

The Wild Colonial Boy

By Gabriel Bergmoser

It had been a sunny afternoon, maybe two years ago, maybe more or less, that he had ridden through this town with Ettie. Shortly before Fitzpatrick, before he knew that he was Ned Kelly. Back when the country was both more and less his than it would be in the days since. Glenrowan had seemed a joke then, and he remembered Ettie laughing at the barely standing collection of houses that some luddite had tried to call a town with a straight face. Still, it was far enough from home and from troubles for that afternoon to be a good one, and he and Ettie had lain together under the blue sky of midday, watching the birds lazily circle overhead and stealing kisses while laughing about what the others would say if they knew. Glenrowan had been their little secret. Now, he supposed, it would never be a secret again.

From inside the music was louder than ever, but he barely noticed it. He stood alone on the porch of the inn, staring out over the fields ahead, at the ghostly shape of distant trees. He was listening for a train, but all the while hoping he wouldn't hear it. Hoping this night would continue as it was before they all left the next day with blurry memories and sore heads, crawling back into the bush to continue the merry chase that had been anything but merry for the two long years it had dragged on.

Briefly the thought occurred to him that perhaps his tiring of the life they had been leading had led to this. Perhaps all his grand designs amounted to little more than dwindling patience. But no. He had known this was the way it had to go since Jerilderie. He had tried to deny it to himself, had pushed away the ugly thought, but it kept coming to him on those late nights when he tried to sleep and all the while waited for the explosion of gunshots in the trees that would bring him the same ignoble end as all the bushrangers he had grown up hearing about.

The band inside had struck up a familiar tune. He cocked his head to listen and almost laughed when the singer's scratchy, out-of-tune voice formed those first words. *'There was a wild colonial boy, Jack Doolan was his name.'*

That was fitting. The song had become an unofficial anthem for the many who believed in the Kellys, a song sung in defiance in pubs across Australia, the mournful story of that wild bushranger who met his end full of bullets and still firing at the traps. He had to wonder if that was prophetic, somehow.

Well, at least part of it would be. But not the rest. Jack Doolan, the hero of that ballad, had never existed. There was a Jack Donahue, a ratty cattle thief shot dead by accident, who somehow became a legend. Well if he could manage it then Ned Kelly damn well could do the

same and better. With a few key differences. There would not be just one song written by Ned Kelly. There would be hundreds. And none of them would be getting his name wrong.

Everyone in the pub was singing along now, the cacophony of voices accompanied by the pounding of many, many feet. Listening, he closed his eyes and tried to push away the twist of sick guilt in his stomach. It was too late for that. Maybe he should embrace it, maybe he should make himself feel it, but in this moment all he wanted to think about was that afternoon with Ettie, back when he had been a nobody. Nobodies died happy, surrounded by family. Nobodies found joy and peace in their humble existence. Nobodies had no songs written about them. Nobodies did not change the world. Those facts, at this point, did not make him feel any renewed doubt or determination. They were just facts.

‘Ned?’

He didn’t turn. Two years in the bush, he recognised all their voices. ‘Back inside Joe. Them townsfolk need watching.’

‘Them townsfolk are drunk as a Beechworth copper and going nowhere while the booze remains free.’ Joe sidled up next to him, eyes on the distant trees. ‘Any sign?’

‘You’ll hear it,’ Ned said. ‘It won’t be subtle.’

‘Aye,’ Joe said. ‘Suppose not. Just nervous, is all.’

‘Don’t be,’ Ned said. ‘You’ve naught to be nervous about. This will go right. Now get yourself inside and take advantage of that free grog. We’ve a big night and a bigger chase ahead.’

Well, that was half true.

‘Right you are,’ Joe said. ‘You’ll be joining us?’

‘Soon enough.’

Joe turned and made for the door. Ned didn’t move. He could hear the metallic grind of Joe’s armour with every step he took, and him coming to a halt was deafening. Ned’s hand slowly moved toward his pistol.

‘Funny thing,’ Joe said.

‘What is?’

‘A hundred traps on that train coming in. Sure, the crash ought to do for most of them, but not all. Some will be unharmed, and that some’ll be more than we four. The armour might deflect a few bullets, but it’ll still be tough.’

‘Your point?’ Ned’s hand rested on the butt of the gun.

‘Seems the sort of thing a man should face sober. Yet you’re encouraging us to get right drunk.’

Ned smiled. *Dear Joe*. His best friend and lieutenant, and a damn sight smarter than the rest of them. More was the pity. ‘A train crash is no mild battering, Joe. The ones who don’t die will be hurt, the few unhurt will be in shock. None of them are expecting this. This victory of ours is as good as complete. If the celebration seems premature, well, it may yet be. But our business at the train is little more than mopping up the last of it. It may seem less than glorious, but the crash will do our job for us.’

The music had lulled. A silence lingered.

‘Right you are.’

The grinding of armour, screech of the door and Ned let go of his gun. He exhaled and closed his eyes. His hands were shaking and the lies still tasted bitter in his mouth.

He wished it could have been different. He wished he didn’t have to lie to those that had been so loyal to him no matter what. He wished it could have been different. But now, in the last hours of his life, it had never been more clear. Every beaten child and raped girl, every stolen horse and burned barn, every atrocity he had seen throughout his youth, had led to this. He had no choice because those hardships had forged him as surely as he had forged the armour that would become a symbol, armour he made not for its practicality but for the sheer power of its image. Easy for children to draw. Easy to put on posters and tattoos. Easy to recreate in all of the millions of ways that would make it immortal. Very few would know his face. But all would know the mask, and that was what mattered.

It was all so perfect. So brilliant nobody knew he was doing it. The Jerilderie Letter, telling a story of woe and injustice in the finest language they could muster. The armour in all its mythological simplicity. The stories they told at every coach they held up and every campfire they warmed their hands over. A legend of four boys who took up arms against the might of the British empire, who stole from the rich to end the debts of their oppressed kin, who rode free and glorious beneath the soaring sun of this infant country.

Australia did not know who it was yet, and the British sought to shape it. But they would do no such thing. Culture grew from legends, legends that created values. A country needed a legend to guide it home, and a legend began with the person willing to sacrifice everything to become one. To let his mates go to their deaths, to kiss his weeping girl goodbye, all the while he cried as well, tears streaking the beard he wore to make himself seem that much older and stronger than he really was. Somewhere along the line he had recognised what was happening and while he hated it and it terrified him, he knew it had to be so.

Change would not come overnight. But it *would come*. Because the authority of a brutal regime could only extend so far and a legend held more weight than a law ever would.

He closed his eyes and took in one long, deep breath of the night air, fresh and bracing and full of the taste of the wilds of the country he loved despite all it had done. It was the taste of a youth spend running in the fields, riding horses, fighting and laughing and swimming in lakes and dancing in pubs and holding Ettie and talking about the life they would have, the children, the home, the old age they would surely share.

Legends didn't get old age. Legends didn't get very much at all. But they gave, and maybe that was more important. Maybe.

There were tears in his eyes and he almost laughed. That was one thing he could not afford anyone to see. That would not do. But he supposed now, when no chance lay ahead for him to ever do it again, he could let himself just be a man.

A whistle in the night; too faint to be heard from inside. The train, puffing as it approached, puffing that slowed as the driver saw a red handkerchief waved in the distance, a warning to stop, a warning that the tracks had been torn up and they were on the way to their doom.

The train had stopped. The schoolmaster had played his part perfectly. In a few moments Ned would go inside, share what had happened, rage at the terrible betrayal of the man. He would force himself to look into the eyes of his friends, to see their fear and share his own. Then he would tell them to get ready. Helmets would be donned. Guns would be raised. And in death four scared boys would become a legend that could never die.

But it was alright. It was all alright.

Ned Kelly took one long, deep breath of the air that once meant freedom and now signalled death. One last breath as the young man. One last moment of being real; a person, here in this split second in time.

He turned and walked back inside.

He had work to do.