

THE MAN WITH
THE OPALS

ALFRED
WILSON-BARRETT

302274

(SBI)

Feb -

JUN 17 1934

slava

mont

detective

+

sinister oriental

↑

another error
by P.H.!

1906

CONTRIBUTOR:

Austin Eagers

also wrote

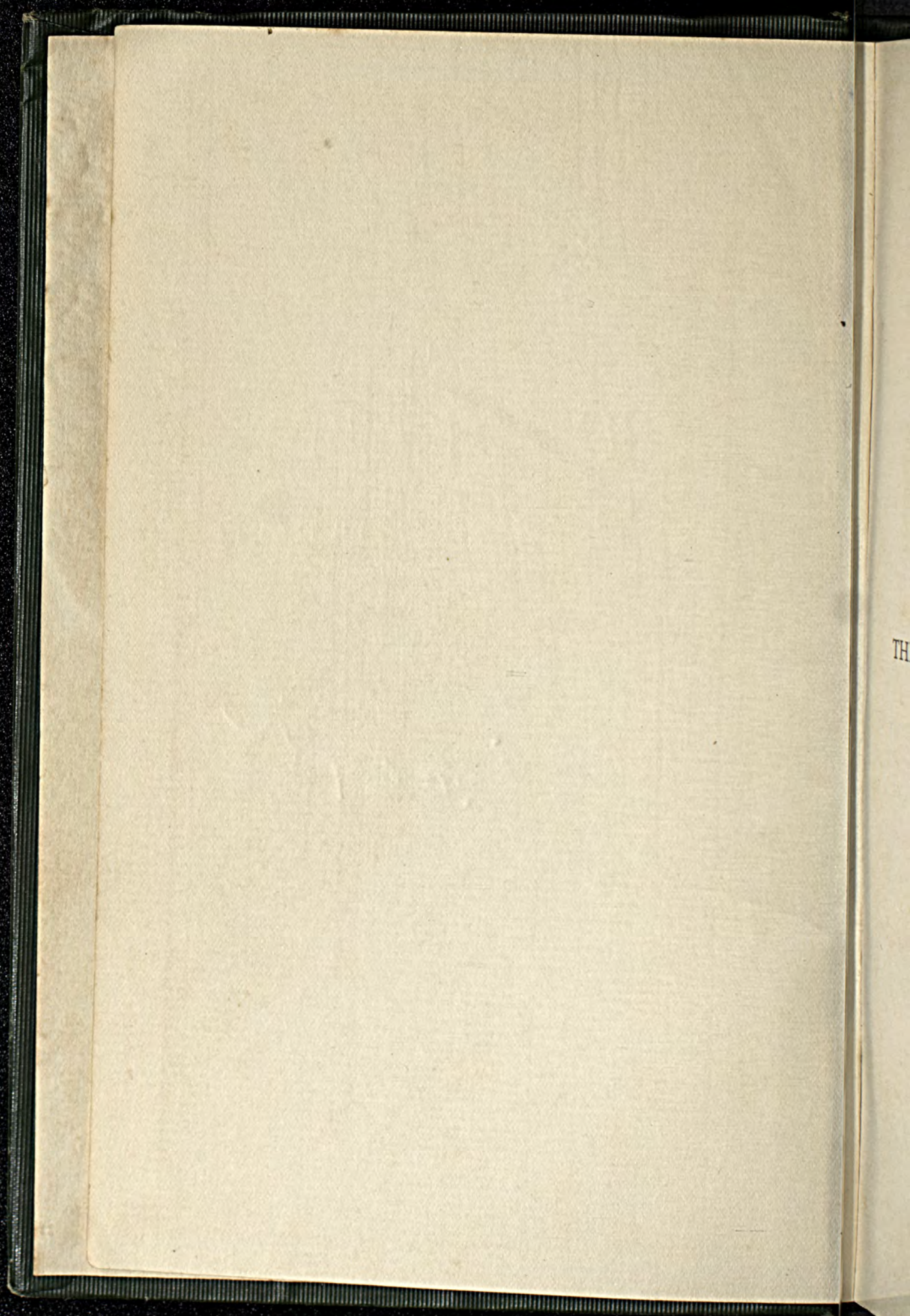
The Devil & the Inventor
Pearson (1900)
in slick case

EXOTIC ADVENTURE, WITH WEIRD
+ FANTASTIC ELEMENTS,
(not including)

INSANITY - HYPNOTISM - CURSED OPALS -
DRUGS

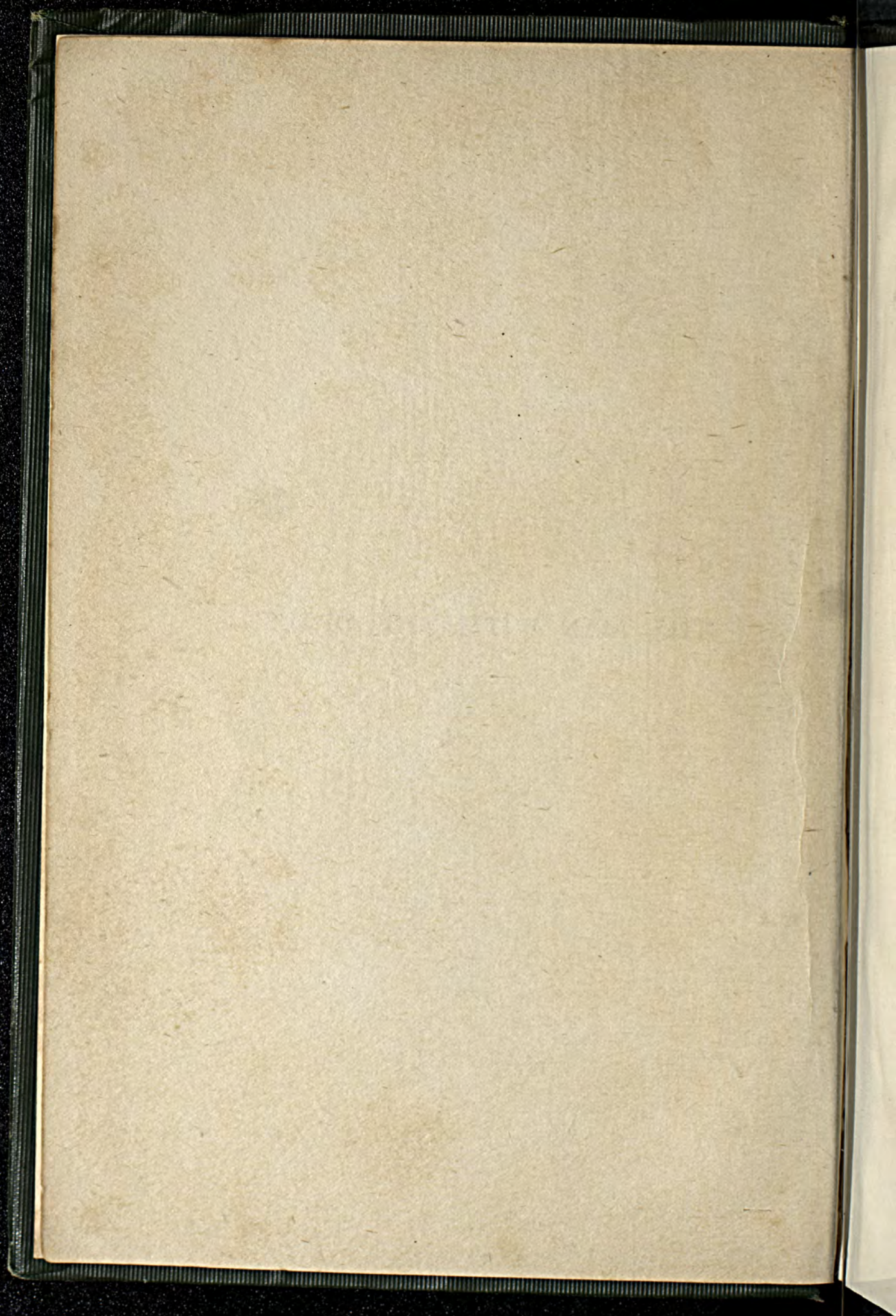
MAP TATOOED ON CAPTAIN'S ARM

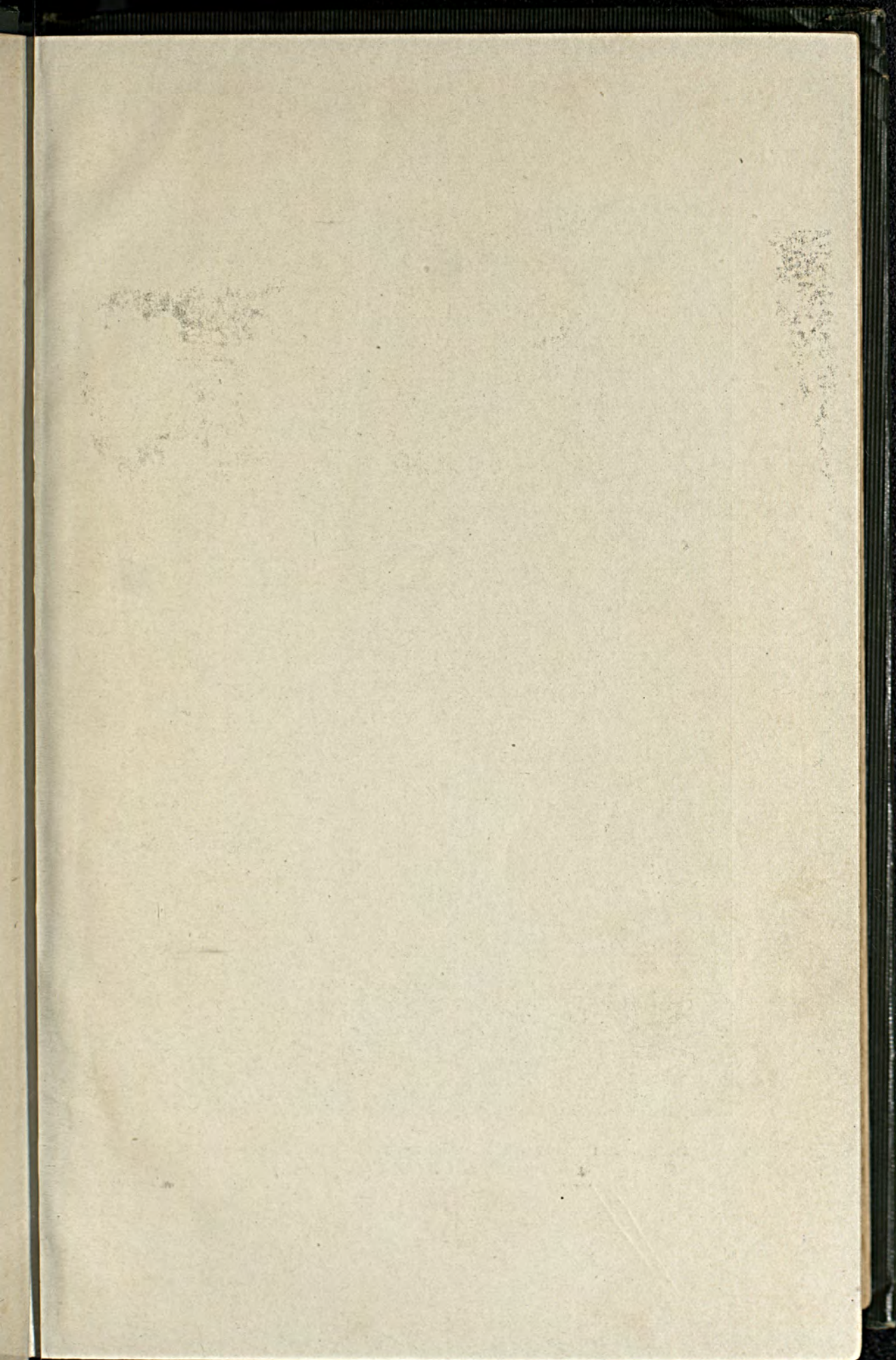
230-234 WEIRD HYPOCRISY + "DEVILISH" POWER
OF BUDDHIST PRIEST



TH

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS







"In a second Durand drew a revolver from his pocket, and
sat up in his chair." (Page 231.)
The Man with the Opals

[Frontispiece

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS.

BY

ALFRED WILSON-BARRETT,

AUTHOR OF "THE GOLDEN LOTUS," "A SOLDIER'S LOVE,"
"THE FRENCH MASTER," ETC., ETC.,

AND

AUSTIN FRYERS,

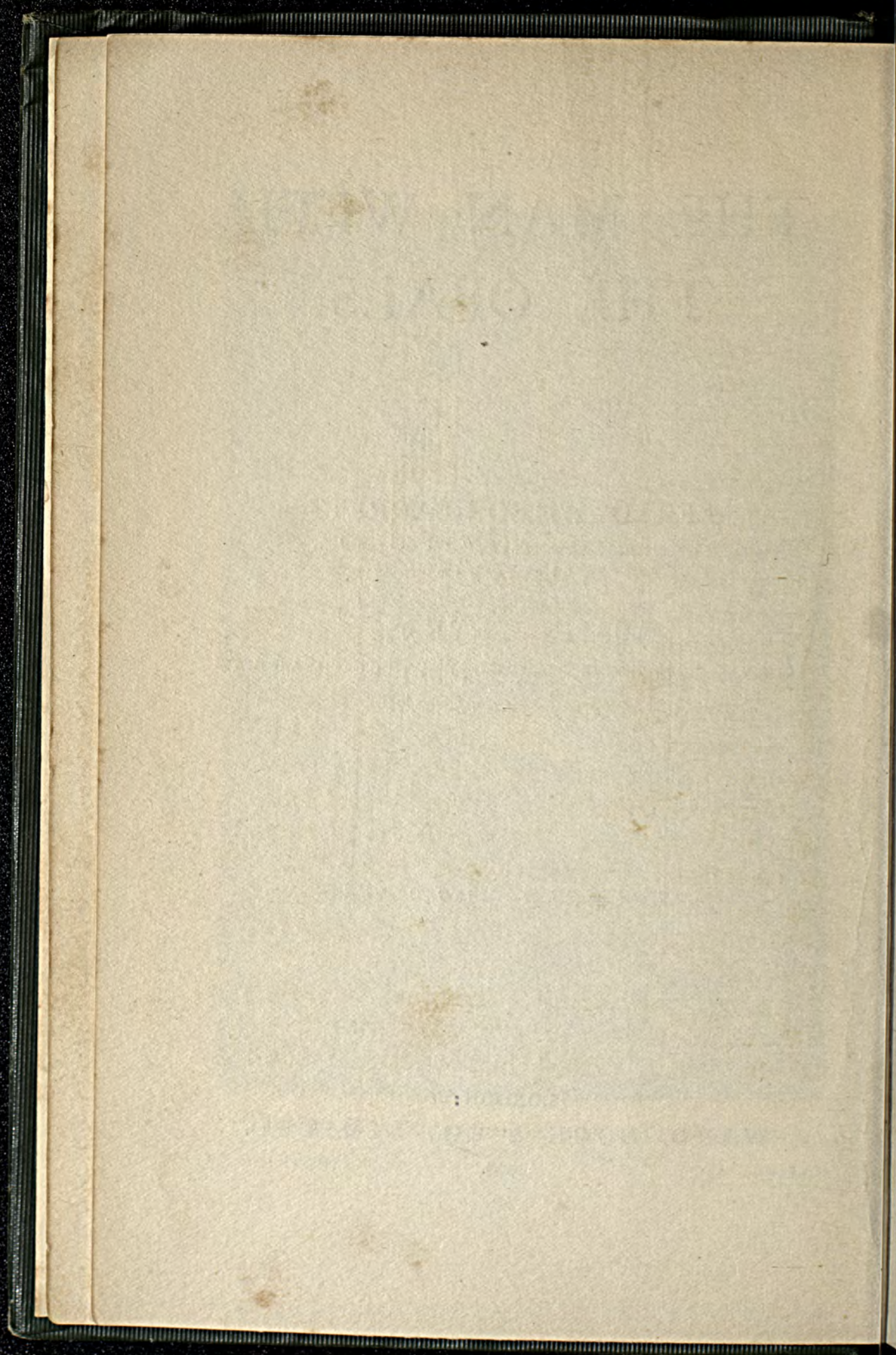
AUTHOR OF "THE PAUPER MILLIONAIRE," "THE DEVIL AND THE
INVENTOR," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HAROLD PIFFARD.

LONDON:

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED.

1906.



TH
for H
the br
the fev
ily unc
Litt
was st
last p
ascend
lit bei
of the
the pa
about
on sh
attenti
Glan
someth
pleasur
suspens
The pa

CHAPTER I

THE steamship *Doric*, one of the Pacific liners, was under weigh at Port Lyttleton for Honolulu. Captain Rutherford was on the bridge watching with an experienced eye the few final arrangements progressing speedily under the disciplined efforts of the crew.

Little remained to be done: the cargo was stowed away, the luggage on board; the last passenger, as all thought him, had ascended the gangway in flying leaps, his kit being thrown after him, to the amusement of the little crowd of idlers on the quay and the passengers on deck. The *Doric* was about to let go, when a sudden commotion on shore attracted Captain Rutherford's attention.

Glancing swiftly in its direction he saw something, and saw it evidently with displeasure, which caused him to signal the suspension of the casting-off arrangements. The passengers on the upper deck were soon

6 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

able to discern the cause of the halt, but those below could not see it, as the crowd on the quay was in the way.

It was no unusual incident ; it only meant that the last passenger had yet to come on board. The captain's displeasure, however, did not arise from the inconvenience of the delay so much as from the fact that this addition promised to be an undesirable one. But in these far-away latitudes discipline wears its red-tape loosely ; and Captain Rutherford was not the man to leave a fellow adrift because he had bidden his old friends farewell with unwise fervour.

The approaching passenger was, to all appearances, unable to stand upright, and was supported on either side by a lusty friend, both of whom had rendered him the useful service of creating a commotion by vigorous shouting and wild gesticulations which now and then threatened to bring the trio to an ignoble heap on the ground ; for his supporters were only a little less helplessly drunk than the hero of the incident.

"Bright looking lot !" growled the captain to Leslie Anson, one of the passengers, who was standing beside the bridge, and who felt strongly tempted to regard the whole affair with amusement.

"Been on the spree, I suppose," said Anson with a shrug, turning away and hiding a smile because Estelle Charters, the daughter of the first officer, who was passing hastily to her cabin with a look of disgust on her pretty face, would have seen it. When she had disappeared from view Anson, with the natural deceit of his sex in its attitude towards matters which women cannot be expected to understand, leaned over the side and was soon in evident sympathy with the ridiculing, jibing crowd on the quay.

"All right, governor," shouted back one of the trio in a rollicking voice, thickened by fatigue and drink.

They were a remarkable trio. Some men get quarrelsome in their cups; some, more fortunate, only get sleepy; others, most fortunate of all, are really happy. Two of the three were really drunk and obviously happy; the impending passenger was sleepy. Had his companions dropped him he would have rolled over in the gutter and snored contentedly.

"Where is he going?" thundered Captain Rutherford.

"Hon'lulu!" replied the speaker of the trio. "It's a'right, Gov., he's only been saying good-bye."

8 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

"Fetch him aboard," growled the Captain to the sailors who were standing by the gangway.

Two of their number rushed down, and taking their cue from the captain's tone—accentuating its import as all subordinates do—seized the stranger roughly, and dragged him limp and ungainly on to the deck.

"Y' aven't got his bag!" shouted his more vigorous friend who was rolling on the quay, having lost the ballast of the load he had been helping to drag.

A street wastrel, who had been unnoticed till then, was standing by the gangway with a black leather portmanteau on his shoulder.

"Bring it aboard!" shouted the captain.

"No fear," responded the urchin saucily, "I don't want a holiday;" a sally which the crowd on the quay, who had been hilarious all through, received with a shout of laughter.

But the crew of the *Doric* were prompt in action, and this was not a matter for parleying. Before the laugh had reached its fullest volume one of them rushed down the gangway and seized the bag. In a few moments the gangway was withdrawn, the sirens had shrieked, chains were rattling, and a thrill ran through the *Doric*. In yet another few moments it had begun to widen

the distance between it and the quay ; the voyage had commenced.

The friends of the new-comer were shouting "good-byes" and "good lucks" from the quay ; the crowd, who had taken it as a joke, entering heartily into the spirit of it ; so that he had a send-off which almost amounted to a demonstration. The passengers on board had tacitly agreed to accept the incident with amused toleration, and were at heart not displeased at such a vigorous break in the monotonous routine of the voyage.

But the object of it all lay on deck, propped up against a couple of bales, sleeping peacefully ; the crew being as yet too busy to take him below. He was a huge man with the chest of a giant. The face, which was now drooping over it in the helplessness of a drunken sleep, was equally huge, exceptionally red, and unusually good-humoured—jolly, one might almost say—in expression. He was beyond the middle height, and was undoubtedly a man of powerful physique. His hair, peeping out from under a slouch hat worn well down on his head, was of a vivid red tint which harmonised well with his unusual complexion and intensified, if possible, its good-humoured aspect.

10 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

Now that the steamer was away from the intrusive noise of the quay, he seemed pathetically human. The passengers coming round in little knots to look at him had already forgiven him. The eloquent appeal of his manacled strength and latent good-humour conquered them. Even Estelle Charters, coming on deck at length, went like the rest to look at him, and smiled. In fact, when she met Anson a few steps further on, and caught his eye, she could not resist it and laughed outright.

CHAPTER II

THE new passenger kept to his cabin during the two days succeeding his coming on board. He might have got over his big drunk had he been so disposed, but it was rumoured that with the help of the stewards he seemed bent on reaching Honolulu in a state similar to that in which he came aboard. He was, however, almost forgotten by the passengers, as he had not been seen and had only been casually heard of since his coming aboard.

Miss Charters was gazing over the bow of the steamer at the foam driven in varying shapes with ever-changing effect through the clear green water, that most idle and most interesting occupation of everyone on a sea-voyage.

Leslie Anson espied her as he came along the deck smoking a cigarette, and throwing the half-consumed cigarette into the sea, he joined her.

"I suppose you will be glad to get back to England, Miss Charters," said he, leaning on the rail at her side, and following her gaze after the sparkling foam in the green abyss beneath them.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, and was silent for a moment. Then she laughed lightly, and looking at him with an expression of playful embarrassment, said:

"I suppose I ought to be glad, but I really don't seem to care. If my father were only satisfied with his position, I should be perfectly content myself, and then—— Well, I don't think I should much care what part of the world we were in."

"He has been telling me about his hard luck," said Anson, a note of sympathy in his tone, "and I can quite understand his feeling his subordinate position keenly."

"You know I don't agree with him," interposed Estelle briskly. "My father was very lucky in getting a ship, and very unfortunate in losing it on his first voyage through the fault of his first lieutenant. Still, to be exonerated as he was, and to become first officer under such an excellent chief as Captain Rutherford, should more than make amends."

"But it is hard to get out of old grooves,

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 13

Miss Charters ; and I fear that your father must be No. 1 at all times, or he will chafe at the limitation——”

“ And as one’s father must always be right, I suppose I ought to be glad that we are going back to England where he is determined to forswear the sea, and enter into competition with land-lubbers. I expect I’m a trifle selfish in not looking forward to it with unqualified pleasure, but as a matter of fact, I love the sea. I am always far happier at sea than on land. But you, Mr. Anson, you are glad, I suppose, to be going home ? ”

“ Yes, I am. I have been away now for nearly six years and have gained nothing but a toughened skin, a seasoned constitution, and a very varied experience.”

“ You have been all the time in New Zealand ? ”

“ No, I spent the first year in Australia picking up experience and trying to determine which was the best line on which to strike out.”

“ I suppose it would be quite rude of me to ask you what you have been doing ? ”

“ Neither rude nor risky, I can assure you, and I should regard your curiosity as a very pleasant compliment.”

Both laughed gaily, and Anson leaned leisurely on the bulwarks as he playfully assumed a studious aspect with a mock endeavour to approach his task seriously.

"To begin at the beginning," he resumed, "I had a rather good time of it as a boy; plenty of pocket money, and good horses to ride and drive. When I was sent to a public school I was able to lord it with the best of them and had every temptation—which I hope I resisted—to become an unmitigated little snob."

"I am sure you never could have been that, Mr. Anson," said Estelle involuntarily and with an unnecessary earnestness which caused the healthy colour on her cheeks, whipped into a bright pink by the sharp sea breezes, to assume a still deeper tinge.

Anson was considerably pleased by this sincere homage, but he was too tactful to show it or to give a hint of the fact that he had detected the pretty embarrassment into which its avowal had thrown Estelle.

"I think I really did escape that," said he, resuming his narrative with unconcern, "because I was genuinely popular with all the boys whose good opinion I cared for. Then I took up the study of medicine, a vocation for which I have never quite been

able to determine whether or no I am well fitted."

"I should scarcely think so," said Estelle. She was evidently a frank young lady, given to the expression of her thoughts. "I should think a more active life would suit you better."

"My inclination certainly favoured that view," assented Anson—an arrant courtier who would find it well nigh impossible to disagree with any view to which his pretty companion gave expression. "For when on the death of my father, I learned to my dismay that he had lived all the time on his capital, and had well-nigh exhausted it, I determined to hazard my fortune in a New World."

"That, then, was why you went to Australia?"

"Yes, like an up-to-date Dick Whittington I set out to seek my fortune."

He paused a moment, a smile playing round the corners of his firm, handsome mouth.

"You do not ask me," said he, "if I found it."

"Of course not," she replied. "That, I think, would be a rude question."

"Well, I tried for it in every possible way at any rate. That much I can claim credit

for. And I enjoyed my experiences, too, during that rough and tumble search. It was a life of fresh places and queer scenes, mustering sheep on the brown, tussock-dotted plains of Canterbury, New Zealand, and up among the snow-capped dividing ranges ; trying at another time to get wheat to grow in Otago and Southland where only rabbits flourish ; then working for gold away among the "races" of the West Coast diggings or the sandy plains of West Australia. In five years I had been in turn farmer, store-keeper, gold-digger, gentleman at large, and sailor. And then at last I found my fortune —"

"I knew you would," said Estelle, a bright, pleased look of intense gratification springing to her eyes. "I felt sure that you are one of the sort to command success. How did you do it ?"

"I shall have to disappoint you," said Anson, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "My fortune came to me in the most unromantic manner—in the shape of a lawyer's letter from England informing me of an inheritance."

Estelle laughed softly. "I am afraid," said she, "the age of romance is passed. You were cut out for a hero, but the proper

stage was not provided. You should have stumbled on a nugget just when you were about to abandon your claim in despair, or something of that sort. No, I suppose modern fortunes are only made by corners in pork, daring speculations or Government contracts. And now that you are no longer a struggle-for-lifer, what are you going to do?"

"Pick up the thread of my career where it was dropped—resume my medical studies. I must do the only thing I have knowledge of, for I could not bear to be idle——"

"Now that I will believe," she interposed with frank flattery.

"And that is, in a word, my present plan for the future, unless fate in some unexpected manner should shape out a different course for me. Here is Dr. Durand coming along. He has been attending our latest passenger. Why the displeased look? Is it dislike of Dr. Durand, or repugnance of the passenger?"

"Both, I think," said she, laughing, the expression of good humour once more settling on her features. "Dr. Durand might be called Dr. Fell for me. Frankly, I do not like him, but I can give no reason for my dislike; and I would rather not remember that besotted giant downstairs."

18 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

"I agree with you about Dr. Durand. He is certainly clever, in fact an able man; but there is something sinister about him. I do not agree with you about our rough diamond downstairs. Hercules is always an accentuated person in his faults and in his virtues, and it is no use judging him by the standard one would apply to Apollo. Ah, Dr. Durand, how is the celebrity in the cabin? I hear you have been attending him."

"Yes," replied Durand; "he had symptoms of delirium tremens this morning, and the captain told me to attend him. I have been with him now again, and have had to resort to strong measures. There is something on his mind, and I thought it necessary to restore him to reason."

Estelle listened, a shade of disgust on her face, but otherwise evinced neither concern nor interest.

"Have you succeeded in pulling him round?"

"Oh, yes, he was not too far gone for that. I shall see him again in half-an-hour or so, and then he will be all right."

At that moment the sound of scuffling followed by a deep bellowing noise came from the bottom of the companion-way. The

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 19

next moment the unmistakable voice of the strange passenger was heard.

"Durand! Durand! Dr. Durand! Where is he? I must find him at once."

The next moment he came blundering up the steps. A steward tried to detain him, but it was as though a spaniel had tried to arrest the sweep of a mastiff.

CHAPTER III

WHEN the burly giant, still unsteady in his gait, and much dishevelled in appearance, had cleared the companion, he came rolling along like a steam engine towards Durand.

The latter blanched a little as he saw him approach—perhaps his methods to ensure a recovery were not of the mildest—and Leslie Anson, apprehensive of the outcome of the impending experience, placed himself between the giant and Miss Charters, a look of wariness on his strong features.

“Are you the ship’s surgeon?” asked the giant, his eyes standing out of his excited red face, his hand large and muscular, but trembling towards Durand.

“Yes,” replied the latter, “I am Dr. Durand.”

“You—you pulled me together. I have come to thank you. God bless you: no man

could have done me a greater service, if it is not too late to help me. You know me. I am the passenger who was lying in the cabin with the cursed drink. How long have I been down there? How far are we out from Port Lyttleton? How can I get back?"

"You can't get back——" began Durand, but the words seemed to touch some latent spring of passion in the man. He drew himself up; his muscles stood out, strong and rigid, and the veins swelled on his forehead, and along his sunburnt hands.

"I must go back," he shouted, his roar fetching a group of eager, curious passengers along the deck, who gathered round in knots, wondering what was the matter and what new excitement was in store for them, centring in their strange fellow passenger.

"If I have to swim back I shall go. But tell me—tell me—how long have I been down there, and how far out are we?"

"You must keep cool," said Durand coldly. "Going back to Port Lyttleton is out of the question. You have been in your cabin two days, and you must wait till we reach Honolulu."

"Two days! two days!" moaned the great giant, wringing his hands in the deepest piteousness of despair.

22 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

Everyone was sorry for him, as he was unmistakably labouring under some terrible anguish of mind, though as yet he had given no clue to its source.

"Don't give way," said Anson kindly, touching him on the arm. "We are but four day's run from Honolulu and you can ship back by the next boat."

"Four days ; and two wasted ; and a week to get back ! No, I shall not do it ; I shall not stand ; I must get back now. Where's the captain ?"

Captain Rutherford was on the bridge, scowling down at the scene on deck. He was a kindly man of genial disposition, but he was a rigid disciplinarian, and the incident so far, brief as it was, conflicted with his prejudices.

The giant turning his eyes, now bloodshot with excitement, in his direction, saw him. In an instant he was bounding towards him, and a moment later was clambering up the steps on to the bridge.

The scene between the two men as they stood silhouetted against the sky was thrilling. It was evident that the giant met with a rebuff at the outset, but he seemed oblivious of all that, and tried to enforce his point with wild gesticulations and his thunderous voice

thick from drink and excitement. Those on deck could only gather from the incoherent words which reached them that he was endeavouring to persuade the captain to put back, and was offering him any terms he chose to name to do it.

"No, no, you maniac! No, I tell you! Here, Charters, Brown, some of you, come and throw this drunken fool off the bridge."

But the giant did not wait for them. With his arms tossing wildly in a frenzy of excitement he rushed along the bridge, leaped down and ran to the foc's'le, where a knot of sailors had gathered, watching the scene and ready to render assistance at the word of the skipper.

"Here, boys," he cried, throwing off one who, in an excess of zeal, had made a grab at him, "you will listen to me; you will have reason, because you are poor men, and I can make you rich, can share thousands of good solid English sovereigns with you if you will help me. Listen to me, I tell you; I know every word I am saying, and I mean every word if it, too. I want you to help me, but I don't ask you to do it for my sake; I want you to do it because it will mean fortunes to you, will set you up in comfort for the

24 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

rest of your lives. You must man a boat and row me back to Port Lyttleton. Yes, I know it's a stiff job, and a risky job, but it's worth all that and more."

The passengers had crowded round while he had been talking, and Charters and some of the officers had tried to bear down on him, but seizing a deck chair he made a sweep with it which cleared a space round him. There was murder, too, in the glance which he shot round on his audience.

"You will hear me, boys, because it is the one chance of your lives to go home with a fortune and set up comfortable with the best of 'em. You know what state I was in when I came aboard—drunk, stupid, helpless, beastly drunk. And I had been drunk the day previous, fool that I was, although I had with me a fortune. I had slaved and worked and starved for years, and the good luck turned my brain. It must have done to make me act so madly. I got into a house—I can take you to it, boys—but drunk as I was, I knew there would be plenty willing to murder me for that fortune. So I hid it—aye, and no one but myself knows where. But it isn't safe to leave it there. Someone may stumble on it. God, it maddens me to think of the risk I run every minute it remains

there. Now, boys, you know what I want—six of you to take a boat and row me back, and there's £1,000 apiece for each of you. More than that, I have money enough by me now to tempt you," and he flourished a bundle of notes as he spoke, "and every penny is yours if you start right away."

There was no mistaking the genuineness of the man. It carried conviction home to every one who listened to him. The sailors fidgetted uneasily; they no longer thought of attacking him, and it was evident that the bait he offered them had roused thoughts within them which stirred them to their very souls. Even the skipper, who had come down from the bridge, had been impressed, and listened intently while the giant poured forth his lava torrent of words.

But when Captain Rutherford read on the faces of his crew the note of irresolution, the spirit of the disciplinarian was roused, and he pushed his way into the forefront and faced the impassioned speaker.

"Now, Mr. Wade," he said with brusque severity, "you're preaching mutiny to my men—that's what it amounts to—and, by heavens, no man shall do that aboard my ship. You know very well I can put you in irons

26 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

for what you have already done, and I'll do it, too, if it doesn't end right here and now. Come, men, clear off! I'm sorry for your misfortune, Mr. Wade, but to talk of putting back with one of His Majesty's mail boats two days out is arrant rot, and to try and bribe my sailors to desert and commandeer one of my boats is inciting to mutiny, and don't you forget it."

There was the unmistakable ring of determination and authority in his voice, before which the sailors slunk away, feeling that already they had been guilty of some offence. The inevitableness of his dictum had, in a measure, even sunk into the mind of the giant, and his head sunk nerveless on his heaving breast.

Leslie Anson, Durand, and a few of the passengers gathered round him and begged him to abandon his mad notion.

"Come down into the cabin," said Anson; "we can have a private chat and see how we can help you."

He silently acquiesced. Anson took him by the arm and led him down. The captain, who was standing by, offered them the use of his own cabin. When they got inside, the giant sank into a seat, and his huge frame racked and heaved with heavy sobs.

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 27

There is no sight more distressing than that of a strong man crying ; and they stood round him, concerned, sympathetic and helpless, waiting till he had recovered himself.

CHAPTER IV

AT last he pulled himself together, and shaking off his emotion as a retriever shakes off the water after a swim, he rose and looked round him with a dazed, far-away expression in his blood-shot eyes. Anson stood nearest him, ready to be the spokesman of the sympathy and friendliness of the little group.

Durand alone, who stood on the outer edge, regarded the scene with a cynical callous expectant curiosity.

"Well, I reckon it's all up with me," said the giant looking round, "but it's hard, damned hard, after the hard life I've led, to let it all slip away because of a few hours' madness."

"But it may not be so bad as you fear. After all, perhaps the risk is not so great as you think."

"How do I know what I may have let

slip, when I had no guard on my mad tongue?" The giant looked round at Anson, his challenging glance appealing in a sort of way for the comfort of contradiction. "Everyone who knew me spoke of my good fortune. Why, I hauled it about with me in a rough canvas bag, strapped up with bits of harness and string. Who were the two who saw me aboard? I don't remember! They will know I did not bring it aboard. God! man, won't the story spread, and won't they trace the bag to the shanty I put up at the night before where I've hidden it?"

"But they may not find it if you have hidden it carefully," said a dapper little man, an Australian merchant on his way to England in connexion with the business of his firm.

"But if they mean to find it, they will. Wouldn't they buy up the shanty and pull it down, and sift the rubbish if necessary when it means getting half a million?"

"But how could you carry half a million in gold?" asked Durand in his cold, hard voice.

"Who said gold?" thundered the giant. "It was in opals—some of the finest I ever set eyes on, and I've dealt with opals all my life. There's a few of them," and diving his hand into his trousers pocket, he strewed

30 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

half-a-dozen of the precious pebbles on the table. "You never saw better than these, and they are not the best I had. What is a bagful of them worth? and I carrying the bag of opals just as though it were so much old iron. Why, when I was beginning to get right fuddled, I left it on the bar in one of the places and was coming out without it till the proprietor called after us."

"I am afraid Mr. Wade is right. He has much cause to fear for his property," said Durand. "It is evident that many people knew of his good luck, and must have known that the bag he was carrying contained the opals. It will also be sure to leak out that the bag did not come with him aboard the *Doric*."

"You are right, surgeon," said Wade, grasping at the confirmation of his worst fears as though it were in some measure a compliment. "News of that sort leaks out, especially when it's something; God! it maddens me to think of it. But I've been unlucky all my life. Even when good luck comes my way, I must go and lose the fortune it showered on me."

The little group had gathered round the heap of stones, and even to the most inexpert eye, it was evident that the giant was not

over-estimating the value of the precious hoard he described.

"We shall be in Honolulu in four days. Can you cable to anyone or to the police?" asked Anson.

"It's no use; I can't remember the name of the damned shanty I put up at, not even the name of the street; but if I were back on the quay at Port Lyttleton I could go to it with my eyes shut."

"Do you think it likely that any of those you were with would seek to rob you?"

"Likely! I should think so; half a million of money is too big a temptation for any one. If they only remember that I didn't cart the opals on board with me, they'll be damned fools if they don't search every inch of Port Lyttleton until they find them. Everyone knew I had them. Why, I had to sell a few of them to get the money I was spending and what I now have on me."

"It's very unfortunate, Mr. Wade," said Durand, an unusual tinge of colour in his cheeks and a note of interest in his voice which was equally foreign to him. "How did you hit on your good luck?"

"Oh, straight enough," he replied. "The opals are mine as honestly as ever one yet came into a man's possession. I struck it

rich in Maoriland; pouched 'em out in the West Coast ranges, and brought 'em away with me in the bag in which they are still lying if no one has found them. I was coming home to England to lord it with the best of them, and now—— Curse my luck! And it was only that I wanted to give a few pals a good spree before I started; and seeing as it was only a matter of hours before the *Doric* started I hadn't the good sense to store my haul in a bank before I went on the boat. We went round the town from pub to pub until I lost my senses and didn't stop to think what I was doing."

"But if it was only a matter of hours," said Anson, "how did you come to be staying at a hotel?"

"It wasn't a hotel in the right sense of the word," Wade replied grimly; "it was really a pub, one of these shanties where you can get a bed. I knew I was getting too fuddled, and I thought I'd like to have a lie down before the *Doric* arrived. 'It's my last shout, lads,' I said, 'and then I shall lie down.' But lor', I don't know how many more shouts we had after that. Then I got upstairs, hugging my bag of opals. But, drunk as I was, it stuck in my gizzard that some one might come into my room and walk

off with them while I lay asleep. So I crawled out of bed, and went groping round the room on my hands and knees looking for somewhere to hide them. There wasn't anywhere at first that exactly suited me, but at last with my knife I roused up the carpet and one of the planks, squeezed my bag of opals through and made it secure again; then I got back to bed, and the next thing I knew was your making me all pins and needles, doctor, down in the cabin. I didn't look pleasant at you, but when I remembered the opals after you had gone out, I blessed you, for what did it matter what pain I suffered so long as I got back to my senses? And now it is useless. I'd give the captain a hundred thousand if he put back, and I'd give fifty thousand for three or four men and a boat—but there, my cursed luck is against me, and I suppose I must start life all over again."

The excitement and probably the effects of his hard drinking bout were telling on the giant. His face turned a dead white, and he had to lean against the table for support. Dr. Durand hurried forward, and taking him by the arm assisted him to his cabin. Before an hour had passed the sounds which reached those passing near indicated that

34 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

Wade had found solace from his worry in drink.

For the first time the fact was, in general, condoned, but it was considered strange that he should have returned to drink, as Dr. Durand was in constant attendance on him.

CHAPTER V

FOR the next day or two "the man with the opals"—as he was speedily nicknamed by the passengers, among whom his story was much discussed—kept very quiet.

It was evident the man had been a hard drinker in his day, and would take to it harder than ever if the opportunity were given him ; so Rutherford, acting autocratically, as a captain of a liner may, gave orders to the bar stewards to limit his allowance of liquor, fearing some further outbreak if he should get under weigh again.

Nevertheless, in spite of the skipper's prohibition, it was evident that the man's dazed look and inflamed face were not consistent with the small amount of drink allowed him, and the suspicion grew in the minds of more than Anson that someone on board was for purposes of his own secretly supplying him with it.

36 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

There was, however, nothing tangible to justify these suspicions, and as time went on, Miss Charters, who felt pity for him, or else took a malicious pleasure in thus snubbing her other admirers, used to talk to him, listening with apparent interest to his tales of strange places and adventures, and the never-long-forgotten subject of his opals, and thus keeping him away, at least for a time, from the surgeon's cabin, a visit to which always meant the beginning of some further excess. But though the big passenger seemed grateful to her for her kindness, and was never weary of chatting to her, force of circumstances forbade him monopolising her conversation for long, and he would drift back again and again to his friend Durand.

Wade used to complain both to Anson and Charters, with whom he was specially intimate, of an intolerable thirst which appeared to possess him, and under the influence of which he would gulp down a jug of water as if it had been a wine-glass. Under this insatiable craving he would beg Anson, through his influence with Rutherford, to get him liquor.

"For the Lord's sake, lad," he would say, "get me some brandy or something. I can't stand this. It's like being burnt up alive."

"You know I would, Wade, if I could," Anson would reply, "but it would be bad for you. Besides, if I tried, it would be no good. Rutherford never changes his mind, and you know his orders. Try and pull along until we get to Honolulu."

Anson regretted having to refuse, but Wade's symptoms were distressing in the extreme, and indeed they seemed inexplicable unless one imputed some foul play to Durand—foul play that Charters did not hesitate to charge him with when he and Anson were alone together. The facts pointed so strongly in that direction that Anson was forced to agree with him. But what were they to do? It was impossible to taste any drugs the surgeon chose to administer to Wade, and to confess their suspicions to the captain without definite proof of some sort would be absurd.

"My belief," said the chief officer to Anson one night as they sat talking over the affair in his cabin, "my belief is that that scoundrel Durand has obtained some idea from poor Wade of the whereabouts of that treasure-trove of his, and is in hopes that the man will drink himself to death and leave him a clear field to go for it."

"You believe Wade's tale, then?" Anson

38 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

asked, more from a desire to learn his opinions on the subject than from any doubt of his own on the subject. "It seems a romantic yarn. A fortune in opals hidden away in the floor of an hotel, and the hiding-place forgotten. And yet I can't for the life of me see the object of the lie on Wade's part, if it is a lie."

"That's my opinion, too," returned Charters thoughtfully. "What object could the fellow have? It is not as if he was hard up, and had invented the yarn to borrow a few pounds from the captain or ourselves. As you saw, he has evidently plenty of ready money. All that he wanted was to be put back to New Zealand, and he was prepared to pay for getting back. He could have no motive but the one he alleged."

It was night when they sat chatting, nearly midnight, and there was no light in the cabin. The passengers had retired to their berths, and the only sounds they could hear were the footsteps of the watch forward, and the lap, lap of the calm waves against the vessel's side. It was a glorious night after a real Pacific day, and far away in front of the steamer stretched the broad silver rays cast by the moon on the peaceful waters. As they gazed on the lovely scene they smoked

drowsily as they chatted. Indeed, they were almost dozing off when the sound of footsteps approaching along the deck aroused them.

"Durand!" whispered Charters quickly. "I hope he is not coming to see me. I dislike the fellow too much to be even polite to him."

"Hush!" Anson whispered, peering out of the cabin door. "Wade is with him, and intoxicated, too. Now that is peculiar, because I know the bar stewards haven't served him to-day. I made enquiries when the bar closed at eleven."

They had no time to say any more, for the two men were close upon them. It was fortunate Anson had had the presence of mind to close the door and fasten it, for the big man lurched heavily against the panels as he passed, making the woodwork rattle again.

"Be quiet, you fool!" muttered Durand, whose hissing voice reached them easily through the ventilators above the door. "You are as drunk as an owl. Do you want the whole ship to know it? Why couldn't you stay in your bunk!"

"Because I wanted more drink," growled Wade angrily, "because I want to be more

drunk still—mad drunk ! blind drunk ! Lord !
I'll bathe in drink ! Give it to me, you beast !
Blast you ! Give it me ! ”

“ Well, come away quietly to your bunk instead of making this infernal row,” grumbled Durand, evidently afraid that his companion's excited tones would reach the ears of others than himself.

“ Give me brandy ! ” reiterated Wade, taking no notice of his words, “ give it me, and I'll drink an ocean of it. I'll die drunk if I want to, and even then you won't win the game ! ”

“ Bah ! What game ? ”

“ Bah, yourself ! Do you think I don't know what you are after ? Do you think I don't see through you, Mr. Durand, ship's surgeon and thief ! You'll give me brandy, and then you'll—pump me, pump me—pump me ! You'd like to know where I slept that night in Port Lyttleton, wouldn't you, Mr. Durand ? Well, why don't you find out ? I've been drunk enough since you've been my friend—the only man on the boat who would take any notice of me—well, I've paid you for it, haven't I ? Haven't you had a hundred notes out of me already, to kill this infernal thirst, this devilish thirst that's eating me up since I came on board this rotten old

tub? Oh, yes, you've earned the money. You haven't cured the thirst—buckets of brandy couldn't do that; but you've made me drunk, and sometimes I've forgotten it. But have I let anything out, eh? You want to be paid above your work, my lad! You want my pretty little opals that I worked for—my pretty opals that this cursed ship's taking me away from. Good God! Yes! taking me away from further and further, while who knows what's happening to them! Curse the ship! Curse the ship! . . .”

The man was getting terribly excited, and they could hear the surgeon attempting to calm him, and lead him towards the saloon entrance. His efforts, however, were useless. His companion, raving wildly, seemed oblivious of him.

At length Durand appeared to lose his temper, and tried to drag the big man away from the door, against which he still leaned. Wade evidently resisted him, and they heard a brief struggle, then a heavy fall, and the sound of retreating footsteps.

Anson opened the cabin door and looked out. Wade had either fallen or been thrown heavily to the deck, and when he and Charters lifted him up they saw the blood flowing from a nasty cut in his temple. He must have

42. *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

struck his head in falling on the iron stay placed to hold back the door in stormy weather.

The cut did not appear a serious one, and as after what they had overheard they did not care to call Durand back, Anson bound up the poor fellow's wound as well as he could, and the two managed to carry him to his cabin, and place him in his bunk, where they left him.

Perhaps it was thoughtless of them not to obtain a proper watch for him, but the man was apparently incapably drunk, and dazed by his wound, and it seemed probable that he would be content to slumber away the rest of the night. About four in the morning Anson was awakened by a terrible scream, and sitting up in his bunk he could hear a hurrying of feet on the deck outside. Conscious that something had gone wrong, though as yet barely awake, he sprang from his berth and hastily donned a few clothes, his heart sinking as he flew out of his cabin, for the terrible cry of "Man overboard!" rang in his ears.

Running wildly along the deck in the direction of the wheel he met Charters, his eyes blazing with excitement, and his face pale.

"It's Wade," he gasped, clasping Anson by the arm, and dragging him onto the upper deck. "He must have got D.T.'s or gone mad. The wound and the drink were too much for him, I suspect. I was rather restless and came to look after him—a moment too late. He ran tearing at me, and knocked me aside as if I had been a straw. He was yelling out that he would swim back if they wouldn't stop the boat for him, and he went overboard like a flash. If he dies, Anson, I shall never forgive myself for not taking proper care of him. We must save him."

As he talked, Charters had dragged Anson with him to one of the quarter boats, which two sailors were already lowering.

"That's where he ought to be," said one of them, pointing far out over the stern. "But it'll be a hard job to pick him up to-night."

Anson rubbed his eyes with amazement. The moon of a few hours back had disappeared, and the sky was now covered with swiftly-flying clouds. The sea was high, and away to windward, in the direction opposite to where the breeze had been blowing before they turned in, the sky was livid, casting a dark night on the waters.

No time was to be lost if the man was to

44 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

be saved, and Charters and Anson without a moment's hesitation tumbled into the boat with one of the sailors who was engaged in lowering it. Fortunately, the alarm had not reached the passengers yet, and the whole thing had been done so quickly that only a sailor or two and the man at the wheel witnessed the exciting incident.

For a few minutes they rowed hard in silence in the direction in which they hoped to find the big passenger, if he were still afloat, and already the lights of the now stationary *Doric* were growing faint in the darkness, when Charters, who held the yoke-lines, cried out that he had caught sight of him on the port bow. They plied their oars with redoubled energy, and were rewarded at last by seeing a head rise dripping from the waves almost under the stern of the boat. The sailor, dropping his oar, made a clutch at it as they passed, but the swimmer quickly ducked his head, and calling out something they could not understand, struck out in the opposite direction.

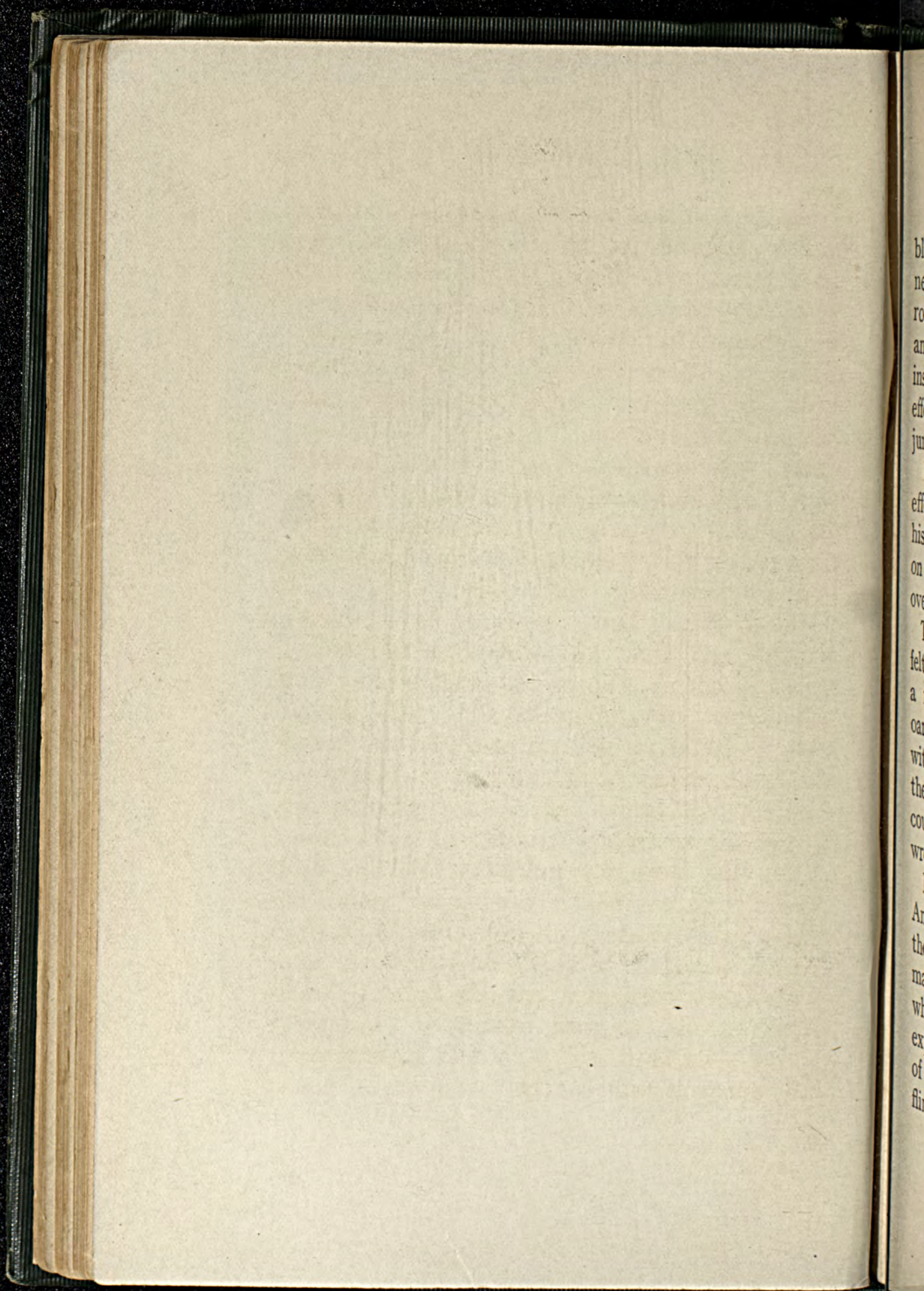
The man, in addition to his magnificent physique, must have been a splendid swimmer to keep afloat for so long in such a sea, but it was evident that he must soon get exhausted and sink unless they could reach him.



"Wade, by this time . . . had the strength of four men."

The Man with the Opals

[Page 45]



bl
ne
ro
an
ins
eff
jun
I
eff
his
on
ove
T
felt
a
oar
wit
the
cou
wre
I
An
the
ma
wh
exp
of
flin

Charters, in his good-heartedness, entirely blamed himself for the accident, and was nearly mad with despair as the boat swung round, and they made again for the swimmer ; and seeing that Wade, to all appearances insane, was determined to defy them in their efforts to save him, flung off his boots and jumped over the side.

He soon reached Wade, whose violent efforts had wearied him, and caught him by his collar. Five minutes later they had him on board, and Charters nimbly clambered over the side after him.

The furious man, however, no sooner felt his feet than he lurched at the sailor, a man called Thompson, and seizing his oar in his powerful grasp, struck the fellow with it full on the forehead. Anson heard the poor chap's skull crack, and before he could reach out a hand, the unfortunate wretch slipped overboard and sank like a stone.

For the next few minutes Charters and Anson expected that every second would be their last. Wade, by this time a raving maniac, had the strength of four men, and while they struggled for their lives, they expected that the boat, tossing at the mercy of the increasing waves, would capsize and fling them into the water.

46 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

At length, when they were almost despairing, the madman's strength seemed to leave him, and he sank down in the thwarts as helpless as a child.

When they had recovered sufficiently to look about them, they found themselves in what was indeed an evil plight. The boat was jumping awkwardly in the hollow of the waves, and there was a short quick sea that made her dip freely and scattered the spray in their eyes. Poor Thompson had taken one of the oars overboard with him, and to add to their misfortunes the *Doric* had disappeared.

Yes, disappeared. For a thick haze, a mere bank of white mist as impenetrable as a blanket, now surrounded them on every side. In vain they shouted wildly, and paddled with the one oar in the direction where they had last seen the ship. In vain they strained their ears with fearful eagerness for some sound which should tell them she was near. But these unavailing efforts were at last abandoned, the hopelessness of them all being only too apparent. Nothing but the lifting of the fog, or the dawning of another day, could enable the *Doric* to pick them up, and when at last it should please Providence to permit either of these things to happen, who

could say how far they might be apart?

It seemed cruel, truly, that in saving this madman Wade—for at that time such he was—they should have to take such a fearful risk. That it was more than a risk never suggested itself to them, black as was the outlook. Such a comparatively short time before they had been safe amid all the luxuries and comforts of a first-class liner. It was not likely that Rutherford would be content to part, without an effort, with two of his passengers, his chief officer and one of his sailors; and yet, with such a sea as was now running, they might drift many miles apart during the long hours that must pass before dawn.

Wade was lying unconscious in the thwarts of the boat, and Charters, who had a perfectly fearless nature, declared his intention at length of going to sleep, which, after curling himself up in the bows, he very soon did. Anson kept awake for some time, hoping every minute to hear the *Doric's* whistle going and see the welcome lights approaching.

After a time, however, a blank came over his wearied brain, and he, too, fell asleep.

* * * * *

Anson awoke first after a sleep of several hours.

48 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

The sea had abated, and was now calm and sluggish, but on every side the cold white mist still hung, mingled with a fine drifting rain which was soaking them to the bone.

Though by now full daylight, it was impossible to see more than a quarter of a mile in any direction, and within that quarter of a mile there was no *Doric* to be seen, nor sign of other vessel.

What that meant Anson knew only too well. Hope takes a lot of killing in such circumstances, yet there seemed no possible chance of the *Doric* picking them up after the time which had elapsed, and must still elapse, before the horizon cleared.

Above a consideration for his own safety rose the remembrance of Estelle Charters and her grief when she should know her father to be missing, her father whom she adored, and who was so proud of her. Poor girl, alone perhaps in the world from this day, separated so suddenly, so cruelly from her natural protector, how great would be her distress: and what, too, would Charters feel when he awoke! He was still asleep, smiling happily in his slumber, in spite of the cold and wet. Wade, too, seemed to be asleep, his unconsciousness having apparently changed to an uneasy repose. Anson had

not the heart to awaken the two. He would as soon have aroused a condemned criminal from that sleep before the fatal morning of execution, which they say is mercifully dreamless.

Anson leaned his head wearily on his hands and reviewed the position as calmly as he could. They were alone in an open boat, without food and, save for the rain which fell, without water. They had one oar, and no sail, and where they were he knew not. The situation was, therefore, pretty desperate at the best.

Charters soon afterwards awoke, but could do nothing to minimize the desperateness of the outlook. When Wade came to his senses, his mind was clear, but he was in an advanced stage of exhaustion and tortured with racking pains. He had but a dim idea of the circumstances which had led up to the plight they were in, but he was too weak to enquire, and they had no desire to inform him.

For the first night and day, though hunger had begun already to trouble them, they were mercifully spared, by reason of the rain, the worst torture of all which threatened them, but after the second day the rain ceased, and the hot Pacific sun came out and

beat down on them with all its withering force. The little water they had saved with infinite care from the downpour began to disappear, and they knew that unless help came very soon, the end was not far off.

Their sufferings were aggravated, if possible, by Wade's piteous condition. Although the unfortunate fellow strove his best, it was almost beyond human nature to disguise his agony, and he broke out every now and then into violent ravings, attempting frequently to spring overboard, and declaring that any death was preferable to his sufferings.

About the fifth day—how easy it seems to write it, that "fifth day," but what it cost them to reach it heaven alone knows—Wade, who had been lying very quiet at Charters' feet in the stern of the boat, called to Anson to come over to them. Anson crawled over from the bows, making pretty heavy weather of the trip, for by this time all three were nearly exhausted.

Wade had been all that day unnaturally quiet. Indeed, but for his horrible appearance, he seemed better really than he had been since his arrival on the *Doric*; but even to Anson's exhausted brain it was clear that it was only the flickering

up of the candle before the final darkness.

As soon as Anson reached the stern and had fallen helplessly into the thwarts by them, Wade began to speak.

It came rather as a shock to both of them even then, that his voice, once loud and jovial, barely reached their ears, near as they were to him.

"Boys," he said, with a sad attempt at his former bluff manner, "things are at their worst—for me at all events—though I pray heaven to spare you two chaps, who got into this mess trying to save a drunken fool. Now, I've an idea I'm about done, but I've a notion that Providence won't let you two chaps finish like this: one a young fellow just beginning life, and the other, Mr. Charters here, with a pretty daughter crying for him, I dare say, now on board the *Doric*. Now, I've no daughter—no gal—no home and no friends. The pals I've had, well, they're pals, and that's all—fellows to knock about and drink with. . . that being so, I've been thinking about these opals that have made all this trouble. Now, there have been some on the ship that have laughed at my yarn about them opals; and I daresay a few that thought 'well, the poor chap has maybe picked up a few chips of the

stones.' But there isn't one of you who'd believe what there really is in that hole in the boards of that pub in Port Lyttleton—that's if they're still there; and who should move them? It ain't likely, when you come to think of it soberly, that they'd go taking up the carpet and looking under the boards, with nothing or none to give them the tip.

"Well, I tell you, Mr. Charters, and you, Mr. Anson, I've been mixed up with opals all my life. I've hunted them in Queensland, I've hunted them in New Zealand, I've hunted them everywhere where they were and where they weren't, and a good few have passed through my hands, and if there's a pennyworth there, there's fifty thousand pounds' worth. Now, if I pass out, as I shall, Mr. Charters, in spite of all you have done to save me, there's no one those opals is due to, and no one who has a claim on them, and there they may rot until they are found by chance, unless I tells someone where to find them—which I can very easily, though I don't remember the name of the street, or the pub where I slept—and unless I make 'em over to someone by my will as my heirs and so forth. Now, I can't make a will for a very good reason, but if I could, having

no one to look to me for anything in the world, as I have said, who could I choose better to leave them to than the men who have gone through all this hell for my rotten, foolish sake? And so, if you'll kindly witness it, Mr. Anson, I hereby give after my death, which I feel to be near, two-third of those opals of mine, now hidden in the floor of a bedroom in an hotel in Port Lyttleton, South Island, New Zealand, to Mr. Charters, in gratitude to him for saving my life at the risk of his own; and if you'll kindly witness it, Mr. Charters, I do ditto with one-third to Mr. Anson here, who has also risked his life for me.

"I know, boys," he continued, "it seems strange to cackle about opals and money now, when a drop of water on our tongues would be worth all the gold and jewels in the world; but I've an idea, as I said before, that you two will be alive for many a day yet, and may the Lord grant I'm right; and if it is so, I reckon you won't find the bit of stuff those opals sell for at all in your way in the days to come."

Charters and Anson thanked him and accepted the positions of heirs and executors with dull acquiescence, but they were not discussing matters in a lawyer's office at

54 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

home: they were facing imminent death in an open boat which reduced the luxuries of life to their true importance, when life itself became the superlative treasure to secure.

Poor Charters, indeed, broke down entirely at Wade's mention of his daughter, and weak as Anson was that started him also, so that both of them blubbered like children; and Wade who previously was tended as a child, was now comforting them with his feeble whistle of a voice.

"Now, boys," continued Wade after a time, bending towards them, "I don't remember the street or the name of the pub I slept in that night, it's true, but put me down in the good old harbour, and I'd find my way to them blindfold. And if you listen to me, you'll be able to do the same."

And thereupon he commenced to give them certain directions, which he declared would make the finding of the hiding-place a simple task. It seemed simple at the time, but when he asked Anson to repeat it, he found he couldn't for the life of him get it right. In the first place there was a Maori name in it difficult to remember; and in the second it was doubtful if either of them could have got safely through

the alphabet in the condition they were in.

Wade gave it up at last, and turned to Charters. He had been laughing feebly for some time at Anson's attempts to remember the directions, as they supposed, but when they looked at him they saw that he continued still to giggle feebly, and to their horror they found him incapable of comprehending a word that was said.

Wade was terribly upset. He had it firmly fixed in his mind that Charters would somehow survive to share the fortune he was so anxious to bequeath to him, and the thought that he might die through the privations they were enduring was maddening to him.

At last Wade, who had been pondering sullenly, dived his hand down into his ragged pocket, and with a sigh of relief drew something out. Anson stared at the object, unable for a moment to comprehend his evident satisfaction. It was a small revolver cartridge.

"I wonder if it would kill me if I let it off in my mouth," he said with a grin, looking at Anson.

"I don't think so," returned Anson, almost fancying his brain was giving way again.

"Neither do I," he said, "or I'd have done it long ago. But that ain't the question.

56 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

Can you guess what use I'm going to make of this, eh ? "

Anson confessed his inability to solve the problem, and he continued :

" You're a fellow who's knocked about, and you ought to know. Just you watch me, and pray my strength don't give way, for my hand is as weak as a cat's."

So saying, he applied the little metal case to his teeth, and, biting off the bullet, carefully poured out the small quantity of gunpowder the wad retained into his palm, and thence on to the seat of the boat, now rocking lazily on the calm sea.

" You haven't got a needle, I suppose ? " he said.

Anson had not, and guessing now what he would be at, wondered lazily how he would manage.

He pondered for a moment or two, and then his hand went round to the back of his waistcoat, and returned with the buckle from the strap.

The buckle was a little black-lacquered iron one, with three sharp prongs, and Wade, after examining it carefully, turned and looked at Charters. The poor fellow lay helplessly babbling, entirely unconscious of his surroundings, and Wade with an effort

supported him with his knees, while he managed to take off his coat.

He rested a moment when he had got Charters' shoulder and arm bare, and looked at him with pity and affection in his eyes. "Lord, send I don't poison his arm with this buckle," he murmured. "I wish I had a proper needle. But it isn't the time to bother about a thing like that! Now you watch me, young fellow. It'll be your turn next if my brain holds out."

So saying, he commenced pricking at Charters' arm, and rubbing in the gunpowder, as if his very life depended on it. He worked figures and names on Charters' arm, the sweat dripping from his livid forehead, and his blue and swollen tongue feebly following every turn of the letters as he traced them, while Anson watched him as idly, as unconsciously, as the dreamer watches the figures of his dream. What cared he for opals then—or for Wade, or Charters, or the world? He was far away in a flax swamp in New Zealand—feeling the damp ground squelch under his horse's feet—watching the hares scampering at the sound of the hoofs—hearing the green flax crack and rattle under the stiff sou'-wester. . . .

When he woke from his dream Wade was

58 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

drawing down Charters' sleeve, and laying him tenderly in the bows again. Then he stooped and kissed the unconscious man's forehead, and murmuring "Your little gal's all right now, old man," he turned to Anson for a moment. "Good-bye, old fellow, I have done my best for both of you," he murmured.

Anson struggled to rouse himself and speak, but was too far gone. He could only lie and gaze at him with wide-open eyes.

Wade stood erect in the boat, his wasted and skeleton form seeming taller from its emaciation. In front of him the blood-red sun just setting, glared in his eyes and made them gleam with a ferocious and horrible light. All around, the ocean was as still and bare and motionless as a vast plain spread with glistening oil. In the boat at his feet lay one man unconscious, and another with apparently scarcely a day's life in him.

For a few moments he stood thus, gazing fiercely at the sun that beat as fiercely back again—beat until the reflection from his eye-balls made Anson's brain ache and ache again.

Then he knelt down, and after appearing to pray for a moment, called out the one word "Mary" and sprang overboard.

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 59

Anson watched idly for a moment the ripples his body made in the calm water, and then with one last thought for Estelle, fell backwards insensible against the bottom of the boat.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was a commotion aboard the Union liner *Drumcondra*. It was first caused by a shout "man overboard," but the look-out, who in the grey light of the early morning had not noticed the derelict boat with which the steamer had collided, now gave the correct alarm. In an instant a boat was being lowered to the rescue, and the cessation of the giant throbbings from the engine-room followed immediately afterwards by a reverse motion sent the passengers scurrying on deck in various stages of *déshabille*, and with still more varying emotions sounding every possibility of mental sensation from curiosity to alarm.

In the small boat, which had ridden cockle-shell fashion on the dance of the waves, two emaciated, senseless figures were lying. The impact had crushed in the side of the boat, giving it a ridiculous and useless appearance, to which no better parallel in

ordinary experience can be found than by comparing it to a battered hat. It was by the merest chance that it escaped being sent swirling down to the depths unnoticed.

A few inches more in the path of the monster, and the life troubles of the occupants would never more have been resumed.

As it was they had been thrown helpless on the side of their battered refuge, and the waves were lapping over them and rapidly filling the boat. It was now a matter of moments as to whether they would be rescued, and the stalwarts of the *Drumcondra* who were running the ropes through the tackle with a whizzing activity, knew it, and did not spare themselves. In a moment or two the boat put off from the side of the ship, but that moment was all too long and the derelict filled and sank almost to the edge while yet they were a few feet from it.

One of the sailors in the prow sprang forward and grasped one of the unconscious figures. His bravery put an end to all uncertainty, for the boat sank in the green gulf without a ripple. A companion had so far imitated his action that leaning forward he was able to fix a boat-hook in the clothing of the second figure, who was consequently sure of being taken aboard the liner, just as

in a few seconds he was pulled, drenched with sea-water, into the rescuer's boat.

The battered boat had, however, gone to the bottom, and with it had disappeared the figures of the plucky sailor and of the unconscious man he had risked his life to save. A cheer and many shouts from the deck of the liner conveyed to those in the boat that the last had not been seen or heard of them, and immediately afterwards a few feet to the left of the gunwale a porpoise commotion in the water disclosed the emerging head of the sailor who came to the surface with a cheery snort like a young whale at play, and then in a cool, business-like fashion composed his burden in the water so that he should float with a fair share of his face above the water-line.

There was evidently no occasion for haste or excitement. The period of uncertainty was over, the rescue was effected, and the transference of the unconscious man to the boat was effected with stolid, workman-like discipline.

The excitement was now wholly confined to those on the deck of the liner, and while the work of rescue was being completed, speculation ran high as to whether it was not all in vain, for certainly no one but a

doctor, or one with knowledge of the doctor's craft, could tell that the figures were not those of dead men. White as death, with gaping mouths and discoloured, distended tongues, they not only seemed done with life, but the parting had apparently been of such a horrible character that many of the passengers turned away unable to bear the suggestive sight as they were being transferred to the deck.

It was therefore taken as a proof of the unique and wonderful skill of the ship's surgeon when, as soon as expedient, and the liner had resumed her journey to Sydney, word was conveyed by the captain to all whom it might concern—which meant every soul on board—that the strangers so providentially rescued were alive, and there was little doubt of their ultimate recovery.

The doctor's diagnosis of their condition was that they had gone through a period of food and water famine, followed by delirium, in which latter stage they would undoubtedly have ended their troubles in the sea had they not been in too exhausted a condition for the effort, in which extremity kindly nature had come to their relief by conferring on them the boon of unconsciousness.

He predicted that it would be fully

64 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

a week before they were strong enough to resume their ordinary mode of life even as convalescents, and as they were now but three days out from Sydney it was obvious that their task of recovery must be committed to the hospital authorities at Sydney. In one respect, however, his predictions were not borne out. One of the patients recovered with an amazing rapidity, and on the second day after he had been brought on board was strong enough to be carried on deck, having weakly thanked the captain for his great kindness. He was too weak and exhausted as yet to make any lengthy communication, and, indeed, apart from the surgeon's strict injunction that he should be relieved from any such exertion, he exhibited a decided leaning towards reticence. He, however, communicated the essential particulars, that his name was Charters, that he was first officer of the *Doric*, now *en route* to England, that his companion was a passenger on the same vessel, that his name was Anson, and that no mishap had occurred to the vessel.

Beyond these facts they only learned that his daughter had gone on in the *Doric* to England, and that his entire anxiety was to reach her as speedily as possible.

How he and Anson came to be cast adrift when no mishap had overtaken the *Doric* remained a mystery, as the surgeon soon discovered that Charters' remarkable physical progress was due in no small degree to the fact that it was at the expense of his mental balance. For just as a somnambulist or a drunken man passes unscathed through dangers which he could not negotiate in full possession of his senses, so in a like manner, Charters' temporary mental deficiencies enabled him to exhibit a recuperative power which he did not in reality possess.

Anson, on the other hand, was in the last stage of physical exhaustion. His life hung by a thread, and the surgeon anxiously realized that the commotion and bustle of a sea voyage were playing hazard with his life. It was, however, impossible to alter this. The routine of the Union line was upset to the fullest extent admissible by the delay involved in the incident of the rescue, and this hiatus in the journey it was necessary to repair by an added vigour in the throbs of the engine-room. All that was possible was to exercise every care and provide every possible relief until the steamer should safely arrive in Sydney, and Anson might be taken to the quietude of the hospital

66 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

ward, there to recruit his strength slowly until he should acquire vigour enough to develop that incipient brain fever through which he must infallibly pass before he could once more enter the outer world. Charters' awakening, after all, was but the spirit of a determined nature goaded to exertion by an overmastering desire. This desire was to rejoin his daughter, and its expression was not merely a craze, but a madness. On the third day, and when the harbour of Sydney was in sight, he was in a state of frenzy which was barely amenable to soothing influences and threatened from time to time to reach a pitch when restraint would have to be resorted to.

In this condition the two castaways who so narrowly escaped death were handed over to the authorities of the Sydney Hospital, and the captain of the *Drumcondra* forwarded messages to the calling places of the homeward-bound *Doric* so that those on board, and above all the daughter of the patient whose mind was in such a parlous state, might know of their safety.

CHAPTER VII

MORE dead than alive was Anson when transferred to a remote ward, there to be nursed back to life by medical skill, and the tender solicitude of the nurses. Exhaustion had worn him to the last ebb, and such life as stirred within him was but the faintest flicker which the least untoward event might extinguish. A strong constitution and a healthy record were his only, as they were the best guarantees of ultimate success, and the surgeon of the *Drumcondra* in taking leave of his unconscious patient, felt confident that time would effect the necessary rally.

The change had a contrary effect on Charters. Instead of growing better, his madness increased, and his vitality ebbed in inverse ratio. Through the mists which obscured the workings of his brain there was

68 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

one clear and ever present idea that he was under restraint, and was being kept back from the journey which he should be taking. He was, however, too completely the prey of his madness by now to have a clear idea of his governing wish, and his anxious ravings embraced a jumble of desires which included a search for his daughter, a hunt for opals, and the necessity of rescuing someone from the ocean.

To the doctors and the nurses in the hospital all this was unintelligible, but it was clearly evident, in theory at all events, that had the *Drumcondra* been on its way to England instead of to Sydney, his recovery would possibly have been perfected. Now, however, the veins of madness had taken him too seriously for such a proposition to be entertained. Although his cure was embarrassed by the conditions, it was obviously necessary that he should be at least sound in mind if not altogether in body before any passenger steamer could arrange to take him on board.

There was also the further hope that the messages from the *Drumcondra* would reach some of the ports of call of the *Dorid* and secure the return of his daughter, whose presence would most probably have more

potent effect than any known medical system.

The days which dragged slowly on saw Anson growing gradually stronger with the inevitable tendency towards brain fever which the doctors regarded as the practically inevitable passport to health ; but on the other hand, Charters was sinking more and more into a condition of mental chaos, such strength as he possessed being exhausted as it accumulated by violent outbursts.

And then at length came news of the *Doric*. A cablegram which read as follows :—

“ Estelle Charters well. Am returning to see Charters and Anson.

*“ Durand, Ship’s Surgeon,
“ Doric.”*

The message was read to Charters—on the dulled ears of Anson it would have had no effect.

“ Durand ! Durand ! ” murmured the madman, and he sank into a period of repose such as he had not enjoyed since first he entered the hospital to become one of the most troublesome cases the staff ever had to deal with.

The doctors noted the effect with wonderment. It seemed as though the name were a health-giving talisman, and the head surgeon—who was given to speculation—founded on the incident an elaborate theory of the effects of association. To his mind it was evident the name had conjured up associations of a soothing and curative effect on the mind of the patient, and had proved almost as beneficial as though the friend himself had put in an appearance.

Charters woke from his peaceful slumber with a mind clearer and more restful than had before been noted, and with a calmness which indicated a considerable recovery of his mental balance he asked for the cable.

"Durand coming to see me," he murmured. "That is good. He will put it all right. Poor Estelle."

The chain of reasoning was evidently an effort, for once more he relapsed into sleep, and a sleep so profound that it was almost unconsciousness. Right through the long orange and pearl-grey evening he slept, and right through the night. Then he stirred restlessly but without awaking, and continued asleep well on into midday.

He awoke, but scarcely stirred, as the

exhaustion he had been madly fighting against had now gained complete ascendancy, and his mind was also mercifully a blank.

He was not much recovered from this condition when Durand arrived at the hospital to be welcomed warmly by the medical staff, who were eager to learn the history of the case ; for it had so far been a complete mystery to them, as no theory could account for the presence of two men in an open boat at sea under such deplorable circumstances who had been attached to a ship whose passage was unattended by any hitch or accident.

"It is certainly one of the most curious incidents we have had at the hospital," said the house surgeon, as they sat in his sanctum on Durand's arrival.

"I can well understand how it must have puzzled you," replied Durand, "but the explanation is comparatively simple."

"That is the inevitable disillusionment of all mysteries," laughed the surgeon.

"We had a man on board suffering from delirium tremens. He jumped overboard at night during a rough heavy sea, and Charters and Anson put off in a boat to attempt his rescue. The act was brave but mad. They

could not possibly see him, and in any case it is nothing short of a miracle that the boat remained on the surface. We cruised about all night searching for them, and remained well on into the morning. Then as there was not a trace of them to be seen, the *Doric* was bound of course to proceed on her way."

"Charters had a daughter on board, did he not? It must have been a terrible ordeal for her, poor girl."

"Yes, it was, but she bore up much better than might have been expected, for she clung to the conviction, which no one on board shared, that her father and his companion were not lost."

"Strange," replied the surgeon, touched by another incident which set his speculative brain at work. "Strange that she should have such a conviction when you see, as it turns out, she was right."

"I am afraid it reveals no psychological principle," returned Durand with a faintly perceptible sneer. "A woman's affectionate nature naturally lives on hope with or without foundation."

"Quite so," replied the surgeon, "but the fact remains that in this instance she was convinced and was right."

"And she would have been equally convinced if she were quite wrong."

"I see that you are a confirmed sceptic," laughed the surgeon. "Will you come up to the wards now and see your friends? Charters will probably recognize you, but Anson is at too low an ebb I am afraid."

Durand expressed his desire to see them at once, and together they proceeded to the ward. Charters was first visited, and they found him in the early stages of one of those paroxysms of madness, which had so wrecked his hopes of recovery up to now.

"This is very unfortunate," said the surgeon anxiously; "he was getting on so nicely, we had hoped that this brain trouble had left him. And, by-the-bye, it is a curious fact that your name had a very soothing effect on him."

"That was merely association——"

"Exactly what I said," exclaimed the surgeon with evident pleasure. "It had an undoubted curative effect."

"Scarcely curative," said Durand. "I should call it merely soothing."

"Surely a distinction without a difference."

"Perhaps," said Durand lightly, and then approaching the bed he took hold of the

74 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

patient's right hand with his own, and then placing his left hand on Charters' forehead he remained silently by the bedside.

The effect was marvellous, and the house surgeon looked on finding more food for speculation in the action of the man who had scoffed at psychological theories.

Under his touch Charters lay still and peaceful, not asleep but resting. For five minutes he remained thus, a meaning look at the surgeon sufficiently indicating that silence was necessary. Then at last Charters sighed, and moving restlessly for a moment, his eyelids opened and his gaze rested sanely and peacefully on Durand.

"Durand!" he murmured. "I knew you would come."

"Of course you did," replied Durand cheerfully. "What a terrible time you have had of it. But you are all right now, eh?"

"Yes, I am all right; but—I think I am very weak. Where is Estelle?"

"She can see you if you are strong enough."

"Oh, I am."

"Well, that's all right. We can't manage it just now as the head physician is not here

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 75

to give her a pass. So you just go to sleep till he returns."

More obedient even than a child, Charters sighed restfully, and turning on his pillow, fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII

“**I** UNDERSTAND it all,” said the surgeon gleefully as they left the ward. “Marvellous, marvellous ; and I never saw an experiment before.”

“What is marvellous ?” asked Durand, looking at him with cool surprise.

“Why, your experiment on Charters ; your very successful experiment, I should call it, judging by the result so far. And to think that it should have such an instant effect, too, not only influencing the mind, but actually recalling the physical vigour as well. All I am curious to see now is whether the effect is lasting. If it is, then I must declare it the most wonderful thing in medical science, and must record my conviction that nothing but antiquated prejudice and dry-as-dust conservatism stands in the way of its general adoption.”

“My dear fellow,” exclaimed Durand in a tone of apparently sincere surprise, “what

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 77

are you talking about? I haven't the faintest notion, I can assure you."

"Of what am I talking! Why, hypnotism, of course. You cannot pretend for a moment that the wonderful change you have effected in Charters is not due to hypnotism."

"Hypnotism! Nonsense, there is no such thing. It is an arrant fraud and imposture."

"Come, come, I am not one of your strait-laced sort," said the surgeon in a pleading tone of expostulation. "What I see with my own eyes is convincing. I don't care what hard names may be given to a thing; if I see and know it to be right I accept it. It must have been by hypnotism that you dismissed Charters' madness, recalled his senses and then sent him to sleep."

"It was most certainly due to nothing of the sort," replied Durand. "I have not the faintest doubt that if his daughter, or anyone else as friendly with him as I am, came here and did as I did, the effect would be just the same."

The surgeon was not convinced, but Durand stubbornly held to his contention, only smoothing his denial sufficiently to ensure that his presence in the hospital would be welcomed.

Under his influence, which he persisted

78 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

was only such as might be exerted by the companionship of any friend, but which the surgeon was fully convinced was hypnotic, Charters progressed rapidly, and soon he was strong enough to be taken out by Durand for a drive. This stage reached, it was only a question of dates to arrange for his passage to England, as it was agreed by Durand and the hospital staff that the voyage not only involved no danger but must prove absolutely beneficial.

A curious fact in connexion with Charters' attitude towards Durand was that while he was physically weak he received him with open arms, but as he regained his strength much of his old dislike and distrust of him returned.

"Why is he taking this interest in me?" was the questioning manner in which he confessed this feeling to himself, and he found the answer when Durand, during their last drive, artfully led the conversation round to Wade and his opals.

Charters, with his innate suspicion and natural shrewdness, was determined to foil Durand if his return to Sydney was prompted, as he believed it was, solely by a desire to glean what information he could of Wade's treasure.

"How marvellous it was that you should have picked him up in such a sea, and on such a night. And then to be for days afloat the three of you. I suppose he was raving all the time about his opals?"

"If he had been I think I should have endeavoured to throw him overboard, as it was through them we were in our pickle," replied Charters with a capital affectation of savagery. "I hardly spoke to him at all; I was too anxious about our chance of escape and worrying about the agony of mind Estelle must have been in."

"How did Wade come by his end? He was not in the boat when you were run down by the *Drumcondra*."

"I really don't know," replied Charters. "I was, I suppose, unconscious at the time."

"Then it was Anson and he who talked?"

"Yes, as long as he was able. But there isn't much talking, I can tell you, when your tongue and palate are like leather for the want of water. It is terrible."

"But before you reached that stage, what did Wade say of the opals?"

"Oh, he was sick of them, too, and said Anson and I might have them."

Charters stopped abruptly, as he found himself under Durand's searching questions,

80 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

disclosing one of the very things he had promised himself to conceal.

"It was the very least he could do," said Durand, "after all you had done for him. What description did he give you of the hiding-place?"

"Do you think I listened to him, mad with him and his opals as I was?"

"Then he did describe the hiding-place?"

"I suppose he did."

"What do you remember of it? He could not remember any details when he was on the *Doric*, but that was no doubt through the drink."

"I tell you I was too sick of him and his story to listen. You must ask Anson."

Charters could have struck himself for his weakness in thus putting Durand on a trial which, in Anson's weak state, might very probably give him the information he required. He congratulated himself, however, on the fact that the key to the story was safely hidden under his sleeve, and he did not fear the possibility of Durand's divining that or worming the secret from him; and he was equally confident that Anson could not remember it even if under pressure from Durand he consented to disclose it.

"I suppose Anson was really more inter-

ested in the opals than you were?" asked Durand.

"I can't say," returned Charters petulantly. "I know they have been a worry and a nuisance to me from the first and I hope never to be troubled with them any more."

Durand took the hint, probably because he believed that he knew all that Charters had to disclose, and he at once adroitly turned the conversation on to Charters' voyage to England.

"It is a pity you cannot wait to take Anson with you," said Durand, a cold, mischievous gleam in his eyes. "But my time is my own, and I shall remain until he has recovered and go back with him."

"That is very kind of you," said Charters, while inwardly he added, "You will remain to wrest the secret of the opals from him if you can. That's your little game."

The following day Charters sailed, and Anson remained. Whatever Durand's game was he certainly meant to play it.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN Anson recovered consciousness he was naturally surprised to find himself lying in a Sydney hospital, and to learn that he had been there for several weeks hovering between this world and the next, with the balance somewhat in favour of the latter.

From the nurse he learned that Charters had departed to join his daughter in England.

Anson could not believe that he had not left any message or address for him after all they had gone through together, until he learned from the hospital physician that, although Charters was well physically, his brain had apparently not wholly recovered from the sufferings he had undergone. He was, said the physician, either strangely unwilling to discuss his adventure, or had indeed lost all recollection of that terrible voyage. It was, however, possible that he had left a message for him with Dr. Durand, an

assiduous friend who was constant in his attendance at the hospital.

This news coming upon him in his weak condition distressed Anson greatly. He had grown very fond of Charters, and his feelings towards Estelle, whose face haunted most of the dreams of his delirium, made it seem impossible that she should pass from his life in this way. Was he in the future to treasure up only the few brief hours that, added together, made up the sum of his acquaintance with her ?

As he lay there in bed, staring down the long wards of the hospital, at the rows of white couches, and the gliding figures of the sweet-faced nurses, or gazing from the window out over the loveliest harbour in the world, he pondered over the events of the few weeks subsequent to his arrival at independence and his determination to return home. What an amount of incidents even for an eventful life those few weeks had given birth to ! Hard up for a few pounds, he had inherited a competency. With a heart, as he thought, steeled against the sex, he had fallen deeply, irrevocably in love, and with a girl who by this time had probably forgotten his very existence, and he was suffering from a wound which would take longer to heal than that in

84 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

his head. He had made and lost a good friend—a bad thing to do after thirty. He had been in danger of his life twice within a week. And then he remembered he had been left a fortune—a fortune in opals. For poor Wade was dead, and he was now co-heir with Charters in the unfortunate fellow's find.

At first the idea rather shocked than pleased him. Those opals had been pretty deadly up to the present. They had cost Wade his life and the poor sailor Thompson his ; Charters and himself had been nearer death than he cared to recall ; and the opals—well, the opals were still in their hiding place—if they had not yet been stolen. He thought more of Estelle in those days when he had nothing to do but think than he did of wealth. He felt sure that she did not care for money ; her love for her father through all his trials and misfortunes, told him that. And besides, if he were rich, Charters was still more wealthy, for was not the greater part of the legacy his ?

Would he try—had he tried—for the opals ? Anson wondered, as he lay one day gazing out on the shipping in the harbour, and watched one of the Union boats starting on its voyage to New Zealand. And then the doctor's words came back to his mind. Charters had been strangely unwilling or unable to recall

those days in the open boat. The doctor had thought his brain affected. Might it not be, as is so often the case, a blank to the events connected with his illness? Might he not have forgotten poor Wade and his will? Indeed, except by inference, he could not be sure the poor fellow was dead, for he was insensible when Wade leaped from the boat. His knowledge of Charters' nature told him that he would take no steps to secure the opals until he was assured of the man's decease, and even then, with his carelessness of practicalities, he would probably give the matter little thought.

But a fortune such as Wade had spoken of was not to be lightly thrown away, and Anson determined to hasten his convalescence, get strong again and find his friends. He could obtain Wade's directions as to the hiding place from Charters' arm, and be the means of presenting Estelle with—well, if she did not care for money, at least with a set of jewels that should be worthy of royalty itself.

He could not quite understand what Durand's presence in Sydney meant, nor did he trust him. For all that, however, it was with a feeling of pleasure he heard that afternoon that Dr. Durand had called and wished to see him.

One always feels a certain amount of in-

86 THE MAN WITH THE OPALS

terest in people, however antipathetic, who have been connected with the great events of one's life ; and this was why he looked forward with interest to Durand's visit.

Durand was a man whom nothing could put out of countenance. The fact, therefore, that Anson's greeting was cool, and that they had been, if not open enemies on the *Doric*, at least passively hostile to each other, apparently made not the least difference to him. He strolled in calmly, looking well-dressed and handsome as usual, and with an amiable smile lighting up his clear-cut features.

"I was delighted to hear you were rescued," he commenced warmly, when he had shaken Anson by the hand, and taken a chair near the sofa on which he rested. "We feared, on board, that you were lost. Rutherford was in a terrible state about the accident, and though we cruised about for hours we could, of course, find no traces of you. That poor girl, Miss Charters, suffered terribly from the suspense. What a beautiful girl she is, and how overjoyed she will be to welcome her father back from the jaws of death," he continued, his cold bright eyes meeting Anson's with a trace of meaning in them.

"She was well when you last saw her?" Anson asked eagerly.

"Quite well, as far as bodily health goes," he returned, "and very grateful to me when I offered to return to Sydney to attend to you both. You have not heard from her?"

"No, and it is hardly possible I could," Anson replied. "She cannot long have reached England, and, of course, has not had time to write to me yet."

Durand's keen eyes seemed to read Anson's secret as he mentioned Estelle's name, but his impassive face gave no sign and he changed the subject.

"Poor Wade has gone, I hear," he said carelessly; "but, poor devil, he was booked, anyway. I did what I could for him on board, but he had an idea I meant him badly, and was not very grateful."

Anson glanced at him, but kept back the remark that was on his lips, and drifting on to the topic of his treatment in hospital, they soon became engaged in easy chat.

Hypnotism is a science that has made great strides of late years, and is capable of still greater expansion, but it is not on record that anyone has ever yet been hypnotized except with consent. Yet it is hardly open to doubt that, given a weak mind or a mind in a weak state, and a will of great power, backed by a splendid vitality, the stronger mind will tri-

88 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

umph over the weaker. Durand did not hypnotize Anson, nor attempt to do so. His nature was given very much more to the material than the psychical side of science, and he had probably never studied the subject; yet had Anson been the most docile subject the Salt-petière ever saw, and his companion the great Charcot himself, he could not have been more thoroughly turned inside out that day, or made more thoroughly communicative about everything upon which he most wished to preserve silence.

How was it? He did not know. But from that day he retained a great respect for Durand, where before he had experienced merely dislike.

He had disliked him the first time he met him. All he had ever been told of him added to his aversion. He disliked him a moment before he came into his room, and he hated him the moment he left it, but he was forced to confess he thought him a most charming and interesting fellow while he was with him that day.

He talked in fascinating style of his adventures, of his travels in many countries; he discussed common acquaintances—he seemed to have met every one—he discoursed brilliantly of science—and at length, so great

was the strange mastery of the man, Anson quite convinced himself that while he was telling him of his experiences in the boat, of Wade's strange will and death, of Charters' tattooed arm, and his probable good fortune—for he did tell him all these things—he quite convinced himself that he was telling the story exceedingly well, and that Durand was the best listener in the world to tell it to.

The man when he chose could certainly be extremely fascinating ; Anson was still very weak, and Durand was the first man of his own class, save the doctor whose time was limited, with whom he had conversed for many weeks. That is how he afterwards tried to excuse himself for his disclosures to the very man he most distrusted.

Durand—how Anson groaned when he recalled the fact—listened attentively to the tale. He expressed his sorrow at Wade's sad end and his sympathy with Charters and Anson for their sufferings, and when he at last rose to take his leave, his parting words were that he would find Charters and his daughter and convey to them Anson's best wishes.

Half an hour after he had gone, and his fascination, or whatever it was, had departed with him, Anson felt convinced that Durand

would undoubtedly seek Charters and ascertain where the opals were hidden, and forestall them both by stealing them. Was it not for that very purpose he had drugged Wade on the *Doric*? Anson bitterly regretted his indiscretion, for he could not even cable a warning to Charters as he did not know his address.

With all he knew of Durand, and of Charters' simple, kindly nature, he could doubt not that Durand would entrap him, too. How he had fooled away Estelle's fortune and his own! Durand, who had the reputation of going to any lengths for money, who had attempted, by means which almost amounted to murder, to worm Wade's secret from him: Durand, whom even that poor drunken fellow had seen through, was now on the trail of the opals; and only Charters' unsuspecting nature stood between him and them. What had he done?

For a day or two he was too troubled to do anything but groan and curse his folly, but after a time nature reasserted itself, and the idea that he might yet remedy his mistake helped to rouse him. At the worst it was but a race, and victory would lie with the fleetest.

He sent for the doctor and asked him anxiously the earliest date when he might hope to leave what was now only a prison to him.

"Aren't you comfortable here, young fellow?" asked the doctor. "I'm sure you ought to be."

"Doctor, it is an affair of the most vital importance that makes me want to leave here," interposed Anson earnestly. "Your kindness—the kindness of all here I shall never forget, but I must go."

"I should have thought the affair of the most vital importance to a young chap like you, after your adventures, would be recovering your health," said the doctor smiling, "but as you seem very keen about it, shall we say a fortnight?"

"A fortnight!"

"Certainly not less. If you go before you will not go beyond the harbour. That is certain."

A fortnight! and another week, say, for getting a boat; that meant that Durand would have three weeks' start.

He raged, implored, threatened. It was no good. The doctor's word was final. His agitation only helped to delay the day of his release, so Anson settled down sullenly to wait for that day to come.

When at length it came, he bought a few clothes and necessities, for the *Doric* had taken all his belongings with her to England,

92 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

and bidding farewell to the hospital, booked his passage on one of the Orient boats for London viâ Colombo.

The voyage this time was without incident of importance, and after some weeks, which seemed months, so anxious was he to reach his journey's end, he landed in England.

CHAPTER X

IT is not to be wondered at that, in spite of the brave attitude of hopefulness maintained by Estelle, her nerves nearly gave way after the disappearance of her father and Anson. That Wade was lost she no more doubted than did any other soul on board the *Doric*, and it was no mitigation of the pity of the passenger or the pang at her own heart that the lives of those she loved—for she did not conceal to herself that she loved Anson—were so uselessly risked if they were not, indeed, sacrificed.

The *Doric* had lain to all night, and when with the coming of morning not only the darkness of night but the overhanging fog was dissipated, and no sign of the boat was visible in any direction between them and the eagerly scanned horizon, it seemed hoping against hope to believe that any possibility of rescue remained.

It was a strange fact, too, that she in-

stinctively resented the only sympathy she received which shared her views as to the possibility that the boat might not have been lost. The sympathiser and comforter was Durand, who theorised stoutly that the conditions by no means precluded the possibility of the boat having drifted during the night out of the range of vision, in which case rescue was only a matter of hours on an ocean path which was constantly being traversed by all manner of craft.

And yet, although he brought reason and logic to the support of her hopes, it was during her conversation with him that her heart seemed to grow cold as ice, and her hopefulness sunk to zero.

It was doubtless due to her invincible and unreasoning dislike of him that his cheering conversation had an effect on her spirits the reverse of what it would have had if another had been the speaker; and yet the very words, even if she could not accept them as reliable or sincere, were a welcome change from the silent glances of pity or common place condolences of the other passengers, and on this account Durand and she were frequently to be seen together during the melancholy continuation of the voyage.

"There is to my mind an easy explanation of the disappearance of the boat," he said, a few days after the voyage had been resumed, "and I think the first news we receive will confirm my theory. More than one vessel passed during the night—I ascertained that from our 'look-out'—and it is very probable that your father and Anson successfully hailed them and were taken aboard."

"Oh, thank you, Dr. Durand, for giving me such grounds for hope. That has not occurred to any one else."

"I must say it did not occur to me till this moment, and yet it is the most reasonable and most plausible explanation. Of course, any vessel rescuing them would proceed on her course, she could not possibly upset her arrangements to the extent of cruising about so as to join the *Doric* in the morning. She would be quite satisfied with having effected a rescue, and the inconvenience to the men rescued would be considered a very slight matter in comparison."

"I think you have really hit on the true solution," exclaimed Estelle fervently. "It is not likely the *Doric* and the boat drifted apart so far in the night, so that they must have fallen in with a vessel of some sort."

"Besides," interrupted Durand impulsively, while a cold and sinister gleam sprang into his eyes, "I have always had the feeling that a matter such as the search for the opals never ends in such a prosaic manner."

"I don't understand you," said Estelle, looking at him with surprise. "Mr. Wade is undoubtedly dead, and with him is lost for ever the only clue to their whereabouts."

"That is what I cannot believe," said Durand with intensity. "The big chances of the world are under influences which we perhaps don't understand, but all the same they are real, and I cannot think that a hoard of choice opals, which must be of almost fabulous value, could be left entirely at the mercy of a drunken madman."

"But unless someone at Port Lyttleton has a clue to their whereabouts it is certain that the story has closed for ever."

"But it is likely that Wade may have imparted this clue to your father and Anson."

"I don't think so; they were never in his company; you alone saw him privately."

"But he looked on me with the suspicion which a man in delirium tremens always harbours against the doctor who seeks to cure him. On the other hand, I am con-

vinced that he was desirous of a confidant. He must have confided in Anson or your father. Why, if it were not so, should they risk their lives to save him?"

"Why?" echoed Estelle coldly. "Surely the ordinary instincts of humanity would have impelled them."

Durand saw that he had made a mistake, and he sought at once to repair it.

"Yes," he said, "Wade could not have had an opportunity of confiding in them, and they must have been actuated only by a desire to save his worthless life. I think you are quite right."

"I know I am," said Estelle so decisively that he at once changed the course of the conversation.

"There is another possibility which has struck me," he resumed, "in thinking out this melancholy business. We have all made up our minds that Wade has been lost——"

"I don't see how there can be any doubt of that," replied Estelle. "It is generally agreed that he was almost if not quite mad, and he was doubtless bent on suicide."

"That is the view in which we have all been most probably mistaken. Wade was mad, it is true, but his madness probably took the

form of an insane desire to swim back to shore so as to regain his treasure."

"A resolve which is just the same thing as to determine to commit suicide."

"By no means," responded Durand. "If suicide were his intention, he would, of course, not battle for his life; he would, on the contrary, seek to compass his death. If, on the contrary, he were bent on the mad resolve to swim back, having failed to secure a boat and crew for which he had tried, he would at least battle for his life. In fact, as he is probably a good swimmer, he would no doubt make considerable headway, while the sousing in the water and the exercise might have the immediate effect of restoring him to his senses."

"That certainly sounds reasonable," said Estelle with growing interest. "But assuming that to be the case, what do you think would happen then?"

"Why, he would no doubt keep afloat until rescued by your father and Anson."

"Who would then at once return to the *Doric*?"

"Well, that is where my strange theory goes right outside what you would regard as probable."

"Then what do you think might have happened?"

"In the first place," said he, leaning back and speaking as from an introspective process of reasoning, "the *Doric* would by that time have been a considerable distance away, as a ship not at anchor must necessarily drift. If we assume that Wade regained his senses, he would tell Anson and your father why he attempted his mad feat. He would have told them the exact value of his treasure, and the danger of discovery which threatened it."

"Still all this was generally known. What do you think could have happened assuming that he once more told his story and told it sanely?"

"Well, this," said Durand, a jealous, angry gleam replacing in his eyes the sinister calculating glance which had illumined them. "He might have proposed to them to row as far away from the *Doric* as possible so as to remain in the open sea on the chance of being picked up by a returning vessel in the morning. It was a big thing to possess a boat, and the plan, while risky and dangerous, was at least feasible. By Heaven, I think that is the explanation. Wade is not dead, and he secured their co-operation by offering to share the treasure with them. Perhaps by now they have secured the opals. What do you think?"

"I think you are quite wrong in everything but that my father and Mr. Anson have been rescued. That I believe, but I believe poor Mr. Wade is dead. Mr. Anson is wealthy and would not be tempted to such a course even by the offer of a fortune, and not for anything in the world would my father cause me such agony of anxiety as I have gone through."

"Well, well," said Durand smiling, his excitement having evaporated as quickly as it had arisen. "I am glad, at any rate, that you are convinced of their safety. I am equally convinced that you have yet to learn the great influence of wealth and what men will go through to acquire it."

Estelle was greatly reassured by this conversation, although it considerably lowered Durand in her opinion. It was no longer merely an undefinable distrust of him which filled her, but she was unspeakably disgusted by the unmistakable cupidity and greed which inspired his thoughts. Instinctively she felt that he was madly jealous of the fact, which seemed to have taken possession of him, that her father and Anson were on the track of the opals. It was impossible not to perceive that he looked on this as a species of good fortune which placed them in a position of advantage over himself.

This led her very largely to discount a statement he made to her the following day which was evidently intended to impress her with the notion that he was most disinterestedly devoted to her service. This was that he had made up his mind to disembark at the next port and return to Port Lyttleton.

"I am certain I shall have news of them there," said he, "and you may rely on my letting you know everything as soon as possible."

Estelle thanked him, but with her ready woman's wit she could not refrain from pointing out the weakness of his position.

"It will," said she, "be largely unnecessary, although I greatly appreciate your kindness, because if my father and Mr. Anson are, as I pray and hope, rescued they will communicate with me direct."

However, as our readers are aware, a cablegram was awaiting the *Doric* which put an end to suspense, and it was with a sincere feeling of thankfulness that she accepted his offer to return to Sydney where they were.

CHAPTER XI

GREATLY relieved as she was by the brief message of the cablegram, it was a melancholy journey for Estelle until she finally reached London.

To a certain extent she had been accorded the *rôle* of a heroine by the passengers, who now saw something mysteriously prescient in the persistence with which she had held to her belief that her father and his companion were alive. The reaction, however, was almost worse than the suspense, and it was a very pale and fragile heroine, indeed, that focussed the attention of the passengers.

Captain Rutherford, who had extended to her a paternal care during the voyage, cheered her up with the assurance that detailed news would undoubtedly await the arrival of the *Doric* in London, as the agents of the company would, as a matter of course, forward particulars.

In due course the *Doric* reached her destina-

tion, and Captain Rutherford had a sheaf of papers and letters awaiting him. He suggested that Estelle should remain on board until he had seen to the berthing arrangements of his vessel, when he would at once communicate to her what news had reached him.

"It is not so good as we could have wished," he said, when at last he was able to examine his papers, "but it is far better than many of us, in fact all of us but you and Durand, dared to hope for."

Estelle went pale, and the kindly captain noticing it hastened to relieve her anxiety.

"Your father is quite well, and at the time the message was sent off was preparing to start for home, as the doctors now think him strong enough."

"Then he has been ill?"

"Yes, my dear. That is the worst news, and that happily is now done with. The fact is the boat drifted about several days, and your father and Mr. Anson were in, I should think, the last stages of exhaustion when they were picked up."

"Then it was not true about Mr. Wade."

"What was not true?"

"Dr. Durand said that Mr. Wade probably suggested to them not to return to the *Doric* but to remain in the boat and get

picked up by a vessel returning to Port Lyttleton or Sydney."

"But why on earth should they do that?"

"Of course, I knew they wouldn't dream of it, but Dr. Durand said that Mr. Wade had probably induced them to join with him in the search for the opals."

"Those wretched stones!" exclaimed the captain angrily. "I really believe there is something in the old superstition about them. So far this particular lot have brought nothing but misery to those connected with them."

"I agree with you, and although I am sorry for Mr. Wade, I am glad my father and Mr. Anson have nothing to do with his treasure."

"Well, as there is no mention of Wade, I conclude he is lost."

"Was my father very ill?"

"Very, I should say, because the anxiety of the doctors was not so much on account of his strength as to whether he might be trusted on the voyage."

"He had not gone mad: you don't mean that?"

"Oh, no; I take it he was in a hurry to return, and they were only anxious to make sure that the delirium of brain fever was entirely routed. As he has doubtless started for

home by now I conclude that he is all right."

"And—and is he coming alone?"

She was longing to enquire about Anson, and yet was fearful of disclosing the secret of her love for him.

"I take it that he is coming alone, because Anson is too ill as yet to be moved. Both were apparently struck down with brain fever, but Anson is in the worse plight of the two. Durand, who seems to have a good heart under a very repellent exterior, is staying with him, so that as he is in hospital, and has also a personal medical attendant, he will be all right."

There was nothing more to learn, and as Captain Rutherford had many other things to attend to Estelle thanked him for his many kindnesses and prepared to depart.

"Oh, by-the-by," he said, detaining her, "there is one thing more. Have you a house in London?"

"A house! Oh, no," replied Estelle blushing, "my father has been too embarrassed in his circumstances to maintain a house since my mother died; besides which he always wishes to have me with him."

"Pray pardon my questions," interposed Captain Rutherford; "I was merely thinking of a possible difficulty your father might have

in communicating with you. Does he know of your address ? ”

“ No, not exactly. We had intended trying to re-engage rooms we once had, but they may be let.”

“ In any case, Miss Charters, my advice will be useful to you. Whatever address you may fix on can be registered at our offices and communicated to your father on his arrival. You can also learn there the name of the ship he is coming in, and the date of the arrival, so that you can meet him.”

“ Oh, thank you ; that will, of course, be the best way.”

“ But ships are erratic things and you might chance to miss him ; that is why I advise you to leave your address under cover for him at the office.”

Estelle knew that the resources which she and her father had looked forward to commanding, and which were now wholly in her charge, were scanty enough to call for the most careful husbanding ; so, leaving her luggage on board, she set out on foot to secure lodgings in the neighbourhood of the docks where she might remain till her father arrived.

The neighbourhood is squalid and infested with evil-looking characters whose looks in

too many instances are by no means misleading. There are, however, many respectable houses there to suit the requirements of those travelling on the world's great highway whose means do not allow them to command the luxuries of the West End hotels.

To one of these, in a clean-looking but narrow thoroughfare called Bridge Street, Estelle successfully applied and secured a bedroom and sitting-room for her own use with an option of an additional bedroom upon the arrival of her father.

She had her luggage removed to these rooms as soon as possible, and busied herself with futile plans for ensuring her father's comfort on his arrival. It was largely an occupation of make-believe, and she found herself torn by anxieties ; wondering if the hint of her father's mental breakdown might not be more serious than she was led to believe, and if Anson's were not of a still more serious character.

There was, however, nothing for it but to wait and hope, and in due course came the information for which she had looked : the name of the vessel by which her father had set sail, and then the expected date of its arrival.

The days wore on wearily and unevent-

fully, and then at last she was able once more to clasp her father in her arms.

It was evident to her at once that a great change had come over him. She had naturally expected him to share in equal measure the ecstasy of joy she felt at their re-union, but his embrace was passionless, almost listless. He seemed, however, to be in full possession of his faculties, and for this she was thankful.

But not until their return to the rooms which were now their home, and until a few hours' intercourse, did she quite understand the change, and then she knew that the intervening time was almost a blank to him. The rigour of his experiences had practically broken him down, and while his health was restored, it was a gift to a man whose interest in life had largely vanished.

CHAPTER XII

NEARLY two months passed in this dull, hopeless manner. Charters would stroll out, walk aimlessly about the streets or down to the docks and home again ; but he apparently had no object in life, and Estelle realized with a dull pain at her heart that their little store of money was growing perilously small.

Her great anxiety as to the future was all the more intensified because she had no one now to consult. Instead of being a helper, her father had sunk into a condition of spiritless listlessness. He did not even refer to the terrible experiences through which he had passed, and she was afraid to awaken the painful memories lest the effect might be to revive an activity which would be harder to deal with than the passive condition into which he had sunk.

And yet the problem of life was an un-

avoidable and a pressing one. Her father, with that reticence which is one of the most characteristic indications of an autocratic nature, had never acquainted her with the extent of his resources outside his salary when in engagement, and so between them and want, so far as she knew, there only remained the quickly lessening store of coins in her box. She feared to question him, feeling instinctively that there was danger in causing him any excitement. Like an anxious mother she was forced to maintain happy surroundings for her baby, and with an anxious thought for the future it seemed to her that she must seek some occupation herself while yet they possessed some means.

Daily, as this conviction grew on her, she worried over the various plans which occurred to her, only to reject one after another. By education she was competent to be a governess, but this expedient struck her as impossible, as it meant being away from her father, who, she felt, needed not only constant care but constant watchfulness. In like manner she had to dismiss as futile the various modes of employment which a girl in her position might seek. All would have necessitated absence from home, and all therefore came under a fatal objection.

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS III

Only one resource which occurred to her seemed feasible, and that was to take a house in some likely neighbourhood and start a private school. This plan she confided to her landlady—a motherly good-natured soul who had quite cottoned to her anxious young lodger—and Estelle was delighted to find that she heartily approved of it and predicted that it would be a great success.

"It is just what is wanted," was the landlady's enthusiastic opinion. "There's lots of people as don't like the Board Schools would be willing to pay sixpence a week to have their kids under a nice young lady like you as would teach 'em manners."

Estelle was delighted with such a hearty endorsement of a plan which would enable her to keep a home where her father would be always with her; but when afterwards she reduced the project to figures, she found that at the landlady's suggested fee it would take forty children, many of them perhaps noisy and troublesome children, to reach an income of one pound a week, all of which would in the first instance be swallowed up in rent.

However, she thought this might be remedied by choosing a neighbourhood where the parents would not expect to have manners and education imparted for so small a fee.

Estelle made several inquiries, and formed what she considered the best plan in the circumstances before she broached the subject to her father.

They were in the little sitting-room overlooking the dingy street, and Charters was languidly watching a couple of pugnacious sparrows in the roadway when she ventured on her proposal.

"Aren't you a little tired of this place, dad?" asked Estelle, winding her arms lovingly round his neck and laying her cheek softly against his.

"Tired of what?" he asked listlessly.

"Why, of this dull place, you dear old goose. I feel that I want something to do instead of moping here all day."

"Why, Estelle, what on earth do you want to do?"

"Oh, anything so long as I am active. But I'll tell you what I should like to do. I should like to——"

But before Estelle could impart the plan she had so laboriously prepared she was interrupted by a knock, and the next moment the door opened and Dr. Durand entered.

Estelle rose, surprised, but there was no hesitation in the manner of Charters' reception. The old lion in him blazed out in sudden

anger, and rising hastily he advanced a step towards Durand.

"You scoundrel!" he exclaimed, "how dare you come here! How dare you enter my room?"

Durand looked at him quite calmly, and with even a compassionate expression.

"I am sorry you resent my visit," said he, standing inside the door, and not venturing further into the room. "I was merely desirous of inquiring after your health——"

"That is no concern of yours," said Charters still beside himself with rage.

"But I naturally take an interest in a patient. After all, you could not complain of the attention I paid you at Sydney."

"And you have called with your bill?"

"Scarcely that. I only called to see if you were completely restored to health."

"Well, you see I'm not. No one ever is completely restored who gets under your devilish hands."

Estelle vainly cast appealing glances to her father in the endeavour to quiet him, but she feared to interpose more actively, lest it might only enrage him still further.

"I am very sorry that you have not got a good opinion of my skill," Durand said blandly; "but I am sure you will some day

confess that I rendered you no small service."

"For which I am willing to pay you, but that gives you no right to thrust your company on us."

"Very well, Mr. Charters, I apologize for my intrusion and will withdraw. I had yet another object in calling——"

"No doubt you had," interpolated Charters with a savage chuckle.

"I thought you and Miss Charters might wish to know in what condition I left Mr. Anson."

"Oh, yes, father," said Estelle anxiously; "you surely do wish to know that."

Charters subsided into his chair with a low growl. Durand took it as the required permission and coolly seated himself.

"Poor Anson," said he, "had a very bad time of it. When he arrived at Sydney he was in a state of complete collapse."

"We don't want to know how he was, but how he is," growled Charters.

"Oh, father!" ejaculated Estelle in a pained tone, for to her no statement could be too detailed.

"I will be brief, Mr. Charters," said Durand calmly; "he had a tough fight with death, but he won the victory at last. Then came an equally tough fight with brain fever. It

was nearly too much for him, but I remained with him right through, and I had little doubt but that he would recover."

"And he has?" asked Estelle anxiously.

"Oh, yes; he will doubtless reach England in a week or so at the latest."

"Why did you not wait for him?" asked Charters suspiciously.

"Because my own affairs had been greatly neglected, and I was in a hurry to get back. I take it that Anson will look you up when he returns, as he is anxious to talk over with you that adventure with Wade——"

"Whom you murdered," said Charters, his savage rage once more getting the better of him.

"I think no one can doubt that Wade has only his own drunken habits to blame for what happened to him."

"Oh, no doubt you can cloak it up, but it was you who encouraged and, for all I know, drugged him, too."

"You are quite mistaken," said Durand suavely. "I did my best to help him. However, Anson is very anxious to discuss with you about Wade's opals. He was continually speaking of them in his delirium, and he sees no reason why you should not secure them with the clue which you have."

116 *THE MAN WITH THE OPALS*

"The clue! The clue!" exclaimed Charters, starting like one dazed, who is set thinking by a chance expression. For a moment he remained thus, and then it seemed as if a revelation had been made to him. But at the same moment a cunning light crept into his eyes, and turning to Durand he exclaimed: "Liar! Liar! and thief! Anson has not sent you here. It is the clue. That is what you want and what you will never get. Go!"

Durand rose without a word and picked up his hat.

"Good afternoon, Miss Charters. Good-day Mr. Charters. I hope you will soon be quite yourself again."

The next instant he was gone.

"I am sorry you were so rude to Mr. Durand," said Estelle.

"The clue!" he repeated. "That's what the villain wants. Estelle, be careful of him. He is a bad man, a wicked man, a villain. He wants the opals. They are worth a mint of money; but he shall never get them, never."

The following morning Estelle heard voices conversing in friendly tones in the hall, and to her great astonishment she recognized them as those of her father and Dr. Durand. A few moments later she heard the front door close, and looking through the window she saw them

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 117

walking up the street together in close and friendly converse.

Although she did not realize it then, she was watching the opening of yet another chapter in the bitter experiences of her life. From the moment he disappeared from sight she lost all news or trace of him for many anxious wearying days.

CHAPTER XIII

ANSON made inquiries without a moment's delay at every place where he was in the least likely to get news of the Charters, but could discover no trace of them. Durand's former address he found, but he had left there before his last voyage, and the people of the place—a small hotel off the Strand—knew nothing of his present whereabouts.

All his efforts were futile. Neither private detectives, nor the police to whom he at length applied, could give him any information, nor did the advertisements which he inserted in the papers prove any more successful. That he did not come across Durand did not surprise him. If Durand's intentions were what he suspected, it was unlikely that he would wish Anson or any one but Charters to know his movements; but how was it that Charters was not to be found? Why had he not replied to the advertisements? He could

not comprehend it, and the real reason never for a moment occurred to him.

With a vague belief that chance might one day bring success, Anson occasionally took his stand by one of the bridges where varying crowds of London's population converge.

On one of these occasions, some weeks after his arrival in England, he found himself leaning against the parapet of London Bridge, gazing with careless eyes at the passing crowd. As he stood idly watching the passers-by, one of them, a girl with a slight, graceful figure, staggered, and with a little cry reeled against the stonework. He hastened to the rescue, thinking it a pity a lady, such as she evidently was, should become the centre of the curious crowd which had already begun to gather round her, but as he drew nearer the blood rushed to his heart, and a wild joy rose in his breast. It was Estelle at last. Yes, there she stood—her proud, lovely face pale and worn—her half-closed eyes casting their dark lashes on her cheeks.

He forced his way through the little knot of spectators hastily, and with an effort she recovered herself slightly as he approached, and half lifted, half supported her a short distance from the crowd.

She appeared surprised to meet him again ;

but half-dazed as she still was, and hardly recovered, it was obvious she was not displeased at the encounter.

"Mr. Anson!" she murmured, "how strange! I never expected we should meet you again. We were all on board so glad to hear of your safe escape."

"Don't trouble about me just now," he said quickly. "Are you better? Would you like a cab? Can I get you one or may I see you home on foot?"

"It is nothing," she returned; "thank you very much. I am better—much better—but how good of you to come to my assistance. I don't know what would have happened to me if I had fainted there on the bridge."

"You are sure you are all right again?" he asked anxiously. "But if you do not mind, I think I had better see you safely to your home. Your father will be worried about you, perhaps. How is he? I have been so anxious to see him again."

Estelle started at the mention of her father, and her lip trembled. "Ah, Mr. Anson," she said sadly, "my father is not at home. He—he is—I cannot find him. I don't know where he has gone. He left me yesterday and I have had no word from him since."

"He left you yesterday," he repeated

slowly, "you have not heard from him since ! Oh, well, I suppose you will find he has returned by now. He may have missed a train, or been detained on business." He could not for a moment comprehend her distress.

Estelle hesitated a second, and then began hurriedly : " Mr. Anson, may I tell you something. Perhaps—you have been very kind—perhaps you could help me. I have no one to—there is no one else I could ask. I am frightened about papa. Ever since that horrible voyage and his accident he has been strange. Something has affected his mind, the doctor says. He seems to remember very little about it all, and though he is still kind and affectionate, he—he is not the same. The noise and traffic confuse him. He appears bewildered in London, and sometimes he loses himself. Once he was away for as long as two days. I hope, I pray, that it is so this time," she continued.

" You hope ! You mean——" he began, rather bewildered.

" I fear—I don't know what I fear, Mr. Anson. Do you remember a Mr. Durand on the *Doric*—the doctor ? "

" Very well ! " replied Anson with a sudden catching at the throat.

" Papa had been better for some time. I

had almost commenced to hope he was quite well again. But two days ago, when we were sitting reading in the evening, a knock came at the door. It must have been opened, and before we could move this man, this Mr. Durand, came into the room. I never liked or trusted him quite, but papa really disliked him more than I. He used to tell me not to speak to him on the *Doric*. He said Mr. Durand was a bad man, and when he came into the room the other evening, papa became terribly agitated and refused to listen to him at all. Mr. Durand seemed to want to be polite, and indeed I felt almost sorry for him, papa was so rude to him. He declared Mr. Durand had something to do with Mr. Wade's sad death, and in the end he ordered him to leave the house."

"He left then? Captain Charters would have nothing to say to him?" he asked eagerly.

"He left that night, yes. But the next morning when we had just finished breakfast, and I had gone upstairs, I heard papa talking to some one in the hall. I did not take much notice at the time. I fancied it might be one of the tradespeople, but after a time I came down. You can imagine how surprised I felt when I saw that the visitor was Mr. Durand."

"Durand again!" he gasped.

"Yes; and oh! Mr. Anson, I cannot understand it at all. Papa was chatting to him in quite a friendly way. They stopped when I came into the room, and Mr. Durand was polite and seemed to want to be friendly, but I distrust him——"

"From what I know of the man, you are right," Anson returned, his heart misgiving him. "But you say your father was apparently friendly now with Durand? He had got over his dislike for him then?"

"Apparently. And now they have some secret from me. Papa, who tells me everything, has some secret with this Mr. Durand which he wishes to hide from me. When I saw they did not wish to talk before me I left the room again, and some time afterwards papa called to me that he was going out with Mr. Durand. He kissed me affectionately, and told me he would not be gone long—not more than an hour, he said."

"Not more than an hour!" he exclaimed. "And you have heard nothing from him since?"

"He has been gone since yesterday morning, and I have heard no word of him. I am foolish, perhaps, but I feel afraid. It is not like the other time, I am sure. He has been

so well lately, more as he used to be. What can it mean?"

Anson feared that he knew only too well what it meant. Durand had been before him, though only two days. But he had to thank his Fate for this meeting with Estelle, and Fate alone. After all, it might not be too late. Fate might still be kind.

And even if it were as he feared—if Durand had deceived Charters and should get the opals, had he not met her again—might not——? And then he remembered that her trouble claimed his unselfish help, and put all other thoughts from his mind. He could guess, though she avoided the question, that food had not passed her lips since her father left her, and that she had spent the time in wandering in search of him. He must get her home, and endeavour to make her take rest and nourishment, while he attempted to find Captain Charters.

They had walked some distance while she told her story, and he noticed that the streets they traversed had been growing smaller and more mean-looking as they got into the neighbourhood of the docks; and when at last she stopped at a little dingy house in a back thoroughfare, he guessed their secret, and the reason he had been so long without finding

trace of them. Seeing Estelle as a saloon passenger and Charters as first officer, a little king on board, and knowing what kind of people they were, he had never dreamed that they could be very poor, or thought of looking for them anywhere but where their position seemed likely to place them. But as he looked at the unpromising exterior of their home, he feared that things had gone badly with poor Charters and that Estelle's anxiety as to her father's health must have been aggravated by other worries, too. That might account, as it seemed to him nothing else could, for Charters' change of front to Durand.

"Forgive me, Miss Charters—don't think me impertinent," he said, "but can you tell me if this man Durand spoke to Captain Charters of—— Is there no reason you can suggest for your father allowing this man in the house again—for his going out with him that day?"

Estelle looked up surprised for a moment. "How strange you should suggest it," she murmured. "I was just remembering something. When papa went away he said to me, 'Cheer up, girly, I think our bad days are over at last.' Poor papa has been worried about money of late, I fear. I paid little attention at the time, but now I recollect

that I did think Mr. Durand was talking of money when I interrupted the conversation. I know poor papa was anxious about our being poor. He lost a lot of money some time ago, and used to fret about it for my sake, though he might have felt I did not care so long as he loved me. Perhaps—but yet how could Mr. Durand bring him any money?”

Anson hesitated. Should he tell her all he knew or not? No! for what good could it do? A fear of he knew not what disaster was hanging over him, and there was no reason why he should add to her anxiety. He could but ask himself why Durand had taken Charters away: why Charters had not returned—given some sign. Better hide what he knew. If good news were coming, it would arrive soon enough.

“Miss Charters,” he said, attempting to disguise his trouble and assuage hers. “I am sure it will all turn out well. Your father has probably had unexpected business affairs with this man and has been delayed. Captain Charters will be home soon, perhaps to-night. Meanwhile, you may rely on me to do all I can to find him. But as a doctor—though only an embryo one—believe me you must not worry yourself any more. Let me beg you to take some rest while I do what I can. You

will only make yourself ill, and I can do all that is necessary."

Estelle was, as he could see, terribly fatigued, and it was with difficulty she restrained herself from breaking down. The fact of having some one she knew to talk to, to aid her, could not but be a great relief to her, and after a moment or so he succeeded in persuading her ; and with a faint attempt at a smile, and a few words of gratitude, she bade him good-night and entered the house.

Anson promised to call early the next day and inform her if he had any news, and then he made his way slowly back again in the direction of the city.

So his folly in telling all to Durand that day in Sydney was already beginning to bear fruit, he thought bitterly. Had it not been for him, Durand, though he had evidently had designs on the opals on board the *Doric*, would probably not have thought of seeking out Charters ; and if, as he supposed was the case, harm had come to Estelle's father, he was to blame.

Yet what could have happened to him ? Durand would hardly murder him, he supposed, for the sake of discovering the secret of Wade's hiding-place. He could easily discover it without such harsh measures, for if, as he imagined was the case, Charters was

ignorant of Wade's death, and Durand had informed him of it and of the object of the tattooing, gratitude would probably make him an easy prey. Yet he felt that the surgeon would stop at little, and unless Durand meant to share with him, Charters, after the secret was learned, would be an inconvenient witness—the only living one who could say to whom the opals in reality belonged.

There was indeed cause for anxiety—a spur to find Charters quickly; but where on earth was he to look for him? He had failed so lamentably in his former search for him, that he rested for a moment as he turned into Holborn and thought it over.

And here Fate, who had been so capricious to him of late, played him a good turn for the second time that day.

As he stood on the pavement near the kerbstone to avoid the crowd, a hansom drove up rapidly, and a man springing quickly out descended almost into his arms. Anson stepped back, and for a moment stared at him, too overcome to speak. It was Durand. He had arrived so swiftly, so utterly unexpectedly, that it almost seemed as if he had called him like a spirit from the vasty deep, and Anson could only stare at him speechless.

"Ah, Mr. Anson," he said coolly, after a

moment's hesitation, "what a fortunate meeting! I was just wondering if you had got on your legs again. I was going to write to you last night, indeed, confessing my failure, but——"

"Your failure?" Anson interrupted.

"Yes; unhappily I have a failure to record. A failure in the matter of those wonderful opals of yours and Charters. My dear fellow you have made some wonderful mistake, or, as is most likely the case, were subject to hallucinations during your terrible time in the boat of the *Doric's*. I am sorry, believe me, to crush your hopes, but your memory or your imagination have played you a sorry trick. I have seen Captain Charters, and there is no sign of tatooing on his arm."

Anson started back, and then smiled. "Of course—he had forgotten," he said, "or rather he was not aware of Wade's proceedings. He was insensible at the time."

"I am sorry to dash your hopes again," returned Durand, watching him curiously, "but I have examined him, and I assure you—but there! you need not take my word, of course. I will give you his address, and you can go there the first thing in the morning."

"His address," Anson repeated wonder-

ingly, "but I know his address. I was there just now—Bridge Street."

"Ah, yes, that's where he was living. Yes, quite so—but where he is now, I mean."

"What do you mean!" Anson asked angrily. "Captain Charters lives in Bridge Street with his daughter. Some days ago you called there, and afterwards Captain Charters went out with you. He has not been seen since then. Miss Charters is terribly distressed at his absence. What does it mean?"

Durand's face fell, as if he had just recollected something disturbing, and he met Anson's anxious gaze with a subdued look. "I forgot you were a friend of theirs," he said with apparent frankness. "The truth is that the poor fellow could not send. He is not in a fit state to. In fact I very much doubt if he knows he has a daughter in the world."

"What on earth are you talking about?" said Anson irritably, yet with a sudden fear at his heart.

"The poor fellow's mad," said Durand calmly, "mad as a hatter. I believe he has been queer for some time—since his unlucky adventure, in fact. On the morning he went out with me he seemed right enough. He came to my rooms, and we had a chat. I led up gradually to the subject of those opals, but

apparently I was not diplomatic enough, or the subject was too much for him. Anyway, he got terribly excited, and in the end I had to call for assistance. In an hour he was a raving maniac."

"Good heavens!" gasped Anson, "mad!"

"I was awfully upset," continued Durand. "I did not know in the least what to do with the poor fellow. I did not like to send for his daughter, for to tell the truth, it appeared to me that the attack was only a temporary one, the consequence of my having suddenly recalled his sufferings in that open boat while his mind was still slightly off the balance. Fortunately I thought of a friend of mine who has had plenty of experience in such cases, and, acting under his advice, I took Charters to his house, where things are more convenient than at my own house. If you care to come and see him the first thing in the morning, as I say, I will give you his address."

Durand's manner was frankness itself, and he appeared really distressed as he told his story, but Anson was wiser than he had been. He listened attentively to Durand's explanation, and it struck him that he had placed a slight emphasis on that "first thing in the morning"—a phrase he had repeated several times. Of course it was late, it is true—nearly

seven o'clock, perhaps, and dark, but——

"Why not to-night?" he asked abruptly.

Impassive as Durand's face was, it seemed to Anson that a shade crossed his features, as he glanced up sharply.

"Certainly," he said quickly, "certainly—but no! How stupid of me! Hennings would not be there. He leaves at seven."

"But there would be some one there, surely?" said Anson. He could see Charters, at least, and relieve Miss Charters' mind.

"No. I fear there will not," returned Durand, biting his lip. "There would only be a man in charge of our friend at least, and he would not let you in without an order."

"But surely the man would recognize you," Anson insisted. "He would remember having seen you with Charters."

"Possibly," Durand returned, "but I am not his master."

"But do you mean that Charters is shut up—that he is a prisoner?" What is this place?"

"The place is the house of my friend, Dr. Hennings," said Durand coldly. "He kindly offered to take charge of Charters—of course only temporarily. He is not a prisoner—certainly not. The law does not allow even a maniac to be shut up without certain

formalities ; but the man was raving for the time, and could not well be turned out into the streets, and as I have said, I did not like to distress Miss Charters by sending him home."

"But I can see him ?" persisted Anson.

"Certainly, you can see him. I will give you his address and will give you help to see him to-morrow. Or you can go by yourself. Hennings will be at home then. To-night it would be useless to go."

"One could at least attempt it," Anson said, for he felt suspicious.

"Attempt it then," said Durand calmly. "I regret I must leave you now. I have engagements. The address is 40, West Street, Whitechapel Road."

So saying, he waved his hand to him, hailed a passing hansom, and was gone before Anson could make up his mind to stop him.

The moment he had disappeared he wished he had detained him by force, and endeavoured to compel him to take him to this doctor's house and attempt to gain entrance. It was, however, a very difficult position. He was no relation to Charters; indeed, Durand was as old a friend as he. Charters had gone voluntarily with the man, and to all appearances Durand had acted kindly in doing as he had

done. To attempt force might have landed him in trouble, even supposing he could have managed it. And then he remembered that he at least had the address of Durand's friend. He could go there himself, and if Charters was to be seen he could surely manage it. If there was a man looking after him he would probably be open to a bribe. At all events he could try.

He looked round for a cab, but Durand had taken the only one in sight, and so he walked on slowly.

It struck him that Durand had taken his departure very suddenly. When he spoke first he did not seem in any hurry, and they had not been talking long. It was not until he began to insist on seeing Charters that Durand had been eager to get off. Had he suddenly determined to go himself to West Street, and should he find Charters there if he waited until the morning?

If Durand were speaking the truth, and there were no tattoo marks on Charters' arm, he should find him. But if the marks were there—and could he have been mistaken!—then Durand knew already what they were; and he knew also that once seen by Anson they would start, as runners say, from the same mark in the chase for the opals. Would

such a man as Durand was allow that to happen if he could prevent it ? No ! If he were right he should not see Charters again until it was too late. At any rate delay might prove fatal. It was probable he had given the right address. Durand in doing so would not have anticipated that he would refuse to wait, and had in all probability laid his plans on that presumption. It was just possible he might upset those plans if he could get a fast cab.

Rousing himself, he started to run, and tore along Holborn keeping a look out. All the big restaurants, unfortunately, were passed, and Holborn, at that part and at that hour, is not a place to find many hansoms ; so he had to run a long way, but at length the jingle of bells and the quick sound of a horse's feet reached his ears, and a smart vehicle came into view.

He hailed it, and sprang quickly on to the step.

" West Street, Whitechapel Road," he cried. " Double fare if you drive quickly." And they started off.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY pulled up with a rattle and a clatter, after what seemed an interminable drive, in a dark street off the Whitechapel Road. Anson paid the cabman and dismissed him, and then turned to give a look at the house opposite which he had halted.

He found himself facing a small door in a brick wall, and concluded that the house stood in a garden, although the wall was too high to see over. The street was badly lighted, but on striking a match he discovered the number engraved on a plate at the side of the entrance and a bell with the direction "pull" upon it.

He obeyed this injunction, and waited as he heard the peal echo down the street. No answer coming, he rang again, and yet again, each time however without effect ; and after a time he was forced to conclude, either that no one was at home or that Durand had been

before him. He had come quickly but it was of course possible ; and deciding to make certain how matters stood he measured the wall with a glance, and with a spring raised himself to the top, whence he dropped lightly to the ground on the other side.

The house, which he could see faintly about twenty yards from him, was in darkness—at least the windows gave forth no sign of habitation ; and almost fearing that he had made a useless journey, he stumbled across what he took to be two or three flower-beds, and made his way stealthily towards it.

He had nearly reached the door when a sound made him pause. It seemed as if a window had been softly opened. He looked up and fancied he could see some one peering forth after the now rapidly disappearing hansom. It was hardly possible that whoever it was could see him, but it was possible, even probable, that he himself was being looked for, and he remained motionless for some minutes.

After a time he heard the window close again, and all was still.

Deciding that the front door would still be fastened, he made his way carefully round to the back of the house, where he hoped to find some means of entrance. It seemed

a queer thing thus to enter a stranger's house at night time, but if this house was occupied, why had its inhabitants not answered his summons? In itself that was suspicious. Taken with the fact that Charters was probably there, it determined him in solving the whole mystery.

The rear of this mysterious mansion was as carefully shrouded in gloom as the front, but Anson thought he could hear footsteps within, and he once caught a ray of light through the shutters of one of the upstairs windows.

He tried the back door cautiously. It was closed, as he anticipated, and for some time he wandered round the place looking vainly for a likely spot to commit what was certainly a felony and break in.

He tried the windows next, and at length one of the ground-floor ones seemed to yield slightly to the prizing of his knife. It was a French window about three feet from the ground, and after a struggle he succeeded in pulling it outwards. He paused a moment to see if the noise it made had attracted any attention within, but hearing no sound, he clambered into the room and carefully lit a match.

It was with a considerable amount of trepidation that he looked round the comfortably

furnished room, evidently a sitting-room, and as the match burned down to his fingers he felt rather inclined to abandon his adventure. But just as he was dropping the burning end he caught sight of a coat hung carelessly over the back of a chair near the fireplace. He felt certain it was the coat he had seen Durand wearing but a little while previously in Holborn. He struck another match and looked more closely. Yes, there was no doubt of it. He had particularly noticed the collar—a fur one, and of rather an expensive kind for a ship's surgeon to wear.

This direct evidence of Durand's presence decided him. Durand was in this house. He had pleaded an engagement. He had declared it was useless to come there that night. But he was there himself. More, he must have driven there direct. There was treachery at work, and he meant to find out what it meant.

He made his way to the door of the room, and opening it softly listened for some sound that might guide his next movements.

The dining-room led into the hall which was dimly lighted by a lamp turned almost out. Opposite he could see a flight of stairs evidently leading down to the kitchen. There appeared, however, to be no servants in this

strange house, for he could hear none of that rattle of knives and clatter of dishes which usually ascends from the lower regions. Yet it was not the hour at which servants, had there been any, would have retired to rest.

He was about to step out and examine further, when he gave a start, and for a second stood too confused to move.

The staircase at which he was looking, after going down two steps, turned a sharp corner masked by an oaken screen hiding its lower distances. Round this corner came a man.

He was but some five yards distant when he appeared, and he was coming straight in Anson's direction. Anson was paralyzed with surprise, and this saved him. The man never lifted his eyes from a round dish which he was carrying in one hand, while he held a lamp above his head with the other.

It is possible that the lamp may have dazzled his vision, or he may have been too engrossed with his thoughts, which were evidently not pleasant ones by the way he frowned and ground his teeth, to notice Anson where he stood in the shadow of the doorway. He was a small stout man of forty-five or so with a bald head and an amiable and rather weak face.

He went on until he came to the end of the hall, and then commenced to mount a second flight of stairs, evidently those which led to the upper stories.

Anson was hesitating whether to follow him or no, when a door opened above, and a voice which he recognized called out, "Quick, you fool! What an infernal time you have been! He's still insensible, and that idiot may be here any time." It was Durand. Anson could not mistake the voice. He himself was the "idiot"—that he did not doubt. Was the other Charters? and what were they going to do?

The man with the round dish had disappeared by now; the staircase was in darkness, and he made his way cautiously forth again and followed upstairs. There were several rooms on the first floor, but a light streaming through the keyhole of one of them attracted his attention first, and walking noiselessly across he knelt down and applied his eye to the keyhole, hoping that no one would open the door suddenly.

The room was brightly lighted, and he could see quite plainly a considerable section of it. Opposite him was a bed, and on it lay, as he had suspected, Charters. He was apparently unconscious or asleep, and save that his hair

looked greyer, appeared much the same as when Anson had first met him on the *Doric*.

He lay upon his back, his right arm to the shoulder being bare. Anson gave an exclamation of joy as his gaze fell upon it, for there on the white skin were the tatoo marks he had seen Wade make on that terrible day at sea. What they were he could not discern, but they were there, and Durand had lied.

The section of the room which his eyes could take in only included the bed and dressing-table, and he was wondering if Durand and his friend were really present when the former came suddenly into his range of vision. He held the round dish in his hand, and his companion, whom Anson presumed to be Doctor Hennings, followed him to the bedside.

Durand placed the dish by the side of the bed and, stooping down applied what appeared to be a small sponge to some liquid in the dish and bent over Charters.

This action hid Charters from the watcher, and left only Durand's back visible. Anson was wondering what Durand was about to do when his attention was attracted by the singular behaviour of Hennings.

This individual, who stood behind Durand, was engaged in threatening him violently

with some weapon, apparently a lancet, which he held in his hand, and which he was using to make vicious little stabs in the direction of Durand's back. His face, convulsed with rage, had still that queer air of weak good nature, which Anson had previously noted, and which seemed to go so badly with his apparently murderous intentions.

While Anson watched this queer byeplay, Durand rose and turned towards his companion, who slipped the lancet back into his pocket and smiled at him absently. "A little more," said Durand quickly. "It's almost out."

He still hid Charters, but as the little doctor returned with the refilled saucer Charters moved uneasily and brought his arm into view. Good heavens! Anson gazed at the limb with eyes almost starting from his head. The marks were nearly gone.

For a second he was too dazed to do more than glare wildly through the keyhole. He had heard tales of Durand's infernal skill, but that he could rub out tattoo marks as one washes a sum from a slate seemed incredible. In that second Durand had passed the sponge again over the arm, and with a bound Anson hurled himself against the door and burst into the room.

"You scoundrel!" he cried, rushing up to Durand, and hurling himself the saucer from his hand.

Cool as ever, Durand turned quickly and glanced at Charters' arm. It was clear and smooth as a child's save for a slight blue tinge where the tattoo had evidently been. Then he turned to Anson. "What do you mean?" he asked coolly.

"You scoundrel!" repeated Anson helplessly, his eye following Durand's glance, and seeing the hopelessness of the case.

Durand looked down at Charters' bare arm. "Illusion, or fact?" he asked with a sneer. "I told you you were the victim of your imagination. You see there are none of the marks you described to me in Sydney."

"You have removed them—you and your confederate!"

"My dear fellow, you know that to be impossible. Tattoo marks are indelible. Any surgeon will tell you that," returned Durand.

Anson turned to Hennings. "My freind's arm was tattooed," he said sternly. "What have you done to him?"

The little doctor's eyes began to waver, and he stammered. "I assure you," he began.

There was no doubt in Anson's mind that he was merely the cat's-paw—willing or other-

wise—of Durand, and he turned his back on him contemptuously and faced the other.

"Will you tell me what those marks were that you have removed in some infernal way?" he demanded.

"Will you tell me what reason I could have for——" Durand commenced.

But Anson was furious—furious at his sneering manner—at his smooth lying—at the way he had been tricked. He sprang at him and got him by the throat. "Tell me, tell me!" he cried, shaking him to and fro.

He would have choked him but that a hoarse cry coming from the bed where Charters lay made him release his grasp and turn round. The noise of the struggle had awakened Charters, and he sprang up in bed with his eyes glaring.

"Hold him! Hold him!" shrieked the little surgeon, flinging himself upon Charters with an agility for which Anson would not have given him credit. "He is still under it—he is dangerous!"

Charters, with a maniac's strength, hurled the little doctor from him, and, brushing past, fled through the door and downstairs. Anson and the others followed, but the banging of the hall-door assured them the madman had fled, and when they hurried out into the darkness

there was no sign or sound to guide them as to the direction he had taken. In vain they searched through and through the garden and even in the streets beyond. He had disappeared.

The thought of the poor fellow in such a condition, and the fear of what might occur to him alone in the streets of London, overpowered all other thoughts in Anson's mind.

"What is to be done?" he asked wildly. The little doctor was looking terribly frightened, and even Durand appeared for the moment to have lost his *sang froid*.

"The police! The police! He must be caught at once!" he said quickly. "I will take Hennings with me and go at once to the station. They will telephone all over London from there. Fortunately there is one at the end of the street."

The police station was soon reached, and they gave the necessary information. Durand seemed as anxious as Anson to secure Charters at once, and the latter at the time could not entirely understand his genuine anxiety.

As for Anson, the one thought in his mind was Estelle. Charters was evidently insane. Suppose, with a maniac's cunning, he should find his way home? What an awful shock

for his daughter, what danger even! His first duty must be to forestall that risk if possible, and, hailing the first cab that passed, Anson jumped into it and ordered the driver to make for Bridge Street.

"You may be thankful for your escape," he said to Durand, as he left the two confederates, "but you shall answer for all this yet."

His only reply was a smile and a wave of the hand, as he took the little doctor's arm and turned homewards. But Anson could see that he was looking haggard and anxious.

When the cab drove up to Bridge Street it was nearly midnight, and the house was in darkness. Estelle must have retired long before. Anson listened for some moments after he had dismissed the cab, but could hear no movement within. Charters at all events, had not returned, and he decided not to disturb Estelle at such an hour with such terrible news.

But he could not go home with the knowledge that Charters might appear at any moment, so he spent the rest of the night walking up and down the little street, keeping guard, and save for a few words exchanged now and then with the policeman on the beat,

whom he took into his confidence, he saw no one.

Poor Estelle ! he thought sadly, as he wandered up and down—guardianless now and poor, she would need money. If only her father could be secured and taken care of, he could turn his attention to Durand and try still to save the opals. But Charters must be found speedily, or it would be too late. Durand knew the secret of Wade's hiding place now, and it did not need much skill to foretell that his first step would be to return to New Zealand. The only chance was to follow him as soon as it was possible to leave Estelle, trace him down, and endeavour to get the secret out of him—or if too late in that, and he had already secured the opals, to recover them somehow ; and Anson felt grimly that in this attempt nothing short of murder would stop him.

The morning did not bring any news of Charters, nor the next day, nor the next.

Anson saw Estelle and told her the sad news, while endeavouring to soften the blow as best he could. She bore it bravely. She had already guessed much of it, poor girl !

On the fourth day, when Anson was having breakfast, his letters were brought in to him.

One of them was addressed in what was evidently a female hand, and something seemed to tell him as he opened it first that it was from Estelle. He had hardly prepared however, for the news it contained ; and for some moments he sat gazing at it in silence. It ran thus :—

“ CHARING CROSS HOTEL,

“ *November 3.*

“ DEAR MR. ANSON,—

“ I hope you will receive this letter before you make your journey to Bridge Street to-morrow, or I fear you will think me strangely ungrateful to you in thus leaving London without thanking you for your great kindness, which, believe me, neither papa nor myself will ever forget. I have, however, no time to do more than scribble this hasty note before the train leaves. I have received word from papa, who I am happy to say is quite well again, to join him at once in Italy, and I am to leave by the continental express to-night. Papa wishes to be remembered to you. He asks me to thank you so much for all your goodness, and say that he hopes to meet you again under happier circumstances. He asks me to say that he will write to your present address

later on. With many kind regards from
papa and myself,

"Believe me,

"Sincerely yours,

"ESTELLE CHARTERS."

He sat there, the unfinished breakfast in front of him, staring at this letter for a considerable time. At the end, except that he now knew every word of Estelle's letter by heart, he was no nearer the comprehension of it than he had been at first.

It is true a few facts seemed to appear after a time. Apparently Charters had recovered from his insanity. At all events, he had recovered sufficiently to make his way abroad and issue instructions to Estelle. At least, Anson supposed he had made his way abroad, though even that did not seem certain. Another fact, and a sad one, was that Estelle had gone, and he should see her—when? "under happier circumstances"—well, that might easily be—they might easily meet under happier circumstances than they had hitherto done—but alas it was sadly indefinite.

Well, she was gone, and Charters was gone; but there was one thing left for him still to do, and now the way to that lay open. It was

to follow Durand. He did not feel amiable towards Durand just then. He was the cause of all this, and Anson determined that he should pay for it. But there was no time to waste in cursing Fate. Estelle was in Italy, and he might go there some day ; but at present he had much farther to go than that sunny clime, and there was much to be done before he could hope to see her again.

CHAPTER XV

IN contemplating the coming struggle with Durand, there was one chance to which Anson clung, and this was, strangely enough, the possibility of help through the little doctor, Hennings. It is true he was to all appearances Durand's confederate, but Anson was bearing in his mind his queer exhibition of helpless hatred when Durand's back was turned that night in his house. He must hate Durand. That he feared him, too, was probable. Would dislike master his terror? There was at least a chance of this, and Anson did not delay in testing it.

On this occasion his ring at the little door in the wall in West Street was answered swiftly and by a smart man-servant.

"Is Dr. Hennings at home?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Will you kindly step this way," returned the man, preceding him up the path.

The house was of a more imposing appearance than Anson had imagined, and taking

this fact together with the presence of a manservant, and the respectable brass plate on the front door, with its "A. Hennings, M.D., M.R.C.S." he concluded that the little doctor was of some standing in his profession. It was difficult to reconcile this belief with his connection with Durand, but it made the issue of his errand look more hopeful.

He was shown into a well furnished consulting room, where he awaited the doctor.

Hennings came into the room rapidly, with a professional smile on his face, and the card—which he had evidently not looked at—in his hand. As soon as he caught sight of Anson, his jaw dropped, and he sank helplessly into a chair, speechless.

"You!" he gasped at last. Then recovering himself with an effort and glancing at the card, which he held upside down and crumpled in his fingers, "Ahem, Mr. Anson. Ah, yes—of course," he murmured.

"My name is Anson," returned his visitor, feeling almost sorry for him, distress was written so plainly on his good-natured face. "Perhaps you remember, I introduced myself to you the other night in this house. Durand was here."

At the name a shadow crossed the doctor's features. "Er—er—yes, Mr. Durand," he

said nervously, still playing with the card. "But may I ask what you wish with me? I presume you do not require my professional services?"

"Dr. Hennings," said Anson firmly, "I have come to ask you to do me a favour—a great favour. I regret to say that you are unknown to me by reputation, but I cannot, of course, help seeing that that reputation must be a high one." The little doctor blushed and fidgetted nervously in his chair.

"That being the case," he continued, "I am sure you would not willingly aid in compounding a felony——"

Dr. Hennings sprang to his feet with his face ghastly pale. "Good heavens!" he cried wildly, "a felony! Then Durand has told you—what do you mean?—oh, Lord!"

"And you were certainly — ignorantly or otherwise—compounding a felony the other night," continued Anson.

Dr. Hennings heaved a sigh of relief, to Anson's surprise, and sat down again. "Oh, the other night," he murmured, "the other night! Ah, but may I ask what felony was committed here the other night?"

"As you are aware," Anson said sternly,

"there was a friend of mine in this house the other night—a Captain Charters. There were certain marks on his arm. They were tattoo marks, and they were removed during his detention here. Why was this done?"

The doctor avoided his glance. "Tattoo marks!" he stammered, "I did not see any tattoo marks."

Anson interrupted him. "They were there. I saw them. Within a few minutes they were removed, and without Captain Charters' knowledge or consent. The object was to place some one in possession—in the sole possession—of a secret which was not his, and to obtain a large sum of money. If you are not aware of this, I tell you so now. The act was felony, though it may certainly be difficult to punish it by law. I have come to ask you what those marks were."

Beads of perspiration were standing on Doctor Hennings' brow, and he looked sadly disturbed. "Was it so bad as that?" he murmured.

"If you are as intimate with Durand as you appear to be," said Anson bitterly, "you can hardly be surprised at anything he does."

The doctor looked up quickly. "He is a devil!" he said.

His face expressed such agitation as he spoke, and his eyes glanced so nervously towards the door—as if he expected every moment to see the object of his fears enter the room—that Anson could hardly keep from smiling.

“He is not a friend of yours, then?”

“Friend?” echoed the little doctor. “My dear sir, if at any time during the last ten years I, a respectable and I trust respected member of the Royal College of Surgeons, could have murdered that man without being found out, I would—well, I would not have had the honour of this visit to-night.”

“Why then?—”

“Young man!” interrupted Dr. Hennings earnestly, “never put yourself into anyone’s power! If you feel you are about to do so, shoot yourself. You will find it simpler in the end. Many years ago—it is too long a story to tell now, even if I could tell it—I was persuaded to do something which I would give the world to undo; would have given any time since then. Lord knows I am not the only man in my profession who regrets a certain day, but from that moment Durand has—he has—but what am I saying? My dear sir, no! I regret I cannot help you.”

Anson considered for a moment. "Very well," he said at length, "then I have only one course open to me. I must apply to the police. I am aware I can prove very little, that I have no case; but I assure you I will make a very pretty scandal."

He was merely bluffing, as poker players say, but his words had some effect.

The doctor rose from his seat, and began to pace the room nervously. "What am I to do," he groaned. "Good Lord! what am I to do?"

"If you tell me what those marks were which were removed from my friend's arm," said Anson coolly, "I give you my word of honour that Durand shall never know my source of information."

"He would guess," groaned Hennings wildly, "he would guess. You don't know him. And even though he may be now——" he stopped quickly and glanced at me.

"On his way to New Zealand, I suppose."

"If he is," said the doctor cautiously, "he will return."

Anson began to despair of eliciting any information after all. There was a sort of mulish obstinacy about the little man which, in spite of his nervousness, appeared likely to baffle him in the end.

"But it is robbery," Anson said sternly, "a crime which you are abetting. Not only are you robbing me, but also a young lady, the daughter of the man you have helped to use so badly."

The little doctor tore at his scanty hair. "I can't help it; I tell you I can't help it," he said wildly.

Anson was fast losing his temper. He was determined to leave no stone unturned to discover the secret of these marks; and he noticed with relief that the doctor did not attempt to escape from his dilemma by the simplest way—that of denying his knowledge of their significance. He knew what the tattooing was evidently. If he wouldn't tell peaceably, well, there was another way—and Anson felt sorry for the little doctor if he had to try it.

He rose to his feet quickly and faced him. "Will you tell me what those marks were?" he asked; and he advanced upon him.

To his amazement, Dr. Hennings' face lightened up swiftly. He stepped behind the table, and taking a packet of papers from his pocket, selected one, and placed it in his pocket, half in and half out of his waistcoat, where it showed up prominently against his neat black apparel. Then he came round

from behind his defences, and approaching Anson, commenced to square up to him vigorously.

"Take it if you can!" he said.

Anson was well over six feet in height, while the doctor was barely five, and stout in proportion. His advance, therefore, took Anson so much by surprise that he stepped back in amazement. After a moment, however, his eye caught the paper—it was impossible not to see it—and he thought he knew how matters stood.

He strode quickly forward, and reaching out his hand, attempted to seize it from the doctor. The doctor, however, who had very suddenly recovered his spirits, had no intention of shirking his part of the performance, and to Anson's astonishment, speedily saluted him with a blow on the nose which made his eyes water.

It was the only effectual onslaught the little doctor made that day. In a few moments Anson was in possession of the document, and the little doctor, a weak smile passing over his features, sat recovering himself on the sofa.

"Good Lord! Good Lord!" he gasped breathlessly. "But that was a good one on your nose! I never thought I should get here."

"Oh, yes, you got there all right!" replied Anson good-humouredly, rubbing his injured feature, which tingled still. "You were very successful."

"But I had no chance with you," he continued. "I used to box a bit when I was a youngster, but only in the light-weights—only in the light-weights. And you have taken my paper! Dear me. I shall of course prosecute you for assault—but it will take some days I suppose, and by that time, perhaps you will be——"

"I shall be on my way to join Durand," he laughed, placing the paper in his pocket.

"Possibly," said Dr. Hennings, "possibly! Meanwhile, you must leave my house." He rang the bell, and the man-servant appeared. "James," said the doctor, "this gentleman has assaulted me."

"Yes, sir," said the man, looking at Anson curiously, but not approaching nearer.

"Show him out at once," continued his master, and the man, eyeing him fiercely, led the way, the doctor giving Anson yet another surprise by favouring him with a wink as he passed him.

"James," said Anson as they made their way down the garden path, "if you would like a couple of rounds——"

The man looked longingly for a moment. "No, thank you, sir," he said at length.

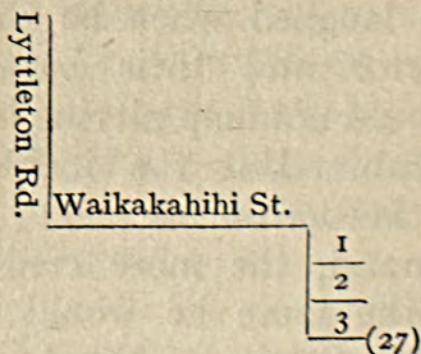
"I thought perhaps you might," Anson returned, and walked out of the gate, not a little amused.

It was with a very natural excitement that Anson gazed at the little paper Dr. Hennings had so diplomatically surrendered. It was a copy, evidently taken by himself, and hurriedly, of Wade's efforts of tattooing. How it recalled to its present owner that terrible day in the open boat, when he had little expected ever to see England again.

How Anson laughed when he thought of the little doctor and their battle. Poor fellow! He could not help pitying him under Durand's thumb. But the incident only made him the keener on his task. The more dangerous Durand, the more credit in defeating him—the more he would have accomplished for Estelle. What a happy inspiration it had been for him to try that house again! How fortunate that he had caught sight of Charters that night through the keyhole, and seen the tattooing on his arm. Had he delayed till the next morning, as Durand had suggested, the marks would have disappeared, and he could not have believed his memory against his eyesight.

The opals would have dropped into Durand's hands irretrievably. It seemed as if Fate, after favouring the man so far, was turning against him. But the opals were not secured yet. How thoroughly those mysterious stones were earning the unfortunate reputation of their species. Were they to bring still more misfortunes? Who could say? But at least if they were, Anson hoped some of it would fall upon Durand.

He took out the paper and looked at it again.



That was the plan. It was simple enough. Lyttleton Road he knew well. It led direct from the Union Company's wharf to the Port Hills. Waikakahihi Street, too, he remembered. The other line must be the street whose name poor Wade had forgotten ; 1 2 3, there was no doubt, represented the

public houses he had stopped at the evening before he sailed, and number 27 in the last one must be the bedroom where he had hidden the opals.

It was obvious that Durand would easily understand the plan. He would of course remember Wade's story as he had told it on the *Doric*, and would quickly put two and two together. And now he was well on his way to New Zealand. Which route would he take? The Vancouver or the 'Frisco were the swiftest; but then no boat had sailed away by that route for some time. He must have gone by Colombo and Australia, where he would have to tranship at Sydney into a Union liner. That would mean a week longer. If Anson waited and took the next chance by the Vancouver route, he would arrive in New Zealand almost as soon as his quarry. Durand might have a few days to wait in Sydney, while Anson would have the three days crawl along the coast from Auckland to Lyttleton. It would be a near thing. Which would win?

He arranged to sail on Wednesday; and on Tuesday went down to his lawyer's office, and drawing sufficient funds for his journey, performed another piece of business, which left Estelle his sole heiress.

Then he booked a passage, and after a sleepless night started for Liverpool.

As he stood on the deck of the *Teutonia*, and watched the busy city fading from sight, it seemed incredible that he should so soon be tempting the perils of the ocean again; that his studies, his plans for the future, his object in leaving the colonies, should be so quickly put aside—and for what?—for the shadow of a fortune, and the shadow of a woman's smile. For were they indeed more than shadows? Time alone could tell.

CHAPTER XVI

THE route to New Zealand by Vancouver is certainly the most suitable for an impatient man. There is a sensation of haste about the business which one misses on the halting Mediterranean passage, and in the hot plod through the Red Sea. The Atlantic liner, proud of its terrific speed, and probably intent on breaking a record, keeps its passengers at fever heat with its startling log. The engines of the Canadian Pacific Railway whisk you across plains and through ravines, while their furious pace is guaranteed by the flying perspective. The effects are obvious; but only seething waves and an occasional port assure the traveller of the P. and O.'s progress.

Impatient as Anson was, the time did not seem long before he found himself at Auckland in the North Island of New Zealand. It was only when he moved his baggage on to a Union steamer and commenced the slow crawl from harbour to

harbour of the roughest coast line in the world, that time began to drag.

As usual in those seas, the weather was bad. Sou'-westers stormed, sweeping up, laden with snow, from the Southern pole itself, forcing them to lay to, sometimes for hours, under the rocky coasts. Nor'-westers took them along too fast, and Southerly "blusters," which made their engines groan again stopped their progress. But they arrived at last.

Anson was pretty well used to the billows' cradling, but it was with feelings of gratitude that he saw the iron-bound, inhospitable looking cliffs of the harbour of Lyttleton appear over the bows—with feelings of gratitude quite apart from his wish to forestall Durand with the opals.

Port Lyttleton is a quaint little township, built on the steeply sloping side of the hills which guard the harbour, and shelter the fertile plains of Canterbury. Though it is honeycombed with small hotels, these are mainly frequented by sailors and the lower class of steerage passenger. Christchurch, which lies on the other side of the hills, is only a journey of ten minutes or so by train, being the spot new arrivals in the colony make for first. Anson therefore felt rather

doubtful as to what sort of a night's lodging "No. 3" public house would provide as, taking his bag in his hand, and leaving his luggage to be called for, he made his way up the Lyttleton Road.

Should he find the opals? Would the next few hours see him enormously rich, and free to return and tempt his fate with Estelle—or would the stones be gone? The nearer he drew to the place the more shadowy became the probability that he was in advance of Durand. Two boats had arrived from Australia within the last day or so, and though he was too eager to make enquiries as to whether Durand was a passenger on either of them, it seemed in his anxiety impossible that he should not have been. Then, too, what other accidents might not have happened? Some stranger might have discovered Wade's treasure, as he himself had suggested on the *Doric*, or the hotel might even have been burnt down.

Thinking thus he came upon Waikakahihi Street, the Maori name Wade had attempted to drill into his companions on that fatal day before he died. Anson's heart began to beat unpleasantly fast. If the plan had been drawn correctly, and his solution was the right one, then the next street should be

the street of the hotels. He took the turning and commenced to count. At the third public house he stopped.

A glance assured him that Wade must indeed have been terribly drunk that night, or he would never have slept in such a place. A man whom Anson judged to be the proprietor was standing as the entrance of the hovel—it was no better than that—and he nodded carelessly, as he walked up. He was a short dark man with an evil scowl, which, however, changed to a grin as Anson approached.

"Can I have a bed?" Anson asked.

By way of reply the fellow's smile expanded, and he turned to some one within. "Here's another of them," he called out to the unseen listener. "Another swell."

Anson's heart sank. "Another of them. Another swell!" Whom did he follow? Durand?

"Can I have a bed here?" he repeated, tapping the man on the shoulder to attract his attention.

He turned quickly at the firm tone, and became more attentive. "Yes," he replied. "Oh, lor', yes, as many as you like. Though I should have thought the Royal would have been more in your line. We're

not quite first class here. However, you know best. Liz, number 27!"

"No. 27!" It was Wade's room!

Anson followed the frowsy servant up the wooden staircase. No. 27! The girl vanished and he was alone. He carefully locked the door, and trying it, found it fairly secure. Then he turned and examined the apartment.

It was assuredly not the place where one would have looked for a fortune. A very ordinary bedroom in the last stage of dilapidation. Two broken-down chairs, a dejected washing-stand, and a bed, formed its furniture. On the floor was a worn-out drugget, tacked here and there to the rotten boards. If Wade had hidden his opals there indeed, and they had remained till now undisturbed it was, he decided, a miracle; or else these people never washed their bedroom floors.

He walked to the window and looked out over the port hills with their brown short herbage, and scattered grazing sheep. That queer feeling of hesitation which occasionally overtakes even the boldest when about to risk much on a single throw, made him defer the decisive moment.

He could never explain how it happened,

or give any reason for his thoughts, but when at length he made up his mind to turn from the window and commence his search, he felt certain that his labour would be in vain.

He raised a few of the tacks in the corner of the drugget nearest the bed, and examined the floor. It was evidently not there that Wade had made his "cache," for the planks were neatly and evenly laid, and extended the whole length of the room. It would have been impossible to raise one of them without proper tools, and after a careful search he could find no trace of disturbance in any of the other corners. A glance was sufficient to show that none of the boards had been disturbed for years, probably not since the hotel had been built; and he sat down on the bed and considered.

The plan said No. 27. There was no doubt of that, and this room was 27. Suddenly an idea struck him. On the opposite wall were two deep indentations in the plaster, and a long scratch evidently caused by constant friction. At one time, therefore, the bed must have stood there; and with a shove Anson moved it away from its present position, and raised the carpet.

Ah! Just underneath where the centre

of the couch had been the builders appeared to have run short of flooring, and the gap was filled up with short pieces, a foot or so long. He was bending over this spot when a knock at the door caused him to bound to his feet.

It was only the servant, asking if he should be down for lunch, but it seemed to Anson as if she had discovered him in the act of robbing her employer. He replied that he should be ready almost immediately, and waited nervously until her footsteps creaked down the rickety stairs.

Then he knelt again, and working with his knife at the board which seemed loose, it gave to the leverage, and he soon had it up, and on to the floor. He looked eagerly into the space it left, his eyes almost starting from his head with anxiety. There were no opals there!

Then some scraps of paper caught his eye, and he clutched at them. They were to all appearances the remains of a visiting card. Tremblingly he laid them on the bed and with some difficulty pieced the card together. On one side were the words in pencil, "Illusion after all?" On the other was printed, "S. S. Durand, M.D."

So he was too late. Well, he feared it all

along. But that was small consolation. Durand need not have added sarcasm to the blow. And yet, if Durand had written those words—as of course he had—why had he torn up the card afterwards. Why?

There could, it seemed to him, be only one explanation. Some one else had found the hoard. But who? The proprietor? Well, whoever it was he too had been disappointed.

He made his way disconsolately downstairs, and lunched, the proprietor watching him curiously the while.

"Do you have many visitors?" Anson asked him in causal tones.

"Oh, lor', yes," he replied, the grin Anson had before noticed returning to his face. "Dozens! Sailors mostly, and that sort. Not many of your kind. Had one or two lately though."

"Anyone by the name of Durand?" he asked carelessly.

"Yes, that's the name of one of them," he returned. "He came the day before yesterday. The other one came just after he left. Seemed sorry to miss Durand. He left last night. I suppose he's your mate," he continued, with some signs of respect. "What's this Durand been up to? Bank cashier?"

Anson hesitated. The man apparently took him and the "other one" whoever he might be, for detectives. "Not exactly," Anson replied cautiously. "But perhaps it wasn't my mate. What was he like—the other one?"

"Big chap with a long beard," returned the proprietor.

"Ah," exclaimed Anson with apparent comprehension. Now who the deuce could this other one be? Some friend or confederate of Durand possibly. "And he had my room? No. 27—had he?"

"Yes. They both asked for that one. I don't know why, for bless you it's the worst room in the house. And I don't mind owning it that that's saying a good deal, though the old place pays me well enough. I only gives folk that number when all the others are full. But as they were so particular about it, I reckoned you'd want it too," said the man.

"Thanks," replied Anson. "I was not particular." He was wondering if the fellow knew or guessed anything of the truth. But it did not seem likely.

"I reckon you won't be stopping as long as you thought, now that you've heard this?" said the fellow after a pause.

"I expect not. But what do you think would be the best thing for me to do?"

The tone of confidence seemed to please the proprietor, and he grinned amiably. "Well," he said, "if you want to come up with this 'ere chap Durand before he gets to Australia, or your mate either, you'll have to look sharp, or you'll be a day behind the fair. Your mate was pretty quick, I can tell you, when he heard his man had left. Instead of going down to the shipping offices and making enquiries there and all over the shop, he gave me a tenner to tell him all I knew. You see what with sailors and one thing and another, as you may guess, I hear a good deal in this house, and I put him up to the fellow's march."

"Oh," said Anson with apparent carelessness, but inward excitement.

"Yes," he continued, the careless tone putting him on his mettle. "It's the West Coast he's making for, said I. He'll not be such a mug as to wait about the port till a boat sails. He'll take the train up country as far as Springfield, and then coach over the Ranges through the Greymouth or Hokitika, and try to get a passage on one of the boats from there to the other side. Perhaps to Newcastle or even Sydney. Your mate

didn't lose time, I can tell you. He found out that I was right, and was off after Durand before you could say 'knife.' Took the train last night. He'll be through the pass by now."

The man retired to his bar, leaving Anson to his thoughts, which were not pleasant ones. There was no doubt he was right, and that was what Durand would do. Under the circumstances, that is if he had the opals, he would not need to spare money, and he could easily obtain a berth on some boat at the West Coast ports. He was two days too late, but boats did not sail every moment. Knowing the country as he did he might still make up the time. At least he need not be far behind the second man.

Deciding quickly, he ran upstairs, got his bag, and hastening down again, called for his bill, intending to tip the proprietor, as the "other one" had done, for his information.

"Can you give us a moment," this latter asked confidentially as Anson entered the bar. "I've something I want to show you."

Wondering what he could desire, Anson followed him into the little private room behind the counter, and watched him while he produced some article from his pocket.

"I wanted to show you this," he said, rubbing at the object with his coat sleeve. "Because in your line you might know the value of it, and that's more than any of my other customers are likely to do."

He held out his hand, and Anson took the thing in his fingers. It was to all appearances a small piece of yellowish brown stone, but on one side of it was a lump that might almost have been the broken half of a large coloured glass marble. He gazed at the rainbow colours for a few moments uncomprehendingly, and then he felt himself turn pale with excitement. It was an uncut opal!

He turned quickly on the man. "Where did you get this from?" he asked, unable to control his eagerness.

At the unexpected tone the man changed colour, and his hand went out instinctively to recover the jewel, but Anson kept it at arm's length. "Where did you get it?" he repeated.

The man eyed him sullenly. Anson saw that he feared he had made a mistake in asking his judgment on his treasure. "I have had it by me a long while," he said at length. "A chap that stayed here once was broke, and I took it in return for his tucker. I never troubled to show it anyone

before. Of course I might have known you detective chaps! I was a fool to show it you. If you think I stole it, you can keep the blessed thing."

Anson was considering, hardly trusting himself to speak just then. The "thing" was an opal, and apparently a valuable one. It was evident the man was lying. In all probability Durand had dropped it while he was staying at this place, and the fellow had found it. If he wished for a confirmation of Wade's story here it was. Good heavens! what had a day or two cost him—and Estelle!

"Look here, my man," he said at last, trying to command a professional air. "I know all about this. You haven't deceived me. Durand was the man you got this from. He wasn't hard up, as you very well know, and I suspect he dropped it, and you very cleverly picked it up. You didn't like to plant it just anywhere, and you thought I might buy it from you—make a bargain and hold my tongue, eh?"

"How was I to know Durand dropped the blessed thing?" stammered the fellow nervously. "I wish I'd never seen it. Besides, I didn't ask you to buy it. Take it if you want it, or give it back to him."

Then it *was* Durand who had lost the opal! Very well, look out Durand!

"Look here," said Anson, "this might easily lose you your licence, and get you into trouble besides; but you found the stone, you say, and I believe you. You deserve something for your luck, and also for putting me up to Durand's movements. I won't be hard on you. I'll give you what the stone is worth to me. I want it for a particular reason. Shall we say twenty pounds?"

The man stared. "Oh, lor'!" he said, "I say, don't deceive a poor fellow! Twenty pounds for that bit of stuff!"

Anson had calculated, knowing very little about the value of such gems, that it would be worth about a hundred pounds when cut. But it was, after all, his own property, and he did not care to buy it too dearly. He carried off his supposed magnanimity nobly. "It doesn't matter," he replied carelessly. "The thing is necessary to me."

The man's unprepossessing visage showed more gratitude than it had probably ever expressed before, and he thanked Anson effusively, if still rather nervously, while he paid him the money, and the trifle for his bill. "So it was a jewel robbery?" he said after a little time, as he made out the receipt.

"Looks like it," he replied laconically, and declining further conversation he pocketed the opal, and taking up the bag, made his way to the station.

In twenty minutes he was in Christchurch. There he quickly purchased a "swag," and making for a livery stable, hired a horse with which, given the start he had, he could make sure of beating the train to Springfield, the terminus of the railway. At this point he knew an old farmer who prided himself on his "cattle." If he could obtain one of his horses on from there, he determined to ride right through to the Coast—a hundred and ten miles altogether—and thus gain a day on Durand.

The livery stable hack, though a trifle sore at the end of his journey, crossed the plains gallantly, and Anson arrived at Springfield, a little township on the edge of the hills, two hours before the train. It might be mentioned here that this latter product of civilization keeps up a noble average of twelve miles an hour; and a New Zealand three-quarter thoroughbred doesn't think much of himself if he can't do a bit better than that at a pinch for four or five hours together.

His acquaintance at Springfield, a typical old Scotch (colonial) sheep farmer, once a

Public School and 'Varsity man, but now as keen an old stock dealer as any in the country, with little of the polish of civilization still clinging to him, welcomed him heartily, and responded satisfactorily to his request for a mount.

"Take a couple," he said heartily, when Anson had explained his haste. "There's two four year olds by Artillery out of trotting mares in the paddock. They'll soon take you over to the Coast, if you can't wait for the coach."

He wasted no time. A chop—the invariable New Zealand chop—and a cup of tea—the invariable New Zealand tea—were soon disposed of, and he started on his journey again. It now being autumn in England it was spring-time in this topsy-turvy country, and he had several hours of daylight yet with the prospect of a moonlight night to follow.

He knew the ride which was before him well. At any other time he would have looked forward to it as a pleasure; and even now, anxious as he was to complete the journey, he could not help appreciating its beauties.

The day had been perfect. Though the sunlight in New Zealand never attains the strength of the tropics or even of an Italian summer, it is considerably brighter and more

powerful than it ever is in England. When he commenced his ride the day was still, perhaps, too warm for the pace at which he was forced to travel, but as the evening drew on, and the mists commenced to gather beneath the port hills which rose blue in the distance, he felt that he could not have chosen a better time for his undertaking.

For the first forty miles or so the way led through sheep country merely, with the homesteads of various "stations" dotted here and there, while now and then it skirted the shores of some not very beautiful lakes. The monotony of the scenery at this point was, however, broken by the ever changing panorama of the mountains, which shut in the horizon on every side, and reared their snow-capped tops aloft, dimly white in the increasing twilight.

At the Bealey Hotel, the halting place for the night of the coaches, where he changed on to the second horse, the real beauty of the wild ride commenced. He knew familiarly what excursionists call "the West Coast trip," by day; it is a sight people have travelled sixteen miles to see; but the same scenes viewed by moonlight and alone with nature—and nature so luxuriantly wild—exceeded imagination.

After crossing a river-bed of interminable width, but carrying little water, the track led past thundering waterfalls, and tree-covered gullies, up, up till the crest of the pass was gained. There on his right, glistening in the rays of the fading sun-light, stretched the Rolleston Glacier, with its masses of ice and snow, while before him, descending until its zig-zags grew faint in the distance, wound the track he was to take. And what a track! Diving over the crest of the Pass, it followed the tortuous course of the mountain torrent, crossing and recrossing by airily hung bridges; in many places cut out of the side of the frowning cliff at a dizzy height above rivers which gurgled and roared in the chasms below, now diving into the heart of the New Zealand bush, whose beauty it is impossible to describe; now winding through magnificent natural avenues, where strange and uncanny night birds hooted, and the trees are always green. . . . But one might fill pages in attempting to describe what is, after all, indescribable.

It was almost morning when, as weary as the horses, he at last reached Hokitika, one of the ports of the West Coast, and the spot where he hoped to catch Durand.

But here again, even after his exertions,

he was doomed to disappointment. Hokitika, though an important place for the West Coast, is but a small township in reality. A stranger would find it difficult to remain hidden there for many hours; and he soon learned that Durand had been seen, but had vanished again.

As fate willed it, two boats had sailed for Sydney within the past twenty-four hours. On one of them Durand had taken his passage. On the second—sailing but eight hours after—had followed “the other one”—the mysterious being who was chasing him with apparently as much eagerness as himself; and with better luck. Anson commenced to feel a strange interest in this unknown, who might be an ally, and who was apparently using such herculean efforts to overtake the same quarry. But Durand and the “other one,” too, were on their way safely to Australia now, and speculation was futile. Heaven send another boat! was Anson’s prayer, and it was granted.

A sailor whom he was questioning informed him that there was a possibility of his obtaining a berth on board a coaler which was about to leave for Newcastle. He would lose but little by having to entrain from there to Sydney, and that little would be almost

gained by the greater speed of the craft. The arrangement was soon made, and a few hours found him on board the grimy vessel which was to carry him a further stage on this wild journey which at present seemed likely to take him round the world before it should end. For unless he could overtake Durand, there was a long way to go yet. That Durand would not attempt to sell the stones in Australia he felt sure; he would undoubtedly make for Europe, where he would find an easy market. But Anson was getting nearer to him. Clever as Durand was, he could hardly suspect that he was being so closely followed. It needed but a slip on his part, some slight procrastination or delay, and he would be upon him.

Grey skies, wild seas, coal dust everywhere—a train journey under burning skies and across plains almost charred up with the heat; then Sydney again, and again too late. This time by three hours. A hasty visit to various shipping offices, and a glance at one particular passenger list, told him that Durand had sailed the same day in a P. and O. boat for England, via Colombo and Suez. "The other one" he lost track of at this point. If he had arrived, it was probable he had caught Durand, and Anson envied him his luck.

There was no such thing as bribing a boat to take him on at once, and a dull, anxious, wearisome week elapsed before he secured a berth on one of the Messageries Line steamers, and set his face towards the Indian Ocean. Never before had Sydney seemed so dull and flat to him. Two days sickened him of the gaieties of the "Block" and the beauties of the harbour. The Chinese quarter, once of great interest to him, amused him no longer, and Manly seemed a howling wilderness, and he the most bored of all the pelicans—that is, if the pelican is really bored in the wilderness, a question about which there might be some disagreement.

More sea, this time calm and lovely, more deck lounging, more quoits, more melancholy recollections of the days on the *Doric* when Estelle and he had paced the deck together for brief delightful moments ; more scandal, more gambling, and then one heavenly morning breaking over a pearl velvet sea, heavenly scents filling the air, vivid green palms and chocolate coloured roads showing up over the side—and Colombo !

If Colombo, on a December morning after a rain, is not indeed Paradise, it is at least difficult to find a nearer approximation on

earth. To land in such a spot after the dreary monotony of a sea voyage: to see that glorious dazzling green—there is no other green like it in the world—after your old acquaintances the funnels and rusty masts: to tread those chocolate coloured paths after the dazzling deck, whose every board you know by heart: to be met at every turn by strange, wild, fascinating figures in every colour and shade, after the pasty faces of your fellow passengers, whose features you have for the most part got to know too well, and consequently to dislike: to enter weird and bewildering bazaars, see strange dances, and hear still stranger music: to live upon chutnies, Bombay duck, and all the wonders of an Indian cuisine, after the monotonous fare of the ship: to do a hundred more delightful things — put in at Colombo under these circumstances and die —without seeing Naples. Naples would only spoil the delightful memory by its unsuccessful attempt to rival it.

Anson put up at the G.O.H.—they were to stay in port till the following morning—and made his way at once to the shipping offices. There he looked up the passenger list of Durand's boat. Yes! she had reached Colombo a week before, and there was the

name he sought. "S. Durand, M.D.," saloon passenger. He was turning away when the list for the voyage from Colombo to England caught his eye, and he gave a hasty glance at it; then caught it up eagerly and ran up and down its columns. Durand's name was not there.

Calling the clerk, Anson asked him if any of the saloon passengers of the *Himalaya* had left the ship at Colombo. He took up a paper carelessly, and slowly read it through. "Yes," he said at length, "four of them left the boat there. Murray, Keith, Brown and Durand."

Anson seized hold of the counter to keep himself from staggering. "Durand! Are you sure?" he gasped.

The clerk stared at him in languid amazement. "Yes," he said, "here it is. Murray, Keith, Brown and Durand. Friend of yours?"

"Where's he staying?"

The man looked up and grinned. "Goodness knows," he said, "I don't. We don't ask our passengers their private affairs, you know: they mightn't like it. He's sure to be at the Oriental or one of the other big hotels. You will easily find him. Perhaps Cook's will be able to tell you."

Anson thanked him and walked out, his brain whirling. So the chase was ended; he had overtaken Durand after all! They were in the same town—perhaps in the same hotel; and he had made the slip which had lost him the race. Clever as he was, he had committed a blunder, and if Anson could make it so, a fatal one.

It troubled him little that the ubiquitous Cook knew nothing of Durand, or that he was not staying—as the clerk at the shipping office had anticipated—at any of the big hotels. He could not remain long hidden in such a place as Colombo, and he should not leave without being run to earth. That Anson vowed!

He spent the day, however, in fruitless search, and when night fell he had not succeeded. He enquired at all the hotels both large and small, and even made the pilgrimage to Mount Lavinia in the hope that Durand might have been tempted to put up outside the town.

Of course it was possible that he might be staying somewhere under an assumed name; so Anson strolled out after dinner through the busy streets, hoping that chance might assist him.

Fascinated by the various sights, he

wandered on through the crowd, now jostled by swiftly trotting rickshaws, now made way for, obsequiously, by ebony-limbed Cingalese ; nodding occasionally to fellow passengers on the boat, and stopping to gaze in at some gaily decorated bazaar, until he found himself at length in the outskirts of the city, and halted to take his bearings.

The night was far advanced. The crowds had vanished, or had been left behind. The street in which he found himself consisted merely of a row of bungalows, whose occupants had probably long since retired to their beds. It was the European quarter, and believing that he knew in which direction his hotel lay, he retraced his steps, and taking what must have been a wrong turning, discovered that he was hopelessly lost.

The street was dark, there being no lights in sight but those of the shipping in the harbour, which shone faintly in the distance, and for a moment he was in doubt which quarter to make for.

At length he decided to make for the boat. His way thence to the Occidental Hotel he knew well enough. If he could reach the port he was all right, and he started out in a line for the sea.

CHAPTER XVII

SUDDENLY he thought he heard a cry, and stopped and listened. The night was still, and the noises from the town having ceased, he could hear every sound distinctly.

From far off down the long palm shaded road came the patter of swiftly running feet ; and as it drew nearer the unmistakable gasping breath of a runner forced to his extremity. After the flying figure, which quickly drew nearer, came another, though heavier, step. With the speed at which thought travels, Anson found himself wondering why the heavier runner was so distressing the lighter and swifter ; but as the two approached he caught the even, level puff-puff of the pursuer, and with the instinct of an old "miler" grasped the situation. In a hundred yards it would have been any odds on the pursued. In a long run, such as this terrible chase evidently was, the pursuer was

merely playing with his quarry. It was beyond doubt a "terrible" chase, for as the first man passed he could see that he held his handkerchief to his brow, and Anson caught a momentary glimpse of blood-stained linen.

The sympathies of an Englishman are ever with the hunted, and the sight made Anson's blood rise.

"All right!" he called out quickly. "Run for your life. I'll hold him!" and he darted into the middle of the track. The hunted one needed no second warning, and the pad-pad of his feet scurrying swiftly round the corner a second later was a clear proof of his presence of mind.

Before Anson could prepare himself the second man came upon him, collided, and staggered back, almost throwing him off his balance with the shock.

"Hum! English — played Rugger — full back, I should think," he muttered. Then recovering himself quickly he advanced upon Anson. "Get out of the way, you damned idiot!" he cried furiously. "Can't you see I want to catch that fellow?"

"It seems to me you have caught him at least one!" Anson rejoined. "He was bleeding like a pig when he passed me."

"Glad of it!" grunted the stranger. "But get out of my way, you!"

"Let the chap alone. He's had enough."

The stranger swore rapidly for a moment—to recover his breath probably—and then charged Anson madly. For a moment they rolled wildly over and over in the darkness of the road. Then Anson emerged on top; and sat on his opponent's chest for a second, while he gazed through the gloom at some object which had found its way into his hand during the struggle.

The form underneath shifted uneasily. "You have got my beard," he gasped.

Anson was staggered for a moment. It was certainly a hairy substance that he held in his hand. Then he began to roar with laughter, which gradually increased till peal after peal echoed down the silent street.

At the sound his antagonist gave a sudden lurch which, weak from his exertions as he was, shook Anson off his prostrate form, and bounded to his feet.

"Good Lord!" he said wildly, "how strange! I would have known that laugh anywhere, I can swear! Anson, my lad, it's not you surely?"

Anson stepped back in amazement.

"Charters!" he cried, and then beginning to realize how matters stood—"then *you* are the 'other one,' and that was—Good heavens! don't say that it was Durand you were following!"

"That was Durand!" said Charters grimly, and they stood for a moment silent. Charters was the first to recover himself. "Damn Durand!" he said cheerfully. "I am so glad to meet you again that I hardly regret having lost the scoundrel. I'd have had him too, in another quarter of a mile! He was done and I could have sprinted any time. What a fool I was. I'm afraid I was enjoying the sport—sort of cat and mouse business, you know; and now I've lost him! Never mind, he's marked, and he can't leave Colombo to-night anyway. Where are you staying? I want a drink!"

"At the Occidental. So do I, and a long one. I don't know my way back there. I was lost when I met you. By the way—ahem!—here's your beard. I did not know you wore one."

"Thanks, I've finished with it," said Charters, ruefully. "I didn't want Durand to recognize me before I caught sight of him by any accident. Throw the beastly thing away. It has been an awful responsibility

to me. I have lost it several times already."

Charters took Anson's arm affectionately, and they started off in the direction in which he said the hotel lay.

"By Jove," he said, "the last time we were together, in that beastly quarter boat of the old *Doric's*, we little expected to meet again safe and sound like this!"

"You forget Dr. Henning's house," replied Anson.

"Dr. Hennings?" said Charters. "How do you mean? Who's he?"

"The house where you were in bed that night — where Durand rubbed out that tattooing!" he returned, surprised.

"Did it belong to a doctor?" said Charters. "I thought they were Durand's rooms. He said they were. How I came to be in bed, I don't know. I went there with him — had a drink, which of course was drugged, and knew nothing more until I found myself outside London in my shirt and trousers. I have a faint recollection of waking up somewhere with a wild desire to escape into the open air, and I think, of a struggle with someone; but it's all very hazy."

"Then you never saw me in the house?" asked Anson.

"You? [Good heavens, no! What were you doing in Durand's rooms—or this doctor's house, as you say it was?"

Anson hesitated for a second. Had Charters indeed been insane, or had he seen him while still under the effects of some drug? Then he remembered that the little doctor had cried out in the excitement of Charters' escape, "Stop him! he's still under it!" Yet there was no doubt Charters had been queer. Both Estelle and the hospital physician in Sydney had said so.

"I was in search of you," he said at length. "Miss Charters, whom I fortunately met, told me you had gone off with Durand, and, though you were expected to return almost at once, you had been away for days. I suspected foul play, and went after you. They must have moved you to this doctor's house, thinking it safer. Durand told me you were mad——" Anson hesitated and bit his lip.

"Mad?" said Charters. "Well, I suppose he wasn't very far wrong at the time. My own doctor said I was a bit queer for some time after that horrible experience in the boat. Otherwise I should not have put myself so weakly into that scoundrel's hands. Durand came to me with that yarn about

poor Wade's death, and I recollected that the unfortunate fellow had made us his heirs—heirs to those wonderful opals. I should have tried to forget the whole miserable affair if it had not been for Durand ; though I had often wondered, and half guessed at the meaning of that tattooing which I discovered on my arm. But I was a little bit cranky still, I suppose, and to tell you the truth, I have had bad luck lately. I hardly knew where to look for a few pounds. And the thought that I might get possession of those opals for Estelle, and also for you, excited me. Durand seemed honest enough in coming to me with his story, and of course, as he knew so much, I never guessed that he was not aware what the marks were that Wade had tattooed. When I recovered from Durand's drugging, I was, for some reason, better in my head than I had been since my accident. Perhaps it was the night's exposure—I remember I was terribly cold—perhaps Durand had done me a good turn unintentionally by giving me something definite to work for, and taking my mind off that horrible boat. At any rate, the moment I knew I had been drugged, and found the marks gone from my arm, I guessed the secret. I felt strong again, and enraged as

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 197

I was with Durand for the way he had treated me, I swore I would have those opals, even if it were only to spite him. I started off for New Zealand at once, taking the train across the Continent to Naples, hoping to catch a boat thence to Australia. I sent for Estelle to follow and join me as quick as she could. Unfortunately I just missed the boat that Durand sailed by at Naples. He was pretty quick in getting off, as you see. I suppose when I escaped he thought there was a considerable risk of my recovering and suspecting what had happened. I do not doubt that he would have kept me in that house if he had not worse designs on me, until he had the opals safe, and perhaps then I might have gone mad indeed."

While Charters was telling his story they had reached the hotel, and waking up a sleepy native servant, furnished themselves with a couple of "pegs" and cigars. The punkahs had ceased their drowsy fanning, but the night was cool and starlit, and they felt no inclination to retire to bed.

"Is Miss Charters with you?" asked Anson with a beating heart, putting a question which had been for a long time hovering on his lips.

"Oh, yes. She is in bed long ago," re-

plied Charters, pointing in the direction of the upper rooms with the end of his finger. "Poor little girl; why, I have hardly seen anything of her yet."

Anson gasped. Estelle in Colombo, and staying in the same hotel!

"Yes," continued Charters. "Fortunately I received some money from my lawyers, the balance of the sale of some investments, at Naples, and I wired for her to come after me. When I saw I should have to come back again, I cabled to stop her at Colombo. And here she has been until I came the other day. But we shall see her in the morning. Tell me how it is you came to be here. Are you after the opals, too?"

Anson quickly put him in possession of the facts of his journey from England in pursuit of Durand, and its results.

When he concluded, Charters laughed. "Durand has made pretty fools of us so far," he said, "but his time is coming. I was nearer catching him than you, however, and should have had him once, only he nearly murdered me. The second time you prevented me."

"Tell me about the first," Anson said eagerly. "I want to hear all that he has done. I have never borne such a grudge

yet against a man, and I want to be quite sure it is justified."

Charters smiled savagely. "When I have done with him you can have your turn," he said, "but not before. Last night was only a taste of what is to come to him! My story won't take long. When I found that I had missed the boat at Naples I enquired everywhere for some way of remedying the misfortune, and I discovered that by making for Marseilles, I could catch a Messageries Maritimes boat for Sydney. I don't much care for the Frenchman's way of working the sea, but needs must when the devil drives, and I must say we got to Sydney all right. There I learned that Durand had gone on in the *Talune* for Lyttleton, and I lost three days waiting for the *Mararoa*. However, she was the faster boat, and I was only a little behind Durand at Lyttleton. At first I could not find that he had been before me at the hotel that Wade had marked with a 3 on the plan he drew on my arm, and which of course I knew by heart, in spite of its having disappeared so mysteriously. He had bribed the proprietor to say nothing, I think, and though the fellow was easily bought afterwards, I had a few moment's excitement, as you can imagine,

when I was shown into the bedroom Wade had occupied, and where I half expected to find his opals. You may believe that I experienced a shock when I saw Durand's card, and recognized that I was a day too late. I tore the beastly thing up in a rage, and threw it back into the hole, where you found it. Then, with feelings towards Durand which were anything but friendly, I interviewed the man of the house. A ten pound note quickly did his business, and I was soon off again after the opals. Durand was not making the pace quite so lively then as he did subsequently. He had the opals, and he did not dream we were so close. The hotel man told me he had gone across country for the West Coast, but to my surprise, when I got into the train in Christchurch, there was Durand in the next carriage. He must have been delayed for some reason, or had given a day up to sight-seeing. I never saw a man so disagreeably surprised as he was when he saw me. You know the carriages on that line. They have a platform at each end. The doors are facing one another, and by walking on to the platform you can see the occupants of the next compartment. I could have stepped across the space between the car-

riages, but if I attacked him in the train, and I didn't suppose he would give up his booty without a struggle, he might have called the guard and made a row, out of which I should have come badly. I couldn't prove that the opals were mine and yours, and I suppose the fellow saw that. At first I used to get up and walk out on to the platform and enjoy his fright; then I would go back again and sit down. By and by, however, the fellow, I suppose, recognized that he was pretty safe, and—he has any amount of pluck, I must say that—began to pay me back again in my own coin. He had a small bag with him, pretty heavy by the look of it, and he used to wave this at me when I came out on to the platform. I could guess it contained the opals, and it was all I could do not to rush in and take the scoundrel by the throat. However, I knew I should have plenty of opportunity when we got to Springfield, and I bided my time. The game with the bag, which he seemed to enjoy immensely, was not very amusing to me as you may imagine, and after a time I gave up coming outside, nursing my revenge until we got to Springfield. I made a mistake, which I regretted many a time since, however.

"We were not far from a junction, and I was wondering if I wouldn't change carriages and get in with Durand, when the train appeared to slow down suddenly. I got up and looked out. In front of me on the platform of what had been the next compartment, but which was now vanishing rapidly in the distance, stood Durand, waving his hand ironically. My carriage was standing still. In a second I realized what had occurred. Durand must have taken advantage of a small descent in the gradient of the line, which forced the buffers of the carriage together, and stooping down, had thrown back the couplings. It was the simplest thing in the world—on a New Zealand train at all events—and it left me for a moment too surprised to stir. I was aroused from my state of stupor by the guard running hastily past. My compartment was the last in the train of four, and the man and myself were the only two whose journey had thus been interrupted. The man gave a hasty glance at the couplings as he ran by, waving his hand frantically in the direction of the rapidly vanishing train. His action gave me, fortunately, time to consider, and when he returned, blown and disconsolate, I had decided on my attitude. If I were to declare

Durand the cause of the contretemps, I should be called as a witness in the action which must inevitably ensue. But they probably wouldn't catch Durand, and I should be the only sufferer.

" 'Hallo!' I cried, as the guard came up, 'what the deuce does this mean? Why are we left behind in this way?'

"The fellow stared at the couplings again, and then at me, helplessly. 'I don't know!' he said, 'the couplings are all right. Didn't you see anything?'

" 'How could I see anything?' I retorted. 'I saw this carriage stop, and I know that I have the most important reasons for getting to Springfield at once. It will be a serious loss to me being delayed. I shall certainly sue the Railway Company. What am I to do? How can I get on?'

"My tone seemed to frighten the guard, who was probably quite as distressed as myself at being left behind, and who, foreseeing trouble for someone, did not want things to be made worse.

" 'There's a trolley in the van, as it happens,' he said. 'No other train passes here till morning, so the stock won't be damaged if we leave it. We can go on to the junction, if you care to, sir. We shan't take long. If

the train don't wait for us, and I don't suppose it will, for we aren't far from Springfield, you may very likely get a horse from the hotel, and get to your journey's end that way."

"I accepted the offer, and we soon had the trolley out and on to the rails. I don't suppose it ever went so fast before, for you may believe we put our backs into working it; and we arrived at the junction not very long after the missing part of our train had departed again.

"I left the guard to tell his tale to the curious listeners, who had gathered round at our arrival, and hurried across to the little shanty called the "Junction Hotel."

"Here, however, to my dismay, I learned that Durand had taken the only available horse, and gone on across country. He had not cared to risk their waiting for us, I expect, and jumping out at Springfield, had bought the hotel hack, and, without stopping to make enquiries about us, had galloped off.

"Fortunately, my friend the guard came to my rescue at this point, and I succeeded in getting a hack from a farm near by. My steed, though a worn-out old crock, could gallop, and after an hour or so, I caught sight of Durand ahead. His horse, as far

as I could see, had had about enough of it, while mine, excited by the race, was still pulling hard. For a mile or two Durand managed to hold his own, and then seeing he had no hope of gaining on me, he struck out across country. This was rather unfortunate for me. The hotel horse could jump, but mine was evidently new to that amusement. We got safely through a couple of gorse hedges, and I was catching him rapidly, when a wire fence came into sight. I had heard of horses jumping plain wire before but I had never seen it done, and I had certainly never expected to attempt the deed myself. Durand—I must say the beggar rides well—went straight at it, and cleared it like a bird. My blood was up. I knew my horse had seen the other one jump, and I trusted to Providence, though I never expected to get over alive. We went at it about thirty miles an hour, struck the wire fore and aft, pecked—and fortunately recovered—but I felt it was all up, unless that jump was the last. I gave my horse his head and a dig in the ribs, and dashed alongside Durand. The next fence, a high barbed wire one, was not far off, and I made a herculean effort to catch Durand's bridle. He lifted his horse forwards, and I missed my

effort. We were charging down on the wire. Durand knowing, I suppose, that it was all up if I got over safely, and thinking by my exhibition over the last fence that I should do so, though I am quite confident my horse couldn't have jumped that wire in a hundred years, reined his hack in quickly just as we reached it, and swerving towards me, struck my animal a heavy blow with his whip. The brute made a furious plunge. I heard a rattle of wire, and remember nothing more until I woke at the Bealey Hotel. I heard that I was picked up by the coach later on, having been seen by one of the outside passengers, lying on top of a dead horse, with about a hundred yards of barbed wire mixed up with me. I recovered sufficiently to go on next day by coach to Hokitika, and thence to Colombo. I couldn't trace Durand for some time, but last night I saw him talking to a couple of Cingalese in a street near the harbour. I followed him cautiously until he left the men, and then walked up to him. Whether he recognized me in that infernal beard or not, I don't know—he's pretty clever! but as soon as I approached he commenced to run. The rest you know. Have another drink?"

"Thanks," responded Anson, and as they

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 207

sat, the pale Indian dawn commenced to throw its shadows about the palm-trees outside. Then, feeling that they could accomplish nothing more until the town was again stirring they decided to retire to bed.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANSON awoke late, after a restless night, and made his way downstairs into the breakfast room, to find Estelle and Charters already half way through their meal. They did not notice his entrance, and he stood for a moment watching them unobserved.

He thought he had never seen Estelle look so lovely, as she sat there chatting easily with her father, delighted to be with him again, and dressed to perfection in one of those white fabrics which Englishwomen in Colombo affect.

She glanced in his direction at last, and returned his salutation with a happy smile.

"You must hurry up, my boy," said Charters, after he had exchanged greetings with Estelle. "The boat sails in an hour, and we mustn't let Durand steal another march on us. For all we know he may have made up his mind to leave Colombo to-day. Fortunately I know all the officers on board

and if we get there in time, I shall be able to discover his intentions."

"But, papa!" cried Estelle. "Surely you are not going to leave me again?"

"I am not going to leave Durand again," said Charters grimly. "If he sails, I go with him—or I have the opals! But I don't think there is really any likelihood of his attempting to get away in such an open manner as that. He would suspect that we should watch the boat. However, darling," he continued, looking affectionately at Estelle, "I won't leave you alone. I can manage Durand by myself, I fancy. Anson will look after you and bring you on, if I don't have time to communicate with you."

Estelle glanced at Anson with a blush, and smiling a little mischievously, said, "You are arranging Mr. Anson's plans very coolly, papa. Perhaps he would prefer not to be burdened with such a responsibility."

But his reply, murmured while the native waiter handed Charters a curry, made her blush still more deeply, and he found himself almost forgetting the seriousness of the position, and hoping that Durand would indeed board the ship, and sail with poor Charters, if it were to mean that he should be left in this enchanting spot alone with her.

However, it was not to be. As they had finished breakfast, and were seated still round the small table, discussing their plans, one of the servants came to them with the news that a boy was waiting outside the hotel with a note for Charters, and the latter departed to interview him.

Estelle turned to Anson quickly, as soon as he had disappeared. "Mr. Anson," she said, "cannot you persuade papa to give up this—this attempt to get these opals. I am sure harm will come of it. Papa is so eager, so reckless, and this man is dangerous, I feel certain. What do these jewels matter compared with the risk they entail? I do not like to say much to papa myself, for I know he is thinking only of me, and he laughs at my fears, but—but I forget: the opals are also yours," she continued.

"Sooner than that harm should come to your father, or that you suffer anxiety, I would willingly forfeit any claims I have to them," he replied eagerly, fascinated by the lovely eyes which gazed up at him half commanding, half pleading. "But they represent, if Wade spoke the truth, an enormous sum of money; and it certainly makes one's blood boil to think of their being stolen, and so coolly, by this scoundrel."

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 211

"But remember the misfortune they have already brought to almost everyone connected with them," said she sadly. "Poor Mr. Wade, the sailor who died, even papa, who has been in great danger. We are happy now we are together again, papa and I. Is it worth risking so much?"

He was about to reply, when Charters entered the room hurriedly, with a scrap of paper in his hand. "Read that!" he said eagerly.

Anson took the paper and read as follows:—

"Colombo.

"If you are wise, go home by the next boat. It sails to-day. I have the opals, and you will never get them from me. They are mine by possession. You cannot prove they are not mine by right; and the only means by which you can ever hope to obtain them—is force! Must I remind you that force can be met by force? You have a daughter. I am alone in the world. Your risk is greater than mine; *and hers than either.*"

Anson clenched his fist as he read this document. At that moment he would have bartered his share of the opals for five

minutes' conversation with Durand. That he should threaten Estelle was maddening. He turned to Charters, and his eye blazed in answering wrath. Danger or no danger, they were not to be frightened like children. They were two men against one! Meanwhile Estelle must be looked after. She must not go outside the hotel; there at least she was safe.

Estelle was unwilling that Anson should permit her father to go alone to the boat, having guessed by the expression on their faces, that they had further news of Durand—so leaving her to the care of an amiable old lady, whose acquaintance Anson had made on board ship, and who was delighted at the prospect of chaperoning such a lovely young creature, they made their way outside.

They had hardly reached the street, when Charters gave a bound. "What an infernal fool I am," he cried, striking his forehead. "I don't deserve such luck!" and he started off running.

Gazing wildly round in search of the cause of his excitement Anson could discover nothing extraordinary, and followed him wondering.

By and bye Charters slackened speed, and pulling out a cigarette, commenced

fumbling for a match. "What a narrow escape," he said breathlessly.

"What have you seen?" asked Anson eagerly. "Durand? Where is he?"

"Durand? No!" replied Charters, again moving on, but this time slowly. "Not Durand, but his messenger," and he pointed towards a young Malay boy of nine or ten, who was strolling along in front of them. The youngster was apparently in no hurry to return to his employer, and wandered on carelessly, now stopping to gaze with wide-open eyes at some English lady who passed, now conversing amiably with friends of his own age and kind; while occasionally, in lightness of heart, he would start off at a run, skipping and bounding along, and making the hearts of the watchers beat with the fear of losing him in the crowd.

"Keep him in sight, for goodness sake," said Charters, "while we've got him we've got Durand."

Anson was not convinced. It seemed to him, with the experience they already had of Durand's cleverness, that this was too good to be true; and his ideas were confirmed when the boy at last turned in at a small bazaar, and took his place behind a counter covered with piles of flimsy silk, Bir-

mingham jewellery, and spurious Eastern wares generally, prepared for tourists with a mania for collecting.

They waited for a moment, hoping against hope, until the youth sold an "Indian" shawl to an enthusiastic young lady from the ship, and then they entered the shop.

"You brought a note to the Oriental Hotel just now?" said Charters, holding a shilling temptingly between his fingers.

"Iss," said the boy, eyeing the coin expectantly.

"Where did you get it from?" asked Charters sternly.

"Coolie—Malay man give it me when bazaar open," said the boy calmly, "tell me take Oriental Hotel."

"Don't you know the man?—where he lives?" said Charters, his jaw dropping.

"No," said the boy frankly. "Never seen him before."

It was pretty evident the boy spoke the truth, and giving him the coin they left the shop. As they emerged from the bazaar into the street, Anson paused, an idea striking him. Durand considered the note important, or he would not have sent it. Probably he had imagined that his threats would frighten them, or he may have thought

there was a possibility of his communication "drawing" them, and so affording him an inkling of their plans. In that case he would wait to hear news of its reception, and to see what the reply would be, if one were vouchsafed.

Across the road was an hotel—the "Eastern Sun," and Anson drew Charters in its direction. "We must not lose sight of that bazaar," he said. "It is our only chance. That coolie may return."

Charters seized the idea, and they entered the hotel. The proprietor welcomed them gladly in their character of two passengers from the boat; and with little difficulty they succeeded in hiring a small sitting-room overlooking the street, from whose shaded verandah, without any fear of being observed, they could obtain a good view of the opposite bazaar.

For some hours they sat contentedly and watched, sipping cool drinks through straws out of long glasses, and trying to take an interest in the many coloured crowds which passed and repassed. But at length the morning began to draw on, and though they had a splendid opportunity of noting the trade the bazaar over the way did with their unsuspecting countrymen, noon found them

still seated at the window without having caught a glimpse of the mysterious Malay.

"This is terrible," groaned Charters after a time. "Do you know what I have just thought of? That Durand probably sailed by the boat this morning, and is now very likely chuckling to himself in a comfortable chair on deck."

Anson started to his feet in dismay, and snatched his watch from his pocket. It was half-past twelve. The boat should have sailed an hour before. "One of us ought to have gone down to the dock, while the other followed the boy," he said feebly. "But it is a little too late to think of that. I fear we are not much good after all at this kind of business. But—good heavens! look!" he cried, darting to the edge of the verandah, and drawing Charters after him.

They gazed down with eyes starting. For along the road, slowly, in the direction of the bazaar, came a Malay. He was a villainous-looking fellow, with one eye, and a sneaking treacherous way of walking, and he glanced about him cautiously as he approached the entrance to the shop. Indeed, so nervous did he appear of being seen, that he passed the place at least half-a-dozen times before he was able to make up his mind to enter.

At length, however, the appearance of the passers-by seemed to satisfy him, and he dodged quickly inside.

After a moment's conversation with the boy, he emerged, and with a hasty glance of his one eye round him, made off up the road.

Charters and Anson hurried downstairs, and to their joy viewed him turning a corner not more than thirty yards in front.

The Malay kept straight on after leaving the main street. His fear of being observed seemed to have left him when once clear of the bazaar, and he did not trouble even to look round during the time they followed him.

On and on he went until, the town itself being left behind, they reached the outskirts of the suburbs, which in Colombo are occupied mainly by Dutch and Portuguese traders. Here he turned into a narrow and secluded street, shaded with palm trees ; and knocking at the door of a bungalow which stood apart from the rest of the pretty but ill-kept cottages, he was admitted after a short conference, the door closing instantly behind him.

Anson was about to step forward, when Charters caught him by the arm. "Stop!"

he cried, "do you know what that place is?"

"Durand's house, I expect," he returned, "or at least the place where he is staying."

"No! And I am sure of it," replied Charters. "The Malay has, I suspect, gone there with a message merely, and I have a strong suspicion I can tell to what it relates. That house is nominally the residence of old 'Cat's eye' Sarmento—so nicknamed from some shady transaction with a celebrated jewel that made a considerable stir a few years ago. He came out of it badly, but is still supposed to be an enormously wealthy man. He is an old Portuguese Jew, and one of the largest dealers in uncut stones in India. He will purchase a diamond from you, especially should you happen to have stolen it, as cheaply as you please; or he will cut your throat to gain its possession with as little scruple as he would drown a kitten. Clever as Durand is, he has met his match in old 'Cat's eye,' if he intends dealing with him in our opals."

"Perhaps he has already done so," said Anson glumly. "Wouldn't it be better to try the house and make sure he is not there?"

"Wait," said Charters confidently. "I am sure Durand is not in that house; or if

he is, that he has only been paying a visit to old Sarmento to lead up to matters. The very fact of his going at all to old 'Cat's eye' would show that there was something crooked in the business; and in that case the old scoundrel is far too clever to have him staying in his bungalow. Besides, though I dare say we can both take pretty good care of ourselves, I wouldn't give twopence for our chance of leaving that place alive if we went there and kicked up a row. 'Cat's eye' always has a few cut-throat Malays and Cingalese knocking about, and the place would be like a swarm of bees in a minute. We had better see what happens," he continued, drawing back behind some palms, out of view of the house. "I have been in this quarter of Colombo before."

However, although they could see both entrance and exit of the bungalow from where they stood, no sign came from within, and when they had waited expectantly for some time, Anson began to get impatient. "The fellow's not coming out at all," he said, "or he's gone without our seeing him."

Charters was about to reply, when they heard the sound of a chain being unfastened inside the house, and the door opened softly.

They were completely hidden where they

stood, and after a moment a dark figure glided out into the roadway, and started back in the direction of the town.

It was the Malay again, and Charters' face lit up. "I was right," he whispered. "And now for Durand and the opals!"

As soon as the native was well on his way, they emerged from their hiding-place and followed him cautiously. This time he made for the centre of the town. He was walking slowly, and as they passed the Oriental Hotel Charters left word for Estelle that they might be late, fearing that she would begin to be nervous at their prolonged absence.

Their way this time lay right through the town, and out again in the direction of the Cinnamon Gardens; but about a mile from the latter place, the Malay turned down a narrow lane, and for a moment they lost sight of him. When they rounded the corner the lane was empty. He had disappeared.

For a second they stood nonplussed. The street was a short one, and apparently consisted of but three bungalows, standing in their own grounds. Two of these buildings were on their side of the way, and the third stood by itself opposite. They were all within about thirty yards of where they

stood, and they had been about double that distance from the Malay when they lost sight of him. It was evident that he might have taken to any one of the three habitations. It was impossible to say which. As far as their outward appearance went, they might all have been deserted, for although it was already growing dark, they could discover no sign of light or movement about them.

Charters was the first to recover his wits. "It is no good knocking at the doors on chance," he said. "If Durand were at home he would not answer, and we couldn't very well break in on suspicion. We must make up our minds to wait. I suspect he will come out before long—when he thinks it is dark enough to be safe."

Anson agreed, although they had been on the move all day, and save for a sandwich or so at the "Eastern Sun," had had nothing to eat since breakfast at the Oriental.

Fortunately the road was bordered with trees and flowering shrubs, and they were able to fling themselves down on the grass and rest while they kept guard.

Charters, occupied with his thoughts, kept silence ; and as the lovely Ceylon night drew on, and the deep blue sky changed from blue to pink, and from pink again to deepest

sapphire—the sapphire of the eastern night—Anson found further respite from his wandering thoughts of Estelle. Poor Estelle! she could not have found that old lady a very exhilarating companion, and, anxious as she would be about their safety, must have spent a sad day—anxious that is about her father's safety, at least, for would she fear for him? The romantic power of the Ceylon night, the scents from the Cinnamon Gardens, which filled the air with their enervating perfume, and the strange atmosphere which overhangs Ceylon and all things Eastern, threw a sentimental tinge over his thoughts, and he gave himself up to wild, sweet dreams from which he yet felt he might have a sad awakening. Yet she was kind to him, and even seemed glad of his companionship. Yes—— He was wandering off into poetic reverie, when he was aroused suddenly by a grip on his arm. Charters was sitting up, and looking eagerly at the house across the way. Two figures were in the doorway, and after a moment's conversation they turned down the now rapidly darkening street.

Even in the dimness, Anson fancied he could recognize Durand's tall figure, and one of the two was undoubtedly the Malay.

They rose cautiously and waited, peering

out, until the figures turned the corner. Then they followed cautiously.

"Now," murmured Charters, "comes the tug of war. If we lose Durand this time, we stand a very poor chance of ever seeing our opals; for unless I am very much mistaken, these two scoundrels are about to pay a visit in the dark to old Sarmento. Probably Durand has the opals with him, or I would stay behind and search this bungalow, taking the risk of his having left anyone to guard it. But he is a reckless devil, and it is probable he does not know Sarmento's character thoroughly. For the matter of that few people do. Now it is a toss-up which is the best thing to do. What do you say?"

"Let us make sure of Durand," said Anson promptly. "After all, we know he has the opals, and while we have him, we have some hold on them. On the other hand, we are not positive, though it certainly seems almost certain, that this place is where he lives."

Charters appeared to be correct in his surmises, for it was evident after a time that the two figures on ahead were making rapidly in the direction of the Portuguese dealer's house.

They had evidently no suspicion that they were being followed, or the idea did not

trouble them, for they did not look round, but went straight on, conversing in a low tone. Indeed, it was so dark that it is doubtful if they could have recognized their pursuers at the distance at which they kept, had they suspected that they were being followed.

By-and-by they reached the little bungalow where Anson and Charters had previously waited for the Malay. The latter, leaving his companion, stepped forward and gave a low whistle, followed at a short interval by a peculiar cry. As the echo died away, the door opened, and motioning to his companion, the native led the way inside. Charters and his companion were about to make their way up to the house in the hope that they might in some manner be able to obtain a glimpse of the proceedings within, when the door opened once more, and the tall figure of the Malay appeared.

He closed the door again carefully after him, and leaning against one of the posts of the verandah, remained, to their dismay, motionless, gazing up at the sky.

For a moment or two they watched him breathlessly, but his figure might have been cut in bronze, so still did he remain, and at last Charters muttered an oath under his

breath. "The fellow's on guard," he whispered. "What on earth are we going to do now?"

"Why not make a detour," suggested Anson, "and come round on the place at the rear? That chap seems to be a fixture there on the verandah."

"For the Lord's sake, don't make a noise then!" whispered Charters. "If you do our chance is gone."

Anson nodded in the darkness, and they crept silently away. The bungalows of which the street was composed were each surrounded by a garden. That next to the Portuguese dealer's appeared to be empty, but it was rather too near to the watchful sentry for them to cross the road and attempt their way in that direction. They therefore walked softly along, searching for another house whose inhabitants should seem to be absent.

After about a hundred yards or so they came upon a narrow lane or passage, which ran along between two gardens, and taking it they emerged in a short time into an open space surrounded with trees, and overlooked by the back windows of the street they had just left. Moving cautiously along until they reached the wall of the empty house, they clambered over it, not without

a certain amount of scraping which made them thankful they had tried the uninhabited dwelling, and dropped into the garden.

"I hope there are no dogs about," said Charters feelingly, "that would be rather awkward." But they heard no signs of growling or rattling of chains, and striking out boldly, they made for the hedge which separated the two gardens. This proved an easy obstacle to surmount, and they arrived at the other side without any mishap. So far so good.

The darkness and the fact of being obliged to move so carefully, were beginning to have an unpleasant effect on their nerves. Anson found himself wishing that he had some visible enemy to tackle, or else that he was well out of it, for every moment it seemed to him that he could feel the cold point of a Malay *kriss* sticking into his back. However, nothing occurred, and they were not destined to be long without something to distract their attention.

There was little to be seen at the rear of the bungalow. Everything was apparently tightly shut and bolted; but as they crept softly round to the side, they saw a gleam of light shoot out across some flowering shrubs which grew by the path, and to their

relief they discovered that the window from which it came was open, and shaded merely with a bamboo blind, through the interstices of which they could see and hear with tolerable distinctness.

Charters was the first to approach and look in, and Anson saw him give a start and draw back swiftly. "He's there," he whispered eagerly. "And the opals, too—or at least some of them! Quick! Look in! But not a sound."

CHAPTER XIX

ANSON stepped forward to the window, and squatting down on the grass, they peered into the room. So near did they seem to the occupants that it appeared as if those inside must hear their excited breathing. But after a time when they had taken in the surroundings, they saw that the party inside were too engrossed with their own affairs to notice them.

The room was a large one—larger than one would have expected the bungalow to contain. It was dimly lighted by an enormous lamp, which, shaded with many coloured glass, swung from the ceiling, and cast quaint lurid lights around the apartment. The walls were draped with Persian and Indian rugs, and laden with strange glittering weapons, Benares brass work, and grinning idols.

In a queerly fashioned chair made of ebony, sideways to the window, sat Durand. Oppo-

site to him reclined a little round red-faced man, with eyes like a fish. He was smiling benevolently on Durand, and but for the evil appearance of his features, might have been the very incarnation of amiability.

In another chair, a hard, upright, wooden one, sat a figure which looked strongly at variance with its surroundings—an old man in the garb of a Buddhist priest. Even seated as he was it was plain he was of enormous height, though very thin, and while of apparently venerable age, he still held himself stiffly erect in his unyielding seat. His face, pale to deadness, was as unwrinkled as a child's, save for his brow, which overhanging a pair of eyes of piercing brightness, was crossed and recrossed with the lines of care and severe thought. While his keen gaze followed every movement of his companions, his features retained a stony and marvellous impassivity, even during the strange scene which followed.

On the table, in the centre of the room, and directly under the lamp, whose rays lent them additional lustre, were scattered some uncut opals of wonderful beauty; some green, some rainbow-coloured, with here and there a marvellous "fire stone," its dull-red

smouldering flame flickering up, with the slight swaying of the lamp, through the milky opal surrounding it. The two watchers gazing at the stones, fascinated by their loveliness, suddenly strained their ears, for the little red-faced man—whom Charters whispered was Sarmento—began to speak.

"That is our offer," he said smilingly, glancing at Durand. "What do you say?"

"No," replied Durand shortly.

"So you don't accept?" said the Portuguese, still smiling, but allowing a little shadow to creep over his face.

Durand was pale and haggard, and the nervous tapping of his fingers on the arm of his chair proved that he was ill at ease.

"No," he repeated, "it is not half their value. And you of all men this side of the line know it."

Sarmiento smiled again, and spoke persuasively. "But, my dear sir, I do not know it. For myself I do not want your opals at all. I would not deal in them with you. There is a something—how shall we say?—a something I do not care about in the affair; and I should have said 'No, thank you' and 'good-day,' if I were acting for myself. But this gentleman, my old friend,

Salar Jung, he has a commission to buy opals, you see. His idols—the idols of his temple—Buddha, Krishna, Siva, I do not know their names! they are crying out for opals. They want them for their eyes, their noses, their toes, and what not; and my friend, Salar Jung, he cannot bear his idols, Krishna, Buddha, etc., to cry out for opals and not supply them. We make you a fair offer—really a very fair offer. You had better accept it.”

“No,” repeated Durand, “I will not.”

“*You had better accept it!*” said the little Portuguese dealer, with a flash lighting up his fishy eyes, and a glance at the priest who allowed no sign to escape him.

In a second Durand drew a revolver from his pocket, and sat up in his chair. “Now, Mr. Sarmento,” he said quickly, “no threats! I know you by reputation, but it suits me to come to you in this business. But no foolery! I warn you. My man is outside, and this weapon is loaded.”

How it was done neither Charters nor Anson could say, for neither of the two men moved, but with a quick rattle and clash, the seats of Durand’s chair shot forward, the two arms swung round and clasped him about the upper part of the body, and, pale with rage, he sat

facing them helplessly, while Sarmento stepped forward and struck the revolver from his imprisoned hands.

"Billy!" yelled Durand quickly. "Billy!"

The door was dashed open, and the Malay bounded into the room, his eye flashing and a knife in his hand. Before, however, he had taken two steps, the old priest stretched out his hand. "Stop," he said sternly, fixing his piercing eye on the man. "You cannot move!"

The native struggled vainly for a second, as if against some irresistible force, and then the light went out of his solitary eye and he rested motionless.

Durand, who had swiftly recovered his marvellous self-control, laughed harshly. "Poor Billy!" he said bitterly. "But that's a very old trick."

Sarmento turned to him, his round red face contrasting strangely with the evil gleam in his fishy eyes. "Now, my friend," he said sternly, "not alone do you not get the money we offered you just now, but you also lose the remainder of your opals. Where are they?"

Durand laughed ironically. "I wonder," he said calmly.

"You will speak," said Sarmento quietly.

"We have means to make you. I have men here who wouldn't be particular about cutting you to pieces, but I dare say we might find out something about the stones without going quite so far as that. What do you say, eh?"

Durand met his gaze fixedly. "Sarmento," he said between his clenched teeth, "I would see myself and you in hell, and your old friend and his idols rotting, before I would *sell* you these opals now—much less tell you where they are."

It was impossible not to admire the cool courage of the man as he sat there defying the wretches in whose power he was; and the two onlookers felt that this was so, in spite of their detestation of him.

The old priest's eyes turned towards him, and he fixed on him a gaze which Durand returned firmly. For a second or two there seemed to be a struggle between them. Then at last, Durand, with the sweat pouring from his brow, dashed his head back against the top of the chair, with a furious blasphemy. "Curse you! curse you! you can't do it," he cried, "You can't do it!"

The priest made a rapid movement, almost like a blow in the air, with his fist, and then—in what manner it was accomplished, whether

by some hidden machinery in the chair, as seems most probable, or by some strange power of which we Western races know nothing, they could not tell—but as he brought down his hand they heard something crack, like a stick breaking in two. Durand bounded convulsively in his chair, but the arms held him tight, and he sank back again raving.

“Curse you! You’ve broken my arm,” he cried. “You’ve got some devilish power over my body, damn you! but I’m no child to cry for mercy. Do you think if you tore me to pieces you could destroy my will, you drivelling old dotard! Do you know what I’ve done to get those opals? What they mean to me? The ambitions, the longing of a lifetime! The means by which these could be gratified cast to your hogs of idols, and fawned over by slobbering priests——”

Enraged by Durand’s last words, the old priest started to his feet, and again his hand went out; but before he had time to bring it down, a shot rang through the air, and the great coloured lamp crashed down on to the floor, leaving the room in darkness. I heard the little Portuguese scream with terror, and then Charters pushed by me. “Take the opals!” he hissed in Anson’s ear, “I can

stand this no longer! Scoundrel as Durand is, these chaps are worse!"

He sprang through the window, and made for Durand's chair. Then there was a sound of splintering wood, and Anson heard Charters mutter hurriedly, "Now run, and be thankful."

The two pushed through the casement, and making for the table where the opals were they scrambled wildly round in the dark for them, cutting their hands in the darkness with the broken glass from the lamp, but getting most of the stones. Charters fumbled for the door and opened it; Anson followed him, and cannoning on his way into a rotund body which he took to be the Portuguese dealer's, he gave it one glorious punch, and darted out.

In a second they were flying wildly up the street.

"If Durand doesn't get away now, it's not my fault," puffed Charters, as they ran steadily along. "For two amiable people, commend me to his two friends. I don't know which I prefer."

They pulled up after they had gone a quarter of a mile or so, and listened for any sound which might tell them they were pursued. Silence reigned, however, and it

seemed probable that the inhabitants of the bungalow had been too much taken by surprise at their sudden entry to think of following. Indeed, Anson felt sure that he had at all events put such an undertaking entirely out of the power of Sarmento.

"Did you secure many opals?" asked Charters anxiously.

"Nearly all there were on the table, I think," replied Anson, producing a handful from his pocket. The two stood for a moment under a lamp inspecting them.

"Why, there must be a small fortune there alone!" said Charters, examining one perfect stone. "If these were only specimens that Durand brought for the dealer to see, what must the bulk be worth! Anson, my boy, we are neither of us rich men: our legacy was worth risking something for."

"You are right," replied Anson, "and it shall not be our fault if we don't succeed. But there is no doubt, I should imagine, that Durand has got the rest of the opals hidden somewhere at his house. We must hasten back there again, or Durand may arrive before us, if he has escaped."

"Well, I smashed up that devilish chair and lifted him out. I had not time or

inclination to do more," returned Charters. "I don't suppose he would miss the chance of making off in the confusion. So, as you say, we had better hurry off to the bungalow whence we saw him come."

They started off afresh, and after a short time reached the little house. The place was to all appearances deserted and locked up, but using their united strength they soon burst the door open, and entered.

Fortunately, there was no one about to observe them, and they found themselves in a dark passage, from which a room led off on either side.

In one of these they discovered a small hand lamp which enabled them to conduct their search with facility.

The house was apparently merely hired for the time by Durand, for the appointments bore the unmistakable signs which those of a "furnished bungalow" present. The two rooms on the ground floor were soon examined, and discovering nothing of interest there they made their way upstairs. And here they met with an obstacle which seemed likely to prove insurmountable.

In the first apartment they entered they could find nothing which could lead them to believe that the opals were there. It was

merely a bedroom, furnished in the unpretentious style usual to such places in Ceylon, and the next room was the same. But at the third their attention was quickly arrested by a small Chubb's safe which stood in a corner by the bed, whose solid weight speedily assured them of the futility of any attempt to force it.

They were bending over it, convinced that the opals were inside, and wondering what on earth to do, when they heard a footstep on the stairs.

They started to their feet, and faced the door. A second later, Durand, pale and self-contained as usual, entered the room. He had his arm bound up in a sling, and carried at his side; and save for this fact, and a slightly drawn look round his mouth, gave no other sign of the torture he must have undergone while helpless in Sarmento's and the old priest's hands.

They stood for a moment too taken aback and confused to move; Durand was the first to speak. "May I ask what you are doing in my house and in my bedroom at this time of night?" he said softly.

Both hesitated, for indeed they did seem in an awkward position; but Charters after a moment, moved forward and faced Durand.

"We have come for our opals," he said sternly, "the opals which poor Wade bequeathed us, which you have stolen, and which you were attempting to sell to 'Cat's eye' Sarmiento to-night."

"Ah," said Durand, starting slightly, and his face flushing a little. "So it was you who fired that shot?"

"It was," returned Charters shortly, "but don't think I helped you to escape for any love I have for you, I beg. I only thought that out of three scoundrels, perhaps those two were the worst. Besides, torture is against the theories of Englishmen in any case, even if thoroughly deserved."

Durand laughed. "Ah," he said coolly. "Thanks. I am much obliged to you for your frankness. You don't mind my considering that your speech has settled the debt, do you?"

"That debt, yes," returned Charters grimly. "But there are others which are not settled yet. Getting me into your rooms and drugging me, for instance. Removing those tattoo marks, and making use of that plan for your own ends, for another instance. . . . But let that pass. Where are our opals?"

"A plain question deserves a plain an-

swer," replied Durand. "In that safe."

"And the key?" continued Charters.

"The key is in my pocket," said Durand, "and there it will remain until I choose to remove it."

Charters made a sudden move forward, and then hesitated. "I am armed," he said, after a moment. "Anson is here. We are two to one, and we are determined men. You are crippled. What do you expect to do against us?"

Durand glanced from one to the other, and appeared to hesitate. "It certainly seems as if I were in rather a tight place," he said after a second. "But if I were to call out of this window, it is probable help would come, and you would find it difficult to explain your presence in my house uninvited, and extremely hard to prove your right to the opals. However——" He paused, and moving to the window, appeared to listen for a moment. Then he faced us again, as if he had heard something which decided him.

"However," he continued, "for reasons of my own, I have decided to accede to your request. I will give you up the opals."

They stared at him, unable almost to believe the evidence of their ears.

"I will give you up the opals," he repeated. "But remember, it is only under compulsion. I am crippled, as you say. I left my revolver in that cursed Portuguese's house, and my servant—through some cursed jugglery—is not here." Drawing a key from his waistcoat pocket, Durand proceeded to the safe, and bending down, opened it. The two, leaning over him, watched excitedly.

As the door swung open they gave an involuntary murmur of delight and wonder. For the floor of the safe and the two small shelves were filled with glittering, shining, rainbow-hued fragments, which even their limited knowledge told them must represent an enormous fortune.

Durand scrambled them out carelessly, without even a sigh, and taking a bag from a shelf near the safe, he bundled the stones in, and handed it to Charters. "There you are," he said. "But one word of advice, and you will have cause to remember it before long, I warn you. *Take care of them!*"

Charters clutched the bag, and put it quickly behind him, as if he expected Durand to repent. Then, his good heart struggling with his dislike, he held it out again. "You

have had some—some bad luck over this affair,” he said. “If you care to pick out a few——”

For a second Durand hesitated, and turning his back, remained silent. Then he faced round again, the usual cold sneer on his handsome face. “Thank you, no!” he said slowly. “My motto in this case is all or none.”

Charters looked at him doubtfully, and then turned away. “Very well,” he said, “Good-night.”

Durand did not reply. He was standing at the window looking down into the street. Anson followed Charters out into the open air, hardly feeling the ground beneath his feet. It seemed too good to be true; but the opals were really theirs at last.

It was dark outside the bungalow, and when they made their way down the garden path Charters stumbled suddenly. As he recovered himself, his revolver slipped from his pocket and fell with a clash on the stones. Anson stooped quickly, and picking it up, returned it to him.

“Thanks,” he said, and put it back in his pocket. As they turned out into the road, Anson thought that he saw something move in the bushes behind them, and looking back

closely he fancied he could distinguish a dusky figure vanishing softly into the shadow. He stopped Charters and they investigated, but saw nothing more, and putting the affair down to imagination, they dismissed it from their minds and walked on.

They often thought afterwards, however, in the light of subsequent events, that that slip of Charters, and the gleam of the revolver barrel in all probability saved their lives that night.

They reached the hotel without any further incident, and ordering a private room, told the waiter to inform Miss Charters of their arrival.

Estelle quickly joined them, delighted at their safe return, though she started back at first in alarm at their appearance, worn and haggard as they were with their day's adventures and the excitement they had gone through. Then her glance flew to Anson's hands, which he for the first time noticed were covered with blood from the cuts the broken glass had inflicted when he scrambled for Durand's specimens in the dark.

"Nothing has happened?" she cried, turning white. "You are not hurt?"

"Not at all," he said hastily. "It is only

a small cut." He almost wished he was indeed seriously wounded when he saw the sweet compassionate look on her face.

"Yes, but there has been an accident," broke in Charters, "an accident which has given us each a fortune. Come, Estelle! Shut the door and draw down the blinds, and see what a present we have brought for a good little girl."

Anson hastened to relieve her of the task, and when all was secure Charters produced the bag, and pouring the opals out onto the table, bade Estelle admire them.

Most daughters of Eve would have been enraptured at the show those wonderful jewels made as they lay there under the brilliant gas-light, and Estelle was no exception to her sex. The two men enjoyed her amazement and delight, participating in it themselves, and by the time they all had admired and valued every one of the stones, and Estelle had decided how they were each to be mounted—for she declared she could not bear to part with any one of them—it was almost morning, and, excited as they were, Charters and Anson were falling asleep in their chairs.

Estelle declared for a time that she was too fascinated with the thought of the jewels

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 245

to go to bed, but Charters at last insisted, and shutting them up again in the bag, carried both them and Estelle off, after a hearty shake of the hand with Anson in congratulation of their success.

CHAPTER XX

IT was a happy trio that met at breakfast in the hotel the following morning. There was immense satisfaction in the fact that the treasure for which they had been seeking, and which had run such risk of being misappropriated, was now safely in their possession. There was, of course, still the fact to face that it was humanly certain every possible effort would be made by their enemies to wrest the opals from them. The priests, whose spies were doubtless to be found in every part of the city, were certain to strain every nerve to secure the treasure which had been all but within their grasp ; while Durand, who had only capitulated through sheer necessity, was of that cool calculating sort of disposition which would simply regard their present advantage as a move in their favour in the game, but which would not preclude him

from hoping for eventual success, to attain which he would use all his cunning, resource and wonderful energy.

"You will be able to queen it, little girl," said Charters to Estelle, "when we get back to London. You will have the most superb set of jewels in existence."

"You will, indeed," said Anson, with delighted eagerness. "The specimens are superb, and it will be possible to make them up with an effect few jewellers in London could equal."

"I think you are both talking like very good-natured people, but also very stupid ones," said Estelle.

"Why? Why?" asked her father in genuine astonishment.

"In the first place, dad, because you are quite coolly assuming that it is in your power to use Mr. Anson's share of the jewels as if they were your own, and," she continued, unheeding the deprecatory gestures of the younger man, "you are both talking as though you had both such huge fortunes apart from these gems that you could either of you afford to let me rummage through them for the choicest specimens."

"If you would only accept them," said Anson eagerly, "I shall take it as the very

greatest pleasure I can possibly derive from them."

"I promise you both that I shall accept some," said she merrily. "I should not be a woman if I could resist such a temptation—but it must be after you have realized the fortune the majority of them are worth, and have it safely placed in your respective banks. There now, we will say no more about it, because you both know I am right, and I am not going to allow myself to think that you have either of you lost your senses through your sudden access to fortune."

"Of course, Estelle, you are quite right, but I really think that out of my own share alone I can realize not merely a handsome fortune, but what would have seemed a week ago a stupendous one, and still be able to let you have a set of opals which will be the envy and talk of London. But to business, Anson! No boat will be leaving here for another week at least, and it will never do to risk these jewels in the hotel. We must see that they are beyond the reach of Durand, and of those villainous priests, or I shall not have a moment's peace. Last night I woke up suddenly from my sleep, fancying in my nervousness that I could hear someone trying the door or the window of my bedroom.

Of course it was only fancy, but what was mere fancy last night may be reality at any moment."

"You are quite right. Our very first move should be to see the jewels safely bestowed. I suppose the proprietor of this hotel has a sitting-room."

"Very likely, but the place is so over-run with Cingalese and people that I do not think it safe. The only real security is to deposit them at the bank, but how are we to do that?"

"I should think the authorities of the bank could readily appreciate the difficulty, and arrange to overcome it. If you go and see the manager of the best bank nearest the quay, so that we shall not have far to transfer the stones to custody of the captain of our boat, he will, I have no doubt, arrange to send for them and ensure their safety."

"Yes, I think that will be the best plan. After all it cannot be such a very unusual experience in such a region of thieves. By-the-bye an idea has just struck me. If they are on the watch they will be sure to expect some such move as this. What has occurred to me is to make up a parcel in imitation of the bag of opals, and carry it with me to the bank."

"Oh, no, dad," interrupted Estelle anxiously. "If they are watching, they might really think you had the opals and, who knows, they might attack you."

"I don't think there is much risk in it," pursued Charters stubbornly. "After all if they are cheated by the ruse, their sole endeavour will be to take the bag from me, and I shall not offer any real resistance. If they do seize it, they will make off to one of their wretched monasteries with it, and before they have discovered their mistake we shall have the stones safely transferred to the strong room of the bank."

"I think it is a capital idea," said Anson. "After all they could not attempt any serious attack on you in broad daylight, bad as this place is, and the ruse may just deceive them sufficiently for our purpose."

"If you are really sure?" said Estelle hesitatingly.

"Oh, well, I may be just bowled over in some way or other, or held forcibly while the bag is seized," said Charters lightly, "but we can't keep our bag of rainbows without running a serious risk every moment they are in our possession. In broad daylight an ordinary assault and robbery is the most they'll venture on; whereas if we don't

get them into safe keeping, these wretches won't stick at murder to accomplish their ends." The plan was further discussed, and Estelle's objections on the score of the risk her father was running were effectually silenced. Anson offered to be the messenger to the bank with the decoy bag, but this Charters would not dream of. But, if truth were to be told, Anson did not insist overmuch, as he had something to say to Estelle, and was glad of the arrangement which ensured their being alone.

CHAPTER XXI

CHARTERS had been gone considerably more than an hour, but serious as was the nature of his mission, and anxious as both were to learn of his safety, the time had seemed only a matter of a few minutes. For Anson had told his love, and Estelle had confessed that from the first moment of their meeting she had been attracted to him, and that the friendship which had then accidentally sprung up between them, had long since ripened into love.

"I know that my father has the friendliest regard for you," she said as they stood by the window, looking over the kaleidoscopic scenes in the street, "and he has a very high appreciation of the many services you have rendered him, so that he will, I am sure, be delighted to hear our news. But—Leslie," and she paused shyly and blushed prettily as she stumbled over his name, "it is a long time since papa went out. I am afraid something may have happened to him."

"I think not, dearest," replied Anson reassuringly, "he has probably found the manager of the bank busy, and it will take him some time to explain all the circumstances."

"Oh, Leslie, look! Here is Dr. Durand."

Yes, it was undoubtedly he. Approaching the hotel with the same self-assured swinging step of old, the usual cool cynical smile playing about his pale features. He saw them as he approached and raised his hat with well-bred ease, taking it quite for granted that their recognition was assured.

Anson stared at him without returning the salutation, but Estelle had been surprised into responding with a slight bow.

"What can the fellow want?" asked Anson with unconcealed annoyance. "He is sure to be intending to call on us, but I think our best course would be to decline to see him."

"On the other hand," said Estelle, "we are surrounded by so many mysterious circumstances that it may be as well to hear what he has to say."

"There is one thing about it," said Anson. "We are on our guard. We know very well that in whatever he does, his desire is to further his own ends, not ours."

Durand came into the room with a cool,

almost imperious air, and a common-place comment on the weather. He probably noticed the reserve with which his intrusion was received, but this did not affect him in the slightest degree. He had no doubt expected this reception, if not one more hostile, and his coming was therefore no doubt for a very different purpose than to remove the unfriendly feeling his own acts had inspired.

"We will not waste time in getting to the object of your unlooked-for visit," said Anson bluntly, "and you will not need me to tell you it is as unwelcome as it is unexpected."

Durand made no reply, nor did he indicate by a gesture even how the words affected him.

"You do not expect us to believe," continued Anson doggedly, "that you can have any other object in this, or in anything else you do, than to consult your own interests."

Durand looked up with an expression of surprise, while a smile played over his features.

"Of course not. Surely that is the most primitive philosophy—that all our ends, good or bad, have their base in self-gratification. Even if I am here to assist you—which, strange to say, is the case—my motive is still to please myself."

There was always an unmistakable strain

of refinement in Durand's manner which saved him from the rough treatment his conduct in general merited, and Estelle motioned him to a chair. Durand, with a quiet "thank you," took it. He was determined to make himself quite at home, and Anson resigned himself to the situation.

"Frankness," said Durand placidly, "will save us much time; and time, I can assure you, is a matter of consequence to treasure-guardians in Colombo at present."

"How do you know that it is necessary for us to preserve guard any longer?" asked Anson, eyeing him suspiciously. "How do you know that the opals are not now safely stowed away in the strong room of a bank?"

"Because the veriest child would not be taken in by such a clumsy ruse," replied Durand, "and I don't suppose for a moment that our enemies the priests and their numerous spies were a bit deceived."

"Our enemies?" ejaculated Anson, with a questioning emphasis on the first word.

"Our enemies, most assuredly," said Durand. "As I said, we will be frank. The opals represent a huge fortune which is a temptation to all of us. They belong really to mother Earth, and are as much the property of one of her sons as they are of any other.

If personal ownership were at all to be considered we should as a matter of strict morality hunt up their real possessor among the Maories."

"You know that is all nonsense," cried Anson. "The jewels belonged lawfully to Wade, who gave them to Charters and myself. They belonged to him, if only in accordance with the universally recognized rights of the first discoverer."

"Of course I know and agree," said Durand blandly. "In fact the Maori who would contest such an imperial proposition would merely betray his rude aboriginal ignorance. I am an Englishman, of course, and believe in our right to extend our Empire wherever there is anything worth taking. We will agree at the outset about all that. The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof is ours."

"You haven't come here for this kind of thing?"

"No, but it clears the air. Wade found the opals, and quite rightly took them. They were his by right—while he could hold them. I found them next, and they were quite rightly mine—while I could hold them. Now they are yours, and quite rightly yours—while you can hold them."

"And we mean to hold them, too," said Anson with a confident laugh.

"I am very glad to hear it. I have come to render you every assistance in my power to do so."

"What is your game, Durand?" broke in Anson hotly. "Do you think I can believe that you have given up all idea of trying to regain them by fair means or foul?"

"If you have any such notion," said Durand calmly, "you may dismiss it from your head as preposterous. I not only intend to regain them, but, if I live, I shall regain them in spite of all you and Charters may do."

He uttered this threat as though he was discussing a proposition for an afternoon stroll, with never a rising of his voice, nor a gesture to indicate any excess of feeling. But that he meant every word of it was unmistakable, and it almost chilled Anson to face a rivalry as relentless as it was passionless.

"Let us know in a word," said he, "why you are here; what you have to propose. You do not disguise that you are an enemy who is not to be appeased, so how can we have lot or part with you?"

Durand smiled.

"I do not admit that I am an enemy. I am merely determined to win the game in which we are all playing for enormous stakes. But even if enmity be the correct expression, there are degrees of enmity. If I have to choose between you and Charters, and those wretched priests—and that is the exact position — I do not hesitate in siding with you. You and Charters did me a good turn once—you saved my life; they tried to cheat me, and failing that they would have murdered me but for you. Now I am here to help you to get out of Colombo. Once we are out of the power of these priests the duel will be between us."

"I am not sure we can accept your co-operation," said Anson. "There are more chances to you in a triangular fight, when we have to guard ourselves on all sides, than there can be when we have only to defend ourselves against you."

"That is not so. I have little doubt of being more than a match for you and Charters under ordinary conditions, but once the opals are in the power of these priests, and hidden away in one of their temples, they are lost for ever. I gave up the opals because they proved more than a match for me. Unless I help you, and we use all our wits, they will

be more than a match for you. Already you have played into their hands in a most serious manner."

"How so?"

"By that clumsy device of sending Charters out with a dummy bag."

"Oh, Mr. Durand, nothing has happened to my father!" cried Estelle, who had up to this remained silent. "You are not suggesting that any harm has come to him?"

"Not exactly harm, perhaps; but how can you expect peace when you play the game of war so loosely?"

"For God's sake, man, say what you mean!" exclaimed Anson, who had read in Durand's words more than they literally conveyed.

"I know nothing, but I have seen enough to expect that they will not miss such a chance. Where is Charters?"

"Gone to the bank."

"Why has he not returned?"

Estelle went deadly pale, and even Anson, who strongly distrusted Durand, and could not as yet bring himself to believe a word he uttered, felt a cold grip at his heart.

"There is only one thing to be done," said Anson, after a moment's thought. "I must

enquire at the bank ; but you, Durand, must come with me."

Durand smiled faintly. " I shall be pleased to go," said he. " You will soon have reason to believe me when I tell you that if you placed the opals there on that table, and asked me to take them, I should decline to do so. In such a hell as this, they are a veritable loadstone of crime."

CHAPTER XXII

IT was with a very anxious heart that Anson set out. He feared to leave Estelle, and yet he knew her anxiety was so great that if immediate search were not made for her father the consequences might be serious. He feared to leave her alone with the jewels, the source of all their trouble, but he did not dare lose sight of Durand.

There was nothing for it that then occurred to him, but to seek Charters at once, and keep directly under his eye the one man whose cunning and determination he most distrusted.

With a few reassuring words to Estelle, hiding as well as he could the anxiety at his own heart, he set out.

Durand as usual, was as cool as though his heart was not set on the struggle against unseen foes in which they were engaged. His coolness helped to sober Anson, who reflected that many things might have happened to

delay Charters, who after all was a robust athletic man, and would not submit to any serious assault without a struggle which might be sufficient to secure him help. In fact, he had come to discount his fears very largely before they reached the bank.

Here, no trace whatever of Charters was obtainable. No one answering to his description had called, and no business such as his had been broached.

Anson turned away blankly. He was at a loss what to do.

"What can you suggest?" he asked, turning to Durand.

"I don't understand you."

"What is the meaning of his not having been here?"

"They have probably stopped him by some means, or else he has had some experience or other which had induced him to change his plans."

"Then he may have returned to the hotel; returned by some other route, while we have been coming this way."

"Perhaps."

"What is in your mind, Durand?"

"I really have no idea as to what may have happened. These fellows are up to a thousand dodges. They may have seized him as a

hostage ; they may have him in one of their numerous dens about here, and may torture him into helping them."

" My God ! and we have left the opals solely in the charge of an innocent, unsuspecting girl ! "

Durand turned and stared at him blankly. " You don't mean to tell me the opals are in the hotel. "

" Of course they are. "

" But in the safe ? in the proprietor's care with his signed receipt for them. "

" No, we did not care to trust them. "

Durand's face went green with suppressed rage.

" God ! " he cried, " you have ruined me. Why did I not realize that I was dealing with maniacs, idiots ? "

And without more ado, he set off at a run, heedless of the attention he was attracting, until he found a 'rickshaw into which he jumped and told the coolie to run with him to the hotel.

Anson followed as fast as he was able, but Durand outpaced him ; nor was there a second 'rickshaw to be got till he had reached the next street.

Durand's anxiety was obviously genuine, but Anson so distrusted him that he soon

evolved in his mind a complete explanation of all that had happened, which pointed conclusively to Durand as the sole instigator.

It was Durand and not the priests who had been watching the hotel ; he it was who had secured Charters' detention so as to provide an excuse for enticing himself away from the hotel, leaving the opals with no one to guard them but Estelle.

What a clever plan it was, and how simple it seemed to Anson now that they had all been hoodwinked and it was too late ! With Charters and himself away, how easy for Durand's tools to gain access to the hotel, overpower Estelle and secure the jewels ! There could be no other possible explanation of it all, and he felt so assured that this was what had happened, that he returned to the hotel consumed with only one desire, and that was to wreak immediate and summary vengeance on Durand.

When he returned, this passionate resolve was by no means slaked by what first met his eyes. This was the figure of Estelle stretched on a couch in the drawing-room insensible, a couple of the hotel servants administering restoratives.

Anson, pained as he was at the sight, was

able through his medical training to see at a glance that she was not in any danger, and was being properly treated ; so with a few hurried directions, he passed into the next room and found Durand hurriedly searching in every available hiding-place, searching, as Anson knew instinctively, for the opals.

Rushing up to him, Anson seized him by the neck, and gripping him as in a vice, flung him round, and sent him whirling into a heap in the corner of the room.

"So, you villain!" he cried, "this is your doing after all."

Durand, lithe as a cat, sprang up and placed the table between himself and Anson.

"You are mistaken," he said hoarsely. "I have had nothing to do with this. It is your own cursed folly has played into the hands of the priests. Don't be a fool, Anson. See if the opals are gone : you know where they are kept."

But Anson had already ascertained that. He had seen at a glance, on entering the room, that the trunk in which they had been placed was broken open and rifled.

"You know well enough that they are gone," he said. "But I shall take the next trick. You have the opals, but you shall not leave this room until I have left my mark on

you for all your miserable deceitful life ! ”

“ I know nothing of all this, I tell you,” said Durand ; “ and if you injure me, you will destroy your last chance of ever seeing the stones again, or of helping Charters.”

The last words caused Anson to pause. He had made up his mind that the jewels were lost, but worse than that might remain. Durand was the villian who had worked the whole evil, but Charters was still in his power, and Estelle would not have him suffer pain or injury for the entire treasure.

“ You scoundrel,” he said, “ you are too clever for us. Release Charters, and let him return here, and you can keep the infernal jewels. I wish we had never heard of them ! ”

“ You do not believe me, but I tell you that I am more disappointed than you at the loss of the opals. I have nothing to do with all this, and you must accept my assistance if anything is to be done.”

“ But Charters must return before Miss Charters recovers.”

“ I will help you to find him, but I do not know where he is.”

Anson, chagrined and baffled, could only look at him with mingled hate, contempt and distrust. With Charters' fate in the balance

he dare not do more. Then he left the room swiftly and returned to Estelle's side.

She was already regaining consciousness, and Anson with a gesture dismissed the servants. A few minutes later she was sighing in his arms.

"Oh, Leslie! Where am I? Where is my father? I remember—you went for him."

"Do not distress yourself dearest for a moment."

"I remember now. I found these flowers on the table; I don't know how they came there; and when I smelt them I—I—Oh, Leslie, I can see it all. I have been insensible—the opals are gone!"

"Yes, dearest, but let them go. They have brought us nothing but misery, unrest and trouble."

"Where is papa? Has he returned?"

"Not yet, dearest, but we shall soon see him now that the unlucky treasure is gone."

At this moment one of the hotel servants brought a note in on a salver. Anson started, for the address was in Charters' handwriting.

Estelle instinctively knew the truth.

"Oh, Leslie," she exclaimed, "I know what you have got there. It is a note from papa."

Anson tore open the envelope and read the message briefly and hurriedly written in pencil.

"DEAR ANSON,—

"You must keep Estelle from being anxious about me. I am in no personal danger, but am clearly given to understand that I shall be detained until the opals are secured by the priests of the monastery to which I am being taken. I cannot advise you what to do, but I am allowed to write this so that you may know why I cannot return. Give my love to Estelle and impress on her that she must not be anxious about me.

"Yours,

"H. CHARTERS."

"There is another reason, dearest, why you need not be anxious," said Anson, "a reason your father does not suspect, and that is that the jewels are no longer in our possession. No doubt as soon as they are taken to the monastery, your father will be released."

"Oh, Leslie! Do you think so? Yes, I am sure it is best that we have seen the last of them. We may have escaped worse trouble and dangers."

"One error I made was to believe that

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 269

Durand was at the bottom of this. He was evidently genuine in his desire to help us for the time, at all events, and so I will consult him before seeing the fellow who has brought this."

CHAPTER XXIII

DURAND was sitting dejectedly on the couch when Anson returned to him. He could see at a glance that there was a change in Anson's manner, and he jumped up excitedly.

"You have news?" he asked. "News of the opals?"

For reply Charters handed him the note he had just received.

Durand glanced through it hurriedly, baffled rage illumining his pale features. "Curse them!" he muttered, "they have the whip-hand of us at the moment; and look like keeping it."

"I must apologise to you for the wrong impression I formed——" Anson began.

"Don't waste time about that," said Durand brusquely, "though I wish you could remove the impressions your fingers have made upon my neck. We must see the fellow who has brought this note, and get what we can out

of him. He won't know that his scoundrelly masters have got the opals, and so he will convey whatever instructions he has received."

Anson agreed, and, Estelle having retired, the sallow priest who had brought the letter was shown into the room.

He salaamed solemnly and profoundly.

"Your employers or confederates," said Durand, "are defying the law in what they are doing."

"The Sahib is mistaken," the priest replied. "We are obeying the commands of our gods."

"Ah, well, it does not much matter ; at any rate you have the advantage at present. What do you require us to do ?"

"Meet me to-night at ten o'clock at the eastern gate of the Cinnamon Gardens. Bring with you the opals. To-morrow the Sahib Charters shall return to you safely, and shall bring with him in money a fair price for the gems which the gods have set their minds on."

"And suppose to-morrow night—or now—we choose to have you arrested ?"

The priest smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Suppose that your temple is identified, and we lodge an information that stolen valuables are concealed in it ?"

"The Sahib must decide for himself."

"And if we hand you the gems to-night, what guarantee have we that our friend will be returned to us safe and sound?"

"We do not want the Sahib. We want the gems!"

"Very well—we will be at the gate of the Cinnamon Gardens to-night at ten, with the opals; and we will trust you to safeguard our friend to-morrow."

"It shall be done."

The fellow salaamed low, and glided from the room. Evidently the supposed possession of the opals conferred some exceptional distinction on them in his eyes.

"What will be the upshot of all this?" asked Anson. "Would it not have been better to have told him at once that the opals were gone?"

"No," replied Durand, "it would only have enraged him, as he knew nothing of it. They have apparently secured them through some other medium, and these fellows are eaten up with jealousy of each other when they are in competition on any work for their gods."

"But can we do nothing?"

"We can and must. We shall go to the monastery and watch, concealed, for Charters' release. They will no doubt release him when the opals reach them, but we must make sure

of this. Besides the opals are not yet lost ; there is still a chance to recover them, as the priests are working against each other in the matter. Why I specially wanted to see the messenger was to see if I could by any means discern his particular monastery. This I was able to do. I know where to run his people to earth. It is one of the oldest places of the sort about here, and is hidden among the hills some miles outside the town on the north side."

"What do you propose to do, then ? What idea have you in your mind, even vaguely ?"

"We must wait till we see what transpires. In the first place Charters may be able to tell us where they have placed the opals."

"You will still try to get them, although they are in the monastery ?" queried Anson, the infection of excitement seizing him as he read in the other's nervous tension the undaunted desire to continue the struggle to the end.

"I shall try to get them, and you will try with me. Are we, three Englishmen, going to submit—call ourselves beaten—while the smallest chance remains ? Do you think Charters is willing to be beaten ?"

"I do not know, but I tell you this frankly : I will not be a party to any adventure in

which he may risk his life. I would not for all the opals risk bringing any more trouble on Miss Charters."

"Nothing is done without risk," said Durand with a faintly perceptible sneer. "But it will be time enough to talk of that when we hear what Charters has to say. At any rate, from my point of view it is necessary that we get to the monastery under cover as soon as possible and await events."

"I confess I do not like leaving Miss Charters alone after the experience she has so recently had."

"Let her decide, then," said Durand decisively. "May we see her?"

"Oh, yes," said Anson. "I think I can guess the trick by which they caused her to faint. Come into the next room. I have no doubt she is anxious to discuss the matter."

This was evidently true, for as they entered she rose from the couch, and extending her hands supplicatingly, she addressed Durand eagerly.

"Oh, Mr. Durand, do you think they will injure my father? Can we not do something at once to assist him?"

"I think so, Miss Charters. At all events I have proposed to Mr. Anson that we should take some immediate measures to try."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Durand. I felt sure you would do something to help us."

"I am proposing that you should both assist me."

"I don't understand," she said distrustfully, while Anson looked uncomfortable, even under the possibility of a moment's misconstruction of his motives by the woman he loved.

"Let me explain," said Durand, ignoring the effect of his words on Anson. "Mr. Charters is a prisoner in a monastery which I know to be situate in the hills to the north. Now that they have stolen the opals they may possibly release Mr. Charters. Still there is the possibility that they may not, or that they may think it safer to spirit him across country somewhere, so as to give them time to dispose of the opals as they choose—they are sure to select the rarer specimens for their temple, and get rid of the rest. I therefore have suggested to Mr. Anson that we should go at once to the monastery and see what assistance we can render your father. If he is released we can watch and see that he is not spirited away. Mr. Anson naturally hesitates to leave you here alone, and perhaps it would be better if I go by myself."

"Oh, no, no," broke in Estelle, turning

appealingly to Anson. "You will go, Leslie, and bring my father back to me?"

"Darling . . ."

"Do not think of me, Leslie. There is no longer any reason why they should want to injure me."

"Then, if you will not be nervous—if you feel sure you will be safe—we will start at once."

Durand smiled. He saw that his point was gained. Within half an hour they had started on their mission.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANSON was never more impressed by the mystery presented by Durand's complex character than when they set out together for the monastery in the hills.

Where had he picked up that habit of secretiveness and assimilation, which led him through those tortuous streets and turnings as though he had been familiar with them all his life, while he carefully stooped now and again to haggle at some bazaar or stall for an article which he did not want and did not mean to have, as though his whole bent was to secure a bargain? There was nothing of the tourist about his manner or method, and not even the close scrutiny of an interested observer could have divined that he had any other object than bargain-hunting.

In this manner they soon reached the outskirts of the city. They were walking along one of the by-streets, Durand whistling softly as he went, and maintaining with con-

summate sang froid the most unconcerned demeanour, when suddenly he said to his companion, in a low commanding whisper, "Come !"

The next instant he dived down an alley, followed closely and not without some trepidation by Anson, and entered the low steaming atmosphere of an eating-place.

The room was almost empty. A couple of Italians were lounging at one of the tables, cutting hunches of bread into pieces, which they washed down with a cheap claret ; while a Malay in another corner was greedily swallowing a dish of rice.

Durand did not remain here, but passed through into another and better room, which led on to a verandah overlooking a garden.

Calling for a couple of the dishes which figured on the bill of fare, he was soon engrossed in a newspaper. The position he had taken up, however, commanded a view of the corridor outside, and also of the garden.

When the attendant left the room he was quickly alert.

" Watch here for a moment," he whispered to Anson "and carefully note if any one passes, or if you can see any one in the garden."

Then, with a hurried glance in the direction of the shop, he sprang nimbly across the cor-

ridor, and clambered noiselessly up the stairs.

He was not gone more than five minutes. When he returned there was a grim smile of satisfaction on his features.

"It is as I expected," he said; "we are watched after all, in spite of our precautions."

"Then what are we to do?" exclaimed Anson helplessly. "They will certainly inform those at the monastery."

"The best thing to do now is to eat," replied Durand calmly. "We shall have a long task before us, and it can't be done on empty stomachs."

The dishes and a bottle of wine were soon on the table, and Durand paid for them as soon as they were served. The meal, if unsatisfactory, was soon disposed of; and Anson, rising simultaneously with Durand, was making for the door.

"Not that way," said Durand quietly, "I reckoned on being watched, and I think we can trick them by going through the garden over that balcony, and out at the back. Once we have cut them off, we are as safe as possible, for I have designedly come in a false direction."

He climbed over the balcony nimbly, and dropped on the grass beneath. Anson, as

quickly, if not quite so easily, followed his example.

"Now," whispered Durand, "we must run for it."

They skirted the shrubs which surrounded a sward in the centre, and thus managed to keep out of view of the house. So far as they could judge, they had not been observed, and managed to reach the end of the garden. Here a high wooden palisade barred their progress; but with the aid of an old tool-house, built in lean-to fashion, they easily reached the top, whence they jumped down, and found themselves in the open country.

"We must look pretty lively," said Durand, "as I have come a long way out of the right road so as to hoodwink them. It will be a long detour for us before we can strike the right road."

It was getting along towards nightfall before the square walls of the monastery loomed before them, but Durand seemed incapable of fatigue. Anson was footsore and physically exhausted, but the example of his strange companion encouraged him to persevere at any cost.

As they approached nearer to the object of their search, Durand suggested that Anson should remain concealed in a clump of rhodo-

dendrons while he reconnoitred. It was with something of relief that Anson threw himself down in the strategic shade, and watched the man he had previously distrusted—and distrusted too with such reason—worm himself, Indian fashion, nearer the frowning walls of the gloomy building, taking advantage of every cover afforded by shrub or rising mound.

Durand was soon lost to view, and Anson, feeling that he could neither help nor in any way control the issue of their adventure, contentedly stretched his weary limbs.

It was nearly an hour since Durand had gone, and Anson, by this time thoroughly rested, was now only anxious for Durand's return, a hundred possible reasons crowding in his mind, which might account for the delay. After all, might not the spies of the priests have been more cunning than they credited, and might they not have been under observation the whole time, with the result that Durand was possibly at this moment keeping Charters company in one of the fastnesses of the monastery? This alarming theory, however, Anson soon scouted, for he rightly concluded that if Durand had fallen into the clutches of the priests he would not himself have been left unmolested.

His anxieties were brought to an end

by a tap on the shoulder, which, it must be confessed, for the moment added to them by startling him. Turning, however, he was reassured by seeing Durand beside him. He had returned so noiselessly that he had not given warning of his presence by the slightest sound.

"I am fagged out," he whispered; "but we can safely rest awhile. They will not stir before nightfall."

"What have you discovered?" asked Anson eagerly. "Have you seen him?"

"I have not seen him," said Durand, "but we know that he is there, and that the opals are there." By the emphasis he placed on the latter words, Anson knew that his heart was still with the treasure. "What I have discovered is where they must bring him out if they release him to-night, and I think they will. There are but three exits. I have been round the entire building. Two lead on to the river, and one winds along that valley below us. I have marked the spot from which, when the time comes, we must watch. I don't think they can dip an oar, or undo a chain without our knowledge. And now let me sleep for half-an-hour, not a moment longer; but if you see anything stirring wake me up at once."

He turned as he spoke, and resting his head on his bent arm against a slight moss-covered rising, he was, a moment later, fast asleep.

The spot Durand had selected, and which they reached in safety when the appointed time arrived, was on a rising ground which lay on the cliff between the postern gate of the monastery and the steep escarpment beneath, along which the swift eddies of the river went foaming and gurgling. To reach it they had to crawl along the ground, as the place was almost denuded of cover. Indeed, their only shelter where they finally rested consisted of some thin and wiry brushwood. It was however by this time the grey of the Ceylon evening, and Durand did not fear detection.

It was fully an hour before anything stirred below them. The monastery might have been a tomb of the dead, for all the signs of life they could detect.

Then, suddenly, and almost noiselessly, the massive gates swung open, and Charters, accompanied by two priests, passed through, and the gate closed behind them.

There was no ceremony of any sort, and the three hurried along the winding path, which kept in the hollow of the hills.

"Come," said Durand, as the mists swallowed up the three. "This will be, after all, an easy job."

"What is your plan?" asked Anson, in a whisper.

"Let them get a sufficient distance from the monastery, and try to capture those fellows."

On and on through the darkness they went, Charters' footsteps sounding heavy and muffled on the turf, their only guide.

At length Durand signified that the time had come, and they drew within a few feet of their unsuspecting quarry.

"Now," said Durand, making a spring for the man he had marked out for himself.

"It's all right, Charters!" sung out Anson, imitating Durand's action.

In a moment the two swarthy figures were on the ground, and Durand had begun to wind a linen cord round his victim's arms.

Anson had not provided himself with anything to take the place of ropes, but Durand in his cool, methodical way had foreseen this, and provided for it. While Anson held his captive down, Durand, producing the necessary material, with the neatest skill completely trussed him.

"By Jove!" Charters said fervently, while

he watched the operation, "you fellows are clever!"

"How are you?" said Anson, rising and extending his hand, which Charters grasped warmly.

"Jolly glad to see you, Anson, my boy, and jolly glad these fellows have been laid by the heels; though I might have known you fellows wouldn't be far off. Where's my little girl, and is she all right?"

"Yes, Estelle is safe, and knows we are here. Doctor Durand, you . . ."

"We won't waste time on explanations, Mr. Charters," interrupted Durand coldly; "you may accept it that you can rely on me absolutely, until I see you safe out of Colombo with the opals."

"Well, that's no easy task to accomplish. You know these scoundrels have got them—I mean their fellow-ruffians in the monastery?"

"I know, but with the information you have got, can't we get them?"

"By Jove! you're a good-plucked one, Durand. Yes, we could get them. These fellows here belong to a clique who are trying to pull off all the credit of the haul to themselves; and the opals are hidden in a room overlooking the river."

"Which we can reach?"

Charters stood for a moment impressed with an idea which had struck him.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I can see how! These fellows slunk out by the gate, but I know they are returning by the river. I heard them arrange that . . ."

An involuntary groan from one of the recumbent figures was a confirmation of his statement.

"Then they must have the key of some other door," he continued.

"I know the door," said Durand.

"Evidently the confederate who let our party out," continued Charters, "will not be at the front gate, and that accounts for the change of plans. Now let us get that key."

But Durand was already searching for it, and a moment later held it up in triumph.

"In all probability only their confederate will be awaiting their return. If we overpower him I can lead you straight to the opals, perhaps without arousing the place."

"But what can we do with these fellows?" asked Anson. "We can't leave them here."

"Why not?" said Durand. "They can never undo those bandages. There is only one necessary precaution; we must gag them."

And even as he spoke one of the priests

emitted a sound—half-shriek, half-whistle—which awoke the echoes, and might well have penetrated to the recesses of the monastery. It was only for a moment, and then Durand kicked him violently to dumbness. It was brutal in the extreme, but they were surrounded by dangers, and in such circumstances most men are callous.

CHAPTER XXV

DURAND deftly gagged the two helpless priests, speed being rather the characteristic of his operations than any manifest consideration for their feelings. But yet, neither of his companions, although they inwardly protested against his callousness, could bring themselves to utter an expression of this disagreement. They knew that their lives were in hazard during every stage of the adventure they were about to enter on ; and they had no doubts that the priests they had rendered impotent to interfere with them, would not have hesitated to murder them, or to take measures to encompass their murder, if such were the only sure means of frustrating their designs.

And so, while Durand put the finishing touches to his gagging operations, Anson and Charters silently prepared themselves for that instant return to the monastery, on which they were determined.

"We will of course see that they are released," suggested Charters, "when we have got the opals."

"Oh yes," replied Durand, "I will send one of their spies in the town out to them at daybreak. They won't hurt here for a few hours, and they endure far greater discomfort than this, weeks at a time, voluntarily, so as to ensure themselves a good time in the next world. They'll rather enjoy this, as it is a little discomfort which has overtaken them in their zeal to present our opals to their tinpot gods. Don't worry about them."

They were some distance on their return journey to the monastery as they spoke, and the easy confidence of Durand was no small incitement to his companions in their determination to see the adventure through at all hazards.

It was a tedious journey in the purple darkness of the tropical night, over uneven ground, and through rasping grasses which caught the clothes and sometimes even penetrated to the flesh like barbed wire. Occasionally too a hiss, followed by a scurrying sound, indicated the unpleasant fact that they had stumbled across a reptile; and occasionally a covey of birds was startled and flew into the night with a hoarse, frightened croaking.

They could faintly distinguish large objects, but they had only instinct, and Durand's unerring sense of locality to guide them aright. But he never halted ; on and on they sped, stumbling over hillocks, crushing through tangled and thorny brushwood, until at length they could hear the sound of a rushing stream making its way in foaming eddies over a rocky bottom.

"Now we are near," whispered Durand, "and we must be prepared to go right through without pause. These two fellows we have gagged will be expected back shortly, so that we must arrive about the time they are looked for. We had better make our plans quite clear. You say, Charters, the opals are in a room overlooking the river."

"Yes. It is octagonal, and I should think is in a turret."

"I think I know it," said Durand decisively. "There is but one window, and that is barred, is it not ?"

"Yes ; heavy iron bars too, so that there is no possibility of entering that way."

"I was wondering if it were possible to get out that way," replied Durand.

"I don't think so. The bars seem very stout and firmly embedded in the stone."

"There is no chance of entering anyhow,

as it is much too high above the river. But if we were attacked while in the room, and we could get out, it might be advisable. I know where these fellows have a boat moored, and it would certainly do much to baffle pursuit if we returned to the city along the other side. The river, too, is a good guide in this darkness. However, this is the plan we must follow. We shall first get the boat and moor it under the window, in case it might prove useful. Then we shall get to the postern door, of which we have the key, overpower the priest who is waiting there, gag him, endeavour to find the room where the opals are concealed, secure them, make our way back and get out by the door by which we entered. How are the jewels hidden?"

"They are still in the bag in which we had them, and they are hidden in a hollow of the pedestal on which a figure of Buddha is placed in a corner of the room."

"The figure lifts off."

"It lifts up. It fits socket-fashion into the pedestal."

"That's clear. If we are in any way disturbed, the one who is freest must make for the room and secure the opals, while the other two keep the priests engaged; then we must fight our way out. Now that is clear."

"Quite clear," said Charters.

"Perfectly," added Anson. "And remember, it must be a fight right through, or a walk-over. If we are tackled we must beat them, as it means death to desecrate their temple as we propose to do."

More plugging over uneven ground, more rasping rushes through grass and brushwood, but now with greater caution, and a studious avoidance of any unnecessary noise, and then Durand cried a halt on the edge of a rising ground, beyond which yawned an abyss of inky blackness unrelieved in any degree, which they knew was the bed of the river, for they could hear the faint ripple of water far below them.

"We must keep along here," whispered Durand, "but follow me very carefully, as the banks are steep. A little further along they descend, and we shall be able to reach the water and the boat."

Charters laid hold of the lapel of Durand's coat by his direction, and Anson followed Charters in the same Indian file manner. The safety of the party depended on Durand, but with his keen perceptions, there was little fear of anything going amiss.

Soon the ground began to decline perceptibly, and after a while precipitously so,

necessitating steps taken sideways to secure surer foothold. At length they reached a low-lying shed, scooped to some extent out of the side of the banks. Out of this Durand speedily piloted a flat-bottomed boat, into which, having led the way himself, he bade his companions enter.

The current was very strong, and it needed no small exertion to propel the boat against it ; but Durand and Anson with their united efforts managed this successfully. When they had passed the first outline of the gloomy monastery, Durand was obliged to gauge the position of the turret in which were hidden the opals. He chose a spot where a projection of rock diverted the current into the middle of the stream, and in the tiny harbour thus formed he securely fastened the boat.

"But how are we to get back?" whispered Charters.

"There is but one way," returned Durand in the same low voice, "we must wade. The stream at the side is not deep."

Suiting the action to the word, he slipped over the side of the boat, and the others silently followed his example.

They stood for a few minutes when they once more ascended the banks of the stream, so

as to allow the water to drip from their clothing.

"Now," whispered Durand, "follow me, but do not enter unless I give you a signal. It will be a very low whistle. I may, however, come back."

The door towards which they made was on the edge of the river-bank, and, fortunately, in that very portion of the monastery in which they were interested.

The three crept noiselessly along by the gloomy stone wall, and when at length the door was reached, Durand pausing only for a moment to listen, slipped the key into the lock.

The door swung noiselessly open, and he entered.

The next moment, and the two outside heard a low gurgling noise, followed by a thud, as of a body falling, and then a faint low whistle sounded.

Durand had given the signal, and Charters and Anson entered.

CHAPTER XXVI

ALL was pitch darkness inside, but within a few paces of the door Anson stumbled against a writhing mass on the floor.

"Is that you, Durand?" he said, stooping down, his outstretched hand encountering a hot liquid, which he knew was blood.

"Yes," returned Durand in a guarded whisper. "You must bind and gag this fellow. He has cut my arm almost through. Hurry, or I shall choke him. I daren't let him call out. Charters, put that door to, but don't lock it."

Anson was clumsy in his manipulation of the bandages with which Durand was plentifully provided. His method was however effective, and the unfortunate priest was soon as helpless as the two who were left to cool their heels outside. Indeed, his case was more desperate, as Durand, partially disabled, had well-nigh throttled him to prevent his crying out.

Anson having completed his task, inquired of Durand the extent of his wound. Durand replied that he had been able to staunch the bleeding to some extent, and that he would get through all right—a reply which led Anson to apprehend that it was of a serious character. However, nothing could be done in the darkness to better their plight, and he could only trust to Durand's indomitable pluck coming to his rescue.

Once more they resorted to the Indian file fashion, Durand again leading. In this manner they threaded a long stone-paved corridor, which was plunged in utter darkness. This led them at length to an octagonal courtyard open to the sky, the extent of which they could dimly discern, owing to the faint glow from dimly-lighted windows on the left side.

It was surrounded by a balustrade, and on the right they could see a flight of stone steps leading to the interior.

"Those steps," whispered Charters, "lead to the room."

"I thought so," replied Durand, with keen satisfaction. "Can you rely on your revolvers?"

"I haven't got one," said Charters.

"Then take this," and Durand placed a

"colt" in his hand. "I have two others, and remember, if the need arise, we must use them. Do not waste a shot."

After this whispered consultation they stole round the space inside the balustrade. They were within a few paces of the wide stairway, when suddenly a loud clanging bell broke the stillness of the night. Almost immediately, in different directions, other bells joined in the clangour.

"It is the alarm!" said Durand. "Come!"

Without further thought of caution, the three made for the stairway. As they did so half a dozen priests with flaming torches came running along various corridors into the courtyard. One of them spied the intruders as they reached the stairs, and with a yell of hatred made for them.

Durand turned as he approached, and bringing the butt end of his revolver crashing down on his head, sent him reeling, an insensible mass, to the ground. The others came on without an instant's pause, their comrade's discomfiture being either unnoticed, or else not sufficient token of danger to cow them.

Anson dashed his clenched fist English-fashion into the face of the nearest, and sent him sprawling; while Durand—who, almost

covered with blood, looked fiendish in the garish light of the torches — disposed of another in the effectual manner he had previously adopted.

But now, on the landing of the stairs above them, some four or five priests appeared, and were barring their way; while in the courtyard below, brief as the period had been, a mass of torches indicated that the strength of the priesthood had gathered there.

“Up! up!” shouted Durand, and he bounded up the stairs, followed by Anson and Charters.

Durand was practically reduced to the use of one arm, but he had the fearless courage which makes light of odds. Hurling himself against the foremost, he sent him hustling amongst companions, and recovering himself instantly dealt another one of his sledgehammer blows with his revolver, which effectually disposed of him.

It was quick work, for it was done before Anson and Charters joining him, formed a solid wedge, which scattered the priests right and left.

Without a pause the three bounded up the stairs, closely followed by a horde of priests who had rushed up the stairs from the courtyard.

"This is it," shouted Charters, pushing open an iron-studded oaken door. But before they could get in the priests were on them.

The lights of the torches were now reflected from unsheathed knives, and Durand without hesitation disposed of his nearest assailants with his revolver.

The sudden and probably unexpected attack drove them back for an instant, as the foremost priests fell groaning to the floor.

The three availed themselves of the respite to rush into the room, Anson, with great presence of mind, using his huge strength to push a heavy oaken cupboard, which stood along the wall, against the door.

"Pile everything you can get against it," said Durand, his voice thick and husky.

Anson and Charters obeyed the injunction—it was, indeed, the most natural resource in any case—and soon the barricade they had erected formed a formidable defence, sorely needed too, as the infuriated cries of the priests outside left them little doubt that they need expect no quarter.

"Durand! Durand!" said Anson. "Where are you?"

A groan was the only answer, and Anson, searching in the darkness of the room, found the man who had proved such a curious mix-

ture of friend and foe, lying in agony on the floor.

"I am done for," groaned Durand; "the loss of blood in any case—my arm—but they reached me before I fired. Doubly done for. I have matches. Light — sure—to find—candles. Buddha——"

Anson felt in the pocket Durand painfully indicated, and finding some matches struck one. He could see at a glance that Durand was really *in extremis*. Handing the matches to Charters, he held up the mysterious doctor's head, Durand smiling gratefully at the kindly attention.

Charters lit one of the candles which stood on the altar-like table, in front of the black impassive statue of the Buddha.

"Don't waste time on me," said Durand painfully. "They are up to some devilment," indicating the priests, among whom an ominous silence for the moment reigned. "Get the opals—remove the bars—only way—and reach the boat. Make a rope somehow and get down. Get the opals."

There was something imperious in the tone of the command, and Charters, lifting the Buddha off the pedestal, drew out the bag with the fatal gems.

"Let me—see them—once more."

Anson motioned to Charters to undo the fastenings. Charters tugged at the strings, and as he did so a thundering attack on the door was an alarming evidence that the priests had now entered on the attack, and meant to batter down their defence.

"Quick!" shouted Durand, with a strength of lung which threw him back exhausted in Anson's arms the next moment.

Charters opened the bag and brought it with the gems exposed to Durand's side.

He looked up faintly, and as Anson turned him gently on his side so that he might see them, he smiled faintly. Then feebly he essayed to lift his hand towards them. Charters divined his wish, and lifting the almost powerless arm, let Durand's hand rest among the jewels for which he had sinned, striven and fought.

A glow of triumph overspread the features.

"Mine! mine!" he murmured, and as the hand dug into the gems spasmodically, he fell back dead.

CHAPTER XXVII

GREAT as was the danger with which they were threatened, the awesomeness of Durand's death made them pause for a moment; Charters bending solemnly over the dead body, Anson holding it reverently in his arms, while the flickering light of the candle lit up the prismatic hues of the gems.

Then Anson laid the body down and folded the arms over the breast.

The barricade against the door held it well in its place, so that it would stand even the violent assault which was directed against it for some time. A cursory examination, however, revealed yet another mode of increasing their defence. There stood iron bolts on pivots hung at intervals along the jamb. These Anson, without much difficulty, was enabled to swing over into their several sockets, so that it was necessary for the attacking party to break through the massive

door to enter the room—they could no longer force it in.

Charters had already turned his attention to the barred window, and with the handy turn of the seaman had soon gauged the possibility of escape in that direction. His look when Anson joined him proved that it was by no means hopeless. The bars had been fitted to prevent ingress, but they were comparatively easy to remove from the inside. In fact they were all keyed by one massive nut, which held the centre bar in its place, and it required but something capable of loosening that to remove the entire barricade. This necessary implement Charters found in one of the iron portions of the structure which had been supporting the Buddha.

While he was working with a will on the bars, Anson was diligently reducing such drapery as he could find in the room—and fortunately the portion allotted to Buddha was profusely curtained—into strips, which he tied end to end so as to construct a rope. They had each completed their task about the same time.

“At last!” said Charters, turning round, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead, “we can get through.”

"And with this," said Anson triumphantly, "we can get down."

"There is just one thing," said Charters, looking down glumly at the dead body of Durand. "He has been a strange fellow, but he had his good qualities, and he is, when all is said and done, an Englishman."

"I know how you feel," said Anson, puzzled. "It seems hard to leave him, but what can we do? And we can't delay here," he added, looking round towards the door, against which the incessant cannonade was at last beginning to tell, as an ominous creaking indicated that it was giving way.

"I know what I'll do," said Charters. "Take out half-a-dozen of those opals. Not the best, but good ones."

Anson carried out the suggestion, and as he did so Charters scribbled a note. This he laid with the opals on Durand's breast, after removing the body to a corner of the room furthest from the door, and placing four lighted candles on the floor by the head.

On the note Charters had written:

"Respect this body of an Englishman, and his friends will pay a ransom you will prize."

Charters and Anson then silently clasped the dead man's hand, and ten minutes later

THE MAN WITH THE OPALS 305

they had gained the boat with their prize.

It was well in the morning when they reached Colombo, and surprised Estelle not alone by returning safe and sound, but by placing in her lap the bag of opals. Needless to say, they deemed it advisable to conceal from her, for the time being, the many risks they had run to recover them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ANSON and Charters could both have found considerable refreshment in sleep, but they determined not to seek rest until the gems were safely lodged in the Bank.

The chance that the s.s. *Europa* had put in that morning altered their plans.

"There lies our safety, my boy," said Charters gaily. "Captain Eyrecourt of the *Europa* is an intimate friend of mine, and he will see us through. We'll just pop the opals in a handbag, take them down to his ship, get him to put them away in his strong-room, and then not all the priests in Ceylon will be able to reach them."

Anson agreed that the proposal was the best they could hit on, and after breakfast they acted on it. Whether the priests had by this time discovered the escape of their prey, and knew of, or suspected the loss of the much-coveted treasure, they had no means of knowing. At any rate, they reached the

Europa, and were at once ushered into the captain's presence without any untoward incident. Captain Eyrecourt greeted Charters warmly; it was quite evident that a sincere friendship subsisted between the two men.

"You said you wanted me to help you, Charters," said the captain, after the first few minutes of general conversation. "What can I do for you?"

"I only want you to stow away a fortune in your strong-room. Colombo is not a safe place to carry it about."

Captain Eyrecourt laughed. Charters among his friends was generally understood to be down on his luck, and he regarded the statement as merely a devil-may-care joke. But when Charters opened his bag, the captain opened his eyes.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "there's no gammon about that."

When the gems were safely stowed away, he uttered many more expressions of wonderment while listening to Charters' narrative.

"Why it sounds almost like a story of adventure."

"But, captain," said Anson, smiling, "nearly all the good stories remain unwritten."

"And now," said Charters, "the matters I should like cleared up are about those gagged priests and poor Durand. I don't want the priests to starve to death, and I should like to save Durand's body from desecration. Can you help me?"

"Of course I can," replied the captain without hesitation. "I'll send a dozen of my men armed, and will go to the monastery, see if the priests have returned, and demand Durand's body. I'll thundering soon see that little matter all right, if they haven't forestalled us."

But Charters suggested a more peaceable course. He accepted the offer of the armed escort, but suggested ransoming Durand's body by the offer of a dozen choice opals to the priests.

"Do that as you like; but I can't see that they have any right to them."

"No, they have no right; but they have suffered much to obtain them."

"Well, thieves should suffer." However, it was arranged in accordance with Charters' suggestion, and within an hour the party set out, bearing an ambulance on which it was hoped they might bear Durand back to his last home.

The monastery loomed up grey and grim

against the golden rays of the early sun as they approached the massive gate. . There was neither sight nor sound of life ; everything was in striking contrast to the fierce scenes enacted therein but a few hours before.

Charters tugged at the iron bell-rope beside the gate, and the clangour of one of the bells which had sounded with such dire import for them when last they heard it, once more broke out over the silent valley.

A little grating was instantly revealed, and a pale ascetic face peered through from within. " We wish to speak with your principal, or Chief Priest. We have come to ransom the body of the Englishman who lies dead within. Tell him that our ransom is a gift of choice opals."

The grating was closed. They waited some twenty minutes before further sign reached them from the inside, and then the sound of bars being withdrawn was heard, and of massive bolts being shot back. Then the gates swung open, and the Chief Priest of the monastery stood within, a number of monks being massed behind him in ceremonial fashion.

" We have come to ask you for the body of the Englishman who met his death here last night," said Charters. " There is much

that might be said, but I am prepared to let the tale close in silence ; and will offer you these precious opals if you hand us the body of my friend."

Charters displayed the opals as he spoke.

The priest advanced and gazed at them eagerly.

"I consent," he replied calmly ; "the body shall be delivered to you."

"It has been, I trust, respected."

"Why should the sahib suspect otherwise ?"

"Well, things were not quite calm here last night. Some of your priests were injured ?"

"Three are dead."

"I feared you might resent that."

"Our brothers have but passed to perfection."

"Then two of your priests were—well, we left them some distance from here. Have they returned ?"

The priest smiled.

"It was our brother gave the alarm. We have no resentment for their suffering. They will be rewarded. It was for the altar of our gods."

"Then you will hand us the body and take those gems."

"We will hand the sahib the body. If the sahib present the gems we will be grateful."

"You can certainly have the gems."

The priest made a sign, and almost immediately four of the monks brought from a room near the gate a stretcher covered with a pure white cloth embroidered in gold.

Charters removed the cloth from the face. It was Durand, calm, strong, confident, smiling in death.

He handed over the opals. The ceremony was ended, and the party returned to Colombo.

The stranger who now visits the English cemetery in that churchyard will find a tomb inscribed—

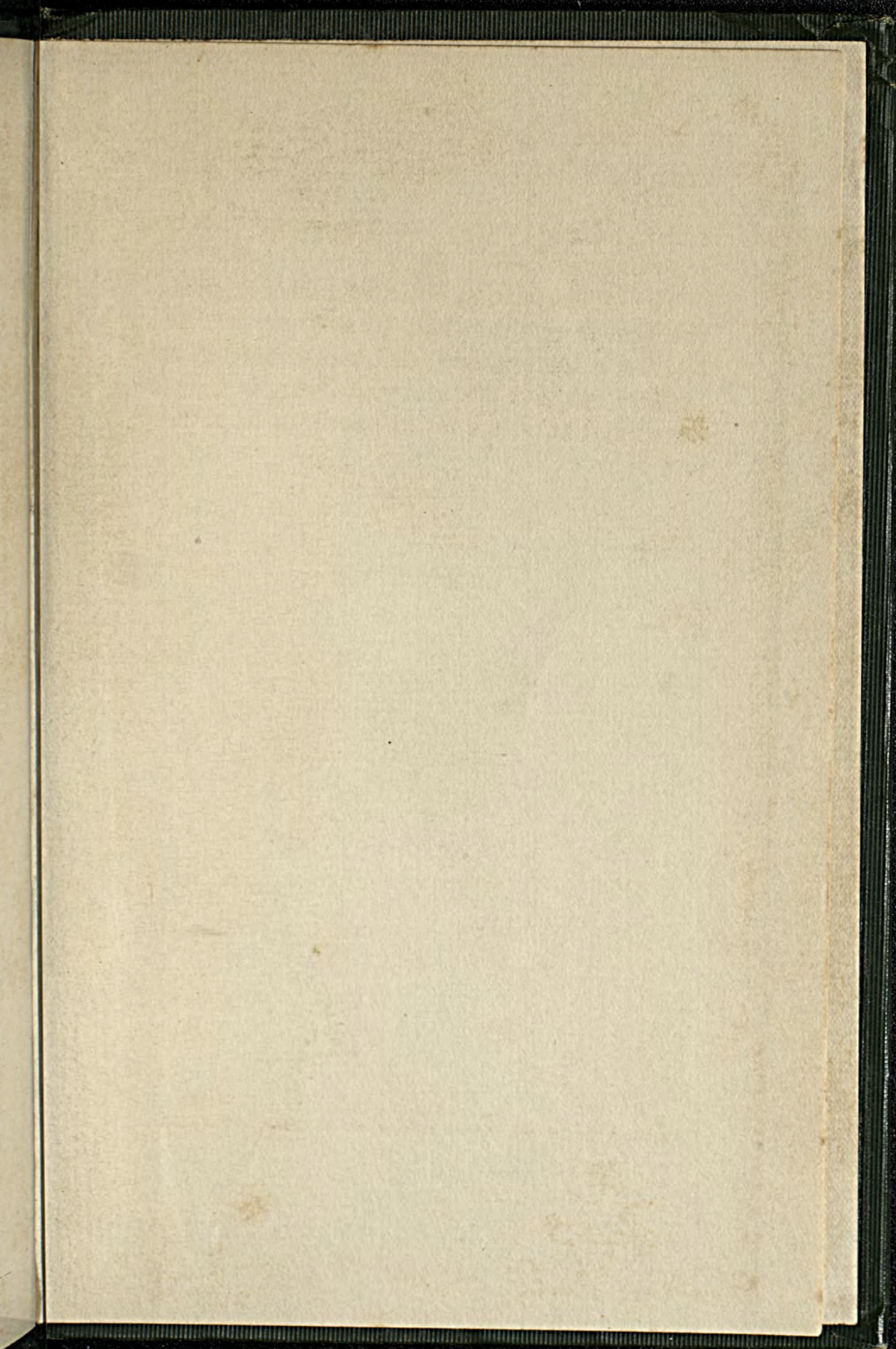
CHARLES DURAND,
OF
LONDON.

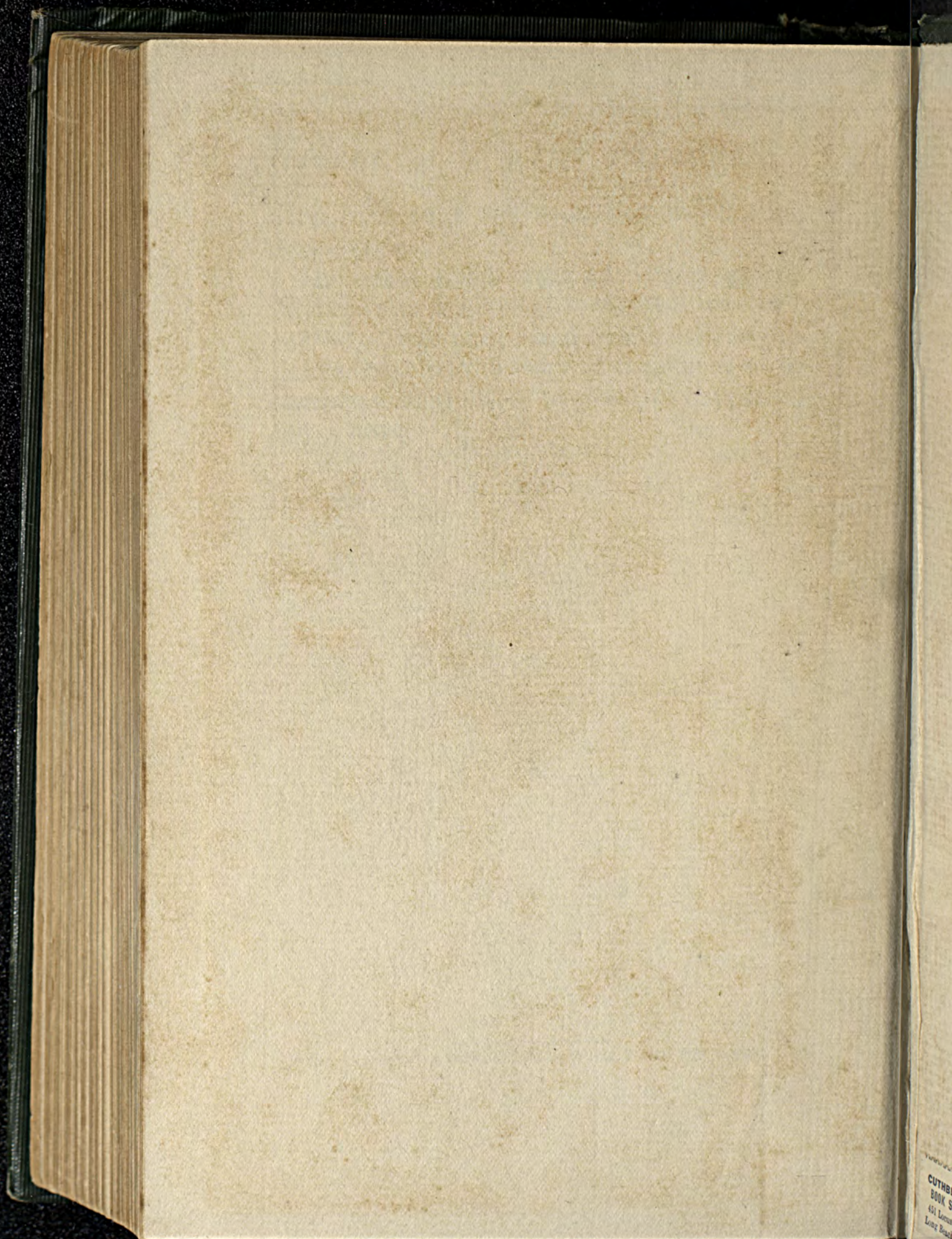
After Life's Fitful Fever.

Estelle heard the full story of the adventures in the monastery on the homeward journey to England. Her decision taken on the spot, never to wear one of the gems, was perhaps only natural. In her married life she did not want anything to remind her of the dangers incurred to recover them which might have left her without father or hus-

band, had they not succeeded in effecting their escape.

The opals, which were admittedly among the best ever submitted to English jewellers, fetched a large price ; and transmuted in this fashion enabled the story of their lives to be continued amid scenes of peace, of happiness, and of love:





CUTHB
BOOK S
451 Locust
Long Beach

S
NR/HNAK
7-94

CUTHBERT'S
BOOK STORE
451 Locust Ave.
Long Beach, Cal.

3/20/11
M. Thompson
\$85.00

