

## **THE LEECH MERCHANT**

*In 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia, a man makes his living catching leeches in the Murray River. His life changes when a woman asks for his help treating her infertility.*

On the banks of the Murray River, its wide waters olive-green under the midday sun, William Jacka draped his trousers over the bough of a nearby red gum. He stuffed his yellowing linen tunic into his boots—he didn't want insects and snakes crawling inside while he was in the water—then pulled a razor from his leather satchel.

The blade could have been put to good use trimming his hair; curly locks that tended to mat and catch wallaby grass seeds. But Jacka instead nicked his thigh, just enough draw blood.

Carefully, step by step so his bare feet didn't sink into the sucking mud, Jacka waded into the Murray. It was biting fresh compared to the blazing day, as though the river had a cold heart the sun couldn't extinguish. He moved forward until his narrow hips were submerged, then waited.

Many won't notice a leech's bite but Jacka was attuned to that nettle-like sting. It didn't take long for one to sense his blood and attach with a hungry vigour. Jacka filled his nostrils with the smell of mud and river swell and his ears the warbling and cackling of the thornbills and kookaburras.

The sun had moved a finger-width across the sky when Jacka emerged from the river. This time his leather satchel produced a small jar of salt and Jacka set to work pulling the leeches from his legs. Their long, coal-black tails thrashed against his coarse hands, many already fat from his blood.

It took Jacka four trips into the water to fill the stoneware jars he had brought. By that time the shadows from the red gums spread far across the river. Jacka secured the jars to his wooden barrow, and, after wiping a dust-speckled forearm over his brow, went to retrieve his trousers.

They were gone.

Jacka worked his way slowly along the churned and rutted road back to Echuca, careful not to jostle his jars. Whoever had taken his clothing (and he had a fair idea who that was) had left only his tunic, which mercifully reached his knees. His bare feet were sore from the journey, still soft after years of city life.

'Pretty pair o' ham and eggs you got there,' came a servile voice from beside the road. A shadow detached itself from the silvery tree trunks.

'You took my trousers, you bastard,' Jacka growled.

The man jumped in front of Jacka's barrow, his movements jittery and cur-like. Leggamy was his name, a runt of a man, as dilapidated as the bark hut he lived in at the edge of town.

'That's quite an accusation you levellin', William Jacka,' Leggamy said. 'You got witnesses who can say that's what happened?'

Jacka feigned a jab with his barrow but was restrained by his precious cargo. ‘Get out of my way, Leggamy.’ Jacka’s voice was deeper than his wiry frame suggested. ‘I better see those boots on my doorstep before sun-up or the constables will turn over your hovel.’

At the mention of the police Leggamy’s gap-toothed grin retracted. ‘There’s an easier way, Will.’ He sidled up so close Jacka could smell the sourness of his breath. ‘Town’s no longer big enough for two leechers.’

Jacka swung a backhand but Leggamy danced clear.

‘You’re pushing it, Leggamy,’ Jacka said, trudging onward with his barrow. ‘I’d better get those boots back.’

Jacka lived in a small brick cottage with a corrugated tin roof. He had purchased it during Echuca’s boom times but now, with the railroads surpassing the river as the preferred means of transport, money was harder to come by.

Inside was a mattress, a table barely large enough to scuff clean his boots, a stove and a fireplace. The only sign of his former affluence was the shelving, which housed the eclectic collection of jars, pots and urns vital to his trade.

Jacka lit an oil lamp and inspected his legs. The wound from his razor was healing nicely but a few leech bites required cleaning and carbolic acid. Infection was a significant risk in his line of work.

Footsteps on the wooden timbers of his porch alerted him. He yanked on his second (and now only) pair of trousers and flung open the door, hoping to catch Leggamy with his boots.

A woman stood there, clinging to the shadows.

‘Apologies, ma’am,’ Jacka said, only partially relinquishing the gruffness that had been roused by the belief it was Leggamy. ‘I’m not selling tonight.’

Jacka was used to seeing Sarah Winton in a bustle dress and parasol, but tonight she wore a dark cotton skirt and blouse. It was as though she didn’t want to be seen.

‘I’m hoping you can help me, William,’ Winton said. ‘I don’t know where else to turn.’

After a moment’s hesitation, Jacka stepped aside. With a glance at the deserted street outside he closed the door behind them.

Winton was a delicately featured woman with skin painfully white for a sun-ravaged country. She was shorter than Jacka—not a common occurrence—and had hair that tended to wisp where it wasn’t pinned down. She looked distractedly at what remained of Jacka’s collection of jars and urns.

‘I’m not sure how I can be of service,’ Jacka prompted.

Winton turned and smiled in a way that suggested her confidence could evaporate at any moment. 'You are aware I've been married for some time now. As I've mentioned, it is my husband's house I've been furnishing with the vessels I've purchased from you.'

Jacka merely nodded. 'I am aware.'

'Errol is a good man, I assure you.'

Jacka felt something rise in his skin at the unbidden comment. He crossed his arms.

Winton stepped closer. 'I've enquired about you. You were a doctor?'

'No,' Jacka said.

'But you studied medicine, at the University of Melbourne?'

'I did, for a while,' Jacka said. 'But I never completed my studies. A person of my background... They were always looking to be rid of me.'

Winton's expression disclosed genuine compassion. 'This land can be a harsh place, and the people here crueller still.' She took to one the stools at Jacka's table, tucking her skirt underneath her. 'It is your medical training I have come for. That, and your experience with leeches.'

Her face caught the flickering lamplight.

'I want you to help me bear a child.'

Jacka stiffened. 'Then I suggest you present to your family physician, ma'am.'

'Farnsworth no longer believes in the efficacy of leeches.'

'And he might be right.'

Winton seemed surprised by the admission. 'Then why do you continue to peddle them?'

'I do not. I sell a commodity. Regardless, I am quitting the trade. That is why I've been selling all these.' He gestured at the shelving. 'Demand from England has waned and there is little money in it.'

'So, you agree with Farnsworth?'

Jacka watched her closely. Abruptly, he stalked over to one of the jars he had filled earlier that day, unscrewed the lid and pulled out a closed fist.

'Hold out your wrist,' he said curtly.

Tentatively, Winton extended her arm, exposing the porcelain, veiny underside. Jacka dropped a fat black leech onto her skin, its slimy, gristly body writhing as it attached. Winton let out a cry.

'Leave it,' Jacka said. 'And I'll tell you how the treatment works.'

Jacka went to his leather satchel and slid out a metal apparatus. It looked like scissors attached to a funnel that expanded with the working of the handles.

‘I take this speculum,’ he said. ‘And I insert four of those things into your cervix. Then I wait for them to engorge. We don’t even know if it works. Are you so eager for a child?’

Winton swallowed. ‘When can you start?’

Jacka flared his broad, flat nose. ‘After your next bleeds. Until then, think it over, good and hard. If this is still what you want, I will administer the treatment.’

Winton returned two weeks later, just after sunset. Both knew there was a danger to the procedure, not just from the leeches but from the impropriety of the engagement itself. Nothing of that was said as Jacka went about his medical duties.

Jacka could tell the first treatment was extremely unpleasant for Winton but she accepted it with stoicism. They spoke little until the end, when Jacka’s patient offered payment.

‘I cannot accept your money,’ Jacka said as he cleaned the speculum.

‘Then I will buy another vase from you. I won’t take no for an answer.’

Winton left with an earthenware pot. She already had so many Jacka couldn’t imagine she needed it.

Winton returned every few nights. On some occasions Jacka declined to treat her until she was sufficiently healed, or due to the timing of her menstrual cycle. On those occasions he simply boiled a tea and the two sat at his small table and spoke of their lives.

Sarah Winton was the daughter of a landowner from Bathurst. She had grown up catching yabbies and playing with the feral kittens in the grain store. Sent to boarding school in Sydney as a teen, she dearly missed that rural life.

‘How did you end up in Echuca?’ Jacka asked.

‘I was married to Errol,’ Winton said in a turn of phrase Jacka found unusual. ‘He was posted here to captain the barracks.’

Winton in turn probed Jacka’s background.

‘How did you come to study medicine?’

‘It was what my father wanted. They only let me in because of his standing.’

‘Your father?’ Winton asked, politely, but with the same puzzlement that always crossed a face enquiring about his heritage.

‘Adoptive father’, Jacka clarified. ‘As soon as he passed my presence became untenable. Eventually I gave them what they needed to be rid of me.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I punched the Chancellor.’

Winton burst into laughter, before quickly covering her mouth. Jacka, too, found himself laughing, something he hadn’t done in a long time.

Winton’s attendance at Jacka’s cottage became more frequent, visiting even when no appointment was scheduled. Jacka had the impression she was treated as an ornament in her world and valued their frank discussions. She showed great interest in Jacka’s knowledge of the Australian bush and he enjoyed her views on class and education.

Jacka soon found his natural gruffness borne of ill-fortune and prejudice had all but melted away. He hadn’t realised how much he had come to enjoy Sarah’s company.

One day she asked, ‘Are you happy in Echuca?’

Jacka shrugged. It was not something a man like him had ever thought to contemplate. But at that moment he was.

Jacka was wading from the Murray, leeches coiling and twisting on his legs, when he saw Leggamy beside his clothes. Anger rose in him like a bushfire. The leeches writhed at the sudden blood flow.

Leggamy raised his hands in defence. ‘I’m just here to talk.’ He grinned in a way that showed off the shadowy gaps between his teeth. ‘I seen you two. You and that girl from the manor.’

Jacka moved with sudden speed, grabbing Leggamy by his braces. The man reeked of nervous sweat and whiskey.

‘What of it?’ Jacka snarled.

‘Been visitin’ a lot. Wonder what that husband would think. Doesn’t have a reputation as a merciful type.’

Jacka pulled Leggamy in close, eyes blazing as Leggamy squirmed. ‘What do you want, Leggamy?’

‘What I always wanted. You give me the leeches and you can keep the girl.’

Jacka lifted the rat-like man and threw him into the river.

Campfires were blazing and curtains were drawn by the time Jacka returned to his cottage. He was tired and angry and so only belatedly noticed the lock on his front door had

been forced. He could hear movement within. Abandoning his barrow, Jacka launched himself inside hoping to catch Leggamy red-handed.

The first thing he saw was the destruction. The few remaining pots, jars and urns that had proudly adorned his shelves lay shattered on his timber floor. His small table was upended and his mattress slashed and ripped.

Beside the wreckage stood two red-breasted soldiers. They startled at Jacka's sudden entrance and moved to ready their rifles, but a third man—unruffled and dressed in a captain's uniform—signalled for them to lower their arms.

He said, 'Mr Jacka, I apologise for this mess. I have been told I have something of a temper.'

Errol Winton had the entitled bearing of a man bred on rugby and rowing, though these days his belly protruded over his belt. His moustache was cultivated in the imperial style, cheek hair brushed upwards.

'I'll keep this simple. I understand you have been...' He paused, his moustache twitching. '...tending to my wife. There is no more need for such treatment, for she is now with child.'

Jacka felt a strange stirring shoot through his veins. The soldiers tensed nearby.

'Get out of my house,' came the rumble from Jacka's throat.

Winton's crocodile eyes bulged at the response. He walked up to and towered over Jacka, so close the leecher could feel the spittle from Winton's mouth.

'I am a gentleman, Mr Jacka. Do not say I didn't give you fair warning.'

Winton bent and picked up a shard of white and blue porcelain.

'This would have been nice in my house, I expect,' he said. 'But it's no longer to my wife's taste.'

He strode out of the cottage, the soldiers following.

Jacka sought the sanctuary of the river. He had attempted to contact Sarah for several days but rumour was her poor state of health in pregnancy had confined her to Winton's manor. Jacka had no way of reaching her.

He did not intend to leech that day, just to swim in the Murray's cold embrace. His clothes were hanging from the red gum behind him as he walked naked into the river's murky waters.

That's when he sensed movement behind him. The crunch of dry bark under boot. The scent of male sweat and gunpowder. The rack-and-slide of bolt action rifles being readied.

Jacka didn't turn. He continued to wade into the river, further than he would usually for leeching, into the dark water where the current tugged at his limbs and his feet could no longer touch the muddy bottom.

The last thing the soldiers saw from the bank was his curly, matted hair slip beneath the olive-green surface.

Sarah Winton gave birth five months later. It was a complicated labour, but the midwife's experience with aboriginal mothers was life-saving.

Rose Jacqueline Winton was born in the early hours of the morning, squalling and healthy with a mop of matted curly hair. She had the delicate elfin features of her mother and would, as the years went by, grow to have a similarly diminutive frame.

But it would always be her skin that defined her life. As dark and ancient as the mud of the mighty Murray, a gift and a curse from the father she would never meet.