

## **TEMPTING FATE**

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## Chapter 1 - Time for change

The crowd gasped as Henry Giles shifted balance and wobbled on the rope beneath his feet while sweat trickled down his forehead and into his eyes. All he could do was blink furiously as his hands were otherwise occupied holding the balance pole. Wearing a suit of armour, even if a lightweight copy of the original, meant performing was much more difficult. Not only because of the heat under the Sydney summer sun, but the suit's weight affected his balance as it could not be corrected quite as quickly as when he did his other stunts dressed in more normal attire.

Inhaling, deeply he took the final dozens steps before reaching the platform where he thrust his balance pole into the cradle mounted on the tower support. Quickly slipping the pole harness from behind his neck, he pulled the stifling metal helmet from his head and cooler air swirled around his sweat-drenched face and neck, providing instant relief. Holding the helmet aloft in one hand he smiled and acknowledged the crowd as they applauded his tightrope-walking feat.

It was the last show for the day and dropped the helmet down to Tom Jackson, his business partner and friend, before he wearily descending the 40-foot ladder and with a final flourishing wave to the crowd headed towards his changing tent.

'It was a good show,' said Tom, a tall powerfully built man with dark curly hair compared to Henry's shorter, more slightly built frame and tight blonde curls. 'I did get a bit worried toward the end however, that was a big wobble you had.'

'This damned armour is hard to perform in. We might need to modify the visor so I get more air,' sighed Henry as they entered the tent and he headed straight to the wooden cask where he filled a tin cup with water.

'I know you keep saying that,' replied Tom. 'But if you want to keep the claim to being 'The Australian Blondin' then you need to keep everything the same as the Frenchman used during his Australian tour. We have discussed this before.'

Tom knows this touches a nerve with Henry, whose stubborn pride would not allow him to do anything in a second-rate way. Tom was surprised, however, that the act had not been enhanced in some way before now. Henry was a man driven by ego and success and merely imitating someone else went against his nature.

Henry unfastened the leather buckles and removed the armour before tossing it into the corner and slumping into a canvas chair to ponder the best way forward. For several months he had been running his tightrope show in Sydney's Domain Park, faithfully imitating the feats of the famous French tightrope walker, Charles Blondin. His ability to recreate all of the master's feats, including sitting on a chair balancing just on the chair's back legs, cooking eggs and bacon on a special charcoal brazier that balanced on its own frame on the rope, and walking with a sack on his head were so good that many had believed that Henry was in fact the real Blondin.

'I am tiring of this show Tom. I yearn for something more challenging, and besides audience numbers are beginning to dwindle.'

'We could catch a ship to Melbourne,' suggested Tom as he lowered himself the only other chair. 'There has been no-one there doing the calibre of work that you do. Most of them are just circus performers and it could be a financial boon for us and with a few months before the weather gets too cold down there we could have a decent season. Besides the city engineer has been making indications that our time here might be drawing to a close. I think he dislikes the hessian sight screens.'

Henry pondered for moment. 'Curse him, I don't want any of those non-paying 'dead heads' seeing the performance, but it might be for the best, there are too many others doing rope walking now. Tell him we will be here till the end of the month and we will pack up, that will give me sufficient reason to develop something new.'

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By the end of February 1877, Henry knew he had made the right decision to wind up the show. The summer heat, falling attendance numbers and the crowd's reluctance to put their hands in their pockets for the items sold at the refreshment stands inside the enclosed area showed that the public had had their fill and a new more daring show was needed.

In addition to low attendance numbers, a testy interaction with his greatest local rival in the world of tightrope walking confirmed Henry's conviction that he needed to something better, and fast.

It started with a knock on the door of Henry's room at his lodgings and opening the door he saw to his surprise, his greatest competitor and self-promoter, James Elson, standing there with a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

'Hallo James, what brings you to my door?' asked Henry.

'I just thought I would deliver the news of my latest feat in person, rather than have you read about it in the newspapers.'

'Latest feat? What do you mean?'

'Oh, I did not think you would have heard. This morning I walked a rope between two buildings, 60 feet high and a distance of 210 feet,' boasted Elson as he stood tall and looked down his nose at Henry. 'So I suppose this makes me the leading rope walker in the country!'

'This morning you say?' echoed Henry as he briefly examined his shoes to hide the shock on his face. Raising his head he looked directly at Elson. 'Well this does come as a surprise, I had heard nothing of it.'

'No doubt you were too busy with that little circus act in the Domain,' retorted Elson. 'I just thought you would like the news delivered personally, but now I must go, I have to speak to more of the press!'

Henry slammed the door on Elson's departing figure.

'Curse the man!' he shouted at no one. 'I am the Australian Blondin, how dare he...'

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The team was coiling the tightrope and placing it into a waterproof canvas sack, rolling up the hessian screens, dismantling the towers and loading it all onto horse-drawn drays, when Henry stormed up to Tom who was supervising the work.

'Tom,' he called as he approached. 'I have just had a visit from that pompous Elson who tells me he has just this morning, performed a walk between two buildings at a distance of 210 feet. How could that upstart perform such a feat right under our noses?'

'I heard the same just a few minutes ago,' replied Tom guardedly. He knows his friend's ego will be severely bruised by Elson's actions and that he will need delicate handling. 'It's just a setback, you know he's no real challenge.'

'No challenge!' exploded Henry. 'The upstart will be in all the papers tomorrow claiming to be a leading tightrope walker. Just because he has done one walk of any note!'

Tom saw Henry's face had turned quite florid as a result of his angst and outburst.

'You will think of something better,' he said in a calming tone. 'Why don't you take a walk while you think on it. I'll finish up here and see you back at the lodgings later and we can discuss our options.'

Henry looked at him and sighed. 'Yes you are right, I am sure I will think of something,' he said and turned and set off towards the bustling Macquarie Street. It was a place where he needed to keep his wits. The road itself, as with most others in this part of the city, was crowded with all manner of horse drawn vehicles; large four wheeled carts piled high with goods for delivery to the many businesses, the city omnibus with its four horses, hansom cabs and buckboards. Added to this are crowds of people; so many in fact that to make progress down the streets, many choose to risk their life sharing the road with the horse drawn vehicles, jumping out of the way as required, careful not to jump into the path of another coming up from behind. Every day the papers reported injuries and death from accidents on the roads.

He headed down the hill towards the harbour and Circular Quay. This part of the city fascinated him and today was no different, with the water busy with ferries and other watercraft departing and arriving. Wandering around the curved sandstone wall on the foreshore that gave the quay its name he arrived at the eastern wharf where several ships were tied alongside. The place was a hive of activity as stores were unloaded from the ship's cargo holds. He watched nets holding the cargo being lifted from the holds and swung out on booms and gently deposited on the wharf. The cargo was set upon by teams of workers who soon loaded it onto waiting drays.

Gazing up at the forest of masts he watched a sailor make his way along one of the spars, loosening the sails to allow them to dry while the ship was at anchor. He saw that while the sailor gripped the lashings on the spar, half leaning over it for support, his feet shuffled sideways along a rope that ran under the spar for its entire length. Watching the sailor as he worked, he looked from one ship to the other and back again; Henry had an epiphany. Almost speechless with excitement he hurried back up Macquarie Street dodging traffic and people and entered the Domain just in time to find Tom who was just leaving.

'Tom, I have an idea!' panted Henry, blustering with excitement. His face was drenched with sweat and his curly blonde hair glistened and he even had sweat on the ends of his waxed mustache. 'It is something that I am sure Blondin himself would approve and put that Elson back in his place.'

Tom looked at him with a look of expectation mixed with carefully hidden amusement. He doubted Henry had exposed himself to this much exertion for a long while. 'Go on.'

'I was down at the harbour and was looking at the ships tied up at the wharf. I watched a sailor moving about high up, shuffling his feet along ropes slung under the spars. That's when I had my idea!

'Those ship's masts are twice the height above the water than we can achieve with towers on land or in fact probably any building in Sydney. What if I could convince two captains to anchor their ships a distance apart and allow us to stretch a rope between the tops of the masts of each ship!' Henry exclaimed.

Tom rubbed his chin deep in thought, as he looked towards the harbour at the tops of some ships masts just visible in the distance. 'I could work I suppose,' he said slowly. 'I think stopping the ships moving and getting the tension right will be the hard part, but yes, it would be worth conducting some investigations.'

Chest swelling with anticipation and despite being a good six inches shorter, Henry reached up and slapped Tom on the back. 'Righto! You get this lot stored away and I will go and visit the Port Office to see when a couple of ships will be tied up long enough to give us time to set up and get a few days of shows in before they have to sail!'

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A week later and dressed to impress in fine breeches, a linen shirt with a stiff high collar and light coloured tie, they strode along the wharf. Tom, despite his longer legs, had to walk fast to keep up with his slightly built friend. Henry grasped a sheet of paper provided to him by the clerk of the Ports Office, with the names of the two newly arrived ships and their captains.

Reaching the bow of the first he read the name of the ship, *Jane Woodburn*, the first name on his list. Reaching a gangway, he consulted his paper again before hailing a person on deck who appeared in charge.

'I wish to enquire if Captain Saunders is available,' called Henry.

The man turned and ran his eye over Henry and without the slightest flicker of emotion said in a thick English West Country dialect, 'Who might be doing the enquirin','

'I am the Australian Blondin and I have business to discuss with the captain.'

A flicker of mirth crossed the man's face. 'Well if you wait 'ere I'll see if the Capin' is available,' and he trudged towards the stern of the ship before stooping to enter a low doorway.

'What do you think Tom?' said Henry with excitement. 'These masts must be 100 feet tall at the top gallants, perfect I'd say!'

Tom craned his neck 'Yes they have the height, this idea might have merit.' Deep down his stomach churned. He had a great fear of heights and it was his job to get the walking rope tied off at each end. While the height of the masts excited Henry, the prospect of going so high filled him with dread.

Movement on the deck caught their attention and Henry clapped his hands together and rubbed his palms in anticipation as a tall, bearded, middle-aged man dressed in a long blue coat and shiny brass buttons studied them as he approached the gangway.

'I am Captain Saunders. Please come aboard, just mind your step as to come off the gangway.'

Henry fairly leaped up the sloping board while Tom, without the athletic prowess of his friend, made his way more cautiously, making use of the strung rope handrails.

'Very good of you to see me Captain, my name is Henry Giles, known here in New South Wales as the Australian Blondin and this is my business partner Tom Jackson,' announced Henry as they followed the captain across the deck, stepping over rope and around various items of ship related equipment.

'Blondin you say.' You might like to share with me what a blondin actually is,' said the captain as he showed them into his cabin and ushered them into two thinly padded chairs across from his desk.

Henry took in the cabin quickly. It was by no means spacious; their chairs were so close that Tom's knees almost touched the desk. One wall had several windows that afforded a view out of the stern, while another had a curtain across it, the captain's sleeping quarters no doubt. Behind the captain the wall had a mixture of drawers and cupboards.

'There was a Frenchman called Blondin who was a famous tight rope walker,' explained Henry. 'I have a tightrope act that does everything he does, except of course, walking across Niagara Gorge as he has done. Hence I have this stage name. I have had an act here in Sydney for some months and am seeking a new challenge.'

Henry sat back and paused while he twisted a pointed tip of his waxed mustache before continuing. 'My idea, sir, is to walk a rope set between the topgallants of two ships. I believe your ship will be docked for the next week which would allow time to set the rope, arrange publicity and have time to do a few performances before you need to set sail. What do you think?'

'Well, it is a novel idea,' replied Saunders slowly. 'What makes you think people would come?'

'My current act sees me 40 feet above the ground, this is the limit we can successfully stay the end posts and maintain sufficient tension on the rope. By using your mast and that of a second ship as the end posts, the height alone and the risk of my doom should I fall will be enough to see people wanting to watch the spectacle. The height of your top gallants, these would be close to 100 feet would they not?'

Saunders nodded. 'The yard for the top gallant sail is 95 feet above the deck, so yes I am sure that a fall from that height, assuming you did not hit the lower yards on the way down, would certainly seal your downfall and give your audience their money's worth,' replied Saunders with a chuckle at his small slice of humour.

'I might be willing,' he continued 'depending on what was in it for me and of course you will need the agreement of another ship.'

Henry outlined his plan to gain a financial return for the effort. As there was no way he could block the view from land or water due to the height, his idea was to anchor the two ships in the middle of the harbour, a distance away from the main population areas. Each ship would need to lay out four anchors, two having a winch to enable adjustments to be made to counter any movement of the tide.

The ships would be far enough from shore that onlookers might see a small figure at best, so spectators would need to buy tickets on chartered ferries where refreshments would also be sold. Premium tickets would allow spectators onto each of the two ships acting as

securing points and the money for these premium tickets and for any refreshments the captains provided, would go directly to the captain of each vessel.

'Very well,' responded Saunders. 'I'm willing if you can find another vessel. Bear in mind that we would lay out the anchors after we are loaded and are ready for sea. The spectators will need to be ferried to our ship and returned after your performance, as we cannot re-dock once we have left our berth. Let us say I can be ready in five days time and can offer you two days at anchor in the harbour, will that suit your purposes?'

'It will indeed!' cried Henry as he leapt to his feet and offered his hand to the captain. 'I will arrange a second ship and advise you further so you can make anchoring arrangements with her captain.'

Later that afternoon as they made their way back to their lodgings Henry was bursting with excitement at having secured the second ship, the *Loch Maree*.

'By God Tom, this will really put the act on the map. Can you see to it that the walking rope will be long enough, 500 feet should be ample. I will see about chartering some ferries and talk to the Gazette, Herald and the Mail about some publicity and arrange some fliers.'

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Four days later Henry has reserved 12 ferries each able to carry between 100 and 200 passengers. Tickets at for six shillings a head were to be sold at the dock on the morning of the walk and a team of workers had been employed to sell refreshments on the ferries at highly profitable prices. Premium tickets were to be sold at ten pounds per head, including a sit-down lunch aboard each vessel with the captain, the captain getting nine pounds and Henry and Tom keeping the rest to cover transport costs of passengers, plus a small profit.

The event was promoted in each of the city's newspapers via advertisements therein:

Australian Blondin  
(H. Giles)

To perform a death defying feat  
100 feet above the harbour  
Walking tightrope between  
Two tall masted vessels

Saturday and Sunday  
17 & 18 March 1877

Everything was set.



## Chapter 2 - All at sea

On Friday morning, March 15, Henry, Tom and two hired men rowed out to the *Jane Woodburn* in a hired ex whaling boat. The boat was laden with the 500-foot rope and a variety of other items required for the performance, so each man laboured at the oars against the easterly breeze. Wavelets slapped against the bow of the wooden boat sending occasional bursts of spray over the men. The ships were moored a mile away, nearer the harbour's northern shore in shallower water that provided better purchase by the ship's anchors.

Soaked from spray and sore of limb from their exertions, they shipped oars as the boat bumped along the lee side of the *Jane Woodburn*. 'An iron ship,' observed Tom. 'I'd not noticed that before.'

'Yes, one of the new breed of ships,' replied Henry. 'Should last a hundred years or more with no danger of woodworm or other rot.'

Captain Saunders peered over the rail and hailed a greeting.

'Good day sirs, I will have a rope lowered so we can haul your gear aboard, and a ladder extended to you.'

Minutes later Henry and Tom stood on the deck and peered up through the rigging, then across to the other ship, the *Loch Maree*.

'Captain, I suggest we first confirm the measurement between the masts,' said Tom who was keen to get set up. 'Are you fully anchored at this stage?'

'Captain Campbell has the *Loch Maree* secured by four anchors, while I have two out, one at the bow and one at the stern as I anticipated there would need to be some adjustments required before I drop the final two,' replied Saunders.

'I suggest we run a light line from the base of one mast to the base of the other,' said Tom. 'If we can keep this distance to no more than 450 feet that will allow us some leeway.'

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Three hours later *Jane Woodburn* had hauled herself forward on her bow anchor rope to increase the distance between the masts to the desired span and set the final two anchors. The walking rope had been hauled up to the topgallant spar. While the lower heights of the forty-foot towers on hard ground did not worry Tom, his core fear of heights remained but he felt obliged to check the knots tied by two of the ship's crew who had been seconded to undertake the securing of the walking rope. Tom was hoisted aloft in a bosun's chair with eyes closed the whole way and on reaching the top, he gripped the spar like a vice with one hand and the other clung to the rope used to hoist him while he

supervised the rope tying. The walking rope was secured with several windings around the mast and three half hitch knots. As the tying was finished, the sailors laugh as they lowered Tom back to the deck.

A lighter rope was attached to the other end of the heavy rope and Tom rowed this over to the *Loch Maree* where two of her crew scampered up the rigging before hauling the light rope and then the heavier walking rope up to its securing point. Tom again 'risked death' in his mind, by being hoisted up in another bosun's chair to again supervise the work.

In addition to the main rope, two pairs of ropes led from a quarter way along the walking rope back to each ship. These were tightened and fixed to act as stablisers to reduce swaying of the main rope. This was Tom's idea as he anticipated the increased distance magnifying sideways movement of the rope.

Later, as they stood on the deck of the *Jane Woodburn* Tom turned to Henry. 'Are you ready for a trial walk? I have to warn you that I experienced some movement when I was up the mast, so you will need to account for that.'

Dressed with thin leather pumps on his feet, silk stocking for ease of movement and loose linen shirt, Henry shook his head and chuckled. 'From what I hear the main movement you felt was in your guts while you were up there!' joked Henry as he started the climb. Unlike his normal ladder with wooden rungs between the rope stringers, the rigging was all-rope and it twisted and flexed under his feet as he climbed. After navigating his way through the mass of ropes at the crows nest lookout halfway up the mast, he rested and gazed about.

The sunlight reflected off the water like the shards of a thousand mirrors. To the southwest, past Fort Denison, a fortified sandstone fort that clings to the small rocky outcrop in the centre of the harbour, he could just make out the masts of ships moored inside Sydney Cove and the impressive buildings of Sydney, now a thriving commercial center, less than 100 years since the arrival of the First Fleet.

He continued his dizzying climb till he reached the top gallant spar where he was met by one of the ship's crew, a thin sinewy man, taller than Henry and perhaps a few years older, though it was hard to tell as his face was weathered and lined and perhaps making him look older than his really was. 'Welcome sir,' the sailor beamed. 'My name is Smythe an' the Capn' has told me to offer you all assistance, being as this is unfamiliar territory for you an' all. There is man at t'other end as well I see.'

'Good to meet you Smythe,' Henry replied. I will just need your help to lift the balance pole off the cradle and hand it to me. Henry steadied himself, placing his right foot on the rope and the other on the horizontal spar. Unlike his regular starting point, where he had a small level platform, here he will start slightly off-balance.

Smythe lifted the balance pole from the cradle that Tom had designed to be tied to the mast above head height, and placed the strap of the support harness that allow Henry's shoulders to take the majority of the weight of the 60 pound pole, behind Henry's neck. Henry leaned back against the mast while he closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. Emptying his mind of all thoughts he focused on the sounds of the breeze in the rigging, the feel of the air on his face, every muscle in his arms and legs, the weight of the balance pole. He placed himself in his surroundings, a pinpoint of existence on the surface of the planet. Then he was ready.

He stepped forward, putting his weight on his right foot, and felt a deep vibration coming through the rope. It was almost like a deep bass song and the feel of it filled his body as he brought his left foot forward onto the rope. Wind, he concluded; the wind was playing a tune on the rope as it stretched through the air over 400 feet to the other ship.

Walking at a steady rhythm of 40 steps a minute he covered the first 100 feet in less than two minutes. The rope, despite Tom's efforts at tensioning, was looser than in his usual performances, but with careful use of the balancing pole he managed to keep the wobbles to a minimum. Six minutes later and sweating profusely, he reached the *Loch Maree*.

'Take my waist!' he urged the sailor as he placed one foot on the spar and brought his other onto the knotted rope circling the mast.

With the sailor holding his waist securely, Henry lifted the balance pole and thrust it into its mast-mounted rack then grasped the rigging in his hands. He engaged the sailor in casual banter while he rested before descending the rigging back to the deck of the *Loch Maree*.

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'It's a long way and more taxing than I thought, Henry told Tom that night back in their lodgings. 'There was a change in the rope tension at times, probably from slight movements of the ships. I'm working hard just to maintain my balance as the rope moves sideways.'

'I'll have the captain put crew on the winches to ensure those anchor cables are kept tight,' responded Tom. 'We are all set for tomorrow. There is a lot of interest and I believe premium tickets for the ships have sold out, which bodes well for ticket sales for the spectators on the ferries.'

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Saturday was bright and sunny and the steady southeasterly breeze and Henry could see the raised wavelets on the water as he stood on the topgallant spar in readiness for the performance.

Below, the well-to-do had finished their sit-down lunches provided by each of the captains, and around each ship was a flotilla of a dozen ferries packed with eager spectators. If nothing else the event would prove a financial success. Henry thought it was a shame about the non-paying 'dead heads' in the flotilla of other small craft, including skiffs, small sailing boats and even larger boats, some with crowds who he suspected had paid money for the privilege.

He had dressed flamboyantly for the occasion, with a green cap with a long red feather, a loose fitting red silk shirt with ruffles at the collar and sleeve cuffs and black silk leggings. The sound of the crowd as they chatted, no doubt discussing the chances of witnessing a spectacular fall, or making a few wagers on the same wafted up. Above the din Tom's voice suddenly boomed out through the speaking tube he had acquired to carry his voice further.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attendance today to witness not only a first for the antipodes, but also a world first, the walking of a tightrope between two ships! What you will witness is not just another tightrope walk, but one that differs from all others before it.

'First is the difficulty. This is not so much the distance, which in itself is far longer than almost any other regularly performed in Europe or America and certainly longer than any other seen anywhere in Australia, but because the fixing points are not secured into solid ground. This in itself creates variations in the tension of the rope because we cannot keep the ships perfectly stationary.

'Today, the Australian Blondin, Mr Henry Giles, will demonstrate daring, courage and balance as he travels not just once between the ships, but also a return journey. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Australian Blondin!' shouted Tom with a flourish of his arm upward.

All eyes turned towards Henry and a hush fell over the crowds.

Henry waved, and then leaning back against the mast, raised his arms behind his head and with Smythe's assistance, lifted the balance pole from its cradle and took the weight on the strap behind his neck.

'See you on my return Smythe,' he said then pauses as he once again took the few minutes to clear his mind and narrow his focus to the task at hand. He heard the murmur of the crowd, the warmth of the sun and the air moving on his face. He slowed his breathing. His mind cleared and focused, he stepped out onto the rope.

Now his total attention was on the rope. Step, step, step, step at his preferred rate of 40 steps a minute. Fifty yards travelled and the midway point was almost reached, but with that came the problem of the rope wobbling sideways. Breaking through his focus he heard Tom's voice as he instructed the crew on the two winches to make sure all slack was taken up.

Midway point reached and now the walk up the gradual incline to the *Loch Maree*. He paused, allowing his muscles to steady. With a self-assured confidence he started the first of the tricks he was to perform. First he bent his legs so his rear kneecap resting inside the bend of the other leg in a move not unlike a curtsy.

‘I hope they appreciate how hard this is’ he thought as he straightened and took several more paces. He stopped and balanced on his right leg and extended his left out and away from the rope. The rope swayed beneath his foot and he shifted the pole from side to side to counter the movement. The crowd roared its appreciation.

‘That’s more like it, do moves they can clearly see’. Another dozen steps and he repeated the maneuver balancing on his left leg and extended his right.

Step, step, step up the slight incline to the safety of the mast and spar the *Loch Maree*. The sailor grabbed the balance pole and held it steady while Henry shifted his grip to the mast and rigging.

‘That was mighty impressive sir,’ enthused the crewman.

‘Thank you. I’ll rest he for a few minutes,’ replied Henry. ‘Did you bring that water flask I requested?’

‘Aye sir, here it is.’

Henry swallowed several draughts of water and handed the flask back to the sailor before performing some knee bends and other stretches to get the blood circulating through his limbs. He turned and with his back to the mast he gave each foot a quick shake then reached back and with the crewman’s help, set the balance pole once again.

The crowd below stopped their conversations as they spotted him step out on his return journey. Step, step, step in a steady rhythm, pausing near the middle to lift one hand from the pole and wave to one side and swap hands to repeat the exercise. Step, step, step on his leather pumps up the incline and to the safety of the mast and spar of the *Jane Woodburn*.

He placed the pole in its cradle and asked Smythe to lash it in place ready for tomorrow’s performance and after a few moments rest, clambered down the rigging to meet the enthusiastic audience.

The crowd gathered around and there was much slapping of back and shaking of his hand to mark his progression to a hatch cover where, from his elevated position, he could address the crowd. Tom approached him with the speaking tube.

‘Thank you all for witnessing today a world first ropewalk,’ boomed Henry. ‘For those wishing to see something a bit more dramatic, such as me plunging to a sudden stop on

wood or water, I am sorry to have disappointed you [chuckles from the crowd] but for those wishing to see, from even my own perspective, a difficult feat, then I trust you have been satisfied. Thank you!

He gestured Tom to follow him and walked briskly through the smiling crowds to the side of the ship where they climbed down the ladder into a waiting boat that would take him to repeat his speech several more times for those on the chartered ferries and on the *Loch Maree*.

‘I think that went rather well,’ he remarked to Tom later as they made their way back to shore in the longboat. ‘That will give Elson something to chew on.’

### CHAPTER 3 – Slack lines

Sunday was a picture postcard day and atop his perch on the *Jane Woodburn*. Henry was again focussing his mind for today's crossings. News of yesterday's successful walks had quickly spread throughout Sydney and today the ferries were, if anything, packed with even more spectators than yesterday. The crowds of premium ticket holders were now cramped into the space on each of the ship's deck and the flotilla of non-paying 'dead heads' in every type of watercraft imaginable had blossomed.

He looked down into the crystal clear blue harbour water allowing his gaze to follow the anchor ropes as they plunged into the depths. He was surprised to see some extra spectators; several large sharks swimming slowing around the ships. 'I'll not be wanting to meet you my friends,' the thought and shuddered at the thought of being torn apart by the savage jaws should he fall. To the south, the sky has a slightly dark, almost misty look to it, quite at odds with the clear sunny weather around him.

Smythe was at his station again and after settling his mind, Henry set off at a slightly brisker pace than yesterday, aiming to spend more time in the middle, as this had been the place where the crowd had most enjoyed his performance. Once again he performed his curtsy and one-legged balances to the cheers and applause of the crowd and made his way steadily to the *Loch Maree*. Once again he took a few minutes to regain his composure.

'You'll not be wanting to delay too long sir,' commented the assisting sailor. 'That's a bit O' wind moving in quickly.'

Henry looked in the direction the sailor indicated but couldn't see any sign of wind, but trusted the old salt's instinct. 'How long do you think?'

'You should ave' plenty of time sir, but you never can tell with these things.'

Henry acknowledged his understanding and following a few minutes calming of mind, set off back towards the *Jane Woodburn*.

Step, step, step and he paused to repeat his one leg balance on each leg in turn, and stopped to wave to all the crowd on the ships and the surrounding flotilla. Step, step, step and he is two-thirds the distance to his destination.

Without forewarning, a sharp gusting wind rushed in from the south. Fingers of air clutched at the ends of the balance pole and try to swing it around and push his centre of gravity away from the rope. Instantly he went into a low crouch to bring his centre of gravity nearer the rope. His feet wobbled under him as he struggled to maintain control and to reverse the momentum of the now obliquely angled balance pole thus reducing its value in helping him balance.

Slowly he managed to bring the pole around against the force of the wind. His shirt cuffs flap wildly and the sound of the rushing air whistled in his ears as his hat was blown from his head and sailed away on the wind. As he managed to gain control and stand upright to recommence his walk, the rope suddenly loses its tension. Below he made out Tom shouting angrily at the crew manning the anchor winches.

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‘Hurry damn you!’ roared Tom as he looked skyward to see the frantic attempts his friend was making to regain some semblance of balance. ‘Hurry, every second counts, get that tension back onto those ropes!’

The crew frantically turned the winches with several feet of rope being wound onto the capstan in a matter of seconds. Captain Saunders rushed to Tom’s side.

‘This gusting wind must have caused some of the anchors to drag,’ Saunders exclaimed. ‘Put your backs into it you laggards,’ he boomed at the crew. Still rope was drawn from the water with no hint of tension. ‘Belay winching both capstans!’ Saunders shouted.

‘What are you doing captain?’ asked Tom in amazement.

Seconds pass. ‘Commence winching!’ cried the captain before turning to Tom. ‘The anchors needed a moment to resettle on the bottom, sometimes a fast retrieve can lift them off the bottom,’ he explained.

Gazing upward Tom saw the efforts at re-tensioning the walking rope have proven too little, too late for his friend.

\*

Henry was too busy to listen to the running commentary. Every muscle in his body was involved in bringing his balance back into equilibrium. The once taut rope had taken on the characteristics of partly cooked spaghetti. He knew he could not remain upright on a rope like this and for the first time in public, he took the necessary extreme actions to save his life.

Quickly lowering his head he thrust the balance pole away then tumbled in a forward roll with a slight twist and fixing his eyes on the rope, reached out. The strap that helped take the weight of the balance pole slipped easily over his head and the pole dropped, one end briefly bouncing off the rope before it performed several slow somersaults before splashing into the water below. As he continued to tumble he grabbed the rope. Clutching desperately he felt the corded texture and gripped tightly as his legs completed the arc and he dangled by just his hands, one hundred feet above the water. Looking down he saw the balance pole settling in the water and a shark move from the side of the ship to investigate.



He was breathing as heavily as if he had just sprinted one hundred yards. Slowly he steadied his breathing and contemplated his next move.

\*

The screams of some of the crowd snatched Tom's attention back to Henry. In the fraction of a second it took him to turn and relocate Henry as he swung to a stop, a slew of thoughts of his friend's doom rushed through his mind only to be replaced by hope as he saw his friend firmly gripping the rope. Breathing a sigh of relief he involuntarily flinched as the balance pole splashed into the water near him.

'The anchors have gripped,' announced Saunders. 'We are getting tension back into that top rope.'

Tom pushed his way through the crowd at the stern and called up, 'Henry! Are you alright?'

'Yes, what happened?'

'The anchors dragged, but we are regaining tension now,' Tom called back.

'I am going to make my way back to you,' shouted Henry. 'Arrange a bosun's chair to help me down as I'll not have strength to climb down by the time I get back to the mast.'

Henry laboriously moved hand over hand back towards the ship. Soon his fingers cramped and he was forced to rest by reaching his arms over the rope and nestling it under his armpits. After a minute's rest he continued. Steadily the distance decreased and he was soon within feet of the mast.

The crowd on the ship and the ferries shouted encouragement as he inched his way along the rope. Finally he was within reach and Smythe's strong hands grasp him under the arms and lifted him on to the spar. All round the crowds cheered and applauded. Several other crewmen had scaled the rigging and manhandled Henry into the bosun's chair.

'You gave us quite a scare,' uttered Smythe. 'I thought you was' a dead man for sure.'

'I felt pretty much that way myself,' grinned Henry as he settled into the bosun's chair. 'It is not something I want to repeat in a hurry.'

'Lower away,' called Smythe, and Henry was quickly lowered to the wooden deck where enthusiastic hands reached out to welcome him to safety.

Tom forced his way through the crowd and gave Henry a strong embrace. 'Thank God you're safe,' enthused Tom. 'Let's get you to the captain's cabin and get a brandy into you.'

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