

**Ambrose Pratt**



*Three  
Years with  
Thunderbolt*

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# **Three Years with Thunderbolt**



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE.

CHAPTER I.—THE MEETING.

CHAPTER II.—THE COMPACT.

CHAPTER III.—I START BUSHRANGING.

CHAPTER IV.—MY FIRST ROBBERY UNDER ARMS.

CHAPTER V.—THE BUSHRANGER AT HOME.

CHAPTER VI.—THE BITER BITTEN.

CHAPTER VII.—"THUNDERBOLT'S LEAP."

CHAPTER VIII.—THE UPS AND DOWNS OF BUSHRANGING.

CHAPTER IX.—I SAVE THUNDERBOLT'S LIFE.

CHAPTER X.—TURNING THE TABLES.

CHAPTER XI.—"THE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE."

CHAPTER XII.—AN EVENTFUL MEETING.

CHAPTER XIII.—IN THE MIRE.

CHAPTER XIV.—THE "DUMMY" PISTOL.

Thunderbolt Bowed Low to the Ladies.

CHAPTER XV.—AN ALARM, FALSE OR—?

CHAPTER XVI.—THE PLUCKY HAWKER.

CHAPTER XVII.—A BRUSH WITH THE POLICE.

CHAPTER XVIII.—A NEW CAREER.

CHAPTER XIX.—A CURIOUS ADVENTURE.

CHAPTER XX.—THE RACE.

CHAPTER XXI.—AN INTERLUDE.

CHAPTER XXII.—OUTWITTED.

CHAPTER XXIII.—A DASTARDLY TRICK.

CHAPTER XXIV.—WOUNDED.

Combo was Hurlled against the Rock.

CHAPTER XXV.—THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

WILLIAM MONCKTON.

CHAPTER XXVI.—THE LAST.

THE END.



## **PREFACE.**

### [Table of Contents](#)

It is within the memory of many living Australians that a lad named William Monckton was tried in the year 1869 at Armidale, N.S.W., before Mr. Justice Meymott and a jury, charged with having committed numerous robberies under arms in company with the famous outlaw, Captain Thunderbolt. Monckton made no serious effort to defend himself, and was convicted. But the youth of the culprit (he was under 18 years of age), and the fact, attested to by a clergyman and several other respectable witnesses at the trial, that parental cruelty had driven him to the bush, operated to secure for the lad the comparatively trifling sentence of three years' imprisonment, with hard labour, in Darlinghurst Gaol, Sydney.

Monckton, however, was released after having served only fourteen months of his sentence, for good conduct in prison; and from that day forward he led a life of such exemplary rectitude that he has long been regarded by all who know him as a worthy citizen of the Commonwealth.

He is at present a well-to-do farmer, resident at Howell, N.S.W., and the head of a large family much respected in the neighbourhood. An easily intelligible delicacy of feeling has during the last thirty years prevented Mr. Monckton from publishing any record of his lawless and romantic youth. Lapse of time, however, and the persuasion of his friends, have combined of late to overcome his long habit of silence, and induced him to

lay his experiences before the world. In the work of editing his memoirs I have received valuable assistance from Mr. F. Herbert Gall and from Mr. M. O'Shannessy, of Howell, two acquaintances of Mr. Monckton, who have been at pains to verify wherever possible, the more important details of his narrative.

**AMBROSE PRATT.**

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# THREE YEARS WITH THUNDERBOLT

[Table of Contents](#)

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# CHAPTER I.—THE MEETING.

## Table of Contents

My name is William Monckton. I was born at Mr. Dangar's station at Gostwick, in the year 1853. My father died when I was six years old, and from that time forward my childhood was excessively unhappy. Soon after my father's death, my mother, who was very poor, married a Yarrowick selector. She took that course, I believe, less for her own sake than in order to provide a home for my brothers and sisters and myself. Unfortunately for me, however, my stepfather conceived a dislike for me, almost from the first. I was the youngest of all our family, and on that account, perhaps, he considered that he had a right to demand from me implicit and unquestioning obedience. Looking backwards now across the long stretch of intervening years, I am fain to acknowledge that there were faults on both sides. He was a stern, hard-natured man, capable of genuine kindness to those who did not cross him, but of a disposition which opposition always rendered obstinate and even brutal. It was my duty, perhaps, to have submitted my will to his, but even when a very young child, I was extremely proud and passionate, and the least injustice, real or apparent, stung me to revolt. A kind word had more effect with me than the most intemperately uttered command. My father, moreover, had ever treated me with kindness, and my first experience of ill-usage came from the hands of the man who had, it seemed to me, usurped my father's place.

I well remember our first quarrel. I had been so tenderly attached to my father that when my mother married again I



felt, in a vague, childish way, that some wrong had been done to the dead, and I could not, try as I would, bring myself (as did my brothers and sisters with facility) to treat my stepfather as a real parent. To me he was a usurper, and ever he remained so. I do not wish it to be thought that I behaved to him with the remotest resemblance of indolence. On the contrary, he inspired me with fear, and while I kept out of his way as much as possible, when we unavoidably met, I showed him the utmost deference. There was one thing, however, in which I could not obey him. I could not call him "father." The word stuck in my throat whenever I tried to use it, and planted a burning pain in my breast. For a time I escaped addressing him by name, but at length he remarked a disposition which had long been obvious to the others, and which had already cost my mother a deal of pain in unsuccessfully striving to overcome. She, poor woman, would have had us all at peace, and very frequently had she reasoned with and tried to persuade me to look upon her husband in the way she wished. But I was unable to yield to her first entreaties, and the passing of time only made matters worse. One evening he called me to him and coldly commanded me to call him "father!"

I was afraid to refuse, and yet I could not obey. I stood silently before him. A little wise kindness then—a few persuasive words—might have altered the whole course of my life. But they were not spoken. I was half overcome, and on the verge of tears. My stepfather repeated his command. I turned with brimming eyes to my mother, who stood by, trembling like a leaf.

"Mother!" I cried piteously, "I can't!"

My stepfather caught my arm in a sudden rage and began to beat me. The first blow made my heart as hard as stone. I cried no more, despite the punishment, and I did not speak, but sullenly and silently defied him. He beat me until he grew tired, and then permitted me to slink away, a bruised but unbroken thing, to bed. From that hour we hated each other with remorseless bitterness, and neither lost a chance in the years that followed to make the other suffer.

But he was a powerful man—I a child. It was only natural that I should have suffered the more. I was my mother's favourite. For that reason he included her in his bitterness, and on the smallest pretext he beat me cruelly before her. He forced me, moreover, to do work about the selection—work that was more properly fitted for a grown man. As I grew up I was obliged to plough, to split rails, to herd the cattle, to break in and ride wild young horses; in fact, to do everything that his ingenuity could devise which might weary my limbs or bend my stubborn spirit. The immediate consequence of his treatment was to increase my hate for him; but a more indirect yet enduring result was that I outstripped my years in physical development and hardiness, and by the time I was fourteen years old I was noted all over the district as an expert rider and backwoodsman.

For my part, I lost no opportunity to torment and outwit my tyrant. Whenever I could I disobeyed him, and cheerfully suffered the consequent beating he gave me. I can, however, remember no act of open or covert malice which I committed for which he did not brutally requite me, and I

cannot claim to have ever gained the smallest advantage over him. This was neither because he was extraordinarily clever in detecting my pranks, nor because I was dull-witted in devising them. The reason was that I was nearly always directly under his supervision, and he must necessarily have been a fool or I a genius had I succeeded in escaping the reward of my misdeeds. While still very young I was supported with the hope of one day becoming strong enough to repay his cruelty in kind. But as I grew older I perceived how very long I should have to postpone my revenge, and the prospect of suffering his tyranny for long years sickened and dismayed me. One day he gave me a particularly savage thrashing for an offence so trifling that I felt I could not any longer endure the life he led me. That night I ran away from home, and walked some twelve miles through the bush to the house of another selector. My stepfather pursued me next day on horseback, and caught me as I was just preparing to set out in order to increase the distance between us. He gave me a beating on the spot, and another before my weeping mother when we had arrived at the homestead.

Three months later I ran away again, and was similarly ill-used when caught. I was by then nearly 15 years of age. My resolution to escape from my cruel stepfather was intensified by the punishment my failures had met with. Watching my chance, I soon ran away again, but he suspected my intention, and, having discovered the direction in which I had departed, he chased me on horseback through the bush and overtook me before I had covered five miles. On that occasion he tied my hands

together with a rope, whose other end he fastened to his saddle. He then set off at a round trot for home, and, in order to save myself from being dragged along the road, I was obliged to run the whole way at his horse's heels at the top of my speed. Well was it then for me that I was strong and toughly fibred, for I believe that the tyrant, had I fallen, would have disdained to check his horse's pace.

When we arrived he bound me, worn out and panting as I was, with my face to the trunk of a tree that grew a few yards from the house, and he gave me so terrible a flogging with his stockwhip that for three days afterwards I lay a groaning wreck in my bed, unable to move a muscle without shrieking aloud with pain. My purpose, however, was neither broken nor changed. I determined to escape or die trying. Hitherto I had been compelled to run away on foot, so close a watch did my brutal stepfather keep over his horses. I resolved that when I recovered I would make a great effort to steal one. He frustrated me, however. Anticipating my design, he sent all the horses away. But that arrangement gave me a chance that he had neglected to consider. He would have had to follow me on foot did I fly again, and I felt confident that I could outpace him. Fearing lest he might perceive and repair his error, I scarcely waited to get well before I was once more in the bush. This time I made for Casher Creek, a direction which I believed my tyrant would consider the least likely for me to pursue, and when daylight broke I was fifteen miles from home. I was tramping along, feeling very hungry and footsore, when I came of a sudden to the edge of a small treeless plain and saw, not a hundred

yards away, a lad of about my own age, seated on horseback mounting guard over a herd of cattle.

I knew him by sight. His name was Charley——, and he was the son of a selector who had been a friend of my father. I had never spoken to him, however, for my stepfather seldom permitted me leisure to make acquaintances; he preferred to work me like a bullock on the farm.

The boy perceived me as soon as I saw him—otherwise I should have darted back among the trees and endeavoured to conceal myself—so much did I fear and distrust my kind. As it was I stared at him defiantly, and I fiercely envied him the half damper which he had been munching when I came upon him, and which he now held in his hand, poised in mid-air between his knee and mouth.

"Hello!" he remarked. "Will Monckton, ain't it?"

I nodded.

"Not run away from home again, have yer?" he demanded.

I was so surprised to learn that any strangers had heard of my previous attempts that I could not reply.

"Have yer?" he repeated.

"Yes!" I answered. "But don't put me away, Charley, will you?" I added imploringly.

He shook his head, "Not much!" he cried. "That stepfather of yours is a brute beast, he is. I'd a' killed him with a tommy axe long ago if I'd been you—and he'd treated me like they say he has you. Why the whole district has him set."

"It would be murder!" I replied.

"My troubles!" cried Charley. "He deserves it. Where are you making for, Will?"

"Anywhere to hide from him, Charley. I'll die before I go back."

"He'll make you if he catches you! You look pretty dead beat, Will."

I shuddered. "I'm done!" I gasped, and sat down weakly on the grass, suddenly conscious that I was very weary.

"I'm that hungry," I said presently.

Charley gazed at me for a moment, then leisurely swung himself to the ground and approached me, stretching out his half-eaten damper, and looking away as he did so. I thanked him and ate it ravenously. I had never enjoyed a meal before one-half so well. I washed it down with a draught from Charley's water bottle, and then arose, refreshed and re-invigorated.

"Say," said Charley. "I know a place where you can hide if you want to!"

"Where?" I asked excitedly.

"Taint fur from here. Just over by Casher Creek. I found it one day when I was after a stray steer. If you like to go there I'll fix you up for vittles. As for your stepfather, he'd never catch you where I mean."

I immediately agreed to his proposal, whereupon the boy invited me to mount his horse behind him, and we set off at a canter, regardless of the cattle in Charley's charge. A smart ride of half-an-hour brought us to the edge of a ravine, where we dismounted. A rough scramble thereafter down some rocks soon displayed to view a long flat grassy ledge, that overhung a small spring of fresh water, and



which had been shielded from observation from above by the hollow walls of the ravine.

"Not a bad camping ground, eh?" said Charley.

"It's magnificent!" I cried in admiration. "No one would ever find me here."

"Not without a tracker, at all events," said Charley. "Well, Will, you'd better stay here to-day, and this evening I'll bring you some tucker and a billy, if I can sneak one, so you can boil yourself some tea. It'll be like playing Robinson Crusoe, won't it?"

With that he left me and I lay down upon the grass and soon fell into a deep sleep. When I awoke it was late in the afternoon, but I had not long to wait before Charley arrived, bearing with him, in fulfilment of his promise, a billycan and a fair store of provisions. For the next three days I lived very happily in my secluded little nook, undisturbed by a living soul except Charley, who brought me all my meals and spent with me whatever time he could snatch from his occupation. I had lost by then so much of my fear of being discovered by my stepfather that on the fourth morning I strolled out upon the plain and made my way to where Charley was minding his cattle. The boy was delighted to see me, and I assisted him at his task for the remainder of the day. That very night, however, he brought me news that made me shake with terror. It seemed that Charley had been foolish enough to boast to one of his acquaintances, a stockman, that he knew of my hiding-place, and this man informed my stepfather.

"You must change your camp at once," cried Charley. "Your stepfather has been searching the district for you, and

he is bound to get a black-tracker to help him before long if he can't find you himself. Wild horses wouldn't make me split on you. But he knows pretty well where you are now; so come along."

As may be imagined, I followed him with alacrity, and I slept that night in a hollow tree not far from the house where Charley lived. The boy came to me early on the following morning and advised me to go with him after the cattle, promising to show me later in the day another hiding-place.

We had scarcely covered half a mile when a man who was mounted on a magnificent chestnut horse passed us at a gallop.

"What a lovely horse, Charley," I cried. "I have never seen such a beauty—have you?"

Charley shook his head, but when horse and rider had disappeared he turned to me and said, "That was Captain Thunderbolt on his horse Combo. He is going down to see my father. They are friends!"

I was both surprised and excited, for I had heard a great deal of the famous bushranger; indeed, his name was at that time ringing through the whole country, and only a day or two before I had run away from home for the last time he had stuck up a coach and robbed a store in our own district. But my stepfather had always spoken of him in such terms of fear and abhorrence that it astonished me to learn that Charley's father regarded him as a friend.

"It's funny your father would be friends with an outlaw!" I remarked.

Charley gave a peculiar laugh. "My dad helped him to stick up ———'s store the other day," he replied; "and he did pretty well out of it, too. You take my tip for it, Will, there are worse sorts than Thunderbolt,—your beastly stepfather, for instance!"

"Your father must be a robber, then!" I gasped, much shocked.

"Bah!" said Charley. "We're all robbers in some way or another if it comes to that—so Dad says at all events. Why, the very land we're walking over belongs by right to the blacks!"

We exchanged no further remarks just then, but all that forenoon I thought of Thunderbolt, and wondered if he could be as brutal a man as my stepfather. I did not think he could be. I had only seen his face for a moment, but I fancied it was a kind one. Early in the afternoon Charley left me, riding home for lunch. On his return he reported that my stepfather had called at his father's house only a few hours before, making inquiries for me. The news threw me into a panic, and scarcely knowing what I said I implored Charley to tell me where I might find Thunderbolt. At first he refused, but at length taking pity on me, he asked me why I wanted to know, and I replied that I wished to beg Thunderbolt to protect me because I believed that my stepfather was afraid of him.

Charley then directed me to the fork of a certain creek about four miles away, whereupon, so sharp was my fear, I set off, running at full speed without even thanking him for the information, or taking the food he had brought for me from his home.

At that moment I had no idea in the world except to escape from my stepfather's clutches, and no criminal impulse was in my mind. My plan was to reach Thunderbolt as soon as possible, and throw myself upon his mercy for protection. Terror had taken hold of all my faculties, and there was no room in my brain for another sentiment. Heedless, therefore, of both past and future, and governed only by a blind fear of the man who had for so many years made my life a hell upon earth, for half-an-hour without a pause I fled through the bush like one pursued by furies, and with every step I took I fancied that I heard the hoof-beats of my stepfather's horse galloping in chase of me; or that I saw his stern face glowering at me from behind each tree or bush I passed. Obligated by failing strength, however, to slacken pace at last, I paused in the very heart of the forest, panting and almost spent. I was still fighting for breath when of a sudden at no great distance from where I strode unsteadily along a male voice burst forth in song. The notes were sweet and mellow, yet thrillingly distinct.

I stopped abruptly, spellbound, at first with astonishment, and then with a quick ensuing rapture. In one second I had forgotten my stepfather and my terror—everything in the world, indeed, except the wild, sweet music of the unseen singer's voice, which poured forth in an unbroken stream of harmony, growing, nevertheless, momentarily more pathetic and melancholy. It seemed to me that the singer's own heart was wistfully vibrating in tune with the touching little story that his song unfolded.

"Oh, don't you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?  
Sweet Alice with hair so brown,

Who wept with delight when you gave her a smile,  
And trembled with fear at your frown!"

The tears started to my eyes as the verse approached its end:—

"In the old churchyard in the valley, Ben Bolt,  
In a corner obscure and alone,  
They have fitted a slab of granite so grey,  
And sweet Alice lies under the stone!"

To the last deep, vibrant note a heavy silence succeeded, during which I could hear my own heartthrobs, but nothing else. I was profoundly moved, and for a long while I did not even wish to stir from my position. Curiosity at length, however, mastered me, and, eager to discover who the singer might be, I stole through the forest with the noiseless caution of an aboriginal. In fifty paces I came upon the edge of a little glade, whence, peering from behind the trunk of a gnarled old red-gum, I beheld, within a dozen feet of me, a man bare-headed, who lay among the grasses, upon the broad of his back, gazing steadily up into the sky's cloudless blue. Quite near him was a saddle, a silver-bitted bridle, and a swag. A magnificent chestnut horse, evidently a thoroughbred, stood nosing at his hobbles at a little distance off. At a glance I recognised the horse. It was "Combo," Thunderbolt's famous steed.

Was, then, the man lying so still before me Thunderbolt himself? The question flashed into my mind, and

involuntarily I sighed, whereupon whatever doubts I had entertained were rapidly resolved.

With a speed that dazzled me, the man sprang from his recumbent attitude to his knees. One hand plucked a revolver from his belt, and, before I could move or speak I was looking over the muzzle of a cocked six-shooter into a pair of keenly watchful dark-brown eyes.

"Hands up!" he commanded curtly.

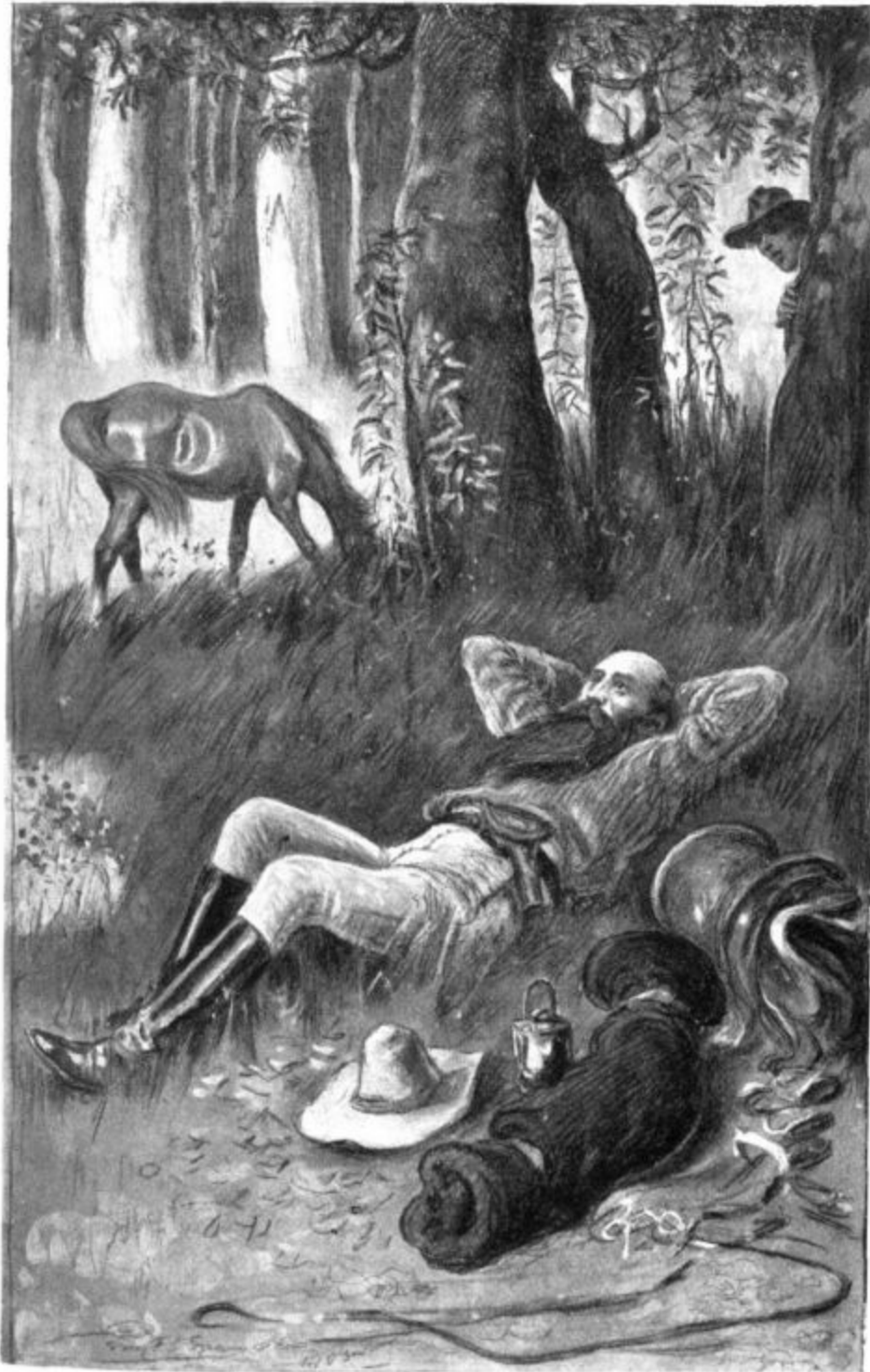
I obeyed him instantly, and yet, boy as I was, I experienced no fear. Some instinct told me that the man who could sing as I had heard that man sing a moment since would not harm one so friendless and miserable as I.

"Are you Thunderbolt?" I asked.

"I am Thunderbolt!" he replied. "Who are you?"

"I am Will Monckton," I answered quietly. "I have been looking for you, sir!"





A Man Bareheaded, who lay among the Grasses. [Page 15

A Man Bareheaded, who lay among the Grasses.

