

AUSTRALIAN FAIRY TALES

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AUSTRALIAN FAIRY TALES



“The globe slowly split in twain.”

AUSTRALIAN FAIRY TALES.

GOLDEN CLOUD.

A CHRISTMAS STORY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LONE ROCK.

Australia! Hast thou no enchanted castles within thy vast domain? Is there not one gallant youth, ready armed to do battle for the fair ones, sleeping 'neath the spell of wicked genii?

Come, youngsters, draw up your chairs. Come, mothers, ye who live your romantic girlhood o'er again in that of your children. Form up, gentlemen, fathers, hard men of the world, whose brows are wrinkled with care and worry, take rank in rear of your fair helpmates. Merchant, lock thy safe, close thy ledgers; horny-handed sons of toil, throw aside your implements of trade; gather near. I am going to draw aside the magic curtain which hides the great continent, marked on our map UNKNOWN. Turn down the lights—our magic lantern is quite ready. Hey presto! Look!

Why, what is this? The heart of a deep mine! A gold mine, with all its dim and rugged corridors, its tunnels and windings, lighted only by a dull taper here and there. There is no one at work, for it is Christmas Eve. Yet the underground region is not altogether untenanted. One man whose duty it is to watch the place, until relieved on the morrow, lies coiled up asleep in one of the long drives. He is a young man, not tall, but strongly made, and with

limbs like another Hercules. On account of his great strength and a certain good temper combined, his mates call him, Samson the Nugget.

For what length of time the Nugget slumbered on this good Christmas Eve will never be known. Certain it is that he suddenly opened his eyes and beheld one of the biggest, and withal one of the ugliest, hulking fellows he had ever seen standing over him. The Nugget was a brave youth, but fear began to take possession of him as he looked at the intruder—a giant in stature, with a huge, flat head upon his shoulder, and a mouth as large, and about the shape of the newspaper receiver at the General Post Office. He carried a lamp in his hand, but there was a queer sheen from his eyes, which illumined the cavern with a fiery glow. His dress was a brown russet, his hat, sugar-loaf in shape, and he carried a sapling for a cudgel.

“Get up, Samson the Nugget, and follow me,” said he in a brief, gruff tone.

“Who are you?” cried our hero, rising to his feet, and seizing a heavy iron drill.

“I am the strongest man in Golden Cloud, and my name is Grapple,” rejoined the other grimly. “Will you come?”

“Where?” said the Nugget. “There is no way out of this mine except by the cage up the shaft.”

“That’s all you know about it,” returned Grapple, with a grim laugh. “If I find a way, have you courage to follow?”

The Nugget felt inclined to refuse point blank, but curiosity being strong within him, he bowed an assent.

Grapple, without a word, turned on his heel and led the way further down the dark recesses of the tunnel. Our hero followed. Of one thing the miner felt certain—that the end of the drive would effectually bar the progress of his unwelcome visitor. Strange to relate, such was not the case.

The narrow passage appeared to extend and widen out before their advance, until it took the shape of a long railway tunnel, from which the pair emerged at length into the bright beams of day. The transit from what seemed to be the bowels of a high mountain range to a landscape fairer and more beautiful than our hero had ever seen, filled his mind with wonder. His companion, now that daylight was upon him, did not seem such an ugly customer after all. He was certainly a huge, grotesque-looking personage, but there wasn't a bit of malice in anything he said or did.

Our hero's amazement was so great, that it was some considerable time before he found words wherewith to address his companion.

"What country is this?" he asked, turning to Grapple.

"This is Golden Cloud."

"Golden Cloud! I never heard of such a place. Why did you bring me here?"

"Because I wanted a companion on my travels," rejoined the other. "I heard you were a very strong man, and I determined to fetch you out of that dismal mine, so that you might enjoy your Christmas holidays with me."

"Oh, indeed! very considerate on your part, my friend, but what if I return to the mine?" said the Nugget.

“You can’t—not without my aid,” responded Grapple. “Now don’t be a fool. I’m going on a sort of excursion into the interior, and I want a companion. We shall not be long away, and I promise to lead you safely back to the place from whence you came as soon as we return.”

The Nugget reflected. He felt a strong desire to see something of this most charming country. Besides, he saw that this strange creature had uttered the truth. He could not possibly find his way back to the mine alone.

Here it must be remarked that, although our hero was only a miner, he possessed both intelligence and culture, not usually found in men of his class. He had read much, and had a longing for the romantic, and in short, in less time than it takes to write this sentence, Samson the Nugget had resolved to go on a holiday tour with his quaint companion.

It is needless to describe their journey for the first two days; suffice it that the route lay through the tangled maze of a pathless forest of noble trees, where branches intertwining overhead formed a leafy canopy for many miles. On the third day Grapple and his companion emerged upon a wide, extensive plain. Towering in the distance, like a pyramid, they observed a gigantic rock standing out above the level expanse around. The sun, gleaming upon its peaks and spires, gave it a weird, fantastic look, as if some great magician of the olden time had bade it rise with the lifting of his wand. As far as the vision reached along the line of the horizon, the plain seemed ringed in by the magnificent bushland through which they had come. Nearer, however, there was a broad river flowing its slow way round the lone cliff; the sheen of its waves

forming a massive girdle, which flashed back the sun's rays a thousandfold.

The evening was drawing nigh as the Nugget and Grapple approached the lofty crag, and they determined to pass the night beneath its sheltering base. For this purpose they crossed a ford on the river, and ascended a wide slope of rich, green sward, softer than velvet, and entered an enclosed space, which had evidently been a most lovely garden at one time. To the gaze of our hero it appeared nothing but a mass of weeds and ragged, bare shrubs, under which a whole multitude of kangaroos, emus, wallabies, wild goats, and native bears were gathered in wild confusion.

The Nugget was filled with amazement as he beheld these animals. Their number was countless, and the tameness with which they submitted to be fondled was more extraordinary still. Indeed, they never moved as the two men strode through their ranks, no more than if they had been so many posts wanting life and movement. The astonishment of our hero was in no way diminished as they reached the western face of the supposed rock. Here they saw a broad flight of steps leading towards a ponderous gateway. The gate stood wide open, and on either side, mounted on pillars of granite, were the carved figures of two gigantic black fellows, each leaning on a spear. Grapple and his companion entered the portal, and found themselves in a lofty corridor, supported by massive columns of polished masonry. To the right and left of them, as they advanced, splendid apartments, vast in their dimensions, and upholstered with costly furniture, met their gaze. It was not the magnitude of the place, nor the fine things therein, which filled them with such speechless amazement, but the wonderful statuary they saw. These figures were in every room, and were so life-like in their dimensions and appearance, that the Nugget was fain to

believe that they were flesh and blood. Ladies and gentlemen were represented quite naturally, and in various places and functions. Yonder a group were seated round the banquet in the act of eating. There another group, mostly ladies, gossiping and laughing. Some had been chiselled walking, some kneeling, others hissing, many reading. The same view met the travellers from one end of this strange mansion to the other. Nothing could seem more substantial, more real, than these beautiful models, attired as they were in robes of gorgeous hue and texture, but foreign and altogether unfamiliar to our hero, who often touched them with his hand. Twenty times he addressed them, but not one answered. They were only images, nothing more. Body, limbs, robes—all were cold and hard as stone to the touch.

Their curiosity appeased, our hero and his companion selected a small but comfortable apartment wherein to pass the night. They had killed a kangaroo the previous day, from the remains of which they dined; then they retired, and both were soon fast asleep.

The Nugget had scarcely closed his eyes, however, ere he was roused by the application of a hard whack on the drum of his left ear.

Now it chanced that Grapple lay on that side of the Nugget and judging hastily, as people are apt to do under similar conditions, our hero sprang up, and began to pound his bedfellow soundly.

“Hold! stop! What is this all about?” cried poor Grapple.

“Did you not give me a blow?” demanded the Nugget fiercely.

“I? Certainly not.”

“Oh, indeed! I suppose the man in the moon did it. There are only two of us here, sir,” cried the Nugget.

“I’ll swear I did not do it. Your blows awakened me.”

“Humph! It is very strange,” cried they, and they grumbled at each other until they fell asleep again.

Not long did the pair enjoy repose. This time Grapple started up with a yell of agony.

“Coward!” he cried, and without further warning he fell upon the Nugget and tried to choke him. We have said that Samson was a powerful fellow. Exerting the full force of his muscles, he overpowered his adversary, and briefly demanded an explanation.

“Wretched, false friend! what have I done that you should stab me with your knife?” cried Grapple, with a groan.

The young miner burst out in a hearty guffaw.

“Look here, my friend,” he replied quickly, “I think both of us have been the dupes of some rascally enemies hereabout. I receive a thump on the ear, you a wound in the leg, when both of us are sound asleep. Mum! Let us to slumber again. Daylight will be here anon; in the meantime, I will keep watch to discover our lurking foe.”

Grapple assented. Having bound up his leg the travellers lay down again as if nothing had happened.

The Nugget, however, slept like a cat, otherwise he would not have seen the most withered, and, at the same time, most repulsive-looking individual in the world stealing noiselessly out on tip-toe from behind one of the statues in the corridor. The day was

breaking, and every object could be clearly distinguished. Watching the intruder, our hero saw he was a dwarf, and a very ugly one. The body of the wee monster was like an ale keg, from which protruded short, sturdy limbs. His hands were dreadfully large, the skin knobbed and gnarled like the bark of a tree. A head, the counterpart of a Christmas pudding with a slice cut out for a mouth, a parsnip for a nose, and a pair of agates for eyes, and you have a rough photograph of the wretch that now advanced as stealthily as a shadow toward our hero and his companion.

As he drew near the prostrate pair he stooped over the Nugget to inflict a blow on his head. Our hero bounded up and tried to catch his foe. Vain effort. With the agility and quickness of a professional wrestler, the dwarf upset the astonished digger as if he had been no more than a schoolboy; then, fleeing along the corridor, he cleared the steps of the gate at one bound and ran swiftly across the garden towards the river.

CHAPTER II. MOTHER DOT.

Samson the Nugget was taken “all aback,” as the sailors say, at the unexpected attack of his wee but nimble opponent. Yet, before the dwarf had time to reach the garden wall, our hero was up and pursued his foe. Like a kangaroo when the hunters are in full cry, the little man bounded down the slope leading to the river, over the stream, and away across the open space, with prodigious leaps rather than with the stride of a runner. Tally-ho! A stern chase is a long chase, but in this case the adage could not be applied, inasmuch as our hero was sound in wind and limb, and, moreover, he was a sturdy pedestrian.



“OUR HERO WENT SPRAWLING HEADLONG OVER HIM.”

He soon gained upon his antagonist, when the latter, ready and fertile in devices, adopted tactics which gave him an advantage, and enabled him to over-reach his pursuer. They were on the edge of the bushland which bordered the plain, and the dwarf, slacking speed, suffered Samson to approach within arm's length, when, turning suddenly, he cast himself flat down, whereupon our hero went sprawling headlong over him. Laughing triumphantly, the dwarf sprang to his feet, and jumped off again in the cover of the bush.

As the miner recovered himself and resumed the pursuit, he observed the chase unexpectedly disappear from view behind a tuft of coarse grass and weeds growing at the base of a gigantic blood-tree. Thinking the antic sprite was forming another trap, the young miner approached the spot cautiously. It was lucky he did so, for in parting the rubbish aside he discovered a wide, deep hole, about the dimensions of an ordinary well. There were neither steps nor ladder down this gaping pit, whose bottom lay far beneath the ken of Samson the Nugget, who stood gazing down the dim void, wondering if the little monster had vanished down it by some potent agency only known to himself. Watching and waiting, Samson satisfied himself that the dwarf had certainly gone down the hole, and he determined to follow him.

With this object in view, our hero marked the spot and retraced his way to the rock. Grapple still slept soundly. Not wishing to disturb him, the Nugget proceeded to the rear of the premises, where he found a long stout rope. With it he returned to the well. Having securely fastened one end of the rope to the tree, he threw the remainder down the chasm, and then began to descend hand over hand. It cannot be denied that this was a dangerous undertaking, but the Nugget, being a digger, and not lacking in pluck, the cost

was not considered. From the first moment our hero had set eyes on the little monster it had somehow come to him that the sprite was in some mysterious manner connected with all the ruin and wreck he had seen at the rock.

Clinging firmly to the rope, the Nugget descended until he reached the end of it. Looking far down he beheld the same dark void, apparently bottomless. While he swayed to and fro like a toy at the end of a string, his pendant body thumped against something that sounded dull and hollow, and he saw he had burst open a secret door in the wall. Planting his foot firmly on the threshold of the aperture, the adventurer let go the rope and found himself in a low, arched cavern. The extremity brought him face to face with a bright landscape, varying both in hue and shade from the region he had just quitted. Right before him a tiny cascade of pure spring water spurted from the breast of the cliff on which he stood, and meandered its course through a belt of trees so quiet and silent that our hero felt appalled at its stillness. There was a broad, well-worn pathway down into the dell, and the Nugget made his way thither. As he walked smartly along, looking right and left of him, he espied a very ancient dame seated upon a bundle of firewood she had evidently gathered. By her side were two large baskets of wild fruit.

“Good-morrow, ma’am,” cried the miner, courteously lifting his hat. “Pray have you seen a very ugly little man pass this way?”

“My son, all men are lovely in my eyes,” replied the crone, and she looked at him with eyes that gleamed like the orbs of a cat in the darkness. “Do you know, I’m right glad you came this way. You look strong. Will you carry my parcels for me?”

“Certainly I will,” replied the Nugget cheerfully. “Where do you live?”

“My hut stands on the range yonder, on the other side of this bush. Dear me, how tired I am to be sure!”

How her cat’s eyes glowed as she looked at him! The Nugget did not see nor heed anything about the old woman; his whole thoughts were centred on the capture of his foe.

“Come, madam,” said he, “one good turn deserves another. Tell me where I may find the fellow I seek, and I’ll carry your goods and yourself on top of them.”

“Oh, good youth, haste is a bad master. If you seek for Dusk in haste, you’ll never find him.”

“Dusk! Who’s Dusk, mother?”

“The dwarf you came to find,” she answered quickly. “Beware, he’s a cunning sprite.”

The Nugget laughed. “I should only like the opportunity to measure weapons with the cowardly little imp,” he said. “Have you seen him?”

“Yes; he passed this way not an hour ago,” she answered.

“Thank you, dame. I’m off!” exclaimed our hero, hastily preparing to follow.

“Nay, good sir, you promised to carry my things,” responded the dame.

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