

SCIENCE, BLACK MAGIC, OR WHAT?

What happened when a Sailor went Dowsing

By 297030

ONE DAY early this year, at a naval shore establishment north from Auckland, I finished my midday meal and walked from the messroom down to my hut. On my way along the path I noticed one of the ratings, a leading hand, walking slowly, rather peculiarly, along the cleared space in front of the barracks. He seemed to have something in his hands, and from his manner something on his mind, too. I didn't take much notice. I thought vaguely that maybe he had had his oppo's rum tot as well as his own, and, anyway, he was entitled to enjoy the warm sunshine as he wished. I said "Hello," but he didn't answer. I thought no more about it.

Half an hour or more later I left the hut to walk over the hill to my "place of duty." To my surprise there was now not one man behaving in this curious way, but about fifteen—most of the personnel of the station. They were all walking slowly, eyes fixed on the ground, something tight in their outstretched hands, and all apparently with something on their minds. Back and forward, around each other, they moved, their attitudes never altering. Not a word was spoken. They didn't look at each other. I was

amazed. The whole place seemed to have gone mad. The sun was hot, but it wasn't as hot as all that. This is fantastic, I thought. All steady on their feet. I stayed to watch and wonder; and I kept on wondering. No one would answer me. They took no notice of either my presence or my queries. For them I just wasn't apparent it seemed. They were friendly enough as a rule. I

couldn't understand it.

It was more than ten minutes before I realized what was happening. Water-divining. That was what had transformed them into the sleepwalkers that had perplexed me. Backing horses carrying the number 8; having your fortune told from tea-leaves in a cup or from the palms of your hands; swinging a dead cat over your head in a cemetery at midnight to cure warts; table-rapping; winning a prize in an art union or raffle; and water-divining. They are some of the things that are associated in my mind with the unknown. And unknown only because they are not possible. So I wasn't very impressed when I found that it was water-divining that was taking all this serious attention. The sunshine was pleasant enough without a display of black magic. I prepared to go on my way.

It was fence wire they had in their hands. Certainly it seemed to be behaving in a way unlike most fence wire. Bending up, bending down, in some cases apparently with such a force that it could not be held. Black magic or not, I had better see what it was all about. I was there for an hour. Next time I would need a much better excuse,

they said, when I arrived over the hill.

The Chief Witch-doctor, the person I had noticed first, laughed when I said there was no such thing, that water-divining was looked on in much the same light as planting carrots by the moon to keep away slugs. I did as he suggested; I took one end of the forked wire with one hand and he held the other end. We walked slowly along,

