The Graven Image

Hornung, E. W., Rowland, Peter

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AFTERWORD

AND THERE, ABRUPTLY, the narrative ends. We take our leave of Jeanette, of Daisy, of Martin and of Gunbar Jack—or, if it be preferred, of David Auburn, for most of Hornung’s readers would have realised, from the moment of his very first appearance in the story, that the mysterious reclusive stockman at Nine Mile gate, the “Englishman With a Past,” is none other than the love-sick portrait painter whom they had encountered on the very first page. The author has gone to immense pains to make that clear to us. (The really astonishing twist to the story would have been, of course, if Gunbar Jack had turned out to be someone completely different.) It entailed, admittedly, acceptance of a massive coincidence—that (in preference to joining the Foreign Legion, though it might have been a close call) David should have fled to the selfsame far corner of the earth to which Jeanette would inexorably be heading four years later. It foreshadows Casablanca, with Rick’s tortured exclamation of disbelief that “of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.” But Casablanca, like The Graven Image, was a romance (with a large dollop of humour thrown in), and on such occasions disbelief has to be suspended.
It seems that the end of the book is almost in sight and it also seems as though we know exactly what it is. David and Jeanette are within hailing distance of one another and Daisy is surely destined to bring them both together—although both of them have, admittedly, sworn her to secrecy about their private histories. She is, clearly, the one person in possession of all the relevant facts, and when a jigsaw is composed of just two pieces, with the jagged edges of the first corresponding to those of the second, it ought surely not to be beyond the wit of the prettiest of feather-headed girls to cry “Eureeka!” or “Crikey!”—followed up, if need be, with “Well, who would have thought it?” But one has the strong suspicion that, preoccupied afresh with her own affairs—and, overwhelming all other considerations, her forthcoming marriage to Henry Flood—she is going to be rather slow to make the necessary connection. The suspense needs to be spun out, and the reader needs to be kept on tenterhooks for a little while longer.

But for how much longer? The text of the incomplete *The Graven Image* has already run to 47,000 words—this compares with completed totals of 45,000 for *A Bride from the Bush* (1890) and 50,000 for *The Boss of Taroomba* (1894), although *Tiny Luttrell* (1893) ran to 80,000 and was a two-volume production. One would hazard a guess that there are at least another 13,000 needed and possibly as many as 18,000. Hornung wrote at a steady, measured pace and was not going to speed up the action simply to accelerate the arrival
of a happy ending. There would be some more twists and
turns before that ending arrived.

Gunbar Jack has signalled his intention to move on at an
early date. One scenario could be that he arrives at the home-
stead to collect his final pay-cheque and that he happens to
do so on a Sunday evening. He will be just in time to join the
other hands for the weekly service. He will glimpse (from
afar) a certain fair-haired girl, with her back to him, strum-
ming away at the piano. He will not identify her as Jeanette
but the sight may well awaken some painful memories. But
for the connection to be made then and there would be too
abrupt, not to say trite. He will collect his cheque and ride
away into the night without delay, nursing those painful
memories. A few distracted words he may let slip to Martin
(or Henry) as he makes his departure, with some degree of
emotion, and Martin (or Henry) will be puzzled as to what
they could possibly mean.

Some days later Martin (or Henry) will happen to men-
tion them to Daisy and it is at this point that the penny
drops. She is still bound by promises of secrecy, of course,
and cannot possibly reveal to Martin (or Henry) what she
knows, but she implores Martin to give chase and to bring
Gunbar Jack back to the homestead—from Melbourne, in all
probability—without delay. The mission will be fulfilled, of
course, and—as two exhausted riders loom in sight, on the
very day of her wedding (half-an-hour behind the Minister,
let’s assume)—Daisy hurries in to see Jeanette (totally un-
aware of what’s afoot) and implores her, as a special favour, to break her pledge not to play a certain piece of music—insisting, with tears in her eyes, that it is essential that she do so. For this is Day’s day, and nothing can be denied her. (“Play it again, Sam!” comes disrespectfully to mind at this point.) Jeanette reluctantly agrees, while insisting that it will most definitely be for the very last time, and as David Auburn rides up to the homestead he is greeted by the once-familiar strains of Schumann’s “Schlummerlied” wafting from an open window. Unable to believe his ears, he rushes in (and Daisy tactfully makes herself scarce, to prepare for imminent plight-trothing with Henry). The music comes to a halt—and so, indeed, does the narrative. Anything else could only be an anti-climax. (Though there might, admittedly, be a hint that the ceremony will be transformed, at very short notice, into a double wedding, and that the Boss will have two brides to give away. And Martin might have the last sardonic word.)

In broad-brush terms, this will pass muster as a conclusion to the book and something on these lines is almost certainly what Hornung—at one level—had in mind. But there was another major issue that needed to be resolved, and he was not clear, for the moment, how he was going to do this. This may have necessitated a pause which broadened into an indefinite delay. Other projects claimed his attention and The Graven Image remained unfinished. The move to a new home, and perhaps another bout of ill-health, might also
have served to distance him still further from the white-heat of creation so far as this particular batch of characters was concerned. And, finally, the threads were lost.

The greatest problem of all, exemplified in the very title of the book, is what is Jeanette going to make of David—and what is David, for his part, going to make of Jeanette? For the truth of the situation is that they barely know one another. And, to make matters worse, each of them has a totally inaccurate concept of the true character of the other. The reader is handicapped by never having seen them in a normal, happy relationship. When the story starts, they are formally engaged but that engagement is broken off almost immediately. The only time we see them together, in the presence of Mrs Burtrand, their relationship is coming to an icy but dignified conclusion. Only as David leaves the room, after he has inadvertently betrayed the true depths of his emotion, does Jeanette find herself falling in love with him for the very first time. A subsequent flashback, in which we learn that he enjoyed her piano-playing and that “Schlummerleid” (as interpreted by her) was his favourite piece above all others, is the only glimpse we have of what their relationship was like in happier days.

Jeanette, engaged in bitter self-recrimination, now builds up a totally false impression of David as a strong, heroic, silent figure, who will henceforth dedicate himself solely to his art. He becomes a graven image, the very epitome of manly independence, and one that she worships. She has no
idea, of course, that he has paid a second visit to her home, to find out from the scheming Mrs Burtrand how the land lies, and that he has left it in what are very nearly floods of tears. The reality and the image do not match up. Similarly, David now regards the unattainable Jeanette as cruel and heartless beyond all measure, and he rips her portrait to shreds in a mood of great bitterness and savage pleasure. Four years hence, he is perhaps a little closer to the image she had conjured up for herself, but very far from being the great painter that she has automatically assumed will have come into existence by this time. He is still learning his craft and his apprenticeship is not yet complete.

Clarifying the relationship between the genuine David and the genuine Jeanette, so that they could start afresh on sounder foundations, was the one task that Hornung needed to tackle seriously before the book could be brought to a real conclusion. He could not duck it, but nor could he see, for the moment, how it was to be accomplished. He had painted himself into a corner. Anything that followed the fairy-tale conclusion sketched in above could only be an anti-climax, and the briefest of Epilogues would hardly have sufficed. Yet at what point, in the closing passages of his narrative, could the couple have a heart-to-heart talk, and sort out basic matters between them, without losing the interest of the reader? High romance would be dwindling into mundane business transactions, though a measure of disillusionment on Jeanette’s part might be counter-balanced by a freshly-
kindled passion on David’s. Reality, if allowed to intrude into fairy-tales, can be a sobering process. Could it be that, like Candide and Cunégonde, they will have become a little wiser by the end of the day and prepared to go forward in genuine partnership, facing up to the world as it really is? Or is David, like Rick, fated to lose the girl for a second time? These are problems that Hornung was unable to resolve.

Lesser questions also come to mind. Are David and Jeanette to remain in Australia or are they to go Home? How is Mrs Burtrand going to get her richly-deserved cum- uppance? What has become of that copy of Owen Almeric, which has so mysteriously disappeared? (It is just conceivable that lovesick Debenham, suffering in the shadows, could enlighten us on this point.) And will anyone ever get round to tuning that piano?

Those familiar with Hornung’s early life will have encountered frequent autobiographical allusions in these chapters. The town of Illingborough, unplaced geographically, is a thinly disguised Middlesbrough, and David Auburn—like his creator—has suffered the mortification of discovering, after returning from his travels abroad, his father laid low by severe financial problems and the family home in new ownership. Jeanette—also like her creator—is despatched to Australia so that she will be able to recover her health. After arriving in Melbourne, she travels to a homestead in the Riverina—just as Hornung did, where he took up the post of tutor to the Parsons family. She becomes, in effect,
a female version of Hornung, and the wonderment and fascination she experiences in seeing new places and adapting to a totally different lifestyle is even told, momentarily, in the first person singular. She loses her way in the Bush—“You never think of such things when you are fresh from Home,” the author confides to us. Elsewhere, he complains of “the intolerable dullness of a summer evening in the backblocks.” It is now impossible to gauge the extent to which the characters in the book were otherwise based upon genuine people, although Edmund Hattersley probably reflects the personality of Richard Dowling to some extent. And it is interesting to note that twice in the text Hornung absentmindedly refers to Daisy as “Mabel,” which indicates that he was definitely portraying someone he knew—could there have been a Mabel in the Parsons family?—although he may simply have been indebted to her for the slight stutter. (The names “Daisy” and “Mabel” can be merged, of course, and bearing in mind the extent to which she had been entrusted with the ultra-secret confidences of both David and Jeanette, one would dearly love to have seen a subsequent chapter bearing the title “What Daisy Knew.”)

The surname “Auburn” had featured in “A Spoilt Negative” (1888) and the surname of Jeanette’s relations recurs in “The Ballad of Ensign Joy” (1917). Place-names from The Graven Image would also surface in a couple of short stories—“The Voice of Gunbar” (1893) and “The Poet of Jumping Sandhills” (1911). In the latter, a lady from Eng-
land, sister of a popular writer of fiction about Australia, retraces her brother’s footsteps and visits locations which, “with somewhat cynical iteration,” his tales had made famous; she is gratified to find that the Jumping Sandhills do indeed “shimmer and change places, like living things.” She stays at the very same homestead where he had lived twenty years earlier, and declares that everything is just as he had described it—“the wire fences and the crows—the corrugated roofs—there! That’s the very noise he says they make in the heat!” And, to complete her delight, it transpires that the scruffy boundary-rider whom she had encountered briefly on the last lap of her journey is none other than a famous poet who had been seeking peace and seclusion by tending sheep, under a false name, far from the madding crowd. (We gather that he will not be quite so alone in future.) Elements of The Graven Image were also reworked in The Boss of Taroomba (1894). The hero (praise be!) is a humble piano-turner who, among other things, wins over the heroine with his rendition of Schumann’s “Schlummerlied.”

So faint echoes of The Graven Image would be picked up in some of Hornung’s subsequent writings, and looking back he may simply have regarded it as apprentice work and a legitimate target for gentle self-mockery. But it is heartbreaking that such a beautifully developed narrative—seemingly four-fifths complete, and endowed with its own richness and intensity—should never have been published in the author’s lifetime. It must be acknowledged that his skills, at the age
of twenty-five, were astonishing. His literary style was fresh and graceful and the extent of his vocabulary remarkable. He knew when, and when not, to exercise restraint. Working with confidence on a wide canvas, and endowed with innate powers of description and perception, he was able to probe, with insight and compassion, into the thoughts, motives and desires of half-a-dozen disparate characters. The human comedy was being played out once again in a variety of settings, in a manner of which Trollope himself would surely have approved. His delighted mentor, Richard Dowling, might well have exclaimed, in common with Edmund Hattersley, “I didn’t look for stuff like this from you for years to come!”

The fact that the author somehow lost his way or was interrupted when it came to tying up all the loose ends and bringing his saga to a successful conclusion is a matter for deep regret. One can only speculate, as the present writer has tried to do, on how matters might have developed had the visitor from Porlock, or a factor equally disrupting, not put in an appearance. But one can rejoice, nevertheless, that Hornung’s third book has now appeared in print, almost in its entirety, one hundred and twenty-five years after it was written. In completed form, it would have been a more-than-worthy successor to *A Bride from the Bush*. Its appearance, particularly at a time when a significant anniversary of his birth is to be celebrated in 2016, can only enhance his reputation and give fresh pleasure to his ever-growing army of admirers.