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CHAPTER 5

X chapter head

CROSSLAND'S SOUTHERN CROSS

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The discovery of Southern Cross as a Goldfield has to be attributed to natives imparting information to Government Surveyor, Charles Crossland in 1887. Pointing south to the desolate territory where Southern Cross was later established, one of a group of natives said to Crossland, "Plenty gold that way."

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Charles Crossland was maintaining a well discovered by C. C. Hunt on the borders of Lake Koorkoordine, which lies about 6 kilometres north of Wimmera Hill where the district's first gold claim was later made. The territory had distinct gold-bearing characteristics and Crossland believed he had an important task to perform in the surveying and maintaining of soaks and wells discovered and constructed by explorers Lefroy and Hunt. The dry season had set in and there was no time to be lost in an investigation of the native's claim which could take several days. The recovery of precious drinking water was of vital importance.

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Later, in the Golden Valley area – so named because of its golden wattle – Crossland spoke with Mick Toomey and Tom Riseley. They were ex-railway workers who, after freelance prospecting which brought no rewards, joined forces with the Phoenix Syndicate. Drilling deeply within the Golden valley district they were raising nothing but useless earth, and despondency within themselves.

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Feeling sympathetic, Crossland told them of the promising territory lying only about fifty kilometres distant, south of Lake Koorkoordine, and of the native's assertion that gold was to be found there. Such a lead was worth following and Toomey and Riseley lost no time in vacating Golden Valley. Guided by a native, Tommy Wheelbarrow, and with a laden packhorse, they rode first for Barcoytin Well. They moved slowly, prospecting the red earth en route.

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At Barcoytin Well there was ample drinking water and they camped there overnight in the December of 1887. The following morning, with their horses watered and waterbags filled, they headed towards Hunt's well at Koorkoordine. Travelling slowly, zigzag fashion, and fossicking, two and a half days elapsed before they reached Hunt's well where, according to Tommy Wheelbarrow, "water never die."

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X para But the "sun had drunk the water," within the well; whilst the horses in the late -/ December heat were thirsting for the precious liquid. The water bags were now empty, and the only course open was to return to the nearest known drinking water at Barcoytin.

X para They arrived there that night on thirsting, weary horses, but the oasis again greeted them with ample drinking water. Yet now the prospects of following Crossland's lead south of Hunt's empty well appeared bleak. Even if only a few days of prospecting were anticipated, including travelling, the venture could only be attempted with camels, or with two or three extra pack horses, each carrying only water.

X para They had decided to return to Golden Valley and there make the necessary l.c./ preparations, when fate showed sympathy. The heavens opened. And rain, unusual for the season, saturated the red earth.

X para 7/ On a late afternoon, with the rain having cleared, the small party headed again for Koorkoordine. Neither camels nor extra packhorses were needed because following the heavy rain, Hunt's well would now be holding precious liquid. Throughout the night, in the cooling darkness, they continued on their way, guided by the stars – the Southern Cross their marker.¹

X para -/ A new, rinsed clean day was dawning on their arrival at salt Lake Koorkoordine and, -/ l.c./ as expected, Hunt's well offered ample fresh water. With a base camp at the well they made southerly probes, but slowly, as their packhorse having staked a leg was walking lame. ,/ ,/

X para Early in January 1888, on Wimmera Hill, they discovered gold nuggets glittering l.c./ from the ground, washed clear and clean by the recent rains. But within hours of the nuggets being collected the pack horse, having carried its burden to the golden terminus, collapsed amidst the grey-green scrub and died. Without a packhorse, further prospecting was impossible. Toomey and Riseley pegged a claim on the hill, and, with the native, headed back to Koorkoordine, and from there on to Golden Valley. l.c./

X para Here they met acquaintances, Hugh Fraser and Joe Rodgers who greeted the incoming party with the news that a silver strike had been made at Mount Jackson. Then, in appreciation of this first-hand information the Southern Cross gold discovery was disclosed to Fraser and Rodgers.

X para l.c./ A verbal agreement, confirmed with a handshake, was made. If Fraser and Rodgers struck gold at Wimmera Hill, or if Toomey and Riseley discovered silver in the Mount

u/ Jackson area, then such claims would be shared by all four men. The gentlemen's agreement was not honored. Fraser located gold by pegging an area next to Toomey's tapping into the same lode – and this was Fraser's only sharing of his gold at Southern Cross.

X para Hugh Fraser's mine was to become the largest and most productive of any mine in the "Cross." It was registered first as a lease, and later, on 8 October 1889, as a Company, when additional capital was needed to buy machinery for deeper mining. From this mine, in November 1890, shareholders were paid a dividend of sixpence, the first dividend from gold ever to be paid within the colony. l.c./

X para The following year, in 1891, Fraser's mine drew international publicity due to murderer, Frederick Bayley Deeming being arrested on the mine, whilst working under the alias of "baron Swanson." Engaged by manager Captain Oats, Baron Swanson was employed as an engineer. John Kirwan, recounting events, quotes a letter written by goldfields' trucker, Thomas Talbot, whose letter reads: 7/

X quote para #/ "There was an engineer on the Fraser mine, where I was a trucker, called Baron Swanson. His work was to maintain the batteries and machinery in working order and keep the pumps going underground, which at the time gave considerable trouble. He was very clever with machinery and the pumps, and was considered the best man the mine had so far at the work. He often had yarns with the trucking lads. Most of us liked him. There was one man on the mine, Black Charley hee was called, and he disliked Swanson.. Black Charley always said he was a bad man, a man who was callous and would stop at no crime to achieve his purpose. It was merely instinct with Black Charley for he could give no reason to justify his condemnation. 7/ 7/ 7/ 7/ #/ 7/ 7/ 7/ 7/

X quote para 7/ "With the fair sex, Swanson was a special favourite. He made no secret that he was engaged to be married, but notwithstanding, the few women then at Southern Cross allowed themselves to be fascinated by him. He readily gave them diamonds, or what purported to be diamonds, and seemed to be lavishly generous to them. 7/

X quote para 7/ "He was preparing a cottage in which he and his future wife would live. She was a Melbourne girl and she was coming to West Australia to marry him. I and another young man helped to mix cement. We carried the cement into the little cottage for him to put a cement floor. d/

X quote para 7/ While the renovation of the cottage was in progress, one day, to our surprise, a constable came to the mine and read a paper to the engineer and arrested him for murder. I will never forget how calmly he took the news. He assured the constable it was a great mistake, and told his friends that he would prove his innocence. When he left on the coach a large crowd assembled to see him off. He wished all a merry goodbye and promised them he would be back amongst them before long.

X quote para trs/ The trial in Melbourne proved his real name was Deeming, that he had murdered a number of wives and that the method adopted for disposing of their bodies was to bury them under cement floors. He was hanged but several women believed he was innocent and mourned his end!"ⁱⁱ

X para l.c./ Deeming, on trial in Melbourne, was defended by Alfred Deakin who, in 1903, became Australia's second Premier, succeeding Sir Edmond Barton. Deeming was convicted and hanged on 23 May 1892. u/

X para 18/ l.c. / l.c./ The first work strike on the colony's goldfields occurred at Southern Cross in 1891, the strike resulting from the employees on Fraser's mine having their wages reduced. Early in 1891 the mine enjoyed a boom period. But this was followed by a slump during which only low-grade ore was mined. Finance became scarce and diggers' wages were reduced to the level being paid in the Eastern Colonies' goldfields, this despite the cost of living on the "Cross" being comparatively higher. trs/ 7/

X para 9/ 9/ At Fraser's mine the reduction in wages meant that men had to toil for £1 per week. Food was free, but this Fraser-provided food was neither sufficient nor of acceptable quality. Yet Managing Director, Hugh Fraser was able to call the tune. He had been paying employees with bills of credit which could be spent at stores within southern Cross. Away from the Cross there was no guarantee the bills would be recognized which meant the striking miners could not afford to leave town. Eventually, in 1902, as Fraser and his fellow directors expected, workers applied for re-employment under the reduced rates of pay.ⁱⁱⁱ one pound/ caps/ s/

X para 11/ 11/ Kingpin Fraser picked out a skeleton workforce. The rest were left to fend for themselves. Yet Fraser's chosen workers did not stay with him for long. September 17, 1892, Arthur Bayley arrived in town on a worn out horse with its saddlebags bulging with gold, and this triggered an exodus, almost complete, from the "Cross."^{iv} On / trs/ 7/ i/

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Hugh Fraser's bills of credit were suddenly valuable. They offered the means of setting up freelance prospectors with provisions. Fraser's mine became morgue-like in its desolation. Underground shafts echoed their emptiness. And outside the abandoned mine Fraser pleaded and promised greater rewards to a body of unresponsive, fast-disappearing men whose goal was a new horizon said to glitter with gold in the sunlight. This rainbow's end, lying a desert away, was called Fly Flat.

L.C./

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ⁱ See *The Kimberleys Explored*, by A. Hicks, in *W.A. Historical Society Journal & Proceedings* (1938).

ⁱⁱ See the book by JW Kirwan: *My Life's Adventure* (London 1936).

ⁱⁱⁱ Southern Cross during this period is described in a booklet by EH Hallack *Western Australia and the Yilgarn Goldfields* (Adelaide, 1891).

^{iv} See *The Mile that Midas Touched* by Casey & Mayman (Adelaide 1964).

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