“A Rough Shed”

Henry Lawson

A hot, breathless, blinding sunrise—the sun having appeared suddenly above the ragged edge of the barren scrub like a great disc of molten steel. No hint of a morning breeze before it, no sign on earth or sky to show that it is morning—save the position of the sun.

A clearing in the scrub—bare as though the surface of the earth were ploughed and harrowed, and dusty as the road. Two oblong huts —one for the shearers and one for the rouseabouts— in about the centre of the clearing (as if even the mongrel scrub had shrunk away from them) built end-to-end, of weatherboards, and roofed with galvanised iron. Little ventilation; no verandah; no attempt to create, artificially, a breath of air through the buildings. Unpainted, sordid—hideous. Outside, heaps of ashes still hot and smoking. Close at hand, “butcher’s shop”—a bush and bag breakwind in the dust, under a couple of sheets of iron, with offal, grease and clotted blood blackening the surface of the ground about it. Greasy, stinking sheepskins hanging everywhere with blood-blotched sides out. Grease inches deep in great black patches about the fireplace ends of the huts, where wash-up and “boiling” water is thrown.

Inside, a rough table on supports driven into the black, greasy ground floor, and formed of flooring boards, running on uneven lines the length of the hut from within about 6ft. of the fireplace. Lengths of single six-inch boards or slabs on each side, supported by the projecting ends of short pieces of timber nailed across the legs of the table to serve as seats.

On each side of the hut runs a rough framework, like the partitions in a stable; each compartment battened off to about the size of a manger, and containing four bunks, one above the other, on each side— their ends, of course, to the table. Scarcely breathing space anywhere between. Fireplace, the full width of the hut in one end, where all the cooking and baking for forty or fifty men is done, and where flour, sugar, etc., are kept in open bags. Fire, like a very furnace. Buckets of tea and coffee on roasting beds of coals and ashes on the hearth. Pile of “brownie” on the bare black boards at the end of the table. Unspeakable aroma of forty or fifty men who have little inclination and less opportunity to wash their skins, and who soak some of the grease out of their clothes —in buckets of hot water—on Saturday afternoons or Sundays. And clinging to all, and over all, the smell of the dried, stale yolk of wool —the stink of rams!

“I am a rouseabout of the rouseabouts. I have fallen so far that it is beneath me to try to climb to the proud position of ‘ringer’ of the shed. I had that ambition once, when I was the softest of green hands; but then I thought I could work out my salvation and go home. I’ve got used to hell since then. I only get twenty-five shillings a week (less station store charges) and tucker here. I have been seven years west of the Darling and never shore a sheep. Why don’t I learn to shear, and so make money? What should I do with more money? Get out of this and go home? I would

never go home unless I had enough money to keep me for the rest of my life, and I'll never make that Out Back. Otherwise, what should I do at home? And how should I account for the seven years, if I were to go home? Could I describe shed life to them and explain how I lived. They think shearing only takes a few days of the year—at the beginning of summer. They'd want to know how I lived the rest of the year. Could I explain that I 'jabbed trotters' and was a 'tea-and-sugar burglar' between sheds. They'd think I'd been a tramp and a beggar all the time. Could I explain *anything* so that they'd understand? I'd have to be lying all the time and would soon be tripped up and found out. For, whatever else I have been I was never much of a liar. No, I'll never go home.

"I become momentarily conscious about daylight. The flies on the track got me into that habit, I think; they start at day-break— when the mosquitoes give over.

"The cook rings a bullock bell.

"The cook is fire-proof. He is as a fiend from the nethermost sheol and needs to be. No man sees him sleep, for he makes bread —or worse, brownie—at night, and he rings a bullock bell loudly at half-past five in the morning to rouse us from our animal torpors. Others, the sheep-ho's or the engine-drivers at the shed or wool-wash, call him, if he does sleep. They manage it in shifts, somehow, and sleep somewhere, sometime. We haven't time to know. The cook rings the bullock bell and yells the time. It was the same time five minutes ago—or a year ago. No time to decide which. I dash water over my head and face and slap handfuls on my eyelids —gummed over aching eyes—still blighted by the yolk o' wool— grey, greasy-feeling water from a cut-down kerosene tin which I sneaked from the cook and hid under my bunk and had the foresight to refill from the cask last night, under cover of warm, still, suffocating darkness. Or was it the night before last? Anyhow, it will be sneaked from me to-day, and from the crawler who will collar it to-morrow, and 'touched' and 'lifted' and 'collared' and recovered by the cook, and sneaked back again, and cause foul language, and fights, maybe, till we 'cut-out'.

"No; we didn't have sweet dreams of home and mother, gentle poet— nor yet of babbling brooks and sweethearts, and love's young dream. We are too dirty and dog-tired when we tumble down, and have too little time to sleep it off. We don't want to dream those dreams out here— they'd only be nightmares for us, and we'd wake to remember. We *mustn't* remember here.

"At the edge of the timber a great galvanised-iron shed, nearly all roof, coming down to within 6ft. 6in. of the 'board' over the 'shoots'. Cloud of red dust in the dead timber behind, going up—noon-day dust. Fence covered with skins; carcases being burned; blue smoke going straight up as in noonday. Great glossy (greasy-glossy) black crows 'flopping' around.

“The first syren has gone. We hurry in single files from opposite ends of rouseabouts’ and shearers’ huts (as the paths happen to run to the shed) gulping hot tea or coffee from a pint-pot in one hand and biting at a junk of brownie in the other.

“Shed of forty hands. Shearers rush the pens and yank out sheep and throw them like demons; grip them with their knees, take up machines, jerk the strings; and with a rattling whirring roar the great machine-shed starts for the day.

“ ‘Go it, you ——— tigers!’ yells a tar-boy. ‘Wool away!’ ‘Tar!’ ‘Sheep Ho!’ We rush through with a whirring roar till breakfast time.

“We seize our tin plate from the pile, knife and fork from the candle-box, and crowd round the camp-oven to jab out lean chops, dry as chips, boiled in fat. Chops or curry-and-rice. There is some growling and cursing. We slip into our places without removing our hats. There’s no time to hunt for mislaid hats when the whistle goes. Row of hat brims, level, drawn over eyes, or thrust back—according to characters or temperaments. Thrust back denotes a lucky absence of brains, I fancy. Row of forks going up, or jabbing, or poised, loaded, waiting for last mouthful to be bolted.

“We pick up, sweep, tar, sew wounds, catch sheep that break from the pens, jump down and pick up those that can’t rise at the bottom of the shoots, ‘bring-my-combs-from-the-grinder-will-yer,’ laugh at dirty jokes, and swear—and, in short, are the ‘will-yer’ slaves, body and soul, of seven, six, five, or four shearers, according to the distance from the rolling tables.

“The shearer on the board at the shed is a demon. He gets so much a hundred; we, 25s. a week. He is not supposed, by the rules of the shed, the Union, and humanity, to take a sheep out of the pen *after* the bell goes (smoke-ho, meals, or knock-off), but his watch is hanging on the post, and he times himself to get so many sheep out of the pen *before* the bell goes, and *one more*—the ‘bell-sheep’—as it is ringing. We have to take the last fleece to the table and leave our board clean. We go through the day of eight hours in runs of about an hour and 20 minutes between smoke-ho’s—from 6 to 6. If the shearers shore 200 instead of 100, they’d get 2 Pounds a day instead of 1 Pound, and we’d have twice as much work to do for our 25s. per week. But the shearers are racing each other for tallies. And it’s no use kicking. There is no God here and no Unionism (though we all have tickets). But what am I growling about? I’ve worked from 6 to 6 with no smoke-ho’s for half the wages, and food we wouldn’t give the sheep-ho dog. It’s the bush growl, born of heat, flies, and dust. I’d growl now if I had a thousand a year. We *must* growl, swear, and some of us drink to d.t.’s, or go mad sober.

“Pants and shirts stiff with grease as though a couple of pounds of soft black putty were spread on with a painter’s knife.

“No, gentle bard!—we don’t sing at our work. Over the whirr and roar and hum all day long, and with iteration that is childish and irritating to the intelligent greenhand, float unthinkable adjectives and adverbs, addressed to jumbucks, jackaroos, and mates indiscriminately. And worse words for the boss over the board—behind his back.

“I came of a Good Christian Family—perhaps that’s why I went to the Devil. When I came out here I’d shrink from the man who used foul language. In a short time I used it with the worst. I couldn’t help it.

“That’s the way of it. If I went back to a woman’s country again I wouldn’t swear. I’d forget this as I would a nightmare. That’s the way of it. There’s something of the larrikin about us. We don’t exist individually. Off the board, away from the shed (and each other) we are quiet—even gentle.

“A great-horned ram, in poor condition, but shorn of a heavy fleece, picks himself up at the foot of the ‘shoot’, and hesitates, as if ashamed to go down to the other end where the ewes are. The most ridiculous object under Heaven.

“A tar-boy of fifteen, of the bush, with a mouth so vile that a street-boy, same age (up with a shearing uncle), kicks him behind—having proved his superiority with his fists before the shed started. Of which unspeakable little fiend the roughest shearer of a rough shed was heard to say, in effect, that if he thought there was the slightest possibility of his becoming the father of such a boy he’d———take drastic measures to prevent the possibility of his becoming a proud parent at all.

“Twice a day the cooks and their familiars carry buckets of oatmeal-water and tea to the shed, two each on a yoke. We cry, ‘Where are you coming to, my pretty maids?’

“In ten minutes the surfaces of the buckets are black with flies. We have given over trying to keep them clear. We stir the living cream aside with the bottoms of the pints, and guzzle gallons, and sweat it out again. Occasionally a shearer pauses and throws the perspiration from his forehead in a rain.

“Shearers live in such a greedy rush of excitement that often a strong man will, at a prick of the shears, fall in a death-like faint on the board.

“We hate the Boss-of-the-Board as the shearers’ ‘slushy’ hates the shearers’ cook. I don’t know why. He’s a very fair boss.

“He refused to put on a traveller yesterday, and the traveller knocked him down. He walked into the shed this morning with his hat back and thumbs in waistcoat—a tribute to man’s weakness. He threatened to dismiss the traveller’s mate, a bigger man, for rough shearing—

a tribute to man's strength. The shearer said nothing. We hate the boss because he *is* boss, but we respect him because he is a strong man. He is as hard up as any of us, I hear, and has a sick wife and a large, small family in Melbourne. God judge us all!

"There is a gambling-school here, headed by the shearers' cook. After tea they head-'em, and advance cheques are passed from hand to hand, and thrown in the dust until they are black. When it's too dark to see with nose to the ground, they go inside and gamble with cards. Sometimes they start on Saturday afternoon, heading 'em till dark, play cards all night, start again heading 'em Sunday afternoon, play cards all Sunday night, and sleep themselves sane on Monday, or go to work ghastly—like dead men.

"Cry of 'Fight'; we all rush out. But there isn't much fighting. Afraid of murdering each other. I'm beginning to think that most bush crime is due to irritation born of dust, heat, and flies.

"The smothering atmosphere shudders when the sun goes down. We call it the sunset breeze.

"Saturday night or Sunday we're invited into the shearers' hut. There are songs that are not hymns and recitations and speeches that are not prayers.

"Last Sunday night: Slush lamps at long intervals on table. Men playing cards, sewing on patches—(nearly all smoking)— some writing, and the rest reading Deadwood Dick. At one end of the table a Christian Endeavourer endeavouring; at the other a cockney Jew, from the hawker's boat, trying to sell rotten clothes. In response to complaints, direct and not chosen generally for Sunday, the shearers' rep. requests both apostles to shut up or leave.

"He couldn't be expected to take the Christian and leave the Jew, any more than he could take the Jew and leave the Christian. We are just amongst ourselves in our hell.

"Fiddle at the end of rouseabouts' hut. Voice of Jackeroo, from upper bunk with apologetic oaths: 'For God's sake chuck that up; it makes a man think of blanky old things!'

"A lost soul laughs (mine) and dreadful night smothers us."