

# A Ghost from the Sea

By Dick Donovan

Towards the latter half of the fifties, Melbourne, in Australia, was startled by an extraordinary and terrible crime. It was at the very height of what was known as the “gold fever”. A year or two before, news had spread like wildfire that gold had been discovered in enormous quantities in various parts of the country. That news literally seemed to turn people mad, and young and old, the halt, the lame, and even the blind, rushed away for the fabled regions of El Dorado. Whole families, who had been content to jog on quietly year after year, earning fair wages, and getting all the necessaries of life, were seized with the fever, and, selling up their belongings rump and stump, invested in billies,<sup>1</sup> tomahawks, spades, pick-axes, washing-pans,<sup>2</sup> and other etceteras, and shouldering their swags set off for the mysterious regions, where it was rumoured gold was lying on the surface of the ground in big nuggets. Fortunate, indeed, were those who had any belongings to sell in order to provide themselves with the plant required for roughing it in the bush; for many had nothing at all, save what they stood upright in, but, imagining that they were going to gather in the precious metal in sackfulls, they started off with the rest, only to perish, it may be, miserably of starvation, disappointment, and broken hearts. This period in the history of our Australian colonies is a startling record of human credulity, human folly, wickedness, despair and death. The fever was confined to no particular class of people.

Clergymen, bankers, landowners, shipowners, merchants, shopkeepers, sailors, labourers, classical scholars and ignoramuses alike fell under the fascination. The worst passions of our nature manifested themselves; hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, uncharitableness. The parsons were no better than the paupers; the classical scholars than the ignoramuses. The thin veneering of so-called civilization was rubbed off, and the savage appeared in all his fierceness at the cry of “Gold! Gold!”

It is at such periods as these that the moralist finds his pabulum, and those good but weak-minded people who think that human nature has improved with the advance of time have only to get on the house-tops and utter the cry of “Gold!” again, to prove that we are not a whit better than our ancestors were three thousand years ago. This may not be very flattering to us, but alas! it is true. In those days of Australian gold rushes the bush was a veritable *terra incognita*. Explorers had attempted to penetrate into the mystic interior, but many never came back again, and to this day it is not known where their bones moulder. Those who did return were gaunt, famine-stricken, hollow-eyed, for they had looked upon death, and the stories they told were calculated to appal everyone but the most daring and reckless. But the report of the gold finds so turned the heads of people that, forgetting all about the dangers and privations they would have to endure, they started off into those unknown regions, and thousands literally perished by the way. The experiences of some of these unfortunate people are in themselves amongst the most pathetic and moving of human stories.

Melbourne at the time of this narrative was not the Melbourne of today. It was then simply a collection of canvas and wooden huts and houses, with a few buildings of a more substantial character. One of the most imposing houses in the place was that known as “Jackson’s Boarding-

---

<sup>1</sup> Tin cans for cooking.

<sup>2</sup> The primitive mode of washing gold.

house." It was built partly of wood and partly of stone, and was kept by a man and his wife named Jackson. Very little, if anything, was known of the Jacksons' history, beyond that they had come to the colony a few years previously. Jackson was a nautical man, and had purchased a schooner with which he traded up and down the coast, though with indifferent success.

At last his schooner was wrecked, and Jackson and his wife, who had always sailed with him, built a wooden shanty, in what was then known as Canvas Town—now Melbourne—where they sold liquors and provisions. They seemed to have done fairly well, for very soon they erected what was then quite an imposing building, and they called it "Jackson's Boarding-house."

Jackson was remarkable for an extraordinarily powerful physique. He stood about six feet high, and his muscular development was so great that it was said he could lift a cask of split peas, weighing nearly three hundredweight, from the ground, and raise it at arm's length above his head. He was an ill-favoured man, however, for he had a low brow, small cunning sort of eyes, and was exceedingly passionate in his temper. But it was notable that he seemed to be strongly attached to his wife, and they were never known to disagree.

Mrs Jackson was a striking contrast to her husband, for she was a slightly built little woman, with a pink and white face, sickly blue eyes, and a mass of tow-like hair that was almost the colour of flax, whereas her husband was as dark as a raven.

Soon after these people had opened their boarding-house, there came to lodge with them a Mr and Mrs Harvey, who had recently arrived from England. They had, like many others, come out to try and improve their fortunes. A warm intimacy seemed to spring up between the two couples, and they lived apparently in the greatest harmony. It was understood that Mr Harvey was a mechanic by trade. He was a strong, healthy man, very handy and useful, and did odd jobs for the community. His wife was a pretty, agreeable woman, and soon became a great favourite, for she played the piano and sang well, and was always ready to afford amusement or render assistance to anyone needing it, where it lay in her power. Her husband acquired the character of a rather indolent, good-natured sort of fellow, whose aim seemed to be to suddenly accumulate wealth without doing much labour for it.

At length the gold fever set in, and amongst those who started off in the first rush for the regions of fabulous wealth was Harvey, his wife remaining behind at Jackson's boarding-house. Some eight months later Harvey returned, and soon the report spread that he had brought thousands of pounds' worth of nuggets and gold dust. He remained in the town for four weeks, during which he and his wife denied themselves nothing, and it was evident that the report about his wealth was in the main true. Then, having furnished himself with an extensive outfit in the shape of tent, cooking-stove, digging and washing utensils, he started up the country again, Mrs Harvey still remaining at the boarding-house. She purchased a horse and buggy, provided herself with fine clothes and jewellery, and common gossip had it that this little, blue-eyed flaxen-haired woman was the richest person in Melbourne. Two months later, her husband still being absent at the diggings, the community was startled one morning by a report that Mrs Harvey had been murdered. The report proved to be only too true, and the story told by a female servant in the boarding-house was this. She went to the lady's room to see why she had not appeared, it being an hour and a half after her usual time of rising. She found the door locked, and, repeated knocking having failed to elicit a response, she informed her master, and expressed fears that something was wrong. Jackson at once went upstairs with some of the lodgers, and, failing to get an answer, he at once broke open the door, and then a terrible sight revealed itself.

Lying across the bed was the body of Mrs Harvey. She was dressed only in her night-dress, which was disarranged and torn as if she had struggled desperately, as in fact she had, for further

evidence of this was forthcoming. She was on her back, her head hanging over the farthest side of the bed. Twisted tightly round her neck until it had cut into the flesh was a crimson cord sash or belt, such as in those days was common—these sashes, or, more correctly speaking scarves, being worn by men round their waists to keep their trousers up, instead of braces. The horribly distorted features showed that the poor woman had been strangled, and subsequent medical examination brought to light that her head had been forced back with such tremendous force that the neck was absolutely broken. Discolorations about the mouth indicated that a heavy hand had been pressed there to keep her from screaming. There were also deep indents and bruises on the wrists, which proved that she had struggled and been firmly grasped there by the murderer. Other parts of the body were also terribly bruised, as if in the struggle she had been banged repeatedly against the massive wooden bedstead.

Murder had been done, that was certain. That the murderer was a man was equally certain, for no female could have exerted such tremendous force as had evidently been used. It was no less certain that robbery had been the motive, for a very large travelling trunk or box had been forced open, in spite of an unusually strong lock, and two iron bands round it which were secured with padlocks. All the poor creature's clothes had been turned out of the box, and were scattered about the floor, as well as her jewellery, nothing in that way being taken. Now what did that prove? It proved this: the murderer, with the cunning of a devil, knew that in such a place to possess himself of her jewellery, valuable as it was, would almost certainly lead to his detection. No, it was neither her jewellery nor her clothes he wanted, but the nuggets and gold dust her husband had brought from the diggings. No one could swear to gold dust or nuggets, and both were plentiful, for diggers, especially sailors, were constantly arriving from the diggings with hoards of gold, which they sold for ready cash far below their value: for at this early period there was no regular exchange or agency for the purchase of the precious metal.

The next question was: How did the murderer get into the room? Not by the door, for a dozen witnesses vowed that it was locked on the inside, the key still in the lock, when Jackson broke open the door. The only other entrance, then, was by the window, twenty-five feet from the ground. There was no indication that a ladder had been used, and so the theory was that the murderer had secreted himself under the bed, and when his fiendish work was completed he had gone out by the window, climbed up by means of an iron gutter pipe to the roof, and had then descended into the house through a skylight.

Now came the most important question of all: Who was the murderer? At the time of the crime there were nearly forty people staying in the boarding-house, mostly men, a good many of them being sailors. The police arrangements of the town were very primitive, and by no means equal to coping with such a mysterious tragedy, and unfortunately not an atom of evidence could be got that would have justified the arrest of any individual. The result was the mystery was destined to remain a mystery for ever; and the times were too exciting and too changing for such a crime even as that to long occupy the public mind, and so, almost with the burying of the flaxen-haired woman who had been so cruelly done to death, the tragedy was forgotten for a time. Three months later, however, its memory was revived by the arrival of Mr Harvey. He had written two or three times to his wife, had received no answer, had got alarmed, and had come to see what was the matter. The news almost drove him off his mind, for he had been passionately attached to his wife. He stated that he had left her with about ten thousand pounds' worth of gold; and he now offered to give anyone five thousand pounds' worth of gold who would bring the murderer to justice. The offer, however, proved of no avail; not the faintest due could be obtained. Jackson had taken charge of the murdered woman's effects, and these he handed to the

husband, who certified his belief that they were all correct except the gold, which was in nuggets and dust, one nugget alone being valued at between two and three thousand pounds. And so the poor husband departed, an utterly changed and broken man.

Another person in the community had also changed considerably. This was Jackson, the boarding-house keeper. He generally bore the character of being a steady, industrious man, but he suddenly developed a craving for drink, and as a consequence neglected his business, which, of course, declined, the result being an opposition house was started, and Jackson's once flourishing boarding establishment lost all its custom. Jackson drank harder than ever then, and even his wife gave way to the vice. At length, a year after the murder, Jackson sold off his effects, and he and his wife took their passage for England, in a ship called the *Gloriana*.

This ends the first part of the record, but the sequel—startling and inexplicable—has yet to be told.

The *Gloriana* was a large, full-rigged, clipper ship, one of a line trading between the mother country and the colonies. She was commanded by a hard-headed Scotchman, Captain Norman Douglas, who was well known in the trade, and, in fact, was one of the most popular skippers on that route. He bore the reputation of being a singularly conscientious and truthful man, and utterly without sentiment or superstition. There are no doubt plenty of people still living who were acquainted with him, who would unhesitatingly endorse this statement.

The *Gloriana* had a fair complement of passengers, first and second class. Amongst the first class were Jackson and his wife. It is necessary, in order to make what follows more dearly intelligible, to describe one portion of the ship. She was fitted with what was known in the old days as a "monkey poop", with an alloway or passage running on each side. This passage was reached from the main deck by three or four wooden steps. Right aft a short flight of steps led to the poop, on which was a hurricane house, with a companion way going down to the cuddy, or, as it is now called, the saloon. In the break of the poop, flush with the main deck, so that his window and door faced the bows of the vessel, was the captain's state-room, and alongside of his door was the entrance to the cuddy from the main deck. The Jacksons' cabin was the first in the cuddy on the left-hand side on entering, and next to the captain's, though it must be remembered that the captain had to come out of the cuddy to get into his room. That is, his door opened from the main deck, whereas the Jackson's opened from the cuddy, and consequently at right angles with the captain's.

The vessel made a splendid passage through Bass's Straits, the weather being magnificent, but it was noted with some astonishment that the Jacksons rarely appeared on deck, but remained in their cabin, and it was whispered about that Mr Jackson was almost constantly muddled more or less with drink. He and his wife kept to themselves, and seemed to carefully avoid their fellow passengers. One night, when the ship was well out in the South Pacific, and bowling along under double-reefed top-sails, Captain Douglas was sleeping soundly in the middle watch, when his door was suddenly opened, and Jackson precipitated himself into his room, dressed only in his night shirt. He was ghastly pale, was trembling like an aspen leaf and seemed to be suffering from the effects of a terrible fright.

Naturally thinking that something was the matter, the captain sprang from his bed, and was surprised to find Jackson on his knees, his lips blanched, his face streaming with a cold perspiration.

"What is the meaning of this?" the captain demanded.

"For God's sake save me!" Jackson moaned in terror. "Save you from what and whom?" asked the captain, thinking that his passenger was suffering from delirium tremens.

“From her,” groaned the man. “She all but lured me into the sea, but I broke the spell in time, and rushed in here.”

This extraordinary remark naturally tended to confirm the captain’s idea about the delirium, and so he soothed his passenger as well as he could, and then led him back to his cabin, where he noted that Mrs Jackson was soundly asleep in her bunk. He helped Jackson into his bunk, tucked him well up with the clothes, and left him; and as he came out of the cuddy on to the deck to reach his own room again, he started back until he all but fell, for it seemed to him that a flash of brilliant light had almost blinded him, while something soft touched his face. He thought that this might be a sea-bird, but what was the light?

It was the second mate’s watch, and that officer was walking the poop, while the portion of the crew on duty were lying or sitting about in the waist of the vessel.

“Mr Harrington,” sang out the captain to the second mate, “what was that light?”

“What light, sir?” asked the officer in astonishment

“Why, didn’t you see a brilliant flash of light?”

“No, sir,” answered the officer, thinking the captain must have been indulging in a little too much grog.

“Ahoy, there, you fellows,” roared the skipper to the watch on deck. “Where did that light come from?”

“What light, sir?” asked several voices.

“Good heavens! did you not see a flash of bright light?” exclaimed the captain angrily, for he thought he was being made a fool of.

“No, sir, we saw no light,” answered the crew unanimously.

Captain Douglas was mystified. What did this mean? Was it a delusion? Had he been made a fool of by his senses, or what?

He went into his cabin again with his mind strangely disturbed. The ship was sailing splendidly, a heavy sea running alter her, a gale was blowing, the sky was clear, the stars shining brightly, and neither in sea nor sky was there anything to account for that flash of light, or that *something* that had touched him. His officer and his men could not have been in collusion, and therefore Captain Douglas came to the conclusion that he had been made a fool of by his own senses, though, taken in connection with Jackson’s strange remarks, Captain Douglas was affected as he had never been affected before.

Next day the crew told one another that “the old man” had been “soaking himself.”

Captain Douglas was unusually thoughtful. He invited Jackson into his cabin and asked him what had been the matter with him during the night Jackson appeared to be very ill, with a scared, cowed expression in his face. “I don’t know,” he replied a little sullenly, “I think I must have been dreaming.”

“Well, I hope you won’t dream again like that,” remarked the captain, and then he told his own experience. As he heard this Jackson seemed to grow terrified again, and he groaned between chattering teeth:

“Heaven pity me then, it’s a reality!”

“What is?” asked the astonished captain.

Jackson covered his face with his hands as he answered:

“Three times since we left Melbourne I have seen the vision of a woman, and she tries to lure me into the sea.” He shuddered like one who was seized with palsy.

A few hours before this Captain Douglas would have roared with incredulous laughter had he been told such a thing. Now he was solemnly silent, for his own experience—the touch and the

flash of light—permitted of no explanation that he could furnish. And so this tough old sailor, who had sailed the salt seas from his youth, and braved the perils of the deep in all parts of the world, was seized with a nameless fear that he could not allay.

The good ship continued to bowl along before favouring gales until she drew into the stormy ocean that roars around Cape Horn. During this time Jackson was seldom seen except for an hour or two in the early part of the day, when he and his wife would promenade the poop. He seemed to have changed very much. Everyone on board said that he looked ten years older since leaving Melbourne. His hair had blanched, his face was pallid and wrinkled, his eyes were restless as if from fear.

The vessel fell in with terrific weather off the Horn. Monstrous icebergs and field ice made navigation perilous, while the hurricane's wrath lashed the ice-strewn ocean into mountainous waves. The ship could only pursue her course under storm sails, and only then by ceaseless vigilance being exercised on the part of all the crew. For nearly a week the captain was on deck, snatching an hour or two's sleep as best he could during the twenty-four.

One night, when the *Gloriana* had nearly doubled the Horn, the weather seemed to grow worse, so that it became necessary to heave the ship to under a close-reefed main topsail. The sky was inky in its blackness. Not a star shone out from the ebony vault; but over the sea were vast flashing fields of phosphorescent foam as the giant waves broke with an awful roar; while looming in the blackness were ponderous icebergs in whose hollows the sea thundered. Now and again unusually terrific squalls came howling up from the south, bringing showers of jagged ice and hailstones as big as marbles. It was a night of horror and danger such as those who have never sailed in that stormy southern ocean can form but a faint conception of.

Vigilant and anxious, and clad in heavy sea-boots and oilskins, Captain Douglas stood on the poop with the chief mate; the second mate and several of the crew being on the forecastle straining their eyes on the look-out for the ice, while both in the main and foretop a man was lashed also on the look-out. Suddenly as the captain and chief officer stood together at the break of the poop sheltering themselves under the lee of a tarpaulin lashed in the rigging, the captain staggered, and seizing the officer's arm exclaimed hoarsely:

“My God! what is that?”

And well might he so exclaim, for to his horrified gaze there appeared on the main deck a mass of trembling light that in an instant seemed to change into a woman's figure, a woman with long, streaming fair hair, while round her white neck a scarf was twisted. The captain and his mate were transfixed with horror, for they both saw it. But they were to see even a more fearsome sight yet. The apparition rose, waving her arms the while, and floating out over the howling waste of black, writhing waters; and as she rose there suddenly darted from the cabin doorway the half-naked Jackson, his hair streaming in the wind. The apparition still waved her arm, still floated out away from the ship, and then, before the terror-stricken men who witnessed the awful sight could move to stop him, the wretched man uttered a scream of despair and fear that froze the blood of those who heard it, and with one bound he leapt into the boiling waters, and at that instant the apparition disappeared like a flash of lightning.

It was some moments before either of the two men had sufficiently recovered to speak. Then they asked each other if their senses had fooled them. But the captain, remembering his former experience, rushed to Jackson's cabin. Mrs Jackson alone was in it, and she was sleeping. It was no delusion then. Jackson had jumped overboard, lured by that ghost from the sea. It was impossible to make the slightest attempt to save him; he had gone down into the black and boiling waters never to rise again.

Mrs Jackson was not informed of her husband's suicide until the following day, and when she heard of it she fell down in a swoon; and, on recovering, it was found that she had lost her reason, so that it was necessary to watch and guard her for the rest of the voyage. On arrival in England it was deemed prudent to place her in an asylum, where she died six months later. No word ever escaped her lips that would have tended to elucidate the awful mystery. She seemed to be tortured with some indescribable anguish, and from morning till night she paced to and fro, wringing her hands and moaning piteously. But to those who witnessed that appalling scene off Cape Horn when Jackson went to his doom, the mystery required no explanation, for it explained itself: and that explanation was that it was he who had murdered poor Mrs Harvey, and the phantom of his victim had lured him to a terrible death.