

The White Feather

by Lorraine Orman

Author's Introduction to *The White Feather*

This is a story for older children and teens set in New Zealand during World War I. The location of the story is Denniston, a coalmining town on the West Coast of the South Island. The climate was cruel and the coalmining families had to be tough.

I wrote the story because I wanted to mark the recent World War I centenaries - and because it's important to show how New Zealanders at home were affected by the world wars.

My YA e-book *Touchstone* also looks at a West Coast coalmining family, and my book (published by Scholastic NZ) called *My Story: Here Come the Marines* looks at rural life in New Zealand during World War II.

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It was all Poison Ivy's fault. Mam said we should be nice to Ivy Beecroft because her wits curdled when her husband was killed by the Turks at a place called Gallipoli. But it's hard to feel sorry for her. Every time anyone talk to her she drags the conversation round to her husband's death. She gives me the willies.

My older brother Bill and I were walking home from the bath-house when Poison Ivy caught us. At the end of their shift in the coalmine Bill and the other miners strip off their clothes and sluice the dust out of their skins under the steaming showers in the bath-house. It's funny seeing this row of black men going into the bath-house and half an hour later they come out all pink and shiny.

Some afternoons, as long as I've finished my chores, Mam lets me go and meet Bill at the bath-house door. Even though I'm a boy, I'm not allowed in. It's miners only.

I like walking home with Bill. He always passes me his crib-tin. When I open it there's one sandwich he's saved just for me, decorated with black fingerprints. The coal-dust makes the sandwich taste even better.

I'd just swallowed the last mouthful of bread when a hunched figure slipped from behind a bush and stood in our path. It was Poison Ivy, a black shawl draped over her head. Her face was pale and her eyes were like dark holes.

"Mrs Beecroft," Bill said, stopping and touching his cap. I did the same.

"Bill Lowry," she said in a hollow voice. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," Bill said.

"Old enough," she said, "More than old enough. Time to do your duty, Bill Lowry. Take this token and think long and hard about what you must do." She handed Bill something, then disappeared into the mist.

I stared at Bill's open palm. On it lay a white feather. White feathers mean that people think you're a coward. If you get one you're meant to sign up as a soldier and go off to fight in the war.

"Don't take any notice!" I shouted. "Stupid Poison Ivy doesn't know what she's talking about! You're in a protected occupation. You don't have to go and fight."

Bill frowned at the feather. For a moment his face looked as haunted as Poison Ivy's. My heart sank to my boots. "I know I don't have to go and fight," he said. "But it's hard, Tom, ruddy hard. Thousands of blokes my age have gone over to Europe to fight. They're doing their duty for New Zealand and the Motherland. And all I'm doing is hewing coal. It just doesn't seem right."

"You're doing your bit! They need coal for the warships," I said.

"Oh, aye," he said glumly.

"You can't go," I said, fighting back tears. Thirteen-year-old boys do NOT cry in front of their big brothers. "You mustn't go."

Bill sighed. "I'm not going, Tom."

But I heard the word he didn't speak. And that word was "yet".

Bill blew the feather into the air. Then he tried to change the subject. "How's Sultan today? Did he work a shift?"

I shook my head. Sultan was my favourite pit horse. He worked down the mine pulling tubs of coal. But he's pretty old for a working horse, and some days he just seems to run out of puff. Gus, who looks after the horses, often lets Sultan have a day off.

I like visiting Sultan in the stables near the mine mouth. I always give him a good brush down and I usually have a handful of vegetable scraps in my pocket for him. "He's only worked six shifts in the last fortnight," I said.

"Hmm," said Bill. We both knew that if Sultan got too old for working in the mine he'd be sent to the knacker's yard. I couldn't bear the thought of Sultan being turned into dog tucker. "Don't get too attached to him, Tom," Bill said.

I was saved from replying because we'd arrived home. We took off our boots at the door so as not to mess up Mam's clean floor. She was standing at the coal range, stirring something in a big pot. It was her special mutton stew. My mouth watered. I was always hungry these days. "Da not home yet?" Bill asked.

Mam rolled her eyes. "Likely he'll be taking liquid refreshment at the Star Hotel." Dad worked at the Bins, which was where the coal was sorted before it went down the Incline

railway to the coal trains waiting at the bottom of the hill. Da used to hew coal in the mine but a rock fall crushed his knee about ten years ago. He says beer is the best thing to dull the pain.

"Poison Ivy gave Bill a white feather," I burst out.

Mam shot a look at Bill. "Don't take any notice of Ivy, son. Mad as a hatter, that one."

Bill slumped down at the table. "Reckon she's got a point, though. I've been doing a bit of thinking."

Mam put a plate in front of him loaded with stew and potatoes and cabbage. "Well, you can stop your thinking. We need you here, and that's that." She tilted her head in my direction. "We'll talk later, Bill, when your Da's home."

I hate it when they talk about things after I've gone to bed. But I was desperately hungry, so I got stuck into my stew.

That night I tried to stay awake till Bill came to bed in the room we shared. I wanted to know what the three of them had been talking about. But my eyelids drooped, then closed, and I was asleep.

Nothing much happened for a few weeks. Well, nothing important, that is. Da came home so drunk one night that Mam and Bill had to pick him up between them and chuck him on the bed. Mam and Bill did lots of hissy whispering to each other after that, but I couldn't hear what they were saying.

My best friend Douglas stole the Headmaster's leather strap and tossed it into one of the coal tubs. Unfortunately someone saw it before it went down the Incline, and grabbed it. All the boys in our class got three whacks on the butt.

We had a really bad storm that covered the whole town in ice, including the school playground. When a primer boy needed to visit the latrine over the creek, one of us big boys had to take him so he didn't get blown away by the wind.

Bill stopped talking to me. He went round looking like he'd lost a quid and found a penny. Several times I opened his crib-tin, expecting my sandwich, and it was empty. "Sorry, Tom," Bill muttered. "Things on my mind." He also spent a lot of time sitting on his bed and staring at the map of Europe he'd stuck up on the wall.

Sultan continued to go downhill. He barely looked up when I visited his stall. Gus scowled and shook his head. "Poor old boy. Reckon it'd be kinder to put an end to it."

"Can't you give him a tonic or something?" I asked. I held a handful of fresh grass in front of Sultan's nose. He snorted at the grass, but didn't eat it.

Then came the Saturday when I woke up and Bill wasn't in his bed. This was unusual because every Saturday morning we always went along to the sports ground and

watched the rugby players - rain, hail or snow. Mam came into the room and handed me a cup of hot cocoa. Then she sat on the side of my bed and looked at me.

"What?" I said. I had a bad feeling.

"Bill's gone," she replied.

"Gone where?" But I knew.

"He's signed up with the army. He got a ride down to Westport very early this morning. He's off to training camp."

I couldn't speak. My brain was full of words but I couldn't get them out. Eventually I croaked, "But he didn't say goodbye."

Mam patted my leg. "He knew you'd be upset. He thought it was best this way."

"What if he gets killed? And we didn't say goodbye?"

Mam shut her eyes. Her face was as pale as my sheet. "Sorry, Tom."

I gritted my teeth so hard my whole face hurt. I would NOT cry. "Blast Poison Ivy and her white feather," I choked out.

"It wasn't just the feather," Mum replied. She handed me a piece of paper. "He left this for you."

Bill's note said, "Sorry to sneak away, Tommy boy. But it's the right thing to do. I just couldn't live with myself. I've left you a present. Go and see Stan Price. He's expecting you. Love from your brother Bill."

Mam ruffled my hair. "Don't forget your cocoa."

It took me quarter of an hour to run to the Price farm. It was down the hill a bit, in a sheltered valley where Stan and his family grew vegetables and raised a few animals - chickens, sheep, cows. They had a good business selling their produce to the mining folk, because our town was built on rock and nobody could grow anything.

Stan was banging nails into a shed door. "Giddyay," he said through a mouthful of nails.

"Umm ... Bill said you had something for me?"

"Too right," he said, spitting the nails into his hand. "Go round the back of the house and take the path to the left of the chook house." He was grinning.

I followed his directions and found myself looking over the fence into a paddock. Two horses stood there peacefully, side by side. One I didn't recognise, but the other was Sultan. He saw me, whinnied, and trotted across the paddock towards me. I grabbed a fistful of grass so I had something to offer him. I rubbed his long, silky nose while he chewed. I swear he was smiling at me.

"Looks like retirement agrees with him," Stan said from behind me. "But I reckon his new owner needs to visit him several times a week. He might get lonely otherwise."

My heart stopped. "Owner? Who..."

"Hold your horses. Bill bought him from the mining company. For you. He paid me for his keep for a long time to come. Said he'll be back to pay the next instalment when the war finishes. Sultan is yours now, Tom."

I leaned over the fence and rested my cheek against Sultan's neck. This time I let the tears come. Stan chuckled and slipped away but I hardly noticed him.

Oh, Bill. Sultan will have a grand old age. And you'll come back from the war and we'll look after him together for years and years. That's the way it's going to be. You hear me, Bill?