

"What was the other man like, Master Walter?" asked Long Steve. Walter could only say that he talked very much as if he had a hot potato in his mouth. "Oh, that's little Dick Green at the head of the lagoon," cried Long Steve, half disappointed at not having found a worthier foe. "It's hard, Cap'en, if you an' me can't nab little Dick Green an' the Poley."

"Would you like to go, Walter?" said the Captain. "I think it's only fair that you should see the fun."

Of course Walter wanted to go. So it was arranged that Steve should have tea and chops ready, and three horses saddled, at his hut (which stood apart from the other men's), and call his master and Walter at half-past two next morning. The Captain thought it advisable to start thus early, in case the sheep-stealers should have changed their minds after Walter left them, and agreed to meet at an earlier hour for safety's sake.

Walter greatly enjoyed his early breakfast by the wood fire in Long Steve's hut, and the silent ride through the Bush—all three armed. But when they had put up their horses in Sal's ruined stables, and were crouching in Sal's roofless parlour, the adventure did not seem quite so jolly to Walter.

But presently, while it was still quite dark, a light came dancing down the other side of the hollow. Long Steve sallied out to reconnoitre. When he came back, he said—

"Yes, it's little Dick, sure enough—busy finishing off his brush-hurdles. He'll soon ha' done, and then you an' me, Cap'en, had better creep down to the fold, whilst it's yet dark. Master Walter can stay here with the horses, an' bring 'em down when we cooey. Oh, yes, Cap'en, he'll be safe enough. Neither Dick nor the Poley would set a foot in here if you'd give them a thousand pounds."

In spite of this assurance, Walter wearied of his lonely vigil.

At length the eastern sky brightened, the laughing-jackasses hooted out their hideously hilarious morning chorus, and the sun came up, bronzing the scrub and the tree-tops. Walter could see little Dick quite plainly now. He was lying on the ground smoking his pipe. Then came another weary watch, but at last up started little Dick and went to meet Black Poley, who was coming down to the Pannikin with the stolen sheep. They were all driven into the fold, and the two thieves were quietly talking together when, as it seemed to Walter, from beneath their very feet the Captain and Long Steve jumped up like Jacks-in-the-box. The Captain felled Black Poley as if he had been indeed a bullock; Long Steve laid little Dick on his

back as if he had been a child of four years old. By the time Walter had obeyed the cooey and galloped down with the horses, both thieves had their arms strongly bound behind them with green hide. With strips of the same they were fastened to the Captain's and Long Steve's stirrups, and then, driving the ewes before them, the three thief-takers set out for home. As Long Steve had expected, they found the rest of the flock on the other side of the ridge that sloped down into Sal's Pannikin.

The overseer turned as white as a sheet when his master rode up to Daventry Hall with his sheep and his prisoners, but neither Dick nor the Poley peached.

Black Poley was sentenced to an awful flogging before he was sent back to Sydney, and little Dick got ten years in a chain-gang. The Captain thought now that his property would be safe for a while, but he was utterly mistaken. He had only weeded out two scoundrels whose places were almost instantly supplied by two at least as bad; he had managed to focus the hatred of the district on himself, and, moreover, just then Hook-handed Bill and his gang came on circuit, so to speak, to the country round the lagoon. They had made their last *habitat* rather too hot to hold them, and with secure hiding-places in the range of shore-hills, they promised themselves some rich raids on the gentlemen-settlers who were dotted here and there around the lagoon.

Hook-handed Bill was a bushranger, without any of the redeeming qualities which a certain set of story-tellers are so fond of giving to robbers. He was a greedy, savage brute. Physically he was a left-handed giant, who owed his sobriquet to the fact that he had lost his right hand, and supplied its place with a sharp hook. Horrid tales were told of what that hook had done; "ripping up" was Hook-handed Bill's favourite mode of murder. Burning alive in a bullock's hide stood next in his estimation. It was said, too, that he was in the habit of waylaying bullock-drivers on their way down to Sydney with their masters' wool, of shamming to be on the best of terms with them, and then murdering them wholesale in their sleep, afterwards disposing of the wool through the agency of some of his ticket-of-leave friends.

Such a villain, with half-a-dozen followers only not quite so bad as himself, was no pleasant Bush neighbour. Some of the gentlemen-settlers sent their wives and children into Sydney. All rode about armed by day, and at night had their most valuable cattle driven into the stockyards, and their favourite horses into the stables,