

## CHAPTER 17

### On Top of a Hill

Bill sat with his chin in his hands on a great lump of blackish rock on the hilltop. 'Rock was right,' he thought; it weighed more than he did but he could feel it rocking back and forward unsteadily under him. He looked across at the others standing in a circle some twenty metres away scratching their heads and murmuring together. Their disappointment was evident. They had searched the top of the hill for ten minutes and found nothing. They had been over the compass angles and paced out the 35 metres twice but had discovered nothing. No hiding hole. No depression in the rocky soil. They had dug here and dug there and found nothing. Bill had given up in disgust. He could, he thought not for the first time, have been still sound asleep in his cosy sleeping bag. The sun had not yet risen and they had been up for an hour and a half.

Cate had woken in time all right, drat her! She had tugged at his arm. Her persistent pulling had ruined a lovely dream in which he was trying to get a net to land the biggest fish he had ever caught. When at last he had emerged from the tent he had found the other three looking as though they would rather have been in bed too—but not Cate. She looked as though she had been asleep for eight hours.

"Come on Bill," Tom had whispered. "Got all the gear? Who's got the pack?"

"I've got it," Mark had replied.

"Got the torches?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then. Quietly." And away they had stumbled along the narrow foot track to the road. The camp was utterly still. Through the trees they could vaguely discern *Great Saint Joseph*, motionless, lying to her anchor just off the beach. There was not a breath of wind.

Once away from the camp they settled into a steady walking rhythm. Their torches lit the dusty road. It was pitch dark—except for the

stars which shone fiercely. *And* it was freezing cold. The others all talked in low voices but Bill was not interested in discussion. He wished he had landed that fish. It had been a beauty. If only the others weren't so earnest. Why couldn't they have waited until after breakfast. "Bill's a bit grumpy," he heard Mark say to the others. "That boy enjoys his sleep," Cate had replied. "Good for his soul, a bit of hardship." Why was *she* so chirpy. It was just like a girl—always chasing after adventure and mysteries. Three or four hours wouldn't have made a difference and they would at least have been able to see what they were doing and to enjoy the whole thing. But Cate had been so persistent. That was the trouble with girls. They were always *at* you. What if that sailor had said they would have to hurry? You could bet *they* would still be sound asleep, and the soldiers, and the Air Force fellows too. Girls had no sense of proportion. How much of this road did they have to travel again? Five miles. That was eight kilometres! More than an hour of this. He hugged his jacket around him more closely and plodded behind the others.

After a while the exercise cleared Bill's head and he felt a bit happier. The torches lit up a junction in the road ahead.

"Not this one," said Tom who was studying the map. "The next one. This one would take us to Seal Rocks." They continued along the road and, ten minutes or so later, found the track to take them to Johnson's Hill. The way was flat and featureless, the track sandy and winding. Their footsteps made little sound. There was a sudden movement in the bush to the side of the track and a thump.

"What was that," said Liz reacting with a little scream.

"Roo," said Tom laconically. "Or Wallaby."

"There are no monsters in the Australian bush," said Cate.

"Except for snakes," said Mark.

"Snakes?" said Liz.

"Too cold for them," said Bill.

"Bill!" said Cate. "Good morning. It's nice to have you along." Bill preserved a judicious silence and Cate didn't press her advantage. The next moment they all came to a halt at a remarkable sound from

their right. *Blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou.* It ran down the scale like water being poured from a bottle.

“What on earth is *that*?” asked Cate aghast. The sound had ceased as suddenly as it had begun leaving them staring at but unable to see each other.

“I thought you said there were no monsters,” said Liz.

“What is it Tom?” asked Mark. Tom was thinking.

“It’s a bird,” he replied. Somewhere in his recordings of bird calls he had heard it before. He seemed, he thought, to have spent this holiday going back over his store of bird recordings.

“Are you sure it’s only a bird?” asked Cate. The call came again from across the swamp that lay to the east of them. *Blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou, blou.*

“It’s a swamp bird,” said Tom. “A cuckoo with a funny name. It’s got a long tail like a pheasant. It’s called a Pheasant Coucal.”

“What a weird name.”

“Almost as weird as the call it makes.”

“Come on. Let’s keep going. It’s not going to bite us.” They continued on their way.

“How far now Tom?” asked Mark a little while later.

“There will be another junction in a few hundred yards. We take the left hand track and then we skirt along the side of a ridge for a mile and a half or so and it ends in Johnson’s Hill.” Bill realised with a start that they had been walking more than half an hour. And he was beginning to notice the surrounding trees and shrubs. He looked at the horizon. The sky seemed to have a bit of light in it. Yes, at last the night was coming to an end.

“The big question is—Will we be the first ones there?”

“Bound to be.”

“Those fellows all looked pretty tough. Do you think you, Mark and Bill could fight them off while Liz and I find the loot?”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Here’s the next junction. Which one again Tom?”

“Left,” said Bill repeating Tom’s instruction. They took the left fork. The land to the left of them now started to rise and the track began to climb away from the sandy valley floor.

“Thank heaven for a bit of light. We’ll be able to put the torches out soon.” The track began to climb in earnest after another half a mile. After turning through a gully or two it climbed fairly steeply into a saddle.

“Hullo. The track goes straight down here.”

“That must be the route down to the beach. There must be a track up the hill.”

“Here it is,” said Bill. They shone the torches towards him and saw a foot track which climbed steeply up from the saddle.

“Let’s go.”

“About five hundred yards,” said Tom and they quickened their steps.

“Oh. Let’s hope we’re there first.”

“Let’s hope the clues are right.”

“Let’s hope we’ve juggled and arranged them correctly.”

But apparently they hadn’t. They reached the top ten minutes later. It was a funny sort of hill—all bumpy and with lumps of rock poking out everywhere. Happily it was deserted.

“Not a sign of a sailor, soldier or airman anywhere,” said Liz.

“The first question is where to start,” said Cate.

“Thirty five metres, but thirty five metres from where?”

They decided it must be from a prominent rock which seemed to mark the highest point. Tom used the compass. They paced out the distance but had found nothing. They paced it out again and came to a slightly different spot. Again nothing. They then tried five metres south and three metres west. No good. Then three metres south and five west. Again no good. Then they had tried the opposite—five metres west and three metres south and three metres west and five south and, of course, had come to the same places.

Seated on his rock Bill closed his eyes and thought back to how he had fished off the point in the splendid easterly breeze in the fading light their first night on Snapper Island. He hadn’t caught a fish that night but he’d caught some later. Snapper, the mystery island with its rainforest and its stinging trees. How long ago was it? Was it only three days? They had done so much it seemed like a week or more.

The aboriginal midden; the marker hanging in the fig tree he had come upon late in the afternoon; the clue stencilled on the ground—N—the first of the clues. They had got so many and now none of it seemed to make sense. They must be in the right place but where was this elusive key. There were only four clues missing and Cate's reasoning, he had to confess, seemed utterly logical. The letter H Mark had found had to stand for 'hill'. Three of the missing ones had to be I, L and L. There was only the last one. But why should that be so critical that they couldn't guess it? What could it be?

He thought through the clues and put them in order J, O, H, N, S, O, N, S, H (for Hill), 3, 5, M, S, W. It all fitted—"Johnson's Hill 35 metres south west". It had to be 35 metres—53 metres would put the site in mid air over a cliff. So what was the missing one? At one stage it seemed that every clue they found would turn out to be an S. So probably it would be another S. How on earth could another S help them? It couldn't be Johnson's Hills; there was only one of them. May be S was for the plural of metre—35 metres. But the recognised symbol for metres was simply M. SWS—south west south? No. WSS—west south south—there was no such direction. SSW—sou' sou' west. It was *possible*. What was the angular difference between south west and sou' sou' west? He went around the points in his head—south west, south west by south, sou' sou' west. And each point was what? Eleven and a quarter degrees. Two points. Two points abaft the beam, Tom had said. That's when the port light had cut out. He could see the fishing boat passing up Port Stephens in the twilight towards the entrance to the sea. Its red port light shining strongly, then blinking, then it was gone completely. He was dozing and woke with a start. A beam of light lit up the little hill. The sun was coming up. He rubbed his eyes and stretched wearily.

What had he been thinking of again? It was something important. What was it? Sou' sou' west. Yes. That could be it. Now if the direction was sou' sou' west and not south west they should have walked in a different direction from the highest point. Different by twenty two and half degrees.

“Tom,” he called. Tom and Mark were talking together. Mark had his hands on his hips. Tom was looking hard at the compass in his hand. Tom looked up but they were too engrossed for Tom to react to Bill’s call. The girls had sat down and were gazing over the water looking away from him. Cate had her head in her hands. They were tired too, he could tell, and were talking quietly together. Oh, drat them all. Where would the point be if they had walked from the point at twenty two and a half degrees further around the compass towards the south? Somewhere between him and where the others were. No. Somewhere behind him. He turned and looked over his shoulder. There was more of the flat hill top. No. Maybe not. Too far. Then where. Here. Here? Yes. He stood up and looked around at the ground.

“Under this rock,” he shouted it and the others looked suddenly across at him.

“What are you doing Bill?” Tom called. The girls got up. They all started to walk across to him. Bill got down on his knees and put all his strength against the large lump of volcanic rock he had been sitting on. He rocked it back and forth, once, twice and on the third push it rolled over and away from him with a loud thump.

“Here!” he said triumphantly picking up something on the ground and holding it up. It was a small brown leather bag tied at the top.

“Bill. You’re a genius!” cried Cate running up to him and grabbing and hugging him. “You’re a genius. How did you do it?” Tom clapped him on the back. Liz said: “Oh, well done, Bill, well done,” and shook his shoulder and Mark solemnly shook his hand. The depression which had settled like a morning fog over them all was dispelled in an instant and they stood laughing in the sunlight which now lit the hilltop strongly.

“How did you do it?”

“The missing clue,” said Bill. “It’s an S. The direction was not south west it was sou’ sou’ west.”

“He is a genius,” said Cate to the others. “He’s a genius. I told you we had to have Bill along.”

“In spite of his grumpiness.”

“Come on, Bill. Open it up.” He bent to the task struggling with the knots at the mouth of the little bag.

“Good lad,” said Tom as the cord began to loosen. He pulled open the mouth and turned it upside down. A small object fell out, bounced off his hand and was caught deftly by Mark before it hit the ground. He held up his hand for all to see.

“The golden key.”

“We’ve done it Tom,” said Cate jumping and grabbing him around the neck. “We’ve done it.”

“Oh, what an adventure!”

“Who’s going to keep it safe?”

“Bill. It’s only fair. He found it. Put it back in the bag and put it in your pocket.”

“Just a suggestion,” said Mark. “But hadn’t we best get out of here quickly. The armed forces can’t be far away. All the ones we’ve seen so far have been big fellows.”

“Ugly, too!”

“That’s right.” They were sobered by the realisation.

“It would be very embarrassing to be caught with the goods.”

“Come on then.”

“What are we going to do about this rock?”

“We’d better put it back in place. Give us a hand Mark. It’s pretty heavy.” The two elder boys manoeuvred the large lump of rock back into its previous position.

“Look it’s got fossils growing out of it,” said Mark. They all bent to look at the surface of the rock.

“Look. There’s a shell, or the place where a shell used to be.”

“And here’s another.”

“It’s volcanic. Solidified molten lava, I’ll bet. And those shells probably indicate that it erupted through the bed of the ocean.”

“So we’re standing on part of an old volcano.”

“Listen you two. If we don’t move soon we may in strife. Let’s go, for heaven’s sake. You can come back and do your geological studies later in the week.” They gathered their belongings and quickly set off down the path up which they had come.

Twenty minutes later they met the first of the competitors from the armed forces. They were hurrying up the track towards them.

“Oh, no!” said Tom to the others.  
“What is it?” asked Liz.  
“It’s the two fellows we met in the canoe on the Myall River.” The leader recognised him as they came up.  
“Good day. You’re up early.”  
“Getting a bit of exercise before breakfast,” said Tom forcing a grin.  
“Good to see. You completed your trip up the river in the canoe then.”  
“Yes,” said Tom. “Getting back across the Broadwater was fairly exciting. How did you fare?”  
“Oh,” said the other soldier. “We got even less sleep than we hoped. But we’ve got to get on”—this to his companion.  
“Yes. We’ve got something to do and then we will be able to relax. Have you seen any other soldiers or sailors in your travels this morning?”  
“No,” said Mark. “No one.”  
“Good. Well. We had better be getting along. We might see you later today. God bless.” The two men left, jogging up the track towards Johnson’s Hill.  
“Well the Morse doesn’t seem to have given the Navy much of an advantage, does it?” said Mark after a while. “Army first, Navy nowhere.”  
“What a nice fellow,” said Cate. “It’s not everyone who wishes God’s blessing on you. I feel quite guilty, now.”  
“Knowing that they are going up there in vain?” said Tom.  
“Yes,” said Liz. “It was exciting discovering all the clues and finding the key but now it seems as though we have done something nasty, doesn’t it?”  
“What, depriving them of their prize?”  
“Perhaps we should have left it there.”  
“But it was a fair fight,” said Bill. “It’s not as if we cheated.”  
“Well, we started before they did.”  
“But we weren’t to know then how significant the clues were.”  
“And we started without the list of instructions. So we really were behind them when we got going.”  
“It still feels mean to have deprived them of the prize for all their effort, doesn’t it?” Liz’s appeal was unanswerable. The sense of



elation which had followed on the finding of the prize had evaporated and they headed for camp now somewhat depressed. “There’s something else I’ve just realised,” said Liz.

“What’s that?”

“We *have* cheated. We used Father Hannan’s boat and it’s got a motor.” The realisation which followed this announcement added to their gloom.

“What are you thinking about Cate?” asked Tom.

“I’m having trouble with my conscience.”

“Well, you had better see a priest. I know where we can find one.”

“All right. We’ll all go and see him. Father Hannan will know what to do.”

“A sort of confession?” asked Mark.

“Yes. We will show you Anglicans just how it’s done.”

