

The Taking of Stingaree

E.W. Hornung

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STINGAREE had crossed the Murray, and all Victoria was agog with the news. It was not his first descent upon that Colony, nor likely to be his last, unless Sub-Inspector Kilbride and his mounted myrmidons did much better than they had done before. There is no stimulus, however, like a trembling reputation. Within four-and-twenty hours Kilbride himself was on the track of the invader, whose heels he had never seen, much less his face. And he rode alone.

It was not merely his reputation that was at stake, though nothing could restore that more effectually than the single-handed capture of so notorious a desperado as Stingaree. The dashing officer was not unnaturally actuated by the sum of three hundred pounds now set upon the outlaw's person, alive or dead. That would be a little windfall for one man, but not much to divide among five or six; on the other hand, and with all his faults, Sub-Inspector Kilbride had courage enough to furnish forth a squadron. He was a black-bearded, high-checked Irish-Australian, keen and over-eager to a disease, restless, irascible, but full of the fire and dash that make as dangerous an enemy as another good fighter need desire. And as a fine fighter in an infamous cause, Stingaree had his admirers even in Victoria, where the old tale of popular sympathy with a picturesque rascal was responsible for not the least of the Sub-Inspector's difficulties. But even this struck Kilbride as yet another of those obstacles which were more easily surmounted alone than at the head of a talkative squad; and with that conviction he pushed his thoroughbred on and on through a whole cool night and three parts of an Australian summer's day. Imagine, then, his disgust at the apparition of a mounted trooper galloping to meet him in the middle of the afternoon, and within a few miles of a former hiding-place of the bushranger, where the senior officer had strong hopes of finding and surprising him now.

"Where the devil do you come from?" cried Kilbride, as the other rode up.

"Jumping Creek," was the crisp reply. "Stationed there."

"Then why don't you stop there and do your duty?"

"Stingaree!" said the laconic trooper.

"What! Do you think you're after him too?"

"I am after him."

"So am I."

"Then you're going in the wrong direction."

Kilbride flushed a warm brown from beard to helmet.

"Do you know who you're speaking to?" cried he. "I'm Sub-Inspector Kilbride, and this business is my business, and no other man's in this Colony. You go back to your barracks, sir! I'm not going to have every damned fool in the force charging about the country on his own account."

The trooper was a dark, smart, dapper young fellow, of a type not easily browbeaten or subdued. And discipline is not the strong point of forces so irregular as the mounted police of a crescent colony. But nothing could have been more admirable than the manner in which this rebuke was received.

"Very well, sir, if you wish it; but I can assure you that you are off the track of Stingaree."

"How do you know?" asked Kilbride, rudely; but he was beginning to look less black.

"I happen to know the place. You would have some difficulty in finding it if you never were there before. I only stumbled across it by accident myself."

"Lately?"

"One day last winter when I was out looking for some horses."

"And you kept it to yourself!"

The trooper hung his head. "I knew we should have him across the river again," he said. "It was only a question of time; and — well, sir, you can understand!"

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"You were keen on taking him yourself, were you?"

"As keen as you are, Mr. Kilbride!" owned the younger man, raising bold eyes, and looking his superior fairly and squarely in the face.

Kilbride returned the stare, and what he saw unsettled him. The other was wiry, trim, eminently alert; he had the masterful mouth and the dare-devil eye, and his horse seemed a part of himself. A more promising comrade at hot work was not to be desired: and the work would be hot if Stingaree had half a chance. After all, it was better for two to succeed than for one to fail. "Half the money and a whole skin!" said Kilbride to himself, and rapped out his decision with an oath.

The trooper's eyes lit with reckless mirth, and a soft cheer came from under his breath.

"By the bye, what's your name," said Kilbride, "before we start?"

"Bowen — Jack Bowen."

"Then I know all about you! Why on earth didn't you tell me before? It was you who took that black fellow who murdered the shepherd on Woolshed Creek, wasn't it?"

The admission was made with due modesty.

"Why, you're the very man for me!" Kilbride cried. "You show the way, Jack, and I'll make the going."

And off they went together at a canter, the slanting sun striking fire from their buttons and accoutrements, and lighting their sunburnt faces as it lit the red stems and the white that raced past them on either side. For a little they followed the path which Kilbride had taken on his way thither; then the trooper plunged into the thick bush on the left, and the game became follow-my-leader, in and out, out and in, through a maze of red stems and of white, where the pungent eucalyptus scent hung heavy as the sage-green, perpendicular leaves themselves: and so onward until the Sub-Inspector called a halt.

"How far is it now, Bowen?"

"Two or three miles, sir."

"Good! It'll be light for another hour and a half. We'd better give the mokes a breather while we can. And there'd be no harm in two draws."

"I was just thinking the same thing, sir."

So their reins dangled while they cut up a pipeful of apparent shoe-leather apiece: and presently the dull blue smoke was curling and circling against the dull green foliage, producing subtle half-tint harmonies and momentary arabesques as the horses ambled neck and neck.

"Native of this Colony?" puffed Kilbride.

"Well, no — old country originally — but I've been out some years."

"That's all right so long as you're not a New South Welshman," said Kilbride, with a chuckle "I'll be shot if I wouldn't almost have turned you back if you had been!"

"Victoria is to have all the credit, is she, sir?"

"Anyhow they sha'n't have any on the other side, or I'll know the reason!" the Victorian swore. "I — I — by Jove, I'd as fief lose my man again as let them have a hand in taking him!"

"But why?"

"Why? Do you live so near the border, and can you ask? Did you never hear a Sydney-side drover blowing about his blooming Colony? Haven't you heard of Sydney Harbor till you're sick? And then their papers!" cried Kilbride, with columns in his tone. "But I'll have the last laugh yet! I swore I would, and I will! I swore I'd take Stingaree ——"

"So I heard."

"Yes, they put it in their infernal papers! But it was true — take him I will!"

"Or die in the attempt, eh?"

"Or die and be damned to me!"

All the bitterness of previous failure, indeed of notorious and much-criticized defeat, was in the Sub-Inspector's tone; that of his subordinate, though light as air, had a touch of insolence which an outsider could not have failed — but Kilbride was too excited — to detect. The outsider might possibly have foreseen a rivalry which no longer entered Kilbride's hot head.

Meanwhile the country was changing even with their now leisurely advance. The timbered flats in the region of the river had merged into a gully which was rapidly developing into a gorge, with new luxuriant growths which

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added greatly to the density of the forest, suggesting its very heart. The almost neutral eucalyptian tint was splashed with the gay hues of many parrots, as though the gum-trees had burst into flower. The noise of running water stole gradually through the murmur of leaves. And suddenly an object in the grass struck the sight like a lantern flashed at dead of night: it proved to be an empty sardine tin pricked by a stray lance from the slanting sun.

"We must be near," whispered Kilbride.

"We are there! You hear the creek? He has a gunyah there — that's all. Shall we rush it on horseback or creep up on foot?"

"You know the lie of the land, Bowen; which do you recommend?"

"Rushing it."

"Then here goes."

In a few seconds they had leaped their horses into a tiny clearing on the banks of a creek as relatively minute. And the gunyah — a mere funnel of boughs and leaves, in which a man could lie at full length, but only sit upright at the funnel's mouth — seemed as empty as the space on every hand. The only other sign of Stingaree was a hank of rope flung carelessly across the gunyah roof.

"He may be watching us from among the trees," muttered Kilbride, looking sharply about him. Bowen screwed up his eyes and followed suit.

"I hardly think it, Mr. Kilbride."

"But it's possible, and here we sit for him to pot us! Let's dismount, whether or no."

They slid to the ground. The trooper found himself at the mouth of the gunyah.

"What if he were in there after all!" said he.

"He isn't," said Kilbride, stepping in front and stooping quickly. "But you might creep in, Jack, and see if he's left any sign of life behind him."

The men were standing between the horses, their revolvers cocked. Bowen's answer was to hand his weapon over to Kilbride and to creep into the gunyah on his hands and knees.

"Here's something or other," his voice cried thickly from within. "It's half buried. Wait a bit."

"As sharp as you can!"

"All right; but it's a box, and jolly heavy!"

Kilbride peered nervously to right, left, and centre; then his eyes fell upon his companion wriggling back into the open, a shallow, oblong box in his arms, its polish dimmed and dusted with the mould, as though they had violated a grave.

"Kick it open!" exclaimed Kilbride, excitedly.

But there was no need for that; the box was not even locked; and the lifted lid revealed an inner one of glass, protecting a brass cylinder with steel bristles in uneven growth, and a long line of lilliputian hammers.

"A musical-box!" said the staggered Sub-Inspector.

"That's it, sir. I remember hearing that he'd collared one on one of the stations he stuck up last time he was down here. It must have lain in the ground ever since. And it only shows how hard you must have pressed him, Mr. Kilbride!"

"Yes! I headed him back across the Murray — I soon had him out o' this!" rejoined the other in grim bravado. "Anything else in the gunyah?"

"All he took that trip, I fancy, if we dig a bit. You never gave him time to roll his swag!"

"I must have a look," said Kilbride, his excitement fed by his reviving vanity.

The other questioned whether it were worth while. This settled the Sub-Inspector.

"There may be something to show where he's gone," that casuist suggested, "for I don't believe he's anywhere here."

"Shall I hold the shooters, sir?"

"Thanks; and keep your eyes open, just in case. But it's my opinion that the bird's flown somewhere else, and it's for us to find out where."

Kilbride then crept into the gunyah upon his hands and knees, and found it less dark than he had supposed, the light filtering freely through the leaves and branches. At the inner extremity he found a mildewed blanket, and the place where the musical-box had evidently lain a long time; but there, though he delved to the elbows in the

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loosened earth, his discoveries ended. Puzzled and annoyed, Kilbride was on the verge of cursing his subordinate, when all at once he was given fresh cause. The musical-box had burst into selections from *The Pirates of Penzance*.

"What the deuce are you at?" shouted the irate officer.

"Only seeing how it goes."

"Stop it at once, you fool! He may hear it!"

"You said the bird had flown."

"You dare to argue with me? By thunder, you shall see!"

But it was Sub-Inspector Kilbride who saw most. Backing precipitately out of the gunyah, he turned round before rising upright — and remained upon his knees after all. He was covered by two revolvers — one of them his own — and the face behind the barrels was the one with which the last hour had familiarized Kilbride. The only difference was the single eye-glass in the right eye. And the strains of the musical-box — so thin and tinkling in the open air — filled the pause.

"What in blazes are you playing at?" laughed the luckless officer, feigning to treat the affair as a joke, even while the iron truth was entering his soul by inches.

"Rise another inch without my leave and you may be in blazes to see!"

"Look here, Bowen, what do you mean?"

"Only that Stingaree happens to be at home after all, Mr. Kilbride."

The victim's grin was no longer forced; the situation made for laughter, even if the laughter were hysterical; and for an instant it was given even to Kilbride to see the cruel humor of it. Then he realized all it meant to him — certain ruin or a sudden death — and the drops stood thick upon his skin.

"What of Bowen?" he at length asked hoarsely. The idea of another victim came as some slight alleviation of his own grotesque case.

"I didn't kill him," Stingaree.

"Good!" said Kilbride. It was something that two of them should live to share the shame.

"But wing him I did," added the bushranger. "I couldn't help myself. The beggar put a bullet through my hat; he did well only to get one back in the leg."

Kilbride longed to be winged and wounded in his turn, since blood alone could lessen his disgrace. On cooler reflection, however, it was obviously wiser to feign a surrender more abject than it might finally prove to have been.

"Well," said Kilbride, "you have the whip-hand over me this time, and I give you best. How long are you going to keep me on my knees?"

"You can get up when you like," replied Stingaree, "if you promise not to play the fool. So you were really going to take me this time, were you? I have really no desire to rub it in, but if I were you I should have kept that to myself until I'd done it. And you wanted to have me all to yourself? Well, you couldn't pay me a higher compliment, but I'm going to pay you a high one in return. You really did make me run for it last time, and leave all sorts of things behind. So this time I mean to take them with me and leave you here instead. Nevertheless, you're the only Victorian trap I have any respect for, Mr. Kilbride, or I shouldn't have gone to all this trouble to get you here."

Kilbride did not blanch, but he heard his apparent doom with a glittering eye, and was deaf for a little to *The Pirates of Penzance*.

"Oh! I'm not going to harm a good man like you," continued Stingaree, "unless you make me. Your friend Bowen made me, but I don't promise to fire low every time, mark you! There's another good man on the other side — Cairns by name — you know him, do you? He'll kick up his heels when he hears of this; but they do no better in New South Wales, so don't you let that worry you. To think you held both shooters at one stage of the game! I trusted you, and so you trusted me; if only you had known, eh? Hear that tune, and know what it is? It's in your honor, Mr. Kilbride."

And Stingaree hummed the policemen's chorus sotto voce; but before the end, with a swift remorse, induced by the dignity of Kilbride's bearing in humiliating disaster, he swooped upon the insolent instrument and stopped its tinkle by touching the lever with one revolver-barrel while sedulously covering the Sub-Inspector with the other. The sudden cessation of the toy music, bringing back into undue prominence all the little bush noises which

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had filled the air before, brought home to Kilbride a position which he had subconsciously associated with those malevolent strains as something theatrical and unreal. He had known in his heart that it was real, without grasping the reality until now. He flung up his fists in sudden entreaty.

"Put a bullet through me," he cried, "if you're a man!"

Stingaree shook a decisive head.

"Not if I can help it," said he. "But I fear I shall have to tie you up."

"That's slow death!"

"It never has been yet, but you must take your chance. Get me that rope that's slung over the gunyah. It's got to be done."

Kilbride obeyed with apparent apathy; but his heart was inflamed with a sudden and infernal glow. Yes, it had never ended in death in any case that he could recall of this time—honored trick of all the bushrangers; on the contrary, sooner or later, most victims had contrived to release themselves. Well, one victim was going to complete his release by hanging himself by the same rope to the same tree! Meanwhile he confronted his captor grimly, the coil in both hands.

"There's a loop at one end," said Stingaree. "Stick your foot through it — either foot you like."

Kilbride obeyed, wondering whether his head would go through when his turn came.

"Now chuck me the other end."

It fell in coils at the bushranger's feet.

"Now stand up against that blue gum," he continued, pointing at the tree with Kilbride's revolver, his own being back at his hip. "And stand still like a sensible chap!"

Stingaree then walked round and round the tree, paying out the long rope, yet keeping it taut, until it wound round tree and man from the latter's ankles to his armpits. Instinctively Kilbride had kept his arms free to the last, but they were no use to him in his suit of hemp, and one after the other his wrists were pinned and handcuffed behind the tree. The cold steel came as a shock. The captive had counted on loosening the knots by degrees, beginning with those about his hands. But there was no loosening steel gyves like these; he knew the feel of them too well; they were Kilbride's own, that he had brought with him for Stingaree. "Found 'em in your saddle-bags while you were in my gunyah," explained the bushranger, stepping round to survey his handiwork. "Sorry to sear the kid — so to speak! But you see you were my most dangerous enemy on this side of the Murray!"

The enemy did not look very dangerous as he stood in the dusk, in the heart of that forest, lashed to that tree, with his finger-tips not quite meeting behind it, and the blood already on his wrists.

"And now?" he whispered, hoarse already, his lips cracking, and his throat parched.

"I shall give you a drink before I go."

"I won't take one from you!"

"I shall make you, if I have to be a bigger brute than ever. You must live to spin this yarn!"

"Never!"

Stingaree smiled to himself as he produced pipe and tobacco; but it was not his sinister smile; it was rather that of the victor who salutes the vanquished in his heart. Meanwhile a more striking and a more subtle change had come over the face of Kilbride. It was not joy, but it was quite a new grimness, and in his own preoccupation the bushranger did not notice it at all. He sauntered nearer with his knife and his tobacco—plug, and there was some compassion in his pensive stare.

"Cheer up, man!" said he. "There's no disgrace in coming out second best to me. You may smile. You'll find it's generally admitted in New South Wales. And after all, you needn't tell little crooked Cairns how it happened. So that stops your smile! But he's the best man left on my tracks, and I shouldn't be surprised if he's the first to find you."

"No more should I!" said a harsh voice behind the bushranger. "Hands up and empty, Stingaree, or you're the next dead man in this little Colony!"

Quick as thought Stingaree stepped in front of the tied Victorian. But his hands were up, and his eye—glass dangling on its string.

"Oh, you don't catch me kill two birds," rasped the newcomer's voice, "though I'm not sure which of you would be least loss!"

Stingaree stood aside once more, and waved his hands without lowering them, bowing from his captor to his

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captive as he did so.

"Superintendent Cairns, of New South Wales — Inspector Kilbride, of Victoria," said he. "You two men will be glad to know each other."

The New South Welshman drawled out a dry expression of his own satisfaction. His was a strange and striking personality. Dark as a mulatto, and round-shouldered to the extent of some distinct deformity, he carried his eyes high under the lids, and shot his piercing glance from under the penthouse of a beetling brow; a lipless mouth was pursed in such a fashion as to shorten the upper lip and exaggerate an already powerful chin; and this stooping and intent carriage was no less suggestive of the human sleuth-hound than were the veiled vigilance and dogged determination of the lowered face. Such was the man who had succeeded where Kilbride had failed — succeeded at the most humiliating moment of that most ignominious failure — and who came unwarrantably from the wrong side of the Murray. The Victorian stood in his bonds and favored his rival with such a glare as he had not levelled at Stingaree himself. But not a syllable did Kilbride vouchsafe. And the Superintendent was fully occupied with his prisoner.

"'Little crooked Cairns,' am I? There are those that look a jolly sight smaller, and 'll have a worse hump than mine for the rest of their born days! Come nearer and turn your back."

And the revolver was withdrawn from its carrier on the stolen constabulary belt. The bushranger was then searched for other weapons; then marched into the bush at the pistol's point, and brought back handcuffed to the Superintendent's bridle.

"That's the way you'll come marching home, my boy; and one of us on horseback each side; don't trust you in a saddle on a dark night!"

Indeed, it was nearly dark already, and in the nebulous middle-distance a laughing jackass was indulging in his evening peal. Cairns jerked his head in the direction of the unearthly cackle. "Lots of 'em down here in Vic, I believe," said he, and at length turned his attention to the bound man. "You see, I wanted to land him alive and kicking without spilling blood," he continued, opening his knife. "That was why I had to let him tie you up."

"You let him?" thundered the Victorian, breaking his silence with a bellow. It was as though the man with the knife had cut through the rope into the bound man's body.

"Stand still," said he, "or I may hurt you. I had to let him, my good fellow, or we'd have been dropping each other like bullocks. As it is, not a scratch between us, though I found young Bowen in a pretty bad way. Our friend had stuck up Jumping Creek barracks in the small hours, put a bullet through Bowen's leg, and come away in his uniform. Pretty tall, that, eh? I shouldn't wonder if you'd swing him for it alone, down here in Vic; no doubt you've got to be more severe in a young Colony. Well, I tracked my gentleman to the barracks, and I found Bowen in his blood, sent my trooper for a doctor, and got on your tracks before they were half an hour old. I came up with you just as he'd stuck you up. He had one in each hand. It wasn't quite good enough at the moment."

The knife shore through the rope for the last time, and it lay in short ends all round the tree.

"Now my hands," cried Kilbride fiercely.

"I beg pardon?" said the satirical Superintendent.

"My hands, I tell you!"

"There's a little word they teach 'em to say at our State Schools. Perhaps you never heard it down in Vic?"

"Don't be a silly fool," said Kilbride, wearily. "You haven't been through what I have!"

"That's true," said Cairns. "Still, you might be decently civil to the man that gets you out of a mess."

Nevertheless, the handcuffs were immediately removed; and that instant, with the curtest thanks, Sub-Inspector Kilbride sprang forward with such vigorous intent that the other detained him forcibly by one of his stiff and aching arms.

"What are you after now, Kilbride?"

"My prisoner!"

"Your what?"

"My prisoner," I said.

"I like that — and you his!"

Kilbride burst into a voluble defence of his position.

"What right have you on this side of the Murray, you Sydney-sider? None at all, except as a passenger. You can't lay finger on man, woman, or child in this Colony, and, by God, you sha'n't! Nor yet upon the three hundred

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there's on his head; and the sons of convicts down in Sydney can put that in their pipe and smoke it

For all his cool and ready insolence, the misshapen Superintendent from the other side stood dazed and bewildered by this volcanic outpouring. Then his dark face flushed darker, and with a snarl he clinched his fists. The Victorian, however, had turned on his heel, and now his liberated hands flew skyward, as though the bushranger's revolver covered him yet again.

But there was no such weapon discernible through the shade; no New South Welshman's horse; and neither sight, sound, wraith, nor echo of Stingaree, the outlawed bushranger, the terror and the despair of the Sister Colonies!

"I thought it might be done when I saw how you fixed him," said Kilbride cheerfully. "Those beggars can ride lying down or standing up!"

"I believe you saw him clear!"

"I'll settle that with you when I've caught him."

"You catch him, you gum-sucker, when you as good as let him go!"

And a volley of further and far more trenchant abuse was discharged by Superintendent Cairns, of the New South Wales Police. But Kilbride was already in the saddle; a covert outward kick with his spurred heel, and the third horse went cantering riderless into the trees.

"He won't go far," sang the Sub-Inspector, "and he'll take you safe back to barracks if you give him his head. It's easy to get bushed in this country — for new chums from penal settlements!"

As the Victorian galloped into the darkness, and the New South Welshman dashed wildly after the third horse, the laughing jackass in the invisible middle-distance gave his last grotesque guffaw at departed day. And the laughing jackass is a Victorian bird.