

The Honor of the Road

E.W. Hornung

Table of Contents

<u>The Honor of the Road</u>	1
<u>E.W. Hornung</u>	2

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SERGEANT CAMERON was undressing for bed when he first heard the voices through the weather-board walls; in less than a minute there was a knock at his door.

"Here's Mr. Hardcastle from Rosanna, sir. He says he must see you at once."

"The deuce he does! What about?"

"He says he'll only tell you; but he's ridden over in three hours, and he looks like the dead."

"Give him some whiskey, Tyler, and tell him I'll be down in two ticks."

So saying, the gray-bearded sergeant of the New South Wales Mounted Police tucked his night-gown into his cord breeches, slipped into his tunic, and hastened to the parlor which served as court-room on occasion, buttoning as he went. Mr. Hardcastle had a glass to his lips as the sergeant entered. He was a very fine man of forty, and his massive frame was crowned with a countenance as handsome as it was open and bold; but at a glance it was plain that he was both shaken and exhausted, and in no mood to hide either his fatigue or his distress. Sergeant Cameron sat down on the other side of the oval table with the faded cloth; the younger constable had left the room when Hardcastle called him back.

"Don't go, Tyler," said he. "You may as well both hear what I've got to say. It's — it's Stingaree!"

The name was echoed in incredulous undertones.

"But he's down in Vic," urged the sergeant. "He's been giving our chaps a devil of a time down there!"

"He's come back. I've seen him with my own eyes. But I'm beginning at the wrong end first," said the squatter, taking another sip and then sitting back to survey his hearers. "You know old Duncan, my overseer?"

The sergeant nodded.

"Of course you know him," the other continued, "and so does the whole back-country, and did even before he won this fortune in the Melbourne Cup sweep. I suppose you've heard how he took the news? He was fuddling himself from his own bottle on Sunday afternoon when the mail came; the first I knew of it was when I saw him sitting with his letter in one hand and throwing out the rest of his grog with the other. Then he told us he had won the first prize of thirty thousand, and that he had made up his mind to have his next drink at his own place in Scotland. He left us that afternoon to catch the coach and go down to Sydney for his money. He ought to have been back this evening before sundown."

The sergeant put in his word:

"That he ought, for I saw him come off the coach and start for the station as soon as they'd run up the horse he left behind him at the pub. I wondered what had brought him, if he was so set on getting back to the old country."

"I could tell you," said Hardcastle, after some little hesitation, "and I may as well. Poor old Duncan was the most generous of men, and nothing would serve him but that every soul on Rosanna should share more or less in his good fortune. I am ashamed to tell you how much he spoke of pressing on myself. You have probably heard that one of his peculiarities was that he would never take payment by check, like other people? I believe it was because he had knocked down too many checks in his day. In any case, we used to call him Hard Cash Duncan on Rosanna; and I am very much afraid that when you saw him he must have had the whole of his thirty thousand pounds upon him in the hardest form of cash."

"But what has happened, Mr. Hardcastle?"

"The very worst," said Hardcastle, stooping to sip. The three heads came closer together across the faded tablecloth. "There was no sign of him at seven; he ought to have been with us before six. We had done our best to make it an occasion, and it seemed that the dinner would be spoilt. So at seven young Evans, my store-keeper, went off at a gallop to meet him, and at twenty-five past he came galloping back leading a riderless horse. It was the one you saw Duncan riding this afternoon. There was blood upon the saddle. I found it. And within another hour we had found the poor old boy himself, dead and cold in the middle of the track, with a bullet through his

The Honor of the Road

heart."

The squatter's voice trembled with an emotion that did him honor in his hearers' eyes; and the gray-bearded sergeant waited a little before asking questions.

"What makes you think it is Stingaree?" he inquired, at length.

"I tell you I saw him on the run, with my own eyes, this morning. I passed him in one of my paddocks, as close as I am to you, and asked him if he was looking for the homestead. He answered that he was only riding through, and we neither of us stopped."

"Yet you knew all the time that it was Stingaree?"

"No; to be quite honest," replied Hardcastle, "I never dreamt of it at the time. But now I am quite positive on the point. He hadn't his eye-glass in his eye, but it was dangling on its cord all right; and there was the curled mustache, and the boots and breeches that one knows all about, if one has never seen them for oneself. Yet I own it didn't dawn on me just then. I happened to be thinking of the stations round about, and wondering if they were as burnt up as we are, and when I met this swell I simply took him for a new chum on one or other of them."

"There had been robbery, of course?"

"An absolute clearance," said Hardcastle. "The valise had been cut to ribbons with a knife, and its other contents were strewed all about; a pocketbook we found still bulging from the roll of notes which—had been taken out. I waited beside him while Evans went back for the buggy, and when they started to take him in I rode on to you."

"We'll ride back with you at once," said the sergeant, "and find you a fresh horse if your own has had enough. Run up the lot, Tyler, and Mr. Hardcastle can take his choice. It seems clear enough," continued Cameron, as the trooper disappeared. "But this is a new departure for Stingaree; it's the very thing that everybody said he would never do."

"And yet it's the logical climax of his career; it might have happened long ago, but it's not his first blood as it is," argued Hardcastle, when he had drained his glass. "Didn't he wing one of you down in Victoria the other day? Your bushranger is bound to come to it sooner or later. He may much prefer not to shoot; but he has only to get up against a man of his own calibre, as resolute and as well armed as himself, to have no choice in the matter. Poor old Duncan was the very type; he would never have given way. In fact, we found him with his own revolver fast in his hand, and a finger frozen to the trigger, but not a chamber discharged."

"Yes? Then that settles it, and it must have been foul play," cried Cameron, owning a doubt in its dismissal. "And we mustn't lose a single minute in getting on this blackguard's tracks."

Yet it was midnight before the little cavalcade set out upon a ride of over thirty miles, for arrangements had to be made for a telegram to be sent to the Glenrinald coroner first thing in the morning, and to insure this it was necessary to disturb the postmaster, who occupied one of the three weather-board dwellings which constituted the roadside hamlet of Clear Corner. A round moon topped the sand hills as the trio rode away; it was near its almost dazzling zenith when they reined up at the scene of the murder. This was at a point where the sandy track ran through a belt of scrub, and the sergeant got off to examine the ground with Hardcastle, while Tyler mounted guard in the saddle. But nothing of importance was discovered by the pair on foot, and nothing seen or heard by their mounted comrade.

They found the station still astir and faintly aglow in the veiled daylight of the moon. A cluster of the men stood in a glare at the door of their hut; the travellers' hut betrayed the like symptoms of excitement; at the kitchen door were more men with pannikins, and odd glimpses of a Relit, white-capped face within. But on the broad veranda sat two young men with their backs to a closed and darkened window. And behind the window lay all that remained of an elderly man, whose brown, gnarled face was scarcely recognizable by the newcomers in its strange smooth pallor, but his grizzled beard weirdly familiar and still crisp with lingering life.

The coroner arrived in some thirty hours, which had brought forth nothing new; his jury was drawn from the men's hut and rabbiters' tents; and after a prolonged but inconclusive investigation, the inquest was adjourned for a week. But the seven days were as barren as the first, and a verdict against some person unknown a foregone result. This did not satisfy the many who were positive that they knew the person; for Stingaree had been seen a hundred miles lower down, doubtless on his way back to Victoria, and with his appearance altered in a telltale manner. But the coroner thought he knew better than anybody else, and had his way, notwithstanding the manifest feeling on the long veranda where he held his court.

The Honor of the Road

So jurors and spectators drifted back to hut and tent and neighboring station, the coroner started in his buggy for Glenruald, and last of all the police departed, leading the horse which Hardcastle had ridden home from their barracks, and leaving him at peace once more with his two young men. But on the squatter the time had told; his table had been full to overflowing through it all; and he sank into a long chair, a trifle grayer at the temples, a thought looser in his dress, as the pugarees of Cameron and Tyler fluttered out of sight.

"I think we might have a drink," he said with a wry smile to Evans, who fetched the decanter from the store; the jackeroo was called from a stable which had become Augean during the week, and the three were still mildly tipping when the store-keeper came to his feet.

"Good Lord!" cried he. "I thought we'd seen the last of the plucky police!"

"You don't mean to say they're coming back?"

"I do, worse luck! Cameron, Tyler, and some new joker in plain clothes."

Hardcastle finished his drink with a resigned smile, and stood on the veranda to receive the intruders.

"After all, it will stave off the reaction I began to feel the moment they had turned their backs," said he. "Well, well, well! I thought I'd just got rid of you fellows, and back you come like base coin!"

"You mustn't blame us," said the sergeant, first to dismount. "We couldn't know that Superintendent Cairns had been sent up from Sydney, much less that we should ride right into him in your horse-paddock!"

The squatter had stepped down from the veranda with polite alacrity.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Cairns," said he. "I only wish you had come before."

The creature in the plain clothes looked about him with a dry smile, and a sharp eye upon the younger men and the empty glasses, as he and the sergeant accompanied Hardcastle to the veranda, while Tyler took charge of the three horses. The fame of Cairns had travelled before him to Rosanna, but none had been prepared for a figure so weird or for a countenance so forbidding and malign. His manners were equally uncouth. He shook his bent head to decline refreshment; he pointedly ignored a generalization of Hardcastle's about the crime; and when he spoke, it was in a gratuitously satirical style of his own.

"May I ask, Mr. Hardcastle, if you are the owner or the manager of this lodge in a howling wilderness?"

"I'm sorry to say I am both."

"I appreciate the sorrow. I failed to discern a single green blade as I came along."

"We depend on salt-bush and the like."

"In spite of which, I believe, you have had several lean years?"

"There's no denying it."

"I am sorry to be one of so many intruders in such a season, Mr. Hardcastle, but I shall not trouble you long. I hope to take the murderer to-night."

"Stingaree?"

"Not quite so loud, please. Who else, should you suppose? You may be interested to hear that he has been in hiding on your run for several days, and so have I, within fairly easy reach of him. But he is not a man to be taken single-handed without further loss of life; so I intercepted you, sergeant, and now you are both enlightened. Tonight, with your assistance and that of your young colleague, I count upon a bloodless victory. But I should prefer you, Mr. Hardcastle, not to mention the matter to the very young men whom I noticed in your company on my arrival. Have I your promise to comply with my wishes on this point, and on any other which may arise in connection with the capture?"

And a steely glitter shot through the beetling eyebrows; but Hardcastle had given his word before the request was rounded to that pedantic neatness which characterized the crabbed utterances of the round-shouldered dictator.

"That is well," he went on, "for now I can admit you both into my plan of campaign. Suppose we sit down here on the veranda, at the end farthest from any door. Be good enough to draw your chairs nearer mine, gentlemen. It might be dangerous if a fourth person heard me say that I had discovered the murderer's ill-gotten hoard!"

"Not you, sir!" cried Cameron.

"Good God!" exclaimed the squatter.

"The discoverer was not divine, and indeed no human being but myself," the bent man averred, turning with mischievous humor from one to the other of his astonished hearers. "Yes, there was more gold than I would have

The Honor of the Road

credited a sane Scotchman with carrying through the wilds; but the bulk was in small notes, and the whole has been buried in the scrub close to the scene of the murder, doubtless to avoid at once the detection and the division of such unusual spoil."

"You are thinking of his mate?"

It was Cameron who had asked the question, but Mr. Hardcastle followed immediately with another.

"Did you remove the spoil?"

"My dear Mr. Hardcastle! How you must lack the detective instinct! Of course, I left everything as nearly as possible as I found it; the man camps on the spot, or very near it; he lights no fires and is careful to leave no marks, but I am more or less convinced of it. And that is where I shall take him to—night, or, rather, early to—morrow morning."

"I wish you could make it to—night," said Hardcastle, with a yawn that put a period to a pause of some duration.

"Why?" demanded the detective, raising open eyes for once.

"Because I've had a desperate week of it," replied Hardcastle, "and am dead with sleep."

The other carried his growing geniality to the length of an almost hearty laugh.

"My dear sir, do you suppose that I thought of taking you with us? No, Mr. Hardcastle, the risks of this sort of enterprise are for those who are paid to run them. And there is a risk; if we timed our attack too early or too late there would be bloodshed to a certainty. But at two o'clock the average man is fast asleep; at a quarter after one, therefore, I start with Sergeant Cameron and Constable Tyler."

Hardcastle yawned again.

"I should like to have been with you, but there are compensations," said he. "I doubt if I shall even stay up to see you off."

"If you did you would sit up alone," returned the Superintendent. "I intend to turn in myself for three or four hours; and it will be in the face of all my wishes, sergeant, if you and Tyler do not do the same. No reason to tell him what a short night it's to be; it might prevent a young fellow like that from getting any sleep at all. Merely let it be arranged that we all turn in betimes in view of an early start; we three alone need know how early the start will be."

They had their simple dinner at half—past seven, when the detective took it on himself to entertain the party, and succeeded so well that the entertainment was continued on the veranda for the better part of another hour. Doubled up in his chair, abnormal, weird, he recounted in particular the exploits of Stingaree (included a garbled version of the recent fiasco across the Murray) with a zest only equalled by his confidant undertaking to avenge the death of Robert Duncan before another day was out; all listened in a rapt silence, and the younger men were duly disappointed when the party broke up prematurely between nine and ten. But they also had played their part in a fatiguing week; by the later hour all were in their rooms, and before very long Rosanna Station lay lighted only by the full white moon of New South Wales.

Cameron wondered if it could possibly be two o'clock, while Tyler sat up insensate with the full weight of his first sleep, when their chief crept into the double—bedded room in which the two policemen had been put. He owned himself before his time by an hour and more, but explained that he had an idea which had only struck him as he was about to fall asleep.

"If we hunt for the fellow in the dark," said he, "we may give him the alarm before we come on him. But if we go now there is at least a chance that we may find his fire to guide us. I am aware I said he wouldn't light one there, but everybody knows that Stingaree uses a spirit—lamp. In any case it's a chance, and with a desperate man like that we can't afford to give the ghost of a chance away."

The sergeant dressed without more ado, as did his subordinate on learning the nature of their midnight errand; meanwhile the disturber of slumbers was gone to the horse—yard to start saddling. The others followed in a few minutes. And there was the horse—yard overflowing with moonshine, but empty alike of man and beast.

"I wonder what's got him?" murmured the bewildered sergeant uneasily.

"Old Harry, for all I care!" muttered the other. "I'm no such nuts on him, if you ask me. There's a bit too much of him for my taste."

In his secret breast the sergeant entertained a similar sentiment, but he was too old an officer to breathe disaffection in the ear of his subaltern. He contented himself with a mild expression of his surprise at the conduct

The Honor of the Road

of the Sydney authorities in putting a "towny" over his head without so much as a word of notice.

"And such a 'towny'!" echoed Tyler. "One you never heard of in your life before, and never will again!"

"Speak for yourself!" rejoined Cameron, irritated at the exaggeration of their case. "I have heard of him ever since I joined the force."

"Well, he's a funny joke to have shoved over us, a blooming little hunchback like that."

"I always heard that he was none the worse for what he couldn't help, and now I can understand it," said the sergeant, "for he's not such a hunch ——"

The men looked at each other in the moonlight, and the ugly word was never finished. A dozen hoofs were galloping upon them, their thunder muffled by the sandy road, and into the tank of moonshine came two horses, hounded by the detective bareback on the third.

"Someone left the slip-rails down, and they were all over the horse-paddock," he panted. "But I took a bridle and managed to catch one, and it was easy enough to run up the other two."

But even Constable Tyler thought the more of their misshapen leader for the feat.

There was now no time to be lost, for it approached midnight, but the trio were soon cantering through the horse-paddock neck-and-neck, and the new day found them at the farther gate. The moon still poured unbroken brilliance upon that desert world of sandy stretches tufted with saltbush and erratically overgrown with scrub. The shadow of the gate was as another gate lying ready to be hung; for each particular wire in the fence there was a thin black stripe upon the ground. The three passed through, and came in quick time upon the edge of that scrub in which the crime had been committed. And here the chief called a halt.

"The two to nail him must be on foot," said he. "You can creep upon him on foot as you never could with a horse; but I will remain mounted in the road and ride him down if he shows fight."

So the pair in the pugarees walked one at either stirrup of their crooked chief, leaving the two horses tethered to a tree, until of a sudden the whole party halted as one. They had rounded a bend in the road with great caution, for they all knew where they were; but only one of them was prepared for the position of the light which dashed into their eyes from the heart of the scrub.

It was a tiny light, set low upon the ground, and yet it flashed through the forest like a diamond in a bundle of hay. It burnt at no little distance from the track, for at a movement it was lost, but it was some hundreds of yards nearer the station than the scene of the murder. The chief whispered that this was where he had found the buried booty, and over half the distance he led the way, winding in and out among the trees, now throwing a leg across his horse's withers to avoid a bole, anon embracing its neck to escape contact with the branches. It was long before they could discern anything but the light itself amid the trunks and branches of the scrub.

Suddenly the horseman stopped, beckoning with his free hand to the pair afoot, pointing at the fire with the one that held the reins; and as they crept up to him he stooped in the stirrups till his mouth was close to the sergeant's ear.

"He's sitting on the far side of the light, but you can't see his face. I thought he was a log, and I still believe he's asleep. Creep on him like cats till he looks up; then rush him with your revolvers before he can draw his, and I'll support you with mine!"

Nearer and nearer stole Cameron and Tyler; the rider managed to coax a few more noiseless steps from his clever mount, but dropped the reins and squared his elbows some twenty paces from the light — a hurricane lamp now in the sharpest focus. The policemen crawled some yards ahead; all three carried revolver in hand. But still the unsuspecting figure sat motionless, his chin upon his chest, the brim of his wideawake hiding his face, a little heap of gold and notes before him on the ground. Then the Superintendent's horse flung up its head; its teeth champed upon the bit; the man sat bolt upright, and the light of the hurricane lamp fell full upon the face of Hardcastle the squatter.

"Rush him! rush him! That's the man we want!"

But the momentary stupefaction of the police had given Hardcastle his opportunity; the hurricane lamp flew between them, going out where it fell, and for a minute the revolvers spat harmlessly in the remaining patchwork of moonshine and shadow.

"Get behind trees; shoot low, don't kill him!" shouted the chief from his saddle. "Now on to him before he can load again. That's it! Pin him! Throw your revolvers away, or he'll snatch one before you know where you are! Ah, I thought he was too strong for you! Mr. Hardcastle, I'll put a bullet through you myself if you don't instantly

The Honor of the Road

surrender!"

And the fight ended with the bent man leaning in his stirrups over the locked and swaying group, as he brandished his revolver to suit deed to word. It was a heavy blow with the long barrel that finally turned the scale. In a few seconds Hardcastle stood a prisoner, the handcuffs fitting his large wrists like gloves, his great frame panting from the fray, and yet a marvel of monstrous manhood in its stoical and defiant carriage.

"For God's sake, Cairns, do what you say!" he cried. "Put three bullets through me, and divide what's on the ground between you!"

"I half wish we could, for your sake," was the reply. "But it's idle to speak of it, and I'm afraid you've committed a crime that places you beyond the reach of sympathy."

"That he has!" cried the sergeant, wiping blood from his gray beard. "It's plain as a pikestaff now; and to think that he was the one to come and fetch us the very night he'd done it! But what licks me more than anything is how in the world you found him out, sir!"

The hunchback looked down upon the stalwart prisoner standing up to his last inch between his two captors: there was an impersonal interest in the man's bold eyes that invited a statement more eloquently than the sergeant's tongue.

"I will tell you," said the horseman, smiling down upon the three on foot. "In the first place, I had my own reasons for knowing that Stingaree was nowhere near this place on the night of the murder, for I happen to have been on his tracks for some time. Who knew all about the dead man's stroke of luck, his insane preference for hard cash, the time of his return? Mr. Hardcastle, for one. Who swore that he had met Stingaree face to face upon the run? Mr. Hardcastle alone; there was not a soul to corroborate or contradict him. Who was in need of many thousand pounds? Mr. Hardcastle, as I suspected, and as he practically admitted to me when we discussed the bad season on my arrival. I was pretty sure of my man before I crossed the boundary fence, but I was absolutely convinced before I had spent twenty minutes on his veranda."

The prisoner smiled sardonically in the moonlight. The policemen gazed with awe upon the man who had solved a nine days' mystery in fewer hours.

"You must remember," he continued, "that I have spent some days and nights upon the run; during the days I have camped in the thickest scrub I could find, but by night I have been very busy, and last night I had a stroke of luck. I stumbled by accident on a track that led me to the place I had been looking for all along. You see, I had put myself in Hardcastle's skin, and I was quite clear that I should have buried a lapful of gold and notes somewhere in the bush until the hue and cry had blown over. Not that I expected to find it so near the scene of the crime — I should certainly have gone farther afield myself."

"But I can't make out why that wasn't enough for you, sir," ventured the sergeant, deferentially. "Why didn't you come in and arrest him on that?"

"You shall see in three minutes. Wasn't it far better to catch him red-handed as we have? You will at least admit that it was far neater. I say I have the place. I say we are all going to it at two in the morning. I say, let us sleep till a little after one. Was it not obvious what would happen? The only thing I did not expect was to find him asleep with the swag under his nose."

Then Hardcastle spoke up.

"I was not asleep," said he. "I thought I was safe for an hour or two . . . and I began to think . . . I was wondering what to do . . . whether to cut my throat at once . . ."

And his dreadful voice died away like a single chord struck in an empty room.

"But Stingaree," put in Tyler in the end. "What's happened to him?"

"He also has been here. But he was many a mile away at the time."

"What brought him here?"

The crooked Superintendent from Sydney was sitting strangely upright in his saddle; his face was not to be seen, for his back was to the moon, but he seemed to rub one of his eyes.

"He may have wished to clear his character. He may have itched to uphold the honor of that road of which he considers himself a not imperfect knight. He may have found it so jolly easy to play policeman down in Victoria, that he couldn't resist another shot in a better cause up here. At his worst he never killed a man in all his life. And you will be good enough to take his own word for it that he never will!"

He had backed his horse while he spoke; he turned a little to the light, and the eye-glass gleamed in his eye.

The Honor of the Road

The young constable sprang forward.

"Stingaree!" he screamed.

But the gray sergeant flung his arms round their prisoner.

"That's right!" cried the bushranger, as he trotted off. "Your horses and even your pistols are out of reach, thanks to a discipline for which I love you dearly. You hang on to your bird in the hand, my friends, and never again misjudge the one in the bush!"

And as the trees swallowed the cantering horse and man, followed by a futile shot from the first revolver which the young constable had picked up, an embittered admiration kindled in the captive murderer's eyes.