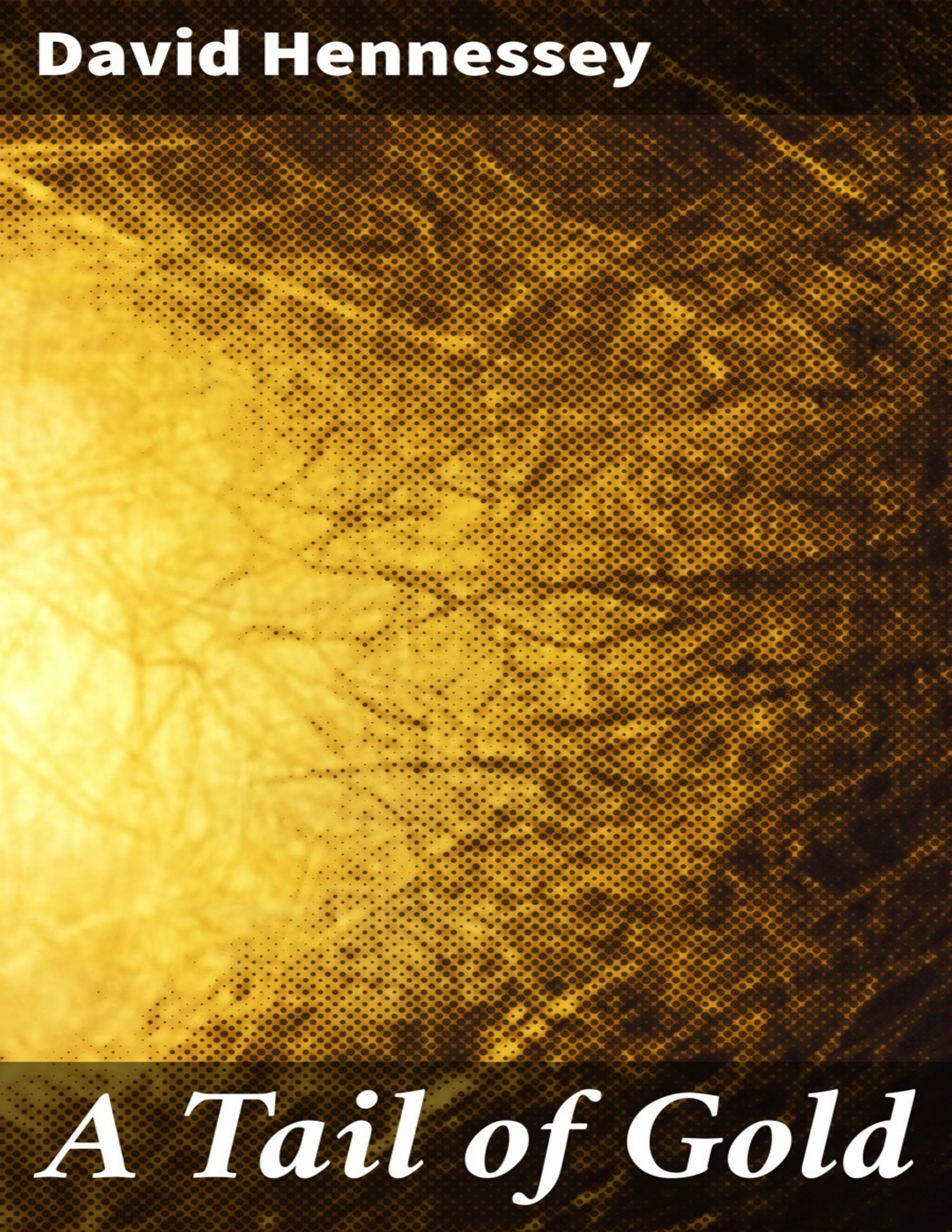
David Hennessey



A Tail of Gold

David Hennessey

A Tail of Gold

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338076052

Table of Contents

"

PROLOGUE.—A BROKEN THEORY

Table of Contents

A man read from an old diary—'In the miner's dolly-pot it yielded a fair sample of what one might expect to get out of a bulk crushing from the gold-bearing reef of Humanity. Panned out in the prospecting dish, the sample showed a tail of gold, which, if not wholly satisfactory, gave encouragement to proceed...'

'But, Joe...'

'No buts, please. I'm just weary of the lure of life, and the lure of women, and the lure of gold. If people would only say what they positively think, and have actually seen, and really know; but they won't. So it's good for them, sometimes, to have the honest truth told in homely Saxon. If you think "damn" and mean "damn" write damn, and not D and a dash. I had a theory myself once; but it was a broken theory. Broken? Confound it, no!' he shouted. 'It was smashed to atoms...and by the hand of a woman.'

That was all we could get out of him, so I have called this story—which is largely his—'A Tail of Gold.'

I.—THE MUD MAJOR

Table of Contents

ONE Christmas Eve, in a cool corner of the big smoking-room of a Melbourne Club, Major Smart might have been heard laying down the law to some of his acquaintances. He had a difficult task in hand, for he was trying to persuade himself, as well as his audience, that what he said was true.

A party had just gone up country, fishing and shooting, and the 'Mud Major,' as he was called, sub rosa, in the club, was expatiating upon his knowledge of the Bush, declaring that it was not only free from dangerous wild animals, but absolutely devoid of anything ghostly or uncanny.

'It's too new a country,' he said, 'for anything of that sort,' and he looked around the group of men with a self-complacent air, which challenged any assertion to the contrary.

Among others, a young lieutenant, who had had some experience in the vast solitudes of the interior and had fought in South Africa, was listening to him; and as the Major waxed warm in speech, not a few mysterious occurrences which he had been unable to explain by natural causes came into his mind.

The men smoked for a while in silence, for in Australia, Christmas Eve is usually alive with old memories and thronged with the ghosts of other days. No one seemed inclined to question Major Smart's assertion.

At last Lieutenant Monckton, throwing away his cigar and moistening his lips from the glass which stood on the table beside him, broke the silence. 'It's Christmas Eve,

gentlemen,' he said. 'Let me tell you a story, and Major Smart shall explain the "secrets of the prison house" to us, if he can.'

'You have no doubt read in the papers lately about a man who is said to be a typhoid carrier. He seems to be immune himself: but he carries the disease around, and, here and there, makes a present of it to an acquaintance, as a man might give another a cigar.'

A close observer would have noticed that Major Smart, at this, moved uneasily in his chair. They happened to be his cigars which most of the men were smoking, although Monckton was probably unaware of the fact; but he regarded the lieutenant, whom he had known from his childhood, with a look of suspicion and dislike.

'There was a man I knew in South Africa,' continued the lieutenant, 'who carried accidents around with him, in much the same way. Men couldn't have anything to do with him, but something unaccountable happened to them. Usually they died by accident in some remarkable fashion; but he was in no way to blame. I bumped up against him once in the Basuto Country, and nearly lost my life. I'll tell you the story if you care to hear it.'

Monckton waited for some encouragement to proceed: but he was taken aback by the silence which followed his suggestion. A story was usually acceptable, and Monckton was known to be a good raconteur; but to-night no one seemed anxious to listen to him. Not that they were at all discourteous, rather the reverse: but they all made excuses to get away. Colonel Pearce, with uncommon courtesy for him, went over and said 'Good-night,' adding mysteriously:

'No offence to you, lieutenant, only your story might have been a bit rough on Major Smart.'

The Major, during the long silence, had turned as pale as when, one parade day, his horse threw him nearly under the Governor's carriage. Looking at his watch, he muttered something about having another engagement.

It was getting late, but the lateness of the hour did not account for the sudden dispersion of the party. The significance of the thing was that none who were in the know explained to Will Monckton why his story was likely to ruffle the feelings of Boswell Smart.

The lieutenant had innocently hit a snag, as the saying is, and he had cause to remember it afterwards.

Major Smart was colonial rather than Australian. Which is another way of saying that his whole person, carefully groomed and tailored as it was, suggested mediocrity. He was of medium height, and ample girth; but too loudly dressed. He had light hair, was of middle age, of mixed Hebrew, Manx and Manchester nationality; and very smooth of speech. Blue evasive eyes looked over a prominent nose and clean shaven jaw. Across his vest glittered a heavy chain, and on the fourth finger of his right hand there shone a diamond ring. To use a mining illustration, a bulk sample of him panned out would have shown much mica glitter but little gold.

A large brass plate at the entrance to commodious offices in Collins Street described him as an Attorney at Law and Commissioner for Affidavits; but he never practised in the Courts, and so far as any one knew, his only business was the legal management, as co-trustee, of a gold mine in

which he and his family held the chief interest. Bye-products were company promoting and mining speculation; but these were not nearly so remunerative as the steady old gold mine, which had once belonged to his father, and which for over twenty years had returned in dividends an average of several thousand pounds annually.

He was reputed wealthy by business men, but was not greatly esteemed; for Boswell Smart's luck was a one-sided thing, which rarely benefited any one but himself. However, he had influence and followers, as will most men who have money at command, whether it be their own or other people's.

How he got into the military will be readily understood, when it is explained that he had money and influence, and that his father was there before him in the old days of civilian officers. He used to tell how his 'old man' had spent a fortune upon the regiment in the good old days of gold mining; but Boswell had inherited none of his father's generosity, and knew as little of soldiering as he did of law. However, the square peg having got into the round hole, it stopped there, as it has a fashion of doing in Australia. Smart had been purposely affronted by fellow-officers both at mess and on parade in the hope that he would resign his commission; but the title of Major sounded too dignified to be readily relinquished. So they had to tolerate him, with his led horse and officious manners; they laughed at him behind his back, and, because he was afraid to ride, called him the Mud Major.

He was a bit of a mystery moreover, for through a quarrel with his father over money matters, he had been absent

from Victoria for some years prior to the old gentleman's death. He returned then with a considerable amount of money, which he said he had made in mining.

He was extremely reticent about these years, which he was supposed to have spent in Queensland; but Mrs. Madge Maguire, who probably knew more about him than any one else, had been heard to remark that the Major had a cupboard in his office which contained a skeleton.

Anyhow, on his return he dropped into his father's shoes, and took the old man's place, so far as he was able, both in the military and in the hurly-burly of Melbourne life. He had a strange habit of starting when spoken to and an astonishing right-about-face jump when he wished to cut an acquaintance; but society neglected him, for he was no gentleman, and it was rumoured that he had a fearful fatality pertaining to him. It was seriously asserted that he dared not ride, or drive, or sail a boat, or fire off a gun, or indeed travel by coach, steamer, or rail; for, whenever he did so, something was almost sure to happen, by which the Mud Major was injured, and some other man killed.

Probably this was an exaggeration; but at the time of this story no less than ten persons who had been associated with him in business had paid the penalty, in sudden death or frightful accident, and always, somehow, to the Major's advantage.

II.—THE MAJOR'S FETISH

Table of Contents

SMART left the club in company with the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage of the Upper House, and an honorary member of the Cabinet. This gentleman was also managing director of a company which had offices in the same palatial building as the Major.

They had known each other for several years and were mutually interested in sundry mining ventures; few of which, however, had proved very remunerative to Gammage. The heavy calls of a silver mining company floated by Smart had recently been a heavy drain upon him, and he had told the Major that morning that he intended to forfeit his shares.

Smart took the opportunity, as they walked to the railway-station, to advise him to hold on; but Gammage shook his head.

'I'm thankful it's a "No Liability" company,' said he. 'I'm not going to throw any more good money after bad. I'm sorry to have to forfeit, Major,' he continued in a more friendly tone, 'you must have lost a lot of money yourself by the dashed thing, and I'd like to help you; but you know my opinion of the "Silver Streak" is that it's nothing better than a pot-hole, and I don't intend to chuck any more of my good sovereigns into it.'

'Very well,' replied the Major without any display of ill-feeling. 'But you can do nothing now until after Christmas. This is Tuesday, and to-morrow's Christmas Day; there'll be nothing doing before Friday, and the Stock Exchange will not open until Monday. I shall be in town for an hour or two on

Friday morning, and will look you up. There may be news from the mine by then.'

They walked down Swanston Street to the Central, and together boarded an incoming train: they lived only a section apart, on the Suburban line.

On reaching his station Smart rose to leave, and as he did so drew out his watch and noticed that it was ten-thirty-five. As he closed the carriage door, and stood by it for a moment, Gammage gave him what Smart thought was a peculiar look, and asked: 'Are you going to your office to-morrow?'

'Not likely,' replied the Major. 'Christmas Day; no mail and probably ninety in the shade. No, sir! I shall attend morning service and afterward be found at home, with roast goose and plum pudding, in the bosom of my family. Good-night!'

They laughed as the train moved on; but the Major's mind was ill at ease as he turned his steps homeward. He had been nettled by Will Monckton's proposed story. He was not quite sure whether the lieutenant intended his remarks to be personal; and some of the others evidently took it that way. Monckton was a confounded upstart, with his swagger about having been in active service. 'I'd like to put all these beggarly South Africans into a bag,' muttered the Major, 'and sink them in the Bay. Anyhow, the rotters haven't much chance of promotion; we can block them there. And so Monckton bumped up against a fellow with a fetish in South Africa and nearly lost his life. Pity he did not quite lose it, it would have saved a lot of trouble; and now the beggar's bumped up against me!'

The Major might have been heard to chuckle after this, but he did not chuckle long.

'Hang it all!' he exclaimed, sotto voce, 'how I hate Christmas! For three years now it's always brought trouble, and this one is no better. There's that Tasmanian option to pay or forfeit next week, and if Gammage draws out of the "Silver Streak" and there's no change in the formation, I shall have to carry the dashed mine myself, or let the whole thing go; most of the others are slackers. Then there is that strike at the Cyanide Works, and the bank manager, of course, wants to see me about my account—the idiots always want to see you at the most inconvenient time. It's like my luck! I shouldn't wonder if something else happens. That wretched old fetish doggerel has been swinging to and fro across my brain all day—

'"Ay, though he's buried in a cave
And trodden down with stones
And years have rotted off his flesh
The world shall see his bones."

'That's a pleasant rhyme for a man with half a score of dead people to his credit to have swinging through his brain on Christmas Eve. I must have heard it fifty times to-night at the club. But it isn't true. Her bones will never be discovered, and if they are, who cares? There are scores of skeletons buried in old shafts and drives upon Australian gold fields, that will never be discovered until the Day of Judgment. Ah! the Day of Judgment! Isn't that a most inopportune thing to think about on Christmas Eve?'

But the thoughts which so strangely passed through the mind of Boswell Smart on this particular Christmas Eve,

were brushed away later on by a glass of whisky and the laughter of the girls and boys of his family. It was the ghost of something which belonged to the dead past; but the years were so many that it had almost ceased to matter. The ghost had grown familiar and ancient, so that it had lost much of its fearsomeness; as such things will, when many other things have piled themselves above them.

However, Smart could not shake off the feeling that something else was going to happen. He had hoped all that day to get an important telegram from the mine manager of the Silver Streak, and after some thought he decided that if it came he would let Gammage forfeit his shares. It would be all the better for himself and the remaining shareholders if things turned out as he hoped and expected. The wire might have been taken in by the caretaker.

So he determined to slip quietly into town early next morning. No one would be about. He was not sure but that it might even then be lying on the table of his office.

Miners, mining speculators, and mining gamblers are all to be found in Australia. It was to the last class that Smart belonged. It seemed to have been born in him, for, although he had never lifted pick or shovel in his life for serious labour, he had the mining mania to his finger tips. Ordinary mining men left business alone during holidays; but not he. The lure of gold enticed him back to his office at unwonted hours. He was always expecting some great news. So, on Christmas morning, he left by an early train for Melbourne, without telling any one of his destination. His wife understood that he was going for a morning walk and would

meet the family at church, and as he was not a man to question she said nothing more about it.

Few Melbourne people visit the city proper before noon on holidays. The advent of the motor-car has somewhat altered things, but at the time of this story, the principal streets of the city presented an appearance of absolute desertion in the early hours of Sunday, Good Friday, and Christmas Day. Bright sunlight shone upon broad roadways and wide pavements, flanked by gaily furnished shop windows and all the panoply of modern retail trade; but save for a solitary policeman or caretaker, whole blocks gave no indication of the tens of thousands of busy feet which, on other days, trod those pavements.

Somehow the Major felt almost ashamed of himself as his heavy tread broke the silence of Collins Street. Not one of the hundreds of well-dressed citizens he was wont to meet at ten in the morning was there. The shop windows were mostly without shutters or blinds, and it was as though every one of them was an open mouth saying: 'What dost thou here, Major?'

He looked up and down the deserted street before opening, with a Yale key, the big door of the huge building in which he had his offices. Pushing it gently back he entered quickly, closed the door again, stood in the marble vestibule, and listened.

He could hardly have explained why he did not wish to be seen. Surely he had a right to enter his own offices at any time. There were dozens of them in that great building; but he seemed to be the only person about, and everything was silent as the tomb.

The caretaker and his wife lived on the topmost floor; but they were away for Christmas, and the lifts had been left upon the ground floor.

The Major, who was not used to much exertion, mounted the white marble staircase with deliberation. The morning was warm, and he removed his tall silk hat, to wipe the perspiration from his forehead, as he paused upon each landing and listened.

The silence seemed strange to him, for on ordinary days the great building was as busy as a hive of bees; but, save the noise he himself made, not a sound was to be heard.

Reaching the floor where his own offices and those of Ebenezer Gammage were situated, he took some keys from his pocket, and was about to open the door of his private room; but instead, he unlocked the outer office, usually occupied by a clerk and messenger.

Everything had been left in order, swept and dusted. Some opened letters were on the table; he glanced at them, they were only circulars and accounts. The telegram he had come for was not there; so, with a careless glance around, he walked over to the inner office door, upon which was written in gold letters, 'Private, Major Boswell Smart.' He lit a cigar before unlocking the door.

After turning the handle he put the keys back in his pocket, thinking the while that the telegram might have been slipped by the caretaker under the outer door; then he passed in.

But, upon the threshold he stopped...looked...tried to speak. The exclamation froze upon his lips. At last it came. 'My God! What's this?'

Confronting him, leaning back in a large leather-covered armchair, was a white-faced figure. And as he looked, cold sweat broke out upon his forehead and the blood went surging back to his heart. A woman, between thirty and forty years of age, confronted him. One who had been comely in life but now, stiff and cold, sat there with dark lines under the eyes, stone dead.

Callous as he was, a nameless horror filled his mind, as he fell, rather than sat, upon a chair. Suddenly he sprang to his feet, however, and hurried into the outer office. He remembered that he had left the outside door upon the latch: but not a sound was to be heard in the great building. He locked the door, and returned to the inner room.

The corpse was totally unknown to him. The head had fallen back upon the leather covering of the chair: the glazed, open eyes were almost black: the hair dark: the face full and round, and well-nourished. The dress was plain, but of good material; one ungloved hand displayed three rings, two of them costly, the other a plain gold wedding ring. She was not tall, for sitting in the chair, her feet were off the ground.

The horrified man looked around, to see if this mysterious visitor had brought bag or parcel, or anything by which she might be identified; there was nothing to be seen. How she had come there, and where she had come from, and what had caused her death, were thoughts that hurried rapidly through the Major's affrighted mind. Was it another victim to prove still further the existence of his insatiable fetish?

Suddenly, with wide open eyes, the Major started. He had made a discovery...an extraordinary discovery! It was not a chair of his office that the corpse was seated on; but one of a suite which adorned the more sumptuously furnished private office of the Hon. Ebenezer Gammage.

The mystery deepened! He had previously supposed that the woman had come into his office alive; but how could this have been, in view of Gammage's chair? At this he went over, and felt the hand of the corpse; the fingers were cold and rigid. She must have been dead since yesterday.

For ten fearful minutes Smart sat there, trying to think what he ought to do: 'Ring up the police; go for a doctor; see if any one else was in the building; or leave everything as it was, say nothing, and get back home as quickly as possible.'

Just then the cathedral bells commenced to ring, flooding the hot still air of the city with their call to worship. The chimes rose and fell, and reverberated through the streets, which now echoed to the tread of a few passing feet. It was too late to leave the building in the expectation of no one seeing him. He would have to wait until the church services had begun.

Then a great idea came to him. He knew nothing about this woman. She had died in one of Ebenezer Gammage's chairs. He would return the chair and its contents to Ebenezer Gammage's private office, and say nothing about it.

'Let Gammage see to it!'

Upon this, several other thoughts presented themselves: Gammage had come into the club late the previous night.

Where had he been, and what had he been doing? Why had he asked him whether he was going to his office on Christmas morning?

Ah! Why indeed?

A dangerous light shone in the Major's eyes: 'Gammage knows something about this thing,' he thought, 'he may have put the woman in here himself; she was sitting in one of his chairs when she died.' Then he smiled; he had a duplicate key which opened his neighbour's private office. He would put the chair, with its occupant, back again!

With a sigh of profound relief Smart opened his door and looked out into the wide corridor, and listened...no one was to be seen...nothing to be heard.

The Major stole quickly out on tip-toe and unlocked the door of his neighbour's board room, and, as noiselessly as possible, wheeled in the chair with the dead woman, and placed it hurriedly at the foot of the large directors' table. Then he stealthily closed the door and slipped back into his own room.

It was with a sense of supreme satisfaction that he looked around as he closed the door, for just then he heard a sound from below.

Some one else had entered the building; he was only just in time. He listened at his door. Silence again! It must have been some one on another flat!

As may be surmised, the events of this fearful half-hour had left the Major considerably shaken, and his hand trembled as he poured himself out a glass of whisky, obtained from a private cupboard. 'At any rate,' he thought,

'I've got rid of the corpse, and Gammage can do what he likes with it. It was in his chair!'

He lit his cigar again, and sat at his desk, for he did not wish to leave the building until after eleven, when people generally would be in church. Presently, close by a cedar bookcase, near where the easy-chair had stood, he saw something lying upon the carpet. It appeared to be a letter. He picked it up hastily, and with trembling fingers tore it open. It had been dropped there by the dead woman. Smart read it with ashy face, and then dropped into his chair, staring at it with dim eyes, as he held it in his hand.

He knew now who the dead woman was, and tried to speak her name; but his lips were palsied with dismay. His mind was, for the moment, unbalanced, and imagination played tricks with him. He babbled of a dead captain in the North, who had been his partner.

Presently he recovered himself somewhat, and muttered thickly: 'Another dead! It's all mine!' He drank more of the whisky, which seemed to revive him, and then whispered hoarsely: 'She must have come here to tell me of her husband's death, and climbing the stairs, have died of heart failure. What an awful thing! and I've put her in Gammage's board room. There'll be the devil of a row, and heaven only knows what will be the end of it; but I can't bring her back, for there are people in the building.'

'I must get out of this or I shall smother!'

As he stood once more in the quiet street, and the glare of the hot sunlight struck his face, he closed his eyes to recover himself; but as he did so dead faces stared upon

him, and every one of them was the face of her whom he had left in the silence of Ebenezer Gammage's board room.

'I shall go mad,' he thought, as he opened his eyes, 'unless I brace myself up...And this is Christmas Day!'

He hurried to the railway-station. But as he did so, again and again, like some haunting terror, from his subconscious memory, the doleful strain repeated itself—

'Ay, though he's buried in a cave
And trodden down with stones
And years have rotted off his flesh
The world shall see his bones.'

III.—THE MAJOR GOES TO CHURCH

Table of Contents

AT the Central Railway Station the Major caught an outgoing train for Toorak. He had met no one he knew, and although late, he decided to slip into the church, as he had promised his wife, and walk home with the family.

The church was near the station, and he managed to find a seat at the back, just inside the door, unnoticed save by a few unimportant people. He was thankful that no one knew of his intention to call at his office, and he was very hopeful that no one in town had recognized him.

Sitting at the back, he could look all over the church. He had guessed that Gammage would be present, for he had seen the family motor-car outside. His own pew was occupied by his wife and family.

Nearer to the pulpit was the square pew belonging to old Miss Monckton and Mrs. Maguire; there was room for three more in it, and Molly Maguire and Will Monckton being in attendance, the seat was fairly filled, as, indeed, was the whole building.

Prayers were over, and the old vicar was preaching a Christmas sermon which made a singular medley with the Major's thoughts.

When Smart sat down, he heard the vicar say: 'Brethren, the decorations of the church, the prayers we have offered, and the Christmas hymns we have sung, remind us that this birthday of our Lord should be kept by us here with solemn joy before it is observed with greetings and congratulations in the home circle.'

The Major shivered, notwithstanding the heat of the day, as he looked across to where the Hon. Ebenezer sat at the end of his pew. Mrs. Gammage had on a new hat with ostrich feathers, and three of the Miss Gammages and two young brothers occupied the rest of the seat. They were all well dressed, and made a very presentable appearance.

'I wonder,' thought the Major, who was still a bit unhinged, 'whether, after all, it may have been a murder, and whether Gammage will be hanged. I shall have to slip out quietly at the close. I couldn't trust myself to speak to him.'

But he had lost an interesting part of the sermon. The minister had been telling the congregation how a Christmas card had been placed upon his plate at the breakfast table that morning. It had upon it a wreath of holly berries encircling the miniature picture of a snowy landscape, and underneath was written the old message, 'A merry Christmas to you!'

'How like some magic mirror,' said the vicar, 'that card recalled the Christmastides of long ago. The gloom of the old land; winter was upon the landscape, and snow upon the ground; the pond upon the village green, or in the city park, was frozen inches thick, and merry skaters glanced swiftly past, and the keen, frosty, bracing air sent the quick blood tingling through the veins.'

By this reference to an English Christmas, the preacher had evidently gripped the attention of his congregation, for there was a hushed silence in the church. But it did not grip the attention of Boswell Smart. Nothing would just then!

Gammage moved and mopped his face with a silk handkerchief, and the Major, whose mind was possessed with the thought of the dead woman in his neighbour's office, thought, 'Pity it's not winterly weather here just now; there'll be a bad smell in Gammage's office by Friday.'

'Life,' continued the preacher, 'has been chequered since then; but we have not forgotten...Voices come to us through the long distance, and we see visions that belong to other days.'

'I can't stand this any longer,' said the agitated Major, almost audibly, 'that dead woman—and visions of other days indeed! Good heaven! haven't I been punished enough, without this thing coming upon me? I must get out of this. I was a fool to come. I might have known that on Christmas morning old Payne would have some mournful thing to tell us about ancient memories and past misdeeds. Curse old memories, I say! I ought to be rich, and I mean to be rich. I've never murdered any one myself, and never intend to, and the ill-luck that others have had, when on my business, hasn't been my fault. All I want is gold, and it's to be had in plenty in Australia, and I mean to have it, and no prating old fool of a parson is going to stop me, either.'

That is what the Major said to himself; but to the verger, who sat near the door, he whispered as he went out: 'Beautiful sermon, Bentley, I feel a bit faint with the heat; a little heart trouble, nothing serious. I'll stand outside in the fresh air, I think; or listen in the porch. I may walk home presently without waiting for my people. You might let them know, please.'

In this way, the Major effected a clever retreat. He had been to church. The verger could testify to that. He had successfully checkmated Gammage's move in putting a dead woman into his office...if Gammage had done it...and moreover he had seen him in church with his family, and yet avoided a meeting, which might have been embarrassing.

Yet, as he walked homeward, he told himself that he had no appetite for his Christmas dinner, and no relish for Christmas festivities. A great fear was upon him, and more than once he resolved to go and see Gammage, and to make a clean breast of it. But his courage failed him, and finally he resolved, like the coward he was, to let events take their course.

He was afraid that in wheeling the chair with the dead woman into Ebenezer Gammage's office, he had made a mistake. 'Such tragedies,' he thought, 'are best left alone,' and he cursed his luck, in that he had gone back to the office at all that morning.

Some men are always blaming their luck.

It was usual for the Smart family to have a kind of re-union of friends and relations on the evening of Christmas Day, with supper on a wide veranda overlooking the lawn. A number of relatives and friends dropped in as usual; but it was explained to them that the Major was not feeling well; and the gathering, so far as he was concerned, was not a success.

On the whole, Major Smart was an easy-going husband and father, and was usually jolly enough with his children; but, he paced the garden walks alone that night, smoking; and his wife, cowed by some remark he had made to her,

said to the children: 'You'd better leave your father alone tonight, he seems frightfully out of sorts.'

On the warm night air there came to him from the house the sound of music and dancing, and laughter; but the dark mood was on him. It was not now so much this dead woman that occupied his thoughts as that her death had furnished further evidence to him of his evil fetish. His restless brain would not remain idle; he was plotting now to get Will Monckton in some way associated with him in business, in order that he might become another victim.

He would have to be careful however, lest suspicion should attach to himself, for he had a reversionary interest in the Monckton property, and his project was somehow to secure Miss Monckton's money for himself, and the hand of Molly Maguire for his eldest son Bob. In both matters Will Monckton blocked the way.

He marched up and down under the oak trees, in the warm summer moonlit night, lost to all Christmas sentiment and kindly feeling toward his fellows. He wanted to be rich...very rich...and it mattered nothing to him who went under so long as he came out on top. Fearing the dead and hating the living, he was no companion that night for the gay throng which was keeping Christmas under his roof.

It is not to be wondered that he would not go in.

IV.—MOLLY MAGUIRE

Table of Contents

THERE had been a bond between the Moncktons, Smarts and Maguires, better understood by Australians of the olden days than by others. The late Harold Monckton, banker, Charley Maguire, squatter, and Boswell Smart, mine owner, had been shipmates; and in the days of long voyages to Australia by sailing vessel to have been shipmates was accounted by many to be akin to actual blood relationship. When a man told you that he and another were shipmates, you might usually conclude that they were something more than friends.

These three men came to Australia together on board the Great Britain, and in the absence of other relatives had been drawn to each other, so that they had been like brothers in the rough days of early Victorian gold mining. All three had prospered, all three were now deceased; but the feeling of kinship had continued with their posterity. The young people were on friendly visiting terms. And as for Will Monckton and Molly Maguire, they hardly knew themselves at this period of our story whether they were brother and sister, sweethearts, or only chums.

They had grown up next door to each other in adjoining Toorak mansions, known as The Firs and The Poplars, with only a three rail fence dividing the grounds; in which fence, by the way, was a white gate, with a well beaten path on either side of it, so worn as to suggest that the two houses were on very friendly terms.

Old Harold Monckton, who had built the mansion with the fir trees, was a life-long chum of Charley Maguire, who had erected the big house with the poplars, while Miss Monckton of The Firs, who was now quite an elderly lady, and the more youthful Mrs. Maguire, of The Poplars, had long been like sisters.

Not that the two families were much alike in their tastes and leanings. The Maguires were all for the Bush, and spent a good deal of their time on a station owned by them; while the Moncktons were for the town and society and the military. But for years it had been a settled thing that Christmas should be kept by both families, in good old-fashioned style, in Melbourne, and on alternate years they joined together in united festivities at The Firs and The Poplars. This year it was the turn of The Poplars, and invitations had been issued to a number of friends. But the Moncktons and Maguires were on a far more friendly footing with each other than with the Smarts.

For the information of some readers, it may be explained that Christmas in Australia is, in many respects, different to Christmas in older and colder lands. The gathering of kinsfolk and the coming home for Christmas are less noticeable, as holidays are more numerous, and sons and daughters better able to visit the paternal home at week ends. All this tends to make a family reunion on Christmas Day less common in the Sunny South. Then, too, the hot summer weather of December makes Christmas, of necessity, more of an out-door holiday. Picnics and sports are held where cool breezes blow from the ocean.

Probably too, as the Rev. Charles Payne pointed out in his sermon, Christmas is less of a religious festival in Australia. Santa Claus is still of interest to the children; but the dear old Saint has become shoppy in the Commonwealth. The big Christmas picture advertisements of the stores are plastered on every hoarding. There are no Christmas Clothing Clubs, and few, if any, starving mouths to feed; no cold to nip and perish the children of the poor. And the Child-Christ sentiment, which makes Christmas so essentially a religious festival in Europe and America, is largely wanting.

Both Miss Monckton and Mrs. Maguire agreed that it was beautiful to think of people in all Christian lands being possessed with a common sentiment, which made it easier to be good and generous, and easier to forgive.

'But,' interjected Will Monckton, who had travelled and seen something of the world, 'the fact remains, that although an Australian Christmas is, to the bulk of people, less domestic, it is less exclusive in regard to strangers and on the whole freer and more open-handed and neighbourly than elsewhere. In Europe, Christmas is kept with closed doors; we keep it here with doors wide open; and,' continued Will, looking across at Molly with a smile, for they were having mid-day dinner together, as on Sunday, 'it's the way we like it best.'

'Indeed we do,' said Molly, laughing, 'it's a fine dance we'll have to-night upon the grass, in the big marquee, beneath the trees.'

Molly Maguire had inherited from her mother a delicious spice of Irish brogue, which added no little to the attractiveness of her conversation.