

## A Vignette of Port Phillip

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If the heaven of the hedonist be found (as some think) in idyllic conditions of life, the aborigines of the Upper Yarra made fair to enter into that illusionary paradise. For countless ages, stationary as to population, disturbed by no aspirations, and governed by tradition alone, they held undisputed possession of a tribal heritage unsurpassed in all resources that conduce to physical welfare.

In accordance with such external conditions, the moral temperament of the tribe was genial, generous and magnanimous. Physically, they were a race of athletes, incredibly expert in bushcraft, and the women were comely, as aborigines go. Probably no people—taken in their primitive simplicity—have been so wantonly maligned; but this injustice has never been perpetrated by humane and competent observers. The libel should be frankly and wholly withdrawn in the interests of science, if not on the plea of fairness.

From the first contact of black and white races on the Yarra, a mutual good feeling prevailed. One underlying cause may be noted. Only three years before the settlement of Port Phillip, Negro slavery had been abolished by legal enactment throughout the British dependencies. The movement had been of slow growth, definitely affecting popular thought in the direction of sympathy with dark-skinned races in general. Hence the moral atmosphere at that time was tinged by a theoretical recognition of common manhood, irrespective of colour. This was manifested in the attitude of the Port Phillip squatters and their employees toward the local blacks, as well as in strongly-worded official charges from the Colonial Office. Owing to this wave of popular sentiment, the blacks were not only better treated than defenceless natives usually are, but were better understood. Happily, no rash act of hostility on either side precipitated a collision; and the cordial relations of the two races remained unbroken to the last.

And the last days were already in sight. No benevolence could have preserved the indigenous race. Born into a narrow horizon of life, their fatal contentment had paralysed initiative so effectually that all individual potencies of innovation—never lacking where man is found—died with each brain so endowed. Therefore, apart from social disposition, their idea of personal excellence implied nothing beyond a superior dexterity in the construction and use of their anomalous weapons; whilst the supernatural element—also inseparable from human nature—found exercise in a far-reaching cult of sorcery.

But underneath the petrified usages that fix a tribal type lies the fact that Nature, the Mother, never repeats herself. Heredity, to say the least, is equivocal—is more full of surprises in its defaults than in its reproductions. Inborn variety is peremptory, and not always impressionable to despotic routine. There was a member of the upper Yarra tribe whose ardent receptivity and clear intellect might have made a mark if conditions had permitted. His native name was Baradyuk, though, in accordance with a custom of the time, he called himself Ryrrie, after his most valued friend. He was about twenty years of age when the Upper Yarra was first settled. By an accident in early childhood he had lost his left arm, but the remaining hand acquired a degree of precision with spear and boomerang which placed him easily first amongst the tribesmen of his own age.

By immemorial custom, each youth, before being admitted to the privileges of manhood, had to run down a selected kangaroo—a “flying doe”—and kill her with the barbed spear, which was always used as a lance, never as a javelin. Baradyuk had performed this exploit with ease, and had taken as his wife a young lubra, named Kunuwarra (the swan).

But it was not the aboriginal accomplishments of Baradyuk that attracted the regard of his white friends. He acquired with marvellous rapidity a sufficient knowledge of their language to understand ordinary conversation, and to make his own meaning clear. He noted, with intelligent interest, the luxury of settled abodes, the domestication of animals, the use of metals, the miracle of letters, the many wonders of the new system. Withal, there was a frank consciousness of initial equality in his deportment toward these representatives of an incomparably higher civilisation. And, though stubbornly sceptical with respect to witchcraft, augury, and other tribal superstitions, his inquiring mind pursued with eagerness the white man’s doctrine of the Resurrection (a tenet more generally accepted then than now). All the Port Phillip blacks held a listless supposition that the white settlers were their own remote forefathers now re-appearing as a higher type, and to Baradyuk’s inductive intellect the partially analogous doctrine of the strangers seemed to confirm and supplement this hypothesis; thus extending the range of inquiry one step farther into the Unknown. All this research was impersonal, prompted only by the love of truth and the rapture of discovery. Too late had Nature produced the man; if the time had been conducive, a racial epoch might have supervened.

For three or four years the tall, one-armed aboriginal was a familiar and welcome visitor at the new stations on the Upper Yarra. To the ignorant and superficial he appeared merely inquisitive; to others, his mental responsiveness never lost its charms.

He became more and more regardless of tribal usages. Quick to copy, and even excel, all that appealed to the latent nobility of his nature, he treated his wife as an equal; to which concession she responded with a blind devotedness that enlisted every faculty of her being. She never left his presence, except when they parted each day to procure food in their separate vocations. Unlike the rest of their tribe, she listened eagerly to his comments and conclusions, respecting the peaceful invasion of the white settlers.

But intellectual discernment is not communicable.

Though earnestly essaying to follow Baradyuk’s musings, expressed in imperfect terms of aboriginal speculation, his wife’s inadequate mind halted in a hazy half-light which served mainly to ratify the traditions and myths already embedded in her consciousness. Yet she was aware of something beyond her field of vision, something in the personality of her husband which made her own life precious for his service and companionship.

At this time it happened that a Government survey party was verifying the neighbouring landmarks, and mapping the course of the Yarra. The chief of the party, being a corresponding member of an ethnological society in Paris, employed Baradyuk to collect aboriginal weapons and implements, particularly the celts of flint or diorite, which, by this time, had been thrown away in favour of the steel tomahawks supplied gratuitously by the Government.

In carrying out this commission, Baradyuk visited a Gippsland tribe, where he was well known and hospitably received. But, a few days after his return to the Yarra, a little boy of the Gippsland tribe sickened and died. The child’s father, Yilinbo, attributed the death to some act of sorcery effected by Baradyuk during his otherwise purposeless visit—for certainly no member of the Gippsland tribe could conceive a value to the now obsolete stone tomahawks. Baradyuk had timely warning of

Yilinbo's ominous imputation, but, courageous and confident, he took no precautions beyond a casual watchfulness.

One winter day the tribesmen of the Yarra dispersed, as usual, to collect food; mostly scrutinising and sounding hollow trees in quest of 'possums or bears; whilst along the river the women gathered clean stems of soft thistles, or dug up dandelion roots (the true *dent de lion*, not the weed wrongly so called). Baradyuk, whose mutilation unfitted him for climbing, went alone across the flats, armed only with two spears. Soon he sighted half-a-dozen kangaroos coming out of the ranges to feed on the river flats. Swiftly and silently, he gained a commanding position, with good cover. Then, with the slender spear held midway, its indented rear-end engaged by the claw of the wimmera, he selected his mark, and launched the weapon. A quick, fortuitous motion brought the kangaroo out of line, but the next moment his second spear overtook the flying group, and transfixed one of the startled fugitives.

One moment later, a sudden swerve of the escaping animals caught the alert eye of Baradyuk, and fixed his attention upon the small clump of tee-tree at which they shied. Then, while with one rapid glance, he noted the tactical possibilities of the ground, a return-boomerang shot upward from behind the tee-tree, and his hasty apprehension gave place to the cool gladiatorial instinct of a brave man confronted by definite peril. For he knew that the tea-tree clump covered a fully-armed foe—the man who sought his life, who had stalked him for advantage, and now held all the odds.

To attempt the recovery of his own spears was certain death; the alternative was to retire from cover to cover, gaining ground until his own unrivalled swiftness of foot might avail for direct flight. Already the boomerang was circling above and beyond the tree which shielded him, and that refuge was no longer tenable. He bounded up the steep side of the range, at a right angle to his intended line of retreat, in order to confuse the trajectory of the other's missiles by holding higher ground. Eluding one spear by a hand's breadth, he took cover before another could be discharged.

During his flight he had marked the spear strike ground, seventy or eighty paces beyond where it had crossed his course. His own wimmera was still in his hand, and with that spear he could at least hold back his enemy until some chance might afford more equal terms of combat, or opening for escape. As a marksman or as a runner, he knew himself far superior to Yilinbo. Meantime, he had gained little or nothing by difference of level, for his antagonist, now fully assured that he was unarmed, advanced openly upon him, not deigning to expend another return-boomerang in searching his cover. But the capture of that fallen spear might still turn the odds.

It was a short start and a hazardous dash. The intervening space was sufficiently open for the flight of a direct-boomerang, and his antagonist's armament included that formidable weapon. But, with all his energies concentrated on the task before him, he darted forth at a speed which gave his opponent little time for aim, and, bounding, ducking, side-leaping, he reached his objective unharmed, though a second spear passed him on the way. But whilst snatching the first spear in his flight, he saw that it had struck a stone, and its point was shattered to rope-like splinters.

Without an instant's pause he continued his course to where the second spear, driven almost horizontally into the sward, still quivered with its initial force. This he tore from the ground, after a backward glance; then he bounded high in the air—prematurely, by half a pulse beat. For as his feet returned to earth, the terrible war-boomerang, gyrating with dead-level trajectory, struck midway between knee and ankle, half-severing one limb, and fracturing the other.

As the victor raced down upon him, Baradyuk writhed to the base of a tree close by, and there supported himself upon his knees, grimly facing his antagonist, with the recovered spear in his

wimmera. Yilinbo, apprehensive of intervention by Baradyuk's tribe, advanced without pause, covering himself with his shield. At twenty paces distance, Baradyuk made two rapid feints and discharged his spear. The weapon, striking Yilinbo's shield near its lower extremity, wrenched the slight shell upward, and inflicted a flesh wound on his thigh. Yilinbo dropped his shield, and withdrew the spear; then, swinging his waddy with both hands, he rushed upon his crippled opponent. Two ruthless blows stretched Baradyuk on the ground; then Yilinbo knelt beside him, and, taking a sharpened mussel-shell out of the netted bag which hung backward from his neck, drew the keen edge heavily and repeatedly along the shrinking flank of his fallen enemy.

It was a striking anomaly that the genial and kindly blacks of Port Phillip, with their instinctive repugnance to anything in the shape of deliberate torture, should be devoted to a practice which, for insensate brutality, has been paralleled only amongst the most ferocious races of mankind. But by ingrained usage, founded on some actuating superstition, it was deemed the prerogative of any victor in mortal combat to take as a trophy the kidneys of the vanquished, and smear his own body with the fresh, reeking kidney fat. Doubtless this was a survival from some state of savagery far lower than that which prevailed in Port Phillip at the time of settlement. For the spontaneous kindness of these children of Nature was conspicuous. But from some cause their moral sense seemed strangely in abeyance concerning the revolting rite referred to; indeed, it was a subject which they would discuss with perfect artlessness and indifference. And now, by the irony of circumstance, the only aboriginal who held the custom in abhorrence was probably its last victim. Moreover, the one tribesman whose balanced mind repudiated the besotment of witchcraft was probably the last sacrifice to that delusion. For all such beliefs and observances vanished in the racial paralysis which heralded a virtual extinction.

Baradyuk slowly awoke to consciousness. Mutilated, crippled, dying by inches, he accepted his fate with the stoicism of the savage; deploring nothing, hoping nothing, fearing nothing. His past life, with its dreams, its aspirations, its discoveries, seemed suddenly removed to an immeasurable distance; and the ghastly present was a phantasm which would not be gainsaid. Yet each moment in itself was endurable, and only the present moment was of any avail. All future moments mattered as little as the moments of the past.

An hour went by. The sky was overcast, and a keen, sleet-laden south wind swept the flat, scourging his lacerated flesh into intolerable pain. Here the fortitude of primitive manhood reached its limit, and a demoralizing wave of self-pity left him keenly conscious of injustice, isolation, and utter helplessness.

But a half-smothered wail of anguish answered the desolate thought, and in another moment Ku[n]uwarra was raising his wounded head from the ground. Her quick eye read the story at a glance. She wasted no time in lamentation, but, tenderly wrapping her rug around [his shivering form, she fled toward] the camp. In a few minutes she returned with a fire stick, and kindled a small fire where the sufferer would feel its warmth. Then two tribesmen who had followed her from the camp, cut a quantity of leafy scrub, and built a mia mia, having the fire at its entrance. This done, they withdrew, and Ku[n]uwarra devoted herself solely to soothing by her aid and companionship the dismal journey of the doomed man.

For two days and nights her vigil lasted. With fidelity intensified by hopelessness she anticipated every wish, while the mere magnetism of her lingering touch alleviated the weary agony which would cease only with life.

At last came that long divorce, bringing to the devoted woman a sense of chill desolation softened by unspeakable thankfulness. But her ministry was not yet finished. The tribesmen, silent and sorrowful, had daily waited on their dying comrade, and on their second visit had left a few long strips of freshly peeled wattle bark. The next office of the forlorn woman was to prepare her husband's body for burial according to the custom of his tribe. This was done by folding the inanimate form with knees to chin, and binding the limbs and body closely together with the strips of bark.

Then as night approached she surrounded the corpse, at a few yards distance, with a circle of small fires, to guard against the evil influences that walked in darkness. Through that long winter night she heedfully attended the fires, till morning brought the men of her tribe. They came dejected, constrained, and awe-stricken, as children when death claims a companion.

With their yam sticks they dug a grave of five feet deep, into which they lowered the body in a sitting position. Then the corpse was covered by two strong sheets of bark, placed diagonally, and the grave filled in. The smouldering fires were next extinguished, the *mia mia* dismantled, and all record or trace of the departed tribesman purposely obliterated.

No reprisal ensued. Two fully equipped Yarra warriors had followed Yilinbo to the first ridge of the Dandenong, but here the tracks indicated that he was joined by four fellow-tribesmen, who had accompanied him so far on the raid, and ~~had there~~ awaited his return. Whereupon the pursuers turned back, to plan retribution with their tribe. But the strange apathy of that transitional era precluded further action, till in the course of a few weeks the outrage was half condoned. Even under primitive conditions the ideal of vendetta was alien to the light and elastic temperament of the Port Phillip aborigines.

Kunuwarra covered her head with pipeclay—the sign of bereavement—but seldom camped or travelled with her tribe. Her time was spent chiefly in wandering alone by the river, or lingering round the homes of two or three white women, whose compassion had deepened into sympathy. And from this time forward she wore clothing supplied by these friends.

Winter had given place to summer, when the Upper Yarra was again visited by the surveyor who had been the innocent cause of Baradyuk's death. No one had discerned the capabilities of the intellectual and amiable aboriginal as clearly as he, but scientific considerations were paramount in his mind. On a moonlight night he opened the grave of Baradyuk, carefully noted the mode of burial, and secured the skull for his private collection. Then he refilled the grave, and endeavoured to efface all traces of his visit.

Meanwhile, at intervals of no more than two or three days, Kunuwarra was accustomed to pass her husband's resting place; though a childlike awe, born of veneration rather than fear, prevented her from lingering by the spot. In one of these lonely rambles, half a year after the burial of Baradyuk, she noticed that the grave had been disturbed.

The tragedy of the past had clouded her mind with a sense of unreality in all things beyond the details of daily life; hence she was unsusceptible to surprise, even when thus confronted by the apparently supernatural. For nothing could be more foreign to aboriginal sentiment than the supposition that a grave had been deliberately tampered with.

She examined no further, finding a sufficient solution in some shapeless apprehension begotten of the vague eschatological superstition of her race, and from that time the indeterminate forecast congealed into a settled monomania. Yet she kept her own counsel. Gentle, patient, unobtrusive, she haunted the

home station daily; weaving rush baskets for the women, and supplying the men's huts with eels and blackfish, caught by soaking blackwood bark in isolated lagoons, where the fish were left by recurrent floods.

Winter had come again, when the squatter, on a business visit to Melbourne, engaged a ticket-of-leave convict, named "Wingy" Sheldon, to serve as groom and dairyman. This ruffian had been a cavalry soldier in the East India Company's service, and had lost his left arm by the righteous stroke of a Mahratta tulwar, at the sack of a native temple. Shipped home to England as damaged war-material, he had gone into partnership with a professional purveyor of anatomical "subjects", and had shortly afterward tendered to a society of medical students a body bearing evident marks of foul play. Further examination showed this to be the corpse of his confederate, suffocated during a drunken stupor. The students would have hushed the matter up, but a whisper reached the police. Sheldon was arrested, tried, convicted and condemned to death, the sentence being afterwards commuted to transportation for life.

The grey barbarian is not always lower than the Christian child. "Wingy" Sheldon was more callous and truculent, more servile and degraded, than any aboriginal of the upper Yarra tribe. Apart from a thorough competency in the work allotted to him, his sullen ill-nature and aggressive boorishness made him a most unpopular man amongst his fellows; and he was particularly disliked and avoided by the blacks who frequented the home station.

Yet Kunuwarra seemed to regard him with inexplicable interest, and now her dreamy monomania took shape as a settled hallucination. Without in any way forcing herself upon his notice, she was always near him, watchful, wistful, expectant; evidently perplexed, yet pertinacious, as one whose soul is bound up in a last assurance. "Wingy's" fellow workmen used the situation as a theme for ribald jocularities; and he, bidding for the approbation of his employer, made a point of treating the woman with demonstrative harshness and contempt. On every opportunity, he struck her with the hunting whip he habitually carried, but no ripple of fear or resentment disturbed the melancholy patience which absorbed her being. Silent and submissive, but supported by some clinging imagination too hazy to be called a hope, she waited, waited, while the unavailing days crept by.

Meanwhile, Sheldon was on his best behaviour. Doubtless the felon, now released from a life-long pressure of adverse conditions, was spontaneously developing some better element hitherto latent in his embruted nature. When half his year's engagement had expired, his employer readily consented to his marriage with a woman in Melbourne, whom he had known in Van Diemen's Land, when both were assigned to the same master. So Sheldon accompanied the bullock driver on a trip to Melbourne for stores, and returned to the station with his newly-wedded wife.

In every respect this woman seemed a direct antithesis to the clumsy boor with whom she had cast her lot. Well-mannered, graceful, keen-eyed, classic-featured, ardent, and resolute, she was evidently one who would go far in good or evil. She had been sent out for infanticide.

Kunuwarra seemed to foreknow and apprehend Sheldon's movements by intuition. From the time of his return to the station she haunted him no more, though maintaining friendly, and even affectionate relations with the white women and children on the place. She built a mia mia on the face of a cliff half-a-mile from the homestead, and there the spark of her red fire was visible every night, wet or dry, and the lonely woman lived on, waiting for she knew not what.

It was apparent from the first that Sheldon's wife regarded him with the contempt which soon ripens into intolerable loathing; and the husband naturally resented this in his own ungainly and blustering

way. But one morning, about a month after their marriage, he beat her with his whip—probably impelled to the action by an uncouth sense of authority, rather than by exasperation. During the day he went to the men’s hut for his meals, whilst his wife remained indoors. In the evening he went home, and a minute later he was seen to emerge from the door, walking slowly and unsteadily, with his arm upraised. Three or four men, standing at the door of their hut, watched him approach, pausing frequently, as if to recover strength, then renewing his way with obvious effort. As he came nearer, they saw the semi-cylindrical handle of a shear blade projecting from his right side—the handle only, for the eight-inch blade had been driven home.

“Don’t touch it yet!” he gasped. “I’m gone when it’s pulled out! Mind, I done it! Where’s the master?”

A seat was brought out, on which they supported his swaying form. The squatter himself now joined the group.

“Who has done this?” he demanded.

The dying man roused himself, and faltered—

“I done it meself! Mind I done it meself! Now, pull it out, for God’s sake!”

The squatter signed to one of the men, who gently withdrew the weapon.

“Mind, I done—”

A rush of bright red arterial blood foamed from the white, writhing lips, and so, with a magnanimous lie half-uttered, the convict followed across the boundary more than one victim of his own stolid brutality.

They carried him back to his hut. In the full light of the doorway stood his wife, scornful, defiant, like some fearless wild animal at bay.

“Stand aside, Mrs Sheldon,” said the squatter coldly. “He has cleared you with his dying statement, but you must be ready to leave the station at sunrise to-morrow.”

The woman bowed, with a sardonic smile.

Early next morning a dray started for Melbourne, carrying Mrs Sheldon and her belongings. At midday another conveyed a roughly-made coffin to an adjacent hill, where “Wingy” Sheldon was buried without ceremony.

But not without a mourner. On the following morning a stock-keeper, riding past the grave, was first to contemplate the final scene of a drama of clashing cross-purposes, played impromptu by future-blind puppets, each guided by a dominant impulse. The loose mound had been dug away with a yamstick, a little below the original surface, and in that hollow lay the dead body of Kunuwarra. Probably no autopsy, however scientifically skilful, could have determined the physical cause of her death. She had seen enough, suffered enough, brooded enough, and now, exercising that strange faculty peculiar to savage races, she had died by mere volition of will.

They buried her close by, in a grave unmarked and unremembered. To most observers of her later life she had appeared as a crazy, harmless oddity; yet there were some who read a note of tenderest pathos

into the lowly tragedy. For dissimilar customs of life and modes of thought can never cancel certain touches of nature that make the whole world kin.

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