

**ROLF
BOLDREWOOD**

THE
SQUATTER'S
DREAM

Rolf Boldrewood
The Squatter's Dream

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The Squatter's Dream A story of Australian Life

CHAPTER I

“Here in the sultriest season let him rest.
Fresh is the green beneath those aged trees;
Here winds of gentlest wing will fan his breast,
From heaven itself he may inhale the breeze.” —*Byron*.

Jack Redgrave was a jolly, well-to-do young squatter, who, in the year 185 – , had a very fair cattle station in one of the Australian colonies, upon which he lived in much comfort and reasonable possession of the minor luxuries of life. He had, in bush parlance, “taken it up” himself, when hardly more than a lad, had faced bad seasons, blacks, bush-fires, bushrangers, and bankers (these last he always said terrified him far more than the others), and had finally settled down into a somewhat too easy possession of a couple of thousand good cattle, a well-bred, rather fortunate stud, and a roomy, cool cottage with a broad verandah all covered with creepers.

The climate in which his abode was situated was temperate, from latitude and proximity to the coast. It was cold in the winter, but many a ton of she-oak and box had burned away in the great stone chimney, before which Jack used to toast himself in the cold nights, after a long day’s riding after cattle. He had plenty of books, for he did not altogether neglect what he called his mind, and he had time to read them, as of course he was not always out on the run, or away mustering, or doing a small – sometimes very small – bit of business at the country town, just forty miles off, or drafting or branding his cattle. He would work away manfully at all these avocations for a time, and then, the cattle being branded up, the business in the country town settled, the musters completed, and the stockmen gone home, he used to settle down for a week or two at home, and take it easy. Then he read whole forenoons, rather indiscriminately perhaps, but still to the general advantage of his intelligence. History, novels, voyages and travels, classics, science, natural history, political economy, languages – they all had their turn. He had an uncommonly good memory, so that no really well-educated prig could be certain that he would be found ignorant upon any given subject then before the company, as he was found to possess a fund of information when hard pressed.

He was a great gardener, and had the best fruit trees and some of the best flowers in that part of the country. At all odd times, that is, early in the morning before it was time to dress for breakfast, in afternoons when he had been out all day, and generally when he had nothing particular to do, he was accustomed to dig patiently, and to plant and prune, and drain and trench, in this garden of his. He was a strong fellow, who had always lived a steady kind of life, so that he had a constitution utterly unimpaired, and spirits to match. These last were so good that he generally rose in the morning with the kind of feeling which every boy experiences during the holidays – that the day was not long enough for all the enjoyable occupations which were before him, and that it was incumbent on him to rise up and enter into possession of these delights with as little loss of time as might be.

For there were so many pleasant things daily occurring, and, wonderful to relate, they were real, absolute duties. There were those cattle to be drafted that had been brought from the Lost Waterhole, most of which he had not seen for six months. There were those nice steers to ride through, now so grown and fattened – indeed almost ready for market. There were ever so many pretty little

calves, white and roan and red, which he had never seen at all, following their mothers, and which were of course to be branded. It was not an unpleasant office placing the brand carefully upon their tender skins, an office he seldom delegated – seeing the J R indelibly imprinted thereon, with the consciousness that each animal so treated might be considered to be a five-pound note added to his property and possessions.

There was the wild-fowl shooting in the lagoons and marshes which lay amid his territory; the kangaroo hunting with favourite greyhounds; the jolly musters at his neighbours' stations – all cattlemen like himself; and the occasional races, picnics, balls, and parties at the country town, where resided many families, including divers young ladies, whose fresh charms often caused Jack's heart to bound like a cricket-ball. He was in great force at the annual race meetings. Then all the good fellows – and there were many squatters in those days that deserved the appellation – who lived within a hundred miles would come down to Hampden, the country town referred to; and great would be the joy and jollity of that week. Everybody, in a general way, bred, trained, and rode his own horses; and as everybody, in a general way, was young and active, the arrangement was productive of excellent racing and unlimited fun.

Then the race ball, at which everybody made it a point of honour to dance all night. Then the smaller dances, picnics, and riding parties – for nearly all the Hampden young ladies could ride well. While the “schooling” indulged in by Jack and his contemporaries, under the stimulus of ladies' eyes, over the stiff fences which surrounded Hampden, was “delightfully dangerous,” as one of the girls observed, regretting that such amusements were to her prohibited. At the end of the week everybody went peaceably home again, fortified against such dullness as occasionally invades that freest of all free lives, that pleasantest of all pleasant professions – the calling of a squatter.

Several times in each year, generally in the winter time, our hero would hold a great general gathering at Marshmead, and would “muster for fat cattle,” as the important operation was termed. Then all the neighbours within fifty miles would come over, or send their stockmen, as the case might be, and there would be great fun for a few days – galloping about and around, and “cutting out,” in the camp every day; feasting, and smoking, and singing, and story-telling, both in the cottage and the huts, with a modest allowance of drinking (in the district around Hampden there was very little of that), by night. After a few days of this kind of work, Jack would go forth proudly on the war-path with his stockman, Geordie Stirling, and a black boy, and in front of them a good draft of unusually well-bred fat cattle, in full route for the metropolis – a not very lengthened drive – during which no possible care by day or by night was omitted by Jack or his subordinates – indeed, they seldom slept, except by snatches, for the last ten days of the journey, never put the cattle in the yard for any consideration whatever, but saw them safely landed at their market, and ready for the flattering description with which they were always submitted to the bidding of the butchers.

This truly important operation concluded, Geordie and the boy were generally sent back the next day, and Jack proceeded to enjoy himself for a fortnight, as became a dweller in the wilderness who had conducted his enterprise to that point of success which comprehends the cheque in your pocket. How he used to enjoy those lovely genuine holidays, after his hard work! for the work, while it lasted, *was* pretty hard. And, though Jack with his back to the fire in the club smoking-room, laying down the law about the “Orders in Council” or the prospects of the next Assembly Ball, did not give one the idea of a life of severe self-denial, yet neither does a sailor on shore. And as Jack Tar, rolling down the street, “with courses free,” is still the same man who, a month since, was holding on to a spar (and life) at midnight, reefing the ice-hard sail, with death and darkness around for many a league; so our Jack, leading his horse across a cold plain, and tramping up to his ankles in frosted mud, the long night through, immediately behind his half-seen drove, was the same man, only in the stage of toil and endurance, preceding and giving keener zest to that of enjoyment. Our young squatter was a very sociable fellow, and had plenty of friends. He wished ill to no man, and would rather do a kindness to any one than not. He liked all kinds of people for all kinds of opposite qualities. He liked

the “fast” men, because they were often clever and generally had good manners. There was no danger of his following their lead, because he was unusually steady; and besides, if he had any obstinacy it was in the direction of choosing his own path. He liked the *savants*, and the musical celebrities, and the “good” people, because he sympathized with all their different aims or attainments. He liked the old ladies because of their experience and improving talk; and he liked, or rather loved, all the young ladies, tall or short, dark or fair, slow, serious, languishing, literary – there was something very nice about all of them. In fact, Jack Redgrave liked everybody, and everybody liked him. He had that degree of amiability which proceeds from a rooted dislike to steady thinking, combined with strong sympathies. He hated being bored in any way himself, and tried to protect others from what annoyed him so especially. No wonder that he was popular.

After two or three weeks of town life, into which he managed to compress as many dinners, dances, talks, flirtations, rides, drives, new books, and new friends, as would have lasted any moderate man a year, he would virtuously resolve to go home to Marshmead. After beginning to sternly resolve and prepare on Monday morning, he generally went on resolving and preparing till Saturday, at some hour of which fatal day he would depart, telling himself that he had had enough town for six months.

In a few days he would be back at Marshmead. Then a new period of enjoyment commenced, as he woke in the pure fresh bush air – his window I need not state was always open at night – and heard the fluty carols of the black and white birds which “proclaim the dawn,” and the lowing of the dairy herd being fetched up by Geordie, who was a preternaturally early riser.

A stage or two on the town side of his station lived Bertram Tunstall, a great friend of his, whose homestead he always made the day before reaching home. They were great cronies.

Tunstall was an extremely well-educated man, and had a far better head than Jack, whom he would occasionally lecture for want of method, punctuality, and general heedlessness of the morrow. Jack had more life and energy than his friend, to whom, however, he generally deferred in important matters. They had a sincere liking and respect for one another, and never had any shadow of coldness fallen upon their friendship. When either man went to town it would have been accounted most unfriendly if he had not within the week, or on his way home, visited the other, and given him the benefit of his new ideas and experiences.

Jack accordingly rode up to the “Lightwoods” half an hour before sunset, and seeing his friend sitting in the verandah reading, raised a wild shout and galloped up to the garden gate.

“Well, Bertie, old boy, how serene and peaceful we look. No wonder those ruffianly agricultural agitators think we squatters never do any work, and ought to have our runs taken away and given to the poor. Why, all looks as quiet as if everything was done and thought about till next Christmas, and as if you had been reading steadily in that chair since I saw you last.”

“Even a demagogue, Jack, would hesitate to believe that because a man read occasionally he didn’t work at all. I wish *they* would read more, by the way; then they wouldn’t be so illogical. But I really haven’t much to do just now, except in the garden. I’m a store-cattle man, you know, and my lot being well broken in – ”

“You’ve only to sit in the verandah and read till they get fat. That’s the worst of our life. There isn’t enough for a man of energy to do – and upon my word, old fellow, I’m getting tired of it.”

“Tired of what?” asked his friend, rather wonderingly; “tired of your life, or tired of your bread and butter, because the butter is too abundant? Oh, I see, we are just returned from town, where we met a young lady who – ”

“Not at all; not that I didn’t meet a very nice girl – ”

“You always do. If you went to Patagonia, you’d say, “Pon my word I met a very nice girl there, considering – her hair wasn’t very greasy, she had good eyes and teeth, and her skin – her skins, I mean – had not such a bad odour when you got used to it.’ You’re such a very tolerant fellow.”

“You be hanged; but this Ellen Middleton really *was* a nice girl, capital figure, nice face, good expression you know, and reads – so few girls read at all nowadays.”

“I believe they read just as much as or more than ever; only when a fellow takes a girl for good and all, to last him for forty or fifty years, if he live so long, she'd need to be a *very* nice girl indeed, as you say.”

“Don't talk in that utilitarian way; one would think you had no heart; but it does seem an awful risk, doesn't it? Suppose one got taken in, as you do sometimes about horses ‘incurably lame,’ or ‘no heart,’ like that brute Bolivar I gave such a price for. What a splendid thing it would be if one were only a Turk, and could marry every year and believe one was acting most religiously and devoutly.”

“Come, Jack, who is talking unprofitably now? Something's gone wrong with you evidently. Here comes dinner.”

After dinner the friends sat and smoked in the broad verandah, and looked out over the undulating grassy downs, timbered like a park, and at the blue starry night.

“I really was in earnest,” said Jack, “when I talked about being tired of the sort of life you and I, and all the fellows in this district, are leading just now.”

“Were you though?” asked his friend; “what's amiss with it?”

“Well, we are wasting our time, I consider, with these small cattle stations. No one has room for more than two or three thousand head of cattle. And what are they?”

“Only a pleasant livelihood,” answered his friend, “including books, quiet, fresh air, exercise, variety, a dignified occupation, and perfect independence, plus one or two thousand a year income. It's not much, I grant you; but I'm a moderate man, and I feel almost contented.”

“What's a couple of thousand a year in a country like this?” broke in Jack, impetuously, “while those sheep-holding fellows in Riverina are making their five or ten upon country only half or a quarter stocked. They have only to breed up, and there they are, with fifty or a hundred thousand sheep. Sheep, with the run given in, will always be worth a pound ahead, whatever way the country goes.”

“I'm not so sure of that,” said Tunstall; “though I have never been across the Murray, and don't intend to go, as far as I know. As for sheep, I hate them, and I hate shepherds, lazy crawling wretches! they and the sheep are just fit to torment one another. Besides, how do you know these great profits *are* made? You're not much of an accountant, Jack, excuse me.”

“I didn't think you were so prejudiced,” quoth Jack, with dignity. “I can cipher fast enough when it's worth while. Besides, better heads than mine are in the spec. You know Foreland, Marsalay, the Milmans, and Hugh Brass, all longheaded men! They are buying up unstocked country or cattle runs, and putting on ewes by the ten thousand.”

“Better heads than yours may lie as low, my dear Jack; though I don't mean to say you have a bad head by any means. And as to the account-keeping you can do that very reasonably, like most other things — *when you try*, when you try, old man. But you don't often try, you careless, easygoing beggar that you are, except when you are excited – as you are now – by something in the way of natural history – a mare's nest, so to speak.”

“This mare's nest will have golden eggs in it then. Theodorus Sharpe told me that he made as much in one year from the station he bought out there as he had done in half-a-dozen while he was wasting his life (that was his expression) down here.”

“Has the benevolent Theodorus any unstocked back country to dispose of?” asked Tunstall, quietly.

“Well, he has one place to sell – a regular bargain,” said Jack, rather hesitatingly, “but we didn't make any special agreement about it. I am to go out and see the country for myself.”

“And suppose you do like it, and believe a good deal more of what Theodorus Sharpe tells you than I should like to do, what then?”

“Why then I shall sell Marshmead, buy a large block of country, and put on breeding sheep.”

“I suppose it wouldn't be considered perfectly Eastern hospitality to call a man a perfect fool in one's own house. But, Jack, if you do this thing I shall *think* so. You may quarrel with me if you like.”

“I should never quarrel with you, dear old boy, whatever you said or thought. Be sure of that,” said Jack, feelingly. “We have been too long friends and brothers for that. But I reserve *my* right to think you an unambitious, unprogressive what’s-your-name. You will be eaten out by cockatoos in another five years, when I am selling out and starting for my European tour.”

“I will take the chance of that,” said Tunstall; “but, joking apart, I would do anything to persuade you not to go. Besides, you have a duty to perform to this district, where you have lived so long, and, on the whole, done so well. I thought you were rather strong on the point, though I confess I am not, of duty to one’s country socially, politically, and what not.”

“Well, I grant you I had notions of that kind once,” admitted Jack, “but then you see all these small towns have become so confoundedly democratic lately, that I think we squatters owe them nothing, and must look after our own interests.”

“Which means making as much money as ever we can, and by whatever means. Jack! Jack! the demon of vulgar ambition, mere material advancement, has seized upon you, and I can see it is of no use talking. My good old warm-hearted Jack has vanished, and in his place I see a mere money-making speculator, gambling with land and stock instead of cards and dice. If you make the money you dream of, it will do you no good, and if not – ”

“Well, if not? Suppose I don’t win?”

“Then you will lose your life, or all that makes life worth having. I have never seen a ruined man who had not lost much beside his years and his money. I can’t say another word. Good-night!”

Next morning the subject was not resumed. The friends wrung each other’s hands silently at parting, and Jack rode home to Marshmead.

When he got to the outer gate of the paddock he opened it meditatively, and as he swung it to without dismounting his heart smote him for the deed he was about to commit, as a species of treason against all his foregone life and associations.

CHAPTER II

“Who calleth thee, heart? World's strife,
With a golden heft to his knife.” —*E.B. Browning*

The sun was setting over the broad, open creek flat, which was dotted with groups of cattle, the prevailing white and roan colouring of which testified to their short-horn extraction. It was the autumnal season, but the early rains, which never failed in *that* favoured district, had promoted the growth of a thick and green if rather short sward, grateful to the eye after the somewhat hot day. A couple of favourite mares and half-a dozen blood yearlings came galloping up, neighing, and causing Hassan, his favourite old hack, to put up his head and sidle about. Everything looked prosperous and peaceful, and, withal, wore that indescribable air of half solitude which characterizes the Australian bush.

Jack's heart swelled as he saw the place which he had first chosen out of the waste, which he had made and built up, stick by stick, hut by hut, into its present comfortable completeness, and he said to himself – “I have half a mind to stick to old Hampden after all!” Here was the place where, a mere boy, he had ridden a tired horse one night, neither of them having eaten since early morn, into the thick of a camp of hostile blacks! How he had called upon the old horse with sudden spur, and how gallantly the good nag, so dead beat but a moment before, had answered, and carried him safely away from the half-childish, half-ferocious beings who would have knocked him on the head with as little remorse then as an opossum! Yonder was where the old sod but stood, put up by him and the faithful Geordie, and in which he had considered himself luxuriously lodged, as a contrast to living under a dray.

Over there was where he had sowed his first vegetable seeds, cutting down and carrying the saplings with which it was fenced. It was, certainly, so small that the blacks believed he had buried some one there, whom he had done to death secretly, and would never be convinced to the contrary, disbelieving both his vows and his vegetables. There was the stockyard which he and Geordie had put up, carrying much of the material on their shoulders, when the bullocks, as was their custom, “quite frequent,” were lost for a week.

He gazed at the old slab hut, the first real expensive regular station-building which the property had boasted. How proud he had been of it too! Slabs averaging over a foot wide! Upper and lower wall-plates all complete. Loop holes, necessities of the period, on either side of the chimney. Never was there such a hut. It was the first one he had helped to build, and it was shrined as a palace in his imagination for years after.

And now that the rude old days were gone, and the pretty cottage stood, amid the fruitful orchard and trim flower-beds, that the brown face of Harry the groom appears, from a well-ordered stable, with half-a-dozen colts and hacks duly done by at rack and manger, that the stackyard showed imposingly with its trimly-thatched ricks, and that the table was already laid by Mrs. Stirling, the housekeeper, in the cool dining-room, and “decored with napery” very creditable to a bachelor establishment; – was he to leave all this realized order, this capitalized comfort, and go forth into the arid wilderness of the interior, suffering the passed-away privations of the “bark hut and tin pot era” – all for the sake of – what? Making more money! He felt ashamed of himself, as Geordie came forward with a smile of welcome upon his rugged face, and said —

“Well, master, I was afraid you was never coming back. Here's that fellow Fakewell been and mustered on the sly again, and it's the greatest mercy as I heard only the day before.”

“You were there, I'll be bound, Geordie.”

“Ye’ll ken that, sir, though I had to ride half the night. It was well worth a ride, though. I got ten good calves and a gra-and two-year-old, unbranded heifer, old Poll’s, you’ll mind her, that got away at weaning.”

“I don’t remember – but how did you persuade Fakewell to take your word? I should have thought he’d have forged half-a-dozen mothers for a beast of that age.”

“Well, we had a sair barney, well nigh a fight, you might be sure. At last I said, ‘I’ll leave it to the black boy to say whose calf she is, and if he says the wrong cow you shall have her.’

“‘But how am I to know,’ says he, ‘that you haven’t told him what to say?’

“‘You saw him come up. Hoo could I know she was here?’

“‘Well, that’s true,’ says he. ‘Well, now you tell me the old cow’s name as you say she belongs to, so as he can’t hear, and then I’ll ask him the question.’

“‘All right,’ I said, ‘you hear the paction (to all the stockmen, and they gathered round); Mr. Fakewell says he’ll give me that heifer, the red beast with the white tail, if Sandfly there can tell the auld coo’s name right. You see the callant didna come with me; he just brought up the fresh horses.’

“‘All right,’ they said.

“So Fakewell says – ‘Now, Sandfly, who does that heifer belong to?’

“The small black imp looks serious at her for a minute, and then his face broke out into a grin all over. ‘That one belong to Mr. Redgrave – why that old ‘cranky Poll’s’ calf, we lose him out of weaner mob last year.’

“All right, that’s so,” says Fakewell, uncommon sulky, while all the men just roared; ‘but don’t you brand yer calves when you wean ’em?’

“That one get through gate, and Mr. Redgrave says no use turn back all the mob, then tree fall down on fence and let out her and two more. But that young cranky Poll safe enough, I take Bible oath.’

“‘You’ll do; take your heifer,’ says he; ‘I’ll be even with some one for this.’”

“I dare say he didn’t get the best of you, Master Geordie,” said Jack, kindly; “he’d be a sharp fellow if he did. You were going to muster the ‘Lost Waterhole Camp’ soon, weren’t you?”

“There’s a mob there that wants bringing in and regulating down there just uncommon bad. I was biding a bit, till you came home.”

“Well, Geordie, you can call me at daylight to-morrow. I’ll have an early breakfast and go out with you. You know I haven’t been getting up quite so early lately.”

“You can just wake as early as any one, when you like, sir; but I’ll call you. What horse shall I tell Harry?”

“Well, I’ll take ‘the Don,’ I think. No, tell him to get ‘Mustang,’ he’s the best cutting-out horse.”

“No man ever had a better servant,” thought Jack as he sat down in half an hour to his well-appointed table and well-served, well-cooked repast.

Geordie Stirling was as shrewd, staunch a Borderer as ever was reared in that somewhat bleak locality, a worthy descendant of the men who gathered fast with spear and brand, when the bale-fires gave notice that the moss-troopers were among their herds. He was sober, economical, and self-denying. He and his good wife had retained the stern doctrines in which their youth had been reared, but little acted upon by the circumstances and customs of colonial life.

Jack applied himself to his dinner with reasonable earnestness, having had a longish ride, and being one of those persons whose natural appetite is rarely interfered with by circumstances. He could always eat, drink, and sleep with a zest which present joy or sorrow to come had no power to disturb. He therefore appreciated the roast fowl and other home-grown delicacies which Mrs. Stirling placed before him, and settled down to a good comfortable read afterwards, leaving the momentous question of migration temporarily in abeyance. After all this was over, however, he returned to the consideration of the subject. He went over Fred Tunstall’s arguments, which he thought were well enough in their way, but savoured of a nature unprogressive and too easily contented. “It’s all very

well to be contented,” he said to himself; “and we are very fairly placed now, but a man must look ahead. Suppose these runs are cut up and sold by a democratic ministry, or allowed to be taken up, before survey, by cockatoos, where shall we be in ten years? Almost cockatoos ourselves, with run for four or five hundred head of cattle; a lot of fellows pestering our lives out; and a couple of thousand acres of purchased land. There’s no living to be made out of *that*. Not what I call a living; unless one were to milk his own cows, and so on. I hardly think I should do that. No! I’ll go in for something that will be growing and increasing year by year, not the other way. This district is getting worn out. The land is too good. The runs are too small and too close to one another, and will be smaller yet. No! my idea of a run is twenty miles frontage to a river – the Oxley or the Lachlan, with thirty miles back; then with twenty thousand ewes, or even ten to start with, you may expect something like an increase, and lots of ground to put them on. Then sell out and have a little Continental travel; come back, marry, and settle down. By Jove! here goes – Victory or Westminster Abbey!”

Inspired by these glorious visions, and conceiving quite a contempt for poor little Marshmead, with only 2,000 cattle and a hundred horses upon its 20,000 acres, Jack took out his writing materials and scribbled off the following advertisement: —

“Messrs. Drawe and Backwell have much pleasure in announcing the sale by auction, at an early period, of which due notice will be given, of the station known as Marshmead, in the Hampden district, with two thousand unusually well-bred cattle of the J R brand. The run, in point of quality, is one of the best, in a celebrated fattening district. The cattle are highly bred, carefully culled, and have always brought first-class prices at the metropolitan sale-yards. The improvements are extensive, modern, and complete. The only reason for selling this valuable property is that the proprietor contemplates leaving the colony.”

“There,” said Jack, laying down his pen, “that’s quite enough – puffing won’t sell a place, and everybody’s heard of Marshmead, and of the J R cattle, most likely. If they haven’t, they can ask. There’s no great difficulty in selling a first-class run. And now I’ll seal it up ready for the post, and turn in.”

Next morning, considerably to Geordie’s disappointment, Jack declined to go out to the “Lost Waterhole Camp,” telling him rather shortly (to conceal his real feelings) that he thought of selling the place, and that it would be time to muster when they were delivering.

“Going to sell the run!” gasped Geordie, perfectly aghast. “Why, master, what ever put such a thing into your head? Where will ye find a bonnier place than this? and there’s no such a herd of cattle in all the country round. Sell Marshmead! Why, you must have picked up that when in town.”

“Never mind where I picked it up,” said Jack, rather crossly; “I have thought the matter over well, you may believe, and as I have made up my mind there is no use in talking about it. You don’t suppose Hampden is all Australia?”

“No, but it’s one of the best bits upon the whole surface of it – and that I’ll live and die on,” said Geordie. “Look at the soil and the climate. Didn’t I go across the Murray to meet they store cattle, and wasna it nearly the death of me? Six weeks’ hard sun, and never a drop of rain. And blight, and flies, and bush mosquiteys; why, I’d rather live here on a pound a week than have a good station there. Think o’ the garden, too.”

“Well, Geordie,” said Jack, “all that’s very well, but look at the size of the runs! Why, I saw 1,000 head of fat cattle coming past one station I stayed at, in one mob, splendid cattle too; bigger and better than any of our little drafts we think such a lot of. Besides, I don’t mind heat, you know, and I’m bent on being a large stockholder, or none at all.”

“Weel, weel!” said Geordie, “you will never be convinced. I know you’ll just have your own way, but take care ye dinna gang the road to lose all the bonny place ye have worked hard for. The Lord keep ye from making haste to be rich.”

“I know, I know,” said Jack, testily; “but the Bible says nothing about changing your district. Abraham did that, you know, and evidently was getting crowded up where he was.”

“Master John, you’re not jestin’ about God’s Word! ye would never do the like o’ that, I know, but Elsie and I will pray ye’ll be properly directed – and Elspeth Stirling will be a sorrowful woman I know to stay behind, as she must, when all’s sold and ye go away to that desolate, waesome hot desert, where there’s neither Sabbaths, nor Christian men, nor the Word once in a year.”

The fateful advertisement duly appeared, and divers “intending purchasers,” introduced by Messrs. Drawe and Backwell, arrived at Marshmead, where they were met with that tempered civility which such visitors generally receive.

The usual objections were made. The run was not large enough; the boundaries were inconvenient or not properly defined; the stock were not as good as had been represented; the improvements were not sufficiently extensive. This statement was made by a young and aristocratic investor, who was about to be married. He was very critical about the height of the cottage walls, and the size of the sitting-room. The buildings were too numerous and expensive, and would take more money than they were worth to keep in repair. This was the report and opinion of an elderly purchaser (Scotch), who did not see the necessity of anything bigger than a two-roomed slab hut. Such an edifice had been quite enough for him (he was pleased to remark) to make twenty thousand pounds in, on the Lower Murray, and to drink many a gallon of whisky in. As such results and recreations comprised, in his estimation, “the whole duty of man,” he considered Jack’s neat outbuildings, and even the garden —*horresco referens!*— to be totally superfluous and unprofitable. He expressed his intention, if he were to do such an unlikely thing as to buy the wee bit kail-yard o’ a place, to pull two-thirds of the huts down.

All these criticisms, mingled with sordid chaffering, were extremely distasteful to Jack’s taste, and his temper suffered to such an extent that he had thought of writing to the agents to give no further orders for inspection. However, shortly after the departure of the objectionable old savage, as he profanely termed the veteran pastoralist, he received a telegram to say that the sale was concluded. Mr. Donald M’Donald, late of Binjee-Mungee, had paid half cash, and the rest at short-dated bills, and would send his nephew, Mr. Angus M’Tavish, to take delivery in a few days.

Long before these irrevocable matters had come to pass, our hero had bitterly repented of his determination. Those of his neighbours who were not on such terms of intimacy as to expostulate roundly, like Tunstall, could not conceal their distrust or disapproval of his course. Some were sincerely sorry to lose him as a neighbour, and this expression of feeling touched him more deeply than the opposition of the others.

Mr. M’Tavish arrived, and, after delivery of his credentials, the last solemnities of mustering and delivery were duly concluded.

The “nephew of his uncle” was an inexperienced but deeply suspicious youth, who declined to take the most obvious things for granted, and consistently disbelieved every word that was said to him. Geordie Stirling with difficulty refrained from laying hands upon him; and Jack was so disgusted with his “manners and customs” that, on the evening when the delivery was concluded, he declined to spend another night at old Marshmead, but betook himself, with his two favourite hacks, specially reserved at time of sale, to the nearest inn, from which he made the best of his way to the metropolis.

The disruption of old ties and habitudes was much more painful than he had anticipated. His two faithful retainers located themselves upon an adjoining farm, which their savings had enabled them to purchase. To this they removed their stock, which was choice though not numerous. Geordie, after his first warning, said no more, knowing by experience that his master, when he had set his mind upon a thing, was more obstinate than many a man of sterner mould. Too sincere to acquiesce, his rugged, weather-beaten lineaments retained their look of solemn disapproval, mingled at times with a curiously pathetic gaze, to the last.

With his wife Elspeth, a woman of much originality and force of character, combined with deep religious feeling of the old-fashioned Puritan type, the case was different.

She had a strong and sincere affection for John Redgrave, whom she had known from his early boyhood, and in many ways had she demonstrated this. She had unobtrusively and efficiently ministered to his comfort for years. She had not scrupled to take him to task in a homely and earnest way for minor faults and backslidings, all of which rebukes and remonstrances he had taken in good part, as springing from an over-zealous but conscientious desire for his welfare. His friends smiled at the good old woman's warnings and testifyings, occasionally delivered, when performing her household duties, in the presence of any company then and there assembled, by whom she was not in the slightest degree abashed, or to be turned from any righteous purpose.

"Eh, Maister John, ye'll no be wantin' to ride anither of thae weary steeplechasers?" she had been pleased to inquire upon a certain occasion; "ye'll just be fa'in doon and hurtin' yersel', or lamin' and woundin' the puir beastie that's been granted to man for a' useful purposes!"

She had been in the habit of "being faithful to him," as she termed divers very plain spoken and home-thrusting exhortations in respect to his general habits and walk in life, whenever she had reason to think such allocution to be necessary. She had taken him to task repeatedly for unprofitable reading upon, and lax observance of, the Sabbath; for a too devoted adherence to racing, and the unpardonable sin of betting; for too protracted absences in the metropolis, and consequent neglect of his interests at Marshmead; and, generally, for any departure from the strict line of Christian life and manners which she rigidly observed herself, and compelled Geordie to practice. Though sometimes testy at such infringements upon the liberty of the subject, Jack had sufficient sense and good feeling to recognize the true and deep anxiety for his welfare from which this excess of carefulness sprang. In every other respect old Elsie's rule was without flaw or blemish. For all the years of their stay at Marshmead, no bachelor in all the West had enjoyed such perfect immunity from the troubles and minor miseries to which Australian employers are subjected. Spotless cleanliness, perfect comfort, and proverbial cookery, had been the unbroken experience of the Marshmead household. It was a place at which all guests, brought there for pleasure or duty, hastened to arrive, and lingered with flattering unwillingness to leave.

And now this pleasant home was to be broken up, the peaceful repose and organized comfort to be abandoned, and the farewell words to be said to the faithful retainer.

Jack felt parting with the old woman more than he cared to own; he felt almost ashamed and slightly irritated at the depth of his emotion. "Confound it," he said to himself, "it's very hard that one can't sell one's run and move off to a thinly-stocked country without feeling as if one had committed a species of wrong and treachery, and having to make as many affecting farewells as I have no doubt my governor did when he left England for the *terra incognita* Australia."

"Well, Elsie," he said, with an attempt at ease and jocularity he was far from feeling, "I must say good-bye. I hope you and Geordie will be snug and comfortable at your farm. I'll write to you when I'm settled in Riverina; and, if I do as well as some others, I shall make a pot of money, and be off to the old country in a few years."

He put out his hand, but the old woman heeded it not, but gazed in his face with a wistful, pleading look, and the tears filled her eyes, not often seen in melting mood, as she said —

"Oh, Maister John, oh, my bairn, that I should live to see you ride away from the bonny home where ye've lived so long, and been aye respeckit and useful in your generation. Do ye think ye have the Lord's blessing for giving up the lot where He has placed ye and blessed ye, for to gang amang strangers and scorners — all for the desire of gain? I misdoot the flitting, and the craving for the riches that perish in the using, sairly — sairly. Dinna forget your Bible; and pray, oh, pray to Him, my bairn, that ye may be direckit in the right way. I canna speak mair for greetin' and mistrustin' that my auld een have looked their last on your bonny face. May the Lord have ye in His keeping."

Her tears flowed unrestrainedly, as she clasped his hand in both of hers, and then turned away in silence.

“Geordie,” said our hero, strongly inclined to follow suit, “you mustn’t let Elsie fret like this, you know. I am not going away for ever. You’ll see me back most likely in the summer, for a little change and a mouthful of sea air. I shall find you taking all the prizes at the Hampden show with that bull calf of old Cherry’s.”

“It’s little pleasure we’ll have in him, or the rest of the stock, for a while,” answered Geordie. “The place will no be natural like, wantin’ ye. The Lord’s will be done,” added he, reverently. “We’re a’ in His keepin’. I’d come with ye, for as far and as hot as yon sa-andy desert o’ a place is, if it werena for the wife. God bless ye, Maister John!”

CHAPTER III

“So forward to fresh fields and pastures new.” —*Milton*.

Jack's spirits had recovered their usual high average when he found himself once more at the club in a very free and unfettered condition, and clothed with the prestige of a man who had sold his station well, and was likely to rise in (pastoral) life.

He was bold, energetic, moderately experienced, and had all that sanguine trust in the splendid probabilities of life common to those youthful knights who have come scatheless through the tourney, and have never, as yet, been

“Dragged from amid the horses' feet,
With dented shield and helmet beat.”

He derived a little amusement (for he possessed a keen faculty of observation, though, as with other gifts, he did not always make the best use of that endowment) from the evident brevet rank which was accorded to him by the moneyed and other magnates. His advice was asked as to stock investments. He was consulted upon social and political questions. Invitations, of which he had always received a fair allowance, came in showers. Report magnified considerably the price he had received for Marshmead. Many chaperons and haughty matrons of the most exacting class bid eagerly for his society. In short, Jack Redgrave had become the fashion, and for a time revelled in all the privileged luxury of that somewhat intoxicating position. Notwithstanding a fine natural tendency *desipere in loco*, our hero was much too shrewd and practical a personage not to be fully aware that this kind of thing could not last. He had a far higher ambition than would have permitted him to subside into a club swell, or a social butterfly, permanently. He had, besides, that craving for bodily exercise, even labour, common to men of vigorous organization, which, however lulled and deadened for a time, could not be controlled for any protracted period.

He had, therefore, kept up a reasonably diligent search among the station agents and others for any likely investment which might form the nucleus of the large establishment, capable of indefinite expansion, of which he had vowed to become the proprietor.

Such a one, at length (for, as usual when a man has his pockets full of money, and is hungering and thirsting to buy, one would think that there was not a purchaseable run on the whole continent of Australia), was “submitted to his notice” by a leading agent; the proprietor, like himself in the advertisement of Marshmead, was “about to leave the colony,” so that all doubt of purely philanthropical intention in selling this “potentiality of fabulous wealth” was set at rest. Jack took the mail that night, with the offer in his pocket, and in a few days found himself deposited at “a lodge in the wilderness” of Riverina, face to face with the magnificent enterprize.

Gondaree had been a cattle-station from the ancient days, when old Morgan had taken it up with five hundred head of cattle and two or three convict servants, in the interests and by the order of the well-known Captain Kidd, of Double Bay. A couple of huts had been built, with stock-yard and gallows. The usual acclimatization and pioneer civilization had followed. One of the stockmen had been speared: a score or two of the blacks, to speak well within bounds, had been shot. By intervals of labour, sometimes toilsome and incessant, oftener monotonous and mechanical, the sole recreation being a mad debauch on the part of master and man, the place slowly but surely and profitably progressed – progressed with the tenacious persistence and sullen obstinacy of the race, which, notwithstanding toils, dangers, broils, bloodshed, and reckless revelries, rarely abandons the object originally specified. Pioneer or privateer, merchant or missionary, the root qualities of the great colonizing breed are identical. They perish in the breach, they drink and gamble, but they rarely

raise the siege. The standard *is* planted, though by reckless or unworthy hands; still goes on the grand march of civilization, with splendour of peace and pomp of war. With the fair fanes and foul alleys of cities – with peaceful village and waving cornfield – so has it ever been; so till the dawn of a purer day, a higher faith, must it ever be, the ceaseless “martyrdom of man.”

“And the individual withers,
And the race is more and more.”

Gondaree had advanced. The drafts of fat cattle had improved in number and quality – at first, in the old, old days, when supply bore hard upon demand, selling for little more than provided an adequate quantity of flour, tea, sugar, and tobacco for the year’s consumption. But the herd had spread by degrees over the wide plains of “the back,” as well as over the broad river flats and green reed-beds of “the frontage,” and began to be numbered by thousands rather than by the original hundreds.

Changes slowly took place. Old Morgan had retired to a small station of his own with a herd of cattle and horses doubtfully accumulated, as was the fashion of the day, by permission of his master, who had never once visited Gondaree.

The old stockmen were dead, or gone none knew whither; but another overseer, of comparatively modern notions, occupied his place, and while enduring the monotonous, unrelieved existence, cursed the unprogressive policy which debarred him from the sole bush recreation – in that desert region – of planning and putting up “improvements.”

About the period of which we speak, it had occurred to the trustees of the late Captain Kidd that, as cattle-stations had risen much in value in that part of the country, from the rage which then obtained to dispose of those despised animals and replace them with sheep, it was an appropriate time to sell. The station had paid fairly for years past. Not a penny had been spent upon its development in any way; and now, “as those Victorian fellows and others, who ought to know better, were going wild about salt-bush cattle-stations to put sheep on – why, this was clearly the time to put Gondaree in the market.”

As Jack drove up in the unpretending vehicle which bore Her Majesty’s mails and adventurous travellers to the scarce-known township of “far Bochara,” the day was near its close. The homestead was scarcely calculated to prepossess people. They had passed the river a couple of miles back, and now halted at a sandy hillock, beneath which lay a sullen lagoon. There were two ruinous slab huts, with bark roofs, at no great distance from each other. There was a stock-yard immediately at the back of the huts, where piles of bones, with the skulls and horns of long-slain beasts, told the tale of the earliest occupation of the place.

There was no garden, no horse-paddock, nothing of any kind, sort, or description but the two huts, which might have originally cost ten pounds each. Jack, taking his valise and rug, walked towards the largest hut, from which a brown-faced young fellow, in a Crimean shirt and moleskin trousers, had emerged.

“You are Mr. – Mr. – Redgrave,” said he, consulting a well-thumbed letter which he took out of his pocket. “I have orders to show you the place and the cattle. Won’t you come in?”

Jack stepped over two or three impediments which barred the path, and narrowly escaped breaking his shins over a bullock’s head, which a grand-looking kangaroo dog was gnawing. He glanced at the door, which was let into the wall-plate of the hut above and below, after the oldest known form of hinge, and sat down somewhat ruefully upon a wooden stool.

“You’re from town, I suppose?” said the young man, mechanically filling his pipe, and looking with calm interest at Jack’s general get-up.

“Yes,” answered Jack, “I am. You are aware that I have come to look at the run. When can we make a beginning?”

“To-morrow morning,” was the answer. “I’ll send for the horses at daylight.”

“How do you get on without a horse-paddock?” asked Jack, balancing himself upon the insecure stool, and looking enviously at his companion, who was seated upon the only bed in the apartment. “Don’t you sometimes lose time at musters?”

“Time ain’t of much account on the Warroo,” answered the overseer, spitting carelessly upon the earthen floor. “We have a cursed sight more of it than we know what to do with. And Captain Kidd didn’t believe in improvements. Many a time I’ve written and written for this and that, but the answer was that old Morgan did very well without them for so many years, and so might I. I got sick of it, and just rubbed on like the rest. If I had had my way, I’d have burned down the thundering old place long ago, and put up everything new at Steamboat Point. But you might as well talk to an old working bullock as to our trustees.”

“What are the cattle like?” inquired Mr. Redgrave.

“Well, not so bad, considering there hasn’t been a bull bought these ten years. It’s first-class fattening country; I dare say you saw that if you noticed any mobs as you came along.” Jack nodded. “When the country is real good cattle will hold their own, no matter how they’re bred. There ain’t much the matter with the cattle – a few stags and rough ones, of course, but pretty fair on the whole. I expect you’re hungry after your journey. The hut-keeper will bring in tea directly.”

In a few moments that functionary appeared, with a pair of trousers so extremely dirty as to suggest the idea that he had been permanently located upon a back block, where economy in the use of water was a virtue of necessity. Rubbing down the collection of slabs which did duty for a table with a damp cloth, he placed thereon a tin dish, containing a large joint of salt beef, a damper like the segment of a cart-wheel, and a couple of plates, one of which was of the same useful metal as the dish. He then departed, and presently appeared with a very black camp-kettle, or billy, of hot tea, which he placed upon the floor; scattering several pannikins upon the board, one of which contained sugar, he lounged out again, after having taken a good comprehensive stare at the new comer.

“We smashed our teapot last muster,” said the manager, apologetically, “and we can’t get another till the drays come up. This is a pretty rough shop, as you see, but I suppose you ain’t just out from England?”

“I have been in the bush before,” said Jack, sententiously. “Are the flies always as bad here?”

“Well, they’re enough to eat your eyes out, and the mosquitoes too – worse after the rains; but they say it’s worse lower down the river.”

“Worse than this! I should hardly have thought it possible,” mused Jack, as the swarming insects disputed the beef with him, and caused him to be cautious of shutting his mouth after enclosing a few accidentally. The bread was black with them, the sugar, the table generally, and every now and then one of a small black variety would dart straight into the corner of his eye.

When the uninviting meal was over, Jack walked outside, and, lighting his pipe, commenced to consider the question of the purchase of the place. With the sedative influences of the great narcotic a more calmly judicial view of the question presented itself.

He was sufficiently experienced to know that, whereas you may make a homestead and adjuncts sufficiently good to satisfy the most exacting Squatter-Sybarite, if such be wanting, you can by no means build a good run if the country, that is, extent and quality of pasture, be wanting. A prudent buyer, therefore, does not attach much value to improvements, scrutinizing carefully the run itself as the only source of future profits.

“It is a beastly hole!” quoth Jack, as he finished his pipe, “only fit for a black fellow, or a Scotchman on his promotion; but from what I saw of the cattle as I came along (and they tell no lies) there is no mistake about the country. They were all as fat as pigs, the yearlings and calves, as well as the aged cattle. I never saw them look like that at Marshmead, or even at Glen na Voirlich, which used to be thought the richest spot in our district. There is nothing to hinder me clearing out the whole of the herd and having ten or fifteen thousand ewes on the place before lambing time. There is no scab

and no foot-rot within a colony of us. With fair luck, I could have up a woolshed in time to shear; and a decent lambing, say 70 per cent., would give me – let me see, how many altogether after shearing?”

Here Jack went into abstruse arithmetical calculations as to the numbers, sexes, ages, and value of his possible property, and, after a very rapid subtraction of cattle and multiplication of sheep, saw himself the owner of fifty thousand of the last-named fashionable animals, which, when sold at twenty-five shillings per head, or even twenty-seven and sixpence (everything given in), would do very well until he should have visited Europe, and returned to commence operations upon a scale even more grand and comprehensive.

“I think I see my way,” he said to himself, finally, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. “Of course one must rough it at first; the great thing in these large stock operations is decisiveness.”

He accordingly decided to go to bed at once, and informed Mr. Hawkesbury, the overseer, that he should be ready as soon as they could see in the morning, and so betook himself to a couch, of which the supporting portion was ingeniously constructed of strips of hide, and the mattress, bed-clothing, curtains, &c., represented by a pair of blankets evidently akin in antiquity, as in hue, to Bob the cook's trousers.

Accepting his host's brief apologies, Jack turned in, and Mr. Hawkesbury, having disembarassed himself of his boots, pulled a ragged opossum-rug over him, and lay down before the fire-place, with his pipe in his mouth.

The coach and mail travelling, continued during two preceding days and nights, had banged and shaken Jack's hardy frame sufficiently to induce a healthy fatigue. In two minutes he was sound asleep, and for three or four hours never turned in his bed. Then he woke suddenly, and with the moment of consciousness was enabled to realize Mr. Gulliver's experiences after the first flight of the arrows of the Liliputians.

He arose swiftly, and muttering direful maledictions upon the Warroo, and all inhabitants of its borders from source to mouth, frontage and back, myall, salt-bush, and cotton-bush, pulled on his garments and looked around.

It yet wanted three hours to daylight. Mr. Hawkesbury was sleeping like an infant. He could see the moon through a crack in the bark roof, and hear the far hoarse note of the night-bird. Taking his railway rug, he opened the door, which creaked upon its Egyptian hinge, and walked forth.

“Beautiful was the night. Behind the black wall of the forest.”

And so on, as Longfellow has it in mournful *Evangeline*. The forest was not exactly black, being partly of the moderately-foliaged eucalyptus, and having a strip of the swaying, streaming myall, of a colour more resembling blue than black. Still there were shadows sufficiently darksome and weird in conjunction with the glittering moonbeams to appeal to the stranger's poetic sympathies. The deep, still waters of the lagoon lay like dulled silver, ever and anon stirred into ripples of wondrous brilliancy by the leaping of a fish, or the sinuous trail of a reptile or water rodent. All was still as in the untroubled æons ere discovery. In spite of the squalid surroundings and the sordid human traces, Nature had resumed her grand solitude and the majestic hush of the desert.

“All this is very fine,” quoth Jack to himself. “What a glorious night; but I must try and have a little more sleep somehow.” He picked out a tolerably convenient spot between the buttressed roots of a vast casuarina, which from laziness rather than from taste had been spared by the ruthless axes of the pioneers, and wrapping himself in his rug lay down in the sand. The gentle murmur of the ever-sounding, mournful-sighing tree soon hushed his tired senses, and the sun was rising as he raised himself on his elbow and looked round.

It was a slightly different sleeping arrangement from those to which he had been long accustomed. Nor were the concomitants less strange. A large pig had approached nearer than was altogether pleasant. She was evidently speculating as to the weak, defenceless, possibly edible condition of the traveller. Jack had not been conversant with the comprehensively carnivorous habits of Warroo pigs. He was, therefore, less alarmed than amused. He also made the discovery that he was

no great distance from a populous ant-hill, of which, however, the free and enlightened citizens had not as yet “gone for him.” Altogether he fully realized the necessity for changing front, and, rising somewhat suddenly to his feet, was about to walk over to the hut when the rolling thunder of horses at speed, rapidly approaching, decided him to await the new sensation.

Round a jutting point of timber a small drove of twenty or thirty horses came at a headlong gallop in a cloud of dust, and made straight for the stockyard in the direct track for which Jack's bedroom was situated. Standing close up to the old tree, which was sufficiently strong and broad to shield him, he awaited the cavalry charge. They passed close on either side, to the unaffected astonishment of an old mare, who turned her eyes upon him with a wild glare as she brushed his shoulder with her sweeping mane. Dashing into the large receiving-yard of the old stockyard, they stopped suddenly and began to walk gently about, as if fully satisfied with themselves. Following fast came two wild riders, one of whom was a slight half-caste lad, and the other, to Jack's great surprise, a black girl of eighteen or twenty. This last child of the desert rode *en cavalier* on an ordinary saddle with extremely rusty stirrup-irons. Her long wavy hair fell in masses over her shoulders. Her eyes were soft and large, her features by no means unpleasing, and her unsophisticated teeth white and regular. Dashing up to the slip-rails, this young person jumped off her horse with panther-like agility, and putting up the heavy saplings, thus addressed Mr. Hawkesbury, who, with Jack, had approached: —

“By gum, Misser Hoxbry, you give me that horrid old mare to-day I ride her inside out, the ole brute.”

“What for, Wildduck?” inquired the overseer; “what's she been doing now?”

“Why, run away all over the country and break half-a-dozen times, and make me and Spitfire close up dead. Look at him.” Here she pointed to her steed, a small violent weed, whose wide nostril and heaving flank showed that he had been going best pace for a considerable period. “That boy, Billy Mortimer, not worth a cuss.”

Having volunteered this last piece of information, Wildduck pulled off the saddle, which she placed, cantle downward, against the fence, so as to permit the moistened padding to receive all drying influences of sun and air; then, dragging off the bridle to the apparent danger of Spitfire's front teeth, she permitted that excitable courser to wander at will.

“That one pull my arm off close up,” she remarked, “all along that ole devil of a mare. I'll take it out of her to-day, my word! Who's this cove?”

“Gentleman come up to buy station,” answered Hawkesbury; “by and by, master belong to you; and if you're a good girl he'll give you a new gown and a pound of tobacco. Now you get breakfast, and ride over to Jook-jook – tell'm all to meet us at the Long Camp to-morrow.”

“Kai-i!” said the savage damsel, in a long-drawn plaintive cry of surprise, as she put her fingers, with assumed shyness, up to her face, and peered roguishly through them; then, hitching up her scanty and tattered dress, she ran off without more conversation to the hut.

“Good gracious!” said Jack to himself, “I wonder what old Elsie and Geordie Stirling would think of all this; Moabitish women and all the rest of it, I suppose. However, I am not here for the present to regulate the social code of the Lower Warroo. Have you got the tribe here?” he said, aloud.

“No, Wildduck ran away from a travelling mob of cattle,” answered Hawkesbury. “She's a smart gin when she's away from grog, and a stunner at cutting out on a camp.”

That day passed in an exhaustive general tour round the run. Mounted upon an elderly stock-horse of unimpeachable figure, with legs considerably the worse for wear, and provided with a saddle which caused him to vow that never again would he permit himself to be dissociated from his favourite Wilkinson, Jack was piloted by Mr. Hawkesbury through the “frontage” and a considerable portion of the “back” regions of Gondaree. It was the same story: oceans of feed, water everywhere, all the cattle rolling fat. Nothing that the most hard-hearted buyer could object to, if troubled with but a grain of conscience. Billowy waves of oat grass, wild clover (*medicago sativa*), and half-a-dozen strange fodder plants, of which Redgrave knew not the names, adorned the great meadows or river flats;

while out of the immense reed-beds, the feathery tassels of which stirred in the breeze far above their heads, came ever and anon, at the crack of the stock-whip, large droves of cattle in Indian file, in such gorgeous condition that, as our hero could not refrain from saying, a dealer in fat stock might have taken the whole lot to market, cows, calves, bullocks and steers, without rejecting a beast.

Leaving these grand savannahs, when they proceeded to the more arid back country there was still no deterioration in the character of the pasturage. Myall and boree belts of timber, never known to grow upon “poor” or “sour” land, alternated with far-stretching plains, where the salt-bush, the cotton-bush, and many another salsiferous herb and shrub, betokened that Elysium of the squatter, “sound fattening country.” John Redgrave was charmed. He forgot the dog-hole he had left in the morning, the fleas, the pigs, the evil habiliments of Bob the cook, the uninviting meal, all the shocks and outrages upon his tastes and habits; his mind dwelt only upon the great extent and apparently half-stocked condition of Gondaree. And as they rode home by starlight the somewhat perilous stumbles of the old stock-horse only partially disturbed a reverie in which a new wool-shed, a crack wash-pen, every kind of modern “improvement,” embellished a model run, carrying fifty thousand high-caste merino sheep.

He demolished his well-earned supper of corned beef and damper that night with quite another species of appetite; and as he deposited himself in an extemporized hammock, above the reach of midnight marauders, he told himself that Gondaree was not such a bad place after all, and only wanted an owner possessed of sufficient brains to develop its great capabilities to become a pleasant, profitable, and childish safe investment.

Wildduck's mission had apparently been successful. The old mare was making off from the men's hut in a comparatively exhausted state, while a chorus of voices, accented with the pervading British oath, told of the arrival of a number of friends and allies. High among the noisiest of the talkers, and, it must be confessed, by no means reticent of strong language, rose the clear tones and childlike laughter of the savage damsel. In the delicate *badinage* likely to obtain in such a gathering it was apparent that she could well hold her own.

“My word, Johnny Dickson,” she was saying to a tall, lathy stripling, whose long hair protected the upper portion of his spine from all danger of sunstroke, “you get one big buster off that roan mare to-day; spread all over the ground, too. Thought you was goin' to peg out a free-selection.”

“You shut up, and go back to old man Jack, you black varmint,” retorted the unhorsed man-at-arms amid roars of laughter. “You ain't no great chop on a horse, except to ride him to death. I can back anything you'll tackle, or ere a black fellow between this and Adelaide. I'm half a mind to box your ears, you saucy slut.”

“Ha, ha,” yelled the girl, “*you* ride? that's a good un! You not game to get on the Doctor here to-morrow, not for twenty pound. You touch me! Why, ole Nanny fight you any day, with a yam-stick. *I* fight you myself, blessed if I don't.”

“What's all this?” demanded Mr. Hawkesbury, suddenly appearing on the scene. “Have any of you fellows been bringing grog on the place? Because it's a rascally shame, and I won't have it.”

“Well, sir,” said one of the stockmen, “one of the chaps had a bottle, quite accidental like, and the gin got a suck or two. That's what set her tongue goin'. But it's all gone now, and nothing broke. Which way do we go to-morrow?”

“Well, I want to muster those Bimbalong Creek cattle, and then put as many as we can get on the main camp, just to give this gentleman here (indicating Jack) a sort of idea of the numbers. Daylight start, remember, so don't be losing your horses.”

“All right,” said the self-constituted spokesman, the others merely nodding acquiescence; “we'll short-hobble them to-night – they can't get away very far.”

Considerably before daylight beefsteaks were frying, horses were being gathered up, and a variety of sounds proclaimed that when bent upon doing a day's work the dwellers around Gondaree could set about it in an energetic and business-like fashion. There was not a streak of crimson in

the pearly dawn-light, as the whole party, comprising more than a dozen men and the redoubtable Wildduck, rode silently along the indistinct trail which led "out back." There was a good deal of smoking and but little talk for the first hour. After that time converse became more general, and the pace was improved at a suggestion from Mr. Hawkesbury that the sooner they all got to the scene of their work the better, as it was a pretty good day's ride there and back.

"So it is," answered a hard, weather-beaten-looking, grizzled stockman. "I never see such a part of the country as this. If it was in other colonies I've been to they'd have had a good hut, and yards, and a horse-paddock at Bimbalong this years back. But they wouldn't spend a ten pound note or two, those Sydney merchants, not for to save the lives of every stockman on the Warroo."

"That wouldn't be much of a loss, Jingaree," said the overseer, laughing, while a sort of sardonic smile went the round of the company, as if they appreciated the satire; "and I shouldn't blame 'em if that was the worst of it. But it's a loss to themselves, if they only knew it. All they can say is, plenty of money has been made on old Gondaree, as bad as it is. I hope the next owner will do as well – and better."

"Me think 'um you better git it back to me and ole man Jack," suggested Wildduck, now restored to her usual state of coolness and self-possession. "Ole man Jack own Gondaree water-hole by rights. Everybody say Gondaree people live like black fellows. What for you not give it us back again?"

"Well, I'm blowed," answered the overseer, aghast at the audacious proposition; "what next? No, no, Wildduck. We've improved the country." Here the stockmen grinned. "Besides, you and old man Jack would go and knock it down. You ain't particular to a few glasses of grog, you know, Wildduck."

"White fellow learn us that," answered the girl, sullenly, and the "chase rode on."

In rather less than three hours the party of horsemen had reached a narrow reed-fringed watercourse, the line of which was marked by dwarf eucalypti, no specimens of which had been encountered since they left the homestead.

Here they halted for a while upon a sand-ridge picturesquely wooded with the bright green arrowy pine (*callitris*), and, after a short smoke, Mr. Hawkesbury proceeded to make a disposition of forces.

"Three of you go up the creek till you get to the other side of Long Plain, there's mostly a mob somewhere about there. You'll see a big brindle bullock; if you get him you've got the leading mob. Jingaree, you can start; take Johnson and Billy Mortimer with you. Charley Jones, you beat up the myall across the creek; take Jackson and Long Bill. Four of you go out back till you come to the old Durgah boundary; you'll know it by the sheep-tracks, confound them. Waterton, you come with me, and Mr. Redgrave will take the Fishery mob. Wildduck, you too, it will keep you out of mischief, and you can have a gallop after the buffalo cows' mob, and show off a bit."

"All right," answered the sable scout, showing her brilliant teeth, and winding the stock-whip round her head with practised hand she made Spitfire jump all fours off the ground, and proceed sideways, and even tail foremost (as is the manner of excitable steeds), for the next quarter of a mile.

Every section of the party having "split and squandered" according to orders, which were, like those of a captain at cricket or football, unhesitatingly obeyed, Jack found himself proceeding parallel with the creek, with Mr. Hawkesbury as companion, followed by a wiry, sun-tanned Australian lad and Miss Wildduck aforesaid.

It was still early. They had ridden twenty miles, and the day's work was only commencing. Always fond of this particular description of station-work, John Redgrave looked with the keen eye of a bushman, and something of the poet's fancy, upon the scene. Eastward the sun-rays were lighting up a limitless ocean of grey plain, tinged with a delicate tone of green, while the hazy distance, precious in that land of hard outlines and too brilliant colouring, was passing from a stage of tremulous gold to the fierce splendour of the desert noon.

There was not a hill within a hundred miles. The level sky-line was unbroken as on the deep, or where the Arab camel kneels by the far-seen plumy palms. The horses stepped along briskly. The air

was dry and fresh. The element of grandeur and unimpeded territorial magnificence told powerfully upon John's sanguine nature.

"I don't care what they say," he thought. "This is a magnificent country, and I believe would carry no end of sheep, if properly fenced and managed. I flatter myself I shall make such a change as will astonish the oldest and many other inhabitants."

Following the water, they rode quietly onward until, near a bend of the humble but enormously important streamlet, they descried the "Fishery," of which Hawkesbury had spoken. This was a ruinous and long deserted "weir," formed of old by the compatriots of Wildduck, for the ensnaring of eels and such fish as might be left disporting themselves in the Bimbalong after a flood of unusual height. At such periods the outer meres and back creeks received a portion of the larger species of fish which habitually reposed in the still, deep waters of the Warroo. Traces could still be seen of a labyrinth of artificial channels, dams, and reservoirs, showing considerable ingenuity, and distinct evidence of more continuous labour than the aboriginal Australian is generally credited with.

CHAPTER IV

“Ye seeken loud and see for your winningses.” —*Chaucer*.

“My word,” exclaimed Wildduck, jumping from her horse and gazing at the rare ruin of her fading race, “this big one fishery one time. Me come here like it picaninny. All about black fellow that time. Bullo – bullo.”

Here she spread out her hands, as if to denote an altogether immeasurable muster-roll of warriors.

“Big one corrobaree – shake ’em ground all about; and old man Coradjee too.”

Here she sank her voice into an awe-stricken whisper.

“Where are they all gone, Wildduck?” inquired Redgrave; “along a Warroo?”

“Along a Warroo?” cried the girl, mockingly. “Worse than that. White fellow shoot ’em like possum. That ole duffer, Morgan, shoot fader belonging to me.”

“Come, come, Wildduck,” said Hawkesbury, “we’re after cattle just now – never mind about old Mindai. It wasn’t one, nor yet two, white fellows only that *he* picked the bones of, if all the yarns are true.”

“You think I no care, because I’m black,” said the girl, reproachfully, as the tears rolled down her dusky cheeks. “I very fond of my poor ole fader. – Hallo! there’s cattle – come along, Waterton.”

“Changing the subject with a vengeance,” thought Redgrave, as the mercurial mourner, with all the fickleness of her race, superadded to that of her sex, looked back a laughing challenge to the stockman, and closing her heels upon the eager pony, was at top speed in about three strides. Looking in the direction of Spitfire’s outstretched neck, Redgrave and his companion could descry a long dark line of moving objects at a considerable distance on the plain, but whether horses, cattle, or even a troop of emu, they were unable to make out with certainty.

“Let’s back her up quietly,” said Hawkesbury. “She and Charley will head them; it’s no use bustin’ our horses. This is rather a flash mob, but they’ll be all right when they’re wheeled once or twice.”

Keeping on at a steady hand-gallop, they soon came up with a large lot of cattle going best pace in the wrong direction. The accomplished Wildduck, however, flew round them like a falcon, Spitfire doing his mile in remarkably fair time. Being ably supported by Waterton, the absconders were rounded up, and were ready to return and be forgiven, when Hawkesbury and Mr. Redgrade joined them.

“By Jove!” cried our hero, with unconcealed approval, “what grand condition all the herd seem to be in! Look at those leaders.” Here he pointed to a string of great raking five and six year old bullocks, whose immense frames, a little coarse, but well grown and symmetrical, were filled up to the uttermost point of development. “You don’t seem to have drafted them very closely.”

“No,” said Hawkesbury, carelessly. “We never send anything away that isn’t real prime, and we missed this mob last year. They get their time at Gondaree; and the last two seasons have been stunning good ones.”

“Don’t you always have good seasons, then?” asked Jack, innocently.

The overseer looked sharply at him for a moment, without answering, and then said —

“Well, not always, it depends upon the rain a good deal; not but what there’s always plenty of back-water on this run.”

“Oh! I dare say it makes a difference in this dry country,” returned Jack, carelessly, thinking of Marshmead, where it used to rain sometimes from March to November, almost without cessation, and where a month’s fine weather was hailed as a distinct advantage to the sodden pasturage. “But the rain never does anything but good here, I suppose.”

“Nothing but good, you may say that, when it does come. This lot won't be long getting to camp. Ha! I can hear Jingaree's and the other fellows' whips going.”

By this time they had nearly reached the camp at which the various scouting parties had separated. They had nothing to do but to follow the drove, which, after the manner of well-broken station herds of the olden time, never relaxed speed until they reached the camp, when they stopped of their own accord, and while recovering their wind moved gently to and fro, greeting friends or strangers with appropriately modulated bellowings.

Much about the same time the other parties of stockmen could be seen coming towards the common centre, each following a lesser or a greater drove. Jingaree had been fortunate in “dropping across” his lot earlier in the day, and was in peaceful possession of the camp and an undisturbed smoke long before they arrived.

Mr. Redgrave rode through the fifteen or sixteen hundred there assembled by himself, the stockmen meanwhile sitting sideways on their horses, or otherwise at ease, while he made inspection.

“I should like to have had a lot like this at the Lost Water-hole Camp, at poor old Marshmead,” thought Jack to himself, “for old Rooney, the dealer, to pick from, when I used to sell to him. How he and Geordie would have gone cutting out by the hour. They would have almost forgotten to quarrel. Why, there isn't a poor beast on the camp except that cancered bullock.”

When he had completed a leisurely progress through the panting, staring, but non-aggressive multitude, he rejoined Mr. Hawkesbury, with the conviction strongly established in his mind that he had never seen so many really fat cattle in one camp before, and that the country that would do that with a coarse, neglected herd would do anything.

Mr. Hawkesbury having asked him whether he wanted to see anything more on that camp, and receiving no answer in the negative, gave orders to “let the cattle go,” and the party, proceeding to the bank of the creek, permitted their steeds to graze at will with the reins trailing under their feet, after the manner of stock-horses, and addressed themselves to such moderate refreshment, in the form of junks of corned beef and wedges of damper, as they had brought with them. Mr. Hawkesbury produced a sufficient quantity for himself and his guest, who found that the riding, the admiration, and the novel experience had whetted his appetite.

Fairly well earned was the hour's rest by the reeds of the creek. Hawkesbury had at first thought of putting together the greater part of the herd, but on reflection concluded that the day was rather far advanced.

They were twenty miles from home. It would be as well to defer the collection of the cattle belonging to the main camp until the following day. In a general way it might be thought that a ride of forty miles, exclusive of two or three hours' galloping at camp, was a fair day's work. So it would have appeared, doubtless, to the author of *Guy Livingstone*, who in one of his novels describes the hero and his good steed as being in a condition of extreme exhaustion after a ride of *thirty miles*. Whyte Melville, too, who handles equally well pen, brand, and bridle, finds the horses of Gilbert and his friend in *Good for Nothing, or All Down Hill*, reduced to such an “enfeebled condition” by sore backs, consequent upon one day's kangaroo-hunting, that they are compelled to send a messenger for fresh horses a hundred miles or more to *Sydney*, and to await his return in camp.

With all deference to, and sympathy with, the humanity which probably prompted so mercifully moderate a chronicle, we must assert that to these gifted writers little is known of the astonishing feats of speed and endurance performed by the ordinary Australian horse.

Hawkesbury, indeed, rather grumbled when the party arrived at Gondaree at what he considered an indifferent day's work. He, his men, and their horses would have thought it nothing “making a song about,” as Rob Roy says, to have ridden to Bimbalong, camped the cattle, “cut out” or drafted, on horseback, a couple of hundred head of fat bullocks, and to have brought the lot safe to Gondaree stock-yard by moonlight. This would have involved about twenty hours' riding, a large proportion of the work being done at full gallop, and during the hottest part of the day. But they *had* done it

many a time and often. And neither the grass-fed horses, the cattle, nor the careless horsemen were a whit the worse for it.

However, as Mr. Hawkesbury had truly stated in their first interview, the economy of time was by no means a leading consideration on the Warroo. So the next day was devoted to the arousing and parading of the stock within reach of the main camp. Mr. Redgrave's opinion, as to the number and general value of the herd after this operation, was so satisfactory that on the morrow he once more committed himself to the tender mercies of the Warroo mail, and proceeded incontinently to the metropolis, where he without further demur concluded the bargain, and became the first proud purchaser of Gondaree, and five thousand head of mixed cattle, to be taken "by the books."

Jack found the club a paradise after his sojourn in the wilderness. At that time comparatively few men had explored the *terra incognita* of Riverina with a view to personal settlement. Therefore Jack's fame as a man of daring enterprise and commercial sagacity rose steadily until it reached a most respectable altitude in the social barometer. He alluded but sparingly to the privations and perils of his journey, making up for this reticence by glowing descriptions of the fattening qualities and vast extent of his newly-acquired territory. He aroused the envy of his old companions of the settled districts, and was besieged with applications from the relatives of wholly inexperienced youths from Britain, and other youngsters of Australian rearing, who had had more experience than was profitable, to take them back with him as assistants. These offers he was prudent enough to decline.

His cash had been duly paid down, and the name of John Redgrave attached to sundry bills at one and two years – bearing interest at eight per cent. – the whole purchase-money being about twenty thousand pounds, with right of brand, stock-horses, station-stores, implements, and furniture given in. What was given in, though it cost some hard bargaining and several telegrams, was not of great value. Among the twenty stock-horses there were about two sound ones. The stores consisted of three bags of flour, half a bag of sugar, and a quarter of a chest of tea. There was an old cart and some harness, of which only the green hide portion was "reliable." Several iron buckets, which served indifferently for boiling meat and carrying the moderate supplies of water needed or, more correctly used on the establishment. Of the three saddles, but one was station property. The others belonged to Mr. Hawkesbury and the stockman.

Jack had decided to take the cattle at five thousand head without muster, being of opinion, from the "look of the herd," and from a careful inspection of the station-books, wherein the brandings had been carefully registered, and a liberal percentage allowed for deaths and losses, that the number was on the run. He knew from experience that a counting muster was a troublesome and injurious operation, and that it was better to lose a few head than to knock the whole herd about. He therefore made all necessary arrangements for going up and taking immediate possession of Gondaree.

His plan of operations, well considered and carefully calculated, was this: He had sternly determined upon "clearing off" the whole of the cattle. Sheep were the only stock fit for the consideration of a large operator. For cattle there could be only the limited and surely decreasing local demand. For sheep, that is, for wool, you had the world for a market. Wool *might* fall; but, like gold, its fashion was universal. Every man who wore a Crimean shirt, every woman who wore a magenta petticoat, was a constituent and a contributor; the die was cast. He was impatient of the very idea of cattle as an investment for a man of ordinary foresight. He was not sure whether he would even be bothered with a score or two for milkers.

To this end he now directed all his energies; and being able to work, as Bertie Tunstall had truly observed, when he liked, now that he was excited by the pressure of a great undertaking – an advance along the whole line of his forces, so to speak – he displayed certain qualities of generalship.

He first made a very good sale of all the fat cattle on the run (binding the buyer to take a number which would give the herd "a scraping") to his old acquaintance Rooney, the cattle-dealer. These were to be removed within two months from date of sale. He left instructions with his agents, Messrs. Drawe and Backwell, to sell the whole of the remaining portion of the herd (reserving only

twenty milkers) as store cattle, to any one who was slow and old-fashioned enough to desire them. He bought and despatched stores, of a quality and variety rather different from what he received, sufficient to last for twelve months; all the fittings and accessories for a cottage and for a wool-shed, including nails, iron roofing, doors, sashes – everything, in fact, except the outer timber, which could be procured on the spot. He had no idea of trusting himself to the war-prices of the inland store-keepers. A few tons of wire for preliminary fencing, wool-bales, tools, a dray, carts, an earth-scoop for dam-making, well-gearing and sixty-gallon buckets, a few tents, plough and harrow (must have some hay), a few decent horses, an American waggon with four-horse harness, and other articles “too numerous to mention,” about this time found themselves on the road to Gondaree. All these trifling matters “footed up” to a sum which gave a temporarily reflective expression to Jack’s open countenance. Necessaries for a sheep-station, especially in the process of conversion from cattle ditto, have a way of coming out strong in the addition department.

“What of that?” demanded Jack of his conscience, or that quiet cousin-german, prudence; “a sheep-station must be properly worked, or not at all. The first year’s wool will pay for it all. And then the lambs!”

In order to manage a decent-sized sheep property (and nothing is so expensive as a small one), you must have an overseer. Jack was not going to be penny-lunatic enough to be his own manager. And the right sort of man must be thoroughly up to all the latest lights and discoveries – not a working overseer, a rough, upper-shepherd sort of individual who counted sheep and helped to make bush-yards, but a fairly-educated modern species of centurion, whose intelligence and knowledge of stock (meaning sheep) were combined with commercial shrewdness and military power of combination. A man who could tell you in a few minutes how much a dam displacing several thousand cubic yards of earth ought to cost; how many men, in what number of days, should complete it; what provisions they ought to consume; and what wages, working reasonably, they ought to earn. A man full of the latest information as to spouts and soda, hot water and cold, with a natural turn heightened by experience, for determining the proportionate shades of fineness, density, freeness, and length of staple which, in combination, could with safety be taken as a model for the ideal merino. A man capable of sketching, with accuracy and forethought, the multifarious buildings, enclosures, and “improvements” necessary for a sheep-station in the first year of its existence, or of conducting the shearing to a successful issue without them at need.

For subalterns so variously gifted a demand had of late years grown up, owing to the large profits and wonderful development of the wool-producing interest. Of one of these highly-certificated “competition-wallahs” John Redgrave had determined to possess himself.

In Mr. Alexander M’Nab, late of Strathallan, and formerly of Mount Gresham, he deemed that he had secured one of the most promising and highly-trained specimens of the type.

Sandy M’Nab, as he was generally called, was about eight-and-twenty years of age, the son of a small but respectable farmer in the north of Ireland, in which condition of life he had acquired an early knowledge of stock, and an exceedingly sound rudimentary education. Far too ambitious to content himself with the limited programme of his forefathers, he had emigrated at sixteen, and worked his way up through the various stages of Australian bush apprenticeship, until he had reached his present grade, from which he trusted to pass into the ranks of the Squatocracy.

Having secured this valuable functionary, and covenanted to pay him at the rate of three hundred per annum, his first act was to despatch him, after a somewhat lengthy consultation, to inspect a small lot of ten thousand ewes, and on approval to hire men and bring them to Gondaree. It was necessary to lose no time; lambing would be on in June, in August shearing would be imminent. And the cattle would require to be off, and the sheep to be on, somewhere about April, if the first year’s operations were to have any chance of being financially successful.

The stores having been purchased, and Mr. M’Nab with his letter of credit having been shipped, that alert lieutenant, with characteristic promptitude, reporting himself in readiness to embark at six

hours' notice, nothing remained but for Mr. Redgrave to "render himself" again at Gondaree in the capacity of purchaser.

He accordingly cleared out from the club with alarmingly stern self-denial, and, declining to risk his important existence in the Warroo mail, took the road in the light American waggon, with his spare horses and a couple of active lads accustomed to bush work.

After a journey of ordinary duration and absence of adventure, he once more sighted the unromantic but priceless waters of the Warroo, and beheld, with the eye of a proprietor, the "waste lands of the Crown" – most literally deserving that appellation – with the full right and title to which, as lessee, he stood invested.

Mr. Hawkesbury, in apparently the same Crimean shirt, with black and scarlet in alternate bars, stood smoking the small myall pipe in much the same attitude at the hut door as when Jack was borne off by two jibs and a bolter in the Warroo mail. Bob the cook, the dark hues of his apparel unrelieved by any shade of scarlet, appeared in his doorway with his hands in his pockets, but betraying unwonted interest as the *cortège* ascended the sandhill.

Ordering the boys to let go the horses, and to pitch the tent, which he had used on the journey, at a safe distance from the huts, Jack descended with a slight increase of dignity, as of one in authority, and greeted his predecessor.

"So you've bought us out," he said, after inspecting carefully the letter which Jack handed to him, "and I'm ordered to deliver over the cattle, and the stores, – there ain't much of them, – and the horses, and in fact the whole boiling. Well, I wish you luck, sir; the run's a good 'un and no mistake, and the cattle are pretty fair, considering what's been done for 'em. I suppose you won't want me after you've taken delivery."

"I shall be very glad if you will stay on," quoth Jack, whose honest heart felt averse to ousting any man from a home, "until the cattle are cleared off; after that I shall have another gentleman in charge of the sheep and place generally. By staying two or three months you will oblige me, if it suits your arrangements."

"All right," answered Mr. Hawkesbury: "I know the cattle pretty well, and I dare say I can save as many as will cover my wages. I think you'll find them muster up pretty close to their book-number."

The signal shot of the campaign was fired, so to speak, upon the arrival of Mr. John Rooney, who came in a few days by appointment to take the first draft of the Gondaree fat cattle.

Jack was sitting outside of his tent, like an Arab sheik, and thinking regretfully of the flower-laden evening breeze which he had so often inhaled at the same hour at Marshmead, when a tall, soldierly-looking man rode up on a tired horse and jumped off with an unreserved exclamation of relief.

"Hallo! Rooney, is that you, in this uncivilized part of the world? Rather different from the old place, isn't it! Come in, and I'll have your horse hobbled out. You mustn't expect stables or paddock or any other luxuries on the Warroo."

"Sure, I know it well – my heavy curse on the same river; there never was any dacency next or anigh it. Didn't they lend me a buck-jumper at Morahgil to-day, and the first place I found myself was on the broad of my back."

"What a shame! Did they give you another horse?"

"They did not. I rode the same devil right through. It's little bucking he feels inclined for now."

"So I should think, after an eighty-mile ride. When did you leave?"

"About twelve o'clock. I was riding all night, and got there to breakfast. The last time I took cattle from Morahgil I happened to knock down the superintendent with a roping pole, maybe that's why he treated me so – the mane blayguard."

"Well, he ought not to have let such a trifle dwell on his mind, perhaps. But take a glass of grog, Rooney, while the fellow gets your tea."

“Faith, and I will, Masther John; and it’s sound I’ll sleep to-night, fleas or no fleas. A man can’t do without it for more than three nights at a time.”

In a few days the muster was duly concluded, and three hundred prime bullocks secured in the ancient but massive stockyard. One of Rooney’s drovers and a couple of road hands had arrived the evening before, to whom they were intrusted. Rooney was too great a man to be able to afford the time to travel with his own cattle, and had, indeed, a score of other mobs to meet, despatch, buy, or sell, to arrive in as many different and distant parts of the colony.

“Well, Masther John,” said he, “I won’t deny that I haven’t lifted a finer mob this season. Isn’t it a murthering fine run, when it puts the beef on them big-boned divils like that? If ye had some of those roan steers we used to get at the Lost Waterhole Camp, sure they wouldn’t be able to see out of their eyes with fat. I’ll be able to get the eight hundred out of these aisy enough. I’ll send Joe. Best for the cows and the rest of the bullocks the moment he’s shut of those circle-dot cattle. I must be off down the river. I’ve a long ride before me. But, Masther John, see here now, don’t be building too much on the saysons in these parts. It’s not like Marshmead; I’ve seen it all as bare as a brickfield, from the Warroo to the Oxley; and these very cattle with their ribs up to their backbones, and dyin’ by hundreds. D’ye hear me now? Don’t be spending all your money before ye see how prices are going. I’m thinking we’ll see a dale of changes in the next three or four years – all this racin’ and jostlin’ for breeding sheep can’t hould out. Good-bye, sir.”

And so the kindly, stalwart, shrewd cattle dealer went on his way, and Jack saw him no more for a season. But his warning words left an impression of doubt and distrust upon the mind of his hearer that no caution had previously had power to do. Was it possible that he had made a mistake, and an irrevocable one? Was such a change in the seasons credible, and could all his stretch of luxuriant prairie turn into dust and ashes? It was impossible. He had known bad seasons, or thought he had, in the old west country; he had seen grass and water pretty scarce, and had a lower average of fat cattle in some seasons than others; but as to any total disappearance of pasture, any ruinous loss of stock, such he had never witnessed and was quite unable to realize.

CHAPTER V

“So many days my ewes have been with young;
So many weeks ere the poor fools will ean;
So many years ere I shall shear the fleece.” —*King Henry VI.*

Jack had soon quite enough upon his hands to occupy him for every waking hour and moment, to fatigue his body, and, consequently, to lay to rest any obtrusive doubts or fears as to the ultimate success of his undertaking. The stores began to arrive, and he had to fix a site for the new cottage and the indispensable wool-shed. The former locality he selected at Steamboat Point, before alluded to by Mr. Hawkesbury, which was a bluff near a deep reach of the river, shaded by couba trees and river-oaks of great age, and at an elevation far above the periodical floods which from time to time swept the lowlands of the Warroo, and converted its sluggish tide into a furious devastating torrent.

Sawyers were engaged, carpenters, splitters, and labourers generally. With these, as, indeed, with all the station *employés*, much conflict had to be gone through as to prices of contract and labour. A new proprietor was looked upon as a person of limited intelligence, but altogether of boundless wealth, which, in greater or less degree, each “old hand” believed it his privilege to share. It was held to be an act of meanness and unjustifiable parsimony for one in his position to expect to have work done at the same rate as other people. Jack had much trouble in disabusing them of this superstition. Eventually it came to be admitted that “the cove knew his way about,” and “had seen a thing or two before;” after which matters went more smoothly.

Then letters came from Drawe and Backwell stating that a large operator, with a million of acres or so of new country, where “the blacks were too bad for sheep,” had bought the whole of the herd, after Rooney had done drafting, and was ready to take delivery without delay.

In due time all this hard and anxious work was accomplished. Mr. Joe Best returned and possessed himself of every fat bullock and every decent cow “without incumbrance” on the place. And then the long-resident Gondaree herd – much lowing, and fully of opinion, judged by its demeanour, that the end of the world was come – was violently evicted and driven off from its birthplace in three great droves by a small army of stockmen and all the dogs within a hundred miles.

So the cattle were “cleared off,” at low prices too, as in after days Jack had occasion to remember. But nobody bought store cattle in that year except as a sort of personal favour. Nothing better could be expected.

“Well – so they’re mustered and gone at last,” said Hawkesbury, the day after the last engagement. “Blest if I didn’t think some of us would lose the number of our mess. Those old cows would eat a man – let alone skiver him. The herd came up well to their number in the books, didn’t they? There was more of those Bimbalong cattle than I took ’em to be. Well, there’s been a deal of money took off this run since I came – next to nothing spent either; that’s what I look at. I hope the sheep-racket will do as well, sir.”

“I hope so, too, Hawkesbury,” answered Jack. “One good season with sheep is generally said to be worth three with cattle. I had a letter to-day from M’Nab to say that he was on the road with the ewes, and would be here early next month.”

“Well, then, I’ll cut my stick; you won’t want the pair of us, and I’m not much to do with sheep, except putting the dogs on old Boxall’s whenever I’ve caught ’em over their boundary. You’ll have to watch *him*, if you get mixed, or you’ll come short.”

“Every sheep of mine will be legibly fire-branded,” said Jack, with a certain pride; “there’s no getting over that, you know.”

“He’ll fire-brand too,” said Hawkesbury, “in the same place, quick. And as his ear-mark’s a close crop, and he’s not particular what ear, his shepherds might easy make any stray lots uncommon like their own.”

“By Jove!” said Jack, rather startled at the new light thrown on sheep management on the Warroo. “However M’Nab will see to that; he’s not an easy man to get round, they say. Then, would you really prefer to leave? If so, I’ll make out your account.”

“If you please, Mr. Redgrave. I’ve been up here five years now; so I think I’ll go down the country, and see my people for a bit of change. It don’t do to stay in these parts too long at a time, unless a man wants to turn into a black fellow or a lushington.”

On the very day mentioned in his latest despatch, Mr. M’Nab arrived with his ten thousand ewes; and a very good lot they were – in excellent condition too. He had nosed out an unfrequented back track, where the feed was unspoiled by those marauding bands of “condottieri,” travelling sheep. Water had been plentiful, so that the bold stroke was successful. Pitching his tent in a sheltered spot, he sat up half the night busy with pen and pencil, and by breakfast time had every account made out, and all his supernumeraries ready to be paid off. The expenses of the journey, with a tabulated statement showing the exact cost per sheep of the expedition, were also upon a separate sheet of paper handed up to his employer.

From this time forth all went on with unslackening and successful progress. M’Nab was in his glory, and went forth rejoicing each day, planning, calculating, ordering, and arranging to his heart’s content. The out-stations were chosen, the flocks drafted and apportioned, a ration-carrier selected, bush-yards made, while, simultaneously, the cottage walls began to arise on Steamboat Point, and the site of the wool-shed, on a plain bordering an ana-branch sufficient for water, but too inconsiderable for flood, was, after careful consideration, finally decided upon. The season was very favourable; rain fell seasonably and plentifully; grass was abundant, and the sheep fattened up “hand over hand” without a suspicion of foot-rot, or any of the long train of ailments which the fascinating, profitable, but too susceptible merino so often affects.

The more Jack saw of his new manager the more he liked and respected him. He felt almost humiliated as he noted his perfect mastery of every detail connected with station (*i. e.* sheep) management, his energy, his forecast, his rapid and easy arrangement of a hundred jarring details, and reflected that he had purchased the invaluable services of this gifted personage for so moderate a consideration.

“We shall not have time to get up a decent wool-shed this year, Mr. Redgrave,” he said, at one of their first councils. “We *must* have a good, substantial store, as it won’t do to have things of value lying about. A small room alongside will do for me till we get near shearing. We must knock up a temporary shed with hurdles and calico, and wash the best way we can in the creek. Next year we can go in for spouts, and all the rest of it, and I hope we’ll be able to shear in such a shed as the Warroo has never seen yet.”

“It’s a good while to Christmas,” said Jack. “How about the shed if we put more men on? I don’t like make-shifts.”

“Couldn’t possibly be done in the time,” answered Mr. M’Nab, with prompt decision. “Lambing will keep us pretty busy for two months. We *must* have shearing over by October, or all this clover-burr that I see about will be in the wool, and out of your pocket to the tune of about threepence a pound. Besides, these sawyers and bush-carpenters can’t be depended upon. They might leave us in the lurch, and then we should neither have one thing nor the other.”

“Very well,” said Jack, “I leave that part of it to you.”

All Mr. M’Nab’s plans and prophecies had a fashion of succeeding, and verifying themselves to the letter. Apparently he forgot nothing, superintended everything, trusted nobody, and coerced, persuaded, and placed everybody like pawns on a chess-board. His temper was wonderfully under command; he never bullied his underlings, but had a way of assuring them that he was afraid they

wouldn't get on together, supplemented on continued disapproval by a calm order to come in and get their cheque. This system was found to be efficacious. He always kept a spare hand or two, and was thereby enabled to fill up the place of a deserter at a moment's notice.

Thus, with the aid of M'Nab and of a good season, John Redgrave, during the first year, prospered exceedingly. His sheep had a capital increase, and nearly eight thousand gamesome, vigorous lambs followed their mothers to the wash-pool. The wool was got off clean, and wonderfully clear of dirt and seed; and just before shearing Mr. M'Nab exhibited a specimen of his peculiar talents which also brought grist to the mill.

It happened in this wise: – Looking over the papers one evening he descried mention of a lot of store sheep then on their way to town, and on a line of road which would bring them near to Gondaree.

“This lot would suit us very well, Mr. Redgrave,” said he, looking up from his paper, and then taking a careful transcript in his pocket-book of their ages, numbers, and sexes. “Seven thousand altogether – five thousand four and six tooth wethers, with a couple of thousand ewes; if they are good-framed sheep, with decent fleeces, and the ewes not too old, they would pay well to buy on a six months' bill. We could take the wool off and have them fat on these Bimbalong plains by the time the bill comes due.”

“How about seeing them?” quoth Jack; “they may be Queensland sheep, with wool about half an inch long. They often shear them late on purpose when they are going to start them on the road. ‘They're a simple people,’ as Sam Slick says, those Queenslanders.”

“Of course I must see them,” answered M'Nab. “I never buy a pig in a poke; but they will be within a hundred miles of us in a week, and I can ride across and see them, and find out their idea of price. Shearing is always an expensive business, and the same plant and hands will do for double our number of sheep, if we can get them at a price.”

M'Nab carried out his intention, and, falling across the caravan in an accidental kind of way, extracted full particulars from the owner, a somewhat irascible old fellow, who was convoying in person. He returned with a favourable report. The sheep were good sheep; they had well-grown fleeces, rather coarse; but that did not matter with fattening sheep; they were large and would make good wethers when topped up. The ewes were pretty fair, and not broken-mouthed. They wanted eleven shillings all round, and they were in the hands of Day and Burton, the stock agents.

“Now, I've been thinking,” said Mr. M'Nab, meditatively, “whether it wouldn't pay for me to run down to Melbourne by the mail – it passes to-morrow morning – and arrange the whole thing with Day and Burton. Writing takes an awful long time. Besides, I might knock sixpence a head off, and that would pay for my coach-fare and time, and a good deal over. Seven thousand sixpences are one hundred and seventy-five pounds. Thirty pounds would take me there and back, inside of three weeks.”

“That will only allow you two days in town,” said Jack, “and you'll be shaken to death in that beastly mail-cart.”

“Never mind that,” said the burly son of the “black north,” stretching his sinewy frame. “I can stand a deal of killing. Shall I go?”

“Oh, go by all means, if you think you can do any good. I don't envy you the journey.”

M'Nab accordingly departed by the mail next morning, leaving Jack to carry on the establishment in his absence, a responsibility which absorbed the whole of his waking hours so completely that he had no time to think of anything but sheep and shepherds, with an occasional dash of dingo. One forenoon, as he was waiting for his midday meal, having ridden many a mile since daylight, he descried a small party approaching on foot which he was puzzled at first to classify. He soon discovered them to be aboriginals. First walked a tall, white-haired old man, carrying a long fish-spear, and but little encumbered with wearing apparel. After him a gin, not by any means of a “suitable age” (as people say in the case of presumably marriageable widowers), then two lean, toothless old beldames of gins staggering under loads of blankets, camp furniture, spare weapons, an

iron pot or two, and a few puppies; several half-starved, mangy dogs followed in a string. Finally, the whole party advanced to within a few paces of the hut and sat solemnly down, the old savage sticking his spear into the earth previously with great deliberation.

As the little group sat silently in their places bolt upright, like so many North American Indians, Jack walked down to open proceedings. The principal personage was not without an air of simple dignity, and was very different of aspect from the dissipated and debased beggars which the younger blacks of a tribe but too often become. He was evidently of great age, but Jack could see no means of divining whether seventy years or a hundred and twenty would be the more correct approximation. His dark and furrowed countenance, seamed with innumerable wrinkles, resembled that of a graven image. His hair and beard, curling and abundant, were white as snow. His eye was bright, and as he smiled with childish good humour it was apparent that the climate so fatal to the incisors and bicuspid of the white invader, had spared the larger proportion of his grinders. On Jack's desiring to know his pleasure, he smiled cheerfully again, and muttering "baal dalain," motioned to the younger female, as if desiring her to act as interpreter. She was muffled up in a large opossum-rug which concealed the greater part of her face; but as she said a few words in a plaintive tone, and with a great affectation of shyness, Jack looking at her for the first time recognized the brilliant eyes and mischievous countenance of his old acquaintance Wildduck.

"So it's you?" he exclaimed, much amused, upon which the whole party grinned responsively, the two old women particularly. "And is this your grandfather, and all your grandmothers; and what do you want at Gondaree?"

"This my husband, cooley belonging to me – ole man Jack," explained Wildduck, with an air of matronly propriety. "Ole man Jack, he wantim you let him stay long a wash-pen shearing time. He look out sheep no drown. Swim fust-rate, that ole man."

"Well, I'll see," replied Jack, who had heard M'Nab say a black fellow or two would be handy at the wash-pen – the sheep having rather a long swim. "You can go and camp down there by the water. How did you come to marry such an old fellow, eh, Wildduck?"

"My fader give me to him when I picaninny. Ippai and Kapothra, I s'pos. Black fellow always marry likit that. White girl baal marry ole man, eh, Mr. Redgrave?"

"Never; that is, not unless he's very rich, Wildduck. Here's a fig of tobacco. Go to the store and get some tea and sugar, and flour."

Old man Jack and his lawful but by no means monogamous household, were permitted to camp at the Wash-pen Creek, in readiness for the somewhat heavy list of casualties which "throwing in" always involves. A sheep encumbered with a heavy fleece, and exhausted by a protracted immersion, often contrives to drown as suddenly and perversely as a Lascar. Nothing short of the superior aquatic resources of a savage prevents heavy loss occasionally. So Mr. Redgrave, averse in a general way, for reasons of state, to having native camps on the station, yet made a compromise in this instance. A few sheets of bark were stripped, a few bundles of grass cut, a few pieces of dry wood dragged up by old Nanny and Maramie, and the establishment was complete. A short half-hour after, and there was a cake baked on the coals, hot tea in a couple of very black quart pots, while the odours of a roasted opossum, and the haunch of wallaby, were by no means without temptation to fasting wayfarers with unsophisticated palates. As old man Jack sat near the cheerful fire, with his eyes still keen and roving, wandering meditatively over the still water and the far-stretching plain, as the fading eve closed in magical splendour before his unresponsive gaze, how much was this poor, untaught savage to be pitied, in comparison with a happy English labourer, *adscriptus glebæ* of his parish – lord of eleven babes, and twelve shillings per week, and, though scarce past his prime, dreading increased rheumatism and decreasing wages with every coming winter!

For this octogenarian of one of earth's most ancient families had retained most of his accomplishments, a few simple virtues, and much of his strength and suppleness; still could he stand erect in his frail canoe, fashioned out of a single sheet of bark, and drive her swift and safely through

the turbulent tide of a flooded river. Still could he dive like an otter, and like that “fell beastie” bring up the impaled fish or the amphibious turtle. Still could he snare the wild fowl, track the honey-bee, and rifle the nest of the pheasant of the thicket. Upon him, as, indeed, is the case with many of the older aboriginals, the fatal gifts of the white man had no power. He refused the fire-water; he touched not the strange weed, by reason of the magical properties of which the souls of men are exhaled in acrid vapour – oh, subtle and premature cremation! – or sublimated in infinite sneezings. He drank of the lake and of the river, as did his forefathers; he ate of the fowls of the air and of their eggs (I grieve to add, occasionally stale), of the forest creatures, and of the fish of the rivers. In spite of this unauthorized and unrelieved diet, lightly had the burning summers passed over his venerable pate. The square shoulders had not bowed, the upright form still retained its natural elasticity, while the knotted muscles of the limbs, moving like steel rings under his sable skin, showed undiminished power and volume.

CHAPTER VI

“Law was designed to keep a state in peace.” —*Crabbe*.

The mail-trap arrived this time with unwonted punctuality, and out of it stepped Mr. M’Nab, “to time” as usual, and with his accustomed cool air of satisfaction and success.

“Made rather a better deal of it than I expected, sir,” was his assertion, after the usual greetings. “There were several heavy lots of store sheep to arrive, so I stood off, and went to look at some others, and finally got these for ten and threepence. We had a hard fight for the odd threepence; but they gave in, and I have the agreement in my pocket.”

“You have done famously,” said Jack, “and I am ever so glad to see you back. I have been worked to death. Every shepherd seems to have tried how the dingoes rated the flavour of his flock, or arranged for a ‘box’ at the least, since you went. I have put on Wildduck’s family for retrievers at the wash-pen.”

“Well, we wanted a black fellow or two there,” said M’Nab. “Throwing in is always a risky thing, but we can’t help it this year. There’s nothing like a black fellow where sheep have anything like a long swim.”

Jack re-congratulated himself that night upon the fortunate possession of the astute and efficient M’Nab, who seemed, like the dweller at the Central Chinese “Inn of the Three Perfections,” to “conduct all kinds of operations with unflinching success.” In this instance he had made a sum equalling two-thirds of his salary entirely by his own forethought and promptitude of action. This was something like a subaltern, and Jack, looking proud —

Far as human eye could see —
Saw the promise of the future
And the prices sheep would be.

The season, with insensible and subtle gradation, stole slowly, yet surely, forward. The oat-grass waved its tassels strangely like the familiar hay-field over many a league of plain and meadow. The callow broods of wild fowl sailed joyously amid the broad flags of the lagoons, or in the deep pools of the creeks and river. The hawk screamed exultant as she floated adown the long azure of the bright blue, changeless summer sky. Bird, and tree, and flower told truly and gleefully, after their fashion, of the coming of fair spring; brief might be her stay, it is true, but all nature had time to gaze on her richly-tinted robes and form, potently enthralling in their sudden splendour, as are the fierce and glowing charms of the south.

Unbroken success! The new sheep arrived and were delivered reluctantly by their owner, who swore by all his gods that the agents had betrayed him, and that for two pins he would not deliver at all, but finally consented to hear reason, and sold his cart and horses, tent and traps – yet another bargain – to the invincible M’Nab, departing with his underlings by mail.

Shearing was nearly over, the last flock being washed, when one afternoon M’Nab came home in a high state of dissatisfaction with everything. The men were shearing badly; there had been two or three rows; the washers had struck for more wages; everything was out of gear.

“I’ve been trying to find out the reason all day,” said he, as he threw himself down on the camp-bed in his tent, with clouded brow, “and I can think of nothing unless there is some villainous hawker about with grog; and I haven’t seen any cart either.”

“It’s awfully vexatious,” said Jack, “just as we were getting through so well. What the pest is that?” By this time, the day having been expended in mishaps and conjectures, evening was drawing

on. A dark figure came bounding through the twilight at a high rate of speed, and, casting itself on the tent floor, remained in a crouching, pleading position.

“Why, Wildduck,” said Jack, in amazement, “what is the matter now? You are the most dramatic young woman. Has a hostile brave been attempting to carry you off? or old man Jack had a fit of unfounded jealousy? Tell us all about it.”

“That ole black gin, Nanny,” sobbed the girl, lifting up her face, across which the blood from a gash on the brow mixed freely with her tears; “that one try to kill me, she close up choke me only for Maramie.” Here she showed her throat, on which were marks of severe compression.

“Poor Wildduck!” said Jack, trying to soothe the excited creature. “What made her do that? I thought yours was a model happy family?”

“She quiet enough, only for that cursed drink. She regular debbil-debbil when she get a glass.”

“Ay!” said M’Nab, “just as I expected; and where did you all get it? You’ve had a nip, too, I can see.”

“Only one glass, Mr. M’Nab; won’t tell a lie,” deprecated the fugitive. “That bumboat man sell shearers and washers some. You no see him?”

“How should I see?” quoth M’Nab; “where is he now?”

“Just inside timber by the wash-pen,” answered the girl; “he sneak out, but leave ’em cart there.”

“I think I see my way to cutting out this pirate, or ‘bumboat,’ as Wildduck calls him,” said Jack. “The forest laws were sharp and stern – that is, I believe, that on suspicion of illegal grog you can capture a hawker with the strong hand in New South Wales. So, Wildduck, you go and camp with the carrier’s wife, she’ll take you in; and, M’Nab, you get a couple of horses and the ration-carrier – he’s a stout fellow – and we’ll go forth and board this craft. We’ll do a bit of privateering; ha, ha! ‘whate’er they sees upon the seas they seize upon it.”

With short preparation the little party set out in the cool starlight. Jack put a revolver into his belt for fear of accidents. Mr. M’Nab had fished out the section of the Licensed Hawkers’ Act which referred to the illegal carrying of spirits, and, being duly satisfied that he had the law on his side, was ready for anything. The ration-carrier was strictly impartial. He was ready to assist in the triumph of capture, or to return unsuccessful with an equal mind, caring not a straw which way the enterprise went. He lit his pipe, and followed silently. As they approached the wash-pen they became sensible of an extraordinary noise, as of crying, talking, and screaming – all mingled. From time to time a wild shriek rent the air, while the rapid articulation in an unknown tongue seemed to go on uninterruptedly.

“Must be another set of blacks,” said Jack, as he halted to listen. “I hope not; one camp is quite enough on the place at a time.”

“It’s that old sweep, Nanny, I’m thinking,” said the ration-carrier. “When she has a drop of grog on board she can make row enough for a whole tribe. I’ve heard her at them games before.”

As the miami of the sable patriarch came into view, dimly lighted by a small fire, an altogether unique scene presented itself. The old gin, called Nanny, very lightly attired, was marching backward and forward in front of the fire, apparently in a state of demoniac possession. She was crying aloud in her own tongue, with the voice at its highest pitch of shrillness, and with inconceivable rapidity and frenzy. In her hand she carried a long and tolerably stout wand, being, in fact, no other than the identical yam-stick to which Wildduck had referred as a weapon of offence, when proposing her as a fitting antagonist for the contumacious young stockman. With this she occasionally punctuated her rhetoric by waving it over her head, or bringing it down with terrific violence upon the earth. The meagre frame of the old heathen seemed galvanised into magical power and strength as she paced swiftly on her self-appointed course, whirling her shrivelled arms on high, or bounding from the earth with surprising agility. Such may have been the form, such the accents, of the inspired prophetess in the dawn of a religion of mystery and fear among the rude tribes of earth’s earliest peoples – a Cassandra shrieking forth her country’s woes – a Sibyl pouring out the dread oracles of a demon worship. The old warrior sat unmoved, with stony eyes fixed on vacancy, as the weird apparition

passed and repassed like the phantasmagoria of a dream; while his aged companion, who seemed of softer mould, cowered fearfully and helplessly by his side.

“By Jove!” said Jack, “this is a grand and inspiring sight. I don’t wonder that Wildduck fled away from this style of thing. This old beldame would frighten the very witches on a respectable Walpurgis night. Great is the fire-water of the white man!”

“She’ll wear herself out soon,” said the ration-carrier. “Old man Jack wouldn’t stand nice about downing her with the waddy, if she came near enough to him. He and the tother old mammy, they never touches no grog. They’re about the only two people in this part of the country as I know of as doesn’t. But the gins is awful.”

“Polygamy has its weak side, apparently,” moralized Jack, as still the frenzied form sped frantically past, and raved, and yelled, and chattered, and threatened; “not but what the uncultured white female occasionally goes on ‘the rampage’ to some purpose. Hallo! she’s shortening stride; we shall see the finale.”

Suddenly, as if an unseen hand had arrested the force which had so miraculously sustained her feeble form, she stopped. The fire of her protruding eyes was quenched; her nerveless limbs tottered and dragged; uttering a horrible, hoarse, unnatural cry, and throwing out her arms as in supplication and fear, she fell forward, without an effort to save herself, almost upon the embers of the dying fire. Old man Jack sat stern and immovable; but the woman ran forward with a gesture of pity, and, dragging the corpse-like form a few paces from the fire, covered it with a large opossum-skin cloak or rug.

“We may as well be getting on towards this scoundrel of a hawker,” proposed M’Nab. “He ought to get it a little hotter if it were only for this bit of mischief.”

“There’s a deal of tobacky in the grog these fellows sell,” observed the ration-carrier, with steady conviction, “that’s the worst of ’em; if they’d only keep good stuff, it wouldn’t be so much matter in this black country, as one might say. But I remember getting two glasses, only two as I’m alive, from a hawker once; I’m blest if they didn’t send me clean mad and stupid for a whole week.”

On the side furthest from the creek upon which the temporary wash-pen had been constructed, and midway between it and the plains, which stretched far to the eastward, lay a sand-ridge or dune, covered with thick growing pines. In this natural covert the reconnoitring party doubted not that the disturber of their peace had concealed himself. Riding into it, they separated until they struck the well-worn trail which, in the pre-merino days, had formed the path by which divers outlying cattle came in to water; following this, they came up to a clear space where a furtive-looking fire betrayed the camp of the unlicensed victualler. A store-cart, with the ordinary canvas tilt, and the heterogeneous packages common to the profession, were partly masked by the timber. As they rode up rapidly a man emerged from the shadow of a large pine and confronted them.

“Hallo! mates,” he said, in a gruff but jocular tone; “what’s the row? You ain’t in the bushranging line, are you? because I’ve just sent away my cheques, worse luck.”

“You’ll see who we are directly,” said Jack, jumping down, and giving his horse to the ration-carrier. “I wish to search your cart, that’s all. I believe you’ve been selling spirits to my men. I’m a magistrate.”

“What d’yer mean, then, by coming here on the bounce?” said the man, placing himself doggedly between Jack and the cart. “You ain’t got a warrant, and I’ll see you far enough before you touches a thing in that there cart. Why, my wife’s asleep there.”

“No she ain’t,” said a shrill voice, as a woman disengaged herself from the canvas, “but you don’t touch anything for all that. We’ve our licence, ain’t we, Bill, and what’s the use of paying money to Government if pore people can’t be purtected?”

“Perhaps you’re not aware,” said M’Nab, with cool accuracy, “that by the 19th and 20th sections of the 13th Victoria, No. 36, any magistrate or constable, on suspicion of spirits in unlawful quantities being carried for the purpose of sale, can search such hawker’s cart and take possession of the spirits.”

“That’s the law,” said Jack, “and we are going to search your cart; so stand aside, you cowardly scoundrel, making your ill-gotten profits out of the wages of a lot of poor fellows who have worked hard for them. Do you see this?” Here Jack suddenly produced his revolver, and giving the fellow a shove, which sent him staggering against a fallen tree, took possession of the vehicle, all unheeding the shrill tones and anything but choice language of the female delinquent.

“Ay!” said M’Nab, as he leaped actively into the cart, and turned over packages of moleskin and bundles of boots, bars of soap, and strings of dried apples, “this is all right and square; if you had only kept to a fair trade nobody could take ye. What’s under these blankets?”

Lifting a pile of loosely-spread blankets, he suddenly raised a shout of triumph.

“So this was where the lady was sleeping, is it? Pity for you, my man, she didn’t stay there; we should have been too polite to raise her. The murder is out.” Here he drummed with his hand upon a new kind of instrument – a ten-gallon keg, half empty too. “What a lot the ruffian must have sold.”

“What is your name?” asked Jack, blandly.

“William Smith,” answered the fellow, gruffly.

“Alias Jones, alias Dawkins, I suppose; never mind, we shall have time to find out your early history, I dare say. Now, William, it becomes my duty to arrest you in the Queen’s name, and, for fear of your giving us the slip, I must take the precaution of tying your hands behind your back.”

Suiting the action to the word, he “muzzled” Mr. William so suddenly and effectually that, aided by M’Nab, there was no great difficulty in securing him by means of a stout cord which formed part of his own belongings.

“Keep off, Mrs. Smith, or we shall be under the necessity of tying you up too.”

This was no superfluous warning, as with a considerable flow of Billingsgate, and with uplifted arms, the “bumboat woman” showed the strongest desire to injure Jack’s complexion.

“You call yourselves men,” she screamed, “coming here in the dead of night, three to one, and rummaging pore people’s property like a lot of bushrangers. I’ll have the law of ye, if you was fifty squatters – robbing the country, and won’t let a pore man live. I’ve got money, and friends too, as’ll see us righted. Don’t ye lay a finger on me, ye hungry, grinding, Port Phillip Yankee slave driver” – (this to M’Nab) – “or I’ll claw your ugly face till your mother wouldn’t know ye.”

“It’s my opinion and belief,” said M’Nab, “that she wouldn’t be far behind old Nanny, if she had that yam-stick and another tot or two of her own grog. Here, Wilson, you catch this fellow’s horse; there he is, hobbled under the big tree, and put him in the shafts. Mr. Redgrave and I will bring yours on.”

The ration-carrier, much entertained, did as he was told, and Mr. William being ordered to enter his own vehicle, on pain of being attached to the tail-board, and compelled to walk behind, like a bullock-driver’s hackney, the procession moved off, the ration-carrier driving, and the others riding behind. Mrs. Smith followed for some distance, disparaging everybody concerned, and invoking curses upon the innocent heads of all the squatters in Riverina, but finally consented to avail herself of the carriage.

In this order they reached Gondaree at an advanced hour of the night; and the next day Mr. William was safely lodged in the lock-up at the rising township of Burrabri, thirty miles down the river. Here he languished, until a couple of neighbouring Justices of the Peace could spare time from their shearing to try the case, when, the needful evidence being forthcoming, he was fined thirty pounds, with the alternative of three months’ imprisonment in Bochara gaol.

Hereupon his faithful companion appeared in a new light, and made a highly practical suggestion – “You take it out, Bill,” said the artful fair one; “don’t you go for to pay ’em a red farden. You’ll be a deal cooler in gaol than anywhere else in this blessed sandy country. I’ll look arter the cart and hoss, and have all ready for a good spree at Christmas. You’ll be out by then.”

Mr. William looked at the blue sky through the open door of the public-house – the improvised court-house on such occasions – but finally decided to earn an honest penny – ten pounds per mensem, by voluntary incarceration.

When he *did* come forth, just before the Christmas week – alas that the chronicler should have to record one more instance of woman's perfidy! – the frail partner of his guilt had sold the horse and cart, retained the price thereof, and bolted with “another ‘Bill,’ whose Christian name was John.”

The little episode ended, nothing occurred to mar the onward progress of events until the last bale of wool was duly shorn, packed, and safely deposited on a waggon *en route* for the steamer and a colonial market.

Then, with a clear conscience and a feeling of intense and cumulative satisfaction, Mr. John Redgrave betook himself once more to the busy haunts of men. Had he been Sir John Franklin, returning from a three-years' voyage to the North Pole, he could hardly have been more jubilant and grateful to a kind Providence, when he again ensconced himself in the up-train for the metropolis. He revelled and rioted in the unwonted luxuries of town life, like a midshipman at the Blue Posts. Bread and butter, decent cookery, and cool claret, the half-forgotten ceremonial of dinner, billiards, books, balls, lawn parties, ladies, luxuries of all sorts and kinds; how delicious, how intoxicating they were! Material advantages went hand in hand with this re-entrance to Eden. He had very properly agreed with M'Nab that it was well to sell this year's clip in the colony, as the washing and getting up were only so-so, and wool was high. Next year they might show the English and French buyers what the J R brand over Gondaree was like, and reasonably hope that every year would add to the selling price of that valuable, extensive, and scientifically got-up clip.

Jack looked bronzed, and thinner than of old, but all his friends, especially the ladies, voted it an improvement; he had the air of an explorer, a dweller in the wilderness, and what not. His wool, which followed him, sold extremely well. Assumed to be successful, he was more popular than ever. His bankers were urbane; he was consulted by some of the oldest and most astute speculators; men prophesied great things as to his ultimate financial triumphs. And Jack already looked upon himself as forming one of the congress of Australian Rothschilds, and began to think of all the munificent and ingeniously helpful things that he would do in such case; for he was of a kindly and sentimentally generous tendency, this speculative Jack of ours, and his day-dreams of wealth were never unmingled with the names of those who immediately after such realization would hear something to their advantage. Jack lingered in Paradise for a couple of months, during which time he received his wool money, and made arrangements with his bankers for the purchase of as much wire as would suffice to fence a large proportion of his run. His stores were commensurate with the future prestige of the establishment. He explained to Mr. Mildmay Shrood, his banker, that he might possibly put on a few thousand more sheep if he saw a good opportunity. Of course he could buy more cheaply for cash; and if they paid as well as the lot he had picked up this year, they would be very cheap after the wool was off their backs.

“My dear sir,” said Mr. Shrood, with an air of friendly interest, “the bank will be most happy to honour your drafts up to ten thousand pounds. If you need more you will be kind enough to advise. I hear the most favourable accounts of the district in which you have invested, and of your property in particular. What is your own opinion – which I should value – upon the present prices of stock and stations? will they keep up?”

“I have the fullest belief,” quoth Jack, with judicial certainty, “in the present rates being maintained for the next ten years; for five years at least it is impossible by my calculations, if correct, that any serious fall should take place. The stock, I believe, are not in the country in sufficient numbers to meet the rapidly enlarging demand for meat. Wool is daily finding new markets and manufacturers. I never expect to see bullocks above five pounds again; but sheep – sheep, you may depend, will go on rising in price until I should not be surprised to see first-class stations fetching thirty shillings, or even two pounds, all round.”

“Quite of your opinion, my dear Mr. Redgrave,” quoth the affable coin-compeller. “Happy to have my ideas confirmed by a gentleman of so much experience. Depend upon it, sheep-farming is in its infancy. Good morning. *Good* morning, my dear sir.”

Jack saw no particular reason for hurrying himself, being represented at Gondaree by a far better man than himself, as he told everybody. So he spent his Christmastide joyously, and permitted January to glide over, as a month suitable for gradually making up his mind to return to the wilderness. Early in February he began to feel bored with the “too-muchness” of nothing to do, and wisely departed.

CHAPTER VII

“But he still governed with resistless hand,
And where he could not guide he would command.” —*Crabbe*.

When Jack got back he was rather shocked at the altered aspect of the run. There had been no rain, except in inconsiderable quantity, during his absence, and the herbage generally showed signs of a deficiency of moisture. The river flats, which were so lush and heavily cropped with green herbage that your horse's feet made a “swish-swashing” noise as you rode through it, now were very parched up, dry, and bare, or else burned off altogether.

On mentioning this to Mr. M'Nab, he said —

“Well, the fact is that the grass got very dry, and some fellow put a fire-stick into it. Then we have had a great number of travelling sheep through lately, and they have fed their mile pretty bare. The season has been very dry so far. I sincerely trust we shall get rain soon.”

“We may,” said Jack. “But when once these dry years set in, they say you never know when it may rain again. But how do the sheep look?”

“Couldn't possibly look better,” answered M'Nab, decisively. “There is any quantity of feed and water at the back, and I have not troubled the frontage much. I am glad ye sent the wire up. We were nearly stopped, as it came just as the posts were in. I have got one line of the lambing paddock nearly finished, and we shall have that part of the play over before long. No more shepherds and ‘motherers’ to pay in that humbugging way next year.”

“And how are the other things getting on?” inquired Jack.

“Well, the cottage is nearly fit to go into. Your bedroom is finished and ready for you. I had a garden fenced in, and put on a Chinaman with a pump to grow some vegetables – for we were all half-way to a little scurvy. The wool-shed is getting along, though the carpenters went on the spree at Bochara for a fortnight. In fact, all is doing well generally, and I think you'll say the sheep are improved.”

Jack lost no time in establishing himself in his bedroom in the new cottage, which he had judiciously caused to be built of “pise,” or rammed earth, by this means saving the cartage of material, for the soil was dug out immediately in front of the building, and securing coolness, solidity, and thickness of wall, none of which conditions are to be found in weather-board or slab buildings. Brick or stone was not, of course, to be thought of, owing to the absence of lime, and the tremendous expense of such materials. The heat was terrific. But when Jack found himself the tenant of a cool, spacious apartment, with his books, a writing-table, and a little decent furniture, the rest of the cottage including a fair-sized sitting-room, with walls of reasonable altitude, he did not despair of being able to support life for the few years required for the process of making a fortune. The river, fringed by the graceful though dark-hued casuarinas, was pleasant enough to look on, as it rippled on over pools and sandy shallows, immediately below his verandah. And beyond all expression was it glorious to bathe in by early morn or sultry eve.

The garden, though far, far different from the lost Eden of Marshmead, with its crowding crops, glossy shrubs, and heavily-laden fruit trees, was still a source of interest and pleasure. Under the unwearied labour and water-carrying of Ah Sing, rows of vegetables appeared, grateful to the eye, and were ravenously devoured by the *employés* of the station, whom a constant course of mutton, damper, and tea – tea, damper, and mutton – had led to, as M'Nab said truly, the border-land of one of the most awful diseases that scourge humanity. Never before had a cabbage been grown at Gondaree, and the older residents looked with a kind of awe at Ah Sing as he watered his rows of succulent vegetables, toilsomely and regularly, in the long hot mornings and breezeless afternoons.

“My word, John,” said Jingaree, who had ridden over from Jook-jook one day on no particular business, but to look at the wonderful improvements which afforded the staple subject of conversation that summer on the Warroo, “you’re working this garden-racket fust chop. I’ve been here eight year, and never see a green thing except marsh-mallars and Warrigal cabbage. How ever do you make ’em come like that?”

“Plenty water, plenty dung, plenty work, welly good cabbagee,” said Ah Sing, sententially. “Why you not grow melon, tater, ladishee?”

“I don’t say we mightn’t,” said Jingaree, half soliloquizing, “but it’s too hot in these parts to be carrying water all day long like a Chow. Give us one of them cabbagees, John.”

“You takee two,” quoth the liberal celestial. “Mr. Mackinab, he say, give um shepherdy all about. You shepherdy?”

“You be hanged!” growled the insulted stockman. “Do I look like a slouchin’, ’possum-eating, billy-carrying crawler of a shepherd? I’ve had a horse under me ever since I was big enough to know Jingaree mountain from a haystack, and a horse I’ll have as long as I can carry a stock-whip. However, I don’t suppose you meant any offence, John. Hand over the cabbagees. Blest if I couldn’t eat ’em raw without a mossel of salt.”

“Here tomala – welly good tomala,” said the pacific Chinaman, appalled at the unexpected wrath of the stranger. “Welly good cabbagee, good-bye.”

Jack being comfortably placed in his cottage, took a leisurely look through his accounts. He was rather astonished, and a little shocked, to find what a sum he had got through for all the various necessaries of his position. – Stores, wages, contract payments, wire, blacksmith, carpenters, sawyers, bricklayers (for the wash-pen and the cottage chimneys). – Cheque, cheque, there seemed no end to the outflow of cash – and a good deal more was to come, or rather to go, before next lambing, washing, and shearing were concluded. He mentioned his ideas on the subject to Mr. M’Nab.

That financier frankly admitted that the outlay *was* large, positively but not relatively. “You understand, sir,” he said, “that much of this money will not have to be spent twice. Once have your fences up, and breed up, or buy, till you have stocked your run, and you are at the point where the largest amount of profit, the wool and the surplus sheep, is met by the minimum of expenditure. No labour will be wanted but three or four boundary riders. The wool, I think, will be well got up, and ought to sell well.”

“I dare say,” said Jack, “I dare say. It’s no use stopping half way, but really, the money does seem to run out as from a sieve. However, it will be as cheap to shear 40,000 sheep as twenty. So I shall decide to stock up as soon as the fences are finished.”

This point being settled, Mr. M’Nab pushed on his projects and operations with unflagging energy. He worked all day and half the night, and seemed to know neither weariness nor fatigue of mind or body. He had all the calculations of all the different contracts at his fingers’ ends, and never permitted to cool any of the multifarious irons which he had in the fire.

He kept the different parties of teamsters, fencers, splitters, carpenters, sawyers, dam-makers, well-sinkers, all in hand, going smoothly and without delay, hitch, or dissatisfaction. He provided for their rations being taken to them, kept all the accounts accurately, and if there was so much as a sheepskin not returned, as per agreement, the defaulter was regularly charged with it. Incidentally, and besides all this work, sufficient for two ordinary men, he administered the shepherds and their charge – now amounting to nearly 30,000 sheep. Jack’s admiration of his manager did not slacken or change. “By Jove!” he said to himself, occasionally, “that fellow M’Nab is fit to be a general of division. He never leaves anything to chance, and he seems to foresee everything and to arrange the cure before the ailment is announced.”

The cottage being now finished, Jack began to find life not only endurable, but almost enjoyable. He had got up a remnant of his library, and with some English papers, and the excellent weeklies of the colonies, he found that he had quite as much mental pabulum as he had leisure to consume.

The sheep were looking famously well. The lambs were nearly as big in appearance as their mothers. The store sheep had fattened, and would be fit for the butcher as soon as their fleeces were off. The shepherds, for a wonder, gave no trouble, the ground being open, and their flocks strong; all was going well. The wool-shed was progressing towards completion; the wash-pen would follow suit, and be ready for the spouts, with all the latest improvements, which were even now on the road. Unto Jack, as he smoked in the verandah at night, gazing on the bright blue starry sky, listening to the rippling river, came freshly once more the beatific vision of a completely-fenced and fully-stocked run, paying splendidly, and ultimately taken off his hands at a profit, which should satisfy pride and compensate privation.

He and Mr. M'Nab had also become accustomed to the ways of the population. "I thought at first," said Jack, "that I never set eyes on such a set of duffers and loafers as the men at the Warroo generally. But I have had to change my opinion. They only want management, and I have seen some of the best working men among them I ever saw anywhere. One requires a good deal of patience in a new country."

"They want a dash of ill temper now and then," rejoined M'Nab. "It's very hard, when work is waiting for want of men, to see a gang of stout, lazy fellows going on, refusing a pound and five-and-twenty shillings a week, because the work is not to their taste."

"But do they?" inquired Jack.

"There were five men refused work from one of the fence contractors at that price yesterday," said M'Nab, wrathfully. "They wouldn't do the bullocking and only get shepherds' wages, was the answer. I had the travellers' hut locked up, and not a bit of meat or flour will any traveller get till we get men."

"That doesn't seem unjust," said Jack. "I don't see that we are called upon to maintain a strike against our own rate of wages, which we do in effect by feeding all the idle fellows who elect to march on. But don't be hard on them. They can do us harm enough if they try."

"I don't see that, sir. The salt-bush won't burn, and they would never think of anything else. They must be taught in this part of the world that they will not be encouraged to refuse fair wages. Now we are talking about rates – seventeen and sixpence is quite enough to give a hundred for shearing. We must have an understanding with the other sheep-owners, and try and fix it this year."

Whether intimidated by the determined attitude of Mr. M'Nab, or because men differ in their aspirations, on the Warroo as in other places, the next party of travellers thankfully accepted the contractors' work and wages, and buckled to at once. They were, in fact, a party of navvies just set free from a long piece of contract, and this putting up posts, pretty hard work, was just what they wanted.

M'Nab fully believed it was owing to him, and mentally vowed to act with similar decision in the next case of mutiny. A steady enforcement of your own rules is what the people here look for, thought he.

The seasons glided on. Month after month of Jack's life, and of all our lives, fled past, and once again shearing became imminent. The time did not hang heavily on his hands; he rose at daylight, and after a plunge in the river the various work of each day asserted its claims, and our merino-multiplier found himself wending his way home at eve as weary as Gray's ploughman, only fit for the consumption of dinner and an early retreat to his bedroom. A more pretentious and certainly more neatly-arrayed artist – indeed, a *cordon bleu*, unable to withstand the temptations of town life – had succeeded Bob the cook. Now that the cottage was completed, and reasonable comfort and coolness were attainable, Jack told himself that it was not such a bad life after all. A decent neighbour or two had turned up within visiting distance – that is under fifty miles. The constant labour sweetened his mental health, while the "great expectations" of the flawless perfection of the new wool-shed, the highly improved wash-pen, and the generally triumphant success of the coming clip, lent ardour to his soul and exultation to his general bearing. M'Nab, as usual, worked, and planned, and calculated, and organized with the tireless regularity of an engine. Chiefly by his exertions and a

large emission of circulars, the Warroo sheep-holders had been roused to a determination to reduce the price of shearing per hundred from twenty shillings to seventeen and sixpence. This reduced rate, in spite of some grumbling, they were enabled to carry out, chiefly owing to an unusual abundance of the particular class of workmen concerned. The men, after a few partial strikes, capitulated. But they knew from whence the movement had emanated, and were not inclined altogether to forget the fact. Indeed, of late M'Nab, from overwork and concentration of thought, had lost his originally imperturbable manner. He had got into a habit of "driving" his men, and bore himself more nearly akin to the demeanour of the second mate on board a Yankee merchantman than the superintendent of the somewhat free and independent workmen of an Australian colony.

"He's going too fast, that new boss," said one of the wash-pen hands one day, as Mr. M'Nab, unusually chafed at the laziness of one of the men who were helping to fit a boiler, had, in requital of some insolent rejoinder, knocked him down, and discharged him on the spot. "He'll get a rough turn yet, if he don't look out – there's some very queer characters on the Warroo."

And now the last week of July had arrived. The season promised to be early. The grasses were unusually forward, while the burr-clover, matted and luxuriant, made it evident that rather less than the ordinary term of sunshine would suffice to harden its myriads of aggressively injurious seed-cylinders. The warning was not unnoticed by the ever-watchful eye of M'Nab.

"There will be a bad time with any sheds that are unlucky enough to be late this year," he said, as Jack and he were inspecting the dam and lately-placed spouts of the wash-pen; "that's why I've been carrying a full head of steam lately, to get all in order this month. Thank goodness, the shed will be finished on Saturday, and I'm ready for a start on the first of August."

Of a certainty, every one capable of being acted upon by the contagion of a very uncommon degree of energy had been working at high pressure for the last two months. Paddocks had been completed; huts were ready for the washers and shearers. The great plant, including a steam-engine, had been strongly and efficiently fitted at the wash-pen, where a dam sent back the water for a mile, to the great astonishment of Jingaree and his friends, who occasionally rode over, as a species of holiday, to inspect the work.

"My word," said this representative of the Arcadian, or perhaps Saturnian, period. "I wonder what old Morgan would say to all this here tiddley-winkin', with steam-engine, and wire-fences, and knock-about men at a pound a week, as plenty as the black fellows when he first came on the ground. They'll have a Christy pallis yet, and minstrels too, I'll be bound. They've fenced us off from our Long Camp, too, with that cussed wire. Said our cattle went over our boundary. Boundaries be blowed! I've seen every herd mixed from here to Bochara, after a dry season. Took men as knew their work to draft 'em again, I can tell you. If these here fences is to be run up all along the river, any Jackaroo can go stock-keeping. The country's going to mischief."

Winding up with this decided statement of disapproval, Mr. Jingaree thus delivered himself at a cattle muster at one of the old-fashioned stations, where the ancient manners and customs of the land were still preserved in an uncorrupted state. The other gentlemen, Mr. Billy the Bay, from Durgah, Mr. Long Jem, from Deep Creek, Mr. Flash Jack, from Banda Murranul, and a dozen other representatives of the spur and stock-whip, listened with evident approbation to Jingaree's peroration. "The blessed country's a blessed sight too full," said Mr. Long Jem. "I mind the time when, if a cove wanted a fresh hand, he had to ride to Bochara and stay there a couple of days, till some feller had finished knockin' down his cheque. Now they can stay at home, and pick and choose among the travellers at their ease. It's these blessed immigrants and diggers as spoils our market. What right have they got to the country, I'd like to know?"

This natural but highly protective view of the labour question found general acquiescence, and nothing but the absurd latter-day theories of the necessity of population, and the freedom of the individual, prevented, in their opinion, a return of the good old times, when each man fixed the rate of his own remuneration.

Meanwhile Mr. M'Nab's daring innovations progressed and prospered at the much-changed and highly-improved Gondaree. On Saturday afternoon Redgrave and his manager surveyed, with no little pride, the completed and indeed admirable wool-shed. Nothing on the Warroo had ever been seen like it. Jack felt honestly proud of his new possession, as he walked up and down the long building. The shearing floor was neatly, even ornamentally, laid with the boards of the delicately-tinted Australian pine. The long pens which delivered the sheep to the operator were battened on a new principle, applied by the ever-inventive genius of M'Nab. There were separate back yards and accurately divided portions of the floor for twenty shearers. The roof was neatly shingled. All the appliances for saving labour were of the most modern description, and as different from the old-world contrivances in vogue among the wool-sheds of the Warroo as a threshing-machine from a pair of flails. The wool-press alone had cost more as it stood ready for work than many a shed, wash-pen, huts, and yards of the old days.

CHAPTER VIII

“The crackling embers glow,
And flakes of hideous smoke the skies defile.” —*Crabbe*.

“There is accommodation for more shearers than we shall need this year,” said M’Nab, apologetically, “but it is as well to do the thing thoroughly. Next year I hope we shall have fifty thousand to shear, and if you go in for some back country I don’t see why there shouldn’t be a hundred thousand sheep on the board before you sell out. That will be a sale worth talking about. Meanwhile, there’s nothing like plenty of room in a shed. The wool will be all the better this year even for it.”

“I know it has cost a frightful lot of money,” said Jack, pensively, practising a gentle gallop on the smooth, pale-yellow, aromatic-scented floor. “I dare say it will be a pleasure to shear in it, and all that – but it’s spoiled a thousand pounds one way or the other.”

“What’s a thousand pounds?” said M’Nab, with a sort of gaze that seemed as though he were piercing the mists of futurity, and seeing an unbroken procession of tens of thousands of improved merinos marching slowly and impressively on to the battens, ready to deliver three pounds and a-half of spout-washed wool at half-a-crown a pound. “When you come to add a penny or twopence a pound to a large clip, all the money you can spend in a wash-pen, or a shed, is repaid in a couple of years. Of course I mean when things are on a large scale.”

“Well, we’re spending money on a large scale,” said Jack. “I only hope the returns and profits will be in the same proportion.”

“Not a doubt of it,” said M’Nab. “I must be off home to meet the fencers.”

The shed was locked up, and they drove home. As they alighted, three men were standing at the door of the store, apparently waiting for the “dole” – a pound of meat and a pannikin of flour, which is now found to be the reasonable minimum, given to every wayfarer by the dwellers in Riverina, wholly irrespective of caste, colour, indisposition to work, or otherwise, “as the case may be.”

Jack went into the house to prepare for dinner, while M’Nab, looking absently at the men, took out a key and made towards the entrance to the store.

“Stop,” cried M’Nab, “didn’t I see you three men on the road to-day, about four miles off? Which way have you come?”

“We’re from down the river,” said one of the fellows, a voluble, good-for-nothing, loafing impostor, a regular “coaster” and “up one side of the river and down the other” traveller, as the men say, asking for work, and praying, so long as food and shelter are afforded, that he may not get it. “We’ve been looking for work this weeks, and I’m sure, sliding into an impressive low-tragedy growl, the ’ardships men ’as to put up with in this country – a-travellin’ for work – no one can’t imagine.”

“I dare say not,” said M’Nab; “it’s precious little you fellows know of hardships, fed at every station you come to, taking an easy day’s walk, and not obliged to work unless the employment thoroughly suits you. How far have you come to-day?”

There was a slight appearance of hesitation and reference to each other as the spokesman answered – “From Dickson’s, a station about fifteen miles distant.”

“You are telling me a lie,” said M’Nab, wrathfully. “I saw you sitting down on your swags this morning at the crossing-place, five miles from here, and the hut-keeper on the other side of the river told me you had been there all night and had only just left.”

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