

PROLOGUE

THE WARMTH HAD barely left my body, but already they have my obituary written. It's no secret that it's been sitting in the drawer of the Inspector-General of the New South Wales police, John McLerie, for the past six months.

They brought me into town on the back of a donkey like Jesus, paraded along the main street of Forbes on the way to the police station up on Barrack Hill. It takes a lot to bring the busy main street of a prosperous gold-mining town of twenty thousand people to a halt, but the sight of my raw, bleeding, bullet-riddled body was enough to silence idle chatter and still the ponderous tread of the beasts of burden that plough a furrow up and down the wide, dusty street day and night.

Ignoring the foul gases erupting from my body and the trickles of urine and strands of bloody flux, which ran down my legs and stained the ochre dust, the traps dragged me by the boots into a cool, dark room lit by a single shaft of filtered, yellow sunlight. Roundly cursing because the rigors had set in and made their task more difficult, two strapping Forbes Constables raised their batons high above their heads and brought them down with sickening cracks to ease the offending stiffness in my dead joints, knees and fingers.

Grunting and sweating they forced me upright onto a stretcher in the corner, forced a pistol into my dead hand and, with greasy thumbs, gouged open my eyelids to reveal what the newspapers called my 'mad, wide-eyed stare.'

Their work done, they shuffled off for breakfast and a woman called Mary came in and washed the dried blood from my face, hair and hands with a cloth and warm water. Though she couldn't hear or see me I leaned close and thanked her softly for her kindness, and idly wondered if her other name might be Magdalene, like that other Mary long ago who had performed the same service for that other poor bastard who hadn't deserved the end he'd got...

Once the rattling dice in the back room had decided the fate of my saddle, gun and holster, the black curtain at the door way was swept back and the 'viewing' commenced.

The big Irish Constable, the pork fat from his hurried breakfast still glistening on his moustache, the mist of a celebratory whisky still on his breath, began to collect pieces of silver from his customers with a well-practiced backhand. Soon the room was full of whispering shadows; the ghouls the morbid, the curious and the souvenir hunters, come to ogle at the bullet-ridden corpse of the notorious bushranger, Ben Hall as though it was some kind of carnival curiosity.

They tore strips from my bloodied shirt, souvenired locks of my hair and some 'Doubting Thomas,' a rat-arsed, weasel of a bloke with baccy-stained teeth and a squint eye, stuck his fingers into my bullet-wounds to make sure I was really dead.

A flash of powder lit up the room with white light as a photographer recorded the grisly scene for posterity and, no doubt, profit. As the smoke settled, the Irish Constable called 'time', but before they skulked back through the black curtain into the burning sunlight and gritty dust of Forbes, one or two peered into my dead, unseeing eyes as if trying to winkle out of me that last terrible secret that I had taken with me beyond the grave...

What is it that brings to the surface the terrible, malevolent forces that live deep in the souls of men? And what measure of good and evil must a bucko battle with before he's forced to ride out along with his devils? Learned men at Melbourne University are looking for the answers inside 'Mad' Dan Morgan's empty, decomposing head, sent to them in a hatbox by the good folk of Wangaratta. Even a man with no schooling knows the criminal tendency has nothing to do with the shape of the head, or the size of the brain. It's determined by the measures of betrayal, guilt and vengeance that seep into a man's life and dictate his actions and destiny.

I came to the sad knowing of this even as I watched through my own dying eye my bloodied, torn, bullet-riddled body being hoisted up and tied to a tree by the New South Wales police. 'You'll never take me alive,' I once told Inspector Norton and they took me at my word. Their voices, still hoarse with the unholy joy of their success, decreed that death was not punishment enough. They were seeking vengeance for all the times the Ben Hall gang brought ridicule and disgrace down on their heads and for the comrades that we killed. So, drunk with power and Irish whisky, they used my cadaver for target practice. Only after a hail of bullets had ripped my flesh and bone asunder and their gun smoke dispersed along with the early morning mists would any kind of satisfaction have a ghost's chance in hell of stilling the pounding of those bastards' cruel hearts.

My life was one crowded hour. I was the most notorious bushranger in Australian history. I was with Darkie Gardiner when he pulled off the biggest-ever armed robbery at Eugowra rocks and led the gang that bailed up banks, towns and more citizens, coaches, shops and stations than any other bushrangers in history.

I was betrayed, jailed, shackled and shot. I declared war on the squatters and the New South Wales police. I took on their curses, their guns their native trackers and dogs and survived, but along the way I also buried and grieved for good men who lost their lives. I never killed anyone, nor did I ever set out to, but men did die, but not by my design.

Fate also played its mysterious part in turning me from selector to bushranger. It brought me to the people and places that influenced the road I took. Did my story turn out as God intended, or did meddling hands change the course of my destiny? This I will only learn in the Great Hereafter.

From my vantage point, high up in the rafters, I watch the local undertaker, Mr Toler, heaving my stiffened cadaver into a rough wooden shell with as little care and ceremony as the Forbes constabulary. As I watch his grim doings below, I ponder the question thoughtfully, how soon might that be... the Great Hereafter? As I see it, I must be already there... or nearabouts, anyhow. But before I discover the great mysteries of the afterlife, I have a story to tell. As is usually the case, a life less ordinary began in very humble surroundings.