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ICE


ALLEN & UNWIN

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FOR TWELVE DAYS THE CITY had been waiting impatiently for its arrival. Some men, including many in the government, had dismissed the first reports as baseless rumours, until cables from Tasmania and telegrams from several lighthouses along the eastern coast confirmed the truth. But none of the newspaper stories, which grew more excited by the day, prepared the people of Sydney for what they were about to see.

Hundreds of thousands of spectators stood on the Heads, craning their necks for the first sign of it, and lined the ridges and beaches of both sides of the harbour. Adolescent boys and young men clung to tree branches. Two military bands and three church brass bands fought for prime position on the rocky outcrop of Mrs Macquarie's Chair. The piers, wharves, punts and jetties of Semi-Circular Quay were clogged with men and women in their Sunday best, publicans, whores, photographers in fig trees and on roofs, yapping dogs, country folk, Aborigines, Chinamen, foreign dignitaries and parents telling their eager children that they would and should always remember this day. Hundreds of horse

buses overburdened with passengers, hansom cabs, barouches, jiggling broughams, dogcarts and landaus driven by glowing flunkies in full livery, dotted the slopes that led down to the quay where, throughout the morning, bunches of chained prisoners were escorted down side streets and hurried out of sight behind the storehouses. Soldiers and policemen formed a human barricade across the eastern side of the quay, where, for the first time that the city could recall, there were no ships at anchor. Lined up outside the storehouses were scores of carts and countless labourers stripped for work, sweating in the sultry summer morning. Out on the harbour yachts, fishing boats and hastily constructed rafts, draped with streamers and flowers, bobbed gently in the calm emerald waters, waiting expectantly for the first glimpse of the unprecedented, marvellous *thing*.

Those people on the Heads, the name given to the north and south cliffs that were separated by only half a mile, and which provided a narrow, funnel-like entrance from the Pacific Ocean, were the first to see it. Perhaps *see* is the wrong word, because it shone so brightly that its shape seemed to burn into the retinas of the spectators, and everyone squinted or raised their hands to shade their eyes, as if they were staring directly at the noonday sun itself.

As it passed between the Heads, its width was such that, for a few minutes, onlookers wondered if it could in fact squeeze through. Once it had cautiously entered the harbour, those in the yachts and boats were momentarily blinded too. The spectacle was so dazzling and beautiful that, it was said, people were rendered dumbstruck. The bands that moments before had been jostling for space forgot to start playing.

Few, if any, of the spectators had ever seen an iceberg before. Of course they had seen drawings and photographs but, instead of a jagged, rugged surface, the summer sun had melted this one smooth, so that it resembled, reported some journalists, a white pyramid or a massive, lustrous, uncut diamond. The closer it came, the more the sun, now overhead, transformed it into an incandescent block of corrosive light. What the Sydneysiders saw was an iceberg that had, during its journey north from the Antarctic waters, been reduced by a third, but it still looked monumental and was easily bigger than Australia's tallest building. The ship towing it into the harbour, compared to its payload, seemed as tiny as a child's toy.

As it made its stately five-mile trip up the harbour, the crowds began to cheer. The boats and yachts swirled around the luminous tower of ice like insects hovering around a lantern. The bands played loudly, but not the same tune, so that the iceberg's languid journey was accompanied by a cacophony of jaunty popular music-hall songs and fervent religious hymns. The last to see the iceberg were those waiting at Sydney Cove. As the radiant freight appeared from behind the rocky escarpment of Mrs Macquarie's Chair, the sun shone directly onto the ice, creating a glare so brilliant, so blinding, that the awaiting spectators automatically, and en masse, took a few steps back—as if, wrote one overwrought reporter from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, they had *seen the effulgent light of Heaven*. The children, none of whom had ever seen ice, pointed and cried out in wonder.

It took some time to manoeuvre the ship and its valuable freight into a position flush alongside the quay which had, by order

of the colonial government, been vacated by some sixteen ships the day before. As the iceberg was edged closer, the gigantic chains connecting it to the ship clanked and groaned until, with a thud, the mountain of ice hit the wharf, causing it to shake violently with the intensity of an earthquake, panicking some workers. Finally, after one final thump against the quay, as if in an agony of relief at having reached its destination, the iceberg stood still.

Several young boys, dressed only in shorts, ran from their hiding place behind a warehouse, and dived into the water, where they attempted to climb the iceberg. They found it impossible, however, to get a footing on its slippery surface, and slid helplessly back down into the sea. The milling crowd pushed forward, creating such a crush that dozens of women fainted. The soldiers and policemen linked arms to hold the gawkers back. Even close up the iceberg was beautiful, its translucent sheen giving it the appearance of moist white marble.

The ship's gangplank was lowered, and a quartet of flushed investors, wearing dark suits and top hats, walked unsteadily up onto the deck. They were greeted by two men in rough clothes, one of whom was tall and well built, with ginger hair that, in the reflected lustre of the shining ice, seemed to one effusive reporter to *resemble momentarily a halo*. His partner, even taller, was solid and bearded. The businessmen shook the hands of the two men and applauded the scruffy, tired crew and captain, who were assembled on the poop deck. Then the Lord Mayor (*The Very Australian Etiquette of culture following in the vulgar path of economics*, as the *Morning Sun* remarked sarcastically) climbed the gangplank, shook the two men by the hand, and turned to the

teeming throng. He shouted something but no one could hear him. Believing it to be a call to honour the two brave men, the crowd erupted in thunderous cheers, stopping only when one of the four merchants produced a revolver and fired it into the air. It was a signal for the workmen to begin. Driving carts filled with ropes, chains, saws, axes, spikes and sledgehammers, the workmen made their way through the crowds of dignitaries who stepped aside, according the workers respect they hadn't hitherto experienced from the rich and powerful. At the same time, wharf labourers slid open the storehouse doors, revealing enormous mounds of fresh sawdust. The prison guards, carrying truncheons, escorted batches of lethargic prisoners onto the dock to help the workmen. The investors remained on board the ship to oversee the preparations, while the Lord Mayor, whose skinny frame seemed so gaunt within the voluminous robes that he seemed more a scarecrow than a human being, led the two men off the ship.

The trio made their way through the exultant swarm. Up close both men looked weary and drained. Their red eyes were still squinting, as if they had been permanently blinded by their cargo. Women reached out to touch them and men grabbed their limp hands and shook them excitedly, causing the pair to grimace and bite their dry, peeling lips in pain. The crowd continued shouting congratulations while photographers yelled for them to look towards their cameras. The bearded man smiled shyly but appeared to enjoy the clamour and the attention. His partner, however, his pale face framed with ginger stubble, seemed curiously aloof, as if the cheering and yelling and the forcible shaking of his hand, the slaps on the back and pulling at his clothes, were happening to someone else.

As the Lord Mayor motioned for them to step into the open carriage, both men paused at the same time, gazed back at the iceberg and then at each other. It was at that moment, the newspapers would report, that Malcolm smiled for the first time and Andrew grinned in reply. Sitting down next to one another they exchanged a conspiratorial wink of triumph. The carriage inched itself through the crush. Both men, the bottom half of their bodies unseen by the throng, gently massaged their frost-bitten hands that were stinging harshly from the handshakes. People threw flowers, torn newspapers and even sweets at them and then, at one point, Andrew, upon hearing his name shouted in a falsetto chorus, suddenly swivelled around and blew a kiss to five young women in an open carriage waving to him.

Before the Lord Mayor's carriage was halfway up George Street—Sydney's main thoroughfare—the workmen and prisoners, supervised from the stern by the four investors, were crawling over the iceberg. A team of surveyors had methodically mapped out the first areas to be cut and pairs of men were carving out blocks of ice with saws whose teeth were the size of sharks'. A large group of spectators, badly affected by the heat, crowded into a section of the quay that lay in the iceberg's shadow and, closing their eyes with pleasure, lifted their faces to feel the faint cooling breeze that blew across the ice.

Merchant seamen whose own ships had been shifted to the western side of the quay ran their practised eyes over the ship and were shocked by its condition. The sails were threadbare, some torn, the funnel cracked and battered. The main upper topsail was parchment thin, as were the front jibs. The rigging was frayed and

the wood around the forecastle and bridge had been warped by the Antarctic cold. The name of the ship was almost indecipherable and the guess was that it was called *The Goathland*. How on earth, wondered the seamen, did this virtual hulk sail halfway across the world, venture into the freezing Southern Ocean and tow a gargantuan lump of ice all the way to Sydney? What they did know was that the iceberg, now covered with men like ants crawling over a mountain of sugar, was worth a fortune.

Once the carriage had arrived at the Town Hall, the three men squeezed their way through the noisy crowd to a dais set up in the portico. The Lord Mayor positioned himself between the two bleary-eyed men and held up his hands for silence. About five thousand people had gathered on the marble steps and were spilling out onto George Street in the blazing sun, some seeking relief under gaily coloured umbrellas. Most of the men wore bowlers or top hats and the women were resplendent in their wide-brimmed hats festooned with parrot feathers. The Lord Mayor's voice squeaked like a small animal caught in a trap and could barely be heard a few yards away.

Malcolm began to take an interest in the proceedings. Since his arrival he had felt like a piece of driftwood at the mercy of a turbulent tide, but now his senses began to accustom themselves to what was happening, as if the days of sleep deprivation had never occurred. He and Andrew had expected to be greeted only by the merchants who had invested in their scheme, not this frenzy. As he glanced at the new Grecian columns of the portico, the splendid facades of sandstone buildings across the street, and the distant church spires, Malcolm was surprised at the

wealth and architectural confidence of the colony, one which had been in existence for just under a century. He had imagined Sydney as something closer to a sleepy subtropical port, rather than a booming city built around the most magnificent harbour he had ever seen.

His thoughts were interrupted by the Lord Mayor, whose squeak was turning into a hoarse moan from the effort of projecting to so many. *Ice*, he was saying . . . *Australia has everything but ice. We have sheep, wheat and gold but we do not have ice, and these two men, these two adventurers, brave men from the Mother Country, have brought us a mother lode of ice at the height of summer. We have had ships bring Boston ice from the United States to quench our thirst, but only the wealthy could afford what little there was. Now, it is within the reach of all. This iceberg means democracy. This iceberg means civilisation. Now Australia has everything! We thank them!* The Lord Mayor pushed Andrew forward. After taking a deep breath, he began his speech in the familiar deep baritone that seemed to bounce off the hats in front and, like a stone skipping across a pond, skimmed across the rows of spectators to the stragglers at the rear, who stopped shuffling in irritation, grateful to hear at last what was being said. He praised the brave crew and the enthusiastic people of Sydney and, finally, thanked his friend and business partner who had prodded and cajoled him into *the great unknown land of ice*. He then made room for Malcolm. Gazing at the crowd, Malcolm glimpsed a cluster of journalists at the side furiously taking notes and several artists staring intently at him while their obedient hands sketched his likeness. Beyond them, out in the street, were countless craning, expectant faces, all glowing with perspiration. (He was suddenly struck by a memory from childhood,

of being jostled in such a monstrous crowd, only now he was the centre of attention and not that distant, diminutive Queen Victoria on a hot, hazy Glasgow day.) Then, as he was about to speak, he saw a woman in her early twenties lift her head up out of the pitch-black shadow of her hat, as if emerging from a dark sea. Her skin was preternaturally white, her hair blonde. He caught his breath as if he had seen a ghost. She smiled. All her teeth were gold and suddenly her mouth, reflecting the sun, was ablaze with brilliant light. He looked away, feeling an unexplained revulsion at the sight of such beauty sullied by primitive greed, and was thankful to hear himself speaking loudly and without contemplation. He was not to remember anything of his speech except for the vague recollection that he thanked the appropriate people and, of course, Andrew, whom he loved like no other man (and who, the crowd did not know, had saved him twice: the first time from utmost despair nearly a year before and then, just a few weeks before in the Antarctic, when that strong right hand of his had grabbed the sleeve of Malcolm's jacket, pulling him back as he slid, slowly and inexorably, down the sloping top of the iceberg towards its edge, from where he would have dropped several hundred feet into the oblivion of the freezing sea).

The Lord Mayor wanted the two men to stay and meet more dignitaries but both were keen to return to the ship and watch the dismantling of the iceberg. Returning to the quay they passed horse-drawn carts, laden with huge chunks of ice embedded in sawdust, labouring up the hill into the city. The bands had dispersed, as had some of the crowd, but an astonishing number of people had stayed. There were thousands, most of them huddled in tight pockets in the few areas of shade or stoically sheltering under

umbrellas, watching the workmen hack and saw into the ice. Occasionally a worker would slide down a slippery slope of the iceberg into the sea, much to the delight of the children and laughter of fellow workmen. A long line of carts and wagons were backed up past the Botanic Gardens and around into Mrs Macquarie's Chair. Those drivers who weren't lying under their vehicles to avoid the sun squabbled with other drivers about the order of use of the few water taps to relieve the thirst of their forlorn horses, who had long given up swishing their tails and stood resigned to the heat, their eyes a squirming black porridge of flies.

As the sun arched towards the distant Blue Mountains, the western side of the iceberg, coated in a translucent film of moisture, shone onto the houses and storerooms on the opposite side of the quay, causing their windows to glow like thousands of blank white eyes. It seemed to Malcolm that the whole of the port and the seedy district of The Rocks was mesmerised by the iceberg. A peculiar feeling crept up on him. He felt sorry for the diminishing iceberg, as if it were a rare animal stoically allowing itself to be skinned and chopped to pieces. On the way from the Antarctic it had sometimes tugged against its chains and cables as if trying to break free, and at other times rushed forward as if determined to ram the ship's stern. Every day he could see the strain of its forced journey as it began to shrink, its moist sheen evidence of the perspiration of effort. Staring at the iceberg he realised it had been in a permanent state of transformation on its trek north. Sculpted by the sea, wind and sun during its captive journey, it had lost its jagged edges, its juvenile coarseness, and had become something classical and majestic. Now it was becoming ugly and paltry.

Standing on the poop deck of the *Goathland* as it rocked gently in the swell created by a ferry filled with passengers gawking at the remains of the iceberg, Malcolm was amazed at the risk he and Andrew had taken—all because this colonial outpost had an insatiable craving for ice. As he watched a thirsty workman, hanging onto the side of the iceberg from a rope tied around his waist, leaned forward to lick greedily at the ice. Malcolm smiled. It reminded him of something he had neglected to do, and that was to taste it. *Malcolm?* He turned and saw his friend in a brand-new suit, his beard clipped and neat. *We're being picked up in half an hour.* Malcolm had forgotten their engagement and didn't really feel like going; he wanted to witness every single moment of the iceberg's demolition. But he had promised Andrew he would go, and he owed his friend much.

