

# THE PHANTOM STATION

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EARLY every Englishman who goes to the colonies is filled with a longing to be a ranchman; to drive bullocks, and to mix with the rough, strong, cow-boys of his imagination. I do not mind confessing now, for years have gone by since then, that I was no better than the rest of my fellow-voyagers, the only difference being that perhaps my ideas of ranch, or station life were even more romantic than theirs. I had the wildest fancies concerning the habits of cow boys. I pictured myself on a thin shaggy pony with a high-backed saddle and lasso pummel, galloping wildly into the nearest township, accompanied by a roaring crowd of these boys. I could see myself ahead of them all, cracking my long stock whip with my right hand as I took left-handed shots at the lamp-posts with my six-shooter. How as each light went out shouts of applause greeted me; how the inhabitants hurried out of our way, laughing and telling their friends that the "boys" were enjoying themselves to-night!

These were only my wildest dreams of what station life was. The others are laid aside, but not forgotten.

With such romantic ideas it was not surprising that soon after my arrival in New Zealand I hurried off to the Hawke's Bay district, where I heard the largest cattle and sheep stations were situated. Whilst in Napier I made enquiries as to how I should get employment as a stockman. I, of course, thought so long as one could ride no difficulty would be met—in fact that squatters would be only too glad to have men. To my utter astonishment I

found things otherwise, and learnt that the only way to get work of this kind was to tramp from station to station and enquire at each if a man were needed.

Seeing that there was no other method, and not wishing to waste time, I wrapped a few clothes in a blanket, strapped them on my back, and started on my journey. Prior to leaving I received minute instructions from my adviser as to the way of procedure.

It was a bright morning, full of promise; the sun had not long risen, and the streets of Napier were deserted. I hurriedly left my hotel, and walked sharply away, hoping that no one would see me; for, be the truth spoken, I felt my position was not a dignified one. A tramp in a town was somewhat different to a man going to be a stockman in the country. I feared that the inhabitants of Napier would not look at the matter from this broad standpoint, and that they would see only the outward signs, and judge me accordingly—a loafer and a tramp—whereas, no man that ever trod the pavements of that worthy but sleepy town had higher resolves or more beautiful ideals than I had that bright November morning.

Once clear of the town, I felt less conscious of the swag on my back, and stepped out more freely, dreaming gaily of the bright future which I thought lay before me.

The roads were in splendid condition, and the beautiful scenery made walking a pleasure. After the quiet, peaceful look of English country, the wild broken tracks of land on which I soon found myself were strangely interesting. For the first two days my travels took me along the main road, and I experienced no

difficulty in finding my way, though I saw but few people of whom to enquire.

Concerning the tramp I had, and the experiences at the various stations, little need be said; they were the same that hundreds of others have written about, so I will push on to my third day.

As I had walked at a fair rate I was soon, well out into the country. The stations were now further apart, which made it necessary to get an early start to enable me to reach the next stopping place before sundown. It was on the 13th day of the month that I left the last station this side of the Tutikouri River in my search for one on the other side. I remember the date well, for the mail from England was due, and as I tramped along I wondered if any letters were lying at Napier for me. Once or twice I felt inclined to turn back, so keen was my longing for home news. However, I stuck to the road and walked steadily on all day, until, at five o'clock in the afternoon, I sighted a large wool shed and station, on the far side of the river where I had been told that I should find it. It was almost hidden from sight by the thick bush which grew all along the opposite bank. As it only appeared to be a mile from the other side, I sat down to enjoy a rest and smoke before wading the river. Young as I was at tramping I knew enough not to arrive too early at a station, for it only meant more work—most squatters make the swagmen (tramps) work until sundown before they will give them their meals and allot them a sleeping-place, hence the name sundowner is given to those men who do not arrive at a station until the sun has set and work for the day is over.

The river rippled idly past me as I lay down on the soft grass, puffing clouds of smoke into the air and enjoying to the full the wonderful sensation of complete freedom. Here was I, without a penny in my pocket, in a land where the sun was nearly always shining; surrounded on all sides by the most perfect scenery; free from all care and looking quietly across at the station where I knew I could get as much food as I wanted, a nice place to sleep in and

the companionship of amusing men. It was delightful to lie down and think on all these good things, to picture the scramble that was going on in London, my native town—how men were tearing about in the foggy streets all bent on a fight for existence, all fearing that tomorrow they might be ruined, or that next month they would not be able to meet their bills. I felt so far above all these men in my content. There was a mad delight in the peace that surrounded me. What had I to bother about? Absolutely nothing. I knew if I didn't get work I could go on as I was, and surely no life could be more pleasant.

It was in this dreamy blissful state that I took a last look at the station, marking carefully the direction I had to take, and struck off down the bank with my swag held high over my head, to keep it dry as I waded through the river. Luckily it was not in flood and only wet me to my waist. Once on the opposite bank I shouldered my swag, wrung some of the water out of my clothes, and searched for a track to take me to the station. At first I could see no sign of any path, but after about half-an-hour's hunting I came across the wheel marks of a cart which, not long since, had evidently passed through the river about half a mile below where I had crossed. So distinct were the tracks that I felt sure if I hurried I should come across the dray. It could not be far ahead, for the water which had dripped from the horses was still wet on the ground. For fully half-an-hour I trudged along feeling all the time that the cart, if leading me to the station, was taking me a roundabout way. This I knew might possibly be necessary, a creek or the clump of bush I had seen might have barred the most direct route. Suddenly the wheel tracks led me into a small swamp and through a creek. I followed them but on reaching the other side could no longer discover where the wheels had been. As it was now getting dark I wasted as little time as possible in trying to find the lost tracks, but instead searched for some trodden footway which would take me right.

A more desolate looking place than

this I had never come across. The land around me was extremely marshy. Ti-tree, scrub and flax, grew over everything and no sign of field or station could I see. To the right of me grew the thick bush, barring my view, behind stretched the flat broken ground I had traversed, and ahead bush, swamp and scrub. For some minutes I remained still listening intently for some sign of life, the barking of a dog or the cracking of a stockwhip. All was as quiet as the grave. In desperation I *coo-ee'd* loudly once or twice in the hope that if anyone were about they would answer me. I waited anxiously for an answer till the stillness began to depress me. The dripping of the water and the murky noises of the swamp were the only sounds that broke the monotony. Their very regularity only added to the unpleasantness of the situation.

At last I decided to retrace my steps and endeavour to find another track; I came to the conclusion that the one I had been following was wrong.

In twenty minutes I was back by the river and felt a pleasant sense of homeliness in its company. Darkness was coming on apace. I quickly took my bearings again and started off in what I felt sure was a direct line for the station. There was no track visible, but as I was certain the bush could not be very large, I thought I would trust to Providence and make a bold dash for it.

New chum as I was, I knew the dangers of trying to pass through the bush, but I was getting desperate and the distance seemed so short.

Anybody, I thought, could walk straight for that little way. Fearing lest I should go wrong, I took care to leave good marks behind me so that I should have no difficulty in retracing my steps to the river, which had now become quite a home to me; from its opposite bank I knew I could see the station; that in itself was a comfort in this lonely spot.

For the first quarter of a mile the bush was thin, and the undergrowth was not sufficient to impede my progress, but as I went on it became thicker, the trees higher and the darkness more intense. Walking in a straight line became im-

possible, for great trees and fallen logs barred my way. Gradually I felt I was going down into a gully. I could see the tree tops far beneath me.

From the river the ground had seemed quite level, and surely, I began to think, I had travelled more than a mile. The farther I went the more troubled I felt. I was certain that I was wrong again.

The gully seemed endless, and in a kind of nervous terror I swung sharply round and began hurriedly to retrace my steps. A large rat jumped down from the branch of a tree in front of me and scuttled through the thick undergrowth.

Uncanny feelings began to assert themselves, and I scrambled along as fast as I could, stumbling over fallen branches and getting entangled in "bush lawyer" and "supplejack." The latter seemed purposely to twine its long vines round me and clutch my arms and legs. The more I tugged to free myself the more entangled I became and the more nervous I grew. These vine-like ropes seemed human in their persistence. Each strand had to be parted and separately disentangled before I could proceed. When I got back to the open the perspiration was pouring off me and my heart was thumping against my ribs. I doubled my pace until I saw the river before me.

On reaching it I sank down by its friendly bank, thoroughly exhausted.

Beyond a small crust of bread, I had eaten nothing since my breakfast and was now feeling the pangs of hunger. It must have been nine o'clock, and I had been thirteen hours without a meal. The river looked more deep and lonely now as I gazed down at it. I was strangely tired and weak, and felt more like sleeping where I lay than re-crossing it, preparatory to making a fresh start, I determined to make sure of the exact position of the station. The water was cold, and in the darkness I took a new crossing, where the water rose up to my arm-pits. It was indeed terribly cold and made me shiver as I battled through it. At last I reached the opposite side. Throwing down my swag I ran up the bank. There it was! Exactly where I had come from! The white roof of

station and wool shed, even in the darkness, stood out plain and clear against the sky.

For a moment I shut my eyes and then opened them again to make sure that what I saw was no fancy. It was all right. A light shone out from one of the windows and a dog barked loudly in the distance. The men were evidently closing up for the night.

Filled with fresh energy I made one more start. This time I followed the river further up, so that I should cross in a straight line to the sheds. On reaching the opposite bank my way was barred by a steep, bush-covered hill, the sides of which, from the water, were impossible to climb. I determined not to be done this time, so I headed up the stream in order to find some other landing place beyond the station. About two hundred yards higher up I arrived at a ford where cattle came to drink, and could have shouted for very joy. With a bound I was out of the water, and a few minutes later was following the cattle tracks right in the direction I knew the station lay.

This time I felt sure I was right. I fancied I could already hear the men talking in their shanties. Vain fancy that it was!

After an hour's weary walking, I found myself back at the cattle ford!

The river babbled by. The moon shone on its waters in peaceful serenity. I hated that river now, and turned from it in disgust. Back into the bush I strode, neither looking nor caring which direction I took.

A fever seemed to possess me as I stumbled along barking my shins against the tree stumps.

Presently I fell down exhausted and must have slept. When I awoke, strange noises filled the bush. The trees groaned and the wind sighed through their branches. As I lay and listened, I wondered if I were awake, whether these noises were only fancies of a fevered brain or whether the wind had really risen. The gnawing sensations of hunger began to tear at me and my soaking clothes hung round me, making me shiver all over. Strange ideas began to haunt me.

Suddenly I started up. The loneliness of the place began to frighten me. I felt that a walk would steady my nerves. I was weak and tired but I scrambled along in a vain endeavour to dissipate my fears and bring warmth to my body. I had no idea where I was going, every place seemed alike. The trees and shrubs all grew in one way and there was no telling one from the other. The fitful flashes of the moon as they shot through the thick clouds overhead, seemed to cast strange shadows across my path. The wind, too, was rising, and the boughs of the trees groaned weirdly. A swimming seemed to fill my head and my limbs refused to move another inch. Again I sank down, this time by the side of a small creek; its green mossy bank looked restful.

On all sides the tall trees stared down at me. Queer noises made me start, and every now and then I felt as if some unknown horror were upon me. The shadows cast by the moon danced like demons in this wild unearthly grotto. My brain began to mix the real and the unreal. A sort of haziness came over my vision, and the shadows took shape and danced round me, as if mocking me in my sad plight. The wind gained strength and howled piteously through the trees.

I felt that I was going mad. I must get up and move about. As I rose a clamouring noise broke on my ears almost deafening me. The demons danced more furiously. My head swam round. I heard a crash, and felt a keen pain shoot through my head. I fell back instantly; a strange sensation of peace came over me. The imps of the bush went further and further away; the harsh sounds became fainter and fainter.

Death! I thought how sweet it was. Suddenly, it must have been hours afterwards, for the sun was well up in the heavens, I came back to consciousness. At first a strange feeling of uncertainty possessed me, and I could not collect my thoughts. I wondered, in a vague sort of way, where I was.

At last, little by little, a feeling of unrest came over me, and I began to realise my position. The events of the

past night came crowding before me, till I remembered all—the crash and the oblivion.

Blood was on my hands, and I became conscious of a dull pain in my head. My hair was all clotted with blood. The broken bough of a tree lay by my side; its branches were half over my body.

Now I knew everything. The whole ghastly position was before me. I was lost in the bush!

Weak, sore and feeble, I rose slowly to my feet, and crawled to the little stream to bathe my temples in its muddy, swollen waters. A terrible storm must have raged in the night, for the bush was strewn with broken branches. The beautiful ferns of yesterday were now a tangled heap of rubbish.

How miserable I was! The gnawing pangs of hunger alone kept me from lying down again.

Surely, now, in the daylight I should be able to find the Phantom Station.

The water had refreshed me. Slowly I began to retrace my steps, but the way was rough, and all traces of the path by which I had come had now disappeared.

For hours I wandered aimlessly about, getting weaker and weaker, till at last I sunk down thoroughly exhausted and slept, praying that I might never wake again. A cracking of whips and shouting of men suddenly startled me from my dreams. Hope sprang up within me. They sounded so near, just behind me.

I started up and scrambled towards the sound with all my remaining strength, stumbling and falling as I went.

The shouts of human voices still sounded plainly. It was no mere fancy this time. The rough oaths of the cattlemen were the sweetest of music to me. Their voices were going away, and a frenzy seized me lest I should

fail to reach the open in time to cry out.

Suddenly, through the trees, far on a hilltop, I saw a mob of cattle tearing wildly about. Men were rushing here and there rounding them up, but they were going away from me. In a few minutes they would be over the hilltop and out of sight!

I struggled on, though each movement wrung me with pain.

It was fully an hour before I reached the spot, and there below me I saw the road I had come the day before. To the right of it lay the river I had crossed, and behind me the bush where the Phantom Station had led me astray. I determined to abandon all hope of finding it, and setting my face to the road I crawled back to the station at which I had last slept. When I arrived there astonishment was on everyone's face; my pitiful condition alarmed them. I tried to speak and explain my position, but I was too weak.

The squatter's wife took charge of me, and, after giving me the smallest piece of bread and honey and half a glass of milk despatched me to bed, where I lay all that day.

When I awoke I ate the biggest meal I had ever tackled, and after it I was able to tell them what they had already guessed, that I had missed my road and spent the night in the bush. I remember how I laughed when they told me the station was no phantom, but a real and very big one. They could hardly believe that I was speaking the truth, for I must have walked round it at least twice and at one time, at the creek, could only have been three hundred yards from the main road.

The next day I found my phantom station quite easily, and have since been over the bush that had nearly become my burial ground. To this day I cannot imagine how I missed the track, but such is the way of the bush when a new chum first takes to it.

