

CHAPTER I.

MY name's Dick Marston, Sydney-side native. I'm twenty-nine years old, six feet in my stocking-soles, and thirteen stone weight. Pretty strong and active with it, so they say. I don't want to blow—not ^ahere, any road—but it takes a good man to put me on my back, or stand up to me with the gloves, or the naked mauleys.¹ I can ride anything—anything that ever was lapped in horsehide—swim like a musk-duck, and track like a Myall blackfellow. Most things that a man can do, I'm up to, and that's all about it. As I lift myself now, I can feel the muscle swell on my arm like a cricket ball, in spite of the——well, in spite of everything.

[No. 1]

The morning sun comes shining through the window bars; and ever since he was up, have I been cursing the daylight, cursing myself, and them that brought me into the world. Did I curse mother? and the hour I was born into this miserable life.²

Why should I curse the day? Why do I lie here, groaning; yes, crying like a child, and beating my head against the stone floor. I am not mad, though I am shut up in a cell. No. Better for me if I was. But it's all up now; there's no get away this time; and I, Dick Marston, as strong as a bullock, as active as a rock-wallaby, chock full of life and spirits and health, have been tried for bushranging—robbery under arms³ they ^bcalled it. And though the blood runs through my veins like the water in the mountain creeks, and every bit of bone and sinew is as sound as the day I was born, I must die on the gallows this day month.

Die—die—yes, ^cdie; be strung up like a dog, as they say. I'm

^ahere] here *Ec*⁺ ^bcalled it. And] call it—and *Er*⁺ ^cdie] die *Ec*⁺

blessed if ever I ^a*did* know of a dog being hanged, though, if it comes to that, a shot or a bait generally makes an end of 'em in this country. Ha, ha! Did I laugh? What a rum thing it is that a man should have a laugh in him when he's only got twenty-nine days more to live—a day for every year of my life. Well, laughing or crying, this is what it has come to at last. All the drinking and recklessness; the flash talk and the idle ways; the merry cross-country rides that we used to have, night or day, it made no odds to us; every man well mounted, as like as not on a racehorse in training, taken out of his stable within the week; the sharp brushes with the police, when now and then a man was wounded on each side, but no one killed. That came later on; worse luck. The jolly sprees we used to have in the bush ^btownship, where we chucked our money about like gentlemen, where all the girls had a smile and a kind word for a lot of game upstanding chaps, that acted like men, if they ^c*did* keep the road a little lively. Our “bush telegraphs” were safe to let us know when the “traps” were closing in on us, and then—why the coach would be “stuck up” a hundred miles away, in a different direction, within twenty-four hours. Marston's gang again! The police are in pursuit! That's what we'd see in the papers. We had 'em sent to us regular; besides having the pick of 'em when we cut open the mail-bags.

And now—that chain rubbed a sore—curse it; all ^d*that* racket's over. It's more than hard to die in this settled infernal fixed sort of way, like a bullock in the killing-yard, all ready to be “pithed.” I used to pity them when I was a boy, walking round the yard, pushing their noses through the rails, trying for a likely place to jump, stamping and pawing and roaring and knocking their heads ^eagain the heavy close rails,⁴ with misery and rage in their eyes, till their time was up. Nobody told ^fthem *beforehand*, though!

Have I and the likes of me ever felt much the same, I wonder, shut up in a pen like this, with the rails up, and not a place a rat could creep through, waiting till our killing time was come! The poor devils of steers have never done anything but ramble off the run now and again, while we—but it's too late to think of that. It ^g*is* hard. There's no saying it isn't; no, nor thinking what a fool,

^a*did*] did *Ec*⁺ ^btownship] townships *Er*⁺ ^c*did*] did *Ec*⁺ ^d*that*] that
Ec⁺ ^eagain] against *Er*⁺ ^fthem *beforehand*] ~ beforehand *Ec* them beforehand
Er⁺ ^g*is*] is *Ec*

what a blind, stupid, thundering idiot a fellow's been, to laugh at the steady working life that would have helped him up, bit by bit, to a good farm, a good wife, and innocent little kids about him, like that chap George Storefield, that came to see me last week. He was real rightdown sorry for me, I could tell, though Jim and I used to laugh at him, and call him a regular old crawler of a milker's calf in the old days. The tears came into his eyes reg'lar like a woman as he gave my hand a squeeze, and turned his head away. We was little chaps together, you know. A man always feels that, you know. And old George, he'll go back—a fifty-mile ride—but what's that on a good horse? He'll be late home, but he can cross the rock ford the short way over the creek. I can see him turn his horse loose at the garden gate, and walk through the quinces that lead up to the cottage, with his saddle on his arm. Can't I see it all, as plain as if I was there!

And his wife and the young 'uns 'll run out when they hear father's horse, and want to hear all the news. When he goes in there's his meal tidy and decent waiting for him, while he tells them about the poor chap he's been to see, as is to be scragged next month. Ha! ha! what a rum joke it is, isn't it?

And then he'll go out in the verandah, with the roses growin' all over the posts and smellin' sweet in the cool night air. After that, he'll have his smoke, and sit there thinkin' about ^ame, perhaps, and old days, and what not, till all hours—till his wife comes and fetches him in. And here I lie—my God! why didn't they knock me on the head when I was born, like a lamb in a dry season, or a blind puppy—blind enough, God knows! They do so in some countries, if the books say true, and what a hell of misery that must save some people from!

Well—it's done, now—and there's no get away. I may as well make the best of it. A sergeant of police was shot in ^bour last scrimmage, and they must fit some one over that. It's only natural. He was rash, or Starlight would never have dropped him that day. Not if he'd ^cbeen sober, either. We'd been drinking all night at that Willow Tree shanty.⁵ Bad grog, too! When a man's half drunk he's fit for any devilment that comes before him. Drink? How do you think a

^ame] me Ec*

^bour] out Et TZ

^cbeen] be Ec

chap that's taken to the bush—regularly turned out, I mean—with a price on his head, and a fire burning in his heart night and day, can stand his life if he don't drink? When he thinks of what he might have been, and what he is! Why, nearly every man he meets is paid to run him down, or trap him some way like a stray dog that's taken to sheep-killin'. He knows a score of men and women, too, that are only looking out for a chance to sell his blood on the quiet and pouch the money. Do you think ^athat makes a chap mad and miserable, and tired of his life, or not? And if a drop of grog will take him right out of his wretched self for a bit, why shouldn't he drink? People don't know what ^bthey're talking about. Why, he is that miserable, ^cand he wonders why he don't hang himself, and save the Government all the trouble; and if a few nobblers make him feel as if he might have some good chances yet, and that it doesn't so much matter after all, why shouldn't he drink?

He ^ddoes drink, of course; every miserable man and a good many women as have something to fear or repent of, drink! The worst of it is that too much of it brings on the "horrors," and then the devil, instead of giving you a jog now and then, sends one of his imps to grin in your face, and pull your heartstrings all day and all night long. By George, I'm getting clever—too clever altogether, ^eI'd think—if I could forget ^ffor one moment, in the middle of all the nonsense, that I was to ^gdie on Thursday three weeks! ^hdie on Thursday three weeks! ⁱdie on Thursday! That's the way the time runs in my ears like a chime of bells. But it's all mere bosh I've been reading these long six months I've been chained up here—after I was committed for trial—when I came out of the hospital after curing me of that wound, for I was hit bad by that black tracker. They gave me some books to read, for fear I'd go mad, and cheat the hangman. I was always fond of reading, and many a night I've read to poor old mother and Aileen before I left the old place. I was that weak and low, after I took the turn, and I felt glad to get a book to take me away from sitting, staring, and blinking at nothing, by the hour together. ^jIt was all very well then; I was too weak to think much. But when I began to get

^athat] that Ec⁺ ^bthey're] they are Ec⁺ ^cand] that Er⁺ ^ddoes] does Ec⁺
^eI'd] I Ec⁺ ^ffor one moment] for one moment Ec⁺ ^gdie on Thursday] die on Thursday Ec⁺
^hdie on Thursday Ec⁺ ⁱdie on Thursday] die on Thursday Ec⁺ ^jdie on Thursday] die on Thursday Ec⁺
^kIt] I Ec

well again I kept always coming across something in the book that made me groan or cry out, as if some one had stuck a knife in me. A dark chap did once—through the ribs—it didn't feel so bad; a little sharpish at first. Why didn't he aim a bit higher! He never was no good, even at that. As I was saying, there'd be something about a horse, or the country, or the spring weather—it's just coming in now, and the Indian corn's shooting after the rain, and ^aI'll never see it; or they'd put in a bit about the cows walking through the river in the hot summer afternoons; or they'd go describing, ^band about a girl, until I began to think of sister Aileen again; then I'd run my head against the wall, or do something like a madman, and they'd stop the books for a week; and I'd be as miserable as a bandicoot, worse and worse a lot, with all the devil's tricks and bad thoughts in my head, and nothing to put them away.

I must either kill myself, or get something to fill up my time till the day—yes, ^c*the day* comes. I've always been a middling writer, tho' I can't say much for the grammar, and spelling, and that, but I'll put it all down, from the beginning to the end, and may be it'll save some other unfortunate young chap from pulling back, like a colt when he's first roped, setting himself against everything in the way of proper breaking, making a fool of himself generally, and choking himself down, as I've done.

The gaoler—he looks hard—he has to do that, ^dfor there's more than one or two within here that would have him by the throat, with his heart's blood running, in half a minute, if they had their way, and the warder was off guard. He knows that very well. But he's not a bad hearted chap. “You can have books, or paper and pens, anything you like,” he said, “you unfortunate young beggar, until you're turned off.”

“If I'd only had you to see after me when I was young,” says I—
 “Come; don't whine,” he said, then he burst out laughing. “You didn't mean it, I see. I ought to have known better. You're not one of that sort, and I like you all the better for it.”

^aI'll] *I'll* *Er*⁺

^band] *Om. Er*⁺

^c*the day*] *the day* *Ec*⁺

^dfor] *Om. Ec*⁺

Well; here goes. Lots of pens, a big bottle of ink, and ever so much foolscap paper, the right sort for me, or I shouldn't have been here. I'm blessed if it doesn't look as if I was going to write copies again. Don't I remember how I used to go to school in old times; the rides there and back on the old pony; and pretty little Grace Storefield that I was so fond of, and used to show her how to do her lessons. I believe I learned more that way than if I'd had only myself to think about. There was another girl, the daughter of the poundkeeper, that I wanted her to beat: and the way we both worked, and I coached her up, was a caution. And she ^a*did* get above her in her class. How proud we were. She gave me a kiss, too, and a bit of her hair. Poor Gracey, I wonder where she is now, and what she'd think if she saw me here to-day. If I could have looked ahead, and seen myself—chained now like a dog, and going to die a dog's death this day month!

Anyhow, I must make a start. How do people begin when they set to work to write their own sayings and doings? There's been a deal more doing than talking in my life—it was the wrong sort—more's the pity.

Well, let's see; his parents were poor, but respectable. That's what they always say. My parents were poor, and mother was as good a soul as ever broke bread, and wouldn't have taken a shilling's worth that wasn't her own if she'd been starving. But as for father, he'd been a poacher in England, a Lincolnshire man he was, and got sent out for it. He wasn't much more than a boy, he said, and it was only for a hare or two, which didn't seem much. But I begin to think, being able to see the right of things a bit now, and having no bad grog inside of me to turn a fellow's head upside down, as poaching must be something like cattle and horse duffing—not the worst thing in the world itself, but mighty likely to lead to it.

Dad had always been a hardworking, steady-going sort of chap, good at most things, and like a lot more of the Government men, as the convicts were always called round our part, he saved some money as soon as he had done his time, and married mother, who was a simple emigrant girl just out from Ireland. Father was a square-built, good-looking chap, I believe, then,—not so tall as I

^a*did*] did Ec⁺

am by three inches, but wonderfully strong and quick on his pins. They did say as he could hammer any man in the district before he got old and stiff. I never saw him “shape” but once, and then he rolled into a man big enough to eat him, and polished him off in a way that showed me—though I was a bit of a boy then—that he’d been at the game before. He didn’t ride so bad either, though he hadn’t had much of it where he came from; but he was afraid of nothing, and had a quiet way with colts. He could make pretty good play in thick country, and ride a roughish horse too.

Well, our farm was on a good little flat, with a big mountain in front, and a scrubby, rangy country at the back for miles. People often asked him why he chose such a place. “It suits me,” he used to say with a laugh, and talk of something else. We could only raise about enough corn and potatoes, in a general way, for ourselves, from the flat, but there were other chances and pickings which helped to make the pot boil, and them we’d have been a deal better without.

First of all, though our cultivation paddock was small, and the good land seemed squeezed in between the hills, there was a narrow ^atrack up the creek, and here it widened out into a large, well grassed flat. This was where our cattle ran, for, of course, we had a team of workers and a few milkers, when we came. No one ever took up a farm in those days without a dray ^band team, a year’s rations, a few horses and milkers, pigs and fowls, and a little furniture. They didn’t collar a 40-acre selection, as they do now⁶—spend all their money in getting the land, and squat down as bare as robins. A man with his wife and children all under a sheet of bark, nothing on their backs, and very little in their bellies. However, some of them do pretty well, though they do say they have to live on ’possums for a time. We didn’t do much, in spite of our grand start.

The flat was well enough, but there were other places in the gullies beyond that that father had dropped upon when he was out shooting; he was a tremendous chap for poking about on foot or on horseback, and though he was an Englishman, he was what you call a born bushman. I never saw any man almost as was his equal. Wherever he’d been once, there he could take you to again; and what was more, if it was in the dead of the night he could do it just

^atrack] tract *E2*⁺ ^band] and a *Ec*⁺

the same. People said he was as good as a blackfellow, but I never saw one that was as good as he was, all round. In a strange country, too. That was what beat me—he'd know the way the creek run, and noticed when the cattle headed to camp, and a lot of things that other people couldn't see, or if they did couldn't remember again. He was a great man for solitary ^arambles,⁷ too. He and an old dog he had, called Crib, a crossbred mongrel-looking brute—most like what they call a lurcher in England, father said. Anyhow, he could do most anything but talk. He could bite to some purpose, drive cattle or sheep, catch a kangaroo if it wasn't a regular flyer, fight like a bulldog and swim like a retriever, track anything, and fetch and carry, but bark he wouldn't. He'd stand and look at Dad as if he worshipped him, and he'd make him some sign, and off he'd go like a child that's got a message. ^b*Why* he was so fond of the old man we boys couldn't make out. We were afraid of him, and as far as we could see he never patted or made much of Crib. He thrashed him unmerciful as he did us boys. Still the dog was that fond of him you'd think he'd like to die for him, there and then. But dogs are not like boys, or men either—better, perhaps.

Well, we were all born at the hut by the creek, I suppose, for I remember it as soon as I could remember anything. It was a snug hut enough, for father was a good bush carpenter, and didn't turn his back to any one for splitting and fencing, hutbuilding and shingle-splitting; he had had a year or two at sawing, too, but after he was married he dropped that. But I've heard mother say that he took great pride in the hut when he brought her to it first, and said it was the best built hut within fifty miles. He split every slab, cut every post and wallplate and rafter himself, with a man to help him at odd times; and after the frame was up, and the bark on the roof, he camped underneath and finished every bit of it,—chimney, flooring, doors, windows, and partitions by himself. Then he dug up a little garden in front, and planted a dozen or two peaches and quinces in it; put a couple of roses—a red and a white one—by the posts of the verandah, and it was all ready for his pretty Norah, as she says he used to call her then. If I've heard her tell about the garden and the quince trees and the two roses once, I've heard her tell it

^arambles] walks *Ec*⁺

^b*Why*] Why *Ec*⁺

a hundred times. Poor mother! we used to get round her—Aileen, and Jim, and I—and say, “Tell us about the garden, mother.” She’d never refuse; those were her happy days, she always said. She used to cry afterwards,—nearly always.

The first thing almost that I can remember was riding the old pony ’Possum out to bring in the milkers. Father was away somewhere, so mother took us all out and put me on the pony, and let me have a whip. Aileen walked alongside, and very proud I was. My legs stuck out straight on the old pony’s fat back. Mother had ridden him up when she came—the first horse she ever rode, she said. He was a quiet little old roan, with a bright eye and legs like gate-posts, but he never fell down with us boys, for all that. If we fell off he stopped still and began to feed, so that he suited us all to pieces. We soon got sharp enough to flail him along with a quince stick, and we used to bring up the milkers, I expect, a good deal faster than was good for them. After a bit we could milk, leg-roped, and bail up for ourselves, and help dad brand the calves, which began to come pretty thick. There were only three of us children, my brother Jim, who was two years younger than I was, and then Aileen, who was four years behind him. I know we were both able to nurse the baby awhile after she came, and neither of us wanted better fun than to be allowed to watch her, or rock the cradle, or as a great treat to carry her a few steps. Somehow we was that fond and proud of her from the first that we’d have done anything in the world for her. And so we would now. I was going to say ^athat, but poor Jim ^bis under a forest-oak on a sand-hill, and I—well, I’m here, and if I’d listened to her advice I should have been a free man. A free man! How it sounds, doesn’t it, with the sun shining, and the blue sky over your head, and the birds twittering, and the grass beneath your feet. I wonder if I shall go mad before my time’s up.

Mother was a Roman Catholic, most Irishwomen are; and Dad was ^ca Protestant, if he was anything. However, that says nothing. People that don’t talk much about their religion, or follow it up at all, won’t change it for all that. So father, ^dtho’ mother tried him hard enough when they were first married, wouldn’t hear of turning, not if he was to be killed for it, as I once heard him say. “No!” he says,

^athat, but] —but that *Ec*⁺ ^bis] lies *EI*⁺ ^ca] *Om. TZ* ^dtho’] though *Ec*⁺

“my father and grandfather, and all the lot, was church people, and so I shall live and die. I don’t know ^athat it would make much matter to me; but such as my notions is, I shall stick to ’em as long as the craft holds together. You can bring up the girl in your own way; it’s made a good woman of you, or found you one, which is most likely, and so she may take her chance. But I stand for church and ^bking, and so shall the boys, as sure as my name’s Ben Marston.”

^athat] as *El*⁺

^bking] King *Ec*⁺

CHAPTER II.

FATHER was one of those people that gets shut of a deal of trouble in this world by always sticking to one thing. If he said he'd do this or that, he always did it and nothing else. As for turning him, a wild bull halfway down a range was a likelier try-on. So nobody ever bothered him after he'd once opened his mouth. They knew it was so much lost labour. I sometimes thought Aileen was a bit like him in her way of sticking to things. But then she was always right—you see.

[No. 2]

So that clinched it. Mother gave in like a wise woman as she was. The clergyman from Bargo came one day and christened me and Jim—made one job of it. But mother took Aileen herself in the spring cart all the way to the township and had her christened in the chapel, in the middle of the service all right and regular—by Father Roche.

There's good and bad of every sort, and I've met plenty that were no chop of all churches—but if Father Roche, or Father any body else, had any hand in making mother and Aileen half as good as they were, I'd turn to-morrow, if I ever got out again. I don't suppose it was the religion that made much difference in our case, for Patsey Daly and his three brothers, that lived on the creek higher up were as much on the cross as men could be, and many a time I've seen them ride to chapel and attend mass and look as if they'd never seen a "clearskin" in their lives. Patsey was hanged afterwards for bushranging and gold robbery, and he had more than one man's blood to answer for. Now we wern't¹ like that—we never troubled the church one way or the other—we knew we were doing what we oughtn't to do, and ^awe scorned to look pious and keep two faces under one hood.

^awe] *Om. Ec*⁺

By degrees we all grew older—began to be active and able to do half a man’s work. We learned to ride—pretty well—at least that is we could ride a bare-backed horse at full gallop through timber or down a range: could back a colt just caught and have him as quiet as an old cow in a week. We could ^ause the axe and the cross-cut saw—for father dropped that sort of work himself and made Jim and I do all the rough jobs of mending the fences, getting fire-wood, milking the cows, and, after a bit, ploughing the bit of flat we kept in cultivation.

Jim and I, when we were fifteen and thirteen—he was bigger for his age than I was, and so near my own strength that I didn’t care about touching him—were the smartest lads on the creek,—father said,—he didn’t often praise us, either. We had often ridden over to help at the muster of the large cattle stations that were on the ^bother side of the range, and not more than twenty or thirty miles from us.

Some of our young stock used to stray among the squatters’ cattle and we liked attending the muster because there was plenty of galloping about and cutting-out and fun in the men’s hut at night and often a halfcrown or so for helping some one away with a big mob of cattle or a lot for the pound. Father didn’t go himself and I used to notice that whenever we came up and said we were Ben Marston’s boys—both master and super looked rather glum, and then appeared not to think any more about it. I heard the owner of one of these stations say to his managing man, “Pity, isn’t it? fine boys, too.” I didn’t understand what they meant. I do now.

We could do a few things besides riding, because, as I told you before, we had been to a bit of a school kept by an old chap that had once seen better days, that lived three miles off, near a little bush township. This village, like most of these places, had a public-house and a blacksmith’s shop. That was about all—the publican kept the store and managed pretty well to get hold of all the money that was made by the people round about. That is of those ^cthat were “good drinking men.” He had half-a-dozen children, and though he was not up to much, he wasn’t that bad that he didn’t want his children to have the chance of being better than himself. I’ve seen

^ause] us *Ec*

^bother] *Om. Ec*⁺

^cthat] who *E3*

a good many crooked people in my day—but very few that though they'd given themselves up as a bad job didn't hope a bit that their youngsters mightn't take after them. Curious, isn't it? but it is true, I can tell you. So Lammerby, the publican, though he was a greedy sly sort of fellow, that bought things he knew were stolen, and lent out money and charged everybody two prices for the things he sold 'em, didn't like the thought of his children growing up like ^amyall cattle, as he said himself, and so he fished out this old Mr. Howard that had been a friend or a victim or some kind of pal of his in old times, near Sydney, and got him to come and keep school.

He was a curious man, this Mr. Howard. What ^bhe'd been or done none of us ever knew,—but he spoke up to one of the squatters that said something sharp to him one day, in a way that ^cshewed us boys, that he thought himself as good as he was. And he stood up straight and looked him in the face, till we hardly could think he was the same man—that was so bent and shambling and broken-down looking, most times. He used to live in a little hut in the township all by himself. It was just big enough to hold him and us at our lessons. He had his dinner at the inn—along with Mr. and Mrs. Lammerby—she was always kind to him—and made him puddings and things when he was ill. He was pretty often ill, and then he'd hear us our ^dlesson at the bedside, and make a short day of it.

Mostly he drank nothing but tea. He used to smoke a good deal out of a big meerschaum pipe with figures on it that he used to show us when he was in a good humour. But two or three times a year, he used to set-to and drink for a week, and then school was left off till he was right. We didn't think much of that. Everybody, almost, that we knew did the same. All the men,—nearly all that is—and some of the women—not mother though—she wouldn't have touched a drop of wine or spirits to save her life; and never did to her dying day. We just thought of it, as if they'd got a touch of fever or sunstroke or broke a rib or something. They'd get over it in a week or two and be all right again.

All the same, poor old Mr. Howard wasn't always on the booze, not by any manner of means. He never touched a drop of anything—

^amyall] Myall *E1*⁺ ^bhe'd] he had *E1*⁺ ^cshewed] showed *Ec*⁺ ^dlesson] lessons *Ec*⁺

not even gingerbeer while he was straight, and he kept us all going from 9 o'clock in the morning till 3 in the afternoon, summer and winter, for more than six years. Then he died, poor old chap,—found dead in his bed one morning. Many a basting he gave me and Jim with an old malacca cane he had with a silver knob to it. We were all pretty frightened of him. He'd say—to me and Jim and the other boys, “It's the best chance of making men of yourselves you ever had, if you only knew it. You'll be rich farmers or settlers, perhaps magistrates, one of these days. That is, if you're not hanged—It's you, I mean,—he'd say—pointing to me and Jim and the Dalys:² I believe some of you ^a*will be hanged* unless you change a good deal. It's ^bbold blood and bad blood that runs in your veins, and you'll come to earn the wages of sin³ some day. It's a strange thing,” he used to say, as if he was talking to himself, “that the girls are so good, while the boys are delivered over to the ^cevil one, except a case here and there. Look at Mary Darcy and Jane Lammerby, and my little pet Aileen here. I defy any village in Britain to turn out such girls—plenty of rosy cheeked gigglers—but the natural refinement and intelligence of these little damsels astonishes me.”

Well, the old man died suddenly, as I said, and we were all very sorry—and the school was broken up. But he had taught us all to write fairly and to keep accounts, to read and spell decently, and to know a little geography. It wasn't a great deal, but what we knew we knew well, and—I often think of what he said—now it's too late—we ought to have made better use of it. After school broke up father said Jim and I knew quite as much as was likely to be any good to us, and we must work for our living like other people. We'd always done a pretty fair share of ^d*that*, and our hands were hard with using the axe and the spade, let alone holding the plough at odd times, and harrowing. Helping father to kill and brand and a lot of other things, besides getting up while the stars were in the sky so as to get the cows milked early, before it was time to go to school.

All this time, we had lived in a free kind of way—we wanted for nothing. We had plenty of good beef, and a calf now and then. About this time, I began to wonder, how it was that so many cattle and

^a*will be hanged*] will be hanged *Ec* *will be hanged* *Et*⁺ ^bbold] cold *Et*⁺ ^cevil one] Evil one *Ec*⁺ ^d*that*] that *Ec*⁺

horses passed through father's hands and what became of them.

I hadn't lived all my life on Rocky Creek, and among some of the smartest hands in that line that old New South Wales ever bred without knowing what "clearskins" and "cross" beasts meant, and being well aware that our brand was often put on a calf that no cow of ours ever suckled. Don't I remember well the first calf I ever helped to put our letters on? I've often wished I'd defied father, then taken my licking and bolted away from home. *'It's that very calf* and the things it led to—that's helped to put me where I am!

Just as I sit here, and these cursed irons rattle whenever I move my feet, I can see that very evening, and father and the old dog with a little mob of our crawling cattle and half a dozen head of strangers, cows and calves and a fat little steer—coming through the scrub to the old stockyard.

It was an awkward place for a yard, people used to say; scrubby and stony all round, a blind sort of hole you couldn't see till you were right on the top of it. But there was a "wing" ran out, a good way through the scrub,—there's no better guide to a yard like that,—and there was a sort of track cattle followed easy enough once you were round the hill. Anyhow, between father and the dog and the old mare he always rode, very few beasts ever broke away.

These strange cattle had been driven a good way, I could see—the cows and calves looked done up, and the steer's tongue was out—it was hottish weather—the old dog had been "heeling" him up too, for he was bleeding up to the hocks, and the end of his tail was bitten off. He was a savage old wretch was Crib. Like all dogs that never bark—and men too—his bite was all the worse.

"Go and get the brands—confound you—don't stand there frightening the cattle," says father, as the tired cattle after smelling and jostling a bit rushed into the yard. "You, Jim, make a fire, and look sharp about it. I want to brand old Polly's calf, and another or two." Father came down to the hut while the brands were getting ready, and began to look at the harness cask which stood in a little back skillion. It was pretty empty; we had been living on eggs, bacon, and bread and butter for a week.

"Oh, mother! there's such a pretty red calf in the yard," I said,

*'It's . . . calf] It's that very calf Ec**

“with a star and a white spot on the flank—and ^athere’s a yellow steer fat enough to kill!”

“What!” said mother, turning round and looking at father with her eyes staring—a sort of dark blue they were, people used to say mine and Jim’s were the same colour, and her brown hair pushed back off her face, as if she was looking at a ghost. “Is it doing ^bthat again you are, after all you promised me, and you so nearly ^ccaught caught—after the last one? Didn’t I go on my knees to ye to ask ye to drop it and lead a good life—and didn’t ye tell me ye’d never do the like again—and the poor innocent children, too: I wonder ye’ve the heart to do it.”

It came into my head now to wonder why the sergeant and two policemen had come down from Bargo, very early in the morning, about three months ago, and asked father to show them the beef in his cask, and the hide belonging to it. I wondered at the time the beast was killed why father made the hide into a rope, and before he did that had cut out the brand and dropped it into a hot fire. The police saw a hide with our brand on, all right—killed about a fortnight. They didn’t know it had been taken off a cancered bullock—and that father took the trouble to “stick” him and bleed him before he took the hide off, so as it shouldn’t look dark. Father, certainly, knew most things in the way of working on the cross. I can see now he’d have made his money a deal easier, and no trouble of mind if he’d only chosen to go straight.

When mother said this, father looked at her for a bit, as if he was sorry for it; then he straightened himself up and an ugly look came into his face, as he growled out, “You mind your own business—we must live as well as other people. There’s squatters here, that does as bad. They’re just like the squires at home; think a poor man hasn’t a right to live. You bring the brand and look alive, Dick—or I’ll sharpen ye up a bit.”

The brand was in the corner, but mother got between me and it and stretched out her hand to father as if to stop me and him.

“In God’s name,” she cried out, “arn’t ye satisfied with losing your own soul and bringing disgrace upon your family, but ye must be the ruin of your innocent children. Don’t touch the brand, Dick!”

^athere’s] there *E*₃

^bthat] that *Ec*⁺

^ccaught] *Om. Ec*⁺

But father wasn't a man to be crossed, and what made it worse he had a couple of glasses of bad grog in him. There was an old villain of a shanty-keeper that lived on a back creek. He'd been there, as he came by and had a glass or two. He had a regular savage temper, father had—though he was quiet enough and not bad to us when he was right. But the grog always spoiled him.

He gave poor mother a shove which sent her reeling against the wall, where she fell down and hit her head against the stool, and lay there,—Aileen sitting down in the corner, turned white, and began to cry, while father catches me a box on the ear which sends me kicking—picks up the brand out of the corner and walks out—with me after him.

I think if I'd been another year or so older I'd have struck back—I felt that savage about poor mother that I could have gone at him myself—but we had been too long used to do everything he told us—and somehow, even if a chap's father's a bad one, he don't seem like other men to him. So, as Jim had lighted the fire, we branded the little red heifer calf first—a fine fat six months' old nugget she was—and then three bull calves, *all strangers*, and then Polly's calf, I suppose just for a blind. Jim and I knew the four calves were all strangers—but we didn't know the brands of the mothers; they all seemed different.

After this all was made right to kill a beast. The gallows was ready rigged in a corner of the yard; father brought his gun and shot the yellow steer. The calves were put into our calf pen, Polly's and all—and all the cows turned out to go where they liked.

We helped father to skin and hang up the beast and pretty late it was when we finished. Mother had laid us out our tea and gone to bed with Aileen. We had ours and then went to bed. Father sat outside and smoked in the starlight. Hours after I woke up and heard mother crying. Before daylight we were up again, and the steer was cut up and salted and in the harness-cask soon after sunrise. His head and feet were all popped into a big pot where we used to make soup for the pigs, and by the time it had been boiling an hour or two there was no fear of any one swearing to the yellow steer by "head-mark."

^a*all strangers*] all strangers *Ec*⁺

We had a hearty breakfast off the “skirt,” but mother wouldn’t touch a bit, nor let Aileen take any—she took nothing but a bit of bread and a cup of tea, and sat there looking miserable and downcast. Father said nothing but sat very dark-looking, and ate his food as if nothing was the matter. After breakfast he took his mare, the old dog followed; there was no need to whistle for ^a*him*—it’s my belief he knew more than many a Christian—and away they went. Father didn’t come home for a week—he had got into the habit of staying away for days and days together. Then things went on the old way.

^a*him*] him *Ec*⁺

CHAPTER III.

So the years went on—slow enough they seemed to us sometimes—the green winters, pretty cold, I tell you, with frost and hailstorms, and the long hot summers. We were not called boys any longer, except by mother and Aileen, but took our places among the men of the district. We lived mostly at home, in the old way; sometimes working pretty hard, sometimes doing very little. When the cows were milked, and the wood chopped, there was nothing to do for the rest of the day. The creek was that close that mother used to go and dip the bucket into it herself when she wanted one, from a little wooden step above the ^acool reedy waterhole.

Now and then, we used to dig in the garden. There was reaping and corn-pulling and husking for part of the year; but often, for weeks at a time, there was next to nothing to do. No hunting worth much—we were sick of kangarooing, like the dogs themselves, that as they grew old, would run a little way, and then pull up; if a mob came, jump, jump, past them. No shooting, except a few ducks and pigeons. Father used to laugh at the shooting in this country, and say they'd never have poachers here—the game wasn't worth it. No fishing, except an odd codfish, in the deepest waterholes; and you might sit half a day without a bite.

Now this was very bad for us boys. Lads want plenty of work, and a little play now and then, to keep them straight. If there's none, ^b*they'll make it*; and you can't tell how far they'll go when they once start.

Well, Jim and I used to get our horses, and ride off quietly in the afternoon, as if we were going after cattle; but, in reality, as soon

^acool] clear *Et*⁺

^b*they'll make it*] they'll make it *Ec*⁺

as we were out of sight of mother, to ride over to that old villain, Grimes, the shanty-keeper, where we met the young Dalys, and others of the same sort—talked a good deal of nonsense and gossip. What was worse played at ^awas all-fours and euchre, which we had learned from an American harvest hand, at one of the large farms.

Besides playing for money, which put us rather into trouble sometimes, as we ^bcouldn't always find a ^chalf-a-crown if we lost it, we learned another bad habit, and that was to drink spirits. What burning nasty stuff I thought it at first; and so did we all! But every one wanted to be thought a man, and up to all kinds of wickedness, so we used to make ^da point of drinking our nobbler, and sometimes treating the others twice, if we had cash.

There was another family that lived a couple of miles off higher up the creek, and we had always been good friends with them, though they never came to our house, and only we boys went to theirs. They were the parents of the little girl that ^ecame to school with us, and a boy who was a year older than me.

Their father had been a gardener at home,¹ and he married a native girl who was born somewhere about the Hawkesbury, near Windsor. Her father had been a farmer, and many a time she told us how sorry she was to go away from the old place, and what fine corn and pumpkins they grew; and how they had a church at Windsor, and used to take their hay and fruit and potatoes to Sydney, and what a grand place Sydney was, with stone buildings called markets for people to sell fruit and vegetables and poultry in; and how you could walk down into Lower George-street and see Sydney Harbour, a great, shining salt water plain, a thousand times as big as the biggest waterhole, with ships and boats and sailors, and every kind of strange thing upon it.

Mrs. Storefield was pretty fond of talking, and she was always fond of me because once when she was out after the cows, and her man was away, and she had left Grace at home, the little thing crawled down to the waterhole and tumbled in. I happened to be riding up with a message for mother to borrow some soap when I heard a little cry like a lamb's, and there was poor little Gracey struggling in the water like a drowning kitten, with her face under.

^awas] *Om. Ec+* ^bcouldn't] couldn't *Ec+* ^chalf-a-crown] half-crown *Ec+*
^da] it a *Ec+* ^ecame] went *Ec+*

Another minute or two would have finished her, but I was off the old pony and into the water like a teal flapper. I had her out in a second or two, and she gasped and cried a bit, but soon came to, and when Mrs. Storefield came home she first cried over her as if she would break her heart and kissed her, and then she kissed me, and said, "Now, Dick Marston, you look here. Your mother's a good woman, though simple; your father I don't like, and I hear ^aa many stories about him that makes me think the less we ought to see of the lot of you the better. But you've saved my child's life to-day, and I'll be a friend and a mother to you as long as I live, even if you turn out bad, and I'm rather afraid you will—you and Jim both,—but it won't be my fault for want of trying to keep you straight; and John and ^bI 'll be your kind and loving friends as long as we live, no matter what happens."

After that—it was strange enough—but I always took to the little toddling thing that I'd pulled out of the water. I wasn't very big myself, if it comes to that, and she seemed to have a feeling about it, for she'd come to me every time I went there, and sit on my knee and look at me with her big brown serious eyes—they were just the same after she grew up—and talk to me in her little childish lingo. I believe she knew all about it, for she used to say, "Dick pull Gracey out of water"; and then she'd throw her arms round my neck and kiss me, and walk off to her mother. If I'd let her drown then, and tied a stone round my neck and dropped through the reeds to the bottom of the big waterhole, it would have been better for both of us.

When John came home he was nearly as bad as the old woman, and wanted to give me a filly, but I wouldn't have it, boy as I was. I never cared for money nor money's worth, and I was not going to be paid for picking a kid out of the water.

George Storefield, Gracey's brother, was about my own age. He thought a lot of what I'd done for her, and years afterwards I threatened to punch his head if he said anything more about it. He laughed, and held out his hand.

"You and I might have been better friends lately," says he; "but don't you forget you've got another brother besides Jim—one that will stick to you, too, fair weather or foul."

^aa] *Om. Er*+

^bI 'll] I'll *Ec I will Er*+

I always had a great belief in George, though we didn't get on over well, and often had fallings out. He was too steady and hardworking altogether for Jim and me. He worked all day and every day, and saved every penny he made. Catch him gaffing!—no, not for a sixpence. He called the Dalys and Jacksons thieves and swindlers, who would be locked up, or even hanged, some day, unless they mended themselves. As for drinking a glass of grog, you might just as soon ask him to take a little laudanum or arsenic.

“Why should I drink grog?” he used to say—“such stuff, too, as you get at that old villain Grimes’s—with a good appetite and a good conscience? I’m afraid of no man; the police may come and live on my ground for what I care. I work all day, have a read in the evening, and sleep like a top when I turn in. What do I want more?”

“Oh, but you never see any life,” Jim said; “you’re just like an old working bullock that walks up to the yoke in the morning and never stops hauling till he’s let go at night. This is a free country, and I don’t think a fellow was born for that kind of thing and nothing else.”

“This country’s like any other country, Jim,” George would say, holding up his head, and looking straight at him with his steady grey eyes; “a man must work and save when he’s young if he don’t want to be a beggar or a slave when he’s old. I believe in a man enjoying himself as well as you do, but my notion of that is to have a good farm, well stocked, and paid for, by and bye, and then to take it easy, perhaps when my back is a little stiffer than it is now.”

“But a man must have a little fun when he is young,” I said. “What’s the use of having money when you’re old and rusty, and can’t take pleasure in anything?”

“A man needn’t be ^a*so very* old at 40,” he says then, “and 20 years’ steady work will put all of us youngsters well up the ladder. Besides, I don’t call it fun, getting half drunk with a lot of blackguards at a low pothouse or a shanty, listening to the stupid talk and boasting lies of a pack of loafers and worse. They’re fit for nothing better; ^b*but you and Jim are*. Now, look here, I’ve got a small contract from Mr. Andrews for a lot of fencing stuff. It will pay us wages and something over. If you like to go in with me, we’ll go share and

^a*so very*] so very *Ec*⁺

^b*but . . . are*] but you and Jim are *Ec*⁺

share. I know what hands you both are at splitting and fencing. What do you say?"

Jim, poor Jim, was inclined to take George's offer. He was that goodhearted that a kind word would turn him ^aany time. But I was put out at his laying it down so about the Dalys, and us shantying and gaffing, and I do think now that some folks are born so as they can't do without a taste of some sort of fun once in a way. I can't put it out clear, but it ought to be fixed somehow for us chaps that haven't got the gift of working all day and every day, but can do two days' work in one when we like, that we should have our allowance of reasonable fun and pleasure—that is, what ^b*me* called pleasure, not what somebody thinks we ought to take pleasure in. Anyway, I turned on George rather rough, and I says, "We're not good enough for the likes of you, Mr. Storefield. It's very kind of you to think of us, but we'll take our own line and you take yours."

[No. 3]

"I'm sorry for it, Dick, and more sorry that you take huff at an old friend. All I want is to do you good, and act a friend's part. Good bye—some day you'll see it."

"You're hard on George," says Jim. "There's no pleasing you to-day; one would think there were lots of chaps fighting how to give us a lift. Good bye, George, old man; I'm sorry we can't wire in with you—we'd soon knock out those posts and rails on the ironbark range."

"You'd better stop, Jim, and take a hand in the deal," says I (or, rather, the devil, for I believe he gets inside a chap at times), "and then you and George can take a turn at local-preaching when you're cut out. I'm off." So without another word I jumped on to my horse and went off down the hill, across the creek, and over the boulders the other side, without much caring where I was going. The fact was, I felt I had acted meanly in sneering at a man who only said what he did for my good; and I was'nt at all sure that I hadn't made a breach between Gracey and myself, and, though I had such a temper when it was roused that all the world wouldn't have stopped me, every time I thought of not seeing that girl again made my heart ache as if it would burst.

I was nearly home before I heard the clatter of a horse's feet, and

^aany] at any *E*₃ ^b*me*] *we* *Ec*⁺

Jim rode up alongside of me. He was just the same as ever, with a smile on his face. You didn't often see it without one.

I knew he had come after me, and had given up his own fancy for mine.

"I thought you were going to stay and turn good," I said. "Why didn't you?"

"It might have been better for me if I had," he said, "but you know very well, Dick, that whatever turns up, whether it's for good or evil, you and I go together."

We looked at one another for a moment. Our eyes met. We didn't say anything; but we understood one another as well as if we had talked for a week. We rode up to the door of our cottage without speaking. The sun had set, and some of the stars had come out, early as it was, for it was late autumn. Aileen was sitting on a bench in the verandah reading, mother was working away as usual at something in the house. Mother couldn't read or write, but you never caught her sitting with her hands before her. Except when she was asleep, I don't think she ever was quite still.

Aileen ran out to us, and stood while we let go our horses, and brought the saddles and bridles under the verandah.

"I'm glad you're come home for one thing," she said. "There is a message from father. He wants you to meet him."

"Who brought it?" I said.

"One of the Dalys—Patsey, I think."

"All right," said Jim, kissing her as he lifted her up in his great, strong arms. "I must go in and have a gossip with the old woman. Aileen can tell me after tea. I daresay it's not so good that it won't keep."

Mother was that fond of both of us that I believe, as sure as I sit here, she'd have put her head on the block or died in any other way for either of her boys, not because it was her duty, but glad and cheerful like, to have saved us from death or disgrace. I think she was fonder of us two than she was of Aileen. Mothers are generally fonder of their sons. Why I never could see; and if she thought more of one than the other it was Jim. He was the youngest, and he had that kind of big, frolicsome, loving way with him—like a Newfoundland pup, about half grown. I always used to think, somehow, nobody ever seemed to be able to get into a pelter with

Jim, not even father, and that was a thing as some people couldn't be got to believe. As for mother and Aileen, they were as fond of him as if he'd been a big baby.

So while he went 'in to sit down on the stretcher, and let mother put her arms round his neck and hug him and cry over him, as she always did if he'd been away more than a day or two, I took a walk down the creek with Aileen in the starlight, to hear all about this message from father. Besides, I could see that she was very serious over it, and I thought there might be something in it more than common.

"First of all, did you make any agreement with George Storefield?" she said.

"No; why should I? Has he been talking to you about me? What right has he to meddle with my business?"

"Oh, Dick, don't talk like that. Anything that he said was only to do you a kindness and Jim."

"Hang him and his kindness too," I said. "Let him keep it for those that want it. But what did he tell you?"

"He said, first of all," answered poor Aileen, with the tears in her eyes, and trying to take hold of my hand, "that he had a contract for fencing timber, which he had taken at good prices, which he would share with you and Jim; that he knew you two and himself could finish it in a few weeks, and that he expected to get the contract for the timber for the new bridge at Dargo, which he would let you go shares in too. He didn't like to speak about that because it wasn't certain; but he had calculated all the quantities and prices, and he was sure you would make £70 or £80 each before Christmas. Now, was there any harm in that; and don't you think it was very good of him to think of it?"

"Well, he's not a bad fellow, old George," I said, "but he's a little too fond of interfering with other people's business. Jim and I are quite able to manage our own affairs, as I told him this evening, when I refused to have anything to do with his fencing arrangement."

"Oh, Dick, did you?" she said. "What a pity! I made sure Jim would have liked it so, for only last week he said he was sick and tired of having nothing to do—that he should soon lose all his knack

^ain] *Om. Ec*^a

at using tools that he used to be so proud of. Didn't he say he'd like to join George?"

"He would, I dare say, and I told him to do as he liked. I came away by myself, and only saw him just before we crossed the range. He's big enough ^aand old enough to take his own line."

"But you know he thinks so much of you," she groaned out, "that he'd follow you to destruction. That will be the end of it, depend upon it, Dick. I tell you so now; ^byou're taking to bad ^cways, and you'll have his blood on your head yet."

"Jim's old enough and big enough to take care of himself," I said, sulkily. "If he likes to come my way I won't hinder him; I won't try to persuade him one way or the other. Let him take his own line; I don't believe in preaching and old women's talk. Let a man act and think for himself."

"You'll break my heart and poor mother's too," said Aileen, suddenly taking both my hands in hers. "What has she done but love us ever since we were born, and what does she live for? You know she has no pleasure of any kind; you know she's afraid every morning she wakes that the police will get father for some of his cross doings, and now you and Jim are going the same wild way, and whatever—whatever—will be the end of it?"

Here she let go my hands and sobbed and cried, as if she was a child again, much as I remember her doing one day when my kangaroo dog killed her favourite cat. And Aileen was a girl that didn't cry much generally, and never about anything that happened to herself; it was always about somebody else and their misfortunes. She was a quiet girl, too, very determined, and not much given to talking about what she was going to do, but when she made up her mind she was sure to stick to it. I used to think she was more like father than any of us. She had his coloured hair and eyes, and his way of standing and looking, as if the whole world wouldn't shift him. But she'd mother's soft heart for all that, and I took the more notice of her crying and whimpering this time because it was so strange for her.

If any one could have seen straight into my heart just then I was regularly knocked over, and had two minds to go inside to Jim and

^aand old enough] *Om. TZ* ^byou're taking] you've taken *Ec*⁺ ^cways, and] ways; *Ec*⁺

tell him we'd take George's splitting job, and start to tackle it first thing to-morrow morning. But ^ajust then one of those confounded nighthawks flitted on ^bto a dead tree before us, and began ^cwith its dreary "hoo-ho," as if it was laughing at me. I can see the place now—the mountain, black and dismal, the moon low and strange looking, the little waterhole glittering in the half light, and this dark bird hooting away in the night. An odd feeling seemed to come over my mind, and if it had been the devil himself standing on the dead limb it could not have had a worse effect on me as I stopped there, uncertain whether to turn to the right or the left.

We don't often know in this world sometimes whether we are turning off along a road where we shall never come back from, or whether we can go just a little way and look at the far-off hills and new rivers, and come home safe.

I remember the whole lot of bad-meaning thoughts coming with a rush over my heart, and I laughed at myself for being so soft as to choose a hardworking, pokey kind of life at the word of a slow fellow like George when I might be riding about the country on a fine horse, eating and drinking of the best, and only doing what people said half the old settlers had made their money by.

Poor Aileen told me afterwards that if she'd thought for a moment I could be turned she'd have gone down on her knees and never got up till I promised to keep straight and begin to work at honest daily labour like a man—like a man who hoped to end his days in a good house, on a good farm, with a good wife and nice children round him, and not in a prison cell. Some people would call the first, after years of honest work, and being always able to look everyone in the face, being more of a man than the other. But people have different ways and different ideas.

"Come, Ailie," I said, "are you going to whine and cry all night? I shall be afraid to come home if you're going to be like this. What's the message from father?"

She wiped away her tears, and, putting her hand on my shoulder, looked steadily into my face.

"Poor boy—poor dear Dick," she said, "I feel as if I should see that fresh face of yours looking very different some day or other.

^ajust then] then just *Ec*

^bto] *Om. Ec*⁺

^cwith its dreary] his *Ec*⁺

Something tells me that there's bad luck before you. But, never mind, you'll never lose your sister, if the luck's ever so bad. Father sent word you and Jim were to meet him at Broken Creek, and ^ato bring your whips with you."

"What in the world's that for?" I said, half speaking to myself. "It looks as if there was a big mob to drive, and where's he to get a big mob there, in that mountainous, beastly place, where the cattle all bolt like wallabies, and where I never saw 20 head together."

"He's got some reason for it," said Aileen, sorrowfully. "If I were you I wouldn't go. It's no good, and father's trying now to drag you and Jim into the bad ways he's been following these years."

"How do you know it's so bad?" said I. "How can a girl like you know?"

"I know very well," she said: "do you think I've lived here all these years and don't know things. What makes him always come home after dark, and be that nervous every time he sees a stranger coming up. You'd think he was come out of gaol. Why has he always got money, and why does mother look so miserable when he's at home, and cheer up when he goes away?"

"He may get jobs of droving or something," I said. "You have no right to say that he's robbing, or something of that sort, because he doesn't care about tying himself to mother's apron string."

Aileen laughed, but it was more like crying.

"You told me just now," she said—oh, so sorrowfully—"that you and Jim were old enough to take a line of your own. Why don't you do it now?"

"And tell father we'll have nothing more to do with him!"

"Why not?" she said, standing up straight before me, and facing me just as I saw father face the big bullock-driver before he knocked him down. "Why not? You need never ask him for another meal—you can earn an easy living in half-a-dozen ways, you and Jim—why should you let him spoil your life and ruin your soul for evermore?"

"The priest put that into your head," ^bI said, sneeringly; "Father Doyle—of course he knows what they'll do with a fellow after he's dead."

^ato] *Om. Er*⁺

^bI] *Om. Ec*

“No!” she said; “Father Doyle never said a word about you that wasn’t good and kind. He says mother’s a good Catholic, and he takes an interest in you boys and me because of her.”

“He can persuade you women to do anything,” I said (not that I had any grudge against poor old Father Doyle, who used to come riding up the rough mountain track on his white horse—and tiring his old bones, just “to look after his flock,” as he said, and nice lambs some of them were), but I wanted to tease her and make her break off with this fancy of hers.

“He never does and couldn’t persuade me, except for my good,” said she, getting more and more roused, and her black eyes glowed again, “and I’ll tell you what I’ll do to prove it. It’s a sin—but if it is I’ll stand by it, and now I’ll swear it,—here she knelt down—as Almighty God shall help me at the last day, if you and Jim will promise me to start straight off up the country and take bushwork till shearing comes on, and never to have any truck with cross chaps and their ways, I’ll turn Protestant. I’ll go to church with you and keep to it till I die.”

Wasn’t she a trump? I’ve known women that would give up a lot for a man they were sweet on, and wives that would follow their husbands about like spaniels, and women that would lie and deceive and all but rob and murder for men they were fond of, and sometimes do nearly as much to spite other women. But I don’t think I ever knew a woman that would give up her religion for any one before, and it’s not as if she wasn’t ^astaunch to her own faith. She was as regular in her prayers and crossings and beads and all the rest of it as mother herself, and if there ever was a good girl in the whole world she was one. She turned faint as she said this, and I thought she was going to drop down. If anything could have turned me then it would have been this. It was almost like giving her life for ours. And I don’t think she’d have valued hers two straws if ^bit could have saved us. There’s a great deal said about different kinds of love in this world, but I can’t help thinking that the love between brothers and sisters that have been brought up together, and have had very few other people to care about is a higher better sort than any other in the world. There’s less selfishness about it—no thought

^astaunch] stanch *Ec* ^bit] she *Et*+

but for the other's good. If that can be made safe, death and pain and poverty and misery are all little things. And was'nt I fond of Aileen, in spite of all my hardness and cross-grained obstinacy?—so fond that I was just going to hug her to me, and say, "Take it all your own way, Ailie dear," when Jim came tearing out of the hut, bareheaded, and stood listening to a far-off sound that caught all our ears at once. We made out the source of it too well—far too well.

What was the noise at that hour of the night?

It was a hollow, faint, distant roaring that gradually kept getting louder. It was the strange, mournful bellowing that comes from a drove of cattle forced along an unknown track. As we listened the sound came clearly on the night wind, faint, yet still clearly coming nearer.

"Cattle being driven," Jim cried out; "and a big mob too. It's father—for a note. Let's get our horses and meet him."

CHAPTER IV.

“ALL right,” said I, “he must have got there a day before his time. It is a big mob and no mistake. I wonder where they’re taking them to.” Aileen shrugged her shoulders and walked in to mother with a look of misery and despair on her face, such as I never saw there before.

[No. 4]

She knew it was no use talking to me now. The idea of going out to meet a large lot of unknown cattle had strongly excited us, as would have been the case with every bush-bred lad. All sorts of wonders passed through our minds as we walked down the creek bank, with our bridles in our hands, towards where our horses usually fed. One was easy to catch, the other with a little management was secured. In 10 minutes we were riding fast through the dark trees and fallen timber towards the wild gullies and ^arock-strewn hills of Broken Creek.

It was not more than an hour when we got up to the cattle. We could hear them a good while before we saw them. “My word,” said Jim, “aint they restless. They can’t have come far, or they wouldn’t roar so. Where can the old man have ‘touched’ for them.”

“How should I know?” I said, roughly. I had a kind of idea, but I thought he would never be so rash.

When we got up I could see the cattle had been rounded up in a flat with stony ridges all round. There must have been three or four hundred of them, only a man and a boy riding round and wheeling them every now and then. Their horses were pretty well knocked up. I knew father at once and the old chestnut mare he used to ride—an animal with legs like ^bgateposts and a mule rump; but you couldn’t

^arock-strewn] rock-strewned *Ec*⁺

^bgateposts] timbers *Et*⁺

tire her, and no beast that ever was calved could get away from her. The boy was a half-caste that father had picked up somewhere; he was as good as two men any day.

“So, you’ve come at last,” growled father, “and a good thing, too. I didn’t expect to be here till to-morrow morning. The dog came home, I suppose—that’s what brought you here—wasn’t it? I thought the infernal cattle would beat Warrigal¹ and me, and we’d have all our ^awork for nothing.”

“Whose cattle are they, and what are you going to do with them?”

“Never you mind; ask no questions and you’ll see all about it to-morrow. I’ll go and take a snooze now; I’ve had no sleep for three nights.”

With our fresh horses and riding round so we kept the cattle easily enough; we did not tell Warrigal he might go to rest, not thinking a half-caste brat like him wanted any. He didn’t say anything, but went to sleep on his horse which walked in and out among the angry cattle as he sat on the saddle with his head down on the horse’s neck. They sniffed at him once or twice, some of the old cows, but none of them horned him; and daylight came rather quicker than one would think.

Then we saw whose cattle they were; they had all Hunter’s and Falkland’s brands on, which showed that they belonged to Banda and Elingamah stations.

“By George!” says Jim, “they’re Mr. Hunter’s cattle, and all these circle dots belong to Banda; what a mob of calves; not one of them branded; what in the world does father intend to do with them?”

Father was up and came over where we stood with our horses in our hands before we had time to say more. He wasn’t one of those that slept after daylight, whether he had work to do or not. He certainly ^bcould work daylight or dark, wet or dry, cold or hot, it was all one to father. It seems a pity what he did was no use to him, as it turned out; for he was a man—was old dad, every inch of him.

“Now boys,” he said, quite brisk and almost good-natured for him, “look alive and we’ll start the cattle; we’ve been long enough here; let ’em head up that gully, and I’ll show you something you’ve never

^awork] trouble *Ec*⁺

^bcould work] *could* ~; *Er*⁺

seen before for as long as you've known Broken Creek Ranges."

"But where are you going to take 'em to?" I said. "They're all Mr. Hunter's and Mr. Falkland's; the brands are plain enough."

"Are the calves branded? you blasted fool," he said, while the black look came over his face that had so often frightened me when I was a child. "You do what I tell you if you've any pluck and gumption about you; or else you and your brother can ride over to Dargo Police-station and 'give me away' if you like; only don't come home again, I warn you, sons or no sons."

If I had done what I had two minds to do—for I wasn't afraid of him then, savage as he looked, told him to do his own duffing and ridden away with Jim there and then—poor Jim who sat on his horse staring at both of us, and saying nothing, how much better it would have been for all of us, the old man as well as ourselves; but it seemed as if it wasn't to be. Partly from use, and partly from a love of danger and something new, which is at the bottom of half the crime in the bush districts, I turned my horse's head after the cattle, which were now beginning to ^astraggle. Jim did the same on his side. How easy ^bis it for chaps to take the road to hell! for that was about the size of it, and we were soon too busy to think about much else.

The track we were driving on led along a narrow rocky gully which looked as if it had been split up or made out of a crack in the earth thousands of years ago by an earthquake or something of that kind. The hills were that steep that every now and then some of the young cattle that were not used to that sort of country would come sliding down and bellow as if they thought they were going to break their necks.

The water rushed down it like a torrent in wet winters, and formed a sort of creek, and the bed of it made what track there was. There were overhanging rocks and places that made you giddy to look at, and some of these must have fallen down and blocked up the creek at one time or ^canother. We had to scramble round them the best way we could.

When we got nearly up to the head of the gully, and great work it was to force the footsore cattle along, as we couldn't use our whips

^astraggle] struggle *Ec-TZ*

^bis it] it is *E₃**

^canother] other *Ec⁺*

over much, Jim called out “Why here comes old Crib. Who’d have thought he’d have seen the track. Well done, old man. Now we’re right.”

Father never took any notice of the poor brute as he came limping along the stones—woman or child, horse or dog, it’s the same old thing. The more any creature loves a man in this world the worse they’re treated. It looks like it, at any rate. I saw how it was, father had given Crib a cruel beating the night before, when he was put out for some trifling matter, and the dog had left him and run home. But now he had thought better of it, and seen our tracks and come to work and slave with his bleeding feet—for they were cut all to pieces—and got the whip across his back now and then for his pains. It’s a queer world!

When we got right to the top of this confounded gully, nearly dead-beat all of us, and only for the dog heeling them up every now and then, and making his teeth nearly meet in them, without a whimper, I believe the cattle would have charged back and beat us. There was a sort of rough tableland, scrubby and stony and thick it was, but still the grass wasn’t bad in summer, when the country below was all dried up. There were wild horses in troops there, and a few wild cattle, so Jim and I knew the place well; but it was too far and too much of a journey for our own horses to go often.

“Do you see that sugar-loaf hill, with the bald top across the range?” said father, riding up just then, as we were taking it easy a little. “Don’t let the cattle straggle and make straight for that.”

“Why it’s miles away,” said Jim, looking rather dismal. “We could never get ’em there.”

“We’re not going there, stupid,” says father; “that’s only the line to keep. I’ll show you something about dinner-time that ’ll open your eyes a bit.”

Poor Jim brightened up at the mention of dinner-time, for, boy-like, he was getting very hungry, and as he wasn’t done growing he had no end of an appetite. I was hungry enough for the matter of that, but I wouldn’t own to it.

“Well, we shall come to somewhere, I suppose,” says Jim, when father was gone. “Blest if I didn’t think he was going to keep us wandering in this blessed Nulla Mountain all day. I wish I’d never seen the blessed cattle. I was only waiting for you to hook it when we

first seen the brands by daylight, and I'd ^abeen off like a brindle 'Mickey' down a range."

"Better for us if we had," I said; "but it's too late now. We must stick to it, I suppose."

We had kept the cattle going for three or four miles through the thickest of the country, every now and then steering our course by the clear round top of Sugarloaf that could be seen for miles round, but never seemed to get any nearer, when we came on ^bto a rough 'sort of log-fence, which ran the way we were going.

"I didn't think there were any farms up here," I said to Jim.

"It's a 'break,'" he said almost in a whisper. "There's a 'duffing-yard' somewhere handy. That's ^dwhat's the matter."

"Keep the cattle along it, any way. We'll soon see what it leads to."

The cattle ran along the fence, as if they expected to get to the end of their troubles soon. The scrub was terribly thick in places, and every now and then there was a break in the fence, when one of us had to go outside and hunt them until we came to the next bit. At last we came to a little open kind of flat, with the scrub that thick round it as you couldn't hardly ride through it, and just as Jim said there was the yard.

It was a "duffing" yard sure enough. No one but people who had cattle to hide and young stock they did'nt want other people to see branded would have made a place there.

Just on the south side of the yard, which was built of great heavy stringybark trees cut down in the line of the fence and made up with limbs and logs, the range went up as steep as the side of a house. The cattle were that tired and footsore, half their feet were bleeding, poor devils, that they ran in through the sliprails and began to ^elay down.

"Light a fire, one of you boys," says father, putting up the heavy sliprails and fastening them. "We must brand these calves before dark. One of you can go to that gonyah, just under the range where that big white rock is, and you'll find tea and sugar and something to eat."

Jim rushed off at once, while I sulkily began to put some bark and twigs together and build a fire.

^aa] ha' Ec⁺ ^bto] Om. Ec⁺ ^csort] so Ec ^dwhat's] what Ec ^elay] lie E₃

“What’s the use of all this cross work?” I said to father. “We’re bound to be caught some day if we keep on at it. Then there’ll be no one left to take care of mother and Aileen.”

He looked rather struck at this, and then said quietly—

“You and your brother can go back now. Never say I kept you against your will. You may as well lend a hand to brand these calves, then you may clear out as soon as you like.”

Well, I didn’t quite like leaving the old chap in the middle of the work like that. I remember thinking, like many another young fool, I suppose, that I could draw back in time, just after I’d tackled this job.

Draw back, indeed. When does a man ever get the chance of doing that, once he’s regularly gone in for any of the devil’s work and wages? He takes care there isn’t much drawing back afterwards.

So I said, “We may as well give you a hand with this lot; but we’ll go home then, and drop all this duffing work. It don’t pay. I’m old enough to know that, and you’ll find it out yet, I expect, father, yourself.”

“The fox ^aruns long, and gives the hounds many a long chase before he’s run into,” he said, with a grim chuckle. “I swore I’d be revenged on ’em all when they locked me up and sent me out here for a paltry hare; broke my old mother’s heart, so it did. I’ve had a pound for every hair in her skin, and I shall go on till I die. After all, if a man goes to work cautious and runs mute, it’s not so easy to catch him in this country, at any rate.”

Jim at this came running out of the cave with a face of joy, a bag of ship biscuit, and a lot of other things. “Here’s tea and sugar,” he said; “and there’s biscuits and jam and a big lump of cheese. Get the fire right, Dick, while I get some water. We’ll soon have some tea, and these biscuits are jolly.”

The tea was made, and we all had a good meal. Father found a bottle of rum too; he took a good drink himself, and gave Jim and me a sip each. I felt less inclined to quarrel with father after that. So we drafted all the calves into a small pen-yard, and began to put our brand on them as quick as we could catch ’em.

A hundred and sixty of ’em altogether—all ages, from a month

^aruns] lives *Et*+

old to nearly a year. Fine strong calves, and in rare condition too. We could see they were all belonging to Mr. Hunter and Mr. Falkland. How they came to leave them all so long unbranded, I can't say. Very careless they often are on these large cattle stations, so that sharp people like father and the Dalys, and a lot more, get an easy chance at them.

Whatever father was going to do with them all when he ^a*had* branded 'em, we couldn't make out.

"There's no place to tail or wean 'em," whispered Jim. "We're not above thirty miles from Banda in a straight line. These cows are dead sure to make straight back the very minute they're let out, and very nice work it'll look with all these calves with our brand on sucking these cows."

Father happened to come round for a hot brand just as Jim finished.

"Never you mind about the weaning," he snarled. "I shan't ask you to tail them either. It wouldn't be a nice job here, would it?" And father actually laughed. It wasn't a very gay kind ^bof laugh, and he shut up his mouth with a sort of snap again. Jim and I hadn't seen him laugh for I don't know how long, and it almost frightened us.

As Jim said, it wouldn't do to let the cattle out again. If calves are ^c*weaned*, and have only one brand on, it is very hard for any man to swear that they are not the property of the man to whom that brand belongs. He may believe them to be his, but may never have seen them in his life; and if he ^d*has* seen them on a camp or on the run, it's very hard to swear to any one particular red or spotted calf, as you would to a horse.

The great dart is to keep the young stock away from their mothers until they forget one another, and then most of the danger is ^epassed. But if calves with one man's brand on are seen ^f*sucking* another man's cows, it is pretty plain that the brand on the calves has been put on without the consent of the owner of the cows.

Which is cattle-stealing. A felony, according to the Act 7 and 8, George ^g4th, No. 29,² punishable with three years' imprisonment, with hard labour, on the roads of the colony or other place, as the Judge may direct.

^a*had*] had *Ec*⁺ ^bof] of a *Ec*⁺ ^c*weaned*] weaned *Ec*⁺ ^d*has*] has *Ec*⁺
^epassed] past *Ez*⁺ ^f*sucking*] sucking *Ec*⁺ ^g4th] IV. *Ec-TZ E3 IV E2*

There's a lot of law! How did I learn it? I had plenty of time in Berrima gaol—worse luck—my first stretch. But it was ^a*after* I'd done the foolishness, and not before.

^a*after*] after *Ec*⁺

CHAPTER V.

“**N**ow then, you boys!” says father, coming ^aup all of a sudden like, and bringing out his words as if it was old times with us, when we didn’t know whether he’d hit first and talk afterwards, or the other way on. “Get out the lot we’ve just branded, and drive ’em straight for that peak, where the water shines dripping over the stones, right ^bagin the sun, and look slippy; we’re burning daylight, and these cows are making row enough, blast ’em, to be heard all the way to Banda. I’ll go on and steady the lead; you keep ’em close up to me.”

Father mounted the old mare. The dog stopped behind; he knew he’d have to mind the tail—that is the ^chindmost cattle—and stop ’em from breaking or running clear away from the others. We threw down the rails. Away the cattle rushed out, all in a long string. You’d ’a thought no mortal ^dmen could ’a kept ’em in that blind hole of a place. But father headed ’em, and turned ’em towards the peak. The dog worried those that wanted to stay by the yard or turn another way. We dropped our whip on ’em, and kept ’em going. In five minutes they were all a moving along in one mob at a pretty sharpish trot, like a lot of store cattle. Father knew his way about, whether the country was thick or open. It was all as one to him. What a slashing stockman he would have made in new country, if he only could have kept straight.

It took us an hour’s hard dinkum to get near the ^ePeak. Sometimes it was awful rocky, as well as scrubby, and the poor devils of cattle got as sore-footed as babies—blood up to the knee, some of ’em;

^aup] up of *Ec* ^bagin] again *Ec*⁺ ^chindmost] hindermost *E*₃ ^dmen] man
*E*₃ ^ePeak] peak *Ec*⁺

but we crowded 'em on; ^athere was no help for it.

At last we rounded up on a flat, rocky, open kind of a place; and here father held up his hand.

"Let 'em ring a bit; some of their tongues are out. These young things is generally soft. Come here, Dick." I rode up, and he told me to follow him.

We walked our horses up to the edge of the mountain, and looked over. It was like the end of the world. Far down there was a dark dreadful drop into a sort of deep valley below. You couldn't see the bottom of it. The trees on the mountain side looked like bushes, and they were big ironbarks, and messmates too. On three sides of us was this awful, desolate-looking precipice,—a dreary, gloomy, God-forsaken kind of spot. The sky got cloudy, and the breeze turned cold and began to murmur and whistle in an odd, unnatural kind of way, while father, seeing how scared and puzzled I was, began to laugh. I shuddered. A thought crossed my mind that it might be the Enemy of Souls, in his shape, going to carry us off for doing such a piece of wickedness.

"Looks queer, doesn't it?" says father, going to the brink and kicking down a boulder, that rolled and crashed down the steep mountain side, tearing its way through scrub and heath till it settled down in the glen below. "It won't do for a man's horse to slip, will it, boy? And yet there's a track here into a fine large paddock, open and clear too, where I'm going to put these cattle into."

I stared at him, without speaking, thinking was he mad.

"No. The old man isn't mad, youngster," he said; "not yet, at least. I'm going to show you a trick that none of you native boys are up to, smart as you think yourselves." Here he got off the old mare, and began to lead her to the edge of the mountain.

"Now you rally the cattle well after me," he said; "they'll follow the old mare after a bit. I left a few cows among 'em on purpose, and when they 'draw' keep 'em going well up, but not too fast."

He had lengthened the bridle of the mare, and tied the end of a light tether rope that he had round her neck to it. I saw her follow him slowly, and turn down a rocky track that seemed to lead straight over a bluff of the precipice.

^athere] and there *E*₃

However, I gave the word to “head on.” The dog had started rounding ’em up as soon as he saw the old mare walk towards the mountain side, and the cattle were soon crushed up pretty close to the mare’s heels.

Mind this, that they were so footsore and tender about the hoofs that they could not have run away from us on foot, if they had tried.

After “ringing” a bit, one of the quiet cows followed up the old mare that was walking step by step forward, and all the rest followed ^aHER like sheep. Cattle will do that. ^bI’ve seen a stockrider, when all the horses were dead beat, trying to get fat cattle to take a river in flood, jump off, and turn his horse loose into the stream. If he went straight, and swam across, all the cattle would follow him like sheep.

Well, when the old mare got to the bluff, she turned short round ^cto the right, and then I saw that she had struck a narrow path down a gully that got deeper and deeper every yard we went. There was just room for a couple or three calves to go abreast, and by-and-by all of ’em ^dwere walking down it like as if they was the beasts ^ea going into Noah’s Ark. It wound and wound and got deeper and deeper, till the walls of rock were ever so far above our heads. Our work was done then; the cattle had to walk on like sheep in a race. We led our horses behind them, and the dog walked along, saving his sore feet as well as he could, and never tried to bite a beast once he got ^fwell within the walls. He looked quite satisfied, and kept chuckling almost to himself. I ^grally¹ believe I’ve seen dogs laugh. Once upon a time I’ve read of, they’d have taken poor Crib for a familiar spirit, and hanged or burnt him. Well, he knew a lot, and no mistake. I’ve seen plenty of Christians as he could buy and sell, and no trouble to him. I’m dashed if the old mare, too, didn’t take a pleasure in working cattle on the cross. She was the laziest old wretch bringing up the cows at home or running in the horses. Many a time Jim and I took a turn out of her when father didn’t know. But put her after a big mob of cattle (she must have known they couldn’t be ours), and she’d clatter down a range like the wall of a house, and bite and kick the tail cattle if they didn’t get out of her way. They say dogs and

^aHER] her *Ec*⁺ ^bI’ve] I have *E3* ^cto] *Om. TZ* ^dwere] was *Ec*⁺ ^ea going]
^fwell] *Om. Ec*⁺ ^grally] really *Ec*⁺

horses are all honest, and it's only us as teaches 'em to do wrong. My notion's they're a deal like ourselves, and some of 'em fancies the square racket dull and safe, while some takes a deal kindlier to the other. Anyhow no cattle-duffer in the colonies could have had a better pair of mates than old Sally and Crib, if the devil himself had broken 'em in special for the trade.

It was child's play now, as far as the driving went. Jim and I walked along, leading our horses and yarning away as we used to do when we were little chaps bringing in the milkers.

"My word, Dick, dad's dropped into a fine road through this thundering mountain, hasn't he? I wonder where it leads to. How high the rock-walls are getting above us," he says. "I know now. I think I heard long ago from one of the Crosbies of a place in the ranges down towards behind the Nulla Mountain, 'Terrible Hollow.' He didn't know about it himself, but said an old stockman told him about it when he was drunk. He said the Government men used to hide the cattle and horses there in old times, and that it was not found out."

"Why wasn't it found out, 'Dick? If the old fellow 'split' about it, some one else would get to know."

"Well, old Dan said that they killed one man that talked of telling; the rest were too frightened after that, and they all swore a big oath never to tell any one except he was on the cross."

"That's how dad ^bcame to know, I suppose," said Jim. "I wish he never had. I don't care about 'these 'cross' doings. I never did. I never seen any good come out of them yet."

"Well, we must go through with it now, I suppose. It won't do to leave old dad in the lurch. You won't, will you, Jim?"

"You know very well I won't," says Jim, very soberlike. "I don't like it any the more for that. But I wish father had broke his leg, and was lying up at home, with mother nursing him, before he found out this hell-hole of a place."

"Well, we're going to get out of it, and soon, too. The gully seems getting wider, and I can see a bit of open country through the trees."

"Thank God for that," says Jim. "My boots 'll part company

^aDick] Jim *Er*⁺

^bcame] come *Ec*⁺

^cthese 'cross'] those cross *Ec*⁺

soon, and the poor devils of calves won't have any hoofs either, if there's much more of this."

"They're drawing faster now. The leading cattle are beginning to run. We're at the end of the drive."

So it was. The deep, rocky gully gradually widened into an open and pretty smooth flat; this, again, into a splendid little plain, up to the knees in grass: a big natural park, closed round on every side with sandstone rockwalls, as upright as if they were built, and a couple of thousand feet above the place where we stood.

This scrub country was crossed by two good creeks; it was several miles across, and a trifle more in length. Our hungry weaners spread out and began to feed, without a notion of their mothers they'd left behind; but they were not the only ones there. We could see other mobs of cattle, some near, some further off; horses, too; and the well-worn track in several ways showed that this was no new grazing ground.

[No. 5]

Father came riding back quite comfortable and hearty-like for him.

"Welcome to Terrible Hollow, lads," says he. "You're the youngest chaps it has ever been shown to, and if I didn't know you were the right stuff, you'd never have seen it, though you're my own flesh and blood. Jump off, and let your horses go. They can't get away, even if they tried; they don't look much like that."

Our poor nags were something like the cattle, pretty hungry and stiff. They put their heads down to the thick green grass, and went in at it with a will.

"Bring your saddles along with you," father said, "and come after me. I'll show you a good camping place. You deserve a treat after last night's work."

We turned back towards the rocky wall, near to where we had come in, and there, behind a bush and a big piece of sandstone that had fallen down, was the entrance to a cave. The walls of it were quite clean and white-looking, the floor was smooth, and the roof was pretty high, well blackened with smoke, too, from the fires which had been lighted in it for many a year gone by.

A kind of natural cellar had been made by scooping out the soft sandstone behind a ledge. From this father took a bag of "flour and

"flour] floor *Ec*

corn meal. We very soon made some cakes in the pan, that tasted well, I can tell you. Tea and sugar, too, and quart pots, some bacon in a flour-bag; and that rasher fried in the pan was the sweetest meat I ever ate in all my born days.

Then father brought out a keg and poured some rum into a pint pot. He took a pretty stiff pull, and then handed it to us. "A little of it won't hurt you, boys," he said, "after a night's work."

I took some—not much; we hadn't learned to drink then—to keep down the fear of something hanging over us. A dreadful fear it is. It makes a coward of every man who doesn't lead a square life, let him be as game as he may.

Jim wouldn't touch it. "No," he said, when I laughed at him, "I promised mother last time I had more than was good for me at Dargo Races that I wouldn't touch it again for two years; and I won't either. I can stand what any other man can, and without the hard stuff either."

"Please yourself," said father. "When you're ready we'll have a ride through the stock."

We finished our meal, and a first-rate one it was. A man never has the same appetite for his meals anywhere else that he has in the bush, specially if he has been up half the night. It's so fresh, and the air makes him feel as if he'd ate nothing for a week. Sitting on a log, or in the cave, as we were, I've had the best meal I've ever tasted since I was born. Not like the close-feeling, close-smelling, dirty-clean graveyard they call a gaol. But it's no use beginning on ^aTHAT. We were young men, and free too. ^bFREE. By all the devils in hell, if there are devils,—and there ^cmust be to tempt a man, or how could he be so great a fool, so blind a born idiot, as to do anything in this world that would put his ^dfreedom in jeopardy! And what for? For folly and nonsense. For a few pounds he could earn with a month's honest work and be all the better man for it. For a false woman's smile that he could buy, and ten like her, if he only kept straight and saving. For a bit of sudden pride or vanity or passion. A short bit of what looks like pleasure. Against months and years of weariness, and cold and heat, and dull half-death, with maybe a dog's death at the end!

^aTHAT] that *Ec*⁺ ^bFREE.] Free. *Ec* Free! *Et*⁺ ^cmust] must *Ec*⁺ ^dfreedom]

I could cry like a child when I think of it now. I ^ahave cried many's the time and often since ^bI've been shut up here, and dashed my head against the stones till I pretty nigh knocked all sense and feeling out of it, not so much in repentance, though I don't say I ^cdon't feel sorry, but to think what a fool, fool, fool I'd been. Yes, fool, three times over—a hundred times—to put my liberty and life against such a miserable stake,—a stake the devil that deals the pack is so safe to win at the end.

I may as well go on. But I can't help breaking out sometimes when I hear the birds calling to one another as they fly over the yard, and know it's fresh air and sun and green grass outside that I ^dshall never see again. Never see the river rippling under the big drooping trees, or the cattle coming down in the twilight to drink after the long hot day. Never, never more! And whose fault is it? Who have I to blame? Perhaps father helped a bit; but I knew better, and no one ^ehalf as much to blame as myself.

Where were we? Oh, at the cave-mouth, coming out with our bridles in our hands to catch our horses. We soon did that, and then we rode away to the other cattle. They were a queer lot, in fine condition, but all sorts of ages and breeds, with every kind of brand and ear-mark.

Lots of the brands we didn't know and had never heard of. Some had no brands at all—full-grown beasts, too; that was a thing we had ^fvery seldom seen. Some of the best cattle and some of the finest horses—and there were some real plums among the horses—had a strange brand, JJ.

“Who does the JJ brand belong to,” I said to Father. “They're the pick of the lot, ^gwho'sever they are.”

Father looked black for a bit, and then he growled out, “Don't you ask too many questions, lad. There's only four living men besides yourselves knows about this place; so take care and don't act foolishly, or you'll lose a plant that may save your life, as well as keep you in cash for many a year to come. That brand belongs to Starlight, and he was the only man left alive of the men that first found it and used it to put away stock in. He wanted help, and told

^ahave] have *Ec*⁺ ^bI've] I have *Ez*⁺ ^cdon't] *Om. Ec*⁺ ^dshall never] never shall *Ec*⁺ ^ehalf] is half *EI*⁺ ^fvery] very *Ec*⁺ ^gwho'sever] whosoever *Ec* whose ever *EI*⁺

me five years ago. He took in a half-caste chap, too, against my will. He helped him with that last lot of cattle that you noticed.”

“But where did those horses come from?” Jim said. “I never hardly saw such a lot before. All got the JJ brand on, too, and nothing else; all about three-year-old.”

“They were brought here as foals,” says father, “following their mothers. Some of them was foaled here; and of course, as they’ve only the one brand on, they never can be claimed or sworn to. They’re from some of Mr. Maxwell’s best thoroughbred mares, and their sire was Earl of Atheling,² imported. He was here for a year.”

“Well they ^a*might* look the real thing!” said Jim, his eyes brightening as he gazed at them. “I’d like to have that dark bay colt with the star. My word, what a fore-hand he’s got; and what quarters, too. If he can’t gallop I’ll never say I know a horse from a poley cow.”

“You shall have him, or as good, never fear, if you stick to your work,” says Father. “You mustn’t cross Starlight, for he’s a born devil when he’s taken the wrong way. Though he talks so soft, the half-caste is an out-and-out chap with cattle, and the horse doesn’t stand on four legs that he can’t ride and make follow him for the matter of that. But, he’s worth watching. I don’t believe in him myself. And now ye have the lot.”

“And a d——d fine lot they are,” I said, for I was vexed with Jim for taking so easy to the bait Father held out to him about the horse. “A very smart crowd to be on the roads, inside of five years, and drag us in with ’em!”

“How do ^byou make that out,” says Father. “Are you going to turn dog now you know the way in. Isn’t it as easy to carry on for a few years more as it was twenty years ago?”

“Not by a long chalk,” I said, for my blood was up and I felt as if I could talk back to Father, and give him as good as he sent, and all for Jim’s sake. Poor Jim. He’d always go to the mischief for the sake of a good horse, and many another ^c“currency” chap has gone the same way. It’s a pity for some of ’em that a blood horse was ever foaled.

^a*might*] might *Ec*⁺

^byou] *Om. Ec*

^ccurrency] Currency *Ec*⁺

“You think you can’t be tracked,” says I, “but you must bear in mind you hav’nt got to do with the old-fashioned mounted police as was potterin’ about when this ‘bot’ was first hit on. There’s chaps the police [are] getting now,³ natives or all the same, as can ride and track every bit as well as the half-caste ‘you’re talking about. Some day they’ll drop on the track of a mob coming in or getting out, and then the game will be all up.”

“You can cut it if you like now,” said Father, looking at me curious like. “Don’t say I dragged you in. You and your brother can go home, and no one will ever know where you were; no more than if you’d gone to the moon.”

Jim looked at the brown colt that just came trotting up, as dad finished speaking; trotting up with his head high and his tail stuck out like a circus horse. If he’d been the devil in a horse-hide, he could’nt have chosen a better moment. Then his eyes began to glitter.

We all three looked at each other. No one spoke. The colt stopped, turned and galloped back to his mates, like a red flyer with the dogs close behind him.

It was not long. We all began to speak at once. But in that time the die was cast, the stakes were down, and in the pool were three men’s lives.

“I don’t care whether we go back or not,” says Jim. “I’ll do either way that Dick likes. But that colt I must have.”

“I never intended to go back,” I said. “But we’re three d——d fools all the same—father and sons. It ’ll be the dearest horse you ever bought, Jim, old man, and so I tell you.”

“Well, I suppose it’s settled now,” says Father; “so let’s have no more chat. We’re like a pack of old women; blessed if we ain’t.”

After that we got on more sociably. Father took us all over the place, and a splendid paddock it was. Walled all round but where we had come in, and a narrow gash in the far side, that not one man in a thousand could ever hit on, except he was put up to it. A wild country for miles when you did get out—all scrub and rock, that few people ever had call to ride over. There was splendid grass everywhere; water and shelter. It was warmer, too, than the country

³you’re] your, *Ec*

above, as you could see by the coats of the cattle and horses. “If it had only been honestly come by,” Jim said, “what a jolly place it would have been.” Towards the north-end of the paddock was a narrow gully with great sandstone walls all round, and where it narrowed the first discoverers had built a stockyard, partly with dry stone walls and partly with logs and rails.

There was no trouble in getting the cattle or horses into this, and there were all kinds of narrow yards and pens for branding the stock if they were clear-skins, and altering or “faking” the brands if they were plain. This led into another yard, which opened into the narrowest part of the gully. Once in this, like the one they came down, and the cattle or horses had no chance but to walk slowly up one behind the other till they ^agot on the tableland above. Here, of course, every kind of work that can be done to help to disguise cattle was done. Earmarks were cut out and altered in shape; or else the whole ear was cropped off. Every letter in the alphabet was altered by means of straight bars, or half circles, figures, crosses, everything you could think of.

“Mr. Starlight is an edicated man.” said Father. “This is all his notion; and many a man has looked at his own beast with the ears altered and the brand faked, and never dreamed he ever owned it. He’s a great card is Starlight. It’s a pity he ever took to this kind of life.”

Father said this with a kind of real sorrow that made me look at him, to see if the grog had got into his head, just as if his life, mine, and Jim’s didn’t matter a straw, compared to this man’s, whoever he was, that had had so many better chances than we had, and had ^bchucked ’em all away.

But it’s a strange thing, that I don’t think there’s any place in the world where men feel a more real out and out respect for a gentleman than in Australia. Everybody’s supposed to be free and equal now; of course they couldn’t be in the convict days. But somehow a man that’s born and bred a gentleman will always be different from other men to the end of the world. What’s the most surprising part of it, is that men like father, who have hated the breed and ^chave suffered by them too, can’t help having a curious liking and admiration for

^agot] get *Ec*

^bchucked] chuck’d *E3*

^chave] *Om. Ec**

them. They'll follow them like dogs, fight for them, shed their blood and die for them. Must be some sort of a natural feeling. Whatever it is, it's there safe enough, and nothing can knock it out of ninety-ninths of all the men and women you meet. I began to be uneasy to see this wonderful mate of father's, who was so many things at once—a cattle stealer, a bushranger, and a gentleman!