

The Steamer

BY PAUL MASON

They sat on the shoreline, surrounded by bleached driftwood, and watched the steamer drift across the lake. Half the town was there, grateful for the break in monotony. Some of the men rested on their haunches further along the beach; others lingered by the shed to talk.

Robert and his father kept to themselves.

One of the crew clanged the steamer's bell, and Robert watched as the paddle wheel slowed and the boat nosed against the wharf. Men bustled about, shouting orders and lassoing ropes around the wooden bollards, and now the travellers,

who'd been sitting outside under the awnings, pushed their way forward, bags in hand.

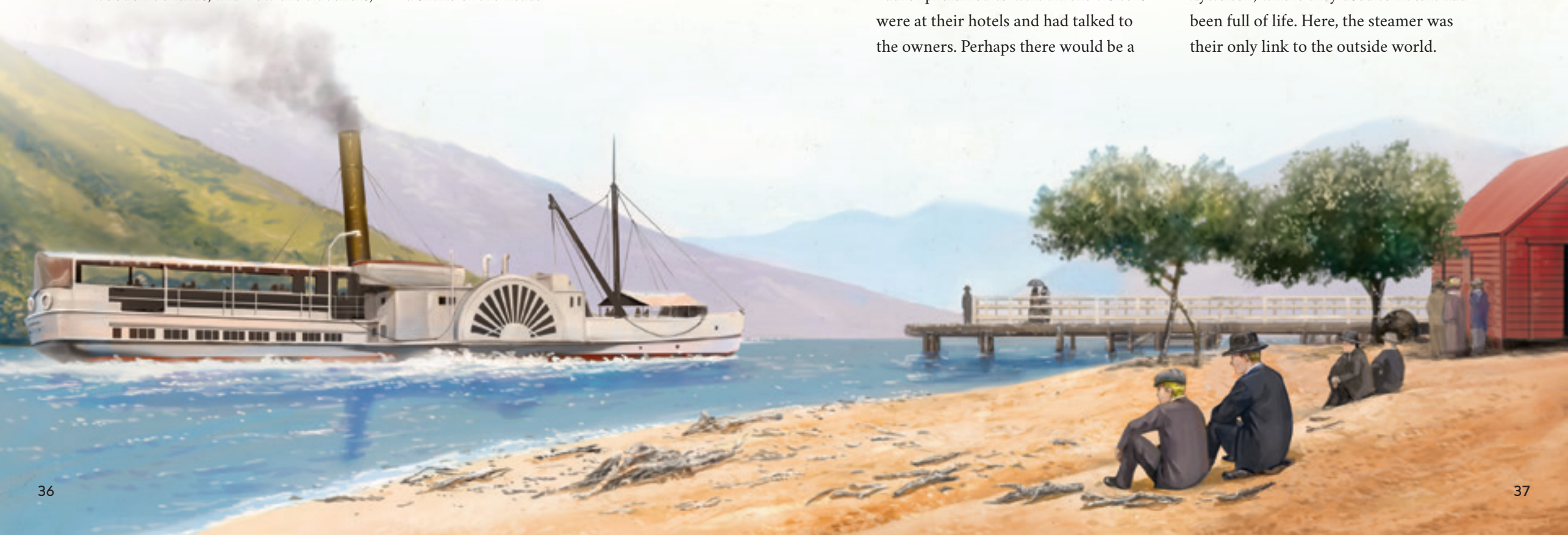
Robert and his father had taken to coming down to the wharf each week to watch the visitors get off the boat. Father would scan the arrivals as they stepped ashore. Lately, it seemed to Robert that he was searching for someone, his gaze more intent than curious. When the steamer was due, his face would darken, but when Robert asked what was wrong, he got a shake of the head.

Once the crew were unloading the bales and wooden crates and mail, Father appeared satisfied. He pushed himself up, dusting the sand from his trousers with his hat, and smiled. "Let's see if someone needs a guide."

As they headed towards town, Robert glanced back at the steamer. A last passenger was stepping off – a middle-aged man with a clipped beard – but Robert didn't say anything. It wasn't their way to approach tourists at the wharf. The other guides did, but Father preferred to wait till the visitors were at their hotels and had talked to the owners. Perhaps there would be a

painter looking for a view, a husband and wife on a walking holiday, young men keen for the challenge of a local peak. Father knew the trails well enough.

Robert's mother sometimes heard of guiding work when she picked up washing from the Earnslaw Hotel. Father didn't like that she was taking in laundry. Robert often wondered why they had moved here. The settlement was nothing more than a few weatherboard buildings hemmed in by mountains at the far end of the lake. He remembered Lyttelton, where they used to live. It had been full of life. Here, the steamer was their only link to the outside world.





Robert and his father passed by the Earnslaw Hotel, not bothering to stop. Harry Birley, the owner, was a well-known guide. Everyone knew he'd been the first to reach the top of Mt Earnslaw, leaving a bent shilling in a bottle at the summit as proof. They went instead to the Alpine Club and the Glenorchy Hotel, with no luck. Lastly, they called in at the Austin Lodge.

"Good day, Iris," said Father, lifting his hat to Mrs Austin, who was working behind the front desk.

"Hello, Charles. I thought you might be dropping by. I've some newly-weds just arrived. They're resting right now, but I've told them about you."

"That's very welcome news and much appreciated, Iris."

Mrs Austin sighed. "But that's your lot, I'm afraid. The other gentleman said he was going straight back once his business was concluded."

Father frowned. "Oh, yes?"

"All the way from Lyttelton – and not planning on staying! He's in the saloon waiting for his lunch. You can talk to him yourself if you like. Change his mind, perhaps?"

They peered around the counter into the saloon, and Robert saw the man with the beard from before. He sat at a table, heavy hands resting on the top.

"And you're behaving yourself, young Robert?" Mrs Austin asked, reaching for the glass jar underneath the counter. She unscrewed the lid and handed him a piece of candied ginger.

"Thanks, Iris, but I won't disturb him," said Father, heading for the door.

Robert struggled to keep up on the way home. Father marched ahead. He seemed to have forgotten he wasn't alone. "Don't you want to ask at the Lake House?" Robert called.

"Maybe later," said Father.

"They might need someone."

"Later."

Their cottage was down a dusty side street not far from the post office. Mother was out in their small backyard, pegging sheets. They flapped on clothes line that ran the entire length of the section, witness to a morning's scrubbing.

"How'd you get on?" Mother asked, her face flushed but smiling. Robert loved that she could be elbow deep in other people's laundry and still manage to be cheerful.

Robert watched as Father took his mother's face in his hands and kissed her on the forehead, letting his lips linger for a moment. "There's a couple at Mrs Austin's place. They might be after a day walk."

"I'm soaking wet," she said, pushing him away. "Any luck at the Lake House?"

"We didn't go," said Robert.

"Why ever not?"

Father let Mother's question hang. "I was thinking ... why don't we go off together for a change? Pack our bedrolls. We could go to the falls – maybe even up the saddle?"

"Us?" Mother laughed.

"Why should I always be taking other people?"

"Because they pay," said Mother.

"But it's such a lovely day."

"We have bills!"

"There was a man from Lyttelton – we didn't ask him," said Robert.

His father frowned at him. "He wasn't a walker. Let's just go for the afternoon then. We could leave now. I'll go round to the Lake House first thing tomorrow."

Mother sighed and pegged another sheet. "You're talking foolishness," she said with a finality that made Father's face fall. "Come inside and have a bite to eat."



The three ate their bread and dripping mostly in silence. Mother tried to chat, but Father wasn't really there. After lunch, she sent Robert to fetch a bar of soap. "Tell Henry I'll settle the account next week," she said.

When he reached the main street, Robert saw the man with the beard coming out of the post office. Mr Smith the postmaster followed close behind and pointed up the street. A few minutes later, after Robert had bought the soap, the man was gone.

It didn't take long to find out where. He was in the back garden talking to Father. Mother stood with them. She wasn't smiling now.

"You never said about a summons, Charles," Robert heard her say. "You told me you'd paid the debt. The slate was clean."

"Robert, you're back," said Father loudly, driving a smile onto his face.

The man nodded at Robert. Dark eyes and dark hat. He looked nice enough, but something was wrong, and Robert quickly looked away. "I got your soap, Ma," he said quietly.

"Thanks, love. Take it inside."

But Robert wasn't going anywhere. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." His mother had been quick to speak, but Robert saw her eyes well up.

"Turns out I have to take a trip," said Father. "Just for a short while. Back to Lyttelton – for work," he added.

The man looked down at the grass and said nothing.

"Lyttelton?" Robert was puzzled. "For how long?"

"Until I can sort things out," said Father. "Hopefully not long."

The man pulled out a gold pocket watch on a chain, then turned to Father. "We ought to think about going. You might want to pack your things." Father nodded and went inside, and the man stood by the steps, his wide shoulders blocking the doorway.

They walked together to the wharf. Mother kept her eyes down the whole way and ignored Robert's questions.



What was a summons? And who was the man?

When they got to the wharf, his parents hugged. "I'll work something out," Father whispered.

"Look after your mother while I'm away," he said to Robert. A firm handshake. Robert felt the tears coming, but he stopped himself from crying.

Father and the man boarded the steamer with the few others who were

leaving that afternoon. Robert hoped they would sit outside so he could wave, but they didn't. Later, as the boat headed up the lake – paddle wheel churning, coal smoke drifting from the funnel – Robert sat by himself on the beach. He would come back next week and wait for the steamer. Perhaps Father would be at the stern with the others, bag in hand, ready to be the first one ashore.

illustrations by Dede Putra

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by Paul Mason

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