

BONFIRE

by Donald Straker

I OPENED the throttle slowly and as the cable took the strain the old house seemed to lean backwards and then collapse in a welter of sarking, scrim and rusty iron. There was the standing chimney and the swaying arms of the peach that had climbed on the eastern wall. But for that peach, whose fruits had gladdened the days of our home building, I would have put a match to the ruin where it stood. Now, with the tree preserved, all the wreckage could be piled for a wondrous Fifth of November.

From old Ben, our neighbour across the river, we had learnt how, many years ago, Roger Biel had cleared the floor of the valley for his farmer sons and had built the old house for his daughter Rose, married much against his wishes to Ezra Booth, a miner turned farmer. There were three girls, brought up by Rose, it seemed, on a diet of strict Calvinism soundly driven home with a tawse. Ezra himself was short and bowlegged and muscularly very strong, but he had tired of his wife's sharp tongue and presently sought respite in long days, and even nights, up at the head of the valley after pig. He shared his kill with the two Biel boys, but when the meat was over plentiful he would take it down to the township and make a deal with O'Shea, who kept the Crown. At times the trading was long drawn out, but that didn't matter since the mare could be trusted to cover the twelve homeward miles without help from Ezra, or breakage to the bottles. During these lapses Rose would keep the wheels of the farm turning until the time arrived when the girls could be constrained to the milking.

Before the last war the surviving daughter had set out one morning in the ancient dog-cart to finish her days with a relative up in Northland. She left house and furniture as it was and did not even trouble to close the front door. Since then the property had had two owners, though neither of them had come to occupy, and when June and I bought the place after the war the paddocks had been going back for over fifteen years. The house had probably been on the down grade for twice as long; drovers and trampers had slept in it, most of the furniture had served to cook their meals, and where the flooring remained it buoyed up islands of indescribable filth. In one place the works of a piano had settled through the joists to ground level and there it crouched, its disordered keys grinning up from the void. There were woe-begone garments drooping from the wall and made to swing by unexplained draughts. Opossums had left their trademarks everywhere. Nor was there only that dismal picture of ill-use and neglect, there was an atmosphere about it that came stealing through the sour web of rotting timber.

"Oh, my goodness—I don't like this at all," June exclaimed on the day when we inspected the place. "It's sinister. I'm sure something awful happened here!"

We worked at it whenever we could spare an hour, and by the evening of the Fourth the last of the rubbish had been forked to the heap—ancient boots and

bedding, mattresses disgorging flock, borer-riddled cupboards with horrible contents, masses of dismembered books and a queer assortment of upholstered fragments with amputated legs and feet. At the summit of all we put the framework of a great four-poster bed, and it lodged with one gaunt post draped in a torn hanging pointing skyward like some early martyr.

In the new sheds I put away the tractor and returned to find our kindly neighbour talking to June by the pyre.

"It will be a landmark gone," he said, leaving us to guess whether he were pleased or sorry about it.

I felt excuse was called for.

"From our windows it was an eyesore," I said. "It blanked out most of the river."

"To me it seemed sinister," June backed up. "Even now there's something a bit creepy about this heap of stuff. I shall be glad when tomorrow comes."

We saw Ben's glance ranging over the pyre until it came to rest at the summit. His white beard jutted from stooped shoulders, for he was nearing eighty.

"That was Rose's bed," he said reflectively. "Came to her from her father, the sawmillier. Used to show it to her visitors—it was unusual, and some thought it very grand. Times I've seen one or other of those girls bent over the end of it, and she belting into them like a tiger. Ezra didn't hold by that. Not that it worried the girls unduly; they were strong girls. Two of them married miners down in Westland; and the other—that's Hettie—throwing her hand in and setting out for Northland. Four hundred miles. Said the place had thoroughly got on her nerves and she never wanted to think of it again."

Most men, he said, liked Ezra; some women were afraid of him. Stories grew up round him; of his strength and his endurance, of his uncanny skill in tracking, and in later years of his astonishing swallow. One of these tales was gruesome. On his way down to the township Ezra's mare had gone lame, and he left her in a paddock and himself humped the kill the last few miles. As was his practice he grasped a foreleg over each shoulder, and as this was a heavy boar the hind legs trailed. The carcass, of course, had been beheaded. The moon came and went in racing cloud and near the hotel Ezra passed three married women. As he told it, to ease his aching arms for a moment, he raised the carcass up so that the legs ceased to trail and the shaggy chest rested on his head. The women became hysterical and the alarmed township turned out to a man. That night the Crown stayed open, and when the men at last went home Ezra's stock with the women had fallen even lower.

With his stick Ben jabbed at the top of a sturdy table. Ezra had always used that for his butchering; it was



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done in the kitchen with the girls watching every cut, and afterwards they washed up the mess.

"There was no real harm in Ezra," Ben explained. "It was just Rose who drove him crackers. After his bout was over he would be quite apologetic; never blamed her; he was very loyal—surprisingly so, I thought. Seeing him all humble like that seemed queer; he was one of the pugnacious sort. Times he did scare those girls. There was one evening. . . Hettie came across to me properly worked up. Would I come at once; her father was beyond reason and they were all at wits end. We ran most of the way."

As they reached the gate there was the sharp crack of a gun and the bullet whanged and whiewed in a macrocarpa. Another crack and the house light disappeared. There was a tinkle of falling glass.

"I went in with my heart bumping in my throat," Ben said. "Mutterings from the bedroom and a low keening from the girls in the kitchen. Rose was striking matches to find a candle. 'He's shot the lamp, Ben,' she said, as matter of fact as you like. 'Can you grab his gun? He doesn't shoot in the dark.' I couldn't face up to it in the dark so I took the candle. The room was thick with powder smoke and I glimpsed Ezra sitting up in the bed—he wore a long white night-cap with a tassel and I saw the light glint on the moving gun barrel. 'There's another!' he shouted. 'See the little blankety-blank-blank—see it—scrabbling in the corner. There!' 'I can see him,' I shouted back. 'Hold the candle, and give me the gun!' By some miracle it worked. I made passes at the corner, lighted by the swaying candle. It fell on the bed and rolled to the floor, and I put my foot on it. Ezra always used a single-barrel twelve bore with round leaden bullets in place of the small shot. In the darkness I slipped out the cart-ridge and felt a whole lot better. Soon Rose came in and lit the candle again. For all her queer doctrine she was a stout woman."

"But—what happened?" June said breathlessly.

Ben turned and looked at her curiously.

"Nothing happened," he said easily. "You mustn't go imagining things, my dear. Nothing whatever happened. Ezra

came to a peaceful end—he was drowned trying to ford the river in flood. Like so many hunters finish up. We found his hat but never his body. There are places in the gorge up there where no man can go. It shook us up properly, I can tell you. That was twenty-odd years ago; and now they've all gone on—all except me. And I never have believed in ghosts." After a moment he added: "They do say that fire lays 'em."

It was a wonderful evening and we walked part of the way home with Ben. From the river bridge the sky downstream still held a trace of the sunset, and up the valley a full moon showed a white face clear of the mountain. The river was very low; the liquid chatter of it on the pebbles sounded like distant voices singing. It looked as if it could never drown anyone.

June crossed to the parapet and stood listening.

"What do you hear?" I asked.

"I thought it was someone shouting," she replied. "Way up in the valley."

"It's just the water," said Ben. "It sometimes sounds like that when the river's dead low."

June was very quiet as we walked home together. She gripped my arm tightly and I wondered whether we were thinking the same thoughts. At our gate we stood for a moment watching the white moonlight playing with the strange assortment on the pyre.

"Do you suppose one day would make much difference?" she said suddenly.

"Is that how you feel?" I laughed.

I fetched a bundle of manuka, and she the matches, and before long the flames of our bonfire were leaping in the windows of the new homestead. Presently from the red core of it came two muffled explosions, and the bedstead with its flaring finger sank in a burst of flying sparks. We looked at each other.

"It—it couldn't be—not really?" said she, agast.

"Don't be silly," I told her. "There were probably two of his old cartridges somewhere in that junk. There may be more."

We listened, watching and stoking for an hour, and then for as long again, but there were no more explosions. The bonfire died, giving us no answer to that uneasy question.