

The Raft

He had managed the grief through the past twelve years, but not the guilt. And though he knew that two ghosts awaited him on that stony terrace above the Kawarau River, Sam McKearn hoped his gold – their gold – would still be there.

The Dunedin years had given him distance from the day that cast a shadow over his life, but his thoughts were harder to escape. And now, in the buttoned-leather confinement of the Dunstan-bound stagecoach, he had little else to do but think. Occasionally the views diverted him – the tussocklands of the Tuapeka, the schist bluffs of the Roxburgh Gorge, or the steam dredges that plied the Clutha River, spewing coalsmoke and noise like so many floating factories.

The three other passengers, strangers to Sam and to each other, sat in silence. At times the swaying carriage lulled him into a half-dream where memories came to life. The memories were always of 1866. Back then he had been warned that a remote mining claim was no place to bring a wife in the depths of an Otago winter. But in winter the river was low, and the gold Sam and Annie hoped to win would mean all their future winters would be warm.

For eight months they had worked the secluded inlet on the north bank of the Kawarau. The site was hidden from the bullock trail above by matagouri scrub and the deceptive angles of the rocks that guarded it. Sam and Annie had been shown the site by their friend, the old Māori guide Wiremu from Cromwell, seven miles downriver. A steep, rocky trail led down from the road to the river. The site was difficult, but Sam had learned from his time on the Dunstan. He knew that gold would be caught in the gravel river-bars that reached out like fingers towards the rocky island eight yards from the riverbank.

The trail was broken by a terrace fifteen feet above the river. Here, a schist outcrop created an overhang that they had enclosed to form a hut, stacking slabs of schist on the exposed sides, with a canvas curtain for a door.

As the days warmed and rain melted the mountain snows, the river occasionally rose, but even in the highest floods the water came only within six feet of the terrace. Outside the hut, Sam had tied Wiremu's mōkihi to a steel spike he had driven into the hard ground. The mōkihi was built of raupō reeds bound with flax, and had the shape of a waka. The old man had insisted they keep the raft in case they became trapped by rising water.

The stagecoach rumbled on along the metalled trail above the Clutha River. Alexandra was now just three hours away. At one point the carriage lurched as its wheels hit a rock. Jolted

from his reverie, Sam looked out to see they were passing through rows of flowering apple trees that had displaced the mining terraces of the Teviot Basin.

Within minutes his thoughts drifted back to January 1866. They had been surprised to see Wiremu that day. It was a long walk for a man whose age they guessed at not less than seventy. Sam remembered how they had shared with Wiremu the news that Annie was pregnant; how the old man said he already knew, and that the signs told him the child would be a boy. The couple said they would name the boy William in Wiremu's honour. The old man had been moved by this, but had to come to warn of a great storm. He urged Sam and Annie to leave without delay. Sam told Wiremu they had seen many floods, and none came close to their shelter.

'But can you not feel it?' Wiremu had said. 'More than the rua kanapu that lights the blackening sky and the whaitiri that rumbles over the mountains. More than these things is the sense of the air. I felt all the great storms of the past, but this storm will be greater than any yet seen. Shelter with me tonight, safe from the river.'

For every day since, Sam McKearn berated himself for ignoring Wiremu's warnings. Every day he felt the weight of its consequences and relived its dreadful detail; how the rains came in their sleep, the river flooding their shelter, their scramble up the rocky trail that had become a torrent of mud. Of Annie slipping and tumbling into the raging river; his desperate paddling of the mōkihi in search of her, and the final realisation that she was gone.

Dunedin was a time of emptiness, and sorrow was a blanket in which he enshrouded himself against the world. Memories became both his comfort and his torment. Every year Sam had marked Annie's birthday with white lilies and candlelight. He would close his eyes and remember her as she was in 1866, never to age. And he would summon an image of how William might look; a mixture of his own Celtic pallor and Annie's continental duskiness. Yet unlike Annie, the child of Sam's vision would age with each passing year, like an enchanted portrait.

Reaching Alexandra at nightfall, the coach pulled up at the staging post outside the Golden Lion Hotel on Shannon Street, near the river. A tall, broad-shouldered man stood waiting for Sam McKearn. It was the pub's owner, Harry Collins. Sam shook his hand with warmth and tears. To Sam he was the angel of 1866, the man who pulled him from the Clutha, who gave him food and shelter while he regained his strength.

‘We leave for the Kawarau at dawn’, Harry said. ‘I still have your raft, and the horses and the wagon are ready.’ Harry explained that he planned to stay a night in Cromwell after taking Sam to the Kawarau, that he would soon open a second hotel there, and would need help to run his Alexandra businesses if ever Sam needed work. Harry’s warmth and companionship lifted Sam’s spirits, as did the beer imported from James Speight’s new brewery in Dunedin, for which he had acquired a taste. But these days he drank more for escape than taste, and while beer elevated his mood momentarily, in the end it always had the opposite effect.

At Cromwell the next morning they stopped where Wiremu’s hut once stood. A passing digger said the old man had died peacefully in the winter, and spoke of the outpouring of love that was Wiremu’s tangi.

The day had warmed when they reached the entrance to the hidden track that led to Sam’s hut. The matagouri now smothered the entrance. Harry retrieved a cane-knife from the wagon and hacked an opening in the scrub. Together they inched the mōkihi down the trail, holding it vertically between the rocks.

After helping to unload Sam’s supplies, including a gold pan and shovel, Harry left with a handshake and good wishes. Sam knelt and lifted the rocks under which he had hidden his bags of gold twelve years ago. They were gone. He held his head in his hands, though somehow he had expected it. Now he would work the river bars again, for as long as it took.

The talk in Alexandra had been of the great quantity of snow that remained on the mountains after the heavy falls of that 1878 winter. Severe freezing had locked the snow in thick ice that failed to melt. One grizzled packer warned that if warm rains melted the snowpacks quickly, the coming flood would be spoken of for a hundred years.

Two weeks after Sam’s return to the Kawarau, the skies darkened and a warm wind funnelled down the gorge. Now, for the first time, he understood the words of Wiremu, of sensing the oncoming storm. He smelt its metallic breath, felt its heavy skies pressing down upon him, and sensed its creeping presence in the very pores of his skin.

He had failed to heed Wiremu’s warnings in 1866 and paid a painful price. Now he would ignore those portents again, not from the audacity of youth, but from surrender. Back then, the water took Annie and William. Let the water take me if it must, he thought. He no longer had the will to fight the river. Ko wai mātou, ‘we are water’, the old man had often said. Sam reflected that if the river was his ancestor, a life spirit and a god, then let it decide. Let it judge me for the shame of 1866. If it is the will of the river to take me, then let it be so.

Wearing a canvas coat Annie had made for him, he sat on a flat boulder beside the mōkihi. Thunder rumbled around the mountains, and soon the first rains came on the warm wind. As night fell the rain intensified, and in the dying light he saw the river rising. He listened to the pelting rain and the thunderclaps; held in ghastly thrall by the lightning that lit the Kawarau Gorge like a Shakespearean stage. As the last connection to Annie, William and Wiremu, the mōkihi was sacred. He rested his hand upon its coarse fibres, determined to stay awake. If this night was to be his last, then he would not abandon it to sleep. Though the night grew cold, to feel its bite, the rain on his face and the sound of the river, was to know he was still alive.

As the river rose further, a moment of peace came over him. Now that he had placed his fate in the arms of the river, a burden seemed to float from his shoulders. It was a peace born not of joy, but of acceptance.

In the darkness he could sense the water creeping upon him, as patient as death itself. At times in the night he bit his cheek and punched the rock on which he sat so that his fist bled in the rain. Anything to defy the demon that sought to steal his final hours. He found himself in wakeful dreams where Annie sat at his side and William, the child who would now be twelve, rested at his feet.

After uncounted hours, the river had reached his knees. Let the river choose, he repeated. The thunder rolled in unbroken waves as older echoes merged with new. The noise of the river grew, while the distant promise of dawn made grey shapes of the mountains. The mōkihi was afloat, its rope straining against the current.

Somewhere in the darkness, beyond the fury of the storm and the rush of the water, came a sound of another kind. It was an unearthly cry, like that of a wounded animal, or such as one might make in the throes of death or grief. It was a wordless wailing that was almost a song. He had heard a similar sound on that fateful morning of 1866. It seemed that even in his last hours the gods were mocking him. The cries persisted, then in the next spray of light he saw where they came from. Eight yards out into the river, a boy clung to a large fallen tree that had snagged on the sunken island.

Sam untied the mōkihi and reeled it towards him. Throwing the excess rope into the raft, he yelled, 'Hold on!'

The boy stopped wailing.

Sam knew that if he tried to paddle directly to the boy, the river would take the raft before it reached him. He angled the mōkihi upriver and drove it with all the leg power he could muster, before diving onto the raft and paddling furiously against the current. The river was strong, but the great arc of his efforts took him towards the tree that held the boy. As the tree loomed, time seemed to slow and the river felt like treacle. With one last thrust of his paddle, he drove the raft into the tree.

The mōkihi bobbed against the branches, and Sam could see the sobbing boy seven feet away, shivering, clinging to the branch, eyes wide with terror. The child looked no older than ten. Sam looped the rope around a branch and flung the loose end towards the boy. It was beyond the boy's grasp. Sam tried again. Still the rope did not reach.

The tree leaned downstream. Sam feared it was about to give way. At the fourth try the boy grasped the rope with one hand, and now held it with both. Sam hauled the boy towards him. The tree buckled further under the force of the river and the pull of the rope.

Sam hauled the boy, who was small and thin, onto the raft. As he did so, the tree surrendered to the river, bobbing and lurching downstream, pulling the raft with it. Sam freed the rope. He vowed that this time no one would be lost to the river. The boy sat wordlessly, shivering and whimpering. They came to the Kowarau River's confluence with the great river the Māori call Mata-Au. The meeting of the waters was calm, and the mōkihi glided through with ease. Sam thought of how a river in high flood widens, its current slowing even as its volume swells. The calmness of the water became his own calmness. Still the boy did not speak.

As Sam guided the raft along the broad, flat water towards the north riverbank at Alexandra, the thunder ceased, and the first rays of dawn shone beneath the clouds. They hauled the mōkihi up the bank and sat on a cluster of rocks surrounded by golden tussocks.

'Tell me your story,' Sam said.

Over the next few minutes, Sam learned of the boy's past; of parents that died within a week of each other; of surviving thirty days cared for by the wife of a dredge-master who ultimately turned him away. How he lived by begging from camp to camp.

'What is your name?' Sam asked.

'Thomas.'

'How old are you?'

'I will be twelve soon. I don't know when.'

The boy lowered his eyes, as if in shame.

‘Let me look after you,’ Sam said.

Through tears the boy said, ‘But I will be a burden to you, as I have been to everyone else ... You have already done enough. You saved my life.’

‘That is true, by the grace of God. But you must also understand ...’

Sam bit his lip. The boy looked up at him.

‘Understand what?’

‘That you also saved mine.’

Behind them, a lamp flared in the entrance to the Golden Lion Hotel.

Sam McKearn removed his coat and draped it over Thomas’s shoulders.

The boy stood, and together they walked towards the light.