

# The Home Reading Circle

## THE SHEARERS' WAGES.

BY OWEN HALL.

AUTHOR OF "THE TRACK OF A STORM."

(Copyright, 1896, by the Hatcher Syndicate.)

"Hallo, Jack. Look live there. The manager wants ye."

"Both the manager" was the prompt reply, given in no very amiable tone. I was Jack. Tom, our new store keeper, owned the stentorian voice which had just summoned me; and the fact that I was at the moment seated in our hut, trying to drink a pannikin of rather hot tea for breakfast, explains the tone of my reply.

Station managers, however, are necessary evils in Australia, and as long as you are on a station it is quite as well to keep in with them as not. So I finished my tea and walked across to the store, some fifty yards away.

"That you, Jack?" The voice came from the end of the station storehouse that was divided off for an office, and it was that of Macallister, the manager.

"Yes, sir; did you want me?"

"Yes. Come here, youngster." I opened the door and found the manager standing beside the open safe with a small leather bag in his hand.

"Look here, Jack," he said, "this has gone to go to Maroonia to-day, and since Bob has gone and twisted his blasted ankle, you're the only hand I've got that I can trust to take it, so you'll have to go. You've been to Maroonia, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir. I know the road all right enough, but I don't think I could get there in one day."

"No. But you can get to Hutchen's to-night, and you'll be there two o'clock to-morrow. I daresay the hands will have done shearing by that time, and they'll be wanting to move on."

"It's money, is it?" I said, looking a little doubtful at the bag.

"Money? I should rather say it was twelve hundred and fifty pounds in notes and gold, and twenty in silver, that's all, so you'll have to look out you don't lose it."

I looked at it doubtfully. "Haden't I better take a revolver?" I asked.

The manager laughed. "A revolver," he repeated, "bless your heart, youngster, that sort of thing's played out years ago. Do you fancy you're back in the old bushranging times?"

"Take a good horse—hitch this on to your belt underneath your coat, and I'll warrant you safe enough from all the bushrangers you'll meet between here and Maroonia."

"All right, sir," I said, unfastening my belt and slipping it through the loop on the bag, which was sealed up.

"Let me see," he said, "what horse are you riding now?"

"Firefly, this last fortnight, but his old foot's a bit tender."

"All right, then, take Cossack; he's doing nothing, and if he's a bit lively, all the better—ninety-five miles'll take that out of him. Now, youngster," he added, "you be off, and mind yourself, I'll look for you back on Saturday."

As I stepped out of the office I felt just a little proud. Only eight months on the station, and trusted with a job like this. There was nothing, of course, in riding to Maroonia; anybody could do a very good hand could do that; but there was a good deal in being trusted with nearly three hundred pounds of the shearer's wages. Cossack was in the stable, and in five minutes I had saddled him and started across country at a smart canter. It was early spring—the only season when Australia is to be seen at her best. The weather had set in warm. The country, as far as the eye could reach, was green—the strange metallic bronze green of the native grass—and it stretched before me to the far horizon line in long, softly-tinted billows, sleeping under the haze of the golden sunshine. I kept the track, for on both sides the grass rose tall and rank, as high as my horse's girth, its heavy drooping masses lighted here and there at the edges by bright splashes of color. In many places the flowers peeped through the tangle and swayed gently in the morning breeze.

The air was full of the life of the spring. Myriads of insects filled the atmosphere with their musical hum or whirled past me in their mad flight. Even the dim recesses of the forest, through a patch of which I had to pass, were cheerful for once with the chatter of parrots and the loud, exultant screams of golden-crested cockatoos. Cossack had been lively enough at first, as the manager had expected, but when he saw that real business was meant he settled down to the long stretching canter with which the Australian horse will cover seven miles an hour through the broiling heat of a long summer's day.

Hour after hour he kept it up with the steady endurance of his race. The ride was a lonely one, but eight months of station life had made solitude seem to me like a second nature. I couldn't miss my way, for I was steering for an outlying spur of the Australian Alps which now rose rugged and gray before me. I knew I had to round the end of the spur just where the Cinnagulla creek comes out into the open, and I should be within about twenty miles of Hutchen's accommodation house on the dividing range, where I was to put up for the night. On, and on—over the

long, rolling waves of the plain, with now and then a glimpse of a tall gray kangaroo that bounded off to right or left through the waving grass, or a little furry bandicoot that would scud with a quick rush, half jump and half run, into the impenetrable shelter of the tall herbage.

Twice I had stopped at the streams we had crossed to give Cossack a drink and once to give him a feed from the nosebag I carried at the pommel of the saddle, and now as the sun was westerly and beginning to throw long shadows from the range across the plain I reached at last the end of the spur for which I had been steering so long. The sharp tinkling gush of the stream made Cossack prick forward his ears as we descended the slope into the broad bottom, where the Cinnagulla creek dashed over its flashing bed of polished white pebbles.

The long shadow of the range had fallen dark and silent over the plain and the light was dying very low in the western sky before I rode up to Hutchen's. The place hadn't much to recommend it to the fastidious, but a year in Australia had effectually removed me out of that class, and I was well pleased to let the stableman take charge of Cossack while I walked into the rough and ready common room of "The Divide." Supper—the rough but plentiful Australian bush supper—with its invariable mutton and its inevitable damper-bread and tea, and after sitting sleepily for half an hour in the place where I had supped I was glad to be shown the way to a rough bed in a small hut, where I could rest after my sixty-mile ride.

I awoke with the blazing morning sun full in my face, and knew that I had overslept myself. To spring out of bed and complete my simple toilet was the work of a minute or two, and in a quarter of an hour I had swallowed a hasty breakfast and started again on my journey. The morning was beautiful, and Cossack, who seemed as fresh as when we had started for our ride of yesterday, appeared to enjoy it as much as I did myself.

The way to Maroonia lay for the first twelve miles or so along the foot of the range, and here the bush ran out into the plain in long tongues through which a rough road had been cut, broad enough for two carts to pass one another. I wanted to get to the station by twelve o'clock if possible, and it was now after seven, so that a steady seven miles an hour would just about do it in the time. There was no need to push Cossack. He was going at his own favorite pace and seemed to enjoy it. He evidently liked the cool shade of the forest, with its long arcades of shadow, flecked and splashed with golden bars and spots of sunshine, and I fully sympathized with him. The wood was full of life; parrots chattered and called in harsh conversational tones from tree to tree; cockatoos scolded and swore in the leafy recesses where the flash of their white and golden plumage combined with their voices to betray them; bandicoots scuttled across the track with a shy, quick motion; an occasional green or brown lizard darted up a tree, its bright eye turned inquiringly on the intruder; and now and then a striped or spotted snake would glide with a swift sinuous motion that faxed the eye to follow it into the dimmer shadows of the forest.

Now we were drawing closer to the range, for I could hear the gush and murmur of the stream that ran along its foot on my left hand, and I knew that I should soon have passed the forest, and be in the full blaze of the morning sunshine. At that moment my ear caught a new sound which belonged neither to the forest nor the stream. It was dull, and sounded distant at first, but grew louder every minute, and I turned half round in my saddle to see what my new companion might be like. He wasn't following the road, but riding a little way to the edge of the forest on my right. I could see the make out that his horse was a tall bay, and that he was coming with the long swinging gallop of the old bush stager through the trees. I was wondering whether I had better wait for him, when suddenly he came alongside, when suddenly he halted me in a deep, strong voice:

"Hallo, young fellow!" he shouted.

"Hold hard there!" The voice was peremptory, and there was a hardly concealed threat in the tone. "What was the man? Could he be a bushranger? Then Macallister's words came back to me: 'Bless your heart, youngster, that sort of thing's played out years ago.' No, it couldn't be a bushranger. Question and answer passed through my mind at lightning speed, but I neither replied to the hail, nor checked the speed of Cossack's canter. In another second the summons came again, and this time in louder and if possible a harsher tone than before: "Hold hard, I say, youngster!" The tone decided me.

"And who the mischief are you?" I asked, touched Cossack's flank with the spur, and he instantly acknowledged by breaking into a gallop. Cossack's gallop was well known in the district, and I had little fear of the tall bay overtaking him. Perhaps my pursuer was of the same opinion, for in another half minute he heard a fierce oath that came rolling out of the wood; then there came a sudden sharp report of a pistol, which reached my ears just as Cossack made a wild, head-long plunge, throwing me like a stone from a sling. I heard the report, I felt myself hurled through the air; I struck against something—and that was all.

"What was that?" I asked, as I lay on the ground, my head throbbing and my eyes swimming.

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came back to me. I sat up and looked stupidly around; no, it wasn't a dream. There within half a dozen yards of me lay Cossack on his side in the very middle of the road—dead, evidently dead. A big, powerful man stood at my side unswerving the top of a pocket flask and looking at me with inquiring eyes. A few yards away there stood a shock-headed black holding a big, brown horse.

"Here, young fellow, have a drop of this," the man said. I glanced at him as I obeyed, and noticed that he was dressed in the quiet uniform of the mounted police.

"What," I said, stupidly, "where's the man that shot my horse?"

He looked at Cossack as he lay on the track, and then back at me. "Stooped, I should say," he replied dryly. "What did he take of your horse?"

As he spoke my hand went instinctively to the place where my belt had been—it was gone. I sprang to my feet with a cry. "He's got the bag," I shouted, and beginning to throw long shadows from the range across the plain I reached at last the end of the spur for which I had been steering so long. The sharp tinkling gush of the stream made Cossack prick forward his ears as we descended the slope into the broad bottom, where the Cinnagulla creek dashed over its flashing bed of polished white pebbles.

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followed—burra, burra." Jacky opened his mouth in a portentous grin, and appeared to find keen enjoyment in a soundless laugh entirely to himself, as he turned and trotted along the bridle track.

For three or four hundred yards the track showed no sign of change. There was the same dismal succession of gray tree trunks, the same scanty undergrowth of flowering heath and occasional crimson waratahs, with no landmark whatever but the faint bridle path that wound through it all. At last Jacky lifted his head and stopped, and the sergeant pulled up his horse and waited. Jacky threw back his great head and sniffed the air suspiciously through his broad nostrils. "White fellow burn smoke," he said; "white fellow burn smoke."

"Right you are, Jacky," replied the sergeant, grimly, as he took a look at the lock of his carbine. "Now, Jacky, you make-a-walk easy-make-a-look white fellow. Jacky nodded his big head, and went slowly forward along the track. The sergeant and I followed.

It was farther off than I had believed it possible even Jacky's nostrils could have scented smoke. At last, however, the gray shadows of the forest were suddenly exchanged for a blaze of sunlight, and we found ourselves on the edge of a little natural clearing. It was perhaps a hundred yards across, and at the opposite side there rose a great shapeless mass of bluish gray stone, against the side of which a rough bush had been built. Out of the roof a thin lance of blue smoke stole up the face of the rock, and a horse-man sat there on a sapling that grew at one side.

We stood looking at it in silence for a minute, and then the sergeant turned to me and said in a low tone: "Is that the horse, youngster? Do you recognize him?"

"I couldn't say I was sure of him," I said, looking hard at the horse. "He looks about the same color, but I hadn't a chance to see him rightly amongst the trees before the shot was fired."

"Well, never mind; I'll soon fetch the man out." I thought he was going to ride forward when the rough bark door was opened and a woman came out. She threw back her long black hair that hung round her face and cast a quick, suspicious glance over the place. Her eye seemed to rest on our party in a moment, for she gave a shrill scream and hurried as if to go in again. Before she had taken a step, however, the door was pushed open from within and a man stepped quickly out. He had a soft felt hat drawn over his face, which seemed so low that his face was almost invisible, yet somehow the figure seemed not unfamiliar to me. The voice, at any rate, I recognized at once as he shouted: "Hello! What the devil are you after here?"

"That's him," I gasped, in answer to the quick look the sergeant turned on me. "That's the beggar that shot Cossack!"

The sergeant touched the horse with the spur, as he exclaimed: "In after you, my fine fellow, so you'd better come along!"

TO BE CONTINUED.

THEY WERE ALL THERE.

From the Cincinnati Tribune.

The witless gentleman paused and looked long and earnestly at the little wheel ventilator, which was whizzing around in the window pane high over his head.

"Can it be," he asked, half aloud, placing one finger in his right ear, he closed his eyes thoughtfully for a second.

"No," he said, with a sigh of relief, as he moved on again; "it isn't one of mine, lost from its place. They're all there."

Unlike most men, he could count his wheels.

Perfectly Sound-Proof.

Realty Agent (exhibiting flat, beamingly)—To prove to you that the walls are perfectly sound-proof, I have just run over into the next flat and told the gentleman there to play the piano.

Mr. Flatiegh (wearily)—Yes, my wife and I heard you telling him to play very softly.—Puck.

Not Open to Criticism.

"What is being faultlessly dressed, Uncle Sam?"

"Why, not wearing anything that isn't paid for."—Chicago Record.

only awaits your invitation to bring into your home healthful, palatable and economical food.

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NERVOUS TROUBLES all kinds cured with NIMAL EXTRACTS. Free book tells how. Washington Chemical Co., Washington, D. C.

## Pertinent Questions.

Why Will a Woman Throw Away Her Good Looks and Comfort?



Why will a woman drag on a sickly, half-hearted existence and miss three-quarters of the joy of living, when she has health almost within her grasp? If she does not value her good looks, does she not value her comfort?

Why, my sister, will you suffer that dull pain in the small of your back, those bearing-down, dragging sensations in the loins, that terrible fullness in the lower bowel, caused by constipation proceeding from the womb lying over and pressing on the rectum? Do you know that these are signs of displacement, and that you will never be well while that lasts?

What a woman needs who is thus affected is to strengthen the ligaments so they will keep her organs in place. There the Compound is constantly rolling in, proves that the Compound is constantly curing thousands of just such cases.

The following letter from Mrs. Marlow is only one of many thousands which Mrs. Pinkham has received this year from those she has relieved—surely such testimony is convincing:

"My trouble commenced after the birth of my last child. I did not know what was the matter with me. My husband went to our family physician and described my symptoms, and he said I had displacement and falling of the womb. He sent me some medicine, but it did little good. I let it go on about two years, and every time I did any hard work my womb would come down. Finally a lady friend advised me to try Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound, which I did. The first bottle helped me so much, I continued to take it right along. My back was almost the same as no back. I could not lift scarcely any weight. My life was just a drag to me. To-day I am well of my womb trouble, and have a good, strong back, thanks to Mrs. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound."—Mrs. L. MARLOW, Middletown, Ill.

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Liberal Accommodations Extended According to Balances and Responsibility.

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Surplus, - - - 320,000  
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WM. CONNELL, President.  
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