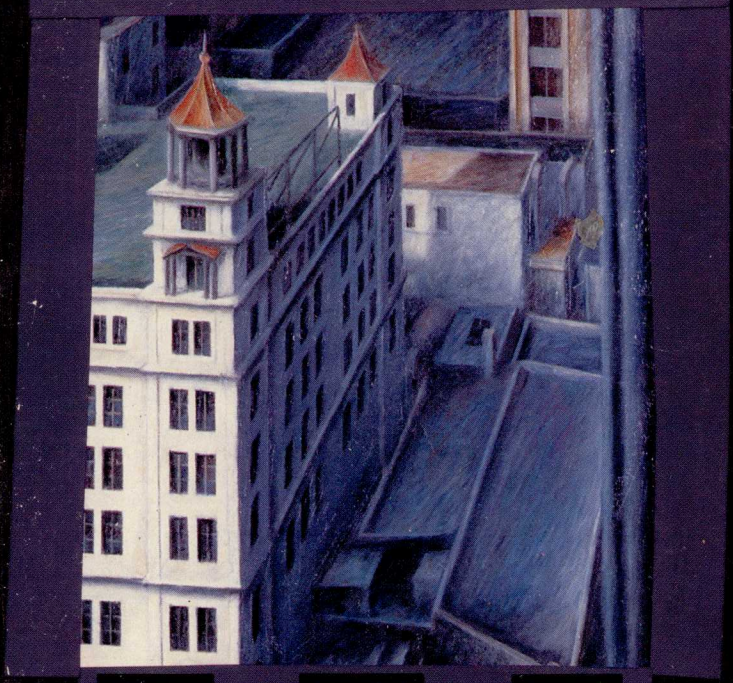
KENNETH "SEAFORTH" MACKENZIE



THE REFUGE

"Written with the wistful grace of one of our most gifted novelists." Sunday Observer

THE REFUGE

Also by Kenneth "Seaforth" Mackenzie

THE YOUNG DESIRE IT
CHOSEN PEOPLE
DEAD MEN RISING

THE REFUGE

KENNETH
SEAFORTH MACKENZIE

ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

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In the first edition of The Refuge *appeared this author's note:*

The Refuge is a work of fiction. All the characters, except those mentioned by their given or assumed names — Neville Chamberlain, Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, General D. MacArthur, H. E. L. Townsend, Jesus, *et alia* — are fictional characters. Thus there need be none of the misunderstanding which prevented the publication in Australia of *Dead Men Rising*. I trust that even the oldest-established legal firms in my own country are in no doubt about this matter.

K.S.M.

Sydney,
1953

To
G. A. FERGUSON, Esquire
in friendship

'All treaties are by their natures false, since they pretend on either hand . . . a willingness to gratify the other's desire that they may the sooner gratify the one's: save only that which a man enters upon with his own soul, to be true unto her.'

MICHAEL PAUL: *The Anatomy of Failure*

ONE

◇

THE END

It was, I found, the most difficult night telephone call I had ever made.

No one would describe me as a nervous man. Years of police reporting give a necessary control of all emotion, not merely a command of the show of it. I have seen men hanged, and the raped and mutilated bodies of young women, and children's bodies that fire has burned, and drowned people on whom fish have been feeding; and for such sights great calmness of spirit is essential. One does not even allow an inward weeping for pity, or for shame at being oneself a man. One looks, and makes notes, and forgets. Nervousness does not come into it.

Yet this telephone call . . . To all the world it was but a routine night call to the headquarters of the criminal investigation branch of the State Police, and all I had to do was to lift the receiver and say 'C.I.B., please,' and the girl would say 'Yes, Mr. Fitzherbert,' and put me through. Or—though it was less desirable—I could use my own direct line, which I prefer to keep clear for incoming calls, for it is the one the police themselves use, ringing me personally instead of the office switchboard. The digits of my home number are the same—1939—and thus, if I am not on duty, they have merely to use the other call-symbol; the number is, of course, unforgettable.

The general reporters' room was fairly busy still, though the country edition must have been just going to bed, for it was eleven o'clock. The tide in the harbour would be flooding westwards towards the bridge under a lowering sky. I had waited for that hour, with, as I thought, no feelings whatever. The management had not yet given me a private room and an

assistant for full-time duty, and my table was in the big room with eighteen others; I walked about, sometimes, between nine and eleven, talking to one man or another, and sometimes sat at my table thinking, hoping that perhaps my own telephone would ring first. But they never bothered me about suicides unless there were peculiar circumstances, or unless it were very late, when they would ring me at home and I would get into touch with the office from there if there were a chance of catching the final or the city edition. If it was not late, they knew I would ring them as usual, at eleven o'clock.

I am certainly not a nervous man. What I had done I had done without fear or fumbling, cleanly, knowing the way—though it was not easy—and the most probable picture it would all make to the police mind, which is as a rule impatient of suicide. Now, however, I found that my hands were sweating profusely, my throat was dry, and in the lower part of my abdomen there was a trembling, jumping sensation; and I felt again the terrible emotion of triumph mixed with and outweighed by black and utter despair, guiltless yet horrified. I forced myself to think of Alan, to remember that what I had done was done for his salvation, not my own, and that I had him to live for; that now he was safe, that dear and beautiful boy.

It was after eleven. If you knew the office sounds in that vast building, you could hear from deep underground, far below street level, the presses running off the country edition, well away by now. At the airfield, the *Gazette* aeroplanes, two of them now, would be warming up out on the runway in the silvery blaze of light. One suicide more or less must mean nothing at all to the men and women of the Australian countryside, who are familiar with death in many forms by the violence of fire and water and the blind malice of accident. . . .

By water. The perspiration tickled the roots of my hair and beard. I took up the house telephone receiver, and said to the girl on the switchboard in my usual voice, 'C.I.B., please, Molly.'

'Yes, Mr. Fitzherbert.'

At this, I felt the excitement and sickness leave me. It was a strong physical sensation, like that of an urgent bodily function timely performed. I sat on the edge of my table swinging one foot and watching the reflection of the ceiling light overhead come and go on the polished toe of that shoe. Often enough I had waited like this for Hubble or one of his men to answer my routine night call, and had been content to wait, assured and at ease. Tonight, it seemed that a long time passed before the harsh click at the other end of the line was followed by the sound of a typewriter working at speed under heavy hands, then by a familiar voice.

'C.I.B.'

'Fitzherbert here, Sergeant. Anything doing?'

That question was the climax of the whole business, and—as happens with so many climaxes—I had not realized it was upon me until I spoke. The sweat ran a little way down my wrist even before the sergeant answered; on my shoe the light was still, and the voices and typewriters in the general room where I sat sounded suddenly loud and many.

'Hullo, Fitz. Nothing much in your line. A gent drove his car over an embankment half an hour ago in Chatswood. Minor injuries. I'll give you details in a minute. A bit of a do at King's Cross—the patrol car's there now, if you can wait half an hour. No details yet. No sign of the chap who got out of the Bay—yes, Manser. Still loose. I'll let you have some reassuring words about that, too. . . . And that's about the lot. Dull life, isn't it?'

Sergeant Hubble I liked. He had put more than one good thing in my way, and given me valuable leads without betraying the trust placed in him by his organization. Tonight, however, his cheery and casual voice was that of a stranger, that of a man I was trying without words to persuade to tell me something he did not know, though I knew it. A sudden compelling desire to prompt him had to be suppressed so strongly that I

found my teeth were clenched painfully, my body rigid with a species of helpless anguish.

'Just a minute, Harry,' I said. 'I'll have that Chatswood smash. Is it worth a picture?'

'Not unless you're light on. A ten-foot drop, not much damage, no one of importance—not even a pinched car. Are you right?'

Moving into the chair, I changed the receiver to my left hand so that I could write. In his most official voice, deep and clear above the bang and rush and ring of the typewriter in the room with him, Sergeant Hubble gave me the story, and then some pointers about the escapee, Manser, who was also a nobody —not even a dangerous criminal. Because the public (which has a perverse and nervous sympathy for those who evade that justice the public itself has decreed) enjoys reading about such evasions, as well as for the reputation of the force, the police are extremely touchy in the matter of these escapes; and this was the fourth in the State in less than three months. My paper's policy has always been to play up the police efforts in such cases—in all cases, in fact, from murder down—and in return we have had a most satisfactory co-operation from those strange, suspicious, arrogant and often frightened men whom I have known to be as brave as at times they have been brutal. I listened and made notes; or perhaps I should say Lloyd Fitzherbert listened and made notes, in a neat shorthand on a tidy block of paper, while I, the secret self of that efficient, experienced and even esteemed police roundsman of the *Sydney Gazette*, stood aside watching with renewed anguish of mind the swift performance of a routine night task. For I had not heard from Hubble what I must hear if I hoped to sleep that night (or, said the subdued, unreasoning voice of despair, to sleep ever again); and, thinking of the tide in the harbour, how it must now be approaching its fullness, I knew it was time; it was time . . .

'And that's that,' Hubble said at last. 'Make what you like of

Manser. He's been sighted, which means we ought to have him by tomorrow night at the latest. They're coming in now from the Cross after putting two men and a woman in Darlinghurst for the night. I think it was only a bun-fight. Ring you back. So long.'

He hung up before I could speak again; but that did not matter, for I had nothing to say that could be said to a police sergeant, however friendly. The nauseated sensation came over me again, and the dark and as it were drunken despair of mind. I put the receiver back on its trestle and sat looking at it. This period was one I had only half-foreseen, knowing it must be lived through but not realizing that a nervous exhaustion such as I had known only once before in my life—when Alan was born and my wife of less than two years' marriage died—would make the endurance of it so hard.

Behind me, the last man on late duty was packing up to go. In the big room, with its barren spread of now vacant tables under the insufficient ceiling lights of white glass, the air was as stale and vitiated as that of an empty theatre after a show. It felt warm, in spite of the bleak May night outside in the streets; I knew that once again the air-conditioning system was out of order on our floor, and the general room, windowless, set in the middle of the building and surrounded by corridors, became at such times almost uninhabitable, and smelt of lavatories. My mind in a sort of frenzy underlined the physical discomfort; I felt I must go out and breathe the cold air of the emptying streets which by compariosn would seem sweet. Only when I had typed out my notes taken from Hubble, and was about to carry the copy to the sub-editors and go on down the imposing lower staircase to the street door, did I realize that I was still waiting—I could not yet leave that telephone lying silent as if in exhausted sleep on its rest, not for more than a minute or two. When I did leave—probably at about midnight, perhaps later, if the call I must hear had not yet come—Hubble could briefly be let know I was to be found at home

within half an hour; within fifteen minutes. . . . A taxi would do it.

The subs had their heads down above the broad table which ran like a great brown polished horseshoe from one door to the other in the inner wall of their room. Unlike the general reporting staff, they could seldom leave their seats at that table during the eight long hours of duty. It was safe to put them into a room with windows overlooking the street—safe and healthy, I suppose. Now for the most part they were absorbed, for it was a busy time, with the cables still coming in from daytime Europe. In the corner annexe which also overlooked the street, the overseas teletype machine kept up a continuous solid rattle and ring, working away on its own as though moved by a human conscience inside its heavy metal case. I left the door open into the passage so that I could hear my telephone if it rang, and took my copy to the basket in front of Blake, the chief sub-editor, who was reading a page-proof. I did not wish now to talk to anyone, but Blake did; he had got the main body of the so-called final edition away, and as usual at this time of night he was bored, and boredom made his thin, sharp, white face with the ginger-red Chaplin moustache and penetrating green eyes look to be consumed with anger. However, as I knew by now, he merely wished for a cup of coffee upstairs in the staff dining-room, and a break away from that table where he must spend more than half the night, five nights out of seven.

Until I put my copy into it, the wire basket was empty. The chief cable-sub was getting paper direct from the teletype machine at the hands of a gum-chewing boy whose face in the harsh light was almost as white, though by no means as thin, as Blake's. Blake snatched the few sheets out of the basket, glanced at them, called out '*Bill!*' in a sharp tenor voice that perfectly matched his own red-and-white colour, and sank back in his wooden armchair to look at me at last.

'Nothing big, Lloyd?' he said. 'We're short of crime. No,

seriously. How about going out and committing a nice juicy murder? A man with your experience, you ought to be able to get away with it.'

Such is the untrustworthy state of a mind battling with strong emotion that for the flashing part of a second I was impelled to answer by saying, 'I have done that once since sunset, and once is enough for a lifetime.' Instead, I laughed, though I had not meant to, nor to laugh so loudly. The room seemed to echo with it, but no head was raised, no face turned. Only Blake looked slightly surprised, and his thin mouth relaxed into a smile of sudden, complete charm.

'Oh come,' he said, 'it's not as funny as that. In fact, it's not funny at all, I know. I did once see a film—or maybe it was in a book I read—where the ace crime reporter goes out and commits the perfect crime, just to make news. Hollywood and the Johnson office being what they are—to say nothing of the deep-seated moral rectitude of the film-going public, or so they say—the poor blighter wasn't allowed to get away with it. I forget what happened, but I know he was duly and fittingly punished.'

All this was spoken at nervous high speed, and ended with a snap-to of his thin lips, unsmiling again. Blake was said to have been one of the really crack officers of the Australian army during the recent war. Looking at him sitting there bored and impatient in the urgent stillness of that room, I could easily believe this to have been so: with his profound and unconscious personal charm which only his friends were allowed to see went all the secret signs of an impersonal ruthlessness, perhaps cruelty, so perceptible to me that sometimes when I was with him I felt that for him the state of war never had been and never would be ended. He had about him always the air of immediate command, even—as now—in his times of greatest boredom.

My eyes saw him, part of my mind was yet again summing him up, but all the time I listened for the bell of my telephone;

and I found I was feeling cold in every part of my body. That laugh had done me no good; it was as though it had come near to shaking loose my grasp on something on which I must retain my strongest hold, or perish. I had turned to go, to cross the room to the door, cross the passage to the big room opposite, with its faintly foul atmosphere, and once more sit at my own table, waiting, when Blake with a muttered exclamation in a tone of impatience and disgust rose from his chair and like a boy vaulted the shining curve at the very centre of the subs' table, and stood beside me, as still as though he had been there all the time.

'Come up for some coffee,' he said. 'You don't look your usual self tonight, Fitz. Too much petty crime, no doubt. Come and have a cup of coffee—my shout.'

'I can't,' I said. 'I'm waiting for the C.I.B. to call me about some trouble at the Cross.'

'How much?' he asked instantly, seeming to forget about his cup of coffee. 'We're full.' However much he might pretend, and jump about like a schoolboy, he was never off duty in that office; he had translated his war into an alert battle against space and time—literally—and this he pursued with a vigour of mind equal to that of his lean, trim body. It was thanks to him more than to any other individual that, in spite of the whims and vagaries and occasional rather petulant modifications of policy higher up, the old *Gazette* had become more concise, cleaner in outline, more readable and so more influential than it had ever been.

'Three or four inches, I imagine—no more,' I told him. 'Keep it for the city if you like.'

'We'll whittle a bit more off that Chief Secretary on the sanctity of the kangaroo, if necessary,' he said. 'With a little less publicity he might show a little more sense. I don't know why Scotty insists on using him—except, of course, that he's always good for sending the correspondence columns mad. Can't your 'phone call wait ten minutes?'