

FRESH
from the
DUST

DOROTHY
HOLMES

STEVE AND THE SANDALWOOD TRAIN

Blood-red earth, deep-blue sky; the scene sprang to life as a long column of smoke sped along the outback rail-track.

‘What do I do?’ A cry reverberated from a ring of rocky outcrops. The troubled man scrambled to the top of a granite rock, positioned himself and peered through his binoculars. Struggling to shake off his mounting anguish, he clenched his fists. ‘Hell!’ He jerked sideways as a wedge-tailed eagle pitched the wide surface of its wings into the wind, stooped, and flew straight at him. It suddenly pulled back, paused, then disappeared out of sight. ‘Whew! That was close! Where the hell is it? Escaping? Huh! Just like me.’ Steve Robinson reached for the letter stuffed in his back pocket. ‘June 1st, 1941. Why did the old man have to wait three years? Why? Was it my fault?’

The sound of a wood train’s whistle echoed across the valley. But the rhythm of the train wheels rolling over the rail joints mimicked his thoughts. ‘Why did he wait? Why did he wait?’

Steve flicked his red hair back and adjusted his binoculars. ‘If it wasn’t my fault, why am I so tense? And the wretched wedge-tail, where did it go? More to the point, where do *I* go? How can I forget the contempt in my old man’s eyes? Piercing! Like the eagles.’

Turning and facing the small sandalwood campsite, Steve recalled Frederick¹, his father’s affront: ‘Remove yer meddling woman from ma farm!’ he had snarled in his broad Scots’ accent.

¹ The name Frederick means ‘peaceful ruler’.

‘Why? For goodness’ sake! We’ve only been married a month! Poor Renee! What has she done to make you so bitter? If she heard you, she’d be devas...’

‘Send her back from where she came! I will not tolerate another woman draining ma purse!’

‘Draining your purse? I work my guts out for a pittance! And Renee does all the housework for nothing! If she can’t stay, I certainly won’t!’

‘You talk nonsense, lad. Housework? That’s a woman’s duty, if little they knew! I need *ye* here. Females! Cannot wait to take the bread from a man’s mouth. No! Never again!’

‘My wife’s not like that! And I hope you’re not talking about Mother. She worked her guts out for us. If she hadn’t been stuck in this wasteland, she’d still be...’

‘Not another word, Steven! This has nought to do with her.’

‘Then, what about Louise and Marion?’

‘Yer sisters! They took ma bread and up and left me! A man provides for his offspring all his life and what does he gain? A whopping thump in the heart!’

‘Father, you know as well as I do, a woman needs a husband. And a man needs a wife.’

‘Not from the rubbish tip!’

‘That’s unfair! She might be poor yet you forget she’s related to the...’

‘Huh! Pure fantasy. Have some respect for *me*, Steven. I gave up ma life fa you!’

‘Oh? If you’d considered me, you would’ve given me an education! You’re always harping on about your degrees from Cambridge! And law! A fat lot of good that was! At least I would have *used* my education. Cambridge should have taught you proper English, not a mixed Scottish dialect!’

‘Ye call me stupid?’ Frederick’s face turned beetroot red. ‘Is tha’ what ye think?’

‘Of course not. You’re an intelligent man. But you’re also stubborn. Look, can we stop arguing?’

‘Hm! Remove that woman, or both leave. Though mark my words,’ Frederick shook his fist; ‘if ye go, dinna ye think ye can come back! *And*, I will speak in whatever dialect I please! Yet, for your sake, I will speak English!’

‘Sorry Father; I don’t want to go. Yet you give me no option.’

‘Lit ’at be enaw!’² Frederick ordered, strode to his room and slammed the door.

Returning to the present, Steve faced the billowing smoke. ‘Oh! Why did the train stop? Huh! I wish this hideous feeling would go away!’ Reminiscing again, he recalled the day he left his father’s farm:

‘Renee love, we’re leaving. He forced me into it,’ Steve remembered saying.

His petite dark-haired bride had commiserated, but it was not unexpected. ‘Don’t worry, darling. I’ll pack right away,’ she’d promised. ‘We’ll go to Kalgoorlie and get that job. We’ll use the money Daddy gave us for a rainy day.’

‘Oh, my darling girl. Thank you. Um, you really think that’s what we should do?’

‘Nothing matters as long as we’re together. We could hitch a ride to save money. It could be fun. Anyway, I’m scared of your dad.’

Steve recalled a special moment a few days after arriving in Kalgoorlie. ‘Thank God Renee hadn’t seen me spying. I’d battled to keep quiet. She’d been so sweet, chatting to the dog. Telling it, “The Midas Hotel job! Steve got it! How about that? Eh, puppy dog?” she’d said. She’d even told the dog she preferred me above everything. Oh well, I would hope so. Then she’d apologised. “Sorry little puppy; he does like you!” How sweet.’

‘Pity the poor dog died,’ Steve murmured as he recalled its death. ‘Wretched snake!’ He shook his head. Steve had every reason to be concerned by the abundance of venomous serpents. He’d worried

² That is enough.

about their daughters, Roberta, just out of nappies, and Annie, just a tiny bundle when he told Renee about the new job. 'Twice the wages of the Midas.' Even so, he was surprised how troubled she looked.

'What job is it?' she had asked.

'Overseeing a woodcutting team?' Steve had made it a question rather than telling her straight. 'Long hours. A bit isolated. Eighty miles South-East of Kalgoorlie. Be alright,' he had assured her. 'I'm prepared for anything. Don't forget, I've worked under my father's iron fist. We'll pack tonight and leave at dawn. Eh, my darling, give me a smile.' There was no smile. Guilt had overwhelmed Steve then and did even now as he thought of his tiny apprehensive wife standing beside their tent in the wilderness. She had clutched baby Annie so protectively and the memory of Robbie clinging tightly to Renee's skirts brought tears to his eyes.

As keen as he was about the new job, Steve admitted that the tent did look fragile. He remembered wishing it wouldn't flap so much in the breeze.

'I wasn't expecting this!' Renee had cried. 'What about our children? Living in a dreadful tent.' Darkness had surely clouded her blue sky.

Steve sprang back to the present. 'Damn!' he yelled. Annoyed that the wood train had stopped miles before the siding and delayed the start of the work, he yanked the letter from his pocket. His father had written it months before. Frederick had never replied to Renee's letters, so Steve decided not to show her this one. 'She'd be upset,' he said. 'Mallee! As if I can't remember the flaming name of the farm!'

Steve knew he should reply. Yet, was conflicted by how to refuse the offer without offending the old man. Best he pretend he'd never received it. Steve forced the binoculars into their case, grabbed his safety matches and ignited the letter; an action he was to bitterly regret. Angry flames and a sprinkling of ash gave his hasty burn greater significance than the train's fresh release of smoke. 'Familiar

passages aren't always safer than unknown charters,' he muttered.

'To-oot. To-oooot.' The shrieking whistle returned his attention to the woodline. He had two minutes before the next whistle sounded. He lifted his binoculars from the case for one last look.

Dotting the red landscape were blue-green sandalwood trees, flowering bushes, and jam and gimlet trees. Leafy umbrellas of gimlets, their spindly branches and fluted coppery trunks stood out boldly. Breathing in the scented air, Steve murmured, 'Should show my Renee this patch. She'd love it. Masses of pink, white and yellow everlastings coming into bud. We're in for an early spring. Just beautiful. How could anyone tire of the outback, its freedom, its peace and changing colours?'

Steve readjusted the lenses. 'Impressive! Grey kangaroos dozing on a carpet of yellow wattle blossoms. Yes. I've made the right decision... I hope.' He realigned his gaze to the undergrowth and saw the wretched eagle had gotten its prey; a defenceless emu chick. Nature's processes are not always kind.'

'Too-oot.' In seconds, the timber train would reach the point on the horizon he'd been monitoring. Steve forced his binoculars into the case, jumped from the rock, switched his thoughts to working mode and ran down the bushy slope. He was overseer to two Australian workers and thirty migrants, some of them minimum-security prisoners of war. The train was already rounding the bend. His team sat a distance from the gravel railway siding, warming themselves under the winter sun. He cupped his hands and shouted, 'Here she comes. Everyone up.'

The men's faces were ruddy from exposure to hot summers and freezing winters, their hands callused from unending toil in the harsh environment.

Australians, Paddy Summers and Bill Kane, had diverted to woodcutting to supplement their incomes between finding 'colour, or yellow boy' common terms for gold. Both in their sixties, they resented authority. Today was no different.

'I says, don't rush. Have a smoke!' Paddy insisted.

Responding more out of fear than submission, the Yugoslavs³ lit themselves a cigarette while the POW Italians turned away. Silence was their rule. Topics such as Italy and Benito Mussolini posed too great a risk for debate in the prospectors' hearing. Incarceration in Fremantle Prison or worse, caged in the notorious Rottneest Island Prison presented a constant threat. Most kept to themselves.

Many of the workers were wary of Paddy. To prove a point, he clambered onto a log on top of a woodpile, covered his face with newspaper and feigned sleep.

Meanwhile, Steve ran the last hundred yards like the athlete he was, hurdling blue-bushes, fallen branches and rabbit burrows. He reached the siding before the smokers had time to butt out their cigarettes.

One by one, bodies stretched and rose. Paddy slithered off his knobbly castle and pretended to inspect the wood stacks. A quick drink from their water bags and the men were ready for the gruelling work ahead. Few complained. It was well into 1941 and wartime. To many, Western Australian rural towns were safe havens. To the Italians, they had been, until Australia followed Britain in declaring war on Italy. Fear spread through the Italian quarters when the German, Italian and Japanese September 27th 1940 mutual defence pact was signed. Yet the outback, far from government eyes, provided a greater sense of security.

Even so, ill winds raged for these New Australians during Bill and Paddy's reign over them. Renowned troublemakers, the Kalgoorlie-bred prospectors exhibited such high handedness that even long-term immigrants remained on guard.

Steve was not intimidated, nor was he slow to chastise. To the workers, he was a good boss, firm but fair. Competent in Italian and Croatian he had learned from workers on his father's farm, he taught newcomers basic English, insisting on English during working hours. He was not racist. He maintained that everyone was equal.

³ Yugoslavs.

Most respected him.

Steve felt increasingly uneasy as the train shuddered to a stop. The usual camaraderie from the younger migrants was missing. They loaded the firewood and sandalwood furiously. Steve frowned and scratched his head.

Old Paddy, more bystander than worker, grinned at his friend, Bill. 'They're scared o' the white feather, Billy boy,' he whispered. 'Ha, ha. They're watchin fa sompthin ta appen.'

'Ya ol' blighter.'

Paddy chuckled. 'Remember their faces when I spun em that yarn last night? Remember? Ol' witches waitin' in the guard's van fa em!'

'Can't say's I remember. I weren't meself last night.'

'Ya wa' on the turps, ya stupid sod.'

'Weren't meself!' Bill retorted. 'Anyways, what else did ya tell em?'

'Thought ya'd remember that! I says, ol' witches come by train ta give ya lazy blighters a white feather fa not fightin' in the war.'

'White feathers is fa us Aussies, ya know. Not fa em foreigners.'

'They dunno that! Anyways, I tol' the young uns the ol' witches gave the Abos the go ahead ta eat the three laziest of em.' Paddy slapped his thighs gleefully. 'I tol' em, Abos a' cannibals. Yeah! Should'a seen the blood drainin' from offa their faces.'

'Ya cruel sod. Aboriginals ain't cannibals. Are okay blokes. An' if the boss hears ya calling em Abos, e'll lock ya up. They be the first people o' the land. An ya should know, me an' me mum are one o' em.'⁴

Paddy thought for a moment. He had vivid memories of white and black people lining up at Kalgoorlie station ready to be shipped out to the war. He quickly changed the subject.

'Well, I tell ya Billy boy, won't be nothin' fa us ta do today. Train'll be loaded in no time.'

Steve strode over to Bill and Paddy and wagged his forefinger. 'What are you two up to?'

⁴ First Peoples are respected by the author of this book. In the process of revising this book, advice from First Nations readers was sought and obtained regarding representation. For God shows no partiality. Romans 2:11.

Paddy chuckled defensively. ‘Got em workin’ a bit harder fa ya, Boss.’

‘We’ll have trouble. The sandalwood must be loaded in separate wagons. Carefully!’

‘No worries, Boss. Me mate’ll check the loads when the boys a’ finished. Won’t ya, Bill?’

‘I’ll check them myself. Now get to work. Make sure the sandalwood is stacked methodically. I’ll check the mine equipment in the end wagon.’

‘Where’s the stuff going?’ Paddy asked.

‘Stuff! For your education, the mine *equipment* is being transferred to a new site. Now hurry. We’ve a job to do.’ Grinning, Steve hurried toward the end wagon. He peered into the guard’s van and was surprised to see Harry Dunill, a tall, thickset fellow overseer, slouched against the back wall. ‘Afternoon, Harry. What brings you here?’

‘G’day, Steve. Avta supervise unloading of the mine equipment when it reaches the new site.’ He pumped his tattooed biceps, observed them approvingly and grinned.

‘Oh? I thought your team was pulling sandalwood from the southwest blocks.’

‘Goin’ there afta the unloading. Um, do us a favour. Don’t let on ya saw me. Just a bit o’ extra pocket money. Ya know ’ow it is.’

‘That’s your business, Harry. Good day. I must rush back to the train driver.’ The odd feeling in Steve suddenly returned. What was this? An omen? No. He didn’t believe in them.

Steve was running to make up lost time when one of the Yugoslavs stopped him.

‘You’ll have to run with me if you want to talk,’ Steve warned.

‘Boss, you stop. You listen. About Paddy. About white feather.’

‘Well, make it snappy.’

Steve was appalled by the story. ‘White feathers are meant for lily-livered Australians, not POWs. It’s bad enough that so many pre-war immigrants are now POWs.’

‘Paddy say Yugoslavs are POWs.’

‘He said what!?’

‘Steve, Paddy is mean old man! Austria and Hungary people wa’ POW in Great War. He say we POW in this war! He wrong.’

‘Paddy probably assumes you’re allies of Germany. Yugoslavia did surrender to Germany.’

‘Not all, Boss Steve. Thousands o’ Yugoslav Partisans fight Germans. I not happy from Paddy and white feather talk.’

‘Leave this to me. I’ve been waiting for an excuse to sack those conniving parasites. They’re more of a hindrance than a help.’

The Yugoslav nodded. ‘Yes, they parasite. You teach us sandalwood tree is root parasite. You say, it draw water and food from other trees. So Boss, is sandalwood tree good or bad parasite?’⁵

‘What do you think?’

‘I think, tree good parasite. Paddy bad parasite,’ the Yugoslav grinned with shared cynicism.

Steve smiled. He liked this man.

‘Oil of sandalwood make good money for us. Enough for Paddy? No. He fox. We more like little lambs.’

‘You can say that again.’ Steve laughed. ‘Though it’s a pity that sandalwood trees feed off our wattles; symbols of patriotism.’ He quietly added, ‘Paddy wouldn’t know what patriotism is. Nor would his mate, Bill Kane.’

‘You right. Um Boss, you stop white feather talk?’

‘I certainly will. Huh! I understand why women with men folk in active service are bitter when they discover a coward hiding away,’ he muttered more to himself than to the Yugoslav. ‘Yet I have difficulty accepting why a woman would hand a man out of uniform a white feather without knowing his circumstances. Most of us would be proud to wear the uniform. It’s not our fault our applications were rejected.’

‘We are manpower on land, Boss.’

‘Er, yes. I dare say the Italian workers who haven’t applied for

⁵ Hosts for the sandalwood tree, a parasite, are nitrogen-fixing trees, especially wattle trees (acacia species) and jam trees (acacia acuminata).

Australian citizenship are worse off. They're suspect despite their allegiance to Australia.'

'You right, Boss.'

'I received a white feather once. It was a shattering experience. Oh, lord! We have a time schedule to meet. Excuse me.'

Steve raced ahead to tell the engineer that the consignment of wood was almost ready to go. The engineer gave him a thumbs up and released some of the steam while the fireman fed the firebox.

Steve ran back to make his final check. He was satisfied with the first five wagon loads. The men had fixed sturdy extender posts at the corners of each wagon to contain the high loads, and had stacked the slender debarked sandalwood trees efficiently.

'What the hell!' he gasped, reaching the end wagons. The mining equipment had been shifted. It had been secure when he'd spoken to Harry Dunill! Someone had disconnected the centring chains. Who in their right mind would heave everything to one side? And where were the restraint blocks? There was something very strange afoot.

Furious, Steve rushed to the guard's van. 'Harry! Where the hell are you?' There was no response. Steve fossicked angrily in the van for the heavy blocks. 'Damn! Not here!' He scrambled up onto a nearby granite outcrop to investigate. There was no sign of them. Someone had deliberately jeopardised the train's safety. 'Could damn well derail it! Huh. Wartime!'

He looked toward the engine and frowned. Two of the restraint-blocks lay atop the sandalwood in one of the wagons. 'What the? That's one of the India consignments.'

Perplexed, he ran, shouting to four young Italians, 'We've got trouble! One of you run and tell the engineer to wait a few minutes while I sort this problem out.'

The one who had the best grasp of English, translated in Italian...

'*Lo faccio io,*' the tallest of them responded. 'I do it,' he quickly converted to English when he saw Steve's look of disapproval.

'Speak English so everyone will understand. "I - *will* - do - it",' Steve sharply corrected. 'Hurry.'

‘I say: “En-gin-eer, wait. Boss is problem”,’ the tallest rehearsed. ‘Yes, Boss?’

“*Has* a problem.” Someone find Harry Dunill and say: “the – boss – wants – you – immediately!”

‘Harry, Boss – want – you – immedi – ly,’ another of the four practised with a chuckle.

Steve had an urgent feeling to check with the train driver himself. However, he said, ‘Good enough. Run. Both of you.’

He turned to the Italians, who were happy to help. ‘This load must be centred and secured properly. I’ll send the Varone brothers to help you, and someone to retrieve the restraint blocks.’

He was furious when he spied the two Varones hiding in dense scrub. ‘Hey! Get back here, damn you!’ Raising a fist, he ran to the first India consignment wagon to get the blocks. ‘Florentine boozers! Useless! Harry? Worse than useless!’

‘Boss end of rope,’ one of the men laughed as he and his mate pushed the machinery in the end wagon into place.

‘Wrong saying. Not rope. Te – ther. Boss – at – the – end – of – his – tether,’ the tallest grinned.

Steve ignored his gut feeling and scaled up the India consignment wagon. He crawled along the logs toward the restraint blocks. Red slush from the sandalwood roots made the logs slippery.

‘This is the trouble with pulling sandalwoods in wet weather,’⁶ he groaned. ‘What the! Two blokes must have been involved here! Splits in the blocks! Branches forced through to pin them down! Why? C’mon! Move, you damned blocks!’

‘Varones’ are gone,’ one of the Italians exclaimed. ‘Mate, help push logs against machine. Push.’

‘Sandalwood logs hold machine good,’ his mate said jubilantly. ‘I run tell Boss we finish.’

⁶ The heartwood oil is at its best when the trees are pulled wet.

‘*Si, si.*’

The mate ran towards the front of the train. ‘Where Boss Steve?’ he asked Paddy.

‘Dunno. Finished ya job already?’ Paddy taunted.

‘Yes, Mr Paddy. I tell Boss.’

‘No!’ Paddy said. ‘Can’t hold the train up all day. *I’ll* tell the driver.’

The engineer had already waited an extra twenty minutes. As his schedule became tighter his hand twitched nervously on his fob watch. Something was wrong. Yet he had a deadline to reach the West Australian Goldfields Firewood Supply Company in Lakewood where half the wood was to be offloaded. From there, the sandalwood wagons were to be coupled to larger engine in Kalgoorlie, and then pulled onto Southern Cross and Kellerberrin where the water tanks on either side of the train’s boiler would be filled. The final destination would be Fremantle Port.

Once the engineer received Paddy’s ‘all clear’ signal, he blew the whistle.

Steve’s heart skipped a beat as he heard the shrill warning. He pushed himself up, and bounced across the load to the edge of the wagon. Expecting a second whistle, he hesitated. Then, with a mighty shove, he tried to free the blocks and force them over the side before trying to jump off.

The engineer’s hands were too quick. He put the locomotive into forward gear, released the brake and opened the regulator valve to send steam surging into the wheel cylinders. The pistons moved, forcing the crank rods to start the wheels in motion. The iron beast discharged its steam, and started with a jolt.

No one saw the figure in the India consignment wagon fall backwards onto the wood as the locomotive thrust forward. In his struggle to get up Steve tumbled sideways, and plummeted into a gap in the load.

‘Help!’ His mind flew into emergency mode. He had to act fast before he was pinned down. ‘Someone, stop the damned train! Help!’

Help!’ Scrambling desperately to get out, he kicked his shoe against a box.

‘Strange,’ he muttered, wasting vital seconds, ‘what idiot put a box in here?’ He pushed upwards a few inches. But the violent rocking of the wagon rammed him down, crushing his legs. Blood seeped slowly into the sandalwoods and their cloggy roots.

His heart pounded as the train gained momentum. The logs trapped him like a vice. One of the blocks rocked precariously close to his head. He forced his head away to avoid impact. Suddenly, the train rounded a sharp bend. The second block swung arc-wise and struck him forcefully on the back of his head. Darkness shrouded him.

The train bumped along at a steady pace to the Firewood Company. After the consignment wagons were unlatched, the train headed to Kalgoorlie where it was hooked up to the larger engine.

For the next three days, Steve drifted in and out of consciousness. During moments of wakefulness, he yearned for an aspirin or two to dull the pain in his head. He managed to sip rain water from the logs, but with increasing difficulty.

He couldn’t feel his legs, and it was bitterly cold and wet. He found himself asking himself: ‘Why, oh why didn’t I accept Father’s offer? Why did I burn his letter? I could live to regret it.’ All of a sudden he had a flashback of his father’s letter, the memory of it very clear:

Mallee

1st of June 1941.

My dear son Steven,

The purpose I write is to offer you a position as my Farm Manager. I was hasty to let you go, and regret any discord. Now I am old, I need a younger man to take over. If you return, I will bequeath the farm to you when I pass on. Your brothers, Samuel and Gavin are too busy with their own affairs to assist an old man.

If you so desire, bring the woman and my two wee

granddaughters. A man needs contact with his kin.

Please consider my offer favourably.

Yours faithfully,

Your loving father.

‘Why didn’t I listen to my damned feelings?’ Forcing his lacerated hands together, he pleaded, ‘Dear God in Heaven, please don’t let me die. You said, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee.” If you rescue me, I’ll return to my father’s farm and work my guts out.’ Steve lost consciousness before he could make any more onerous vows.

When the wagons came to a jerky halt at Kellerberrin, he roused and shouted for help. But his cries were drowned by the din of the railway workshop.

Thoughts of his family back at the camp plagued him. ‘How will they cope if I die? What if Renee or one of the children gets sick? Who’ll take them to hospital? How can Renee know I’m on this wretched train?’ As the swelling on the back of his head increased, he began to hallucinate, and drifted into a coma.⁷

⁷ Coma: Damage to the cingulate and other sections of the brain has been shown to affect a variety of neurobehavioral functions, producing effective disruption (anterior lesions) and memory and visuospatial dysfunction (anterior and posterior lesions).