

John David Hennessy



The Outlaw

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CHAPTER I—THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

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One summer morning, late in the Australian Forties, an assigned servant named John Salathiel had angered his master, one Major Hastings; and the Major was in a towering rage, although it was not really Salathiel's fault. It was hard luck, for in a few weeks the man would have been due for a good conduct ticket.

Sitting upon his big grey mare, stockwhip in hand, the Major, with a flushed face and ugly oath, ordered him to take a six-months-old bull-calf to the butcher's at Maitland, and be back by sundown; or, failing to do so, he would get fifty lashes at the triangles. There and back, the distance was twenty-four miles, and he had to go on foot.

The man listened with his usual deference to the owner of Eurimbla Station; he was taken by surprise; but he flushed crimson when he realized the full meaning of the threat. He knew that the thing couldn't be done. Major Hastings knew it too, even better than Salathiel, and the convict's blood boiled with indignation and dismay. But he was not easily cowed, and Salathiel touched his cap as he turned and walked over to the store, where Bob Brady, the station bookkeeper, stood waiting for him.

It was with some surprise that Brady heard Salathiel, as he drew nearer, cursing the Major bitterly.

"What did the boss want you for, Jack?" he asked sharply

"I have to drive the bull-calf that's bellowing down in the yards to Maitland, and be back by sundown," replied Jack

sullenly.

The bookkeeper looked at Salathiel for a moment, with an amused twinkle in his eye, and then burst into a laugh. The idea of the tall, handsome, steady-going Government man (a convict) who helped him with the station accounts, and for twelve months had scarcely soiled his hands, having a bull-calf in tow on the Maitland road! He liked Salathiel well; but this was too much for his gravity.

"I'll bet you half a crown, Jack," he exclaimed, laughing heartily, "you won't get the brute outside the home-paddock slip-panels inside two hours; those bull-calves, out of the run, are perfect devils to handle alone."

"He says"—and the man's face flushed again with shame—"that if I am not back with the butcher's receipt by sundown, he'll see that I get fifty lashes. Curse him!" he ejaculated, "it's over twelve miles there, isn't it?"

The bookkeeper stopped laughing, for he liked Salathiel. He knew him to be an educated man, altogether different from the common run of convicts; he knew how hardly he had struggled with his lot, and how assiduously he had tried to please the Major; if possible, in some measure to retrieve his lost position. And so this reserved, kindly, self-contained young fellow was to be broken and degraded at the triangles on the whim of a military despot! Brady was rough and hard himself, but his whole soul was moved with indignation at the injustice and brutality of the thing. "Jack," he suddenly exclaimed, "if I were a Government man and had a job given me like that, with such an alternative, I'm hanged if I wouldn't clear out and turn bushranger!"

* * * * *

It was an unhandled, newly-branded calf, fresh from the run, that Salathiel had to take to Maitland. A stout rope was knotted around its thick neck, so that, whatever tricks it might play, it could not well choke. Struggling and bellowing, it took two men to get it out of the yard, and they grinned at each other as they passed the rope over to Jack. It was breakfast time; the boss was not about, so they climbed to the top rail of the stock-yard fence, and pulling out their pipes, sat down to see the performance.

They had not long to wait. The sting of the hot branding iron was fresh on the youngster's tender skin, and bellowing wildly, it leaped upon its hind legs, and then started furiously down the hill.

Salathiel knew something about station life; but this was his first experience with a bull-calf. He held on to the brute, however, pulling hard back upon the rope, and ran as fast as possible. By good luck, the animal headed for the Maitland road slip-panels; but Jack's satisfaction was shortlived, for he tripped over a stump hidden in the long grass and, amid roars of laughter from the stockmen, was thrown flat on his back. Clutching savagely at the rope, he was towed over the grass behind the frightened animal, which, with tail erect and foaming at the mouth, made for a distant fence. It was a ludicrous sight, and the bookkeeper and station hands roared with laughter.

"The fence'll stop 'm," said one of the laughing stockmen, "but he'll never get the devil to Maitland unless he carries him."

"The Boss must have a down on Jack to set him such a job," said another. "I wouldn't undertake it for a tenner."

Salathiel would have given it up then and there but for the threatened flogging, for he was badly cut and bruised and hatless; but he held on, hoping that the frightened animal would soon come to a standstill. When at last it stopped, he got up half-dazed, to find the calf with its head and leg thrust between the panels of the fence, so, hitching the rope round a post, he secured his hat and ran to let down the slip-panels. Fortunately, they were not far distant. Taking them down, he stood for a moment to pull himself together. He had been dragged nearly half a mile and was panting, with the sweat pouring off him. Returning, he found that the calf had backed out of the fence, bellowing, if possible, more loudly than before, and, with protruding tongue, was pulling back upon the rope with the strength of a young horse.

It was a big-boned, vicious scrubber, and Jack knew that kindness would only be thrown away. The brute must be mastered and cowed.

"I haven't been flogged for two years," said Jack aloud, "and I'll get you to Maitland somehow, you devil, or choke you." He shuddered at the recollection of the last flogging, of which he still carried the scars. He, by birth and education a gentleman, who, in his youth, had been full of youthful ambition!

"My God!" he exclaimed, "it were better to die!"

But the sun was fast rising in the heavens, so he set himself to undo the strained rope. Then, by main force, he pulled the stubborn brute upon the road, and tied him to the fence while he put up the slip-panels. Salathiel stood six feet in his socks and was broad in the shoulders; he was on

his mettle; somehow he would do it in the time. He might be able to get a lift in a cart or dray with the animal, so he unfastened the rope from the fence, and cutting a stout stick, prepared to make a fresh start.

The calf, however, had no intention of starting, and in answer to Jack's "Get up," only bellowed and backed closer to the fence, but a smart blow moved him, when he swerved round to horn Salathiel, and in doing so, got the rope entangled in his legs and fell. On Jack approaching to get him up, he suddenly sprang forward, and with a jerk wrenched the rope out of the man's hands.

"You wretch!" ejaculated Jack, as he rushed after him; but the calf was too quick, and raced off into the bush. It was another hour ere, sweating at every pore, he caught the animal. Twice he had lost sight of him completely. It was marvellous that he caught him at all, on foot; but the rope had got fast in the crooked roots of a fallen tree.

They were both winded by this time, and after once more being started in the right direction, the calf moved quietly along for a while. Suddenly, however, it slewed sharply around, and describing a circle, got the rope round Jack's legs and then made a desperate rush back for the station. The man fell, and was dragged a short distance; but his grip of the rope never relaxed.

Now, as every stockman knows, a six-months bull-calf is a terror to drive alone, under any circumstances; but this one seemed possessed of the strength and viciousness of a dozen of its kind, and at last, after four hours had passed, without having covered as many miles, Salathiel, hungry

and wellnigh exhausted with the struggle, tied the animal to a tree and sat down on a fallen log to rest himself and think.

He got his pipe out, for, although he had forgotten to bring food, he had his pipe and tobacco with him. Smoking, he remembered the bookkeeper's hasty words.

"Brady was right," he said to himself, "there's nothing else for it; I'll not go back to be flogged. But it is a brutal shame; I was due for a ticket in less than three months."

The man looked despairingly up at the sun; it was past noon—he could never do it. Then followed further gloomy thoughts, and even tears and broken prayers as he struggled hard with himself, until at last he decided to leave the calf to choke to death, if need be, and make for an outlaw's life in the Liverpool Ranges.

And yet he waited for another hour, hoping that a dray or cart might come along and help him out of his desperate dilemma. He had three long-hoarded one pound notes about him. How willingly would he have given them all to see that calf safely at Maitland!

Presently a gig passed along the road. The driver was a neighbouring squatter, but he only glanced at Jack and the calf suspiciously; he was in a hurry, or he might have pulled up to ask whose calf it was.

Still Jack waited, looking anxiously now up the road, now down. Then he would turn around and glare at the calf, which stood watching for the man's next move, until the whole thing seemed to him like some hideous dream—he could see himself tied again to the triangles, broken and degraded under the brutal lash.

How quiet and inviting, and odorous with the warm smell of gum trees, the great bush was—and yonder were the ranges!

Leaving the calf tied to the tree, Salathiel, sick at heart, went out into the road, and looked carefully up and down for the last time. He could not see or hear any one. Then, like a felon, he slunk off and disappeared.

The inevitable followed, John Joseph Salathiel was gazetted an escaped convict. A month or so afterwards, he, with some others, 'stuck up' the Maitland coach; a constable, who had wounded several bushrangers, was shot dead, and in due course Jack was proclaimed an outlaw.

The story of Jack Salathiel and the bull-calf became a by-word for men to laugh at. It was the last straw, which made a bushranger of a would-be honest man.

CHAPTER II—A TRIAL BY JURY.

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One morning, some two months after the events already recorded, McBurton's Hotel, on the Liverpool Plains Road, was uncommonly busy.

There was to be a dinner and a dance that night at a wealthy squatter's about four miles off, and not a few of the guests had looked in on the way to have a drink and lunch and hear the news, or to do some business with acquaintances, before proceeding to the scene of the festivities.

Sam Grant, the overseer at Eurimbla, was among the early arrivals. He had arranged to meet Ben Baxter, of Mount Hope, about some cattle.

"By-the-way, Sam," said the latter, after their business was transacted and they sat in the commercial-room smoking, with glasses before them, "that Jack Salathiel of yours has not let the grass grow under his feet since he took to the Bush. I hear that he is leader now of one of the gangs that has been playing old boots with them up Walcha and Armidale way."

"Ah!" replied Grant, "it's an awful pity about him; he was a quiet enough chap down at Eurimbla, and a gentlemanly fellow too; I hear that old Walker is in a great fluster. Salathiel sent him a letter last week; quite a formal document, by George!—you know he is a fine scholar—threatening him with summary vengeance if he flogged any more Government men on his place without full inquiry."

"Things are coming to a pretty pass," grumbled Baxter, "these dashed mounted police are not a bit of protection. By-the-way, Sam," he continued, laughing, "I hope you had nothing to do with sending the fellow off with that bull-calf to Maitland. It's no wonder the wretch took to the Bush."

Both men were laughing at this, when the overseer, turning round suddenly, exclaimed: "What's up in the bar?"

Evidently something very unusual was happening. The two men rose to their feet and started to the door.

"Bail up now!" cried a rough voice. They were covered by firearms, and threw up their hands immediately.

Three armed men stood in the doorway, and it was evident that resistance would be useless. Not a shot had been fired so far; but judging by the general commotion, the bushrangers were there in force. Both Baxter and Grant were unarmed, so they quietly went back and sat down again upon their chairs, as directed.

"Whose gang is it?" asked Grant nervously.

"Salathiel's," was the answer, "and understand this, there's no one going to be robbed or shot if you keep quiet. The Captain's here on a bit of lynch law business—there's a dozen of us, and the pub surrounded, so there's going to be no flutter, and it's no use making any fuss."

In the meantime, the leader of the gang had walked coolly into the bar, where quite a dozen men were standing, and putting down a one pound note, called for drinks for himself and his men, and any of the company who might care to join them.

The man serving at the bar hesitated for a moment. He had recognized Salathiel, and hearing the clatter of horses

outside and the general commotion, completely lost his head.

"Now be quick, my friend, if you don't want a bullet through your skull," said Salathiel, pointing a double-barrelled pistol at him, "there's five of them to serve in front, and the others are somewhere at the back."

In dress and general appearance, Salathiel was now a man very different from the cowed and fearful convict with a bull-calf in tow upon the Maitland Road. His bushy brown beard and moustache were carefully trimmed in the fashion of the time. Gold chain and seals hung from the fob of his well-cut riding breeches, and his jack-boots, bright spurs, smart riding jacket and cabbage-tree wide-awake suggested a wealthy sporting squatter or an officer of mounted troops in mufti.

No one in the bar dared lift a hand against the bushrangers, for they knew that it was as much as their lives were worth to do so.

When the barman, white as a sheet from fright, came back from serving the men outside, he and the others were ordered into the commercial-room, where they found all on the premises gathered under guard. There were several well-known men of the district present, as the gang had expected; for the latter knew all about the dinner and the dance.

Having seen that all was right outside, Salathiel walked in and ordered one of his men to place refreshments on the long table. "It's paid for, all on the square, gentlemen," he said. "If any of you wish to do so, help yourselves."

With that he took a more careful look round the room, nodding to Sam Grant and one or two others whom he recognized, including a Maitland publican, and then called out: "Where's McBurton?"

"I don't think he's at home," replied the barman hastily.

"No lies," said Salathiel quietly. "Go and fetch him here, or we'll serve you as we intend, later on, to serve him."

A few minutes afterwards McBurton was dragged in by one of the gang, followed by the barman. They had found him, half-drunk, hiding in the cellar.

"Stand him down at the other end of the table," commanded Salathiel.

Among the company, besides those already mentioned, there were three commercial travellers and the manager of a big northern station—Jack had hoped that his late master might be there too.

"We are going to give this man a fair trial," said the bushranger, addressing the room, "and if we find him guilty, summary punishment. The charges against him are, that twelve months ago he secured the hanging of two of his assigned servants without just cause, and more recently, the brutal flogging of others for trivial offences...What do you say, McBurton: are you guilty or not guilty?"

"For God's sake spare me, Jack Salathiel," groaned the terrified man.

"Ah well, we'll let you plead not guilty, as a matter of form."

"Fitz," he said, addressing one of the gang, "go into the office and bring out McBurton's old magistrate's Bible, that he used to swear oaths on, before he resigned the

Commission of the Peace to start this pub; and you, George," nodding to one of the commercial travellers, "come over here with that order book of yours and take down the depositions, and act generally as clerk of the court. Do you hear?" he called out roughly, picking up his pistol from the table when George hesitated.

"All right, Salathiel; put down your shooting iron," said the commercial man, who was a representative of a big Sydney firm. "Notice, gentlemen," he continued, addressing the company somewhat nervously, "I am acting on compulsion."

Six men, including Baxter, Grant, a commercial, and the Maitland publican, were then gravely sworn on McBurton's Bible, to give a true verdict according to the evidence; and Salathiel called one of his men as first witness for the prosecution. He made him kiss the Book with due formality.

The man was an escaped convict, who, until recently, had been in service on a large selection which McBurton owned. He swore to having been an eyewitness of the hanging of his fellow servants in a paddock, only a few yards from the main road. After frightful ill-usage and provocation, they had attempted McBurton's life.

"How many times were these men flogged by the prisoner's orders before they were executed?" asked Salathiel.

"Mostly every month," replied the witness.

McBurton glared across the table at his old servant, and was heard to mutter something.

"Silence in court!" thundered Salathiel, pointing his double-barrelled pistol at the prisoner. "I won't have the

witnesses intimidated. Another word until you are called upon to speak, and I will deal with you myself."

At this, the company behind and nearest to the prisoner hurriedly pushed themselves farther out of the way.

Two other witnesses from the gang then gave evidence on oath, each one corroborating the charges of cruelty, of which many instances were cited.

"Now, what have you to say for yourself, prisoner, in reply to these charges?" said Salathiel harshly. "If you have any witnesses, we'll have them called."

The trembling, bloated wretch, overbearing and cruel as he was, proved a cur at heart. He tottered half fainting with fright at the end of the table, and held the edge of it with his hands; the sweat stood in beads upon his face; but he made no reply. He had no witnesses to call. His revolting cruelty to his assigned servants was the talk of the countryside. He shook his head, but made no answer. His expectation, and that of every man in the room, excepting the gang, was that he would be shot in his tracks as he stood at the end of the table.

"Gentlemen of the Jury," said Salathiel, turning sternly around to the men he had sworn to return a true verdict. "You have heard the evidence; the prisoner at the bar was, like many others, transported here from the old country. What his crimes may have been I don't know. Here he successfully worked himself into the favour of the authorities, until, ultimately, through his wealth, or his cunning, or his villainy, he was made a magistrate—that in itself was illegal, as you all know—but, being on the Commission, it only gave him opportunity for more brutality.

He has shown no pity for the men, whose hard lot he himself well knows. To agonizing appeals for mercy from those who were equally his fellows in the sight of God, he has shown no pity. You have heard how he has flogged fainting women with his own hand, when the Government flogger refused to proceed further. Several men have died as the result of floggings by his instructions; two of his victims he has hanged; and dozens have, in various ways, been brutally ill-treated by him. Bad as some of them have been, they are largely what his devilish cruelty made them. You are on your oaths, gentlemen, to do justice between man and man; there is no need for you to retire from the court. I will give you five minutes, by that clock, to consider your verdict. Is the prisoner guilty or not guilty of the charges alleged against him?"

On this Salathiel sat down, somewhat flushed, while a silence as of death fell on the company.

After they had listened to the ticking of the clock for a few minutes, the bushranger looked sternly at the jury and lifted his weapon significantly. It was quite enough; they at once put their heads together and conferred in whispers. It was clear that the gang would stand no trifling.

A moment afterwards the commercial traveller stood up. "Jack Salathiel," said he, "we recommend the prisoner to the mercy of the Court."

"Thank you, gentlemen," said the bushranger, dryly bowing his head to them.

"Prisoner at the bar," he said sternly, looking over at McBurton, "you are found guilty by the jury, although they have not exactly said so; but they recommend you to mercy.

Probably you do not know what that means; but I will explain. Had you been found guilty only, you would have been taken out of this court and hanged under your own signboard as a warning to other brutes and murderers; but in view of the jury having recommended you to mercy, the sentence of the Court is that you be stripped and tied under your signboard in full view of the public and receive fifty lashes, well laid on."

Every one passing along the Liverpool Plains Road that afternoon was bailed up to see the flogging, and Salathiel and the gang took good care that the lash (a cat-o'-nine-tails found in McBurton's own office) was properly applied.

McBurton fainted after the thirtieth stroke, so Salathiel ordered him to be cut down, and handed him over, stripped and bleeding as he was, to his wife and daughter.

Although, when it heard of this outrage, the whole Colony laughed in its sleeve and chuckled over McBurton's well-deserved punishment, Salathiel and his gang knew that if anything were likely to stir up the police to unwonted activity, it was the flogging of a one-time magistrate. It was a reflection, also, upon the administration of Justice's justice in the Colony.

The night closed in with a thunderstorm and heavy rain, and Salathiel decided that, under cover of the storm, his gang should scatter for a few weeks. Some of the men grumbled that they had not been allowed to ease the publican and his guests of their loose cash and jewellery; but Salathiel told them that he would not spoil a good thing and explained to them that their moderation would stagger the authorities, and make them not a few friends.

Then he informed them that, as their wants for the time being were well supplied (they had just before 'stuck up' a couple of store-teams), he intended to take himself off south for a month or so, where he had a good thing on. He would meet them when matters had quietened down, at their old rendezvous in the Liverpool Ranges.

CHAPTER III—BETSY CAREY RIDES INTO THE STORY

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At the time of this narrative, Poddy Carey was a settler in one of the fertile valleys of the south coast of New South Wales. The man had been a soldier, and this was a Government grant of three hundred acres, somewhat inconveniently situated near a rocky height, known as Bailey's Bluff, which towered in solitary grandeur above the whole district.

The summit was bare, and also the eastern front, which overlooked the distant Pacific Ocean. On the other three sides it was thickly timbered, the trees, in places, seeming to spring out of the very rock. From the valley they looked little more than bushes, but when near the summit they were found to be good-sized trees. It was a spot to which, in those days, few climbed for pleasure, although they might have done so, for the view of the far off Pacific and long stretch of coast line was unsurpassed even in that romantic district. Landward was a panorama of rural scenery, with occasional glimpses of a broad river and wooded hills, down the sides of which running waters flashed here and there, in the sunlight, on their precipitous courses to broad valleys, where fat cattle fed contentedly and the fruits of a primitive husbandry rewarded the labourer's toil.

Things have altered since then, but at the time of this story a quieter or more secluded place, within easy reach of Sydney, could scarcely have been found. Mails were

received only at rare intervals; while railway travelling and telegraph messages were unknown.

The only road from the Sydney side to Poddy Carey's farm was by a steep bridle track around the Bluff.

A little before noon one sweltering hot day, a horseman might have been seen making his way up the track which led in the direction of this farm. The trees were less dense upon the lower portion of the ascent, which was thickly bestrewn with boulders.

"Steady, Fleetfoot, old man! I think I will walk a bit here!" exclaimed the traveller, pulling up the thorough-bred and swinging himself off the saddle.

He turned round and glanced down the steep hillside as he dropped the reins upon the sweating neck of the horse. It would have been a serious matter for either horse or rider to stumble and roll over just there. They were about half-way up, and it was already a fearful descent to look down upon. And yet, as the man trod carefully along, closely followed by his horse, his experienced eye noted the recent tracks of cattle and pigs, as well as of horses.

"I've not lost my way, that's certain," he said aloud; "but what a road to lead to a farm! How on earth can they get butter and eggs and poultry to market, and drive pigs over such a place as this? I suppose the descent is easier on the other side; the track can't exactly cross the summit, so there must be some way round higher up."

At this he cast his eyes through an opening in the trees toward the bald summit which towered above him. Then for a full half-minute he stood motionless.

"Hanged if there isn't a petticoat up there!" he said, "one of Poddy Carey's daughters looking out for Mr. Bennett, I suppose. I remember they told me there would be three girls and two boys to attend school from this selection." Then he laughed, and laughed again, as he trudged up the steep track, still closely followed by his well-trained steed.

Another quarter of a mile brought him to what at first sight seemed a solid wall of rock, from the side of which a substantial fence stretched out to form a wing for fully thirty yards. It had evidently been set up to assist in driving cattle and other animals through some narrow opening.

"Pig proof too!" he ejaculated, examining the fence more closely, with evident approval. Here he re-mounted, and following the beaten track, which was now smoother and broader, he soon came upon another wing of fencing, which turned the traveller abruptly around a jagged corner, when he found himself inside a large natural enclosure, walled in by perpendicular rocks.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed, looking around: "room to muster a couple of hundred head," and then an involuntary exclamation of surprise burst from him, for riding towards him in this strange place, on a wicked-looking piebald pony, came a fair young girl about seventeen years of age, who seemed to have taken in at a glance both Fleetfoot and his rider.

"I suppose you are Mr. Bennett, the new teacher?" she said, as their eyes met. "I'm to be one of your scholars. I'm Betsy Carey," and with that she moved her pony nearer and held out her hand.

"I'm sure I am very pleased to meet you, Miss Carey," he said, taking the outstretched hand in a cordial grip, "and I shall be very glad to have you for a pupil."

"I'm not so sure about that," answered the girl with a pleasant laugh, "we have counted up that there will be fifteen grown-up girls among your scholars in the new school; and some of them threaten to——" At this she stopped suddenly, as though fearful of betraying a confidence.

"I may count, however, upon your assistance and good example. Miss Carey," replied the new teacher, gravely.

"I don't know so much about that," said the maiden demurely; "you see, mother has taught me all that I know, and I've never been to school before; besides, they all say I'm a bit of a limb, and I shall have ten cows to milk before coming to school, and Loiterer here plays up a bit sometimes, and won't be caught, and that always puts me out; so you see, I may not always be of much assistance to you, nor a good example either."

All this was said with the utmost seriousness and frankness of manner, so much so that the teacher could not repress a smile.

"We heard you were coming over, and mother's expecting you to dinner," the girl chattered away; "and there's dumplings, so we had better be quick, or they may be spoiled. By the way, Mr. Bennett, as I'm to be your scholar, you might as well start and call me Betsy; and mother told me to caution you not to take particular notice of father when he swears. It's his way; you may reform him afterwards, when you get to know him better; but he means

no harm, and we are all used to it; you know the men do swear a good bit about here."

By this time they had emerged from the enclosure by a somewhat similar opening in the rock on the other side, and the teacher seemed to find it difficult to maintain any sustained conversation with his new acquaintance. Loiterer altogether belied his name, and scrambled along the steep pathway, which now dropped abruptly towards the bed of a shallow stream, and stepped over stones and water-worn ruts and projecting roots of trees, as nimbly as might a goat or cat.

After fording the river, on a pebbly bottom, they cantered across some fertile flats, toward the rising ground upon which the house and rough farm buildings were situated. Loiterer champed his bit and tossed his head meanwhile, in sundry ways making it plain that he and his mistress were used to a little faster travelling, but a slow canter was the quickest pace at which the seemingly city-bred school-teacher cared to travel.

"I'm afraid those dumplings will be heavy," grumbled Betsy, looking up at the sun to note the time as they neared the house. "And, Mr. Bennett," she continued, almost in the same breath, as she bent over her pony and took down a top slip-rail, preparatory to jumping across the two lower ones, "don't expect to see me at school when it rains heavily, for the creek comes down a banker in no time, and there's a good bit to do then about the place; besides, Loiterer isn't a very strong swimmer in a flood."

"My word!" ejaculated the mischievous girl to herself. She had jumped Loiterer over the slip-rails, and then had pulled

round to see how the school-teacher was coming along, laughing to herself, as she pictured him fumbling to take down the two remaining slip-rails, to walk his horse through; but instead, to her surprise, the city-bred man, as she supposed him, cleared the lower rails with the ease of an accomplished rough-rider, and then wheeled his horse round and bent over in the saddle to re-place the rail which she had taken down, as though it were the most ordinary thing to do.

At this, the teacher went up considerably in Betsy's estimation, especially as she made some mental notes upon the way he sat in the saddle and managed his horse, which stood side-on to the fence, as steady as a house, while he re-adjusted the rail. It was not exactly a showy animal he rode; but the girl knew the good points of a horse almost as well as her father, and her curiosity was piqued as to how a man who taught school should ride so well and possess so valuable a bit of horse-flesh.

However, as her companion rode up and overtook her, he might have been heard cursing his stupidity under his breath in unscholarly language for not being more on his guard. He had no wish to handicap himself at the start by arousing unnecessary curiosity as to his antecedents.

Whatever she may have thought, the girl made no remark; and they rode up together to the verandah of the house, where Mrs. Carey—one of those women 'whose price is above rubies'—stood waiting to welcome the visitor.

CHAPTER IV—SALATHIEL PERSONATES A SCHOOL-TEACHER

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The clanging of a bullock bell announced to the family that the teacher had arrived and dinner was ready. As may be imagined, to have an educated stranger from Sydney to dinner at the Careys' was not an everyday occurrence, and the visit of the new teacher had been a matter of no little concern to them all.

Poddy Carey was glad to have his boys and girls taught, but he hated fuss. His wife, however, was a woman whose superior intelligence had largely assisted in securing a teacher for the district, and she had prepared for his visit with a foresight worthy of herself and the occasion.

The long dinner table was loaded with savoury viands, a chair stood at either end for the heads of the household, and one for the school-master, with two long forms to accommodate the rest of the family.

"That's Bob, mister," said Poddy Carey, as a tall young man came in and, with some bashfulness, took his place at the table. Pat and Alice and Madge and Judy, and others to the number of nine, were similarly introduced to the teacher's notice, and the meal was begun without further formality.

The visitor having made a few remarks about the heat of the day and want of rain in the district, settled down to enjoy his dinner, and for a time there was a somewhat awkward silence, broken only by the clash of knives and

forks and occasional clatter of tea-cups, as they were copiously replenished by Betsy lower down the table.

Mrs. Carey was naturally quiet and talked but little, but she kept a hospitable eye on the teacher's plate, to make good any remissness on the part of her big husband; but at the same time, unobserved, she watched his face and wondered, as a woman will, over a score of things regarding his personality and propensities.

"I suppose he drinks a bit," she thought to herself, "or they would not have let so good-looking a man come down to an out-of-the-way place like this. I wonder how he got that scar on his forehead; you can see it now he has removed his hat. He looks like a married man, or he would not be so neat and tidy with his clothes; but then, he's too clever and gentlemanly for any of our girls. What white teeth he has! He is a nice man by the look and talk of him. I'll answer for it that brazen Kitty Conroy will be making up to him. I wish he would talk a bit about Sydney and himself. I'll ask him presently what schools he has taught and whether he has been long in the Colony. I'm rather sorry he's not boarding with us—he might have taught Jim and Pat a bit at night—but we're too far away. He looks an obliging, pleasant-tempered man, and is evidently well-bred." And then the good woman sighed, as she thought of the rough work and hard and uncouth surroundings of her married life, and for a moment compared them with earlier days when she was a girl, in the pleasant home of her parents in Herefordshire.

Mrs. Jim Carey was well liked and respected by all the neighbours. She had kept her husband straight, and her

knowledge and sagacity and kindly nature and persevering industry had largely aided his success in life. The sobriquet, which first attached itself to him when he used to ride through the district buying up poddy calves and weaklings and an occasional cow or bullock without a brand, still stuck; but he was now a comparatively well-to-do man. He might have been a magistrate, and had Government men at his beck and call to work and flog; but Mrs. Carey had influenced her husband and indeed almost all the neighbourhood, to keep the district clear of convict labour. "Things are bad enough for a mother with five girls to rear, without that," she would say. And rough and hard as big Jim was, he agreed with her.

"How do you like the school-house we have put up?" asked Mrs. Carey, presently.

"It's very comfortable and central," replied the teacher.

"A bit out of the way, though, isn't it, schoolmaster?" said big Jim, passing his cup down for more tea.

"No, I don't think so," said the teacher.

"Been better more to this way," persisted Poddy. "I wanted it put nearer the south side of the creek, so that you might have boarded with the Mitchells. You may thank my Missis there for the shed for the horses and the skillion to your shanty. I drew the slabs for the school with my bullocks, and, as there were a few over, got the chaps to use 'em up in the lean-to and sheds. I see you've got a dashed fine horse. Chaps like you don't often get hold of thoroughbreds; if you'd been a stranger like, and not a teacher, we should have reckoned that you might have come by it on the cross."

The whole family laughed at this as a good joke, "Fancy," whispered Alice to Madge, "a schoolmaster coming by anything on the cross!"

The teacher laughed with the rest; but Mrs. Carey was annoyed with her husband, for she was watching her visitor closely when the question was put to him and thought he gave a start, as though he resented it. However, the laugh seemed to have broken through the teacher's reserve, and put them all upon a more friendly footing, and by the time a big pudding was brought in by Madge, with a dish of cream, Mr. Bennett was chatting away pleasantly with his future pupils and their parents.

"I suppose you have taught school in several places before in the Colony?" queried Mrs. Carey.

The teacher hesitated a moment, and then replied: "No, not in a district or town school in New South Wales, Mrs. Carey."

"I thought I heard that you were a teacher at Patrick's Plains or Maitland?" replied the good woman, somewhat discomposed.

"I know those towns," said Bennett quietly, "and have taught there; but not in any of the town schools."

"Ah," interjected Big Jim, standing up, "you've been schoolmaster on some of the stations! Come outside, mister, and smoke a pipe of 'bacca on the veranda."

Mrs. Carey presently came out with a chair and sat on the veranda with the men, knitting in hand; for she was never idle, and when the washing up was done, the three elder girls joined them, Alice seating herself on the steps with Madge, and Betsy on the verandah floor, on the other