

Tasman: A Reviewer's Synopsis

SPOILER ALERT: This review discloses the entire story

In 1850, sixteen year-old Irish lad, Ean McClaud, a British printer's apprentice, is snatched from a sound sleep after being falsely accused of stealing a handkerchief. He's dragged to Newgate prison in London then sold to an illegal shipper who takes his cargo of convicts to the penal colony in Port Arthur, Tasmania. Ean faces a three-year term away from his job and his sweetheart, Fiona.

Enslaved on the ship, Ean makes friends with two young men: Charley and Edward. Together they act as scribes for the captain and vow to support each other no matter what happens. However, they are separated upon arrival and must fend for themselves.

Ean's cockiness with the clerk at the penal colony sets him to digging graves, "an appropriate job for a young man who devils children." That association leads to exiles attacking him. His hulky bunkmate, Tom, saves him by saying they are lovers. Ean is disgusted by Tom's claim.

Later Ean becomes part of a road gang and must clear land to build roads. He encounters an aboriginal who tracks his movement and leaves treasures which Ean assumes means the man is friendly. Tom suggests that is not true and to be wary.

Ean is befriended by Barty, an old exile and friend of Tom's. He's a lifer like Tom who's survived the dreaded silent prison and takes on the role of a storyteller along the roadway they are constructing. Tom points out Barty's strange behavior explaining that in the silent prison "The silence kills your mind and then your body withers." Ean scoffs at his pronouncement.

Back at the penitentiary Ean becomes the clerk's assistant and earns the clerk's trust. When he learns of a rebel plot, the gruff convicts accuse him of informing on them and now Ean feels he must escape after several menacing exiles stalk him. This, plus his frustration of being a prisoner leads him to a daring escape in a crate, thanks to help from Barty and Tom.

As the ship where he's a stowaway sails toward Melbourne, Ean's crate falls from the stern. He must swim to land. Eventually he makes his way from the small island where he's ended up to the mainland. There he works on a farm owned by the O'Carroll family while he formulates a plan to continue north toward the gold fields. To protect himself and the O'Carroll family, Ean has claimed amnesia. He becomes interested in Maudie Claire O'Carroll, the daughter and a strong-willed weaver and feels he must explain himself or leave before he causes them trouble.

One Saturday he's called upon to take their produce and Maudie Claire's weavings to market. When he's recognized he's captured and returned to the Port Arthur penal colony. Maudie Claire visits him in the local prison where they hint at their feelings for each other; she leaves a romantic sonnet page they'd shared when he read to her while she did her weaving.

To make an example of his "running," the commandant of the prison orders Ean receive fifty lashes, time in a pillory and eight months in the dreaded separate prison. In addition, his original sentence is extended one year.

Life in the separate prison is life in isolation. Prisoners may never see or speak to another except during Divine Service when convicts sing and yell. Across his weeks in isolation, Ean briefly loses his struggle with his sanity but survives, regretting his earlier boast that time away from the noisy penitentiary would be restful.

After his release from the silent prison, Ean works in a coal mine to complete his sentence, moving into a new darkness, working underground. His partner, Devon Montross is a gruff task master. With the mine closing soon, the men work extra shifts: Ean to earn one year off his time and Devon to lighten his life sentence.

During a mining cave-in Ean breaks his leg, ending further chances to work and shorten his sentence. The night before the mine closes, the exiles are doubled up in cells. His bunkmate is an angry burly man who picks a fight. When Ean awakens the next morning his bunkmate is dead in their locked cell.

Ean is returned to prison and placed in total isolation where no light or sound enters his cell. He's given a trial and found guilty. In two weeks time he'll be hanged unless a witness comes forward.

When Ean is taken to the clerk's office for sentencing he encounters Edward, his friend from the ship, who now works in the office. Their relationship is strained when Edward tells Ean how he shouldn't have thrown away the job Edward now enjoys.

The next day as Ean stands before the commandant of Port Arthur to hear his death sentence announced, he learns he's been cleared of the murder. Soldiers take him to the guard post at Eaglehawk Neck and release him. He walks north toward the O'Carroll's farm hoping their earlier letters of inviting him to return to their farm are genuine.

A wagon appears, driven by Maudie Claire who's arrived to drive him north, back to her family's farm.