

MONUMENT TO MISERY

COAL DUST RAVAGED THE MINERS' LUNGS. Coughing and spitting were the inevitable legacy of their lives in the appalling conditions underground. Disgusting as the spitting was, they had no choice, except when they laid eyes on the mansion on the hill. When they spat then, it was done with malicious intent—the black gobs of mucus expressing what they thought about this lavish reminder of their own squalor and poverty.

The miners called the object of their contempt Taffy Jones's Castle. The name, meant to further denigrate the monument to their misery, found favour with coal baron Gareth Jones, who thought it meant his workers were accepting what he'd set out to achieve.

When he had the mansion built, he copied the ancient castles of his native land Wales. Towering stone walls topped by parapets and battlements, tall stained-glass windows, huge oak doors with studded brass hinges—there was nothing remotely like it anywhere in the infant colony of Queensland.

The difficult building work was done by convicts, whose labour was obtained through Jones' generosity towards the right people in the right places. Emaciated, gaunt men, their rough clothing branded with the broad arrow marking them as prisoners, hacked the stone from quarries with picks and crowbars. They hauled the blocks through the bush on handcarts, chiselled them to size and manhandled them into position. When the mansion was finished, it was as close to a real castle as ego and money could get.

The site had been chosen carefully. Overlooking the Ipswich coalfield, it was on a hill where the mansion could be seen, but with a green curtain of trees, so that those who lived there wouldn't have to look at the blackened poppetheads and ugly mine buildings. It was so suitable for his needs that Jones ignored

all warnings about the dangers of building such a large structure in this place. A labyrinth of his own coal-producing tunnels radiated beneath the mansion, and mining men predicted that sooner or later it would subside into the dark caverns he'd dug to add to his riches.

Typically, Jones didn't care—this was his domain and nature wouldn't dare interfere.

Meanwhile, underground, the miners added to his wealth as they slaved in foul air, heat, dust, dampness, and the daily danger of being buried alive.

Jones, a miner himself in his homeland, had migrated in November 1880 with little more than a driving ambition to make a fortune. He was to be more successful than he had ever dreamed of.

After six months at sea, at twenty-five years of age and with a few coins in his pocket, he disembarked from the two hundred ton square-rigged wooden barque *Maid of Devon* at the Brisbane wharf, with no idea where to go in this strange new country.

As he left the wharf, he had to pass a run-down waterfront inn from which came the yeasty smell of lager. More than a drink he needed a place to think. He pushed open the bat-wing doors and went inside. It was dark inside after the bright sunshine. 'Hello, love,' the large-breasted redhead behind the bar said. 'What's your pleasure?'

He shrugged. 'A pint of bitter, I suppose.'

She left and returned with a foaming tankard, froth running down the side. 'There you are, love,' she said, giving him the once-over. Bronwyn Howell never missed an opportunity to assess her customers in the hope that some day a handsome gentleman would carry her off to an easy life. This one wasn't him, though—short, scrawny even, a thick black moustache the only noticeable feature in an otherwise unremarkable face. Poor as a church mouse, too, by the look of his clothes. Still, you could never tell.

'Just off the ship?' she asked, though she could see he was.

He nodded. 'It's that obvious, then?'

'Where are you from?'

'Wales. I was a miner there.'

'You're Welsh? A Taffy? Well, ain't that a coincidence. So am I. My old man was, anyway.' She held out a hand. 'Bronwyn Howell.'

The hand was smooth and soft. He held it longer than he meant

to. 'Bronwyn? A fine Celtic name that. I'm Gareth. Gareth Jones.'

He brought out some coins. After he paid for the drink, there wasn't much left to jingle in his pocket.

As he sipped the foaming lager, Bronwyn asked: 'What are you going to do with yourself in this big country, Gareth Jones?'

'Haven't the foggiest idea. The only thing I know anything about is coal mining. I suppose I'll try that somewhere.'

'Nearest mines are at Ipswich, a good twenty-five miles west of here.'

'Ipswich, eh? Might be worth a try.'

'The coach going there leaves morning and night from just up the road.'

Jones thought of the fare and his financial position. 'I'm young and fit, the walk will do me good.'

'Twenty-five miles! It's some walk.'

'Then I'd better get started right away.' Jones finished his drink and turned to leave. 'Thanks for pointing me in the right direction.'

'Good luck,' Bronwyn called as he went through the door, adding with a smirk, 'Come back and see us when you've made your fortune.'

'Might do just that.'

Bronwyn had lost interest. If he was going to walk twenty-five miles when there was a coach service, the man was destitute. Not her type at all.

The walk to Ipswich in the stifling heat took the entire day, and part of the next. When darkness fell on the first day, Jones made a bed out of long dry grass at the side of the road. With his scarred leather suitcase as a pillow, he spent an uncomfortable night slapping at buzzing swarms of mosquitoes.

The next morning he resumed trudging. He had no food and was desperately hungry when he reached the hilly town of Ipswich. He spent his last coins on a plate of watery stew and inquired the way to the mines. Out in the bush at Blackstone, he was told, a fair distance away.

It meant another tiring walk, but it was worth it. Given a job at the first mine he tried, he put it down to luck or the need for experienced miners. It was neither; few men were prepared to slave in Ipswich's airless claustrophobic hellholes.

For the next year, the Welshman toiled long hours in terrible

conditions and saved his money, living in a dirt-floor hut in the bush, eating little and spending nothing on himself. Finally he had saved enough to buy a cheap lease on coal-producing land that nobody wanted.

He worked his mine alone, until he could afford a few helpers who were prepared to wait for their paltry wages until the coal they produced was sold.

But Gareth Jones prospered. A head for business, back-breaking work and spending so little on food that he came close to starvation enabled him to buy another lease, this time with more potential than the first. Then another.

The demand for coal in the new colony was high. Within three years, Jones was able to give up working underground to control the embryonic empire that was to become Queensland's largest mining enterprise.

As his wealth grew, so did his need to display it. To advertise his success, he built his elaborate carbon-copy castle. After he moved in and began to live the lavish life of the landed gentry, complete with liveried servants, he needed a wife, more to run his household than for any other reason. But the coalfields had few eligible women, and he'd been too obsessed with work to think about the opposite sex.

He remembered the first woman he had seen in the colony, the Welsh redhead in the Brisbane waterfront tavern. She had a few rough edges, but he sensed in her the sort of strong and callous streak needed to run the household of a mining magnate.

She could be anywhere after three years, but he took the coach to Brisbane in the hope she'd still be at the tavern. To his delight she was serving behind the bar, buxom as ever.

'Hullo, Bronwyn,' he said. He remembered her name because it was Welsh.

'Hullo, love.' It was obvious she didn't recognise him. 'What'll it be?'

'You don't remember me, do you?'

She took a closer look. Undersized, unattractive. Apart from the fashionable clothes, he had nothing to make a girl remember him. 'Sorry, love,' she said, 'but I see so many people.'

'Gareth Jones. Long time back, I was just off the ship. You told me about the coal mines in Ipswich.'

It dawned on her – the Welshman who was so broke he had

to walk to Ipswich. 'I remember,' she said. 'Did you make those twenty-five miles on shanks's pony?'

'I did. And it paid off. I've got you to thank.'

'So you got a job there?'

'Got a job? I own three mines.'

Not another one, Bronwyn thought. Blokes on the make were always telling her how wealthy they were. 'Three mines?' she said with growing disinterest. 'And you're the owner of all three?'

'Not only three mines – I own a castle. And servants.'

Bronwyn smiled to herself. Three mines was stretching things; a castle and servants was too much. 'My, you have done well,' she said in the tone she used to humour those with delusions of grandeur.

'You don't believe I have a castle?'

'Of course. Every miner says his home is his castle.'

'I wish you'd take me seriously. I'll show it to you if you like.'

Bronwyn walked away, shaking her head in disbelief.

Not one to give up easily, Jones booked a room at the tavern and spent his days trying to impress Bronwyn. He threw money around in the bar, bought her gifts. But she had seen these Walter Mitty types before – they'd spend their last two bob to make an impression.

But his persistence paid off; she finally agreed to go out with him. He bought her orchids, they had the best seats at the most popular stage plays, he feted her at expensive restaurants, until she couldn't help but believe that he really did have money. But she wished he'd stop his wild flights of fancy – a castle and servants, indeed. She could accept his being an eccentric, though, if he was well-heeled; after all she still had hopes of snaring a rich husband.

Jones wanted to discuss marriage, but he was shy, inexperienced with women, and didn't know how to go about it. It was left to Bronwyn to take matters into her own hands – or other parts of her anatomy. She got him into bed.

He wasn't much of a lover, but she told him he was. 'We Taffies are a hot-blooded lot,' she'd say after their lukewarm love-making.

Bronwyn played on her Welsh heritage. She told him her father had married an Australian girl after coming out from the old country. They'd had a child – her – and he'd insisted on giving her

a Welsh name, Bronwyn. That much was true, but what Bronwyn didn't tell him was that when she was a four-year-old toddler, Ned Howell had run off with another woman, leaving her mother to rear her in poverty.

Now that Bronwyn had a rich, though less than satisfactory, bedmate she wasn't about to let him get away. She let him know that by sleeping with him, she was compromising her honour, and he should do something about it.

It was the opening the shy Jones wanted—he offered to make an honest woman of her.

Bronwyn, with an admirable display of reluctance, accepted, and when they were wed in a quiet ceremony, the situation had been resolved: Bronwyn got her rich husband; Jones had a housekeeper for his castle.

The honeymoon in a Brisbane hotel was brief. Afterwards they travelled by the coach service to Ipswich, where Jones had his own driver waiting in a polished carriage to drive them out to the coalfields.

Bronwyn was impressed with the liveried servant, the carriage and the two superb thoroughbreds pulling it. She was less impressed when they left the Ipswich streets and bumped along a potholed bush track, passing black mountains of coal and ugly pitheads.

'How much further?' she asked, irritated at the dust and discomfort.

'Nearly there,' Jones said.

Then, on a hill ahead of them, she saw it—a castle! Like something out of a storybook. It took Bronwyn's breath away.

From that moment, she accepted that it was her destiny to be mistress of Taffy Jones's Castle.

JANE AND CON

AT SEA, July 1880, the schooner Plymouth Rock:

SODDEN SAILS SLAPPED USELESSLY AGAINST THE RIGGING, like wet washing on a clothesline. Not an hour before, a screaming gale had bellied them to bursting point, reducing one of the topgallants to a shredded, flapping rag.

Bare-chested sailors scrambled like tattooed monkeys along yardarms high above the deck as they freed the tattered canvas. Deprived of momentum, the little ship wallowed in a sea that had grown placid in the wake of the wild wind.

The decks had been cleared of everyone but the scurrying sailors. Ninety-two terrified passengers were battened down in the hold where they huddled together, desperate for release from their confinement. The smell of vomit was everywhere.

It wasn't the first time they had been locked below while the elements raged. At such times many went down on their knees and prayed as seawater poured through every creaking crevice, and each lurch of the ship could be the final plunge that would take them to a ocean grave far from home.

Ages ago in Portsmouth, England, they had boarded the *Plymouth Rock*, a two hundred and fifty ton fore-and-aft rigged wooden schooner, to transport them to a new life in the infant colony of Queensland. Soon after leaving their homeland, the voyage became their worst nightmare. Overloaded with goods and equipment for the colony and overcrowded with passengers, the ship sat low in the water and responded sluggishly to the helm, rolling dangerously even when seas were stable.

Most of the passengers were seasick. Without fresh food and proper exercise, the scheduled six-month voyage became an ongoing hell. Some died. Wrapped in weighted canvas, they were

emptied overboard, as the captain read a quick passage from a salt-stained Bible.

On the occasions when the weather was favourable, the passengers were allowed on deck, a few at a time. For a brief period they would smell the tangy salt scent of the sea and feel the deck vibrating under them as the ship bounded along, ahead of a piping breeze. It was a fleeting pleasure, forgotten in the terror of the storms.

Now, as the passengers heard the hatch covers being removed, there was a rush to leave the stinking hold. People fought to be the first to breathe the fresh air.

‘Let them go, girlie, there’s time enough,’ Cornelius Walkinton said to the dark-haired, rosy-cheeked young girl beside him. Reassured by the calm voice, she moved back from the crush of bodies.

Con Walkinton was in his early twenties, stocky and square-shouldered, with unruly fair hair and blue eyes that women found attractive, though shyness made it difficult for him to talk to the opposite sex. He had left his farm in Cornwall for the gold that people said waited in Australian streets to be picked up. When he first laid eyes on Jane Winders on the ship, he decided he’d found his gold. Captivated by her looks, Con stayed at a distance, wanting to approach her but not knowing how to go about it.

One night, Jane was the last of the passengers to leave the deck after being let out for a brief break from the confines of the hold. Con had seen her standing in the stern and had delayed his return below in the hope he’d be able to speak to her. Now he stood in the dark watching her and trying to think of something to say.

Jane wasn’t expecting the hand that took hold of her arm. Startled, she turned and looked into the leering, whiskered face of a sailor. He was naked to the waist, a knife-slash scar ran from an ear to his stubbled chin; blackened, broken teeth showed in a mouth that slobbered as it tried to press against hers.

Jane struggled, but the sailor held her tightly, so close that she could smell the rum on his foul breath. Finally, she wrenched herself free and tried to run, but the man blocked her path. ‘What’s wrong, dearie?’ he growled. ‘Ye must be hungry fer a real man after all this time at sea.’

The sailor lurched forward, wrapped his tattooed arms around her and pulled her into him. She gagged at the smell of sweat and

fought to escape. He held her with one muscled arm, the other fumbled with the front flap of his tar-spattered canvas trousers.

Suddenly, the sailor was torn off her and a punch sent him stumbling backwards. He was quickly back, trying to pull a knife from a sheath at his side. Another punch knocked him to the deck. He scrambled to his feet and ran into the darkness, his bare feet slapping on the deck in his hurry to get away.

'Are you all right, lass?' Jane's rescuer helped her up, and she saw it was the same passenger who had been at her side after the storm. She nodded, shaking with fright.

'Come on,' the man said softly. 'I'll help you back down below.' Holding her arm, he led her to the steps of the women's quarters.

She recovered enough composure to murmur her thanks before she shakily climbed down. The man seemed embarrassed and raised his soft tweed cap as she disappeared into the hold.

The next day, he succeeded in finding her. 'I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself last night or that other time after the storm,' he said shyly. 'I'm Cornelius Walkinton. Con.'

'I'm pleased to meet you, Mr Walkinton,' Jane said, holding out her hand.

Con held her hand as long as he could before self-consciously letting it go. 'I hope you don't think I'm too forward, Miss Winders,' he said.

'So you know my name?'

He smiled a boyish grin. 'I've watched you ever since I joined the ship. You seemed such a little thing, so alone and helpless among the other passengers.'

'I'm grateful to you, Mr Walkinton. I didn't know how helpless I was until you came along last night.'

Con twisted his cloth cap in nervous circles and looked away. 'I wonder, Miss Winders, if I might pay my respects to you during the rest of the voyage? It's going to be months before we get to Brisbane.'

Jane smiled. 'You'll have to see Mrs O'Donnell about that, Mr Walkinton.'

Maud O'Donnell, middle-aged and still stoutly handsome, was migrating from Ireland after losing her husband and teenage daughter to the influenza epidemic. Still missing her daughter, she had made herself the self-appointed chaperon to the nineteen-

year-old Jane. 'I'll look after you,' she told Jane when they first met on the ship after leaving Plymouth. 'A lovely little thing like you is going to have trouble keeping all these men at bay.'

Jane assured her she could look after herself, but was thankful to have the company of the worldly woman. From then on, Maude took her protective role to heart and, if she didn't approve of anyone who paid attention to Jane, she discouraged them with an Irish forthrightness that ensured they didn't return.

When the cap-twiddling Con sought Maude's permission to call on Jane, she saw him as an honest country boy who posed no threat. But she was still cautious. 'Ye'll be payin' your respects where I can keep an eye on you, young man.'

After that, the couple were often together but seldom alone; Maude was always hovering around.

With Maude listening to make sure their conversation was acceptable, they told each other of their reasons for going to the faraway young colony. Jane was seeking a warmer climate on medical advice. Both her parents had died in London in the flu epidemic, and she had been left with weakened lungs and little money. She intended to rely on her needlework skills that she had acquired in her parents' drapery business to provide her with a living in the new world. Con told her of the gold nuggets, as big as a man's fist, just waiting to be picked up.

A chance for them to be alone came when a concert was held in the darkened ship's hold. There they were able to hold hands, while everyone sang lustily to a concertina pumped by a passenger with more enthusiasm than musical appreciation.

When the wild gales struck and the hatches were battened-down, Con was always at Jane's side, trying to take her mind off the terror around them.

It was a reprieve when the captain shouted through his brass megaphone: 'You people won't be sorry to know the worst of your voyage is over. We will be out of the monsoon zone soon, and weather conditions will improve. God willing, you have seen the last of being battened down.'

Even those too weak from seasickness to stand cheered. The concertina was brought out, and the singing was happier than it had been for five months.

With Australian shores getting closer, the passengers were

allowed more time on deck, where they were able to enjoy balmy nights, watching the dolphins play in the foamy iridescent water.

On one of these nights, Con asked Jane to marry him. 'I don't have any money, but I'll work hard. Even if there's no gold in the streets, I'm a good farmer, I'll be well able to look after a wife.' It came out in a rush, and Con looked away, as if he didn't want to see her rejection.

Jane, surprised at the sudden proposal from this shy man she had grown to care for so much, was silent for a moment.

'I'll understand, lass, if you don't want me,' he said. 'We haven't known each other for long. I'll wait if you want me to. I'll find you wherever you are in Australia.'

Jane gave him a gentle shake. 'Of course I'll marry you. I'll be proud to be your wife.'

Con tore off his cap, threw it in the air and let out a whoop of joy. He leant forward suddenly and gave Jane a bruising kiss on the lips. It was the first time he'd found the courage to kiss her.

The captain conducted the wedding ceremony on deck, as the *Plymouth Rock* made its way slowly up the Brisbane River. The tropical sun blazed, and Jane sweltered in a high-necked thick frock that was more suited to English conditions. Con was no cooler in his heavy tweed suit. But both were too happy to feel physical discomfort.

Maude O'Donnell stood beside Jane, smiling broadly as if she had engineered the joyful occasion. The other passengers gathered around as the captain read from the same salt-stained Bible he had used for the sea-burials of those who would never see their new land.

Other witnesses to the ceremony were long-beaked white birds, foraging for small black crabs among the twisted mangrove roots.

'I pronounce you man and wife,' said the captain, snapping the Bible shut in his haste to be finished, so he could pay full attention to docking at the Brisbane wharf.

Sails were dropped, and muscled men on the oars of berthing craft nudged the *Plymouth Rock* into the wharf.

When the ship was tied up and the gangplank slammed into position, the passengers filed off. Among them Jane and Con,

Over My Dead Body

carrying their few pieces of luggage, walked on air – still caught up in the euphoria of all that had happened to them in the past hour.

They were together now, a team to take on the unknown new world.