



Grif: A Story of Australian Life

Benjamin Leopold Farjeon

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In one of the most thickly populated parts of Melbourne city, where poverty and vice struggle for breathing space, and where narrow lanes and filthy thoroughfares jostle each other savagely, there stood, surrounded by a hundred miserable hovels, a gloomy house, which might have been likened to a sullen tyrant, frowning down a crowd of abject, poverty-stricken slaves. From its appearance it might have been built a century ago; decay and rottenness were apparent from roof to base: but in reality it was barely a dozen years old. It had lived a wicked and depraved life, had this house, which might account for its premature decay. It looked like a hoary old sinner, and in every wrinkle of its weather-board casing was hidden a story which would make respectability shudder. There are, in every large city, dilapidated or decayed houses of this description, which we avoid or pass by quickly, as we do drunken men in the streets. In one of the apartments of this house, on a dismally wet night, were two inmates, crouched before a fire as miserable as the night. A deal table, whose face and legs bore the marks of much rough usage; a tin candlestick containing a middle-aged tallow candle, the yellow light from which flickered sullenly, as if it were weary of its life and wanted to be done with it; a three-legged stool; and a wretched mattress, which was hiding itself in a corner, with a kind of shamefaced consciousness that it had no business to be where it was:—comprised all the furniture of the room. The gloominess of the apartment and the meanness of the furniture were in keeping with one another, and both were in keeping with the night, which sighed and moaned and wept without; while down the rickety chimney the wind whistled as if in mockery, and the rain-drops fell upon the embers, hissing damp misery into the eyes of the two human beings who sat before the fire, bearing their burden quietly, if not patiently. They were a strange couple. The one, a fair young girl, with a face so mild and sweet, that the beholder, looking upon it when in repose, felt gladdened by the sight. A sweet, fair young face; a face to love. A look of sadness was in her dark brown eyes, and on the fringes, which half-veiled their beauty, were traces of tears. The other, a stunted, ragged boy, with pockmarked face, with bold and brazen eyes, with a vicious smile too often playing about his lips. His hand was supporting his cheek; hers was lying idly upon her knee. The fitful glare of the scanty fire threw light upon both: and to look upon the one, so small and white, with the blue veins so delicately traced; and upon the other, so rough and horny, with every sinew speaking of muscular strength, made one wonder by what mystery of life the two had come into companionship. Yet, strange as was the contrast, there they sat, she upon the stool, he upon the ground, as if they were accustomed to each other's society. Wrapt in her thoughts the girl sat, quiet and motionless, gazing into the fire. What shades of expression passed across her face were of a melancholy nature; the weavings of her fancy in the fitful glare brought nothing of pleasure to her mind. Not far into the past could she look, for she was barely nineteen years of age; but brief as must have been her experience of life's troubles, it was bitter enough to sadden her eyes with tears, and to cause her to quiver as if she were in pain. The boy's thoughts were not of himself; they were of her, as was proven by his peering up at her face anxiously every few moments in silence. That he met with no responsive look evidently troubled him; he threw unquiet glances at her furtively, and then he plucked her gently by the sleeve.

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