think Nuggety there, who is the maist capable gold-miner o' the lot o' us; an' Dead Broke, who has the chance o' doin' vera well wi' his mine,—I think they should both wait an' look after things while we are away. It would never do to leave your mines half worked out. They would be jumped before we got out o' sight."

"I believe that is just right," agreed Emu Bill. "Nuggety can hang on to my interest for me; he's my partner, anyway."

"An' Dead Broke can do the same for me," cried Never Never Dave. "The workings are shallow, and one man can easily get along on his own, an' nary galoot can jump them neither, for the wash is pretty well scraped out already, an' one man's pegs would hold what's left."

In vain Nuggety and his approved companion protested against this apportionment of their duties; innumerable reasons were advanced to show how essential it was that they should remain, and ultimately they agreed to the inevitable. Mackay had spoken truly when he said that Nuggety Dick

was a most accomplished miner; he had been stricken with the gold fever in his early youth, and had never recovered. It was almost a mania with him to discover new fields; his aptitude for locating the powerful talisman was nothing short of marvellous. But Emu Bill, though he chased up the golden gleam with hopeful persistency, really, like all restless natures, found his pleasure in the seeking rather than in the finding. He was a bushman every inch of him, and no more valuable associate for a risky journey into the heart of Australia could be found, as Mackay well knew. As for Never Never Dave, his name had been earned for him by his wide perambulations over the untrodden tracts; his worth as a bushman was known throughout the land.

"But what about me?" pleaded the Shadow. "I has no one to look after my claim, for I hasn't had no mate, but I reckon the old mine has done pretty well by me, an' I won't kick about leaving it."

"How much o' the stuff do ye think is left in your shaft?" demanded Mackay.

"About thirty tons, I reckon."

"Why, we'll go and help you to dig that out," cried Jack.

"And I'll run it through the vat in a couple of days," added Bob.

"You see, Shadow," said Mackay, quizzically, "we canna vera weel do without you."

"Then I'll be the sixth man?" cried the youth, delighted beyond measure.

"You will that if ye promise never to sing 'The Muskittie's Lament' without givin' due warning. You'd mak' us think the niggers were comin' for us every time ye tackled that high note."

"I reckon I'll get an accordion——" But the Shadow got no further.

Wrathfully came the rebuke, "If ye dare purpose desecratin' oor peaceful evenings wi' such an unceevilized device, I'll mak' a present o' ye to the first hungry cannibal we meet, I will." Then, when peace was restored, Mackay summed up the respective responsibilities of the projected expedition's members. "You, Jack, and the Shadow, have shown that you can handle

camels in a circumspect way, therefore you will have charge o' the team. Emu Bill and Never Never Dave will assist when they are no' too busy lookin' for water or fightin' niggers. Bob will be navigator; and as for me—I'll be the pilot o' the craft, and will do my best to guide you to the hidden treasure o' the Never Never, to the land o' rubies, an' diamonds, and gold, which lies beyond the mountain."

CHAPTER IX

Into the Unknown

A full week was occupied in settling up affairs and making final preparations for the journey across the wilderness. The question of transport was speedily arranged. Three camels were necessary to carry stores and sundry mining appliances, and a fourth would be advisable to bear the heavy water-bags of the expedition, as it was not wise policy to burden the animals unduly. Mackay's wiry "Misery" was selected at once as the leader of the team, and two other great leathery hided creatures belonging to Emu Bill and Never Never Dave, named respectively "Repentance" and "Remorse," were called into requisition as being well fitted for the stern work before them. A strong young beast was secured by Mackay from an Afghan trader who called around opportunely, to make up the quartet. This last addition to the outfit, which Jack promptly dubbed "Fireworks," was inclined to be rather vicious in temperament, and after seeing him buck two pack saddles off as a preliminary, Mackay mentally resolved to trust the carriage of the precious water-bags to the more patient "Remorse," and allow "Fireworks" to cool down under more solid freight.

The stores of the expedition were not difficult to obtain; by this time agencies of the large mercantile houses in Kalgoorlie had been established on the Flat, and they were well able to provide all necessary supplies. But the commissariat department of the Australian explorer is never famed for his lavishness; in it luxuries find no part, for here the ship of the desert is the mainstay of the traveller, and on its cumbrous back only room can be found for the bare essentials of life. Flour and tea, tinned beef and various "extracts," these are the sum total of the wanderer's requirements in the Australian wilderness, and with these he would usually be more than content if water could be found to quench his thirst. But this is too often denied, the arid wastes of the great Austral land contain few oases. The scanty rains collected in reluctant drops in some deep rock hole, perhaps for years, are his only hope. Yet these grim forbidding tracts allure the roving spirit if only because of their very grimness. Across their scintillating sands

what wonderful haven may be hid? Surely it is not all desert, something must lie beyond the far horizon. Nature's compensating law must hold some reward for the weary pioneer who gropes so desperately onward and ever onward into the rising sun. Such is the hope, the belief, of those who venture forth into the Never Never. With Mackay, who had already followed the beckoning phantom far back into an unknown mountain, the belief had become almost reality. The spirit of the bush enthralled him, its spell was ever over him. His young companions too were influenced by the air of mystery surrounding their distant goal. The unknown has ever exercised a powerful fascination over the Anglo-Saxon youth, and the two boys revelled in the thought of penetrating untrodden tracts, and rejoiced in their quest of El Dorado.

When all was ready for a start Mackay called them together for earnest consultation.

"I don't want to shout much about the dangers o' the trail, my lads," said he. "But it is as well to understand that the risks are there a' the same, an' it would only be richt for you both to mak' a sort o' statement, an' leave it wi' the Warden. I—I——"

"I know what you mean," said Bob, smiling; "you want us to make our wills—in case of accident."

Mackay looked relieved. "It would be better," he admitted quietly, "or send your money home. Don't think I want to force my advice on you, but I think—I think that would be the better plan."

"I've done that ever since we started to get returns from the battery," answered Bob. "I only have kept what I thought I would owe you for my share of the expedition."

"Mine has been sent home too," murmured Jack, diffidently; "but I've kept two hundred pounds for the expedition."

"An' mine has gone home too," added Mackay, slowly. "But the expedition is my consideration, and I must bear the expense alone. It's a duty, my dear young lads, it's a duty."

No amount of persuasion would shake his decision in this respect.

"It's a journey that's lain on my conscience for some time," he argued. "I have a mission to fulfil which I hope may be outside the other object o' the expedition altogether, though it's possible we may achieve the one while in pursuit o' the other." He chuckled dryly at the thought, then well pleased that his young friends had disposed of their worldly goods to his liking, he went off to give some instructions to Emu Bill about the loading of the camels.

The process had been left in charge of Nuggety Dick, who had received full information from Bob concerning its proper working. It had been open for public inspection all the week, and already many similar vats were being erected on the field; and Wynberg's discovery lay idle—its owner had vanished back whence he came.

The unfortunately placed Rockson, however, was soon given a position more to his liking than the control of a useless stamping mill. Jackson, whose time was required in Kalgoorlie, at Mackay's request, offered him the management of his mine, which was now turning out large quantities of the refractory ore, and this he gladly accepted under the generous arrangement of a fair salary and a considerable interest in the profits. It was Mackay's strange weakness that he could not allow another man undeservedly to suffer, even indirectly, through any action of his or his partners, and hence the exceptional terms offered by Jackson for his services; he had only been too willing to oblige Mackay in the matter as a slight return for the great favour he had received.

Bob and Jack were amazed when, after the Golden Promise had closed down, they counted up the amount with which the Bank at Kalgoorlie had credited them for their share in the gold sent in. They found that they had each realized over a thousand pounds for their few months' labour; the last two weeks' results had swelled up their profits wonderfully, to Bob's deep satisfaction.

"I'm very glad," he said to Jack, "that Mackay will benefit a little by the process; it means that we have made some slight return for his goodness to us, though money can never pay for all that he has done."

"He doesn't seem to value money as some people do," observed Jack. "I don't understand him yet, I don't."

It was after this that Mackay had ventured to express his views to them on private concerns, and when he went away he left the boys no little moved by his well-meant advice; the solemn note of warning in his tones, even when he touched so lightly on the dangers of the desert, had not escaped them.

"I do hope," said Bob, fervently, "that he may never have to take the sextant from me. I—I get nervous when I think of the responsibility he has given me. I wish too," he continued gravely, "that I had some news from home before we start. I haven't heard a word since we left. Of course they couldn't write until they knew where we were, but I think there is time for an answer to my first letter by now."

Jack calculated it up hurriedly. "It would come in by to-night's mail," he said sadly, "and Mackay said we were to start after lunch. I think we should tell him, and ask him to wait."

But this Bob would not hear of for a moment. "Certainly not," he cried. "He treats us as men, not children, and I am not going to worry him with home affairs. All the same," he reflected calmly, "if I had thought of it before I would have mentioned it to him; but now that everything is in readiness for the start—no, I cannot."

"All aboard, boys; all aboard for the Never Never!"

It was the Shadow's voice, and they rushed out at once, turning to cast one look at the dismantled tent which had been their home during these eventful months. No tent or shelter of any kind was being carried by the expedition. The starry heavens must now be their sole roof at night.

They found the camel team waiting the signal to move ahead, and Jack at once stepped to his position alongside Misery, the Shadow having for the time taken charge of Fireworks, who was promising to give trouble.

Mackay stood a little way off, and surveyed the team critically.

"Tighten up Fireworks' girth, Emu," he cried. "He'll slip his saddle in a minute."

Emu Bill proceeded deftly to obey the instruction, annoyed with himself because of having overlooked the defect.

"I'll swear the cunning brute has shrunk hissel' on purpose," he growled. "I pulled him in as tight as a windlass barrel just a second ago. Woah, Fireworks, woah! ye cantankerous son o' a gun."

But Fireworks was intent on creating a diversion. For some time he had been allowed to roam the desert at his own sweet will, and probably his memory of pack-saddles and such like encumbrances had faded into happy oblivion, but now that he felt the old galling weight on his back his vicious temper was aroused to fury, and he stood waving his weird-looking head about in savage sweeps, and ever and again essayed to roll over, pack-saddle and all. When Emu Bill approached him now, the recalcitrant animal suddenly began a series of frisky antics, pulling wildly at the nose rope which the Shadow clutched firmly, and twisting its huge bulk into all sorts of contortions.

"Woah, hang ye!" shouted Bill, again striving to get near.

In reply Fireworks snorted defiance, then bent himself almost double; a sharp crack sounded out as the girths burst, and in a moment the sand was strewn with his load.

"So that was your little trick, was it? ye measly old quadrooped!" cried Emu Bill, in disgust. "Well, I reckon you kin try it over again."

He gathered up the saddle for another effort, but Mackay intervened.

"It won't do, Bill," he said. "We'll just have the circus repeated. We'd better postpone the start until the morning, an' meanwhile we'll put Fireworks through his paces. I didna think the beastie would be so obstreperous."

And, indeed, to look at the animal now, no one would have thought that such a fiery temper lurked in that cumbrous body. Fireworks, after his unruly performance, stood gazing meekly at the wreckage he had created, the very picture of innocence. Yet it was a wise policy to break him in to a more fitting tolerance with his burden before venturing into the great desert, where mishaps would cause more vexatious delays, and probably occasion damage which could not then be easily rectified.

Thus it was that the whole team was unloaded, and the remainder of the day spent in coaxing the one refractory camel into a more tractable spirit, a result which Emu Bill and his companion bushman seemed to have thoroughly accomplished before sundown, and high hopes were entertained of making an early departure next morning.

The mail arrived somewhat earlier than usual that night, a fact which did not surprise any one when they saw Macguire sitting on the box-seat beside the driver. Mackay sighed wearily when he observed his old enemy.

"I had hoped I had seen the last o' him," he said to Bob; "but I suppose the misguided man is looking for trouble, as usual." To his astonishment, however, Macguire purposely evaded him, and disappeared rapidly down the workings to where some of his old gang were still employed on none too lucrative holdings.

"Perhaps he's got tired of running up against us," said Bob. "I don't think the game has paid him too well, and he may be turning over the proverbial new leaf now."

"Umph!" Mackay's monosyllabic utterance was non-committal, but it was plain that his faith in that new leaf in the present instance was none of the strongest.

The mail brought a letter for each of the boys and one for Mackay, and on glancing at the handwriting on his envelope Bob was satisfied; the expected news from home had reached him, after all. Hurriedly he tore it open, and read the closely written sheets which a fond mother had penned. He smiled brightly at the anxious opening phrases, which inquired so minutely about his health and general welfare. "I have heard," she wrote, "that fever often breaks out in a gold-mining camp—malaria or gold fever, I think—and I am sending you a small bottle of quinine, which I want you to promise to take regularly——" Bob thought that rather good, and read the sentence aloud to Mackay, who had mastered the contents of his epistle at a hasty glance. That gentleman was gravely amused. "She's richt about the gold fever," said he, with, a short laugh, "an' it's a terribly rampagin' disease in its way, though I dinna think quinine would affect it much. Prussic acid or some such deadly poison would be the only cure, for once a man gets the gold fever it remains in his blood a' his life, ready to be stirred up to violent

action at the sight o' a nugget. Ay, it's a bad fever, Bob, an' we've a' got it in some degree. However, your guid mother needna fear about the other plague—malaria—for neither it nor any other disease o' the kind can live in Western Australia. You must just write a note an' tell her that. The air o' this country is too dry an' clear for any microbe to fancy."

Bob continued his silent perusal of the letter, and as he got towards the end a puzzled expression came into his features; it was clear that the letter from home contained something of more striking import than the warning against pernicious fevers. The intelligence which disturbed him was conveyed on the last two sheets, and this was how it ran:—

"I know you will be grieved to hear that your uncle Dick is dead. Since your father was drowned I have never had a line from him; he was the first to bring the sad news to me, and his own sorrow seemed greater than he could bear. Your father and he had been inseparable companions in their youth, and many times before the *Sea King* sailed on her last cruise I used to hear them planning out their great schemes for the future, for your uncle had ever been a wanderer, and was filled with strange ideas about the riches of some parts of the world he had visited. He went off to Australia after arranging your poor father's affairs, and nothing was ever heard of him again. All along I fancied that it was his money which provided the little income left to us, for your father's savings could not have been much; sailors are so poorly paid. The solicitors always put me off when I inquired about it, but now I know that it was his great kindly heart which went out to the widow and the fatherless, and caused provision to be made for them out of his own scanty means. On the morning after you left I received a letter from a gentleman who had just returned from Australia, and who had been with him when he died, enclosing a draft for two hundred pounds, and saying that that was the sum realized by the sale of your uncle's effects, and that he had been entrusted to send it to me. No other information was given, and no address was on the letter. When I showed it to my solicitors they told me the truth of what I had guessed from the first. My boy, you were always uncle Dick's favourite, and you have every cause to remember him gratefully. If you can find out where he died, erect a little cross over his resting-place for me. I would so much like to have it done."

Bob read and re-read the strange story which brought back the past so vividly to his mind, and his eyes grew moist in spite of himself.

"No bad news, I hope, lad," spoke Mackay, kindly.

Bob struggled with his emotion for a moment without success, then handed the pages to his interrogator in silence. Mackay read them over carefully, with a face showing keen concern; indeed, he seemed even more moved than Bob when he had finished. "Ay, ay," he said huskily, "he was a good man, an' there's too few o' his sort in the world. But you'll dae what your mother bids you. You will put up that cross afore you leave Australia. I'll—I'll help you to find the place." Then he turned abruptly to Jack, who had read his letter, and was now gazing at the envelope with profound content.

"You've been gloatin' over your billy doo for some time, Jack," he said lightly. "I don't suppose your news has affected your appetite."

Jack flushed, and made haste to secrete his precious missive; but in his hurry the envelope fell to the floor, and it was observed that it bore the same peculiar postmark as Bob's. The boy grabbed it up in confusion, while the big man laughed. Whereupon Jack waxed indignant.

"What about your own billet-doux?" he asked mischievously. "I think I noticed you got a letter too."

"Here it is, young Lochinvar, here it is," and Mackay flung an open sheet at the youth. "Read it, read it; don't mind me. I'm sort o' pleased to mak' it known that somebody thinks o' me."

Obeying his request, Jack cleared his throat and read aloud the following:—

"DEAR MR. MACKAY.—

"I have just heard that you are about to start out on a journey into the interior, and I thought I would remind you of a little account I have against you for several items you sent for last week. The amount is £10 17s. 6d. I'll let you off the odd sixpence, but please send your cheque for the remainder before you start. The Never Never is such an uncertain country—to get out of. Best wishes.

"Yours sincerely,
"J. RANNIGAN."

"Now, that is what I call a thoughtful letter," commented Jack, when he had finished.

"A vera thoughtful letter indeed," agreed Mackay, dryly.

Then they set about preparing tea, and while they were thus engaged the Shadow made his appearance, evidently in great good humour. He carried something concealed in his hand which he gazed at tenderly as he entered, then consigned it to some secret recess in his scanty wardrobe.

"I reckon," said he, "that I want an invite to your banquet to-night. I hasn't even an inch o' damper left in my tent. I broke up the happy home too soon, I calc'late."

Mackay laughed. "I ken you're a grand cook, Shadow," said he, "an', providin' ye behave, we'll be glad to have your company. Ye'll get flour in that bag at your feet, an' water in the kerosene-tin beside ye. Now ye can take my place an' mak' wi' these ingredients something nice an' tasty. I'll even gie ye a tootle on the flute to inspire ye in yer efforts."

The lad's countenance fell. "I see I has come along too soon," he grumbled. Then he fished about in the folds of his shirt and drew forth the treasure he had secreted. In the quickly fading light it was not easily observable what he held in his hand; but when the wondering trio saw him convey the same to his mouth their worst fears were realized. Before they could protest, the wailing of a mouth-organ filled the tent. The Shadow blew with might and main, an ecstatic joy illuminating his features, his foot keeping time to the music he perpetrated, and sending up clouds of dust from the sandy floor. That he anticipated a sudden closure was very apparent by the fierce energy he displayed, yet, strangely enough, he was allowed to finish the first tune without mishap; it was only when he adroitly essayed to glide off into a fresh outburst that Mackay intervened.

"Ye should play that first spasm mair pianissimo," he ventured mildly, while Jack sprinkled water about to allay the dust. "Now, put that orchestra in

your pocket, an' keep it there until we get far oot into the bush. Then ye can kill the crows wi' it if ye like."

"Right O!" responded the Shadow, seemingly delighted to have escaped so easily. "Now, I reckon I'll bake a real bowser brownie for tea, an' we'll have a real ole blow out, we will."

"Let us eat, drink, and be merry," remarked Bob, thoughtfully, "for tomorrow we——"

"Start for the Never Never," prompted Jack.

Shortly after sunrise the camel team was once more loaded up, and now Fireworks' demeanour was beyond reproach; he submitted to his burden with philosophic calm, and only once showed his playful disposition by tearing the sleeve from Emu Bill's shirt while that gentleman was standing too conveniently near his head. By eight o'clock all was ready for the start, the last breakfast in camp had been partaken of, and the various members of the expedition were standing at their posts awaiting the signal for advance. The population of Golden Flat had turned out *en masse* to witness the departure. It was not every day that an expedition left for the distant Never Never. Nuggety Dick and Dead Broke Dan were there looking anything but happy; one word from Mackay even now would have made them join the party but the leader of the expedition sternly refused to meet their appealing eyes. Once more he glanced over the team critically, as if mentally weighing up the amount of endurance contained in the four powerful animals. His scrutiny seemed to give him much satisfaction, and he smiled grimly as he turned his face to the east.

"All ready, boys?" he cried.

"All ready!" came the unanimous reply.

Then, just as he was about to signal "Right away," the crowd parted, and Macguire struggled to the front.

"Hold on a minute, boys!" he shouted. "I want a word with Mackay."

As for Mackay, he viewed the interrupter with considerable disfavour.

"If you had any differences to settle, you might have come along last night," he said. "What's the trouble wi' you?"

"Why, man, I just want to say that I bear no ill feeling, an' that I hope you'll be successful, that's all. What course are ye making?"

Mackay gazed at the questioner in puzzled wonderment. "I'm glad to have your good wishes, Macguire," he said slowly. "Our course is east by north to a place that's a bit harder to find than Golden Flat. Let her go, boys!"

The long whips cracked, Misery's bell began to chime; the crowd stepped back to give the ponderous team free passage, uniting as they did so in a stentorian Coo-ee, that strange call of the bush which combines in its notes the acme of feeling and good fellowship. Bob and Jack coo-eed lustily in return, Mackay waved a cheery goodbye, Emu Bill and Never Never Dave chaffed their sorrowing acquaintances with tender affection as they passed along the line, and the Shadow, pulling at Fireworks' nose-rope with one hand contrived to unearth his mouth-organ with the other. Strongly he blew, and stepped forth jauntily to the stirring time of "The Girl I left Behind Me," but his charge steadfastly refused to accelerate his gait in such undignified fashion, and the Shadow had perforce to seek around in his *répertoire* for a more suitable march, which he soon found in "There is a Happy Land," and he kept up his melancholy dirge until he heard Never Never's voice raised in dire threat against his person. Then there was silence, broken only by the tinkling bell of the leading camel, and the vague echoes of Golden Flat's farewells.

Thus they headed out towards the desert, into the land of the Never Never.

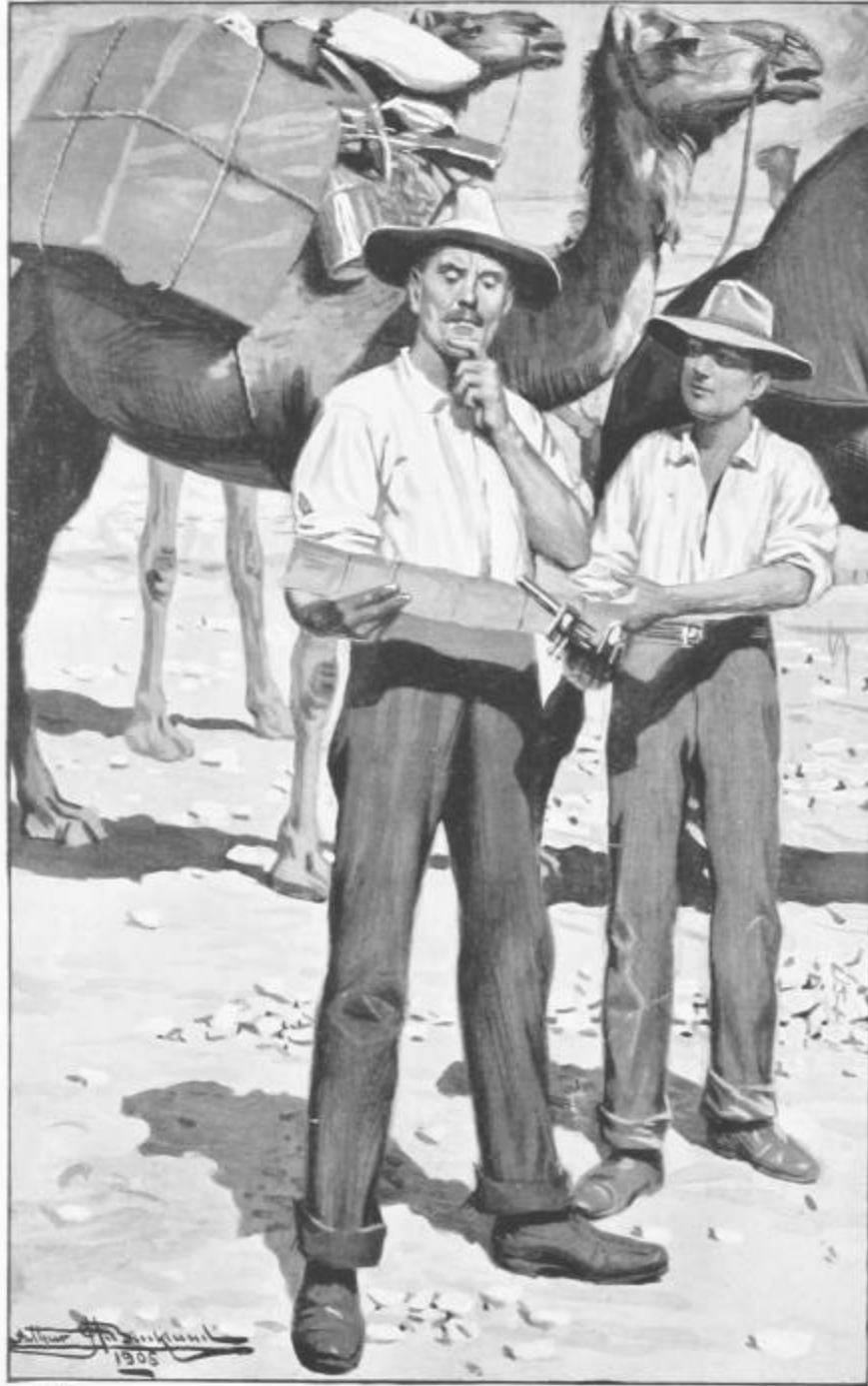
CHAPTER X

An Awkward Predicament

The first halt was made at noon when little more than eight miles had been traversed. The country encountered from the start had been a soft powdery sand formation, with occasional belts of dwarfed eucalypti, which intervened from the north. Progress was necessarily slow at this early stage of the journey, for it was advisable to allow the camels to harden to their work gradually.

Mackay had so far led the march, steering an approximate course by the sun, but immediately they stopped, he called Bob aside for a conference.

"You see," he said, "when we went out before we started from a more northerly latitude, an' I calculate we should hit our old track in another hundred and eighty miles if we keep angling in a wee bit north o' east. I've got a copy o' the log up to pretty near the—the finish, an' here's where I think we ought to join on to Bentley's route." He unfolded a long track chart which he carried in his hand; it was made up of several sheets of ordinary note-paper, gummed laterally together, and on its much faded surface several inky hieroglyphics stood out bravely. He pointed to a besmeared cross nearly halfway over the chart, and Bob, looking closely, read the printed lettering beside it: "Fortunate Spring, lat. $28^{\circ} 17' 5''$, long. $125^{\circ} 19' 6''$."



**"HE UNFOLDED A LONG TRACK CHART WHICH
HE CARRIED IN HIS HAND"**

"We are somewhere under the twenty-fifth parallel just now," reflected Bob.
"That means we are about 120 miles south of your old track. I'd better draw

out our present position on my own chart and mark a compass course for Fortunate Spring."

Mackay looked relieved. "Be vera exact wi' your calculations, my lad," he said earnestly, as he walked away.

Bob took the sun's altitude three times while a hasty lunch was being prepared, and laboriously checked each result to five places of decimals, then he carefully marked their temporary camp's position on his still bare chart, and drew a dotted line thence to the location of Fortunate Spring.

"We'll have to travel nor'-east half north to make it," said he.

Mackay nodded cheerfully. "I hope we are lucky in strikin' water," he observed. "About ten days is our stretch without it, for the camels can't stand more, and they can't stand that often either."

"We'll hit it right enough," commented Emu Bill, hopefully.

"If it's in the country, you kin bet I'll smell it," grunted Never Never. "I'm strong at nosin' out water, I am."

"Oh, after that one hundred and eighty miles, I'll know where we are," said Mackay; "but there's always some little uncertainty as we understood from the first, an' it won't be outside o' our calculations if we do go thirsty a bit."

"Not a blessed fraction!" cried the Shadow, decanting the boiling tea from the billy into the enamelled cups. "Who says sugar? You, Emu? Well, there ain't none; have a try at saccharine, an' be happy." He gulped down his own portion hurriedly, then ran off to round up Fireworks, which was beginning to stray too far from his neighbours, and ten minutes later the expedition was once more on the move.

The next several days passed uneventfully; the same uninspiring desert sands prevailed, and the intense heat haze radiating from its shimmering surface affected the eyes of the travellers, causing them to quiver and blink painfully, while overhead the sun stared down from a cloudless sky. Not a trace of moisture was visible anywhere, certainly no water could exist amid these barren wastes, and all hoped most anxiously that a change in the monotonous landscape might soon take place.

"It's a pretty thirsty lookin' start we've made," said Mackay, when a week had elapsed, and they still struggled along ankle deep in the burning sands. Bob was walking by his side keeping an eager eye on what appeared to be a light cloud-patch on the far horizon. He had noticed it for some time, but was unwilling to mention his hopes in case they might be doomed to early disappointment. Now, however, he felt pretty sure that his eyes had not deceived him.

"There's a belt of timber straight ahead," he announced quietly, after Mackay had spoken. The elder man shifted his gaze somewhat, and with puckered eyes surveyed the slight break on the horizon's even curve.

"You're quite richt, Bob," he remarked, with a sigh of relief. "I've been steerin' by the shadow o' the sun across the camels, an' I've almost mesmerized mysel', I think, or I should have seen those trees earlier. It's a hard course for a bushman, Bob, that fractional nor'-easter you gave me."

Emu Bill and Never Never Dave had by this time found it necessary to assist in pulling the camels through the sand. Jack, leading Misery, had not much difficulty with his charge, for that wiry animal plodded steadily onward with ponderous movement despite all obstacles, but Fireworks was by no means as energetic as he once was, and the Shadow anathematized him roundly as he, with bent shoulders, strained at the nose-rope of the reluctant beast, a proceeding which the two bushmen had soon to emulate. Now, when these weary individuals heard of the impending change in the land surface, they gave vent to their joy in sundry whoops of delight.

"It looks likely country for water, Mac," cried Never Never, as they drew nearer, and could plainly distinguish the feathery scrub in their course. The sand too as they advanced, hardened considerably, and here and there great dioritic blows reared their heads above the plain.

"You're right there, Dave," responded Mackay, after a while, "if there's been any rain in the district for the last year or two we ought to find a rock hole—Hillo! Easy boys, and get your rifles ready. I see a when niggers dodgin' aboot among the scrub."

"Nigs!" echoed Emu Bill and Never Never almost with one voice. There was an inflection of decided pleasure in the exclamation, as if these two had

longed for a skirmish to ease the routine of their journey. Mackay himself seemed in no way displeased, yet he took care to impress caution on his impetuous associates. "A spear or boomerang can kill as well's a bullet," he warned, while each man examined his rifle. "Now, Jack, don't be so anxious to get forrit, an' keep on the lee side o' Misery an' no' at his head when we get near."

As yet Bob was unable to distinguish any aborigines among the sparse scrub, but as they continued their wary advance he soon perceived several dusky forms crouching amid the timber, and his heart gave a bound when the savage creatures suddenly stood up and united in a shrill yell of defiance. He had never dreamt that these wild denizens of the bush could be so hideous; they seemed more ape than man, their faces were covered by long tangling hair black as jet, and only white gleaming eyes were visible; their bodies were repulsively scarred and painted. This much Bob had time to notice, then a hail of spears rustled out from the scrub, fell short, and buried their barbed tips in the sand at their feet. And now the bush seemed alive with blacks; uncouth forms sprang from the side of each tiny sapling where they had been standing motionless, and harsh guttural screams filled the air.

"They're a bit more numerous than I thought," muttered Mackay, calling a halt, "an' I've an idea that if we dinna rush them pretty quick, they'll rush us. Now, Jack, swing Misery round an' let him stand, then grab your rifle." Jack obeyed promptly, and at that moment another shower of spears hurtled overhead.

"By gum!" growled Never Never, "they'll get our range next try."

"They're comin' for us now, I reckon!" cried the Shadow, and of that there could be no doubt; the shrieking horde had evidently decided to exterminate the invaders of their domain without further delay. On they came, brandishing their waddies and boomerangs, a compact mass of blood-thirsty black fury.

"Now, boys!" roared Mackay, "Aim low and stop them." A thunderous discharge followed his words, and six rifles spat out their leaden challenge to the foe. The wonderful din created by the exploding cordite apparently stupefied the blacks for a moment; they ceased their wild rush, and gazed

with astonishment at those of their number who had fallen. Despite Mackay's oft-repeated animosity towards the aborigines in general, he could not countenance wholesale slaughter. "They're a poor lot, boys," said he; yet even while he commiserated with them the savages joined in another determined rush. There must have been over twenty of them, and so impetuously did they come that they were within twenty yards of the white defenders before a second volley made them hesitate, and even now they did not all stop; a few stalwart warriors kept on their mad course, and hurled themselves almost upon the reeking rifle muzzles. If the attack had been made in full force things would have gone hard with the expedition. As it was, however, the little group had no difficulty in beating back the frenzied band. The Shadow and Jack were in their element; they little recked of danger when plying their heated weapons, though the vengeful club of one of the natives had missed Jack's head by little more than a hair's breadth, and the Shadow's face had been severely gashed by a flying boomerang. Bob could not fail to observe how serious matters would have been had the natives made their onrush in skirmishing order; their close blocked formation made it impossible for even the most random shots to miss their billet, and now as the savage and discomfited creatures sullenly withdrew, they dragged with them many maimed and wounded comrades.

"I can't understand why the beggars are so stupid," said Bob, watching the last of them disappear in the distance.

"Ye may learn more o' their tactics before our journey is finished," Mackay observed quietly; "at the same time, there is a wonderful difference among the tribes, an' that is where the explorer's danger lies. He may judge from a nomadic spiritless lot which he may chance to meet that a' natives are the same, and he may gie his life for the mistake later on."

By this time the team was again on the move, and within a few minutes a halt was made in the densest part of the scrub, while Never Never and Emu Bill searched around for water. But the search was vain, no welcome spring or rock-hole could be found, and a heavy gloom began to affect the spirits of the party whose hopes had been raised so high only to be thus rudely dashed. Even Mackay, usually most cheerful in times of stress and danger, looked grave as he reflected upon their somewhat unenviable position. He knew what the others had not calculated upon. He knew that the camels

were already at their last extremity of endurance; accustomed as they had been while at Golden Flat to drink every few days, they had not absorbed their full supply before starting. Misery alone, hardened veteran of many desert journeys that he was, had drunk his fill, and now his great reserve of strength showed plainly over the other beasts.

"I reckon them nigs had a mighty cheek to make such a howlin' fight for nothin'," complained the Shadow. "One would have thought they was protectin' a lake o' cool crystal water——"

"Slow up on that, Shad, or I'll squelch ye wi' an empty water-bag," warned Emu Bill, who could not stand reference to such an unlimited supply of the precious fluid at this moment.

"There must be water about, all the same," said Bob. "These natives, I suppose, get thirsty, like other people. I'm off to have a look round myself," and he sped away.

"Be vera careful, Bob, be careful——"

But Bob was already out of earshot, pursuing a dogged course eastward in the wake of the retreating blacks. In his hand he grasped a heavy Colt revolver, which he had extricated from the holster on his belt. A wild idea had seized him; he meant, if possible, to capture one of the blacks and make him disclose the treasure they had guarded so fiercely. It was a foolhardy plan which had so hastily formulated in his brain, and in his calmer moments Bob would have been quick to realize what a desperate venture was that which he had now so lightly undertaken. But the urgent necessity of finding water was powerfully impressed upon him, and caution for the time being was thrown to the winds. Eagerly he rushed along, and in a few minutes had passed out of sight of his companions; then suddenly two ebony-skinned warriors barred his path; he had blundered right on to them by the merest accident. At a glance he saw that they were armed with waddies and boomerangs only, their spears having probably been discharged in the fray from which they had fled. Yet a waddie at close quarters is no mean weapon, and Bob pulled himself up promptly, and with a stern smile levelled his revolver. His astonishment was great when, with a curious gurgle of mingled surprise and fear, the dusky twain dropped their weapons and incontinently fled before him. And now Bob's heart was filled

with wrath because of the cowardice of the pair. Had they only waited and surrendered quietly to his request—though how he could have made them understand his wishes he did not stop to think—all might have been well. With scarce a pause he gave chase, covering the ground in long impetuous strides, but it soon became evident that unless something unforeseen occurred to check the flight of the fugitives, he could never hope to overtake them. On they sped, clearing the sand in great bounds, even stopping at intervals to gaze back at their pursuer. Bob's chagrin was deep, and he sent one or two revolver bullets crashing after the disappearing couple which had the effect of making them run the faster, while far in the rear the excited cries of his anxious comrades showed that they were now concerning themselves over his prolonged absence.

Yet the ardour of the pursuit had taken possession of Bob; with a mighty effort he managed to quicken his pace so that he actually drew up considerably on the fleet-footed pair—scarce fifty yards divided them. "Another spurt and I've got them," thought Bob, and he clenched his teeth and strove boldly in the attempt. Now thirty yards only separated them, now twenty, now ten. Bob chuckled grimly to himself at the prospect of after all being successful in the chase, and stretched out his hand, then in an instant the hitherto level course came to an abrupt stop, a layer of branches and spinifex grass spread right across the track. The blacks had cleared it at a leap, but before Bob had time to prepare for a spring he had staggered into the midst of the cut brushwood, and at once felt himself sinking down into space. It all occurred in a second or so. He clutched wildly at the pigmy branches as he descended through them, but they broke in his hands, and with a rush and a plunge he fell downwards into an unknown depth.

When he recovered himself, about a minute later, he became aware that he was standing, considerably shaken and bruised, waist deep in some semi-solid fluid at the bottom of a natural shaft, which he mentally calculated to be at least twenty feet deep. He had found water for a surety, and now would have given much to get out of its slimy embrace, but the steep dioritic walls were quite unscalable. Bob was hopelessly a prisoner. Then did he blame himself most bitterly for his mistaken ardour and lack of perception. The wily natives had but pretended to be overcome at the last wild rush so as to lead him directly over the subterranean trap.

"Mackay was certainly right," he muttered. "Their cunning is nothing short of devilish; and after being told of that, here I go like a fool and prove it for myself."

He had little time, however, for unprofitable moralizings, and he peered up and around his strange prison-house with anxious eyes, yet his surroundings were of so murky a nature that he could only vaguely guess the description of the trap into which he had fallen. His gaze was instinctively directed toward the gaping hole in the brushwood through which he had fallen, though what he expected to see there he did not very well know. But he now realized the nature of the blacks too fully to believe for a moment that they intended to leave him to his fate without further molestation.

"Why, the water is bad enough as it is," he said, with a forced attempt at pleasantry. "They'll certainly come to fish me out before long."

He had not been in his awkward predicament many minutes when a black grinning face stared down at him. Bob shuddered and crouched closer to the damp rocks; he was half prepared for a stone to be thrown or a spear to be poked tantalizingly in his direction, but no such proceedings were taken. The demoniacally leering face continued to look down at him without movement for several seconds, when it was joined by another equally hideous; they belonged to the two savages who had led him such an unfortunate chase. They had now returned to view their victim after having probably given the alarm to their fellows. Bob groaned in dismay, but returned their gaze with stoical complacency, having not yet fully comprehended his true position.

At length, however, his strange gaolers, with many guttural exclamations, began to cover up the tell-tale gap in the layer of furze; then their prisoner's senses returned to him with a rush, and his emotions almost overwhelmed him. The blacks surely meant to cover up the hole so that his companions might not find him, and when they would depart after vain searchings, he would be left to the tender mercies of the "stupid" natives he had so commiserated! In truth Bob's cup of bitterness was filled to overflowing.

But he decided, nevertheless, to do his best to prevent the success of their scheme. His revolver was still dry, for he had by some odd instinct clung to it tenaciously despite his demoralizing downfall, and now he became aware

for the first time that he held it in his hand. He fired two shots upwards in rapid succession. Operations ceased on the instant, and Bob felt comforted. He knew that Mackay would soon seek him out if any clue as to his whereabouts was left. His rejoicings, however, were premature, and very speedily checked. As he gazed at the sky through the gap which gave him light, he noticed the aperture slowly yet surely grow narrower and narrower. The blacks were pushing the superfluous brush over the opening by the aid of long sticks! Bob shouted with the full force of his lungs and discharged the remaining shots in his revolver upwards, but only a hoarse cackle of satisfaction from the natives answered his attempts at communication with the outside world, and soon—as the last glimpse of sky was shut out—he was enveloped in absolute darkness.

"Well, I assuredly could not have landed myself in a worse fix if I had tried," he soliloquized with wonderful calm. "Here I am, shut up in a twenty-foot water-hole in the middle of the Australian desert and surrounded by hostile savages. That's pretty good for a start—and, I'm afraid, for a finish too." He continued his unpleasant musings, while he carefully reloaded his revolver. Then he wondered what his companions would do when he failed to appear, and a ray of hope flashed across his sorely tried brain. Mackay and Emu Bill were expert bushmen, and indeed so was Never Never Dave. He had often heard them speak of tracking up clues of even the very flimsiest nature; might they not, after all, be able to follow the slight impressions left by his footsteps on the sandy gravel?... What a cruel irony of Fate to plunge him headlong into what he most desired to find—water. Had he been caught in a sand-hole he would not have felt so much aggrieved; but water, of all things! While thinking in this strain, he remembered that, though he had been extremely thirsty all day, he had not yet tasted of his find. But his thirst had effectually gone from him, and he abhorred the slimy touch of the fluid which encircled his limbs. Suddenly he felt some huge creature brush against his knee, and then climb up against him with many a wriggle and splutter. What new horror was this? Bob was anything but timid in temperament, yet he shivered at the sinuous contact of this unknown thing, and endeavoured frantically to shake it off, but it only clung the tighter.

Some little time now elapsed, to Bob it seemed like half an hour, for the moments dragged like ages, though five minutes would have been a nearer

estimate. Then a subdued muttering was heard above, and he expected every instant to see more hideous faces grinning at him through the bushy covering. He guessed that the whole tribe had now arrived to witness his plight; and he was not far wrong, for nearly all the warriors whose powers of locomotion had not been interfered with earlier in the day had assembled overhead. The weary sojourner in the depths kept his gaze fixed on the roof of the shaft where one or two gleams of light filtered through the last unevenly laid scrub; his eyes had by this time grown accustomed to the gloom of his environment, and while he watched he carefully cocked his revolver, and adjusted it to fire on the hair trigger, so that his aim might not be disturbed at a critical juncture. Soon a gaunt black hand drew aside the branches; Bob's haste was his own undoing. Had he waited long enough the oily-skinned savage might have let in the light more fully, but as it was he fired, and a howl of pain told him he had not fired in vain; but the brushwood fell back into position, and his prison was left as dark as ever. He now made an effort to climb up the walls of the dank and evil-smelling pit in which he was immured; but the flinty formations exposed were dripping with moisture, and slippery, and offered no place for foothold. Bob would have given much then for a match, there were a few in the pockets of his nether garments, but they were well submerged beneath the level of the water, and consequently useless. The floundering animal that had climbed against his legs next aroused his curiosity; he could not imagine what sort of creature it might be, and his courage was not sufficient to prompt his making a practical investigation as to its form or temper with his hand, which, as it afterwards turned out, was just as well for the hand. Another lull ensued, and he began to be alarmed at the silence of his dusky gaolers. Were they premeditating some sudden and novel doom for himself, or had they indeed abandoned him to die in this horrible water-trap? And where were his companions all the time? To relieve the monotony he fired two more shots upwards at random and was rejoiced to hear another yell of pain from outside, but a retaliation in the shape of a fusillade of stones came crashing down, missing him by a few inches only. Again he fired, and again. Bob had grown desperate, he did not much care what form the reply of the natives would take, but now he heard an answering shot in the distance, while near at hand the Shadow's well-known voice hilloed out lustily. There now appeared to be considerable agitation among the blacks

above; their feet pattered on the sand confusedly, and then a shrill yell intimated to Bob clearly enough that his tormentors had taken flight.

He was about to congratulate himself heartily on escaping so opportunely from a distinctly awkward predicament, when he heard the sand crunch under hurrying footsteps, and the Shadow, now close above, commenced to shout his name. He was evidently bent on following the retreating natives, for he halted not a moment, but kept up his mad rush forward. Before the horrified prisoner below could raise an alarm, he had jumped impetuously into the snare which had already done its work so well, and a moment later he tumbled down heavily head over heels by Bob's side. The spray he threw up almost blinded Bob, and the fetid odours that were thus again let loose, caused him to gasp wildly. His comrade in misfortune struggled to his feet with eloquent maledictions, and his amazement when he recognized Bob—the light was now streaming down through the gap he had made—was very genuine indeed.

"What in thunder is you doing here?" he cried.

Bob considered the question rather superfluous under the circumstances.

"Me? Oh, I'm fishing!" he replied laconically.

The Shadow ceased his flow of language for a moment, and examined the walls of his gloomy habitation with interest. It did not take him long to grasp the situation.

"Hang it, that was a tidy trick to play on a peaceable sort o' cuss like me. They've bagged the pair of us, an' if we'd had the savvy o' a mosquito, we didn't oughter be here," he snorted in extreme disgust.

"It is a bit humiliating," admitted Bob, not at all displeased that the wonderfully acute Shadow had blundered into the trap as easily as himself. It tended to soothe his wounded feelings in no little degree. "But all the same," he added brightly, "we've found water, and that's worth some inconvenience, isn't it?"

The Shadow grunted something unintelligible and began to prospect in the almost viscous fluid with both hands.

"There's some slimy crawler shoved up against me," he growled, "an' I reckon I'm goin' to break his little back, so that he won't have no appetite to feed on us afterwards." He groped around viciously.

"I have had a good half hour of its company, whatever it is," remarked Bob. "But the splash you made frightened him off for a bit. But hold hard! Shadow, hold hard, man! Don't you see what it is?"

Bob's eyes, more accustomed to the dull environment than his companion's, had now detected an unusually large-sized iguana struggling in the water; it had apparently fallen in from above, as they had done, and its snapping jaws looked decidedly dangerous. The Shadow ceased his investigations with remarkable celerity, then lifted up his voice in fluent condemnation of all sorts and conditions of crawling creatures. When he had exhausted his store of expletives, he made a vain effort to climb the oozy walls of the cavern, and succeeded only in getting a fresh douche for his pains.

"I wonder who'll come first," he murmured feebly, "Mackay or them savages? I reckon we shid know pretty sudden."

They were not left much longer in doubt. The report of Mackay's powerful rifle broke the silence, they recognized it by the heavy charge of powder it fired and the series of shrill yells which answered it showed that the natives were still in the vicinity. Anon the anxious pair heard the scrub break before the advance of some hurrying person, and the crunch, crunch of feet in the sand.

"Go back and mind the camels, Jack," they heard Mackay's decisive voice ring out. "I'll find Bob, if he's above ground, an' that reckless young rascal o' a Shadow too."

"But we ain't above ground!" roared the last-named youth, forgetting that his voice would be absorbed in the echoes of the shaft before it reached the surface. On came the stalwart bushman, and the fierce invective against the blacks in general, and these savages in particular, which issued from his lips as he ran, came as a revelation to Bob, who had never heard his friend so moved.

In a few moments he had reached the vicinity of the pit wherein the adventurous pair were entombed, and Bob made ready to signal once more

with his revolver, but such action was unnecessary. The experienced eye of Mackay had quickly noticed the cut brushwood, and he bore down towards it without hesitation. Then, thrusting his head through the opening in the bushy covering, he surveyed the captives below with a grim smile of amusement. "So this is where you are, my lads," said he. His relief was so evident that Bob and the Shadow felt even more ashamed because of the trouble they had caused than there was any need for. Then Bob found his speech.

"There's water here," he cried.

"Water!" Mackay's ruddy features positively glowed with pleasure. "Well, well, I shouldna wonder but what you've taken the only means o' finding it, an' though it was a novel sort o' method, an' just a trifle dangerous, we canna be too thankful that it has succeeded. Now, you'll hae to content yoursel's a bit longer while I see aboot gettin' a rope to pu' ye up——"

"Don't go away, boss!" howled the Shadow. "Them yelpin' baboons'll be back in two shakes if ye does." But Mackay had no intention of going away; he proceeded to signal with his rifle, and soon the entire camp, camels and all, arrived in answer to his call. Great was the hilarity of Jack and the two bushmen when they learned of the strange position in which Bob and the Shadow had been found; but their joy was real indeed that water had been discovered, after all, and when they raised their dripping comrades to the surface they embarrassed them more by their expressions of gratitude than by their display of what under the circumstances would surely have been but a pardonable levity.

Now came the tedious process of drawing water for the camels to drink, and also for refilling the almost dry canvas bags which Remorse carried. For the latter purpose the thick sand-impregnated fluid was laboriously filtered through a sheet of calico, so that a fair amount of its solid matter was eliminated. But it was not the sediment that was the most objectionable feature of the liquid; it simply stank with vile odours, so that Emu Bill and Never Never Dave, who had undertaken the duty of hauling up the buckets, had anything but a pleasant time while they were so engaged. The boys marvelled at the extraordinary capacity of the camels for the uninviting solution; between them they managed to absorb well over a hundred

gallons, and when at length they were satisfied, very little save mud remained at the bottom of the shaft.

"I would never have believed these natives capable of such a smart trick as that they played on me," said Bob, who had been unusually silent since his rescue. "Imagine the forethought of the beggars in covering up that confounded hole, and then luring me directly on to it!"

"They're no' so deficient in gumption as you at first considered, Bob, my lad," answered Mackay, with a twinkle in his eye. "However, I don't think they covered up the shaft exactly for your benefit. Just look——" He kicked a few of the branches aside and drew Bob's attention to their wholly sapless nature. "These same bits o' twigs have done duty for many a long day. The natives cover the water principally to prevent evaporation as much as possible, but also to keep all sorts o' animals an' reptiles from fallin' into it an' so spoilin' the flavour. The water has vera likely lain in that rock-hole for years, an' only such judicious economy on their part has left us enough for our needs."

"I reckon they'll have to shift their lodgings pretty soon," laughed the Shadow, "for they'll have a pretty hard job gettin' a drink when we leave, an' the next man that does a dive into the reservoir as Bob an' me did, shid strike something hard at the bottom."

The afternoon was already far advanced, but when Never Never Dave suggested that they should camp where they were until morning, Mackay would not hear of such a proceeding.

"We'll find trouble soon enough without lookin' for it, Dave," said he, "an' if there's one thing I dislike it's camping near a crowd o' niggers in the night time. They would try to swipe us out before morning, for the miserable vermin get vera brave after sundown. No, boys, we'll head out right now for Fortunate Spring. Fetch out the compass, Jack, an' let me have a look at that course again. The sun has shifted a bit since I worked out the correct shadow to steer by."

Immediately afterwards Misery's bell began to chime, and the camel team moved on its weary way.

CHAPTER XI

The Finding of Fortunate Spring

For several days after leaving the scene of Bob's adventure the travellers struggled over a most disheartening tract of country. The timber belt amid which they had discovered water proved to be but a narrow strip, extending down from the north-west; it evidently marked the course of an ancient river-bed, for immediately beyond its scope the sullen desert appeared bare of all vegetation, save for occasional clumps of saltbush and tufts of spinifex grass. Over this barren waste they forced their dogged course, starting at sunrise and halting towards noon, when the heat became too terribly oppressive both for man and beast; then in the evening they would continue the journey, sometimes marching late into the night. It was well for them that water had been found so opportunely, for assuredly none promised in the arid sands they were now encountering. The fifth day, however, brought with it the hope of better things. Away to the east the landscape took on a much more broken aspect, a feature which gradually extended right across the line of travel. Great dry gullies, starting from apparent nothingness, tore up the plain in all directions, and giant boulders of desert sandstone outcropped in prodigal profusion. And this drastic change in the land surface cheered the wanderers mightily, for though in itself it offered greater obstacles to progress than the weary sand-flats, it relieved the eyes, which had become so weary of gazing at the seemingly everlasting monotonous desert, and uplifted their hearts strangely.

Another day, and several mouldering ridges surrounded them; mere hillocks of sand they were, yet, rising as they did abruptly from an even expanse, they appeared in the distance as precipitous mountain steeps, and it was hard to believe that their grandeur would fade away at a closer view. Within these guarding barriers, a beautiful white tableland lay spread, so white and pure that it glittered like marble in the sun's rays. The sight was a dazzlingly splendid one, and Jack, who had been the first to climb the gentle elevation hiding the valley from the south, had exclaimed in delight—

"What a huge lake we are coming to; it looks like a great frosted Christmas card!"

"Lake!" Mackay had answered, almost sorrowfully. "Ay, it's a lake that will give us a maist desperate thirst, instead o' quenching what we've got."

And soon the truth of this remark was borne painfully on them all, for the lake was a mass of crusted and crystallized salt, that crushed like tinder beneath their feet and showered over the heads of the voyagers in sparkling clouds of finest dust. It filled their ears and eyes and nostrils; they inhaled the minute grains with every breath; it covered their tattered clothing in a gauzy film of white.

"Well, I'm blest!" ejaculated Emu Bill, "if this ain't the cruellest joke to play on a thirsty sinner, an' nary a drink within hundreds o' miles!"

"Shut up, Bill, an' ye won't swallow so much of it," retorted Never Never Dave, unsympathetically. Then he was moved to further speech. "Bless yer soul! It's a whole brewery we'll want afore we gets through this, I'm thinking."

"I had an idea," observed Mackay, blandly, "that you two had joined the temperance party a week or so before we left, so as to get accustomed to a bit o' a drought."

"Temperance party!" stormed the unusually loquacious Never Never, "I reckon this here circus would break up any anti-thirst campaign in less'n five minutes."

He would have continued, but his companion sternly rebuked him by casting at him the words with which he had himself been silenced. After that not a word was spoken for fully ten minutes, and the camel team staggered blindly on, floundering through intervening salt wreaths like ships in a heavy sea. The lake appeared to be nearly six miles in length, which meant that at least two hours would be spent in the crossing, for their rate of travel seldom exceeded three miles an hour, and was more often considerably less. In that time, if each man satisfied his craving for water from their very limited store, there would be but little left, and by Bob's calculations they were yet about thirty miles from the location of Fortunate Spring. But though each of the little party suffered severely, not one of them

made other than jocular mention of his longing, and Mackay felt proud of the fortitude and reserve they displayed. He was especially concerned for Bob and Jack, for they, not having been hardened to such experiences, must have felt the influence of their salt bath most keenly; but if they were in any way incommoded they showed no sign. Bob walked by Mackay's side, talking at intervals concerning the probable geological history of interior Australia—a subject of endless interest to him. Jack and the Shadow strode at Misery's head, for now Fireworks needed no guiding hand at his nose-ropes, but followed submissively in the rear of Repentance, and from snatches of their conversation, which floated to Mackay's ears, he gathered that Jack was giving his Australian comrade a description of the snows and frosts of the old country as a set-off to the blazing heat they were now experiencing.

"Yes, I reckon I'll go home with you," the Shadow was saying. "It must be a grand country, wi' no snakes nor centipedes nor other crawlers, an' nary muskittie to nibble you in your sleep."

Bob laughed. "I'm afraid the confined spaces at home would hardly suit him after this," he said. "I don't think I could stand the nature of things on the other side myself now."

"Because you're a born wanderer, Bob," smiled Mackay; "an' the world itself will soon be too small for you."

At last the end of the salt lake was reached, and cheerfully a path was forced over the encircling ridges, for all had high hopes of what might lie beyond. But disappointment again was their portion: the grim, unbroken desert stretched before them in all its hideous dreariness; the land of beau desire had not yet come.

"I remember well," said Mackay, "that Fortunate Spring was in a pretty bare sort o' country, but it certainly wasna as bad as this, although we had a hard tussle before we came to it."

On, on, they struggled; but, if anything, their course became more difficult as they proceeded. On the following morning a gentle wavy outline against the sky in the northerly distance warned them of some impending change, but by this time the members of the expedition had become spied to their

comfortless lot, and scarce dared hope for an improvement until they neared the portals of their goal, their shadowy land of El Dorado.

Gradually the sinuous curves on the horizon loomed up plainer to the view, and lo! as they crested an intervening sand hillock, a strange sight met their gaze. As far as the eye could reach west or north, a sea of undulating sand ridges appeared, rolling down like gigantic breakers from the dim northwest, the mighty valleys between each swelling sand-wave being over a hundred yards apart and fully thirty feet deep. Capping these wonderful billows regular rows of saltbush and spinifex, so regularly spread, indeed, that in the rosy morning light the whole scene was like some Brobdingnagian field, with furrows bearing luxurious vegetation.

"I reckon we has struck the land o' Goschen at last," said the Shadow, joyously.

"It does look pretty," Jack allowed hesitatingly, as they stood to take in the view, and waited for the others to come up. Indeed, so unaccustomed had they grown to seeing such close array of even the wiry desert growths that for the moment all imagined they looked upon a wildering forest. The saltbush was by the fantasy of mirage exalted to lordly proportions, and the spiky spinifex patches drooped in the sun's rays like the spreading fronds of the stately palm.

Mackay dispelled the illusion; he of all the party seemed ill at ease.

"I didna think the sand-waves extended so far back," he muttered, half to himself. Then he added, aloud, "It's no' a land o' promise you're lookin' at, boys; it's a deceiving land o' misery an' dispair, where many a good man has lost his life."

"But what about the beautiful trees and shrubs?" asked Bob, in wonderment. "They seem to stretch back for miles and miles."

"It's only another case where distance lends enchantment, as the poet says, my lad. Your trees are only saltbush, and instead o' growin' closely, there's over fifty yards between each o' them; it's those behind that fill in the gaps. The eye can never understand the perspective o' this country, the air is so clear that distant objects almost blend wi' what is close at hand."

He spoke truly. When they forced their way at a difficult angle across the vast undulations, they discovered to their sorrow that only the sparsest of vegetation found root on the hill crests, while the long interstices were absolutely barren. Not only this, but the sand on the inclines and declivities was so loosely packed that the camels sank to the knees in their strenuous efforts to scale them, and had to be pulled over the barring obstacles by sheer force.

"A day of this will just about finish Remorse," said Mackay, noting how that meek yet willing animal was labouring under its load. "I think, Bob, we'd better keep in the trough o' these confounded waves until we run oot o' them, I ken we must be near the edge as it is, for I mind that Fortunate Spring was a good day's travel past their eastern limit. That was why the chief called it by that name. We were vera nearly lost on those same ridges; we didna find a drop o' water for over a hundred miles, and we were just about dead beat when we came upon it."

"How far do they run towards the north?" questioned Bob.

"Well, Carnegie, who was one o' the finest explorers that ever handled a sextant, calculated they covered nearly three hundred miles o' West Australia. What their area is God only knows, yet it must be over fifty thousand square miles."

"I should think this would be nearly as bad as the Sahara," said Jack, as he tugged at Misery's rope. "I haven't seen a drop of water since we started, unless that which Bob fell into."

"The Sahara?" echoed Mackay. "Why, we wouldn't ca' it a desert at all. It's only because it's so near the old country that it is considered to be anything extraordinary. This country, Jack, wouldna be an explorer's preserve if it contained as much water as the Sahara. It would be overrun in every direction by gold-miners."

Then Jack was silent, marvelling greatly that in his earlier youth at school he had learned so little concerning the vast sandy wastes of Australia. Soon, as they kept on their altered course, the retarding undulations began to grow less and less high, and by late afternoon they had merged into the monotonous plains, now welcome indeed to the travellers after their

encounter with the formidable sand-ridges. But their progress that day had barely totalled ten miles, and the camels were well-nigh exhausted after their extreme exertions. The poor brutes had had a severe experience from the beginning, and the rough usage was telling heavily upon their strength. That night they could scarcely muster up sufficient spirit to chew their usual meal of saltbush tips, and, after a few weak efforts, Remorse and Repentance lay down in the sand, while Misery and Fireworks gazed at the little group around the camp-fire with mute, appealing eyes.

"I hope we don't have any trouble finding that spring," said Mackay, anxiously, and instinctively they all turned to Bob with a questioning look. The young navigator winced as he took out his notebook and hurriedly checked his previous calculations.

"We were in latitude $28^{\circ} 24' 7''$ at noon to-day," he said quietly; "that should make us about seven miles only from the location of Fortunate Spring, allowing we made five miles since lunch."

"But the longitude, Bob?" asked Mackay. "How do we stand for that?"

Bob again examined his log-book. "I have it marked at $125^{\circ} 11' 17''$," he answered, "but we came a good bit easterly since that. I'll try it again in the morning, though I think we're almost on the correct line now, and should hit the Spring by going due north."

He handed the book to Mackay, who glanced at the figures and mentally checked the simpler calculations, but he did not ask for Bob's table of logarithms, and the young man felt satisfied. Bob, indeed, was sure of his positions; they had been worked out with painful exactitude, but he could not help feeling anxious about the morrow. The country in the vicinity seemed so utterly arid and barren. Could the original figures he received be correct? Might not possibly some mistake have crept into Bentley's estimates? He shuddered at the thought, then was immediately sorry for the passing doubt. Who was he who dared question the accuracy of an old and tried explorer's chart? Yet Bob went to sleep that night feeling vaguely uneasy, and by early sunrise he was up taking altitudes, Jack and the Shadow attending him to mark the time of his observations. It was nearly nine o'clock before they were ready to move out that morning; the camels had for a long time refused to be loaded, and when loaded they could not be

prevailed upon to arise to their feet, until forced to do so by the necessarily cruel expedient of lighting fires under their noses.

"That's nothing, Jack," Mackay said with a laugh, for he had noticed the look of pain on the boy's face. "They get up long before they're hurt; their hide is like leather, you know, and camels are vera often stubborn and annoying when there's really no occasion for it."

But he knew well that the poor animals were not refractory without reason on this morning, though he endeavoured to make light of the fact. Wearily the heavily laden beasts trudged along, and when the first hour passed, and the sand showed signs of hardening, the Shadow made a valiant effort to infuse life into their hulking movements by blowing at his long-unused mouth-organ vociferously, and making the air resound with discordant notes, for his cracked lips could ill glide along the reeds with any degree of certainty. Bob, who was striding along well in advance, smiled as he heard the concert thus let loose, and he smiled the more when the dismal voices of Emu Bill and Never Never Dave were added to the chorus; and, looking back, he observed these two worthies prancing on with martial steps, though certainly not with martial grace, for their bodies were bent as they pulled their reluctant charges onwards, and their feet, notwithstanding their jaunty uplifting, went down almost in the same place. And Mackay, looking back at the perspiring musician, nodded encouragingly, much to that alert youth's amazement, for he had expected but a rude check as a reward for his labours. Not only did he thus ostensibly appreciate the lively music, but he joined in with his comrades lustily in their vocal exercises; and in this way the labouring train progressed, and almost unnoticeably a thin, straggling array of mallee and mulga shrubs began to dot the hardening sand surface, a slight dip in the land had obscured them from earlier view. By eleven o'clock the sand had merged into the longed-for iron-pebble strewn plains, and now the scrub was comparatively abundant all around, and the tough, wiry grasses which the camels loved appeared in greater profusion. Yet no signs of Fortunate Spring.

"It can't be far off now," said Bob, hopefully. "I'd better fix our position again before we go further, in case we might pass it."

"And that would be easily done, my lad," spoke Mackay. "I remember well that the water was in a mallee flat, just scrubby country like this, but there was no kind o' landmark except a fair-sized lime tree which grew beside it, an' I canna see any lime trees about here."

"I'll have another shot at the sun," decided Bob, and at once the team came to a halt, while Jack hastily unstrapped the sextant and chronometer from Misery's back.

A few minutes more and Bob had worked out the necessary calculation.

"I make the latitude come out exactly," he said gravely.

"Try again, Bob; try again," urged Mackay.

With sinking heart Bob once more levelled his sextant; the horizon was easily discernible through the scraggy bush, and the flat itself was level as could be.

"I find the latitude reading correct," he repeated, with bloodless lips; "and the longitude," he added, after a pause, "is the same as it was this morning, the same as is marked on my chart over the location of the Spring."

"We'll soon find it, if it is near abouts," cried Emu Bill, cheerily. "Don't fret, Bob, them springs have a habit of getting lost at times. Come on, Never Never, come an' help me to smell it out wi' that tender nose o' yours."

And they rushed off into the bush towards the west. The Shadow and Jack started to follow, but Mackay recalled them.

"You two had better look around due north," he said, "and I'll tackle the east myself. Now don't go further than a mile, an' signal wi' a revolver-shot if ye find anything."

Without a word they departed on their quest, and Mackay and Bob were left alone. Calmly the elder man interrogated the lad, who was standing in an attitude of deepest dejection, the sextant hanging loosely in his hand.

"And is there no room for a mistake in any o' your figures, Bob?"

"None, none, that I can imagine. I have been particularly careful——"

Bob could not finish his sentence, a flood of emotion swept over him, and he sat down in the sand and covered his face with his hands.

"Why, my laddie, ye mustn't blame yoursel' for no error o' yours," spoke Mackay, kindly, gazing at the despondent youth with a strange light in his keen grey eyes. "Brace yoursel' up, Bob; we'll likely find the spring at no great distance, an' if we don't, well—we'll look for another one if the camels stand by us."

He hurried away into the eastward scrub. Bob arose and gazed after him with quivering eyelids.

"Yes," he murmured brokenly, "I have brought you all to your death, and I can do nothing now to save.... I know the error is not mine, but I cannot and will not blame a dead man.... I wonder what can possibly be wrong."

He shook his head in utter hopelessness, then he glanced at the sextant, lying as he had left it, half buried in the sand. He took it up and brushed the silvered arc carefully with the ragged sleeve of his shirt, and was preparing to place it in its case when a new idea seemed to strike him. He grasped the instrument with a firmer grip and stood erect, a new light, a light of gladness shining in his eyes.

"It's strange I never thought of it before," he said aloud; "a minute or two either way would make all the difference." He picked up the chronometer, which lay idly at his feet, and examined it critically. "It's just possible," he muttered, "the jolting of the camel may have made it go a bit fast; I wonder if I can check it. I am going to try."

Long and eagerly he gazed at the sun through the powerful telescope of the sextant, and every now and then he would note down his observations, and consult the Nautical Almanac which lay open before him. In the midst of these proceedings, Emu Bill and Never Never Dave returned, after a fruitless search, and while they stood watching him, Jack and the Shadow also made their appearance, and lined up beside the other two in solemn silence. There was no need to ask them if they had been successful, their faces plainly indicated disappointment, though they both strove hard to hide their feelings. As for the first arrivals, their rugged countenances betrayed not the slightest trace of emotion. Bill calmly chewed a quid of tobacco, and

Dave reflectively pulled at his pipe. To them it did not seem to be a matter of much moment whether they found the spring or not. At length Bob threw down the sextant with a weary sigh.

"The chronometer is right," said he, sadly; then, as his comrades looked at him questioningly, he faltered: "I've done my best, boys ... the fault may not be altogether mine, but ... I am responsible to you.... What can you think of me——?" He gave way completely.

Then out spoke Emu Bill, and his voice rang firm and true—

"Shoot me fur a dingo if I'll listen to you miscallin' yourself, Bob. You has shown us afore what ye were made o', an' hang me for a cross-eyed Chinese if I'll believe you've made the mistake."

"I'm right with ye thar, Bill," grunted Never Never.

Bob looked at them in silent gratitude that was more potent than words.

"Blow me!" blurted out the Shadow, "this ain't no funeral circus." He strode aside and examined the canvas bags overlapping Remorse's tough hide; they were flat and empty, the last drop had gone. He rejoined the little circle quietly, and held out his hand to Bob, who was gazing with unseeing eyes into the horizon. "I knows it ain't your fault," he said simply.

Jack alone had not spoken, but Bob knew his comrade's thoughts; he knew the loyal courage and devotion of the boy's heart.

And all this time Mackay had not come back, nor had any welcome signal been heard. Bob commenced to fear that he would not come back unless he had something to report.

"What did ye mean by sayin' the chronometer was right, Bob?" asked Emu Bill, suddenly.

"If it had gone fast or slow, my longitude, which I calculated by it, would have been out accordingly," replied Bob, listlessly. "I thought the jolting might have affected it."

"Why then," returned Bill, "ain't it more likely that Bentley's time was wrong? If he came in from the west across the whole darned stretch o' sand-

ridges, I reckon he would bust things up a bit."

Bob was startled into fresh energy. "Of course, you're right, Bill!" he cried excitedly. "I've been so anxiously looking for a possible error in my own instrument, I never thought of it occurring with Bentley's. I believe you've hit the solution of the whole difficulty. We'll find Fortunate Spring due east of us in that case, for his latitude would be sure to be right."

"We'll get under way at oncet then," grunted Never Never Dave. "We're bound to meet Mackay comin' back."

At once Jack rushed to Misery's head, and the others hastened to their posts. Bob picked up the sextant and chronometer, and with a surging hope in his heart led the way in the direction that Mackay had taken. Slowly, slowly, they broke through the scrub, Misery's bell sending out its melancholy note, and shattering the oppressive stillness which had prevailed but a few minutes before. Onward they went and onward, and yet no sign of Mackay, and no sign of a spring to gladden their weary eyes. About two miles had been traversed, and the spirits of the forlorn party were drooping fast, when from the bush but a few hundred yards ahead a revolver shot boomed out loudly. With one accord the camels stopped dead. They seemed to realize that something was about to happen. Again came the sonorous echoes of an exploding cartridge, and a hoarse cheer burst from the eagerly listening quartet.

"Mackay has found it! Hurrah! Hurrah!" roared the Shadow, and with renewed effort a path was forced on towards the origin of the welcome sound. Five minutes more and they broke into a rough clearing in the bush in the centre of which a tall lime tree reared high above its dwarfed surroundings; and seated by the tree gazing at some rude markings that showed faintly on the gaunt white trunk, was Mackay. At his feet, sunk among the spreading roots, and half hidden by enclustering grassy growths, gleamed the water of the spring. Bob gave a gasp of relief and thankfulness. Emu Bill and Never Never Dave calmly began to unload the camels, the Shadow after vainly trying to find his speech, mechanically pulled out his musical instrument, and sought to indicate his joy thereon.

Then Mackay arose to his feet, "Dinna desecrate the place, Shadow," said he, in gentle reproach. "Remember this is a monument to the dead."

He motioned Bob and Jack to come forward and view the mossy inscription on the tree, and silently they obeyed his summons. Deep graven in the wood was the legend: "Fortunate Spring, 1898. Bentley's Expedition. Lat. 28° 17' 5'', long. 125° 19' 6'' (Dead Reck.) Course E." Then followed a list of the initials of the party headed by those of Mackay: "J. M."

By this time Emu Bill, Never Never Dave, and the Shadow had also gathered round to view the symbols left by Mackay's old leader, and as each man traced out the lettering for himself, he doffed his tattered hat reverently.

"Ay, boys," spoke Mackay, breaking the solemn hush that reigned, "it was a fortunate spring for us then, and it's a fortunate spring for this expedition now. But how did you manage to come straight for it, Bob? It took me a good time zig-zagging through the bush before I sighted the tree."

In a few words the young navigator explained the cause of their coming, then he pointed to the inscription "Dead Reck." "That shows that Bentley did not think his readings altogether accurate," he said gravely, "and he meant it as a warning to others, though why he didn't put it on his chart is strange to me."

Mackay looked at the speaker with a troubled countenance.

"It's been my fault, Bob. When I copied the figures into my own book I didna think it necessary to put the qualification down."

"I wants to say here," interjected Emu Bill, "that in my humble opinion Bob can steer a course wi' any man, an' my ole carcass is here to prove it. A hundred an' eighty miles he's took us across the miserablest country on God's earth, an' nary time has I heard him grumble."

"I goes nap on Bob every time," concurred Never Never.

A light of real happiness overspread Mackay's bronzed features.

"What more can you ask, Bob?" he said earnestly, "than the testimony o' the pioneer, wha' lends his life to your guidance."

"Hurrah for Fortunate Spring!" shouted Jack, unable to contain himself longer.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" roared the answering chorus.



CHAPTER XII

A Night Attack

They lingered for two days by Fortunate Spring in order to give the camels a much-needed rest, then they proceeded on their march, now steering due east, and it was strange indeed how this altered course affected the spirits of the party. They seemed to feel that they were at last on the straight track towards the mystic land of their desire. Mackay even more than the others showed the change in his feelings; he whistled joyously in the exuberance of his heart, and cheered on the labouring team with hearty words of praise. And Bob, relieved considerably of his own vague doubts in himself, had changed apparently into a new being. The vagaries of the Shadow called forth his amusement, and the dry wordy dialogues of the two bushmen never failed to make him laugh with keenest appreciation, a fact which endeared him much to that valiant couple. The freedom of the mighty desert held him in thrall, its dangers were forgotten, the call of the wild was in his ears, the secret of the Never Never beckoned him.

"I told you the sunny skies would alter your temperament," said Jack, whose boisterous good nature had never once deserted him. "I don't think a man gets a fair show in the constantly cloudy weather at home."

"And yet we always get back to the old country somehow," answered Bob, thoughtfully. "I suppose its grand history attracts us when the greater world has palled. I believe I could almost live in history, Jack, wandering about among the castles and cathedrals that have seen the centuries pass. What wonderful records the grim old walls hold. Why, each stone would seem alive to me."

"It would be pleasant to have a big holiday at home," admitted Jack, wistfully; "but our time—and means, for travelling about was pretty limited when we were there——"

"But that will never be again," cried Bob, gaily; "just consider what we have already got in this country, and who knows what may await us out

where we are going?"

Who knew indeed? Who ever knows what lies in the dim distance of untrodden tracts? The days passed quickly, though the country continued to be barren and cheerless in aspect, the difficulties of travel were not nearly what they had been on the first long weary stretch. More than once a soak was discovered to replenish the water-bags before they had yet gone dry, and within a week two new wells had been charted. They were little more than the muddy residues of a long previous rainfall, still, the dignity of a Central Australian well as a rule lies wholly in its title, a fact which is well enough known to all explorers.

So successful were they in their journeying that after ten days had elapsed, and they were a hundred and forty miles east of Fortunate Spring, Mackay considered that a brief deviation to the north might be ventured upon on the off chance of evading a long dry stretch which at this stage intervened on Bentley's route, the next and final spring charted by that explorer being over seventy miles distant.

"We had a terribly hard time on that journey," said he, as he gazed across the wavy expanse of shifting sands which spread before them, "an' it's just possible the country to the north'ard a bit may be better. It canna be much worse."

For a long time, however, the varied route showed little prospect of improvement; sand, sand, everlasting sand spread everywhere before them, and progress became dangerously slow. The camels struggled in vain to make headway; they sank and floundered and stumbled in the wreathing masses. In five days the distance covered totalled only forty miles. No wonder Mackay looked grave as he noticed the water-bags' woefully flat appearance.

"I tell you what, boys," burst out Emu Bill, during their noonday halt, "it's mighty sartain we has struck a snag this time. This is the miserablest patch ——" He broke off abruptly and fell to abusing the flies besieging his face with remarkable eloquence. No one seemed disposed to question Bill's statement in any way, and shortly afterwards the march was renewed, Bill, Never Never, and the Shadow alternately lauding the striving camels for

their patient endurance, and bestowing maledictions upon them for their ponderously slow onward movement.

Hour after hour the melancholy procession laboured along. So soon had the grimmer influence of the country exerted its baleful spell that for a long time each man feared to speak lest he might betray the growing depression at his heart. Then, just as the evening shadows were beginning to close in, a welcome break in the monotonous landscape appeared to gladden their straining eyes. In the faint distance a feathery line of scrub stretched across their path, indicating a decided change in the sand surface, and the sight added vigour to their failing steps. Eagerly they strove to reach the inviting mallee coppice before the thick blackness of night came down to envelop them. But it was not to be; the stumbling gait of the camels could not be hastened, though Emu Bill and his compatriots implored and beseeched the hardy animals with an eloquence that was touching to hear.

"One more try, boys," cried Mackay. "There's bound to be water somewhere among the timber, and we may save ourselves another night of misery by finding it now." He went to Jack's assistance, and together they tugged at the leading camel's nose-rope until the poor brute was literally being dragged through the yielding sands. This method of progression not proving very satisfactory, he next made laudable endeavour to enliven the march by singing raucously a few bars from that old song, "The Campbells are Coming."

"I just reckon they are comin'," Never Never Dave groaned, somewhat confusing the reference; "but they need a jolly lot of persuasion, they do. Get up, Repentance, you cross-eyed streak o' misery. Didn't I give ye a drink last week?"

At length Mackay saw that they must be content to halt in the open for one night more.

"We can't do it, boys," he said, "so let us look for a decent camping-space in the sand; we'll find water if there's any about in the morning."

They had barely time to gather a few twigs from the sparse brush now in evidence, and start a feeble fire, before an impenetrable darkness descended over the desert. Then they busied themselves unloading the camels and

preparing their frugal meal, the latter an operation which rarely occupied much time, for obvious reasons. They were indeed in a very deplorable plight at this period; the water-bags had given up much of their store by evaporation, and they now contained but a very meagre supply of the valuable liquid, and the camels were well-nigh dying on their feet from sheer exhaustion.

The hour was quite late, and they were about to roll themselves in their blankets, when suddenly a bright light flamed up luridly among the trees in their course, and harshly through the still air rose the strains of a native chant.

"By the Great Howlin' Billy!" growled Never Never Dave, "there's a corroborree on to-night. It's mighty lucky we didn't reach the timber, after all."

"If there's any nigs about there's bound to be water," asserted the Shadow, with a chuckle of delight, and certainly his reasoning was sound.

Higher and higher blazed the warning beacon, and louder and louder sounded the warriors' dismal wailings, and through the leafless branches of the eucalypti a wildly dancing band of ape-like figures could be distinguished. The little group gazed at the ominous spectacle in silence and with mingled feelings. The presence of a native tribe in the neighbourhood was conclusive proof that an ample water supply was not far off; indeed the aborigines of the Interior almost invariably hold their corroborree ceremonials around the principal spring of the district, for according to their belief a mighty spirit has its abode in every desert pool or soak, and from the slimy depths thereof watches over the welfare of his people. But when ought displeases this dread "Wangul"—the great Dweller in the Waters—he visits his wrath upon the land by drying up the springs and betaking himself elsewhere. It is a wonderfully convenient idea, for it explains away all droughts and following pestilences, and it appeals to the simple heathen instinct as no finer teachings could. To propitiate this god of theirs many ordinances are performed and numerous sacrifices offered, and should any wandering members of an alien tribe happen to be near on such occasions, they are promptly seized upon to occupy the unenviable position of

"Corroborree mourners," a post which entails death, preceded by much horrible suffering.

Mackay was mentally recalling his various experiences with the natives in different parts of the country, and with little sense of comfort, when Emu Bill disturbed his musings by saying suddenly—

"I wonder what the howling celebration means to-night, anyway?"

The others had by this time gone to sleep, having been utterly worn out by their trying day's encounter with the desert, and these two sat alone by the dying fire.

"I'm just a wee bit afraid, Bill," answered Mackay, dubiously, "that it has some bearing on our arrival. I never did like to be near the murderous pests in the nighttime."

Bill stirred about uneasily, and it was clear that he shared Mackay's fears.

"I believe you are right," he said, after a moment's pause. "The skunks must have seen us a long way off."

He relapsed into a gloomy silence, and began to draw with great care sundry diagrams in the sand with the improvised camp poker.

Meanwhile the whirling figures in the wood continued their mad career, and the flames from the great fire in their midst spouted high above the motionless mallee tips. The myriad stars twinkled merrily in an unclouded sky, and the Southern Cross constellation shone out brilliantly almost directly overhead. A slender crescent moon just above the horizon lent its feeble halo to the scene, so that a vague, eerie half light seemed to float on the surface of the land. Faster and still faster the maddened Wangul worshippers rushed, and the night was filled with their harsh, unmusical ravings.

Mackay watched the progress of events with quickening interest, while Emu Bill with many a muttered malediction examined the charges in his revolver, and smoked reflectively. Mackay was very unwilling to awake the sleepers unless it were absolutely necessary; they needed all the rest they could get. But Emu Bill recalled him to a sense of duty.

"I've been watching the circus," he said quietly, "an' I can see nary mourner in the crowd. For a dead cert they'll be comin' fur us when they've worked up enough enthusiasm. They'll imagine us to be asleep by now."

Mackay got up without a word, and shook Bob and Jack back to consciousness. Never Never Dave was alert on the instant, but the Shadow slumbered deeply and refused to be awakened, whereupon Emu Bill aroused him by rolling him rudely out of his blanket, a proceeding which almost created a civil war on the spot.

"You has no right to dislocate my sweet dreams in such a dingo fashion," the bellicose Shadow protested grumpily; but when he understood the seriousness of the position his wrath dissolved speedily. "At the same time I reckon you is a bit too much skeert about the antics o' them muskitties," he remarked chidingly. "I was having a daisy dream, I was; flooded rivers an' gold an' di'monds, an'——"

"Shut it off, Shad," unsympathetically interrupted the object of his disapproval. "They're on our track now. Look!"

The corroborree fire continued to blaze up vividly, and the watchers could see numerous naked savages piling on the logs and dancing amid the showering sparks like denizens of the nether world. The circling mass of grotesquely garbed warriors had broken up in apparent confusion, but quickly they again came into view and re-formed on the edge of the zone of illumination, then spreading fan-like to north and south, they came slowly yet steadily towards the supposed sleeping camp. A moment more and they were hidden from view in the intervening shadows.

"Things are beginning to look lively," said Bob, adjusting his cartridge-belt.

Jack ranged himself quietly by his comrade's side, his rifle gripped in readiness.

"I don't know how this is going to turn out, Bob," he said slowly; "but I mean to shoot straight, to-night."

"It's a case o' self preservation, my lad," warned Mackay; and he closed the breech of his powerful weapon with a vicious snap. "You needna think o'

usin' the stock o' your gun in this scrimmage. I am just afraid it's goin' to be more serious than I thought."

There could be little doubt as to the meaning of the wily natives' tactics. Assuredly they intended to surround the little camp, which they considered to be safely asleep, and spear the party at their leisure.

"We are to be their sacrificial offerings, apparently," remarked Bob, with forced calm.

Mackay was aroused to a sudden burst of fury at the words; his long-smouldering anger against the natives effervesced to an alarming pitch.

"I'll give them sacrifices," he grated, peering into the darkness with eyes that seemed like glowing coals of fire over the gleaming barrel of his rifle. "I'll make them think an earthquake has broken loose in their midst. I'll—I'll _____"

Indignation choked his fiery utterance, and he said no more, but toyed lingeringly with the trigger of his gun.

A minute elapsed, it seemed an eternity, but no signs of the enemy could yet be traced. Instinctively Bob's eyes returned to the recent centre of affairs where the impish fire feeders were heaping on the logs with frantic glee, and he shuddered involuntarily. The suspense was rapidly becoming unbearable, and the little band expected every moment to be overwhelmed with flying spears from some unlooked-for corner. Each pigmy bush around to their overstrained vision took on the appearance of a crouching warrior, and it was with the exercise of great restraint that Mackay and his comrades refrained from firing at random into the night. Slowly the seconds dragged their weary course, then all at once a weird unearthly chorus reached the ears of the anxiously waiting group; it seemed to come from everywhere around, and they turned about in dismay. The attacking horde were closing in on them from all points of the compass. Only when the ring had been completed had they begun their deadly advance. Neither Mackay nor any of them had expected this.

"I reckon we is bested, mates," groaned Emu Bill, helplessly; and it certainly did seem as if he spoke truly.

Another minute elapsed, then they grounded their arms in impotent rage; the swelling chant from an unknown number of throats was drawing insidiously nearer, and they could only roughly guess the various origins of sound. Mackay turned to Jack to give a last word of encouragement, and he was surprised to find the boy standing by Bob's side in an attitude of acute attention—his head was bent forward, and he shielded his ear with his hand as if he were listening intently.

"I've got them," he whispered eagerly. "Unless there's a dummy musician in their ranks, there's a fifty yards' blank in the circle straight out by the camel packs."

"How many do you make altogether, Jack?" inquired Mackay.

The boy replied promptly, "They seem to be about thirty yards or so apart. They are nearly two hundred yards off now, and coming very slowly. There must be nearly fifty of the beasts."

"Good for you, Jack," murmured Mackay, heartily, a tribute of praise which even at that moment Emu Bill and the Shadow echoed with characteristic vehemence.

There was no time to be lost, the fateful ring was closing every instant; so, gripping his rifle tightly, the leader of the expedition made a course out in the direction as indicated by Jack, his comrades following after in Indian file. And as they passed out by the camels, each man breathed a prayer for their safety; then, with the hideous voices of the approaching warriors ringing in their ears, they made their way stealthily out through the saving gap into the freedom beyond.

Surely never before had a course been steered by such odd reckoning, yet the droning cries on either side of the escaping party as they neared the edge of the invisible circle guided them as well as glaring beacons would have done, and they manœuvred cautiously through the midst of the fervently singing band, luckily escaping all observation.

"It was like navigatin' through the Heads of Sydney Harbour," exclaimed Emu Bill, flinging himself down on the sand immediately they had cleared the dangerous line.

"We've got to thank our stars the beggars have the good sense to say grace before supper," said Jack, cheerfully.

"We are no' just altogether out o' the difficulty yet," warned Mackay. "They'll be back with a rush when they find out their mistake."

"But you ain't goin' to let them run the whole circus, surely?" complained Emu Bill. "Let's pepper the howlin' dervishes now."

Mackay seemed to hesitate for a moment, the odds in numbers were greatly against them.

"Train your guns on the old camp, boys," he said quietly. "You'll see their black bodies against the glow o' the ashes when they get nearer." He had scarcely spoken these words when the dismal chant of the over-sanguine natives ceased, and with blood curdling yells the savage horde swept on to their supposed work of extermination. The onlookers saw a perfect hail of spears strike and quiver amid the smouldering ashes; then a fantastical array of fiend-like forms swarmed before their eyes, and prolonged shrieks of baffled rage rent the air. Now was their opportunity. "Fire, boys!" cried Mackay, himself setting the example; and the death-dealing weapons thundered out their grim challenge to the foe. When they looked again only a fiercely struggling mass of black humanity was visible, and the scattering sparks showed where the shots had taken effect. Once more a well-directed volley was poured into the surging crowd; but this time the flash of the rifles betrayed their presence, and immediately about a dozen gaunt apparitions charged down on the little party with vengeful shouts. It looked as if nothing could stand against that maddened rush. In vain the rifles spoke, the members of the attacking band seemed in no wise to diminish, their figures could only be vaguely traced in the gloom.



**"IT LOOKED AS IF NOTHING COULD STAND AGAINST THAT
MADDENED RUSH"**

"Keep easy, lads; keep easy," said Mackay, encouragingly. "Load up your magazines, an' reserve every bullet until they are close on to us. We can't miss them then, and it's our only hope of stopping them."

Bob, plying his almost red-hot rifle, checked himself at the words, and calmly obeyed the instructions given; Jack, panting furiously with his extreme exertions, grounded his loaded weapon and waited with something like a gnawing despair at his heart. The Shadow grumbled incoherently to himself, Emu Bill and Never Never Dave said not a word, but stood erect, calm, and motionless beside Mackay, awaiting the shock. Then a strange thing happened; while the demoralized natives around the vacated camp kept up their frenzied rushing hither and thither, seeking aimlessly their hidden enemy, the four camels of the expedition, aroused by the unusual sounds prevailing, stalked slowly forward into the thick of the mêlée, and there they stood, their long necks swaying curiously, like fearsome spectres from an unknown world. A howl of terror burst from the group who had located the position of the defenders, they ceased their onward course, hesitated for a moment, then turned and fled precipitately, an example which the rest of their stricken brethren speedily thought fit to copy; and before Mackay or any of his companions could realize what had happened, the entire assembly were in full retreat, leaving the bulk of their spears and boomerangs littered on the sand.

"Good for you, Misery!" applauded Jack, running forward, and the leader of the team, hearing the well-known voice, staggered to meet him and knelt at his feet.

"I reckon we owes them animiles the price o' our carcasses," said Never Never Dave, sententiously, as they walked quietly back to the deserted camp-fire. They found their blankets lying as they had left them, but transfixed with numberless spears, and after carefully extracting these crude yet deadly missiles they replenished the fire with them, and lay down to rest beside the ruddy glow, for it was now early morning, and the air had become unpleasantly chill. The corroborree beacon had been deserted, only occasional scattering sparks showing where the strange ceremonial had taken place, and away in the distance the vague crackling of branches indicated that the would-be annihilators of the camp were already far from reach.

"Great Centipedes! That was a close shave," growled Emu Bill, before he dropped off to sleep.

"But we have the advantage of knowing," returned Bob, with his usual calm philosophy, "that we shall find water near where the beggars held their odd orgy, and that should recompense for much." Then his eyes closed in slumber, and he entered a realm of phantasies where hostile aborigines and dreary salt plains were alike unknown. The weary strain of the night was over.

They found water after daybreak as they had anticipated. It was contained in a deep sunken rock-hole with an almost unfathomable bottom, wherein one might well fancy some dread monster to exist. They refilled the empty water-bags with thankful hearts, and, fearing another attack in force that night, renewed their march early in the afternoon. It was soon apparent that a better country had now been reached; dry it was certainly, yet the soil showed a considerable improvement over that already traversed, and the scrub became almost continuous instead of in sparse and far-divided belts as formerly. But though all promised well for an unusually favourable journey that day and for many days to come, the presence of hostile bands of aborigines all along the route of travel was too evident a feature of the landscape to be overlooked, and the team had perforce to move onwards warily.

"I do hope," said Mackay, as the evening approached, "that the blacks will give us a rest to-night. There's more risk in these scrimmages at close quarters than is healthy."

Bob had arrived at that conclusion some time before. "We're not more than fifty miles from the location you gave me of Bentley's last camp," he observed gravely. "If I shift the course slightly to the south to-morrow we ought to be up at it in three days."

A spasm of pain crossed Mackay's face. "Ay, my lad, we'll need to be extra cautious now," he said meaningly. "We mustna allow oursel's to be wiped out before we come to the mountain. I've got a bit of a score to settle in that quarter."

The sun was now but a few points above the western horizon, and his fiery radiance bathed the great silent bushland in golden splendour. The motionless mulga and mallee shrubs seemed ablaze with ruddy light, and the wastes of sand shone as a sea of burnished bronze. Not a sound was

heard save the harsh cries of the gaily plumaged parrots that flitted eerily from tree to tree, and the occasional dismal monotone of the mopoke. Then suddenly from the shadow of a thicker clump of timber than usual a series of yells rang out, and at the same time a shower of spears whizzed overhead, and perilously close. Each member of the little group realized in an instant what had happened, and seized his rifle.

"Get the camels under cover, boys!" cried Mackay, from his position well ahead of the main party.

"There's nary bit o' cover!" roared back Emu Bill, who had diplomatically stretched himself flat on the ground at the first alarm. Whiz! splash! Even as he spoke a long quivering missile rushed through the shadeless branches and penetrated the great water-bag overlapping Remorse's flank. The stout canvas resisted the shock sufficiently to save the animal from injury, but the precious and dearly-hoarded contents gushed from the rent created in a copious flood. A cry of horror broke from Bob, Jack uttered a wail of anguish, and an expression of much fervour issued from Never Never Dave's mouth. With a bound Mackay rushed forward in vain attempt to save the few remaining drops, but it was not to be; before they had time to realize the seriousness of their loss the gurgling stream had ceased; the canvas skin had given up its store.

"I'll pulverize the hyena that did it!" howled the Shadow, dashing forward through the scrub.

"I'm with you," cried Jack, following closely at his heels.

It all happened so quickly that Mackay had no time to give any directions or restrain the indignant pair. Several further flights of spears skimmed well overhead, and one or two barbed darts more surely aimed, whistled dangerously near to Mackay's head.

"This is gettin' mighty monotonous," growled Emu Bill, looking around impotently, for as yet not a single savage was to be seen.

"There must be water in the district," said Bob, coolly, examining his revolver. "I suppose we've got to go on the hunt again." Without further remark he turned and rushed after his companions, whose vehement shouts

as they charged along were mingled with the shrill cries of the dusky warriors. "Try and catch one, Shadow," he loudly shouted as he ran.

Fearful that disaster might overtake the entire party, Mackay gripped his rifle and hurried after them, leaving Emu Bill and Never Never Dave in charge of the team, a position which they condemned bitterly at such a time. The shadows of night were fast closing in, and between the trees of the pigmy forest a heavy gloom had settled providing excellent cover for the blacks should they have decided to renew the attack; but these strange creatures, having discharged their weapons, were now beating a retreat, yelling most hideously the while.

Scarcely fifty yards before him Mackay could dimly descry Jack, the Shadow, and Bob leaping on after the fugitives, and he quickened his pace in order to come up with them.

"We'll catch a specimen," cried Bob, eagerly, "if we have to chase them all night."

On they raced, while the crackling branches a little way ahead betokened the nearness of their quarry, whose shrieks alone would have been an unerring guide. Evidently the fleeing warriors were just as tired as their pursuers, for they were gradually losing ground. Suddenly one of their number screeched out some sort of signal which had the effect of making the runners scatter in all directions. Bob could just see their shaggy heads above the bushes as they diverged on various tacks; then the new order of things confused them all, and one by one the gorilla-like figures vanished from their view. Yet still they kept up the race, loth to return without some satisfaction. The night was rapidly darkening, obscuring the scrub and intervening sand wastes in a common pall, so that progress was made only with great difficulty, and wearily the aimless search was continued.

"We'll have to turn, boys," said Mackay, at length, when the stars commenced to glimmer in the heavens. "We must go back to the camels. To-morrow we'll have a look round for water. And to think that we had any amount of it this morning——"

A hearty exclamation from the Shadow interrupted him. They were passing under an unusually large lime tree, and that youthful individual had halted

with an unrestrained roar of mingled merriment and relief. Looking up against the stars Mackay could see an awkward figure scrambling frantically among the higher branches.

"Treed! By Jove!" cried Bob, gazing upwards also.

"I reckoned I smelt nigger," said the Shadow, when he had recovered his equanimity; "but if his long legs hadn't banged me on the cocoa-nut, I'd never ha' thought o' lookin' in the tree for the skunk."

"And now comes the job o' gettin' him down," said Mackay. "An' it won't be an easy contract either, judgin' by the way he hangs on to the branches."

"The Shadow and I will soon attend to him," said Jack, with a laugh; and without further ado he commenced to swarm up the small round trunk of the tree.

"Be careful, Jack," warned Mackay. "He may smash your head before you reach him."

"Will he, though?" growled the active climber, already half-way up.

"Strategy's the word, Jack," counselled the Shadow, as he prepared to ascend to his companion's assistance. The lithe tree swayed under its load, then bent until its lower limbs reached the ground.

"We'd better see that our prisoner doesn't make his escape by jumping for it," remarked Bob, and he and Mackay therefore stood at opposite sides of the tree, watching the huddled form with alert eyes. Nearer and nearer Jack writhed his way to the top, and slowly the terrified aboriginal retreated to the farthest limit of the branch on which he rested, until it cracked ominously.

"I guess I've got you now," muttered Jack. "You just wait till I come to you."

But the shivering savage had no such intention; and as Jack approached he began to scream horribly, more after the manner of a wild beast than a human being. Then he broke off bits of the lesser branches and twigs, and showered them down on his implacable enemy.

"Just shake him off the branch an' I'll catch him," advised the Shadow, worming his sinewy form along the limb directly underneath his prey.

In vain Jack endeavoured to grasp his prospective prisoner, the oily native eluded him every time, and sorely tried the persistent besieger's temper by keeping up a vicious fusillade of wood fragments. He had, however, completely overlooked the presence of the Shadow directly below, and when in the midst of a furious assault, his foot slipped slightly, it was instantly seized by that watchful gentleman, and held in a ruthless grip.

"Now, I reckon you've got to come," said he, evading the free limb's onslaught with much dexterity. "Now! Stand from under, boys!"

Crash! They came down all three together, the top branch having broken with the strain, but the height was not very great, and the sand below was loosely packed.

"It's a jolly good thing," quoth the Shadow, "that the black beggar was so nice and soft; it was just like bouncing on top o' a cushion, it was."

Jack did not appear to be particularly grateful for anything as he picked himself up, but he very promptly took an arm of the captive along with the Shadow.

"Yes, that's right; take care of your prisoner now that you've got him," said Mackay, turning to lead the way back to the spot where the camel team had been left. "We'll have to mak' the most o' his knowledge."

Then he addressed the sullen aboriginal, and by a constant repetition of the word "Babba" (water), sought to make him understand their needs. But it was all to no purpose. The captive made no sign, and only groaned horribly when the question was pressed with a show of anger.

"All the same," sternly spoke Bob, "he'll have to tell us what he knows before morning."

In a short time they had reached the camels, where Emu Bill and Never Never Dave awaited them with ill-concealed impatience. But their joy on observing the aboriginal was great indeed.

"I reckon he'll get water for us all right," said Emu Bill, as they unloaded the camel. "I just reckon he will."

The Shadow now proceeded to build a fire, and soon the roaring flames leapt up cheerily. Having no water, they could not make tea, so they contented themselves with munching some pieces of damper, for which, however, they had little appetite.

It was at this point that the prisoner showed signs of interest in the proceedings, and Jack thereupon proffered him a substantial bunch of the dry fare, which he seized and ate with avidity.

But still Mackay's repeated interrogations seemed to have no effect on the savage, who kept glancing over to where the Shadow was gingerly slicing up some tinned conglomeration which is served out to explorers under a variety of names, and he opened his cavernous orifice expectantly.

"The poor beggar is hungry," said Bob. "Let him have a piece of that unknown substance, Shadow; if it does not kill him it may arouse some sense of gratitude."

"He'd reduce our stores mighty quick," grumbled the Shadow, noting with dismay how rapidly his hospitable offerings disappeared.

"Just hold on a jiff," murmured Emu Bill, thoughtfully. "I reckon I has struck a daisy idea." He hastened over to the many sacks lying on the ground where the camels had been unloaded, and came back with a handful of salt. "When you are as old as I is, Shad," said he, graciously, "you will know how to handle blacks, I calc'late. Does ye savvy?"

The Shadow took the salt with humble deference, and without a word proceeded to mix it lavishly with the contents of a small tin of the aforementioned compound, which he then handed to the hungry native.

"Eat every bit o' it, ye howlin' baboon," said he, kindly, "an' if ye isn't as thirsty as a camel after it, I reckon there must be something wrong wi' your construction."

Mackay and Bob listened to the schemers with amusement, then, as they saw the ravenous heathen bolt the salt-laden meat with great gusto, they

forgot for a moment their own thirsty condition and indulged in a paroxysm of laughter.

"For a certainty our dusky friend will want water badly soon," said Bob; and they all sat around the camp fire and calmly awaited developments. If their prisoner knew of the presence of water in the vicinity he must surely endeavour to find it—half a pound of the strongest salt in his interior might enlighten him as to the meaning of 'Babba Babba,' which Mackay had repeated to him so persistently. And they were not mistaken. Half an hour later he began to show unmistakable signs of uneasiness, and his lips moved like the gills of a fish out of water. Then he strained at the rope which bound him to a mulga sapling behind, and rolled his eyes beseechingly.

"Better give him a full hour yet," said Mackay. "We can thirst just as comfortably as he can now, I think."

Emu Bill chuckled dryly.

"I is a grand instructor o' furrin' languages," he said. "I just reckon that that there nigger knows what water means now."

It was nearly midnight, and the slow minutes dragged like ages as they sat around the fire anxiously watching the antics of the salt-gorged aboriginal. For a long time no one spoke, but their basilisk-like glare evidently disconcerted the sufferer in no little degree, and he commenced to moan in an exceedingly melancholy manner, and endeavoured to evade their gaze by every artifice in his power.

"He thinks we mean to eat him, and have been feeding him to make him nice and plump!" hazarded Bob at length, and he had truly guessed the captive's thoughts. However, the tortures of thirst were surely having due effect on the poor savage, and his cries soon became most distracting to the listeners' ears. Suddenly he broke into a wailing chorus which echoed dismally through the still air, and caused even the long-suffering camels to raise their heads in protest.

"B-bab-ba-bab-ba!" he cried, tugging strenuously at the binding cords.

"Patience ain't so bad a virtue, after all," soliloquized Emu Bill, calmly slackening the rope from the tree, and gripping the free end of it tightly.

With a bound the native headed out into the densest part of the scrub, almost pulling Bill over the sand in his frantic haste; the rest of the party followed at their best speed. Their now tractable guide did not lead them any distance. He stopped in a small hollow not far from the scene of his capture, and with feverish hands scraped away some covering twigs and branches, revealing to the onlookers' eager eyes a glittering pool of clearest water.

With a deep gurgle of relief he buried his tangled visage in the spring, and drank so deeply that the Shadow felt compelled to jerk him backwards out of sheer regard for his welfare.

"It's mighty stupid o' ye drinkin' so much after a heavy supper," said he, reprovingly. "It's real bad for your digestion, I reckon."

CHAPTER XIII

The Mystic Mountain

"Latitude 27° 42' 10'', longitude 128° 7' 11''." It was noon three days after leaving Thirsty Spring, as their last strangely-found well had been designated, and Bob read aloud these observations as he noted them down in his log-book. They had reached the vicinity of Bentley's last camp, and all eyes had been alert for the melancholy symbols of the ill-fated expedition. Away to the east the country extended back in a series of rugged "blows" until they suddenly merged into apparent nothingness; a swelling, white haze obscured the true horizon in this direction, but north and south well-wooded grassy plains stretched into the dim distance. The uttermost edge of the desert seemed to have been reached at last.

"Ay, it was just about here that the camel broke away," said Mackay, musingly, "and over there"—he pointed to the east—"lies the mountain."

"It must be a terrible long way over there, Mac," commented Emu Bill, "for we should see it 'bout forty miles off if it is any size, an' you said it was a whopper."

Mackay looked puzzled; certainly no mountain was visible at this period.

"It *must* be there," he reiterated grimly.

Bob, too, was much exercised over the prolonged absence of the desert sentinel; it had figured so much in all their calculations that it had, indeed, been the initial quest of the expedition.

"There's an extraordinary heat haze rising up straight ahead," said he. "Perhaps it hides that shadowy mountain."

"It's there right enough," said Mackay, again. "I mind well that I didna see it until I was right up against it."

"There's something mighty uncanny about this place," grunted Never Never Dave, who had been gazing around suspiciously.

A gentle zephyr breeze wafted towards them from the obscuring mists, and they sniffed the air wonderingly.

"Blow me tight, boys," muttered Emu Bill, "we has struck old Jimmy Squarefoot's country."

"That are a fact," concurred Never Never Dave, solemnly; "we has come a bit too far on this trip. No wonder poor ole Bentley didn't get back."

"Why, what is wrong?" asked Jack, in some alarm.

"What is wrong?" echoed Never Never. "Why, we must be near Hades, my lad; don't you smell it?"

A strong odour of a pungent, sulphurous nature assuredly filled the air. Mackay was equally mystified with the others, though he did not give expression to his thoughts. He was trying to recall to the minutest incident the happenings of over a year ago in the same district.

"I distinctly saw their tracks," he repeated, half to himself, "and the bones _____"

"But there ain't no bones now," interrupted Emu Bill. "There's some curious mystery about this here place, there is."

A cry from the Shadow, who had gone exploring on his own account some distance off, drew their attention. It was plain that he had discovered something important, for he semaphored to them excitedly as they looked. Silently they obeyed his summons, and in a few minutes were gazing at the poor relics of the last expedition, where they lay half covered in the sand.

There they were beyond a doubt, a mass of bleaching bones. Reverently they uncovered their heads, then Mackay knelt down by the sad litter, and great, dry sobs shook his breast. His companions turned away with heavy eyes, all but Bob, who remained to comfort the grief-stricken man.

"We may at least bury the remains," he said sadly, "and I think we might put up a small mark over the spot. There are lots of trees about which we could cut down."

Mackay looked at him kindly. "Not yet, Bob, not yet," he muttered hoarsely; "not till I have squared accounts with the wretches who committed this crime. These poor fellows here were murdered after daring the dangers o' the desert; their last mortal remains have awaited my coming here on the surface o' the sweltering sands, and they cry to me for vengeance—and vengeance they shall have before I cover them from the light o' a just Heaven." He rose with forced calm and linked his arm in Bob's. "You shall help me, Bob," he said earnestly; "you of all people have a reason——"

He ceased abruptly as Emu Bill appeared once more. The tall bushman was apparently much moved, though he strove to hide his sorrow.

"I has just been talkin' to Never Never," he began, in an even voice, "an' we has come to the conclusion that we'll go an' wipe out some o' them skunks who did this. I reckon we'll feel better after it."

Mackay smiled faintly. "I believe we are near the end o' our search for the hidden treasure o' the Never Never," he said quietly. "The invisible mountain must mark the entrance to the land we are seeking, but we may have many a struggle before we triumph, but each difficulty overcome will bring us nearer our goal. Let us move on once more, Bill; I must see the other side o' the mountain——"

"An' nary one o' us is goin' back on you," said Emu Bill, with a grim laugh. "Wherever that there perfume comes from, I reckon Never Never an' me will see the end o' the journey."

They retraced their way to the camels, and in a short time were forcing a trail on into the seething mists. And now the stumbling camel-train experienced great difficulty in negotiating the many dry ravines that lay in their course, and they climbed over the basaltic bluffs which now and again reared their heads above the boulder-strewn expanse, only with the extremest effort. The sun beat down pitilessly on the wayfarers, and here the heat was, indeed, overpowering; it seemed to rise in long, pulsating swells from the bare rocks and hang in a filmy cloud of vapour, through which the eye could see but vaguely, as in a dream-picture. On, on, the pioneers struggled, and as they proceeded, the strange, sulphurous odour became more and more perceptible, until it assailed the nostrils in sharp,

burning breaths. Yet still the vision ahead was clouded by dense white vapours, and the horizon remained obscured. Then suddenly a curious thing happened: the shrouding curtain in the near distance lifted up like a giant screen in a theatre, and through the mists of dispelling ether a dark towering height loomed up vividly.

"The mountain! the mountain!" cried Jack; and truly it was a mountain, and a mountain of so precipitous and forbidding an aspect that it looked like an immense black wall rising into the sky.

"That is just how I ran up against it before," said Mackay, calmly. "It appeared all at once, and I wondered why I didn't see it earlier."

"Well, this beats me," growled Emu Bill. "An' why in all the world *didn't* we see such a colossal monument before? We oughter have sighted that there tower o' Babel at least two days back."

Even as he spoke a great white mask rose from the base of the towering elevation, and in an instant the mighty landmark had vanished from their view.

"I reckon we has had a sight o' ole Jimmy Squarefoot's furnace," remarked Never Never Dave, mysteriously. "An' don't it smell strong?"

"It jest howls," groaned Emu Bill, gasping hard.

Mackay kept an unmoved silence. He apparently had no intention of being surprised at anything; but Bob somewhat eased the minds of the twain by endeavouring to explain the phenomenon they had witnessed.

"The covering haze is nothing but steam," said he. "I think the mountain must be volcanic."

Mackay shook his head. "I shouldna wonder if it is an extinct volcano," he said; "but there was no lava flow that I remember, and it disappeared just the same."

Notwithstanding the odd happenings during the last few minutes, the camels were not permitted to slacken their pace. Each and all of the party had determined to probe the mystery to the fullest, and the solution was soon forthcoming. As they forced their way into the densest depths of the

ghost-like curtain, they became quickly aware of a gurgling, boiling sound almost at their feet. Bob's keen ears were the first to catch the unwonted echoes; but before he could speak a greenish-yellow cloud rolled before his eyes, and he staggered back, choking wildly.

"Ease off, boys," spoke Mackay. "We must scout around an' investigate before we go further."

The whole party, camels and all, were now enveloped in the wreathing smoke-columns, and the sky was hidden from sight. Blindly Bob made a few steps forward, keeping well to the right of the unseen caldron, which now bubbled and foamed spasmodically. The Shadow followed, stumbling and gasping, and within a minute the two found themselves in a clear and untainted atmosphere, and but a yard or so from the base of the gloomy mountain. Loudly they shouted to their companions, and soon the spectral forms of the camels hove into view, with Mackay and Jack treading cautiously at their head. But where were Emu Bill and Never Never Dave? They seemed to have vanished completely.

"They were alongside Jack an' me a minute ago," said Mackay, gazing wonderingly around.

"I reckon I'll go back an' see if they've stopped to look at the scenery," grunted the Shadow; and he made a dash into the heavy fumes once more.

The three who waited by the camels heard a startled cry, followed by a faint splash, then all was silent. Hastily Mackay seized a camel pack-rope, and would have rushed off after him, but Bob interfered.

"I think I can guess where to find them," he said. "Let me go."

With reluctance Mackay saw him depart; but before Bob had entered the chaos the swelling mass rose before him, disclosing in his track a broad, pit-like cavity. Hurriedly he strode to the edge of the caldron; but ere he reached it the Shadow climbed out of its seething depths wet and dripping, and saying strange things to himself. Immediately behind him Never Never Dave's head popped up, and an eloquent flow of language was let loose upon the air. Lastly, Emu Bill scrambled into the open. He looked savagely around for a moment, until he caught sight of the Shadow, and his wrath overflowed in a torrent of abuse. All three were bedraggled enough looking

specimens; but the last arrivals were considerably worse off than the Shadow in that respect—their hair was covered with a greenish scum, which spread down over their faces and almost blinded them.

"It was all that wretched young Shadow's fault!" roared Emu Bill.

"But you were there first, Bill," remonstrated Mackay, laughingly.

"Of course we were. We went plump into the filthy boilers; but we got a good grip o' the sides, and were sliding out quick an' lively, when, blow me! if that howlin' scarecrow didn't bounce down on top o' us, an' sent us swimmin' like tadpoles to the bottom. Ugh!"

But their indignation quelled speedily when they learnt how excellent had been the intentions of the much-maligned youth.

"It must be a hot spring," said Bob.

"And there are more of them," cried Jack. "See, they are scattered all round the foot of the mountain."

"I reckon it is hot, right enough," grumbled Emu Bill. "I'm just 'bout turned into a Salamander, I is."

As Jack had noticed, quite a number of similar indentations formed a line right along the base of the mountain, and in each yawning crater examined, a greenish-yellow fluid bubbled tempestuously. High overhead the smoke-wreaths dissembled into thin air, and for a brief space all was beautifully clear. Then a dull rumble like the mutterings of subdued thunder was heard, and immediately snowy puffs of smoke issued from the strange cavities. The denser fumes rapidly spread along the ground like a turbulent, foaming sea; then the whole seemed gradually to rise upwards and suspend as a filmy pall before the face of the mountain. Yet, strangely enough, the noxious odours were now almost absent.

"Ay, it's vera marvellous," said Mackay, with a sigh. "So does Nature protect her treasure-houses."

"It's a wonder you managed to get through without accident when you came," Bob observed thoughtfully. "But, then, it's possible the line was clear when you passed."

"A breeze of wind would have lifted that fog," hazarded Jack. "I should think that on some days the clouds would not be nearly so constant nor so thick."

"You're possibly right, Jack," mused Mackay, looking upwards. "See how the smoke curls in to the west now."

They all followed his gaze, and, surely enough, the mists appeared to bend over before a powerful air current and break off into numberless flying patches of lambent spray. Assuredly, a fairly strong blast must be blowing on the mountain summit, though all was serene and unmoved below. They now bethought themselves of having an inspection of the wonderful elevation, which they had reached after so much weary striving. There it stood, gaunt and bare, precipitous in outline, and rising almost sheer to a height of over eight hundred feet, and as far as the eye could reach in either direction along the base, the same grim barrier appeared, but it curved in almost imperceptibly at each limit of observation.

"The monument might stretch across into Queensland," said Emu Bill, "if we tried to follow it round. I vote we does a scramble over the top."

"I tried that before, Bill," answered Mackay, "but I'm going to try it again. Only we'll look for the easiest side before we start."

"But what about the camels?" asked Jack. "We can never get them over it."

"An' we've got to remember that there's an all-fired quantity o' bloodthirsty niggers about," said Never Never Dave.

"Suppose we hobble them out on the other side of the smoke," suggested Bob. "If the blacks stay beyond the mountain they couldn't very well see them so close in, and the camels are too tired to wander much."

"It's a risk, Bob," said Mackay; "but the whole journey has been a risk, an' it's the best we can do. We can keep an eye on them from the top—if we get there."

"An' our rifles can speak for us from there well enough," laughed Emu Bill; "an' there's one howlin' satisfaction about it, there's nary spear could reach us."

And so it was arranged; the four tired beasts were unloaded, the bell was unstrapped from Misery's neck, and the Shadow led them out to the plains, manœuvring most carefully in his passage between the bubbling caldrons. In a few minutes he returned, with a somewhat anxious visage.

"I is pretty certain I saw a nig on the top o' the hill when I was out back a bit," he announced.

"On the top o' the hill?" cried Emu Bill, incredulously. "Well, if they don't pop too many spears at us, I don't mind if they stay there until we get up."

"But you couldn't see anything through the haze, Shad," said Bob.

"I just did. The top o' the concern was shining strong in the sun, an' I got a sight o' a big nigger dressed like a corroborree mourner standin' looking' at me."

It was quite possible that the Shadow's information was correct, for the fine haze in the upper air would barely have obscured the bold ridge of the mountain summit, especially with the sun's rays beating strong upon it. Yet it was evident that the young bushman's statement was received with considerable unbelief.

"It's been a hallucination, Shad," laughed Jack.

It was already late in the afternoon, and it would have been useless to attempt the climb that night, so a tour of investigation was made in order to discover the least impregnable aspect of the frowning barrier, and as the little party moved along they carried their rifles ready for immediate action in case of a sudden alarm. But not a sign of natives was observed, and they tramped mile after mile over the jagged rocky *débris* lining the base of the mountain without once noting an easier place of ascent than that which they had first gazed upon. Not a trace of vegetation showed on the steep declivity; the bare rocks scintillated in the last rays of the setting sun, and showed up barren and forbidding. Here and there deep clefts appeared, striating the gloomy formation, and cutting deep into the heart of the mountain. It was one of these that drew an exclamation from Mackay.

"That looks vera like the cap o' a gold-bearing lode showing at the bottom o' the gully," he cried. He crept carefully into the yawning crevice, and

broke off a piece of the supposed auriferous stone with the iron heel of his boot. "Decomposed diorite," he announced, "and showing gold all over. I do believe the whole mountain is just a mass of gold lodes an' leaders."

"Well, I'm blest," murmured Emu Bill, "if that don't beat everything——"

"But we can't carry the hillock away," said Jack, hurriedly.

The difficulties of transport had at once appeared to his practical mind, and his words acted as a restraining tonic on the exhilarating spirits of the others.

"You're right there, Jack," agreed Mackay, with a smile, "but if we get plenty of water on the other side, we could very soon get machinery out here; an' I've a firm idea that our golden land o' promise lies just beyond this barrier." He tapped the rocky surface with his hand meditatively. "And more than that," he continued, with rising excitement, "I believe we'll find rubies and diamonds as well. I mind we picked up some rubies in the gullies around the last camp when I was here before. At least, Phil, the geologist, said they were rubies, an' I'd back his knowledge in that direction against any man's. He said they had been shed from some mountain or other, but, of course, we hadna seen the mountain at this time; and poor Phil never did see it, either."

They commenced to retrace their steps, for the night was fast closing in, and as they walked along, Bob stooped down occasionally to pick up pebbles from the silted driftage at his feet, and unobtrusively placed them in his pocket for future inspection. They had almost reached the place where they had unloaded the camels, when the Shadow shouted out triumphantly—

"Look, boys! I reckon there ain't no mistake about that nigger, is there?"

He was gazing at the ridge forming the summit of the mountain, and looking up, Bob saw a tall, dishevelled figure standing against the sky-line and waving his arms energetically.

"By gum, he is wild!" laughed Emu Bill; "an' what a dandy outfit he's got; why, the beggar's got a 'possum blanket over him."

He raised his rifle mechanically, but Mackay had already levelled his piece at the silhouetted form.

"Please don't shoot," pleaded Bob, staying his hand. "It almost seems like murder to kill a man like that."

Mackay lowered his weapon with a groan, and Bob, looking upwards once more, was astounded to see the object of his commiseration extending his hands as if in benediction. He stood thus for a moment, then, with a despairing gesture, pointed towards the Western desert.

"I'm glad I didna shoot," said Mackay; "that's the most wonderful savage I've seen. He even tried to warn us not to come further."

"That was out o' gratitood for us not shootin'," laughed Emu Bill; "but, blow me, I can't shoot a nig when he hasn't a spear or weapon o' some sort in his hand."

When they looked again, the strange aboriginal was gone.

The spirits of the little party were unusually cheerful that night, as they sat around their camp-fire and talked eagerly over their prospects on the morrow. Their objective had been reached at last, the toil and stress of the dreary journey was over, the reward—and of reward they all seemed well assured—was now about to be theirs.

"I reckon I'll give ye a hymn o' praise on the orchestra," remarked the Shadow, pulling his ear-shattering instrument from the pocket where it had lain silent since the finding of Fortunate Spring.

"If ye does," threatened Emu Bill, "I'll dump ye in that there smelling solution right over the head."

"Hang it, Bill," complained the unappreciated musician, "I ain't quite dry yet, as it is. Couldn't ye think o' some happier kind o' return for my professional services?"

"Anyhow," consoled Jack, "it wouldn't do to let the niggers know we were about; they might come for us when we were helplessly enslaved with your melody."

The Shadow grinned. "Right O," said he; "music is off."

But Mackay had not seemed at all unwilling to encourage the youth's suggestion.

"The blacks should ken we are about by this time," he observed lightly; "but there are six good rifles in this camp, an' we might as well encourage them to come out now as at any other time. There's going to be a good moon up to-night."

"You might give us a tootle on the flute," said Never Never Dave; "I hasn't heard ye play since we left Golden Flat."

"Let us have 'The Muskittie's Lament,'" urged the Shadow; "I is just dyin' to stretch my voice a bit."

"No, Shadow; though you are a budding Sims Reeves, I can't sympathize wi' you enough just now to listen to you singing. I must even deny you the pleasure o' hearing me warble the old familiar tune to-night, for I'm no' in the mood for waxing extravagantly joyous. But seein' we've reached the deceivin' mountain at last, and without mishap, I'll gie ye a blaw on the flute, if only to make this night something different from other nights."

Jack fetched the flute with alacrity, and then seated himself beside Bob, and soon the little group were listening in hushed silence to the pensive strains of one of Balfe's melodies. When it was finished, the man of many moods paused for a moment, and his eyes roamed instinctively back towards the desert, and though the smoky cloud still intervened, Bob guessed at once that he was again filled with swelling memories of the past.

"Let us have something lively, Mac," said Emu Bill, "something that will make us forget them pestiferous niggers for a bit."

"I can't do it, Bill," came the husky response; "not here, not to-night." Then he lifted the flute once more. "I'll play you one o' Bentley's favourite hymns," he said gravely. "Well do I mind we used a' to sing it whiles when we were on the march."

Softly into the night rose the notes; they lingered by each deep crevasse on the mountain side, and echoed back from the rocky steps. Unspeakably

entrancing was the effect. The musician himself seemed lost in the wonderful sounds he created, and his hearers, after listening in mute attention for some time, by a common impulse joined in with the words, familiar to them all—

"Lead, kindly Light,...
Lead Thou me on."

And as the rough voices swelled upwards, a weird answering chorus floated back to them from the summit of the mountain, and lo! several dark forms appeared outlined against the starry sky. Emu Bill ceased his vocal exercises at once, and squirmed about uneasily until the flute stopped.

"Say, mates," said he, anxiously; "I hope it ain't no corroborree song they is singin'."

Mackay glanced upwards, then hastily grasped his rifle, but the vague voices in the air broke afresh upon his ears just as he was about to pull the trigger, and he laid the deadly weapon down with a shudder.

"They are actually mimicking that bonnie hymn," he said nervously. "I—I haven't the heart to shoot——"

"And aren't their voices almost musical!" cried Jack, whose ear was keenly attuned to melody. "They make a very much better attempt than our corroborree savages did about a week ago; their voices were simply hideous."

"The aborigines are born mimics, Jack," answered Mackay; "but, as you say, their song is usually enough to drive a man to drink—providin' he can get it. Still there may be a different sort o' savage in this mysterious country. If the land itself is better, it would influence the people, and who knows maybe they have acquired some accomplishments unknown to their brethren on the flats."

"I can't make them out at all," said Bob, quietly. "Everything seems so unreal, so—so uncanny about here, and these niggers singing that hymn have given me the creeps."

"Let me have one go at 'The Muskittie's Lament,'" pleaded the Shadow. "I reckon it would bust them up to mimic that high note——"

"You leave that long-suffering muskittie alone," said Mackay. "We'll bust them up wi' something more solid in the morning. I'll climb that mountain or go under trying."

Conversation somewhat flagged after that. The events of the day had all been so strange and inexplicable; the lure of the mountain was becoming oppressively potent, and each of the staunch little band was filled with his own secret convictions regarding what might lie beyond.

"Better turn into your blankets, boys," said Mackay, at length. "You'll need all your energies in the morning. I'm going to keep watch and see that nothing happens while you sleep. I'm not going to risk another wipe out in this quarter."

"You ain't goin' to do sentry go on your own," spoke Never Never Dave. "I reckon I'll take my turn."

"An' me, of course!" cried Emu Bill.

"And ain't the poor, low-down Shadow any good?" complained that individual, pathetically. "Let me do a prance round, boss. I ain't a bit sleepy."

"Let Jack and me take it for the first night," said Bob, quietly.

Mackay laughed. "I know you are all vera willing, my lads, but the first night is my care; I'll ask Bob, who is next in responsibility, to take part o' the watch. Jack and the Shadow will be on duty to-morrow night, and you, Bill and Never Never, can take the next;" which equable arrangement appeared to suit every one.

Then Bob arose, rifle in hand, and stepped forward.

"No, no, Bob; not yet," said Mackay. "I'll call you in three or four hours to take a spell. Lie down and sleep for a bit, my lad."

But Bob was obdurate. "You've been wearing yourself out these last few days," he said simply. "You can surely trust me to fill your place for the first

half of the night, at least. Perhaps I may not need to call you, for I know I couldn't sleep if I tried. My brain is buzzing with odd ideas, which would be bound to keep me awake."

The elder man hesitated for a moment, then gave in. "But promise to call me at one o'clock, Bob," he said, "otherwise I'll stay up with you;" and Bob promised.

A few minutes and a row of sleeping figures lay outstretched around the fire. Bob tightened up his cartridge-belt, pulled up the heads of several cartridges so that they might be easily extracted in an emergency, examined the magazine of his gun, and closed the breech gently, bringing the trigger to full cock. Then he waited, motionless as a statue, beside the huddled forms of his comrades, with rifle upraised, and every nerve strung at highest tension. Well he knew that danger threatened; he felt it in the air; an ominous calm prevailed; how soon would it be broken by the savage yells of the guardians of the mountain? Bob gripped his rifle the tighter, and his eyes scanned the near distance critically, then roamed aloft to the now deserted mountain summit. A slight sound startled him, and his finger closed gently on the trigger of his weapon, but it was only Mackay tossing restlessly in his blanket. Bob looked pityingly at the sleepless form, and at that moment Mackay beckoned him.

"I canna get it out o' my mind," he whispered, "that when I followed the tracks o' the blacks, they led right into the mountain an' no' round about it, an' it beats me to know how they managed to climb over so quickly. Keep a careful watch, Bob; keep a careful watch."

Bob nodded silently and returned to his position. He had unconsciously shared Mackay's fears before they had been spoken. Since he first saw the mysterious mount he had marvelled how it had been scaled, and how descents had been accomplished.

The Southern Cross slowly sank to rest, and the edge of the Great Bear constellation peeped above the northern horizon. Yet still the watcher stood erect at his post, and the camp slumbered.

CHAPTER XIV

The Struggle by the Mountain

It was well after midnight, and Bob still stood guard over the sleeping camp with undiminished vigilance. Not a sound in the air escaped him; he heard the distant scream of the curlew with a shiver of dread, then nearer at hand the dull monotone of a mopoke resting on some rocky ledge overhead would reach his ears as a dismal calling from a shadowy world. Again would come a period of silence, broken only by the gurgling echoes from the sulphur springs, and the regular breathing of the sleepers. Bob pulled himself together impatiently, he had felt himself relaxing into a kind of stupor wherein all things grim and melancholy appeared to him.

"I wouldn't have believed," he muttered, "what a shattering influence a night watch has on a man's nerves."

The long wailing cry of a dingo now penetrated piercingly over the desert from the west, and the watcher stirred uneasily at the mournful sound which seemed to convey in it all the sadness and despair of a voice from the nether world.

The weird notes had scarcely died away when he became conscious of a peculiar tap-tapping almost close beside him. He could not make it out; the black surface of the barring range rose before his eyes, but he could distinguish nothing there, and the moon shone clearly on the giant rock. Tap! Tap! Tap! Softly the echoes came but imperceptibly growing louder; anxiously he scanned the bare hillside for some clue to the mystery, and as his eyes reached the ridge of the mountain he was startled to see a tall beshrouded figure standing there, and apparently gazing down upon him. Bob was certain the apparition had not been in the same place but a minute ago, and surely he could not be responsible for these strange noises which seemed to come from the mountain, yet with no cause showing. Tap! Tap! Tap! Harsher and more metallic the ghostly reverberations rang, and now a faint call wafted down from the heights; again and again it came, gently falling on the mystified listener's ears like a voice from the skies, and the

strange figure aloft waved his arms in wild gesticulation. Sharper and still sharper sounded the demoralizing tapping, and with it now came a curious shuffling, slight almost to noiselessness, but Bob's sensitive ears were not to be deceived. A cold sweat broke out upon his brow; the vague disturbances of the night were issuing not from the side of the mountain, but from its interior! With a quick stride he reached Mackay, and at a touch the sleeper awoke.

"What is it, lad, what is it?" he asked, breathlessly, his rifle already in his hand.

Bob placed his finger on his lips, and pointed silently to the mountain.

"They're coming *through* it!" he whispered, hoarsely.

Mackay nodded briefly, and strode silently over to the resounding wall, and Bob hastily aroused the sleepers. In a moment the camp was prepared, and meanwhile Mackay was walking stealthily along the base of the mount, his ears bent down to the rock as he strove to locate the mysterious alarms. And now the distant call from the hilltop floated down to them once more, and Emu Bill started at the sound, and looked up wonderingly, for the faint double note of a coo-ee had this time been plainly heard, and the tall form on the distant heights was despairingly pointing outwards across the desert.

"That nigger can coo-ee like a good 'un," muttered he, "an' he's tryin' to warn us. I reckon that's because we didn't shoot him to-day; but I never believed a nig could feel any gratitood."

Suddenly the echoes ceased, and all was silent as a tomb. Bob looked, and saw Mackay crouched hard against the rocky wall on the edge of a deep fissure which showed down half the face of the mountain. He seemed like an animal preparing for a deadly spring.

"I reckon we should go over beside him," said Never Never Dave, but so speedy had been the developments of events that there was no time to decide upon a definite course of action. Indeed, not one of the party guessed what wild happening was about to take place. Bob somehow expected to hear the preliminary yells of an attacking horde, even as they had heard them before, but no such outcry took place. He saw Mackay beckon wildly with one hand over his shoulder, and quickly he obeyed the summons, the

others following with silent footsteps. Then a stone clattered noisily at the bottom of the ravine, and to Bob's amazement, a swarthy face appeared from the depths, surmounted by a tall waving head-dress of feathers. As the warrior emerged further into view, Bob's astonishment increased, for here was no naked savage, but a gorgeously arrayed aboriginal, splendidly proportioned, and carrying in his hand a long curved bow and several arrows. Bob had just time to note this much and no more, for Mackay's rifle belched out almost in the new arrival's face, but the shot had been fired with the hands resting loosely on the ground, and the bullet sped high, scattering the nodding plumes of the astonished black in all directions. With a cry of pent-up fury, Mackay lunged forward to grasp his prey, and at once the stalwart native closed with him. And now crowding up behind, one by one, a solemn procession of similarly attired warriors came trooping. The first of the number without hesitation rushed to the assistance of his struggling comrade, the others calmly bore down upon the little group, who, with Bob at their head, had watched the scene as in a dream. With a hoarse snarl of rage Never Never Dave opened fire, and almost at the same instant the entire artillery of the camp spouted out flame and smoke and leaden hail. In reply, a cloud of arrows flew about their heads, and Bob felt one pierce the muscle of his arm, but he pulled out the slender barb with a wrench, and again his rifle spoke, and the roar of many reports in his ears told him that his comrades too were strenuously engaged. Backwards and forwards the spectral warriors surged, and yet never a sound escaped their lips, and they strove with steady effort to come to close quarters with the camp defenders.

Meanwhile, Mackay was engaged in desperate encounter on the edge of the fray. His first antagonist he had flung from him almost immediately, limp and broken, from that dreadful clutch. The second he had rendered *hors de combat* with a single blow of his mighty fist. Then two more rushed upon him, but profiting by the experience of their brethren they evaded his circling arms, and hurled themselves upon his lower limbs, and there they clutched leech-like, while others hastened to attack him from behind. Mackay marvelled for the moment why they had not shot him down with their arrows; his own rifle had been thrown aside after the first fruitless shot, but now his revolver flashed in his hand, and the weighty stock came down crash on the head of his nearest encumbrance, but before he could use it again, he was seized from the back and pulled to the earth, yet even as he

fell his revolver exploded upwards into the faces of his foes, and he chuckled in grim joy as he felt their relaxing hold. It was at this stage that Bob missed him from their midst. The attack had drawn off somewhat, and he glanced around for the first time in search of his companions. Then he noticed the seething band standing over the fallen giant, and a wild fury filled his heart.

"Come on, boys," he cried, "Mackay's down!" and he dashed to the rescue.

Quick as he was Never Never Dave was quicker, and his clubbed rifle swung light as a feather in his strong right hand, but it fell heavy as lead on the heads of the all too previous natives, who had not looked for further molestation from that quarter. With a guttural exclamation they leaped aside, and Mackay arose bleeding and scarred. But the end was not yet; even while the defenders were congratulating themselves on their victory the natives once more swooped down upon them, and their arrows whistled loudly through the air. They had guessed that the death-dealing weapons of the little party had lost their power, for indeed there had not been a shot fired these many minutes, and the magazines of the rifles were empty. But they still had their revolvers, and at the first discharge the angry blacks seemed to waver, but still they came on. As in a dream Bob saw a wild, grinning face peering into his, while a heavy club was raised to strike; vainly he tried to lift his revolver, the blood rushed to his head, his brain reeled, another instant and the blow would have fallen, when, with a stifled cry, Jack dashed before him and sprang fiercely at the savage's throat. The very force of his onslaught bore back the gloating native, the club fell, but it fell harmlessly to the ground as Jack's fingers closed on its owner's throat. But the warrior had had enough; disentangling himself from the youth's grasp, with many a wriggle and gasp, he turned and fled, and when Jack looked round he found that the entire enemy had vanished.

"Now, boys," said Mackay, cheerily, "let us estimate the damage. You, Bob, have got an arrow-hole in your arm, an' I'm surprised you've managed to hold out so long, but if you had got that crack on the head that was meant for you, you would never have seen old England again."

Bob laughed weakly. "I'm pretty right," he said. "What about yourself?"

"Nothing serious, my lad; and you, Jack?"

"Not a scratch," responded that youth, brightly.

"As for me, boys," echoed out Emu Bill's voice dismally, "I'm a regular pin-cushion, I am. I reckon they've ventilated me a bit; but hang it all, them arrows don't hurt worth a cent."

But where were the Shadow and Never Never Dave? The former they found sitting moodily by the base of the mountain, his back propped against it for support.

"That there last rush 'bout finished me," he said. "A howling gorilla gave me a tender smack on the back wi' his club, an'—an' I believe it's broken."

Mackay laughed. "The back or the club, Shadow?" said he; whereat the sorrowful youngster arose painfully to his feet, and communed with himself in language deep and eloquent.

"Where in thunder has Never Never gone?" cried Emu Bill, anxiously, as they looked in vain for the well-known figure of the bushman.

"He was beside me when that last rush came on," said Jack, almost tearfully. "I didn't see what happened to any one after that."

"Dave! Dave!" cried Emu Bill, and there was a quiver in his voice which sounded strangely on his lips. "Where are you, Dave?"

Then a thin, weak voice answered out of the gloom by the ravine.

"I is right here, Bill, old man, right here."

And there they found him, lying aslant on the loose *débris* as he had fallen, an inert mass. His face was upturned to the sky, and his breath issued between his clenched teeth in long spasmodic jerks. He smiled feebly as they bent over him.

"I'm sent for this trip, boys," he murmured.

"Don't say that, Dave," groaned Emu Bill, in anguish; "you ain't goin' to leave your old comrade, Dave?"

Mackay knelt down by the stricken man and placed his hand over the feebly beating heart, and a hoarse cry of pain burst from his lips, which was

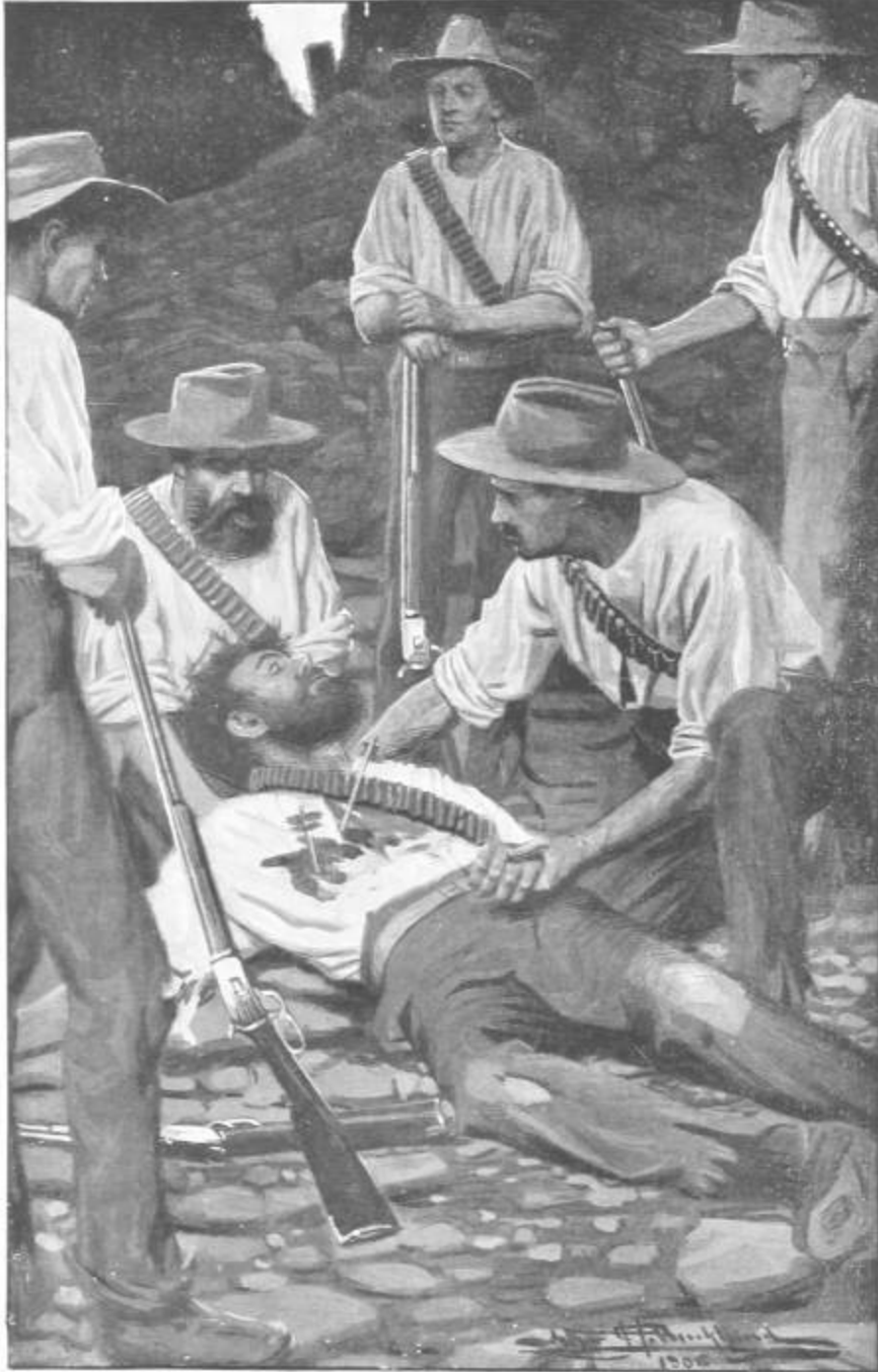
echoed by the sad little group around.

"They must have given you a sair crack, Davie, man," said he, "a sair, sair crack."

Then he caught sight of the broken butts of two arrows in the sufferer's broad chest, and he turned aside with a heavy sigh.

"Never Never's going, lads," he said, with deep emotion. "Say your good-byes before it is too late."

Emu Bill gently pillowed his dying comrade's head upon his knee, and the tears ran down his rugged cheeks unchecked, and dropped upon Never Never Dave's pallid face.



**"EMU BILL GENTLY PILLOWED HIS DYING COMRADE'S
HEAD UPON HIS KNEE"**

"Couldn't we carry him over and lay him on the blankets?" whispered Bob.

Mackay sadly shook his head. Then Never Never Dave opened his eyes and glanced at the sorrowing assembly, while his old smile struggled to his lips.

"Good-bye, boys," he whispered, "don't fret 'bout me. I is goin' on a long, long trail, where there ain't no nigs an' no snakes. Never Never has made his last bush journey, I reckon. But—but—we reached the mountain." He ceased and laboured for breath, while the blood welled out from his cruel wounds with the exertion. Silently each pressed round and squeezed the bushman's rough and horny hand in a farewell grip. Once more the man whose life-blood was ebbing so cruelly fast away spoke, but now he was in the fantasy of delirium. "We'll get the spring all right, Bob. Don't worry, my lad—and the mountain, wi' gold and diamonds—we'll reach it, after all. Over the mountain—over—the—mountain." And so Never Never Dave went forth himself on a new quest with a smile on his lips, the smile of a man who knew no fear even at the end of his earthly pilgrimage. Emu Bill gathered the stiffening form in his arms, gulping down the great sobs with an effort, and tenderly he carried his lifeless burden over to the camp-fire, and sad indeed were the hearts of the melancholy procession which followed.

"I reckon Never Never has had his wish, anyhow," said Emu Bill, quietly. "He has passed in his checks with his boots on."

"May we a' go out on the long trail as bravely," spoke Mackay, solemnly. "Dave has gone over the mountain right enough. Over the mountain o' earthly difficulty and down through the valley of the shadow. We should not pity him now, boys, for he's free o' all the sorrows an' cares, an' disappointments o' this vale o' tears. But we mustn't forget the living, lads, though we respect the dead, or there may be more o' us starting out on the long trail before sunrise. Get a lamp, Jack, an' we'll have a look at that gully where they came out."

"You're right, Mac," answered Emu Bill; "I'll get a pick too, in case we need it."

The lamp was speedily brought, and they started over to the gully whence the natives had emerged, and as they crossed the scene of their conflict Jack stumbled over the dead body of one of the warriors. He shuddered painfully, and Bob, who was at his hand, drew him aside.

"There are three more of them, Jack," he whispered. "Never Never, hasn't gone under unavenged."

Mackay heard the words, and he laughed harshly.

"Ay, there's three more o' them, Bob," he said, "and there's a dozen more who feel a bit mair pained in their anatomy than we do."

They reached the treacherous ravine, and Mackay, taking the lamp in his hand, cautiously moved forwards and downwards into the deep recess, and gazed at the rocky rubble there strewn in bewilderment. In a moment Emu Bill stood beside him, pick in hand, but he too was nonplussed completely by the very natural appearance of affairs.

"I'll swear I saw them come outen this here hole," he said.

"We can't blame ourselves vera much for neglectin' to notice things," agreed Mackay, with a grim smile.

In the depths of the fissure which striated the mountain, only a number of loose boulders were to be seen.

"I reckon I'll try and shift some o' them," spoke Emu Bill. He stooped down and lifted one or two of the heaviest rock fragments, while Mackay held the light, and examined the markings on the walls of the cavern with keen interest.

"There ain't no opening here at all," cried Emu Bill, looking round fearfully, as if half expecting to find the savages still close in the vicinity. "I'm certain sure they couldn't get through here."

Mackay smiled. "I don't know what sort o' blacks we've struck, Bill," he said earnestly; "but if they constructed this trap-door arrangement they've got a wonderful amount o' intelligence."

He traced with his finger an irregularly shaped shelving crack in the southerly wall. It seemed a perfectly natural occurrence in every way, as indeed it was, but the edges gaped considerably towards the top, and Mackay, pressing lightly against the mossy front, caused the overlapping rim to close solid into the rock. By this time Bob, Jack, and the Shadow had scrambled in beside the two.

"But they couldn't get through that measly crack," protested Emu Bill, not quite understanding.

Mackay reached for the pick, and inserting the sharp point into the thin, almost unnoticeable crack now showing, pulled gently, and behold, the weighty rock swung back on end revealing a narrow, tunnel-like entrance penetrating into the mountain. At the same time a draught of damp and stifling air issued from the dark and gloomy passage way, extinguishing the lamp, and before they could look again, the rock fell softly back into position, and this time it closed with a snap. Again Mackay endeavoured to lever it open, but now the solid formation refused to be moved; try as he might, the doorway into the mountain seemed closed conclusively against him.

"Surely it cannot be a natural cave formation?" said Bob.

"Nary cave, Bob," returned Emu Bill, decisively.

"Not in a diorite rock," added Mackay, much perplexed.

They stood gazing at the tantalizing face of the ponderous doorway for some time without speaking. Then Mackay was aroused to action.

"We'll find out all about it before we go away from here," he said, "but in the meantime we'll barricade the swinging rock on this side to prevent any one coming out. I have an idea that it wasn't right closed at first or we would never have been able to find it; the blacks were in too great a hurry to be cautious, I'm thinking."

With a will they all set to work and built up a rampart of massive boulders in the ravine. Then they sadly went back to the camp-fire to await the coming of the dawn. All thought of sleep had left them now, and they sat moodily by the flickering flames for some time without a word being spoken, then as the chill morning air made itself felt, Bob's wounded arm, which he had not yet examined, began to grow stiff, and his head throbbed painfully. The Shadow, too, was far from comfortable, though he made no complaint, and he fought against his growing weakness manfully but at last, with a weary sigh, he fell back limp on his blanket. Then Mackay rose with an exclamation of regret.

"Bill," he said, "we've forgotten that these young mates of ours are scarcely as tough as we are. We'd better try an' doctor up their bruises a bit."

Emu Bill staggered to his feet with a sympathetic grunt, and walked blindly towards the camel packs in search of something that might serve for bandages, and Mackay stooped over the fallen Shadow and pulled back the neck of his much-torn shirt. The cause of that individual's relapse was not difficult to find, a great jagged gash on the young bushman's shoulder showed what a fierce blow he had received, evidently from a flint-studded club. Jack hurried to fetch water to lave the bloody wound, but the Shadow refused to receive any attention.

"Let the thing dry, boss," he said, sitting up once more. "I reckon I ain't no tender chicken to howl 'bout a muskittie bite."

Bob's memento of the affray was a little more serious; one of the barbs of the arrow had broken in his arm, keeping the wound open, and the blood was still dripping down his sleeve in great gouty drops. Mackay carefully cut out the splintered wood with the point of his sheath-knife, an acutely painful operation; but the patient never winced.

Then Emu Bill returned. "I can't find nary cloth 'ceptin' flour-bags," he announced. "Take a bit o' this here shirt o' mine."

He ripped off a sleeve of his garment and handed it to Mackay, and with it Bob's arm was soon tightly dressed. And now the rosy light of approaching dawn began to spread over the scene, and the stars faded out one by one before the radiant sun's advance. Morning had come at last. Yes, morning had come, and with it appeared in all their grim hideousness the evidences of the long night's struggle. There was Never Never Dave stretched beside them, his calm white face gazing peacefully towards the heavens. A little way off four huddled forms lay bent up in the dust, their torn plumes scattered around them. Here and there arrows and clubs were strewn, and gory tracks marked the way towards the subterranean passage wherein the warriors had retreated. Bob surveyed the ghastly relics with a sorrowful countenance. Here to him was a new aspect of the wanderer's life. In the pursuit of Nature's treasure the risks were many if the rewards were great. All was not sunshine and romance and pleasurable excitement. He stood for some minutes in silent contemplation.

"Yes," he said aloud, "and I, too, would have been lying there, had it not been for you, Jack."

"Don't speak about it, Bob," returned the boy at his side, with a shudder. "How could I have gone home without you?"

Mackay had, in the mean time, been examining the discarded weapons of the aborigines with critical interest.

"It seems to me," he said quietly, "that we might all have been lying there if the warriors hadn't imagined us to be asleep. I can only find about twenty arrows altogether. I think they could only have carried one or two each, never dreaming they would have need for more."

"I reckon that is why they tried to rush us every time," remarked Emu Bill. "They were too cock-sure, they were; an' we've got to be thankful for it. But ain't this a funny get up for nigs, even if they is on for a corroborree dance?"

He pointed to the strange habiliments of the dead warriors. Each native was cloaked in a rich opossum robe, suspended from the shoulders almost down to the heels.

"I can't make them out, Bill," said Mackay. "They are different from any tribe I've ever run across before. They're bigger than an ordinary native, and their faces look almost intelligent. But we've forgotten about the mountain passage. Surely the blacks couldn't have made that. There's more o' a mystery here than I can fathom, Bill; but we'll soon know what it all means."

"I just reckon we will," grated Emu Bill as they turned away.

Jack, who was now the most active member of the party, was not long in preparing breakfast, and the stimulating influence of the boiling tea did much to revive their weary spirits.

"If only Never Never hadn't gone under," said the Shadow, as he munched at his hard, unpalatable damper fare, "I could have felt real joyous, I could. I reckon we has struck the land o' gold and di'monds right enough."

The mysterious mountain had assuredly grown more and more mystifying. What wonderful secret could be hid beyond? What strange people could have made the tunnel through its mighty heart?

"I am convinced we are about to make a wonderful discovery," said Bob. "Ordinary aborigines could never have constructed that passage——"

"And allowing that they could," interjected Jack; "what purpose is it supposed to serve?"

"I reckon it's the treasure chamber o' the Never Never we has struck at last," observed Emu Bill, with quiet assurance. "Nary man ever knew what to expect in this here country; but we has struck the secret, only poor old Dave ain't with us no more."

There was no doubt that the expedition had reached a region of strange mystery in the heart of the great unknown land of the Never Never. Their humble repast over, there now came the sad duty of interring the body of their dead comrade. Silently they filed off, armed with pick and shovel, in search of a soft spot in which to dig the grave. But no kindly soil was to be found; the bare rock appeared everywhere immediately below the surface.

"There's only one thing we can do," said Mackay. "We must drill and shoot a hole down wi' gelignite, that is, unless we carry poor Dave out across these springs into the desert, but for my part I'd rather bury him close into the mountain. I think he would have liked it himself. Let us give poor old Dave a big monument, boys, I'm sure none o' us will grudge the work."

Grudge the work? Not they. It was the last tribute they could pay to the faithful and brave companion of their travels, and with heavy hearts they set about their task. A case of gelignite had been included in the outfit of the expedition in anticipation of any valuable ore deposits being found which might necessitate blasting before samples could be obtained, and now for the first time the deadly explosive was called into requisition, and for a most melancholy purpose. The long steel drills which had done such good work in the Golden Promise Mine were also called into play, and all forenoon Mackay and Emu Bill laboured at their sad work, relieved occasionally by Jack, the Shadow, and Bob, for though the last two were then wholly unfitted for any exertion, they insisted on taking their turn, Bob swinging the great hammer with his one free hand, while the Shadow held and turned the drill. At every half hour or so the mighty roar of an explosion would burst forth from the rocky excavation, and a hail of boulders and showers of iron sand were hurled into the air.

In the midst of this turmoil Bob happened to look up, and he was scarcely surprised to see the same gloomy figure on the mountain summit watching their operations intently.

"I can understand his warning now," he muttered to himself. "He knew they were going to attack us from the tunnel. But why should he have wished to save us?"

The more he considered the matter the more puzzled he became. Then he observed quite a number of the oddly garbed natives join their companion on the hilltop. Again and again the dull boom of the heavy gelignite charges echoed out on the still air, and after each ponderous report a fresh group seemed to gather up aloft until Bob could count fully fifty of them.

"I reckon this here circus sort o' disturbs them," grunted Emu Bill.

Mackay looked anxious. "I hope there's no more o' them," he remarked gravely. "We've struck a bigger-sized tribe than we calculated on, Bill, an' we'll have to be vera cautious."

At last the tomb was completed and reverently they wrapped the dead man in his blanket and carried him to his last earthly rest. No tears now dimmed their eyes, their sorrow was deep set in the heart; it had passed the mere emotional stage, and could find relief only in strenuous action. Then they stood around the open grave with bowed heads, while Mackay repeated a brief prayer. Long afterwards Bob remembered the quiet dignity of his utterance, the simple eloquence of his tribute, and the whole pathetic scene would return to him with all its overwhelming memories. When he had finished, they shovelled in the loose sand and rubble in solemn silence, and built up a cairn over the top.

The natives from their position of vantage had gazed stolidly down on them throughout the entire ceremonial; but now they dispersed, leaving but one solitary watcher on the height.

"We'll have to plant these natives now," said Mackay; "we can't leave them lying like that."

They walked over and surveyed the bodies again, and the Shadow taking the long opossum robe from one of them, threw it over his own shoulders

with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"I reckon this here ornament should just fit me," said he, turning round for inspection.

Emu Bill laughed hoarsely. "Throw the wretched thing away, Shad," he growled. "Ye doesn't want to wear a nig's wardrobe, does ye?"

But a wild idea had just then entered Mackay's head; he bent down and gathered several of the emu feathers lying around; these he stuck in the Shadow's hair much to that youth's disgust.

"Why, Shad, if your face was blacked you'd pass for one of the warriors!" exclaimed Jack, noting the effect at once.

"We'll save these decorations for future use," said Mackay, quietly.

Emu Bill whistled softly, "I never thought o' that," said he. "I reckon it's a real daisy idea."

Quickly they despoiled the natives of their gorgeous trappings, and Bob sighed when the miserable bodies were revealed in all their savage nakedness, and marvelled at the unusual muscular development showing in their chest and limbs.

"Ay, Bob," said Mackay, guessing his thoughts, "one of these fellows is worth two of any other tribe, I ken. Somehow, though I have a sair grudge against them, I feel sort o' sorry to see such bonnie specimens slaughtered."

"But I reckon they would have danced round our funeral all right," said Emu Bill, savagely. "Hang it, the nigs in this here country ain't fit to live, they ain't."

"There are no opossums about here, are there?" asked Jack, suddenly.

"Nary one," answered Emu Bill, with a laugh. "Why, they couldn't live on sand, an' there ain't no trees around that a muskittie couldn't bend by sitting on them."

"Then where could these skins come from?" cried the lad.

Bob shook his head dubiously, and Emu Bill seemed to have thought of the matter for the first time. Mackay alone seemed confident in his knowledge.

"It's a sure proof, Jack," said he, "that beyond the mountain there must be a different kind o' country, a country o' forests and rivers, maybe, and our Eldorado."

CHAPTER XV

The Secret of the Mountain

It was well into the afternoon before their gruesome task was accomplished, and the sun shone far down in the Western sky when they returned to the camp. They had carried the deceased warriors out into the sandy tracts beyond the boiling springs. It cannot be said that they were unduly sympathetic with the slain, and certainly they were anything but enamoured of their self-imposed contract, but the alternative would have been extremely disagreeable.

"I have no doubt their brethren would have come for them to-night," said Bob, "and saved us a good deal of trouble—if we could only have depended on them going peaceably away again."

"Ay, if," agreed Mackay, dryly. "But their coming would only mean more funerals, Bob, and as for that, I believe they've been trying to force that patent door of theirs before now."

He turned and gazed towards the fissure at the base of the mountain, and at that moment there distinctly came a sound therefrom as of the jarring of rocks under pressure. They all kept perfect silence for a minute or two, and again the sound was repeated, but this time it was succeeded by the sharp rattle of falling boulders.

"That's the top o' our barricade down, I reckon," whispered the Shadow, reaching gingerly for his rifle.

"They would see us go out into the plains," hazarded Bob, calmly, "but the smoke of these very convenient boilers has kept them from noticing our return."

Mackay nodded. "They've got about a solid ton to shift before the door will swing," he said musingly. "Now I wonder if we should go an' help them wi' the job or no'?"

"I reckon we has had enough for one day, Mac," answered Emu Bill, wearily. "Let the skunks work their own passage."

Another rattle, louder than the first, reached their ears.

"Pears to me they is in a mighty hurry," grinned the Shadow.

Bob rose to his feet. "I'm going to have a look," he said. "Come on, Jack;" and they tip-toed over to the origin of the disturbances, leaving their companions apparently deeply and solely intent on bringing the billy on the fire to a boil speedily.

Mackay had examined the barricade once or twice earlier in the day, and noticed no change in its appearance, and was convinced that nothing short of gelignite cartridges could shift their obstruction from the inside. Bob held the same opinion, but he was nevertheless curious to see what sort of efforts were being made. Making a short *détour*, they silently approached the entrance to the underground passage from the side farthest from the movable rocky slab. The interstice had been well-nigh filled with diorite boulders, leaving only the top of the solid panel showing; but when Bob looked now, he was alarmed to find a considerable shrinkage in the level of the barricade, and though the noisy echoes of falling rocks were still plainly heard, it was evident that nothing was rolling down from the top of the pile. Jack drew a quick breath of anxiety; Bob was perplexed beyond measure, but he made no sign, and as he looked, behold! the boulder stack was gradually, yet surely, sinking—sinking apparently into the earth beneath. Then his eye noticed some slight change in the position of the rocking wall; it was thrust up somewhat, and gaped widely. The solution of the mystery was now made clear: the great slab moved upwards as well as outwards, and the depletion of the pile was taking place from the bottom; the rock fragments were rolling inwards to the tunnel!

Hastily he beckoned on his companions, and they came forward at a run, just as the last stone was disappearing from view. But the natives had now taken alarm. There came a dull thud as the doorway relapsed into its accustomed place, and then their rapidly retreating footsteps were heard as they scurried back into the subterranean channel, and the peculiar tapping of the night before heralded the direction of their flight.

Mackay took in the position at a glance, and an expression of grave concern settled on his features.

"Their resources are positively marvellous," he groaned in despair. "It's a vera fortunate thing, Bob, that you werena influenced by my stupid over-confidence, and came to investigate. We might have been bowled over wi' their arrows before we had time to lift a rifle." He continued bitterly to abuse himself while he inspected the now bare cavity in the mountain.

"I reckon it's a long sight more fortunate that they came along in the daytime," commented Emu Bill, "which they likely wouldn't have done, if they had thought we were about. Seems to me, that good Samaritan job o' ours in planting them nigs nice and comfortable out in the sand has done us a service right away."

"You've hit it pretty near, Bill," Bob agreed. "If they had done that trick in the night, we should probably have been wiped out."

"This is a mighty unpleasant climate for us tender lambs, it is," wailed the Shadow. "There's nary night but what we may wake up wi' a screech an' find ourselves dead."

"There's one way we can block it for good," muttered Mackay, grimly, "but I'm no vera willing to do it, for it will block us too, an' I mean to get inside that mountain before I'm a couple o' days older." He looked towards the gelignite case, lying near where it had been placed for safety, and his companions knew his plan at once. "Yes, we may well shoot down a bit o' the mountain big enough to bar that tunnel safe as a house, but that wouldn't suit us afterwards."

"If we roll round a few boulders wider than the door itself, that would keep things pretty safe for a night," suggested Jack; and in the end, this was the plan decided upon, and for half an hour they busied themselves transporting the most unwieldy diorite blocks they could find, and fixing them securely into the cavity. Then they returned to partake of their well-earned and belated dinner of tea and damper.

The last added proof of the blacks' ingenuity considerably disturbed the members of the little party. It had been so hard to believe that aborigines

could possibly have constructed the tunnel through the mountain, but now they were inclined to imagine their savage neighbours capable of anything.

"I reckon we has got to go slow, boys," remarked Emu Bill, with a troubled expression; "them nigs don't seem to be the genuine article. They knows a long sight too much for my liking, they does."

Mackay, too, was obviously concerned. The mysterious tunnel mystified him; he could not imagine how it had been wrought, but there was gradually dawning in him a vastly increased respect for the natives who lived beyond the mountain. That they were different from all other tribes he had encountered was only too evident. The question was, in how great a degree did they excel their brethren of the plains? Judging from his brief experience of them, Mackay's estimate of their powers was far higher than he cared to admit.

"Of course," he said, in answer to Emu Bill, "if the country on the other side is what we expect, the natives will be of a much more advanced class than any we've met before. You see, it's the power o' environment, Bill; it may have worked marvels here, for a' we know."

They ate their unpalatable meal without much further remark. Then Bob, who had been pondering deeply over the events of the last twenty-four hours, showed the trend of his thoughts by asking quietly if any of the aboriginal tribes had been known to use bows and arrows.

"I never saw, nor heard tell o' such a thing before," grunted Emu Bill.

"In that case," said Bob, "these natives show that they have originated that custom here, or have retained it from an earlier period, before the blacks began to degenerate; and, in either case, it proves them to be an exceptional lot altogether."

"That's just what's bothering me, Bob," admitted Mackay. "We might well tackle an ordinary tribe, even though we only numbered five against fifty, but wi' these beggars here, I'll allow we seem to be embarking on a job that is, to say the least of it, a bit unhealthy. No, no, don't think I'm gettin' nervous, Bill, but we must calculate the chances before we start. Bob counted fifty niggers on the hill this morning, so we've a fair idea o' what we are goin' to run up against."

"Hang it, boss," complained the Shadow; "you doesn't think a crowd o' nigs is goin' to hustle us back now, does ye? If we kin join their happy family in the daytime we'll scatter 'em quick an' lively, but the night gives me the creeps, it does. I can never see the sights o' my rifle in the dark."

"If we were once on the other side of the mountain," said Jack, eagerly, "we could soon shift the blacks; it's the wretched old tunnel that keeps worrying us here."

"Ay, my lad," said Mackay, dryly; "the tunnel is a vera curious construction for a crowd o' aborigines to make, an' the more I think about it, the more puzzled I become. I was going to suggest that Bill an' me should force the passage in the morning, while the three o' you waited out by the camels in case o' accident."

"I'm right wi' you there," cried Emu Bill. "I reckon it ain't safe for these here young 'uns to come along wi' us first——"

A storm of protest greeted his words, and Bob turned to Mackay reproachfully.

"I know what you mean," he said; "but neither Jack nor I will leave unless we all leave together, so that if anything happened to you we would not escape in any case. Isn't it far better to make the most of our strength instead of dividing it?"

"Well, well, perhaps you are right," returned the big man, hastily, as if annoyed at his own fears; "but we'd better wait until morning before we start the circus. Like the Shadow, I prefer to meet the natives in daylight, and anyhow, we're a' needing a sleep to-night, so we'd be better to turn in early and get up by sunrise. It should take us a good half-hour in the morning blowing out that tunnel door for a start."

Certainly nothing further could be done on that day, for the darkness was already closing in, and each one of the party was weary and tired from lack of sleep. So shortly afterwards they lay down in their blankets, though not before a searching examination had been made of the new barricade erected at the entrance to the subterranean passage, and, in spite of the known dangers surrounding them, they slept soundly, each taking a two hours' watch in turn. It was well after midnight when Bob awoke for the first time,

and at once his ears caught the strange tapping in the mountain which had first heralded the approach of the natives on the night before. He aroused himself immediately, and saw Mackay, who was on guard, listening to the ghostly echoes intently. Slowly they seemed to pass along the base of the hill, then all was quiet. Bob got up and joined Mackay, and together they walked softly towards the fissure, and there in the dull light they could vaguely see the great boulders move as if under pressure from beneath, but though they watched for fully ten minutes in silence, the barricade remained intact. Jack's scheme had worked admirably. Then Mackay turned on his heel with a loud laugh.

"It's just as well to let them ken we're here, Bob," he explained; and the sound of scurrying footsteps which answered him from the concealed passage showed that the natives had thought fit to retire once more. Then again the peculiar tapping issued out dully from the great rock, continuing for nearly a minute before it faded into the stillness of the night.

"Well, what do you make of it, Bob?" asked Mackay.

Bob did not hesitate a moment. "The passage must lead for some distance along the face of the mountain," said he. "But why these strange sounds are heard every time the blacks come along, I cannot say."

"Man, Bob," laughed Mackay, "that's vera easily explained. The tunnel must be dark, of course, and the warriors have to guide themselves along the passage by feeling the walls wi' their arrows or clubs as they go. It just struck me that that was the reason o' the uncanny noises when I heard them come along there to-night. Simple enough, isn't it, Bob?"

"I'm glad there is nothing approaching the supernatural about it, anyhow," replied Bob, soberly. "The echoes seemed to ring in my ears like a knell of doom."

He shuddered as he got back into his blanket. The others were awake by this time; but when they learned that an ineffective attempt had been made to destroy the barricade, they chuckled in rare good-humour, and went off to sleep again. The remainder of the night passed without alarm, and the morning broke, calm and serene, over the little camp, which awoke to life with renewed vigour after its peaceful slumber. Breakfast was soon over;

then a hurried council of war was held to reason out the best plan of action. Emu Bill was in favour of inserting a heavy charge of gelignite in the rocking panel which had defied their gentler efforts on the preceding day; and Jack and the Shadow supported this proposal vociferously. Mackay, however, though he had at first advocated this drastic action, now seemed reluctant to carry it through; and Bob, too, though he did not say much, was evidently pondering over some other and better scheme, which he at last broached hesitatingly.

"If the passage runs parallel with the face of the mountain for twenty or thirty yards," he said, "it strikes me that if we made a fresh entrance to it as far away from the old one as possible, we could deceive the natives most completely, and perhaps provide a means of escape in an emergency."

"I don't quite catch on," grumbled Emu Bill. "I'm hanged if I see what difference it should make; an' we doesn't know how far we'd have to dig into the blasted rock afore we hit the tunnel—if it's where you say."

Mackay took up a pick, and, proceeding along the base of the mountain away from the fissure, struck at the rocky wall repeatedly, with the result that a deep, hollow rumbling issued forth at each stroke, until a point had been reached some thirty yards distant from the tunnel entrance, when only the solid diorite formation gave back the sound.

"I calculate we'd have less than five feet to drive, Bill," said he. "About a couple o' long shots in from the top would do it. You can trace the passage as plainly as if you were looking at it. I don't know what the idea was in making it like a boomerang; but we'll soon find out. Now, Bob, you're better at explaining than me. Try an' convince Bill o' the advantages we may derive from making a new hole into the mountain."

"I reckon I can see it all right," cried the Shadow. "Oh, it are a daisy——"

"Shut up, Shad," growled Emu Bill. "Now, Bob, for any sake, tell me your plan. Of course I'm with you, whether I understand or not; but, blow me if I can see the force o' doing extra work in the niggers' mountain fur nothin'."

Then Bob endeavoured to elucidate the ideas which had been taking shape in his brain all through the night, since Mackay and he had come to a

conclusion as to the origin of the warning sounds and the proximity of the passage for some distance to the outer air.

"If we don't tamper with the old door, boys," said he, earnestly, "we can block up the hole we make by some bagging, and so will always have a chance of escape if the natives are too many for us. They will guard their own entrance only, for they probably will never see ours; and it's just as well to take precautions. The darkness of the tunnel will help our plan; and if we succeed without having to trouble about getting back, so much the better——"

"And there are a few more arguments in favour o' the scheme, Bob," added Mackay; "but we may see the excellence o' them later."

"But they'll hear us firing the charges, won't they?" said Jack.

"They heard us doing the same thing yesterday," answered Mackay; "an' they saw us too, so it's no vera likely they'll trouble us to-day. But if we put the drill-holes in deep enough, and give the powder plenty work to do, there shouldna be much noise—in fact, I doubt if they'll hear it at a'."

No time was lost in making the experiment, and the long steel drills were quickly grinding their way through the hard outer casing of the rock as nearly as could be judged opposite the place where the passage took an abrupt turn inwards. And now the mining knowledge of Mackay and Emu Bill made their work comparatively easy; they knew exactly the correct angles at which to drive the drills so as to obtain the best results when they loaded the holes so made with the deadly explosive. Steadily they laboured at their task, Bob, Jack, and the Shadow assisting at intervals, but more often engaged farther out in the open making a goodly appearance for the benefit of the natives, should they chance to be watching, and thus drawing attention away from the great work in hand. For a full hour Mackay slogged at the steel with his mighty hammer, then gradually the borings extracted from the deepening hole grew lighter and redder in colour, and the drill sank inwards rapidly.

"That's a new formation we've struck, Bill," said he, pausing to examine the edge of his tool. Then an exclamation broke from his lips. "We're chippin'

through a gold lode!" he cried; "and it's so rich that the drill clogs in the metal."

"I reckon there's nary nig'll shift us from here now," said Emu Bill, examining for himself the gold grains exposed. "I means to see the other side o' this here mountain, or bust. I reckon there must be oceans o' gold an' di'monds over there."

At this stage Jack called out warningly, "I see old Nebuchadnezzar on the top of the mountain again."

"It's the same old nig that we didn't shoot," exclaimed the Shadow; "an', blow me! if he ain't goin' to throw stones at us."

The tall figure on the summit had certainly attempted to throw something down; but it caught on a jutting rock overhead, and bounded thence into the rising vapours of the hot springs. Once more he appeared to cast some projectile into the air; but if he did, it did not reach the ground in the vicinity of the anxious party beneath. Then again a visible missile came hurtling down; but it fell wide, much to the Shadow's satisfaction.

"The old fool can't throw stones for nuts!" he cried delightedly.

"I don't think he'll hurt us much," said Mackay, with a laugh. "Let him play away, Shadow, if it amuses him; it doesn't do us any damage."

And the individual aloft continued his strange pranks for some time, though in no one instance did the stones he threw alight even moderately near; then he vanished as suddenly as he had come.

"I think we're about ready for firing, Bill," said Mackay, shortly afterwards. "We'd better hurry up, too, seeing that there does not seem to be any one about to watch in the mean time."

The drill had been driven over eight feet down, at an angle of somewhat less than forty-five degrees, and Bob, making a rough calculation, considered that its extremity was at least four feet away from the surface of the rock in a straight line.

"We'll give it twenty-five cartridges, I think," mused Mackay, "an' the shock o' discharge should burst at least another foot inwards."

"I reckon something's bound to shift," murmured Emu Bill, as he deftly prepared the charges, and inserted the long fuse.

Bob watched the last operation with quiet interest, but not so Jack and the Shadow. They suddenly pranced off towards the cooking utensils by the fire, and began to drag them back out of range.

"Tea and damper is bad enough," groaned the Shadow, tenderly secreting the only two billy cans the expedition possessed; "but damper without tea would be howlin' starvation, it would."

"You doesn't need to worry, Shad," grinned Emu Bill. "There won't be much o' a scatter here."

And he calmly applied a lighted match to the end of the fuse, and stood for almost a minute, listening to its sputtering as the fire crept slowly down towards the gelignite, before he turned away. Another minute, two minutes, three minutes passed.

"I'm afraid we've had a misfire, Bill," said Mackay.

But just as he spoke the base of the mountain seemed to quiver and burst forward, then came a dull report, and when the smoke cleared away, a giant crack showed in the rock, but otherwise no evidences were left to indicate that a powerful explosive had been at work.

"That's hard lines," said Emu Bill, stepping forward. "It might have shifted that chunk o' iron out o' the road, anyway. Now we'll need to begin all over again."

"I'm no so sure o' that," answered Mackay, waving his hat in the rent created in order to dispel the clinging white fumes, which obscured all vision.

Then it was made apparent that it was no mere crack in the formation they gazed upon. The force of explosion has not only cleft the rock, but had thrust it almost a yard forward in one unbroken mass, and at the bottom of the chasm thus made a vague blackness appeared, the blackness of a void. Mackay bent down his head eagerly, but hastily withdrew it again; a rush of heavy damp air, stifling and odorous, had come with a gust in his face.

"I reckon them powder fumes'll make you feel pretty bad," sympathized Emu Bill. "Just give the smoke time to clear, Mac, an' then we'll put in another shot."

"There's no need to do any more work here, Bill," answered Mackay, recovering himself. "We've broken right into the tunnel first pop! There it is, too, as natural-looking an entrance as you could wish to see, wi' a door—if we could move it—that weighs five tons if it weighs a pound."

Eagerly they all clustered round to look; and now that the atmosphere had grown less clouded, the dark shadows of the cavern below were plainly discernible. Bob gave a sigh of relief. At last the secret of the mountain was to be revealed.

"Well, I reckon I'd better get down an' prospect round a bit," said Emu Bill, hitching up his nether garments preparatory to scrambling down into the uncertain depths.

"Let me go first," urged the Shadow. "I'm the lightest, and it wouldn't hurt me much if I did go down a bit further than I expected when I let go the edge."

"We'll lower a rope wi' a stone on the end o' it before any one goes down," said Mackay, firmly. "We've got to engineer this funeral vera cautiously, my lad, an' mustna go bouncing ourselves into difficulties, as if there was a good fairy waiting by us every time to pull us out o' them."

A rope was speedily forthcoming, and fastening a fragment of rock to the end of it, Mackay carefully allowed it to descend. It came to a standstill in good time, however, showing that the bottom of the passage was barely three feet below the point where the rent had entered its wall. Mackay quickly proceeded to adjust the rope so that its extremity dangled just on the edge of the yawning gap, then he made it fast on the outside by coiling it several times round the top of the sundered rock.

"A man could pull himself out in a hurry by getting something to hold on to," he remarked, "an' it's just as well to be prepared."

This operation completed, Emu Bill wriggled himself down through the narrow opening, and holding on to the guiding-rope, quickly disappeared

from view, while his companions on the surface waited expectantly for his report on his surroundings.

"Well, an' what do you make of it, Bill?" demanded Mackay, when the tension on the cable had slackened.

"I can't see a single thing," came the response. "It's dark as—as Hades, an'—howlin' blazes! but it does smell."

Without a word Mackay slid down beside his complaining comrade; the Shadow followed, then Jack, and lastly Bob squirmed down beside them. All was dark and oppressively gloomy in the strange passage, and the thin streak of light from the opening they themselves had made, only served to intensify the utter blackness which prevailed. They stood for a full minute without speaking, their ears alert for the slightest sound which might warn them of danger; but all was silent as a tomb.

"Now, boys," whispered Mackay, "we'll have a look at the inside o' that other doorway before we go any further." He led the way, staggering and stumbling, and Bob, following at his heels, became conscious that the floor of the tunnel was extremely muddy and wet. After a few steps Mackay paused. "I've got a bit o' candle in my pocket," he said; "I may as well strike a light."

The match spluttered feebly in his hand for a moment, and then went out, but on a second attempt he succeeded in getting the candle alight, and though it burned with a dismal blue flame, it illuminated the rocky cavern sufficiently for the adventurers to observe its structure.

They stood in a longitudinal chamber about eight feet high, and barely four in width. The roof fairly scintillated with beaded moisture, and the dank, cold walls were adrip with ooze. The bottom of the chamber, as they had already discovered, was a soft and clinging clayey formation. Mackay's trained eye immediately grasped the significance of the scene.

"This is a most extraordinary thing to find in the heart o' Australia," he said. "It's a tunnel driven through an enormous gold lode, an' it's vera evident that the men who made it knew almost nothing about mining, for the ore hasn't been stripped either to the hanging wall or foot wall. It's just as if a blind gap had been dug into the country where it was softest."

"I see a nugget shining in the roof," whispered Jack, pointing to a yellow splatch showing overhead.

"Ay, my lad, an' I can see several more," said Mackay, surveying the exposed stratum in bewilderment. "It is a wonderful mine, without a doubt, but what on earth the natives do with it is more than I can imagine."

He moved onwards once more, and then he halted suddenly, and held the candle aloft. The passage had come to an end; before him stood the huge stone panel which had first barred their entrance; at his feet gaped a deep, pit-like cavity.

"Come close up here, Bob," he said quietly. "Come an' have a look at this arrangement o' things; primitive but effective, eh?"

Bob gazed at the sight before him in absolute wonderment. The great stone which marked the end of the chamber stood upright on an egg-shaped base; it appeared to be formed like a rude and bluff wedge, the wider extremity protruding outwards, where, as had been seen, it flanged neatly on to the main rock from which it had sprung. But it was not its shape that surprised Bob: a massive bar of some gleaming metal was welded into it fully halfway up its height, and from this U-shaped bar a rope of extraordinary girth stretched taut into the depths of the pit, where it could be seen attached to a ponderous mass of diorite rock, which hung from it like the weight of a giant clock.

"It must take more than one man to open that door," murmured Jack.

"They probably always come in force when they use this passage," mused Bob; "and see, I suppose that arrangement is for keeping the stone bent over when they are out?"

He pointed to a short and stout log lying near, which had apparently been used for preventing a quick rush back of the weighted panel when the warriors had gone out on the night of the conflict. Mackay stepped gingerly across the intervening shaft, and shone his light into its unsavoury depths as he did so.

"I see now where our boulder barricade dropped to," he said; "but I can see also that they can never move our present obstruction in the same way, the

big blocks outside will stick them, no matter how they try."

Emu Bill now tried to find his speech. "How in thunder is we to account for the rock prizing open wi' us at first?" said he. "I can't understand this here concern yet, I can't."

Bob pointed downwards to where the wall of the pit was deeply scarred and dented.

"Likely enough the weight caught in the side," he said, "and so eased off the tension considerably."

Mackay, who had been keenly scrutinizing the rope and the stout bar in the stone to which it was connected, now lifted his head.

"The rope is made o' a grass which doesn't grow on our side o' the mountain, boys," he said; "but the bar is fashioned out o' a metal which is known to all of us, though we've never managed to possess it in sufficient quantities to throw away on a job like this, where simple iron would be far stronger and better in every way."

"Why!" exclaimed Emu Bill. "You doesn't mean to say that they've stuck a chunk o' gold in that there stone, does ye?"

"I just do," answered Mackay, wearily. "Now, I think we'd better get out and think over things for a bit. Two or three shocks o' that sort would just about destroy my nervous system altogether."

"But you ain't goin' to leave that bonanza in the rock, surely?" cried the Shadow. "Let me get one tug at it, boss, I'll pretty soon yank it out, I'll——"

But here his companions gently but firmly led him away.

"There's bound to be lots more of it lying around," said Jack, soothingly, as they retraced their steps.

When they reached the exit the light of the candle showed them that the tunnel here swung off to the left at a right angle, and at this point the passage was considerably wider than they had at first judged, probably owing to the difficulty the natives had experienced in making such a sharp

turn. But the eye could distinguish nothing beyond the radius of the feeble illumination; all was oppressively murky and damp and repellent.

"That's our road, boys," said Mackay, pointing with his candle into the gloomy cavern which led into the heart of the mountain. "But before we start on our journey we'll get out an' make our final arrangements, an' change our wardrobe to suit the situation."

In a few minutes they were all on the surface once more, eagerly talking over their prospects, for, strangely enough, the dangerous aspect of their projected journey through the mountain was for the moment lost on them, so completely had the glamour of the golden tunnel exercised its subtle influence. Mackay, however, quickly regained his control.

"We must remember, boys," he cautioned, "that we have no ordinary natives to contend with, an' before we leave this camp it will be necessary to attend to some details which may be helpful to us afterwards."

"What would you suggest?" asked Bob.

"In the first instance," Mackay replied, "we should hide the camel-packs containing our provisions. We can easily do that out among the sand on the other side o' the springs. It won't take us half an hour altogether."

"But what about the camels?" interjected Jack.

"They are a good distance away, my lad, an' they're no' hobbled. They'll just have to take their chance; but I don't think there's much risk in that direction, after all, for Misery can't stand the sight o' a nigger, an' if he bolted, the rest would follow, an' we could track them up afterwards just as I had to do before in this same district."

It was yet early in the day, and though Emu Bill was loath to delay their tour of discovery even for five minutes, he was brought to see the wisdom of Mackay's advice. Within half an hour the camp had assumed a bare and desolate appearance, only the heavier mining implements being left at the base of the mountain. Then they gathered round the cleft in the rock, and hurriedly prepared for their work of subterranean exploration. It had been agreed that the party should don the robes of the deceased warriors in order to lessen the chances of detection should any natives be encountered while

traversing the mysterious passage, but now they saw that whereas there were five persons to transform into savages, there were but four of the long furry coverings, although the feathered decorations for completing their sartorial equipment were more numerous than necessary.

"I believe I saw one o' them 'possum robes in the pit, aside the hanging rock," said Emu Bill, reflectively. "I'll go an' get it in a jiff."

He disappeared into the recess immediately, and Bob heard him feeling his way back towards the old entrance, muttering and grumbling against the awkward nature of the dismal, muddy track at each floundering step. Then for a brief space all was still.

"A bit o' charcoal rubbed over the face an' neck will make us more nigger-like, I'm thinkin'," laughed Mackay, as he surveyed himself with rueful gaze.

It was no sooner said than done. Jack rushed over to the smouldering fire, and came back with a handful of charred embers, and with these they smeared their faces and hands plentifully.

"An' I reckon we won't want our boots," grunted the Shadow, discarding his almost soleless shoes, and rolling up the legs of his much-frayed nether garments.

"That's right, Shadow," said Mackay; "you make a grand nigger, an' I only hope I don't mistake you in the dark for a real warrior, an' slaughter you in error."

Bob and Jack, when they had finished their toilet, looked their part to the life; but when Mackay's towering bulk was arrayed and besplashed to his satisfaction, he seemed the most fearsome object imaginable, a formidable-looking savage indeed.

"Now I wonder what's keeping Bill?" broke out Jack, impatiently. "This rock here is burning my feet terribly."

"He'll be tryin' to wrench off that bit o' gold from the big stone," remarked the Shadow, with assurance. "I reckon I'll go down an' help him."

"You'll do nothing o' the kind," said Mackay, firmly, laying a restraining hand on the youth's shoulder. "We've got something else to do in the meantime, my lad. Bill will be gropin' in the dark for that nigger dress, an' he'll be here in a minute."

The Shadow's feeble smile at being intercepted in his desire to possess the treasure he so much coveted looked so malevolent on his besmeared features, that Jack could not forbear a hearty laugh. Then Bob gave a gasp of dismay.

"I can hear natives coming through the passage!" he said. "What are we to do about Bill?"

The vague echoes of shuffling movements were now quite plainly heard, and still there was no sign from Emu Bill; probably he had not yet become aware of the ominous sounds, or perhaps he was, as the Shadow had suggested, too much engrossed with a congenial task to grasp their true significance. With a forceful expression on his lips Mackay insinuated his muscular form into the gap, and just at that instant a band of savages swept by him so close that they almost touched him. Then only it seemed that Emu Bill became aroused to his danger. A hoarse snarl of rage rang along the passage, and the sounds of a silent scuffle came to Mackay's ears as he stood motionless by the exit. With a stifled groan he pulled himself up, just as the warriors had evidently accomplished their work.

"Have they killed him too?" whispered Jack, nervously.

Mackay did not trust himself to reply. He motioned Bob to hand him his rifle, and he was sliding back into the passage with a vengeful rage in his heart when a stentorian call from Emu Bill made him pause.

"I'm not dead, boys," he cried, "but they've got me trussed up like a prize fowl, an' I don't know what they're goin' to do wi' me. Block the light, or they'll see where I came in, an' don't try to save me now, for there's over a score o' the skunks. It'll be all right, boys, all right. Ye are a pack of miserable, sneakin', howlin' gorillas——"

The last phrase, which was continued at some length, was obviously destined for his captors as they bore him along. It was evident that Bill had suffered no serious hurt at their hands, and his warning showed that, even

under such exceptionally trying circumstances, he was not unmindful of the welfare of his comrades, who would assuredly have been overcome had they descended to his assistance. The bushman's chivalric self-abnegation however would not have deterred Mackay from taking long odds at a work of rescue, but in the gloom of the cavern such action would have been futile, or perhaps worse, because any shots fired at random might just as easily kill Emu Bill as any one else, and the resultant chaos could only end in one way. So Bill was led away by the savage band, who gave vent to their satisfaction by sending forth shrill, unmusical shouts, which rang through the vaulted chamber like the cries of demons in torment. They passed by the gap in the wall which Mackay's bulk covered without a moment's pause, and marched slowly on into the heart of the mountain.

When at last all discordant sounds had died away, Mackay aroused himself with alacrity; but when his gaze fell upon the despondent countenances of his companions, he could not forbear a smile; their dusky aspect and warrior-like trappings agreed ill with their sorrowful visages.

"Now, my young savages," he cried, "try an' look less miserable. We've got to get through the mountain somehow now, for I won't leave Bill over there on his own. See that you've got plenty of cartridges, my lads, an' let us go."

"Poor old Bill!" murmured the Shadow, sadly. "It was that darned chunk o' gold that did it, I reckon."

"Now that they've found some one in the tunnel," said Bob, wearily, "they'll most likely come back to set a guard over the door; and when they find it won't open, they'll look around until they get this entrance, so that we'll be blocked completely from getting back."

Mackay was already halfway into the passage, but he climbed out again quickly on hearing Bob's words.

"You're quite right, Bob," said he, "an' there's only one thing to do before we start on Bill's trail. I don't like the idea o' it, but I believe it's the best plan."

They all hurried over to the barricaded entrance of the fissure, and straightway began to pull aside the great rocks they had placed there so carefully the night before. Already Mackay's forethought in hiding the

stores of the expedition was about to bear good fruit. If the blacks came out now, as they undoubtedly would, they would find nothing to destroy of any importance, and it was extremely unlikely that the natural-looking crack in the rock further along the hill would receive their attention; and, even if it did, the adventurous four would run no more risk than if they had left the barricaded crevice intact. Mackay calculated much on the blind, unreasoning ardour of the blacks.

"They won't come out in the daytime if they think we're about," said he, grimly, "and in the night they can see nothing, anyhow, though I hope we haven't to dodge about in that passage for such a length o' time."

Jack now bethought himself of a brilliant scheme whereby the purposes of the free exit would be served without danger of the blacks profiting much thereby. He found poor Never Never Dave's empty rifle lying near, and this he carefully propped up by the aid of several boulders with the long barrel directed fairly at the great stone door.

"They'll think there's a man behind the gun," said he, chuckling in boyish glee, "and whenever they open the concern they'll pop back again mighty quick."

"It's a vera excellent idea, Jack," approved Mackay. "Now, surely, we can go our way in peace."

They returned to the rent in the mountain which the explosive had made, and without further hesitation stepped down into the depths below, and Mackay, who was the last to descend, dragged with him a number of empty flour bags with which he effectually screened the little light which filtered between the sundered rocks. All was still in the passage as they felt their way cautiously forward, hugging the walls for guidance, their bare feet plashing in the oozy mire. Mackay and Bob led the way, each pressing against the opposite sides of the passage for support. Jack and the Shadow followed, more secure of their steps, knowing that the way was proved before them. On, on, they struggled; Bob would have dearly liked to light a match, but that would have been extremely foolhardy at such a critical juncture of their pilgrimage, as it would betray their presence to any aboriginal who might happen to be lurking near.

Already they seemed to have been an age in the stifling cavern, though but a few minutes had elapsed since their entry. The tunnel, as nearly as Bob could judge, had continued on a straight course, but it was hard to estimate with certainty how great a distance had been traversed.

Suddenly Mackay stopped and clutched Bob's arm in a vice-like grip.

"There's a hole o' some sort at our feet," he whispered, as the lad stumbled backwards.

Bob put forward one foot gingerly, but it met with no resistance; assuredly a dangerous void intervened in their path. In vain they sought across the full width of the passage for a foothold; not an inch of solid ground remained, and the clayey particles dislodged by their essaying footsteps fell down into an unknown depth, and sundry gurgles and splashes echoed back as they reached the bottom.

"There's no scarcity o' water there," remarked Mackay; then he felt over as far as he could reach with his rifle, and at the utmost limit of his stretch something hard interposed. "It's just like a shaft cutting down through the lode," he murmured; "but how the beggars get across it beats me to understand."

"We could take it at a jump, I think," suggested Jack.

"I'm afraid we'd slip into the water if we tried, my lad. It's no' easy gettin' a firm footing in this clay for a start. No, I think I'll throw the Shadow across first an' he can steady us from the other side."

"Say, boss," said that individual, plaintively, "I ain't no flying machine or human bullet. I reckon my tender bones won't get damaged so much if I jump——"

But while they stood thus deliberating as how best to surmount the difficulty, the dreaded sound of approaching natives fell dully on their ears. The Shadow uttered a stifled groan and his rifle-lock clicked under his impetuous fingers. Jack gave a faint whistle of dismay, and Bob calmly drew and cocked his revolver. Mackay stood unmoved, straining his eyes into the gloom; then he gently pressed Bob back close to the wall.

"Hug the side," he whispered; and each one crushed hard against the slimy rock, and waited.

Pat! pat! pat! came the unwelcome echoes, accompanied by an occasional splash, as the oncoming band floundered in the mire, and the direction from which the disturbance came was away decidedly to the left, although it was speedily altering to a point straight ahead. Bob noted this fact carefully, despite his alarm.

Nearer and nearer the unseen band advanced until but a few yards separated them from the yawning pit. Bob held his breath. Would they walk blindly into it? Had they miscalculated its position? He felt Mackay's hand press lightly on his shoulder as if to give him confidence, and he marvelled at its steadiness, and braced himself for the encounter he felt sure was about to begin. He could hear Jack's heart throbbing under the severe tension of the moment, and the Shadow's quick breaths indicated how trying was the strain even for that iron-nerved youth. But now came the crucial moment; the foremost savage shrieked out a guttural word of warning, as it seemed, and stopped, apparently on the edge of the chasm. A second later and his feet alighted with a sharp, sliding sound close opposite Bob, and with a recovering effort he passed on. He was followed immediately by another and still another warrior, whose arrows rustled in their hands as they cleared the gulf. If one of them had slipped there could have been little hope of escape for the intrepid quartet, for assuredly the slightest stumble would have sent him right into their arms. But no disaster of the kind occurred, each wildly-leaping figure arrived safely on the slippery floorway beside them and lunged forward with the momentum of his flight, and in this way fifteen warriors passed and proceeded on their way; then all was quiet again.

Mackay broke the silence. "That was a close shave, my lads," said he, coolly. "Now, I wonder if any of you noticed how they got across so sprightly?"

"I reckon they jumped," grunted the Shadow, "an' I is mighty pleased they jumped so well."

"It would be a good jump," whispered Bob; "but they cleared it too easily without a run."

"I think I'll risk lighting a match," said Mackay. "There's a bend in the tunnel straight forward a bit, so nothing can be seen past that, an' the niggers that have passed will probably be dodgin' the barrel o' Never Never's rifle by this time."

A howl of terror from that extremity of the tunnel almost verified his surmise. Mackay calmly struck a match, held it aloft for an instant, and blew it out hurriedly, but in that fleeting moment Bob caught sight of a stout rope suspended from a beam directly over the pit, and he also observed that at this point the roof of the tunnel was considerably farther above them than it had been at the start of their journey. Evidently, greater work of excavation had been done at this part of the golden lode. Mackay groped forward and seized the rope, gave it a tug to test its strength, then swung himself lightly across the obstacle which had delayed them so long. Bob went next, then Jack and Shadow trusted their weight to the flying trapeze.

"They might just as well have put a log or two across that shaft," murmured Mackay.

"Yes, I reckon it would be a long sight handier for visitors," agreed the Shadow; and they plodded on once more. Slowly, slowly, they advanced, and now Bob became conscious of a growing change in the atmosphere; it was surely becoming less and less stifling, and the overpowering odours which had been with them so long were gradually dispelling. Round to the left bore Mackay, and Bob followed, wondering vaguely if the light of the outside world would soon burst upon them, but no sign of lessening gloom cheered them on their altered course. Another few minutes passed, then Mackay stopped with an exclamation of surprise, the solid wall had reared up before him; they had been following a blind drive!

"I'm certain I heard them coming round this way," he said, feeling with his hand across the barring rock as if in search of some clue to the mystery.

"We may have taken a wrong turning," suggested Bob, much perplexed. Then he missed Jack beside him, and the Shadow too had disappeared. "They're both gone," he muttered anxiously.

"That shows there must be a branch off somewhere," said Mackay, cheerily. "They must have been hugging the right wall while we clutched on to the

left. We'll hang in to the right going back, Bob, an' we'll get back on to the main passage."

And back they went, striving vainly to quell the rising fear in their hearts, for both were more alarmed than they cared to admit over the absence of their comrades. At last they reached the awkward turn, and almost, at the same moment, floundering footsteps were heard approaching from a new direction, almost continuous with the line along which they had just returned. Not a word was spoken, and the two stood motionless at the junction of the ways waiting for some sign which would indicate to them whether their near neighbours were friends or foes. And even as they stopped, the sounds which had attracted their attention ceased abruptly, and for a short space all was still. But it was only for a short space; away back in the distance the harsh cries of the returning warriors thundered along the passage. Apparently they had not ventured out beyond the mountain, and that knowledge was satisfactory enough, but what of the new danger which threatened by their retreat? There was no deep chasm to distract the savages' notice at this point. On they came, their unmusical voices raised in a droning chant which might equally well have expressed joy or regret so far as Bob could make out. Then it suddenly struck him that they would imagine the white invaders of their domain to be still outside, despite their capture of Emu Bill in the well-guarded precincts, and were duly rejoicing in consequence. Over the watery pit they swung, nearer and nearer they drew. Then out of the deep gloom opposite clicked the hammer of a rifle, sure evidence that it was Jack and the Shadow who waited near. But it was too late now to speak, and the way of safety was unknown. Mackay and Bob pressed backwards whence they had last come, and the foremost savage almost brushed up against them as he felt for the wall. Bob's hand was on the trigger of his revolver ready to fire, but the warrior with a grunt passed over the entrance to their retreat, and stumbled onwards into the unexplored darkness ahead. And in this way the invisible band trooped by, nor did they once pause to investigate the openings on their left or right.

When they had passed out of hearing, a cautious voice whispered hoarsely from the darkness—

"Is ye there, boss? Shout out quick, for I is goin' to shoot."

"Keep your finger off that trigger, you nervous young rascal," responded Mackay, sternly; and at the words the lost pair issued forth from their hiding, and rejoined their companions.

"It was all owing to our following the right hand wall," Jack hastened to explain. "We didn't know you weren't with us until we came to the end."

"Another blind drive," muttered Mackay. "This is getting very confusing. It's just as well the niggers came back again to show us the way."

"And it was just as well they came back while we were off the main track," said Bob; "otherwise we might have had trouble."

Then they moved on along the middle track which they had been fortunate not to find at first, and for the space of several minutes not a word was spoken. There was no doubt about the hazardous nature of the mission on which they were employed; and Bob smiled grimly to himself as he reckoned up the chances against them, yet, strangely enough, each member of the expedition seemed in no wise to consider his own safety, and was fully determined to meet the best or worst that Fate had in store. A period had come in their lives when the call of the Unknown was irresistible; and had this for a moment failed them, the firm desire to rescue Emu Bill from the clutches of the savages would have sent them steadily onwards, recklessly ignoring the cost, for the wanderer's creed is simple and sincere—he may never forsake a comrade in deadly peril.

Their progress was painfully slow, for they knew not what obstacles might lie in their path, and probably it had been a miscalculation of their own pace that had led Mackay into error, when he turned into the drive along which he fancied he had heard the blacks approaching, for now the tunnel was distinctly curving to the left, and the occasional rush of fresh air which swept into their faces told them quite plainly that they were on the highway to the outside world. Slowly, too, the darkness began to merge into a gloom less and less profound, until the floor and sides of the cavern they traversed became dimly discernible.

"We won't be long now, my lads," encouraged Mackay.

"I is gettin' mighty nervous," murmured the Shadow, cheerfully. "I reckon I'll go back home. This ain't no place for a youth o' tender years, it ain't."

Bob laughed quietly at his companion's happy pessimism, and was about to make a reply when a faint buzzing sound in the unseen distance ahead drew his attention. Mackay, too, had heard it, and he stopped for an instant to listen more intently.

"What is it?" asked Jack, trying vainly to make out the cause of the vague noises.

"It's natives—at a distance, Jack, my lad," said Mackay. "They're outside the tunnel; so we'll be all right if there's no' too many o' them. I'm just hoping we've seen the full strength o' the tribe already."

They resumed their march; and now they had less difficulty in making progress owing to the continued increase of light, and as they proceeded the confused babel of voices became more and more distinct. The tunnel was by this time veering back towards its original course. Then suddenly a bright light flashed upon them as through a giant lens. The exit of the tunnel was in sight at last! Once more Mackay stopped, and was on the point of making some cautionary remark; but even while he turned the bright circle ahead was darkened, and several natives entered. A word at that moment might have proved disastrous, and Bob gripped Mackay's arm just in time; scarcely twenty yards separated them from their enemies. The big man hesitated only for a moment, then quickly concealed his rifle under his long cloak and walked slowly forward, his companions copying his example without a murmur.

The oncoming warriors were now close beside them; but in the semi-light of the cavern their dusky faces could not be distinguished. By this time they had apparently become aware of the presence of the dauntless four, for they stepped aside to let them pass, and addressed Mackay in a series of unintelligible ejaculations—presumably of inquiry—to which that gentleman answered by a non-committal grunt, and strode on his way. And for the third time within an hour the natives brushed by the little group, and left them unmolested; but on this occasion it was the efficacy of their disguise which saved them—a fact which made the Shadow effervesce with delight. However, it was yet too early to rejoice, and Bob and Jack restrained their spirits with an effort. As for Mackay, he made no sign that anything unusual had happened, and walked on calmly as before, but a

repressed cry of wonder burst from his lips when he reached the end of the tunnel and gazed beyond on the land which they had so eagerly sought, and his companions echoed his cry when they, too, looked on the scene which lay before them. And little wonder, for their eyes were drinking in a vision of rare beauty—it was as if a glimpse of a tropical paradise had been vouchsafed them. In the near distance the waters of a crystal lake glistened in the sunshine, and lapped a coral-white beach, while, fringing its outer edge, and extending back and upwards, a luxurious forest in miniature lay spread. The sight was wonderfully cool and exhilarating to the beholders so long accustomed to the arid desert. Here certainly was no lack of water, no absence of shade.

But in their first hasty glance at the entrancing picture none of the watchers had noticed the many bower-like structures which lined the edge of the abundant foliage; and now Jack drew attention to this feature of the landscape with some concern.

"There must be quite a population in the valley," said he.

Mackay nodded gravely. "My calculations have been all out," he remarked in a subdued voice. Then his rage rose again. "But I'll no' go back," he added fiercely, "until I have avenged my old comrades. I couldna do it, my lads. But you——"

"Will stay with you," interrupted Bob, quietly.

"I reckon something's goin' to happen pretty sudden," grumbled the Shadow, craning his neck out of the tunnel, and looking all around anxiously.

The voices which they had heard while in the far back recesses of the passage reached their ears close beside them, and towards the right. In their eagerness they had overlooked the near vicinity while absorbed in contemplation of the tiny lake and forest beyond; but now the Shadow's gaze rested upon a crouching circle of warriors less than forty yards from him, and it seemed as if each gaudily-bedecked native was eyeing the figures at the mouth of the underground passage with the keenest interest.

"Look, boss," said the Shadow, "they seem to be quite tame. The critters must have seen us all the time."

Mackay raved silently at his lack of perception, and drawing back into the recess, examined his rifle, and felt for his cartridge-belt underneath his furry garb.

"Why," said Bob, "we forget we appear to be savages too; they won't think there is anything wrong."

But in this conjecture Bob was soon proved to be very much mistaken. Immediately the Shadow withdrew his head, an animated discussion appeared to take place among the blacks, and their voices were raised to an alarming pitch. Bob, though still keeping in the shade, could see the dusky ring clearly by pressing hard against the rocky wall on his left, and he noted with dismay the growing disturbance which followed the advent and withdrawal of his companion's befeathered cranium.

"It's no use, Bob," said Mackay, coming up beside him, "They know we are not the genuine article apparently, an' we've got to fight now whether we will or no."

Yet still no attempt was made on the part of the natives to come to closer quarters with the intruders, although many had arisen, bows in hand, as if impatient for the fray.

"There's a curious old chap sitting in the middle," said Jack, peering out of his shelter; "I wonder if he has anything to do with their hesitation? He seems to have a lot to say."

Bob looked again, and caught a glimpse of an odd wizened figure sitting amid the gesticulating warriors, and evidently endeavouring to restrain their ardour. He had not been observable before, but a gap made in the circle by the sudden movement of the restless band had revealed him, as Jack had quickly noticed.

"He must be their king," remarked Mackay; "but it's vera strange that he should want to delay the circus."

The grizzled old native certainly appeared to have considerable influence over the others; there could be no doubt that he was a leader of some sort, and his policy was clearly not the policy of his followers, at which the watchers by the tunnel marvelled exceedingly. For several minutes he

continued to address the multitude, glancing occasionally towards the objects of their wrath and waving his hand as if signalling for some one on the heights through which Mackay and his companions had come. But at last he ceased his wordy exhortations, and slowly arose to his feet, donning as he did so a gigantic head-dress fashioned out of the skin of some peculiar animal, the grinning head of which had been cunningly retained in its pristine shape, so that the living creature seemed to glare out savagely over the thick locks of the wearer; and as he stood thus arrayed a tumultuous roar issued from the lips of the awaiting horde, and they turned in a mass and marched straight for the opening to the underground passage.

"Old Nebuchadnezzar has put his war-paint on at last," muttered Mackay. "Now, my lads, let us rush them while we can. If we can stop them even for a minute we'll win the day in spite o' their numbers."

"Let her go, boss!" yelled the Shadow from behind, and Mackay, with a hoarse bellow of anger, dashed forward to meet the foe, his impetuous comrades bounding closely at his heels. All were filled with the mad desire to slay until the last. The lust of battle had taken hold of them completely; no thought of the probable grim finale was theirs.

Their wild advance caused the blacks to hesitate momentarily, and the front rank crowded back. Bob noticed in a flash the advantage which had thus been given, and he knew why Mackay had so suddenly left the shelter of the cavern. While the natives hustled together not a bow could be bent. Quickly he dropped on one knee beside his leader, Jack and the Shadow falling into line as if by a preconceived arrangement. Had they discharged their rifles at that crucial moment their enemy would have been mowed down before the leaden hail. But ere a finger pressed the trigger, the old chief, with a shrill cry, which was heard high above the din, leapt in front of his myrmidons, and, with an almost regal gesture, waved them back. That he himself escaped being riddled with bullets was a lasting testimony to the iron nerves of the dauntless four who, even at such a critical juncture, disdained to fire on one whose face was turned away from them. But they recovered themselves promptly and prepared to follow up their apparent triumph, yet the ancient warrior stayed them with outstretched hand.

"I'll soon throw him out of the way," roared Mackay, dashing forward.

Before he reached the patriarchal chief, however, a stentorian call from behind arrested his attention, and he stood rooted to the spot, dazed and bewildered. Again the cry sounded in his ears—

"Come back, Jim; for God's sake, come back. There's three hundred against you."

He staggered and would have fallen, had not Bob's strong arm supported him; then he turned almost fearfully. Five tall figures were hastening frantically down the hillside, and the foremost was the watcher of the summit. As in a dream Mackay raised his rifle, and he did not seem to notice when Bob pressed the deadly tube down. He was gazing with wild staring eyes at the approaching form.

"Great Centipedes!" howled the Shadow, in amazement. "It's a white man!"

That broke the spell. With a hoarse exclamation, Mackay rushed to meet the new-comer.



"MACKAY RUSHED TO MEET THE NEW-COMER"

"Dick!" he cried.

"Yes, it's me, Jim," came the answer. "I knew you would come."

CHAPTER XVI

The Prisoners by the Mount

Silently the two men clasped hands. Mackay could not trust himself to speak, so strong was his emotion at meeting his old leader in the flesh after having given him up as dead for over a year.

"Yes, I knew you would come, Jim," repeated Richard Bentley, the explorer, "and month after month I have watched for you on the mountain-top, hoping yet fearing for your coming."

"But the bones?" murmured Mackay, questioningly. "I—saw—the bones?"

Bentley smiled. "I wouldn't have thought it of you, Jim," he said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "But I see you must have fallen into the error you used to preach so much against. Where were your powers of observation? I am sure you would have known the difference between camels' bones and human bones if you had examined them. But I know how you must have felt, old man, and I don't wonder at your mistake at such a terrible moment. They burnt the camels, Jim, because they could never take them through the passage in the mountain——"

"Whaur is ma auld enemy?" roared an interrupting voice, and a lithe figure in savage habiliments spun into the midst of the group, blowing tempestuously. The impetus of his flight down the steep hillside was only brought to a close when he bounced against Mackay like a weighty stone from a catapult.

"I kent it was you! I kent it was you!" he cried, in honest delight; "I couldna mistak' that sweet visage o' yours even though it's half changed its colour."

"Stewart, you red-headed rascal, you've knocked the wind clean oot o' me," replied Mackay, sternly, shaking his aggressor's hand nevertheless with hearty warmth. "I might have known that nothing could have killed you."

Two others now pressed up, their sun-tanned and bearded features fairly glowing with delight. They were Phil, the geologist, and Pioneer Bill, the bushman of Bentley's party, and their joy at seeing their lost comrade again was affecting in its sincerity.

Emu Bill was the next to approach. "I knew you wouldn't be long after me, Mac," he said, "but I'm blowed if I expected you to bounce through so sudden. Bentley, here, mesmerized the nigs that scooped me in, or I should have been dead meat by this time. They seemed mighty unwilling to let me go, all the same, an' I was a bit anxious 'bout your reception, I was."

Meanwhile Bob stood a little way apart, his heart filled with gladness at the happy reunion. Jack and the Shadow were calmly leaning on their rifles, and keeping a watchful glance on the old chief, who in turn was eyeing the boys with a smile on his wrinkled countenance. About a hundred yards behind him his massed warriors stood, silent and grim.

"I reckon we should go an' wash the filthy black off our faces," said the Shadow to Jack; "it feels mighty uncomfortable, it does." Then he gazed at his companion in surprise. "Why," he cried, "you're face is marked like the bars o' a cage. What has you been doin' to it?"

Jack laughed. "I had forgotten that we ought to be black," said he, "or I could have told you that yours was like the moon under partial eclipse."

"And how about mine?" asked Bob.

"Clean washed off," answered Jack. "But look at Mackay; isn't his a treat? It's striped like the zebra in a circus."

Mackay heard the remark, and put up his hand to his cheek. "Well, well," he said, in disgust, "here I was fancyin' myself to be black as the ace o' spades. No wonder the niggers thought there was something no' right about our get-up. It must have been the water dripping from the roof o' the passage." Then he turned to Bob. "It's a good thing we passed that last batch inside the tunnel, Bob."

Bob nodded gravely, then discarded his cumbersome robe, and straightened out his sinewy form with a sigh of relief.

"Now, boys," said Mackay, quietly, addressing himself to Bentley and his comrades, "I want to introduce to you my three young comrades, who have stuck by me on a journey that has tried the nerves and beaten some o' the finest explorers who ever tackled the desert. Come forward, Shadow, an' you, Jack—a pair o' reckless young rascals, true as steel, an' without fear——"

"I say, boss," protested the Shadow, "do let me have a scrimmage wi' a nigger or two, just to show how brave I really is. I is just burstin' wi' bravery——"

Jack at this stage dragged him aside.

"And you, Bob," continued Mackay, and his voice unconsciously became softened, "what can I say for you? Only this, my lad, that without you this expedition would never have reached the mountain. To you belongs a' the credit that my auld friends here shower upon me——"

"No, no," broke in Bob, hastily; "it is just like you to say so, but I'll not allow it. I was only the navigator under your supervision."

Mackay placed his hand on the youth's shoulder. "Bob," he said gently, "I have a confession to make. I'll admit that I ken how to handle a sextant an' read the vernier, but beyond that I canna go. I wasna able to check your observations, my laddie, but I was afraid to tell you before, lest it might make you nervous to ken that a' our lives depended on your skill. Here now, at the end o' our journey, I wish to give you the credit which is your due."

Bentley smiled as he grasped Bob's hand. "Sextant or no sextant," he said, "you couldn't go far out in Mackay's company, my boy. I know him of old. But why, your face seems strangely familiar to me; surely——"

Mackay shrugged his broad shoulders, and smiled a happy smile.

"You hand on a bit, Dick," he said. "I have a few words to say to Bob which I hesitated to speak earlier, for—for obvious reasons. Do you remember when I first met Jack and you, Bob?" he asked.

"I should say so," answered Bob, fervently. "I have had cause to thank——"

The big man shook his head deprecatingly. "And do you know why I, who am a—a very unsociable individual at the best, encouraged you in your wish to go out to Australia, an' even offered you the extraordinar' advantage o' my company on the journey? No, of course you don't. It was because I knew that uncle you spoke of, my lad."

"You knew him?" cried Bob. "But you didn't say——"

"I thought he was dead," broke in Mackay, gravely; "but I was mistaken. He was, an' is, vera much alive—an' his name is Richard Bentley Wentworth."

"Great Heavens!" ejaculated Bentley, gazing at Bob earnestly. "Can it be true? But of course it is. How could I have been so blind."

Then the scales fell from Bob's eyes. "Uncle Dick!" he cried, rushing forward.

"My dear, dear lad," murmured the explorer, clasping him in his arms. "This is the first happiness I have had for ten years. You are a worthy son of a worthy father, my boy. Thank God I have lived to see you."

To say that the onlookers to this strange scene were surprised would ill express the state of their feelings. They were simply thunderstruck. Then Jack found his voice. "Hurrah!" he shouted, in an ecstasy of glee, and hurried to clasp his comrade's hand. Eagerly they all crowded round to offer their congratulations, and Mackay stood alone, a smile of peaceful contentment stealing over his grim old features.

"Yes," he muttered, "there is some satisfaction in the wanderer's life after a'. Bob steered us here, which was right, but Mackay will be the man to lead the back trail through the mountain."

"I fully believe you, Jim," said a voice at his elbow, and Bentley laid an affectionate grasp upon his arm.

The whole of the little drama had been enacted within the space of a few minutes, and the actors therein had apparently become oblivious to the fact that a band of impatient blacks were drawn up in aggressive order at no great distance. They were not allowed to remain long in this blissful state, however, for the aged chief suddenly hastened forward, and shrilled a few

words to Bentley, which had the effect of arousing that happy man to a true sense of his responsibilities. He answered the old warrior in an odd monosyllabic language, which he spoke with perfect ease, much to the astonishment of the youthful members of the group, who had never before heard a white man converse so fluently in the savage tongue. For some moments they held high consultation thus, and Bob was quick to observe a shade of dire uneasiness steal over the features of his newly found relative; and he noticed, too, that the natives in the background were gradually drawing nearer and nearer, while loud, angry mutterings filled their ranks.

It was at this stage that Stewart whispered something into Mackay's ear which made that gentleman frown deeply, hesitate for a brief instant, then surreptitiously remove the magazine of his rifle; and his three companions, obeying a signal from his eye, quickly unloaded their weapons and secreted the cartridges. Bentley seemed to have been conscious of these proceedings, for it was only when the firearms had been rendered harmless that he turned and addressed the party.

"I don't wish to alarm you, boys," he said, "but the king, who has always been a good friend of mine, tells me that his warriors are getting beyond his control, and nothing short of a miracle can save us. You killed four of them, you see, and wounded about a dozen more, and, by their law, a life must pay for a life."

"That's vera comforting," grunted Mackay, preparing to reload his rifle afresh, and glaring savagely at Stewart the while.

"Don't! For Heaven's sake don't do that, Jim," exclaimed Bentley. "Lay down your rifles, and I'll try and talk them over."

Reluctantly each proffered his deadly weapon to the king, who received it with unconcealed joy.

"We've still got our revolvers," whispered Jack to Stewart, who was looking very sorrowful indeed.

Yet still the warriors came surging on, despite their old king's frenzied expostulations. In vain he displayed the trophies he had received in proof of the good intentions of the visitors, and as his followers crowded heedlessly forward, his wrath at his own impotence was terrible to witness.

Mackay was deciding on the bold stroke of retaking the weapons from the king's grasp, when Bentley stepped slowly out to meet the angry mob. He was greeted with shrill yells, the dominant note of which seemed to be fear and expectancy rather than fury.

"He'll be killed! he'll be killed!" cried Jack, making as if to dash to his assistance.

The Shadow restrained him. "I reckon he's all right," said he. "Them nigs is howlin' wi' terror, they are."

"What power can he have over them?" asked Bob, in awe, as he watched the single man sway the fiery multitude with his calm words. Phil, the geologist, who was by his side, answered him.

"Your uncle's knowledge of aboriginal tribes has stood us all in good stead before this," he said quietly. "Listen to that cry. Can you make anything of it?"

"It sounds like Bilya Backan," Bob said, straining his ears to catch the prevailing shouts.

"Bilya Backan!" exclaimed Mackay. "Has Dick got that position here? Ah, well, it means that we are safe enough so long as he keeps his power; but I can see trouble ahead when he tries to get away."

"Why, what does it mean?" questioned Bob, in wonder.

"Mean? It means that he is the sorcerer o' this tribe, and will be guarded night and day if they think he wants to clear out. But, hallo! he doesna seem to be succeeding just as well as he should. It seems to me I'd better be sorcerer number two, an' devise an opportune miracle."

Bentley, indeed, appeared to have great difficulty in quelling the unruly spirit of the savage warriors. They crowded around him almost threateningly, and brandished their bows and clubs in half-restrained fury. The unhappy king had joined his more powerful friend, and was lending his high-pitched voice to the uproar. Mackay unconcernedly chipped at something he held in his hand with the point of his sheath-knife, then stalked jauntily towards the gesticulating throng.

"Keep back, Jim! keep back!" warned Bentley. "You are the man they want principally. Keep back, if you value your life."

"You canna kill me, Dick," laughed Mackay. "I've come over to work a miracle to that effect."

Yet to all appearances it seemed as if the resourceful Scot was tempting Providence to too great a degree in the present instance. The blacks redoubled their clamour at his approach, and one false move on the part of Bentley at this juncture would assuredly have brought about his companion's doom, but he did not once turn his back on the truculent band.

"What wild idea have you got?" he cried over his shoulder. "I think I'll manage them all right. I'm telling them that the spirit of the thunder killed their brethren for their own misdeeds."

"That's good enough," said Mackay. "But you'd better tell them you've decided to slaughter me right off now, only that you're afraid Wangul, the maist powerful god in their calendar, will protect me, seein' I'm an auld friend o' his. Get my rifle from old Methuselah, Dick; let me load it, an' shoot me with the first cartridge. Savvy?"

Bentley pretended not to hear, but he spoke out several sentences rapidly, which evidently pleased the warriors mightily, then he signed to the king to fetch the rifles.

"The long-barrelled one's mine, Dick," cautioned Mackay. "Ah, that's right."

He seized his treasured weapon, and in a trice had inserted two cartridges, and closed the breech, leaving one in the barrel. Bentley received back the deadly firearm with evident trepidation, and once more addressed the multitude.

"Hear ye, O my people," he cried, in their own weird tongue. "The friend of Wangul, the mighty dweller in the waters, whose breath dries up the land and makes it desolate, stands before you and dares the strength of the big thunder. If it so be that he dies by the spirit which issueth forth when the thunder speaks, then shall you work your will upon the others. But if he lives and defies the spirit, then surely is he indeed in the guarding care of

Wangul, and must be permitted to go unhurt with his brethren to partake of food with me in my home by the hillside."

Mackay smiled grimly as he gathered the text of the speech, but a great roar from the assembled blacks indicated that the arrangement met with their full approval. Bentley raised the rifle with an obvious effort, and at the action a wild cry of alarm broke from the lips of the little group in the rear, who had never dreamt that Mackay's promised miracle was to take on such a deadly aspect of reality. And now the withered old chief created a diversion. With a gurgle of joy he sprang forward and took the rifle from Bentley's unresisting hands, and levelling it almost against Mackay's broad chest, pulled the trigger. A terrific explosion followed, and Bentley uttered a groan of anguish. The miracle, as he had understood it, was to have been accomplished by his firing wide, and he had relinquished the firearm, never thinking that the wily king of the savages meant to do other than lay it aside with the others. To his intense astonishment, however, and to the amazement of the massed blacks, the "friend of Wangul" stood erect and smiling after the thunderous reverberation had died away.

A loud cheer from his comrades behind showed how truly thankful they were at his marvellous escape from what had looked like certain death, but the most astounded of all present was, undoubtedly, the dusky individual who had fired the shot; he pranced about with the reeking rifle still in his hands, shrieking out all sorts of incantations. Suddenly he stopped short, opened and closed the breech of the gun, thereby forcing another cartridge into position, and, with a crafty smile on his lips, directed the long tube at a stalwart savage standing near, and fired. The unoffending victim uttered a yell like a wounded dingo, and sprang several feet into the air, then subsided on the ground, and writhed in torment with a bullet-hole clean through his shoulder. That was enough. With droning wails of fear the natives drew back in alarm, gazing at the man who had withstood a similar shock with wild, staring eyes. Bentley knelt down and examined the wounded native, then, calling two of his brethren, who came forward reluctantly, he gave them some directions for his treatment. The king meanwhile was grovelling on the ground, his head beating the dust, and his voice raised in feeble lamentation; and, while he was thus prostrated, Jack crept stealthily up and gathered in the rifles lying near.

"That will be another miracle for the old beggar to explain," said he, when he rejoined his companions.

"You've fairly frightened the old fellow to death, Jim," remarked Bentley, stooping over the fallen monarch. "I'll tell you about him afterwards; but he was proof against all sorts of sorceries, and now I shouldn't wonder if he turns over a new leaf, and goes in for the extremest forms of savagery. But come with us to our retreat. There are many things we have to talk over to-night. This day has been a wonderful one for all of us."

"You might tell me, boss, how you dodged the bullet?" pleaded the Shadow, as they all walked along together.

"Yes, that is a matter I should like to understand," added Bentley.

The big man laughed. "The explanation is vera simple," said he. "There wasna any bullet in the first cartridge; I took it oot aforehand!"

"You're just the same auld deceitfu' schemer you used to be," murmured Stewart, sorrowfully. "I'm fair shocked at your woefu' depravity. You would actually bamboozle the puir heathen!"

"What's that you've got inside your cloak?" demanded Mackay, slyly, noting an odd protuberance in his corrector's garment.

Stewart beamed. "That's a vera dangerous gun, Mac, ma man," he answered solemnly, "an' I'm takin' it awa' in case the unfortunate niggers might dae themselves damage wi' it."

They had been so engrossed in their mutual recriminations that Mackay had not noticed the odd logged structure which now appeared before them; it was half hidden amid a splendid group of lime and cedar trees which occurred in the valley, about two hundred yards to the north of the tunnel entrance, and the waters of the beautiful lake lapped the white sands within a few paces of it. Mackay gave a rough glance round to make sure of his position. The sun had descended behind the frowning barrier range, and a gloom was settling over the valley.

Bentley guessed his thoughts. "I know every foot of the country, Jim," he said quietly. "We'll talk over our plans to-night. What have we got in the

larder, Stewart?"

"I caught ane or twa fish this morning," answered that individual, smilingly. "I thought we might have some visitors to keep us company."

"And there's bread made from wild bananas," added Phil. "It's not half bad, though it will take you a little time to get accustomed to it."

Bentley pushed open the door, which was an airy contrivance composed of light saplings interlaced with long tendril forest growths, and it swung from above by stout plaited grassy cords.

"Enter, boys," he said, "and welcome, most heartily welcome, to the white man's dwelling in the mystic valley of the Never Never."

Mackay mechanically raised his hand to his head as he stepped between the portals, and a grunt of disgust forced itself from his lips when, instead of the hat he expected to find, a few muddy feathers broke off in his grasp. The boys, following close behind, saw the action and laughed, yet immediately proceeded to copy his example, so strong was the habit of civilization upon them.

The single large room within was bare, save for a rough logged table in the middle of the floor, and sundry rude but comfortable chairs which were scattered about.

"We sleep on the ground," explained Bentley; "we've never had the heart to attempt building proper bunks. Have you a match, Jim?"

Mackay sought in his pocket and produced the small corked bottle in which he carried his supply so that it might be preserved from damp, and Bentley, with a sigh of thankfulness, applied a light to a torch of fine fibrous sticks stuck in a crevice in the table. Bob watched him with many questions surging on his lips.

"How do you usually get a light?" he asked at length.

"You are anticipating me, Bob," laughed Bentley. "At night we use the flints, in the old primitive way, but in the daytime I use the lens of my pocket microscope which was left to me. If I hold it in the sun's rays it will light a fire of these twigs in less than sixty seconds. That was the first thing

the natives saw me do that made them marvel. They couldn't understand how I could call down fire from heaven, and it's one of the few things which that knowing old king of theirs hasn't grasped yet."

In a few minutes Stewart and Pioneer Bill were busy preparing supper. There seemed to be no lack of cooking utensils, and each vessel was most peculiarly marked, as if it had been stamped out of the solid. Mackay, who had thrown off his encumbering outer garb, sat gazing into the fire, apparently lost in the depths of his thoughts; Bentley and Phil were talking earnestly together in a subdued voice; Emu Bill roamed aimlessly about the room; Bob, Jack, and the Shadow were glaring with wide-open eyes at the thin metal platters with which Stewart had adorned the table;—not one of them could find words to speak.

"Is—is it another mirage?" muttered the Shadow, at length, stretching out a hesitating hand; then a whoop of delight burst from his lips. "Say, boss," he cried, shaking Mackay energetically by the shoulder. "Look! Look at this!"

Mackay awoke from his reverie with a start, and turned his head.

"Ay, it's gold, Shadow," said he, calmly. "I am no' vera surprised."

Bentley gave a whistle of annoyance. "Well, boys," he explained, "I absolutely forgot to mention the matter, but gold is so plentiful in this quarter that I have got quite accustomed to it, and I do believe I had also forgotten that the stuff has such a powerful value——"

"Spin us your yarn after supper, Dick," said Mackay. "I'm as hungry as a starved dingo just now."

"I've felt a bit sick ever since I saw them plates an' things," said Emu Bill, pausing in his perambulations. "Howlin' blazes! I wish we could cart the whole mountain away wi' us."

"I don't suppose you've got a bit o' tea in your pocket?" interjected Stewart, eyeing Mackay pathetically. "No? Weel, I'll just have to mak' up my ain concoction. It's no' vera bad when you get accustomed to it; but I'm sair wearyin' for a ceevilized drink. I hope the flavour o' the leaves winna disagree wi' ye; I gather them off a wee bush that grows in the forest, but the taste is naething like the real article."

Stewart's tea, however, proved to be a wonderfully palatable beverage, and the accompanying fare of such a highly appetizing nature that Mackay's little party soon felt revived to their fullest energies.

"It will be something to remember that we've eaten out of golden dishes," Jack remarked with much satisfaction. "I think I'll appropriate a spoon as a memento."

Bentley sighed wearily. "You may be tired enough of these same spoons before you leave here, Jack," he said.

Mackay gave a snort of disapproval, and rose from his chair.

"Load up these rifles, Shadow," he directed. "And now, Dick"—seating himself once more—"fire away wi' your story. What sort o' place have we struck, an' how do ye account for the natives being so different from others? an' tell me how in the name o' a' that's wonderful, you havena escaped long syne wi' your pockets fu' o' nuggets?"

Without hesitation, Bentley plunged into his narrative. "When you had been about an hour away, Jim," he began, "chasing up that confounded camel, and while we were loading the team, we were suddenly surrounded by an army of the oddest-looking warriors imaginable. They must have been hiding in the scrub near by us for some time, for we had no warning whatever of their coming, and, to make matters worse, not one of us had a rifle ready. They bore down on us without a word, and, of course, quickly had the best of it, for they were ten to one, and were armed with clubs and arrows. They seemed quite peaceably inclined, however, and did not appear to be in any way anxious to exterminate us at once, though Stewart got a crack on the head which nearly finished him."

"I did that," murmured that individual, patting the back of his skull tenderly. "But ye shid mak' mention o' hoo I squelched a when o' them wi' ma naked fist aforehand."

"They carried us away," continued Bentley, reminiscently, "though not before they had built a huge fire beside our camp. I thought they meant it for us; but when I saw them unloading the poor camels I knew at once what was going to happen. It is a common custom among the most knowing savages to burn the bodies of animals or men so as to give the impression

that the expedition had died of thirst years before. They have deceived Government search-parties many times by that ruse, and frightened off explorers from tackling the same supposedly droughty quarter again. Anyhow, our captors made short work of the unfortunate camels, scooped up every bit of our outfit, and marched on. I don't need to speak of our surprise when we passed through the choking fumes of the sulphur springs. We all know about them, and probably you know more than we do, for you were camped alongside, and we scarcely got a glimpse of the wonderful craters. The passage, too, you know possibly better than we, for we have never been allowed to go back to the entrance, and twenty warriors guard it night and day when there are any signs of danger, or a strange tribe is in the vicinity. But the biggest surprise of all came when we had an opportunity of studying the valley and its formations, and we got that very speedily, for that curious old king of the tribe released us almost as soon as we were brought in."

"I can remember he had some difficulty with his followers then, too," interjected Phil, gravely. "They weren't quite so wild as they were to-day, but they were bad enough until you talked to them in their own lingo."

Bentley smiled. "I could see even then," he said, "that their aged leader had some strange scheme in hand, though it was several weeks later before he laid his views quite clearly before me."

"And do you mean to say that you waited here o' your ain free will as prisoners?" snorted Mackay.

"For the first little while we were interested to know what sort of country we had reached, and then, when even the riches of the valley began to pall on us, we suddenly realized that we could not help ourselves. The tunnel was always well watched, but even had we got safely through the mountain, where were we then? On the edge of an enormous desert without food or means of transport. You must recollect, Jim, that the camels had been killed, as probably yours have been by this time."

Mackay started to his feet, but resumed his seat with a smile.

"It would be dark before they could venture out," he said, musingly. "We have a good ten hours' grace yet. Hurry up wi' your story, Dick; I want to

know whether we should stay here, an' get rich quick wi' the gold oot o' the mountain, or clear out while we have a chance."

"You forget, Jim," said Bentley, quietly, "that your chance has gone. I tried to warn you from the summit in every conceivable manner, but you wouldn't understand. I even scribbled charcoal messages on pieces of wood and threw them down, and you paid no attention."

"We thought you were throwing stones at us," said Bob. "You looked so very like a native at that distance."

"It was a miracle we didn't pop you over with our rifles," commented Emu Bill, shortly.

"I dinna see that our chance has vanished just yet, if we care to take it," Mackay observed, with undiminished assurance. "But go on wi' your yarn, Dick; what I'm anxious to know is, who made that tunnel and for what purpose?"

"First of all, let me tell you," said Bentley, "that this valley is almost impregnable from every direction but one. Away to the north-east there is a slight break in the circular range, but the country in that quarter is so broken and desolate that it is almost impassable, and certainly no explorer making an east or west course would dream of altering his route to the south at that point. He would rather give the mountain—if he happened to see it then—as wide a berth as possible. On the west, as you know, Nature guards her secret very effectually, and it might have remained undiscovered for another hundred years if you had not escaped from the expedition as you did, and so been able to track up the mysterious mountain afresh, and with greater caution. But now that you are here, you may take it as a surety that you will never be allowed to leave with the knowledge you have gained. The fact is, boys, this valley in the heart of the Never Never land is a perfect treasure-house of gold and gems, and it is inhabited by the remnants of a once truly remarkable tribe. They are still infinitely superior in knowledge and intellect to any other aboriginal race that I know, but they have been degenerating slowly these last many centuries, ever since the upheaval, I should imagine, which altered the aspect of Central Australia, and separated it from Polynesia. Their environment has protected them to an enormous degree, for their home in this natural paradise is surely all that could be

desired, but, from what I have been able to gather from the king, they have inherited a policy of isolation, which is now almost a part of their creed. Any unsuspecting tribe that wanders near is attacked with the utmost ferocity, as I have myself witnessed on more than one occasion. The early rulers of this strange little kingdom were undoubtedly wise men, and it seems to me they were struggling towards a kind of civilization. The tunnel was driven in their time, but whether it was intended to provide a means of exterminating their savage neighbours of the plains, or gradually pushed through in the course of their excavations for gold, I haven't been able to discover, though I rather fancy both reasons came into play. The gold has been used for all sorts of purposes, because it can be hammered into any shape so very easily. Its value in the outside world is wholly incomprehensible to them."

"Do you think they have ever heard of the great world beyond the desert?" asked Bob, who had been listening with keen interest.

"There can be no doubt about that, my lad. It's simply marvellous how remote native races acquire their news; but they invariably get it, though in this case there is nothing inexplicable about it, for the cunning old king has his scouts wandering all over the country. The dangers of the vast salt tracks have little meaning to them, for they seem to have cultivated an instinct for smelling out any water there may be within miles of them, and they can travel a very long way without it if necessity arises. Their system of navigation is beyond my understanding altogether."

"An' what do you think made the old chap so tenderhearted when you came along, Dick?" asked Mackay.

Bentley shook his head. "I know why he didn't demolish us at first," he said. "The tunnel had been commencing to cave in about the centre, where the dripping water had weakened the walls, and all his warriors' efforts at timbering it were without avail. You see, they hadn't grasped the necessary principle of locking the timber to prevent lateral strain. I suppose he thought the white man could make things right."

"An' it was a terrible hard job too," grunted Stewart, "for we had to do the maist o' it in the dark. A light wouldna' burn five minutes in the place, an' the air was enough to poison a nigger."

"After that," continued Bentley, "I seemed to get into his good graces somewhat. I talked to him of other tribes I had met, and generally showed such a keen interest in the welfare of his kingdom, that I believe he altered his purpose to kill us, greatly against the wishes of his subjects. It was then he gave out that I was the direct representative of one of their most dreaded gods, and I've had to live up to my reputation ever since. You saw the result of my influence over the king to-day. Yet I've noticed the more I have tried to civilize him, the less his warriors like him, and, to tell the truth, I expected an open revolt against his ruling long before this. If I hadn't arrived in time to-day I shouldn't like to think what might have happened. I didn't expect you could possibly get through the passage, for when I rescued Bill from the warriors they went straight back, and we climbed the mountain to make another effort to warn you against trying. They were so savage when I took Bill from them, that I believe they would have killed you right away if they had met you. I don't know yet how you escaped."

"As it happened," said Mackay, dryly, "the darkness saved us when they first came through, an' when they were returning we had fortunately made a mistake in our direction, and got into a cross drive."

"Thank goodness we made these drives," cried Bentley, fervently.

"You made them?" echoed Mackay, incredulously.

"Yes, we made them, Jim. I tried to get the natives to help, but they very quickly tired of the work, and contented themselves watching us instead. I felt curious to know the width of the lode, and we just managed to strike the walls of the giant fissure, when our picks, which we had recovered, were worn almost to the wooden handles. I scarcely fancied continuing operations with flint-headed implements, such as must have been used in the main work of excavation, and, besides, I didn't see any hope of us being able to carry away the gold we got, even if an opportunity of escape had offered. We washed the stuff in the lake here by hand; it decomposed very rapidly on contact with the air, and hardly required any crushing. Stewart made all our cooking utensils out of the results of our work, and I melted what was left. You will see it lying over there in the corner."

Mackay looked casually in the direction indicated, but the three boys made a dash towards the golden treasure, and after a first glance the usually

imperturbable Scot arose with a bound and followed them. There, lying carelessly on the damp clay, were half a dozen huge irregularly shaped masses, which glistened yellow in the dull light. Jack lifted one in his hand with some difficulty.

"I reckon I want to lie down an' die somewhere," muttered Emu Bill, feebly blinking his eyes at the dazzling spectacle.

"How much do you think you've got here, Dick?" said Mackay, calmly.

Bentley smiled. "Just about a hundredweight, I calculate," he answered. "But it is no earthly good to us. We can't carry it away, even if we had the chance."

Mackay looked perplexed, and for a few moments seemed to be struggling with a mighty problem.

"The weight wouldna' be much among the lot o' us," he murmured at length, "but—but it hurts me sair to think o' leaving a' that stuff in the mountain."

"Don't let that worry you, old man," broke in Bentley hastily. "If you've got a scheme for escape, let us act upon it without delay; there's more than any of us will ever need in this shanty besides gold. Show him the collection, Phil."

Without a word Phil drew forth a short, deep case made of plaited twigs from a recess under the table, and threw open the lid, exposing a mass of red, blue, and yellow tinted pebbles.

"There you are, Mac," said he, "they don't look anything special in their present rough state, but they're worth a long way more than a hundredweight of gold, and certainly very much more portable. They are rubies and sapphires, and I think there are some diamonds among them. There's surely enough here to go round without bothering about more, though I can show you where to get them to-morrow if you want a bigger stock."

"To-morrow, Phil," said Mackay, with decision, "we'll be marching along homeward bound, if we're no' lying perforated wi' arrows in some corner o'

the tunnel. We'll help you to carry the treasure, an' maybe afterwards we'll come back an' get some for oursel's. Isn't that right, Bob?"

Bob nodded, then quickly dived into his pocket, and extricated therefrom sundry rounded stones, and showed them to Phil.

"Are these any good?" he asked. "I picked them up on the other side of the mountain the first day we arrived, and had forgotten all about them."

"They're exactly the same, Bob," returned the geologist, with a smile, "and they come from the same source, apparently."

"Let us know your plan, Jim, and we'll make an effort to get away if it is possible," urged Bentley. "But I won't budge unless we agree to make an even divide of the treasure of the Never Never." And the sharing of the spoil was insisted upon with happy unanimity.

It was now about ten o'clock in the evening and Mackay pushed open the door and looked out; the air was close and sultry as if presaging a thunderstorm, and a heavy, dark cloud suspended over the little valley; in the gloom near the tunnel several forms were to be seen flitting about. He returned into the room with a smile on his lips.

"We're goin' to have rain, I think," he announced, "an' I shouldn't wonder if there's a bit o' thunder along wi' it. The elements will fight on our side, boys; we'll just give them a bit o' a start. An' now, Dick," he added, eyeing his old leader quizzically, "did I no' see you lookin' at us when we were blowing chunks o' Australia into the air this morning?"

"I saw you making a tomb for poor Never Never Dave," answered Bentley, sadly.

Emu Bill groaned and Mackay sighed deeply.

"But that was yesterday, Dick. What about this morning?"

"Yes, I noticed you this morning, too; but I only heard one explosion, and didn't think anything of it."

"Where were your powers o' observation, Dick? We were bursting a new entrance into the mountain." But Mackay's satisfaction at his sally was

clouded by the sad recollections aroused by his friend's first remark. "You tell him, Bob," he added weakly. "Tell him o' our precautionary arrangements which should stand us in good stead now."

A few minutes later a series of great pattering drops on the bark roof of the dwelling intimated that the expected storm had burst; slowly they came at first, then louder and louder hissed the growing deluge until it seemed as if the floodgates of the heavens had broken loose, and a dull, tearing roar echoed across the vale as the thunder-cloud rent in twain.

"If that doesna frighten the niggers they ought to be ashamed o' themselves," grunted Mackay. "Now we'll go, lads, an' trust to Providence an' our rifles for a safe journey."

They gathered up their precious freight, each taking a goodly share so that nothing was left, and silently they filed out into the raging night, and, with Bentley leading, groped a cautious course towards the underground passage. Through the beating torrent they caught glimpses of many lights in the native camps bordering the lake near at hand, and the droning intonation of a most melancholy chant reached their ears in occasional snatches as they hurried on their way. The natives were invoking the favour of the mighty thunder-god who that day had smitten one of their warriors so cruelly. At last they arrived at the opening from which Mackay and his companions had first gazed out in wonder, and with a united breath of thankfulness entered the yawning darkness of the cavern.

Yet, even as they disappeared, a shrill cry of alarm sounded out above the storm from the vicinity of the home they had just vacated, and a chorus of answering yells showed too truly that their flight had been discovered.

"That was the old king's voice," whispered Bentley, as the fugitives paused for a moment to listen. "He probably called to get you to stay the thunder. We just got away in time."

"The other end is where our danger lies," muttered Mackay. "Now, lads, follow me, an' be as slippery as you can. Those howlin' hyenas will be at our backs in a minute."

Blindly they stumbled on, staggering from wall to wall in their feverish eagerness; but before they had even reached the cross-drives, the cries of

their savage pursuers were echoing along the passage close in their rear. On, on they laboured, and now Mackay began to hesitate in his course, so that his comrades kept pushing up in a confused mass behind him. In the excitement which reigned they could not well understand why their doughty leader should pause at such an inopportune moment. But that level-headed individual knew exactly what he was doing; in another instant he had found the rope which hung over the treacherous pit.

"Now, my bonnie boys," said he, "over you go. You, Bob, take the lead, and walk quietly on. I'll be after you in a jiff."

"I never knew of this death-trap," breathed Bentley, hoarsely. "Jim, old man, Heaven knows how you managed to negotiate this terrible place at first."

"My power o' observation is strong even in the dark," chuckled the brawny Scot. "Now, grip the rope, Dick, an' get across. Here's old Methuselah's gang almost beside us, an' I want to stop their progress a bit."

Bentley delayed no further, and in a flash Mackay too had leapt the gully, but, ere he hastened after the others, he leaned out over the unseen chasm and smote at the thick cord high overhead with his sheath-knife, then he gathered up his burden and struggled after his companions. He overtook them while they were yet some distance from the sudden bend which occurred just opposite the entrance the gelignite had made, for Bob was treading cautiously, expecting each moment to be assailed by the warriors whose duty it was to abide by the rocking stone. And that his fears in that direction were by no means groundless was proved by the excited mutterings which at this moment issued from the end of the passage, and the ominous snap of the great rock as it closed into position was distinctly heard. The watchful blacks had evidently been investigating matters outside, and had just returned to their post. The clamour of the pursuing band was now most demoralizingly loud and fierce. They seemed to be already rejoicing at the pleasing prospect before them: their enemy was neatly caught between two fires; little wonder that they sent out shriek after shriek of delirious acclamation. And in the mean time the escaping party, trudging heavily through the mire, rejoiced also that the noisy exuberance of the warriors so effectually drowned their own hastening footsteps, and

thus prevented their near approach to safety from being made known to the awaiting savages.

Then a yell, louder and more dismal than ever, suddenly echoed through the cavern; it was followed by a dull plunge, and immediately a succession of similar disturbances intimated that the all too eager warriors had experienced a rude and ardour-cooling check. Mackay chuckled right heartily when the success of his scheme was thus revealed to him.

"There has been more than one o' the beggars who has jumped for the rope an' missed," he whispered, with ill-suppressed mirth; and then only did his comrades guess the part he had played in the natives' discomfiture.

By this time they had reached the quick turn of the passage, and Bob felt carefully for the saving gap that would lead to freedom. The cries of the baffled warriors in the rear now rang out through the darkness like the wails of coyotes cheated of their prey, and their brethren ahead, by their hoarse exclamations of dismay, were apparently considerably exercised over the strange happening which had taken place.

"Quick, boys," said Mackay, when Bob had laid bare the opening. "Up ye go in a hurry, an' hang on to your treasure; I'll send the rifles aloft when you're a' through."

Bentley would have remonstrated, but the imperturbable director of affairs was obdurate.

"I'm engineering this circus," he said sternly. "Now, out you go. Whoop-la!"

In his own hearty exuberance he seemed utterly to have forgotten the near presence of a part of the enemy, and his voice sounded out boisterously as he cheered each of his companions on his way to the outside world. For a brief instant there was absolute silence from the extreme end of the tunnel, and Mackay knew that the inevitable rush would speedily follow. Nor was he mistaken. With screams of rage the blacks advanced, and the reckless man laughed aloud as they came. He caught Jack, who alone remained, in his powerful arms and literally hurled him into the embrace of Stewart, who stood ready to receive him.

"And now, my lads, here's the rifles," he cried, thrusting the collected weapons out through the aperture.

"Hang the rifles! Come oot yersel'!" howled Stewart, reaching down a massive bony fist, and grasping his comrade by the shoulder; and in this way Mackay, clutching fast to the armoury of the expedition, was hauled to the surface, even as the foremost of the vengeful warriors dashed their heads impotently into the aperture through which he had been yanked so rigorously forth.



"MACKAY, CLUTCHING FAST TO THE ARMOURY OF THE EXPEDITION, WAS HAULED TO THE SURFACE"

"There was no need for you exertin' your muscular powers in that vera drastic fashion," reproved the latest arrival, turning, and thrusting the stock of his rifle down into the gap with calm forcefulness.

The response which greeted his action seemed to soothe him somewhat.

"All's well that ends well," he remarked philosophically; "but before we start congratulating oorsel's we'd better lock these twa doors an' leave the keys on the outside."

In a short time a very effective boulder barricade was arranged before both entrances, the enormous rocks used for the purpose being rolled and carried to their positions by the united strength of the party; only when this work was completed, when the yells of the baulked warriors sounded dull and subdued behind the solid barriers, only then did the earnest toilers pause.

The night was beautifully clear, not a cloud was visible in the sky, and the stars shone down with steady radiance. The rising mists from the bubbling caldrons spread like a ghostly white veil in the near westward distance, and ever and anon a heavy rumbling would run along the line of the deep cavities, and fresh vapoury puffs from the craters ascended towards the heavens. For fully a minute no one spoke; the extreme tension on their nerves for the last half-hour had been most trying to all, and their silence was now more eloquent of their thankfulness than words.

"There has been no rain on this side of the mountain," said Bob, at length, examining the rubbly surface of the ground intently.

"It would all condense inside the valley, Bob," answered Bentley. "We are back once more in the thirsty desert of the Never Never, and"—turning to Mackay—"we owe our escape to you, Jim; we owe our lives to you——"

"We'll no' dwell on the subject," interrupted that gentleman, cheerily. "I have no doubt we'll a' find oursel's in tighter corners on some other expedition. It's fair surprisin' how often a man can warstle oot o' a difficulty by the skin o' his teeth. I'm just a wee bit afraid that the skin o' my teeth is gettin' sair worn at the game, but it's grand fun, a' the same. However," he continued hastily, as an upward glance revealed to him several dark forms on the summit outlined against the sky, "I think I'll go and round up the camels now, so that we can start on the homeward trail without any unnecessary delay. I've a dim idea that the climate o' the country nearer Fortunate Spring will be healthier for us than this."

"I is comin' wi' you, boss," cried the Shadow. "I think I know where the leather-hided animiles are."

"All right, my lad; an' you, Jack, might unearth the stores an' the water-bag, so as to be ready when we come back. Never mind the heavy tools. I see the niggers have shifted the case o' gelignite we left in sight. I hope it gives them indigestion pretty bad."

"Have ye no' got an extra pair o' breeks in the camp?" inquired Stewart, appealingly. "I dinna like waltzin' about like a gorilla oot o' a circus."

Mackay laughed. "I'm vera pleased to see you've got some sense o' shame left in ye, my man," he said sternly. "Mak' free o' the wardrobe o' the expedition, boys, every one o' you. Bob will dispense it out, though I don't think there's enough to go round. Anyhow, there's lots o' string in the outfit, an' you can easily mak' yoursel's vera presentable garments out o' the empty bags when we get further on; but I can see we'll a' be in an outward state o' advanced disintegration before we reach civilization."

It was nearly two months later, and the sun stared pitilessly down on a struggling camel-train that was wearily forcing its way outwards from the grim desert of the interior. The animals comprising the team were but four in all, surely much too inadequate a number to be the mainstay of the nine strangely garbed figures who accompanied them; yet, judging by the light packs on their backs, it was very apparent that the outfit of the returning expedition did not greatly impede their movements. Slowly, slowly the great hulking creatures laboured on. At the leader's head strode a youth, who, every now and again, turned to pat the trembling nostrils of his cumbrous charge, and cheer it forward with endearing words. His face was deeply browned by long exposure to the scorching sun's rays. His clothing, consisting of a few shreds of what had once been a shirt, and a pair of nether garments so tattered and torn that they clung by almost miraculous means to his person, was sufficient to indicate that he had been long on the march; but if further proof were required, a glance at his boots would have been more than enough. The uppers alone were left, and they were tied to his sockless feet by numberless cords and strips of hessian cloth. But despite the dilapidated nature of his dress, it was the acme of respectability,

compared with that of some of his comrades. Indeed, the combined wardrobe of the party was such that the most abandoned tramp would have turned aside from it in disgust.

"Keep Misery moving, Jack—keep him moving," cried a familiar voice; and a strongly built, yet gaunt-faced man strode up alongside the young leader of the train, and patted his shoulder in friendly encouragement.

Then he stopped and awaited the coming of the rearmost camel, which was lagging painfully, and addressed its attendant in similar tones.

"An hour or so more will do it, my lad—only an hour or so more. Golden Flat should be just over the horizon."

"Say, boss," came the answer, "this here fiery animile is 'bout busted; but I reckon I'll pull him in somehow."

He groped about in some hidden recess of his well-ventilated shirt, and extricated a small shining instrument, which he placed to his lips with a smile of real joy.

"Now, boys," he cried, "here we goes again—one, two, three!" and at once the strains of a favourite melody echoed out in the air.

The bulk of his companions shuddered at the opening shock, then joined boisterously in the chorus. Loudly, triumphantly, they bellowed forth in varying voices and keys, and, lo! the camels pricked up their ears and quickened their steps, and the weary-eyed singers and chief musician marched to the tune thus given with sprightly step—

"Soon we'll be in London town.
Sing, my lads, yo ho-o——"

Again and again the cheering refrain was taken up; then suddenly a cry of astonishment burst from the lips of a lithe and wiry young man who had been on the point of consulting his note-book for the twentieth time since he took his noonday altitude.

"We've missed it!" he cried. "That must be Kalgoorlie ahead."

The music stopped at once; the white, glistening roofs of a fair-sized township had suddenly appeared to view, nestling at the foot of a gentle undulation in the land surface.

"I'm afraid there has been some mistake made, Bob," said a tall, grave-faced, dark-bearded man who walked by his side. "What do you make of it, Jim?" He addressed the stalwart individual who had but a moment or so before been coaxing on the camels.

"I don't know, Dick; it's hardly big enough for Kalgoorlie. I canna think what place it is. Bob, my lad, that's the first error o' navigation I've known you to make."

So did Mackay's expedition, with its augmented numbers rescued from the far back Never Never Land, yet with one sad depletion in the original party, see civilization once more. It would have been hard indeed to recognize them now, so marked were they by privation. The stores had been used most sparingly, for the supply had not been lavish enough to stand the additional strain imposed upon it by the extra appetites of Bentley's party. So all had cheerfully pinched and starved themselves throughout the long journey. But now their sufferings were nearly over; civilization, in the form of some unknown township or city, was in sight. Bob alone seemed to be grieved. He had steered an unerring course these many weeks; and now, when he fancied he was heading for Golden Flat, it was humiliating to feel that at the very last he had made some grave miscalculation.

"Never mind, Bob," said Mackay, kindly. "You knew you were safe enough in your direction."

Bob sighed and shook his head, and consulted his log-book again, but appeared to derive little satisfaction from his scrutiny. On, on the worn-out team staggered; and as the welcome settlement loomed up nearer and nearer the hearts of the wayfarers grew light. Yet the size of the township confused them; there were several wide streets in evidence, and one great building in particular arrested their attention. And yet withal the whole scene seemed strangely familiar to Mackay and his young companions, and Emu Bill, too, looked puzzled as he gazed at the strange city so revealed.

"I hope it ain't no mirage," he murmured, with vague discontent.

"We'll soon know what we've struck," cried Jack. "Here's a horseman coming out to meet us."

"I thought I knew every bit o' this country," grumbled Mackay, "but this certainly beats me, though somehow everything looks vera like a place I prospected before. Anyhow, we'll soon see. Hallo!" he called out, as the horseman drew rein in front of him and stared at the travel-worn company in curious amazement. "Hallo! you bold, bad bushman; what township is this?"

The man replied only with a gaze of more intense amazement than before, until he was sternly brought to his bearings by the now irate questioner.

"Say, mate," he protested weakly, "don't bounce a man so sudden. You all look like Rip Van Winkles, you does, only worse. But you must be strangers in these parts if you don't know Wentworth City. Why, it's the biggest min _____"

"What!"

The cry came like a roar from the lips of the nine men at once, and the startled individual on the horse jerked back in alarm; but becoming satisfied that his interrogators really desired information, he proceeded to give it to them.

"Wentworth City, mates, ain't very old, but it has squatted here to stay. It boomed up like a shot after the diskivery o' a process for treating the refractory ores in the district. There's simply no end o' the stuff, an' we expect to get a railway along shortly."

"How did it get its name?" inquired Mackay, calmly.

"Well, I has only been a couple o' weeks here myself, an' don't know exactly how it happened; but every one will tell you that it is called after the diskiverer o' the process which sent it booming. A young chap, I believe he was, an' he went out exploring afterwards. But it's mighty funny you doesn't know that much. Say, you must have come in from out back?"

Mackay nodded briefly. "You've struck it," said he; "but now tell me if you know a man called Nuggety Dick, and where can we find him?"

"Nuggety Dick?" echoed the horseman. "Why, you won't have any trouble finding him. He's the mayor, he is. Go along the main street right in front o' you—it is called Mackay Street—an' turn down Golden Promise Drive on your right, an'—but I'd better go in front an' show you——"

"Yes, you'd better," murmured Mackay, feebly; then he reached out and clasped Bob's hand.

"And so you all mean to have a trip to the old country, boys?" said Nuggety Dick.

It was about an hour later, and the wanderers were seated in the mayor's dining-room doing ample justice to the generous fare provided by that hospitable individual, whose pleasure at meeting his old friends again had been almost boyish in its glad exuberance.

"It's over ten years since I left the dear old land, Dick," answered Bentley, "and now I should like to see it again. I wanted to persuade every one to come, but I found they didn't need any persuading. All but Bill seemed to have taken it as a foregone conclusion that they were to have a run home as a reward for their labours."

"An' I would go quick enough, boys," said Emu Bill, quietly, "but I reckon I'd peg out if I lost sight o' the Southern Cross. I ain't no traveller, boys; I is only a simple bushman, an' somehow the grim old desert grips me tight."

"I reckon I'll be able to tell you all about it when I get back, Bill," said the Shadow. "I is goin' with Jack to see the sights, an' we'll have a rare good time——"

"I hope you've made up your mind to behave yoursel'?" interjected Mackay, severely.

"Surely, boss, you can trust me. I won't even squelch a policeman unless he looks at me cross-eyed. I'll be gentle as a little lamb, I will, an' I won't round up no horses nor camels nor nothin'."

"Well, I hope it's only a trip you're goin' to take, boys, an' that you'll all come back an' look me up in a month or so," said Nuggety Dick, earnestly.

They remained talking in this strain for some time; then Mackay suddenly inquired after his old enemy, Macguire.

"I don't bear the man any ill will," said he. "I'm just sort o' curious to know if he rose wi' the fortunes o' Wentworth City; that name must have stuck in his throat——"

"Why, hasn't you heard?" exclaimed Dick; "but, of course, you couldn't know. Macguire cleared out 'bout two days after you, an' every one fancied he meant to follow you up, because he thought you were goin' to some new strike. He had his old crowd wi' him, an' a black tracker. He has never come back yet. I reckon he must have gone under."

"Poor beggar!" murmured Bob. "I hope he manages to come out all right, but——" He shook his head doubtfully.

"If by any chance he does hit our old trail into the Never Never, he'll be mighty sorry for it afterwards," spoke Mackay, grimly, with visions of vengeful savages before his eyes.

That night Bob came into Mackay's room at the hotel where they were all staying.

"I wanted to see you alone," he said simply, "so that I might tell you how truly I have appreciated your great kindnesses. I know now who it was that sent that letter to my mother, you dear old humbug."

Mackay smiled. "My reward is more than I ever dreamed, my lad. You yourself have given me much by your friendship. I haven't been disappointed in you, Bob, an' I hope our partnership will no' finish here."

"I'll be with you every time," cried Bob, heartily.

"I don't know what it is, but you can count on me," came a well-known voice beyond the thin wooden partition, and immediately afterwards Jack burst into the room. "I thought I heard about another threatened expedition," he said eagerly, "and I wanted to sign my name to it right away."

"I have an idea," ventured Mackay, gazing at the boy with shrewd, twinkling eyes—"I have an idea, Jack, that when you get home you'll find a wonderfu' magnetic influence there to restrain your wandering nature. But all the same, I shouldna wonder but you'll be allowed to mak' just another journey in my good company, for Bob has promised to say a word or two in my favour, so that I won't be judged altogether as an uncouth savage from the Never Never——"

"Is this a corroborree you're holding, Jim?" said Bentley, suddenly entering the doorway.

"No, Dick, nothing so vera desperate; we were sort o' considerin' a future expedition, that's a'."

"Already?" laughed Bentley. "Why, man, haven't you knocked around this little planet enough to last you a lifetime?"

"I am afraid there is no such thing as contentment in the world," said Bob, gravely. "We have sought fortune, and we have found it——"

"Ay, an' we found more than fortune, Bob," added Mackay, gazing at his old leader affectionately. "The gold and gems are welcome enough, but the lives o' my comrades are dearer to me than a'."

Bentley laid a gentle hand on Mackay's shoulder, and his voice was full as he spoke.

"Yes, my lads," he said, "you will find true happiness, not in riches nor in the fulfilment of worldly ambition, for our satisfaction is ever in the striving after rather than in the attainment of our desires; but it will come to you in

the realization of an unerring truth: greater by far than gold or gems is the love of our fellow-men."

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