

The Mind's Own Place

A novel

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The Wordsworth Collection, purchased 2010

Inside photograph of the Old Mill, South Perth, 1890. Sourced from the collection of the State Library of Western Australia and reproduced with the permission of the Library Board of Western Australia.

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To Gale
my ideal reader

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same...

So *Satan* spake...

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

The people of Fremantle were used to convicts. A generation was nearly grown up who had always seen the grey-clad gangs at work on jetties and bridges, roads and government buildings; who knew that the curfew tolled at ten o'clock each night, and after that the policeman on rounds challenged late wanderers with the words, 'Bond or free?'

Alexandra Hasluck, *Unwilling Emigrants: A Study of the Convict Period in Western Australia*

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one...

St Paul, *Epistle to the Galatians*



Prologue

Mill Point, January 1882

She was loosening soil in the vegetable patch with a heavy-pronged fork when a large frog hopped out lopsidedly from behind the bean row, one leg entangled in a piece of string. She caught the hobbled wriggling thing in her hands. Its emerald skin felt moist but waxy as she carefully unwound the string to set it free. Bounding away, it disappeared somewhere among the plants in search of another hiding place. She returned to her rhythm of digging, and then decided after a few minutes that the sand needed more humus mixed into it. Going over to a corner of the garden where leaves had been heaped and rotted, she swung her big fork vigorously into the pile. There was a high-pitched noise, a long reedy wail. Aghast, she saw that she had impaled the frog. It was squeaking in anguish as it squirmed on one of the tines, which had entered its gullet to skewer its body and the full length of one leg. She forced herself to grasp the clammy creature a second time, pull it off the fork and throw it quickly back into the rubbish mound, out of sight. Nausea made her tremble.

Later that same day there was a stranger on her doorstep, bringing dire news from the prison.

Her husband had been short in stature, and this man who now stood before her was almost a head shorter – not much more than five foot, she guessed. But his manner was quietly authoritative, with a solid presence despite the lack of height. He looked as thickset and weathered as a quayside bollard. A bollard with a fat moustache. She was aware that his eyes, pale blue, unblinking, had closely watched her reaction to the grim tidings he had just imparted.

‘I know you were estranged from him, ma’am,’ he was saying as she led him into a small drab room, sparsely furnished. ‘But setting aside the rights and wrongs of all that, it seemed only proper to let you know what’s happened before gossip arrives at your door or you read about this matter in the newspaper. *The West Australian* may well report it in a lurid way.’

‘I thank you, sir. It’s considerate of you to come here and tell me. I wasn’t on the friendliest terms with him of late, I won’t deny that, but to hear what he’s done now is shocking. Truly shocking.’

She lowered her eyes and put a hand to her mouth. He observed a tremor in her cheek. *So she’s not unfeeling after all*, he thought. *Unless it’s just the drink*. Satan’s letter was in his mind.

‘Telling my little boy will be hard,’ she said. ‘He’s in the bedroom now, playing jackstraws, the poor mite.’ After a pause, she added quietly, ‘And people will talk. No doubt much of the blame will fall on me.’

There was a knock at the cottage door and she went to answer it, returning in the company of a sprucely dressed gentleman.

She began to introduce them: 'This is my uncle...'

'We're acquainted, Polly,' said the new arrival with a nod of greeting and a brisk handshake. 'How are you, Sergeant Rowe?'

'Well enough, Mr Letch, well enough, but it's a sorry business that has brought me here. You've heard?'

'I have.' Sighing, Letch glanced down as if the scrubbed floorboards might suggest some consoling thought. 'And so I came directly to break the news. It seems you've told Polly already.'

The woman gestured to the threadbare armchairs. 'Do sit down, please, both of you. I'll put the kettle on the hob and fetch you some tea.'

She left the room and the men sat in silence for a few moments.

'He had exceptional qualities,' said Rowe. 'That's the pity of it. But his spirit was badly bruised. He deserved better fortune. And the colony is much the poorer for his loss.'

Nodding, Letch frowned. 'He felt bitter towards some of us at the last. Perhaps justifiably. I've often thought about the similarities, in bygone years, between his situation and mine,' he said. 'About the reverses we both suffered as younger men, through our own folly, the mistakes that brought us to this place always lingering in our minds. But then such different eventual outcomes. I've been lucky and he was luckless.'

'You've toiled for your success, Mr Letch. Everyone acknowledges that.'

'He could hardly be accused of working less hard than I did. And he had talents beyond mine. His character may have been flawed, but God knows that's just as true of me. Yet I've prospered beyond my deserts, while he's ended in disgrace.'

‘Our endings are sometimes shaped by our beginnings, are they not? The child may continue to inhabit the man. If we knew more about his early years, that could help to explain his later tribulations.’

‘Perhaps so. He wouldn’t be the only person who never quite finished growing up.’ Alfred Letch clasped his hands and inspected the nails pensively before continuing. ‘But in the final count, I believe, each of us embodies something enigmatic – a riddle that no story of failed adulthood can fully decipher.’

Thomas

London to Lancashire, August 1833

Teeth clenched, neck bent sideways, he inched himself into the crevice above the ledge. Fear clutched at him, sweat stung his eyes, but Eddie's scoffing words made him try to continue.

'What's the matter, Tomtit? Fraid, art tha?'

'It's much tighter,' he gasped, his voice muffled and distorted, 'than I thought it would be. I can hardly squeeze in here.'

'Nonsense. Th'art small and skinny enough to fit easily. Go on.'

'I reckon this is far enough now.'

'No, th'art only halfway. The dare was th'd get right in under the rails. Th'art not going to funk it now?'

The cavity was dark and dirty, with an oily smell. He fervently wished he hadn't been goaded into this.

Eddie had put the challenge to him: 'Bet th'd be too scared to climb up in there, between that rampart and the railway track.'

'Would not!'

'Do it then. Go on, do it.'

So Thomas had to show he wasn't a coward. But now he was seized by the alarming sensation that he could neither move further in nor wriggle out again. He seemed to be jammed. Wedged tight. There was a painful crick in his neck, and his arms and legs felt frozen. He began to tremble. The trembling was not only within his body but also in the beam on which he lay, and in the track close above him. Then the trembling became a shuddering vibration, and with it a rumble that grew louder and louder into a terrible approaching clamour. He squirmed, sobbed, but there was no escaping the throb and quake of it. Although he knew he was crying out, screaming now, he could not hear his puny voice above the great snorting roar of the steam engine as the train hurtled past, just a few fearful inches overhead, carriage after racketing carriage, on its boisterous headlong charge from the embankment out across the viaduct.

As the monstrous noise receded he was conscious of his own feeble whimpering and of the shameful wetness spreading around his crotch.

'Eddie!' he wailed desperately. 'Help me, Eddie!'

'What? Can't get out by thaself?'

'I'm stuck fast.'

There was a tentative tugging at his arm, but it seemed impossible to budge him.

'I'd best get someone.'

'Don't leave me here! Eddie! Eddie?'

There was no answer. He was alone, convulsed with self-pity. Time stretched out wretchedly.



But the previous ten days had been like a blissful dream. First there was the long journey with his father, all the way from Islington up here to Newton in Makerfield, twenty hours without a pause except for changing the horses. Never before had he left the familiar little district of his upbringing, and it felt momentous – almost adult – to be waving farewell to his mother and sisters as dawn broke. He walked proudly beside his father along their foggy streets to the coaching inn, Grice staggering behind them with their bags. As a starting point for this expedition, their villa could hardly have been more conveniently located: a short stroll took them along Richmond Avenue to the corner of Liverpool Road, and on down to the Angel, the first staging post on the journey from London to the north.

Every little thing was imbued with excitement, even the smells of horses and harness, of sweaty ostlers, of pungent pipe smoke. Hubbub filled the inn yard, as the men around him raised their deep phlegm-thickened voices to make themselves heard above all the whinnying and barking and shouting. Early sunlight brightened the colours of coaches and uniforms. The yellow of the post-chaise carriages, three of them in a row, stood out in vivid contrast to the livery of their own mail coach with its maroon doors and lower panels, black upper panels, scarlet wheels, and the royal coat of arms on the doors. Grice, sweating and huffing, hefted their bags up into the foreboot, inclined his head deferentially towards Mr Browne, muttered, ‘I wish you safe travelling, sir,’ and took his leave, looking as glum as ever.

‘If Grice has smiled even once in all his years as our servant, I’ve not seen it,’ remarked his father. It occurred to Thomas that nobody ever exhibited a cheerful demeanour in his father’s presence.

One of the post-chaises was being readied for departure. A smart-looking postilion stood nearby, booted and spurred, hand firmly on his horse's bridle, awaiting the moment to move the animal into a lead position. Thomas admired the flamboyance of the man's uniform: he was resplendent in short blue jacket, top-boots, shiny white hat, white cord breeches, white neckcloth and a yellow waistcoat with glinting pearl buttons. But his manner seemed vainglorious, and Thomas was not the only one who saw this. His father nudged him, saying, 'A bit too pleased with himself, that peacock, eh, Thomas?' At this moment something startled the horse and it reared up suddenly, jerking the postboy so that he toppled into a pool of mud, soiling his white hat and breeches. There was much coarse laughter around the inn yard at the sight of his bedraggled finery. Thomas felt a twinge of sympathy but his father hissed a familiar scriptural proverb in his ear: 'Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.'

Though uncertain about their expedition's precise purpose, Thomas was solemnly conscious of the privilege of accompanying his father. He half understood that it involved a business scheme – and also, in some vague way, his own employment prospects.

'Your schooling days are behind you now, Thomas,' his father had said the evening before their departure, stern as ever, puffing on his little clay pipe. 'It's the working life for you from this point onwards. Time to learn how to make your way shrewdly in the world, m'boy, and earn a living. Diligence! Application!' He wagged an admonitory finger, as if to forestall any waywardly indolent impulse his son might be tempted to indulge.

'But this place you're taking me to...'

‘Newton. Up north.’

‘But why travel so far away, Papa? What is it we’re going to do there?’

Henry Browne inhaled deeply, frowning to dramatise the gravity of their purpose and the authority of his pronouncement. ‘We’re to spend time in this part of Lancashire because it’s where new ways of designing and manufacturing are at their boldest. At their most advanced. In particular’ – coughing, he paused to wave away the acrid pipe smoke curling around his head – ‘in particular, there’s no better place in all of England to understand the commercial opportunities being quickened by the development of railways. That’s where the future lies, mark my words.’

When his father deepened his voice in that orotund way, one hand slowly rubbing his belly with satisfaction as he spoke, he reminded Thomas of Mr Wiggins addressing the school assembly – but Henry Browne’s command of long instructive sentences was even more impressive than the headmaster’s.

‘It’s fortunate,’ he continued in the same teacherly tone, ‘that my brother Ralph, canny fellow, is right there in the thick of it. By staying with him and observing the work he does as a foreman at the big new foundry that’s just been constructed in Newton, we can find out what openings are likely to come up when the railway moves south. You can be sure London will become the centre of a railway system before long. Oh yes. A grand system! Locomotive transport will transform this nation, I know it.’

‘But if —’

Impatient with buts or ifs, his father waved away the interruption. ‘Engineering,’ he went on, haloed in smoke, ‘is going to be the most vigorous and prosperous profession

in the years ahead. Civil engineers, mechanical engineers. There'll be a whole new world of innovation and investment, Thomas. Those of us who've thought ahead and studied the prospects can take advantage of that transformation before others have woken up to the magnitude of it all.'

'Why is Newton such a good place to see these —?'

'Because of its location! In the past, Ralph's letters tell me, Newton has just been a little market town, but it's situated halfway between Warrington and Wigan on the great northern road, and halfway between Liverpool and Manchester, too — the new railway line goes through it east to west. Great achievement by that Stephenson fellow — the first railway in the world to carry passengers along with many kinds of freight! So business is coming to Newton from all corners of the country.'

Thomas quivered with awe at his father's self-assurance, his knowledge of the commercial world, his ability to explain how things worked. To be the offspring of a well-educated successful businessman who could speak with such profundity, that was enough to make any son proud — though anxious, too: anxious about what such a father expected of him. Not to succeed would apparently be unforgivable.

But now they were climbing into the coach and setting forth. Their fellow passengers presented a comical contrast: an extremely thin, tight-lipped old lady with a doleful-looking dog at her feet sat opposite Thomas, and beside her, taking up most of the space on that side of the coach, a florid corpulent man with splayed legs making frequent recourse to a liquor bottle as he read aloud various sections of his newspaper and voiced tangential rambling thoughts on a miscellany of loosely associated topics.

The road north from London began to take them through landscapes Thomas had previously been only able to imagine. He wished he could look at more of the countryside along the way, but the shape of the coach window restricted his line of vision. Intermittently there were brief glimpses of farms and fields, ragged hedgerows and dark copses. He caught sight now and then of wind-swayed wheat on hillsides, ready for the harvest, and of little twisting lanes, stone bridges, tollgates, quiet hamlets, lively-looking market towns. At times he dozed. The hours slipped by until afternoon faded into dusk. As they left the solid macadam surface behind and their carriage lurched along a rough stretch of rutted roadway with sombre trees on either side, he asked his father anxiously about highwaymen.

‘No, no,’ replied Mr Browne with a dismissive shrug. ‘We won’t encounter any of those rascals. They belong to the past. The country’s much more law-abiding these days, what with the Peelers in London and the severe punishments our courts now mete out for wrongdoing.’

A mile up the highway, in the day’s last dim light, they saw and smelt a gibbet at a crossroads. As they passed close by, Thomas stared open-mouthed at the barred iron cage swinging in the breeze and the shackled, half-decayed body he could barely discern inside. He could think of no fate more terrible than to be hung in chains, rotting away as a public spectacle.

His father nodded at the grim exhibit and sniffed noisily – perhaps with righteous satisfaction, perhaps with sheer disgust; Thomas couldn’t be sure.