

Too Many Sheep

I WAS down behind the yards bringing up some two-tooths that the old man wanted to cull out for footrot when I heard him whistle me. You'd have thought I was a dog, but that was always his way with us. I left Bill to look after them and went over. He told me to go into town in the car to collect a chap who had applied for the job. He wanted to see if the house would be all right for him and his wife and five kids. I knew it wouldn't, but there's no arguing with the old man once he has made up his mind, so I got into the car just as I was in my muddy boots and torn jersey and set off.

This farm of ours is in four holdings. The old man has been buying out the neighbours for years, and he owns about two thousand acres now. Some of it is pretty steep, but there are enough flats to run fifty dairy cows. It is good country and lies to the sun, but very isolated. A lot of tawene in the gullies and he expected this chap to come and grub it out and help put in a mile or two of new fencing. But I knew he wouldn't come. He would have to work with Jock Lambie, which is no joke. And then no respectable person, unless he was a Maori, would think of putting up his family in that old shearing cottage.

"It's not fit for a dog to live in," I said.

"What's that?" he said. "Cut out that talk and go and do as I say." He shook his stick at me as if I was a crazy steer.

I've never had much time for the old man, I suppose because I feel that he despises me. Once I told him I wanted to work in the city and have a forty-hour week, and he nearly took to me with the shotgun. That's the sort of person he is. There are a lot like him around this country, I imagine, but he must be one of the worst. Got a temper like a child of six, the kind that is just uncontrollable. He's given me more than one hiding with his big stick in my day.

Perhaps I was unlucky in being the last of his three sons to come along. He put Jim and Dave on two of his properties, but he didn't know what to do with me so he got me to milk the Friesians. A dog's life, never any let-up, milking day and night, Saturdays and Sundays. I wanted a decent city job where my week-ends were free, but he threatened to cut me off without a penny if I went away without his consent, and so far I've been too much of a coward to try and dare him. One of these days I might do it, but just now I'm no better than a flunkey for him. So much for the virtue of courage. I simply haven't got it.

"You do as I tell you," he said. "And you'll get along all right."

A fat lot he cared for me. He was just farming me the same as he was farming the land and his two thousand sheep and fifty dairy cows. I was so much profit for him, that's all. Saved him wages.

I had a bit of difficulty finding the house, but luckily the bloke was at home when I got there.

"I'm Tom Donovan," I said. "Dad wants me to take you out to have a look at the job."

He got his coat and asked me to help him shift next door the baby he was minding. His wife was down at the hospital, he said. All the way out in the

A Short Story by PHILLIP WILSON

car he asked me questions about the farm and the job. I could see he knew a bit about farming. He said he'd had a city pitch for a few years but wanted to get back on the land. The real problem though was accommodation.

"This is only an old shearer's cottage," I said.

"How many sheep per acre?" he asked. "Is it isolated? Is it tractor country?"

I said my father would tell him about it.

When we got there the old man was looking at the ewes with Bill Firth, who works for us. Dad was leaning against the rail of the yards, and when he saw Andrews hop out of the car he straightened up and stared at him.

"What do you think of the country out here?" he said.

"It looks all right," Andrews said with a grin. "A bit bare in places."

There was a pause, then Andrews said, "What's the house like?"

"I'll take you round and show you," Dad said.

"What's the job, exactly?"

"Well, first of all there's this towreen. There's about two months' work in that. Then there's the fencing. You say you're a good fencer?"

"I'm a good one, all right," Andrews said.

"You're a good worker? I don't want any of these fly-by-night jokers working for me."

"Of course I am," Andrews said.

"I've got a man fencing now, up on the other side of that hill there. He's a bit funny but a smart fencer, and if you can get on with him you shouldn't have any trouble. I've got a good horse for you to ride, but I'd like you to bring your own saddle."

"How will I get on for supplies?"

"We kill our own meat," Dad said. "I'll let you have a sheep now and then. And you can work a forty-hour week or whatever you want. It's six bob an hour."

After they had looked at the house there was a spell while Andrews nutted it out. I could see he wasn't terribly keen to live there, but at last he said, "All right."

"Good," Dad said. "Talk it over with your wife and ring me tomorrow night, because if you don't take it there's a friend of mine up in Hastings wants the job, and I said I'd let him know by Wednesday morning."

Well, Andrews installed his tribe and soon all the barbed wire fences for miles around seemed to be hung out with washing and babies' naps. After a week or so I asked him what he thought of Jock Lambie. Old Jock had come out from Scotland and taken up a small tussock block. He was one of those Dad couldn't buy out, so he got him to work for him instead. Jock didn't make much of a living off the tussock and he was glad of the wages. He had never married and lived a real bachelor existence, didn't go to town or have any fun. I couldn't understand him. He used to exist on meat and potatoes. Killed a sheep every Sunday morning and ate it all the week. Never touched a green vegetable or anything like that. He was very dour and I used to see him work-



"When he saw Andrews hop out of the car he straightened up and stared at him."

ing up there in his red-and-white tam o' shanter with his collie lying in the grass never more than a few yards away from him. Andrews said he was all right. He'd invited Jock down to the house but he wouldn't come because he said he didn't care for company. He was one of the old breed that there used to be a lot of in this country in the early days.

I kept on at Dad to let me go to town, but he is a hard man to persuade.

"That's no life for a young chap," he said. "You'd be spending all your money on women and amusement. Look at Jock Lambie. What a worker! He's the sort of man I admire."

"I don't want to become a man alone like him," I said.

What can you do? I tried to get Andrews to see my point of view, because he had worked in the city. But he agreed with Dad.

"This is the life for a man," he said. "Plenty of fresh air and good red meat."

"I'm not likely to starve in town," I said. "And I'm sure the air's just as pure there."

"The future of this country's out here on the land," he said. "Not cooped up in some city suburb surrounded by grafters who never did a day's honest toil in their lives."

He sounded as bad as my old man, and I thought I would just have to wait until something happened that made them change their minds.

Jock was a nuggety old chap and worked like a nigger, and he soon had Andrews sweating to keep up with him on the fencing. They were working on the south boundary and I would go out and watch them and talk about things. It was cold with a little snow around still. Jock didn't mind yarning to me, and he at least thought I mightn't be altogether crazy wanting to go into town to make my fortune.

"If you're going, then do it while you're young," he said. "Look at me. I've never made anything of my life. I bought this tussock when I was young and land was cheap, but if I sell it now, and I'd get a good price for it, I still won't have anything else to do. I'm too old to start over again."

"Why don't you just retire?" I said.

"No, laddie," he said. "I'm stuck here, and I'll die here."

Mrs. Andrews soon developed into a real back-country wife, over-worked, lean as a rake, and with a sharp tongue. She dressed her children in old flour bags because she couldn't afford any-

thing better, I suppose. She told me she would much rather live in a decent city house where there was plenty of hot water all day and she didn't have to be always chopping wood for the stove.

"I want to go back," she said. "And when this job cuts out I hope we do."

Dad had guaranteed Andrews a year's work, with maybe more after that, depending on how he liked the district. He soon had Andrews under his thumb so that he didn't know whether to go or stay at the end of the year. On the one hand his wife and Jock Lambie and me were trying to persuade him to leave, and on the other Dad was trying to talk him into staying.

It came to a head quite suddenly, about the time when the year was nearly done. Mrs. Andrews was pretty fed up with the primitive conditions they were living in, but Andrews wouldn't budge. Then one morning he went out with a sledge of posts and wire to the fencing line and Jock Lambie didn't turn up. Old Jock hadn't had a day's illness in his life, but he had been driving himself so hard lately that Andrews was worried. He asked me to go over to Jock's cottage on the other side of the hill and find out what was the matter.

I found him lying in his bed, and I could see he would never put another staple on the wire. The collie was setting up an awful row. There was half a skinned sheep hanging from the rafters and the remains of last night's rib of mutton on the table. Dad got the doctor but they couldn't find anything the matter with him. The doctor said he had just worn out his system, and that his sheep a week routine these last twenty years probably hadn't helped any, either.

"Is that what you think?" I asked Andrews. "Could that kill a man?"

"How do I know?" he said.

Dad went down to the lawyer's office and put in an offer for Jock's farm, because that piece of land would make his holding in the valley just about complete. Andrews thought Dad was a bit cold-blooded over it, and it started him thinking.

"Maybe there's something in what you say after all, Tom," he said to me. "How would you like to head back to town with us at the end of the month, and we'll go job-hunting together?"

"Don't you do it," Dad said.

But I said I thought it was a good idea.