

Shearing In The Riverina, New South Wales

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SHEARING IN THE RIVERINA, NEW SOUTH WALES.

“SHEARING commences to-morrow!” These apparently simple words were spoken by Hugh Gordon, the manager of Anabanco station, in the district of Riverina, in the colony of New South Wales, one Monday morning in the month of August. The utterance had its importance to every member of a rather extensive “corps dramatique” awaiting the industrial drama about to be performed.

A low sand-hill a few years since had looked out over a sea of grey plains, covered partly with grass, partly with salsiferous bushes and herbs. Two or three huts built of the trunks of the pine and roofed with the bark of the box-tree, and a skeleton-looking cattle-yard with its high “gallows” (a rude timber stage whereon to hang slaughtered cattle) alone broke the monotony of the plain-ocean. A comparatively small herd of cattle, 2000 or 3000, found more than sufficient pasturage during the short winter and spring, but were always compelled to migrate to mountain pastures when the swamps, which alone in those days formed the water-stores of the run, were dried up. But two or three, or at most half-a-dozen, stockmen were ever needed for the purpose of managing the herd, so inadequate in number and profitable occupation to this vast tract of grazing country.

But, a little later, one of the great chiefs of the wool-producing interest — a shepherd-king, so to speak, of shrewdness, energy, and capital — had seen, approved and purchased the lease of this waste kingdom. Almost at once, as if by magic, the scene changed. Great gangs of navvies appeared, wending their way across the silent plain. Dams were made, wells were dug. Tons of fencing wire were dropped on the sand by the long line of teams which seemed never tired of arriving. Sheep by thousands, and tens of thousands, began to come, grazing and cropping up to the lonely sandhill — now swarming with blacksmiths, carpenters, engineers, fencers, shepherds, bullock-drivers — till the place looked like a fair on the borders of Tartary.

Meanwhile everything was moving with calculated force and cost, under the “reign of law”. The seeming expense was merely the economic truth of doing all the necessary work at once, rather than by instalments. One hundred men for one day rather than one man for one hundred days.

Results soon began to demonstrate themselves. In twelve months the dams were full, the wells sending up their far-fetched priceless water, the wire fences erected, the shepherds gone, and 17,000 sheep cropping the herbage of Anabanco. Tuesday was the day fixed for the actual commencement of the momentous, almost solemn transaction — the pastoral Hegira, so to speak, as the time of most station events is calculated with reference to it, as happening before or after shearing. But before the first shot is fired which tells of the battle begun, what raids and skirmishes, what reconnoitring and vedette duty must take place!

First arrives the cook-in-chief to the shearers, with two assistants to lay in a few provisions for the week's consumption of 70 able-bodied men. I must here explain that the cook of a large shearing-shed is a highly paid and tolerably irresponsible official. He is paid and provided by the shearers. Payment is generally arranged on the scale of half-a-crown a head weekly from each shearer. For this sum he must provide punctual and effective cooking, paying out of his own pocket as many “marmitons” as may be needful for that end, and to satisfy his tolerably exacting and fastidious employers.

In the present case he confers with the storekeeper, Mr de Vere, a young gentleman of aristocratic connexions who is thus gaining an excellent practical knowledge of the working of a large station and to this end has the store-keeping department entrusted to him during shearing.

He does not perhaps look quite fit for a croquet party as he stands now, with a flour-scoop in one hand and a pound of tobacco in the other. But he looks like a man at work, and also like a gentleman, as he is. “Jack the Cook” thus addresses him:

“Now, Mr de Vere, I hope there's not going to be any humbugging about my rations and things! The men are all up in their quarters, and as hungry as free selectors. They've been a-payin' for their rations for ever so long, and of course now shearing's on, they're good for a little extra!”

“All right, Jack,” returns de Vere, good-temperedly, “all your lot was weighed out and sent away before breakfast. You must have missed the cart. Here's the list. I'll read it out to you: three bags flour, half a bullock, two bags sugar, a chest of tea, four dozen of pickles, four dozen of jam, two gallons of vinegar, five pounds pepper, a bag of salt, plates, knives, forks, ovens, frying-pans, saucepans, iron pots, and about a hundred other things. Now, mind you, return all the cooking things safe, or *pay for them* — that's the order! You don't want anything more, do you? You've got enough for a regiment of cavalry, I should think.”

“Well, I don't know. There won't be much left in a week if the weather holds good,” makes answer the chef, as one who thought nothing too

stupendous to be accomplished by shearers, “but I knew I'd forgot something. As I'm here I'll take a few dozen boxes of sardines, and a case of pickled salmon. The boys likes 'em, and, murder alive! haven't we forgot the plums and currants? A hundredweight of each, Mr de Vere! They'll be crying out for plum-duff and currant buns for the afternoon; and bullying the life out of me, if I haven't a few trifles like. It's a hard life, surely, a shearers' cook. Well, good-bye, sir, you have 'em all down in the book.”

Lest the reader should imagine that the role of Mr Gordon at Anabanco was a reign of luxury and that waste which tendeth to penury, let him be aware that all shearers in Riverina are paid at a certain rate, usually that of *one* pound per hundred sheep shorn. They agree, on the other hand, to pay for all supplies consumed by them at certain prices fixed before the shearing agreement is signed. Hence, it is entirely their own affair whether their mess bills are extravagant or economical. They can have anything within the rather wide range of the station store. *Pâtés de foie gras*, ortolans, roast ostrich, novels, top-boots, double-barrelled guns, *if they like to pay for them* — with one exception. No wine, no spirits! Neither are they permitted to bring these stimulants “on to the grounds” for their private use. Grog at shearing? Matches in a powder-mill! It's very sad and bad; but our Anglo-Saxon industrial or defensive champion cannot be trusted with the fire-water. Navvies, men-of-war's men, soldiers, *and* shearers — fine fellows all. But though the younger men might only drink in moderation, the majority and the older men are utterly without self-control once in the front of temptation. And wars, 'wounds without cause,' hot heads, shaking hands, delay and bad shearing, would be the inevitable results of spirits *à la discrétion*. So much is this a matter of certainty from experience that a clause is inserted, and cheerfully signed, in most shearing agreements, “that any man getting drunk or bringing spirits on to the station during shearing, *loses the whole of* the money earned by him.” The men know that the restriction is for their benefit, as well as for the interest of the master, and join in the prohibition heartily.

Let us give a glance at the small army of working-men assembled at Anabanco — one out of hundreds of stations in the colony of New South Wales, ranging from 100,000 sheep downwards. There are seventy shearers; about fifty washers, including the men connected with the steam-engine, boilers, bricklayers and the like; ten or twelve boundary-riders, whose duty it is to ride round the large paddocks, seeing that the fences are all intact, and keeping a general look-out over the condition of the sheep; three or four overseers; half-a-dozen young gentlemen acquiring a practical knowledge of sheep-farming, or, as it is generally phrased, “colonial experience” — a comprehensive expression enough; a score or two of

teamsters, with a couple of hundred horses or bullocks, waiting for the high-piled wool bales, which are loaded up and sent away almost as soon as shorn; wool-sorters, pickers-up, pressers, yardsmen, extra shepherds. It may easily be gathered from this outline what an 'army with banners' is arrayed at Anabanco. While statistically inclined, it may be added that the cash due for the shearing alone (less the mess bill) amounts to £1700; for the washing (roughly), £400, exclusive of provisions consumed, hutting, wood, water, cooking. Carriage of wool £1500. Other hands from £30 to £40 per week. All of which disbursements take place within from eight to twelve weeks after the shears are in the first sheep.

Tuesday comes "big with fate." As the sun tinges the far skyline, the shearers are taking a slight refectation of coffee and currant buns to enable them to withstand the exhausting interval between six and eight o'clock, when the serious breakfast occurs. Shearers always diet themselves on the principle that the more they eat the stronger they must be. Digestion, as preliminary to muscular development, is left to take its chance. They certainly do get through a tremendous amount of work. The whole frame is at its utmost tension, early and late. But the preservation of health is due to their natural strength of constitution rather than to their profuse and unscientific diet. Half-an-hour after sunrise Mr Gordon walks quietly into the vast building which contains the sheep and their shearers — called "the shed," par excellence. Everything is in perfect cleanliness and order — the floor swept and smooth, with its carefully planed boards of pale yellow aromatic pine. Small tramways, with baskets for the fleeces, run the wool up to the wool tables, superseding the more general plan of hand picking. At each side of the shed floor are certain small areas, four or five feet square, such space being found by experience to be sufficient for the postures and gymnastics practised during the shearing of a sheep. Opposite to each square is an aperture, communicating with a long narrow paved yard, outside of the shed. Through this each man pops his sheep when shorn, where he remains in company with the others shorn by the same hand, until counted out. This being done by the overseer or manager supplies a check upon hasty or unskilful work. The body of the woolshed, floored with battens placed half an inch apart, is filled with the woolly victims. This enclosure is subdivided into minor pens, of which each fronts the place of two shearers, who catch from it until the pen is empty. When this takes place, a man for the purpose refills it. As there are local advantages, an equitable distribution of places for shearing has to be made by lot.

On every subdivision stands a shearer, as Mr Gordon walks, with an air of calm authority, down the long aisle. Seventy men, chiefly in their prime,

the flower of the working-men of the colony, they are variously gathered. England, Ireland, and Scotland are represented in the proportion of one half of the number; the other half is composed of native-born Australians.

Among these last — of pure Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic descent — are to be seen some of the finest men, physically considered, the race is capable of producing. Taller than their British-born brethren, with softer voices and more regular features, they inherit the powerful frames and unequalled muscular development of the breed. Leading lives chiefly devoted to agricultural labour, they enjoy larger intervals of leisure than is permissible to the labouring classes of Europe. The climate is mild, and favourable to health. They have been accustomed from childhood to abundance of the best food; opportunities of intercolonial travel are frequent and common. Hence the Anglo-Australian labourer without, on the one hand, the sharpened eagerness which marks his Transatlantic cousin, has yet an air of independence and intelligence, combined with a natural grace of movement, unknown to the peasantry of Britain.

An idea is prevalent that the Australians are, as a race, physically inferior to the British. It is asserted that they grow too fast, tend to height and slenderness, and do not possess adequate stamina and muscle. The idea is erroneous. The men reared in the cities on the seaboard, living sedentary lives in shops, banks, or counting-houses, are doubtless more or less pale and slight of form. So are they who live under such conditions all over the world. But those youngsters who have followed the plough on the upland farms, or lived a wilder life on the stations of the far interior, who have had their fill of wheaten bread and beefsteaks since they could walk, and snuffed up the free bush breezes from infancy, they are *men*. —

Stout of heart and ready of hand,
As e'er drove prey from Cumberland;

— a business, I may remark, at which many of them would have distinguished themselves.

Take Abraham Lawson as he stands there in a natural and unstudied attitude, 6 feet 4 inches in his stockings, wide-chested, stalwart, with a face like that of a Greek statue. Take Billy May, fair-haired, mild, insouciant, almost languid, till you see him at work. Then, again, Jack Windsor, handsome, saucy, and wiry as a bull-terrier and like him with strong natural inclination for the combat; good for any man of his weight, or a trifle over, with the gloves or without.

It is curious to note how the old English practice of settling disputes with

nature's weapons has taken root in Australia. It would 'gladden the sullen souls' of the defunct gladiators to watch two lads, whose fathers had never trodden England's soil, pull off their jackets and go to work "hammer and tongs," with all the savage silence of the true island type.

It is now about seven o'clock. Mr Gordon moves forward. As he does so, every man leans towards the open door of the pen in front of which he stands. The bell sounds! With the first stroke each one of the seventy men has sprung upon a sheep — has drawn it out — placed its head across his knee — and is working his shears as if the "last man out" was to be flogged, or tarred and feathered at the least. Four minutes — James Steadman, who learned last year, has shorn down one side of his sheep; Jack Holmes and Gundagai Bill are well down the other sides of theirs; when Billy May raises himself with a jerking sigh, and releases his sheep, perfectly clean-shorn from the nose to the heels, through the aperture of his separate enclosure. With the same effort apparently he calls out 'Wool!' and darts upon another sheep. Drawing this second victim across his knee, he buries his shear-points in the long wool of its neck. A moment after a lithe and eager boy has gathered up fleece number one, and tossed it into the train-basket, the shearer is halfway down the sheep's side, the wool hanging in one fleece like a great glossy mat, before you have done wondering whether he did really shear the first sheep, or whether he had not a ready-shorn one in his coat-sleeve — like a conjuror.

By this time Jack Holmes and Gundagai Bill are 'out,' or finished; and the cry of "Wool! Wool!" seems to run continuously up and down the long aisles of the shed, like a single note upon some rude instrument. Now and then the "refrain" is varied by "Tar!" being shouted instead, when a piece of skin is snipped off as well as the wool. Great healing properties are attributed to this extract in the shed. And if a shearer slice off a piece of flesh from his own person, as occasionally happens, he gravely anoints it with the universal remedy, and considers that the onus then lies with Providence, there being no more that man can do. Though little time is lost, the men are by no means up to the speed which they will attain in a few days, when in full practice and training. Their nerve, muscle, eye, endurance, will be all at, so to speak, concert-pitch, and sheep after sheep will be shorn with a precision and celerity even awful to the unprofessional observer.

The unpastoral reader may be informed that speed and completeness of denudation are the grand desiderata in shearing; the employer thinks principally of the latter, the shearer principally of the former. To adjust equitably the proportion is one of those incomplete aspirations which torment humanity. Hence the contest — old as human society — between

labour and capital.

This is the first day. According to old-established custom, a kind of truce obtains. It is before the battle, the "salut," when no hasty word or too demonstrative action can be suffered by the canons of good taste. Red Bill, Flash Jack, Jem the Scooper, and other roaring blades, more famous for expedition than faithful manipulation, are shearing today with a painstaking precision, as of men to whom character is everything.

Mr Gordon marches softly up and down, regarding the shearers with a paternal and gratified expression, occasionally hinting at slight improvements of style, or expressing unqualified approval as a sheep is turned out shaven rather than shorn. All goes on well. Nothing is heard but expressions of goodwill and enthusiasm for the general welfare. It is a triumph of the dignity of labour.

One o'clock. Mr Gordon moved on to the bell and sounded it. At the first stroke several men on their way to the pens stopped abruptly and began to put on their coats. One fellow of an alert nature (Master Jack Windsor) had just finished his sheep and was sharpening his shears, when his eye caught Mr Gordon's form in proximity to the final bell. With a bound like a wild cat, he reached the pen and drew out his sheep a bare second before the first stroke, amidst the laughter and congratulations of his comrades. Another man had his hand on the pen-gate at the same instant, but by the Median law was compelled to return sheepless. He was cheered, but ironically. Those whose sheep were in an unfinished stage quietly completed them; the others moving off to their huts, where their board literally smoked with abundance.

An hour passed. The meal was concluded; the smoke was over; and the more careful men were back in the shed sharpening their shears by two o'clock. Punctually at that hour the bell repeated its summons *de capo*. The warm afternoon gradually lengthened its shadows; the shears clicked in tireless monotone; the pens filled and became empty. The wool-presses yawned for the mountain of fleeces which filled the bins in front of them, divided into various grades of excellence, and continuously disgorged them, neatly and cubically packed and branded.

At six o'clock the bell brought the day's work to a close. The sheep of each man were counted in his presence, and noted down with scrupulous care, the record being written out in full and hung up for public inspection in the shed next day. This important ceremony over, master and men, manager, labourers and supernumeraries, betook themselves to their separate abodes, with such keen avoidance of delay that in five minutes not a soul was left in or near the great building lately so busy and populous, except the boys who were sweeping up the floor. The silence of ages seems

to fall and settle upon it.

Next morning at a rather earlier hour every man is at his post. Business is meant decidedly. Now commences the delicate and difficult part of the superintendence which keeps Mr Gordon at his post in the shed, nearly from daylight till dark, for from eight to ten weeks. During the first day he has formed a sort of gauge of each man's temper and workmanship. For now, and henceforth, the natural bias of each shearer will appear. Some try to shear too fast, and in their haste shear badly. Some are rough and savage with the sheep, which do occasionally kick and become unquiet at critical times; and it must be confessed are provoking enough. Some shear very fairly and handsomely to a superficial eye, but commit the unpardonable offence of "leaving wool on." Some are deceitful, shearing carefully when overlooked, but "racing" and otherwise misbehaving directly the eye of authority is diverted. These and many other tricks and defects require to be noted and abated, quietly but firmly, by the manager of the shed — firmly because evil would develop and spread ruinously if not checked; quietly because immense loss might be incurred by a strike. Shearing differs from other work in this wise: it is work against time, more especially in Riverina. If the wool be not off the backs of the sheep before November, all sorts of draw-backs and destructions supervene. The spear-shaped grass-seeds, specially formed as if in special collusion with the Evil One, hasten to bury themselves in the wool, and even in the flesh of the tender victims. Dust rises in red clouds from the unmoistened, betrampled meadows so lately verdurous and flower-spangled. From snowy white to an unlovely dark brown turn the carefully washed fleeces, causing anathema from overseers and depreciation from brokers. All these losses of temper, trouble, and money become inevitable if shearing be protracted, it may be, beyond a given week.

Hence, as in harvest with a short allowance of fair weather, discipline must be tempered with diplomacy. Lose your temper, and be over particular: off go Billy May, Abraham Lawson, and half-a-dozen of your best men, making a weekly difference of perhaps two or three thousand sheep for the remainder of the shearing. Can you not replace them? Not so! Every shed in Riverina will be hard at work during this present month of September and for every hour of October. Till that time not a shearer will come to your gate, except, perhaps, one or two useless, characterless men. Are you to tolerate bad workmanship? Not that either. But try all other means with your men before you resort to harshness; and be quite certain that your sentence is just, and that you can afford the defection.

So our friend Mr Gordon, wise from many tens of thousands of shorn sheep that have been counted out past his steady eye, criticises temperately,

but watchfully. He reproves sufficiently, and no more, any glaring fault; makes his calculation as to who are really bad shearers, and can be discharged without loss to the commonwealth, or who can shear fairly and can be coached up to a decent average. One division, slow, and good only when slow, have to be watched lest they emulate "the talent," and so come to grief. Then "the talent" has to be mildly admonished from time to time lest they force the pace, set a bad example, and lure the other men on to "racing." This last leads to slovenly shearing, ill-usage of the sheep, and general dissatisfaction.

Tact, temper, patience, and firmness are each and all necessary in that Captain of Industry who has the very delicate and important task of superintending a large woolshed. Hugh Gordon had shown all in such proportion as would have made a distinguished man anywhere, had fortune not adjusted for him this particular profession. Calm with the consciousness of strength, he was kind and considerate in manner as in nature, until provoked by glaring dishonesty or incivility. Then the lion part of his nature woke up, so that it commonly went ill with the aggressor. As this was matter of public report, he had little occasion to spoil the repose of his bearing. Day succeeds day, and for a fortnight the machinery goes on smoothly and successfully. The sheep arrive at an appointed day and hour by detachments and regiments at the washpen. They depart thence, like good boys on Saturday night, redolent of soap and water, and clean to a fault. They enter the shed white and flossy as newly combed poodles to emerge, on the way back to their pasturage, slim, delicate, agile, with a bright black A legibly branded with tar on their paper-white skins.

The Anabanco world — stiffish but undaunted — is turning out of bed one morning. Ha! what sounds are these? And why does the room look so dark? Rain, as I'm alive. "Hurrah!" says Master Jack Bowles, one of the young gentlemen. He is learning (more or less) practical sheep-farming, preparatory to having (one of these days) an Anabanco of his own. "Well, this is a change, and I'm not sorry for one," quoth Mr. Jack, "I'm stiff all over. No one can stand such work long. Won't the shearers growl! No shearing to-day, and perhaps none tomorrow either." Truth to tell, Mr Bowles' sentiments are not confined to his ingenuous bosom. Some of the shearers grumble at being stopped "just as a man was earning a few shillings." Those who are in top pace and condition don't like it. But to many of the rank and file — working up to and a little beyond their strength — with whom swelled wrists and other protests of nature are becoming apparent, it is a relief, and they are glad of the respite. So at dinner-time all the sheep in the sheds, put in overnight in anticipation of such a contingency, are reported shorn. All hands are then idle for the rest

of the day. The shearers dress and avail themselves of various resources. Some go to look at their horses, now in clover, or its equivalent, in the Riverina graminetum. Some play cards, others wash or mend their clothes. A large proportion of the Australians having armed themselves with paper, envelopes, and a shilling's worth of stamps from the store, bethink themselves of neglected or desirable correspondents. Many a letter for Mrs Leftalone, Wallaroo Creek, or Miss Jane Sweetapple, Honeysuckle Flat, as the case may be, will find its way into the post-bag tomorrow. A pair of youngsters are having a round or two with the gloves; while to complete the variety of recreations compatible with life at a woolshed, a selected troupe are busy in the comparative solitude of that building, at a rehearsal of a tragedy and a farce, with which they intend, the very next rainy day, to astonish the population of Anabanco.

At the home-station a truce to labour's "alarms" is proclaimed except in the case and person of Mr de Vere. So far is he from participation in the general holiday that he finds the store thronged with shearers, washers, and "knock-about men," who being let loose, think it would be nice to go and buy something "pour passer le temps." He therefore grumbles slightly at having no rest like other people.

"That's all very fine," says Mr Jack Bowles, who, seated on a case, is smoking a large meerschaum and mildly regarding all things, "but what have you got to do when we're all *hard at work* at the shed?" He speaks with an air of great importance and responsibility.

"That's right, Mr Bowles," chimes in one of the shearers, "stand up for the shed. I never see a young gentleman work as hard as you do."

"Bosh!" growls de Vere, "as if anybody couldn't gallop about from the shed to the washpen, and carry messages, and give half of them wrong! Why, Mr Gordon said the other day, he should have to take you off and put on a Chinaman — that he couldn't make more mistakes."

"All envy and malice, and t'other thing, de Vere, because you think I'm rising in the profession," returns the good-natured Bowles, "Mr Gordon's going to send 20,000 sheep, after shearing, to the Lik Lak paddock, and he said I should go in charge."

"Charge be hanged!" laughs de Vere, with two very bright-patterned Crimean shirts, one in each hand, which he offers to a tall young shearer for inspection. "There's a well there, and whenever either of the two men, of whom you'll have *charge*, gets sick or runs away, you'll have to work the whim in his place, till another man's sent out, if it's a month."

This appalling view of station promotion rather startles Mr Jack, who applies himself to his meerschaum, amid the ironical comments of the shearers. However, not easily daunted or "shut up," according to the more

familiar station phrase, he rejoins, after a brief interval of contemplation, “that accidents will happen, you know, de Vere, my boy — apropos of which moral sentiment, I'll come and help you in your dry-goods business; and then, look here, if *you* get ill or run away, I'll have a profession to fall back upon.”

This is held to be a Roland of sufficient pungency for de Vere's Oliver. Everyone laughed. And then the two youngsters betook themselves to a humorous puffing of the miscellaneous contents of the store: tulip-beds of gorgeous Crimean shirts, boots, books, tobacco, canvas slippers, pocket-knives, Epsom salts, pipes, pickles, painkillers, pocket handkerchiefs, pills, sardines, saddles, shears and sauces: in fact everything which every kind of man might want, and which apparently every man did want, for large and various were the purchases, and great the flow of conversation. Finally, everything was severely and accurately debited to the purchasers, and the store was cleared and locked up. A large store is a necessity of a large station; not by any means because of the profit upon goods sold, but it obviously would be bad economy for old Bill, the shepherd, or Barney, the bullock-driver, to visit the next township, from ten to thirty miles distant, as the case may be, every time the former wanted a pound of tobacco, or the latter a pair of boots. They might possibly obtain these necessary articles as good in quality, as cheap in price. But there are wolves in that wood, oh, my weak brothers! In all towns dwells one of the 'sons of the Giant' — the Giant Grog — red-eyed, with steel muscles and iron claws; once in these, which have held many and better men to the death, neither Barney nor Bill emerges, save pale, fevered, nerveless, and impecunious. So arose the station store. Barney befits himself with boots without losing his feet; Bill fills his pocket with match-boxes and smokes the pipe of sobriety, virtuous perforce till his carnival, after shearing.

The next day was wet, and threatened further broken weather. Matters were not too placid with the shearers. A day or two for rest is very well, but continuous wet weather means compulsory idleness, and gloom succeeds repose; for not only are all hands losing time and earning no money, but they are, to use the language of the stable “eating their heads off” the while. The rather profuse mess and general expenditure, which caused little reflection when they were earning at the rate of two or three hundred pounds a year, became unpleasantly suggestive, now that all is going out and nothing coming in. Hence loud and deep were the anathemas as the discontented men gazed sadly or wrathfully at the misty sky.

A few days showery weather having, therefore, wellnigh driven our shearers to desperation, out comes the sun in all his glory. He is never far away or very faint in Riverina. All the pens are filled for the morrow; very

soon after the earliest sunbeams the bell sounds its welcome summons, and the whole force tackles to the work with an ardour proportioned to the delay, every man working as if for the ransom of his whole family from slavery. How men work spurred on by the double excitement of acquiring social reputation and making money rapidly! Not an instant is lost; not a nerve, limb, or muscle doing less than the hardest task-master could flog out of a slave. Occasionally you see a shearer, after finishing his sheep, walk quickly out and not appear for a couple of hours, or perhaps not again during the day. Do not put him down as a sluggard; be assured that he has tasked nature dangerously hard, and has only given in just before she does. Look at that silent slight youngster, with a bandage round his swollen wrist. Every “blow” of the shears is agony to him, yet he disdains to give in, and has been working “in distress” for hours. The pain is great, as you can see by the flush which occasionally surges across his brown face, yet he goes on manfully to the last sheep, and endures to the very verge of fainting.

There was now a change in the manner and tone of the shed, especially towards the end of the day. It was now the ding of the desperate fray, when the blood of the fierce animal man is up, when mortal blows are exchanged, and curses float upward with the smoke and dust. The ceaseless clicking of the shears — the stern earnestness of the men, toiling with a feverish and tireless energy — the constant succession of sheep shorn and let go, caught and commenced — the occasional savage oath or passionate gesture, as a sheep kicked and struggled with perverse delaying obstinacy — the cuts and stabs, with brief decided tones of Mr Gordon, in repression or command — all told the spectator that tragic action was introduced into the performance. Indeed, one of the minor excitements of shearing was then and there transacted. Mr Gordon had more than once warned a dark sullen-looking man that he did not approve of his style of shearing. He was temporarily absent, and on his return found the same man about to let go a sheep whose appearance, as a shorn wool-bearing quadruped, was painful and discreditable in the extreme.

“Let your sheep go, my man,” said Gordon, in a tone which somehow arrested the attention of nearly all the shearers, “but don't trouble yourself to catch another!”

“Why not?” said the delinquent, sulkily.

“You know very well why not!” replied Gordon, walking closely up to him, and looking straight at him with eyes that began to glitter, “you've had fair warning. You've not chosen to take it. Now you can go!”

“I suppose you'll pay a man for the sheep he's shorn?” growled out the ruffian.

“Not one shilling until after shearing. You can come then if you like,” answered Gordon, with perfect distinctness.

The cowed bully looked savagely at him; but the tall powerful frame and steady eye were not inviting for personal arbitration of the matter in hand. He put up his two pairs of shears, put on his coat, and walked out of the shed. The time was passed when Red Bill or Terrible Dick (ruffians whom a sparse labour-market rendered necessary evils) would have flung down his shears upon the floor and told the manager that if he didn't like that shearing he could shear his ---- sheep himself and be hanged to him; or, on refusal of instant payment, would have proposed to bury his shears in the intestines of his employer by way of adjusting the balance between Capital and Labour. Many wild tales are told of woolshed rows. I knew of one squatter stabbed mortally with that fatal and convenient weapon, a shear-blade.

The man thus summarily dealt with could, like most of his companions, shear very well if he took pains. Keeping to a moderate number of sheep, his workmanship could be good. But he must needs try and keep up with Billy May or Abraham Lawson, who can shear from 100 to 130 sheep per day, and do them beautifully. So in “racing” he works hastily and badly, cuts the skin of his luckless sheep nearly as often as the wool, and leaves wool here and there on them, grievous and exasperating to behold. So sentence of expulsion goes forth fully against him. Having arrayed himself for the road he makes one more effort for a settlement and some money wherewith to pay for board and lodging on the road. Only to have a mad carouse at the nearest township, however; after which he will tell a plausible story of his leaving the shed on account of Mr Gordon's temper, and avail himself of the usual free hospitality of the bush to reach another shed. He addresses Mr Gordon with an attempt at conciliation and deference.

“It seems very 'ard, sir, as a man can't get the trifle of money coming to him, which I've worked 'ard for.”

“It's very hard you won't try and shear decently,” retorts Mr Gordon, by no means conciliated. “Leave the shed!”

Ill-conditioned rascal as the shearer is, he has a mate or travelling-companion in whose breast exists some rough idea of fidelity. He now takes up the dialogue.

“I suppose if Jim's shearing don't suit, mine won't either.”

“I did not speak to you,” answered Mr Gordon, as calmly as if he had expected the speech, “but of course you can go.”

He said this with an air of studied unconcern, as if he would rather like a dozen more men to knock off work. The two men walk out, but the

epidemic does not spread, and several take the lesson home and mend their ways accordingly.

The weather now was splendid; not a cloud specked the bright blue sky. The shearers continue to work at the same express-train pace; fifty bales of wool roll every day from the wool-presses; as fast as they reach that number they are loaded upon the numerous drays and wagons which have been waiting for weeks. Tall brown men have been recklessly cutting up hides for the last fortnight, wherewith to lash the bales securely. It is considered safer practice to load wool as soon as may be; fifty bales represent about a thousand pounds sterling. In a building, however secure, should a fire break out, a few hundred bales are easily burned; but once on the dray, this much-dreaded "edax rerum" in a dry country has little chance. The driver, responsible to the extent of his freight, generally sleeps under his dray; hence both watchman and insulation are provided.

The unrelaxing energy with which the work was pushed at this stage was exciting and contagious; at or before daylight every soul in the great establishment was up. The boundary-riders were always starting off for a twenty or thirty mile ride, and bringing tens of thousands of sheep to the wash-pen. At that huge lavatory there was splashing and soaking all day with an army of washers; not a moment is lost from daylight till dark, or used for any purpose save the all-engrossing work and needful food. At nine o'clock p.m. luxurious dreamless sleep, given only to those whose physical powers have been taxed to the utmost and who can bear without injury the daily tension.

Everything and everybody were in splendid working order, nothing out of gear. Rapid and regular as a steam-engine the great host of toilers moved onward daily with a march which promised an unusually early completion. Mr Gordon was not in high spirits, for so cautious and far-seeing a captain rarely felt himself so independent of circumstances as to indulge in that reckless mood — but much satisfied with the prospect. Whew! The afternoon darkens, and the night is delivered over to water-spouts and hurricanes, as it appears. Next day was raw, gusty, with chill heavy showers; drains had to be cut, roofs to be seen to; shorn sheep were shivering, washers all playing pitch-and-toss, shearers sulky; everybody but the young gentlemen wearing a most injured expression of countenance. "Looks as if it would rain for a month," says Long Jack. "If we hadn't been delayed might have had the shearing over by this." Reminded that there are 50,000 sheep yet remaining to be shorn, and that by no possibility could they have been finished, he answers, "Suppose so, always the same, everything sure to go agin the poor man." The weather did not clear up. Winter seemed to have taken thought, and determined to

show even this land of eternal summer that he had his rights. The shed would be filled, and before the sheep so kept dry were shorn, down would come the rain again. Not a full day's shearing for ten days. Then the clouds disappeared as if the curtain of a stage had been rolled up, and lo! the golden sun, fervid and impatient to obliterate the track of winter.

The first day after the recommencement, matters went much as usual. Steady work and little talk, as if everyone was anxious to make up for the lost time. But on the second morning after breakfast, when the bell sounded, instead of the usual cheerful dash at the sheep, every man stood silent and motionless in his place. Someone uttered the words "roll up!". Then the seventy men converged, and slowly, but with one impulse, walked up to the end of the shed where stood Mr Gordon.

The concerted action of any body of men bears with it an element of power which commands respect. The weapon of force is theirs; it is at their option to wield it with or without mercy. At one period of Australian colonisation a superintendent in Mr Gordon's position might have had good ground for uneasiness. Mr Jack Bowles saw in it an *emeute* of a democratic and sanguinary nature, regretted deeply his absent revolver, but drew up to his leader prepared to die by his side. That calm centurion felt no such serious misgivings. He knew that there had been dire grumbling among the shearers in consequence of the weather. He knew that there were malcontents among them. He was prepared for some sort of demand on their part, and had concluded to make certain concessions of a moderate degree. So looking cheerfully at the men, he quietly awaited the deputation. As they neared him there was a little hesitation, and then three delegates came to the front. These were Old Ben, Abraham Lawson, and Billy May. Ben Thornton had been selected for his age and long experience of the rights and laws of the craft. He was a weather-beaten, wiry old Englishman, whose face and accent, darkened as the former was by the Australian summers of half a century, still retained the trace of his native Devonshire. It was his boast that he had shorn for forty years, and as regularly "knocked-down" (or spent in a single debauch) his shearing money. Lawson represented the small free-holders, being a steady, shrewd fellow, and one of the fastest shearers. Billy May stood for the fashion and "talent," being the "Ringer," or fastest shearer of the whole assembly, and as such truly admirable and distinguished.

"Well now, men," quoth Mr Gordon, cheerily meeting matters half-way, "what's it all about?" The younger delegate looked at Old Ben, who, now that it "was demanded of him to speak the truth," or such dilution thereof as might seem most favourable to the interests of the shed, found a difficulty like many wiser men about his exordium.

“Well, Muster Gordon,” at length he broke forth, “look'ee here, sir. The weather's been awful bad, and clean agin shearing. We've not been earning our grub, and — ”

“So it has,” answered the manager, “so it has. But can I help the weather? I'm as anxious as you are to have the shearing over quickly. We're both of one mind about that, eh?”

“That's all right enough, sir,” struck in Abraham Lawson, who felt that Ben was getting the worst of the argument, and was moreover far less fluent than usual, probably from being deprived of the aid of the customary expletives, “but we've come to say this, sir, that the season's turned out very wet indeed. We've had a deal of broken time, and the men feel it very hard to be paying for a lot of rations, and hardly earning anything. We're shearing the sheep very close and clean. You won't have 'em done no otherways. Not like some sheds where a man can 'run' a bit and make up for lost time. Now we've all come to think this, sir, that if we're to go on shearing the sheep well, and to stick to them, and get them done before the dust and grass-seed come in, that you ought to make us some allowance. We know we've agreed for so much a hundred, and all that. Still as the season's turned so out-and-out bad, we hope you'll consider it and make it up to us somehow.”

“Never knew a worse year,” corroborated Billy May, who thought it indispensable to say something. “Haven't made enough, myself, to pay the cook.”

This was not strictly true, at any rate, as to Master Billy's own earnings; he being such a remarkably fast shearer (and good withal), that he had always a respectable sum credited to him for his days' work, even when many of the slower men came off short enough.

However, enough had been said to make Mr Gordon fully comprehend the case. The men were dissatisfied. They had come in a roundabout way to the conclusion that some pecuniary concession, not mentioned in their bond, should come from the side of capital to that of labour. Whether wages, interest of capital, share of profits, reserve fund, they knew not nor cared. This was their stand. And being Englishmen they intended to abide by it.

The manager had considered the situation before it actually arose. He now rapidly took in the remaining points of debate. The shearers had signed a specific agreement for a stipulated rate of payment, irrespective of the weather. By the letter of the law, they had no case. Whether they made little or much profit was not his affair. But he was a just and kindly man, as well as reasonably politic. They had shorn well, and the weather had been discouraging. He knew too that an abrupt denial might cause a passive

mutiny, if not a strike. If they set themselves to thwart him, it was in their power to shear badly, to shear slowly, and to force him to discharge many of them. He might have them fined, perhaps imprisoned by the police-court. Meanwhile, how could shearing go on? Dust and grass-seeds would soon be upon them. He resolved on a compromise, and spoke out at once in a firm and decided tone as the men gathered up yet more closely around him.

“Look here, all of you! You know very well that I'm not bound to find you in fine weather. Still I am aware that the season has been against you. You have shorn pretty well, so far, though I've had to make examples, and am quite ready to make more. What I am willing to do is this: to every man who works on till the finish and shears to my satisfaction, I will make a fair allowance in the ration account. That is, I will make no charge for the beef. Does that suit you?” There was a chorus of “All right sir, we're satisfied. Mr Gordon always does the fair thing.” &c. And work was immediately resumed with alacrity.

The clerk of the weather, too gracious even in these regions as far as the absence of rain is concerned, was steadily propitious. Cloudless skies and a gradually ascending thermometer alone were the signs that spring was changing into summer. The splendid herbage ripened and dried; patches of bare earth began to be discernible amid the late thick-swarded pastures, dust to rise and cloud-pillars of sand to float and eddy — the desert genii of the Arab. But the work went on at a high rate of speed, outpacing the fast-coming summer; and before any serious disasters arose, the last flock was “on the battens,” and, amid ironical congratulations, the “cobbler,” or last sheep was seized, and stripped of his rather dense and difficult fleece. In ten minutes the vast woolshed, lately echoing with the ceaseless click of the shears, the jests, the songs, the oaths of the rude congregation, was silent and deserted. The floors were swept, the pens closed, the sheep on their way to a distant paddock. Not a soul remains about the building but the pressers, who stay to work at the rapidly lessening piles of fleeces in the bins, or a meditative teamster who sits musing on a wool-bale, absorbed in a calculation as to when his load will be made up.

It is sundown, a rather later time of closing than usual, but rendered necessary by the possibility of the “grand finale.” The younger men troop over to the hut, larking like schoolboys. Abraham Lawson throws a poncho over his broad shoulders, lights his pipe, and strides along, towering above the rest, erect and stately as a guardsman. Considerably more so than you or I, reader, would have been, had we shorn 130 sheep, as he has done today. Billy May has shorn 142, and he puts his hand on the five-foot paling fence of the yard and vaults over it like a deer, preparatory to a swim in the

creek. At dinner you will see them all with fresh Crimeans and Jerseys, clean, comfortable, and in grand spirits. Next morning is settling-day. The book-keeping departments at Anabanco being severely correct, all is in readiness. Each man's tally or number of sheep shorn has been entered daily to his credit. His private and personal investments at the store have been as duly debited. The shearers, as a corporation, have been charged with the multifarious items of their rather copious mess-bill. This sum total is divided by the number of the shearers, the extract being the amount for which each man is liable. This sum varies in its weekly proportion at different sheds. With an extravagant cook, or cooks, the weekly bill is often alarming. When the men and their functionary study economy it may be kept very reasonably low.

The men have been sitting or standing about the office for half-an-hour when Mr Jack Bowles rushes out, and shouts "William May!" That young person, excessively clean, attired in a quiet tweed suit, with his hair cut very correctly short, advances with an air of calm intrepidity, and faces Mr Gordon. Gordon, now seated at a long table, wearing a judicial expression of countenance.

"Well, May, here's your account": —

	So many sheep, at £1 per 100.....	£----
Cook, so many weeks.....	£	
Shearing store account.....	£	
Private store account.....	£	
..	----	----
Total	..	£----

"Is the tally of your sheep right?" "Oh! I daresay it's all right, Mr Gordon, I made it so and so; about ten less."

"Well, well! Ours is correct, no doubt. Now I want to make up a good subscription for the hospital this year. How much will you give? You've done pretty well, I think."

"Put me down a pound, sir."

"Very well, that's fair enough. If every one gives what they can afford, you men will always have a place to go to when you're hurt or laid up. So I put your name down, and you'll see it in the published list. Now about the shearing, May. I consider that you've done your work very well, and behaved very well all through. You're a fast shearer, but you shear closely, and don't knock your sheep about. I therefore do not charge you for any part of your meat bill, and I pay you at the rate of half-a-crown a hundred for all your sheep, over and above your agreement. Will that do?"

"Very well, indeed, and I'm much obliged to you, Mr Gordon."

“Well, good-bye May! Always call when you're passing, and if any work is going on you'll get your share. Here's your cheque. Send in Lawson!” Exit May, in high spirits, having cleared about three pounds per week, during the whole term of shearing, and having lived a far from unpleasant life, indeed akin to that of a fighting cock, from the commencement to the end of that period.

Lawson's interview may be described as having very similar results. He, also, was a first-class shearer, though not so artistic as the gifted Billy. Jack Windsor's saucy blue eyes twinkled merrily as he returned to his companions, and incontinently leaped on the back of his wild-eyed colt. After these three worthies came a shearer named Jackson; he belonged to quite a different class; he could shear very well if he pleased, but had a rooted disbelief that honesty was the best policy, and a fixed determination to shear as many sheep as he could get the manager to pass. By dint of close watching, constant reprimand, and occasional “raddling” (marking badly-shorn sheep and refusing to count them) Mr Gordon had managed to tone him down to average respectability of execution. Still he was always uneasily aware that whenever his eye was not upon him, Jackson was doing what he ought not to do with might and main. Gordon had, indeed, kept him on from sheer necessity, but he intended none the less to mark his opinion of him.

“Come in, Jackson! Your tally is so-and-so. Is that right?”

Jackson. — “I suppose so.”

“Cook and store account, so much; shearing account so much.”

Jackson. — “And a good deal too.”

“That is your affair,” said Mr Gordon, sternly enough. “Now look here! You're in my opinion a bad shearer and a bad man. You have given me a great deal of trouble, and I should have kicked you out of the shed weeks ago if I had not been short of men. I shall make a difference between you and men who have tried to do their best. I make you no allowance of any sort, I pay you by the strict agreement. There's your cheque. Go!”

Jackson goes out with a very black countenance. He mutters with a surly oath that if “he'd known how he was going to be served he'd ha' ‘blocked’ 'em a little more.” He is pretty well believed to have been served right, and he secures no sympathy whatever. Working-men of all classes are shrewd and fair judges generally. If an employer does his best to mete out justice he is always appreciated and supported by the majority. These few instances will serve as a description of the whole process of settling with the shearers. The horses have all been got in. Great catching and saddling-up has taken place all the morning. By the afternoon the whole party are dispersed to the four winds; some, like Abraham Lawson and his friends,

to sheds “higher up,” in a colder climate, where shearing necessarily commences later. From these they will pass to others, until the last sheep in the mountain runs are shorn. Then those who have not farms of their own betake themselves to reaping. Billy May and Jack Windsor are quite as ready to back themselves against time in the wheat-field as on the shearing-floor. Harvest over, they find their pockets inconveniently full, so they commence to visit their friends and repay themselves for their toils by a tolerably liberal allowance of rest and recreation.

Old Ben and a few choice specimens of the olden time get no further than the nearest public house. Their cheques are handed to the landlord and a “stupendous and terrible spree” sets in. At the end of a week he informs them that they have received liquor to the amount of their cheques — something over a hundred pounds — save the mark! They meekly acquiesce, as is their custom. The landlord generously presents them with a glass of grog each, and they take the road for the next woolshed.

The shearers being despatched, the sheep-washers, a smaller and less regarded force, file up. They number some forty men. Nothing more than fair bodily strength, willingness and obedience being required in their case, they are more easy to get and to replace than shearers. They are a varied and motley lot. That powerful and rather handsome man is a New Yorker, of Irish parentage. Next to him is a slight, neat, quiet individual. He was a lieutenant in a line regiment. The lad in the rear was a Sandhurst cadet. Then came two navvies and a New Zealander, five Chinamen, a Frenchman, two Germans, Tin Pot, Jerry, and Wallaby — three aboriginal blacks. There are no invidious distinctions as to caste, colour, or nationality. Every one is a man and a brother at sheep-washing. Wage, one pound per week; wood, water, tents and food “à la discrétion.” Their accounts are simple: so many weeks, so many pounds; store account, so much; hospital? well, five shillings; cheque, good-morning.

The wool-pressers, the fleece-rollers, the fleece-pickers, the yardsmen, the washers' cooks, the hut cooks, the spare shepherds; all these and a few other supernumeraries inevitable at shearing-time, having been paid off, the snowstorm of cheques which has been fluttering all day comes to an end. Mr Gordon and the remaining “sous-officiers” go to rest that night with much of the mental strain removed which has been telling on every waking moment for the last two months.

The long train of drays and wagons, with loads varying from twenty to forty-five bales, has been moving off in detachments since the commencement. In a day or two the last of them will have rolled heavily away. The 1400 bales, averaging three and a half hundredweight, are distributed, slow journeying, along the road, which they mark from afar,

standing huge and columnar like guide tumuli, from Anabanco to the waters of the Murray. Between the two points there is neither a hill nor a stone. All is the vast monotonous sea of plain — at this season a prairie-meadow exuberant with vegetation; in the late summer, or in the occasional and dreaded phenomenon of a *dry winter*, dusty, and herbless as a brickfield, for hundreds of miles.

Silence falls on the plains and waters of Anabanco for the next six months. The woolshed, the washpen, and all the huts connected with them are lone and voiceless as caravanserais in a city of the plague.
