

however, persistently preyed on Daventry Hall.

All the assigned servants, except Long Steve and his wife, were habitual thieves. They did not get any wages for their work, and so they thought themselves free to help themselves to their master's property. So many pounds of salt or fresh meat and flour, so much coarse brown sugar and inferior tea, and a little tobacco, were the rations served out to each man every week; but there was good living in the men's huts for all that. China pigs, ducks, turkeys, &c., mysteriously disappeared. The men made out that they had wandered into the Bush, and been devoured by Bush beasts and birds, or else starved to death; but if Captain Daventry had gone to the huts a little more frequently, instead of trusting, as he did, to his overseer, the savoury scent that often issued from them would have told him what had become of his poultry, &c. Walter noticed the savoury steam one evening, but the overseer said that he had shot some wild ducks, and given them to the men. This overseer was a convict—a smooth-faced, smooth-tongued rascal. He was trusted to weigh out the rations, and the men used to carry a good deal besides their rations out of the store. The house servants, too, whenever they had a good opportunity, would appropriate unguarded valuables. They had no difficulty in disposing of them, since all the assigned servants, except Long Steve and his wife, were in league with the ticket-of-leave farmers round about. Most of these ticket-of-leavers were a thieving, drunken lot. Some of them would reconvey their Government grants for a keg of rum. As for conveyance of another kind—Pistol's—they did not rob one another, but gentlemen-settlers they considered fair game. Captain Daventry's bullocks found their way into the ticket-of-leavers' beef casks. They stole his best horses; they clapped their brands on his best colts, fillies, and calves; they pastured their own horses and cattle on his grant; through the villany of his overseer and convict-shepherds, they robbed him of his sheep wholesale. They had even the impudence to steal Dragon-fly!

"Why, Daventry," said one of the Captain's friends one day, "what made you sell that capital chestnut your little fellow used to ride? He fetched a good price, though, I believe."

"I didn't sell him," answered the Captain moodily; "he was stolen. A nice lot of neighbours we've got; however, I think I've scared 'em for one while."

When Dragon-fly was first missing, the overseer had comforted Walter by telling him

that his horse could only have strayed a little way into the Bush, and was sure to turn up soon. Mounted on another nag, Walter rode about for days in search of his favourite, but never saw him more. Walter found out something else, however. He was riding home very dispiritedly one evening, when he noticed Black Poley—as one of his father's shepherds who lived at an out-station was nicknamed, from the resemblance his head bore to a hornless bullock's—mounting the rise on the right of the gully in which Walter was riding. Walter could not understand what Poley was doing there at that time of night, and having been made suspicious by the loss of his horse, he pressed after Poley as quietly as he could. By the time he topped the ridge it was nearly dark, but he could make out Poley going down the other side of the ridge, and another man coming up to meet him. Walter was a brave little fellow. He tied his horse to a tree, and, slipping down the ridge, got within earshot of the two men, who were sitting, smoking and talking, on a fallen tree-trunk.

"Well, Poley, how many can you let me have this time?"

Poley gave a gruff laugh, and answered with an oath: "—if I don't try it on with three score! The cove is so jolly green, it's my belief he'll never miss 'em. I began with twos an' threes, an' now I've worked it up to a score, an' I've al'ays got over the cove somehow. What does sich as him know about sheep an' farmin'? —if I don't try *four* score—good yows, too; so you must stand something handsome."

"To-morrow morning then—at the old place—Sal's Pannikin."

"All right! I'll work round there about an hour after sunrise."

Then something was said about the overseer; but what, Walter could not make out. Not waiting to hear any more, he crept back to his horse, mounted, galloped home, and told his father what he had heard. At first the captain was going to consult with the overseer, but one or two little things recently had rather shaken his confidence in the overseer, and so he sent for Long Steve instead. Long Steve knew Sal's Pannikin well. It was a lonely hollow in an unoccupied part of the Bush, and was called Sal's because on its brink a Mrs. Sarah Mullins had once kept a most disreputable sly drinking-house. Strange goings on had taken place there. At last the landlady had been most brutally murdered in her own house, and after that it was allowed to go to ruin, and had the reputation of being haunted.