

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,⁺ 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 *Et*⁺ ^c*did*] did *Ec*⁺ ^d*that*] that *Ec*⁺
^eagain] against *Et*⁺ ^fthem *beforehand*] ~ beforehand *Ec* *them* beforehand *Et*⁺
^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 E1+ ^ddoes] does Ec+
^eI'd] I Ec+ ^ffor one moment] for one moment Ec+ ^gdie on Thursday] die on Thursday Ec+
^hdie on Thursday] die on Thursday Ec+ ⁱdie on Thursday] die on Thursday Ec+
^jIt] 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.”

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^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 *Er*⁺

^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 *E1*⁺

^bking] King *Ec*⁺

CHAPTER XXII.

IBROUGHT it out sudden-like to Aileen before I could stop myself, but it was all ^atrue; [that our plan was to ‘turn out’ as bush-rangers—]¹ that, and nothing short of it, we’d laid it out to tackle as soon as we began to work regular together, and look ahead a bit. How we were to make the first start we couldn’t agree; but we were bound to make another big touch, and this time the police would be after us for something worth while. Anyhow, we could take it easy at the Hollow for a bit, and settle all the ins and outs without hurrying ourselves.

[No. 20]

Our dart now was to get to The Hollow that night some time, and not to leave much of a track either. Nobody had found out the place yet, and wasn’t going to if we knew. It was too useful a hiding-place to give away without trouble, and we swore to take all sorts of good care to keep it secret, if it was to be done by the art of man.

We went up Nulla mountain the same way as we remembered doing when Jim and I rode to meet father that time he had the lot of weaners. We kept wide and didn’t follow on after one another so as to make a marked trail. It was a long, dark, dreary ride. We had to look sharp so as not to get dragged off by a breasthigh bough in the thick country. There was no fetching a doctor if any one was hurt. Father rode ahead. He knew the ins and outs of the road better than any of us, though Jim, who had lived most of his time in the Hollow after he got away from the police, was getting to know it pretty well. We were obliged to go slow mostly—for a good deal of the track lay along the bed of a creek, full of boulders and rocks,

^atrue; [that . . . bushrangers—] that, and . . . a bit. *Ed.*] true; that, and . . . a bit. *SM Ec* true. *EI*⁺

that we had to cross ever so many times in a mile. The sharp-edged rocks too overhung low enough to knock your brains out, if you didn't mind.

It was far into the night when we got to the old yard. There it stood, just as I recollect seeing it the time Jim and I and Father branded the weaners. It had only been used once or twice since. It was patched up a bit in places, but nobody seemed to have gone next or ^anigh it for a long time. The grass had grown up round the slip-rails; it was as strange and forsaken-looking as if it belonged to a deserted station.

As we rode up, a man comes out from an angle of the fence and gives a whistle. We knew, almost without looking, that it was Warrigal. He'd come there to meet Starlight and take him round some other way. Every track and short cut there was in the mountains was as easy to him as the road to George Storefield's was to us. Nulla mountain was full of curious gullies, and caves, and places that the devil himself could hardly have run a man to ground in, unless he'd lived near it all his life as Warrigal had. He wasn't very free in showing them to us, but he'd have made a bridge of his own body any time to let Starlight go safe. So when they rode away together we knew he was safe whoever might be after us, and that we should see him in The Hollow some time next day.

We went on for a mile or two further; then we got off, and turned our horses loose. The rest of the way we had ^bto do on foot. My horse and Jim's had got regularly broke ^cin to Rocky Flat, and we knew that they'd go home as sure as possible, not quite straight, but keeping somewhere in the right direction. As for father he always used to keep a horse or two, trained to go home when he'd done with him. The pony he rode to-night would just trot off, and never put his nose ^dto the ground almost till he got wind of home.

We humped our saddles and swags ourselves; a stiffish load too, but the night was cool, and we did our best. It was no use growling. It had to be done, and the sooner the better. It seemed a long time—following father step by step—before we came to the place where I thought the cattle were going to be driven over the precipice. Here we pulled up for a bit and had a smoke. It was a queer time and a queer look out.

^anigh] night *Ec* ^bto] *Om. Ec* ^cin to] into *Et⁺* ^dto] *Om. Ec*

Three o'clock² in the ^amorning; the stars in the sky, and it so clear that we could see Nulla ^bMountain rising up against it ^clike a huge black mass,³ without sign of ^dtrees or rocks. Below us the whole valley looked like a sea of mist, and we just ^egoing to throw ourselves into it. Before us, on the other side of ^fThe Hollow, ^gwas the high, clear-marked dome, which dad called Sugarloaf. Everything was strange, silent, solitary, and, stranger than all, here were we—three desperate ^hmen—going to make ourselves a home in this lonesome, God-forsaken ⁱplace. I ^jwas not very thin-skinned by that time, but if ^kI had seen the devil ^lsuddenly there amongst us, so as to make a fourth,⁴ I shouldn't have been surprised. ^mEverything—the place, the time, ⁿthe men—seemed so regularly cut out for ^ohim. We smoked our pipes out, and said nothing to each ^pother. Then father makes a ^qstart down, and we follows him; took a goodish while, but ^rat last we got down all right, and ^sfather heads away for the cave. When we got there ^tall our troubles were over for a ^ubit. Jim struck a match and had a ^vgood fire going in no ^wtime—there was plenty of dry ^xwood about. Then father rolls a keg out ^yfrom a hole in the wall; ^zit was first-rate dark brandy, and we ^Adidn't feel any the worse for a ^Bnip all round. When a man's cold and ^Ctired and hungry, and ^Dtroubled in his mind as well, a good ^Estrong caulker of grog ^Fdoesn't do him ^Gany harm to speak of. It strings him up and ^Hjust puts him ^Istraight; if he's anything of a man he can stand it, and feel all the better for ^Jit. But it's an easy lesson to ^Klearn; and there's them that can't ^Lstop, once

^amorning;] ~— *Er*⁺ ^bMountain] mountain *Er* *TZ* ^clike . . . mass] a big black lump *Er*⁺ ^dtrees . . . like a] tree or rock; underneath the valley, one *Er*⁺ ^egoing . . . us,] agoing to drop into it; *Er*⁺ ^fThe] the *Ec*⁺ ^gwas . . . Sugarloaf. Everything . . . and, stranger *Ec*] ~ . . . ~ ~ . . . ~, ~ *SM* the clear hill we called {call *E*₃} the Sugarloaf. Everything seemed dead, silent, and solitary, and a rummier start *Er*⁺ ^hmen—going] men, driven *Er*⁺ ⁱplace.] ~! *Er*⁺ ^jwas . . . thin-skinned] wasn't very fanciful *Er*⁺ ^kI had seen] *Om. Er*⁺ ^lsuddenly . . . fourth,] had risen up to make a fourth amongst us *Er*⁺ ^mEverything—the] The *Er*⁺ ⁿthe . . . so] and the men seemed *Er*⁺ ^ohim. We] him and his mob. *P We Er*⁺ ^pother.] other, good or bad. *Er*⁺ ^qstart down,] start, *Er*⁺ ^rat last] *Om. Er*⁺ ^sfather . . . away] headed *Er*⁺ ^tall] *Om. Er*⁺ ^ubit] while *Er*⁺ ^vgood] *Om. Er*⁺ ^wtime—] ~; *Er*⁺ ^xwood about] wood, of course *Er*⁺ ^yfrom] of *Er*⁺ ^zit . . . brandy,] first-rate dark brandy it was, *Er*⁺ ^Adidn't . . . worse *Ec*] didn't . . . ~ *SM* felt a sight better *Er*⁺ ^Bnip] good stiff nip *Er*⁺ ^Ctired] ~, *Er*—*E*₂ ^Dtroubled . . . mind] down on his luck *Er*⁺ ^Estrong] *Om. Er*⁺ ^Fdoesn't] don't *Er*⁺ ^Gany] no *Er*⁺ ^Hjust] *Om. Er*⁺ ^Istraight; if] ~. If *Er*⁺ ^Jit . . . easy] it; but it's a precious sight too easy a *Er*⁺ ^Klearn;] ~, *Er*⁺ ^Lstop,] ~ *Ec*

they begin, till they've smothered ^aall the brains that God Almighty ^bever put inside their ^cskulls. Just as if they was to bore a hole and ^dpour laudanum and gunpowder⁵ in. ^eNo; they wouldn't stop if they were sure of going to heaven ^fnext minute, or to hell ^gstraight, if they put the last glass to their lips. I've heard men say it, and knew they meant it. Not the worst sort of ^hmen either.

ⁱHowever, we were none of us like that. ^jThen, anyhow. We could take ^kit or leave ^lit, and though dad could do with ^ma good lot, he always knew what he was about, and could put the peg in ⁿwhen he liked as well as anybody. So we had one strongish ^otot, and then the tea was ^pready boiling. There ^qwere biscuits, and we fried some hung ^rbeef that was stowed away in a harness cask, and made a ^sfirst-rate supper of it. We were ^ttoo tired to talk much, so we made up the ^ufire, rolled ourselves in our ^vblankets, and slept as sound as tops till a good hour after sunrise.

When I woke Jim was fast ^wasleep; but dad had been up a goodish ^xwhile, made up the fire, and got things ready for breakfast. It was a fine, clear ^ymorning, and everything looked ^zvery pleasant, ^Aspecially to ^Bme, who'd been locked up away from ^Call this sort of thing so long. The grass was ^Dlong and green ^Eall round the ^Foutside of the cave and right up to the big sandstone slabs of the floor, looking as if it had never been ^Geaten down much. No more it had. It ^Hwouldn't have paid to have overstocked ^IThe Hollow. What cattle and horses ^Jthere was there was always in splendid condition, and had a fine time of ^Kit.

^aall . . . that] what brains *Er*⁺ ^bever] *Om. Er*⁺ ^cskulls. Just] ~, just *Er*⁺ ^dpour . . . and] put *Er*⁺ ^eNo;] ~! *Er*⁺ ^fnext minute] straight *Er*⁺ ^gstraight,] next minute *Er*⁺ ^hmen] ~, *Er*⁺ ⁱHowever, we] We *Er*⁺ ^jThen] Not then *Er*⁺ ^kit] *Om. Er*⁺ ^lit,] ~; *Ec* ^ma good lot,] ~ ~ ~ *Ec* his share when it was going, *Er*⁺ ⁿwhen . . . anybody] any time *Er*⁺ ^otot, and then] tot while *Er*⁺ ^pready] *Om. Er*⁺ ^qwere . . . and] was a bag of ship biscuit; *Er*⁺ ^rbeef . . . cask,] ~ . . . ~ *Ec* beef, *Er*⁺ ^sfirst-rate . . . it] jolly good supper *Er*⁺ ^ttoo tired] that tired we didn't care *Er*⁺ ^ufire,] fire last thing and *Er*⁺ ^vblankets . . . woke, *Er*⁺ ^wasleep; I didn't wake till the sun had been up an hour or more. *P* I woke first; *Er*⁺ ^xwhile . . . fire,] while *Er*⁺ ^ymorning, and] morning; *Er*⁺ ^zvery pleasant] beautiful *Er*⁺ ^Aspecially] especially *E*₃ ^Bme, who'd] me that had *Er*⁺ ^Call] *Om. Er*⁺ ^Dlong] thick *Er*⁺ ^Eall] *Om. Er*⁺ ^Foutside . . . cave] ~ . . . ~, *Ec* cave, *Er*⁺ ^Geaten down much] eat down very close *Er*⁺ ^Hwouldn't] would never *Er*⁺ ^IThe] the *Ec*⁺ ^Jthere . . . and] they kept there *Er*⁺ ^Kit.] it, and were always in grand condition. *Er*⁺

“Horse-breeding’s our best game,” says the old man, “if they’re going to pay such prices as this. ^aI’m half a mind to start and take a lot over to Port Phillip. ^bI believe they’d have fetched a hundred apiece there.”

It was the old story. If we could have looked ahead a bit and had ^cnot anything to do with those infernal Momberah cattle, we should have been free to have tackled these diggings like everybody else, or gone cattle-droving, butchering, or twenty other things that meant making money hand over hand, and no danger or obligation to any man.

There was George Storefield, old Slow and Sure as we used to call him, making no end of money by farming and carrying, and every now and then buying a farm, so that he’d have all the frontage to the creek and the richest part of the valley for miles directly.

We could each of us do a bigger day’s work than George; he said so himself. We could write and cipher as well, we were as good at a bargain, and better at lots of things. Why was he steadily going up the tree and rising in life, in money, and standing, while we had gone down, and were going lower every day? Why, because he had stuck steadily to his work and been always square, always honest. We hadn’t. This is what came of it.

As we didn’t want to go away anywhere till the little excitement about the horses was over, we had to stay quiet for a spell, and amuse ourselves the best way we could in the Hollow. We were yarning about the diggings next morning, telling father what a row all the cradles made, when all of a sudden Jim says, “Suppose we go and try to rout out something about that old hermit’s hut. There was a cradle there, wasn’t there? There’s no doubt he’d been washing gold in the creek there years and years before these other chaps found it at the Turon. He might have planted a lot; there’s no saying. Suppose we go and have a look to-day?”

“I don’t mind,” I said; “it will give us something to do. Did you ever hear of his having gold, father?”

“Only from Warrigal, and he didn’t say much,” says dad. “But from what he did let out, the chaps that were here then thought they’d a show of coming in for some when he died, and were nearly

^a‘m] I’ve *E2*⁺
not had *Ec-TZ*

^bI . . . [287:3] took it.] *Om. E2*⁺ see also following entries

^cnot]

going to burn the hut down when they didn't get anything. That's all I know."

Next day we started off early and took some grub with us to camp out all night. We took a spade, a pick, and an axe. They'd be handy if we wanted to dig or be moving things. No horse, one gun, and some cartridges.

It had been raining a lot lately but cleared up for a beautiful day. The grass looked splendid. When we came to the old hut it looked quite home-like. It was getting on for spring, the middle of October. The weather had been ever so cold and wet, but now the sun came out warm and the days were getting longer. There was an almond-tree near the old hut full of white flowers, and an early peach-tree in bloom. "I wonder if our almond tree's out yet in the Rocky Flat 'Garden?'" says Jim. I knew what he was thinking of.

We put our things inside the old hut, and began to make a regular search to see if we could find anything. We found letters cut here and there in the slabs. They'd been cut deep with a sharp knife, and plenty of time taken over the work. There were some short words, but they didn't seem to mean anything.

I looked at 'em over and over again, though Jim, who was always wanting to get to hard work, and never liked using his head when he could use his hands, said, "What ^bwas the use of bothering over his scribblings and scratchings? Most likely the old cove was half cracked and meant nothing."

But it struck me different. He wasn't very mad, for all I could see. Only he had his reasons for living by himself, like us, only they were not likely to be the same as ours. He'd been sharp enough to search for gold and find some. He'd travelled in Mexico, or he wouldn't have known anything about a cradle.⁸ No; he wasn't very mad, and I was going to study over these letters on the slabs, and see if I could make anything out of them.

Jim said I was welcome, only he'd have up the hearthstone—it was a tremendous big heavy slab of sandstone; he believed we'd find something under it. Anyhow, the other fellows hadn't gone to the bother of having it up; it had never been stirred, we could see by the way the couch grass had grown all ^cround it.

^aGarden] garden *Ec-TZ*

^bwas] is *Et TZ*

^cround] around *Ec-TZ*