



The Black Opal

Katharine Susannah Prichard

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A string of vehicles moved slowly out of the New Town, taking the road over the long, low slope of the Ridge to the plains. Nothing was moving on the wide stretch of the plains or under the fine, clear blue sky of early spring, except this train of shabby, dust-covered vehicles. The road, no more than a track of wheels on shingly earth, wound lazily through paper daisies growing in drifts beside it, and throwing a white coverlet to the dim, circling horizon. The faint, dry fragrance of paper daisies was in the air; a native cuckoo calling. The little girl sitting beside Michael Brady in Newton's buggy glanced behind her now and then. Michael was driving the old black horse from the coach stables and Newton's bay mare, and Sophie and her father were sitting beside him on the front seat. In the open back of the buggy behind them lay a long box with wreaths and bunches of paper daisies and budda blossoms over it. Sophie knew all the people on the road, and to whom the horses and buggies they had borrowed belonged. Jun Johnson and Charley Heathfield were riding together in the Afghan storekeeper's sulky with his fat white pony before them. Anwah Kaked and Mrs. Kaked had the store cart themselves. Watty and Mrs. Frost were on the coach. Ed. Ventry was driving them and had put up the second seat for George and Mrs. Woods and Maggie Grant. Peter Newton and Cash Wilson followed in Newton's newly varnished black sulky. Sam Nancarrow had given Martha M'Cready a lift, and Pony-Fence Inglewood was driving Mrs. Archie and Mrs. Ted Cross in Robb's old heavy buggy, with the shaggy draught mare used for carting water in the township during the summer, in the shafts. The Flails' home-made jinker, whose body was painted a dull yellow, came last of the vehicles on the road. Sophie could just see Arthur Henty and two or three stockmen from Warria riding through a thin haze of red dust. But she knew men were walking two abreast behind the vehicles and horsemen—Bill Grant, Archie and Ted Cross, and a score of miners from the Three Mile and the Punti rush. At a curve of the road she had seen Snow-Shoes and Potch straggling along behind the others, the old man stooping to pick wild flowers by the roadside, and Potch plodding on, looking straight in front of him.

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