



## **THE CURSE OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOLD**

as told by Doc Forgey

*It is hard to discount or ignore tales told by well-established important men in their community who insist that they have been cursed; that ghosts have contacted them. These men cannot be dismissed lightly. Such a tale was told by George Woodfall. He was a wealthy man from Sidney, Australia. This is a strange, supposedly true, story of a curse and ghosts that haunted him in the middle of the last century.*

George Woodfall was originally from England. He was from a well-respected family, but he lost all of his money in business dealings, causing him to immigrate to Australia to seek his fortune. And what better way to seek one's fortune in the outback than prospecting for gold?

He found two partners, Harper and Freeth, and together they searched the backcountry of Australia for gold. Woodfall was hoping to find enough that he could rebuild his fortune. Harper and Freeth were typical prospectors—two rough characters looking for an easy strike so that they could live it up a while in town before heading out again to look for more gold.

The three prospectors were lucky, for little by little they found gold. The nuggets and specks kept adding up until they were happy with their find—at least Harper and Freeth were. They were slowly working their way back to Sidney, Australia, to spend their fortunes when they noticed a remarkable waterfall leaping out of the side of a cliff. Such a remarkable sight was made even more appealing, for the mountain slope contained considerable quartz, which is frequently a gold-bearing rock. Even from the ground they could see a cave entrance near the waterfall. Certainly they should look into such a find!

They crawled up the rubble slope to the cave entrance. Once there they found that the cave entrance was a vertical shaft straight down. Chopping up some sturdy small trees, they fashioned pegs that they could drive into cracks in the rock, thus making a ladder that they could climb down. In this manner they were able to make it to the bottom of this cave. It was very impressive, with a vast cathedral-like ceiling that reverberated to the thunderous roar of the nearby waterfall. Large stalactites and stalagmites glittered in their torchlight. (Stalactites are the rock formations that hang down from the ceilings, while

stalagmites grow up from the ground.) Beautiful quartz crystals in the walls reflected their light. Excited by the possibility of a rich find, they set to work, digging into the quartz veins in the walls, heedless of the extreme beauty that surrounded them.

But beauty was all that they would find, for the quartz had very little evidence of gold in it. At one point they smashed a large quartz formation, finding a small den of a cave behind it. Exhausted by their work, the three men decided to rest in the small den before climbing out and proceeding on their way to Sidney. They were able to gather firewood from the shattered trees that had fallen down the shaft. In the warmer confines of the den, they lit their fire and settled down for the night.

Their talk that night, as usual, was of their gold, calculating its worth and describing the meals they would eat and the fun they would have when they reached Sidney. But Woodfall fell into a silent brooding, since he was an impatient man. Each had a respectable amount of gold, but these men he was with had little ambition. The gold they had would soon be squandered. If he could only have the entire amount, then he would be wealthy enough to really make a comeback!

There would be no chance of simply robbing his two companions and running to Sidney or anywhere else with the gold. They would follow him to the ends of the earth. As he pondered the situation, he eventually came to a bone-chilling plan. He would murder his companions. But they were both strong men, both clever desert travelers. He would have to be swift and sure of himself.

The fire was dying down. Woodfall would need light, but just enough light to accomplish his task—not so much light that they might notice his movements. How would he kill both of these men almost at once? Would they never stop talking, laughing, carrying on? He took some of the breakfast firewood and added a little to the fire. Neither man seemed to pay attention to him. And soon, fortunately, they seemed to fall asleep. He waited until he could hear the even deep breathing one expects in sleeping men.

His plans well laid, he waited until the fire died. He could barely see Freeth, his closest victim. He would have to dispatch him and instantly roll to Harper's position and get him anywhere he could. Sweat was standing on his brow, even in the cool damp cave. His muscles tense, he knew the time was right—it was now or never.

Quick as a flash, he struck Freeth a death blow right to the heart! There was scarcely a gurgle, simply a convulsion as the man received this lethal blow. Then he flung himself toward Harper. Woodfall had failed to count on the almost sixth sense that a woodsman develops to danger. That sixth sense had caused Harper to spring awake. Harper had turned to grab for his pistol as Woodfall lunged at him. Woodfall tackled him—both the knife and gun clattered away onto the darkness of the cave floor. Woodfall had the advantage as he grabbed Harper around the throat and squeezed like a madman. Harper had been unable to get a breath of air and thus soon thrashed, tangled in his bedroll as he convulsed from the lack of oxygen. Woodfall let the unconscious man loose, but searched

for his knife. Locating it by its glitter in the dim light, he instantly turned back toward the strangled Harper. Harper was sitting, unable to speak as he was still gasping for breath, but his pitiful face could be seen, his face flushed, his eyes protruding. He looked up at Woodfall desperately, putting his hands together, praying for mercy. But Woodfall had gone too far to stop now. He plunged the knife straight into Harper's chest.

“AAAUUUGGGHHH!”

Harper died with a terrible scream that echoed and reverberated through the great room of the nearby large cave.

Even though it was the middle of the night, Woodfall decided to leave that place at once. He combined the gold that they had all mined into his pack. The twisted bodies of his companions were too much for his conscience, and he decided to bury them. Perhaps he could hide any evidence of his crime forever in the bottom of the small grotto.

But digging in that cave bottom was harder work than he thought. The floor was clay, packed hard as concrete, with many small rocks. He chiseled away at it, but tiring he decided just to lay them in the shallow grave he had constructed and lay what debris he had picked from the floor over them. There would be little chance anyone would find this remote location, and if they did, there was nothing that could connect him with their deaths anyway.

Thus he left them, partially covered with loose rubble. He attached a rope to his now-heavy saddlebags, then carefully climbed up the treacherous wooden stakes they had placed in the entrance shaft. He left this horror behind

him for Sidney, where his fortune awaited him. The date was September 20—a day that would soon mean a lot to George Woodfall.

Once in Sidney he established himself as a wealthy man from England who was interested in investing his money in various Australian enterprises. Woodfall was obviously a man who took chances. When the opportunity arose, he invested nearly everything in a new mining property called the Benambra Mine, soon to become one of the wealthiest mines in Australia. The shares skyrocketed, and he found himself a very rich man.

He purchased an estate in an exclusive area of Sidney called Pott's Point. There he lived in grand style. He entertained lavishly and had many friends in the highest levels of society. But soon September came around. After one party he sat alone by an open window in his sitting room, staring across the dark waters of Port Jackson to the harbor lights at the Heads. More and more of his conscience ate at him—he would have given back all of his wealth, if only the terrible deed that he had done could be reversed. In this frame of mind, he had a strong inclination to go to the police and confess his crime. But soon this mood passed. He sank back into his chair, thinking that at least dead men could tell no tales, and those men were hardly fit to have owned that wealth that they would have merely lost within a month.

Suddenly, he heard a voice in the room say, "It is time. Let us begin."

Sure that he had overheard burglars, he slipped to his desk and obtained a revolver. He searched the house, but was unable to find any evidence of intruders. He returned

the revolver to his desk. Deciding to go to bed, he put out the lights in the room and started for the door. He had hardly taken a step when he said that he heard a heavy thump, like a body falling at his feet. As he staggered back in alarm, he began to hear sounds—the sound of a waterfall reverberating in the room, then worst of all came an ear-piercing scream, just like the last terrible cry made by Harper when Woodfall plunged the knife into his chest. There were other terrible, unknown noises that shook and rebounded through the room.

He collapsed into a corner, covering his ears against the terrible bedlam, but he was unable to drown this living nightmare out. It was as if he was back in the cave, reliving that night of terror—the night he sent two of his companions to the next world.

He expected his servants to hear this racket and come flying down from their quarters. But no one came, and he soon guessed that only he could hear this nightmare of sounds—the devil's concert as he later called it.

At the height of this noise, it suddenly ceased. Then, next to him a voice spoke, plain as day. It was the voice of the slain Harper.

“You are growing forgetful, George. In a week's time it will be September the twentieth. We are here to remind you.”

George Woodfall remembered the voice—without doubt it was Harper's, whose nightmarish scream had haunted him so long. But he also felt, rather than heard, another presence—that of Freeth whom he had killed so suddenly.

“Your time has not come yet, George, but before it does we will teach you to remember. We will expect you in the cave on the twentieth. Don’t forget to come. That is the only way you will escape us.”

“Yes, I will come,” Woodfall answered, and then he fell into a dream.

Was it a visit from beyond, or merely the tortured mind of a man who had committed cold-blooded murder?

Nevertheless, Woodfall returned to the cave, fearful of disobeying the dreaded specter who had contacted him beyond the grave. The trip back had to be made alone and in secret. Once there he had to again thrust in the wooden pegs to support his weight as he climbed down into that chamber of horrors. Woodfall later said of his experience that there he spent “a night of such agonizing horror that I wondered afterward how I came to retain either life or reason.”

What actually took place in the cave that night? We can only guess, but it would be doubtful that Woodfall could have touched the decaying bodies of his victims, covered with the thin layer of rocks.

Each year after this, he repeated his ghastly journey, spending a whole night in this hellish pit—listening to the roar of the waterfall. Each year the bodies rotted more and more, becoming more skeletal, more decayed. It was only by going back there that he felt he could have peace between times. But each year his dread of September twentieth mounted.

During the fourth year he decided that he would not go. But there was to be no escape, for again Harper and

Freeth visited him at Pott's Point, turning his home into a raging hell. From that time on, he never tried, never hoped, to avoid the yearly pilgrimage to this cave of death.

This grim yearly ritual had one major effect on George Woodfall. It changed his whole attitude toward life. No more did he hold frivolous parties. He tried to make up for his deed by giving to charity. He went to church regularly. He became one of Sidney's most respected citizens. His importance to the community is the reason that we are so aware of what eventually happened to him.

No one could possibly have guessed that he was a murderer. He had kept his gruesome secret well. Even his yearly trips had been carefully planned so that no one followed him, or even missed him. But the urge to confess his deed was constantly beneath the surface. Perhaps Harper and Freeth would leave him in peace if he confessed to the authorities? Anything would be better than the visit to the dreaded cave.

Finally, after twenty wretched years, and after nineteen terrifying visits to the cave of horror, Woodfall decided that he would make a complete confession. He felt compelled to make one more pilgrimage. But before he left, he sat down and wrote out his confession, noting the details of the murders, his many trips to the cave in penance, but particularly the visits of the ghosts of Harper and Freeth to his home at Pott's Point. He then left his home, never to return. His disappearance was a sensation in Sidney. All of his property and business dealings were found to be in perfect order. A statue was erected to the memory of this great civic leader. But his disappearance was also a mystery that would not be solved for five years.

The mystery was solved by William Rowley, the architect of many canals in New South Wales, and the Reverend Charles Power, of St. Chrysostom Church, Redfern, Sydney. They went on an expedition into the wilds of the Blue Mountains, gathering specimens for Reverend Power's large collection of butterflies. Both of them had known George Woodfall personally.

It was the twentieth of September when they came upon the spectacular waterfall that had first attracted Woodfall, Freeth, and Harper nearly twenty-five years before. They camped near the base of the waterfall, delighted with the beauty of the area. Just after supper, while relaxing around the campfire, a thunderstorm rolled around them. A deep red glare shone through the clouds that seemed to turn the pouring torrent of water to a crimson blood color. This caused them to stare closely at the waterfall, and in so doing they noticed the figure of a man—rather the image of a man along the edge of the waterfall. The image seemed to be beckoning them up the slope.

Although it was dark and treacherous, they scrambled up the hill. It took them an hour and a half to reach the place where they saw the man. They were following a dim trail along a steep precipice, with the mountain towering above them steeply in the night. In another hour they had reached the summit where the waterfall leaped off into the valley below. There they noted an ironbark tree that had been blazed with an arrow pointing directly downward.

In the nearby brush they found the entrance of the cave shaft. They held their lantern over the black pit and



*The Curse of the Australian Gold*

noted the wooden pegs that had been driven in the shaft wall. The stakes seemed secure, so the two men daringly descended. After a struggle with the treacherous entrance shaft, they found themselves at the bottom of the main cave, standing in awe at its size, listening to the roar of the cascading falls nearby. They examined the magnificent chunks of broken quartz, the beautiful cave formations, and the large boulders that littered the cavern floor.

Finally Rowley found the entrance of the smaller cave and entered it! His cry of horror brought Reverend Power hurrying in after him. As Power joined him, Rowley said, "Come, let's go back. This is no place for us!"

"For heaven's sake, what is it?" Power demanded.

Rowley then turned the full effect of his lantern upon the scene in the grotto. There in front of them was the shallow open grave, the tools used to dig it still scattered about, but sitting on the edge of the grave was a skeleton, bush clothes rotted to tatters, sitting as if he was peering, grinning down into the grave.

Two more bodies lay in the grave, one on top of the other. The one on top was similarly an almost completely decomposed skeleton. The one underneath was not as decayed as the other two!

Rowley reached down with a sapling and brushed aside the top corpse to view the one beneath. He was in the last stages of decay, but the dried flesh on the face made him seem vaguely familiar. There was something obviously strange about the positioning of the bodies. Why was one less decomposed than the others on the bottom? The other two had obviously been dead a much longer time. How was

it possible for the man who had died last to be found underneath a man who had died many years before?

They noted some camping gear and searched through it. In an old coat, fallen apart from age and the dampness of the cave, they found a flat metal box containing the inscription: GEORGE WOODFALL, POTT'S POINT, SIDNEY. Within that box they had the answer to the mystery that they were staring at, or at least a part of the mystery. Inside was the confession of George Woodfall, how he had killed Harper and Freeth for their gold, and how they had made him return to this place every year.

In his confession he wrote that he was making this, his twentieth trip, his last trip. He planned to return to the authorities and turn his confession over to them. He would never again return to this horrid cave.

But he did not return from his twentieth trip. He did not leave the power of Harper and Freeth ever again. How was he killed?

He had originally laid the bodies of his two victims in the grave that he had dug. And there they had laid during the twenty years of his visits, slowly decomposing. Because of his fear and loathing of this horrid place, it is hard to imagine him in any way disturbing or touching their bodies.

But he said that this would be his last visit to this place—from this point on he would attempt to free himself from the power of the dead. And to help him do it he would give himself up to the authorities, to be locked in prison so that he could NOT return, even if he wanted to try. Perhaps the ghosts of Freeth and Harper, which

had such great power over him, prevented his ever leaving again. Perhaps he arrived to find them sitting on the edge of the grave awaiting his return. Or perhaps he went hopelessly insane during this, his last visit to the cave.

Reverend Power felt there was something very devilish about the whole thing—that the place smelt like the very pit of hell.

The two men buried the three bodies, Reverend Power saying a prayer over them. A cairn was constructed outside the entrance of the grotto, marking their grave site—a cairn made of beautiful gold-bearing crystalline quartz from the cavern floor.

### *Story Outline*

I. George Woodfall murders two companions in a cave located near a waterfall, high on a cliff, to steal their gold. Freeth he kills instantly, Harper struggles but is finally half-strangled and then stabbed to death.

II. Woodfall invests his money well and becomes a very wealthy and respected man in Sidney, Australia. But he is haunted on the anniversary of the murder—voices in his house and the sound of the waterfall convince him to return to the scene of his crime.

III. For nineteen years he returns yearly, spending the night in the cave with the bodies of his victims.

IV. Finally, he decides he will return only one last time and afterward make a confession to the police. He never returns from this secret trip to the cave.

V. Five years later two men stumble across the waterfall. They notice the appearance of an image of a man who seems to beckon them up the hill, where they find the cave.

VI. Inside they find the bodies of three men. Two have been dead a long time. Two men are in the shallow grave dug by Woodfall—and he is one of them! One of the older corpses is located on top of him, the other is sitting on the side of the grave. They find Woodfall's confession, thus learning the whole incredible story, which was recorded in the Sidney newspapers.