

I'm Digger's Son

The little cottage slept under the stars. A soft wind from the sea blew through the trees. Moonlight, strong and clear, showed a mill at the end of the garden. A chained dog lay outside the cottage door. He too was asleep.

When a car came along the rough road, the dog barked loudly and fiercely. Four men got out of the car and hurried through the garden gate. Then they saw the dog by the door and stopped.

After a moment, the light of an oil lamp appeared in a window. The door opened, and a boy's voice said: "Be quiet, Shane! Lie down!"

The dog stopped barking; but it didn't lie down till the boy put a gentle hand on its head.

One of the men called out: "It's me, Phil. It's Benson. I've brought some friends with me. Wake Digger, will you?"

The boy invited them to come in. He was wearing a thin pair of shorts; nothing else. The lamplight shone on his body and lit up his dark young face. The brown skin, the flat nose and the thick black hair showed his aboriginal blood. But the eyes and the mouth showed a different look.

"My father's away," he said. "He's driving some cattle. He'll be back in five or six days."

The man behind Benson cried "Oh, God!" Then he fell into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

The boy looked at him closely. He knew the man. His name was Clem Richardson. He had a big farm on the other side of Tawanga; he grew sugar, and he also had a lot of cattle. Digger, the boy's father, had worked for him once and had called him a "good fellow". He was a big strong man. But now his shoulders were shaking, and tears were running through his fingers.

Benson said: "That's bad, Phil. That's really bad. Did your father say which way he would go? I want to find him quickly."

The boy shook his head. Then he turned towards the back of the room. A woman was standing there. A white woman. Only the boy had heard her come in.

"You won't be able to contact him till he reaches Rocky," she said. "You could send him a telegram there."

"Too late!" Benson cried. "Much too late! It's Clem's girl Wanda. She walked away from a picnic party near Podd's Bay.



You know what that country is like. It's really wild."

The boy showed no surprise. His father was the best tracker in the north of the country. If someone came to their house at night, there was only one reason: a child had been lost in the bush

Once an old woman had stolen a baby and had taken it up the creek. Digger had found them and had brought them safely back. Phil

remembered that time very clearly. The people of Tawanga had collected money and had given his father a fridge.

Digger always refused to accept money when he saved someone's life. "The gods made me a tracker," he said. "They gave me this mysterious power. I can't sell it."

The boy looked at the fridge in the corner of the room. Then he looked at Benson.

"Yes, it's wild country," he said. "When was she missed?"

"About twelve o'clock," said Benson. He pointed to the other man. "We four were there with our families. We caught some fish and cooked them. When we were ready to eat, someone said: "Wanda isn't here. She went for a walk." We thought she would come back soon. So we ate. Then we sat and smoked."

"Clem's wife began to be anxious, so Clem went to look for Wanda. At first he was able to follow her tracks. Then they left the path and were lost in the bush. Clem came back to us for help. We searched all the afternoon. We thought she couldn't have gone far. She's a little girl. She's only eight."

Benson looked hard at the boy. The other men did the same. He was only a boy, but he was Digger's son.

"Didn't you follow her tracks, where they left the path?" he asked. But he wasn't looking at them; he was watching his mother. She knew what he would do. She had already packed his rucksack with a few necessary things; his new torch was among them. Now she was making coffee.

"There was no sign of her," Benson answered weakly. "The ground there is covered with dead leaves. Her feet didn't leave a mark."

The boy shook his head. "The signs were there, but you couldn't see them. It's useless now. Too many people have walked over them. But if we search further away, we may still find them."

"The police are there now, and the neighbours. About a hundred people are searching with torches." "The boy was checking the things in his rucksack. "I'm not my Dad, of course," he said. "But he has taught me a lot. I may be able to help." He lifted his head with pride as he added:

"I'm Digger's son."

Clem Richardson stared at him without a word. Then he turned to Benson. "It's no use," he said. "We must get proper help."

"Listen, Clem," his friend replied. "This boy has travelled a lot with his father. He must have learnt some of his secrets."

"But he's only a boy," Clem said. "A weak little boy!"

The boy gave them some black coffee. "As soon as it's light, we must find her tracks. She may have gone down to the creek to drink."

They got into Benson's car and drove to the picnic place.

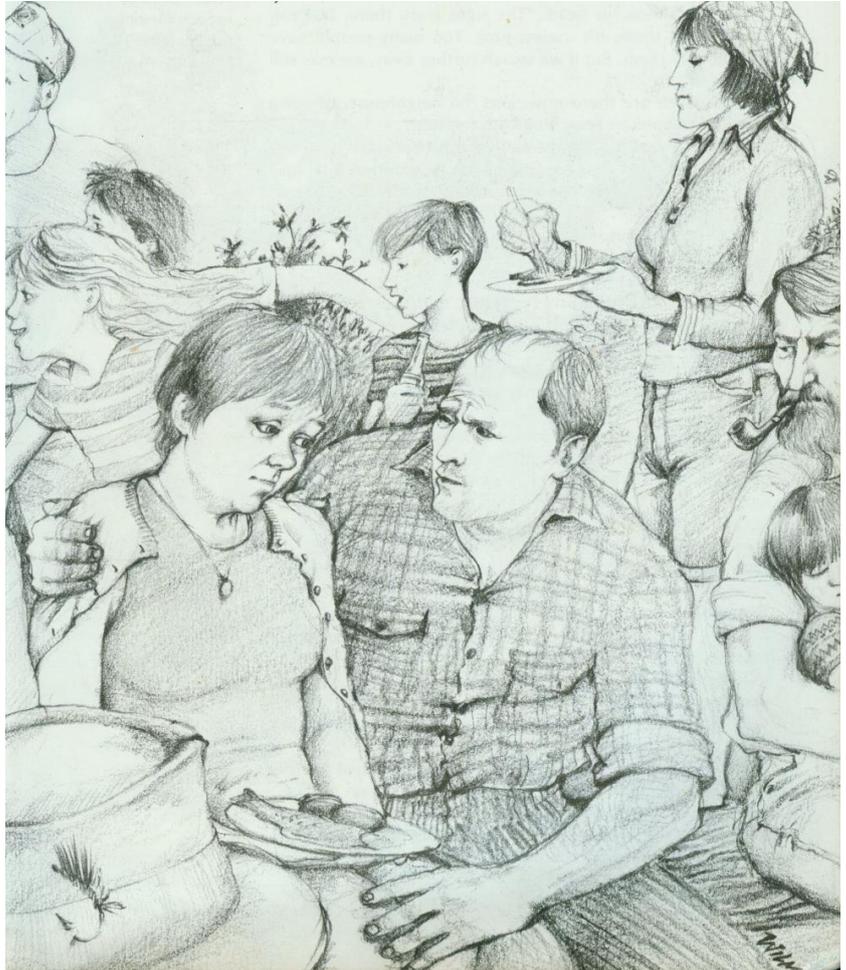
A man appeared and said: "They've just found her tracks by the creek. She seems to have crossed it. We've lost her tracks again."

The first light of day was in the sky as they started off. They soon reached the place where the girl had left the path. The bushes grow thickly here. They scratched the boy's bare legs. He didn't complain, but he thought: "If that girl had bare legs too, why did she come here?"

At last they reached the creek. Thirty or forty men were there.

They all looked at the boy in surprise. They had been expecting his father.

Phil started looking around. He moved quietly and said nothing. Only Benson watched him closely.



"What is it, Phil?" he asked when the boy seemed to have found something.

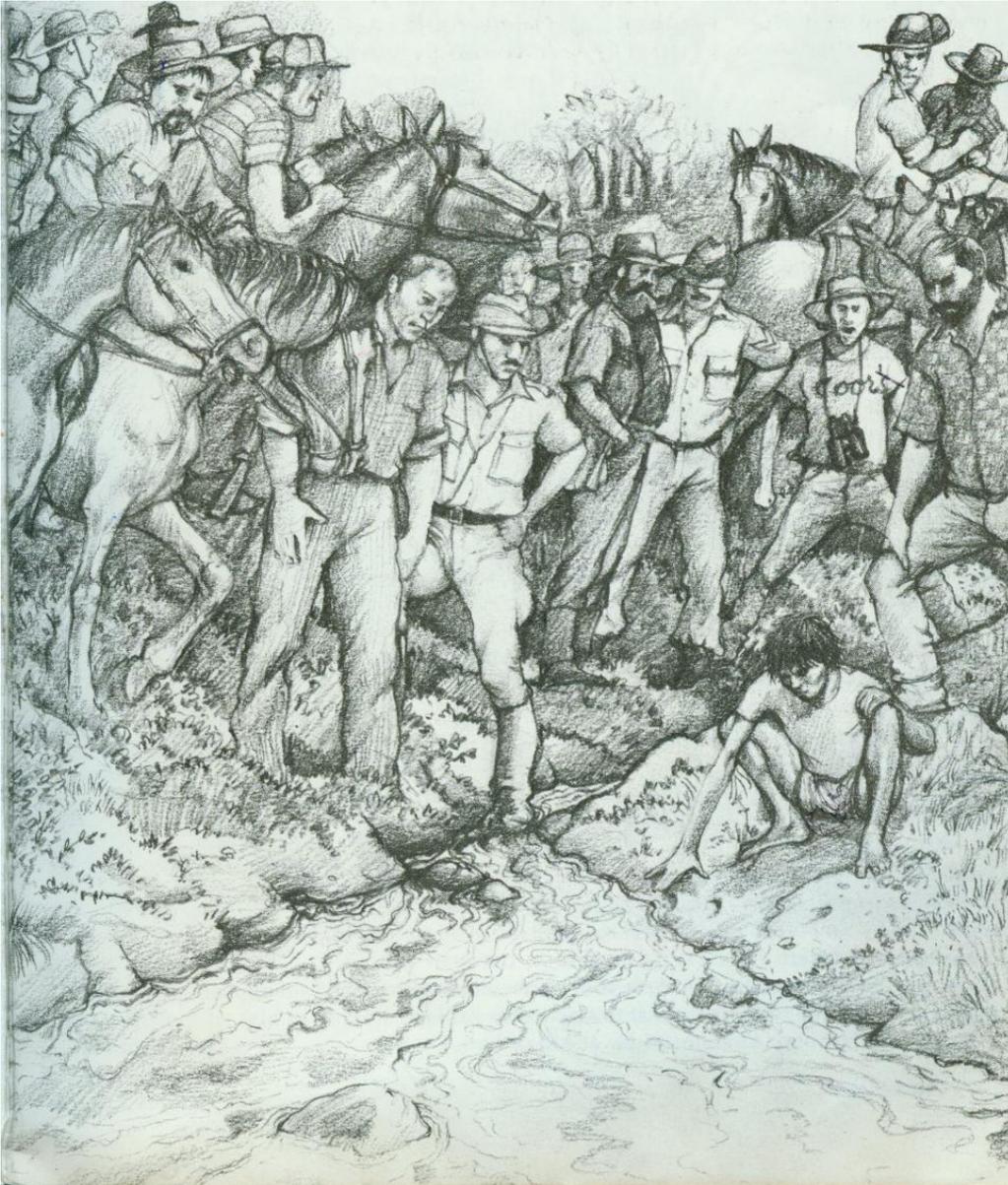
Phil had noticed a group of trees in the distance. They were covered with gay yellow flowers. Something told him that the girl would have seen them too. She would have gone towards them.

"I don't know, Mr Benson," he said quietly. Then he started walking towards the trees.

Benson followed. So did Richardson and a man called Parker. The other men refused to be led by a boy of twelve.

Not far away, Phil found his first proof: the toe mark of a child's shoe. "She went this way," he said.

When they reached the trees, there were more signs. She seemed to have rested there. Fresher tracks led away towards the hills.



Phil?" he asked.

"I'll be all right, Mr Benson."

It was very quiet when they had gone. But Phil wasn't afraid. He hurried on till it was too dark to see her tracks. Then he lay down and slept. He was much too tired to eat.

When daylight came, he ate some food from his rucksack. He was thinking: "I must find the place where she spent the night. If she's very tired, she may still be there."

He found it where he expected to find it, between two rocks. She had eaten some wild fruit and left their stones on the ground. But she must have gone several hours earlier.

Phil looked around. A mountain lay ahead of him. On his right he could hear the distant sound of the sea. Surely she

At five o'clock they came to some low wet land. The soft mud showed perfect tracks of two little bare feet. She had lost her shoes!

"How could a child of eight come so far?" Benson wondered. "If she's still alive, she must be terribly tired and hungry and lonely."

It was getting dark when they reached dry ground again. Suddenly Parker gave a cry and fell down.

"I've been bitten!" he shouted. "Take care. It's in the grass there. What kind of snake is it?"

The boy killed the snake while Benson looked at Parker's leg. "A black snake," he said. "Your leg may swell, but the bite isn't dangerous."

"I shall have to go back," said Parker.

The boy turned to Benson. "You'd better go with him," he said. "I'll leave clear signs and you can catch me up in the morning."

"Will you be all right,

would go back to the sea? Yes, the tracks were leading him that way. But then suddenly they turned towards the mountain. "She can't have gone up there!" he told himself. But in his heart he knew she had.

He walked all day. The signs were few, but they were enough for him. Surely he would soon catch up with her? He stopped twice for a drink, but he didn't dare to rest. Every minute was important now.

The sun was going down again as he reached the mountain top.

"She must be down there," he thought. "But if I don't find her tonight, she will die."

The first stars were in the sky when he noticed something under a tree. Could it be Wanda? Or was his tired mind imagining things? He ran forward and pointed his torch at the spot.

Yes. It was Wanda, but he hardly recognized her. Her skin was badly burnt by the sun. Her clothes were torn. Her small bare feet were swollen and cut, and black with dirt.

She was breathing. She was still alive. But her eyes were shut.



He went down on his knees and held her hand in his. It felt hot. "Fever", he said to himself. "I must carry her. But which way shall I go?"

Gently, he lifted the girl in his arms. She was heavy and he was terribly tired. But he only had one thought: he must take her with him, or she would die.

At sunrise he met a group of riders. When they took the child from his arms, he almost fell. They gave him water and he drank a few drops. He was too tired to drink any more. Too tired to talk. Too tired to listen.

Benson took care of him in the camp till he felt better. Next day he drove the boy home in his big car. The boy watched the strong hands on the wheel; he wished that the car belonged to him.

"Clem's a rich man, Phil," said Benson. "He's generous too, and he wants to thank you."

The boy shook his head.

"A birthday present perhaps?"

"Perhaps." Phil smiled.

"All right, Phil!" Benson said sadly. "I'll tell Clem. He'll find a really nice present. You can be sure of that."

He stopped the car under a tree outside the neat cottage. He could see the boy's mother working in the garden. The boy got out and opened the garden gate. Then he turned and gave Benson a big smile.

"There's a silver plate on the front of our fridge," he said. "It explains why they gave it to Dad. Will they write on a silver plate for me too?"

"Of course, Digger. Of course they'll do that," Benson replied.

Digger? Had Mr Benson called him that by mistake? "No. He must have said it on purpose," Phil thought. "Dad will be really pleased when I tell him."

Then he went indoors to look for something to eat. He was always hungry.



Questions for "I'm Digger's son"

1. Describe the scene around the house when the four men arrive
2. What is the boy's name, and how old is he?
3. Describe his aboriginal features
4. Who is missing, and how old is she?
5. Where was the girl lost?
6. Why is it, that Digger will not accept money when he has found a missing person?
7. What was done to find the girl?



8. Why is it, that only a few people follow Phil when he starts tracking Wanda?
9. Where did he find his first trace of her?
10. Why did Parker and Benson leave him just before nightfall?
11. Where did Phil spend the night and what about Wanda? How could Phil know?

12. What happened on the second day of the search?
13. Where had Wanda gone?
14. Where did Phil find Wanda?
15. What condition was she in?
16. For how long did he carry the girl?
17. What did Phil dream about when he was driven home?
18. Why did Benson call Phil Digger?

