CLASSICS TO GO

IN BAD COMPANY

AND OTHER STORIES

ROLF BOLDREWOOD

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IN BAD COMPANY

CHAPTER I

Bill Hardwick was as fine a specimen of an Australian as you could find in a day's march. Active as a cat and strong withal, he was mostly described as 'a real good all-round chap, that you couldn't put wrong at any kind of work that a man could be asked to do.'

He could plough and reap, dig and mow, put up fences and huts, break in horses and drive bullocks; he could milk cows and help in the dairy as handily as a woman. These and other accomplishments he was known to possess, and being a steady, sensible fellow, was always welcome when work was needed and a good man valued. Besides all this he was the fastest and the best shearer in the district of Tumut, New South Wales, where he was born, as had been his father and mother before him. So that he was a true Australian in every sense of the word.

It could not be said that the British race had degenerated as far as he was concerned. Six feet high, broad-chested, light-flanked, and standing on his legs like a gamecock, he was always ready to fight or work, run, ride or swim, in fact to tackle any muscular exercise in the world at the shortest notice.

Bill had always been temperate, declining to spend his earnings to enrich the easy-going township publican, whose mode of gaining a living struck him as being too far removed from that of honest toil. Such being his principles and mode of life, he had put by a couple of hundred pounds, and 'taken up a selection.' This means (in Australia) that he

had conditionally purchased three hundred and twenty acres of Crown Land, had paid up two shillings per acre of the upset price, leaving the balance of eighteen shillings, to be paid off when convenient. He had constructed thereon, chiefly with his own hands, a comfortable, four-roomed cottage, of the 'slab' architecture of the period, and after fencing in his property and devoting the proceeds of a couple of shearings to a modest outlay in furniture, had married Jenny Dawson, a good-looking, well-conducted young woman, whom he had known ever since he was big enough to crack a stockwhip.

In her way she was as clever and capable; exceptionally well adapted for the position of a farmer's wife, towards which occupation her birth and surroundings had tended. She was strong and enduring in her way, as were her husband and brothers in theirs. She could milk cows and make excellent butter, wasn't afraid of a turbulent heifer in the dairy herd, or indisposed to rise before daylight in the winter mornings and drive in the milkers through the wet or frozen grass. She could catch and saddle her own riding-horse or drive the spring cart along an indifferent road to the country town. She knew all about the rearing of calves, pigs, and poultry; could salt beef and cure bacon—in a general way attend to all the details of a farm. Her father had acquired a small grant in the early colonial days, and from its produce and profits reared a family of healthy boys and girls.

They had not been educated up to the State school standard now considered necessary for every dweller in town or country, but they could read and write decently; had also such knowledge of arithmetic as enabled them to keep their modest accounts. Such having been the early training of Bill's helpmate, it was a fair augury that, with luck and good conduct, they were as likely as any young couple of their age to prosper reasonably, so as eventually to acquire a competence, or even, as indeed not a few of

their old friends and neighbours had done, to attain to that enviable position generally described as 'making a fortune.'

For the first few years nothing could have been more promising than the course of affairs at Chidowla or 'Appletree Flat,' as their homestead was formerly named, in consequence of the umbrageous growth of the 'angophora' in the meadow by the mountain creek, which bordered their farm. Bill stayed at home and worked steadily, until he had put in his crop. He cleared and cultivated a larger piece of ground with each succeeding year. The seasons were genial, and the rainfall, though occasionally precarious, did not, during this period, show any diminution. But annually, before the first spring month came round, Bill saddled the old mare, and leading a less valuable or perhaps half-broken young horse, packed his travelling 'swag' upon it and started off for the shearing. Jenny did not particularly like being left alone for three months or perhaps four, with no one but the children, for by this time a sturdy boy and baby girl had been added to the household. But Bill brought home such a welcome addition to the funds in the shape of the squatters' cheques, that she hid her uneasiness and discomfort from him, only hoping, as she said, that some day, if matters went on as they were going, they would be able to do without the shearing money, and Bill could afford to stop with his wife and children all the year round. That was what *she* would like.

So time went on, till after one more shearing, Bill began to think about buying the next selection, which an improvident neighbour would shortly be forced to sell, owing to his drinking habits and too great fondness for country race meetings.

The soil of the land so handily situated was better than their own, and, as an adjoining farm, could be managed without additional expense.

The 'improvements' necessary for holding it under the lenient land laws of New South Wales had been effected.

They were not particularly valuable, but they had been passed by the Inspector of Conditional Purchases, who was not too hard on a poor man, if he made his selection his '*bona fide* home and residence.' This condition Mr. Dick Donahue certainly had fulfilled as far as locating his hard-working wife Bridget and half-a-dozen bare-legged, ragged children thereon, with very little to eat sometimes, while he was acting as judge at a bush race meeting, or drinking recklessly at the public-house in the township.

So now the end had come. The place was mortgaged up to its full value with the bank at Talmorah, the manager of which had refused to advance another shilling upon it.

The storekeeper, who had a bill of sale over the furniture, horses and cows, plough, harrow, and winnowing machine, had decided to sell him up. The butcher and the baker, despairing of getting their bills paid, declined further orders. Poor Bridget had been lately feeding herself and the children on milk and potatoes, last year's bacon, and what eggs the fowls, not too well fed themselves, kindly produced.

Jenny had helped them many a time, from womanly pity. But for her, they would often have been without the 'damper' bread, which served to fill up crevices with the hungry brood —not that she expected return or payment, but as she said, 'How could I see the poor things hungry, while we have a snug home and all we can eat and drink?'

Then she would mentally compare Bill's industry with Dick's neglect, and a feeling of wifely pride would thrill her heart as she returned to her comfortable cottage and put her children, always neatly dressed, to sleep in their clean cots.

As she sat before the fire, near the trimly-swept hearth, which looked so pleasant and homely, though there was but a wooden slab chimney with a stone facing, a vision arose before her of prosperous days when they would have a ring fence round their own and the Donahues' farm—perhaps even an 'additional conditional lease,' to be freehold eventually—afterwards a flock of sheep and who knows what in the years to come.

'The Donahues, poor things, would have to sell and go away, that was certain; *they* couldn't prevent them being sold up—and, of course, Bill might as well buy it as another. The bank manager, Mr. Calthorpe, would sell the place, partly on credit, trusting Bill for the remainder, with security on both farms, because he was sober and industrious. Indeed, he told Bill so last week. What a thing it was to have a good name! When she thought of the way other women's husbands "knocked down" their money after shearing, forty and fifty pounds, even more, in a week's drunken bout, she felt that she could not be too thankful.

'Now Bill, when shearing was over, generally took a small sum in cash—just enough to see him home, and paid in the cheque for the season's shearing to his bank account. It was over sixty pounds last year, for he sold his spare horse—a thirty-shilling colt out of the pound, that he had broken in himself—to the overseer, for ten guineas, and rode home on the old mare, who, being fat and frolicsome after her spell, "carried him and his swag first-rate."

'As to the two farms, no doubt it would give them all they knew, at first, to live and pay interest. But other people could do it, and why shouldn't they? Look at the Mullers! The bark hut they lived in for the first few years is still there. They kept tools, seed potatoes, odds and ends in it now. Next, they built a snug four-roomed slab cottage, with an iron roof. That's used for the kitchen and men's room. For

they've got a fine brick house, with a verandah and grand furniture, and a big orchard and more land, and a flock of sheep and a dairy and a buggy and—everything. How I should like a buggy to drive myself and the children to the township! Wouldn't it be grand? To be sure they're Germans, and it's well known they work harder and save more than us natives. But what one man and woman can do, another ought to be able for, I say!'

And here Jenny shut her mouth with a resolute expression and worked away at her needle till bedtime. Things were going on comfortably with this meritorious young couple, and Bill was getting ready to start for the annual trip 'down the river,' as it was generally described. This was a region distant three hundred miles from the agricultural district where the little homestead had been created. The 'down the river' woolsheds were larger and less strictly managed (so report said) than those of the more temperate region, which lay near the sources of the great rivers. In some of them as many as one hundred, two hundred, even three hundred thousand sheep were annually shorn. And as the fast shearers would do from a hundred to a hundred and fifty sheep per day, it may be calculated, at the rate of one pound per hundred, what a nice little cheque would be coming to every man after a season's shearing. More particularly if the weather was fine.

Bill was getting ready to start on the following morning when a man named Janus Stoate arrived, whom he knew pretty well, having more than once shorn in the same shed with him.

He was a cleverish, talkative fellow, with some ability and more assurance, qualities which attract steady-going, unimaginative men like Bill, who at once invited him to stay till the morning, when they could travel together. Stoate cheerfully assented, and on the morrow they took the road

after breakfast, much to Mrs. Hardwick's annoyance, who did not care for the arrangement. For, with feminine intuition, she distrusted Janus Stoate, about whom she and her husband had had arguments.

He was a Londoner—an 'assisted' emigrant, a radical socialist, brought out at the expense of the colony. For which service he was so little grateful that he spoke disrespectfully of all the authorities, from the Governor downward, and indeed, as it seemed to her, of respectable people of every rank and condition. Now Jenny, besides being naturally an intelligent young woman, utilised her leisure hours during her husband's absence, for reading the newspapers, as well as any books she could get at. She had indeed more brains than he had, which gift she owed to an Irish grandmother. And though she did by no means attempt to rule him, her advice was always listened to and considered.

'I wish you were going with some one else,' she said with an air of vexation. 'It's strange that that Stoate should come, just on your last evening at home. I don't like him a little bit. He's just artful enough to persuade you men that he's going to do something great with this "Australian Shearers' Union" that I see so much about in the newspapers. I don't believe in him, and so I tell you, Bill!'

'I know you don't like Unions,' he answered, 'but see what they've done for the working classes! What could we shearers have done without ours?'

'Just what you did before you had anything to do with him and his Union. Do your work and get paid for it. You got your shearing money all right, didn't you? Mr. Templemore's cheques, and Mr. Dickson's and Mr. Shand's, were always paid, weren't they? How should we have got the land and this home, but for them?'

'Well, but, Jenny, we ought to think about the other workers as well as ourselves—"Every man should stand by his order," as Stoate says.'

'I don't see that at all. Charity's all very well, but we have our own business to look after and let other people mind theirs. Order, indeed! I call it disorder,—and them that work it up will have to pay for it, mark my words. You look at those children, William Hardwick, that's where you've got to give your money to, and your wife, and not a lot of gassing spouters like Janus Stoate, who don't care if their families starve, while they're drinking and smoking, talking rubbish, and thinking themselves fine fellows, and what fools you and the rest are to pay them for it.'

'Well, but the squatters are lowering the price of shearing, Jenny; we must make a stand against that, surely!'

'And suppose they do. Isn't wool falling, and sheep too? Aren't they boiling down their ewes, and selling legs of mutton for a shilling apiece? Why should they go on paying a pound a hundred when everything's down? When prices rise, shearing'll go up again, and wages too—you know we can get mutton now for a penny a pound. Doesn't that make a difference? You men seem to have no sense in you, to talk in that way!'

'Well, but what are we to do? If they go on cutting down wages, there's no saying what they'll do next.'

'Time enough to think about that when it comes. You take a fair thing, now that times are bad, it'll help them that's helped you, and when they get better, shearing and everything else will go up too. You can't get big wages out of small profits; your friends don't seem to have gumption enough to see that. I'm ashamed of you, I really am, Bill!'

'Well, I must go now—I daresay the squatters will give in, and there'll be no row at all.'

'What do you want to have a row for, I should like to know? Haven't you always been well treated and well fed, and well paid?—and now you want to turn on them that did it for you, just as if you were one of those larrikins and spielers, that come up partly for work, and more for gambling and stealing! I say it's downright ungrateful and foolish besides—and if you follow all the Union fads, mark my words, you'll live to rue the day.'

'Well, good-bye, Jenny, I can't stop any longer, you're too set up to be reasonable.'

'Good-bye, Bill, and don't be going and running risks at another man's bidding; and if you bring that man here again, as sure as my name's Jane Hardwick, I'll set the dogs on him.' And here Jenny went into the cottage, and shut the door with a bang, while Bill rode down the track to join his companion, feeling distinctly uncomfortable; the more so, as he reflected that he and Jenny had never parted in this way before.

'You've been a long time saying good-bye,' said that gentleman, with a sneering accent in his voice; 'that's the worst of bein' married, you never can follow your own opinions without a lot of barneyin' and opposition. It's a curious thing that women never seem to be on the side of progress—they're that narrow-minded, as they don't look ahead of the day's work.'

'My old woman's more given to look ahead than I am,' said Bill seriously. 'But, of course, we all know that we must stick together, if we expect to get anything out of the employers.'

'Yes, yes—by George, you're quite right,' said Stoate, as if Bill had enunciated an original and brilliant idea. 'What I and the workers want is to bring the capitalists on their knees—the labour element has never had its proper share of profits in the past. But we're going to have things different in the

future. How was all the big estates put together, and them fine houses built, except by *our* labour? And what do we get after all, now the work's done? We've never had our fair share. Don't you see that?' Here he looked at Bill, who could find nothing to say but—

'I suppose not.'

'Suppose not? We've as much right to be ridin' in our buggies as the man as just passed us with that slashin' pair. Our labour made the land valuable—built the houses and put up the fences. Where do *we* come in, I ask you?'

'Well, I suppose the men that worked got their wages, didn't they?' answered Bill. 'There's been a deal of employment the last few years. I did pretty well out of a fencing contract, I know, and my mate started a big selection from his share.'

'Yes, yes, I daresay, that's where you fellers make the mistake. If you get a few pounds slung to you by these capitalists, you don't think of the other poor chaps walkin' about half starved, begging a meal here and a night's lodging there. What we ought to go in for is a co-operative national movement. That's the easiest of all. One man to find the money.'

'Is it?' Bill could not help saying, interrupting the flood of Stoate's eloquence. 'I've always found it dashed hard to find a few pounds.'

'I don't mean fellers like us; we work hard—a dashed sight too hard for all we get. I mean the regular professional capitalist, in a manner of speakin', that's got his money by buying land, when the Government oughtn't never to have sold it, if they'd had any savey, or had it left him by his father, as had robbed the people some other way. Well, he finds the money, you and I the muscle—and mark you, they can't do nothin' without *that*—and others, smartish chaps as comes from the people mostly, finds the brains.'

'And what after that?'

'That's what I'm a-coming to,' answered Stoate pompously. 'When the sheep's shorn, the fat ones sold, the wheat reaped, and the money put in the bank, we all divide fair, according to our shares. So much for interest on capital, so much for labouring work, so much for head work, so much for light, easy things like clerking, as most any fool can do.'

'That sounds pretty fair,' replied Bill, scratching his head, as he endeavoured to grasp the complex conditions of the scheme. 'But who's to boss the whole thing? There must be a boss?'

'Oh, of course, there'll be a council—elected by the people—that is of course the shareholders in each industrial, co-operative establishment; they all have votes, you know. The council will do all the bossing.'

'Oh, I see, and all share alike. One man's as good as another, I suppose.'

'Certainly, all have equal rights; every man willing to work has a right to have work found for him by the State.'

'But suppose he won't work when it *is* found for him? You and I have known plenty of coves like that.'

'Well, of course, there *is* a difference in men—some haven't the natural gift, as you may say—don't care for "hard graft," but you must remember no one'll have to work hard when labour's federated.'

'How'll the work be done, then?'

'Why, you see, every one will have to do four or six hours a day, rich and poor, young and old, from sixteen to sixty. Before that their eddication [Mr. Stoate's early environment—his father was a radical cobbler—had fixed his pronunciation of that important word inexorably], this eddication, I say (which is the great thing for a worker, and

enables him to hold his own against the employers, who've always had a monopoly of it), has to be attended to. After sixty, they've to be pensioned off, not wanted to do no more work. And as Bellamy says in his *Looking Backward* (a great book, as all our chaps ought to read)—"If every one in the State worked their four hours a day, the whole work of the world could be easy done, and no one the worse for it."'

'That sounds well enough,' said Bill thoughtfully, 'but I'm afraid it wouldn't wash. A lot of chaps would be trying for the easy parts, and those that were cast for the rough and tumble wouldn't do it with a will, or only half and half. And who's to draft 'em off? The fellers elected to do it would have all the say, and if they had a down on a chap—perhaps a deal better man than themselves—they could drop him in for the lowest billets going.'

'That could all be set right in the usual way,' replied Stoate, pompously mouthing his words as if addressing an imaginary audience. 'Every member of the Association would have the right of appeal to the Grand Council.'

'And suppose they didn't side with the workin' feller—these talking chaps, as like as not, would hang together—he'd have to grin and bear it. He'd be no better than a slave. Worse than things are now. For a man can get a lawyer, and fight out his case before the P.M., and the other beaks. They're mostly fair and square—what I've seen of 'em. They've no interest one way or the other.'

'No more would the Grand Labour Council.'

'Don't know so much about that, working coves are middlin' jealous of one another. If one chap's been elected to the Council, as you call it, and another feller opposed him and got beat, there's sure to be bad blood between them, and the man that's up like enough'll want to rub it into the man

that's down—and there'd be no one to see fair play like the beaks.'

'Why, you're getting to be a regular "master's man." That's not the way to talk, if you're goin' to be a Unionist.'

'Oh, I'll follow the Union,' replied Bill, 'if things are going to be fair and square, not any other way, and so I tell you. But if it's such a jolly good thing to put your money in a station and share and share alike with all the other chaps, why don't some of you Union chaps put your money together?—lots of you could raise a hundred or more if you didn't drink it. Then you could shear your own sheep, sell your own wool, and raise your own bread, meat, vegetables—everything. You could divide the profits at the end of the year, and if running a squatting station's such a thundering good thing, why you'd all make fortunes in no time. What do you say to that now?'

'Well, of course, it sounds right enough,' answered Stoate, with less than his usual readiness. 'There's a lot of things to be considered about afore you put your money into a big thing like that. You've got to get the proper sort of partners—men as you know something about, and that can be depended on for to work steady, and do what they're told.'

'Do what they're told? Why, ain't that the one thing you Union chaps are fighting the squatters about? They're not to be masters in their own woolsheds! The shearers and rouseabouts are *not* to obey the squatters' overseer, they must work as the Union's delegate tells 'em. What sort of fake d'ye call that? Suppose I'm harvestin'—my crop's not much now, but it may be, some day—d'ye mean to say I'm not to talk sharp to my own men, and say "do this" or "do that"? And a delegate walkin' up and down, makin' believe to be boss, while I'm payin' for the wages and rations, and horses and thrashing-machine, and the whole boiling, would I stand that? No! I'd kick him out of the place, and that

dashed soon, I can tell you!' And here Bill's eyes began to sparkle and his fists to tighten on the reins as if he itched to 'stand up to his man,' with steady eye and watchful 'left,' ready for the first chance to 'land' his adversary.

The sun was scarcely an hour high when the wayfarers came in sight of the village-appearing group of edifices familiarly known as a 'sheep station.' The 'men's hut' came first into view—a substantial dwelling, with horizontal sawn slabs and shingled roof, a stone chimney and a dining-room. Boasting a cook, moreover, of far from ordinary rank. A superior building, in fact, to the one which the owner of the station thought good enough for himself for the first few years of his occupation of North Yalla-doora.

This was the abiding-place of the resident labourers on the station; men who received a fixed weekly wage, varying from a pound to twenty-five shillings per week, with board and lodging additional. The Australian labourer is catered for on perhaps the most liberal dietary scale in the world. He is supplied with three meals per diem, of beef or mutton of the best quality, with bread *à discrétion*, also tea (the ordinary drink of the country) in unlimited quantity, with milk and vegetables if procurable. Condiments, sauces, and preserves, if his tastes run that way, he has to pay for as extras.

They can be procured, also wearing apparel, boots, and all other necessaries, at the station store; failing that, at the 'township,' invariably found within easy distance of any large station.

Besides the 'men's hut' comes next in rank the 'shearers' hut,' dedicated to those important and (at shearing time) exclusive personages; the sheep-washers', the rouseabouts' huts, all necessary different establishments; as also the 'travellers' hut,' set apart for the nomadic labourer or 'swagman,' who sojourning but for a night is by the

unwritten law of Bushland provided with bread and meat, cooking utensils, water, and firewood *gratis*.

Then, at a certain distance, the woolshed—with half an acre of roofed, battened yards and pens—the 'big house,' the stable, the horse-yard, the stock-yard, the milking-yard, with perhaps half-a-dozen additional nondescript constructions.

It may easily be imagined that such buildings, scattered and disjointed as they were, had much more the appearance of a village than of a single establishment owned, managed, and supported by one man (or one firm), and absolutely subject to his orders and interest.

'Might as well stop here to-night,' said Stoate; 'it's twenty-five mile to Coolah Creek for to-morrow, and the road heavy in places. Look at it! There's a bloomin' township to belong to one man, and *us* travellin' the country looking for work!'

'It took a lot of labour to put up all the huts and places, not to count in the shed and yards, you bet,' said his companion, who had been silent for the last half-hour, 'and many a cheque was drawed afore the last nail was drove in. I know a chap that's made a small fortune out of Mr. Templemore's contracts, and that's got a farm to show for it to-day. What's wrong with that?'

'Why, don't you see? Suppose the State had this first-rate block of country, cut it up in fair-sized farms, advanced the men the money to put up their places and crop it the first year, see what a population it would keep. Keep in comfort, too,' he continued, as he refilled his pipe and made ready for a leisurely smoke. 'Let me see, there's fifty thousand acres of freehold on this North Yalla-doora run, besides as much more leased. Divide that into nice-sized farms, that'd give us a thousand fifty-acre lots, or five 'underd 'underd-acre ones. See what a crowd of families that'd keep.'

'And suppose there come a dry season,' queried Bill rather gruffly, 'how about the families then? I've seen the sheep dyin' by hundreds on this very place—and the whole forty thousand 'd 'a died in another month if rain hadn't come. But I'm gettin' full up of this Union racket. Small farms in a dry country's foolishness. Where are we goin' to camp? Look at the grass on that flat! And I've seen it like a road.'

'It ain't bad near the creek,' said his companion. 'You can let the horses go while I go up to the overseer and get a bit of ration.'

'There's no call to do that. See that bag? My old woman's put bread and beef enough in that for a week anyhow, besides bacon, and tea, and sugar.'

'That's all right,' answered Stoate airily, 'but we may as well get fresh mutton for nothing. They always give travellers a pound or two here, and a pannikin of flour. It comes in handy for cakes.'

'Well, I'm d—d!' said Hardwick, unable to contain his wrathful astonishment. 'D'ye mean to tell me as you're a-goin' to *beg* food from this squatter here and take his charity after abusing him and all belonging to him and schemin' to ruin 'em? I call it dashed, dirty, crawling meanness, and for two pins I wouldn't travel the same side of the road with you, and so I tell you, Janus Stoate.'

There was a snaky glitter in Stoate's small, black eyes as he met for an instant the bold gaze of the Australian; but, with characteristic cunning, he turned it off with a half laugh.

'Why, Bill, what hot coffee you're a-gettin', all over a little joke like this 'ere. Now I feel as I've a right to be fed on the road when I and my feller-workers bring our labour to the door—in a manner of speakin'. We've no call to think ourselves under obligation to the squatters for their

"miserable dole," as our Head Centre calls it. It's only our due when all's said and done.'

'Miserable dole,' growled Bill, now engaged in taking off his pack. 'That's a dashed fine name to give free rations, to the tune of half-a-dozen sheep a night, and a couple of bags of flour a week, which I know Tambo did last shearing. A lot of chaps going about the country askin' for work, and prayin' to God they mayn't find it—and abusin' the people that feed 'em on top of it all. I wonder the squatters don't stop feedin' travellers, and that's all about it. I would if I was boss, I know, except the old men.'

'How about the sheds and the grass when the weather gets dry?' asked Stoate, with a sidelong glance of spite.

'That's easy enough, if a chap's a d—d scoundrel; but suppose he's caught and gets five years in Berrima Gaol, he'd wish he'd acted more like a white man and less like a myall blackfellow. But stoush all this yabber. You boil the billy, while I get out the grub and hobble the horses. I feel up to a good square feed.'

So did Mr. Stoate, apparently, as he consumed slice after slice of the cold corned beef and damper which Jenny had put up neatly in Bill's 'tucker bag,' not disdaining divers hunks of 'brownie,' washed down with a couple of pints of 'billy tea,' after which he professed that he felt better, and proceeded to fill and light his pipe with deliberation.

By this time the hobbled horses had betaken themselves through the abundant pasture of the river flat, and their bells sounding faint and distant, Bill declared his intention of heading them back, in case they should try to make off towards the home they had left. He returned in half an hour, stating that they were in a bend and blocked by a horseshoe lagoon.

Both men addressed themselves to the task of putting up the small tent which Bill carried, and bestowed their swags therein, after which Mr. Stoate proposed that they should go over to the men's hut, and have a bit of a yarn before they turned in.

Bill remarked that they had to be up at daylight, but supposed that an hour wouldn't matter. So the wayfarers strolled over to a long building, not far from the creek bank, which they entered without ceremony. They found themselves in the presence of about twenty men, in the ordinary dress of the station hand, viz. tweed or moleskin trousers and Crimean shirt. Some had coats, but the majority were in their shirt sleeves. There were mostly of ages between twenty and forty, differing in nationality, speech, and occupation.

England, Ireland, Scotland, and Australia were represented. A Frenchman, two Germans, a coloured man (American), besides a tall, well-made Australian half-caste, who spoke much the same English as the others, but had a softer voice, with rather slower intonation.

At one end of the large room was an ample fireplace, with a glowing wood fire, around which several men were sitting or standing, mostly smoking. Others were seated at the long, solid dining-table reading, for in one corner stood some fairly well-filled bookshelves. One man was writing a letter.

A few were lying in their bunks, rows of which were on either side of the room. A certain amount of quiet conversation was going on. There was no loud talking, swearing, or rude behaviour of any sort, and in spite of the bare walls and plain surroundings an air of comfort pervaded the whole.

Stoate was greeted by several of the younger men, one of whom was disposed to be facetious, as he exclaimed—

'Hulloa, my noble agitator, what brings you here? Goin' to call out the shearers, and play the devil generally, eh? You've come to the wrong shop at North Yalla-doora—we're all steady-going coves here.'

'I suppose you're game to stand up for your rights, Joe Brace, and not afraid of getting your wages raised, if the Union does that for you?'

'*If* it does,' rejoined Joe sarcastically; 'and who's to go bail for that, I'd like to know? You and your crowd haven't done any great things so far, except make bad blood between masters and men—when everything was peace and goodwill before, as the parson says.'

'Well—what's that? Yer can't get nothin' in the world without fightin' for it—I reckon we're going to have a bit of war for a change. Yes, *war*, and a dashed good thing too, when men have to take orders from their feller-men, and be worked like slaves into the bargain.'

'Brayvo, Janus, old man!' replied the other, with mock approval. 'I see what it's come to. You're to be a delegate with a pot hat and a watch-chain, and get four pound a week for gassin', while us fools of fellers does the hard graft. That's your dart, to sit alongside of Barraker and the rest of the people's try-bunes—ain't them the blokes that stands up and says, like Ben Willett, as we're trod on, and starved, and treated worse than nigger slaves?'

'So you are, if you only knew it. Look at all this here country-side in the hands of two or three men, as sucks your blood, and fattens on it!'

'The boss here ain't too fat, if that's what's the matter, and we're not a very hungry-lookin' crowd, boys,' said the speaker, looking round. 'We've got good wages, good food, a book or two to read, and a table to write our letters at. You've been loafin' in Melbourne, Janus, and got oppressed

there—spent all your money, forgot to buy a decent rig-out (them's last year's boots as you have on), come on the roads to beg from station to station, and abuse them as feeds you, after your belly's full. What do *you* say, Paddy?'

The man whom he addressed folded up the sheet upon which he had been writing, and rising from the form on which he sat, stood before the fire, displaying an athletic figure, and determined countenance, lighted up by a pair of glancing blue eyes, which proclaimed his nationality.

'I say that this strike business is all d—d rot, run by a lot of sneaks for their own ends. *They're* the vermin that fatten on the working-men, that are fools enough to believe their rubbish—not the squatters, who've mostly worked hard for what they've made, and spent it free enough, more power to them! Where's there a man on North Yalla-doora that's got anything to complain of? We're well paid, well fed, well cooked for, eh, Jack? and as comfortable in our way as the boss is in his. More indeed, for we've got a shingled roof, and his is box-bark. The travellers' hut's shingled, so is the rouseabouts'. He's never had time to have his own place done up, though he lives like a gentleman, as we all know.'

'Yer 'arf a gentleman yerself, ain't yer, *Mister* O'Kelly?' replied Stoate sneeringly. 'No wonder yer don't take no interest in the workers—the men that makes the wealth of this country, and every other. Yer the makin's of a first-class "scab," and if the chaps here was of my mind you'd be put out of every hut on the river.' Before the last word was fully out, O'Kelly made a couple of steps forward with so vengeful a glare in his blue eyes that Stoate involuntarily drew back—with such haste also, that he trod on the foot of a man behind him and nearly fell backward.

'You infernal scoundrel!' he cried; 'dare to take my name into your ugly mouth again, and I'll kick you from here to the woolshed, and drown you in the wash-pen afterwards. I've

done a man's work in Australia for the last five years, though I wasn't brought up to it, as some of you know. I've nothing to say against the men who gave me honest pay for honest work, and whose salt I've eaten. But skulking crawlers like you are ruining the country. You're worse than a dingo—*he* don't beg. You come here and whine for food, and then try to bite the hand that feeds you. Didn't I see you at the store to-night, waiting for grub, like the other travellers?'

'No, yer didn't then,' snarled Stoate.

'Well, I have before this, and more than once. I expect you're loafing on your mate, who's a decent fellow, and the sooner he parts company with a hound like you, the better. But this is our hut, and out you go, or I will, and that's the long and short of it. Come on, Joe!'

'The public's not on for a sermon to-night, Janus, old man,' said the young fellow before mentioned. 'Paddy's got his monkey up, and it'll be bloody wars if you don't clear. Yer mate's a cove as we'd like to spend the evenin' with, but the votin's agin yer, Janus, it raly is.'

'I came in with Stoate,' said Bill, 'and in course I'm here to see it out with him, man to man. But this is your hut, and not ours, mate, so we'd better get back to our camp—good-night all!'

CHAPTER II

The sun-rays were slowly irradiating 'the level waste, the rounded grey' which accurately described the landscape, in the lower Riverina, which our travellers had reached after a fortnight's travel, and where the large and pastorally famous sheep station of Tandāra had been constructed. Far as the eye could range was an unbroken expanse of sea-like plain, covered at this spring time of year with profuse vegetation—the monotony being occasionally relieved by clumps of the peculiar timber growing only amid the vast levels watered by the Darling. The wilga, the boree, and the mogil copses were in shape, outline, and area so curiously alike, that the lost wanderer proverbially found difficulty in fixing upon any particular clump as a landmark. Once strayed from the faint irregular track, often the only road between stations thirty or forty miles apart—once confused as to the compass bearings, and how little hope was there for the wayfarer, especially if weary, thirsty, and on foot! The clump of mogil or wilga trees, which he had toiled so many a mile in the burning afternoon to reach, was the facsimile of the one left, was it that morning or the one before? More than once had he, by walking in a circle, and making for apparently 'creek timber' at variance with his original course, found himself at the *same clump*, verified by his own tracks, and the ashes of his small fire, as the one which he had left forty-eight hours ago.

Reckless and desperate, he takes the course again, feeling weaker by two days' hard walking—footsore, hungry—above all, *thirsty*, to the verge of delirium. Let us hope that he falls in with a belated boundary rider who shows him an endless-seeming wire fence, which he commands him to follow, till he meets the jackaroo sent with a water-bag to meet him. If

this good angel (not otherwise angelic-seeming) 'drops across' him, well and good; if not so, or he does not 'cut the tracks' of a station team, or the lonely mailman going a back road, God help him! Soon will the crows gathering expectant round a pair of eagles, telegraph to the sharp-eyed scouts of the wilderness that they may ride over and see the dried-up, wasted similitude of what *was* once a man.

No such tragedy was likely to be enacted in the case of our two shearers. They were fairly mounted. They had food and water to spare. Bill was an experienced bushman, and both men had been along this track before. So they followed the winding trail traced faintly on the broad green sheet of spring herbage, sometimes almost invisible—or wholly so, where an old sheep camp had erased the hoof-or wheel-marks—turning to the right or the left with confident accuracy, until they 'picked up' the course again. Wading girth-deep through the subsidiary watercourses—billabongs, cowalls, and such—bank high in this year of unusual rain and plenty (they are synonymous in riverine Australia, 'arida nutrix'), and scaring the water-fowl, which floated or flew in countless flocks.

That gigantic crane, the brolgan (or native companion), danced his quadrille in front of them, 'advance, retire, flap wing, and set to partner,' before he sailed away to a region unfrequented by the peaceful-seeming but dangerous intruder. Crimson-winged, French grey galah parrots fluttered around them in companies, never very far out of shot; the small speckled doves, loveliest of the columba tribes, rose whirring in bevies, while the

swift-footed 'emu' over the waste
Speeds like a horseman that travels in haste.

To the inexperienced European traveller beholding this region for the first time, all-ignorant of the reverse side of

the shield, what a pastoral paradise it would have seemed! Concealed from his vision the dread spectres of Famine, Death, Ruin, and Despair, which the shutting-up of the windows of Heaven for a season, has power to summon thereon.

This was a good year, however, in pastoral parlance. Thousands of lambs born in the autumnal months of April and May were now skipping, fat and frolicsome, by the sides of the ewes, in the immense untended flocks. They had been but recently marked and numbered, the latter arithmetical conclusion being obtained by the accurate if primitive method of counting the heaps of severed tails, which modern sheep-farming exacts from the bleeding innocents. The percentage ranged from ninety to nearly a hundred, an almost abnormally favourable result.

How different from the famine years of a past decade, still fresh in men's minds, when every lamb was killed as soon as born 'to save its mother's life,' and in many stations one-half of the ewes died also, from sheer starvation; when immense migratory flocks, like those of the 'mesta' of their Spanish ancestors, swept over the land, destroying, locust-like, every green thing (and dry, too, for that matter), steering towards the mountain plateaux, which boast green grass and rill-melodies, the long relentless summer through —that summer which, on lower levels, had slain even the wild creatures of the forest and plain, inured from countless ages to the deadly droughts of their Austral home.

When the kangaroos by the thousand die,
It's rough on the travelling sheep,

as 'Banjo' sings.

This station, when reached, presented a different appearance from North Yalla-doora. The prairie-like plain, far as the eye could reach, was bisected by a wide and turbid

stream, flowing between banks, now low and partly submerged, now lofty and precipitous; occasionally overhanging as if cut away by the angry waters, in one of the foaming floods which, from time to time, alternated with seasons when the shallow stream trickled feebly over the rock-bars in the river-bed.

The buildings were large, but less complete in appearance than those of Yalla-doora. An air of feverish energy pervaded the whole establishment, which seemed to denote that time was more valued than finish, for the pressing work in hand. The windings of the river could be distinctly marked by the size of the great eucalypts which fringed the banks, refusing to grow away from its waters. How often had they been hailed with joy by the weary wayfarer, athirst even unto death, who knows that his trials are over, when from afar he sights the 'river timber.' And now, the signs of the campaign were visible. Men rode in at speed from distant parts of the immense area known as Tandara 'run.' From the far horizon came nearer and yet nearer the lines of unladen waggons, with long teams of lagging horses or even bullocks, from twelve to twenty in number.

Far from fat and well-liking were these necessary beasts of draught, but sure to leave the station frolicsome and obese after a few weeks' depasturing upon the giant herbage which for a hundred leagues in every direction waved in vast meads like ripening corn. An assemblage of tents and hastily constructed shelters on a 'point' of the river proclaims the 'camp' or temporary abode of the expectant shearers and rouseabouts, wool-pressers, ordinary hands, and general utility men, upon every large run at shearing time, but more especially on so exceptionally important a property as that of Tandara.

'By George! there's a big roll up on Steamer Point this time,' said Bill. 'I've shorn here twice, and never seen as many