

# *b'twixt and b'tween*

*by*  
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## *Coalville Train*

Far out across the Western plains, the wind gathered strength as it swirled about the trees on the river bank.

In a burst of fury it threw its power against the flank of the Great Dividing Range, whipping around the little train and clawing at the caps of the engineer and fireman in the cab. Its chill failed to touch them however, as the heat from the firebox kept the iron cabin cosy.

"It's a fickle wind today Harry."

"Ay, that it is", replied the fireman as he heaved another shovel load into the flames. "Glad I'm snug in here, not back with the boys" and he motioned towards the miners huddled in the empty trucks behind them.

It was Midwinter's Day and today the Coalville train was hauling human freight up the mountain where it usually ran light, returning the coal trucks to the mine from the river port on the plains below. The workers had overstayed their welcome at the bar last night and missing the morning run for the shift change they were now paying for their lack of foresight with a rough ride out in the open trucks.

The engineer looked up the line as it wound across the side of the hill and around a spur, out of sight.

"Here, take the throttle. I'll take over the shovel for a while."

"You sure Jim?"

"Sure, just take it easy round the spur."

"Okay, if you say so" and they swapped places. Harry sat with his hand resting on the big brass lever while Jim scooped up a shovelful of coal from the tender, stomped on the plate and thrust the fuel into the furnace. Black smoke belched from the funnel as the grade increased even more.

"Deadman's Curve coming up!"

"Fine, just keep her steady" replied the driver and putting his head down, he continued shovelling purposefully, looking neither left nor right as the engine approached the bend.

Steam hissed off the boiler as a rain squall struck, soaking miners and machine alike. The wheels began to slip as they met mud that formed on the rails.

Slowly the train rounded the bend and started across the viaduct.

"She's losing it Jim. What do I do?"

"You'll be right, just keep it slow and steady" he said, not looking up from his task.

"Maybe you should take over again."

"No, you'll be fine"

"Come on Jim, I think you'd better."

"Oh alright then" came the uncharacteristically grumpy reply and he straightened up and moved toward the driver's position.

Suddenly the engineer collapsed on the floor as if in pain. Harry quickly bent down beside him. The engine puffed slowly on, slipping and gripping alternately as it felt its way across the viaduct. Far below the stream tumbled over the rocks, between the stone pillars before leaping from the ledge and out of sight down the mountainside.

"Are you alright Jim? What happened?"

"I'll be ok in a minute. Are we off the trestle yet?"

"We're getting there. Can I do anything to help?"

"Just get us back onto solid ground." The driver pulled himself up and rested against the wall of the cab as the fireman went back to the throttle.

"Use the sand" came the order and as Harry pulled the handle a fine trail of sand trickled from the box onto the rails ahead of the driving wheels. Instantly the men felt the motion of the train pick up as traction improved.

Within a minute the engine had rolled off the trestle again and the engineer clambered to his feet and took over the throttle, apparently none the worse for wear.

"Thanks Harry, you did well."

"But what was that all about? You looked like you've been hit by a train."

"Something like that. It's a long story."

"Well I'm not going anywhere you aint for the next hour or so. Out with it. Come on."

"Are you sure you want to hear this? It's a touch strange"

"Well if it's bit strange I definitely want to hear it."

"Oh alright..." and his eyes glazed over a little as he recalled the story his mother had told him so often as a child, about another young boy, looking for adventure...

### *Hide And Seek*

The tall grass rustled gently. Was it the wind, or was it the Tiger, slipping slyly through the jungle, stalking its prey to the bloody end. The hunter raised his elephant gun, just in case, and cast his eyes around, looking for the slightest hint of the man-eater's orange and black pelt. His ears craned for the softest sound of paw fall. His mind was keen and his senses sharp.

"Jacob! Jacob! Where are you?" His concentration shattered, the ten year old stood up dejectedly. There would be no Tiger skin on the bedroom wall today. His mother had seen to that, yanking him back to the reality of an Australian bush paddock on the edge of a riverside town. As if to seal the fate of his fantasy, the sound of a riverboat whistle pierced the afternoon heat answered by the long wail of the work train as it passed on the river bank. Jacob turned toward the sound of his mother's voice and started for home, dragging the butt of his elephant gun in the red dirt.

"Jacob! Come on home! Emyleigh's here!"

The sound of her name was enough to pick up his steps. Emyleigh was a tom boy. Emyleigh was fun. She didn't want to play with dolls. She wanted to play with the boys, Jacob and his brother Joshua. There was nothing like a game of hide and seek with Emyleigh and to top it off, she was pretty. His little legs fair flew as he leapt fallen trees and ducked under branches along the well worn path. Taking the shortcut across the back of Mrs. Markell's place he came out on the dirt road and ran into his front yard only slowing at the gate so as not to look too eager. Emyleigh was on the swing with her back to him. He stopped, caught his breath and called out..

"Leelee!"

"There you are Jake. You want to play?"

"Sure. What you want to do?"

"How about Hide and Seek?"

"Ok. Is Josh home?"

"I think so. Let's go look" and the two kids went off to find Jacobs younger brother.

Soon the three of them were engrossed in their favourite pastime. The home paddock provided plenty of good hiding places and they regularly spent hours concealing themselves from each other. Today was no exception and the sun was low in the West when Jacob caught up with Emyleigh hiding behind the rose bushes against the shed.

"Found you!" he chanted and crawled into the confined space where she was crouching.

"I thought you'd never find me. My legs have gone numb while I waited. Come on let me out Jake" and she pushed him back out the hole.

As she did so the two of them scratched their hands against the thorns and the blood began to flow.

"Ow! That hurts."

"Don't be a sook Jake. Mine doesn't hurt", she said waving her red stained digits in his direction.

"I know", spoke up Joshua. "You should become blood brothers. Like the Indians Mrs. Markell told us about. Hold the scratches together and you'll be tied for life. Real mates."

"Shall we?" Jacob asked.

"You're not afraid are you Jake?", she replied with a hint of coyness. Emyleigh was growing up a little faster than Jacob and unbeknownst to any of them, there were other forces at play here. The idea appealed to her on a level she didn't quite understand yet.

"Of course not... here" and he thrust out his hand.

She took it in hers and they held the wounds together as their blood mingled.

Jacob looked up from their interlaced fingers and met Emyleigh's eyes. There was a strange but pleasant look in them. His little heart pounded briefly, and suddenly scared, he drew his hand away.

"We'd better see Mum for a bandage", he said and they started for the back door. Emyleigh walked close beside Jacob and Joshua wandered along in the rear. He didn't understand how, or why, but something had changed between the three of them. It didn't feel bad, just different and maybe he felt just a little left out.

### *Swings and Roundabouts*

Lazy summer days rolled one into another and the children played together more each week. The boys were lucky that their father was on the railway gang, building the line into the mountains for the new mine at Coalville. This meant that unlike so many of the local lads who were farmer's sons, they didn't have to help on the land. Their mother gave them jobs to do around the house and yard, but mostly they were left to their own devices during the long hot days when they weren't at school.

Emyleigh's mother worked her a little harder around the house. 'Good training for when you get married' she would say and Emyleigh would set to, doing the washing or scrubbing the floor. Meanwhile her mother would be doing mending for the local bachelors, of whom there were many, or tending to her garden from which she sold a small amount of vegetables to supplement her husband's income. There was still time to spend with the boys though and Emyleigh could be seen out and about with them on many an occasion. Their activities were becoming a little more refined though. Following her insistence, the brothers no longer called her Leelee but used the slightly older sounding 'Em' and when it came to choosing something to do, she was more likely to suggest playing down by the river, or going for a walk, always something less boyish than their previously boisterous pastimes. She seemed quite happy just to be near Jake and started to treat Josh more like a little brother than a playmate. There was no doubt that Jake had become more attached to her too. They were still young enough not to notice what was happening though and just felt that the old games were getting boring. Still young enough as well to be under their mother's control when within earshot and it was with her that they were on their way to visit the Joneses when Jake felt a sudden pain wash over him.

He broke into a run towards the Joneses house, visible just down the road.

"Slow down boy. No need for such a hurry."

"Emyleigh's in trouble. I have to help her" and he rushed off.

Josh was pulling at his mother's hand.

"Ok. Away you go" and she watched her youngest son disappear up the road.

When he arrived in the front yard, Jake was helping Emyleigh up off the ground. Her right arm was hanging at a strange angle.

"Go get Mrs. Jones!" and Josh ran inside to fetch her.

"Lucky you arrived when you did Jake."

"It wasn't luck, Emyleigh. I felt something, a sort of pain in my arm as we were coming down the road."

"That's odd."

Just then Mrs. Jones appeared, a look of horror spreading across her face as she saw the dangling limb.

"What happened love?"

"I fell off the swing and hurt my arm Mum", she winced.

"My goodness it looks dislocated. We'll have to take you to see Dr. Toogood in town. Jacob, can you harness the trap?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jones."

"Good. Well you know where it is" and as he headed for the paddock gate, his mother arrived on the scene. After a quick explanation she went to assist him and before long the Joneses were off to town as the visitors turned for home again. The eucalypts bordering the Joneses garden were silhouetted starkly against the setting sun by the time they returned from the doctor. It had been a little painful, but Emyleigh's arm was back in alignment and she sported a sling for her troubles.

The rest of the summer was spent in gentler activities and lighter work around the house. For Emyleigh, it wasn't all bad, once she forgot the pain.

## *Fire In The Hole*

Fire in the hole!

Men crouching behind boulders ducked their heads. Some put their fingers in their ears.

A brief silence descended on the worksite .

Evan stared out across the plains that shimmered in the noon day heat. A blue haze hung over the scrubby bush, petering out at the distant edge of the desert. Suddenly the ground shook and the rock at his back shifted perceptibly. He sprang to his feet to avoid being crushed if it started to roll. His mate Billy, sitting next to him rocked forward on to his heels to stand up but too late, as the massive stone began to move. Evan grabbed at Billy's arm to pull him out of the way, but he was trapped by the cuff of his work pants and Evan struggled desperately to drag him out of danger. Slowly the boulder tipped over, wobbled sideways and as the poor navvy screamed in terror, it rolled onto Billy's chest, crushing the life out of him.

Evan collapsed in tears while men rushed through the falling debris from the blasting to try and save him. One look though and they knew he was gone. The final few projectiles stung as they rained down on the worker's heads and shoulders, left uncovered in the rush.

"Get a doctor up here!" a voice called out.

"No point lad, he's gone", came the reply.

"Not for him, idiot. Look at the blood around here. We were far too close. Who set that damned charge?"

"Harvey did I think."

"There'll be hell to pay. What's he tryin' to do? Blow up the whole fekin' mountain?"

Slowly Evan Jones stood up again and looked around. Men were holding handkerchiefs to their heads, arms and shoulders, trying to stem the flow of blood from their wounds. None were serious, but he was one of the few without any cuts or bruises and most of the men had several. A couple were hobbling from hits on the legs and feet.

Evan was union rep and as the scene drifted back into focus, his responsibilities dawned on him. He clambered over to the crew chief.

"Smith, I'm calling the men out until you find out what went wrong and we get these men attended to... Ok men! Everyone on the train. I'm calling you out. You, you and you, help those men over there and Smith, you better make sure the bosses get Billy out from under there quick smart. We'll be expectin' a proper burial in town, day after next... Come on!" and putting his arm around an injured workmate he headed for the train.

It was three hours later when Jones walked into his yard. Emyleigh and the boys were lying on a blanket under the trees watching the patterns in the clouds.

"You're home early Da."

"Accident on the spur."

"Are you alright love?"

It was Beth, Evan's wife. She had seen him come through the gate and went to the door to see why he was home early.

"Sure. Some idiot placed too big a charge and some of the men are injured."

He dropped his eyes to the ground. "Billy's dead."

"I'm so sorry love. How?"

"Rock rolled on him. Would have got me too if I hadn't stood up so fast. Everyone rushed to help him and quite a few got hit by falling stones. We'll be out for a day or two I should think. There'll be a funeral for Billy in a couple of days and they've got to sort out what happened before we start up again".

"Well it'll be nice to have you around the house for a day or two anyway, instead of worrying 'bout you up there." Evan shouldered his sack and coat and the two adults went inside.

"You know Black's Hole..."

"Yep"

"Well maybe we could go swimming up there tomorrow."

"But we're not allowed to."

"Not by ourselves. Your Dad could take us while he's off work"

"Not likely. You ever seen him go swimming?"

"Well, you could ask couldn't you?"

"I s'pose..."

"Go on. Go and ask him now."

"Later."

"No, go now, then we can go over and see Mum."

"Oh, alright" and she trotted off to the kitchen where her mother had just put the kettle back on the stove for a cuppa. Her father was just out of earshot in the bedroom removing his work clothes.

"Ma?"

"Yes dear?"

"Can we go swimming up at Black's Hole tomorrow?"

"I'm too busy love. I've got a pile of mending to do tomorrow."

"Da, could take us."

"That would make a change. Do you really think you could convince him to take you?"

"Well... I was hoping you'd ask him for me."

"And why should I do that?"

"He never goes anywhere with us."

"I guess you're right. I'll see what I can do, but don't hold your breath."

Just then Evan came out of the bedroom. His clean shoes clicked on the stone floor.

"Go on Ma..." Emyleigh whispered.

"Go on what?" her father said. "And what's the whispering for?"

"Emyleigh and the lads want you to take them swimming up at Black's Hole tomorrow. What do you think?"

"I've got some things to do in town,..."

"Go on love. It's not like you're running after them every day. It's summer. I'll pack a picnic. It'd make a nice change for you."

"Oh... alright, but only if I get my things done in the morning and you promise to take care of the pony, young girl."

"Oh, of course Da. Thankyou! We'll go see Mrs. Madison." and she ran out to tell the boys.

"Now don't you go thinking of letting her down Evan."

"No, no I won't" he replied, absent mindedly. He gazed aimlessly out the window. His vision blurred ever so slightly at the memory of Billy laughing as he slipped

the half open lid off his battered lunch tin, only to find a baby wombat nestled in the remains of his meal. Evan was going to miss that smiling face. He'd have to see to it that a plaque was placed up on that spur. 'Something else to do tomorrow.'

## *Monkey Business*

The next day dawned bright and clear. Typical summer weather.

Emyleigh and the Madison boys were looking forward to the ride out to Black's Hole and the boys rushed over to the Jones' house to be ready when Evan returned.

When three o'clock rolled round without a sign of him however, it was a very dejected little group that finally accepted it was too late for a plunge in the cool deep waters in the shade of the cliffs. Feeling too disappointed to play, Jake and Josh mumbled their goodbyes and headed down the road.

Coming to the cross roads where they should turn for home, Josh said, "I don't feel like going home yet. Today was going to be special. Let's go down to the railway and see what's going on over there", so they headed on down to the track.

Meeting the line just out of town the two boys wandered along looking for anything half interesting that might have fallen from the train. They had only gone a few hundred yards when they came across a ganger parked next to the tracks. They climbed on and sat for a while staring up the rails.

"You know what Josh, we could go look for gold."

"Gold? Where?"

"Up on the spur. I heard Dad and Mr. Jones talking about it the other night in the kitchen" and rubbing his chin with his hand, Jake mimicked Mr. Jones, "You know Ethan", he said, "I reckon there's got be a might more gold up there than they're saying. It's just lying around in the gully up on the spur. Washed down from the tops" and Jake stopped frowning in the manner of a man with serious thoughts on his mind.

"If we can get this thing onto the rails, we could go and pick some up. Nobody would know. They've all knocked off work 'cause of the accident. We'd just take a little bit. Just enough to buy a horse of our own so we don't have to wait for Mr. Jones or Mum and Dad to take us places. I'm old enough to take care of my own horse. Come on." And he jumped down and looked around for something to lever the ganger onto the tracks. Nearby he found the requisite equipment and after twenty minutes or so of pushing, pulling, lifting and levering, the hand cart sat squarely on the rails. The two boys were exhausted, but elated. This was going to be a special day after all. They sat on the vehicle for a few minutes to gather their breath.

"Come on then" and taking one end of the handle each, they began pumping. At first the trolley started off in the wrong direction but with a little coercion they were soon moving along at a jogging pace away from Wattleford towards adventure.

### *Drowned Rats*

Half an hour later and five miles down the track, the brothers were drifting along between the bushes at walking pace, arguing. Joshua had stopped pumping.

"We should have turned off at the points Jake."

"No. I'm sure that just goes to the mill."

"But the mill's on the way to the mountains... see." and Josh turned and waved his hand toward the silhouette of the Great Divide. Jake's eyes followed the motion as the ganger rumbled onto a long bridge. He stopped pumping and they slowed to a stop in the centre of the trestle.

"Well... maybe... but you can just see the new line going up the side of the ridge... there. See it comes from way over..." and he fell silent as a train whistle sounded nearby.

"Geez Jake! There's a train coming."

"I can hear that! Quick, pump."

"Which way?"

"Back... quick!"

They both leaned into the handle and quickly the wheels began to turn.....the wrong way.

"Stop! Stop! The other way!"

Now gangers aren't very easy to reverse when you're only the boys' age and it rolled closer and closer to the sound of the oncoming train as they desperately tried to bring it to a halt. By now they could easily see the line of smoke billowing above the bush as the express sped towards the bridge. It was only a matter of seconds before it would appear at the far end and confront the hapless pair. Jake looked down. It was a fair drop to the river, but the water seemed quite deep. It would be their only chance.

"Jake!"

He looked up again to see the engine barrelling around the bend and onto the trestle.

"Jump Josh!" and the brothers leapt from the ganger.

The drop to the water seemed to pass in slow motion for the two, punctuated by the crash of the ganger exploding across the front of the engine.

Pieces of splintered wood flew into the air, arcing gracefully out and into the water behind the boys.

The heavy steel wheels caught against the front bogey of the engine, clattering and clanging their way along the rails before slithering off the side, plunging into the river beneath a column of water, narrowly missing Josh as he came to the surface.

He shook the hair out of his eyes and looked around for his big brother.

"Jake! Jake!"

He couldn't see him.

"Jake! Jake!"

In the background the sound of steel wheels screeching on steel rails pierced the afternoon. Carriages banged noisily up against each other as the train came to a stop on the far side of the bridge.

"Jake! Jake!"

No reply.

Joshua dove beneath the water and swam downstream a little peering through the crystal clear mountain water for his brother. No luck. He surfaced again, looking around. Over by a half sunken tree he saw a movement in the water.

Without thinking he struck out for it with a strong stroke. Arriving at the tree seconds later he could see that Jake was trapped beneath the surface, his clothing caught on a submerged branch. He was beginning to swallow water.

In Wattleford the main street was busy. People were congregating for the arrival of the express. Evan Jones was waiting for the arrival of a railways inspector to look into Billy's death, completely oblivious to the fact that he'd let his daughter and the boys down.

Beth tapped him on the shoulder.

"Where do you think you've been then?" she said grumpily.

"Pardon?"

"Where have you been? You were meant to be home long ago to take the children swimming."

"Oh. I forgot."

"That'd be right. Too busy to keep a promise to your own daughter."

"But I've got to meet the inspector and give a statement about Billy."

"Yes, I know, 'more important things'. You could have got one of the men to come and tell me what was happening, but I guess it probably never even crossed your mind that the children were waiting. Emyleigh was so disappointed that I had to drop everything and come in to town to buy her a treat to keep her out of my hair." Mrs. Jones idea of bringing up children was less 'Spare the Rod' and more 'Spoil the Child'.

Over her left shoulder in the general store across the street, Emyleigh was admiring a clock in the hands of Mrs. Sutton, a friend of her mother.

"What do you think Emyleigh? Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes Ma'am", she replied. Emyleigh was on her best behaviour. Bernice Sutton was the wife of a squatter worth a small fortune and not only a friend but also a regular client of her mother's. It wouldn't do to offend her.

"How much is it Fred?"

"Ten pounds fifteen ma'am."

"Oo.. that much. But it is nice isn't it?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Very well, I'll take it Fred. Here Emyleigh, hold it for me please while I pay Fred" and she handed over the timepiece before handing over the cash.

"Let's see now. What's the time Fred?"

"A quarter past four Ma'am" he replied taking out his pocket watch. "The express should be here any minute."

She turned to Emyleigh just in time to catch the clock as it fell from her hands. Her mouth dropped open as the girl dropped slowly to the floor clutching at her throat.

She was having trouble breathing, as if she had something in her air passages. Something burbled and bubbled.

"My goodness!"

"Fred! Hold this!" Mrs. Sutton handed the clock to Fred and knelt down to Emyleigh. Not being able to figure out what was happening, she stood up and taking smelling salts from her bag, said "Get Beth, she's outside!", then she bent to wave the bottle under Emyleigh's nose.

Out at the bridge, Josh was struggling to free his brother as Jake began to slip into unconsciousness. Tearing at his shirt with his bare hands the young boy managed to rip it far enough to free the trapped boy.

The two bobbed to the surface as passengers and crew from the train began to make their way down to the water's edge.

Dragging them from the water Doctor Toogood, who had been on the train, rolled Jake on his side. He coughed up water and gasped in fresh air as his body heaved several times, repeating the process. Soon he rolled on his back and opened his eyes. The two of them lay looking like drowned rats. Josh was exhausted.

Emyleigh's eyelids flickered once or twice and she looked up at her parents and Mrs. Sutton bending over her.

"What happened love?"

"I...I... don't know. I came over faint all of a sudden."

"See Evan. Look at the state you've got her in. I hope this teaches you to keep your promises."

"No Ma. That's not it. I don't know what it was."

"See. It wasn't me."

"Oh, be quiet and help me get her onto a chair.... Are you alright now love?"

"I think so. It seems to have passed."

"Now, you thank Mrs. Sutton, Emyleigh. It was her that came to your aid."

"Thank you Ma'am."

"You're very welcome I'm sure. You just be careful for a while. Now I must be going. The train's due any minute. Would you wrap that for me please Fred? I'll collect it before I leave for home" and she left the shop.

"I'd better get across the road too. Will you be right to take her home Beth?"

"I s'pose, but we'll wait for a while just to be sure."

### *To Fit The Crime*

Mr. Trumble checked his pocket watch for the umpteenth time. As Stationmaster he was a stickler for punctuality. The express was twenty minutes late already and no sign of smoke yet. His brow furrowed even further, if that was possible. He looked up at the clock on the tower. That was no help, so he went back into the ticket office and tapped the clock on the wall. The hands stayed resolutely where they were. Pushing up the back of his cap he rubbed his crown, a reflex action now familiar to the Wattleford populace. There had been plenty of late trains in his three years there and some attributed his shiny pate to this habit.

Finally, in the distance, the whistle was heard as the express crossed the main road where it met the ferry. Mr. Trumble hurried out onto the platform and checked that the baggage trolley was in place. He had only once needed to use it, when Mrs. Sutton had returned from Melbourne after a big shopping spree, but nevertheless he had to ensure it was ready, just in case.

The engine slowed to a stop and the platform filled with people from the carriages. Most were on their way north and were just in town to catch the steamer up river. They would be staying overnight in the Grand and leaving on the boat in the morning.

Amongst the heads bobbing along the platform, the stationmaster could see the conductor hurrying toward him, with the doctor, an unfamiliar man and a couple of boys at his side. The group stopped as they drew near.

"Zenith, what have you got there?" he said nodding towards to the brothers standing, dripping water.

"A couple of young sky larkers, I'm afraid. Bit of a story really. Suffice it to say the ganger's smashed up out on Five Mile Creek. Nothing left of it actually. Have you seen O'Brien? "

"He's up at the spur checking out the accident site."

"This is Mr. Peters from head office. He's here to investigate the accident."

"Oh, welcome to Wattleford, sir. Evan should be around here somewhere. He'll fill you in." He looked around and seeing Emyleigh's father further down the

platform, he waved him over to meet the inspector and the two headed for the public bar of the Victoria, to discuss the accident over a pint or two.

"Well I guess you two will have to wait but don't leave town, we'll deal with you when the funeral's over. Now, get out of my sight. Go tell your father I want to see him."

"What happened?" Trumble said.

Mr. Zenith placed a hand on the older man's shoulder and ushered him into the office.

Through the ticket window, the muffled sound of the conductor's voice could be heard outlining events at the bridge.

Out in the main street the two boys were trudging along in the direction of home, heads bowed. They knew they were in big trouble and had no misconceptions about the consequences.

They turned into King St, towards home and came up alongside Emyleigh and her mother slowly walking home too. Mrs. Jones was fussing over her daughter, keen to ensure she didn't faint again.

"Hello Mrs. Jones... Emyleigh." Jake greeted them. "You're looking a bit pale Em"

"She had a fainting spell... My word what happened to you? You're all wet."

"We fell in Five Mile Creek. Jake nearly drowned, but I saved him."

"Did you now? And when was this?"

"About half an hour ago I s'pose Ma'am."

"Half and hour ago. That's when I fainted. I thought I was going to die. I couldn't breathe. Felt like I was drown...." and her voice trailed off.

The young couple looked at each, a querulous expression on their faces.

In his mind, Jake was replaying the events of the afternoon Emyleigh fell from the swing. His warning had been a slight fainting feeling just like she was describing, only milder. Something strange was going on, or was it his imagination.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Jones prattled on about how fragile her daughter had become and how she should stay out of the sun and not exert herself too much, totally disregarding that she had been indoors doing virtually nothing.

The four of them walked a short way together until they came to the boys' turnoff and they said goodbye. There would be time to talk over the coincidence later. For now the brothers just wanted to get the punishment over and done with so they could go on with their lives, but this time it would be different. Their clowning around had had serious consequences and little did they know that the course of their lives would be changed forever as a result.

Two days later Jake and Josh were standing before the Stationmaster's desk

facing Mr. Peters and Constable O'Brien. Their father stood to one side, leaning on the window sill, with the engine shed silhouetted behind him by the afternoon sun. Against the opposite wall stood Mr. Trumble, his arms folded. Things were looking very serious indeed for the lads. They had started to think their deeds had been overlooked when their father said he was too preoccupied with the accident and the funeral to deal with them. He had chosen to leave it to the authorities, saying... "You two are growing up now. It's time you took responsibility for your actions like men. The Constable and the railways can decide what to do with you. You should have known better. I don't know what you thought you were up to."

Josh, had spoken up.

"We were going up to the spur to get some gold to buy a horse so we didn't have to rely on you and Mum and Mr. Jones. He was meant to take us swimming."

"What made you think there was gold up there."

"We heard you talking to Em's dad about it the other night in the kitchen."

"Not gold boy. Coal! Why do you think they call it the Coalville line. It's heading for Coalville, where the new coal mine is. I don't know..." He shook his head and called out the door towards the clothes line, "What's wrong with your sons Mary?"

"My sons?", came the distant reply with a hint of amused amazement.

"Now go to your room. I don't want see your faces again tonight. As if I didn't have enough troubles" and for a day or two it looked like that would be the end of it, but now the day of reckoning had arrived.

"Well boys." Constable O'Brien started proceedings. "What do you think you were up to?"

This time Jake did the explaining, leaving out the bit about the gold and the horse. No need to look stupid twice. Mr. Madison said nothing about the omission. After all, it didn't excuse anything and certainly wouldn't fix the damage.

Jake finished up the story with a heartfelt apology and an offer to pay for a new ganger. Everyone in the room knew that neither the boys nor their father had the money to do that.

"I see... the policeman said looking thoughtful. Peters? Any questions?"

"No. It all seems quite clear to me. These two stole railway property, operating it without authorisation on a government line, endangering life and limb and subsequently causing an accident that destroyed a valuable railways vehicle, not to mention almost losing at least one life in the process, and holding up Her Majesty's mail."

"We didn't hold up the train sir." It was the voice of the youngest in the room, fearful of ending his short life at the end of a rope for train robbery.

"No... well... I meant delaying Her Majesty's mail... Unless you have anything to add Trumble, or you Madison..." Both men shook their head slightly. They had a

fair idea of what was coming next. The adults had had a long talk about it all prior to calling the lads in.

"Very well then boys, and I call you that advisedly, Constable O'Brien, Mr. Trumble and I have discussed this and we understand you did this without malicious intent. Nevertheless, the ganger is gone and a new one must be paid for. We know you have no money and your father shouldn't have to pay for your sins. You in particular Jacob, are old enough to take responsibility for your actions. You're about old enough to start working. The law is quite clear. It says we should throw you in jail for a couple of years."

The boys shuddered visibly as he stopped for effect.

"However....." The boys faces lightened up with expectations of getting off scot free.

"However, we've decided to take you up on your offer. Your father has agreed. Jacob, you will not be returning to school this year, but will take up a position with the railways here in the yards. You will officially get a standard wage from which the cost of the ganger will be subtracted in weekly instalments. You will be left a small amount for living expenses. If you work hard your debt will be wiped in four years at which time you may remain with the railways and make a career of it, or leave, as you wish. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir. When will I have to start."

"Today's Thursday. I think Monday would be best. Monday, 6 o'clock here then. Now Joshua. You're too young to leave school, but you will be required to work off your share. You are to report to Mr. Trumble here after school every day to help cleanup and such around the station."

"xcuse me Sir?"

"Yes."

"For how long Sir?"

"I think two years should do it, don't you Trumble?"

Trumble nodded, "I reckon so."

"Would I have the holidays off Sir?"

"Don't be cheeky son" his father butted in.

"Oh.. I don't know. What do you think O'Brien?"

The policeman thought about it for a couple of seconds. "I suppose so, but if he doesn't do a good job, you may have to extend the time to make up."

Jake's face fell and an involuntary word slipped from his lips, "But..."

"Now Jacob. You're old enough to know better. It's a little different with Joshua. Besides which you'll be paid, and get training into the bargain. Do you know how many boys want apprenticeships on the railways. You do well and you'll be set for life. I see this more as an opportunity than a punishment. You'd do well to look at it that way yourself. You'll find life a lot easier. Any more questions...? Very well,

off you go then and report here Monday Jacob. And Joshua, Mr. Trumble will be expecting you in two weeks, on the first day of school understand?"

The boys nodded, "Yes Sir. Thankyou Sir." and went out side to wait for their father.

### *Further Down The Line*

Silver lines every cloud, so they say and even though the next year brought drought conditions to Wattleford, Jake could still see its glint as he signed for his pay each week. To his surprise he found he enjoyed the work in the rail yards. The physical exertion of shovelling coal and ballast around, lugging equipment and generally helping in the shed, left him with a satisfied weariness at the end of the day and a small sense of achievement. He was learning too. The machinery fascinated him and he took every opportunity to ask about how it worked and how to run and maintain it. The process of cleaning the firebox and boiler and preparing them for the lighter, essential for any lad intending to move on to a Fireman's position and thence to a Driver, was soon a part of everyday life.

Contrary to regulations, procedures in a small place like Wattleford were not too strict, and with his inquisitive streak, Jake's brain was filled day by day with the facts and figures required to be a true railwayman. At nights he dreamed of sitting at the throttle of the express, sparks and smoke rushing past his ear, the moon setting behind the Great Dividing range as the train barrelled down the incline towards the distant lights of Melbourne. Not that he'd ever been to the city, but every now and then a fireman or engineer would tell him a tale or two about the run south, the Big Smoke or the struggle back up the Great Divide on the way north with a double header and an overloaded train.

His parents were proud of him too. Proud of the way he had knuckled under and accepted his responsibility. Ethan and Mary had never considered themselves the smartest of folks and their expectations for their sons had been modest. Life in a river port, while providing an interesting parade of travellers, didn't provide an interesting array of career opportunities and the railways had always been the brothers most likely destination. Their capers had just accelerated the process somewhat. It also meant they circumvented the selection process before gaining some experience.

Joshua too, had fallen into line and had gained some sorely needed self confidence. In the playground he was looked up to by his peers. He was the one with a 'Job'. No matter that he wasn't paid. The responsibility and trust given him by the stationmaster, combined with the notoriety gained from the ganger episode had elevated his status amongst his mates. He soon got used to not having time to spend with them after school and they were growing too, growing into cheap labour for the family farms and businesses. At least Josh was working away from

the home and for the Railways at that. Walking home following an afternoon moving baggage, sweeping and helping Mr. Trumble, his little chest would swell with pride as he past the young girls playing Hopscotch in the street.

"Hello Josh. Going' home from work?"

"Aye Lass" he would reply, mimicking the stationmaster's tones.

"Do you want to play with us?"

"I'm `fraid not. I have to go home and wash up. It's dirty work down there you know. Hope you don't mind."

"No, s'pose not. See you at school tomorrow then."

He waved a casual goodbye, trying to look like the young men from the wharf who hung out down by the pub.

Outwardly the boys were still children, but inside they were growing fast. Their physiques would catch up soon enough and with his constant exercise, Jake was well on his way.

## *A Bit Forward*

A small cloud of red dust drifted across the platform from the drays hurrying out of town. As Emyleigh stepped out of the turnstile her eyes swept the station looking for Joshua. He appeared, coughing slightly, as the dust drifted off across the yard.

She lowered the handkerchief from her mouth.

"I wish they'd cobble the street. The dust is terrible this time of year."

"You want to be here all afternoon. I go home covered in it."

"I'm sure you do. Have you seen Jake around?"

"Yep. He's over in the shed I think."

"Thanks Josh. I'll see you later on" and she jumped down onto the tracks and started towards the big building on the far side of the yards.

Emyleigh hadn't really come prepared for a trek across the tracks, but delicately holding her hem up a little, she managed to negotiate the obstacle course until she was staring into the dark interior of the shed. Here, ruled by steam, oil and coal dust, was the quintessential male domain. She hesitated before going in, but she had come on a matter of highest importance and must not retreat now.

Taking a step into the dark, she peered around, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Out of the shadows, a handful of large shapes took form. A couple of them with silvery ghosts of steam milling around the running gear, waiting for work...a destination to chase... energy to expend in the pursuit of speed.

Here and there shafts of late afternoon sun cut through the coal dust and bounced off the polished steel of the rails. Emyleigh shuddered a little. It all looked a bit too much as she'd imagined Merlin's den to be. It only lacked the glow beneath the cauldron, but no... there it was. In the engine nearest to her, the firebox

doors opened, silhouetting a man shovelling coal into the depths of the dragon. A devil red glow encircled his head where the flames lit up his frizzy hair. The doors closed again with a clang and the fireman disappeared out the opposite side of the cab. A steam boat whistle on the nearby river, brought her back to her senses. 'What was that all about?' she thought. 'Must be getting sleepy, day dreaming like that. It has to be the heat in here' and she blinked, shook her head and started into the gloom again.

As engines sheds go, the Wattleford building wasn't very big, but it still rated as the largest single enclosed space in town, and Emyleigh had never been in it before. Beyond the hissing of steam, it was almost devoid of sound. Just the occasional clatter of metal on metal and the odd clunk of a boot on the stone floor.

She moved deeper in amongst the machinery. Crossing the rails between a shunter and a mainline engine she looked down towards the end wall. There she recognized Jake's outline as he shovelled spilt coal from the floor into a barrow. He was working with his back to her. Having traversed nearly the full length of the building and crossed several tracks, she was now feeling quite daring and crept up behind him, anticipating the pleasure of affecting the surprise.

"BOO!"

"What do you think you're doing' in here young woman?"

She nearly collapsed in fright. It was the Yard Supervisor who had unwittingly turned the tables, calling from the platform of the engine right alongside her.

"Having a seizure I think" she replied, holding her hand to her heart.

"You nearly frightened me to death."

"Serves you right. What are you up to?"

By now Jake had turned around.

"Em. What are you doing here? This is no place for a woman."

"Sorry. I wanted to ask you to the dance." She blurted out without thinking. Her mind was elsewhere.

"What was that he said?" it was saying . "He called me a woman." There was that warm fuzzy glow again and she beamed inwardly.

"I didn't know it would be a problem."

"It's dangerous in here lass. Jake, take her back to the platform and be quick about it. I want this cleaned up post haste and Miss, I'd be careful if I was you. You'll end up a railway widow some day, chasing men in here like that."

"Come on Em. I'll see you back to the station" and he ushered her out of the near end of the shed and across the tracks.

"Well, what do say then?" she asked as they stepped over the rails.

"To what?"

"To the dance. I gave up on waiting for you to ask, so I decided I had to do it myself."

"Of course I'll go with you. I just assumed..."

"Well a girl likes to be asked sometimes, even if it is a foregone conclusion."

The past year or so had seen the two spending more and more time together, both with and without a chaperon. Mrs. Jones liked to think of her only daughter as being refined, socially educated, but everyone in town had seen the two grow up together and there was never a peep whenever they were discovered hand in hand or just walking together a little later than was proper.

They made a handsome couple after all and most of the long-time locals assumed they would marry one day. The pair seemed so close but even they didn't know just how close.

### *Fire & Train*

The night of the dance came. Jake gave his usual display of staying upright on two left feet. He did however have good rhythm and logic, so while the band played reels and jigs he counted out loud, followed his neighbours around the floor and generally kept from looking too clumsy. When the end of the evening drew near though and the slow dances came, while he made an attempt not to shame Emyleigh they both knew it was pointless and not without a little pleasure did they retire from the hall and cross the road to walk along the wharf.

The sickle moon shone back from the water flowing round the western bend as an owl hooted its approval on the far bank.

Emyleigh gazed up through the branches of the Wattle trees at the end of the wharf.

"Have you every thought about how we live between two rivers here. This one", she motioned to the waters at their feet," and the one in the sky."

"You mean the Milky Way."

"Doesn't it look like a river of stars?"

"I guess so. I hadn't thought of it like that... I wonder if they have riverboats up there?"

"Don't be silly."

"Well it's not all that silly. The world's a big, strange place."

"A bit big for my liking."

"Wouldn't you like to go and see the wonders of the world."

"Not really. I'm quite happy here. Aren't you?" she said coyly.

While Jake wasn't a mental giant, he did know his girlfriend rather well and instinctively replied, "As long as you're with me I'd be happy anywhere."

This produced the expected effect and Emyleigh let him fold her into his arms. It was by no means a cold night, but the warmth of his embrace washed over her.

They kissed. Not the hot, abandoned exploratory kiss of new passion. Not the brief, familiar, brush of the lips of age old marriage, but the tender touch of

intimate youth. Respectful, yet seeking . Unhurried, in the tacit knowledge that there was time, a life time in fact, to plumb the waters that swirled beneath this intimacy.

A steam whistle echoed from close down river.

The couple drew a little apart and turned in unison towards the moon.

A trail of smoke drifted up from beyond the trees in the crook of the river, curling around the constellations, playing with the patterns and cutting the crescent in two. The slapping of the paddle wheels could be heard as the fairy lights of the steamer hove into view. This was a very late arrival for a passenger boat and in Jake's mind, not all that well timed either.

All thoughts of further intimacy drifted off with the smoke and the young couple turned to wander hand in hand back towards the main street.

Passing a coal hopper Emyleigh said, "Jake. How would you like to go on a picnic tomorrow? Just you and me. We could take the trap. We never really get time just to ourselves. Even the boats seem to conspire against us." As if in response the incoming steamer whistled long and loud.

"I'd love to Em but I'm working tomorrow."

"But I thought you had tomorrow off."

"I was going to, but Jameson is ill. You know Jameson?"

"Yes. The fireman on the Coalville train."

"That's him. Well he's really very sick and at the moment there's no one around to replace him. They've asked me to do it. It's a great opportunity and if I can show them I can do it, I might have a chance to move up."

The excitement in his voice was contagious and Emyleigh felt her disappointment swept away as its wave engulfed her. This was not the first time she had been overcome by his emotions.

"Speaking of work, I guess I should take you home. I've got an early start."

"I suppose so", she answered a little reluctantly. The evening had been pleasant. Not quite the romantic episode she had anticipated, still, Jake couldn't afford to be late on his first day riding the footplate.

## *Headin' for the Hills*

In the period between the destruction of the ganger and Jameson falling ill, the line to Coalville had been completed and the mine shaft sunk. Daily the Coalville train snaked its way up the side of the hills and out of sight into the highlands, pulling a line of empty trucks, one carriage, sometimes full of returning miners and a guards van. This was the domain of Mr. Grey who controlled the brakes, amongst other things. It was a demanding task, but was often over shadowed by the job of keeping the miners in line. The idea of sobering up before returning to the mine didn't occur to many of them and dangerous behaviour and fights

periodically broke out amongst them. This was one reason there were no bars in Coalville itself. Lord only knows how many drunks there'd be turning up for their shift if liquor was available up there. With a ban on drink on the train it supposedly meant they had at least three hours between the bottle neck and pithead. Unfortunately for him, Grey was the one who had to enforce it. All this was running through his mind that Saturday morning as he strode up to the engine.

"Good morning, Mr. Grey" came a cheery voice, followed by that scraping sound that the wide flat coal shovel makes as it slides across the coal fragments littering the floor.

"Jake", he nodded back. "What are you doing here?"

"Jameson's still sick. They asked me to fill in."

"I see. Well, just do as you're told and work hard. I'm sure you'll do fine. Have you seen any of the boys this morning. The shift change...?"

"Yes sir. They look a bit under the weather. Not too feisty I'd say."

"Good, I don't feel like a rough ride this morning, oh, and you can call me George. The other firemen do."

"Right, George", Jake's ego inflated just a little at the reference. It didn't take much to flatter the youth and any suggestion that he might be on his way up served the purpose fine. He was determined to take advantage of this opportunity.

"I'll see you later. We should be off soon" and George checked his pocket watch as he walked back along the train to where the miners were climbing into the carriage. No niceties for these passengers, such as boarding at the platform. The train departed from the siding where the empty coal trucks had been left the day before.

The mine worked a three train system. At any one time there would be a line of trucks at the pithead being filled, one at the wharf unloading and one either waiting empty on the siding over night or somewhere in transit between Wattleford and Coalville.

A couple of minutes later engineer O'Leary ('That's, 'O' apostrophe, Leary if you don't mind') returned with the appropriate papers and the last miners scrambled on board. The clank of metal on metal passed down the train until the Guard's Van was tagging obediently along behind the departing engine.

Jake shovelled hard as they crossed the main road at the edge of town. Black smoke billowed from the funnel and the procession picked up speed.

Soon they were rattling along at a good pace with the stand-in fireman hard at work.

A mile or two from town, O'Leary throttled back and pulled on the whistle as a signal came into sight.

"Take a short rest lad. You'll be needin' your puff soon enough when we hit the incline. The points are just ahead, we'll coast through them for a bit. There's a small slope just the other side."

The points that the brothers had argued over a couple of years before, appeared just ahead, set to the left and Coalville.

'Josh was right', Jake thought. 'If only I'd listened, oh well, too late' and the engine clattered over the points, the line of trucks trailing along behind.

An hour later and Jake was sweating profusely as the driving wheels dragged the train across the face of the hill occasionally slipping from the load and the damp rails.

"Hey lad, look up ahead. Here's the cause of all your woes" and the driver pointed up along the line. Everyone on the railways in Wattleford knew of the boys escapade and where they thought they were heading. Now at the end of his finger, O'Leary could see a sign beside the line. 'Deadman's Curve' it read in a crooked hand. Just beyond it was an official railways sign, 'Trestle CV02 - 45'9"' followed by a speed indication plate saying '10mph'. This was country for care. "There's the spur where he died. We'll soon be on the trestle" and they eased into the bend and onto the viaduct. The chasm opened out beyond the unseen rails beneath them.

The pointlessness of the boys' quest was obvious. Even if they'd made their way to the spur, they couldn't have got down to the creek bed. The sides were too steep and of course there wasn't a glint of gold anywhere. God knows how they had built the trestle.

Soon the engine was across and back on solid ground. The long grind up the hills continued until eventually the floor of the high valley was rolling by beneath the wheels. Alongside the track the Coalville Creek tumbled from rock to rock towards the spur, now well behind them.

Well done lad, well done", O'Leary said, slapping Jake on the back as they rounded the last bend and pulled into the small rail yard at the mine.

"We'll make a fireman of you yet" and he proceeded to set about disconnecting the empty wagons.

Before long Jake was helping walk the engine round on the turn table ready to couple onto the full coal trucks for the return trip to Wattleford. One thing about working the engine for the mine, there was always plenty of coal in the bunker ready to fill the tender. O'Leary eased the engine under the hopper and while Jake operated the chute, he topped off the water tanks from the tower opposite. The lad was in his element. He'd never been this far into the hills before and the fresh mountain breeze and scraggy vegetation that persisted in sprouting through the slag struck a chord in his soul. He was in no hurry to head for the plains again.

Feeding the flames on the way up had been a real test of his stamina but he had come through with flying colours and now the easy part was ahead, downhill all the way. He stared around at the hilltops clad in grey cloud. Coalville was not a bright place, but it seemed to hold a certain mystery, locked in by the ridges and the weather, it's one gateway now standing in front of the engine, down the creek bed and out to the West.

They rattled forward, onto a siding and reversed up to the line of loaded trucks. Jake jumped down to couple them to the coal tender but found one of the yardmen there already.

"She's right mate. I've got it. You guys are bit early today. In a hurry?"

"Not really."

"Come on Jake, we've got a few minutes. Let's get a cuppa."

It was O'Leary, nodding in the direction of the yard office and the two headed off across the tracks.

"Keep an eye on 'er for us will you Sam?"

"Aye" and the yardman wandered up to sit on the steps of the engine.

Entering the yard office, Jake felt a tremor of warmth pass through him as he stepped up to the pot belly stove. It was cosy in there, with the kettle bubbling gently on the hot plate.

"I put it on when I saw you coming." It was Tucker, the yard manager, "and who do we have here then?"

"Jake sir, Jake Madison."

"Where's Jameson?"

"Ill. He's coughing his lungs out in bed. Doc Toogood doesn't give him long. Jake's filling in till we can get a new man."

"Seems he's doin' alright. You got in 15 minutes early today."

"Yes, he'll do..., for now." The driver didn't want his new offsider getting a swelled head and so he under stated his satisfaction at the lad's performance. He was already thinking of how he could wangle it so Jake stayed on permanently. After all, he was energetic, keen and had taken well to instruction on the way up. Firing an engine wasn't just a case of heaving coal into the flames. There was a technique to maintaining the fire and a good fireman had to learn it until it was instinctive. Jake seemed to be a natural. Not only that, he was pleasant enough company too. 'You never know who you're going to have to put up with, if you leave it to head office', he thought. He'd had his share of bad company in the cab over the years.

O'Leary poured himself a cup and passed a mug to Jake.

"There you go. Get yourself warmed up."

It wasn't that life on the foot plate was particularly cold, the firebox pumped out plenty of heat, but the chill winter winds coming down from the tops would whip in through the sides and straight through the cotton of the railway issue shirt.

Body heat from shovelling was enough to preclude leaving any jacket on, so in Winter on the Coalville line, the cab crew were constantly fighting chills. Jake felt the heat flowing through him from the sweet liquid as he sat on the edge of the table swinging his legs gently. He stared out across the yard to the distant peaks, feeling content. These men were the good honest type to which his father belonged and he felt right at home in their company. He daydreamed briefly of a life spent amongst them, discussing the weather, the politics of the day and railway business between the regular runs from the plains to the hills and back. "You right lad?"

Jake nodded, sculled the last of his tea and hopped off the table.

"Bye lad. See you tomorrow then?"

"I hope so."

"I 'spect so too. Have a good trip" and the engine crew clambered down the ladder, under the signal gantry and out across the yard.

Soon they had pressure up again and the familiar rattle of couplings heralded the departure of the train. The line of coal laden trucks snaked across the points, following the smoke and noise of the engine around the foot of the sheltering spur and off down the valley, quickly fading into the distance.

The sounds around the pithead fell behind, passing from mind as Jake stoked the firebox for the journey ahead.

"Hold up there Lad. Don't over do it. It's all down hill from here," said the driver as they exited the mouth of the valley and turned toward the trestle at Deadman's Curve.

The western plains, laced with the silver streams of a myriad of rivers, spread out to the horizon on their right and Jake took a breather to lean on the window of the cab and take in their beauty. The early afternoon sun had warmed the air on the flank of the mountains and the overcast of the morning had given way to a blue sky suspended on crisp winter air.

The squeal of metal on metal startled him back to reality as O'Leary gently applied the brakes.

At the far end of the train George was complimenting his effort in the guards van. The line of wagons clanged up against each other as the engine slowed.

"'s can be a tricky business. 'specially on wet metal. Here, I'll show you how."

O'Leary was falling into his own trap without thinking, already acting as if Jake would be his new fireman. His education was under way and this would be the first of many, many times with the younger man at the brake lever and the older man on the throttle as the Coalville Train snaked its way across the face of the hills, heading for Wattleford.

## *Up the Creek with a Paddle(boat)*

Some things in life are just meant to be and it seems that fate has a way of arranging for them to come about, despite the normal flow of events. Jake's promotion to fireman was one of those things. Following several half heard conversations in the station master's office, and the to and fro of a handful of official Railways envelopes, he was invited to sit for his fireman's ticket. An inspector friend of Trumble's, took time from his other duties during a visit to the riverside town, to test him and soon Jake was appointed as the permanent replacement for Jameson, circumventing regular railways procedure somewhat. His father was very proud. It looked like the young scallywag was turning out alright after all.

By now Jake and Emyleigh were firmly established as a couple and in her mind at least it was only a matter of time before they wed. At seventeen she was at 'prime marrying age' as her mother would say.

'Time to start some serious man hunting' she'd say in private. She definitely had designs on marrying her daughter off to a young man with prospects, and contrary to Emyleigh's own feelings on the subject, Jake didn't fit the bill. Her father's opinion, of course, was never sought, much less given.

One hot summer's day Mrs. Jones was in town when she overheard a conversation between Bernice Sutton and Mrs. Reynolds, the wife of another of the big property owners from just out of town. Now Mrs. Jones knew that the Reynolds had a couple of sons in their late teens and had been keeping an eye, as it were, on their development. The news that fell to her ears opened up possibilities and set her mind whirring.

Wattleford wasn't known for its high society functions and even if it had been, Emyleigh was unlikely to have received an invitation. That is, judging by the gatherings on the wealthier properties in the district, where she had already been omitted from the guest lists. Much to her mother's chagrin this had precluded any chance of Emyleigh meeting the most eligible bachelors around and particularly the Reynolds boys, Tom and Seymour. Mrs. Jones now hatched a plan to put this right.

"Evan, I think Emyleigh and I should take a trip up river for a few days. The 'Eagle's Wing' is going up to Martindale and back in a couple of days with a government inspection committee and I think it would do Emyleigh good to see some more of the country. She's been so restricted here and I could do with a little holiday."

Her husband looked up from stuffing his pipe.

"A holiday? From what?"

"This one horse town. It just doesn't have the hustle and bustle of Cardiff that I'm used to."

'Here we go again', he thought. Ever since they'd arrived in Victoria, she'd found countless opportunities to get her way by reminding him that she came from the high end of town while he had been just a miner's son who dragged her half way round the world to this backwater on the edge of nowhere. The 'guilt gun' he called it and she had it loaded again.

"Well, what do you think Evan?"

"Very well", he gave in. It would be costly, but then a few days to himself wouldn't go amiss either. At least she hadn't asked to go on the regular trip all the way up to the border and she might be able to glean a bit of information on the inspection that could be helpful. She was after all, very good at 'acquiring' knowledge in public places and so it was decided.

Emyleigh, being the adventurous type, was soon looking forward to the trip, although she didn't quite understand where her mother suddenly got the urge to travel from. She had never shown any desire for it before and so the father's unspoken suspicions spread to the daughter, but she kept them to herself. 'The real purpose of the journey will show itself soon enough', she thought.

A mist drifted across the river, encircling the row of paddle steamers moored along the wharf as the government delegation descended the three flights of stairs to river level. Behind them came the Joneses with Jake tagging along beside Emyleigh, much to Mrs. Jones' annoyance. She had her own reasons for not wanting them to be seen together this day, but thought better of saying anything. She glanced around furtively, looking for something, or someone. Obviously the object of her curiosity was not in sight.

"Are you ladies travelling alone?", the Captain enquired after their situation. It was after all, not common for women to travel unaccompanied on the river. The Outback was still far enough from 'Civilisation' for all kinds of unpleasant or uncouth things to happen to the unwary or unprepared.

"Thankyou for asking, but our companions should be here at any moment", Mrs Jones replied just quiet enough to avoid Emyleigh hearing.

Just up the river, a steamer eased out into the stream, a logging barge following obediently behind. The haunting sound of its whistle echoed off the far bank as it slipped past the passengers settling in on the 'Eagle's Wing'.

The crew tied down a couple of crates on the deck and the Captain strolled to the stern and inspected the wheel. He had no desire for any hiccoughs on this trip. A good report from the delegation might mean more government work in the future. He moved forward again and mounted the steps to the bridge.

"All aboard?" called the captain leaning out of the window.

"Hold on!" came the reply from the top of the steps as Tom and Seymour rushed, almost tumbling in their hurry, down to the gangplank.

The clatter of well-heeled shoes on the wooden deck heralded their arrival.

'Most undignified' thought Mrs. Jones, though her face betrayed a hint of relief.

"Cast off fore'. Cast off aft."

Jake looked a little longingly into Emyleigh's eyes, she indicated the proximity of her mother with her eyebrows and he went ashore without the desired goodbye kiss. Even a peck on the cheek would have sufficed, but not with his prospective mother in law at hand.

"Bon Voyage" he called, not really knowing its' meaning.

"See you in a couple of days Jake. Be good" and the gleaming steamer pulled away from the wharf.

Jake stood and watched the sunlight glinting off the water as it splashed from the paddles, waiting until their 'Slap slap slap' had faded away around the bend before ascending the steps and heading for work.

He was going to miss her.

Despite the constant coming and going of vessels at Wattleford, Emyleigh had never actually travelled on one before and the pulse and gyrations of the engines, punctuated with bursts of steam, kept her intrigued when the view of the passing countryside became boring.

Meanwhile her mother kept trying to manoeuvre her and the Reynolds boys together. She was somewhat concerned that she may have over estimated their ages. Certainly their maturity didn't seem to be up to that of the boys she knew of their age. Jake, for instant was far more mature. On the other hand she had sunk a lot of their savings into this trip so she determined to make the most of it, "After all", she thought, "they will grow up eventually and probably soon".

Her daughter was standing staring at the big piston driving the paddle crank when they reached the junction around midday.

The helm was brought over and the stately vessel slewed around against the current and headed up the tributary towards Martindale.

Tom Reynolds was standing back a little watching the engine too. Unbeknownst to Emyleigh, she was in his sights as well.

Mrs. Jones, who had been resting in the shade with a lemonade, came around the corner of the cabin as he stepped over and leaned on the rail beside her daughter. She stopped to observe the young couple in coversation.

"Miss Jones."

"Mr. Reynolds", Emyleigh replied nodding slightly in his direction.

"It's not usual for the women to be interested in the machinery, but I've noticed you here at the rail a few times since we departed."

"I guess it comes from my father. He works for the railways. So does my boyfriend."

Her mother's heart sank. Maybe she should have let her daughter in on her plans, rather than let nature take its course.

"He's a lucky man then. Beauty and brains."

"Why, thank you." Emyleigh went a little shy.

'There's hope yet', her mother thought and retreated to the cabin.

"What brings you on this trip Miss Jones?"

"Call me Emyleigh....Tom?"

"Very well... Emyleigh."

"Mother thought it was time I saw some of the country. I guess she thought with the delegation taking up most of the boat it would be a more civilised trip than what I hear it can be."

"She can't have heard that Seymour and I would be on it too."

"On the contrary. I suspect that was one of the deciding factors. She has her mind set on marrying me 'above my station', the railway station that is and I think you two qualify in her eyes."

"Oh do we now? Well, you never know. A warm, clear night, a moonlit river. You might think better of us too."

"That's a little forward of you, but anyway, what made you think I had a low opinion of you in the first place?"

"Oh, just a feeling. I've never seen you at any of our functions out at Wyndoree."

"I've never been invited."

"We'll have to fix that in future then. You would like to come, wouldn't you?"

"Certainly. I look forward to it"

She turned from the machinery and wandered over to the port rail. Tom followed. They stared at the bank for a while in silence before falling into general conversation about the wildlife on the river.

The miles slid past beneath the keel and soon it was dinner time.

Their private passenger status threw the Reynolds and the Joneses together at one of the few tables.

As with so any meetings of this sort, the conversation centred around the food, which was unexpectedly good for a riverboat, or so the brothers said. Captain Franks was out to please.

After the meal Emyleigh and her mother sat on the upper deck in the cool of the evening.

"Had a good day love?"

"Very pleasant, thank you mother" and she stared up into the Milky Way, thinking of the night of the dance, standing on the wharf with Jake, doing this same thing, when the whistle blew and she started. Sitting on the upper deck they were so

close now to the whistle, and the timing, synchronised with her recollection of that night, had caught her off guard. Slowly her heart went back to its normal pace. Up on the bank there was a rustling in the bushes and a small band of men holding lanterns appeared in response to the blast. It was the wood cutters who owned the landing they were now approaching.

The boat crew threw lines to them as they pulled alongside the jetty and soon the vessel was made fast.

Emyleigh watched as the men began loading fuel for the morning's journey.

On the lower deck, Tom and Seymour could be heard bantering with a couple of the government men over a game of cards. It sounded like Tom was winning.

"I think it's time for bed Emyleigh" her mother said. The card game was not a good sign in her mind. 'Better', she thought, 'to keep Emyleigh away from it.' She might have to review her opinions on these young men.

The two women descended the stairs and entering their tiny cabin, made ready for bed.

Before long the sound of men hurrying to and fro across the gangplank, and the intermittent protest and laughter of the gamblers, faded into the dreamy background silence that washed over the young woman as she drifted into sleep. The night's rest was fitful, broken by dreams of Jake. This was the first time they had really been apart over night. Geographically they were not all that distant from each other, but in travel terms they were a day away. As with Jake's trips up to Coalville and back though, Emyleigh still felt a strong link. As if he was there, keeping an eye out for her. The day's conversations with Tom had been pleasant but meaningless.

'All he seemed to talk about were frivolous things. Social events, food, cards.' Of course she was being too hard on him. They hardly knew each other. What did she expect him to talk about?

These thoughts flickered briefly across the theatre of her mind before vanishing into the wings, leaving the image of her life long companion, centre stage.

Mentally she applauded, laughed silently with joy and sank back into sleep. Such strange things, dreams.

Back in Wattleford, Jake's night followed a similar pattern.

Periods of deep, work induced sleep, punctuated by vivid images of Emyleigh. He had seen the Reynolds boys run aboard, their rakish good looks and enthusiasm spilling over the scene.

Was that a twinge of jealousy he felt? Probably not. Probably just a touch of aching muscles from a hard day shovelling coal.

'bet they don't have to lift a finger for their livelihood', he thought. He was wrong of course, but who could blame him for such natural ponderings.

Morning came in a blaze of sunbeams as the dawn shone through smoke from a bush fire in the ranges.

The fingers of light felt their way down the trunks of the eucalypts on the bank and onto the surface of the water where they reflected up and through the slats on the ladies' cabin door. Emyleigh, awoken by the sounds of the riverboat making ready to leave, lay on her back and watched the rippling lace of light on the ceiling. The aromatic smell of smoke mixed with the bush fragrances made her hungry and she nudged her mother awake.

"Mother... Mother... Time to get up. They'll be serving breakfast soon."

Slowly her mother sat up and the two women began their preparations for the day. They would reach Martindale before dusk and naturally in their pride, they wanted to make a good impression as visitors from 'The big smoke', for that is what Wattleford was compared to Martindale. Just how much bigger, the two were yet to find out.

They squeezed around each other to use the small jug of water and basin that stood on the tiny cabinet wedged into the corner. There was just enough space for Mrs. Jones to begin regretting suggesting the trip.

Their morning ablutions were accompanied by polite bumps and expressions of discomfort that drifted out the louvres and onto the deck, where, by chance, Seymour was leaning enjoying the day's first pipe. This was the source of the smoke.

Finally mother and daughter emerged, blinking in the bright sunlight. The sky was cloudless and a gathering Northerly was beginning to sweep the bush with hot air. It was shaping up to be the kind of day when the smallest spark could send a fifty foot wall of flame rushing headlong through the trees, driving all that could move before it and razing all that couldn't.

During Emyleigh's lifetime, Wattleford had been spared from bushfire but she had seen them in the distance and that was frightening enough. Inevitably some poor farmer or traveller would arrive in town soon afterward, blackened and coughing, telling of a close escape after running wildly through the scrub trying to find a way to safety. Then, every few years a body or two would be found, maybe weeks afterward, huddled in the hollow of a creek or laying beneath a fallen tree, the remnants of a jacket over their face in a last ditch attempt at survival.

These images, or the stories of them, flooded easily into her mind as she watched the trees nodding towards the South, like a line of soldiers, eager to flee the enemy, but fated to stand and fight.

The Eagle's Wing took flight from the jetty and headed upstream.

A pleasant breakfast was followed by a relaxing, though hot, morning in the shade along the port rail, watching the countryside slide by.

Mrs. Jones had had resigned herself to the fact that maybe the Reynolds's boys weren't the catch she thought after all and left her daughter to do as she pleased. No more trying to manoeuvre her into a promising encounter.

In between gazing at the scenery, she occupied herself with some lacework and Emyleigh read. That was one thing her mother was proud of. Her daughter was a discerning and avid reader. While Wattleford was still some years from having its own Mechanic's institute, Emyleigh kept up a flow of orders for books from Melbourne through a catalogue service. She would choose a volume from its pages and a train driver friend of Jake's would kindly purchase it for her next time he was in Collins St. delivering it on his run up with the express.

So the majority of the day passed, with the working sounds of the steamer as a backdrop and the whistle of the wind in the funnel stays overhead.

For all the attention Emyleigh gave to the horizon, her concerns about bushfire did not come to fruition and by the time the meagre lights of a Martindale dusk showed around the bend, her apprehensions had faded somewhat.

As the Eagle's Wing drifted up to the wharf, slowed by the head current, the sounds of raucous activity in the hotel, just back from the riverbank, rolled across the water.

Mrs. Jones Frowned. What had she let them in for?

All she could see of Martindale was one shop, a small block house with bars on the windows and of course the hotel. Any buildings beyond that were lost in the gathering dark.

'Oh well, I guess we'll see it all in the morning.'

They were fortunate though. Because of the special nature of the trip, the two women were able to stay on the boat overnight, in fact for both nights of the planned stay by the delegation.

Apparently, in the morning there was to be a big meeting of local squatters and interested parties about the issuing of government titles and such like. Tom had mentioned that he and Seymour were there to see about the possibility of obtaining acreage for themselves. It seemed they were seeking independence from the family property down south.

Every word he spoke seemed to put a nail in the coffin of Mrs. Jones' plans. She had no desire to see her daughter married to a stockman, stuck in the back of beyond, on her own most of the time. Jake's prospects were improving by the day.

The women stayed on board all evening before turning in at a civilised hour. The delegation and the Reynolds brothers left soon after docking and disappeared in the direction of the hotel from whence the noise continued late into the night.

Around two a.m. Emyleigh was awoken by a thump on the wall and the sound of whispering voices.

"Watch it! You'll wake the women."

"Careful with that barrel!"

"Damn!. Bloody ropes. Someone ought to talk to the crew."

The sound of boots went back and forth along the deck and down the gangplank for some time accompanied by men grunting and cursing quietly.

After a few minutes of this, Emyleigh rose and went quietly to the door. Looking down through the slats she could just see the occasional foot or elbow pass and was about to retire again when a barrel head appeared in her line of sight.

Someone was taking a short rest outside.

"God I could do with a drink. Can't we tap one of these?"

"You leave the profits alone. Ol' Stumpy knows just how much there's meant to be. You could be shot for tampering with the stock."

"You don't say brother", came the sarcastic reply.

"Now get a move on Seymour, we haven't got all night".

'So that's it', she thought. 'They're running grog with someone called 'Stumpy'. What would mother think if she knew about this? In fact, I wonder what their own mother would think?' All at once she felt secure again. Having figured out her mother's plan for the trip, she had been on the look out for something to foil the plot. Up till now the brothers had been quietly doing the work themselves, but this put the cap on it. If all else failed, she would tell her mother about the night's activities, but for the moment discretion was the order of the day. She lay down again and drifting into sleep, cast around in her mind, trying to think who 'Stumpy' might be.

The dawn was heralded by another hot dry Northerly. By now the bush was tinder dry and looking across the bare earth from the top of the riverbank, Emyleigh and her mother saw the shimmering images of reflected heat. Martindale floated in an oasis that stretched to the trees in the near distance. It was only mid morning.

"Lord!", Mrs . Jones exclaimed as she scanned the town.

The metropolis of Martindale was spread before them, exactly like the night before. One shop, one pub and one jail. The expected houses and busy main street had failed to materialize. It was going to be a boring day for the two of them, or so she thought.

They took a turn around the settlement, soon ending up on the veranda of the hotel. Emyleigh peered inside, searching for a civilised spot to take tea, or lemonade, or anything refreshing. The bar was full of squatters and government men. The meeting was about to begin. She backed out quietly and the ladies retired to the riverboat for some shade.

They were sitting on the stern deck when the captain came down from the bridge and walked up to them, the familiar sound of his limping gait echoing softly from the shed on the wharf.

Emyleighs brain ticked over. 'Snap!' the identity of 'Stumpy' became clear. 'The captain is in on it', she thought. This instantly changed her opinion of the man who had been so thoughtful on the trip. Still she kept the information to herself. "Would you ladies care for a drink?" he asked. "It's going to be a long day I'm afraid."

Emyleigh smiled inwardly at the irony of his suggestion before accepting his offer and soon the cook appeared with a tray.

The two women spent most of the day chasing the shade and fanning themselves between short naps and occasional conversation, until around four o'clock when a commotion erupted beyond the crest of the riverbank.

Those on board rushed across the gangplank and up the bank. The ladies followed.

From the top, the scene was chaos.

Men were running everywhere. The delegation was heading their way post haste and behind them the hotel was aflame.

"Captain. Have you got any pumps on board?"

"Only for the bilges."

"Damn. Isn't there some way you could get some water up here?"

"'fraid not commissioner."

"Alright men. Over to the tank", and they headed for the windmill to join the squatters. A human chain was forming to pass the few buckets on hand between the tank and the fire.

Suddenly Tom came running out of the burning building, his shirt ablaze. Seymour, who was standing watching, grabbed him and wrapping his jacket around Tom's torso, rolled him on the ground, extinguishing the flames.

Tom cried out in pain.

The women rushed over to the stricken man and gently helped him to his feet. His back was black and red, raw flesh where the skin had been burned off. Pieces of scorched fabric stuck to the edges of the burn. It looked ghastly.

"Is there anyone here who knows how to treat burns?"

"Only old Joseph. The nearest doctor's in Wattleford."

"Well get him then. Go on", said Mrs. Jones.

The speaker shuffled off down what passed for a street, circling round the blazing building and cutting through the bucket brigade. Soon he was lost among the trees on the far edge of town.

Carefully the Captain, Seymour and the ladies ushered Tom back on board and laid him face down in the softest berth on the boat. Emyleigh dabbed at the burn with water to try and clean it up, but every time she did so, he winched in pain. Soon after, he passed out.

"Let him sleep said the captain. Best thing for him. Just keep an eye on him till old Joseph gets here. We'll take him down to Wattleford as soon as he's finished and things are cleaned up here."

Half an hour passed with Tom out cold, then the messenger returned with a weather beaten black skinned man.

"This is Joseph?" Mrs. Jones queried of Grant, the messenger. "I thought you were getting someone who had a clue what to do."

"He does. The Abo's have lived with bushfire for thousands of years. Do you think they never got burned?"

"Well if it's the best we can do..."

Joseph took some dry plant material from a pouch he had brought with him and crushed it on a plate at Tom's bedside. Adding a drop or two of water, he mixed up a poultice.

Carefully peeling away the remainder of the material around the wound, he applied the poultice to the burn.

Tom moaned a little and woke up.

Joseph said something to Grant in his native tongue.

"Tom, does that feel any better?"

"A little" and he grunted.

Another comment from Joseph and Grant was asking the captain for a bandage. He scurried out and returned with a sheet that Emyleigh quickly tore into strips. Joseph soaked a strip in water, wrapped the poultice in it then bandaged it over the worst of the wound.

He gave Grant some more of the mixture and instructions on caring for the patient which he relayed to Emyleigh and made to leave.

"Thank him for us, please, would you?" she said and Grant did so.

The old native smiled at the little group, turned and left.

Up in the town, the fire was nearly spent. Most of the building was gone and the men were exhausted from their attempts to put it out. The publican sifted through the remains. Levering the hatch aside with a dead branch, he went down into the rough cellar and brought up a keg of beer. He cast around for some glasses. Most had broken in the heat but with a little help he rustled up enough for the men to all have a drink. They were sitting around on stumps and rocks contemplating the ruins when 'Stumpy' walked up.

"Tom's a bit more comfortable now. It's too close to dark to leave tonight, so I'll be shoving off at first light to get him to Doc. Toogood. Anyone who's coming better be on board by then. Of course you gentleman may use your cabins overnight now that the hotel's gone", he said, nodding at the government men. Comments of gratitude emanated from a few of the men in question. The rest were too weary.

“Right then. I’ll be off. See you later” and the captain went back to his station. An hour or so afterward the delegates could be seen drifting back on board in ones and twos as the Hotelkeeper and his staff picked through the cooling embers for anything recoverable.

### *Line of fire*

Morning came and yet another hot dry wind. Now it was three days in a row. Surely this would be the day of the next stage in the cycle when the weather broke and thunder storms whipped across the dry landscape. With the southerly wind shift, cooler air would reduce the fire risk but the lightning itself would become a danger. Ground strikes could easily set off the bush, burning out hundreds of acres at a time. Some of the squatters knew from the local tribes that this burning cycle was necessary for the bush to thrive, but the havoc it caused with stock and property overrode any tolerance they might have for the walls of flame that periodically swept across their land. Some tried to take rudimentary precautions but these were soon forgotten in the fear that washed over every creature in the path of the fires.

Even before the women had risen and dressed, the deck resounded to the sound of activity and soon the steam whistle announced their departure. The familiar noise of the paddle wheel began and with an ever so slight bump as it left the wharf, the riverboat came about and headed downstream.

It was soon evident that the trip home, with the flow of the river would be significantly faster than that of the outward voyage.

Emyleigh went to check on Tom before taking breakfast. Seymour had been with him all night and was collapsed in the corner on a chair. Tom was resting peacefully. She gently checked his bandage and left without disturbing either of them.

By late morning the ‘Eagle’s Wing’ was nearly at the junction again while high on the spur Jake was on the footplate with the train about to turn up the valley to Coalville.

He took a short breather as they reached the crest and gazed out over the plain. There, not too far north of the river he could see a small bush fire burning. It was well away from any settlement and would probably be left to burn out on its own. For some reason this worried him. He had no real idea exactly where Emyleigh and her mother were at that moment. They weren’t due back until the next day, but he had a feeling they were either in danger or heading for it. The only thing he could do about it was get home as fast as possible. He turned to his job again with renewed vigour.

By mid afternoon Jake was back in Wattleford and Emyleigh was heading upstream from the junction with the smell of smoke wafting over the deck.

From the engine on the way home, Jake had seen the bush fire again. This time it was much larger and leapt through the crowns of the trees to within striking distance of the river between Wattleford and the junction.

The closer he got to home, the more a feeling of dread grew in his heart. He had no reason to believe Emyleigh and her mother were anywhere near the fire, but the more he tried to rationalise away the thought, the more certain he became that they were in danger.

He leapt from the footplate as they drew to a halt in the Wattleford yard.

"Bed her down for me, will you?" he called to O'Leary.

He had been worrying out loud all the way home and the engineer knew better than to try and stop him. He turned to the shovel and took over the young fireman's task as Jake rushed off to the wharf.

Arriving at the top of the steps he cast his eyes along the jetty below him. There were only a couple of boats tied up and only one of those had steam up.

She was the 'Lindy Lee', a sturdy little workhorse with a strong engine and a big heart, built to pull heavily laden barges up and down the waterway. Jake bounded across the gangway and up the ladder to the bridge.

"Hamish. When are you leavin'? You are going down river aren't you?"

"Yes. We're headin' down to the Hardwood Landing to get a barge in about half an hour. I'm just waiting for Craddock to come back from the shops.

Now Jake knew John Craddock well enough to know that he wasn't likely to be back on time and certainly not sober. The only shop he frequented sold alcohol and nothing else.

"If I can get him back early can I come down river with you?"

"Of course Jake, of course."

Jake was out the bridge door, down the companionway, across the gangway and halfway up the steps before the captain had time to put his thumbs back in his waistcoat pockets, which was his usual stance when addressing someone.

A small cloud of dust sprung from the fireman's heels as he sprinted down the main street, straight into the bar of the Victoria Hotel.

"Fancy seeing you here young ladddd.."

The voice of the lone occupant came from the darkness of the far corner. As he had guessed, Jake recognized the drunken tones of Craddock.

"The captain wants you on board now! Come on. No time to lose" and he walked over to help the crewman to his feet.

Craddock lurched against him and the two men stumbled out of the bar and into the glare of the afternoon summer sun.

With difficulty the younger man ushered his charge towards the wharf, down the steps and onto the deck.

"Cap'n McTavish! I've got Craddock. Can we leave now?"

"To be sure lad. Give him a hand will you. I presume he's drunk. Smith! We got steam up?"

"Aye Cap'n", the engineer's voice echoed out of the boiler room.

"Cast off forw'd! Cast off aft!"

Jake ran to the stern and pulled the ropes on board as Craddock did the same at the bow with somewhat less agility. The little boat eased out into the stream.

As they cleared the edge of town, Jake went up to the bridge. From the higher vantage point, smoke was just visible on the horizon to the North West.

"Looks like a big one."

"Aye"

"Do you think we'll run into it?"

"I doubt it, but if the wind picks up it might come down as far as the landing."

"Maybe we should hurry in case the men there need taken off."

"That's my plan lad, don't worry."

Jake breathed a silent sigh of relief. He had done the best he could, now it was up to the 'Lindy Lee' and fate to get him to his sweetheart in time.

Despite steaming with the current, the wash from the little steamer broke noisily on the banks as it rushed down the river at close to full speed.

While he was pleased with the captain's determination to make the landing quickly, any speed would have been too slow for Jake's liking and his feeling of dread grew as the minutes passed.

Downstream, out of sight, the 'Eagle's Wing' was making good time heading home. 'Stumpy' had noticed the bushfire too and was hoping to beat it to the river up ahead. Usually paddle steamers were relatively safe on the water but he couldn't be too careful.

The Sun was close to setting when the Eagle's Wing rounded a bend to be confronted by the sight of the Hardwood Landing ablaze and a wall of flame along the bank. Three men were standing on the jetty with nowhere to go. A barge laden with wood was tied up alongside and the wood cutters were considering cutting it free and drifting downstream, hopefully out of reach of the fire.

'Stumpy' brought the 'Eagle's Wing' alongside the barge, holding it there with the ease of a seasoned riverboat man and the men jumped on board, one of them was holding the bow rope from the barge. The eldest of the new passengers climbed up to the bridge and had a few words with the captain.

Soon the paddle steamer was towing the timber barge away from the conflagration. The men stood and watched as the rough shack they called home burst into flames and collapsed in ashes behind them. The 'Eagle's Wing' swung in close to the far bank, to ground the barge there for later retrieval, as the jetty caught fire. The rescue had been none to soon.

The wood cutters cast off the barge, hoping it would stay grounded until the fire had past and they could return with another boat. The 'Eagle's Wing' was a stern wheeler, not rigged for towing, plus the captain was rushing to get Tom back to the doctor in Wattleford and the barge would only slow him down. He pulled away at full steam and headed up stream again.

It was only a mile or so further on that the paddle steamer had to pass close to the northern shore to avoid shallow water. The high banks at this point were capped with dense bush now fully ablaze.

The passengers all moved to the down wind rail, sheltering behind the boat's superstructure, Emyleigh and her mother were near the stern.

As the boat reached the apex of the bend, a large tree fell, flaming, onto the foredeck, crashing through into the forward hold and smashing several of the flagons of whisky. Instantly a river of fire flowed back into the boat through the bilges. All the men rushed forward grabbing buckets to try and extinguish it. Gallons of water scooped out of the river only served to spread the alcohol until it reached the wood store surrounding the boiler in the centre of the boat. The stack quickly caught fire cutting off the men from the controls and from the women at the stern. Fire licked up the walls of the bridge until 'Stumpy' had to abandon his post. The boat was now completely out of control with the regulator wide open and the boiler temperature climbing every second, well beyond it's design limits. Flagon of alcohol were cracking in the heat, spreading more burning fluid around the feet of the male passengers and crew until it got to the point where, the captain had to order them to 'abandon ship'.

Emyleigh's mother burst into tears as she saw the men leap into the water leaving them stranded on the deck.

Several of the men tried to swim back to help them, but the boat steamed on at full speed, out of reach of their best efforts, nearly sucking two of them into the paddle blades on the way by.

Ahead of the runaway steamer, more trees toppled into the river. Running down on them the 'Eagle's Wing' slammed into the first one and slewed around to port, jamming up against another large gum in deep water. The paddles kept turning, vainly trying to push the vessel free. Water from the wheel splashed over the women, helping to protect them from the fires around them, but as non swimmers, their position had hardly improved. Steam could be heard shrieking as it escaped from boiler seams loosened by the extreme pressure. Common sense said it could blow at any minute.

Emyleigh was casting about for something to support them in the water, when she heard a man's voice calling faintly for help. Then it came to her. Tom was still in his cabin. She rushed to his door. Luckily his berth was at the rear of the boat and not yet on fire. She went in. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, barely

conscious. The heat from the burning boat was hell on his burned skin and he was having great trouble trying to stand.

She carefully put her arm around him, avoiding the burned areas as best she could and helped him out onto the stern deck.

Now the women had another problem. It would be one thing for them to jump into the water and cling onto something, but Tom was in no condition to try it and they couldn't just abandon him.

During all this, one of the government men, who was a strong swimmer had tried to get to the boat again, but had been swept away by the current, only returning to the far shore safely with some difficulty. It seemed the women were on their own with the injured man.

The superstructure of the boat began to collapse in on itself and soon the boiler and engine were exposed amongst a pile of burning wood, all sitting in the pool of flaming alcohol that filled the bilges. The hull itself, cooled by the water in which it floated had not caught fire, although the topsides, the hull above the waterline, were beginning to char.

Emyleigh moved towards to the boiler. In the light of the flames she could just see the pressure gauge. The needle was well into the red. Fortunately the engine was still working away at the paddle wheel, bleeding off some of the energy, otherwise it was clear the whole lot would have already been just small pieces of metal and wood drifting down the river, shattered by the exploding boiler. Time was quickly running out.

During all this, up river, the 'Lindy Lee' was steaming full tilt for the landing when the fire broke through to the river bank alongside her.

McTavish signalled 'dead slow' and moving closer to the bank opposite the fire, he took a good look at the inferno, rubbing his beard with the stub of his right index finger.

"I reckon we're too late for the boys at the landing."

"There's still a chance", replied Jake, standing beside him.

"We might as well go back. I don't want to risk losing ol' Lindy."

"No, no. Please keep going. Em' and her mother are down there, on the 'Eagle's Wing' and I'm sure they're in danger. We've got to go and help them."

"But the 'Wing's not due back till tomorrow."

"I know, but I also know they need our help now, not far away."

"Are you sure the heat's not getting to you lad?"

"No. This is something I just know. I sense it. I've had a growing feeling about it all day".

"But why should I risk everything on your hunch?"

"It's not the first time this has happened. I've had these signs before, several times and each time they've been right. They always involve Em'. She gets them too, about me."

"I think you're just love struck, you two, but if it's that bad we'd better go find out. Maybe the lads at the landing will be needing us anyway. That's as far as I'm going though. No further."

"Thanks, that'll be far enough I'm sure."

McTavish whistled into the speaking tube and the little craft picked up speed again and for the next hour they powered down stream keeping as far from the burning trees as possible.

By now, on the burning boat, panic was beginning to set in. Emyleigh was about to push her mother into the water with a crate to cling to, because no amount of reasoning would get her to go voluntarily.

"Go, mother, go! I'll fix up something for Tom and we'll follow you", she lied. She intended to make it as painless as possible for the injured man and hopefully jump in at the very last minute. She was betting on the flames getting to the stern before the boiler blew. It wasn't a good wager.

Turning to push the crate over the rail she looked upstream and there, to her amazement, was the 'Lindy Lee', emerging out of the smoke and steaming down towards them. The figure of a man could just be discerned clambering quickly down from the bridge and running to the fore deck. To Emyleigh it was a familiar form, silhouetted by the light of the flames reflected off the cabin walls.

Noticing the group of men on the far shore, McTavish veered over towards them. They in turn started shouting and waving at the remains of the 'Eagle's Wing', apparently pointing out Tom and the women still on board.

Rapidly the bow cut back to starboard as the boat slowed to manoeuvre around the trees in the river, some of which were still ablaze above water level. It was fortunate that she was such a small vessel. Many steamers on the river, including the 'Eagle's Wing' would not have been able to get past the snags to help.

As the rescuers approached the burning hulk, McTavish rang for reverse. The flames were too high and the risk too great to come alongside. So near and yet so far. He could not get close enough to pass the injured man from deck to deck.

As he stood off a little to contemplate another approach, the paint on the cabin began to blister in the heat. He backed off a little more just as Jake entered the bridge again.

"Can you bring her up on the stern, from up wind? I'll run out that log on deck so you can keep off as far as possible. We can bring them across that way."

"I guess it'll have to do. We can't leave them there."

With Jake on hand there was no chance of that of course. He wouldn't leave his girl to such a grizzly fate without expending the last breath in his body first.

Quickly he was back on deck and with a now sober Craddock to help, they lashed the log to the foredeck so that it protruded about fifteen feet forward of the bow, rather like a bow sprit or battering ram. The second description was what concerned McTavish. It would be a tricky business coming in close enough to use the log as a gangplank, without holing the remainder of the burning boat and locking the two boats together. Jake obviously had faith in him though and it proved to be well founded.

The captain swung to port, steamed across the shallows on the inside of the river bend taking advantage of the 'Lindy Lee's' shallow draught and swung around to approach from down river, with the wind aft. Ringing 'Dead Stop' McTavish found that the current going one direction and the wind blowing against it held the boat almost still. That made the whole prospect easier.

On 'Slow Ahead' he eased up to the stern of the stricken vessel.

On board, Emyleigh and her Mother moved Tom as gently as they could over to the rail. Jake balanced precariously on the tip of the log, ready to leap onto the deck. As the two craft came together, Emyleigh's face betrayed the joy and relief of seeing Jake there, ready to rescue them.

"Quick, back from the rail", he called as the battering ram slid towards the burning vessel.

In the noise of the fires, the women didn't understand his instructions and stood still waiting.

Jake could see that the smaller boat wouldn't stop in time and taking a short run along the timber, leapt the last few feet onto the burning deck. Emyleigh caught him as he slipped on some melted pitch that had bubbled up from between the decking. He pushed her aside and grabbed her mother as the log smashed through the rail and thrust through the space where they had been standing seconds earlier.

"Right. Mrs. Jones, across you go." And he indicated the makeshift gangway. She hesitated.

Suddenly a whistling whine started behind them, coming from the direction of the boiler. It slowly began to climb in pitch. There was no need for Jake to explain what this meant. Mrs. Jones turned, and stepping over the remains of the rail, gingerly edged the ten or so feet across the log to the rescue boat.

"Here. Give me a hand Em." Jake indicated Tom lying on the deck and she helped him lift the unconscious man over his shoulder.

"Now off you go" and he steered her towards the log.

Behind them the whining sound was reaching an eardrum piercing pitch, driving the fear factor even higher in the young couple.

On the 'Lindy Lee', McTavish could hear it too, and as Jake stepped off the deck of the 'Eagle's Wing' he ordered 'Full Astern.'

The water boiled up in front of the side paddles and the log swayed perilously as it withdrew from the flaming vessel. Jake's balance wavered as he struggled to carry Tom across to safety. Three more steps and the two men were on board. The captain continued to back off from the flames as Craddock put an axe through the lashings on the log. The tip had caught fire as Jake ran across and he had no intention of bringing the flames on board. The timber tipped forward and sliding back along the starboard rail some distance, it tumbled into the water in a cloud of steam. The captain saw it slip away from the hull as he backed off further.

"Get down the stern! She's going to blow!" he called down to the fore deck. Emyleigh ushered her mother back along the port rail to the rear of the cabin and found shelter on the stern deck. Jake followed quickly, helping Tom along. Now away from the direct heat of the flames, he was coming to again. Craddock appeared on the side deck, framed by the canopy and the flaming trees on the bank behind.

In the blink of an eye he was lying face down on the deck, his nose bleeding. In that split second the boiler on the 'Eagle's Wing' had finally given in to the extreme pressure and exploded.

Hot metal fragments rained down on the 'Lindy Lee'. Bullet-like holes appeared all along the starboard side of the cabin. Flaming wood cart wheeled across the sky, splashing down all around the boat and on the deck.

The flames on the shore, driven South towards the river for the last twenty hours or so, briefly bowed to the North as the pressure of the blast blew them back on their path. At the same time the men on the far shore were knocked to the ground.

When the sound of the explosion had died, there came a loud curse from inside the engine room of the 'Lindy Lee'.

"Bloody hell!" It was Smith, McTavish's engineer examining his hat which now sported entry and exit holes where a red hot rivet had passed right through. Had it gone through when he was wearing it he would have been dead, but fortunately he had hung it on the back of the door and was doubled over, stoking the boiler, when the projectile penetrated his domain.

Jake ran along the deck to check on Craddock. He had risen to his knees and wiping his nose with the back of his hand, produced his own curses as the blood smeared across it. Jake helped him to his feet. He would be fine.

McTavish brought the steamer around to starboard and moved in to the shore to pick up the men from the 'Eagle's Wing'.

They waded into the shallow water and with a hand from Jake and Craddock, were soon on board.

While this was taking place, Emyleigh explained the situation with Tom, so, as soon as all were aboard, the skipper signalled 'Full Steam Ahead' and they started

upstream again, into the gathering dusk, their way lit by the bushfire now slowly dying out on the northern bank of the river.

## *Capitulation*

The disastrous trip on the 'Eagle's Wing' was well behind them when finally Emyleigh became Mrs. Madison.

Jake's heroics had done the trick and all opposition from Mrs. Jones was quashed in one foul swoop. He had 'come, like a character from a Greek legend, through the smoke and fire to rescue, not only Emyleigh and I, but also the man who, but for fate, could have stolen his sweetheart away.' Em's mother did tend to get a bit carried away at times like these and their engagement party seemed an opportune moment.

Tom and Seymour were there too of course, having struck up a close friendship with the young couple following the return of the 'Lindy Lee'.

As could be expected, Tom was eternally grateful to Jake for carrying him from the burning boat to safety. Although unmentioned, he was also shamed by the alcohol smuggling that had caused the escalation of the incident beyond control. Needless to say the Reynolds boys were no longer involved in that trade although one couldn't be too sure about Captain 'Stumpy'. Despite losing his pride and joy, he still seemed to find plenty of reasons to steam up to Martindale in the boat that he now skippered for a business man down in Melbourne. What could be taken to be evidence of this appeared part way through the evening when a large, unlabelled, flagon of whisky turned up behind the makeshift bar, shortly following 'Stumpy's entry. Captain McTavish, as was his way, had arrived on the dot, along with several of the town's luminaries.

The young couple had become very well known and quite popular as a result of the escapade and many of the locals came to join them in celebration. Henceforth the elders of the community would have their eyes on Jake and his bride-to-be. As always, there were too few in Wattleford who had the charisma and guts to serve in public office and at least a couple of them held out hopes for Jake in that respect. 'Time will tell', they thought to themselves and kept their own council for the present.

The little church was overflowing on the big day. The Madisons had insisted that the wedding be kept small, but that didn't deter the locals from dropping by and the pews were a-buzz as the groom and his brother took their place before the altar.

The harmonium struck up 'Here Comes the Bride' and Jake turned to see his sweetheart, no longer the tom boy of his youth, glide up the aisle in all her beauty, on the arm of her 'Da'.

The service was simple as were the arrangements of wildflowers gathered from along the river banks. The scent of Wattle wafted through the church and out the main doors as the newly married couple greeted the sunshine together, smiling down on the small crowd of well wishers outside.

The Jones's trap was gaily decorated with flowers and ribbons and soon the floor was carpeted with rice as those gathered showered them with good luck. Railways wages at any level were not generous and the wedding feast would have been a small affair but for the Reynolds offer to pay for and host it at their property.

It was in that direction that Jake headed the trap as they left the church with a procession of carriages, drays and other vehicles snaking behind them through the town.

Emyleigh held a borrowed blue sun umbrella over them both and rested her head on Jake's shoulder as they trotted along. He turned his head and kissed her hair. In the column behind them the women smiled and sighed at the sight, occasionally giving that 'Why aren't we like that anymore?' glance to their husbands handling the reins beside them.

Wyndoree was the closest big property to town and so the line of traffic wound its way up the drive to the homestead, standing grand on a rise, a few hundred yards back from the road.

The front entrance was festooned with ribbons and flowers and the Reynolds family stood on the veranda to welcome them.

"So finally you're accepting my invitation to our home Em, but I see you've brought a partner. Oh woe is me. All my plans are foiled."

Tom winked at Jake and smiled at the new bride. She laughed a little nervously in return.

Mr. and Mrs. Madison stood next to the Joneses to greet the guests and the party began.

Despite the elegant surroundings of the ballroom, when the meal was over the gathering soon turned into a full on bush dance and the line of French doors swung open to admit the many well wishers who had tagged along behind the procession.

Seymour had opened the gate to the front paddock for them to picnic beside a small billabong and when the toasts and speeches were over, the sound of the fiddle and accordion finally called them to join the dancing in the house.

The lamps burned low by the time the musicians packed up their instruments and the last of the revellers left for town.

The young couple had retired much earlier to the room provided by the Reynolds, to lie in each other's arms. It had been a big day and both were exhausted. A traditional wedding night was not on the cards for them, so it seemed.

Emyleigh rested her head on Jakes chest and traced the patterns as the full moon cast the shadow of the lace curtain across them. Her eyelids drooped and she willed them open, turning to look up her husband. He smiled down at her and held her tighter. There was no need for words and they sighed silently in unison. They say there is an unspoken bond between lovers, but these two knew they had something above and beyond even that. She snuggled closer. He caressed her hair and she raised her face to his. They kissed. Presently his lips moved to her neck and it became evident that it would be a traditional wedding night after all.

### *Like Brother*

While all these events surrounding Jake and Emyleigh were transpiring, Josh had not been sitting still. Growing strong and energetic, he was a more outgoing sort of lad and having seen his brother's quick rise in the ranks of the railways and the esteem of the town, he set about to emulate his brother and make his way in the world.

He wasn't about to wait for fate to provide an opportunity so he went straight to the yard manager in Wattleford and asked to take on the tasks that Jake had been doing. Sweeping, dusting and carrying baggage had lost its appeal after a couple of years, even when Mr. Trumble began to pay him a small sum for it. This money came out of the Station master's own pocket as there was no budget for a station hand, but with the rail traffic to and from Wattleford growing slowly but steadily, the he had become used to having the boy helping. Life was just that much easier with Josh on the platform. Unfortunately for Josh, Jake's old job had already been filled and so he cast around for something else.

Eventually he hitched a ride with his brother up to Coalville and signed on at the mine.

Reluctantly Mr. Trumble let him go and soon Josh was to be seen daily carrying his kit into the cage, ready for another hard shift at the coal face. His physical similarity to Jake gave an eerie sense of déjà vu and every now and then when he was crossing the rail yards to the bachelor's quarters, he had to remind the yard manager which brother he in fact, was.

With Jake as a role model, Josh was soon accepted as a valuable worker and by the wedding, his muscles had developed and he was what would be regarded as a 'strapping lad'.

When he walked out with his brother and his new wife, she felt like a queen with her palace guards, as they marched purposefully on either side. The Madison boys didn't do anything half heartedly, (including walking) and she felt safe from harm flanked by the brothers.

The elder Mrs. Madison sighed and smiled with pleasure as she watched the younger Mrs. Madison head off down the gravel road with her sons. She was justifiably proud of the two lads who had turned boyhood indiscretion into a road to the future and of course she had always been fond of the feisty young girl who had spent so many hours as a child playing with them in her yard.

### *Once More With Feeling*

Time slid by, as it tends to do when life revolves around cyclic things such as railway schedules, and a year or so passed with little excitement in the Madison and Jones families.

The younger Madison couple moved into a small cottage on Jake's parent's place that the brothers had fixed up from a near ruin. It wasn't much but in their way they were happy enough there. All the time though Jake had his eye on grander things. Every day he would quiz O'Leary about running the engine and after a while the engineer made a point of obtaining the manuals and criteria needed for him to sit his engineer's certificate. With his natural curiosity Jake soon had the knowledge to sit the exam, for which he would have to go down to Melbourne. One thing concerned him though. When, (not if), he obtained his engineers certificate, the only way he could utilise it would be to move away from Wattleford. There was a very limited number of drivers needed there and all the positions were filled already.

He knew he would miss the town where he grew up and his family in particular. Quite how Emyleigh would take it he wasn't sure. They'd been through a lot together though, so logic said she would be fine, as long as they were together. There had been talk about changing the Coalville train schedule so that the engine was based at the mine and headed out every morning with a full train, returning empty in the afternoon. This would mean that Jake, O'Leary and George Grey, the guard, would have to live in Coalville and judging by Em's reaction, it looked like a bigger shift might not be too traumatic for her after all. In any case, as a married couple, they would be given a railway's house to live in if it was a country posting and that couldn't be all bad, if a little noisy as it would most likely be right next to the tracks.

With all this in mind he despatched his application to head office in the 'big smoke' one morning before work and headed across the tracks to take over the engine from the lighter.

It was a magnificent day and he was in high spirits, confident he would pass the exam when the time came and looking forward to the view from the spur on the way to the mine.

All went as usual for the first part of the journey. Jake shovelled hard, banking up the fire and building up the pressure for the final climb into the mountain valley so

that he could rest a little at the trestle and gaze out over the plains. He never tired of the sight, although several times over the summer he had been somewhat jittery when he spied smoke rising from distant bush fires.

Just as they were about to round 'Deadman's Curve' Jake was standing at the rear of the footplate, his right hand holding the back edge of the cab roof, wiping his brow with the back of his left hand when he heard a low rumble behind him. It was barely audible above the bursts of steam and heat pulsing from the stack. "What's that?" he asked his partner.

"Dunno" 'O'Leary replied, and stretching out his left hand to keep it on the throttle, he leaned over to look up the bank next to the line. Jake ran his eyes over the slope, but could see nothing.

"Probably nothing to worry about", the driver said and turned back his position as the train steamed slowly past the cutting.

"Watch out!" shouted Jake as the hillside gave way in a small landslide.

"What?" called O'Leary and turned around again, just in time to take the blow of a large rock that bounced down the hill, ricocheting into the cab. He instinctively let go of the throttle, grabbing for some support, finding instead the boiling hot pressure gauge pipes on the boiler. Instantly releasing his grip again with the pain, the Irishman fell against the boiler itself, and slid slowly to the floor. The smell of burning flesh and singed cotton filled the air.

A lesser man might think 'Not again!' at the sight of a second burn victim at his feet, but not Jake. As the train chuffed slowly up the hill on its own, he tried to make the engineer as comfortable as possible, trickling cold water from his drink flask onto the wound in the hope that it would alleviate the suffering a little.

Soon though, he had to turn his attention to the engine. The fires need stoking and the throttle needed attending to. He took to the task with a will and stuck with the juggling act until, only half an hour late, he pulled into the yard at Coalville.

"Get the Doctor!" he called to the first man within earshot. "O'Leary's hurt" and he slowed the train to a stop.

Soon Dr. Dawson, a recent appointment at the mine, arrived with his bag of tricks and a stretcher and the injured man was carried off for treatment.

This left Jake in a bit of a fix. He had no driver to return the train to Wattleford. He went over to the yard office and discussed it with Tucker. The older man was very impressed by the way Jake had brought the train into Coalville on his own and after a couple of confirming wires to Wattleford, it was decided that Jake would be stand-in engineer on the return trip. All he needed now was a fireman. He was sure to find someone in a coal mining town who could shovel coal, but of course half the men were underground and the other half were resting. Not many of them would want to give up their afternoon plus the next shift's pay for the heat of the cab.

There was one obvious choice of course and fortunately he was off shift. Jake walked over to the bachelor's quarters and down the dormitory to the familiar foot of the bed of his brother.

Josh was lying back reading a week old 'Argus'.

"Come on Lazy Bones... there's work to do" and Jake gave him a gentle tap on the sock with his boot, leaving a slight coal coloured mark.

"Hey. Don't dirty up my socks!"

"Don't quibble. They'll be dirty enough by the time we get to Wattleford."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm taking the train down to the river and I need a fireman. You've just been volunteered."

"By who?"

"By me."

"Who died and made you engineer?"

"O'Leary. Well actually he didn't die, but he's badly burned and they've appointed me relief for the return. I need a reliable fireman and you're my first choice. Comin'?"

"Of course", came the reply. Josh was now feeling a little stupid about his dying comment. "Give me a minute to sort it with the shift supervisor."

"No need. I saw him on the way over. Grab your bag and let's go."

Josh jumped up, threw a couple of necessities in his kit and followed his older brother out to the yard.

By the time the Madison boys had arrived in Wattleford, news of Jake's exploit had preceded them and a small group of friends had gathered to welcome him, a hero once again. Josh had handled the fireman's job well and Jake had been free to apply his new knowledge, driving the engine. The trip down from the mine with a fully laden coal train was never easy and required a fine touch in places to provide a smooth journey. It was not at all unlikely that the steepness of the line and the weight of the coal would cause a runaway, given a little bit of inattention and a smidgen of bad luck, but neither occurred on this run and Jake proved his worth at the throttle.

Mrs. O'Leary was particularly thankful for Jake's efforts and said as much before accompanying her husband to Dr. Toogood. There he would wait for the next boat to Echuca, and the nearest hospital. There was always the option of going on the back of a dray, but the river provided a much smoother ride both for patient and nurse.

"Well done lad. I knew we could rely on you." It was Mr. Trumble. "And you too Josh. You both did a good job. I suppose, bein' you, you'll want to take on the throttle permanently now Jake."

"Well..."

"Well you know today's little escapade was unofficial. The less head office hear 'bout it the better, but we'll get a relief driver up overnight and I'll see what I can do about you sitting those exams post haste. Maybe we can swing it for you to come back here when you've got your ticket. I doubt that O'Leary will be getting back in the cab. Least ways, not for a long time."

"That would be great sir. Not O'Leary, I mean the exams. I'm sure I'm ready for them."

"I'll bet you are at that and what about you, young man. We'll be needing a new fireman before long. How'd you enjoy the ride down?"

"Much better than being down that dark, damp hole. I reckon I could handle it fine."

"Well if today's anything to go by I'm sure you can. I'll keep you in mind when the time comes if you like. You'll have to go through the training though."

"That would be great, thanks."

"Right you are then."

The brothers finished up in the cab with big smiles on their faces and headed for home.

"It'll be good to see Mum and Dad again. Get a good night's sleep somewhere other than the barracks. It can get a bit cold up there at night."

"Well, Em' and I might be joining you up there soon, depending on the exams though. There's talk of swapping the run so we overnight at the mine instead of down here. Something to do with shipping the coal out for Melbourne in the afternoon instead of the morning."

"It's not the best place to take a wife, but I guess they'd have to give you a railway house. That wouldn't be bad." Josh replied.

"No. A bit more privacy wouldn't go astray. It's nice being near Mum and Dad but..." and the conversation trailed off as they disappeared down the road home.

## *Big Smoke*

Mr. Trumble was as good as his word and it was only a week or two before Jake received a telegram summoning him to Melbourne to sit for his engineer's ticket. This would be the first time since their wedding that he and Emyleigh had been apart overnight. She hadn't been well lately and Jake was a little concerned. He chucked his kitbag into the cab of the engine, kissed her goodbye and jumped up onto the footplate. During his time in the Wattleford yards, Jake had made friends with just about every crew that did the run up from Melbourne and so he was able to ride in the cab and use the trip south to brush up on his knowledge for the test.

Soon his anxiety about Em' was overcome by the excitement of barrelling through new countryside headed for the big city. He had heard tales of the descent from

the Great Divide to the plains of Port Phillip and was looking forward to seeing how it was handled. When the time came it was all an anticlimax. To a man who had learned to drive on the inclines of the Coalville line, it was a walk in the park. He began to feel a little more confident about the coming tests.

They arrived on the plains and Jake leaned back on the coal tender and thought about Emyleigh. Though he didn't know it, she was at that very moment sitting across the desk from Dr. Toogood describing her symptoms.

About the time that Jake jumped from the cab and headed across the yards towards the Spencer street building, Emyleigh closed the surgery door behind her with a smile on her face. The good doctor had just confirmed her mother's diagnosis.

Jake ascended the front steps and entered the foyer, staring at the space around him and down the long corridors that opened up beyond the doors on either side. He approached the desk and was soon on his way to the examiner's office to notify of his arrival.

Not long afterwards he was checking in to the little hotel across the street.

All evening trams clattered by outside. Even without their unfamiliar noise, he would have found it hard sleeping, excited as he was.

The next morning, eager to start, Jake hurried down the narrow staircase, quickly ate the bacon and eggs placed before him and went out onto the footpath.

He checked the clock on the station. 7:25am.

He looked around, wondering how to fill in the time and decided on a walk down to the river. Turning left he sauntered down to Flinders street and crossed to the river bank. He took the tow path under the bridge and emerged alongside a three masted barque, tied up at the wharf. A steam crane was unloading sacks of wheat from the hold. Men, already stripped to the waist in the early morning chill were man handling the cargo nets onto a line of waiting drays. The horse's breath steamed ever so slightly in the fresh air. In the rigging a couple of men he took to be sailors were clambering around checking and testing the sheets. This was the first time he'd seen a windjammer but his thoughts were not with the bustle of the jetty, or spectacle of the sailing ship, but on the day ahead. He took a last look up the towering masts with a shiver and wandered back towards the railways offices.

The morning was allocated for the written test and Jake went in with a couple of other hopefuls and sat down.

He was excited but composed and felt sure he would pass.

The examiner entered. He hung his hat and coat on the hook behind the door, placed a large leather brief case on the desk and reached into the breast pocket of his jacket

"Jacob...."

Jake looked up.

"There's a wire here for you", and he smoothed back his grey hair as he moved to pass it over.

For a moment Jake's heart sank. 'Bad news? Is Em' alright?' he thought.

The paper touched his hand and he felt an inexplicable wave of joy wash over him.

Tearing open the end of the envelope, he unfolded the contents.

'DEAR JAKE STOP ALL WELL STOP BABY DUE SEPTEMBER STOP COULD NOT WAIT TO TELL YOU STOP LOVE EM STOP

Jake let out a whoop and the examiner jumped in surprise.

Everyone turned to him with questioning looks.

"I'm going to be a dad."

"Congratulations", "Well done", came the responses.

"Right lads, sit down..." and the tests were handed out.

All morning Jake tried to focus but the wire had completely thrown his concentration. His mind kept wandering back to the news. The irony of it was that the very thing that was distracting him from the test was the very thing that made it all the more important to pass his ticket and receive the resulting pay rise. After all, fathers have extra responsibilities, extra costs.

The morning dragged by until finally time was up for the test.

"Very well, go to lunch while I check over your answers. Be back here at two for your run."

The three aspirants left together and spent lunch sitting on the river bank eating sandwiches and mulling over how well or badly they thought they'd done. Jake was the least optimistic. He felt he had failed dismally, such had been his state of mind since reading the good news. On the other hand he was over the moon about becoming a father and rushed off to send a message home in response.

Two o'clock came round and Jake had settled down somewhat. Sending the wire had got some of the excitement out of his system and he felt more ready for the practical part of the test, that was of course if he past the theory.

"Well lads", the examiner always called those being tested 'Lads', it gave him a feeling of age and wisdom beyond his years, "I'm glad to say you all passed, although mister Madison, I did expect something more spectacular based on the reports I received out of the Wattleford yard. I guess it's only to be expected. I probably should have held the cable until after the test. Anyway all's well... Right, let's go check out your driving" and the room emptied as they left for the yards.

In contrast to the morning, the afternoon sped by. Jake was last to step up to the throttle where his natural ability and experience helped him breeze through the process and soon he was back in the shed shutting down the steam and wiping off his hands. This was a trait not common amongst the engineers in the city. The

country drivers up on the border took pride in polishing and cleaning their charges and themselves. (The city men were also proud, but wore the coal dust as a mark of authority, visible to all those on the streets where they would get knowing winks, smiles and looks of admiration from the boys on the trams. When they arrived home though they were as fastidious as any man in their line of work.)

"Well done mister Madison. Ok lads, gather round. Firstly I'd like to say you all did well. Well enough to get your tickets..."

Beams appeared all round.

"Official notification will be sent out in a day or two with the details of your results. You all have one or two areas you might want to look at improving, but all in all you have the potential to be fine engineers. Congratulations. You may go and celebrate now."

The trio thanked the examiner and headed out onto Spencer street.

"Where do you want to go for a drink then? One of Jake's companions asked.

"I'm off home" he replied.

"Of course. See the little wife. Maybe give her one to celebrate, eh?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Oh, sorry. Did I offend you?"

Jake was not known for his bawdy mind or tongue and had been a little taken aback by the comment.

"No, no, but I do want to see her and have a bit of a celebration with her and Mum and Dad."

"Ok then. See you. Good Luck" and they parted company as Jake headed for the yards again to hitch a ride on the evening freight to Wattleford.

## *On the Move*

As promised his certificate arrived soon after and Jake took to sharing the driving with the relief engineer while he waited for permanent assignment.

Mr Trumble and the yard manager exerted what influence they had and within a few weeks, Jake was the new driver on the Coalville line. Along with the posting came notification that the rumoured shift to Coalville was on and Jake and Emyleigh were bound for the hills.

Josh moved into the spare room at his parents while he undertook intensive training in the shed and soon he was able to pass his fireman's ticket, although not without a little grumbling in the halls of Spencer street about the influence of a 'certain stationmaster'.

The relief fireman gladly hopped a train back to Melbourne and the arms of his fiance as Josh stepped up to the plate on the Coalville line. The brothers were back together again.

Now that she was beginning to show, the prospective grandmothers were a little concerned that Emyleigh would be so far away but when Josh assured them that Dr. Dawson, who served the mining community, would be well up to the task their concerns faded a little and they resigned themselves to the inevitable.

All too soon relocation day came and the young couple packed their belongings on the dray and headed down to the yards.

Their fathers helped load the suitcases and a couple of cartons of hand me down household goods, into the guards van and with a few tears from the mothers, Jake headed for a new life in the hills, with his brother beside him and his wife in the carriage at the rear of the train.

Soon the couple were established in their railway cottage, not far from the yards and well within sight and sound of the pithead.

At first, life in Coalville seemed to Emyleigh to be all shades of grey. Grey rock slopes hemmed in the little community on three sides. Grey smoke sometimes tending to black, belched from the chimneys of the mine buildings competing with the shunters in the rail yards for quantity. Grey clouds hung around the hilltops for most of everyday and grey skinned miners traipsed past her door twice daily, heading home after their shifts far underground.

While it was true that she was surrounded by grey, her condition had refocused her mind somewhat and she failed to notice the bushes that flowered across the rocky slopes, or the patches of colour, spot lit by the sun as it's rays burst randomly through the cloud cover. Neither did she notice the light in the eyes of the miners as they waved to her on their way to work. The colourful displays of flowers in window boxes and garden beds outside each of the married men's houses also failed to burst into her world. It was only the company of her husband and his brother that brought her to life and when she heard Jake's distinctive long - short - long blast on the whistle as they headed down the valley in the morning, she felt alone and abandoned.

Oddly enough there were very few young couples in Coalville and it took some time before Emyleigh made friends with Gretchen, a young mother who had followed her husband Walther out to Australia in search of a new life.

Gretchen was full of energy. She had grown up in the mountains of southern Germany and to her Coalville sat in a shallow valley amongst low hills. Her impression was not at all like that of Emyleigh who felt hemmed in, after a life spent on the edge of the vast plains of the Australian outback.

Gradually the two women became close friends and as Emyleigh's pregnancy progressed Gretchen supported her in whatever way she could.

At first communication was a bit stilted between them. Gretchen's English was not good yet and Emyleigh's German was non-existent, but some things are universal and they overcame that problem without too much trouble. Soon Gretchen and

her poorly two year old son Peter, were regular visitors at the Madisons. A few weeks later, Josh, tired of the lack of privacy in the single men's quarters, moved into the second bedroom and by then the brothers had struck up a friendship with Walther too.

The remaining months passed slowly, draped in the fog and drizzle of winter in the mountains and as her time drew near, Emyleigh fell ill and was confined to bed with a fever. Her mother came up on the train to attend to her, along with Gretchen of course.

Midwinter's day ushered in another grey morning and despite knowing his wife was in good hands, Jake was reluctant to leave for work. A feeling of dread had been stealing over him during the past few days.

He kissed her on the forehead, smoothing back a lock of her hair as she smiled weakly up at him. He could feel the burning sensation of her brow against his rough hands.

"Bye love.." she said, as her pale hand dropped to the bedspread. Mary tucked it under the covers.

"Go on Jake. You'd better not be late. I'll take care of her."

He pulled the curtain on the French doors back a little more and peered up at the clouds, frowning.

"I guess you're right, Mary. Goodbye sweetie... love you." and he blew her another kiss. Picking up his lunch box from the dresser, he turned and left the room. Subconsciously he half expected not to see her alive again, she looked so pale and weak.

Josh closed the door of his bedroom softly as he stepped into the tiny hallway. Together they went out into the weather.

"I don't like the look of the sky Josh. It could get a bit wild later on."

"You're probably right. Good thing we have a nice warm engine to keep us from the cold."

"Yes, it's fine for us but it's Emyleigh I'm worried about. A bout of freezing weather won't help her fever any and there's the baby to think about. He's due any day now."

"So sure it's a boy, aren't you."

"I can feel it you know. I even have dreams about teaching him to drive the engine, but he always seems to know everything already. Like he's been a driver before."

"What have you been putting in your nightcap lately Jake? Whisky?" and they walked off towards the engine shed.

## *Samaritans*

"Lads!"

It was Dr. Dawson.

"I need your help."

"Morning Doctor. What can we do for you?"

"Walther's had an accident. A bit of a cave in I'm afraid. There's water coming in too. I need you to take him to Wattleford. He'll have to go down river to the hospital. He's in a lot of pain so you'd better take it easy on the run down. Lee Mah will go with him. You'll give him a hand to put him on the steamer won't you?"

"Of course, of course. But why Lee?"

"Well I can't go, what with Emyleigh's condition and the situation below, and Lee's the only one with any idea at all what to do, besides which, Harrow can get by without him for a few days. They've got a big job ahead digging out the cave-in and pumping out the water and with those eight blokes leaving last week, Harrow won't let anyone else go. Least ways not until you bring up the new bunch tonight."

"Is Gretchen going?"

"No. She's worried about taking Peter out in this weather and there's no one to look after him with Emyleigh laid up."

"Right then. We'll take it easy, but it could be a rocky ride in this wind. We'll make sure that Walther and Lee get on the boat too."

"Thanks. I'll go and tell Grey."

"He should be in the loading office. We'll see you at the train."

"I'll look in on Em' in a bit. If there's any news today I'll wire the station at Wattleford".

The brothers strode off across the tracks to the engine shed and soon the down train was sitting waiting to go as the doctor and a couple of miners lifted Walther's stretcher into the guards van.

The men stepped back from the train, Grey signalled 'All clear' and the clang of metal couplings announced the start of the journey.

Jake's customary long - short -long burst on the whistle and the coal trucks trundled noisily out onto the main line, followed obediently by the empty miners carriage and the three men in the guards van.

Raindrops hissed against the boiler as the engine rounded the first bend and headed for the spur at the mouth of the valley. There the moderate Westerly wind rapidly gained force as it hit the hills and roared into the highlands, funnelled by the ridges on either side of the valley. The cab shook from side to side as the little

train turned South across the face of the Great Divide and onto the trestle at Deadman's Curve.

Jake could see the creek far below, already swollen by the rain.

"We'll have to be careful not to shake up Walther too much. He must be in real pain."

"I'll bet. It was a nasty accident by the look of his leg."

Jake throttled back and used the engine to brake the train's momentum. Due to the accident, only half the coal trucks had been ready to go, so it was a short train on this run. The most precious cargo was the injured man and with all due care the brothers found themselves steaming the last few miles into Wattleford in near record time, held back only by the buffeting the wind had given them.

Contrary to normal procedure, the signals on the approach to Wattleford indicated a stop. Jake applied the brakes and as they came to a standstill, a yardsman jumped up and told them to pull up at the platform to help get Walther off. He threw the points, the signals changed and slowly they wound their way across the yard and alongside the platform where Trumble stood with Dr. Toogood, waiting to check the patient over.

Josh ran back and helped them carry Walther into the warmth of the station master's office and when he returned, the brothers moved the train off to its regular decoupling point.

It was two o'clock and the down river steamer was due to leave at two thirty. Quickly they parked the engine and leaving a lad from the yard to keep an eye on the firebox, they hurried back to Trumble's office.

Dr. Toogood pronounced Walther well enough to travel, with care, and Jake, Josh, Grey and Lee Mah picked up a corner of the stretcher each. With the doctor holding an umbrella over the injured man the little procession traipsed down the main street to the wharf as the rain returned.

From the wharf, Jake could see that the river had already risen somewhat. 'Well that's a blessing I guess' he thought. 'We don't have to go all the way down with him' and they descended the first flight of steps to the high water jetty.

Trumble had sent word ahead to the boat and Stumpy came to the gangway to meet them.

"Walther. You're lookin' a bit the worse for wear my man. I always knew your were stingey, but this is a bit drastic, just to get a free trip."

Walther smiled back, then grimaced as a wave of pain washed over him.

"Vell don't you go getting' caught in any flamin' snags meister, after all my effort" he retorted as the pain subsided, his English coloured strongly by his German accent. "I'm not sure I'm up to savin' you today."

"What's that? Who said this man was sick? Aw.. come on. Get him on board. Put him in cabin 1. It'll be a little smoother there" and the men manoeuvred the stretcher along the side deck and squeezing into the tiny space, lifted him as

gently as they could into the berth. Lee Mah settled in on the one small chair and prepared for the long trip.

"We'll make sure that Gretchen and Peter are looked after, Walther. Don't worry. Take care of him Lee Mah."

"I will Jake".

"Off you go. You've got your own wife to get back to. Thanks", and Walther waved briefly as they backed out of the cabin.

## *Deja Vu*

Back at the station, the brothers dropped in at the telegraph office for any news from Coalville.

There was a wire from Dr. Dawson. Emyleigh had gone into labour.

Jake flew into action.

"Come on Josh. Let's go. I've got to get home."

"Right behind you" and they rushed out of the office and bounded across the tracks to the engine.

"Thanks lad. Well done," Josh said as the yard hand slipped down the steps to the ground. "Do you know if the train's ready yet?"

"I think so, but I heard that the track's closed due to the weather. I reckon your run's cancelled. Better check though."

Jake had no intention of staying in Wattleford a moment longer than necessary and quickly they shunted onto the siding and coupled onto the empty wagons.

"Stay here." Jake said to his firemen and looking back at the guards van, he leapt down and sprinted back to Grey who was just starting the walk forwards.

"What's this about the line being closed?"

"'fraid so. I was just coming to tell you. We'll have to stay the night. They're worried that we'll get blown off the spur in a gust. For that matter, so am I. It was bad enough on the way down, and it's getting worse by the minute."

"Well I can't wait here while Em's having the baby. I've got a bad feeling about it all. I'm going whether you come or not."

"Count me out, thankyou. I know you've got a good reason, but I'm not risking my neck breaking the company rules. You can get by without me, I'm sure."

"Fine. I'll be off then" and Jake headed back to the engine.

He glanced over at station clock. Through the rain he could just make out the minute hand. 'Twenty five to. Good', he thought to himself and clambered up onto the foot plate.

"Let's go brother! Get the points!"

Josh clambered along the side of the boiler and as they approached the points he jumped off, ran ahead and threw the levers, directing the train out onto the main line East.

Jake knew the timetable like the back of his hands and was aware that the express from Melbourne was due at five to three. They would have to be quick to be sure of beating it to the points for the Coalville line.

Josh shovelled madly to get up a good head of steam and they stormed out of town heading for the hills.

Four miles out Jake's keen eyes spotted a strange cloud ahead. It was long and thin and reforming at the near end as the tail dispersed rapidly in the wind.

This looked all too familiar. Memories of the episode on the ganger flooded back. "Josh! Look!" and he pointed across the fields to the ominous cloud.

"Christ Jake! Here we go again! Can we make it?"

"I think so. She's sure to hit us if we stop now. The points are just up ahead.

We've got to get off the main line before she comes through. Get out there pronto and as soon as I slow down, make sure they're set for the mine."

Once more Josh edged along the handrail past the burning steel of the boiler. Rain stung his face as they barrelled along. Steam and smoke from the stack obscured his vision, but by the time Jake had throttled back to running pace, Josh was ready. Leaping to the ground he stumbled briefly on the rough dirt, recovered his balance and started running again. The engine slowed to jogging pace as he threw the switch.

Even upwind the young fireman could hear the whistle of the express as it entered the curve approaching the points. The squeal of its brakes confirmed that the driver had seen the smoke of the outward bound engine. He too knew that there was no time and not enough track to stop. He slipped a crucifix from his shirt, touched it against his lips, turned his eyes heavenward and muttered a prayer.

In the dark of the bedroom, Emyleigh was in a sweat.

Mary dabbed her forehead with a damp towel and looked at the clock, hoping Dr. Dawson would return soon.

The pains were coming at ten minute intervals now and she didn't want to be alone with her daughter when the baby arrived.

Suddenly Emyleigh sat bolt upright, with her hands to her face and cried out for Jake. Her eyes were wide open, but she seemed unaware of Mary's presence.

Back on the plains, Jake had the throttle wide open the second the rails swung across and he passed Josh gaining speed rapidly as the empty wagons clattered and bounced across the points. The guards van had barely cleared them as Josh threw the lever back again. The weight of the express slammed the steel across the last few inches wrenching the handle from his hand.

He grabbed his wrist in pain.

With the roar of the express echoing in his ears he turned and ran down the tracks towards the line of coal trucks, now slowing to a stop. Jake hung out of the cab watching the disappearing red light on the rear of the express. He knew there would be trouble for certain now.

Josh caught up with the engine and climbed, puffing hard, into the shelter of the cab, wiping the rain and sweat from his face and neck with a rag. Black stripes appeared across his forehead and throat as the coaldust mixed with the moisture. Jake took one look at him and burst out laughing.

The fireman was puzzled by his brother's reaction.

"What's so funny? We nearly got killed back there."

As soon as he could get his breath back, Jake held up his pocket watch so Jake could see himself in the polished silver case.

More laughter exploded as the two of them released the tension from their near disaster.

"Don't you ever do that again. To think of the number of times you've led me into trouble big brother. Next time we won't be so lucky. I need my head read for following you."

"I doubt there'll be a next time. After this I wouldn't be surprised if they pull my ticket, after all I'm the one that's meant to be in charge.

He flipped open the watch before slipping it into his pocket. The time was four minutes to three.

"What time do you have Josh?"

The fireman looked at his watch. "Four minutes to three. Haven't you.?"

"Yes, but I checked the station clock before we left. It said twenty five to."

"Twenty five to two. Not twenty five to three. Didn't you know it was hit by lightning earlier in the storm. It's stopped."

"That explains the near miss then."

"I thought you were cutting it fine when we left town at ten to. At least I now know you haven't got a death wish."

"Come on. Let's get going before they come looking for us. I've got a birth to get to." and he poured on the steam.

The driving wheels began to turn, at first slipping on the wet rails, then gripping and slipping alternately until finally finding the traction they needed to pull away with the line of trucks.

The brothers were on their way again.

Josh's wrist was sore but soon settled down to a dull throb as he shovelled hard to raise the pressure again for the climb ahead.

## *Storm Child*

Rain splattered across the hall floor as Dr. Dawson rushed in from the storm.

"How's she going" he called out.

"The pains are coming closer together now. I think it's almost here."

"Don't worry. I'm coming." And he quickly hung his hat and coat on the hook, leaning his umbrella behind the door before going through to the bedroom.

"How are things at the mine?"

"They'll be fine. The rest of the men are all accounted for. There were only a few minor injuries apart from Walther. Harrow's wife has gone over to help Gretchen... Now Let's see..." and he began to examine Emyleigh.

"You're right. Shouldn't be long now."

Mary jumped at the flash of lightning, followed almost immediately by it's companion roll of thunder.

"It's getting closer" she said.

"Ye...s" the doctor replied absent mindedly.

At the pithead, the mine had been closed temporarily awaiting the end of the storm. No one was below ground as Harrow and the shift foremen stood in the door of the cable house discussing what to do about clearing the cave-in when the weather improved. They knew they'd have to pump it dry for a start, before tackling the rock fall.

Beneath their feet, unseen and unknown, a gas pocket was being squeezed by the in flood of water through the cave-in. Pressure was building. It would take very little to set off an explosion and there was not long to wait...

Out on the line as it wove up the flank of the mountains, the little train was storming the incline. Black clouds from the smoke stack mingled with the rain squalls, blending into the dark clouds as they scudded off into the dusk sweeping in from the East.

In the cramped shelter of the cab, the brothers put their all into trying to make it home for the birth.

Electricity can be an awesome power and nature seemed determined to demonstrate this as the bolt of lightning struck the pithead.

Sparks leapt from the pools of water around the gantry standing high above the iron sheds.

Blinded briefly by the flash, none of the men saw the current run down the cables, deep into the shaft, but they did hear the explosion. Seconds later, a cloud of coaldust and debris burst from the shaft, flying high into the air where the storm either beat it to the ground or whisked it off to some obscure fate in the distant hills.

The worst of the incident though was masked by the sound of the wind and rain.

Had the men chosen to look down the nearby gorge, they would have seen a huge hole blown in the cliff beneath them and a wall of water, mud and supporting timbers rushing down the swollen stream towards the plains. In its path stood the trestle at Deadman's Curve.

In the Madisons house, Dr. Dawson heard the explosion too.

"What the.." he looked from Emyleigh to the door and back, got up and went to the window. Across the rail yards he could see the three men stumble out of the cable shed. They looked unhurt and to stay that way they stepped back into the shelter of the doorway as debris fell back to earth.

The doctor pondered for a minute. No one seemed to be coming to get him so he turned back to his patient. It wouldn't be long now.

Mary lit more lamps as night rolled in.

There are few places as bleak as a mountainside in a storm, buffeted by the full force of the wind and pelted relentlessly by rain and hail. Deadman's Curve was just such a place.

The timber frame of the viaduct stood stoutly against the worst of the weather as it had done for the decade or so since its construction. The polished stone of Billy's memorial flashed brightly back at the gods, each time they hurled their electric lances at the ground. Sheets of water cascaded down the slopes, forming small rivers alongside the tracks and tumbling into the gorge at the feet of the trestle.

The tracks began to rumble as the train approached.

The trestle began to rumble as the wall of mud and debris from the mine approached and Emyleigh, trembled and cried out in pain as the moment of birth approached.

The closer the engine inched in the teeth of the gale, the closer the mud rushed, born on by the irresistible force of gravity, and the closer the baby came to the light, born by the irresistible force of nature.

"I don't like this Jake!" Josh yelled over the scream of the wind as he saw the slopes above the line starting to shift in the wet.

"Don't worry. We're nearly there. 'The Curve's just ahead. Once we're over, we'll be into the shelter of the valley."

"I hope you're right."

"Come on Em'. Push...push..."

"What do you think I'm doing Mum?"

"Now, now. No need to be cheeky."

"Come on. Another big one, there's a girl" chipped in the doctor. He thought he could see the head now.

Back at the trestle, the enraged river struck the structure full force. It shook then swayed.

In the gorge a jumble of mine timbers jammed sideways across the waters flow, locking up against the pylons.

The tracks high above swayed as the timber supports began slowly to twist and split.

Just out of sight, on the oncoming train, Josh's wrist, injured back at the points, had been giving him trouble for the last few miles and to help him keep up the pressure Jake was throwing coal into the firebox with his bare hands.

Unlike most drivers, he never wore gloves. He said he could 'feel the soul of the engine through the throttle' that way and the coal was cutting up the palms of his hands. He didn't notice the drops of blood and coal falling on the metal floor. He was totally focussed on getting home. Inside he could feel the pains normally reserved for women giving birth and he knew just what his young wife was going through. He had to get to her.

As they rounded Deadman's Curve, the scene ahead was disaster in slow motion. The precision curves of the parallel steel were rippling and bending out of shape. Spikes rang, snapping off as the sleepers splintered and collapsed. The line began to give way, no longer supported by the network of braces that had been so carefully constructed to do just that.

All at once the pressure of water behind the debris on the stream had its way and like a giant hand across a poker table, the trestle, sleepers and tracks, were swept over the cliff to the plains far below. The wrenching sound of the collapsing structure was buried beneath the crash of thunder rolling above the gaping chasm, now lying in the path of the engine. The brothers' luck had run out. All this went unnoticed by the men in the cab, with their heads down, intent on stoking the fiery beast.

100 yards, 90 yards, 80 yards.

The distance between the engine and eternity disappeared into the mouth of the firebox.

Finally Jake looked up to check the dials.

His eyes widened in fear. He grabbed the levers to fling the engine into reverse. "Josh!..."

His brother stood bolt upright, the terror in his big brother's voice, striking him like a hammer blow as sparks spraying from the wheels whipped past the footplate in the wind.

"Whaaaaa?....."

At that precise moment, in the dim light of the bedroom, a baby's head emerged into the hands of the doctor, accompanied by the cry of his mother.

"Again, Em', again. Just one more and he'll be here."

She leaned up on her elbows, her hair straggling and lank, soaked by the sweat running down her forehead. Mary put her arm behind her daughter's back to support her.

"Breath deep, come on. You can do it."

"You never said it was this hard Mum."

"I know, I know, now come on. One more" and Emyleigh put all her strength into pushing the new life into the world.

The frail body of the boy slid out and into the doctor's waiting arms, he quickly tied and cut the umbilical cord.

On the flank of the mountains, the dragon took flight as the engine somersaulted off the edge of the gorge.

Burning coals tumbled from the firebox as it clanged open.

Inside the cab Jake and Josh were thrown around like dolls, slamming into the hot boiler, and bouncing off the gauges.

Coal trucks spiralled through the air, whipping the empty guards van about like a tail.

As Emyleigh's shriek came to an end silence fell over the tableau in the bedroom. The doctor and mother stood wide eyed as she fell back on the bed.

In contrast, the sounds of the storm raged over the spur as the engine exploded across the bottom of the gorge.

Flaming pieces of metal catapulted through the air, marking the boundaries of the disaster as they landed in a ring around the point of impact

As in life, the brothers had faced death together.

Emyleigh screamed out her husband's name, a long, descending scream, unlike any the doctor had heard during child birth before.

"Jake'll be here soon love" her mother said, trying to calm her.

"No he won't. Something terrible's happened. I felt it."

The doctor stepped back in alarm, the new Madison in his arms.

"What do you mean?"

"I've always been able to feel his pain and he can feel mine too. I know it. He's gone."

Mary's attention returned to the new born boy.

"Doctor. Is he breathing yet?"

“Not quite. Just a second” and he held up the baby by its ankles. With a quick slap on the rear the new born’s vocal cords burst into life.

Mary breathed a sigh of relief.

Emyleigh hadn’t noticed. She was already grieving for Jake.

As a brilliant flash lit up the room, the scene went negative and the building shook with the instant crash of thunder.

Dr. Dawson opened the drapes with one hand and looked out to see what damage had been wrought. Through the windows an eerie, glowing ball could be seen drifting across the landscape towards the house.

As the new arrival continued to cry, the trio of adults watched transfixed as the ball drifted through the window.

Mary gasped as the image of a man in a railway cap appeared briefly on the glass, fading as the ball moved into the bedroom and on towards the doctor.

He quickly handed the baby to its mother and backed into the corner away from the glow, a look of fear in his eyes.

It changed course and drifted to the bed where Emyleigh lay trapped in its path by the bedclothes tangled around her.

She clutched the infant tightly to her breast but the glowing sphere move relentlessly toward her.

Emyleigh struggled for breath, turning in the bed as she did, trying unsuccessfully to keep her new son away from the advancing light.

Finally it enveloped the baby and he stopped crying as the glow faded out.

The young mother fell back against the pillows, breathing freely once again. A smile lit up her face.

Puzzled, Mary and Dr. Dawson rushed over to check that both Mother and child were unhurt.

To their relief there seemed to be no injuries to either of them.

The baby’s little lungs pumped away with a regular rhythm and the heart beat was strong and steady.

Emyleigh was clearly exhausted but unhurt.

They both breathed a sigh.

“Now my girl. It’s about time for the afterbirth...”

Mary swept the boy into her arms as Emyleigh fainted...

*And so...*

"My first public outing was the funeral. They buried Dad and Uncle Josh on the mountain next to Billy's memorial back there. You've seen the headstones."

"Yes, but I thought they were just navvies from the construction days."

"No. That's their graves."

"So that was you born in the storm?"

"Yep."

"And what about the ball lightning? Are you ok?"

"You know me. What do you think?"

"Stupid question I suppose."

A moment or so passed in silence.

"Harry. How long have you wanted to be on the railways."

"Oh... since I was about ten I think. When I first saw the express barrelling across five mile creek. I was fishing there with my dad. It was mighty impressive, all steam and smoke, roaring south to the big smoke and distant adventure. Why do you ask?"

"Oh I was just thinking. I've always just assumed I'd be an engineer. The first time I stepped onto the plate I felt I was returning home. Everything was familiar. The feel of the throttle, the touch of the glass as I tapped the gauges. Even the way the world was framed by the windows. There's a certain perspective you get from the cab don't you reckon? It's different from the dust and wind of say a wagon or even an automobile."

"I know what you mean. Kind of like being at the movie house. You can watch the world go by, immune from it all. In your own little world."

"Well Dad and Uncle Josh found out otherwise."

"Yep, I guess. Sorry 'bout that."

"It's all right. I think about them a lot though. They say there's more than a little of my dad in me and you know.... They might be right.

Jake reached up and pulled the whistle cord.

The sound rang out through the valley as they approached the mine, a long, a short and another long wailing tone.

In her kitchen, Emyleigh heard the echo of the whistle and felt a lone tear slip down her cheek, as she did every afternoon, when the sound heralded the return of the Coalville Train in the hands of the man she loved.

*The End*