

Title

Requiem for a Wren

**By
Nevil Shute**

Woodstar Publisher, 2015

About this eBook

“Requiem for a Wren” by Nevil Shute

© 1955 by Nevil Shute

© Woodstar Publisher S. A., 2014

BISBN 978-999-2727-04-2 (pdf)

BISBN 978-999-2727-05-2 (mobi)

BISBN 978-999-2727-06-2 (ePub)

Published in electronic format, January, 2015 by Woodstar Publisher S. A.

Available electronically at: **eBookstore Bird**.

Copyright and license

All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the above publisher of this book.

License Notes

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then you should purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the author's work.

Contents

Title 2

About this eBook 3

Copyright and license 3

Contents 3

Requiem for a Wren 4

Epigraph 4

Chapter 1 /4

Chapter 2 /14

Chapter 3 /29

Chapter 4 /48

Chapter 5 /61

Chapter 6 /78

Chapter 7 /89

Chapter 8 /105

Chapter 9 /119

Chapter 10 /131

Requiem for a Wren

Epigraph

I shall never be friends again with roses;
I shall loathe sweet tunes, where a note grown strong
Relents and recoils, and climbs and closes,
As a wave of the sea turned back by song.
There are sounds where the soul's delight takes fire,
Face to face with its own desire;
A delight that rebels, a desire that reposes;
I shall hate sweet music my whole life long.

The pulse of war and passion of wonder,
The heavens that murmur, the sounds that shine,
The stars that sing and the loves that thunder,
The music burning at heart like wine,
An armed archangel whose hands raise up
All senses mixed in the spirit's cup
Till flesh and spirit are molten in sunder -
These things are over, and no more mine.

A. C. Swinburne.

Chapter 1

There was a layer of cumulus, about seven-tenths, with tops at about five thousand feet as we came to Essendon airport; we broke out of it at two thousand and we were on the circuit downwind, with the aerodrome on our starboard wing. I sat with my eyes glued to the window looking out at Melbourne, because this was my home town and I had been away five years. The hostess touched me on the arm and drew my attention from the scene, and told me to fasten my safety belt. I had not seen the sign light up.

"Sorry," I said.

She smiled, and then she said quietly, "Would you like any help down the gangway, sir?"

I shook my head. "I'll wait till the others are all off. I'm all right if I take my time."

She nodded and moved on, courteous and efficient. I wondered how she knew that going downstairs was the tricky part; perhaps that was a feature of her training, or perhaps the hostesses on the machine from San Francisco had told her about me at Sydney. I turned back to the window to watch the approach to the runway and the landing, and I remained absorbed in the techniques till the machine came to a standstill at the terminal building and the engines came to rest.

While the other passengers got off I sat at the window trying to see who was there to meet me. It was likely to be my father. I hadn't given them much notice for I had only telegraphed the time of my arrival from Sydney when I landed there the previous evening and it was barely two o'clock now; moreover they weren't expecting me for another four days and we live a hundred and twenty miles from the airport. The wing hid a good part of the enclosure but I saw nobody I knew. I wondered if I should have to go in to town to the Club and telephone home from there.

I followed the last passenger down the aisle to the door, and thanked the hostesses as I passed them. I made slow time down the steps but once on the flat I was all right, of course, and walked over to the enclosure. Then I caught sight of a face I knew. It was Harry Drew, our foreman, come to meet me. It was a warm, summery spring day and Harry was very smart. He is a man about forty years old, with dark, curly hair and a youthful figure. He was wearing an opulent-looking American shirt without a jacket on that warm day, a brown shirt buttoned to the neck and worn without a tie; his brown-green grazier's trousers were clean and newly creased and held up with a brand-new embossed belt with a large, shiny buckle. He caught my eye and half raised his hand in salutation.

I passed through the gate and he came to meet me. "Morning, Harry," I said. "How are you today?"

"Good, Mr. Duncan," he replied. "We didn't expect you till Friday." He took the overnight bag from me.

"I came along a bit quicker than I thought I would," I said.

He was clearly puzzled, as they all must have been by my telegram. "Did you come on a different ship?" he asked. "We thought you'd be flying from Fremantle, arriving Saturday morning."

"I didn't come that way," I said. "I had to stay in London a bit longer. I flew all the way, through New York and San Francisco to Sydney."

"Come the other way round?"

"That's right," I said. We passed into the airport building. "How's my mother, Harry? She's not here, is she?"

"She didn't come," he said. "She gets out most fine days, but sitting in the chair most of the time, you know. She don't go away much now. Three months or more since she went down to Melbourne." He paused by the newspaper stand. "The colonel, he was coming down to meet you, but we had a bit of trouble."

"What sort of trouble?" I enquired.

"The house parlourmaid," he said. "Seems like she committed suicide or something. Anyway, she's dead."

I stared at him. "For God's sake! How did that happen?"

"I don't really know," he said. "It only happened this morning, and I left about half past ten to get down here to meet you. She took tablets or something, what they give you to make you sleep."

"She did it last night?"

"That's right, Mr. Alan."

"Who found her?"

"She didn't come down to her work. They get down to the kitchen in the house about six or quarter past and have a cup of tea. When she didn't come down Annie went up to her room about seven."

"Old Annie found her?"

"That's right. She was dead. The colonel rang through for me to go up to the house, 'n soon after I got there Dr. Stanley, he arrived. I suppose the colonel telephoned for him. But there wasn't anything that he could do; she was dead all right. So then they got on to the police, and just about then your telegram came from Sydney saying you'd be coming in today. The colonel, he couldn't leave home with all that going on to come down here to meet you, so he said to me to take the Jaguar and come instead."

I stood by the paper stand while the crowd milled around us. It was a muddle and a mess, and I was deeply sorry for my father and mother. My father was over seventy and my mother not much less, and neither of them in the best of health. Too bad that they should have a nuisance of this nature thrust on them.

"What did she do it for?" I asked. "In trouble with some man?"

He wrinkled his brows. "I wouldn't think so," he said. "Coombargana's a small place and not so easy to get away from unless you've got a car of your own, which she hadn't. She couldn't have been going with one of the lads at Coombargana and have no one know about it. I wouldn't think it was that."

"How long had she been with us?"

"About a year. Maybe a bit longer. English, she was."

I nodded; she would have been. English or Dutch or German; an Australian house parlourmaid is rare indeed. "Well, I wish to God she'd picked another day to do it," I remarked. He grinned, and we went out to where the motor coaches stand to claim my luggage.

The Jaguar was two years old but it was still fairly new; as they grew older my parents were staying more and more at home. They had the Buick, too, which they still used a lot, that they had got through Singapore before I went away to England. We put my suitcases in the boot and Harry said, "Will you drive, Mr. Alan?"

I shook my head; I wanted to be able to see the countryside on this, my first day back in my own country. "You take her. How long did it take you to get down here?"

"About two hours and a quarter. I was afraid I'd be late."

Our Australian main roads are straight and good and relatively empty, but even so an average of over fifty was good going. "You've had dinner?" I asked.

He nodded. "I got some tucker while I was waiting for the plane. Do you want to go in to the city before going home?"

I shook my head. "Let's get going and find out what the form is about this trouble at home."

He nodded, and we got into the car and drove out of the airport. He made for the Western Highway by a short cut through suburban roads I did not know; there had been much building on the outskirts of the city since I left. I did not talk to him till we were clear of the houses and making good time on the highway out to Bacchus Marsh, but then I began to question him about the property.

"Let's see," he said. "It was after you went away that the colonel sold the hard land up on Baldy Hill to the Commission, for resumption? Five thousand two hundred acres he let go, for the soldier settlers. All the bit on the far side of the road, from the crossroads up to Sinclair's place." I nodded. "They cut it up into eleven lots, with eleven houses; there's chaps in seven of them now and four houses still finishing." He dropped to forty for a moment behind a trailer truck and then accelerated past it and up to seventy-five again. "I was sorry when the colonel decided to do that," he said, "but thinking it over, maybe he was right. What's left is all good land, and we've got enough."

"That leaves us with about thirteen thousand acres?"

"Thirteen thousand three hundred and eighty-seven," he replied.

"What are we running on that now?"

"Thirty-seven thousand, eight hundred and forty Merinos all told," he said. "That's counting this year's lambs, of course. Six hundred and eighty-two Herefords."

I nodded, indexing the figures in my memory. This was my business from now on, and everything that I had known and been in Europe was behind me. "Finished the shearing?" I enquired.

"Finished last Friday week," he said.

"How did it run out?"

"Good," he said. "We sheared seven hundred and sixteen bales this year." A bale of wool contains three hundred pounds in weight, and at the prices that I knew were current it was worth about a hundred and sixty pounds, taking an average of the grades. Our wool clip must

have been worth a hundred and fifteen thousand pounds or so, and then there would be the sales of cattle and of lambs on top of that. Take away the costs of running the property, say thirty or forty thousand pounds, and we were still left with an income of over a hundred thousand pounds for tax. It had been like that for several years.

"That's all right," I said. "How many did we shear last year?"

"Six hundred and seventy-eight bales, Mr. Alan," he said. "It's the improved pastures doing it. We sowed another five hundred acres last autumn, across the river, from where we make the firebreak by the marsh up to the main road, Phalaris and Sub Clover."

"Up to where Harrison's place is?"

"That's right, only Harrison's not there now. He got another property over by Ararat. His place was resumed."

As we went on into the Western District through Bacchus Marsh to Ballarat he told me all about the property. My father had been ploughing back much of the profits in to the land and saving the rest for death duties. He was determined to improve the carrying capacity of the property by mechanization and re-seeding paddocks and pasture conservation. Silage was made in a big way for winter feed, a novelty since I was at home last, and there were now four big diesel tractors on the place, one of them a crawler. Horses were still used by the boundary riders but draught horses had vanished from Coombargana, and my father drove all over the property in a Land Rover instead of riding on a horse as he had always done when I was young. That suited me, for artificial feet are something of a handicap upon a horse. There was a great deal for me to learn about the property before I could unload some of the work from my parents, and I was quite keen to make a start. First of all, it would be necessary to clean up this infernal business of the house parlourmaid, however.

We passed through Bacchus Marsh and up over the Pentland Hills. On that fine, sunny, warm October day the air was like wine, with all the glistening glamour and the scents of spring. The view was superb from the top; I could see right over to Geelong forty miles away, and the blue curve of the bay as it swung round to Queenscliff and the Heads. Over to the west, ahead of us, the long blue ridge of the Grampians was already showing up over the horizon, over a hundred miles away and twenty miles or so past Coombargana. We dropped down off the hills at eighty miles an hour on the way to Ballarat, and there were the long gorse hedges all in bloom that the property owners in that part affect, mile after mile of them, scenting the countryside in the warm sun as we drove on into the Western District.

This was my own country, and I was glad to be home. When I had come home before I had disliked it all, and fretted bad-temperedly till I got away again. That was in 1946 when I had come out of hospital in England, stumbling along insecurely on my dummy feet. On board the ship I had tried to do too much and had fallen a couple of times in the rough weather of the Bay; after that I had stayed in my cabin most of the time, angry and frustrated. When I had come home it was all too easy and too pleasant for me in the Western District. The wartime restlessness was still on me and the European sense of strife and urgency; I could do little that was effective at Coombargana with my disability and my father was still active and well capable of getting along without me. I stuck it for two years, because it seemed to me that now that Bill was dead and Helen married I ought to be at home learning to carry on the property, but it didn't work out well. By 1948 I was safe on my feet and able to get about quite normally, but I was thirty-four and life was slipping past me. I could not face burial alive in Coombargana at that age after all that I had been and done during the war, and I began to feel I should go crazy if I didn't get away from it to England again, where things were happening. I think my parents understood, because they made no objection when I suggested that I should go back to Oxford for a year and finish taking my degree. That was five years ago.

What I didn't realize then was that it wasn't England I was really fretting for. It was my lost youth.

I came back this time with a quieter mind, my youth behind me and all packed away. I was thirty-nine, middle-aged and mature, able to realize and to appreciate that it was not only in England that important things went on, that there were things of consequence and value going on even in my own country. Even the job that I had spurned before, the job of running Coombargana to turn out more meat and wool each year, now seemed to me to be worth doing, not one that would impress the world or get me a knighthood, but a job within my powers and worth doing in a gentle, unsensational way. I owed it to my parents to come home for they were getting tired and old, and sometimes rather ill, and now that I was home I was glad that I had come.

We drove into the suburbs of Ballarat and went trickling along like a twenty-year-old Austin Seven. I turned to Harry by my side. "This bloody parlourmaid," I said. "You say she was English. Do you know if she had any relations in Australia?"

"I never heard she had, Mr. Alan," he replied. "Your dad might know."

"Did my parents get her through a registry office?"

He shook his head. "She turned up in Forfar at the Post Office Hotel one day, by bus from Ballarat, I think it was. Working her way round the world, with a rucksack on her back - hiking, you might say. She worked in the hotel with Mrs. Collins for a week or two. Then she come out with the postman one day for the ride. Your parents had a Polish married couple but the man was always on the grog, 'n your dad gave them the sack. Then this girl came along and offered herself for the job, and your mother took her on."

"How long ago was that?"

"Let's see," he said. "It was wintertime. August, I'd say - August a year ago."

I thought about it for a minute. "Do you know where she went for her holiday?"

"I don't think she took one - not while she was working at Coombargana."

"What was her name?"

"Jessie Proctor."

He wove the Jaguar skilfully through the traffic of the town and drove out down the Avenue of Honour and turned off on to the Skipton road. "You may find your parents kind of upset," he said presently. "She was the best help they had in the house since I've been at Coombargana. I think they liked her, too."

"They did?"

"I think so, Mr. Alan." He paused, and then said awkwardly, "I thought you ought to know, case you might say anything rough about her, not knowing."

I nodded. "Thanks for telling me." We drove along in silence while I thought this over. "If she was happy in the place whatever made her go and do a thing like that?"

"I dunno, Mr. Alan," he replied. "I dunno what makes girls go and do the things they do."

I sat silent, thinking all this over. If my mother had grown attached to this girl it made things so much the worse, and nothing was more likely if she was a decent girl. My mother was now crippled with arthritis and could not get about very much, so that she met few people and perhaps was rather lonely, which was one of the reasons why I had come home. In a big house like Coombargana that must be run with indoor servants, unsatisfactory servants can be a continual worry and a nuisance to a woman in my mother's state of health, and they had had a long succession of married couples who had come for a few days and departed without notice because the place was too isolated, or had quarrelled with Annie our old cook, or had got drunk, or had stolen things. If in the end a girl had turned up who worked happily at Coombargana and made no trouble it was very likely that my mother would have grown to depend on her and might even have treated her more as a companion than as a servant. An English girl working her way round the world would be a well-informed person, possibly

even well educated. She might have been a great comfort to my mother.

We passed through Skipton while I sat in silence thinking of these things and many others and ran on into the undulating pastoral landscape that was my own place, a county not unlike Wiltshire in England but without the people, so that you can stand on almost any hilltop and look all round the horizon and see nothing but the pastures and the sheep, with no sign of man except perhaps one fence in the far distance. There are shallow lakes and trout streams, seldom fished because they are too distant from the city, and most of the homesteads are located beside permanent water anyway so that anyone who cares for fishing can catch a trout with fly or worm within a few hundred yards of his own home. A lonely country for those who are not interested in the land, and bleak in winter when we usually get quite a lot of snow. In summer, a country in continual danger from grass fires, so that we spend much time and energy in planting wide strips of green crops such as rape for firebreaks. A summer fire that gets out of control in my country can wipe out all the pasture feed and fifty thousand pounds' worth of sheep in a couple of days. A country with not much mental stimulus outside the land, so that those who dislike us and call us the wool barons say that we all sink to the mental level of the sheep, and get to look like them, too.

We came to Forfar, which is our village and about six miles from Coombargana, a little place of one long street straggling on the highway. Not much seemed to have changed there; there were a couple of new stores and electricity had reached the place while I had been away. For the rest it was unaltered; I saw Tom Hicks the garage owner at his pumps and waved my hand to him, and then we turned off on the gravel road to my home.

Presently we came in sight of the house, backed by tall pine trees that shelter it from the west, with the river curling round before it. Coombargana is my home and I would not willingly live anywhere else, but architecturally I will admit that the house isn't everybody's cup of tea. My grandfather, Alan Duncan, built it about 1897. He was born at Ellon between Peterhead and Aberdeen in 1845, the son of a small farmer. He came out to Australia when he was twenty years old to make his fortune in the goldfields of Ballarat, but gold was already big business by the time he got there, and he soon tired of working for a wage in a mine. Within a year he had moved further out to farm, and took up land at Coombargana with the first settlers. By the time he was fifty he was running sheep on thirty thousand acres, and able to afford what he called a gentleman's house.

He made a trip home in 1895 to see his relations, and while in Ellon he went to see the Queen's house at Balmoral; I doubt if he saw the Queen. He returned to Coombargana with a picture postcard of Balmoral Castle and set himself to build a house like that, but on a smaller scale. There was no architect in the countryside to help him and the only materials that the builder could produce were a peculiarly ugly red brick, and concrete. The house that evolved was a castle that looked like no castle has ever looked before, yet inside it was comfortable and well designed; a good house to live in. It was like that till his death in 1922; I remember it well as a child. When my father inherited it he took down eleven little spires that ornamented the battlements and started to grow creepers over it to tone it down a bit but the possums used the creepers as a ladder to get in to the roof. My father had the creepers removed and painted the whole thing cream in colour, which did away with the hot look in summer anyway. In 1938 my parents spent some months in England and my mother came back all steamed up about the modern décor, and painted all the outside doors and window frames crimson.

Well, that's Coombargana. It's my home, and I like it.

We crossed the river by the wooden bridge and swung round towards the house, and passed in to the drive between the great mossy concrete gate pillars. The place was well cared for, because my parents keep two gardeners going all the time, the enormous macrocarpa hedges neatly clipped in rectangular forms, the drive and the gravel sweep up to the house freshly raked and free from weeds. There are many better houses than Coombargana in

England, but not many so well kept. The beds of daffodils were bright in the sunlight, masses of them, and behind the japonica bushes the camellias in bloom made a brave show of colour.

The Jaguar drew up before the door and I thanked Harry and got out. The red door opened and my father was there on the steps to meet me. I knew, of course, that he would be older but I had not visualized him in old age; one always remembers people as they were when last you saw them. My father was thinner than he had been and his face had a white, pallid hue I didn't like at all, but he was the same old Dad.

He said, "Hullo, Alan. You're back earlier than we thought."

"I know," I said. "I got hung up in London and had to miss the boat. I flew through America."

"So that was it!" he said. "We thought you must have flown. How did you get the dollars to come through America?"

I grinned. "There are ways and means."

He laughed. "Well, come on in and see your mother." Harry was unloading my two suitcases from the boot. "Stick them just inside the door, Harry, and I'll get John to take them up presently." He turned to me. "I'm not allowed to lift anything now."

"I can manage them," I said. "I can take them up, one at a time."

He hesitated. "Would you rather do that?"

I nodded. "I like doing everything I can."

"All right." He said no more about my disability, but told Harry to put the car away. We went together into the great hall.

"You're looking very well," he said.

I grinned. "Wish I could say the same of you, Dad. You're not looking too good."

"Ah well," he said, "we none of us get any younger, and this has been rather a trying day. I expect Harry told you about the trouble here?"

I nodded. "I was very sorry to hear it."

"We'll talk about that later," he said. "Come on and see your mother. I kept her in bed today." He paused, and then he said, "Did I tell you that we sleep on the ground floor now?"

I was surprised. "No."

He nodded. "Your mother can't manage the stairs alone. It was either that or putting in a lift. We turned the billiard room into our bedroom with the gunroom as my dressing room, and put the billiard table up in what used to be our bedroom. It's worked out quite well. Matter of fact, I like it better."

He led the way into the old billiard room. They had redecorated it, and with the French windows opening on to the lawn it made a sunny, pleasant room. My mother was sitting up in bed, not very much changed in her appearance. I went over and kissed her. "Back at last," I said. "You're looking very well, Mum."

She held me for a moment. "Oh, Alan dear," she said, "it *is* nice to have you back. But how did you get here so soon?"

I told her my story about being held up in London and missing the ship, and complimented her on the arrangement of the room. My father went out and Mother asked me about Helen, and I spent a few minutes answering all her questions about my sister in London.

Helen was the youngest of us; she had gone to England in 1946 when she was twenty-four, avid to get away into a wider world, like many young Australians. In England she had gone all arty and crafty and had picked up with a chap called Laurence Hilton who worked for the BBC and put on plays for the Third Programme. She married him in 1947 and had not been home since; they had one child, rather an unpleasant little boy. I had tried to like Laurence and to get alongside him but we had very little in common. Privately I thought him a phoney and I suspected that he had seen Helen coming because, of course, she had a good bit of money behind her. However, she seemed happy with him and had adopted most of his

views, including the one that Australia was a cultural desert that no decent person would dream of living in. His earning capacity, of course, was quite inadequate for the life they wished to lead. They have a very pleasant little house in Cheyne Walk overlooking the river where they entertain a lot of visitors from ivory towers, and Coombargana pays.

I annoyed Laurence very much one day by referring to my father as a patron of the arts. I'd probably have annoyed my father too if he'd known.

I gave my mother a roseate, expurgated account of Helen and Laurence and their way of life, stressing its importance and the reputation that Laurence Hilton was building up in the artistic world. My father came in again then, pushing a tea trolley, for my parents live and eat in the English way with dinner at eight o'clock in the evening. There was trouble about the tea, because my father had brought the wrong sort of cups and had forgotten the tea strainer and the hot water jug, and my mother sent him off to get them.

"We're all a bit upside down today," she said sadly. "We haven't had to do this ourselves for so long."

"I know," I said. "Harry told me. I was very sorry to hear about it."

"Yes," my mother said quietly, "it's been a very great blow to us, Alan. I'm so sorry that it had to happen on the very day that you come home."

"That's all right," I said. "I'm glad in a way it did happen now, if it had to. Dad doesn't look too fit."

"I think he's just tired today," Mother said. "He had that operation last year, you remember." I nodded. "The specialist assured us that it was non-malignant. I think it's just that he's tired and upset."

"I should think so," I said, but I didn't think so at all. "Tell me, has there got to be an inquest?"

She nodded. "Dr. Bateman, he's the coroner. He's coming out tomorrow morning, with the police. Dr. Stanley was here again this afternoon. I think there's got to be a post mortem."

"Why did she do it, Mum?" I asked. "Was she depressed?"

"I don't think so," she said. "She was just as usual, I think. She was a very reserved girl, Alan. She never talked about herself or her own affairs, like most women do. It was rather difficult to know what she thought of anything. She was always just about the same."

"Was she attractive, Mother? Attractive to men?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. She was rather plain. I'm sure it wasn't anything like that."

It was puzzling; we seemed to have come to a dead end. "Have you got any idea why she did it?"

My mother said, "I think it was an accident, Alan. I think it must have been. There was this bottle of sleeping tablets by her bedside, quite a big bottle, with only two left in it. Dr. Stanley said he thought she must have taken at least twenty." She paused. "I think she took one, perhaps, when she went to bed and then had a nightmare or something, and got up, sort of sleep walking, and took tablet after tablet. I'm *sure* it was an accident."

It was a possibility. "There were two tablets left in the bottle?"

"Yes."

"If she was going to commit suicide," I said, "she'd have taken the lot. She'd want to make sure of it. You don't think she had any motive for wanting to make away with herself, Mother?"

"I'm sure she hadn't, Alan. She seemed just the same as ever."

I thought for a moment. "Did she get any letters yesterday?"

"She never had any."

"Never had any letters?"

My father came back with the tea strainer and the hot water jug and put them on the

trolley. "I was telling Alan about Jessie," she said, and now there was a suspicion of moisture about her eyes, and a break in her voice. "He was asking if she got a letter yesterday."

"She never got any mail at all, according to Annie," my father said. "She never got a letter all the time that she'd been here. I never saw one addressed to her, and nor did Annie."

"I never did," said my mother.

I stared at them. "That's very unusual, surely. Did she write any?"

"I don't think so," said my father. "I usually take the mail in when I go, but she never gave me one to take. I don't even know her handwriting. Annie says she never wrote a letter, and she never got one."

"Could she write?" I asked. Sometimes a domestic servant can't.

"Oh yes. She was a well-educated girl," my mother said. "Very well educated. I knew her handwriting. She used to take down messages on the pad in the hall, when someone telephoned. You've seen them, Richard. You *do* know her handwriting."

My father said, "Oh, yes, of course I do. But that's the only place I've ever seen it."

My mother leaned from her bed and poured out the tea. "Do you know anything about her relations?" I asked. "You've sent a telegram?"

My father said, "We haven't, Alan. There's not a scrap of anything in her room to tell us who she was."

My mind, of course, was still concerned with the details of travel. "There must be something," I said. "Vaccination and inoculation certificates. She must have had a passport, too."

My father said, "There isn't anything at all, Alan. There's no document of any sort in her room. There's only her clothes and a few novels. Practically all of those are from the house, too."

"That's all right," my mother said, and again there was a tremor in her voice. "I told her she could read any of the books she wanted to, at any time."

She passed me my tea, and I sat with it in my hand in silence for a minute. I did not want to say what I was thinking, that here was clear evidence of suicide, because my mother wanted to believe it was an accident and maybe it was better that she should. But if the girl before her death had taken pains to destroy evidence of her identity it meant that her death was planned beforehand. It must mean that.

I glanced at my father. "So we've got nobody to telegraph to, to tell them that she's dead? We don't know who she was, or where she came from?"

"That's right, Alan," said my father. "We don't know who she was, or where she came from. She came to us from the Post Office Hotel," and he went on to tell me what I knew already.

My mother said, "Annie says that she had worked in Sydney. She thinks she came from England several years ago. But I don't think that's right. She said once that she only landed in Australia a few weeks before she came to us from the hotel."

"She never told anyone what she'd been doing before she came to Forfar, to the hotel?" I asked.

My mother shook her head. "She never talked about herself at all."

"She was probably married," I suggested.

My parents stared at me in astonishment; the thought was quite a new one to them. I said slowly, "An unsatisfactory marriage, here in Australia, that she wanted to forget about. That would explain why she didn't talk about her past life. If all her documents were in her married name, it would explain why she destroyed them. She would have wanted to make a completely fresh start."

My father said, "Well, that's a new idea entirely." He paused. "It certainly seems to fit the facts."

I pursued my line of thought. "Proctor is almost certainly her maiden name. We'll have to try and find the husband, or the police will. I suppose it's their job. He'll have to be found and told about her death. They'll have to start looking for a man who married an English girl called Jessie Proctor, probably in Sydney, probably two or three years ago, and who probably left him fifteen or sixteen months ago, a little time before she fetched up in Forfar and came to you. It'll mean a bit of work for them, but it won't take them very long."

My father sighed with relief. "I think you've got it, Alan," he said. "It's far the most likely idea so far. And it accounts for everything." He turned to me. "I don't mind telling you, I've been worried over this. The inquest is tomorrow, and it's going to make a lot of trouble if we don't know who she is."

"Don't worry about it, Dad," I said. It seemed to me that he was in no state to get worked up about anything, and I had come home to unload him. "I'll go to the inquest."

"I'll have to come with you," he said. "It would certainly be a help if you came too, Alan. I suppose living here in the country one gets rather out of touch with the world. It certainly never occurred to me that she might be a married woman."

My mother said nothing, and it seemed to me that we had talked about this rather unsavoury business long enough. I began to ask them questions about the property. Rabbits, it seemed, were now reduced to manageable proportions thanks to myxomatosis and my father's energy. The result had been a progressive increase in the stock upon the property, partly due to pasture improvement but mostly, I think, due to the reduction of rabbits. Old Jim Plowden who had been a boundary rider when I went away had fallen from his horse and broken his thigh some years ago; as he was over sixty my father had put him in charge of the rabbit pack, a miscellaneous assortment of about thirty mongrel dogs kept in a kennel and run as a disciplined force in the war against the rabbit. This war went on continuously with tractor-drawn rippers to destroy the warrens, with smoke bombs and ferrets, and above all with the rabbit pack to chase and destroy the vermin as they were flushed from their burrows. Seven rabbits will eat as much feed as a sheep, and on Coombargana after the neglect of the war years there must have been a hundred thousand rabbits, or more.

My father had been experimenting with spreading super-phosphate from the air on paddocks that were too rough and stony to make spreading it from trucks a possibility, and this again had increased the carrying capacity of the land. Two Tiger Moths had done the work efficiently and well, and he was going to have more paddocks treated in this way in the coming summer. He had built new shearers' quarters soon after I had left, which I had never seen, of course, and in the last year he had largely remodelled the shearing shed and had installed new machinery throughout. He had built four new weatherboard houses for the station hands to replace the last of the older, two-roomed shacks of my grandfather's time, and a couple of years ago he had put up a considerable power station with a diesel engine of no less than sixty horsepower to provide electricity not only for our house but for each of the eleven houses on the property.

My father was only able to give me the bare outline of all these activities during tea, and my mother, of course, wanted to know all about my life in London so that we had much to talk about. My mother seemed much brighter when she had had her tea, and announced her intention of getting up for dinner, which I thought was a good thing and better for her than lying in bed thinking about the dead parlourmaid upstairs. It was arranged that my father would drive me round the property for a couple of hours in the Land Rover before dinner while my mother got up and dressed and organized the dinner with Annie our old cook and Mrs. Plowden, who was usually brought in to help with the washing up in times of domestic crisis.

We finished tea and put the cups and plates back on the tea trolley, which my father proceeded to wheel out through the big, galleried central hall to the pantry. I stayed for a

moment with my mother before going out to carry my suitcases up to my bedroom on the upper floor.

My mother said, "I think you're wrong about Jessie, Alan."

"In what way?" I asked. "Wrong about what?"

"About her being married," said my mother quietly. "I'm sure she wasn't."

I was silent, because it's a difficult subject for a bachelor to dispute with a woman of my mother's age. "Did she ever say she wasn't?" I asked at last.

My mother shook her head. "She never said anything at all about her own affairs. But I'm quite sure she wasn't married."

Chapter 2

As old age had crept upon my father and mother they had reduced the scale of their expenditure upon themselves to quite a small proportion of their net income. They never had kept racehorses as many of our neighbours do, and they had outgrown the pleasures of spending money. They got a book each month through the Book Society and they bought a few gramophone records when they were in Melbourne, but with increasing years and infirmity they got more pleasure out of old things than new, out of old books that they had read fifteen or twenty years before and turned back to now with pleasure, out of old gramophone records, out of furniture that they had bought thirty years ago when they took over Coombargana.

Helen's allowance and my own had absorbed a good slice of their net income after taxation, which in recent years had fluctuated between twenty and thirty thousand pounds a year. Much of the rest had been saved and invested prudently to provide for death duties on an estate which might well be assessed at a quarter of a million pounds upon my father's death, but this cash reserve was now adequate for any calls that were likely to be made on it. In other countries and in other circles a prosperity such as ours might be accompanied by wild parties in the city, with a nude girl in a bath of champagne in the middle of the dinner table and a dozen crashed motor cars next morning. In the Western District things have never been like that; perhaps an agricultural prosperity doesn't go that way. Certainly Australian wool producers, those who survived the hard times of the thirties when wool was down to a shilling a pound, got such an economic fright as would keep them in the straight and narrow path for the rest of their lives. I can vouch for it that at Coombargana and all the other stations that I know the money made seems to be spent prudently and well.

My father's great interest was in the property, and all his spare money was now going into improvements. Wherever I looked as we drove round in the Land Rover there was something new, new stockyards, new spray sheep dips, new vehicles, new pumps, new generators, new houses, new fences, new windmills, and new dams. In the hard times before the second war, when I was a boy at Coombargana, much of this expenditure would have been classed as rank extravagance, but times had changed and my father had had the wit to change with them. Labour costs had trebled since the thirties and the output of the property had doubled, so that any machine that would save an hour of a man's time was now a good machine.

We went into the long shearing shed, now empty and swept clean, of course, for the shearing was over and the shed would remain unused till next year. He showed me how he had rearranged the stands and the tables and the bins, and the new machinery. He had made a job of it all right; I could visualize the production line, so to speak, when this place was going full blast and sheep were passing through at the rate of three hundred an hour. I was keenly interested in all that he had done for this was my job from now on, but the dead parlourmaid was still in the background of my mind.

We rested for a few minutes in the long, cool aisle of the shed, leaning against a table, looking around. "Mother doesn't seem to think much of my idea that the girl was married," I said.

"She doesn't?"

I shook my head.

"I'd never thought of her as a married woman, myself," my father remarked. "She might have been, of course."

"How old was she?"

"Twenty-eight or thirty, I should say. It's difficult to judge."

"Harry said she never took a holiday."

"I don't think she did. I think she went into Ballarat once or twice for shopping, but apart from that I don't think she left the place the whole time she was here."

I wrinkled my brows. "What did she do on her days off?"

He thought for a minute. "I think she was interested in the property," he said. "She used to go out with Jim Plowden and the rabbit pack. I think she liked the dogs. She liked shooting, too. I never had much to do with her outside; she kept her place, you know. The men say that she was a very fine shot at rabbits, either with a gun or a rifle. They say she never seemed to miss." He paused. "I've been wondering if she was a farmer's daughter perhaps, back at home."

I nodded. "You don't know what part of England she came from?"

"I don't," he said. "Annie thinks she came from London, but I don't think she really knows."

"That doesn't line up with her being a farmer's daughter."

"I know."

We sat silent for a minute. Then I glanced at him, and said, "The coroner's coming here tomorrow morning, with the police?"

He nodded. "They've got to give a certificate for burial. There'll have to be an inquest, of course."

"Bit awkward, if we don't know who she was."

He bit his lip. "I know," he said. I glanced at him, and there was an old man's tremor moving his head, the first time I had seen it. "It makes us look - well, careless."

"I wouldn't worry about that, Dad," I said. "It's not as if she was a young girl that you were responsible for. She was a grown woman."

His hands moved to his chin, as if to stop the tremor. "I know," he replied. "But it looks bad all the same. As if we didn't care."

He turned to me. "It's a very good thing for your mother that you've come home, Alan. It's going to take her mind off it. Be with her as much as you can till the funeral is over. Tell her about England - anything."

"She's going to miss her, is she?"

He nodded. "She's going to miss her a great deal. When a woman's getting on in years and not very well, it's a great comfort to have a girl about the place who's sensible and responsible. She's a great loss to your mother, Alan."

I nodded slowly. "Mother was fond of her?"

"I think so. Yes, I think she was," my father said. "The girl kept her place, but she used to think ahead and do things for your mother before she thought of asking for them, if you understand what I mean. She was very thoughtful for your mother in that way."

If she had been thoughtful for my mother it seemed to indicate that she had liked being at Coombargana; indeed, everything that I had heard seemed to point that way. She had never even bothered to take the holidays that were due her. Then why had she taken her own life? I glanced at my father. "What do you think about this theory of Mother's, that it was an