

THE STIRRING TALE OF THE BOY WHO BECAME



# *The Man from Snowy River*

*Elyne Mitchell*

THE NOVELISATION OF THE FILM

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*Elyne Mitchell*



*All characters in this book are  
entirely fictitious, and no reference  
is intended to any living person.*

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## Chapter One

### BLACK BRUMBY STALLION

The cold autumn wind blew over the mountain peaks. It touched the hides of the wild horses, lifted the jet black and silver manes that shone in the sunset light. The sound of the wind in the granite tors, high above them, filled the mob with urgent disquiet.

The great black stallion tossed his head, gathered his herd, and set off at a wild gallop along the snowgrass ridge. The wind played with the horses, blowing the fluffy seeds of summer's golden billy buttons among their pounding legs, swaying the last remaining creamy candles of the candle-heath in the sphagnum bogs, so that the herd leapt and shied. Tails flew, hooves pounded on the snowgrass, and, with the thud and thunder of their galloping, excitement grew in the mob—passing like wildfire from stallion to mares, from the mares to the foals, to the fillies, to the young colts.

Whither away? Only the oldest of the mares had ever been on this side of the range before, but that black stallion knew his way. Something had drawn him, called him, till he crossed the mountains again.

Down the horses thundered into the dwarf snow gums. But while they were still high in the world, amongst the air and the wind, with the far-flung mountains all



around them, the stallion stopped on a high knoll where the snow gums had long ago been killed by fire. The ancient limbs of the trees, once wind-twisted and pressed low to the ground, were now bleached to silver, and there the herd's leader stood, and there he reared, black above the silver lace of trunks and branches, and he threw a wild neigh ringing. He trumpeted out his great stallion call proclaiming the might he had to bestow—all that was his at birth, all that he had made his, in a lifetime in this high, wild land of snow, and frost, and the blizzard winds.

For that black stallion had seen many winters, galloped across much hard snow—sunk into soft snow, ploughing through it in all its sparkling depth. He had seen the brilliant days of many summers and the pouring rain and steel-hard frosts of many winters; he had seen lightning cleave the sky and set the forest ablaze. He had been shaken by thunder rolling round those granite rocks, and he had known wind that tore away heart and soul—or bore the seed of life. The howl of the dingo was part of his life, and the wild screaming of the black cockatoos. He knew the pigmy possums who travel the mountains on the tracks that the broad-tooth rats make through the alpine scrub. The sparrow hawk of summer had often hovered above him and his herd, and sometimes the black-shouldered kite. All this he held as memories within him . . . and he had known the love and care of human beings—and had chosen the wild.

Any mare that heard his neigh ring out from that high knoll would heed his call and follow him, through snow or flood; any young horse that heard that summons would sense all the excitement of the boundless forest and the high, bare ridges against the sky, and would be moved to join him.

While his herd stamped and snorted, still trembling with pleasure from the gallop, he led off, more slowly now, down between the great pillars of the mountain ash forest.

A dingo howled, somewhere down in a deep gully. The



forest of mountain ash was barely lit by the last of the sunset. One stretch of a little creek that ran at the foot of the woollybutts reflected the sky, so that the sunset colours lay, translucent, on the forest floor. The tops of the trees were briefly silhouetted against the light.

Again from the deep, deep gully came the haunting howl of the dingo, echoing round the timbered ridges—sad, eerie, part of a world into which man rarely strays. Darkness closed in slowly, till only the reflection of stars moved in the creek waters.

The dark bulk of a hut stood in a large, cleared flat. As darkness fell, its shape melted into the night, except for the chinks of light that showed through its slabs and gleamed in its small, square windows. That ancient howl of the dingo sounded again, throwing echoes from rock to rock, crying sorrow, loss, and longing. In the night, the sparks from the hut's chimney flew upwards.

Another sound passed through the bush, and the usual rustlings quietened. Even the dingo was silent. A giant flying phalanger, near the top of the smooth trunk of a ribbon gum, stopped climbing and sat listening to the sound. Animal, or bird, or even bunyip—it was impossible to imagine what made that weird noise. The sound came again, and it came from the hut. It began to turn into some sort of melody.

It stopped, and there were human voices. The flying phalanger continued up the tree, a wombat moved ponderously over the forest floor, then the dingo howl echoed again and again, and the sparks flew upwards above the stone chimney.

Inside the hut, a man's voice said:

"I don't think you'll make our fortune with that harmonium, Jim."

After a few more bars of the tune, Jim answered, laughing:

"It might chase off the dingoes." He stood up, a fair boy of about eighteen, and gently ran his work-scarred but sensitive hands over the veneer surface of the instrument.

He looked across at his father. The spare, strongly



built man was sitting at the end of the table, not far from the wide, open fire. Ledgers and notebooks lay open on the old table. Henry Craig was smiling, but he said:

“It’s the debt collectors that I’d like to see kept off.”

He put an old horseshoe, as a paper weight, on top of a bunch of accounts, and his hand smoothed the page of the ledger.

“Well, they won’t come all the way up here,” Jim said, frowning.

“No, but we won’t get stores or boots next time we go to town.”

A log rolled in the fire. Henry Craig spoke again:

“No matter which way I figure it, nought and nought still equals nought.”

He smiled at Jim and walked to the rough stone fireplace, pushing the log further back with his boot, creating a burst of sparks as he stood there, leaning his elbow on the mantelshelf. A smoke-stained old oilcloth with a scalloped edge covered the rough-hewn shelf.

“Why don’t we get Bess in foal, and pick up some more brood mares, Dad?” Jim suggested. “Why not go in for horses, more? This country breeds good horses.”

Henry moved his arm slightly; the fire glow emphasised his cheekbones and forehead and the shadows deepened the graven lines there. Then he took an old tea cannister from the shelf, flipped up its lid, stepped across the slab floor, and emptied it on to the table by the ledger. A single note fluttered out and a few pennies rattled on the wooden surface. Jim watched silently, his hand still caressing the polished casing of the harmonium.

“That’s why not—nothing to buy mares with,” Henry said, and moved to the stove to start ladling out stew. “If we want to keep this place, we’ll have to go down out of the mountains for a bit, and take a job—mustering, or horse breaking, to earn something more than we can make off this land at present.”

The silence was broken by the long drawn-out “qua-a-ark” of a possum. Up till then he had not even considered that they might have to leave the mountain and



take work in the lower country. Most deeply, he did not wish to go.

Jim could feel the touch of a wind that was gently moving the streamers of bark on the tall mountain ash, fanning the leaves of the snow gums up above; as it entered the hut, it moved some of the papers stuck on the walls. For a second that faint drift of air brought the eucalypt scent of the ash leaves in through the chinks of the hut. He knew that only very rarely would a wind at evening carry that marvellous mountain scent down on to the plains that lay below them. But if they had to go down there . . . He took a deep breath.

Henry put two plates of stew down on the table, got knives and forks from a drawer. The fire seemed to go quiet, and the whisper of the wind ceased. He knew quite well that his wife's illness had cost a lot of money; that, and poor prices for cattle since, had left him badly in debt. He and Jim would simply have to earn more. It wouldn't be the first time that men had worked for wages to make it possible to hold the land they owned.

"If we hired out as a team, I reckon we'd do quite well," he said.

"Not as cooks." Jim looked at the stew with twinkling eyes, but his smile deepened. Yes, they could work as a team.

The chill of the night and the silence seemed to lessen. There was warmth in knowing that his father valued his ability to break in a horse, to cut out a beast on a cattle camp, and to find his way when riding unknown country. He gave a little sigh, like the wind stirring those long leaves on the trees around their mountain clearing, and then tried to look confidently at his father.

"We'd do best breaking in horses," he said, finishing his stew. He poured hot water from a billy into a tin bowl, and rinsed his plate, then sat down at the harmonium and tried to play again. The wheezing and discordance was even worse. At last he gave up, and sat staring into the gloom of the hut.

"Mum really could play this," he said, and his voice



betrayed an aching regret.

Henry moved restlessly. Three years sometimes seemed such a long time, and yet he still rode home to the hut expecting to find her, or turned to speak to her as if she were still at his side. Things had not gone very well since.

“Yes,” he said. “She played beautifully.”

Once again the silence outside was broken by the faint sound of the wind. This time it was in the higher peaks, just the trees murmuring.

A disturbed whinny came from the shed outside.

“Bess can’t have liked your music.” Henry was trying to sound cheerful.

Jim got up.

“I’ll go and see that she is all right,” he said. The shed was quiet again but he took down a lantern, lit it, and walked out.

It was cold outside. Jim shivered and drew in a deep breath, trying to fill himself with the scent of the mountain bush, but even the scent seemed to have faded, as though the bush were withholding itself. The wind had dropped for the moment, and there was no murmur in the trees on the high ridges, no whisper of stirring bark streamers. Jim was used to that feeling in the bush, of silent, age-old waiting, but tonight it was profoundly noticeable.

He walked into the shed, but neither of the animals there greeted him, neither whickered an answer to his soft-spoken words:

“Hi there, Bess. Hi, Bob, old feller.”

Then the dingo howled—quite close.

Jim hung up the lantern. The light gleamed on both pairs of eyes, the mare’s and the gelding’s; it made the harness, hanging on its rough wooden pegs, throw grotesque shadows. He noticed that his father had left his rifle in its saddle bucket below the harness. The dark shapes of the animals blended with the gloom of the shed.

The two horses seemed tense, on edge. He spoke to them gently:

“Whoa Bess, steady girl, steady.”

The mare moved nervously. Something, too, upset the



old gelding. Jim felt his own skin creeping, but he did not know why. Bess snorted; Bob stamped his hooves. Jim stroked Bess's nose, patted her neck. In the half light he could see that her nostrils were flaring and her ears flickering back and forth, listening. Her eyes stared, the whites very noticeable in the lantern light.

"Steady, old girl," he murmured again.

But suddenly he was nearly knocked backwards as she flung up her head and whinnied. The sound filled the slab and bark shed, filled it with wild, throbbing excitement, and yet a touch of fear, too.

She reared and plunged, and reared again, only just missing Jim with her flailing hooves.

Henry Craig came racing across from the hut, and the mare quietened briefly.

Jim was breathless.

"I reckon the dingoes set her off," he said to his father.

Into the momentary quiet, there sounded the piercing call of a stallion.

"Not wild dogs—wild horses," Henry muttered.

Now the mare was out of control, and there was nothing they could do except try to soothe her and keep away from her thrashing hooves. The gelding, too, was banging and crashing around in his stall.

That stallion's call had come from somewhere very close. Henry looked out of the shed and was sure he saw brumbies racing through the trees not too far away.

Jim managed to tie a rope on either side of Bess's headstall and tether her securely. Then he joined his father outside the shed. Suddenly the brumbies broke out of the forest, further up the ridge, their shadows flickering in the faint glow of moonlight, and, as the moon rose, that great, black stallion reared in silhouette against it.

Henry's voice was almost a whisper:

"It's been years since he ran on this side of the mountains."

Then Henry went quickly back into the shed to get his rifle. When he returned, the stallion was still there,



standing on a clear crest of the ridge against the moon. Henry began to load his rifle.

“You’re not going to shoot him?” Jim gasped. “Please, Dad, no!”

Henry answered sharply:

“He’s only going to cause us grief . . . take our horses . . . He’s caused great sadness before.”

Yet, even so, the father hesitated. For how could he shoot a horse he knew had once been made a scapegoat—had once been a symbol of love, and sorrow, and jealousy, even death?

Jim was horrified. His mind raced quickly.

“But Dad, there are some good horses there. They’d be worth a fair bit.”

“Caught and broken, they might,” he replied grimly, raising his rifle.

“No!” shouted Jim.

Startled by this loud cry, the stallion vanished and his herd melted into the bush as quickly as they had come. Slowly Henry Craig unloaded his rifle, and sighed—perhaps with relief.

The two of them stood watching and waiting to see if the brumbies would appear again. In that stallion, magnificent against the rising moon, the father had seen one thing, and his son had seen another.

Jim saw a grand animal, rearing, free and wild; and, though a shiver went down his spine and his skin suddenly seemed to rise in goose flesh, as if something like fear had momentarily swept through the bush, his thoughts turned to how they could catch those horses and break them in, and how, by using the mares for breeding, they might not have to leave their mountain home.

In the stallion Henry saw only a terrible reminder of the past; he recalled an earlier time in the lives of the mountain men, the memory of which should have been buried beneath the snow, but which still lived on, just as that stallion lived on.

“They’d have to be good animals, Dad,” Jim said. “You reckon that old stallion’s a thoroughbred; his mares



must have got away from mountain stations, or from parties riding through, or be daughters of escaped mares—and no one in this area has ever had useless horses. They must be good.”

“Yes, they’d be from good mares all right, and not only from mountain stations,” Henry said, and his voice was sad. “The horses that get away and run wild, even on the plains, always make for the dense bush.”

“We could catch them,” Jim pleaded. He was trying to excite his father’s interest and enthusiasm.

“Hold on, son,” Henry smiled. “That horse has been running free since you were a small child . . . a magnificently cunning animal.”

Jim forgot that little wind of fear blowing through the bush. Ideas and visions began to flow through his head. He had broken in quite a number of horses, and he imagined himself breaking in the brumbies from this thoroughbred stallion’s mob.

“We could build a holding yard, up on the flat spur, and drive them in,” he urged.

His father laughed. “You don’t give up easily, son—I’ll give you that.” Nonetheless he was thinking, wondering if it were worth a try—even if only to please Jim. “No—I don’t think so.”

“But, Dad—”

“No,” his father said firmly. “We’ll yard them on Kelly’s Saddle.”

Jim gave a whoop of joy.

With the mare and gelding safely tethered, and quieter, now, the two walked back through the cold, moonlit night. The fire in the hut had died down to red coals and ash. Feeling tired, they did not even boil the billy for tea, but went straight to bed.

When the moon shadows had already crept round till they were pointing from north to south, Jim half woke. A vision of that stallion’s head and its strong, noble body filled his waking dream; and in his ears his father’s voice was saying: “He will only bring grief.”

Something had disturbed his sleep and he was



shouting: "You're not going to shoot him?" Or was he shouting? For he had not woken his father.

He found himself whispering now: "That beautiful horse could not bring grief." And, in the dark of the night, enveloping him like a dream, came the thought that the black stallion symbolised in his magnificence night and day, life and death, grief and joy.

Then, suddenly fully alert, Jim knew that what had really woken him was a far-away chorus of neighs, and Bess answering it with longing.

He pulled his kangaroo skin rug right up over his chin, determined that Bess should not join the brumbies. But there again were the wild horses calling, calling through the night, and there was Bess's answer ringing out.

## Chapter Two

### TWO GRAVES AND AN EMPTY HUT

A thin mist drifted over the mountain peaks, licked upwards hiding a rocky tor, moved through the snow gums, crept hither and thither down the corridors between the mountain ash. It wreathed about the rugged walls of a steep gorge, then rose, leaving the granite rocks, and flowed over Kelly's Saddle.

It was too thin a mist to deaden the sound of axes. The chopping rang out, sharp in the cold air. A pair of magpies carolled to the early morning.

Through the eddies of mist on the saddle could be seen rails already forming wings, and the start of a holding yard being constructed.

The chopping went on. Henry Craig and Jim were alternating, chop for chop, one on either side of a mountain ash that stood on the steep fall of the saddle. Bess was tethered not far away, her saddle on a log beside her; the gelding stood in logging harness, ready to drag logs into place.

Jim was exuberantly happy: his scheme to catch and yard the brumbies had been adopted. He and his father, working in unison, stopped and changed sides of the tree



without either of them having to say a word to suggest they should change around.

Henry had an amused glint in his eyes. Jim was always a good worker, though at his best with horses, but he was so anxious to make these yards quickly that nothing would tire him. Henry enjoyed the rhythm of swinging an axe; he enjoyed the sound of it chopping into the wood, and the smell of the fresh-cut tree . . . It was really only because Jim, with his sensitivity to horses, made such a good job of breaking them in that Henry had agreed to the idea of catching the brumbies . . . He only wished he could rid himself of the faintly uncomfortable feeling that there had always been something unlucky about that thoroughbred stallion . . .

Henry had been born in the mountains, one of the earliest of the babies born to British settlers near the Snowy River. Though he had worked for a while on the Overflow, he had owned this piece of Snowy River country since well before Jim was born, and had done much felling of tall timber in the forests.

They stopped for a moment, before the final strokes that would fell the tree. Standing there, with the trees towering high above them, Jim laughed as he heard a lyrebird way down in the gorge below, mimicking the sound of their axes: "Chop, chop," it went, and then it whistled as a man would whistle his dog.

"Even a lyrebird is mocking us," Henry said. "It knows we do not need a sapling of this size to fence in a brumby."

"It was you who said that stallion would take some holding," Jim retorted with a grin, and looked approvingly at what they had already constructed—wings that would narrow down into a funnel and force a galloping mob of horses into the holding yard.

"Oh well," Henry said, "better to be certain. Perhaps the bird's only teasing us for trying to work so fast."

They went on chopping until the tree began to creak and groan, and then they stood clear for it to fall. With a great crack, a second of silence, and then that sudden