

The
Denniston
Rose

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Burnett's Face, Denniston © Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington,
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For Laughton

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Denniston is a real coal-mining town, now deserted, on a high, barren plateau above the West Coast of the South Island of New Zealand.

In my story, events on 'the Hill' in the 1880s are as accurate as I could make them. The isolation, the appalling climate, the tyranny of the Denniston Incline (which was the only means of access), the circumstances leading to New Zealand's first miners' strike are all historical facts.

The people, on the other hand, are pure fiction. I apologise to the descendants of those tough men and women — mine managers, teachers, businessmen and colliers — whose real-life positions my characters have usurped. I hope the imaginary characters have inherited some of the spirit of those true pioneers.

Damn Denniston
Damn the track
Damn the way both there and back
Damn the wind and damn the weather
God damn Denniston altogether.

From J.T. Ward, 'Recollections of a Lifetime on
the West Coast of the South Island', *Westport News*,

21.9.1884

Arrivals



Rose

ROSE OF TRALEE and her mother arrived on the Hill at night during a storm. Con the Brake insisted it was the worst storm of '82; possibly even since the mine opened, though that was hotly debated. There were, after all, plenty of good examples to argue over. Like the one in 1880, where the wind, screaming unchecked over that dead plateau, drove hail thirty feet into Banbury mine, sending young Jimmy Cotter, who fancied it was a cave-in, screaming for the entrance. Or those terrible three days — January, was it? — the next year: thirty inches of rain in thirty-six hours and mud up to your knees around the Brake Head. That was the same storm blew one of the new miners' tents, wooden floor and all, off the Camp and down into the gully, taking Tom Garter and Willie Huff with it. You couldn't have a worse storm than that. *And* they closed the Incline that time.

Con the Brake had never been known to concede a point in an argument.

‘Well,’ he would say, hammering his great fist on the rough plank that served as Red Minifie’s bar table, ‘they should have closed it the night Rose arrived. Running loaded wagons down the Incline was tricky enough in broad daylight, you know, with no wind. Only that night there was a bloody order to fill, remember, and the Company facing ruin, and naturally those mean bastards put money ahead of men’s safety every time. You know it’s the truth!’

It’s true anyway that the weather was bad that night. A gale-force westerly came straight off the sea, heavy with salt and rain. Down there at sea level, on the narrow band of swampy land, trapped between black mountains and stormy sea, in the tiny settlement of Waimangaroa, unpainted iron on the new Company houses heaved and squealed against nails not yet settled in. The storm roared inland, over the town, over the flat coastal strip, straight up the gully towards the mountains. In the gorge the river rose and ran oily with a mixture of mud and coal-slack. Great ancient beech trees groaned, their slapping branches showering tiny leaves into the shrieking air. At the head of the gully the wind butted, whump! into the black rampart of the escarpment, bent almost vertical and raced on up, two thousand feet up, howling all the way, up to Denniston.

Rose’s mother never said why she chose to arrive at night, let alone in that storm. In another town, people would worry away at a mystery like that, gnawing at the hard, bright bone, over teacups and white lace tablecloth. But plenty of people on Denniston had secrets. There was a saying that every living soul on the Hill had been chased up there — by the law or some other fury; that they escaped onto that desolate plateau and then somehow mutated, like a tough breed of goats, into a race that actually enjoyed mist and cold and isolation. The recruited English miners would be an exception perhaps — no

secrets there. They were on the Hill to work — to hew coal and get on with it. Con the Brake, himself a walking treasure-chest of secrets, would say that generations underground in the Midlands had mutated the English miners before they arrived.

So no one knew what brought Rose's mother. She must've been desperate, that was obvious, considering who she was coming to join, and the manner of her arrival, but you didn't ask nosy questions on the Hill, and she never offered a reason. Not to folk who might pass on the gossip, anyway. Rose's mother was never one you could have a normal chat with. There was some kind of angry fire burning in that woman, a fire that had been damped down with too much slack. Most of the time she smouldered away in some private world of her own; walked past as if the rest of the world didn't exist. If she decided to speak, the words blazed out — shreds and tatters of speech, not decent sentences you could respond to. A hint of some foreign lingo underlying her words. Also a touch of madness. An embarrassing woman, was the general opinion, with her shouts, snorts of laughter, hands in all directions. Who would know whether she was enjoying herself or in a furious temper? The truth was, Rose's mother was always too difficult, too uncomfortable. Would it have made a difference if one of the other women had befriended her? It's debatable.

Con the Brake, on the other hand, every bit as foreign as Rose's mother, with a past every bit as mysterious, was as open as the sea with his friendships and favours. That night might not have been the best moment to judge, mind you. Being on duty on such a night would strain the good nature of a saint. Never one to hold back in the words department, Con let loose a good flow in at least two languages, shouting and cursing at the blinding rain, the money-grubbing mine manager, the icy-cold iron of the brake controls. Rain and hail blinded the little window of the brake-shed. He risked

leaving, for a moment, the two handles that had become, over the past two years, like extensions of his own arms. Out on the platform he peered down the rails over the edge of the bluff. The lantern, swinging on the tail of the descending loaded wagon, had disappeared into the storm. Somewhere below, the empty wagon was rising in the wild dark, its lantern equally obliterated.

‘Shut your mouth!’ yells Con the Brake to the hook-man. Con’s temper frays to a strand under pressure. ‘How can a bod count if you yak?’

The hook-man, in dripping oilskins and dripping moustache, shrugs and turns away. If Con can curse while he counts, you’d think he could pass the time of day too. But no one wants to be responsible for an accident. Better to stay mum. He taps a wooden chock, testing its fit against the wheels of the waiting full wagon, then crouches under its sloping metal side, taking what cover he can from the storm.

Back in the shed, Con counts seconds in some other language. A new-fangled invention, attached to the drum, is supposed to tell him the position of the wagon, but he doesn’t trust the thing. A man’s experience and judgement is better in a storm like this. His great fists handle the wheels with surprising delicacy. These wheels, smaller than wagon wheels but similar, are mounted, waist high, horizontal to the concrete floor. On each, a knob like a cheerful thumb tucks into Con’s paw. He turns one wheel a quarter, the other less. Cold water flows into the pistons, cooling them. Towering behind him, the great winding drum slows, and slows again. Better safe than sorry tonight. The wire rope, snaking round and round the drum, and quivering with the tension of its two burdens — a descending full wagon and an ascending empty one — groans as it gives out more slowly on the Company side, takes up at the same slowing speed on the donkey. This time the empty wagon

is being hauled up on the donkey side. That's the north. Why donkey is a mystery. Company you can understand. Nearer to Westport, 'the Cardiff of the South Seas', where the streets are straight, where the manager wears a clean shirt every day and lives with his wife in his comfortable, dry home.

Con the Brake and the hook-man are both peering into the howling darkness. Con hoping to hell he's got the timing right and not slowed the bloody thing too soon, John Gantry Senior, hook-man, waiting to uncouple the empty, hook up the full one, and run the empty on down to the Bins for reloading. Four more full wagons and the shift's over, please God and good luck.

First they see a pale halo of light rising through cloud and rain. The lantern's wagging back and forth in the wind as if signalling a disaster. Con grunts. Timing's right enough. He winds with a will now, and the great brake-drum groans. If the wagon comes over too fast John Gantry could be history and Con out of a job. Con nods grimly — good, good, here she comes nice and sweet over the brow.

Next they see, like some unlikely ghost story, a pale face swimming in and out of the rain and mist. Holy Mary, there's someone coming up in the wagon! A woman by the shape of the hat and the size of her. Not crouching down, taking what cover she might from the sloping metal sides, but upright, straight as a tree and grim. She comes up inside the wagon, clinging to the leading side as if it were a ship's prow, feet apart like a man, leaning her good black coat into the rusty metal. Both arms are stretched wide, hooked over the lip to hold her firm against the steep grade and the storm. A plume of coal-slack, whipped off the descending wagon as it roared down past her, must have caught her full in the face. Now, rain and wind have etched lines in the sooty mask. Her skin is a shifting landscape like moonlight on a dark river.

The woman stares ahead, the one still thing in this buffeting

night. That wagon, rising up an impossible slope on a filthy night, is most definitely in her charge.

Metal wheels squeal on wet rails; the wagon comes level and mounts the siding ramp. Even Con the Brake is silenced by the apparition. John Gantry Senior stands in awe. For a single moment the woman turns her head and looks down at Con. He jerks violently as if an electric current has struck up at him through his controls. Then the bell announcing the safe arrival, at Middle Brake, of the full wagon reminds them all that nothing waits for the Company. Even the woman seems to know this. She stands braced while the streaming hook-man knocks out the pin, heaves the great metal hook from its socket and lays it on the ground. He pushes her wagon gently ahead toward the Bins and goes back to the hook. Grunting with the effort — no one's going to tell him he's getting past it — he drags the heavy hook and its four-inch cable over to the full wagon, waiting poised on the edge. First he uncouples the safety rope. Now he rams the hook home and drives in the locking pin. Last, he taps out the chock from under the wheels and gives Con the nod. Bells ring. The great drum groans and turns; the cable leaps up and snaps taut. The wagon moves. Four minutes on the dot seven more ton of bright coal hurtles down, down, to Middle Brake and then on down to Conn's Creek. The Denniston Incline, Engineering Masterpiece, Eighth Wonder of the Modern World: eighteen hundred feet in two near-vertical drops.

With his hands still on the controls, counting still, Con watches over his shoulder. He is shaking. In the wavering light from the Pumphouse lamps he sees the woman reach down into her wagon. She hands out three wet bundles which John places carefully on the mud of the siding. The first is a brown leather suitcase, battered but decent. Then comes a large bundle — linen perhaps — wrapped in tarpaulin and tied with string. The third, also wrapped in tarpaulin,

is a child. A small hole cut in the stiff canvas shows a wet face with sharp, interested eyes. String, tied under the child's chin and around the back of her neck, turns the square of tarpaulin into a dark hood and cape.

'Ah Jesus!' Con moans. 'Jesus!'

The mother hands her out like any other parcel. John Gantry Senior takes the child gently as a handful of suds and puts her little boots on the driest patch he can find. She stands by the other luggage, hardly distinguishable in shape and size, but a wonder to Con and the hook-man.

The mother takes John's offered hand; allows herself to be lowered to the ground. She bellows words into the wind and Con can see by the way John shrugs that he hasn't heard. The woman pushes back her streaming hair in a gesture familiar to Con and shouts again. This time John gathers the gist. She's asking for Jimmy Cork's place.

John Gantry Senior looks sharply over to Con the Brake, who stares down the rail, pretending he hasn't heard.

'Jesus save us all,' mutters Con. 'And especially me.'

Later that night, Con, washed and night-gowned, slides his tree-trunk of a body between clean sheets and wakes up the woman, soft and warm as dough, who is the joy of his life and is known on Denniston as Mrs C. Rasmussen, Con the Brake's wife. She explodes.

'What?' she shouts so half the men's quarters can hear. 'You never sent a woman and child over to Jimmy Cork's!'

'What could we do?' mumbles Con into the great welcoming bosom. 'Hook-man try, all right. He say to her it's a bitty late for a visit. Tell her she might stay at Hanrattys' till morning.'

Mrs C. Rasmussen snorts. 'A woman arriving in the middle of the night is not going to have money for boarding houses.'

‘Totty would not turn her away.’ Con’s hands are gentle on his wife, but the picture of that woman still burns. Maybe it wasn’t Angel. Surely that woman would never bed up with Jimmy Cork. All that soot and rain — how could he recognise any poor soul? No, no, that bad storm has spooked him, is all.

Mrs Rasmussen groans. ‘The child, the child!’

Con’s great bleak face, cracked and craggy as fjords in winter, softens into a warmer, rounder landscape. ‘The child,’ he says and he kneads his woman’s — his wife’s — lovely flesh, ‘The child smiled at us as if she were out on a Sunday picnic. Terror, you wouldn’t be surprised. Or tears, you know? All you could see was two eyes and a bitty yellow hair, but that smile — it was like sun coming out, I’m saying it.’

‘They went to Jimmy Cork’s?’ demands Mrs C. Rasmussen, withholding favours till she knows the worst: what chaos might need putting to rights in the morning.

‘They did, woman,’ mutters Con, hard and ready for her. He is ashamed of his urgency. It won’t be her, please Jesus it won’t. ‘To Jimmy’s. Now let be. I’d say they were survivors both. Like we two.’

‘Like us,’ corrects Mrs C. Rasmussen, but lets be.