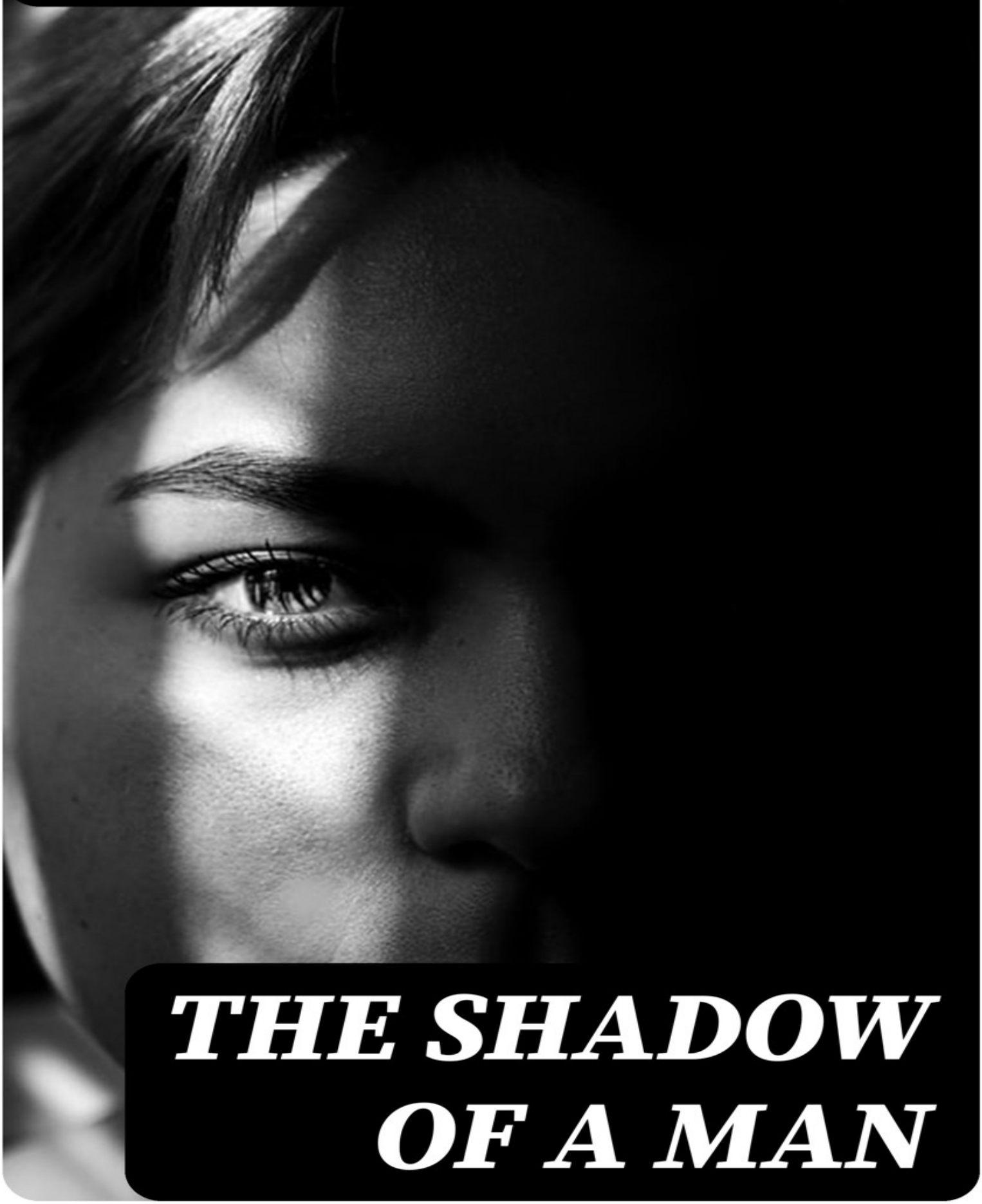
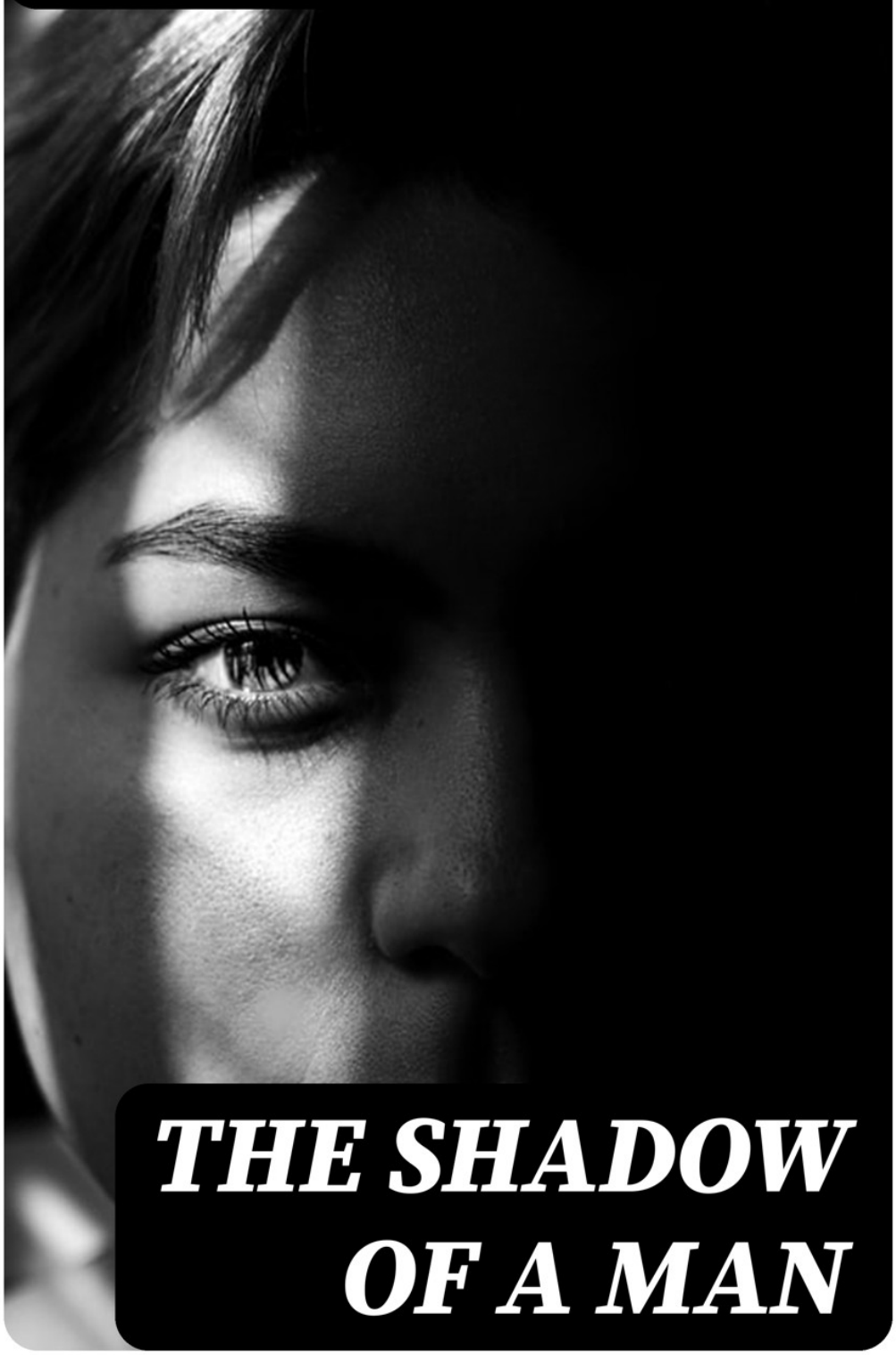
E. W. HORNUNG



THE SHADOW OF A MAN

E. W. HORNUNG



THE SHADOW OF A MAN

E. W. Hornung

The Shadow of a Man

EAN 8596547169116

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

Table of Contents

I

Table of Contents

THE BELLE OF TOORAK

"And you're quite sure the place doesn't choke you off?"

"The place? Why, I'd marry you for it alone. It's just sweet!"

Of course it was nothing of the kind. There was the usual galaxy of log huts; the biggest and best of them, the one with the verandah in which the pair were sitting, was far from meriting the name of house which courtesy extended to it. These huts had the inevitable roofs of galvanised iron; these roofs duly expanded in the heat, and made the little tin thunder that dwellers beneath them grow weary of hearing, the warm world over. There were a few pine-trees between the buildings, and the white palings of a well among the pines, and in the upper spaces a broken but persistent horizon of salt-bush plains burning into the blinding blue. In the Riverina you cannot escape these features: you may have more pine-trees and less salt-bush; you may even get blue-bush and cotton-bush, and an occasional mallee forest; but the plains will recur, and the pines will mitigate the plains, and the dazzle and the scent of them shall haunt you evermore, with that sound of the hot complaining roofs, and the taste of tea from a pannikin and water from a water-bag. These rude refinements were delights still in store for Moya Bethune, who saw the bush as yet from a comfortable chair upon a cool verandah, and could sing its praises with a clear conscience. Indeed, a real

enthusiasm glistened in her eyes. And the eyes of Moya happened to be her chief perfection. But for once Rigden was not looking into them, and his own were fixed in thought.

"There's the charm of novelty," he said. "That I can understand."

"If you knew how I revel in it—after Melbourne!"

"Yes, two days after!" said he. "But what about weeks, and months, and years? Years of this verandah and those few pines!"

"We could cover in part of the verandah with trellis-work and creepers. They would grow like wildfire in this heat, and I'm sure the owners wouldn't mind."

"I should have to ask them. I should like to grow them inside as well, to hide the papers."

"There are such things as pictures."

"They would make the furniture look worse."

"And there's such a thing as cretonne; and I'm promised a piano; and there isn't so much of their furniture as to leave no room for a few of our very own things. Besides, there's lots more they couldn't possibly object to. Curtains. Mantel-borders. I'm getting ideas. You won't know the place when I've had it in hand a week. Shall you mind?"

He did not hear the question.

"I don't know it as it is," he said; and indeed for Rigden it was transformation enough to see Moya Bethune there in the delicious flesh, her snowy frock glimmering coolly in the hot verandah, her fine eyes shining through the dust of it like the gems they were.

His face said as much in the better language which needs no words.

"Then what's depressing you?" asked Moya brightly.

"I dread the life for you."

"But why?"

"I've been so utterly bored by it myself."

Her hand slid into his.

"Then you never will be again," she whispered, with a touching confidence.

"No, not on my own account; of course not," said Rigden. "If only——"

And he sighed.

"If only what?"

For he had stopped short.

"If only you don't think better of all this—and of me!"

The girl withdrew her hand, and for a moment regarded Rigden critically, as he leant forward in his chair and she leant back in hers. She did not care for apologetic love-making, and she had met with more kinds than one in her day. Rigden had not apologised when he proposed to her the very week they met (last Cup-week), and, what was more to his credit, had refused to apologise to her rather formidable family for so doing. Whereupon they were engaged, and all her world wondered. No more Government House—no more parties and picnics—but "one long picnic instead," as her brother Theodore had once remarked before Moya, with that brutal frankness which lent a certain piquancy to the family life of the Bethunes. And the mere thought of her brother accounted for so much in her mind,

that Moya was leaning forward again in a moment, and her firm little hand was back in its place.

"I believe it's Theodore!" she cried suspiciously.

"I—I don't understand," he said, telling the untruth badly.

"You do! He's been saying something. But you mustn't mind what Theodore says; he's not to be taken seriously. Oh, how I wish I could have come up alone!" cried Moya, with fine inconsistency, in the same breath. "But next time," she whispered, "I will!"

"Not quite alone," he answered. And his tone was satisfactory at last. And the least little wisp of a cloud between them seemed dispersed and melted for ever and a day.

For Moya was quite in love for the first time in her life, though more than once before she had been within measurable distance of that enviable state. This enabled her to appreciate her present peace of mind by comparing it with former feelings of a less convincing character. And at last there was no doubt about the matter. She had fallen a happy victim to the law of contrasts. Society favourite and city belle, satiated with the attractions of the town, and deadly sick of the same sort of young man, she had struck her flag to one who might have swum into her ken from another planet; for the real bush is as far from Toorak and Hawthorn, and The Block in Collins Street, as it is from Hyde Park Corner.

It may be that Moya saw both bush and bushman in the same rosy light. To the impartial eye Rigden was merely the brick-red, blue-eyed type of Anglo-Saxon: a transparent character, clean of body and mind, modest but

independent, easy-going in most things, immovable in others. But he had been immovable about Moya, whose family at its worst had failed to frighten or to drive him back one inch. She could have loved him for that alone; as it was it settled her; for Moya was of age, and the family had forthwith to make the best of her betrothal.

This they had done with a better grace than might have been expected, for the Bethunes had fine blood in them, though some of its virtue had been strained out of this particular branch. Moya none the less continued to realise the disadvantages of belonging to a large family when one wishes to form a family of two. And this reflection inspired her next remark of any possible interest to the world.

"Do you know, dear, I'm quite glad you haven't got any people?"

Rigden smiled a little strangely.

"You know what I mean!" she cried.

"I know," he said. And the smile became his own.

"Of course I was thinking of my own people," explained Moya. "They can't see beyond Toorak—unless there's something going on at Government House. And I'm so tired of it all—wouldn't settle there now if they paid me. So we're out of touch. Of course I would have loved any one belonging to you; but they mightn't have thought so much of me."

If she was fishing it was an unsuccessful cast. Rigden had grown too grave to make pretty speeches even to his betrothed.

"I wish you had known my mother," was all he said.

"So do I, dear, and your father too."

"Ah! I never knew him myself."

"Tell me about them," she coaxed, holding his sunburnt hand in one of hers, and stroking it with the other. She was not very inquisitive on the subject herself. But she happened to have heard much of it at home, and it was disagreeable not to be in a position to satisfy the curiosity of others. She was scarcely put in that position now.

"They came out in the early days," said Rigden, "both of the colony and of their own married life. Yet already these were numbered, and I was born an orphan. But my dear mother lived to make a man of me: she was the proudest and the poorest little woman in the colony; and in point of fact (if this matters to you) she was not badly connected at home."

Moya said that it didn't matter to her one bit; and was unaware of any insincerity in the denial.

"I don't tell you what her name was," continued Rigden. "I would if you insisted. But I hate the sound of it myself, for they treated her very badly on her marriage, and we never used to mention them from one year's end to another."

Moya pressed his hand, but not the point, though she was sorely tempted to do that too. She had even a sense of irritation at his caring to hide anything from her, but she was quick to see the unworthiness of this sentiment, and quicker to feel a remorse which demanded some sort of expression in order to restore complete self-approval. Yet she would not confess what had been (and still lingered) in her mind. So she fretted about the trifle in your true lover's fashion, and was silent until she hit upon a compromise.

"You know—if only anybody could!—how I would make up to you for all that you have lost, dearest. But nobody can. And I am full of the most diabolical faults—you can't imagine!"

And now she was all sincerity. But Rigden laughed outright.

"Tell me some of them," said he.

Moya hesitated; and did not confess her innate curiosity after all. She was still much too conscious of that blemish.

"I have a horrible temper," she said at length.

"I don't believe it."

"Ask Theodore."

"I certainly shouldn't believe him."

"Then wait and see."

"I will; and when I see it I'll show you what a real temper is like."

"Then——"

"Yes?"

"Well, I suppose I've had more attention than I deserve. So I suppose you might call me unreasonable—exacting—in fact, selfish!"

This was more vital; hence the hesitation on his part.

"When I do," said Rigden, solemnly, "you may send me about my business."

"It may be too late."

"Then we won't meet our troubles half-way," cried the young man, with virile common-sense. "Come! We love each other; that's good enough to go on with. And we've got the station to ourselves; didn't I work it well? So don't let's talk through our necks!"

The bush slang made the girl smile, but excitement had overstrung her finer nerves, and neither tone nor topic could she change at will.

"Shall we always love each other, darling?"

And there was the merest film of moisture upon the lovely eyes that were fixed so frankly upon his own.

"I can only answer for myself," he said, catching her mood. "I shall love you till I die."

"Whatever I do?"

"Even if you give me up."

"That's the one thing I shall never do, dearest."

"God bless you for saying it, Moya. If I knew what I have ever done or can do to deserve you!"

"Don't, dear ... you little dream ... but you will know me by and by."

"Please Heaven!"

And he leant and kissed her with all his might.

"Meanwhile—let us promise each other—there shall be no clouds between us while I am up here this week!"

"I'll kiss the Book on that."

"No shadows!"

"My dear child, why should there be?"

"There's Theodore——"

"Bother Theodore!"

"And then there are all those faults of mine."

"I don't believe in them. But if I did it would make no difference. It's not your qualities I'm in love with, Moya. It's yourself—so there's an end of it."

And an end there was, for about Rigden there was a crisp decisiveness which had the eventual advantage of a nature

only less decided than his own. But it was strange that those should have been the last words.

Still stranger was it, as they sat together in a silence happier than their happiest speech, and as the lowering sun laid long shadows at their feet, that one of these came suddenly between them, and that it was not the shadow of pine-tree or verandah-post, but of a man.

II

Table of Contents

INJURY

It was not Theodore, however. It was a man whom Moya was thankful not to have seen before. Nor was the face more familiar to Rigden himself, or less unlovely between the iron-grey bristles that wove a wiry mat from ear to ear, over a small head and massive jaws. For on attracting their attention the man lifted his wideawake, a trick so foreign to the normal bushman that Rigden's eyebrows were up from the beginning; yet he carried his swag as a swag should be carried; the outer blanket was the orthodox "bluey," duly faded; and the long and lazy stride that of the inveterate "sundowner."

"Eureka Station, I believe?" said the fellow, halting.

"That's the name," said Rigden.

"And are you the boss?"

"I am."

"Then Eureka it is!" cried the swagman, relieving himself of his swag, and heartily kicking it as it lay where he let it

fall.

"But," said Rigden, smiling, "I didn't say I had any work for you, did I?"

"And I didn't ask for any work."

"Travellers' rations, eh? You'll have to wait till my storekeeper comes in. Go and camp in the travellers' hut."

Instead of a thank-you the man smiled—but only slightly—and shook his iron-grey head—but almost imperceptibly. Moya perceived it, however, and could not imagine why Rigden tolerated a demeanour which had struck her as insolent from the very first. She glanced from one man to the other. The smile broadened on the very unpleasant face of the tramp, making it wholly evil in the lady's eyes. So far from dismissing him, however, Rigden rose.

"Excuse me a few minutes," he said, not only briefly, but without even looking at Moya; and with a word to the interloper he led the way to the station store. This was one of the many independent buildings, and not the least substantial. The tramp followed Rigden, and in another moment a particularly solid door had closed behind the pair.

Moya felt at once hurt, aggrieved, and ashamed of her readiness to entertain any such feelings. But shame did not remove them. It was their first day together for two interminable months, and the afternoon was to have been their very very own. That was the recognised arrangement, and surely it was not too much to expect when one had come five hundred miles in the heat of January (most of them by coach) to see one's *fiancé* in one's future home. This afternoon, at least, they might have had to themselves. It should have been held inviolate. Yet he could desert her