

Hornung Ernest William

The Shadow of a Man



Ernest Hornung
The Shadow of a Man

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Hornung E. W. Ernest William

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I

THE BELLE OF TOORAK

"And you're quite sure the place doesn't choke you off?"

"The place? Why, I'd marry you for it alone. It's just sweet!"

Of course it was nothing of the kind. There was the usual galaxy of log huts; the biggest and best of them, the one with the verandah in which the pair were sitting, was far from meriting the name of house which courtesy extended to it. These huts had the inevitable roofs of galvanised iron; these roofs duly expanded in the heat, and made the little tin thunder that dwellers beneath them grow weary of hearing, the warm world over. There were a few pine-trees between the buildings, and the white palings of a well among the pines, and in the upper spaces a broken but persistent horizon of salt-bush plains burning into the blinding blue. In the Riverina you cannot escape these features: you may have more pine-trees and less salt-bush; you may even get blue-bush and cotton-bush, and an occasional mallee forest; but the plains will recur, and the pines will mitigate the plains, and the dazzle and the scent of them shall haunt you evermore, with that sound of the hot complaining roofs, and the taste of tea from a pannikin and water from a water-bag. These rude refinements were delights still in store for Moya Bethune, who saw the bush as yet from a comfortable chair upon a cool verandah, and could sing its praises with a clear conscience. Indeed, a real enthusiasm glistened in her eyes. And the eyes of Moya happened to be her chief perfection. But for once Rigden was not looking into them, and his own were fixed in thought.

"There's the charm of novelty," he said. "That I can understand."

"If you knew how I revel in it – after Melbourne!"

"Yes, two days after!" said he. "But what about weeks, and months, and years? Years of this verandah and those few pines!"

"We could cover in part of the verandah with trellis-work and creepers. They would grow like wildfire in this heat, and I'm sure the owners wouldn't mind."

"I should have to ask them. I should like to grow them inside as well, to hide the papers."

"There are such things as pictures."

"They would make the furniture look worse."

"And there's such a thing as cretonne; and I'm promised a piano; and there isn't so much of their furniture as to leave no room for a few of our very own things. Besides, there's lots more they couldn't possibly object to. Curtains. Mantel-borders. I'm getting ideas. You won't know the place when I've had it in hand a week. Shall you mind?"

He did not hear the question.

"I don't know it as it is," he said; and indeed for Rigden it was transformation enough to see Moya Bethune there in the delicious flesh, her snowy frock glimmering coolly in the hot verandah, her fine eyes shining through the dust of it like the gems they were.

His face said as much in the better language which needs no words.

"Then what's depressing you?" asked Moya brightly.

"I dread the life for you."

"But why?"

"I've been so utterly bored by it myself."

Her hand slid into his.

"Then you never will be again," she whispered, with a touching confidence.

"No, not on my own account; of course not," said Rigden. "If only –"

And he sighed.

"If only what?"

For he had stopped short.

"If only you don't think better of all this – and of me!"

The girl withdrew her hand, and for a moment regarded Rigden critically, as he leant forward in his chair and she leant back in hers. She did not care for apologetic love-making, and she had met with more kinds than one in her day. Rigden had not apologised when he proposed to her the very week they met (last Cup-week), and, what was more to his credit, had refused to apologise to her rather formidable family for so doing. Whereupon they were engaged, and all her world wondered. No more Government House – no more parties and picnics – but "one long picnic instead," as her brother Theodore had once remarked before Moya, with that brutal frankness which lent a certain piquancy to the family life of the Bethunes. And the mere thought of her brother accounted for so much in her mind, that Moya was leaning forward again in a moment, and her firm little hand was back in its place.

"I believe it's Theodore!" she cried suspiciously.

"I – I don't understand," he said, telling the untruth badly.

"You do! He's been saying something. But you mustn't mind what Theodore says; he's not to be taken seriously. Oh, how I wish I could have come up alone!" cried Moya, with fine inconsistency, in the same breath. "But next time," she whispered, "I will!"

"Not quite alone," he answered. And his tone was satisfactory at last. And the least little wisp of a cloud between them seemed dispersed and melted for ever and a day.

For Moya was quite in love for the first time in her life, though more than once before she had been within measurable distance of that enviable state. This enabled her to appreciate her present peace of mind by comparing it with former feelings of a less convincing character. And at last there was no doubt about the matter. She had fallen a happy victim to the law of contrasts. Society favourite and city belle, satiated with the attractions of the town, and deadly sick of the same sort of young man, she had struck her flag to one who might have swum into her ken from another planet; for the real bush is as far from Toorak and Hawthorn, and The Block in Collins Street, as it is from Hyde Park Corner.

It may be that Moya saw both bush and bushman in the same rosy light. To the impartial eye Rigden was merely the brick-red, blue-eyed type of Anglo-Saxon: a transparent character, clean of body and mind, modest but independent, easy-going in most things, immovable in others. But he had been immovable about Moya, whose family at its worst had failed to frighten or to drive him back one inch. She could have loved him for that alone; as it was it settled her; for Moya was of age, and the family had forthwith to make the best of her betrothal.

This they had done with a better grace than might have been expected, for the Bethunes had fine blood in them, though some of its virtue had been strained out of this particular branch. Moya none the less continued to realise the disadvantages of belonging to a large family when one wishes to form a family of two. And this reflection inspired her next remark of any possible interest to the world.

"Do you know, dear, I'm quite glad you haven't got any people?"

Rigden smiled a little strangely.

"You know what I mean!" she cried.

"I know," he said. And the smile became his own.

"Of course I was thinking of my own people," explained Moya. "They can't see beyond Toorak – unless there's something going on at Government House. And I'm so tired of it all – wouldn't settle there now if they paid me. So we're out of touch. Of course I would have loved any one belonging to you; but they mightn't have thought so much of me."

If she was fishing it was an unsuccessful cast. Rigden had grown too grave to make pretty speeches even to his betrothed.

"I wish you had known my mother," was all he said.

"So do I, dear, and your father too."

"Ah! I never knew him myself."

"Tell me about them," she coaxed, holding his sunburnt hand in one of hers, and stroking it with the other. She was not very inquisitive on the subject herself. But she happened to have heard much of it at home, and it was disagreeable not to be in a position to satisfy the curiosity of others. She was scarcely put in that position now.

"They came out in the early days," said Rigden, "both of the colony and of their own married life. Yet already these were numbered, and I was born an orphan. But my dear mother lived to make a man of me: she was the proudest and the poorest little woman in the colony; and in point of fact (if this matters to you) she was not badly connected at home."

Moya said that it didn't matter to her one bit; and was unaware of any insincerity in the denial.

"I don't tell you what her name was," continued Rigden. "I would if you insisted. But I hate the sound of it myself, for they treated her very badly on her marriage, and we never used to mention them from one year's end to another."

Moya pressed his hand, but not the point, though she was sorely tempted to do that too. She had even a sense of irritation at his caring to hide anything from her, but she was quick to see the unworthiness of this sentiment, and quicker to feel a remorse which demanded some sort of expression in order to restore complete self-approval. Yet she would not confess what had been (and still lingered) in her mind. So she fretted about the trifle in your true lover's fashion, and was silent until she hit upon a compromise.

"You know – if only anybody could! – how I would make up to you for all that you have lost, dearest. But nobody can. And I am full of the most diabolical faults – you can't imagine!"

And now she was all sincerity. But Rigden laughed outright.

"Tell me some of them," said he.

Moya hesitated; and did not confess her innate curiosity after all. She was still much too conscious of that blemish.

"I have a horrible temper," she said at length.

"I don't believe it."

"Ask Theodore."

"I certainly shouldn't believe him."

"Then wait and see."

"I will; and when I see it I'll show you what a real temper is like."

"Then – "

"Yes?"

"Well, I suppose I've had more attention than I deserve. So I suppose you might call me unreasonable – exacting – in fact, selfish!"

This was more vital; hence the hesitation on his part.

"When I do," said Rigden, solemnly, "you may send me about my business."

"It may be too late."

"Then we won't meet our troubles half-way," cried the young man, with virile common-sense. "Come! We love each other; that's good enough to go on with. And we've got the station to ourselves; didn't I work it well? So don't let's talk through our necks!"

The bush slang made the girl smile, but excitement had overstrung her finer nerves, and neither tone nor topic could she change at will.

"Shall we always love each other, darling?"

And there was the merest film of moisture upon the lovely eyes that were fixed so frankly upon his own.

"I can only answer for myself," he said, catching her mood. "I shall love you till I die."

"Whatever I do?"

"Even if you give me up."

"That's the one thing I shall never do, dearest."

"God bless you for saying it, Moya. If I knew what I have ever done or can do to deserve you!"

"Don't, dear ... you little dream ... but you will know me by and by."

"Please Heaven!"

And he leant and kissed her with all his might.

"Meanwhile – let us promise each other – there shall be no clouds between us while I am up here this week!"

"I'll kiss the Book on that."

"No shadows!"

"My dear child, why should there be?"

"There's Theodore –"

"Bother Theodore!"

"And then there are all those faults of mine."

"I don't believe in them. But if I did it would make no difference. It's not your qualities I'm in love with, Moya. It's yourself – so there's an end of it."

And an end there was, for about Rigden there was a crisp decisiveness which had the eventual advantage of a nature only less decided than his own. But it was strange that those should have been the last words.

Still stranger was it, as they sat together in a silence happier than their happiest speech, and as the lowering sun laid long shadows at their feet, that one of these came suddenly between them, and that it was not the shadow of pine-tree or verandah-post, but of a man.

II INJURY

It was not Theodore, however. It was a man whom Moya was thankful not to have seen before. Nor was the face more familiar to Rigden himself, or less unlovely between the iron-grey bristles that wove a wiry mat from ear to ear, over a small head and massive jaws. For on attracting their attention the man lifted his wideawake, a trick so foreign to the normal bushman that Rigden's eyebrows were up from the beginning; yet he carried his swag as a swag should be carried; the outer blanket was the orthodox "bluey," duly faded; and the long and lazy stride that of the inveterate "sundowner."

"Eureka Station, I believe?" said the fellow, halting.

"That's the name," said Rigden.

"And are you the boss?"

"I am."

"Then Eureka it is!" cried the swagman, relieving himself of his swag, and heartily kicking it as it lay where he let it fall.

"But," said Rigden, smiling, "I didn't say I had any work for you, did I?"

"And I didn't ask for any work."

"Travellers' rations, eh? You'll have to wait till my storekeeper comes in. Go and camp in the travellers' hut."

Instead of a thank-you the man smiled – but only slightly – and shook his iron-grey head – but almost imperceptibly. Moya perceived it, however, and could not imagine why Rigden tolerated a demeanour which had struck her as insolent from the very first. She glanced from one man to the other. The smile broadened on the very unpleasant face of the tramp, making it wholly evil in the lady's eyes. So far from dismissing him, however, Rigden rose.

"Excuse me a few minutes," he said, not only briefly, but without even looking at Moya; and with a word to the interloper he led the way to the station store. This was one of the many independent buildings, and not the least substantial. The tramp followed Rigden, and in another moment a particularly solid door had closed behind the pair.

Moya felt at once hurt, aggrieved, and ashamed of her readiness to entertain any such feelings. But shame did not remove them. It was their first day together for two interminable months, and the afternoon was to have been their very very own. That was the recognised arrangement, and surely it was not too much to expect when one had come five hundred miles in the heat of January (most of them by coach) to see one's *fiancé* in one's future home. This afternoon, at least, they might have had to themselves. It should have been held inviolate. Yet he could desert her for the first uncleanly sundowner who came along! After first telling the man to wait, he must needs show his strength by giving in and attending to the creature himself, his devotion by leaving her alone on a verandah without another soul in sight or hearing! It might only be for the few minutes mentioned with such off-hand coolness. The slight was just the same.

Such was the first rush of this young lady's injured feelings and too readily embittered thoughts. They were more bitter, however, in form than in essence, for the notorious temper of the Australian Bethunes was seldom permitted a perfectly direct expression. They preferred the oblique ways of irony and sarcasm, and their minds ran in those curves. A little bitterness was in the blood, and Moya could not help being a Bethune.

But she had finer qualities than were rife – or at all events conspicuous – in the rank and file of her distinguished family. She had the quality of essential sweetness which excited their humorous contempt, and she was miraculously free from their innate and unparalleled cynicism. At her worst she had warm feelings, justly balanced by the faculty of cold expression. And at her best she was

quick to see her faults and to deplore them; a candid and enthusiastic friend; staunch at your side, sincere to your face, loyal at all costs behind your back.

It was this loyalty that came to her rescue now: she stood suddenly self-convicted of a whole calendar of secret crime against the man whom she professed to love. Did she love him? Could she possibly love him, and so turn on him in an instant, even in her heart? Oh, yes, yes! She was a little fool, that was all; at least she hoped it was all. To think that her worst faults should hunt her up on the very heels of her frank confession of them! So in a few minutes sense prevailed over sensibility. And for a little all was well.

But these minutes mounted up by fives and then by tens. And the verandah was now filled to blindness and suffocation by the sunken sun. And there sat Moya Bethune, the admired of all the most admirable admirers elsewhere, baking and blinking in solitary martyrdom, while, with a grim and wilful obstinacy, she stoically waited the pleasure of a back-block overseer who preferred a disreputable tramp's society to hers!

The little fool in her was uppermost once more. There was perhaps some provocation now. Yet a little fool it indubitably was. She thought of freckles. Let them come. They would be his fault. Not that he would care.

Care!

And her short lip lifted in a peculiar smile; it was the war-smile of the Bethunes, and not beautiful in itself, but Moya it touched with such a piquant bitter-sweetness that some of her swains would anger her for that very look. Her teeth were white as the wing of the sulphur-crested cockatoo, and that look showed them as no other. Then there was the glitter it put into her eyes: they were often lovelier, but never quite so fine. And a sweet storm-light turned her skin from pale rose to glowing ivory, and the short lip would tremble one moment to set more unmercifully the next. Even so that those who loved and admired the milder Moya, feared and adored her thus.

But this Moya was seldom seen in Toorak, or, for that matter, anywhere else; and, of course, it was never to show itself any more, least of all at Eureka Station. Yet it did so this first, this very afternoon, though not all at once.

For the next thing that happened she took better than all that had gone before, though those were negative offences, and this was a positive affront.

It was when at last the store door opened, and Rigden went over to the kitchen for something steaming in a pannikin, and then to his room for something else. He passed once under Moya's nose, and once close beside her chair, but on each occasion without a look or a word.

"Something is worrying him," she thought. "Poor fellow!"

And for a space her heart softened. But it was no space to speak of; intensified curiosity cut it very short.

"Who can the horrid man be?"

The question paved the way to a new grievance and a new resolve.

"He ought to have told me. But he shall!"

Meanwhile the dividing door was once more shut; and now the better part of an hour had passed; and the only woman on the station (she might remain the only woman) had carried tea through the verandah and advised Moya to go indoors and begin. Moya declined. But no one ever sat in the sun up there. Moya said nothing; but at length gave so short an answer to so natural a question that Mrs. Duncan retreated with a very natural impression, false for the moment, but not for so many moments more.

For presently through the handful of pines, red-stemmed and resinous in the sunset, there came the jingle of bit and stirrup, to interrupt the unworthiest thoughts in which the insulted lady had yet indulged. She was thinking of much that she had missed in town by coming up-country in the height of the season; she was wishing herself back in Toorak. There she was somebody; in Toorak, in Melbourne, they would not dare to treat her thus.

Her fate was full of irony. There she could have had anybody, and, rightly or wrongly, she was aware of the fact. No other girl down there – or in Melbourne, for that matter – was at once a society belle, a general favourite, and a Bethune. The latter titles smacked indeed of the contradiction in terms, but their equal truth merely emphasised the altogether exceptional character of our heroine. That she was herself aware of it was not her fault. She had heard so much of her qualities for so many years. But all her life it had been impressed upon her mind that the Bethunes, as a family, were in a class by themselves in the southern hemisphere. In moments of chagrin, therefore, it was only natural that Moya should aggravate matters by remembering that she also was a Bethune.

A Bethune engaged to a bushman who dared to treat her thus!

Such was the pith and point of these discreditable reflections when the jingle of approaching horse put a sudden end to them. Moya looked up, expecting to see her brother, and instinctively donning a mask. She forgot it was in the buggy that Theodore had been got out of the way, and it was with sheer relief that her eyes lit upon a sergeant and a trooper of the New South Wales mounted police, with fluttering puggarees and twinkling accoutrements, and a black fellow riding bareback in the rear.

They reined up in front of the verandah.

"We want to see Mr. Rigden," said the sergeant, touching the shiny peak of his cap.

"Oh, indeed!"

"Is he about?"

Moya would not say, and pretended she could not. The sudden apparition of the police had filled her with apprehensions as wild as they were vague. The trooper had turned in his saddle to speak to the blackfellow, and Moya saw the great Government revolver at his hip. Even as she hesitated, however, the store door opened, and Rigden locked it behind him before sallying forth alone.

"Yes, here he is!" exclaimed Moya, and sat like a statue in her chair. Yet the pose of the statue was not wholly suggestive of cold indifference and utter unconcern.

"Glad to find you in, Mr. Rigden," said the sergeant. "We're having a little bit of sport, for once in a way."

"I congratulate you. What sort?" said Rigden.

"A man-hunt!"

And there were volumes of past boredom and of present zest in the sergeant's tone.

"That so?" said Rigden. "And who's the man?"

The sergeant glanced at the young lady. Rigden did the same. Their wishes with respect to her were only too obvious. Moya took the fiercer joy in disregarding them.

"I'd like to have a word with you in the store," said the sergeant.

"No, no!" said Rigden hastily. "Sergeant Harkness – Miss Bethune."

It was a cold little bow, despite this triumph.

"Miss Bethune will be interested," added Rigden grimly. "And she won't give anything away."

"Thank you," said Moya. And her tone made him stare.

Harkness touched his horse with the spurs, and rode up close to the verandah, on which Rigden himself now stood.

"Fact is," said he, "it oughtn't to get about among your men, or it's a guinea to a gooseberry they'll go harbouring him. But it's a joker who escaped from Darlinghurst a few days ago. And we've tracked him to your boundary – through your horse-paddock – to your home-paddock gate!"

Rigden glanced at Moya. Her eyes were on him. He knew it before he looked.

"Seen anything of him?" asked the sergeant inevitably.

"Not to my knowledge. What's he like?"

"Oldish. Stubby beard. Cropped head, of course. Grey as a coot."

"Height 5 ft. 11 in.," supplemented the trooper, reading from a paper; "hair iron-grey, brown eyes, large thin nose, sallow complexion, very fierce-looking, slight build, but is a well-made man."

A dead silence followed; then Rigden spoke. Moya's eyes were still upon him, burning him, but he spoke without tremor, and with no more hesitation than was natural in the circumstances.

"No," he said, "I have seen no such man. No such man has been to me!"

"I was afraid of it," said Harkness. "Yet we tracked him to the boundary, every yard, and we got on his tracks again just now near the home-paddock gate. I bet he's camping somewhere within a couple of miles; we must have another look while it's light. Beastly lot of sand you have from the home-paddock gate right up to the house!"

"We're built upon a sandhill, you see," said Rigden, with a wry look into the heavy yellow yard: "one track's pretty much like another in here, eh, Billy?"

The black tracker shook a woolly pate.

"Too muchee damn allasame," said he. "Try again longa gate."

"Yes," said the sergeant, "and we'll bring him here for the night when we catch him. You could lend us your travellers' hut, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes."

"So long then, Mr. Rigden. Don't be surprised if you see us back to supper. I feel pretty warm."

And the sergeant used his spurs again, only to reign up suddenly and swing round in his saddle.

"Been about the place most of the afternoon?" he shouted.

"All the afternoon," replied Rigden; "between the store and this verandah."

"And you've had no travellers at all?"

"Not one."

"Well, never mind," cried the sergeant. "You shall have four for the night."

And the puggarees fluttered, and the stirrup irons jingled, out of sight and earshot, through the dark still pines, and so into a blood-red sunset.

III

INSULT

Rigden remained a minute at least (Moya knew it was five) gazing through the black trees into the red light beyond. That was so characteristic of him and his behaviour! Moya caught up the *Australasian* (at hand but untouched all this time) and pretended she could see to read. The rustle brought Rigden to the right about at last. Moya was deep in illegible advertisements. But the red light reached to her face.

Rigden came slowly to her side. She took no notice of him. His chair was as he had pushed it back an age ago; he drew it nearer than before, and sat down. Nor was this the end of his effrontery.

"Don't touch my hand, please!"

She would not even look at him. In a flash his face was slashed with lines, so deep you might have looked for them to fill with blood. There was plenty of blood beneath the skin. But he obeyed her promptly.

"I am sorry you were present just now," he remarked, as though nothing very tragical had happened. There was none the less an underlying note of tragedy which Moya entirely misconstrued.

"So am I," said she; and her voice nipped like a black frost.

"I wanted you to go, you know!" he reminded her.

"Do you really think it necessary to tell me that?"

All this time she was back in her now invisible advertisements. And her tone was becoming more and more worthy of a Bethune.

"I naturally didn't want you to hear me tell a lie," explained Rigden, with inconsistent honesty.

"On the contrary, I'm very glad to have heard it," rejoined Moya. "It's instructive, to say the least."

"It was necessary," said Rigden quietly.

"No doubt!"

"A lie sometimes is," he continued calmly. "You will probably agree with me there."

"Thank you," said Moya promptly; but no insinuation had been intended, no apology was offered, and Rigden proceeded as though no interruption had occurred.

"I am not good at them as a general rule," he confessed. "But just now I was determined to do my best. I suppose you would call it my worst!"

Moya elected not to call it anything.

"That poor fellow in the store – "

"I really don't care to know anything about him."

" – I simply couldn't do it," concluded Rigden expressively.

"Is he the man they want or not?"

The question came in one breath with the interruption, but with a change of tone so unguardedly complete that Rigden smiled openly. There was no answering smile from Moya. Her sense of humour, that saving grace of the Bethunes as a family, had deserted her as utterly as other graces of which she had more or less of a monopoly.

"Of course he's the man," said Rigden at once; but again there was the deeper trouble in his tone, the intrinsic trouble which mere results could not aggravate.

And this time Moya's perceptions were more acute. But by now pride had the upper hand of her. There was some extraordinary and mysterious reason for Rigden's conduct from beginning to end of this incident, or rather from the beginning to this present point, which was obviously not the end at all. Moya would have given almost anything to know what that reason was; the one thing that

she would not give was the inch involved in asking the question in so many words. And Rigden in his innocence appreciated her delicacy in not asking.

"I can't explain," he began in rueful apology, and would have gone on to entreat her to trust him for once. But for some reason the words jammed. And meanwhile there was an opening which no Bethune could resist.

"Have I asked you for an explanation?"

"No. You've been awfully good about that. You're pretty rough on a fellow, all the same!"

"I don't think I am at all."

"Oh, yes, you are, Moya!"

For her tongue was beginning to hit him hard.

"You needn't raise your voice, Pelham, just because there's some one coming."

It was only the Eureka jackeroo (or "Colonial experimenter"), who had the hardest work on the station, and did it "for his tucker," but so badly as to justify Rigden in his bargain. It may here be mentioned that the manager's full name was Pelham Stanislaus Rigden; it was, however, a subconscious peculiarity of this couple never to address each other by a mere Christian name. Either they confined themselves to the personal pronoun, or they made use of expressions which may well be left upon their lovers' lips. But though scarcely aware of the habitual breach, they were mutually alive to the rare observance, which was perhaps the first thing to make Rigden realise the breadth and depth of his offence. It was with difficulty he could hold his tongue until the jackeroo had turned his horse adrift and betaken himself to the bachelors' hut euphemistically yclept "the barracks."

"What have I done," cried Rigden, in low tones, "besides lying as you heard? That I shall suffer for, to a pretty dead certainty. What else have I done?"

"Oh, nothing," said Moya impatiently, as though the subject bored her. In reality she was wondering and wondering why he should have run the very smallest risk for the sake of a runaway prisoner whom he had certainly pretended never to have seen before.

"But I can see there's something else," persisted Rigden. "What on earth is it, darling? After all I did not lie to you!"

"No," cried Moya, downright at last; "you only left me for two mortal hours alone on this verandah!"

Rigden sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens!" he cried; and little dreamed that he was doubling his enormity.

"So you were unaware of it, were you?"

"Quite!" he vowed naïvely.

"You had forgotten my existence, in fact? Your candour is too charming!"

His candour had already come home to Rigden, and he bitterly deplored it, but there was no retreat from the transparent truth. He therefore braced himself to stand or fall by what he had said, but meanwhile to defend it to the best of his ability.

"You don't know what an interview I had in yonder," he said, jerking a hand towards the store. "And the worst of it is that I can never tell you."

"Ah!"

"God forgive me for forgetting or neglecting you for a single instant!" Rigden exclaimed. "I can only assure you that when I left you I didn't mean to be gone five minutes. You will realise that what I eventually undertook to do for this wretched man made all the difference. It did put you out of my head for the moment; but you speak as though it were going to put you out of my life for all time!"

"For the sake of a man you pretended never to have seen before," murmured Moya, deftly assuming what she burned to know.

"It was no pretence. I didn't recognise him."

"But you do now," pronounced Moya, as one stating a perceptible fact.

"Yes," said Rigden, "I recognise him – now."

There was a pause. Moya broke it softly, a suspicion of sympathy in her voice.

"I am afraid he must have some hold over you."

"He has indeed," said Rigden bitterly; and next moment his heart was leaping, as a flame leaps before the last.

She who loved him was back at his side, she who had flouted him was no more. Her hot hands held both of his. Her quick breath beat upon his face. It was now nearly dark in the verandah, but there was just light enough for him to see the tears shining in her splendid eyes. Rigden was infinitely touched and troubled, but not by this alone. It was her voice that ran into his soul. She was imploring him to tell her all; there must be no secrets between them; let him but tell her the worst and she would stand by him, against all the world if need be, and no matter how bad the worst might be. She was no child. There was nothing he could not tell her, nothing she could not understand and forgive, except his silence. Silence and secrecy were the one unpardonable sin in her eyes. She would even help him to conceal that dreadful man, no matter what the underlying reason might be, or how much she might disagree with it, if only the reason were explained to her once and for all.

It was the one thing that Rigden would not explain.

He entreated her to trust him. His voice broke and the words failed him. But on the crucial point he was firm. And so was she.

"You said you were unreasonable and exacting," he groaned. "I didn't believe it. Now I see that it is true."

"But this is neither one nor the other," cried Moya. "Goodness! If I were never to exact more than your confidence! It's my right. If you refuse – "

"I do refuse it, in this instance, Moya."

"Then here's your ring!"

There was a wrench, a glitter, and something fell hot into his palm.

"I only hope you will think better of this," he said.

"Never!"

"I own that in many ways I have been quite in the wrong – "

"In every way!"

"There you are unreasonable again. I can't help it. I am doing what I honestly believe – "

His voice died away, for a whip was cracking in the darkness, with the muffled beat of unshod hoofs in the heavy sand. They sat together without a word, each waiting for the other to rise first; and thus Theodore found them, though Moya's dress was all he could descry at first.

"That you, Moya? Well, what price the bush? I've been shooting turkeys; they call it sport; but give me crows to-morrow! What, you there too, Rigden? Rum coincidence! Sorry I didn't see you sooner, old chap; but I'm not going to retract about the turkeys."

He disappeared in the direction of the barracks, and Moya held out her hand.

"Lend me that ring," she said. "There's no reason why we should give ourselves away to-night."

"I think the sooner the better," said Rigden.

But he returned the ring.

IV BETHUNE OF THE HALL

Theodore Bethune was a young man of means, with the brains to add to them, and the energy to use his brains. As the eldest of his family he had inherited a special legacy in boyhood; had immediately taken himself away from the Church of England Grammar School, and booked his passage to London by an early boat. On the voyage he read the classics in his deck chair, asked copious questions in the smoking-room, and finally decided upon Cambridge as the theatre of his academical exploits.

Jesus was at that time the College most favoured by Australasian youth: this was quite enough for Theodore Bethune. He ultimately selected Trinity Hall, as appearing to him to offer the distinction of Trinity without its cosmopolitan flavour, and a legal instead of an athletic tradition. In due course he took as good a degree as he required, and proceeded to be called at the English bar before returning to practice in Melbourne. In connection with his university life he had two or three original boasts: he had never been seen intoxicated, never played any game, and only once investigated Fenner's (to watch the Australians). On the other hand, he had added appreciably to his income by intelligent betting on Newmarket course.

Temperament, character, and attainment seemed to have combined to produce the perfect barrister in Theodore Bethune, who was infinitely critical but himself impervious to criticism, while possessed of a capital gift of insolence and a face of triple brass. The man, however, was not so perfect; even the gentleman may exhibit certain flaws. Of these one of his sisters had latterly become very conscious; but they came out as a boon to her on the second evening of this visit to Eureka Station, New South Wales.

For in conversation Bethune was what even he would formerly have called "a terror," an epithet which he still endeavoured to deserve, though he no longer made use of it himself. Captious, cocksure, omniscient, he revelled in the uses of raillery and of repartee. Nothing pleased him more than to combat the pet theories of persons whom he had no occasion to conciliate. He could take any side on any question, as became the profession he never ceased from practising. He destroyed illusions as other men destroy game, and seldom made a new acquaintance without securing a fair bag. Better traits were a playful fancy and an essential geniality which suggested more of mischief than of malice in the real man; the pose, however, was that of uncompromising and heartless critic of every creature of his acquaintance, and every country in which he had set foot.

The first night he had behaved very well. Moya had made him promise that he would not be openly critical for twenty-four hours. He had kept his word like a man and a martyr. The second night was different. Theodore was unmuzzled. And both Moya and Rigden were thankful in their hearts.

Sir Oracle scarce knew where to begin. There were the turkeys which a child could have hit with a pop-gun; there were the emus which the Queen's Prizeman could not have brought down with his Lee-Metford. But Theodore had discovered that there was no medium in the bush. Look at the heat! He had been through the Red Sea at its worst, but it had not fetched the skin from his hands as this one day in Riverina. Riverina, forsooth! Where were their rivers? *Lucus a non lucendo*.

The storekeeper winked; he was a humorist himself, of a lower order.

"No good coming it in Greek up here, mister."

The jackeroo was the storekeeper's hourly butt. The jackeroo was a new chum who had done pretty badly at his public school, and was going to do worse in the bush, but he still knew Latin from Greek when he heard it, and he perceived his chance of scoring off the storekeeper.

"Greek is good," said the jackeroo. "Greek is great!"

"Ah, now we have it!" cried the storekeeper, who was a stout young man with bulbous eyes, and all the sly glances of the low comedian. "'Tis the voice of the scholar, I heard him explain! He comes from Rugby, Mr. Bethune; hasn't he told you yet? Calls himself an Old Rug – sure it isn't a plaid-shawl, Ives? Oh, you needn't put on side because you can draft Greek from Latin!"

Ives the jackeroo, a weak youth wearing spectacles, had put on nothing but the long-suffering smile with which he was in the habit of receiving the storekeeper's grape-shot. He said no more, however, and a brief but disdainful silence on the part of Bethune made an awkward pause which Rigden broke heroically. Hitherto but little talking had been required of him or of Moya. The aggressive Theodore had been their unwitting friend, and he stood them in better stead than ever when the young men adjourned to smoke on the verandah.

This was the time when the engaged couple would naturally have disappeared; they had duly done so the previous evening; to-night they merely sat apart, out of range of the lamp, and the young men galled them both by never glancing their way. Nothing had been noticed yet; nor indeed was there anything remarkable in their silence after so long a day spent in each other's exclusive society. From time to time, however, they made a little talk to save appearances which were incriminating only in their own minds; and all the time their eyes rested together upon the black stack of logs and corrugated iron which was the store.

Once the storekeeper approached with discreet deliberation.

"I've lost my key of the store, Mr. Rigden; may I borrow yours?"

"It's I who've lost mine, Spicer, so I took yours from your room. No, don't bother about your books to-night; don't go over there again. Look after Mr. Bethune."

He turned to Moya when the youth was gone.

"One lie makes many," he muttered grimly.

There was no reply.

Meanwhile Bethune was in his element, with an audience of two bound to listen to him by the bond of a couple of his best cigars, and with just enough of crude retaliation from the storekeeper to act as a blunt cutlass to Theodore's rapier. The table with the lamp was at the latter's elbow, and the rays fell full upon the long successful nose and the unwavering mouth of an otherwise rather ordinary legal countenance. There was plenty of animation in the face, however, and enough of the devil to redeem a good deal of the prig. The lamp also made the most of a gleaming shirt-front; for Theodore insisted on dressing ("for my own comfort, purely,") even in the wilderness, where black coats were good enough for the other young men, and where Mora herself wore a high blouse.

"But there's nothing to be actually ashamed of in an illusion or two," the jackeroo was being assured, "especially at your age. I've had them myself, and may have one or two about me still. You only know it when you lose them, and my faith in myself has been rudely shattered. I've shed one thundering big illusion since I've been up here."

The Rugby boy was not following; he had but expressed a sufficiently real regret at not having gone up to Cambridge himself; and he was wondering whether he should regret it the less in future for what this Cambridge man had to say upon the subject. On the whole it did not reconcile him to the university of the bush, and for a little he had a deaf ear for the conversation. A question had been asked and answered ere he recovered the thread.

"Oh, go on," said the storekeeper. "Give the back-blocks a rest, Bethune!"

"I certainly shall, Mr. Spicer," rejoined Theodore, with the least possible emphasis on the prefix, "once I shake their infernal dust from my shoes. Not that I'd mind the dust if there was anything to do in it. Of course this sort of thing's luxury," he had the grace to interject; "in fact, it's far too luxurious for me. One rather likes to rough it when one comes so far. Anything for some excitement, some romance, something one can't get nearer home!"

"Well, you can't get this," said the loyal storekeeper.

"I never was at a loss for moonlight," observed Theodore, "when there happened to be a moon. There are verandahs in Toorak."

Spicer lowered his voice.

"There was a man once shot dead in this one. Bushrangers!"

"When was that?"

"Oh, well, it was before my time."

"Ten years ago?"

"Ten to twenty, I suppose."

"Ten to twenty! Why, my good fellow, there was a blackfellows' camp in Collins Street, twenty years ago! Corrobborees, and all that, where the trams run now."

"I'm hanged if there were," rejoined Spicer warmly. "Not twenty years ago, no, nor yet thirty!"

"Say forty if it makes you happy. It doesn't affect my argument. You don't expect me to bolt out of this verandah because some poor devil painted it red before I was breeched? What shall it profit us that there were bushrangers once upon a time, and blacks before the bushrangers? The point is that they're both about as extinct as the plesiosaurus –"

"Kill whose cat?" interposed the storekeeper in a burst of his peculiar brand of badinage. "He's coming it again, Ives; you'll have another chance of showing off, old travelling-rug!"

"And all you've got to offer one instead," concluded Bethune, "besides the subtleties of your own humour, is a so-called turkey the size of a haystack, that'll ram its beak down your gun-barrel if you wait long enough."

The Rugbeian laughed outright, and Spicer gained time by insulting him while he rummaged his big head for a retort worthy of Bethune; it was worthier of himself when it came.

"You want adventure, do you? I know the place for you, and it's within ten miles of where you sit. Blind Man's Block!"

"Reminds one of the Tower," yawned Bethune.

"It'll remind you of your sins if ever you get bushed in it! Ten by ten of abandoned beastliness; not a hoof or a drop between the four fences; only scrub, and scrub, and scrub of the very worst. Mallee and porcupine – porcupine and mallee. But you go and sample it; only don't get too far in from the fence. If you do you may turn up your toes; and you won't be the first or the last to turn 'em up in Blind Man's Block."

"What of?" asked Bethune sceptically.

"Thirst," said Spicer; "thirst and hunger, but chiefly thirst."

"In fenced country?"

"It's ten miles between the fences, and not a drop of water, nor the trace of a track. It's abandoned country, I'm telling you."

"But you could never be more than five miles from a fence; surely you could hit one or other of them and follow it up?"

"Could you?" said the storekeeper. "Well, you try it, and let me know! Try it on horseback, and you'll see what it's like to strike a straight line through mallee and porcupine; and after that, if you're still hard up for an adventure, just you try it on foot."

"Don't you, Theodore," advised Rigden from his chair. "I'm not keen on turning out all hands to look for you, old chap."

"But is the place really as bad as all that?" inquired Moya, following him into the conversation for the look of the thing.

"Worse," said Rigden, and leaned forward, silent. In another moment he had risen, walked to the end of the verandah, and returned as far as Bethune's chair. "Sure you want an adventure, Theodore? Because the Assyrians are coming down in the shape of the mounted police, and it's the second time they've been here to-day. Looks fishy, doesn't it?"

Listening, they heard the thin staccato jingle whose first and tiniest tinkle had been caught by Rigden; then with one accord the party rose, and gathered at the end of the verandah, whence the three black horsemen could be seen ambling into larger sizes, among the tussocks of blue-bush, between the station and the rising moon.

"What do they want?" idly inquired Bethune.

"A runaway convict," said Rigden, quietly.

"No!" cried Spicer.

"Is it a fact?" asked Ives, turning instinctively to Miss Bethune.

"I believe so," replied Moya, with notable indifference.

"Then why on earth have you been keeping it dark, both of you?" demanded Bethune, and he favoured the engaged couple with a scrutiny too keen for one of them. Moya's eyes fell. But Rigden was equal to the occasion.

"Because the police don't want it to get about. That's why," said he shortly.

And Moya admired his resource until she had time to think; then it revolted her as much as all the rest. But meanwhile the riders were dismounting in the moonlight. Rigden went out to meet them, and forthwith disappeared with Harkness among the pines.

"No luck at all," growled the sergeant. "We're clean off the scent, and it licks me how he gave you such a wide berth and us the slip. We can't have been that far behind him. None of the other gentlemen came across him, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact I've only just mentioned it to them," replied Rigden, rather lamely. "I thought I'd leave it till you came back. You seemed not to want it to get about, you know."

"No more I do – for lots of reasons. I mean to take the devil, alive or dead, and yet I don't want anybody else to take him! Sounds well, doesn't it? Yet I bet you'd feel the same in my place – if you knew who he was!"

Rigden stood mute.

"You won't cut me out for the reward, Mr. Rigden, if I tell you who it is, between ourselves? You needn't answer: of course you won't. Well – then – it's good old Bovill the bushranger!" And the sergeant's face shone like the silver buttons of the sergeant's tunic.

"Captain Bovill!" gasped Rigden, but only because he felt obliged to gasp something.

"Not so loud, man!" implored the sergeant, who had sunk his own voice to the veriest whisper. "Yes – yes – that's the gentleman. None other! Incredible, isn't it? Of course it wasn't Darlinghurst he escaped from, but Pentridge; only I thought you'd guess if I said; it's been in the papers some days."

"We get ours very late, and haven't always time to read them then. I knew nothing about it."

"Well, then, you knew about as much as is known in Victoria from that day to this. The police down there have lost their end of the thread, and it was my great luck to pick it up again by the merest chance last week. I'll tell you about that another time. But you understand what it would mean to me?"

"Rather!"

"To land him more or less single-handed!"

"I won't tell a soul."

"And don't you go and take the man himself behind my back, Mr. Rigden!" the policeman was obliged to add, with such jocularly as men feign in their deadliest earnest.

But Rigden's laugh was genuine and involuntary.

"I can safely promise that I won't do that," said he. "But ask the other fellows if they've seen the kind of man you describe; if they haven't, no harm done."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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