



ALLEN & UNWIN

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GAME

TREVOR SHEARSTON



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The light was grey and they were riding down through thick scrub with shed bark slippery under the horses' hooves and loose stone beneath. Jack was being their eyes, but both the younger men knew the country south of Marengo better than Ben did. He was content to ride tail with the pack mare.

Jack had overnighted once at the place with a mob when still a stockman, had even then, he claimed, noted its perfection to a bent purpose. By his account, a mile from Jugiong the Yass road climbed to a saddle cupping a shallow valley part-cleared as a layby, there being a spring. The entrance was blind, through boulders. The coach horses and those of the escort would be badly blown after the climb. The men too would have nothing on their minds but a drink of cold water. He had anticipated Ben's rejoinder. 'None of it any damn use, I know, if the bastards get wind of us—they'll double the bloody escort. So we make ourselves scarce.'

The three had disappeared for two days into the hayloft on the Murrumburrah farm of Jack's maternal uncle. The man didn't want them there but took a wad of quids for gin and bread and a mutton stew. He asked where they were headed next and Jack told him back up to Fogg's to fence a few bits of stuff. When they left he watched them out of sight. On Jack's instruction they rode north for an hour, then east and by dusk were on the Galong following the stream south. Ben said nothing, the man was Jack's affair. They were seated at a low fire eating warmed sardines from the tins when Jack said out of a brooding silence, 'He'd shop me except he's too worried I'd get away.'

John turned to Ben and waited. When he offered no comment John looked to Jack. 'What—his own kin?'

'He'd have sold the wife if he run out of Old Tom.'

The youngster strained forward into the firelight. 'And you haven't shot the mongrel?'

'That what you'd do, John?'

Ben heard the dangerous edge. He caught Jack's eye. The return glance said keep your hair on.

'My oath! Any dog back home that turned got a bullet!'

Jack grinned without showing any teeth. 'That so. Well that wouldn't look too good on his stone. Shot for turnin, RIP.'

John erupted into a guffaw, then his face froze, until Ben chuckled and Jack himself began to laugh. Jack stopped first. He waited for John to see he'd quit.

'I reckon we'll make that our last word on him but, eh.'

They'd slept till the moon rose, then ridden to Jugiong, skirting the sleeping village and climbing the ridge that would bring them down onto the saddle and the road. Knowing Jack's weakness for putting gain above risk, Ben wanted a look at the place before they began stopping travellers. It was possible too that a mob was being overnighted.

The scrub between the ash and stringybarks thinned and past the two in front of him Ben caught glimpses of a bowl of native millet with silver-grey ringbarks standing and the road a grey stripe that would be white dust later. He caught movement, looked again and was sure, and was about to call to Jack in the lead, but Jack had already seen and was pulling his mare. They sat their mounts in the shadow of the trees and watched the four figures trudging clumped together along the road. The light was still too thick to be able to make them out other than the fuzzy red of a shirt, the dull glint of a

pan, but the long handles of the shovels strapped across their backs identified them. Diggers. Going north to Lambing Flat. In the still air the clanking that tolled each step sounded as close as the breath of the horses.

‘Buggers are on the move early,’ Jack muttered. ‘We want em?’

‘They’re goin in the wrong direction. Anyway, too bloody early to start standin guard, I want some breakfast.’

They watched till the four climbed to the rim, sank into the road. In those ten minutes the valley grew into being, dark blurs becoming shrubs, pale humps boulders, the line of the stream from the spring a green scribble through tussocks. Ben gave the diggers a further minute, then dropped the pack mare’s reins and rode from the trees and halted his mare and studied the nest of boulders from which the coach would emerge. The driver would be looking ahead to where placed stones made a roadside trough. A fallen ringbark up the slope to the right was the spot to hold the captures, behind his line of sight. From the log she was a straight run, no boulders, down to the road. They’d be halfway to the coach before the traps had the carbines out of the scabbards. He swivelled in the saddle and nodded.

*

By mid-morning of an already hot November day, thirty-four people sat in discrete groupings about the fallen tree. In deference to the presence of a woman all the men, including the three, had retained their coats. She was the wife of a surveyor. She sat on a horse rug beneath a white parasol, he on the step of their buggy, both angry and neither looking at the other. Two drays piled high with wool bales resembled the walls of a ruin, the resigned teamsters sitting straight-legged in its shade, backs against the wheels. A clerk sat alone at one end of the log holding the reins of a nag the three had not given a second glance. At the customary distance from the Europeans, but close enough to include in the same monitoring sweep, a party of Chinese coming from the diggings squatted on their haunches, faces hidden beneath conical hats, each man’s belongings in a tied mat in front of him. A retied mat. Like all there they’d been ordered to empty their pockets and open their loads. Only the purse of the surveyor’s wife remained inviolate.

Ben was alone with the captures. Firearms had been demanded at gunpoint and the caps and bullets removed and dropped in a sack. The lifeless weapons lay where tossed on a filthy tarpaulin from one of the drays. Even so his gaze swept the downcast faces constantly as he stood talking to a squatter named Hayes. The two knew one another slightly. When still a cocky with a wife and son Ben had driven a herd of store beef to Lambing Flat and been levied five pounds by Hayes on behalf of the committee towards building new saleyards. The five pounds had, half an hour earlier, gone into the take bag along with seventeen in interest and a fine gold watch. The squatter had responded tersely to Ben’s attempt now to converse. But curiosity about a man he’d read much of, but didn’t till today realise he’d already met, had got the better of him. Ben asked whether the new yards had in fact been built. Hayes assured him that they had. Then, knowing it was without doubt the only chance he’d ever get, the squatter asked whether Ben had been, as the newspapers asserted, one of the two men never identified by the informer, Charters, in the gang under Gardiner at Eugowra Rocks. Mr Gilbert’s presence was known, certainly, Hayes added quickly, he having been named at both trials. But because they were working together now did not of course mean, he granted, that their association went all the way back to the day of the famed robbery. Ben ignored the flattery and stared into the squatter’s eyes trying to read there his motive in asking. It was no secret in the company he kept, but why should this man know and be able to swear on oath if it came to it.

‘How does it concern you, Mr Hayes?’

~~‘In no way directly, Mr Hall, I admit. I’m simply moved to enquire. As a reader of the newspapers~~

‘And that, you’d have me to believe, grants licence to ask anything.’

‘Not at all. My apology.’

Ben shifted his gaze to one of the Chinese, who had stood and was touching his crotch to signal that he needed to piss. Ben nodded and pointed to a tussock, there, no further. He watched the man shuffle away in his slippers and squat as they did to relieve themselves. His mind, though, was still debating whether to answer. How much did it matter? If ever he was taken the traps would charge him with being there and set about trying to prove it.

‘Yeah. I was there. I shot above the nags though, not into the coach.’

He didn’t know why he’d added that. It was true but the man didn’t need to be told. It sounded as if he was begging off.

‘It was a savage sentence Gardiner got.’

‘More savage than Manns, you reckon.’

Ben was watching the Chinese return to his companions but his eyes grazed the squatter’s face. Hayes’s cheeks had flamed.

‘Ah, quite, yes. I’d forgot.’

‘So’s Harry. Everythin.’ He flicked his hand to dismiss apology before it could be spoken. Jack was escorting a second, smaller, party of Chinese up the slope. ‘Beg pardon.’ Ben turned from the squatter and strode down to meet them. Two in front were wearing striped miner’s shirts and corduroys, the rest were in the uniform of black cotton pyjamas and woven hats. Jack carried across his thighs a double shotgun with tooled barrels and walnut stock.

‘Whose is that beauty?’

‘Jesus you’re a hungry bastard.’

‘It ain’t for me.’

Jack pointed with his chin. ‘In the red shirt.’ He lobbed the gun to Ben, who broke and closed it, then led an imaginary bird. The owner of the gun watched like a hawk. He wore a gold ring in his right ear and had his hair pulled tightly over his skull and tied, rather than plaited into the pigtail his brethren wore. Ben lowered the gun and read the maker’s mark. ‘Tower, eh? No trash for you. Get him where, John?’

‘Not John—Lee. I buy him Bathurst. Twenty quid.’

‘I give you ten.’

The man shook his head. ‘Not sell him.’ His companion tugged on his sleeve, the man jerked his arm free.

‘Then I bloody take it.’

He spun on his heel. The man looked in disbelief at Jack, then touched himself on the chest and pointed after Ben. Jack nodded. The man broke into a half-run.

‘Orright, ten quid.’

Ben spoke over his shoulder. ‘Too late, John, I give you the chance.’

The man stopped and turned his distressed face back on Jack. A two-fingered whistle spun all face towards the nest of boulders. The youngster was out from their cover. He raised and whipped his arm then kicked the stallion into a canter.

Ben stooped and lay the gun across a tussock, ran to the mare and vaulted into the saddle. The teamsters had stood and others too were climbing to their feet in expectation. Ben drew a Navy and rode in among them.

‘Sit down! All of you! There’s your job, Hayes, keep em sittin!’

The squatter began flapping his arms like a bantam hen wings and calling ‘sit, please’. Ben touched the mare with his knees and she picked her way intelligently through the panic. She was beginning to trust him. She hadn’t yet, though, had a revolver go off in her ear. He turned her towards the Chinese climbing the slope and raised the Navy. At the click of the hammer each man broke into a run.

John had slowed the stallion to a trot to come the last twenty yards. Jack called to him, ‘They come behind or in front?’

‘Behind, it looks, I just seen the coach.’

‘There one on the box?’ Ben said.

‘No uniform but I’d say so—he’s got a carbine.’

The youngster didn’t like the police carbines, the roar of them and the size of the slug they threw.

‘We’re down there quick bloody carbines don’t matter.’

When the coach emerged from the boulders it was barely moving, the spokes visible. All on the hillside could hear the blowing of the horses and the driver telling them they were a grand pair of boys and she was only a mile now to the inn and oats and the most of it downhill. On the box beside him was a trooper in plainclothes with a carbine across his lap as John had said. He was looking down into his hand as if at his watch. Neither man had seen the crowd on the hillside. The driver gave the horse flanks a light flick of the reins, then took all four straps in his left hand and gripped the brake lever with his right as the coach started downhill. Two troopers rode from the boulders into the pillow of white dust in the coach’s wake. The bearded one saw them immediately, spoke to the other and pointed. Ben waited for the man then to swivel in the saddle and signal but he remained facing the hillside. Jack had been watching for the same give.

‘Just the two of the bastards.’

The troopers kicked their mounts forward and yelled to the driver, who threw a wild look up the hillside and began heaving with both hands on the reins. A man’s face, mouth open, appeared in the coach window and quickly withdrew. The trooper on the box had unbuttoned his coat to get at his Navys and was checking the priming of the carbine. The two on horseback swerved off the road and started up the hillside. Jack let out a yip and heeled his mare hard in her ribs. Ben and John took up the yipping. Revolvers in both hands, the three launched into a charge downhill, working the mounts with their knees. The troopers wheeled and separated. The bearded man unslung his carbine, the other chose the lesser range but six shots of a revolver. Ben yelled, ‘John—with me!’ and rode at the bearded man.

He was no raw recruit. He ignored their opening shots, levelled the carbine and calmly chose Ben. Finding himself staring into the barrel’s eye, Ben jinked the mare and in the same instant heard the whine of the heavy slug pass his right ear. He fired both revolvers into the bloom of smoke and followed. The man was waiting. He speared the now-useless carbine and, not waiting to watch, reefed hard on the reins, needing to draw a revolver. The stock struck Ben full in the chest. He felt himself toppling and lunged for the mare’s mane, fingers in a tangle of horsehair and trigger guard. John reined in beside him.

‘Jesus, Ben! You hurt?’

‘No, bloody get after him!’

John heeled the stallion hard in the ribs. Unused to such treatment, the horse half-squatted, then sprang off his haunches. Ben found the left stirrup. When he looked round the bearded trooper had turned his horse and was coming again at him and John, firing left and right. Ben saw a puff of wool as a bullet from John clipped the shoulderpad of the man’s coat. The two passed like jousters and then he was on Ben, the snatched shots of both going wide, but giving Ben his first decent look at him as they

passed three yards from one another. He was in his forties, ginger beard and red hair, fierce blue eyes with sweat in the sockets, sun-cracked lips flecked with spit. John came hot on the man's tail. Ben pulled hard on the left rein and the mare responded. She wasn't worried by the guns, far from, she had her blood up. A touch and she broke into a full gallop. The man glanced over his shoulder and saw how close he was being pursued and fired a shot blind from below his left armpit, the first sign of panic he'd given. Ben fired and saw the left flap of the man's coat belly like a sail. John had the nose of the stallion nearly up the arse of the trooper's mount. He leaned and spoke in the animal's ear and in three strides the stallion took him abreast of the other horse. The youngster twisted in the saddle and presented the barrels of both revolvers at the man's head. He wasn't asking him to bail, his snarl said he was going to pull the triggers. The man heaved on the reins and stood in the stirrups and his blown mount staggered sideways and collided with a ringbark. The man bellowed in pain, dropping reins and revolver and clutching his thigh in both hands. The horse walked to a halt, lifted her tail and shat.

Ben and John rode each side of the animal into the rich smell rising around her and levelled revolvers at the man's face. All were breathing too hard to speak. The man's teeth were bared and he was closing and opening his eyes and hissing as he pressed thumbs hard into his thigh. John jumped down to retrieve the dropped weapon. Ben pointed a barrel at the man's second Navy. The man opened the flap of the case one-handed and offered the revolver by the butt and gripped his thigh again. Ben pushed the weapon into his belt. The roar in his ears was lessening and through it he heard a shout, 'You're licked, mate, give it up!' Jack and his man were still at it. He'd forgotten them.

'John, stay with this bastard!' He pulled the mare round. The two were fifty yards away, Jack circling the trooper first in one direction, then the other, but the Navy in his right hand steady on the man. They'd flattened the grass in a wide oval so they resembled equestrians on a field. Unlike Jack, the trooper was maintaining a grim silence, but on a slower and heavier horse was finding Jack always just behind his shoulder. To Ben it was clear the contest was over. His arrival would certainly end it. But as he kned the mare forward the trooper, sick of being outridden, changed tactic and charged. The move caught Jack in mid-taunt. The man rode at him, his revolver arm straight. As he fired Jack dropped in the saddle and thrust his revolver at the man as if to impale him and pulled the trigger. At a range of feet the bullet tore through the man's chest and out between his shoulderblades in a spray of blood and fabric. Uttering a cry like a startled child's, he threw up both arms and slid backwards over the rump of his still-charging horse.

Ben reined in beside Jack and both looked at the body sprawled face down on the ground, the last shudders running through it, fingers opening and clenching, boots drumming on the flattened grass. In the centre of the coat back was a hole the size of a fist, bloody at its flayed edges. The face rested on the right cheek. The left eye was open and coated with grit. Ben repressed the urge to get down and wipe the eyeball. Jack coughed and turned his head to the other side of his mount and spat.

'I thought he'd bail, Ben. The bastard's hung us.'

'What choice he give you?'

'None, the bastard. Jesus Christ!'

They heard footsteps and swung towards the sound, revolvers up and levelled. But it was the squatter, Hayes. He halted, eyes on the revolvers. Ben lowered his. Still half wild, Jack kept his at the man.

'Where are you bloody goin?'

'I know him, Mr Gilbert. Parry. Will you permit me to see if there's anything I can do for him?'

'I'd reckon he's well and truly copped it. But if you want. Why didn't the bloody fool bail? He a

married man?’

‘No.’

‘That’s somethin, anyway. What rank?’

‘Sergeant, Mr Gilbert.’

‘Chasin inspector, was he? He might’ve got it too with a decent nag under him, you can tell the bloody reporters that!’

Ben heard in the rush of words how worked up he was still.

‘Jack. We got a coach to do.’

‘Yeah. While we’re here, eh.’ He pointed to the revolver lying by the outflung right arm, the finger extended as if still seeking it. ‘Hand me that up, matey—butt first.’ The squatter walked to the weapon and stooped, lifted it by the barrel and walked to Jack’s stirrup. Jack blew grit from the cylinder and counted the full chambers, clicked through to a fired chamber, and pushed the revolver into his belt with his own. He wheeled his horse and put her into a canter towards the coach.

Ben nodded down at the body. ‘Nothin I could do, Mr Hayes. Too keen for his own good, your mate.’

He turned the mare and followed Jack.

The driver was throwing the mail bags onto the roadside. The passenger, a gent in a suit and paisle waistcoat, was out and emptying his pockets onto a linen handkerchief spread on the coach’s step. Jack brought his mount to a halt where the bags were falling.

‘Where’d the bastard get to was up beside you?’

The driver straightened with a canvas bag in each hand. ‘I already told Mr Dunn here, he bolted.’ He hooked his head towards the scrub on the far hillside.

‘Stay this side of the coach, but,’ John said, his gaze moving between the gent’s pockets and his hands. ‘Bastard’s still got a carbine.’

Jack dismounted and drew his pocketknife and picked up one of the bags by its padlocked leather collar. John had finished milking the gent. He pointed towards the arena of trampled grass.

‘Looks like you settled him.’

Hayes had removed the coat and turned the body over and was in the act of draping the chest and face.

‘Bastard’s settled us all. Ain’t that sunk in?’ He worked the point of the knife into the heavy canvas and ripped down with his fist.

Ben steered the mare to the bearded trooper sitting hatless on the grass still clutching his thigh in both hands, his face beneath the ginger beard white as paper. The man heard him but didn’t look up.

‘What’s your name?’

‘O’Neill. Sub-inspector.’ The man spoke at the ground.

‘Your sergeant’s copped it. Like I just told Mr Hayes over there, too keen for his own good.’

The man didn’t answer. His cheeks, though, had lost their look of paper and were an angry red.

‘In a bit we’ll want your watch and chain and that ring. You should dismiss that bastard was up on the box, leavin yous to take on three.’

‘The ring was my father’s.’

‘Give your word and you keep it.’

The man glanced from beneath his brows and back down. His cheeks flamed a brighter red.

‘I give my word.’

Ben turned towards the coach. ‘John—our friend here’s got a watch and chain for us. We’ll have his wallet too.’

A half-hour later he rode up the hillside to fetch the shotgun. He had worked out a short speech, that the life they were leading it was them or the traps and the dead trap could as easily have nailed Jack, or any of them. But the averted eyes, and the shock or plain disgust in those that fleetingly met his, told him words were useless. Feeling his unease, the mare had slowed. He kneed her forward. In the new and fatal light in which he'd begun to sense he now rode, it was relief to see that the same light had not touched the shotgun. It lay across the tussock as he'd left it. He jumped down almost gaily, gripped the gun at the breech and remounted and lay it across his thighs. Its weight felt good. He ran his thumb over the engraving on the left barrel of a hare and hound. Then, leaving his thumb there, he turned the mare's head from the sullen crowd, having to resist kicking her into a gallop, and swept his gaze over the scene at the road, taking it in. The coach standing idle, its pair cropping. The pile of slim mailbags white in the sunlight. The bearded sub-inspector, O'Neill, seated now on a bag but still clutching his thigh. And the squatter, Hayes, keeping vigil by the body, its legs sticking out from under the spread coat. Nothing he could do to change any of it. He clicked his tongue and the mare, released, broke into a canter towards the nest of boulders where Jack and John waited with the dead trap's horse, now a second packhorse.

They cut the tracks they'd left coming down, climbed to the ridgetop and stayed on the high ground, coming after an hour into a natural clearing that gave a view of the road north past Jugiong. Jack uncorked the Old Tom and they sat their mounts and passed the bottle. They'd lowered the gin to half when they saw the coach emerge from a belt of trees, the sub-inspector's horse tied behind. It was forty miles to Yass.

They sorted on Jack's poncho, the take bag first. John upended it. They separated the notes from the jewellery, the gent's dress ring and ruby tiepin, a silver snuffbox and five gold watches and chains. The oddity was a leather opium pouch in which one of the Chinese had thought his nuggets safe. Ben picked up the watch taken from Hayes, clicked it open, closed it.

'Should've give this back, he was presented it.'

'He should've bloody said, then,' John muttered.

Jack drew the cord tight again round the neck of the pouch. 'We done good here.' He lifted the pouch and shook it. They heard the dull heavy rattle.

They dealt the banknotes by denomination into piles, then started on the mail, Jack and John slitting the registered letters with their red wax seals, removing any notes then shoving the letters back into the envelopes, Ben working his way through a bag of parcels. Jack slit a promisingly fat envelope but found the fatness to be a square of folded silk. He pincerd one corner and shook the folds out. The square broke into a scarf of blue and yellow fleurs-de-lis on a purple ground. He draped the scarf over gobleted fingers and held it into the sunlight, the colours against gum trunks and scrub as foreign as the flowers patterned. He scrunched the silk into his hand and placed it balled beside his hip and checked the letter, finding five one-pound notes. John nodded down at the ball.

'Who's that for?'

When the silence grew Ben, too, stayed the pocketknife in his hand. On another day Jack would have had the scarf already wrapped around his throat. He reached for another envelope.

'Dunno.'

'Won't say, more like.'

The youngster sent Ben a wink.

‘Either way none of your damn business.’

John made a snorting giggle. ‘Not till I seen her anyway.’

Ben rested the knife on his knee. A dead trap was a lark, so too the prospect of hanging.

‘I reckon he means it, John.’

‘I know he do. Why I’m pushin.’ His hand darted out and slapped Jack on the right boot. Ben tensed, ready to grab Jack’s arm should his hand move to his belt. John was already speaking. ‘Coulda been me that done for us! I was set to blow out his brains, that bastard of ours, before his nag run him into that tree. Bastard knew it too. I didn’t need to remind him neither how close he come, he couldn’t look at me while we was doin the coach. But it wouldn’t be eatin me if I *had* potted him! Ben near got a busted face from his carbine! So why’s it eatin you? Your bastard’s far from the first bloody trap you’ve shot at. Eh? Or’s had a shot at you! Coulda been any of em before today. So now it’s bloody happened.’

Jack looked at Ben, caught between anger and plea. Ben shrugged.

‘Forty people seen you fought him fair.’

‘Not how the traps or the damn papers’ll see it.’

‘Course they bloody won’t, we was bailin a coach. But John’s right—his slug come a couple of inches lower she’d be you under that coat and him crowin about the notes comin to him.’

‘Still might’ve, if he’d had a better nag under him. Nothin wrong with his pluck.’

He reached to his belt, not with intent, slowly, and pulled the dead man’s Navy free and held it flat on his palm to read the stamp on the frame. N.S.W. POLICE No. 204. There was dust fine as talc in the mechanism and in the pores of the metal. The sweat of the man’s hand had darkened the timber of the butt till the grain was near invisible. He lobbed the revolver onto the poncho. John looked at it, then up at him, not believing the meaning of the gesture.

‘You don’t want her?’

Jack shook his head. The youngster snatched the revolver up. He sighted it on a trunk, clicked his tongue, lowered it onto his left hand and turned the cylinder through a revolution.

‘Two left. Shoot em back at the bastards.’

‘I reckon they’ll be lookin to give you the chance, too,’ Ben said quietly.

Camp that night was in a wattle-choked gully where a fire wouldn’t show. Rolled in his blanket, coat for a pillow, John was already asleep. The dead trap’s Navy, fully loaded and capped, was tucked barrel first into the coat’s folds. Before lying down the youngster had extracted from his shammy the wad of notes and using his blanket as table had lain them out by denomination in the firelight. He knew what his share amounted to, he’d just wanted to stare again at the piles of crisp paper. The day’s take had been fourteen quid shy of two thousand. His sleeping face still bore a faint look of amazement.

Jack, riding back from Victoria, had found him at Adjungbilly. He was hiding out by day and coming in to the shanty at night, having absconded from bail at Yass on a charge of robbing a drayman. Jack had taken a shine to him. Probably, Ben suspected, because at seventeen John was near as young as Jack had been when he’d fallen under Gardiner’s spell and left working stock to join him on the roads. Jack had woven the same spell, telling the youngster drays were nothing, the real money was in coaches, and if he was serious about going on the cross and not just talking, Jack would

introduce him to a friend. Three nights later, at Fogg's, Ben had shaken his hand.

The youngster was breathing through his mouth. The full lips were a strange match with the narrow face and beaky chin. Ben wondered if he'd ever kissed a woman other than his mother. He hadn't himself for so long it was hard to remember. The girl Fogg found for him, it would be, not the last time at the shanty but the time before. A touch of the tarbrush and a nice meaty arse. Her face was gone, though. And her name. He came back and found his gaze still on the youngster's mouth. He turned quickly to the fire and took a swallow of gin.

'Too much excitement for the young fella, we've wore him out.'

Jack was nursing his pannikin and staring into the flames. Ben guessed what he was seeing, he could see it himself, the body face down in the dirt and the last shudders running through it.

'Took its time but it was always comin, Jack. And damn sight better one of them. They owed us.'

'I could've shot the bastard sooner. I thought he'd bloody bail.'

'Thinkin's what Old Tom's for.'

Jack half laughed and looked at him. Ben saw himself reflected orange on the dark brown and black of his eyes.

'You'd reckon it was their quids, wouldn't you, the fight the bastards put up.'

'Damned if I'd be doin her for six bob a day. Might start a few of them thinkin the same.'

Jack swigged from his pannikin, then snatched up a stick from the fire and began to jab its glowing tip into the coals, sending a fountain of sparks up into the overhanging wattles. Ben was about to chip him about the glow, then told himself the restlessness was a good sign. The old Jack couldn't sit, he needed always to be stirring things, making something happen from nothing. Ben had known him before the escort robbery, but not well. Jack had been Frank's acolyte. Although five years younger than Ben he'd been on the roads longer, since he was sixteen. He'd learned a ruthlessness Ben knew he could never aspire to. Jack had emptied both barrels into the escort coach. When the hunt got hot and Frank disappeared into Queensland, Jack, abandoned, had come looking for Ben. He'd always admired Ben's calm head, he said. And that he wasn't a drunk. In the two years since that morning, aside from Jack's jaunts into Victoria to see his family, they'd worked together, as a pair or with pick-ups. One of their pick-ups, Micky Burke, had turned his gun on himself after being shot in the guts. At Goimbla each had taken a wrist and dragged Ben's friend from youth Johnny O'Meally, his throat blown away to the foot of a she-oak, cleaned out his pockets and left him for his killers to glut on. A dead trap went some way to balancing the ledger. Jack was still knifing the coals with the stick. Ben picked up the bottle. Jack paused the stick and held out his pannikin. Ben poured it nearly full, then half-corked the bottle and propped it back against its warming rock.

'So where is he now do you reckon?'

'Our trap? Coffined up. They'd be takin him back to Gundagai.'

'No. I mean . . . you know—his . . . soul. He didn't get no rites.'

'You won't neither. Unless they hang us.'

'I'm askin serious, Ben. Where do you reckon he is?'

'You forgotten it all?'

'Never got much.'

'Well the name don't tell us. But if he was our church they'd have got a father to him, give him absolution. I suppose the Prots have the like. So he's with the Lord.'

'In heaven.'

'Made whole and clean.'

'But we got like him, we'll be damned. Especially me.'

‘No! Why? You reckon you’re damned for not lettin yourself be killed? Who made a choice today, Jack? Eh? Weren’t you. Weren’t none of us but him.’

Jack was hunched, staring into the fire. Ben went on speaking to the top of his head.

‘The Lord’s watchin what we do, that’s the truth. But we choose. And your man Parry did. And when our time comes we’ll have to.’

He fell silent and waited. Jack picked up the stick again and jabbed it into the coals.

‘Comin straight at me like that he didn’t give himself much slack.’

‘None.’

They were both now watching the smoking point. When it burst into flame Jack stabbed the stick into the heart of the fire.

‘The bastard gonna keep comin at you all night is he?’

‘No.’

‘Damn hope not.’

Jack grinned. ‘Give us a kick if he starts.’

The grin was the first Ben had seen since Jack had lobbed him the shotgun.

‘Give you more than a kick, might give you a hidin.’

‘That’s brave talk comin from an old man.’

The Jack he knew was returning.

‘Yeah, well yous won’t have him to wipe your noses for a few days.’

‘Where you goin—Taylor’s?’

Ben nodded.

‘You ever show yourself to him? The boy I mean.’

‘No.’

‘How old is he now?’

The sharp questions too were a good sign.

‘Seven. I reckon but after today I might need to. Try gettin him over to Will’s. Have to square it with him first.’

‘They watch his place?’

‘He lets em think they do.’

Jack raised his pannikin but didn’t drink, instead swirled the gin and watched it settle.

‘She had any by him? Taylor?’

‘No. His wife neither. Reckon he’s a steer, eh.’

‘World can do without his get.’ He took a gulp from the pannikin, lowered it, swirled the gin again. ‘Tell me shut up if you want. Just I never been game to ask about none of this.’

‘None of what?’

‘Your boy. Bidy. She was gone, eh, before Eugowra.’

‘Yeah. I heard Taylor was sniffin around. Didn’t get me back there. Little thing named Susan Prior had me by the nuts. I wasn’t complainin. At the time.’

‘Why would you. So when he last seen you, the boy?’

‘Back then.’

‘That’s a while, Ben. You ever wrote her? Or sent word? About seein him.’

‘I see him.’

The centre of the fire fell in with a sigh. Both men felt it a signal. Ben realised only when he looked down that he still held a pannikin. He took a swallow and lowered the pannikin again to his knee.

‘Where will I find you?’

‘I reckon the lad here and me’ll head up to Strickland’s, put some miles between today.’ Ben smiled inwardly at ‘the lad’. ‘Anyway, always nice to see Susan.’

That wasn’t so amusing.

‘You keep your nose well out of there. And somethin else.’

Jack shrugged. ‘You know the sayin about a cut loaf.’

‘Not that loaf, matey.’

Jack put down his pannikin, sprang to his feet. ‘Reminds me.’ He walked from the firelight unbuttoning his fly.

Ben looked over at John. The youngster was lightly snoring. On another night he might have trickled gin into the open mouth. He sat up and drained his pannikin and inverted it on the slab of bark he was using as seat, then reached for the bottle and corked it properly with a thump from the heel of his hand and lobbed it onto Jack’s bedroll.

The boy stood at the splitting block balancing sawn lengths of stringybark on top of one another until he'd made a column the height of a short man. When sure the column would stand he picked up a knot lying on the chips and old bark and ran back to the line gouged with his bare heel. He made a revolver of his left hand, his thumb the hammer, and took aim, his right arm cocked and holding the knot.

'Pchrr!'

The knot struck the man in the chest, toppling him. The boy fired a second finishing shot from his finger, then ran again to the block and picked up the chunk of stringybark that did for the waist.

His christening name was Henry, after Ben's uncle, but Bidy had insisted on the name Harry. She lived with the ex-policeman Taylor on fourteen hundred acres at Reid's Flat, half a mile from the Fish. The man grew feed corn—when he could be bothered—along the creek, but preferred to live from the cattle running semi-wild on the rough-cleared land rising to the ridge along one boundary. The slab hut the boy had left a half-hour earlier had a roof of stringybark sheets with a wattle and clay chimney at its lee end. The pitched roof joined a flat roof over an antbed and granite verandah running the length of the hut. At each side of the flagstone steps geraniums struggled in tubs of adzed-out logs. It was one of the boy's daily jobs to lug water from the creek to the geraniums. Another was filling the box beside the door with the wood he was supposed to be fetching. If Bidy and Taylor weren't up Ben had witnessed the shooting game go on for an hour. One morning he'd seen the boy arrive at the steps with two filled cans on the carrying pole, lower them to the ground and stand watching the door, listening Ben supposed. After a minute he'd pissed on the geraniums and tipped the water into the horse trough. Ben had been torn between laughing and wanting to stride down and give the boy a clip over the ear.

The timber man stood erect again on the splitting block. Harry ran back to his mark. Just as he fired the door of the hut opened and Taylor, a black-haired man not much taller than the column of blocks, came out carrying a bridle, his other hand raised against the glare. He heard the shot and saw the column fall. Ben rose instantly to a crouch. He didn't know what he was going to do but he was not going to have the boy thrashed before his eyes by this man. Taylor had halted but not dropped the bridle.

'Hey! What do you bloody think you're doin? Your mother wants wood!'

The words carried clearly to the ridge. Ben had decided on a shot in the air but the man didn't move. He stood watching while the boy squatted and began piling wood into the crook of his left arm. Then he turned abruptly and strode along the verandah, glancing towards the woodheap as he jumped to the ground. Anticipating the glance, the boy had loaded his arm full. When the man disappeared round the corner of the hut the boy dumped two chunks and started towards the steps.

Taylor had not disappeared from Ben's sight. Many times, watching the actual man, or doing so in his mind, he'd entertained visions of waiting for him on the Burrowa road and putting a slug in his heart. What stopped him each time was Bidy. She'd know who'd held the revolver. It would be like her to clear right out, somewhere he couldn't come. Goulburn. Sydney, even.

The urge was still there, though. Better that he didn't see which way the man rode. The horse had spotted her owner and was trotting towards the yard sliprails. He'd soon have her bridled and saddled.

Ben took a last hard look at the small figure now juggling the load up the steps. Then, moving in a crouch, he wove up through the boulders towards the treeline and the ridgetop where he'd left his own mare hobbled and grazing.

In the hot afternoon of the same day another boy was working to feed fires. The creek flat was a forest of stumps. The severed branches lying on the ground still held the shapes of trees, but the trunks were gone, sawn and split for fence rails. The second boy's name was Charlie Hall. He was cousin to the first, and a year older. In blackened canvas trousers and a singlet and his mother's boots, their toes stuffed with rag, he was dragging a branch towards a fire burning in a stump hole. The fire had been burning since the day before and the stump was well devoured, but he was under orders to keep the wood up to it and he was a boy who took orders seriously. The wall of heat ringing the hole was invisible in the sunlight. He got as close as he could, lobbed the branch and without pausing turned and headed back to the pile he was working his way through, no pause because twenty yards from the hole he'd fed was a new stump, lit that morning.

The same distance the other way his father was digging a trench around yet another, its butt a yard across. He was shirtless, back and arms glistening, sweat dripping from his beard. He was down to dirt orange clay and going at it with a mattock. Axe, bar and long-handled spade lay to hand on the trench rim. The spade was good steel and the rock which struck the blade and bounced made a ringing clang. The man had ducked instinctively, but now straightened, fright turning to anger. Believing it Charlie playing the fool, he opened his mouth to roar at the boy. A whistle spun him round. Ben was standing at the edge of the cleared land.

The last time he'd been to the farm he'd had Dunleavy and 'the old man', James Mount, with him. Jack had been five months in Victoria. Will knew both men and didn't like or trust either, and late at night on the verandah had told him so. Ben had defended them, halfheartedly he admitted to himself as he walked between the stumps towards his brother, who'd climbed from the hole and now stood wiping his neck and arms with his bunched shirt. A month after that night Mount had cleared out and been taken next day without a shot fired. Two days later Dunleavy announced he was turning himself in to the priest at Carcoar. If Will mentioned either, though, he'd have a bite of him. His brother had never bailed a man, never mind twenty at a time, day after day and alone, no one at your back and your eyes everywhere. He'd never lain down nights on end in the bush with a revolver beside each ear and nothing but his thoughts for company. Any company, even useless, was preferable. Will knew of the life, Ben himself had told him. But he'd not lived it. Ben saw the stern lecturing look that had appeared about his brother's eyes. But he couldn't yet have heard about Jugiong.

Will confounded him by clapping his son on the back and pointing.

'Every time we see this fella, Charlie, eh, he's wearin a new coat!'

He thrust out his hand. When Ben took it his brother pulled him into an embrace and held him hard. His neck stank of sweat, his hair and beard of smoke. Ben eased himself free and shook the hand the boy offered shyly, then drew him in to his hip and ruffled his hair.

'Christ, you smell like sweeps, both of you.'

'Jack with you?'

Ben searched his brother's eyes for duplicity. There was none. He was simply repeating what he'd read or been told, that Jack was back and they were working together. He had a world of time for Jack.

'No.'

‘He was gone a while. How is he?’

‘The same, wild and wilder.’

He hadn’t got the smile or the voice right. Will stared at him.

‘Charlie,’ Ben said.

The boy jumped alert. ‘Yes, Uncle Ben?’

‘My nag’s up at the split boulder. There’s two bottles in the blanket roll, a half and a full. Fetch us the full, eh.’

The boy sprinted away. Ben followed him with his eyes, admiring the sureness of foot, but felt Will’s eyes never leave his face. He spoke watching the shrinking figure.

‘He’s shot a trap stone bloody dead. Jugiong, two days ago—we done the Gundagai mail. Fair fight—he’d have put a nail in Jack if Jack hadn’t got in first.’

‘Holy Mother of God.’

‘Yeah, well, bit late for her intercession.’

‘Curb your tongue. What was the fellow’s name?’

‘Parry. Edmund.’

Will bowed his head. He spoke under his breath, crossed himself. Ben waited for him to open his eyes.

‘He was near worth it—we copped two thousand quid. I got three hundred of that here if you reckon she’ll hand him over. That’s if yous are still willin to have him.’

‘Course we’re still willin—have been all this past year! We’re gunna discuss, let’s get out of this bloody sun.’

He started towards the trees lining the creek, pushing his arms roughly into the sleeves of the shirt but leaving it unbuttoned, its tails flowing. He glanced to see that Ben was in hearing.

‘Taylor’d hand him over in a blink—lookin at him’s damn near lookin at you.’

‘Yeah, well if he weren’t a steer he could’ve had some looked like him. Poor bastards.’

He didn’t expect an answer and didn’t get one. They ducked through tea-tree and entered the shade of the she-oaks. Will led him to a log. Ben saw it bore two shone patches, large and small, where they’d sat, father and son, on other days. Picturing them brought a tightness to his throat. Will took his habitual spot. Ben couldn’t sit with his coat buttoned and four revolvers in his belt. He knew what his brother felt about displaying the weapons in front of the boy.

‘I gotta open me coat.’

Will nodded, his eyes remaining on the creek running noisily between granite boulders. Ben unbuttoned, drew the rear Navys from his belt and sat, placing the revolvers on the log at his hip and spreading the flap of the coat. Two inches of the barrels showed.

‘So, can you get him here? Even just a few days? Put it to him?’

Will propped his elbows on his knees and flipped his beard forward so as to rest his chin on his clenched hands. Ben knew better than to hurry him. Two and a half years had passed, but neither had forgotten that he’d been arrested with Ben in the round-up after Eugowra for no reason other than that his name too was Hall, spending three weeks in the lock-up. Will spoke at the creek.

‘I’ll talk to Ann. Where you gunna be?’

‘The Billabong—Jos Strickland’s.’

Ben brought the chamois bag from his inside jacket pocket, untied the drawstring and extracted a roll of notes. He thumbed off five ten-pound notes and placed them like a small tent on his brother’s thigh. Will made no move to touch them.

‘They ain’t from Jugiong.’

Will let a further minute pass. Then he picked up the notes, folded them small and pushed the paper into the pouch on his leather belt and closed the stud, glancing over his shoulder as he did and making Ben glance also. Charlie was doing a half-skipping jog across the flat, wanting to run but afraid of tripping with the bottle. Will dropped a callused hand onto Ben's knee and gripped, then knotted his fingers again.

'We had the Pinnacle traps here last week lookin for a grey racin mare. Plainclothes the three of em. You think y've got honest stockmen comin across your paddocks and they turn out to be traps. Anyways, I told em there was more than one "Hall-Gilbert gang" liftin nags.'

'I reckon Jack's shot a hole in that game too.'

The thud of feet reached them. Charlie rounded the log and arrived breathless before them with the bottle of port. He shoved it at his uncle, his eyes already on the barrels poking from beneath the jacko flap. Ben feigned dismay.

'By crikey, Charlie Hall, you gunna make us drink it out of our fists, are you? Where's the pannikins?'

The boy clutched his temples. 'Sorry, Uncle Ben!' He scrambled over the log and started back across the flat at a run towards the stump where the satchel with their day's provisions lay in the shade.

'When they expectin you?'

Ben read the question behind the question. Every stump at their backs needed grubbing or burning before the flat could be ploughed.

'When I ride up.'

Half the bottle later the brothers, stripped to the waist, were in the circular trench and Charlie was in the fork of a tree with a view up the valley as far as the farm track. It was years since Ben last grubbed a stump. He was working with the bar, lifting it high, driving the blade into the clay around the roots and levering out clods. At the lip of the hole on his spread shirt lay his revolvers. Both men were going at the work, not speaking.

Approaching dusk the following evening their two voices hailed him from boulders below the knob of rock overlooking the southern edge of Rankins plains. Jack had taken seriously the warning about Susan Strickland and waited for him there.

Next morning, the air already dry and hot in their nostrils, the three climbed the knob and sat on its bald crown watching the Billabong creekline for smoke or any other sign that said traps were about. Sighting none they clambered down, saddled the horses, and an hour later rode out of the gully that gave onto the plains. Just past noon they came in sight of the familiar yards and hut, a trickle of smoke rising from the stone chimney. Jack, behind, made a low whistle to get their attention and lifted his chin towards the cow paddock. There was now a third milker. In a new yard attached to the barn three or four poddies were butting one another. 'Nice to see your funds bein put to good use.' Beyond the hut the fruit trees were in full leaf and in the vegetable garden behind the waist-high fence of woven wattles the dark leaves of beet and the lighter green of runner beans on sapling tripods displayed themselves against the yellow grass of the paddock. The three brought the horses to a halt and searched for strange mounts in the yard behind the barn or tied in the shade of the low gums left unfelled about the hut. There were none. Ben wondered where the dogs were. If Jos was working beasts they'd be with him. He kneed the mare forward and as he did the blue dog came from the barn and began to bark.

'Riley!' Jack yelled. 'Shut your face!'

The dog did so and began wagging its whole hindquarters. The hut door was snatched open and Jos Strickland came out, sleeves rolled to the elbow as if he'd stood up from a plate. Seeing three riders he slowed and walked to the edge of the verandah and shaded his eyes, the glare and the wide brims of their hats forcing him to squint to make out their faces.

'Day to you, Jos.'

The man's body fell into a welcoming slouch. 'Ben. Didn't know you with that crop of whiskers. Jack. John.'

'Jos.'

John nodded, having met the man only the once before, at Fogg's.

A woman appeared in the doorway, then vanished, forcing Jack to swallow his greeting. They rode up to the small bumble box pollarded and left standing in the yard as a hitching post and dismounted and tied the reins. The woman came onto the verandah carrying a pitcher and pannikins. She was twenty-three or -four, her beauty careworn but still there, the dark blonde hair which had been free when they'd glimpsed her in the doorway now caught up and held with a bone comb. She stood the pannikins on the verandah rail and smoothed her dress over her hips then threaded the handles again on one finger and started for the steps.

'Good day there, Susan,' Jack called. 'You're lookin trim as ever.'

She didn't look at him, watching instead her feet on the granite slabs. 'This place sees to that.'

'Place is lookin trim too. You'd make a dab midshipman.'

Now safely on the ground she met his frank gaze and laughed, thrusting a pannikin at him to hold while she filled it, then doing the same for Ben. When she moved to John she transferred the pitcher

her left hand with the pannikin and put out her right. 'Susan Strickland.'

Ben had raised his pannikin. He splashed his boots as he quickly lowered it. 'Christ, my apology, Susan—this's John Dunn. Forgot he's only met Jos.'

John had snatched off his hat. He swiped his palm across the belly of his shirt and took her offered hand. 'Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs Strickland.'

'I'd rather Susan. You're a Dunn from where, John?' She withdrew her hand and gave him the pannikin.

'Bit north of Yass.'

'From another line of lags.'

She halted the pitcher at half-pour and gave Ben a stare.

'Why you givin me that look? He'd turned before he met us! Eh, John.'

John looked her in the face and nodded. She gave a shake of the head, I don't want to hear, and finished filling his pannikin.

'I'm from down your way. Binda. I was Quade before I married.'

'I know Quades but they ain't Binda.'

'And I only know Dunns in Forbes. My mother moved us when my father passed. Her brother's there.'

Ben and Jack had emptied their pannikins. Ben held his out towards her. 'That's a good drop, Susan. Touch of limes, eh.'

'There is.'

'What I said!' Jack saluted her with his pannikin. 'Should be runnin a clipper!'

Uneasy with the banter, her husband waved towards the steps. 'Come out of this bloody sun.'

Jack walked to the far side of his horse and stood fiddling with the buckle of a saddlebag then the girth strap until the woman had climbed the steps with pitcher and pannikins and disappeared inside. When they were standing at the verandah rail Ben pointed Strickland's gaze in the direction they'd ridden from. They'd passed animals with dull coats, the bones of their flanks showing. He still had enough cocky in him that he took note of stock and feed.

'We come through your south paddock. Your beasts could do with a bit of condition.'

'Ain't got the pick except along the creek. Thank Christ that don't go dry.'

'What's a beast fetchin?'

Strickland glanced towards the open doorway, lowered his voice. 'Sold fourteen head for twelve a head a month back. Good'ns, not them yous seen.'

'And not yours to sell I'd wager.'

Again the man glanced towards the doorway. 'Mine once they're in the pound. I cop half for the movin. She's in the dark, mind.'

'So you'd like to reckon,' Jack said, climbing the steps. He was holding his right hand behind his back. He called the woman's name.

'I'm doing the fire,' she called back. 'Don't you want to eat?'

'She'll wait, come out here.'

An apron now over her dress, she came to the doorway.

'No, right out.'

Eyes alert for some trick she stepped onto the verandah.

'I reckoned this'd suit you better than me.'

He brought from behind his back the silk scarf and draped it over her shoulder. Taken aback, and not at all sure of the meaning of the gift, she stared at the purple lying down her left arm.

‘My goodness.’

She wiped her hands quickly on the apron, then lifted the silk from her shoulder by a corner, took the opposite corner in finger and thumb, and opened the scarf in front of her. Her husband forced an awkward grin.

‘Cripes—have to buy you a new dress to go with her.’

‘Good luck you’re in funds,’ Jack said. He diverted the enquiring look she began to give her husband. ‘Put her on.’

The men watched as she knotted the scarf around her sun-darkened neck and tugged it out to shawl her shoulders. She coloured, acutely conscious of the four pairs of male eyes on her. Strickland broke the spell.

‘We might go in, eh. I reckon yous could go somethin stronger than lime water.’

The four men were seated on the benches either side of the plank table, the same pannikins in front of them and an uncorked port bottle in the centre. The hut was stringybark slabs, at one end the bed hidden by a curtain of hessian sewn with stars cut from an old velvet dress and at the other the granite fireplace. Susan was at the fire, the scarf put away. Two skillets were on the rails. A bowl of eggs was beside her, and she was carving thick rashers from a flitch of bacon. Jack drained his pannikin, then winked at Ben and reached for the bottle.

‘So, how’s the duffin business, Jos?’

The man mouthed ‘Jesus!’ and flung a look at his wife. She didn’t look round but all saw her shoulders stiffen. There was a hiss as the first rasher hit the fat, followed by another. Jack held the man’s gaze and tilted his chin towards the fierceness at the fire. What’d I say. There came the successive crack and sizzle of six eggs. She scooped up chopped shallots in both hands and scattered them over the bacon.

‘That’s smellin good, Susan.’

She gave no sign that she’d heard. Jack swivelled on the bench and turned down his mouth. Ben was watching Strickland. Pulled between anger and fear of Jack’s ready temper, the man was trying to grin. It was a dangerous game. To end it Ben drew the shammy from inside his jacket, broke the bow and tugged out the wad of notes. He saw Strickland’s eyes widen. He peeled off two ten-pound notes and lay them in front of the man, who picked up and folded them in the one motion and slid them into his shirt pocket. Ben peeled off three more and dropped them in the centre of the table.

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Their camp on Strickland’s was a pool in a bend of the creek a mile from the hut. She-oaks crowded both banks. Further out, near-impenetrable belts of white cypress walled the creek off from the plain. Floods had scoured the creekbed down to granite boulders. A small beach of fine gravel ran to the foot of a more ancient bank. Halfway up the old bank was an undercut deep enough to be a cave, a half-exposed boulder buttressing one side of its mouth, the clay of the roof veined through and held by the roots of a massive grey box. A log laid across the mouth silled a flooring of she-oak and cypress brooms. In summer the place was a bowl of coolness and shade, in winter a haven from the wind. No one could get within a quarter-mile of either bank without they or a nag hearing the crackle of litter. The seclusion didn’t mean they dropped their guard, but they did take their ease.

Ben and Jack were naked in the tea-coloured water. John was seated cross-legged on a flat rock smoking his pipe. Now clean-shaven, Ben was working up a lather in his thick brown hair with a half-bar of Susan’s soap. Jack had the other half and was crouched at a stone at the pool’s edge scrubbing

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