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The Squatter's Ward

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Chapter I.—Somebody's Baby.

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It was a hot day in mid-December, so hot that the perspiration ran in little streams down the face of Richard Merton—familiarly known among his station hands as "Old Dick"—as he sat in a canvas-back chair in the coolest corner of the verandah. He was a middle-aged man of medium height; but his corpulent form made his legs appear exceedingly short. His thin, short-clipped beard was well sprinkled with grey, though he was yet a good many shakes of the leg under forty. His eyes were deep set, bright, piercing eyes, over-shadowed by bushy brows that lent a sinister expression to his face.

Altogether Mr. Richard Merton was not endowed with a prepossessing physiognomy. And yet, though a blustering, quick-tempered man, and somewhat excitable, he was good-hearted in the main.

His shirt-sleeves were rolled up to his elbows; a tam-o'-shanter sat jauntily on his head, and his feet were encased in slippers. He was smoking, his eyes half closed; now and then peering through the haze that shimmered like spider-silk over Tipparoo, he thought of his stockmen sweltering in the noonday, and felt cool by comparison.

The crouching form of an aborigine, hurrying with cat-like movement towards the house, escaped his attention. There was nothing unusual in the appearance of the black himself, but the remarkable burden he bore in his sinewy arms would have excited the interest of any casual observer. This was a little white infant wrapped in a segment of dirty blanket; not

the offspring of a half-caste, but a white of the whites. He carried it pressed against his breast in feminine fashion, and seemed commendably gentle and assiduous in his care of it. He trod the springy turf with surreptitious step, a pack of mangy-looking dogs followed silently at his heels. He swung a bush with one hand to keep the flies from the face of the child, and his coal-black eyes gleamed as they fixed intently on the man in the chair.

In front of the house was a large garden thickly planted with trees. Sheltered by these, the blackfellow paused at the palisade, and took a steady survey of the surroundings. The homestead, partially covered in front with clustering honeysuckle, was a rambling old building that had been in existence since the days when wild blacks were numerous in the locality, and many a tale of bloody fights and sieges its weather-beaten walls might tell were they gifted with the power of speech; and the same might be said of the old gum tree that stood between the house and the back premises, looking down from its eminence upon the curving tops of green willows fringing the shores of Bilbo Creek. Below were the great stockyards and stables, whence arose an incessant chorus from a legion of crows, so frequently the scene of excitement and tumult; while far beyond could be seen the long undulating range of Pine Mountains, marking the eastern horizon, and looking blue-black in the blurring distance.

Having carefully noted the situation, as if to impress it upon his memory for some future occasion, the blackfellow whispered a warning injunction to his dogs, opened the gate, and worked his way in a sinuous course through the

garden. The beauty of the plants, and the fragrance arising from the numerous beds of flowers, had no attraction for this primeval man of the woods. He evidently had but one fixed purpose in his mind, which was to reach the old gentleman on the verandah without attracting the attention of anyone else. Fortune favored him in this, as the intense heat had driven the women to rest in the cool retreats of the house. From the last tree he darted across the gravel walk and stood by the edge of the verandah, rolling his dark eyes around him in a quick, timid manner. A natural festoon of honeysuckle hid him from view. He peered round it some seconds before he ventured to show himself, being actuated then by the child showing signs of waking from the slumber that had hitherto been so propitious to him.

"Good day, boss!"

Merton sprang round sharply, and for some seconds stared in astonishment at his uncouth visitor, standing straight and rigid against the vines.

"Well," he said, "what do you want?" He removed his spectacles and now looked at the child, his glance wandering again to the grinning face of the black man.

"You take dis one piccaninny?" said the latter, holding the child out at arm's length.

"Take your piccaninny!" Merton repeated, bending forward with that stern, frowning look peculiar to some men when peering at objects they do not understand.

"Baal mine!" said the black man; "dis white feller piccanniny—him blonga whita pusson."

This appeared utterly incredible; but, being of a curious disposition, Merton at once stepped forward and took the

child, which the black surrendered with a pleasure he could not conceal. Merton, discarding the nauseous wrapper, examined the child critically, then turned his attention again to the man who had brought it. "Whose child is this?" he asked.

The black shook his head, saying he didn't know.

"Where did you get it?" Merton next inquired, his eyes searching the black man's face with a keen scrutiny; but that worthy's frontispiece was as impassive as a statue of ebony.

"You give um dinner fust time," he bargained. "Me berry hungry—walk long way—all day—big feller hungry."

"Where did you come from?" asked Merton.

"Good way—nodder side Pine Mountain—make um berry tired."

"What is your name?" Merton persisted.

"Wahwon," was the laconic reply,

"Your tribe camp about here?"

"Baal."

"Where then?"

"Wyrallah." He puckered his lips, and jerked his chin forward by way of indicating the direction. The talking had by this time awakened the child, and it commenced to cry immediately.

"Richard Merton had never been blessed with a child of his own, consequently his experience in nursing and pacifying one was nil; and his attempt in this direction was not only ludicrous, but an ignominous failure. He danced it round and round, tossed it up and down, swung it from side to side, and spoke to it in some such manner as he would

have spoken to a young colt; but all to no purpose. The child kicked and screamed, and Mr. Merton had a vague idea, by the extraordinary lung power it displayed, that it must be the offspring of a bookmaker or a sea captain. It made the very rafters tremble, and Mr. Merton's ears tingle. It seemed that the little brat was crying for no other reason than to exasperate him, as there did not appear to be any pins sticking in it, which, from Mr. Merton's point of view, was the only hypothesis to be launched in explanation of such an outburst; and he was manipulating it as carefully and tenderly as a zealous gardener would a delicate hot-house plant. He thought to return it to its black nurse, but the aborigine could not be induced to touch it. He seemed to consider it a matter for congratulation to be rid of it, and, stepping out of reach, placed his arms sturdily behind his back. The perspiration poured more copiously than ever from Merton's face and arms, and he began to lose his temper, and to resort to bouncing, under which treatment the child remonstrated by crying louder than ever.

At this stage Mrs. Merton and the housekeeper came running out to ascertain the cause of the strange noise; the cries of an infant had never been heard within the walls of Tipparoo homestead. They stopped short at the door, and gazed in astonishment at the phenomenal scene before them. To see a child in the house, without any proper attendant, would have excited their curiosity at any time, but to observe one in the arms of Mr. Richard Merton, and his performing the most fantastic capers about the verandah to appease its cries, was well calculated to astound them. For a moment they stared in open-mouthed

wonder; while Mr. Merton appeared to be blissfully oblivious of their presence. At last his wife spoke in a rasping voice:—

"Richard, whatever is the meaning of this?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Merton, stopping abruptly, and pressing the child to his breast. It struggled and yelled even louder than before, and Mr. Merton began to fear it would go off into convulsions or something if it kept on much longer. He was out of breath with it.

"I wish, my dear, you would take this little brat and quiet it. I'm heartily tired of hearing it yell." He tendered the poor little thing to his wife; but she showed a decided disinclination to taking it, and for a moment disputed with the housekeeper as to who should stand behind the other. She was, to a certain extent, a superstitious woman, and thus opposed to touching the child without knowing something about it.

"Where did you get it? Whose child is it? What, are you doing with a baby? Where's its mother?" she asked all in a breath, her eyes wandering restlessly from the child to Mr. Merton, and from Mr. Merton to the aborigine, who stood grinning in malicious enjoyment of the scene.

"I know nothing more about it, Maggie, than you do. This blackfellow here brought it to me, and asked me to take it: I took it."

"So I perceive," coldly; "and you asked no questions, of course?"

"He won't give any information till he's had his dinner."

"That's a very strange tale, Richard!" Mrs. Merton was suspicious. "The sins of a man often come home to roost," she said vindictively. "Who is the blackfellow?"

"He says his name is Wahwon."

"And who sent him here with—with that?"

"I tell you I don't know, Maggie!"

"Indeed!" Mrs. Merton sniffed ominously. "It's very remarkable that a baby should be sent to you by strangers—if you know nothing of its antecedents. I've known of babies being sent like this—" She stopped.

Mr. Merton looked surprised. "Good God, woman—surely you don't think—Here, take this child, for heaven's sake, and do something with it. Give it some arrowroot or pumpkin-squash—anything to stop that blessed howl. And, Betsy, hurry up and get that fellow something to eat in the kitchen. You go round the back, old man, and missy give um dinner. As soon as you've swallowed it, remember, I'll expect you to account for this child, or by the holy bunyip I'll tumble you inside out."

Betsy and Wahwon at once retired. Mrs. Merton stepped forward, her hands behind her. Her husband felt annoyed.

"For God's sake, woman," he said, "take it away. It won't bite!"

Mrs. Merton at last relieved him of his charge, handling it very gingerly. "Do you think we're doing right, Richard, in taking this child? There may have been a—a murder!" she said, with some hesitation.

"Good God!" her husband cried in alarm. "You don't think so?" He began to see for the first time that everything was not as it should be.

"Where are its parents? How came it in such strange hands, and brought here—poor little dear! The circumstances are very peculiar, to say the least. I don't half

like the look of things, Richard. There's something wrong—something very wrong."

"I was too curious to think of it at first—in fact, the strangeness of it all upset me—or I shouldn't have taken it before he had explained." Mr. Merton mopped himself hurriedly with a knitted arrangement he called a "sweat-rag." "Well," he added, after a moment's reflection, "I suppose we'll know all about it presently. Take the youngster inside, Maggie."

"I hope you don't intend to keep it?" queried Maggie, anxiously.

"Someone apparently expects us to do so," Mr. Merton rejoined. "For my part, I can assure you I have no wish to turn my place into a foundlings' home. Maybe some lady friend of yours is playing a joke on us by sending it on in advance of her."

"Of course," said Mrs. Merton, with a little dry cough, "it couldn't be a lady friend of yours. . . ."

"My lady friends are not that way—I mean—that is—they haven't got babies. If they had, they wouldn't pack them off like this."

"Well," said Mrs. Merton, "I'm sure I don't know anyone about here that has a baby, or is likely—"

"That's where it is!" Mr. Merton broke in as a thought struck him. "Your friend has kept it quiet, and planned this as a surprise for you."

Mrs. Merton shook her head. "No, that won't do. I've seen them all quite recently, and I know none of them were expecting anything of that kind. Might it not be—" She stopped, and bent a scared look at the child, which she had

now pacified. "There's something wrong," she added irrelevantly, "some mystery about it—and I hate mysteries."

"I reciprocate your sentiments, my dear," Mr. Merton rejoined. "This sort of mystery is positively abhorrent."

Mrs. Merton bore the little bundle of trouble indoors, rocking it gently in her arms, and talking to it as only a woman can talk to a baby; and the little one was soon cooing in her arms. Mr. Merton had a look at Wahwon in the kitchen, and, after an unsuccessful attempt to make him speak out, left him devouring the victuals the cook had placed on the table for his special benefit. Returning to his wife, he found her and Betsy overhauling the little one; whilst Sarah, the housemaid, was briskly preparing it some farinaceous food.

Mrs. Merton was one of those little busy-bodies who imagine all kinds of ridiculous things in answer to anything that is problematic, and who call up various reminiscences and anecdotes bearing relation to the case, for the sake of comparison. Having turned the murder theory over in her mind for some time, she adopted another, which was no less discouraging. Infants, particularly illegitimate ones, have often been sent to houses, or left on door-steps, in mysterious ways when it was inconvenient for the mothers to keep them. She remembered many such cases, and it appeared to her that this was another, until she made certain discoveries that tended to call forth her sympathy and affability.

"Well, what do you make of it?" Mr. Merton asked.

"Why, it's a dear little girl, Richard!" his wife replied enthusiastically.

"Oh, is that the only thing you've discovered!" said Mr. Merton dejectedly. "I could have found that out myself."

"It's a fine, strong, healthy child," Mrs. Merton continued, "and such a pretty little dear, too! It'd give me great pleasure to adopt it, but I should like to know something about it first. We have no children, Richard, and what a blessing this child would be to our home! A place is never so bright and cheerful—never complete—without some little one in it!"

It was clear to Richard Merton that his wife's maternal instincts and natural love of children were conquering her superstitious fears, and he was much relieved in consequence, for he had feared, if she showed any scruples in accepting the charge, that he would have considerable trouble in inducing the aborigine to receive it back. And yet, he argued to himself, it would not be a justifiable act to enforce it, as he was, in a humane sense, bound to care for it until its parents could be discovered. He further deliberated with himself as to whether he should not detain the aborigine until the peculiar circumstances could be explained. The word of the black man could not be accepted as final, however plausible his account, when given, might be. There may have been, as his wife suggested, a terrible murder committed, and the very black he was succoring, and who had delivered the child into his hands, might be concerned in that murder. The gruesome probability of it made him shudder. A great responsibility had been cast upon his shoulders, which he had blindly and unwittingly permitted; and to alleviate it he recognised the prudence of having the black placed in custody till the police could be

communicated with, and the matter explained to the satisfaction of all concerned.

It was the surest and safest course to pursue; in fact, so far as he could see at this stage, he had no other alternative.

"Why, look here, Richard," said Mrs. Merton, breaking in upon his meditations, "here's a gold chain round its neck, with a richly chased locket appended! I wonder what's in it?"

"Open it and see," said Richard, more practically. She opened it, and beheld the miniature of a beautiful lady, apparently about thirty years of age, and a small lock of fine brown hair tied with a piece of narrow, blue ribbon, and which, ostensibly, had belonged to the original of the miniature.

"Dear me!" Mrs. Merton ejaculated, holding them at arm's length. "I wonder, can it be the child's mother! It must be—no one else would hang her photo and hair in such a place. See how she resembles the child in the eyes—and their mouths are exactly alike. Do you see the likeness, Richard?"

"Umph!" said Richard, who couldn't for his life perceive how a child could resemble an adult, whether they be correlative or other wise. He could understand one grown-up person, or one babe, being the image of another; but a resemblance of one of each to the other he could not imagine.

"Betsy," continued Mrs. Merton, "let us examine her clothing. We may find something else. What fine clothes she has! Look at the richness of this lace, Betsy—and the linen! It's of the very best quality. They must have been well-to-do

people. What a strange thing! You little dear, what are you laughing at? Where's the blackfellow, Richard?"

"I left him in the kitchen," answered Richard, "I must go and look after him. I'm anxious to hear what he has to say. He ought to be pretty well satisfied now."

He strode through the hall to the kitchen, turning over in his mind the various points on which he meant to interrogate Wahwon. At the door he gave a gasp and staggered back. The table was relieved of all edibles, and Wahwon was gone! This was unfortunate, if so be his stupidity had led him to return to his own haunts without testifying as to how he had come by the child, and his right to dispose of it in the summary manner he had done. There still was a chance, though, that he was strolling about the garden awaiting the squatter's convenience. Hoping that such was the case, Richard Merton rushed into the garden, and called loudly to him, but received no answer. He ran round the house and kitchen, and all through the garden, shouting: "Wahwon! Wahwon!" and only the echoes responded. Round the yards and stables, and along the creek he ran, puffing like a hippopotamus, relinquishing the fruitless pursuit only when exhaustion compelled him to do so. Wahwon had disappeared, and Mr. Merton was thoroughly nonplussed. A dawning dread began to creep over him which he could not define. He instinctively recognised that the position of guardian to a child of whom he knew nothing had been suddenly forced upon him, and the only means of elucidation there had been was now lost. Afterthought presented many embarrassments which had not appeared to him before: There had been little cause for

anxiety while the black was present, but his disappearance gave rise to grave doubts and suspicions, and left Mr. Merton in a dilemma. What was he to do now? Why had he left him a single moment unguarded? Anathematising his want of discretion, and much perturbed, he staggered back to his wife, whom he found in a state of excitement and exultation.

"Richard, look here— Why, what's the matter?" she suddenly interrupted herself on seeing the blanched face and scared look of her panting husband.

"Matter enough!' growled Richard. He dropped into a chair, vainly endeavoring to conceal his agitation. Mrs. Merton could not understand it, and felt uneasy.

"What is it?" she asked. "One would think you had been climbing Mount Lindsay—or has someone used you for a lawn-roller?"

"That blackfellow has bolted," replied the aggrieved husband.

"Dear me! How dreadful!" said Mrs. Merton. "Whatever does it mean?"

"I'm afraid there's been a murder committed. There'll be the deuce to pay. It's an unfortunate business—"

"I don't think it's a case of murder, Richard," Mrs. Merton rejoined.

"You don't? Why, Maggie, it was you who made the suggestion!"

"I thought so at first. But I have found a note pinned to the inside of the child's dress. It is addressed to you, and requests you to take charge of the child—to adopt it. There's no name to it . . . that's the strangest part of it. I really can't

think what could possess a man to cause him to act in such an eccentric manner."

Still, Richard Merton was much relieved. He wiped his heated brow and his spectacles at the same time, and proceeded to read the following note:—

"This little child is motherless, or believed to be, and it is impossible for me to bring her up. I have taken the liberty of sending her to you, as I know of no one else with whom I could trust her. It will be a charity if you take her and adopt her as your own daughter. Call her Edith. That is her baptismal name. She will inherit a large fortune on my death, a considerable portion of which will accrue to you if she remains your ward during the interim. I am her only relative, and must, for some years, remain incognito. Be kind to her, and God bless you all.

"Her Father."

"Well, Richard," said Mrs. Merton interrogatively, when her husband had completed the perusal of the above; "what do you think of it?"

"I'm perfectly mystified, Maggie. This is a strange business altogether. One thing, though—this note dispenses with the necessity of communicating with the police. I detest having any dealings with that body."

"Oh, there's no need to communicate with them," Mrs. Merton rejoined.

"Not now. I'd like to have catechised that darkey, though. Confound him! He might have had manners enough to thank me for my hospitality, if not for taking the babe off his hands."

"He may turn up again," Mrs. Merton suggested; "the father may send him back with another message."

"I don't think so," said her less sanguine spouse. "I must have a talk with Magnus Susman. He may be able to suggest something."

"I think it would be better not to consult him. I don't like that man. He's too heterodoxical and hermitical in his opinions and habits; and I believe he's an old miscreant. He has the look of a bad egg, at all events."

Mrs. Merton made a grimace, and flicked a speck of dust from her bodice. "Wangooma is a . . . a bad house."

"That's only your fancy, my dear. I've never seen anything in the man to cavil at, and I've had some considerable dealings with him one way and another." Mr. Merton, in fact, thought the world of Susman.

"You will, some day; mark my words. He's not a man to be trusted."

"I wish you thought differently. He's not been a bad neighbor to us—not at all bad. You only fancy things, Maggie. But what of the child?"

"Why, we'll adopt her, of course, Richard! She'll be Edith Merton—won't you, dear? Bless your little heart!" And she fell to kissing and talking to the "little cherub," and dancing it on her knee. She was as proud of the child now, and as delighted in the knowledge of its being her possession for good and all, as though it were really of her own flesh and blood. As for Merton, he had now cooled down, and regarded events as matters of course, though in sooth he cherished a feeling of vengeance against Wahwon for taking French leave; and a doubt for a moment may have entered

his mind that henceforth he would be to some extent a neglected husband. It was considerably cooler now, the sun being nearly down, and his mercurial spirits had risen in proportion. He sat with folded arms and silently watched his wife feeding the baby with a spoon, and seemed to derive no small amount of edification from so doing. The baby was then rocked to sleep, and the soothing lullaby nearly put Mr. Merton to sleep also; but he woke up sufficiently to observe, with a faint smile, that it took the conjoint efforts of his wife, housekeeper, and maid to put the baby in its little bed. Then the three women repaired to the back rooms to talk over the important event, while Mr. Merton crossed his legs, and lay back to think over it. It seemed a difficult thing for him to realise that he was all at once placed in the capacity of a father without being one; and he marvelled long as to whom the parents of his foster-child might be, and why the father had chosen not to make himself known. The case of the mother was shrouded in mystery, and subjected him to serious reflections, insomuch as he had heard of no death having taken place in the vicinity. But, perhaps, as the black asserted, they may have resided miles beyond the Pine Mountains, perhaps in the neighborhood of Wyrallah, and the death of the woman might be well known to the residents there. Still, again, it was not positively asserted that the mother was dead. The child was "motherless, or believed to be!" What was the meaning of this doubt? Long he sat and thought over the matter without throwing much light upon it; and long years after, when the now innocent little Edith brought trouble and anxiety upon him, he had

cause to resuscitate and to regret the day when she was so strangely introduced into his small household.

And yet again he was glad!

Chapter II.—Doubts and Suspicions.

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The crack of stockwhips and the neighing of horses aroused Mr. Merton from his reverie, and he started up in surprise at the lateness of the hour. He adjusted his cap, and, lighting his pipe, strolled outside. The tired horses were rolling in the soft sand at the stockyard gates, and the men were preparing for supper, as he made his way towards the hut. This stood on the hillside a quarter of a mile below the house. It was an old but commodious building, with slab walls and shingled roof. The interior formed a pleasant contrast to its external roughness and irregularities. There were two long dining-rooms, for whites and blacks, the latter being often in predominance. Both compartments were scrupulously clean, and replete with their complement of furniture, which, though not of an elaborate description, was at least substantial. Adjoining these was a room containing a long narrow table, strewn with various papers and periodicals, while on the walls were a few shelves stocked with a miscellaneous assortment of books. This was the, reading-room, where the rollicking stock-riders read and discussed the news of the world; where exciting debates and arguments were held; where cards, draughts, and other games were played for tobacco and matches when papers and books became "stale"; where many a thrilling tale of the bush was related, and many a stirring song was sung, in the winter months, when a huge log-fire burned briskly in the fireplace at the end, now appropriately filled with a few green bushes standing in an oil drum.

These various apartments were presided over by a West Indian cook named Sam. He was a man six feet one in stature, robust and powerfully built. He was intellectual, too, for an Ethiopian, and, unlike the obtuse aborigines of Australia, possessed the advantages of a liberal education. He was well liked by the white men, but held in abhorrence by the blacks. The dislike was reciprocal, for Sam detested the very sight of a native; and this animosity occasioned no end of broils and bickerings between them. The scholarly Sam classed them as a disjointed link between the orangoutang and the Ethiopian, making sarcastic allusions to their crude gunyahs, and comparing them with the accommodations of the white men.

So far as the latter were concerned, Mr. Richard Merton was considerate to the comforts of his men. He was, nevertheless, in many respects, a stern disciplinarian, and strict in his management. There were no skulkers or loafers on Tipparoo, and no swagmen ever found lodgings there; but there was a Sundown camp on the creek.

The men, on this particular evening, were washing one by one in a tin dish at the back of the hut. This done, they donned their coats and neckerchiefs, and gathered round the table, which was covered with a clean white cloth, and lit with a kerosene lamp. Tipparoo, be it remembered, was a model station—a howling contrast to the majority of stations in New South Wales and Queensland. Enter their grimy, soot-stained huts and observe the stale, soddy bread cast on the bare planks that serve for a table, the sour salt-junk sticking to a rusty tin dish, rusty tin plates and pannikins, rough, stern-visaged men slashing in with might and main,

some lighting their pipes at a dirty slush-lamp in the centre of the board, and puffing whiffs of tobacco smoke in the faces of those still eating. These are mostly, poorly-paid, hard-working men, under an employer who looks upon them as no whit superior to beasts, and treats them as such. Their sleeping apartments are noted for filthiness and disorder: for these disheartened men, bundled together on one broad floor, or in bunks one above another like the steerage berths in a coasting ship, have no will or inclination to keep them clean and tidy; their sense of respectability is nullified by station usage.

The knowledge of this, the memory of past hardships, instilled within the men of Tipparoo a sense of gratitude and satisfaction. They were arranging themselves around the table when Mr. Merton entered.

"Well, Sam, you've got a fine family of big boys here," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Sam. "They always come to see me at meal-time."

"And turn their backs upon you between times," laughed Merton. "How did you find the cattle on the Cobar, Ralf?"

"Poor as crows," said a grey-bearded man, who sat at the head of the table. This was the overseer, Ralf Havelock. "The grass is pretty scarce, hardly enough to feed a bandicoot in places; and the water-holes are dryin' up fast. We pulled three cows out of the bog, an' killed two more that were dyin'. They'd been in too long to've got on their legs again."

"What is Rocky Creek like? Any water in that?"

"Not much—just a bit of a pot-hole here an' there, an' that as black as ink. Gettin' boggy, too, some of em."

"That's a bad look-out. We'll have to shift the cattle across to Sandy Hills. I never knew that Cobar country to carry stock through the summer yet. Mostly, you can flog a flea across it."

"When do you think of shiftin' em?" asked Ralf.

"Next week, I suppose. By the bye, have any of you heard of the death of a woman about here lately?"

They had not, and knew of only one woman residing in the vicinity. "My missus is the only woman I know of about here," said Ralf, an' she was alive an' kickin' this mornin'. It couldn't be Mrs. Jed Roff at Goolgolgon—unless she snuffed out within the last day or two."

"No; I fancy this woman lived over about Wyrallah. A blackfellow brought me a child this afternoon, with a note from its father asking me to adopt it, as it was motherless. I don't know who the father is—the blackfellow took his hook before I could question him. He said his name was Wahwon. Have you ever heard of such a blackfellow?"

"No," said Ralf; "but some of the darkeys might know something about him; they're often over Wyrallah way."

Merton stepped into the next room, where the aborigines were supping; but on inquiry found that Wahwon was known to none of them.

"No," he said, again addressing Ralf. "Just come in here a moment. I want to speak to you." He went into the reading-room, followed by Ralf. The lamp on the table was lit, and both sat down on a long stool, the only kind of seating accommodation the apartment boasted. "I thought,

perhaps, it would be as well to show you this note," Merton continued, taking, from his pocket-book the slip which had been pinned to the child's dress. "I want to see if our opinions coincide."

He watched the countenance of the overseer as he read: but it told him nothing. Ralf perused it unmoved, and passed it back with the same unconcern he had shown in taking it.

"Well, what's your opinion?" asked Merton.

"You can't take any notice o' that." said Ralf, "it's nothing to go by."

"How do you make that out? I thought it important."

"It isn't genuine, for one thing."

"Not genuine?"

"No. It's signed 'Her father.' "

"Well?"

"Can't you see . . . that note was written by a woman?"

Merton hastily unfolded the note again, and looked carefully over it. It was, indeed, a lady's chirography, a fact, which he and Mrs. Merton had overlooked in their first cursory examination of it. The discovery made him more dubious and anxious than he had been at first. Here was deceit at the very outset; and no reliance could be placed in the contents of a letter written by a feminine hand and purporting to come from a man. Mr. Merton felt that his hopes of success were suddenly crushed. "I didn't notice this before," he said. "The thing's getting worse instead of better."

"You ought to've seen the sham at once. First thing I noticed. An' leavin' the writin' alone, there's the doubt about

the mother. The writer says the kid's motherless or believed to be! What the deuce can you make of that?"

"I don't know what to make of it," said Merton. "The father ought to know positively whether she is or is not motherless—unless it's another case of 'strange disappearance.' "

"If it was we'd have heard of it, you may depend. There'd have been a hue an' cry in no time. It would be in the papers, an' everybody would be talkin' about it. The child, of course, would then be well known. That theory won't carry at all. How old is the child?"

"I should think she was about six months old."

"Then we may say the mother was with it for a certainty five months ago—"

"She must have been with it till very recently," Merton interrupted.

"Why so?" asked Ralf.

"They'd have honored me with the charge of it before now if it had been without a mother so far back as that."

"They might've an they mightn't. Just depends. The question is, what became of her if the father doesn't know whether she's dead or alive? If a man dictated the letter, an' there's any truth in its contents, it points to a deep mystery. What's your opinion?"

"I'm almost afraid to speak my mind. I'd rather hear yours."

"Well, to be candid," said Ralf, "I think it must be an illegitimate."

Merton winced, for his own thoughts were spoken in those words.

"I'll tell you for why," continued Ralf. "We'll suppose it to be legitimate, an' the mother deserted it an' her husband for another man. Such a thing couldn't very well be kept quiet, an' would be known to everybody. Nothing gets about quicker than scandal, or is harder to keep from leakin' out. If she disappeared any other way, the result would be the same, as I said before. The father's plight would be known, too, an' he'd be more likely to give the youngster to some woman he knew than to send it in such a way to a stranger as if he didn't care what became of it; an' above all, he wouldn't trust it to a blackfellow to carry through the bush as you might a poddy lamb. Now we'll take it as base-born, in which case it wouldn't be in charge of a father. The mother wouldn't be particular how she got rid of it as long as it was off her hands. Them sort o' mothers always want to get rid o' their kids, an' wouldn't think twice o' givin' it to a blackfellow to take to someone as the gel was brought to you. That's the way I look at it."

Merton groaned inwardly, and returned the note to his pocket-book. "It looks plausible enough," he said, "that I've been burdened with the offspring of some wretched woman. What am I to do? I can't rest with these doubts—these suspicions."

"Perhaps it'd be as well to have a look round before decidin' what to do with it. You might find out something—might run across the blackfellow again. It's a great pity you let him slip you up."

"That's where the shoe pinches, Ralf. But who would have supposed the devil would have run away like that?"

"He must have been put up to it," said Ralf.

"You think the mother, or father, instructed him to act like that?"

"Seems like it. What would be his reason else for not tellin' you all about it? An' blacks generally hang about, too."

"If it is as you say, we'll have a job to find him. Anyhow, I think it will be best to have a general search before doing anything else," said Merton. He meditated for some time before he resumed. "You'd better take some one with you and go to Wyrallah to-morrow, Ralf. He said he came from over that way. It might have been only a blind, but still it won't be any harm go over. Make inquiries, and see if you can find out anything bearing on the case. Bill Mayne can take a couple of others with him and go across to the mountain where Wren and his men are cutting pine. They would very likely know Wahwon, if he's been knocking about there. They can go then to Tillawong, and round home by Minara. I suppose that'll be as much as you'll be able to do. It'll be easy enough for you to recognise the black if you chance across him. He's middle-aged, and has a slight stoop in the shoulders. His dress when I saw him consisted of a patched pair of tweed trousers, torn Crimean shirt, and a worn out, chocolate-colored felt hat. He has a fairish long beard, going grey, and a big crooked nose. You'll know him by that and his clothes, for he's certain to have nothing to change with. Be ready to start away by daylight. You can get dinner at Mogilwooga on your way back."

"Will you be going out yourself?" said Ralf. "We may as well know each other's route, so as not to waste time goin' to the same places."

"Yes," said Merton. "I'll take Mumby with me and go to Goolgolgon and Badginbilly."

"There's a camp or two down the Bargo might be worth your while to have a look at." Ralf suggested. "There's no sayin' but what he might have dropped in there goin' back."

"I mean to have a look round there," Merton answered. "There's a pretty big tribe camped not far from Back Coorawynbah. They've been there a good while too. Maybe Wahwon is not unknown to them."

After a few more instructions to Ralf, and a word or two to Bill Mayne and Mumby, the Tipparoo tracker, Merton went back to the house to consult his wife on the new aspect of affairs.

"It seems to me that what is really wanted is a policeman and a doctor," said the lady, on being informed of the latest developments.

"What do you want with a doctor?" Mr. Merton inquired.

"To go round and see who's been . . . who's responsible . . ."

"I see! I think we'll defer that till a later date, my dear. For the present, we'll consider things—well, simply mysterious."

"Oh, that's just like a man!" Mrs. Merton exclaimed. "I hope they're not to remain 'mysterious' very long. I hate mysteries!"