**CHAPTER I**

Introducing Archer, his employer, and persecutor.

Convict fare.

A glorious feast.

The cause of trouble.

In 1831, the 25-year old William Archer was assigned to work for William Sparke of Hexham on the Hunter River. Sparke was a very poor man, having only a 2000-acre grant from which to make a living; this, though now worth a princely fortune, was in those days a miserable source of income.

Sparke had several servants and was scarcely ever able to provide them with the Government regulation rations. It was nothing unusual for his labourers to be without food for a couple of days. So wishing to make a few pounds, he rented Archer to James Hunter, who was at that time superintendent for Mr. Walter Scott, of Ash Island, to teach his (Scott’s) men how to split timber and erect fences.

Archer was allowed to choose one man as his mate, and their weekly task was to split 350 rails; for his services Sparke received 8s. per hundred for all they turned out. Archer made it a regular practice to go home to Sparke’s place once a week, usually on Saturday night. Then he would return to his work on Monday.

About this time Hunter bought a piece of ground from Sparke, on the mainland, and immediately opposite the upper part of Ash Island, for the purpose of forming a butchering establishment to supply Newcastle with beef. He bought fat cattle from Robert and Elinus Scott of Glendon. Hunter was in the habit of travelling up and down to the station alone, and repeatedly reported to the Newcastle police that he had been fired at by bushrangers. The police had been pestered with this news so often without finding anything in the shape of bushrangers, that they ignored the reports which were still repeatedly made, and as often, disregarded.

As times were hard, and money scarce, Hunter could not afford to erect paddocks for his cattle, so he hired a boy to keep an eye on them. This lad used to stay at the same hut occupied by Archer and his mates at Hexham. His duty was to watch the road in front of the place along which the cattle would have to pass to get back to the station.

One day, he came in and reported to Hunter that Sparke’s men had killed either a sheep or a calf, as he had seen Archer frying some of it.

The facts were as follows: the men were in a state of semi-starvation, and, during Archer’s absence, one of them caught a calf, which was at once killed and dressed, and on his return on Saturday afternoon he found the carcass hanging up in the sleeping room of the hut, and no mine of colossal wealth could possibly have been more welcome.

Archer began at once to inspect the meat. He dissected a lot of chops, which were soon on the fire and frying with music sweeter than the sound of a harp in the hands of a goddess. While sitting by the fire, watching with longing eyes and anticipation for the chops to cook, the boy entered the hut unobserved and unexpected, and, of course, saw the unusual meal in course of preparation. He made no remark but left the place and went straight to his master with the tale; of course the men did not know the boy had laid the information.

On Saturday night and during Sunday the unfortunates had a glorious feast on the fast disappearing carcass, which was devoured with considerable gusto, and little thought of future consequences. Monday morning came, and Archer, as usual, went back to work, and immediately after he landed on the island, received the startling news that Hunter had gone to Newcastle to get warrants for them for killing the calf.

On hearing this Archer went straight to Mrs. Hunter and asked her to let him have the boat to go to Newcastle to see if it could not be settled. But she refused to lend him the boat because her husband had strictly forbidden her to do so. They both feared he would return and warn the other men.

But this did not stop Archer. He stripped off, and tying his clothes in a bundle, which he placed on his head, swam across the river, which, at that part, is some 400 yards wide, and infested with sharks. Getting safely over, he made speedy tracks to the hut, and, delivering the unwelcome news, advised them to at once destroy all traces of the calf and prepare for the worst. Self preservation, the first law of nature, immediately prompted the men to obey, and within half an hour they had everything burnt or planted, and considered themselves secure.

Here it will be necessary to say that according to the assigned convict regulations any man having twelve convicts was empowered to appoint one of them a Farm Constable. Based on this this regulation, Hunter had appointed one of his men to the coveted position.

On Monday afternoon, he went over to the camp with his Constable and asked George Tullock, Sparke’s overseer, whether Archer was in the camp. He said ‘yes’ and was then told, in confidence, that he (Hunter) had come to take him and his other mates to a trial for cattle-stealing. He then asked him to entice Archer into his hut so that he could get the handcuffs on him, threatening Tullock at the same time that if he did not do so he would report him as an accomplice and accessory after the fact.

He was going, he said, to the hut of a man named Flannery, which was about three hundred yards away, to get the handcuffs, and that he would expect him to have Archer in the hut and ready to capture by the time he got back. Dreading the consequences of disobeying, Tullock very reluctantly told Archer he wished him to go down into his hut as he had a new blanket to give him. Wondering at the unexpected philanthropy of the man, yet never dreaming of treachery, Archer went down at once to the overseer’s quarters, which was an ordinary slab hut of two rooms, one of which was used as a kitchen, dining room, and parlor combined, the other as a bed and store room.

In the first combination apartment was a large fireplace, like those usually found in the colony at the present time in the bush; it was built of slabs, and was eight or nine feet wide, and lined inside with stones for a couple or three feet up the sides to protect the slabs from fire. In the room close to the fireplace a cask was standing which was used for steeping the seed wheat in a mixture of brine and lime before sowing, as an antidote for rust. It was a cold, wintry day, and a bright cheerful fire was burning as Archer walked in and seated himself on the corner of a stone in the fireplace, where we will pause to describe him as ‘he sits calmly looking into the fire, and soliloquising as to his ultimate chances of freedom. Though only just turned twenty-five, hard work, and still hard living, had made him look at least five years older. He is a thick-set, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, muscular man, about five feet ten inches high, with an open, pleasant countenance, clean shaved face, blue eyes, and a broad intellectually shaped forehead, with glossy brown hair of which he was evidently proud, judging by the manner in which it was kept. In all he was a man who would be conspicuous amongst his fellows in any sphere of life; one to be trusted till death as a friend, yet dreaded and shunned as an enemy, fearless and brave,

A mighty man is he

With large and sinewy hands

And the muscles on his brawny arms

Are strong as iron bands.

He had not been long sitting as I have described him when the Farm Constable came in and stood leaning with his back against the cask, in the middle of the room. Being an intimate friend of Archer’s, he began to tell him, in a whisper, what was coming, when the door suddenly opened, and Hunter, carrying a pair of handcuffs, stepped into the room followed by Tullock.

Casting a contemptuous glance at Archer, he ordered the constable to put the handcuffs on him. That worthy, well knowing with whom he had to deal, still stood with his arms folded by the cask, as immovable as a statue. Stamping his foot with rage, and calling the constable an arrant coward, Hunter advanced towards the fireplace to arrest Archer himself; when almost within arm's length his courage appeared to fail him, and he stood as though hesitating.

Archer now looked up for the first time, and setting his eyes calmly and steadfastly on Hunter, said, without a tremor in his voice, “You must show me your authority before I allow you to handcuff me. If I have done anything wrong my master is the man to take me, not you, sir; and, as sure as the heavens are above me, if you dare to put your hands on me I will make a backlog of you, and roast you alive.”

(*To be Continued.*)