

A Bushranger at Bay

E.W. Hornung

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THE HON. GUY KENTISH was trotting the globe an exercise foreign to his habit when he went on to Australia for a reason racy of his blood. He wished to witness a certain game of cricket between the full strength of Australia and an English team which included one or two young men of his acquaintance. It was no part of his original scheme to see anything of the country; one of the Australian cricketers put that idea into his head; and it was under inward protest that Mr. Kentish found himself smoking his chronic cigar on the Glenrinald and Clear Corner coach one scorching morning in the month of February. He thought he had never seen such a howling desert in his life; and it is to be feared that in his heart he applied the same epithet to his two fellow-passengers. The one outside was chatting horribly with the driver; the other had tried to chaff the Hon. Guy, and had repaired in some disorder to the company of the mail-bags inside. Kentish wondered whether these were the types he might expect to encounter upon the station to which he Mr. Kentish watched the little operation of "sticking up" without a word. had reluctantly accepted an officious introduction. He wished himself out of the absurd little two-horse coach, out of an expedition whose absurdity was on a larger scale, and back again on the shady side of the two or three streets where he lived his normal life. The fare at wayside inns made the thought of his club a positive pain; and these pangs were at their sharpest when Stingaree cantered out of the scrub on his lily mare, a blessed bolt from the blue.

Mr. Kentish watched the little operation of "sticking up" without a word, but with revived interest in life. He noted the pusillanimous pallor of the driver and his friend, and felt personally indebted to the desperado who had put a stop to their unpleasant conversation. The inside passenger made a yet more obsequious surrender. Not that the trio were set any better example by their noble ally, who began by smiling at the whole affair, and was content to the last in taking an observant interest in the bushranger's methods. These were simple and in a sense humane; there was no personal robbery at all. The mail-bags were sufficient for Stingaree, who on this occasion worked alone, but led a pack-horse, to which the driver and the inside passenger were compelled to strap the long canvas bags, under his eye-glass and his long revolver. Few words were spoken from first to last; the Hon. Guy never put in his at all; but he watched the outlaw like a lynx, without betraying an undue attention, and when all was over he gave a sigh.

"So that's Stingaree!" he said, more to himself than to his comrades in humiliation; but the bushranger had cantered back into the scrub, and his name opened the flood-gates of a profanity which made Kentish wince, for all his knowledge of the world.

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"Do you never swear at him till he has gone?" he asked when he had a chance. The driver leant across the legs of his friend.

"Not unless we want a bullet through our skulls, he answered in boorish derision; and the man between them laughed harshly.

"I thought he had never been known to shoot?"

"That's just it, mister. We don't want him to begin on us."

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"Why didn't you give him a bit of your mind?" the man in the middle inquired of Kentish. "I never heard you open your gills!"

"And we expected to see some pluck from the old country," added the driver, wreaking vengeance with his lash.

Mr. Kentish produced his cigar-case with an insensitive smile, and, after a moment's deliberation, handed it for the first time to his uncouth companions. "Do you want those mail-bags back?" he asked, quite casually, when the three cigars were in blast.

"Want them? Of course I want them; but want must be my boss," said the driver, gloomily.

"I'm not so sure," said Kentish. "When does the next coach pass this way?"

"Midnight, and I drive it. I turn back when I get to Clear Corner, you see."

"Then look out for me about this spot. I'm going to ask you to put me down."

"Put you down?"

"If you don't mind pulling up. I'm not going on at present; but I'll go back with you to Glenruald instead, if you'll keep a lookout for me to-night."

Instinctively the driver put his foot upon the brake, for the request had been made with that quiet authority which this silent passenger had suddenly assumed; and yet it seemed to them such a mad demand that his companions looked at Kentish as they had not looked before. His face bore a close inspection; it was one of those which burn red, and in the redness twinkled hazel eyes that toned agreeably with a fair beard and fairer mustache. The former he had grown upon his travels; but the trail of the West-end tailor, whose shooting-jacket is as distinctive as his frock-coat, was upon Guy Kentish from head to heel. As they watched him he took an open envelope from his pocket, scribbled a few words on a card, put that in, and stuck down the flap.

"Here," said he, "is my letter of introduction to the good people at the Mazeppa Station higher up. If I don't turn up to-night, see that they get it, even if it costs you a bit of this?"

And, putting a sovereign in a startled palm, he jumped to the ground.

"But what are you going to do, sir?" cried the driver, in alarm.

"Recover your mail-bags if I can."

"What? After you've just been stuck up #—"

"Exactly. I hope to stick up Stingaree!"

"Then you were armed all the time?"

Mr. Kentish smiled as he shook his head.

"That's my affair, I imagine; but even so I am not fool enough to tackle such a fellow with his own weapons. You leave it to me, and don't be anxious. But I must be off if I'm to stalk him before he goes through the letters. No, I know what I'm doing, and I shall do better alone. Till to-night, then!"

And he was in the scrub ere they decided to take him at his madcap word, and let his blood be on the chuckle-head of the new-chummiest new chum that ever came out after the rain! Was it pluck or all presence? It was rather plucky even to pretend in such proximity to the terrible Stingaree; on the whole, the coaching trio were disposed to concede a certain amount of unequivocal courage; and the driver, with Kentish's sovereign in his pocket, went so far as to declare that duty alone nailed him to the box.

Meantime the Hon. Guy had skirted the road until he came to double horse-tracks striking back into the bush; these he followed with the wary stealth of one who had spent his autumns, at least, in the right place. They led him through belts of scrub in which he trod like a cat, without disturbing an avoidable branch, and over treeless spaces that he crossed at a run, bent double; but always, as he followed the trail, his shadow fell at one consistent angle, showing how the bushranger rode through his natural element as the crow might have flown overhead.

At last Kentish found himself in a sandy gully bristling with pines, through which the sunlight dripped like melted gold; and in the fine warp and woof of high light and sharp shadow the bushranger's horses stood lashing at the flies with their long tails. The bushranger himself was nowhere to be seen. But at last Kentish descried a white-and-brown litter on either side of the thickest trunk in sight, from whose further side floated intermittent puffs of thin blue smoke. Kentish looked and looked again before advancing. But the tall pine threw such a shadow as should easily swallow his own. And in another minute he was peeping round the bole.

The litter on either was, of course, the shower of miscellaneous postal matter from the mail-bags; and in its midst sat Stingaree against the tree, enjoying his pipe and a copy of Punch, of which the wrapper lay upon his

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knees. Kentish peered for torn envelopes and gaping packets; there were no more. The bushranger had evidently started with Punch, and was still curiously absorbed in its contents. The notorious eye-glass dangled against that kindred vanity, the spotless white jacket which he affected in summer-time; the brown, attentive face, even as Kentish saw it in less than profile, was thus purged of the sinister aspect which such an appendage can impart to the most innocent; and a somewhat passive amusement was its unmistakable note. Nevertheless, the long revolver which had once more done its nefarious work still lay ready to his hand; indeed, the Hon. Guy could have stooped and whipped it up, had he been so minded.

He was absorbed, however, in the absorption of Stingaree; and as he peered audaciously over the other's shoulder he put himself in the outlaw's place. An old friend would have lurked in every cut, a friend whom it might well be a painful pleasure to meet again. There were the oval face and the short upper lip of one imperishable type; on the next page one of Punch's Fancy Portraits, with lines underneath which set Stingaree incongruously humming a stave from H.M.S. Pinafore. Mr. Kentish smiled without surprise. The common folk in the omnibus opposite were the common folk of an inveterate master; there was matter for a homesick sigh in his hint of streaming streets — and Kentish thought he heard one as he held his breath. The page after that detained the reader some minutes. The illustrations proclaimed it an article on the new Savoy opera, and Stingaree confirmed the impression by humming more Pinafore when he came to the end. Kentish left him at it, and, creeping away as silently as he had come, described a circle and came noisily on the bushranger from the front. The result was that Stingaree was not startled into firing, but stopped the intruder at due distance with his revolver levelled across the open copy of Punch.

"I heard you singing Pinafore," cried Kentish, cheerily. "And I find you reading Punch!"

"How dare you find me?" demanded the bushranger, black with passion.

"I thought you wouldn't mind. I am perfectly innocuous — look!"

And, divesting himself of his shooting-coat, he tossed it across for the other's inspection; he wore neither waistcoat nor hip-pocket, and his innocence of arms was manifest when he had turned round slowly where he stood.

"Now may I not come a little nearer?" asked the Hon. Guy.

"No; keep your distance, and tell me why you have come so far. The truth, mind. or you'll be shot!"

"Very well," said Kentish. "They were dreadful people on the coach ——"

"Are they waiting for you?" thundered Stingaree.

"No; they've gone on; and they think me mad."

"So you are."

"We shall see; meanwhile I prefer your company to theirs, and mean to enjoy it up to the moment of my murder."

For an instant Stingaree seemed on the brink of a smile; then his dark face hardened, and he tapped the long barrel in rest between his knees.

"You may call it murder if you like," said he. "That will not prevent me from shooting you dead unless you speak the truth. You have come for something; what is it?"

"I've told you already. I was bored and disgusted. That is the truth."

"But not the whole truth," cried Stingaree. "You had some other reason."

Kentish looked down without speaking. He heard the revolver cocked.

"Come, let us have it, or I'll shoot you like the spy I believe you are!"

"You may shoot me for telling you," said Kentish with a quiet laugh and shrug.

"No. I shall not, unless it turns lent that you're ground-bait for the police."

"That I am not," said Kentish, growing serious in his turn. "But, since you insist, I have come to persuade you to give up every one of these letters which you have no earthly right to touch."

Their eyes met. Stingaree's were the wider open, and in an instant the less stern. He dropped his revolver, with a laugh, into its old place at his side.

"Mad or sane," said he, "I shall be under the unpleasant necessity of leaving you rather securely tied to one of these trees."

"I don't believe you will," returned Kentish, without losing a shade of his rich coloring. "But in any case I suppose we may have a chat first? I give you my word that you are safe from further intrusion to the level best of

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my knowledge and belief. May I sit down instead of standing?"

"You may."

"We are a good many yards apart."

"You may reduce them by half. There."

"I thank you," said Kentish, seating himself tailorwise within arm's length of Stingaree's spurs. "Now, if you will feel in the breast-pocket of my coat you will find a case of very fair cigars — J.S. Murias — not too strong. I shall be honored if you will help yourself and throw me one."

Stingaree took the one, and handed the case with no ungraceful acknowledgment to its owner; but before Mr. Kentish could return the courtesy by proffering his cigar-cutter, the bushranger had produced his razor from a pocket of the white jacket, and sliced off the end with that.

"So you shave every day in the wilds," remarked the other, handing his match-box instead. "And I gave it up on my voyage."

"I alter myself from time to time," said Stingaree, as he struck a light.

"It must be a wonderful life!"

But Stingaree lit up without a word, and Kentish had the wit to do the same. They smoked in silence for some minutes. A gray ash had grown on each cigar before Kentish demanded an opinion of the brand.

"To tell you the truth," said Stingaree, "I have smoked strong trash so many years that I can scarcely taste it." And he peered rather pathetically through his glass.

"Didn't the same apply to Punch?"

"No; I have always read the papers when I could," said Stingaree, and suddenly he was smiling. "That's one reason why I make a specialty of sticking up the mail," he explained.

Mr. Kentish was not to be drawn into a second deliverance on the bushranging career. "Is it a good number?" he asked, nodding toward the copy of Punch. The bushranger picked it up.

"Good enough for me."

"What date?"

"Ninth of December."

"Nearly three months ago. I was in London then," remarked Kentish, in a reflective tone.

"Really?" cried Stingaree, under his breath. His voice was as soft as the other's, but there was suppressed interest in his manner. His dark eyes were only less alight than the red cigar he took from his teeth as he spoke. And he held it like a connoisseur, between finger and thumb, for all his ruined palate.

"I was," repeated Kentish. "I didn't sail till the middle of the month."

"To think you were in town till nearly Christmas!" and Stingaree gazed enviously. "It must be hard to realize," he added in some haste

"Other things," replied Kentish, "are harder."

"I gather from the Punch cartoon that the new Law Courts are in use at last?"

"I was at the opening."

"Then you may have seen this opera that I have been reading about?"

Kentish asked what it was, although he knew.

"Iolanthe."

"Rather! I was there the first night."

"The deuce you were!" cried Stingaree; and for the next quarter of an hour this armed scoundrel, the terror of a district as large as England and Wales, talked of nothing else to the man whom he was about to bind to a tree. Was the new opera equal to its predecessors? Which were the best numbers? Did Punch do it justice, or was there some jealousy in that rival hot-bed of wit and wisdom?

Unfortunately, Guy Kentish had no ear for music, but he made a clear report of the plot, could repeat some of the Lord Chancellor's quips, and was in decided disagreement with the captious banter from which he was given more than one extract. And in default of one of the new airs Stingaree rounded off the subject by dropping once more into —

"For he might have been a Rooshian, A French, or Turk, or Prooshian, Or, perhaps, I-tal-i-an! Or, perhaps, I-tal-i-an! But in spite of all temptations To belong to other nations He remains an Englishman!"

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"I understand that might be said of both of us," remarked Kentish, looking the outlaw boldly in the eyes. "But from all accounts I should have thought you were out here before the days of Gilbert and Sullivan."

"So I was," replied Stingaree, without frown or hesitation. "But you may also have heard that I am fond of music — any I can get. My only opportunities, as a rule," the bushranger continued, smiling mischievously at his cigar, "occur on the stations I have occasion to visit from time to time. On one a good lady played and sang Pinafore and The Pirates of Penzance to me from dewy eve to dawn. I'm bound to say I sang some of it at sight myself; and I flatter myself it helped to pass an embarrassing night rather pleasantly for all concerned. We had all hands on the place for our audience, and when I left I was formally presented with both scores; for I had simply called for horses, and horses were all I took. Only the other day I had the luck to confiscate a musical-box which plays selections from The Pirates. I ought to have had it with me in my swag."

So affable and even charming was the quiet voice, so evident the appreciation of the last inch of the cigar which had thawed a frozen palate and so conceivable a further softening, that Guy Kentish made bolder than before. He knew what he meant to do; he knew how he meant to do it. And yet it seemed just possible there might be a gentler way.

"You don't always take things, I believe?" he hazarded.

"You mean after sticking up?"

"Yes."

"Generally, I fear; it's the whole meaning of the act," confessed Stingaree, still the dandy in tone and phrase. "But there have been exceptions."

"Exactly!" quoth Kentish. "And there's going to be another this afternoon!"

Stingaree hurled the stump of his cigar into the scrub, and without a word the villain was born again, with his hard eyes, his harder mouth, his sinister scowl, his crag of a chin.

"So you come back to that," he cried, harshly. "I thought you had more sense; you will make me tie you up before your time."

"You may do exactly what you like," retorted Kentish, a galling scorn in his unaltered voice. "Only, before you do it, you may as well know who I am."

"My good sir, do you suppose I care who you are?" asked Stingaree, with an angry laugh: and his anger is the rarest thing in all his annals.

"I am quite sure you don't," responded Kentish. "But you may as well know my name, even though you never heard it before." And he gave it with a touch of triumph, not for one moment to be confounded with a natural pride.

The bushranger stared him steadily in the eyes; his hand had dropped once more upon the butt of his revolver. "No; I never did hear it before," he said.

"I'm not surprised," replied the other. "I was a new member when you were turned out of the club." Stingaree's hand closed: his eyes were terrible. "And yet," continued Kentish, "the moment I saw you at close quarters in the road I recognized you as ——"

"Stingaree!" cried the bushranger, on a rich and vibrant note. "Let the other name pass your lips — even here — and it's the last word that ever will!"

"Very well," said Mr. Kentish, with his unaffected shrug. "But, you see, I know all about you."

"You're the only man who does, in all Australia!" exclaimed the outlaw, hoarsely.

"At present! I sha'n't be the only man long."

"You will," said Stingaree through teeth and mustache; and he leaned over, revolver in hand. "You'll be the only man ever, because, instead of tying you up, I'm going to shoot you."

Kentish threw up his head in sharp contempt.

"What!" said he. "Sitting?"

Stingaree sprang to his feet in a fury. "No, I have a brace!" he cried, catching the packhorse. "You shall have the other, if it makes you happy; but you'll be a dead man all the same. I can handle these things, and I shall shoot to kill!"

"Then it's all up with you," said Kentish, rising slowly in his turn.

"All up with me? What the devil do you mean?"

"Unless I am at a certain place by a certain time, with or without these letters that are not yours, another letter

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will be opened."

Stingaree's stare gradually changed into a smile.

"A little vague," said he, "don't you think?"

"It shall be as plain as you please. The letter I mean was scribbled on the coach before I got down. It will only be opened if I don't return. It contains the name you can't bear to hear!

There was a pause. The afternoon sun was sinking with southern precipitancy, and Kentish had got his back to it by cool intent. He studied the play of suppressed mortification and strenuous philosophy in the swarthy face warmed by the reddening light; and admired the arduous triumph of judgment over instinct, even as a certain admiration dawned through the monocle which insensibly focussed his attention.

"And suppose," said Stingaree — "suppose you return empty as you came?" A contemptuous kick sent a pack of letters spinning

"I should feel under no obligation to keep your secret."

"And you think I would trust you to keep it otherwise?"

"If I gave you my word," said Kentish, "I know you would."

Stingaree made no immediate answer but he gazed in the sun-flayed face without suspicion.

"You wouldn't give me your word," he said at last.

"Oh, yes, I would."

"That you would die without letting that name pass your lips?"

"Unless I die delirious — with all my heart. I have as much respect for it as you."

"As much!" echoed the bushranger, in a strange blend of bitterness and obligation. "But how could you explain the bags? How could you have taken them from me?"

Kentish shrugged once more.

"You left them — I found them. Or you were sleeping, but I was unarmed."

"You would lie like that — to save my name?"

"And a man whom I remember perfectly. . ."

Stingaree heard no more; he was down on his knees, collecting the letters into heaps and shovelling them into the bags. Even the copy of Punch and the loose wrapper went in with the rest.

"You can't carry them," said he, when none remained outside. "I'll take them for you and dump them on the track."

"I have to pass the time till midnight. I can manage them in two journeys."

But Stingaree insisted, and presently stood ready to mount his mare.

"You give me your word, Kentish?"

"My word of honor."

"It is something to have one to give! I shall not come back this way; we shall have the Clear Corner police on our tracks by moonlight, and the more they have to choose from the better. So I must go. You have given me your word; you wouldn't care to give me ——"

But his hand went out a little as he spoke, and Kentish's met it seven-eighths of the way.

"Give this up, man! It's a poor game, when all's said; do give it up!" urged the man of the world with the warmth of a lad. "Come back to England and ——"

But the hand he had detained was wrenched from his, and, in the pink sunset sifted through the pines, Stingaree vaulted into his saddle with an oath.

"With a price on my skin!" he cried, and galloped from the gully with a bitter laugh.

And in the moonlight sure enough came bobbing horsemen, with fluttering pugarees and short tunics with silver buttons; but they saw nothing of the missing passenger, who had carried the bags some distance down the road, and had found them quite a comfortable couch in a certain box-clump commanding a sufficient view of the road. Nevertheless, when the little coach came swaying on its leathern springs, its scarlet enamel stained black as ink in the moonshine, he was on the spot to stop it with uplifted arms.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. "I'm the passenger you put down this afternoon." And the driver nearly tumbled from his perch.

"What about my mail-bags?" he recovered himself enough to ask: for it was perfectly plain that the pretentiously intrepid passenger had been skulking all day in the scrub, scared by the terrors of the road.

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"They're in that clump," replied Mr. Kentish. "And you can get them yourself, or send someone else for them, for I have carried them far enough."

"That be blowed for a yarn!" cried the driver, forgetting his benefits in the virtuous indignation of the moment.

"I don't wonder at your thinking it one," returned the other, mildly; "for I never had such absolute luck in all my life!"

And he went on to amplify his first lie like a man.

But when the bags were really back in the coach, piled roof-high on those of the downward mail, then it was worse fun for Guy Kentish outside than even he had anticipated. Question followed question, compliment capped compliment, and a certain unsteady undercurrent of incredulity by no means lessened his embarrassment. Had he but told the truth, he felt he could have borne the praise, and indeed enjoyed it, for he had done far better than anybody was likely to suppose, and already it was irritating to have to keep that circumstance a secret. Yet one thing he was able to say from his soul before the coach drew up at the next stage.

"You should have a spell here," the driver had suggested, "and let me pick you up again on my way back. You'd soon lay hands on the bird himself, if you can put salt on his tail as you've done. And no one else can — we want a few more chums like you."

"I dare say!"

And the new chum's tone bore its own significance.

"You don't mean," cried the driver, "to go and tell me you'll hurry home after this?"

"Only by the first steamer!" said Guy Kentish.

And he kept that word as well.