

# The Storyteller

## THE MAN FROM AUSTRALIA

John Everill stood on the steps of the Langham Hotel, absently watching the passers-by and smoking a cigar that had cost him eighteen pence, though to his unsophisticated taste it had less flavor than many he had bought at the rate of seven for a shilling.

As he stood there, silent and almost motionless, two or three young men idly wondered for whom the 'shabby-looking Johnnie' was waiting, and several cabmen, before turning away, said, in dubious manner, 'Hansom, sir?' being in no way surprised when he shook his head. At last, however, he threw away his half-smoked cigar, and as he sauntered down Regent street repeated the words that had been his unspoken thought on waking: 'Forty years old—a bachelor—a rich man—and one of the loneliest wretches on God's earth.'

Out in Australia, where for sixteen years he had worked as only men who have no ties to distract their attention can work, he had never felt so desolate. For the first five of these sixteen years he had wandered about doing little more than keep himself. Then he had 'chummed' in with another unattached unit, and the two—as they sometimes confessed to each other when they happened to be in one of the solitary places that tempt men to exchange confidences—having neither of them any particular reason for making money, had made it 'hand over fist.' But in the end, and by slow degrees, John's chum seemed to lose his interest in work. He grew restless, complained of the monotonous Australian fare, laughed when his friend insisted on having a doctor's opinion, and to the suggestion of the latter that he should take a holiday, said curtly, 'I'm going to have one, Doc.' 'The next day he died, with the brief farewell, 'I'm tired of money-grubbing; left you all I have, old chum. Go home.'

So John bought a ready-made black suit, put a crape band on his hat and went home; only to find himself ten times more lonely than he had ever felt in the Australian bush. Relations he had none. Of the friends he had known before leaving England, some were married, and indifferent to the shy bronzed man who reminded them of a past they had forgotten; some were dead, others had gone to the dogs. Probably the majority of the half-strange men and their wholly-strange wives would have made John more welcome had they known how much he had to give or to lend, but money was the last thing of which John himself wished to speak, and he did not look rich.

At the corner of Oxford street John paused to glance at the masses of color in the flower-women's baskets, his glance wandering from the flowers to the omnibuses that drove up and went on again to their various destinations. Amongst them one marked Hendon specially attracted his attention, for the Hendon he remembered was a village, and it occurred to him to see how the place had altered would be a good way of passing the afternoon. He therefore ran up the steps, took a seat on the top, and looked about him with careless curiosity until the omnibus stopped opposite St. John's Wood Station. Here, however, his senses became alert, for there on the pavement in the May sunshine stood the double of a ghost that had been his companion through the hours of many a sleepless night—a ghost with reddish brown hair, hazel eyes, and a delicate oval face, probably somewhat paler than nature had intended. Even the flop hat trimmed with a bunch of big daisies that was worn by the 'double,' as well as her pale blue blouse and black skirt, reminded him of the bygone fashions affected by the ghost. So, hardly daring to breathe, John looked and listened whilst the girl said a few words to a companion standing beside her, after which both came 'up-stairs' and took seats in front of John.

'Oh!' sighed the 'double,' fresh air at last. This afternoon that schoolroom was intolerable.'

'My dear, the room's not so bad. It's the brattings in it I can't stand. Sometimes I feel that I'd give a quarter's salary to have a chance of slapping them all round.'

'Well, I could get along if they didn't have so many colds. And not one in ten has a pocket-handkerchief.'

'No, though the Government might so easily put another ha'penny on the rate and buy a few thousands,' was the laughing rejoinder. 'But do let's forget our miseries for an hour. How's your aunt, Di?'

'Di!' And the ghost's name had been Diana.

'Better. You see, now we're living in a real big cottage in a real big garden. You can't think how lively it is.'

'For you? Oh, yes, I can. I'm not quite sure that it would suit me. Is your aunt busy?'

'Not very. She's nearly finished that miniature you saw. But it won't do her any harm to have a rest.'

'No, provided the shekels will come in while she's resting,' was the shrewd retort. And after this the speaker indulged in a long monologue respecting the deficiencies of her wardrobe and the chance of supplying those deficiencies when the summer sales came on.

Meanwhile John Everill furtively watched 'Di,' and though in some respects she was unlike the ghost, in others the resemblance was unmistakable. The little gestures implying yes or no with which she punctuated her friend's monologue, the turn of her head, the slight dissimilarity between the shape of her ears recalled his nightly visitant, and he felt that fortune was doing him a good turn when at the Swiss Cottages her companion descended and went off in the direction of Kilburn.

Still, it was not easy to find an excuse for speaking to the girl, and the chance of doing so might have been lost had not Di caught the chain of her handbag in a bangle she was wearing, and in doing so detached a small coin that rolled under John's feet.

'Chinese?' he said, with a smile, as he put it in her hand.

'Thank you. Yes, it's Chinese.'

'And nowadays rather rare. I have one of the same date. I've carried it about for a good many years and should be very sorry to lose it.'

Now, having been well brought up, Di had a number of unwritten laws by which to guide her conduct in emergencies, and was quite capable of snubbing any stranger who might speak to her on the top of an omnibus, but John had the honest deep-set eyes that inspire confidence; his manner was diffident, his hands and clothes were unmistakably those of a worker, so the girl, always reluctant to hurt the feelings of others, said pleasantly:

'And if my coin had rolled off the top of the omnibus I must have searched in the road till it was found. I should not have gone home without it.'

'Then it was probably a gift?'

'Yes, a Christmas present. My aunt had it years ago from an old friend, and gave it to me when I got my post at the Board School. It was to be a sort of lucky farthing.'

'And has it brought you luck?' he asked.

'Not much, I'm afraid. But of course it must have time. A talisman can't be hurried.'

'No.' Then after a pause he went on in a changed tone, 'I suppose people never discuss secrets on the top of an omnibus?'

'I suppose not.' This was a little surprise.

'So you will not be offended if I say that I heard you speaking about a miniature your aunt is painting?'

'Oh! of course, that does not matter. No one need be ashamed of working.'

'And, to tell the truth,' he resumed apologetically, 'I was rather interested in the matter. As it happens, I want a couple of old photographs copied. By an artist, I mean.'

Di glanced quickly at the speaker and wondered whether he knew that the painting of miniatures was slow work, and its payment possibly beyond his means.

'Unless you have a reason for valuing the portraits,' she began, with some hesitation, 'you might think it sufficient to have them copied by a photographer. Miniatures are—'

'Expensive?' he suggested.

'Well—yes. Oh! please don't think that rude.'

'I don't. On the contrary, I think it kind. But what do you call expensive?'

'My aunt's fee is two guineas.'

'Good. I can afford that, and as I want the work done soon, will you let me come on with you now? I'll pay for one miniature in advance and send a photograph to your aunt to-morrow. Will that be convenient?'

'Quite convenient,' answered Di, half inclined to believe that at last her coin was beginning to bring her luck, and for the rest of the journey she and John compared notes on the London he remembered and the London she knew until the omnibus stopped and she led the way to a quaint little cottage standing some distance from the highroad, where, among the old-fashioned flowers he loved so well, John met the reality of his ghost, the Diana remembered too faithfully for his peace of mind through so many tedious years.

But time had dealt no more kindly with her than with him, and meeting casually in the street, they