

Shame the Stars

Bill let his eyes wander over Elsie as she lay beside him reading her latest Mills and Boon. Whisps of grey hair framed her face and the hands that cradled her novel were mottled with age spots yet he thought to himself, she's as beautiful today as the day we first met over 75 years ago.

Bill remembered it well.



It was a hot, sticky Saturday night and all the eligible young lads and ladies were gathered at the town hall for the big dance – the most important social event of the week. Party lights adorned the rafters, masking the peeling paint and a punch bowl and glasses were set up in one corner under the watchful eye of two elderly matrons. A five-piece band commanded the front stage entertaining locals with a mix of Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire and jaunty jazz numbers. Fanning out along one side of the room, women in figure-hugging satin in hues of peacock blue, dusty pink and emerald green perched on the edge of chairs chatting with friends, eyes searching for a suitor brave enough to whip them onto the dance floor. On the other side, the men stood together in groups, laughing and sneaking peeks at the ladies, egging each other on to take the first step.

As Bill approached the entrance nervous chatter, laughter and music greeted him. He ran his fingers under the sweaty collar of his starched shirt, straightened his tie and jacket and wiped his hands on his freshly pressed pants. His unruly dark hair was slicked down with brill cream and his shoes and hair shone under the lights. Tanned from working under the harsh Australian sun, Bill was a tall, handsome man reminiscent of a rugged Errol Flynn. As he strode into the hall he saw her.

And that's when he thought he'd been struck by lightning.

'Strewth,' he muttered as she floated past him in a ruffled white chiffon dress. Her raven curls swept up around her head, the elegant shape of her neck, her fair skin and blue eyes took his breath away.

As she moved through the crowd, a burly man Bill didn't recognise grabbed her around the middle, swung her in the air and then crushed her against him. 'How about a kiss sweetheart,' he slurred puckering his lips. The slap of her hand on his cheek resonated around the room as she stared him down. The once brash man mumbled an apology before retreating and the fearless beauty continued on her way, holding her head high as she joined an excitable woman with bright red hair and a mass of freckles. He recognised the redhead; it was Daphne Jones who worked at her family's grocery store in town. Ignoring the call of his mates, Bill positioned himself closer to the two ladies.

'Hello Elsie, are you alright?' bellowed Daphne over the music.

'Yes Daphne, I just had to extricate myself from that *gentleman*,' Elsie replied. Her vocabulary and the way she spoke told Bill she was not from the small town he called home.

'I was starting to wonder if you were coming.'

'I had to go through the full inspection and listen to a lecture about all the things "a lady doesn't do" before I left,' Elsie laughed as she surveyed the room, her eyes falling on Bill who grinned and bowed to her.

Elsie lowered her head, her cheeks burning. After what just happened she was cautious about meeting any of the local lads, but she sensed there was something about this man that was different and when she looked up he was still staring at her. She smiled back at him.

Bill stepped forward and held out a rough, calloused hand. 'Bill Smith, pleased to meet you.'

Her skin was warm as her slender fingers wrapped around his. 'Elsie Norman,' she responded.

Up close, Elsie was even prettier and butterflies swirled in Bill's stomach. 'Would you ... er ... care to dance?'

'I'd love to,' Elsie said as she let Bill lead her onto the dance floor, the band striking up a waltz. As Bill placed his hand around her tiny waist he breathed in the scent of lavender and rosewater. The music ended but Bill and Elsie remained in the centre of the room holding each other, oblivious to the sniggers of interested onlookers.

'Would you like to sit down now?'

'No,' breathed Elsie, 'I'd like to keep dancing if you don't mind.'

'I don't mind at all,' Bill replied and they began to sway in time as the music swelled once more. Holding Elsie felt as natural and easy to Bill as breathing, like they had known each other all their lives. He rested his nose on the top of her head and his heart hammered. He lost his step but Elsie picked up the rhythm and they continued with their private, silent conversation.

All too soon it was time to leave and they exited the hall, hands clasped as Bill escorted her to a tall gum tree on the lawn to wait for her ride home.

'Can I see you again?' Bill asked as they stood under the light of the full moon, the cool evening air refreshing on their glistening and sweaty faces.

'That would be lovely, I'd like that.'

Bill tilted her face to his and kissed her. He felt her respond to him, her mouth pressed hard against his as her arms wrapped around his neck. Desire coursed through him and he caressed her cheek as he gently pushed her away. Daphne called out over the crowd, 'Hey Elsie, you'd better not let your mum see you with *him*!'

Bill wondered if Elsie's face was as flushed as his, her heart racing as fast. Regaining her composure, Elsie took two steps back and he felt like he'd woken from a wonderful dream. 'I'd better go. My father will be here any minute. See you next week?' Bill nodded as he watched her turn and walk away, touching his lips where her kiss lingered.

~*~

Bill was distracted and had to endure a torrent of teasing from his mates over the next few days about the woman who had stolen his heart but it was worth it.

No one had made him feel this way, she was truly extraordinary. But he had to pay attention. It was no good forgetting what you were doing when you were felling hard-wood trees that climbed as high as the sky. He and his best mate "Stretch" Squires, so named for his diminutive stature, cleared the bush and cut sleepers for the local timber mill. It wouldn't make them rich but it was honest, hard work.

'Time for a break hey Bill,' declared Stretch. They threw down the axes and got to work on the billy. It was then Bill noticed it, slithering right towards Stretch. Grabbing his hatchet, he called out, 'Duck,' and threw the weapon at the red belly black. It severed the snake's back and his friend swore loudly.

'You could have killed me Bill,' he yelled.

'Nah, the snake could've killed you, not me. I was doing you a favour mate.'

'Don't do me any more favours,' Stretch said, running a shaky hand through his hair, but he was already laughing.

As they dipped biscuits into their tea Stretch probed Bill about Elsie. 'Hey Bill, you fancy that city girl, don't you? You know she could be trouble – she might be used to the good life and I hear she's a catholic too.'

'I don't know Stretch, she's different and a damn good sort.'

'Well don't say I didn't warn you. You should sow your oats before you settle down with any filly,' Stretch mumbled through a mouthful of biscuit.

'Yeah, but when you see a thoroughbred mate, you don't let it get away.' And that was exactly what Bill was going to do.

~~~~~

On Wednesday, Elsie and her mother went into town. Elsie knew where Daphne would be – where she always was – at her parent's store. The shop was the hub of all gossip and the centre of the universe for the people of Wootton. Only the pub could rival it as a source of town information.

The bell that hung over the door tinkled as Elsie entered. 'Hello Elsie, I've been expecting you,' Daphne said as a cheeky grin spread across her face.

'Good morning Daphne,' Elsie replied, pulling her shopping list from her pocket and placing items in her basket. 'Oh Daphne, I wondered if you know anything about Bill Smith?' Elsie inquired as she pretended to examine tins of tea leaves.

'That didn't take long,' Daphne giggled. 'He lives out of town, cuts timber for Allan Taylor's mill. He's a bit of a bushie but he's easy on the eye, isn't he?' she teased.

'I suppose he's handsome enough,' Elsie stated as she made her way to the counter with her basket of goods. 'Does he ... ever come into town for anything?'

'Well, he enjoys a beer at the pub and he plays footy when they can scrape a team together. He usually comes in on Fridays to pick up supplies and check if they have a game on and sometimes he turns up for the Saturday dance. I'll probably see him; do you want me to

leave a message for him?' Daphne hinted and Elsie could hear the expectation in her friend's voice. Daphne can't wait to tell Bill every juicy detail about her.

'No, thank you Daphne,' Elsie replied, picking up the basket. 'I'll see you Saturday night.'

Leaving the shop, Elsie was so busy concocting potential excuses to go into town on Friday that she ran right into someone – Bill!

'Oh, Bill, I'm so sorry. I didn't see you,' Elsie stammered as she retrieved her basket from the ground.

'Elsie, nice to see you too,' Bill laughed, crouching down to help. Their fingers touched and an electric current ran through Elsie's hand.

'I hoped I'd run into you today but not literally,' Bill teased as he helped her up, reluctant to let her go. 'I was hoping I could take you to the pictures.'

Elsie chewed at her bottom lip, her eyes darting down the street where her mother was chatting with a neighbour. 'I ... er ... I'd love to but I'm .. er ... I'm not sure. My mother's pretty strict.'

'Of course. Well, how about I call over and meet your family first? It's the proper thing to do.'

'Yes it is young man,' a stern female voice said from behind Bill. 'You'd better introduce me Elsie.'

Elsie gulped as her mother moved around Bill and inserted herself between them. Bill whipped his hat off his head and stuck out his hand. 'I'm Bill Smith ma'am. I'm a sleeper cutter for the mill.'

'Mrs Norman,' Elsie's mother said shaking his hand. Her face was as stiff as the collar of her black frock and her eyebrows rose as she surveyed his dirty clothes and muddy boots.

Bill straightened his back and Elsie gave him an encouraging smile. 'Mrs Norman, I'd like to take Elsie to the pictures this weekend. I'll have her home as soon as the film is over.'

'I don't think so, Elsie is too young to be gadding about the countryside with someone we don't know,' Mrs Norman replied as she gripped her daughter by the arm. 'Come on Elsie, time to get home.'

Bill stepped around them, his face mere inches from Elsie's mother. 'Mrs Norman ... ma'am ... I like Elsie and I think she likes me. I want to take her out. If you'd be willing.'

To Elsie the silence seemed to stretch on forever. Bill stood as tall and still as the trees in the bush he loved so much.

'Come by the house for tea on Saturday evening and we'll see. We're the last property on Sullivans Road. Six o'clock sharp and don't be late,' Mrs Norman demanded.

~\*~

On Saturday afternoon, Bill scrubbed himself clean, donned his best shirt and tie, and oiled his hair down. Examining himself in the mirror in the small room he rented at Stretch's place he thought he might pass muster.

'Bloody hell,' exclaimed his best mate. 'You're going to a lot of trouble; she'd better be worth it. I wouldn't want to mess with her mother – she looks like a spitfire to me!'

'Well, you have to work hard for the things you want Stretch, one day you'll understand,' Bill said as he patted the short man on the head but his insides were churning.

As he walked the four miles to Elsie's house Bill practiced what he was going to say and how to behave. Stretch's mother had given him a crash course in etiquette – how to sip wine, which knife and fork to use when, and how to engage in respectable dinner conversation. In his hands was a bunch of roses, courtesy of Mrs Squire's garden. He worried Elsie's family would think he was not worthy. He wasn't wealthy but he had saved hard and hoped to buy his own place soon. Then there was the small matter of faith. He was concerned that Elsie's parents would not approve of the match because he was a protestant and Elsie catholic. It was a tricky pairing but Bill was not a religious man and if he had to become a catholic to win her family over, he would.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked firmly on the front door. A well-dressed man with wavy blond hair, a bushy moustache and blue eyes that were just like Elsie's answered and with a half-smile beckoned him inside. 'You must be Bill. You'd better come in; the ladies don't like to be kept waiting.'

One look at Elsie who rose when he entered the sitting room and all the instructions about cutlery and behaviour evaporated. Her hair was down, rippling in black waves around her face and shoulders and she was wearing a navy polka dot dress that was a stark contrast to her fair skin. Bill stood rooted to the spot before remembering his manners and handing the roses to Mrs Norman. He downed the whiskey Elsie's father handed to him in one gulp. During supper, Elsie's parents quizzed him about his work and his upbringing. Bill told them his family lived on a dairy farm in Taree and he had moved to the district two years ago searching for work. As the youngest son he wouldn't inherit the farm and was determined to forge his own path. He puffed out his chest with pride as he told them he was close to buying a small property of his own.

Elsie's mother scrutinised Bill and her daughter, catching the smiles they shared across the table and the heat that coloured her daughter's cheeks whenever Bill said her name. Elizabeth Norman was no idiot. Elsie was smitten and from what she could tell, Bill felt the same way.

After dinner, Bill thanked the Normans for the lovely meal and kissed Mrs Norman and Elsie's hands before he left.

Elsie hid behind the sitting room door as her parents discussed her suitor.

'He's a protestant, you know,' her mother tsked.

'It's not the end of the world, Lizzie,' her father replied, his voice calm and steady. 'He's a good man. I asked around town, and everyone thinks highly of him. He's honest and hard-working. If he's willing to convert, what's the issue?'

'But what are his prospects, John? Can he take care of our daughter?'

'What he said about buying a bit of land is true. Fred Jones told me at the pub, so he must be doing alright. Elsie could do worse.'

In that one conversation, the future of Bill and Elsie was sealed but Bill continued to court her for several months. He forged a strong friendship with Elsie's older brother Henry who enjoyed teasing them about their relationship. When Henry was killed serving in World War II both Elsie and Bill were heartbroken. Bill discovered Elsie loved books, especially romance stories, and when she shared her copy of *Romeo and Juliet* with him, he forced himself to read it. It wasn't his cup of tea but it grew on him.

One evening as he and Elsie sat on the verandah gazing at the night sky Bill turned to her and he thought he understood how Romeo felt about his Juliet.

"The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars," he whispered in her ear, quoting the star-crossed lover and Elsie spun to face him, her eyes shining.

'Shakespeare. Oh, Bill, you did read it. That's so beautiful.'

Bill stood and strode into the house, leaving Elsie alone and speechless.

The minutes ticked by and Elsie was about to follow him to check if he was alright when Bill returned, digging a small ring out of his pocket as he dropped to his knees.

'Elsie, will you marry me,' he asked, his voice shaky.

Elsie lifted him and held him to her, kissing him for so long they gasped for air at the end.

'I take it that's a yes,' Bill chuckled.

Soon they were married and their family grew to eleven children. Through all the years, the good times and the bad, they remained forever in love.



Elsie rolled to her side, dropping the book to the bed as she peered at Bill snoring beside her, television still on and glasses perched on his nose.

She studied his face and thought to herself how well he'd kept his good looks and his sense of humour. He was her husband and could rival any of the heroes she read about each night. She switched the television off and settled her head on his shoulder. Bill stirred instantly.

'Elsie,' he muttered, 'I was watching that.'