

whilst their houses were turned into little forts. In spite of all precautions, the bushrangers committed the most impudent robberies, and though some of the gentlemen-settlers assisted the police in hunting the robbers, no captures were made.

One afternoon, when Walter was in a lonely part of his father's grant, a huge, shaggy-bearded, roughly-clad fellow sprang from behind a clump of trees, and seized him by the collar. The stranger's right arm had no hand, but brandished a sharp hook, and Walter thought that his last hour was come. He was awfully frightened, but he tried not to seem so. "Let me say my prayers first," said Walter.

Hook-handed Bill gave a grin which was even more hideous than his habitual frown, as he answered, "Time enough, youngster. I ain't a-goin' to kill you afore night. I want you to take a message to your — father. He's a deal too cocky for my taste, is the Captain, flogging his men, and lagging his neighbours, and now he's been boasting that he'll take me dead or alive. Will he? We'll soon see who's master. I'll show him how much I care for his blowing. You take him Hook-handed Bill's compliments, and tell him that I give him fair warning that I mean to pay him a visit to-night, and to half flog the life out of him and his sneak of a bullock-driver, and then to string 'em both up—an' you, too, you — young spy!—an' to carry off the womenfolk he's brought from — Old England to look down on their betters. There! you be off, youngster!"

At first the Captain was inclined to treat the bushranger's threat as mere bravado. "However," he added, "if the rascal does choose to come, he could not have consulted my convenience better. The police are coming over to-night, Walter, my boy. We meant to have given the bushrangers a hunt to-morrow morning, but if they like to save us the trouble, so much the better. Don't say anything to your mamma, but go and call Long Steve."

The bullock-driver was firmly convinced that Hook-handed Bill would keep his word, and advised his master to begin his preparations at once, in case the bushrangers should hear from some of their scouts of the intended police-visit, and resolve to rush the house before the arrival of the constables. Accordingly guns, pistols, ammunition, a sword, a cutlass, and a bayonet were got in readiness by the Captain—not that he really believed that there would be any use for them that night. The kitchen clock struck seven—eight—nine, and still the constables did not

come. A little after nine the convict house-servants went away to their huts, and Long Steve carefully bolted the doors after them. Mrs. Daventry and Phœbe were persuaded to go to bed. The garrison of three sat in silence—the Captain expecting every moment to hear the police ride up; Long Steve and Walter, on the other hand, dreading the arrival of the bushrangers. About ten a party of men *were* heard galloping up. "There they are!" cried the Captain, and before Long Steve could stop him, he had opened the front door and run down to the garden-gate. "Why, what a time you've been, Saunders," the Captain shouted to the supposed police-sergeant.

"Have we?" growled back a gruff voice. "Well, we'll try to make up for lost time, you —!"

Discovering his mistake, the Captain fired his pistol at the speaker, and rushed back to the house. A hailstorm of lead soon rattled on the weatherboards, and Mrs. Daventry and Phœbe got up and rushed about like maniacs. The women's screams were not calculated to improve the Captain and Long Steve's aim, and though they had the advantage of cover, and Walter to load for them, and of the moon which came up presently, seven to two are heavy odds. (The overseer and assigned servants said next morning that they had been sound asleep—one, indeed, had heard a little firing, but thought that it was the Captain out duck-shooting!) I am afraid that the besiegers would have been the victors, had not a party of the Captain's friends suddenly made their appearance. They had been dining together about ten miles off, and a drunken convict had let out in their hearing the intended attack on Daventry Hall. They had instantly rushed to horse, and galloped the ten miles at racing speed. The bushrangers turned tail when the new-comers poured a volley into them. Five of the scoundrels, altogether, had been hit, but only one was taken. When this prisoner was escorted to the nearest police-barracks next day, the reason of the constables' non-appearance at Daventry Hall the night before was discovered.

The escort were very much astonished to find no sentinel at the barrack-gates. They were still more astonished to find the sergeant and his men lashed down on the mess-room floor—all gagged, pinioned, and fettered.

Hook-handed Bill had been fully aware of the Captain's arrangements with the police, and had taken them by surprise in their lonely barracks before he despatched his insolent message by Walter.

EDWARD HOWE.