

APRIL 1892

‘Clara! Come and look.’ My sister, Susan, stood at the top of the steps and shouted down from the deck of the steamer to our tiny cabin below.

I turned over in my narrow bunk and pulled the rough wool blanket over my head. I knew the sun was shining outside the porthole, but I didn’t want to go up on deck to look at more bare cliffs and deserted beaches. Since we rounded Cape Leeuwin at the end of March we had been travelling north up the coast of Western Australia.

Sometimes we saw sandhills and windblown scrub to our right. At other times there was nothing but endless Indian Ocean.

‘Get up, Clara!’ Susan was shaking me now, pulling at

the blanket while I held it tight. ‘We’re nearly there!’

I leapt up, threw off the blanket and ran up on deck, wrapping my shawl around me to cover my nightdress. Suddenly there was a terrible clanking sound from the engine below. Our battered steamer gave a great shudder and tipped to one side.

‘We’re sinking!’ Susan screamed, and grabbed the rail with both hands. I was thrown forward and crashed into Mother, who was already there. One of our crewmen leapt off the ship. A moment of panic. Other voices shouting. I was ready to jump when the steamer righted itself and I saw our crewman on the jetty looping a rope around the nearest bollard. He hauled on the rope. Our stern glided slowly towards the Long Jetty and came to rest against a padded pylon. We had finally arrived in the Port of Fremantle.

The jetty was crowded with people coming and going, collecting their luggage, greeting family and friends. There was no-one to meet us. It was much too far for our older sisters, Mary and Emily, to come from Southern Cross, a small gold-mining town 300 miles inland where Mary’s husband, Tom Farren, is the licensee of the Club Hotel. It will be eight years in May since Mary married Tom and they left Queensland to try their luck on the new diggings in the west. Emily went with them. I missed her terribly because she used to play games with me, even though I was only six and she was fourteen, the same age as I was now.

Mary was expecting another baby and she needed Mother’s help. Not many girls would come and work so far out in the bush. Susan and I were going to help out in the hotel while Mary was laid up after the birth. She and her husband already had four little girls, who we hadn’t met yet.

The gangplank slid down and clattered onto the wooden planks of the jetty. We went below to change and get our luggage from the cabin we had been sharing for seven long weeks while the steamer plodded around the coast from our home in Queensland to Western Australia. Mother and I took the handles on either end of our sea trunk and carried it up the steps between us. Susan came behind with our holdalls, one in each hand. As we struggled up to the deck I thought of Pa and our two brothers. I wished they were here to help with the heavy trunk, but I missed them, too. They've stayed behind in Queensland, for now. They all have good jobs at Cooper's Gold Mine, in Charters Towers, and can't afford to lose them.

At the top of the steps, Mother and I rested the trunk on the deck. The steamer's single funnel, its white stripe now coated in grime, had stopped puffing out smoke. After the constant *thump, thump* of the engine, the ship seemed eerily silent, until the captain started barking orders from the wheelhouse and the crew bustled about on deck.

Mother and I lifted the trunk again and carried it down the constantly moving gangplank. Our leather-soled boots slipped and slid on the wet cleats. By the time we stepped onto the jetty I was sweating in my long dress and petticoats.

'Well girls, here we are on dry land at last,' Mother said. Her voice was almost drowned out by the neighing of horses, the shouts of dock workers and the thumps of boxes and bags being loaded into carts and coaches. 'We'll walk to the hotel,' Mother said. 'I believe it's not far, and it will be good to get our land legs back.'

'What about all our things?' Susan bleated, looking at the heavy trunk and holdalls at our feet.

'Just bring your handbag, Susan. I'll arrange for the rest to be delivered,' Mother reassured her.



Mother found a man with a horse and cart who agreed to take our luggage to the hotel where we would be staying for two days until the next train left for York, the end of the line on the way to Southern Cross.

We were making our way along the busy High Street when suddenly a ragged-looking man came dodging through the crowd. He ran across in front of us, looked back over his shoulder, and knocked a woman off her feet. She fell right in front of Susan, who tripped and grabbed hold of me. I dropped my bag and some of my things spilled out onto the pavement. We heard shouting and the sound of more running feet. A policeman in uniform called out 'Stop him!' People stood and stared, or moved out of the way, but no-one tried to catch the running man, who disappeared into a laneway. The policeman, who was very red in the face, stood on the road with his hands on his hips. He shouted again, but he had obviously given up the chase.

'What's happening?' Mother asked the woman as she helped her to her feet and I began to collect my belongings.

'Oh, one of the prisoners has escaped again,' the woman replied.

'Dear me,' Mother exclaimed. 'Is he dangerous?'

The woman laughed. 'No, not at all,' she said. 'They'll catch up with him and lock him up again, but it will do no good. It's almost a game to them.'

'But what has he done?' I asked the woman.

‘All sorts of petty crimes,’ she said with a shrug. ‘Mostly stealing grog, I believe.’

By then the policeman had recovered his breath and people were going about their business again. Mother handed the woman her bag. She hung it on her arm and wished us a pleasant stay.

We had started to move on when a voice called out behind us. ‘Hey miss! You dropped this.’ I turned around. A boy about Susan’s age was holding up a book. It was an ordinary exercise book, but I could see that it was mine.

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The boy handed me the book and I thanked him. It had fallen open at the page I had been writing on. Salty drops of sea water had crinkled the paper and it smelled of oily smoke, but I was glad to have it back. Mother had given it to me when I ran out of books to read early in the journey. Susan and I were only allowed to bring one each. I had read my book of Rudyard Kipling’s short stories so many times that Susan agreed to swap with me, but her copy of *Little Women* turned out to be even more boring than staring at the waves sliding endlessly by.

‘Why don’t you write a story of your own?’ Mother had suggested. She lifted the lid of the sea trunk, took out one of her brand-new exercise books and gave it to me. I opened the stiff cover and ran my fingers over the smooth, clean paper inside. I looked at mother.

‘Can I write in it?’ I asked, feeling the biggest smile pushing up my cheeks.

‘Of course, silly girl,’ Mother was smiling, too. I threw my arms around her and hugged her tight. ‘When I find you a pencil,’ she added, extracting herself from my arms and pushing the trunk back against the cabin wall.

With one of Mother’s pencils and the exercise book in hand, I climbed up to the deck and sat down on a pile of ropes in the shelter of the wheelhouse.

The sea was so rough I couldn’t keep my pencil from wobbling all over the page. Huge swells lifted up our heavy steamer then tipped it into the troughs between each wave. A wall of green water rose up so high it made the steamer seem like a toy boat. It climbed up and up to the top of each wave, balanced there for a moment, then dropped down again with an awful bang. At the bottom it shuddered and shook itself like a dog, before climbing up the next wave. I kept expecting the hull to split apart and hurl us all to the bottom of the sea, but our tough old ship kept ploughing on.

When the weather was calm and the sun shone Mother and Susan came up on deck. Mother sat in the only deckchair and Susan hung over the rail while I continued to write my story.

I wrote about the patterns the clouds were making as they drifted across the sky. And about the sea eagles circling curiously, high above us, then wheeling away towards the coast. They were so beautiful to watch that I was sad to see them go, but it was reassuring to know that Australia was still there, even when we couldn’t see it.

Another storm blew up and forced me to go below. Although it was dry inside, the tiny cabin felt as dark and cramped as a coffin. I couldn’t help feeling that I would be

stuck on that ship for ever. I even imagined falling off the bottom of the world, although I knew that wasn’t possible. Before we left Queensland people had told us that Western Australia was a desolate place, all sand, sin and sorrow. By then I didn’t care what it was like. I just wanted to get there before we all drowned.



I looked up and saw that Mother and Susan had stopped on the street to wait for me. Tucking my exercise book into my bag, I hurried to catch up.

We walked along the streets of Fremantle, admiring the grand official buildings. Between them there were narrow laneways leading to quaint little shops that sold maps and timepieces, ornaments and paintings. A magnificent town hall and a big stone church dominated the high street. Further along, a bustling market sold everything from matches to expensive fur coats.

Mother stopped to buy wool. She had been knitting jumpers for Mary’s four little girls and booties for the new baby, but she ran out of wool a week ago. In one of her letters, Mary told us that wool is hard to get in Southern Cross. Sheep don’t last long there. It’s very dry country and when they run out of food the sheep have to be killed and eaten.

As we passed the post office I saw a postcard with a picture of the Long Jetty and the harbour in the background. I wanted to post it to Mary and Emily, but Mother said it would take three or four weeks to reach them. She said we would be there ourselves in a few days.



On our third day in Fremantle, we rode to the railway station in the cart, with all our luggage, and caught the train to York. The train rattled and swayed along the track. I sat with my exercise book in my lap, but I was too busy staring out of the window to write much. There were sheep and cattle grazing on the green hillsides. Trees lined the driveways leading to farmhouses, sheds and barns. It reminded me of Queensland. I thought about Pa and the boys and wondered if Pa was missing us.

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‘I wish you were coming with us, Pa,’ I had said, standing on the wharf in Brisbane with the steamer blowing smoke and the water slapping against the pylons.

‘Don’t worry, pet. I’ll be joinin’ you in the Golden West before you know it,’ Pa had said, hugging me tight to his broad chest. Then he lifted me up, swung my feet off the ground and whirled me around in a circle. I’m nearly as tall as him now, but we’ve played this game ever since I was tiny. I squealed with delight as the wind caught my petticoats and sent them ballooning up above my knees. Susan giggled with her hand across her mouth, but I didn’t care. I was enjoying every moment in Pa’s arms.

‘Take care of your mother,’ he said, as he stood me back on my feet and kissed my cheek.

Billy and Joe carried our luggage up the gangplank onto the steamer. Susan and I ran after them, bouncing on the moving boards. Mother followed slowly, turning back for one last look at Pa.

Three mournful blasts from the steamer’s blackened funnel sent out a warning to the busy harbour. The two

boys hurried back down the gangplank and we pulled away from the wharf. I stood on the deck waving with Mother and Susan, not knowing whether the fluttering in my stomach was caused by excitement or fear. I had never been on a steamer before.

Susan jumped up and down beside me, waving frantically to Pa and the boys. Mother stood gripping the rail, waving her handkerchief then blowing her nose on it, as the men in our family grew smaller and the port faded into the haze.

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The train jerked to a stop and my pencil fell, clattering to the floor. I closed my book and looked out of the window again.

We had arrived in York, but we still had 167 miles to go. Mother had arranged for a buckboard buggy to take us and our luggage the rest of the way to Southern Cross.

‘How long will it take?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Perhaps three days.’

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We bumped along in the buckboard buggy, crammed in with our luggage and all manner of goods that had been ordered by people who live further out beyond York. The road was narrow, the countryside flat and dry with just a few clumps of trees here and there. The buckboard buggy had no roof or sides and the road was very dusty. Whenever we stopped, the cloud of red dust that the horses stirred up swirled all around us. By the end of the day our hair, our clothes, even our eyes and mouths, were full of it.

When the sun started to set we stopped beside the road for the night. Our driver unharnessed the horses and hobbled their front legs together, so that they could eat any grass they could find, but not go too far away.

The camp fire was soon blazing and our driver made tea with pungent leaves and water he carried in a drum specially fitted to the back of the buggy. He took a bucket

of water to the horses and hung small bags of hay from each of their bridles.

During the night I woke with a start. I could hear chains clanking and feet scuffling in the dark and imagined a prisoner, escaped from Fremantle, come to rob us of all we had. Then I remembered the horses and laughed silently at myself.

I was just dozing off again when I felt warm breath on my face. I sat up quickly. It was only Susan. Her bed-roll was spread out on the ground next to mine and she had rolled over in her sleep. She was breathing in my ear. The stars were very bright in the dark sky and I was thinking we were lucky it wasn't raining. In the morning I said this to the driver. He smiled.

'No danger of that, miss,' he said, offering me some of the damper he had cooked in the coals of last night's fire. 'Dry as a chip out here.'



By the time we reached the new wayside inn, all my bones were aching. We had bounced over rocks and ruts, twisted and turned to avoid fallen trees and been shaken about till my brains felt loose in my head. When I finally got down from the buggy, my legs were more wobbly than they had been after seven weeks at sea.

Mary had written about the inn and told us to stay there. Although it was only partially built it would save us going off the main track to the tiny settlement of Doodlakine with its five houses and one water tank.

Mother had arranged for us to spend the night with Mr and Mrs Fred Wilkins, who were building the inn. They

had already finished some of the bedrooms and were very pleased to see us.

‘Do come in,’ Mrs Wilkins said. ‘It’s lovely to have some female company for once.’

‘Thank you,’ Mother said.

‘We heard that you had passed the crossing. The grapevine is very active out here,’ she told us.

I had not seen any grapevines and, in fact, couldn’t imagine that anything would grow in the dry, rocky country we had travelled through. Mrs Wilkins took us into an empty room.

‘I’m sorry it’s so basic,’ she apologised.

The walls were made with saplings, obviously cut from the straggly trees nearby. They were roped together and mud was slapped all over the outside to fill the gaps. Part of a corrugated iron roof had been added. The dirt floors had been swept until they were hard and clean.

‘It’s a struggle to get building materials this far out,’ Mrs Wilkins said. ‘But we think it will be a good place for an inn. Come and join us when you are settled.’

Once we had spread our bed-rolls on the floor of the room I asked Mother about the grapevines.

‘It’s just a saying, Clara,’ she said. ‘In Queensland we called it the bush telegraph.’

I knew about the bush telegraph, of course, but in Queensland people lived closer together and passed on any news or gossip whenever they met. We had just travelled for two days without seeing anyone else on the road, although I did see a cloud of dust away on the horizon. They must have seen our dust behind them and told the Wilkinses.



Mrs Wilkins cooked a meal for us and afterwards there was lots of singing and laughing. She played her piano accordion and Mr Wilkins started us off by singing ‘The Ship that Never Returned’. We all joined in for the chorus. Susan, who has a sweet voice, sang ‘I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen’ and Mother sang ‘Good Old Jeff’. The driver had lots of jokes and tall tales to tell. I laughed so much I forgot about my aches and pains. It was midnight before anyone even thought of going to bed.