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*The Mystery
of Murrawang*

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Chapter I.—Some Mysteries.

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"Of all the idiotic things I've heard of, this takes the pastry," young Rory Borrn exclaimed, as his father, who had been in town for a couple of days, returned to Broonah with an unwelcome visitor. "I reckon the boss wants his brains brushed. And the hide of that fellow to come here!" Saying which, he strode indignantly out on to the lawn, where he was soon busy erecting a tent as a sleeping-out shelter.

Broonah Station was generally a quiet place at Christmas time, for the shearing was then over, the scouring and pressing completed, and the tinkle of carriers' bells a thing of the past.

But this year there was to be a little gaiety and excitement at the homestead, since Ellis Rhea, whose last seven years had been spent behind prison bars, was now a guest of Mr. Hoey Borrn's.

His coming had not been announced, and he was received by the other members of the family with undisguised astonishment. The fact was that Mr. Borrn believed him to be the victim of circumstantial evidence, and had taken him into his respectable household on account of life family connections. His advent marked the beginning of a more exciting time than the genial old squatter had ever dreamed of.

Borrn was a hale and hearty old gentleman of 60, with a pleasant, ruddy face and scanty grey hair. Though a stout party, slightly warped in the legs, he was full of energy. It was said in the station hut that no stout man of his years

had ever shown such activity as he did one day when he attempted to rob his hives and the bees attacked him. He was fond of a yarn; he was also fond of a drop out of a bottle; and he loved his pipe. A robust, good-natured man was Hoey Borrn.

Rhea was about 35, but looked older. He had come to Broonah for recreation, and looked forward to a merry time—at least, he said so; but there was something in the look of Ellis Rhea that was not pleasing, and somehow he gave the impression that he was incapable of ordinary merriment. His manner in company appeared always to be forced, and sometimes after a silence he would start and answer jerkily, as if he had been caught mentally wandering in a foreign channel.

"We have very little to offer in the way of amusement," said Mr. Borrn, when they were seated at dinner that night, "unless you are fond of shooting, fishing, or kangarooing."

"Why, you have actually named my three favorites; I'd wish for no better sport in the world," Ellis Rhea returned, with a show of enthusiasm.

Mrs. Borrn looked at him steadily for a moment, with something of suspicion, even distrust, in her dark eyes.

"I'm glad of that," said Borrn, "for the swamps and creeks about here are black with game, and there are any amount of barramundi to be caught in the washpool. As for kangaroos and wallabies, I have more of them than I possess sheep. I've often tried to induce Rory to go scalping, but the only satisfaction I ever got was that he'd think about it when he got time."

"That will come with the millennium," added Stella, a winsome little lady of 22. She was more a chip of the old block than Rory, who was three years her senior. Though accomplished in the way that made her an attraction in the drawing-room, her heart was in the great, wild bush. Often a tent was taken out for her at mustering times, and she shared camp life with the men. Riding over hill and dale, breathing the delicious aromas of wild Australia, waking the echoes with her stock whip, and listening to the fluting and carolling of innumerable birds, was to Stella a glorious life. She was bush-bred, and all her childhood associations were wrapped in the primitive splendor of the wide, pastoral lands. Being a nature lover, delighting in her native trees and flowers, the broad run afforded her endless pleasure and interest. Her brother was a more matter-of-fact person, whose aesthetic sense was less pronounced than his business acumen.

"Rory is a hunter," she added, "who is mostly too busy to hunt."

"Never mind," said Rory, "we'll leave as many carcasses on the plains this Christmas as we've done in other years. It's a time of terror for the marsupials."

"Poor things!" said Mrs. Borrn sympathetically. "There should be peace all over the land at this time of year. It's a shame to make holiday shooting dumb animals."

"If you continue in that strain, Mrs. Borrn, you'll make me feel guilty of something dreadful every time I fire a shot," Ellis Rhea asserted, and though he smiled, he looked at Stella with pathetic eyes, which did not escape her mother.

"I have no patience with that man," the latter remarked aside. "Such a confounded hypocrite he is."

She did not treat him with anything like the cordiality that was accorded him by her husband. She had her reasons, and intended to make it hot for Mr. Rhea when opportunity offered.

"I suppose we won't be always shooting or hunting," Rhea continued. "There's a variety of entertainment, I believe. Fishing, for instance—"

"Oh, yes," Rory affirmed. "We can sit up at the washpool without speaking and without getting a bite for two or three hours when ever you feel inclined for that sort of diversion."

"It would not be too exciting for weak nerves, at all events," added Stella, "but I think Mr. Rhea would prefer a visit to the Haunted Glen."

"A haunted glen! You interest me!" Rhea exclaimed, alert in a moment. "Have you really such a place within easy reach of the station?"

"Within a stone's throw," said Rory.

"Indeed!"

"Well, not quite so close as that; but you can see it from the verandah," Stella explained.

"And is it really haunted?"

"It has had the reputation of being haunted for many years," Mr. Borrn answered. "I don't believe in ghosts myself: I think such things are merely reflections, or hallucinations, resulting from a disordered state of mind. Anyhow, I'll tell you the story of the Glen, and you can judge for yourself."

"Do!" said Rhea. "I'll be most delighted to hear it."

"Ten years ago the body of a young man was found there with a gun-shot wound in the back. There wasn't a stitch of clothing on it, or near it, and the hair had been burned close off the head and face, which was unrecognisable. A swag and billy-can lay a few yards from it, but neither of these provided any clue to the man's identity. Some swagman, evidently. But why he was shot, and by whom, the Lord only knows. The body was buried in the Glen—unidentified.

"Previous to this the caves at the end of the Glen were frequently visited by the Ralstons—my predecessors; but after the unknown was interred there it was avoided by everyone. Not a human foot touched its precincts for six years. Dingoes turned the caves into kennels; two eagles took up their abode in the trees above, and owls and bats filled the scrubs around it.

"About seven years ago Ralston himself was riding close by the entrance to the Glen on his way home. It was near dusk. He was scanning a bank of clouds to south'ard, hoping it would bring him the rain he had long wanted, when suddenly his horse gave a quick start, stopped, and snorted.

"Following the direction the horse indicated, Ralston saw a sight that for a moment made his blood run cold. Yet it was nothing very terrible. Standing just before a shelving rock was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her hair streamed across her shoulders, her hands were clasped, and her eyes looked upward.

"He stared at her as one spellbound. She remained immovable, almost rigid in her posture, so that she might have been mistaken for a magnificent specimen of Grecian sculpture, or a figure petrified in the act of prayer. I believe

there are some wonderful and fantastic shapes in the caverns under that hill, formed by ages of percolation, and for awhile Ralston thought this must be one of them that some joker had brought out and stood there.

"But all at once it shivered (I'm telling the yarn as Ralston told it), the lips moved, and some words came, half-sobbing, from them. The speech seemed more a passionate denunciation than a prayer. She continued for a minute or more, but emotion, and the wind that wails eerily through the rock pinnacles there, made her words unintelligible to him.

"Presently she turned, and, with her hands to her face, moved slowly up the Glen for a few paces, then suddenly dropped her hands and strode rapidly away towards Murrawang boundary.

"Angus Ralston had been staring at the woman—or apparition, or whatever it was—with his hair on end. He knew of no living woman who ought to be there; but he knew that Mrs. Garratt Rhea had been thrown from her horse and killed just about there. That may have been in his thoughts at the time. Anyhow, he put spurs to his horse and rode full gallop to the stockyard gate. When he burst into the room where his wife was sitting he was as white as a sheet, and his eyes had the wild look of a hunted fugitive. He told her he had seen a ghost. She laughed at him; she laughed at him for long afterwards; but she couldn't laugh him out of what she called his foolishness.

"He was rated a hard-crusted old fellow by most people, not over scrupulous in his dealings. His past life, for the most part, was a void. No inducement could draw him out

on that point; all he would speak about was sundry conflicts with wild blacks in the early days. The only one I know who could throw any light on the matter is our housekeeper, Lydia Munce; but her lips are as sealed as the dead.

"However, Ralston believed that others might not see this spirit, as it had come to haunt him alone, though he never explained why it should do so. It preyed on his mind to such an extent that his one desire for the time being was to get away from Tiaro Creek and the sight of Kholo Hills. That was how he came to sell me the station.

"Since then the Glen has borne an unenviable reputation. Stockmen and others from time to time averred they had seen a woman, such as Ralston described, walking there; but she always led by the hand a little, curly-headed boy. From reports it would seem that the boy grows bigger as time goes by. I never heard of a ghost starting an infant and growing up before. The mother ghost seems to be aging too. At first she had black hair—'long streaming hair,' some described it; but when last seen it was done up, and was turning grey. What do you make of that?"

"It seems to me," said Ellis Rhea, "that there is some agency foreign to supernatural influence at work in that glen; that is to say, if the affair was investigated it would transpire that the woman is more closely allied to the terrestrial than the celestial world. Does anyone live about the neighborhood?"

"No; there's no place between ours and Murrawang."

"You know that, of course, Mr. Rhea," Mrs. Borrn put in. "You are not a new chum on Tiaro Creek. Indeed, you should know every inch of it."

"I have not seen it for nine or ten years, Mrs. Borrn. Many changes may take place in that time. Murrawang, I know, has changed."

"Merely the homestead. The country around it is much the same as when you saw it last. The same paddocks, the same hills, the same trees—"

"You are wrong, mother," Rory contradicted. "The paddocks were bare and black when Mr. Rhea left. A big bush fire had just swept over them. Now there's grass up to the saddle-flaps everywhere."

"And there's the haunted glen," added Rhea, taking Rory seriously.

"Oh, that's been there since the glacial period," Mrs. Borrn rejoined. "It's a wonder you never heard of it. You ought to be fairly well acquainted at least with the landmarks of Broonah run."

"I have no recollection of it," Rhea answered; "if I had known of it I should certainly have tried to clear up the mystery."

"I've never had sufficient faith in the story myself to bother about it. I think it's all tommy rot; Ralston must have imagined it."

"What do you think, Mr. Rhea?" asked Rory.

"Well; I don't believe in ghosts, to begin with. That sort of thing is all nonsense. If a woman was seen there you may depend it was a woman."

"But what would she be doing there?"

"Ah! that's the rub. Perhaps she had a husband; they may have been travelling and had camped there for a few days, or at different times. Seven years is a long time to

look back; but even now an exploration of those caves should prove interesting."

"Then I vote we form ourselves into a Society for the Investigation of Cave Mysteries," said Rory. "We have now three enthusiasts; between us we should be able to do something."

"I should like to have a quiet talk with that woman, Munce," said Ellis Rhea. "She was a servant of ours, you know, at Berrinong, and was the principal witness against the teller in—in that bank affair, you know. I fancy, from what you say, Mrs. Borrn, that she knows more about the Glen than anyone here. She was many years in Angus Ralston's service before she went to Berrinong."

"You might as well try to bleed a stone, Mr. Rhea, as try to get anything out of Lydia. Let me tell you," Mrs. Borrn went on, "there's a mystery about that woman I could never fathom, and a darker mystery still in connection with the west-end room which she occupies."

"Indeed!"

"She was a conundrum to the Ralstons; she's a conundrum to me. Not that I have any thing against Lydia, mind you. She's a very good woman in every respect, but"—Mrs. Borrn shook her head deprecatingly—"there's a cloud over her—a something; I don't know what."

Rhea was thoughtful. He was not so enthusiastic now as he had been. Still, after some rumination, he begged her to tell him of this woman. He waited with a peculiar eagerness, while she poured out a cup of tea, a strained expression on his face.

The tea was not to Mrs. Born's liking, and she rang the bell for Lydia to put some water in the teapot.

Chapter II.—Lydia Munce.

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Lydia came smartly into the room, but on noticing the visitor she half-stopped, and the pink faded magically from her cheeks. She was a strongly-built woman of middle age, good looking above the average, in whose face, however, there were unmistakable signs of care. Only Rory noticed her concern. What he saw whetted his curiosity, and directed his attention more closely to Rhea when she had finally withdrawn. The man who wanted to have a quiet talk with her had merely given her one shifty glance.

"For some unaccountable reason," Mrs. Borrn commenced, "Ralston had a great antipathy to that west-end room. It was given to Lydia during her last term with them. She still had it when we took her over with the station, and she's got it yet. It isn't a nice room, by any means; no one else here would have it, but she prefers it to any other.

"Now, as soon as her work is finished she goes to that room, locks the door and window, and no amount of knocking or calling can bring her out of it or elicit an answer, until she emerges next morning. She says she does not hear—that she goes to bed and to sleep immediately. But that's all my eye. Just wait till I tell you."

This was a pet phrase of Mrs. Borrn's when she wished to be impressive.

"One night I had to come down for something—I forget what it was—but, anyhow, I couldn't get it without going to Lydia. Receiving no answer to my knock—as usual—I tried

the door, and, very much to my surprise, I found it unlocked. I thought this a fortunate circumstances. Entering quietly, I relit my candle, which the wind had blown out, and looked for Lydia. She wasn't there. Not a sign of her.

"I was angry, you may be sure, at finding the woman out at that hour. It was 12 o'clock, mind you. I was also puzzled as to where she could be. The only outside place where she could look for company, so far as I know, was the hut; and she hadn't been seen there. As a matter of fact. I have never known Lydia to go to the hut. She was always a girl who kept much to herself.

"I fastened the window inside, and locked the door. 'Now my lady,' I says, 'I'll see what your little game is, for now that the kitchen keys are locked up in your room, you'll have to wait outside until I let you in.'"

"I went down early next morning, expecting to find Lydia nursing her chin on the doorstep. Instead, I found the window wide open. The bed was as I had seen it the night before. Apparently she had not long come home, but how did she open the window? I went to the kitchen. There was Lydia at her work as usual!

"'Where were you last night, Lydia?' I asked. I didn't speak very gently either, for I was annoyed at the woman's duplicity.

"'Nowhere, ma'am.' She seemed astonished at the question.

"'Now, Lydia, speak the truth. I went to your room at twelve last night, and you were not there.'

"'I fell asleep in th' chair at th' foot of the bed. I left my candle in the kitchen,' she answered.

"'You sat down in the dark?' I questioned.

"'Just to take my shoes off. Then I fell asleep,' she replied.

"'You must have been very sleepy indeed,' I said, 'when you couldn't keep awake long enough to take your shoes off.'"

"She began to get a little bit cantankerous then; she's not the most amiable person in the world, I can tell you.

"'There's a lot of work on this place for one girl to do, an' I'm kept goin' all day. I often wonder meself how I do it,' was her answer.

"It seemed incredulous that she should be there and I not see her; but I let it remain at that. Next night, however, I posted Rory in the garden to watch the room. He saw her enter with something in her arms, and heard her lock the door and window.

"He waited till an hour after she had put the light out. Then he banged at the door, and called her by name. But there was no response. So he smashed a window-pane to get at the lock. By this means he got into the room. The bed was undisturbed, and Lydia was nowhere to be seen, It was a puzzle to Rory, as it was to the rest of us, how she had got out."

"You are sure she didn't pass out by the door unseen by you?" Ellis Rhea inquired of Rory Born.

"Quite sure. The door was locked and the key inserted inside."

"But wait till I tell you," Mrs. Born resumed. "'Well,' says Rory, 'I'll wait till you come back, my good woman, if I have to wait all night.' So he lit a cigar and sat down, very much

elated; for Rory, you must know, is in his glory when engaged on a mysterious case. It's often struck me that we should have made a detective of him. He has an aptitude for that sort of thing, only" and Mrs. Borrn smiled with the utmost urbanity, "if he were shadowing a suspect it would be with a pair of long-necked spurs dangling at his heels, and a stockwhip doubled over his shoulder. You'll see his spur tracks round the legs of the chairs, and on the linoleum in front of them. Certainly they couldn't be on better heels, for there was never a horse on Tiaro Creek that could throw him out of the saddle. As for his father—well, I've seen a kick-up put him over the horse's neck like a frog leaping into a billabong."

"You're drifting away from the point, my dear," Mr. Borrn quietly interjected.

His wife laughed softly. "Let me see! Where was I?"

"You left me smoking a cigar, mother," said Rory; "when you've finished I'll go and smoke another."

"You're quite welcome to go and smoke it now," his mother rejoined. "But wait till I tell you. When he had sat there for somewhere about three hours, he heard a noise at the window. He kept very quiet, though he was shivering with excitement, you may be sure, but on the alert for any emergency, nevertheless. His eyes were riveted on the window, and he was wondering if she would detect the broken pane, and throw a light within as a precautionary preliminary, when all at once he heard a plaintive me-e-ow! It was the cat.

"He composed himself again, and sat hour after hour, smoking no end of cigars, flavored now and again with