CLASSICS TO GO

ROBBERY UNDER ARMS

ROLF BOLDREWOOD

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Rolf Boldrewood

Preface to New Edition

I dedicate this 'ower true tale' of the wilder aspects of Australian life to my old comrade R. Murray Smith, late Agent-General in London for the colony of Victoria, with hearty thanks for the time and trouble he has devoted to its publication. I trust it will do no discredit to the rising reputation of Australian romance. But though presented in the guise of fiction, this chronicle of the Marston family must not be set down by the reader as wholly fanciful or exaggerated. Much of the narrative is literally true, as can be verified by official records. A lifelong residence in Australia may be accepted as a guarantee for fidelity as to local colour and descriptive detail. I take this opportunity of acknowledging the prompt and liberal recognition of the tale by the proprietors of the 'Sydney Mail', but for which it might never have seen the light.

ROLF BOLDREWOOD.

117 Collins Street West,

Melbourne, 12th December 1888.

Chapter 1

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 here, 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. 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.

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?

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 bush-ranging—robbery under arms they call 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, die; be strung up like a dog, as they say. I'm blessed if ever I 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 townships, 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 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 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 against the heavy close rails, with misery and rage in their eyes, till their time was up. Nobody told THEM 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 IS hard. There's no saying it isn't; no, nor thinking what a fool, 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 me, 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 our 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 been sober either. We'd been drinking all night at that Willow Tree shanty. 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 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 that 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 they are talking about. Why, he is that miserable that 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 does 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, I think. If I could forget for one moment, in the middle of all the nonsense, that I was to die on Thursday three weeks! die on Thursday three weeks! die 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. It was all very well then; I was too weak to think much. But when I began to get 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 I'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 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, 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 maybe 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, 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.'

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 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 hard-working, 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 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 tract 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 and a 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 now—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 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 walks, too—he and an old dog he had, called Crib, a cross-bred 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. 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, hut-building 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 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-rope, 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 a while 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—but that poor Jim lies under a forest oak on a sandhill, 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 a 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, though 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, 'my father and grandfather, and all the lot, was Church people, and so I shall live and die. I don't know as 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 King, and so shall the boys, as sure as my name's Ben Marston.'

Chapter 2

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 half-way 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.

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 anybody 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 bush-ranging and gold robbery, and he had more than one man's blood to answer for. Now we weren't like that; we never troubled the church one way or the other. We knew we were doing what we oughtn't to do, and scorned to look pious and keep two faces under one hood.

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 use 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 firewood, 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 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 half-crown 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 that 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 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 Myall 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 he had 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 showed 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 lessons 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, not even ginger-beer, while he was straight, and he kept us all going from nine o'clock in the morning till three 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; 'I believe some of you WILL be hanged unless you change a good deal. It's cold blood and bad blood that runs in your veins, and you'll come to earn the wages of sin 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 Evil 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 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 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, 'with a star and a white spot on the flank; and there'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 that again you are, after all you promised me, and you so nearly 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, 'aren'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!'

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'.

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 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.

Chapter 3

So the years went on—slow enough they seemed to us sometimes—the green winters, pretty cold, I tell you, with frost and hail-storms, 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 clear 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, 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 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 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 couldn't always find a half-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 it a 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 went to school with us, and a boy who was a year older than me.

Their father had been a gardener at home, 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. 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 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 I will 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.'

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 gray 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 by, 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 so very old at forty,' he says then, 'and twenty 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; 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 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 good-hearted that a kind word would turn him any 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 we 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.'

'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 wasn't 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 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.