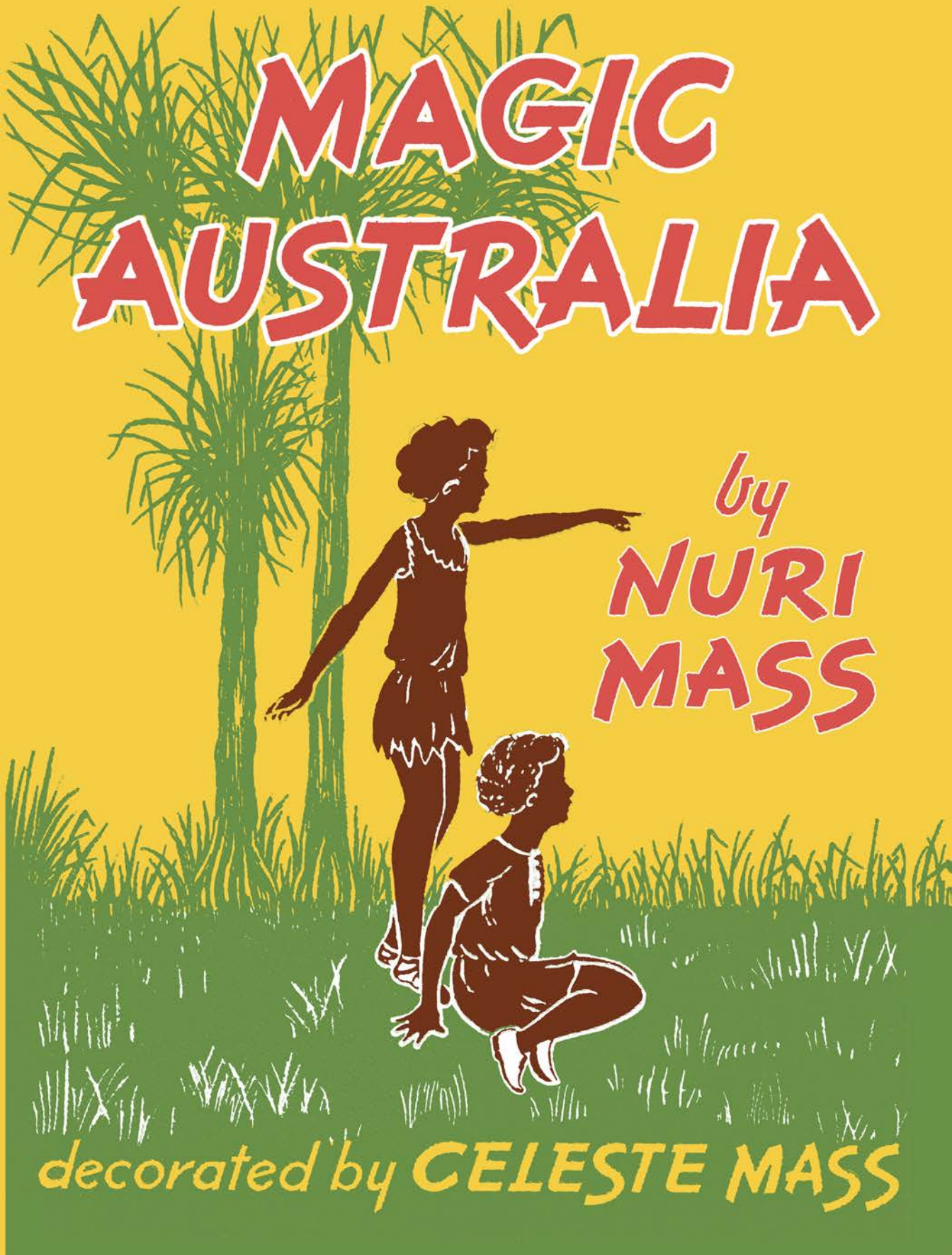
MAGIC AUSTRALIA



by NURI MASS

decorated by CELESTE MASS

A lonely little figure in the shade of a pandanus palm.

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The council of elders. Also crocs, Daly, the Darwin man and lots more.
The chap with all the legs and noses, paddling about in the mud.
Baobab and—
The big hole we all dug, to find out where the sobbing was.
Where Bushbo found out that I was no white ant.
How we got over here I really don't know.
—Spinifex.
The palm that Broome sat under.
This was where Willie-willie came in.
We met Coral here, and Mother of Pearl, fish, shells, islands, bubbles, and tons of other things.
The green giant with the Palm Valley rich—
—a very fellow.
The little red cap and—
—the little black feet.
Where Finke suddenly came dashing along.
Where I did see Opal—and then didn't.
The angry lake ghost—a terrible-looking chap.
This was the hole where Nullarbor "just blew"—and where I climbed down after Bushbo into the darkest place you ever saw.
This was where I didn't see the even richer inside bag,
giant, 'cause I was Dust-storm's and awfully miserable.
This is
MY MAP
(I did it—with my very best print and all—
To show Uncle Edward where Bushbo and I had been)—
Del.
Uncle Edward's little house. I met Bushbo not far from here.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

UNCLE EDWARD

DEL was only nine years old and a day when he had that adventure which he declares to this very hour to have been the most wonderful in his life.

He and his father were spending a long week-end with his Uncle Edward at the time—a thing Del loved doing perhaps more than any other.

Uncle Edward had retired from his work in the city a few years before, and had bought an exciting little house in one of the prettiest parts along the coast south from Sydney—a little house that he had soon filled and surrounded with all manner of interesting things. Outside it he grew a large and beautiful garden, and inside it he was for ever carpentering and inventing. Then, he had his many collections —of shells and corals, of favourite books, of ancient coins and, strangely enough, amongst many others, of smoking pipes. Del loved this

last collection perhaps best of all, for each pipe was so real a character and many of them were so quaint that at times they seemed to have something quite elfish about them.

Later, of course, Del supposed—and rightly enough—that what his father and Uncle Edward had been talking about over the breakfast table on that never-to-be-forgotten morning had had a good bit to do with all that followed; had taken the form of magic watchwords, actually, opening the gates of his mind self and making him able to see and hear far more than he could during the awake hours of his mortal self in the Monday-to-Sunday world.

They had been talking, he remembered, about Australia. Even now he could recall their conversation almost word for word.

"Terrible drought!" his father had said. "Any one would think this was the Centre instead of the south-east."

Uncle Edward had grunted; then, after a long silence, had remarked, "Wonderful country, though—the most wonderful on earth. That's my opinion. Unique—absolutely unique. Ask the scientists."

"True," Del's father had agreed.

"Why?" Del himself had asked. "What's wrong with it?"

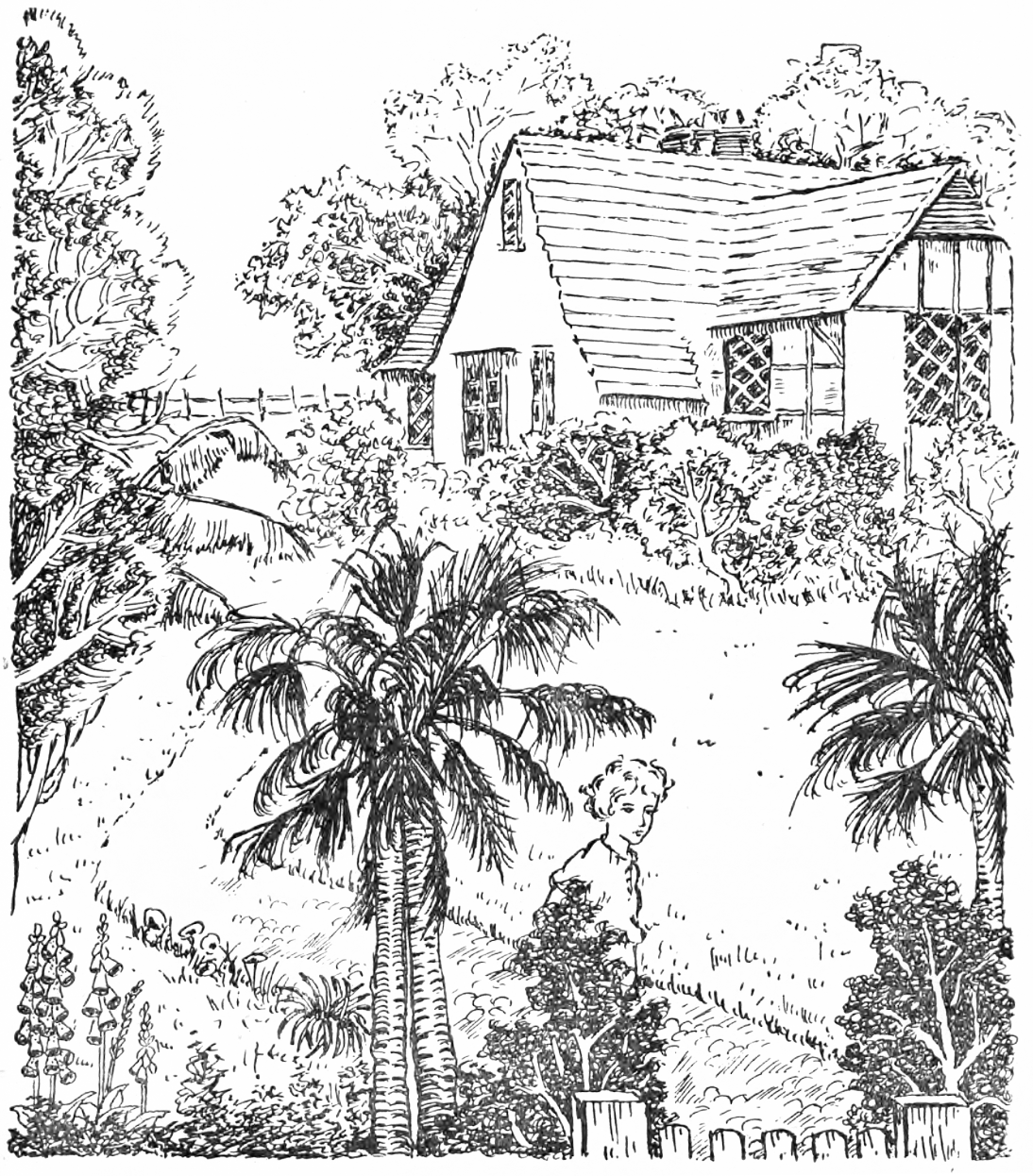
"Nothing's wrong with it, old chap. It's just different, that's all."

"Well, but how different, uncle?"

"Now, that is a long story, my lad, and we certainly haven't got time to go into it this morning. Let's see, it must go back thousands, perhaps millions of years. I don't remember back as far as that. Anyway, a few ages before those odd creatures called boys and girls were even thought of—" Uncle Edward always had such a nice way of putting things—"also before Australia fell out with Asia and America—"

"Fell out?"

"Why yes. Haven't you ever heard about that? The ocean came between them."



He came to the little rustic gate.

"Oh!" Del had looked a good bit puzzled, and Uncle Edward had ruffled his hair and laughed.

Then the conversation had continued again without him, and he could not remember this part so well afterwards, except that quite a lot had been said about opals and many other precious stones; gold, silver and many other valuable metals; about all the marvellous corals and shells in the Great Barrier Reef up north, where most of Uncle Edward's collection had come from, and about the pearls of the north-west; about an enormous amount of underground water—artesian, they had called it—and, among lots of other things, about the animals and plants of Australia, so different from those of every other country.

Then gradually, other things were talked about, and Australia —that strange land of wonder and mystery–seemed to have been forgotten; but not by Del. He kept on thinking and thinking, and asking himself a thousand hows, whys and whens. And as his father's and Uncle Edward's talk kept interrupting and confusing him, he slipped outside into the garden, and walked in and out amongst the bright flowery plots, pulling off a leaf here and kicking a pebble there, until he came to the little rustic gate. He opened this, and wandered out on to a narrow track, which sidled off into the most out-of-the-way and interesting places. And it was then that all the wonderful things began to happen.

CHAPTER II

THE BUSH BOY

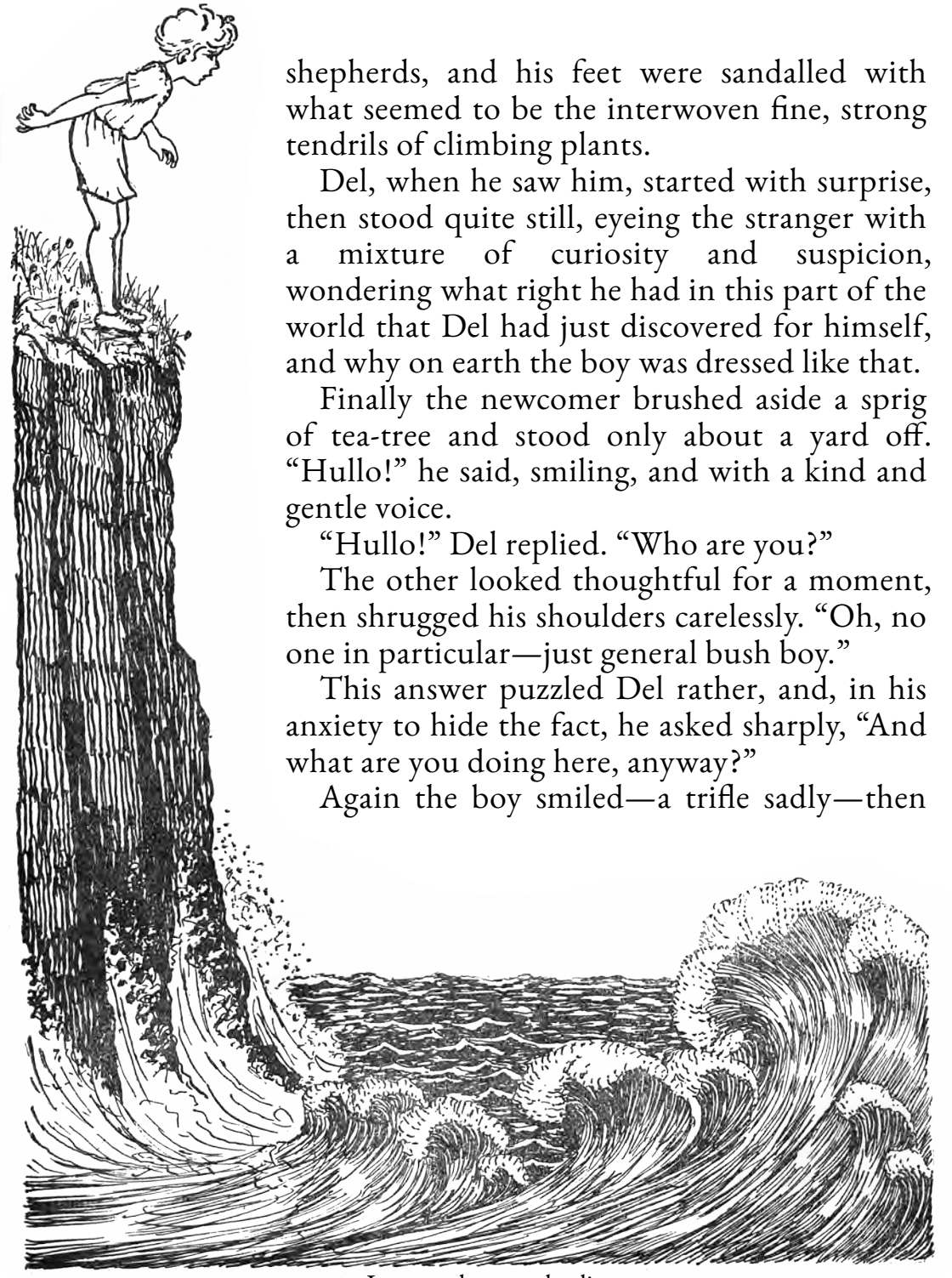
SUDDENLY, after he had been walking for only a few minutes, Del found himself on the top of a cliff he did not remember having seen before, and right at its edge.

Down below—by leaning over ever so carefully he could just see them—there were big blue waves crashing up quickly, one after the other, on to huge rocks. All of them looked very stately, for they each wore a snow-white crown which, in the moment that it lasted, frothed and sprayed like a fairy fountain.

Far out beyond, there was one enormous stretch of the deepest blue imaginable. It looked as if it must go on for ever and ever; and the sunlight fell upon it in millions of sparkles.

Del was entranced, and stood quite still there on the cliff edge for many minutes. He knew it was only the giant ocean he was gazing at, yet to-day somehow, it looked different from what it had ever looked like before. It seemed strangely alive, as if it might at any moment rear up a huge head and speak to him—a head covered with streaming blue hair and encircled with a band of sunlight and foam.

Then he turned to look back upon the thick, many-coloured bush that rose up in hills and spread itself out in broad flat stretches behind him, and, to his astonishment, he found that he was not alone. Coming towards him with a bold, free step was a boy several years older than himself, of slight though powerful build, with skin golden-brown in colour, and heavy locks of dark brown hair that flashed with lightning streaks of gold and copper as the sun struck upon it. He wore a strange moss-green garment something like the leopard-skin of



shepherds, and his feet were sandalled with what seemed to be the interwoven fine, strong tendrils of climbing plants.

Del, when he saw him, started with surprise, then stood quite still, eyeing the stranger with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion, wondering what right he had in this part of the world that Del had just discovered for himself, and why on earth the boy was dressed like that.

Finally the newcomer brushed aside a sprig of tea-tree and stood only about a yard off. "Hullo!" he said, smiling, and with a kind and gentle voice.

"Hullo!" Del replied. "Who are you?"

The other looked thoughtful for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "Oh, no one in particular—just general bush boy."

This answer puzzled Del rather, and, in his anxiety to hide the fact, he asked sharply, "And what are you doing here, anyway?"

Again the boy smiled—a trifle sadly—then

It seemed strangely alive.

replied, "I thought you wouldn't take long to ask that, little white one."

"Why?" Del demanded, feeling uncomfortable.

"Oh, because that is what white ones have always done right from the beginning. When they came first to this great and priceless storehouse of nature, it mattered nothing to them that the dark people of the bush and desert had known it as their home for hundreds of years past, and just like that—" here the bush boy snapped his fingers, and the call of a whip-bird echoed piercingly through the clear air—"yes, just like that," he continued, "the white ones claimed everything for themselves, and made the gentle dark people their slaves, taking their home and freedom from them, even their thoughts; asking them what right they had to be here—"

Del's eyes lit up. He knew something about this. He had often heard Uncle Edward speaking of it. "Yes," he said, highly pleased with himself, "those were the aborigines. I've seen pictures of them. Uncle Edward's got a big book all about them, and I look at it sometimes. Well then, I s'pose you're an aborigine too—although," he added a little less boastfully, "you don't much look like one."

"No," answered the boy, "I'm not one of them, but I'm their friend."

Del thrust his hands into his pockets, and started unconcernedly scraping a groove into the soft earth with his foot. "Then I s'pose you don't like white men," he declared at last.

The bush boy gave a sudden laugh, which was immediately repeated high up in a nearby gumtree by a merry-hearted kookaburra. "Oh yes I do," he said. "I'm their friend too. They're not all of them unkind."

"*I'm* not," Del was rather surprised to hear himself saying after a slight pause.

"I sort of guessed you weren't," said the bush boy.

And that being settled, Del, with no apparent concern, took

out a horn-handled pocket-knife, which Uncle Edward had given him for his birthday, and began cutting his initials into the trunk of a sapling gum with it.

"What do you do that for?" the bush boy asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Del replied, somewhat absently. "Just for fun. Why? Don't you ever do it?"

"No, I don't. If I wanted to write my name anywhere I think I'd want to do it in a useful way."

"What do you mean?" Del asked, looking up with clear interest, his knife suddenly arrested half-way along a downward stroke. "What sort of a useful way? And what is your name, anyhow?"

Repeated by a merry-hearted kookaburra.

"My name? Oh, I don't know. I've never thought of it. Nothing special, I suppose. I'm just the bush boy, that's all."

"All right then, Bushbo," said Del with a broad grin. "But what sort of a useful way would you write it in if you did have one?"

The bush boy folded his arms and was silent for a few moments. He gazed around him at the small wild flowers spangling the earth, at the numbers of scrubby bushes about then up at the tall, crescent-leafed gums. "It's hard to explain," he answered. "I dare say I'd try to help plants grow and animals live in all of these places. But first I'd have to speak with the

wind and rain and heat and other spirits, for without their help I couldn't do anything much."

Del, by this time, was frankly mystified. He gazed wide-eyed, then slowly scratched at the back of his head, just as Uncle Edward always did when he felt uncertain about anything.

"Look, what are you talking about?" he said at last. Then suddenly he flushed, and added hotly, "I-I don't know what you think I'm made of, to believe in your stupid ghosts and fairies. I'm not a baby! I'm not scared!"

But Bushbo only smiled at him a trifle pityingly. "It's wonderful," he said, "how human beings struggle to keep blind and deaf and feelingless, when they've got such huge powers hidden inside them somewhere—far richer than all the countless treasures that the earth spirit holds locked away from men's sight. Ah well. I was mistaken, that's all. I thought you wanted me." And with this, he turned and strode away through the bushes.

Del watched him for a few seconds, uncertain what to do. Then suddenly he closed his pen-knife and thrust it into his pocket, jerked his head up into the air and marched off whistling a tune. But he only went where he could see the boy's retreating figure a little longer—rich golden-brown and moss-green, the sunlight flickering over it like a thousand caressing finger-tips.

At last he could stand it no longer and, "Hey, Bushbo!" he shouted, running towards him as fast as the springy branches sprawling out around him in all directions would let him. "Where are you going?"

The golden-brown boy stopped, turned and waited; then, as Del caught up with him, slightly puffed, "I hardly thought you'd be interested," he said. "Aren't you afraid of being scared?"

Del gave him a playful push. "Aw, go on!" he exclaimed. "I was only joking. Be a sport. Tell us where you're going."

"That's a fairly long story," Bushbo replied after a pause.

"And besides, I don't think you'd care about it much. You'd better go along home."

"But I don't *want* to go home," Del cried petulantly. "And what's more. I'm not *going* home. I'm coming with you."

Bushbo looked down at him uncertainly for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Well, if you must you must, I s'pose," he declared. "But mind now, I didn't ask you to come, so if you don't like it don't blame me!"

And with this he turned and continued on his way, taking long even strides, while Del tramped doggedly beside him, never speaking a word, tripping every now and then over the wiry entanglement of some creeping plant, and whittling a branch of tea-tree with his handsome new pen-knife as he went.