

The Noon Lady of Towitta

Patricia Sumerling is an Adelaide-based professional historian who believes some of the unresolved tales she comes across in her work are ripe for unravelling and for imaginative reconstruction as distinctively South Australian stories.

*for
Roger Andre,
who made this novel possible*

The Noon Lady of Towitta

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Prologue

2 January 1902

Detective Bill Priest was urgently recalled to duty on the second day of the new year as the city of Adelaide took refuge from the holiday heat. A telegram had arrived at police headquarters: a girl had been brutally murdered near Towitta, at the Schippan family farm.

‘Where the hell is Towitta?’ Priest asked Sergeant Decker.

‘Well, the telegram came from Truro, so it must be somewhere round there. Sedan’s near there too. The place is full of German families on farms.’

Priest and a large company of troopers prepared to travel to the murder scene and later that day boarded the train at North Adelaide for Freeling near the Barossa Valley. Extensive equipment and stores were needed for what could be many hot, windy days in the middle of nowhere. After settling the numerous horses, wagons and stores in the cattle trucks, they took their places in the passenger carriage set aside for them. On the journey north, Priest pondered the name Schippan. It was not a common name but he’d been involved with several cases where it had cropped up. He remembered a domestic servant named Mary Schippan whose friend had died after an illegal operation while working for a well-to-do city family a couple of years earlier. He had had trouble in convicting the well-known Adelaide abortionist responsible for several other botched cases. When he finally managed to obtain corroborative evidence he was able to have her locked away for several years. It had been difficult to find any woman who would tell on her, so popular were her services in Adelaide. He’d have been happy to see her hang for the several deaths she was responsible for. He recalled

that she'd have been headed for the gallows but for an unfortunate technicality in the law that meant she got off with her life. He smiled as he pictured her behind bars.

The name Schippan also featured in a case near Sedan where a tyrannical German farmer named Mathes Schippan was involved in a shooting several years before but was acquitted by the courts in Adelaide. There were other disturbing allegations about him that couldn't be proven. One case was the murder of a hawker near Sedan. For some reason Schippan was not arrested although he was under suspicion. Priest soon learned that Mary, the servant involved in the abortion case, was Mathes Schippan's daughter. Considering this German farmer had been involved in several acts of violence, as was his daughter to some degree, Priest kept an open mind about what he might find at the farm. He kept his thoughts to himself about what he already knew of the Schippans while he became familiar with the intricacies of the Towitta murder.

Priest thought it ironic that in the first brief mention of the murder in the newspapers, the journos labelled it 'the Towitta Tragedy'. There was no tragedy about it as far as he was concerned. It was a brutal, savage killing, where the victim, a young girl, was butchered like an animal. Her throat had been repeatedly slashed from ear to ear and she was stabbed at least forty times in a frenzy by someone who knew how to use a knife. No, it was hardly a tragedy.

After many years on the job, Priest had come to learn that nothing was what it seemed and it made no sense to jump to conclusions. To do so would make it harder to find a new theory should the first one not stand up to scrutiny. Priest had been looking forward to a challenge such as this, for over the last few months he'd been involved in some pretty mundane cases. He had been following the sensation in South Africa where Australian soldiers were being tried for killing a Boer priest in cold blood.

The murder scene at Towitta was two days' travel by horse from Adelaide. Taking the train from Adelaide to Freeling and then travelling by horse through Angaston to Towitta cut the journey by half. On arrival at Towitta it was his responsibility to see that his band of troopers was sent around the district to find suitable places to board, while others camped in tents at the farm. It was also his task to organise the investigations and inquest. Priest planned the gathering of evidence and compiling of reports like a military operation. He had to ensure that no stone or speck of dust was left unturned in finding out what had taken place.

Priest and his men broke their journey overnight at the police station at Angaston.

'What's the gen?' Priest asked the two local constables on duty.

The older one, Constable Beckmann replied. 'Well, word is an unaccountable man was alleged to have broken into a farmhouse late at night and for no reason cut a girl's throat from ear to ear. It was surrounded by a lot of mystery and a great deal more running for assistance than running at the alleged intruder.'

'Really?'

'Yes, really, so the search is for some shadowy person who broke in, didn't steal anything and didn't even bring his own knife with him to do the horrible deed?'

Priest butted in, 'A straightforward case then?'

'If only. And to wrap it up nice and neat he left no footprints and was seen by nobody as he fled the area.'

Priest asked, 'What about the rest of the family?'

'As far as we have been informed the girl's elder sister, Mary, was able to struggle free with minor cuts and raise the alarm by running to the barn where her two brothers slept. They won't be much help, I believe they're rather simple. She then sent one of them to their closest neighbours for help. Apparently, there were two older brothers but they left home

a couple of years ago after bashing up their father. Revenge, according to local gossip, for years of beatings and whippings.'

'Who on earth would have been wandering around in the middle of a hot night in the middle of nowhere?' Priest asked.

'Sir, the district is rife with gossip about the Schippan family. There is a lot being said about old man Schippan – he was a tricky character when crossed, I believe.'

Priest nodded. 'I remember a case six or so years ago when Schippan shot a youth. Hartwig, I think his name was, a real troublemaker. Old Schippan claimed he shot him accidentally.'

Constable Beckmann said, 'We also know now that the two sisters and their brothers were on their own. Their parents had left the farm two days after Christmas to spend time with relatives at Eden Valley. We've already had locals popping in here to try and find out more. There's lots of talk about the fact the two single young women were left on their own with two simple brothers.'

'I wonder whether any local man, such as a sweetheart, would have known that they were on their own?' asked Priest.

'It could well have been a stranger passing through, a hawker or commercial traveller up to no good. Although the chances of this seem unlikely, don't you think?' Constable Campbell replied.

The older constable coughed and waited until all eyes were on him before announcing: 'It seems that Mary Schippan has said that the intruder had an English-sounding voice when he threatened to kill her.'

'Hmmm, I can see we'll be having to do a door-to-door on this around the district, especially as there are so many opinions and gossip about the family.' Priest glanced at the darkening sky and his men making camp in the police yard. 'We have an early start. I'll go and join my men now.'

Priest and the mounted troopers rose before dawn the next morning and made their way through Angaston and

down the treacherous Parrot Hill to the Murray Plains twenty-five miles away. He surveyed the plains from the top of the hill, drought ravaged and the colour of a desert. The sand drifts glinted red and released spirals of dust when the wind blew. This was Priest's first visit to the area for some time and he was alarmed at just how desperate the conditions really were. While he was thanking his lucky stars that he didn't live down there himself, he remembered the staff at the police station in Angaston telling him the Murray Flat farmers were better off than many others because they at least had the luxury of rabbits for food.

Priest pondered if that would make much difference. The little township of Towitta must have suffered a miserable existence due to the punishing drought conditions. It was no wonder that someone's nerve had given way in such a desolate place. Looking down the hill to the small scattered farms in that burning South Australian heat, he wondered how often it happened that a peaceful township became notorious overnight due to an act of murder.

Once at the tiny township of Towitta, Priest discovered that the population that used the scattered group of buildings, including a post office, a school, chapel and store, totalled seventy people living in just fifteen houses. The district was made up of many small farms covering around 200 acres each. Sedan, not quite seven miles away, was mostly settled by German families and Angaston was twenty-five miles away up steep and treacherous hill roads. Thirty years before, the Germans in the region had spilled over onto the plains from the more fertile valley of the Barossa, their heartland and spiritual centre.

The scrub country on the plains which extended eastward to the River Murray was usually favoured with fair annual rains, but not in the last year, Priest noted. He knew some farmers were quite well-to-do, but this did not include the Schippans or their neighbours. The nearby hilly district

leading down onto the plains had miles of dry-stone walling, but as the red dusty soil drifted with the wind it banked up alongside and covered them. Towitta was a meeting place of the winds that swooped to earth here from all points of the compass and licked up as much dust as they could carry. After camping in the district for a week, Priest would learn that a gritty red sand mixed with an impalpable powdered limestone continuously floated across the plain, or was borne high in the air by a gust of wind before gently settling on all below.

Towitta was on no map that Priest had, and he doubted that any Australian soul would have heard of it when the reports of the murder hit the newsstands. Most of the residents in the region, including Schippan, had settled there after crown land was divided into small farm blocks. Schippan had lived in the area for over twenty-five years and, like everyone else on the plains, was struggling to survive the present gruelling drought. Located more than a mile away from tiny Towitta, the Schippan farm was in the middle of nowhere with barely a blade of grass, bush or tree to break up the dreary flat landscape. Three miles away, on the western horizon, the Mount Lofty Ranges broke up the otherwise monotonous view.

When the mounted troops reached the farm, Constable Mowbray from Truro was standing by the gated entrance to the property. He was keeping all those with a ghoulis interest at bay, for already the news of the murder had spread far and wide. As they rode into the dusty farmyard Priest noticed two lads and a woman sitting in the shade on a long bench beside the thatched farmhouse. The woman sat staring ahead. Neatly dressed with a white pinafore, she had her hand on the head of one of the boys who lay with his head on her lap and was gently crying. The other, older boy looked sullen as he whittled purposefully at a mallee root with a large razor-sharp butcher's knife. They sat there waiting for who knows what.

Priest, in a horse and carriage, led the procession to the biggest barn. As they arrived the elder boy walked slowly over and asked, 'Sir, can I look after the horses?'

'I would be very much obliged, young man.'

The troopers climbed from carriages or sweating horses and headed for the water pump and troughs for a welcome drink and a cooling down. Priest noted that the smaller boy had dried his tears and had been summoned by his brother to help with the horses. Priest left the men and walked to the farmhouse where he was greeted by Constable Rumball and taken through the kitchen to an inner room.

'Prepare yourself, sir. What you're gonna see isn't very pretty. Though I'm sure it's better than what it was, for Lambert, the local constable, and his mum have put the corpse, Bertha Schippan, on the bed.'

Priest was quick to reply, 'Goodness, they shouldn't have done that before we arrived.'

'Oh, I dunno, sir, it was probably the best thing as it's been over thirty-six hours now, and it's pretty shocking in the bedroom. I mean we haven't touched the blood or anything but we've had to cover her over with a sheet. You'll see why.'

Priest was shown into the tiny bedroom where the body of the young girl was laid out under a sheet on a double bed. Now he could see why she was moved and covered. Swarms of flies buzzed noisily about the stains and splatters of black congealed blood on the floor where Bertha had lain. Priest knew the funeral was well overdue for the temperature hovered around a hundred degrees in the shade and the peculiar smell of death was already fouling the air. He grabbed his laundered neckerchief and covered his nose as he learned that the local coroner and doctor had already done their examinations.

The brothers, Wilhelm and August Schippan, who Priest was told did the heavy manual work around the farm for their

father, helped him in any way they could. It didn't take long for Priest to notice that they were somewhat slow and sluggish. When asked questions it took time for them to reply, and indeed they appeared reluctant to do so, whether out of shyness or lack of English Priest couldn't say at first. The older boy was simply quiet, but his brother was strangely afflicted. As Priest spent more time with them he realised both brothers had problems speaking English.

The troopers soon discovered they had similar problems with the locals who were mostly first- and second-generation German migrants. While they, like the brothers, were most anxious to give the police all the help they sought, it seemed that the presence of a German linguist or a German-speaking police officer other than Deckert would have hastened their enquiries. As it was, they were greatly handicapped because of the lack of understanding of English by some of the locals. It was like being in a foreign country.

When Priest visited witnesses he couldn't fail to notice the excitement provoked by the shocking crime. It caused a thrill of horror in the minds of the honest hard-working German settlers. Such a thrill, he thought, would have been shared just as much by Adelaide folk who were as eager to hear the latest news of tragedies and homicides. Visiting the hotel bars in the district at Sedan, Cambrai and Truro over the following days, he heard the case enthusiastically debated, with theories advanced and refuted and the many suspects, whoever they were, already hanged in the imagination. Rumours of all kind circulated. No one had seen so many police in the district before. Priest noticed that the younger women gazed with wonder at the sight of so many young bronzed troopers going about their important duties.

Miss Mary Schippan was not one of the women who viewed the men in this manner. She appeared uninterested in them but she recognised Priest from the time, more than two years earlier, when her friend, a servant, had died at the

hands of an abortionist in Adelaide. Mary appeared emotionless as he questioned her, looking past him as though in a trance. She moved little and her voice showed no trace of the suffering she must have felt after her terrible ordeal. Maybe she was in shock.

Priest sent the troopers to assist in a systematic scouring of the countryside. Every house within miles was visited. Every stranger was seen and interrogated and every clump of mallee examined, with no result. As he remarked to one of the journalists, 'If any man visited the Schippan house, as described by Miss Schippan, he has vanished completely into thin air as if he employed an airship to escape by.'

In the midst of the search, Mr and Mrs Schippan arrived home from Eden Valley. Priest went out to greet their buggy and tell them what had happened to their daughter.

'Goot afternoon,' Mrs Schippan said, her voice tightly controlled. 'Vee have driven here as fast as vee cout. Vee are very upset that something dreadful has happened to von of our daughters. Tell us please vhat has happened.'

Priest helped them down, their faces grave.

'I am very sorry, Mister and Missus Schippan, but your youngest girl, Bertha, has been savagely attacked and murdered by an intruder. We are doing all we can to find the perpetrator of this barbaric crime. What I can say is that your other three children are safe, although distressed, as you can imagine. Mary has suffered a few cuts and bruises.'

On hearing this, the shocked Mrs Schippan hurried to Mary. Priest took Mr Schippan to the house and led him into the bedroom where his dead daughter lay. Carefully he drew back the sheet and asked him to identify Bertha.

'This is Johanna, Mister Schippan?'

'Ya, but vee call her Berta,' he replied quietly, and reached for his neckerchief.

'Bertha, right. I'll cover her up now. The flies are pretty bad, I'm afraid.' They returned to the kitchen.

‘Mr Schippan, we have seen what we need to and now that you have identified Bertha she must be buried as soon as possible.’

‘Ya, I can see that, Mr Priest. There is an undertaker in Sedan.’

‘I have some notepaper here. Write a note to him and one of my men will ride there for you. Inform him that he must come early tomorrow morning with a coffin. My trooper will also make sure the clergyman you need will be at the graveside in Sedan for a ceremony later in the day. I am sure you want relatives to know too. I’ll leave you to write all the letters you wish delivered. There’s pen and ink in my writing box on the table. Write the notes you need and I’ll send some of my men off to deliver them.’

Mathes Schippan looked distraught and Detective Priest placed a comforting hand on his arm and said quietly, ‘This is a terrible affair Mr Schippan but while I’m here my men and I will do all we can to lessen the burden you and your wife are suffering.’ Applying a little extra pressure to Mathes Schippan’s arm, Priest continued, ‘Now, Mr Schippan, you can see how much mess this brutal murder has made to your home but we are still looking for clues. I’m afraid no one is allowed beyond the kitchen until we have finished our search. We can’t afford to miss any traces of whoever was in the house with Mary and Bertha. After the notes are written I want you and your sons – with help from my men – to construct an outside kitchen with a cooking and eating area. It has to be large enough for your family and all of us. Then you need to re-arrange your barns for your family to sleep in for a few nights.’

Priest noticed that Schippan’s sons were soon helping their father to carry out these instructions. But there was no chatter between them. Rather the boys appeared scared of their father, flinching when he came near. Mrs Schippan sat with