

Kelly Country

A man is looking at a paddock, in the north-east of Victoria. In the distance, there is a rather wretched cottage of considerable age.

Max Gotta start somewhere, but what a start! (loudly)
Where are you, Ned? (Crows cark. Cockatoos squawk. Max laughs.) Been a lifetime since anyone so much as whispered here. Righto Ned, I'm coming to have a look. (He starts to walk, and the cottage comes closer.) Rabbit trap. I haven't seen that sort before ... were the rabbits around in Ned's time? Hell, that's something I don't know. This is going to be beyond me unless I get a bit of help. (loudly) Come on Ned, I'm relying on you! (He gets close to the cottage.) Poor as church mice! Milk for the babies, meat for the men! And the women? Sorrow and disappointment, that was all. They left a land of poverty, and what did they come to? This!

A powerful wind ripples the grass, and the leaves of the trees, few as they are.

Max Well, show yourselves, if you want to be understood!

He opens the door of the cottage, and we hear two voices inside.

Bridie No more of these walks you say you're going on. He's too old for you.

Meg How old were you when you had me?
Bridie You were the pride of my birthday when I turned fifteen.

Meg You started when you were fourteen, same as me.
Bridie I didn't let your father touch me till he said he'd marry me.

Meg If!
Bridie What are you saying, child?

Meg If people saw you were getting big!
Bridie I was proud to have a man who'd never let go of my hand!

Meg So there were others, were there?

Bridie Only one or two, in a lonely place like this.

Meg I want to live in a big town, with people coming and going ...

Bridie You'd go for your walks with men, and you'd find they'd never come back.

Meg (confidently) Oh yes they would!

Bridie Don't be a slut, girl! I didn't bring you into the world for this!

Max (closing the door) A bit more than we bargained for. Where are you, Ned?

Norm (strolling on) He's in jail in Beechworth. Hop in and I'll show you the town.

The cottage becomes the entrance to Beechworth courthouse.

Max They made the law imposing ...
Norm ... to remind the lower orders of their place.

Max opens the door and we hear a stern voice.

Judge Three months. Hard labor. And when you get out, lad, make sure you don't come back. We'll make an old man of you before we let you out, next time.

Max (closing the door) That was when he went to Pentridge, as I recall.

At this point a young woman puts a death mask on a pedestal, and we hear a powerful voice from somewhere out of sight.

Ned When they let me out, I swore they'd never get me again.

Max That was Ned!

Norm He's everywhere, in these parts. Anywhere you go, you'll hear his voice, see where they camped ...

Max I want to find out what he means ...

Ned (offstage) You'll find nothing unless you've got justice in your heart!

Max So where do I start? Inside myself?

He realises that this is so, and sits down to think. Norm disappears. Four policemen lead Harry Power across, and the bushranger is waving and bowing as if he's had a victory of sorts.

Power They've caught old Harry at last. I don't mind jail. I'll have good company. What annoys me is the newspapers pretending to be superior. I'm willing

to bet the fifteen pounds the police took out of my pocket, and let the ladies of Beechworth decide, that Harry Power's a better-looking man than any of the reporters here today!

He goes off with the police.

Max Cocky old bastard! Quite a role model, eh. You never had a chance, Ned!

The cottage we visited before reappears to one side, and we hear its voice.

Bridie He was a boy to be proud of! And those that locked him up were rotten! Megan! For the sake of the Lord's kindness, feed that screamin' child!

Meg (angry, overburdened already) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Max waves a hand at the cottage, and it falls silent.

Max Into the mountains for me.

Range after range appears, one behind the other, then four police officers, keeping well away from each other. Each one introduces another.

Hare That's Nicolson. Mean little skinflint. No bloody use at all.

Sadleir That's Hare. Big fellow, isn't he. Well, he was in his own opinion.

Standish (pointing) Sadleir. Liked to sit and think. Thought if he smoked his pipe, Ned might walk in to be captured.

Nicolson (pointing) Standish. Someone must have told him Ned was drinking at the Melbourne Club. It's the only place he looked.

Max (his hand on the death mask, quoting Ned) What about it boys? Are you with me, Joe?

Nicolson (quoting Joe) A short life and a merry one!

Max (proudly, quoting Ned) My brother Dan.

Sadleir Steve Hart. It was a while before we knew.

Max A sergeant and three constables
Set out from Mansfield town
Near the end of last October
For to hunt the Kellys down.
So they travelled to the Wombat,
And they thought it quite a lark,
And they camped upon the borders of
A creek called Stringybark!

As Max sings, four troopers can be seen among the hills, rifles at the ready. Then there are shots, and groans. Max rushes to see the action, but the bush presses round him, and he seems lost.

Max The police got very close to the hut where the boys were hiding, but of course they didn't know. They weren't as good in the bush as the Kellys.

There is a last shot, very loud.

Max Sergeant Kennedy. Ned had to finish him off.

Ned (out of sight, but voice booming forward) I put his cloak over him and left him as honourable as I could,

and if they were my own brothers I could not be more sorry for them.

Standish Outrage! Nicolson! Get up there at once. Anything you want, any expense, but get those men.

Ned (still out of sight; as he rages, Max takes a step back from the death mask on its pedestal, and considers it) Certainly their wives and children are to be pitied but they must remember those men came into the bush with the intention of scattering pieces of me and my brother all over the bush and yet they know and acknowledge I have been wronged ...

Max puts a white cloth over the death mask and Ned's voice dies away.

Max They were out to get you, Ned, no doubt about that. What a pity you weren't there when they charged the Rats' Castle!

Standish, Nicolson and a bunch of troopers come on, brandishing guns.

Wild Wright (a voice in the distance) Dogs! Curs! Cowards! Follow me if you want to catch the Kellys. I'm going out to join them. Come a little way and I'll shoot the lot of you!

The police follow him through the ranges, then they come to a point where they stop, because they can see a cottage in the distance, in among some trees. They hesitate. Figures come on, nailing notices on trees.

Max Outlawed! Outlawed! To be taken dead or alive.
Reward of two hundred pounds!

Standish (to his uncertain troopers) Five hundred pounds!
Five hundred pounds! Dead or alive!

Troopers (pointing) You reckon they're there?

Standish Charge men, charge!

He blows a whistle. The men charge to the darkened hut and scramble inside. Other troopers, urged on by Standish, rush in after them. From inside the hut there are shots and shouts.

Troopers (realising the hut is empty) Nobody here. Who fired those shots, then? I thought ... Nobody here. Where's the door? Captain Standish! Get us out!

Max (to Standish) The Charge of Sebastopol? The Fiasco of Rats' Castle? How do you want it called?

Standish Nicolson, take charge. I'm going back to the Club!

As Standish leaves, a jaunty young bushman (Aaron Sherritt) comes on. The two men look at each other with interest, then Standish leaves, and Aaron approaches Nicolson.

Aaron They're too good for you in the bush. You don't know where to look.

Max Aaron was the traitor. The middle man who thought he could be smarter than either side. He paid for it with his life.

Aaron There's a cave where you can watch Mrs Byrne. Joe visits at night.

The police follow Aaron into a mountain cave, above the cottage which is now Mrs Byrne's. Hare, the tall police officer, takes over the watch. Darkness falls.

Max The gang went down to Euroa, held up a sheep station, robbed a bank. They cut telegraph lines so no messages got out. (standing near the mask) Ned wrote a letter. It was years before the world knew.

He takes the wrap from the death mask.

Ned (voice from offstage) I am astonished to see members of the Legislative Assembly led astray by such articles as the police, for while an outlaw reigns their pockets swell: 'Tis double pay and country girls'. By concluding, as I have no more paper unless I rob for it, if I get justice, I will cry a go. For I need no lead or powder to revenge my cause, and if words be louder, I will oppose your laws with no offence (remember your railroads), and a sweet goodbye from Edward Kelly, a forced outlaw.

The last words are very faint because Max has put the wrap back over the death mask.

Max He never had a hope. But he fought, and the boys had money for a while. They helped those they trusted.

We see a river, with redgums on either side.

Ned (still offstage) New South Wales!

Max They held up another town. Made a speech. And they had another letter, for all the world to read ...

Ned (offstage, as Max removes the wrap) I wish those men who joined the stock protection society to withdraw their money and give it and as much more to the widows and orphans and poor of Greta district where I spent and will again spend many a happy day fearless free and bold ...

Max (putting the wrap on Ned's death mask once again) If you want to know the rest of it you'll have to read my book!

Ned Can't I be left in peace?

Max Good question. Why am I doing this?

He sits to think. As he does so, we see a modern street scene, anywhere in the north-east of Victoria, the 'Kelly country' of old. Traffic surges through the street, fast, shiny, modern. The scene shows us how much has changed since Ned's day. Max stands restlessly, trying to get on top of his feelings, trying also to get his thoughts in order.

Max What did he achieve? They caught him in the end, and hanged him. And all the talk about a republic of north-east Victoria ... the idea died with Ned. Those men hanging around, for Ned to smash the train at Glenrowan ... they vanished. The next day, or the day after, they were gone. Their talk was only piss and wind. (He takes the wrap off the death mask.) Don't say anything Ned. You were a man of words, but a man of action too.

He stands at a verandah post, watching the modern street. After a moment we become aware of clangorous sounds as ploughshears are beaten into armour. This takes some time, and we hear the outlaws' voices as the armour's made, and tested.

Joe I'll take out Aaron.

Steve Ned and I will look after Glenrowan.

Ned Rip up the rails!

Dan The bastards guarding Aaron will call up a train ...

Ned It'll run off the track while it's rounding the bend ...

Joe And when they crawl out of the wreck ...

We hear many shots, pinging off the armour that they're testing.

Max They were desperate by this stage. They'd had a long winter, and they couldn't see an end.

Ned We decided to bring it to an end!

Steve A short life and a merry one!

Max It wasn't very merry by then.

The modern street dissolves and once again we are looking at a humble wooden cottage. There's a light in its only window, and night surrounds it, outside.

Anton Help! Where am I?

He knocks on the cottage wall. Aaron opens the door.

Ellen No, Aaron. Stay inside. Let me go.

Aaron (putting his wife aside) Who is it?

Anton Anton Veeks. I'm lost.

Aaron You're drunk, Anton. Why don't you take your grog to your tent so you can pass out at home?

Joe (coming forward) It's the end of the road, Aaron, for you.

Aaron We were always friends ...

Joe Not any more.

He fires, Aaron falls, the light in the cottage goes out as the door is slammed. Ellen Sherritt screams and the four policemen inside growl with fear.

Voices Rrrrrrrr ...

Joe Who's in there? Out the lot of you!

Ellen Aaaaaaaahhh!

Joe Out! (He fires.)

Voices Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Joe Ellen, come out! Mrs Barry, come out!

Women Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Police Aaaaaaaahhh!!!

Joe Let the women go! If you're men, you'll defend yourselves!

There's a terrible silence.

Max They wouldn't let the women go. The last thing they wanted was a fight.

Dan Set fire to it. We'll get'em out that way. Shoot'em as they come.

He and Joe drag handfuls of grass against the cottage, but wind blows out their matches.

Joe It's not working.

He fires a couple of shots into the cottage.

Voices (very quietly: in terror) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Dan Not too low. They'll be under the beds, hanging onto the women.

Joe We'll leave Aaron to the crows ...

Dan ... and let them raise the alarm ...

Joe ... we've got a long ride ...

Dan ... to be there before the train.

Anton (as Joe and Dan disappear) I never thought I'd see such a thing.

Ellen (shrilly) Get help, Anton, get help!

Anton (feebly) I'm going to my tent to sleep!

Max The rest is well known. The police stayed in the hut all night. Holding the women. In the morning, they told a Chinaman to take a message, but he was scared. They asked a teacher to take a message, but his wife wouldn't let him go. The Kellys had friends all over the place. It wasn't safe. So Armstrong commandeered a horse. He got to Beechworth in the afternoon, and he told his tale to Superintendent Hare.

Hare, the big man, appears.

Hare We knew something big was going to happen. The Kellys had their spies, but so did we, and we knew that old Mrs Byrne was telling anybody who'd listen that the gang was about to do something that would astonish not only the colony, but the whole wide world.

Max And they did.
Hare They did. First exchange of shots, something got me
 in the arm ...
Sadleir (appearing) I thanked God for the opportunity to
 bring the matter to an end.
Hare I passed out. (He does so.)
Sadleir I got every policeman I could find at Benalla, and I
 hurried to the scene ...
Max ... to do buggerall till morning, and not much after
 that. The police were a shambles in those days. No
 discipline, no training. Uniforms, all pretence ...
Ned What have I been telling you, all this time?
Max Gently Ned. It's your story, but you've had to give it
 to us. Like your life ...

Four suits of armour appear before the audience; the voices of those
that wore them are only heard from offstage.

Joe I'll drink to the Kelly gang, then we'll see how close
 these bastards are!

A shot sounds, and his armour falls with a clang.

Dan Our time's run out ...
Steve We're never getting out of here ...
Dan Two shots'll do it ...
Steve We'll count, one, two, three ...
Dan I don't want anyone to hear ...
Steve Three heartbeats then, then fire ...
Dan Ready?

Steeve Ready.
There are three silent bars, then two shots, fired simultaneously.
Two more suits of armour fall.

Ned I'm alone in a world of anger and rage. I want to
 bring justice down from the skies. I want the earth
 made perfect, but everyone's up to tricks to get a bit
 for themselves ... no matter who they cheat to get it!
 I'm dying for justice because I couldn't find it in life!

He appears in his armour, police fire furiously but without stop-
ping him. Then one of them (Sergeant Steele) lowers his sights and
shoots at Ned's legs. Ned falls to the ground. Police rush in from
everywhere, but Sadleir intervenes.

Sadleir Take him to the station. There's a doctor over there.
Ned's carried to the Glenrowan station. We see him being offered
medical treatment, and a bottle of whisky, which interests him
more.

Sadleir The hotel. Yes Johnstone, do it now.
Johnstone rushes to the hotel under cover of police fire, and sets it
alight. The flames continue until almost the end of this piece.

Sadleir Cover every exit and be ready to fire.
The flames rise higher and higher.
Max Ned was going to do lots of things, but somewhere
 inside himself he was getting ready to die.
Ned Such is life ...

Max puts the wrap around the death mask.

Max We won't look at him any more. You'll only have my word for it now.

Ned (still rageing, though very quietly now, as if from a habit of despair) It will always pay a rich man to be liberal with the poor and make as little enemies as he can as he shall find if the poor is on his side he shall lose nothing by it ...

Max Peace, Ned. You must leave it to writers like me, and the memories of those who come after. Nobody lasts, except in stories ...

Ned Tell my tale. I ask you, do it fairly.

The young woman who put the death mask on its pedestal comes and takes it away.

Max I'm writing this for you, Ned. It's called 'Australian Son'.

Voices (wailing) Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Behind Max, standing at the pedestal with some notes for his book, we see, as at the beginning, a humble cottage in the distance. Enter Standish, Hare, Nicolson and Sadleir, who is carrying Ned's armour, which he puts on the ground with the other three suits.

Standish (whisky glass in hand) What the hell is that noise they're making?

Voices Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Hare (looking at the armour) I think I'll take one for a souvenir. (to Max) You say you're writing a book?

Max indicates the pages on the pedestal in front of him.

Hare Good thinking. I might do the same.

Nicolson (sarcastically) It's a way to set the record straight.

Sadleir Yes. (musing) 'Recollections of a Victorian Police Officer' ...

Hare (triumphantly, and picking up a suit of armour) 'The Last of the Bushrangers!' Heavy bloody thing!

Standish He's taking it to the Clarkes', at Sunbury. Well connected bastard. Oh well, I can't complain. We got them in the end ...

Sadleir (to Max) What did you say you're calling your book?

Max Australian Son.

Voices Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Standish I wish they'd shut up. I can hear them in the Club!

Sadleir The voices of our land. They'll be singing when we're forgotten.

Max bows, the policemen leave, he looks to the cottage in the paddock not so far away, and the voices fade.

For the ideas and impressions stitched together in this libretto I am indebted to all those who have written about the Kelly outbreak, including J.J. Keneally (*The Inner History of the Kelly Gang*), Police Superintendents Sadleir and Hare, and the Royal Commissioners of 1881, but above all to the late Max Brown, whose *Australian Son* affected me deeply long before I came to know Max as a friend.