

## E.L. WHARTON

### TRIBAL LAW

Kit McKay was uneasy. It was the chanting of the corroboree that worried her. It was different from anything she had heard before. Besides, during the last few days she had been aware of tension among the lubras who worked at the homestead. Amelia, Daisy and Sarah, usually merry and giggling, had been silent and morose, putting little effort into the work she had set for them.

Kit could not shake off the feeling of urgency, but what to do? On this isolated cattle station in the Northern Territory vastness was lost in the black night. It was wild rough country a hundred miles from the nearest neighbour, with no telephone or outpost radio. When Jim brought her here to Birricannia as a bride she was over-awed by the immensity of the place. It seemed more like a small township. There were quarters for jackeroos, ringers, windmill expert, book-keeper and the cook, whilst down on the flat the aborigines of the Wangi tribe had their camp. Kit was too busy learning how to run the big homestead and manage her staff to be lonely. It was only when Jim and the men were away mustering and she had no one to turn to in an emergency that she had such a terrifying sense of her aloneness.

From where Kit sat on the verandah she could see the flickering fires of the aborigines' camp and a single light burning in the hut of old Jack, the cowboy. Should she ask him to take her down to the camp? . . . but Jim had made it a definite rule that she should never interfere with the tribal customs of the aborigines. Perhaps the mailman would talk to them when he arrived tomorrow.

Again Kit heard the strange sound of the corroboree, the eerie keening wail of the women rising above the compelling, guttural voices of the men. A bright glow on the horizon heralded the rising of the maturing moon and suddenly it emerged spilling light and shadow on the garden and the bush beyond. She put down her book and walked restlessly up and down the verandah, trying to make a decision. Then she picked up a hurricane lamp and hurried down to the cowboy's quarters.

Old Jack was sitting outside, smoking a pipe. He got up as she approached.

"What's the trouble, Missus," he asked.

"Jack, you must come with me to the camp. I'm sure something horrible is happening."

"Now, Missus, don't go rushin' yer fences, they are only havin' a bit of a corroboree."

"It's a bad one Jack, I know it. If you don't come with me, I'll go alone."

"Well, I reckon the boss will flay me for takin' you there," he grumbled, "but I'll get me lamp."

"Hurry, we must hurry," Kit said, as they stumbled over the uneven ground. She kept praying to herself that whatever they found would not be evil.

Now they could see the figures of the men made grotesque by shadows, with stamping feet and waving arms. The gins in the background were slapping their thighs and moaning. It was all noise and movement and then silence.

Bungil, the leader of the tribe, approached them. He was a fearsome sight. Two emu feathers decorated his head and only the eyes could be seen in his broad face, which was covered with small white feathers, stuck on with dried blood. An apron hung from a belt of human hair around his waist and more feathers were stuck to his thighs. Whorls of gidyea ash covered his chest and arms and small leafy branches were tied to his ankles. In his right hand he held a boomerang and in his left a sharp-pointed spear. He spoke:

"Whafer you come up, Missus?"

Kit, trembling, could only point to the body lying on the ground. A beautiful, young lubra lay there, shining and smooth as ebony, and as still. She was dead. The whimpering piccaninny, tied with bark and hessian to her chest, was alive. Bungil, following the pointing finger, spoke again:

"Him finished."

Kit called out in horror, "Whafer you got that bubba like that?"

"Him finished too."

Jack stepped forward and said belligerently, "That job no good fella."

Kit motioned him away and turning to Victor asked, "S'pose you gibbit longa me?"

The huge aborigine stooped and untied the baby.

"Him yours now, Missus," he said simply.

Kit took the piccaninny in her arms. It was a girl. She turned to old Jack. "Bring the lamps. We must return to the house. She needs attention quickly."

Still un-nerved by the horrible scene at the camp, Kit found old Jack's quiet help a source of comfort. There were a few coals left in the wood stove in the kitchen and he quickly had a fire burning to boil a kettle of water and a saucepan of milk. Then he brought in a tub from the laundry. Kit bathed the baby and found her unharmed. She felt a surging desire to care for the tiny piece of humanity.

"Terrible small," Jack commented.

"But strong, Jack, and good lungs."

The baby continued to cry loudly, but Kit knew she must be thirsty and hungry and would probably sleep after being fed.

"You go to bed Jack. I can manage now, and thank you for your help tonight." She smiled at the old man, so bow legged from years in the saddle, sometimes cantankerous with afflictions of age, but good hearted and trustworthy.

Down at the camp the corroboree for burying the dead lubra continued, but now it had lost its sad note. She was not of their tribe and had been on walkabout when she died. Their law said they could not keep her piccaninny.

Kit had never longed so much for her husband's return. A month later when he rode up to the homestead, she rushed out to meet him. Clinging to him she described the corroboree.

"Oh, Jim, that poor baby! They were going to put her in the fork of a tree, tied to her dead mother. The horror of it still haunts me."

Jim looked at his wife, seeing her strength and tenderness and thought again how lucky he was to have married a woman who could meet the problems of their life in the outback with courage.

"Poor Kit, you've had a tough time," he said, taking her thin tanned face in his hands. "You did a brave thing my dear, in saving this child but you cannot alter the law of the tribe. You must forget what you saw that night."

As they walked up to the house Kit told him how co-operative old Jack had been. "Not a grumble about the milking, and I managed quite well for a few days feeding the baby with a teaspoon. Then a Qantas 'plane landed here on its way south. The pilot was very interested in what had happened. On his return trip he arrived laden with bottles and teats." She laughed. "Enough for half a dozen babies. But it has been a wonderful help. He could not have been kinder."

She led Jim to the cot on the verandah. Brown eyes, bright as an emu's gazed up at them. The baby's body clad only in a napkin was brown and smooth as velvet against the immaculate white of the sheet. Her tiny hands reached out to them and Jim thought, "a piccaninny is the prettiest baby in the world." He turned to his wife. "You must not become too fond of this little one. Her tribe will come for her eventually, you know. You will have to part with her."

But the weeks passed and they did not come. The happiness a baby brings pervaded the house. It was in the light hearted laughter of the lubras as they found innumerable excuses to be near the cot; in the touchingly innocent smell of baby powder and soap in the bathroom; in the absorbing routine of caring for the child.

The monsoons arrived and brought a miracle of green. Practically overnight the dry, parched plains became verdant pastures. Millions of flies followed and Kit was thankful for the gauzed cot made by the station carpenter. After the flies went to bed at night and just before darkness fell, she delighted in taking the baby for a short walk under the bauhinia trees. Her thoughts were of the child's future and how the task of caring for the baby would sustain her in her loneliness. Jim's warning was forgotten. She believed what she wanted to believe, that the tribe did not know of the existence of the child and would not come.

They came with the Easter moon, after the ending of the wet. The child's grandmother (a gentle-faced old lubra), a wet nurse and two men formed the party.

Kit received the news with dumb, uncomprehending disbelief. She looked imploringly at Jim and cried, "You can't allow them to take her to the rough life of a camp." Her voice rose. "She might die."

Jim's face was stern. "I warned you this would happen and she won't die. The aborigines are kind and good to their children. She belongs to the tribe and they have come a long way to claim her." He added in a softer tone, "They are waiting, my dear, do it now."

Kit held the small bundle for the last time. She stroked the curly black hair and kissed the soft brown cheek. As she gave the baby to the grandmother the old woman said, "You good fella, Missus, me name bubba longa you. Me name him Kitty Birricannia."

Kit searched for the right words to ask the grandmother to give the baby a chance of a better life, to send her to one of the missions to school. She seemed to understand. "Mebbee, Missus, mebbe."

The dusky group moved off at first light. Kit, desperately miserable, watched them go.

"Goodbye little Kitty. May the world be good to you." She tried to dry her eyes, but the tears would not cease. Hardly knowing what she was doing she walked down to the garden gate and on and on through the large horse paddock, before awareness of the futility of trying to walk away from

sorrow forced her to turn back.

On the homeward trudge she met a group of the camp children playing on the dusty track. Tommy, one of Amelia's brood, ran up to her holding out a home-made steam roller, minus its string.

"Missus fix?" he enquired.

She took the toy and at the same time noticed that Tommy had trachoma again. The child's eyes badly needed attention. Kit fought a constant battle against this eye disease when the flies were bad. She took Tommy's hand and at that moment knew there was so much more she could do for the camp children. Suddenly, she found courage in honest acknowledgment of the fact.

The cowbell announcing breakfast rang out from the house as she and the children walked back through the bauhinia trees. Overhead a butcher bird sang his glorious aria to the new day.