

*Flights of Fantasy*

Play equipment to fuel the imagination

An Unexpected Journey



by **Russell Bowlby**

# An Unexpected Journey

## Chapter 1



“This is a horse yard” said Freddie – these are stables because they have got two doors and the horses can look out”.

“Freddie and Jack” called their Mother – “Now you’re getting under my feet – go out into the garden and play a while, but don’t go out of the garden. We’ll call you when we are ready”, and with that she pushed them out into the sunlight.

They stood around, unsure of where to go in their new garden – the home they had only arrived at late last night and which was full of boxes and rolls of things – all stacked up on one another in the hall and downstairs rooms.

“Let’s go this way”, said Jack, who at six was the older of the two, and they walked across the drive into the sunlight at the front of the big old house.

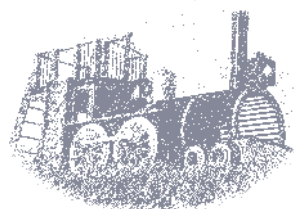
“Look – a secret passage” said Freddie and they hesitantly walked up to the archway which led through a whitewashed passage into a stable yard beyond. “We can’t go there” said Jack, “that’s not the garden”, but Freddie pushed past him and onto the door at the end, and before they knew it they were in the stable yard beyond. All the doors were closed, and the yard was quiet apart from the cackle of an unseen flock of geese somewhere the other side of a wall.

“We shouldn’t be here” said Jack, apprehensively looking back at the passage from whence they had just entered, as if expecting to see his Mother, hands on hips, watching him with a cross face. He was, he was often told, where he wasn’t meant to be, and by the same token, never where he should be. Isn’t this much the same with all little boys?

“I know that” said Jack, looking for something he could contribute – something he could tell Freddie, as an older brother, that Freddie, who was remarkably astute, wouldn’t know.

“That’s not a stable” said Jack, pointing at two huge weathered doors in the side of a barn. “That’s where the elephants lived and there is probably one there now, but you can’t hear him because he is asleep”. That had got Freddie’s interest, and he picked up a stick that was leaning against the wall and cautiously advanced towards the doors, the stick held in front of him. They both approached the doors and looked through the crack between them. As their eyes became accustomed to the light they could see something looming – huge and tall, inside the barn. Freddie’s eyes were wide, and the hairs on his neck prickled. “Is it asleep, Jack – is it asleep?” and he sneezed, several times in quick succession as the dusty air pouring through the crack in the barn doors got into his nose.

“Dooooon’t” yelled Jack – “you’ll wake it” and they both ran back around the corner of the wall, flattening themselves against the cool flint stones, as if some disturbed monster were about to come stampeding out. However, it wasn’t long before they were back at the doors, confidence renewed, and in a moment they had prised the heavy latch up and out of the iron keeper, and with the familiar cracking and groaning of doors that had not been opened for many years, they swung out and aside and the boys were left peering into the gaping blackness of the barn.



Their eyes were wide, their hearts pounding in their ears, as they advanced, sticks in hand, towards this huge monster, clad in dust sheets and towering over them. Shafts of light shone from another, even larger set of doors beyond, dust motes swerving and diving, glistening in the sun beams, turning over and over like lost, golden galaxies.

As their eyes became accustomed to the light, they could eventually see what stood before them. "It's not an elephant", whispered Freddie. "No" said Jack, "it's a machine – a combine harvester" and he went up to the front of the Goliath and tugged on one of the sheets, which slid easily to the floor in clouds of dust.

"You mustn't" hissed Freddie "the farmer will come – or Mummy" but he stopped when he saw Jack's face. "It's not a combine – I think it's, it's a....." he read from a brass plaque at the front of the machine, "United Pacific type 119 1860," he couldn't read the next few words but by now he knew. "It's a train" he shouted, "a real train".

After only the briefest of pauses they set to work, pulling away the dust sheets in billows of dust until the whole edifice was exposed – a huge black, red and gold locomotive, with a tall black funnel, a huge headlamp at the front with a bright red cow catcher, and, at the back, a huge boiler which seemed to go on forever, and a burnished bell, just in front of the cab. They stood by the wheels and looked up at the towering structure – dwarfed by the monster, even the wheels were too high to climb – and there she stood – this massive, magnificent piece of engineering waiting to spring to life with only the lighting of a tiny touchpaper.

"Is it real?" asked Freddie. "I mean, does it work? Where are the rails – what's it doing here?" and all the myriad other questions

crowding into his mind and open imagination. He touched it. "Don't", shouted Jack – "it's not ours". "Yes it is" shouted Freddie, "it's in our barn", and he jumped onto the footplate, with Jack close behind.

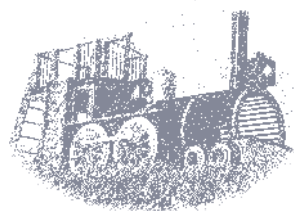
"It's real" he shouted, "It's real, it's real, it's real" and as he peered out of the driver's window, down the gleaming boiler, past the bell, the huge round vessel, the funnel and the big black headlight with the ornate gold on top, he gave the bell a mighty pull. The thunderous peals had a surreal tone as they bounced from the barn walls, echoing and reverberating, rising and falling, a deafening and disorientating sound, ringing through the boys' heads, blocking out everything but the steady background sound of the drive cylinders pumping away, and the steady 'schooompf, schooompf, schooompf' as the barn walls slowly picked up speed, sliding by, becoming a blurr, faster and faster as the mechanical monster gently settled into a steady rocking rhythm and the song of a Goliath on a mission.

"Jump!" shouted Jack, "Jump now, it's moving!" but it was too late, and both boys clung on in the swirling blackness as the huge locomotive suddenly burst out into the sunlight at the end of a long tunnel, the engine note immediately became remote, a steady and reassuring noise of motive power,

'Chumpf, chumpf, chumpf, chumpf' in quick succession – the rapid beat of a drum as she thundered across the prairie. 'Cha,cha,cha,cha,cha,cha'.

"It's real" shouted Jack, "It's magic" shouted Fred.

The locomotive settled down into a steady chatter, an easy coasting of massive clanking metal parts like some huge leviathan aiming at the interminable tracks ahead with the purpose of a missile.



“Pressure?” shouted Jack – “Boiler pressure 80 P.S.I.” grinned Freddie, emerging from the firebox, racoon faced. “Speed?” shouted Jack, “Estimated 30 miles per hour – Sir!” shouted Freddie, as he jumped up and leant out over the foot plate.

“She’s heavy, baby! – yep, she’s heavy – ‘bout 60 tons I reckon” – “put on some speed” shouted Jack – it’s a long way to go to the mountains”, so Freddie shovelled on more coal and opened up the vents. The red heat hissing from the firebox smacked him on the face as he peered into the furnace – miniature cliffs and chasms, all glowing red and white hot – sparks bursting from the incandescent mass, swirling back away over the firebox.

“Oh what a day” sighed Jack as he leant out and stared down the track ahead, as if he’d driven one all his life, wiping his oily hands on his grimy overalls – not giving his mother a thought, for he was a train man now.

‘Clunk, ping’ something went.

‘Dong.....burr.’ “What’s that Jack? What’s happening?”

“Get down Freddie – look here;” they heard the high pitched screams like a flock of approaching geese before they actually saw the first Indian coming slanting in from the side at full gallop, the dust spurting from the horses hooves like bullet puffs, the deep frown on the Apaches face as he thundered in to the attack – and many more followed.

Jack took down the Winchester from the cab roof, as he might have done a thousand times before, cocked the mechanism and took careful aim, squeezed the trigger and heard the report above the sound of the puffing engine – distant and remote, the powder burst rolling away in a moment.

A brave dived forward onto the dust, somersaulting like a rag doll, his horse veering away to swerve back in to join the screaming pack.

“Open her up Fred!” and in a moment the great frame took on a more urgent note, the irresistible torque forcing itself into the wheel cylinders and slowly, inexorably, the giant pulled away, driving forward, black goutts of smoke and fire bursting forth, sparks and flame billowing back over the cab and the fender behind.

“Faster, faster Fred – they’re coming aboard” shouted Jack as he pumped, fired and reloaded – an Indian brave momentarily appearing over the tender to whirl away into the dust.

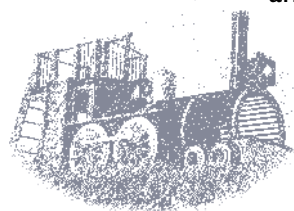
“The horses must tire soon” shouted Fred – “they can’t keep this up for long” as a bullet clanged against the firebox and plucked at his overalls.

“Speed?” shouted Jack – “Forty miles an hour, and rising” came the reply – steady and confident, and gradually the thundering hooves and the clang and ping of passing bullets receded as the Indians fell behind.

“Wow” said Jack, and he pulled the steam whistle in a huge, long blast, while Fred tugged on the bell, chiming its tones endlessly across the empty prairie, like an echo, on an echo, on an echo.....

“We made it – yep we left ‘em for dead baby” shouted Fred, and he did a ridiculous little dance on the foot plate.

“Oh no we didn’t”, muttered Jack – “look up boy” and they both looked ahead to the ominous clouds of white smoke, puffing up into the sky like a lazy giant on a pipe, and below the raging inferno of fire on the tracks ahead.



Freddie, Jack and the locomotive thundered and roared full throttle at 45 miles an hour into the ambush that lay ahead, whistle blaring, bell chiming like battle brass, the locomotive straining like a bull on a leash – vague visions of the men with pigtails, peering down the barrels of rifles (where for goodness sake did those Indians get those guns – not a bow and arrow in sight)!

Rocking and groaning with power, she hit, smoke and flame versus flame and smoke, an explosion of fire, like an asteroid hitting a volcano.

“Get down Freddie”, and the whole worlds exploded into a heat wave of fire and sparks, pinging bullets and searing heat, suddenly they were through – nothing but the open plain beyond, hot clean air ahead and the smell of singed hair and hot oil.

“We’ve done it – we’re clear – open her up and let’s get out of here”.

And so they hurried on to the mountains, so full of relief and not knowing what awaited them there.



## Chapter 2

They continued at a steady pace, into the horizon of blue hills – soft and distant, becoming closer and sharper – faint outlines growing into cliffs and crags, sparse scrub around the base, petering out up the slopes.

Surely nothing could live there – but there was life – wheeling and circling vultures, planing and sailing on the rising thermals, their sharp eyes keenly searching for a creature in distress. “Us!” thought Freddie, his mind’s eye imagining the bird’s eye view of a little toy train chuffing across the prairie in clouds of smoke and dust – so small and insignificant – but, even in this dry and desolate place, the focus of many watching eyes.

Freddie shovelled more coals into the furnace – dribbles of sweat running down his neck soaking into his overalls.

“Pressure 82lbs and steady”, he shouted, grinning at his brother, he shut up the firebox door, straightened up, and put his arm around Jack.

“This is the life Jack – just you and me and our engine.”

Jack would usually have shrugged him off, but this time he didn’t – the vastness of their surroundings, along with the potential dangers bringing them closer together. They worked as one.

“Dust clouds!”, Jack pointed at the palls of dust that hung ahead, rising some hundred feet into the air, obscuring the tracks and hanging like a huge surf wave in front of them; along with a curious drumming, a menacing thunder of hooves, and within moments they swept into the dust clouds into a choking yellow light that blotted out the sun. Whatever this menace was, they were inside it. A huge

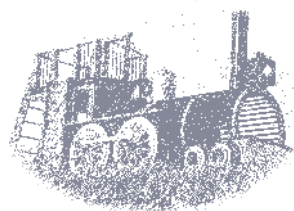
shape thundered across the tracks in front of them leaping and bucking – huge forequarters and a horned head, set on no neck, with a tiny rear end with a long tail held high.

“Buffalo” Freddie shouted, “Get in the cab Jack”, just as a huge shape clanged into the side of the engine and stumbled away into the murk, the engine rocking violently on the suspension with the impact.

Suddenly, another huge hit as an unfortunate beast tried to jump between the cab and the firebox – the massive lump of kicking, twisting sinew, snorting and bellowing, the hooves sliding and skidding on the metal footplates, so close they felt the bovine breath and saw the rolling eye, uncomprehending as the beast kicked and jerked until it suddenly pitched headlong out off the footplate into nowhere leaving a streak of white spume across the firebox.

Jack leapt up and dragged on the whistle chain – a long blast in the chaos. He kept pulling and pulling, blast after blast as the beasts continued to hit the engine and fender which rocked heavily from side to side with each impact, the deafening whistle having no effect on the panic stricken beasts running headlong.

“They’ll have us off the tracks soon”, shouted Jack, as he leant out of the cab, eyes straining in the dust, trying to ascertain the dimensions of this new menace. He quickly drew back as a black shape spun past him, head down, back legs kicking frantically in the air in the throes of death, after a heavy impact with a wheel guard. Jack’s overalls were spattered with blood and gouts of spume, as was the side of the engine. The beasts were suffering death and terrible injuries against the steel goliath that loomed up out of nowhere. There was little chance of avoiding a collision as visibility was down to a few feet, and the world was made



up of thundering hooves, vague shapes, snorting and bellowing with fear.

A sudden loud bang was followed by a screech of escaping steam and immediately the engine lost power and started to slow.

“Broken steam pipe to no. 2 wheel cylinder”, shouted Jack, “Now we’ve got trouble, we’ll stop any minute”, and the great engine became slower and slower as clouds of steam hissed from the broken pipe, surely disconnected by some horned head or whirling hoof.

Jack threw forward the steam valve lever and let the engine coast – the comparative silence hitting immediately like the eye of a storm, and suddenly they were aware of the thinning dust clouds, the sun breaking through, and only the occasional galloping shape until they coasted gently to a stop in the clear, hot, sunlight in the corridor between the stampeding beasts and the foothills to the mountains, which were by now incredibly close.

Both boys jumped down and ran to the side of the engine from where the clouds of steam were spewing forth.

“Broken cylinder feed pipe”, shouted Jack, “Get the toolbox and let’s get it fixed – we’re sitting ducks here.”

Fred scrambled up into the cab and lifted down the heavy toolbox, which he half carried, half dropped onto the footplate, passing it down to Jack below. They both dragged it to the site of the damage and opened it ready to make a repair. The steam pressure pipe had been cleanly broken off and without time and brazing equipment there was no hope of a repair.

“We’ll plug it”, said Freddie as he started to carefully unscrew the broken stub of pipe.

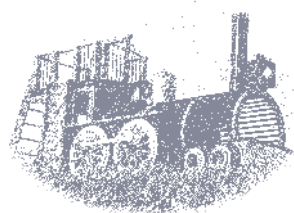
“She’ll only work in three cylinders, but that’ll be enough to get her going”. They worked quickly and before long the plug was in place and the engine was ready to roll, and not a moment too soon. Watching eyes had picked them up from the hills and the Indians were on the attack again, pouring over a nearby ridge in the foothills, their horses slithering and sliding down a loose scree, set back on their haunches, their heads held back, each with a seated, screeching warrior.

“Open her up Fred – full power” Jack shouted, there was panic in his voice, for they were stationary, caught out in the open, and the Indians were fast closing the gap.

So, so slowly she picked up speed, hampered by the dead cylinder on one side, one wheel spinning with power, the other one wasting, the empty powerless cylinder pumping mechanically away, the missing power taking a dreadful toll on their ability to pull away.

Again bullets whizzed and clanged around them, the dusty and bloodstained train a terrible sight, one side covered in streaks of dried gore and congealed dust, the other clean by comparison. The boys crouched in the cab, hiding from the bullets which ricocheted around them, but, so far, had failed to find their target. As they crouched under the gouts of black smoke, to the sound of the screeching spinning wheel in front, they gradually picked up momentum.

Jack again took down the rifle and returned fire, but the Indians did not press home their attack, content to gallop along some distance behind as if shepherding the engine into a trap. This continued for some time, until they were well within the foothills, with the larger peaks beyond. The Indians had dropped back to a canter and the engine maintained a



steady 30 miles per hour.

“They’re letting us go”, shouted Fred, “No they’re not”, replied Jack, “They’ve got something else up their sleeves and we’re heading straight into it – remember the fire on the tracks?”

And he was right, because as they came around a long bend before a ravine, they could see Indians on the tracks ahead on the wooden bridge; part of the wooden structure had been hacked away and a span of track hung perilously in the air with very little supporting structure left beneath it.

Jack started firing at the little running figures on the bridge while they were still far out of range, but it had the effect of galvanising them into action and they started running back towards the train, the bullets hissing and whirring around them.

Two braves fell, dropping two hundred feet into the swirling waters below to be swept away without a trace, but half a dozen or so made it back to solid ground and crouched beside the track, rifles ready.

With a marksman’s eye, Jack dropped three of the crouching figures in as many shots, the rest running to the safety of the nearby scrub, bullets kicking up dust spurts all around them, with yet another Indian brave sprawling in the dirt before he reached the safety of cover.

“Good shooting Jack” shouted Freddie, “There’s not so many to deal with now, but the horses are coming” and as they looked back they saw a pack of horsemen rounding the bend a few hundred yards behind them. Jack pulled on the brakes, cutting the power, and the locomotive shuddered to a halt out on the bridge, just short of the huge gap in the structure.

“Will it take our weight Jack?”

“Don’t know”, came the reply, “There’s one way to find out – we’ve got to go steady, drop the fender Fred, now, we need to lose weight”.

Fred heaved on the screw handle of the coupling, and as the bullets howled around him, after what seemed like an age, the heavy coal fender parted company from the train and was left behind on the tracks – an effective bullet proof barrier – until the Indians overran it, that was.

“We’re short of fuel, and short of water, but we’ve got enough to get us out of here” and with that Jack pushed off the brake and opened the steam valve, giving a long defiant blast on the whistle.

Slowly the engine moved forward, easing steadily to a walking pace as the pursuing Indians, having had to dismount to pass the coal fender, climbed over and around it.

Fred now had the rifle and was able to pick them off – slow easy targets until they had passed the obstacle and were running down the tracks. There was now no protection from the fender and Jack and Freddie were crouched in the cab, completely at the mercy of the bullets that were being fired after them.

More braves dropped as Freddie fired and fired again. The Indians dropped back fifty paces as the engine started to skid and tip on the unsupported rails, which began to buckle as 60 tons of metal came to bear.

“Open the throttle” screamed Freddie and Jack wound open the valve – the steel rims were screeching on the rails and the boys peered out over the side of the tilting cab, straight down into the foaming waters far below.

“We’re going over” screamed Jack as the loco lurched to one side and started to topple, the wheels screeching,



the engine straining, smoke belching from the funnel, obscuring the Indians behind, who by now had stopped firing and were watching the struggling giant tipping to her doom. Suddenly, somehow, with a violent lurch and a rending of tortured metal, the spinning wheels fused to the red hot rails beneath, the engine leaping forward and up onto the sound structure, miraculously struggling up from the twisted, smoking rails and trundled off quietly across the bridge and into the tunnel beyond, as if it were on a Sunday outing.

The Indians stood and stared!

As the engine coasted gently to a halt within the cool walls of the tunnel, the boys could see the cracks in the barn doors ahead, the sunlight streaming through, lighting up the dust motes like so many miniature swirling galaxies.

The locomotive stood, huge, gleaming and cold, and the boys jumped down onto the barn floor.

“That was close”, said Fred, “what a good shot you are Jack” and they gave each other a huge hug which said many things.

Quietly they pulled the dust sheets back in place and crept out through the barn doors into the bright sunlight beyond. As they turned and bolted the greying wooden doors, something fell to the ground with a metallic clatter.

“Look”, said Jack, as he bent to pick up a flattened bullet that had fallen from a fold in Fred’s jumper, “And what’s that hole in your jumper Fred?”

Fred winked at him and they walked back out of the stable yard, through the passage and the archway, back to the house, to see how their parents had got on with the unpacking.

