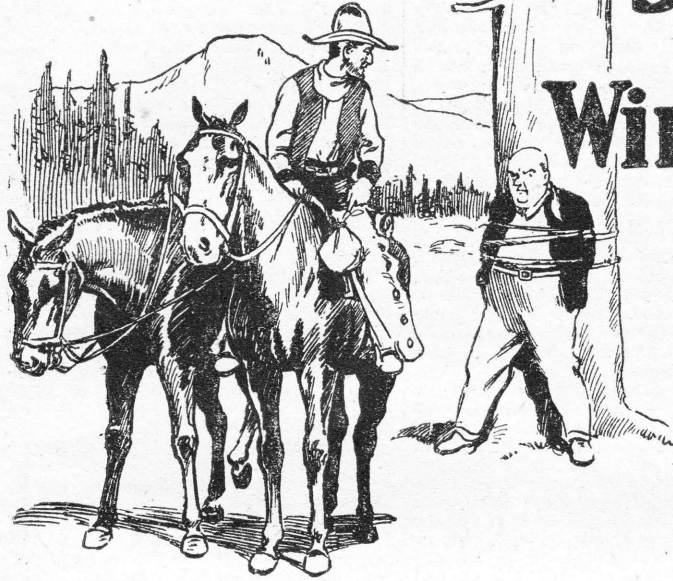


A RANCH COOK'S LUCK!

In amazing circumstances Baldy, the cook of the Windy River Ranch, hears that he is heir to a title and fortune! Has his wonderful dream come true at last?

Sir Baldy, of Windy River!



A SPLENDID, LONG COMPLETE
TALE OF JIMMY SILVER & CO.,
OF ROOKWOOD, OUT WEST.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

(Author of the topping story of the Rookwood Chums
just starting in the "GEM".)

THE FIRST CHAPTER. A Dreamer of Dreams!

BALDY, the cook, laid down his newspaper on his fat knees, and, leaning back against the tree-trunk, stared across the shining waters of the Windy River.

There was a sad and wistful expression on Baldy's fat face.

It was a hot afternoon in the Canadian summer. Baldy, the cook, was in his shirt-sleeves, and there was perspiration on his plump brow. His Stetson hat lay in the grass beside him, and the sunshine glistened on the bald spot on his head.

Really, Baldy ought to have been in the ranch cookhouse just then, getting supper ready for the hungry cowpunchers. But Baldy was thinking about other and more important matters, and he had forgotten both supper and cowpunchers. It was Baldy's fixed belief that he was wasted at Windy River, and that Nature had intended him for something far more imposing than a ranch cook. And never had that seemed to Baldy so certain as it seemed this warm afternoon as he rested under the shade of the trees by the Windy River, with the tangled thicket behind him and the shining waters flowing before his wistful eyes.

Jimmy Silver & Co., sauntering along the riverside, on their way to the ranch, sighted Baldy under the trees, and stopped to speak to him. The chums of Rookwood rather liked Baldy, though they regarded him as almost every kind of an ass—as all the Windy River outfit did. Baldy was a good cook. It was the excellence of his cookery that had saved him more than once from being "fired" from Windy River. But he was good at nothing else, and his belief that he had a soul above cookery only provoked smiles among the ranch-hands. "Hallo, old fat bird!" said Arthur Edward Lovell genially. "Taking a rest?"

Baldy grunted.

"Ain't a galoot entitled to a rest?" he demanded. "I reckon I do twice the work of anybody else at Windy River!"

"Then you're a bit out in your reckoning," grinned Lovell. "Seems to me an easy job, barging about the cookhouse."

Another grunt from Baldy.

"Blow the cookhouse!" he said. "I guess I'm fed-up with the cookhouse, and Windy River, too. I guess I've thought more'n once of vamoosing the ranch. There ain't no scope here for a man of my abilities!"

"You're a jolly good cook, old man!" said Jimmy Silver soothingly. "All the outfit say you're the best cook in Alberta."

"What do I care about cooking?" demanded Baldy. "That ain't really my holt at all. I've just been reading in the paper about a galoot who—"

Baldy broke off with a deep sigh.

"Why, what's the trouble now?" asked Raby.

"Some pilgrims have all the luck," said Baldy. "Hyer's a paragraph in the paper about a man who came into a title and a fortune, after putting in half his life on a ranch in Texas, and never knowing luck was coming his way. Makes a galoot sick!"

"Well, we can't all come into titles and fortunes," remarked Newcome. "If everybody was somebody, then nobody would be anybody, as somebody or other puts it."

"There's a serial story in this paper, too," said Baldy. "All about a galoot whose birth was wrapped in mystery, and who turned out to be a duke."

"Those things only happen in serial stories in newspapers," remarked Jimmy Silver regretfully. "What a pity they happen nowhere else."

"They might," said Baldy. Jimmy Silver & Co. smiled. They knew the romantic turn of Baldy's mind.

Nothing could have been more unromantic than the exterior of Baldy

Bubbin. But a fellow's exterior does not always give a clue to the interior.

Outwardly, Baldy was a fat and rather greasy cook. Nobody would have taken him for anything else—on appearances.

Inwardly, he was quite a different being.

Baldy was romantic to his fat fingertips. He had the nature of a poet.

He spent a great deal of his money on "dime" novels, and a great deal of his time in day-dreams, from which the demands of hungry cowpunchers for meals dragged him back to common earth again, as it were.

Baldy loved to picture himself as his favourite characters in thrilling fiction. Sometimes he was a multi-millionaire, throwing with a careless hand ten-dollar tips on all sides. Sometimes he was the missing heir to an ancient title and estate in the Old Country, and he had even imagined the scene when the white-haired old family solicitor arrived at the cookhouse at Windy River and acquainted him with the fact that his father, the duke, pined for his presence in the ancestral hall.

From such pleasures of the imagination it was simply brutal to be roused by the powerful voice of Pete Peters demanding to know why supper wasn't ready for the outfit.

With a mental wrench on such occasions, Baldy would drop his dukedom and take up his cookery again.

"They might!" repeated Baldy. "I could tell you something if I liked."

"Go it!" grinned Lovell. "Tell us about the beautiful girl you rescued from drowning in the Red Deer River. I like that yarn. You tell it sometimes almost as if you believed it yourself."

Snort from Baldy. It was a weakness of Baldy's that he allowed his tongue to follow his imagination. His soaring spirit was not satisfied with facts.

"I dare say you'd be surprised to hear that there's a secret about my birth!" he said half defiantly.

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"Oh, my hat!" said Lovell.

"Go it!" said Raby. "We're not surprised at all."

"It's a fact," said Baldy doggedly. "My birth is wrapped in mystery, just like that of the galoot I've been reading about. I was brought up by old Silas Bubbin in his cabin on the Saskatchewan River. He was supposed to be my father."

"Only supposed to be?" asked Jimmy Silver, trying to keep grave.

"That's it! One night a mysterious stranger, mounted on a black horse, rode up to the backwoods cabin. He carried a bundle in his arms. In that bundle was an infant of two years, whose delicate features and patrician beauty showed him to be of noble descent. And that infant," said Baldy impressively, "was me."

Jimmy Silver & Co. stared at Baldy Bubbin. They had intended to keep grave while Baldy ran off his latest imaginative canter, evidently derived from the newspaper serial he had just absorbed. But his description of himself as the possessor of delicate features and patrician beauty was too much for their gravity. The Rookwood juniors burst into a sudden and irrepressible roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baldy's story broke off suddenly.

"What are you cackling at?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"You pesky young jays—"

"Sorry!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "But—ha, ha, ha!—are you quite sure about the beauty, old man?"

"Oh, git, do!" growled Baldy Bubbin. "What are you bothering a man for when he's taking a well-earned rest? Git!"

Jimmy Silver & Co., still chuckling, "got," as Baldy requested. Baldy, the cook, frowned after them, and then picked up his newspaper again. If romance persisted in keeping out of his life, he could at least find it in a newspaper serial, and that was better than nothing. And Baldy buried himself in the thrilling serial, till a powerful voice, ringing along the bank of the Windy River, roused him again.

"Where's that Baldy? Where's that thundering cook? Bu'st my boots if I won't hide him with a quirt for having supper late again! Where the thunder is that darned cook?"

It was the voice of Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch. And once more poor Baldy had to bid farewell to missing heirs and beauteous maidens, and realise that he was, in actual fact, a ranch cook, and in considerable danger of feeling the impact of a heavy boot upon his greasy trousers.

Baldy, the cook, picked himself up and rolled away with a discontented grunt, and, quite unknown to him, a grinning face looked round the trunk of the big tree under which Baldy had been sitting, and watched him till he disappeared.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Great News for Baldy!

PEDLAR SMITH was taking a rest.

He needed it.

It was by sheer chance that Mr. Smith had chosen to lean the back of his shabby old coat against the trunk of the same tree selected by Baldy Bubbin. It was a big tree, with large and shady branches, through which rays of sunlight filtered here and there. The trunk was many feet in girth.

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Baldy Bubbin, when he came along from the ranch, sat on the riverward side of the big tree, without the slightest suspicion that a wearier traveller was already resting against the trunk on the other side amid the thickets.

Pedlar Smith had his own reasons—good reasons—for being on the side where the thickets screened him from view.

Mr. Smith was unlike the well-known gentleman who did good by stealth and blushed to find it fame. Mr. Smith generally did evil by stealth, but he was quite anxious to avoid finding it fame.

He was a pedlar by profession. In his pack he carried watches that wouldn't go, alarm-clocks that would not have alarmed a canary, packets of garden seeds warranted never to germinate, bottles of patent medicine with imposing labels that would, according to the labels, cure all the ills to which flesh is heir. These medicines cost Mr. Smith the price of the bottle and labels. The medicines he made himself from the nearest river or pool, adding a little ink and a flavouring of spirits to give the stuff a tone.

Sometimes Mr. Smith did quite a good trade, for he had an eloquent tongue for street-corner addresses. He could, as he himself described it, talk the hind leg off a mule. Sometimes he sold out his whole stock in some backwoods camp or lumber town, and retired from the scene with an empty pack and a full pocket, after which he would "laze" for weeks till his money was all gone upon the potent fire-water.

When he did bad trade, Mr. Smith had a way of helping himself to loose chickens, and even to a stray horse now and then. Moreover, he was an expert with pea-and-thimble, and in a poker game he could deal from the bottom of the pack with ease and grace.

In fact, Pedlar Smith had many gifts, every one of which was likely to land him in the penitentiary at any moment.

His profession made it necessary for him to keep up a knowledge of geography. He had a natural objection to dropping into a town where he had traded on a previous occasion. Men to whom he had sold corn cures and specifics for rheumatism, and razors that would not cut, and seeds that would not grow, and watches that ticked only for an hour or so after they were sold—such buyers were naturally anxious to see Mr. Smith again and talk to him. But Mr. Smith had no desire whatever to see them.

But it sometimes happened that, by error, he "struck" the same town again, and on such occasions trouble resulted.

Hence Mr. Smith's present state of disrepair.

That day he had arrived at the township of Mosquito, on the Windy River, forgetful of the fact that a year before he had done a brisk trade in Mosquito. And wherever Mr. Smith had a brisk trade he was well remembered.

The Mosquito men were glad to see him.

They recognised Mr. Smith, with his red face, his sly and shifty eyes, and his pack; and before Mr. Smith could realise that he had dropped into a hornet's nest, they had gathered round him to talk to him.

Their talk was loud and emphatic, Mr. Smith would not have minded that so much, but they proceeded from words to deeds. In Main Street, Mosquito, Mr. Smith was kicked, hard,

by cowboy boots, and he was "hid" with a lariat. His pack was emptied into the Windy River, and Mr. Smith was compelled to swallow the contents of at least a dozen bottles of his own medicine.

Then he was mounted upon a rail and ridden out of Mosquito, and dumped on the hard, unsympathetic prairie. The Mosquito men warned him that if he was seen again in that vicinity he would be shot at sight. And Mr. Smith, who desired anything but to be seen again in that vicinity, fled as soon as he was free, and did not stop till his breath quite failed him.

Then he crept into the thickets to rest, feeling quite used-up, and sadly in need of repair, too tired even to wonder where his next meal was coming from.

And so it happened that Mr. Smith was dozing on one side of the big tree, while Baldy, the cook, was taking his well-earned rest on the other side, and talking to the Rookwood juniors.

Mr. Smith had been half-asleep, but the sound of voices had roused him. He listened to the talk between Baldy and the juniors, and grinned. Mr. Smith had a sense of humour, and he found Baldy entertaining.

When Pete Peters' powerful voice called the fat cook away, Mr. Smith looked round at him as he went, still grinning.

"Gee-whiz!" murmured Mr. Smith. "What a jay! I guess if I had any of my goods left, that's the kind of jay I'd love to meet."

Mr. Smith sighed.

His pack was at the bottom of the Windy River, hard by Mosquito town, and he had nothing left to sell.

And he was conscious that he was getting hungry.

He was thirsty, too, but he was used to that. A deep and unquenchable thirst had accompanied Mr. Smith throughout his career.

In his present circumstances, footsore and weary, with the night coming on, it was natural that Mr. Smith should ponder on the subject of Baldy Bubbin. Baldy was evidently a "jay" of the first water, the kind of duffer that Mr. Smith was always pleased to meet. It was hard lines if the sly and shifty Mr. Smith could not "touch" such a "chump" for at least a meal, if not a lodging for the night.

Baldy was cook at the neighbouring ranch, as Pedlar Smith had learned from what he had overheard. Mr. Smith thought of the cookhouse, and his mouth watered. A cosy corner in the cookhouse, with a square meal before him, was what Mr. Smith yearned for at that moment. And a "jay" like Baldy should be like wax in his cunning hands. It was only necessary to think out some little scheme for pulling Baldy's egregious leg.

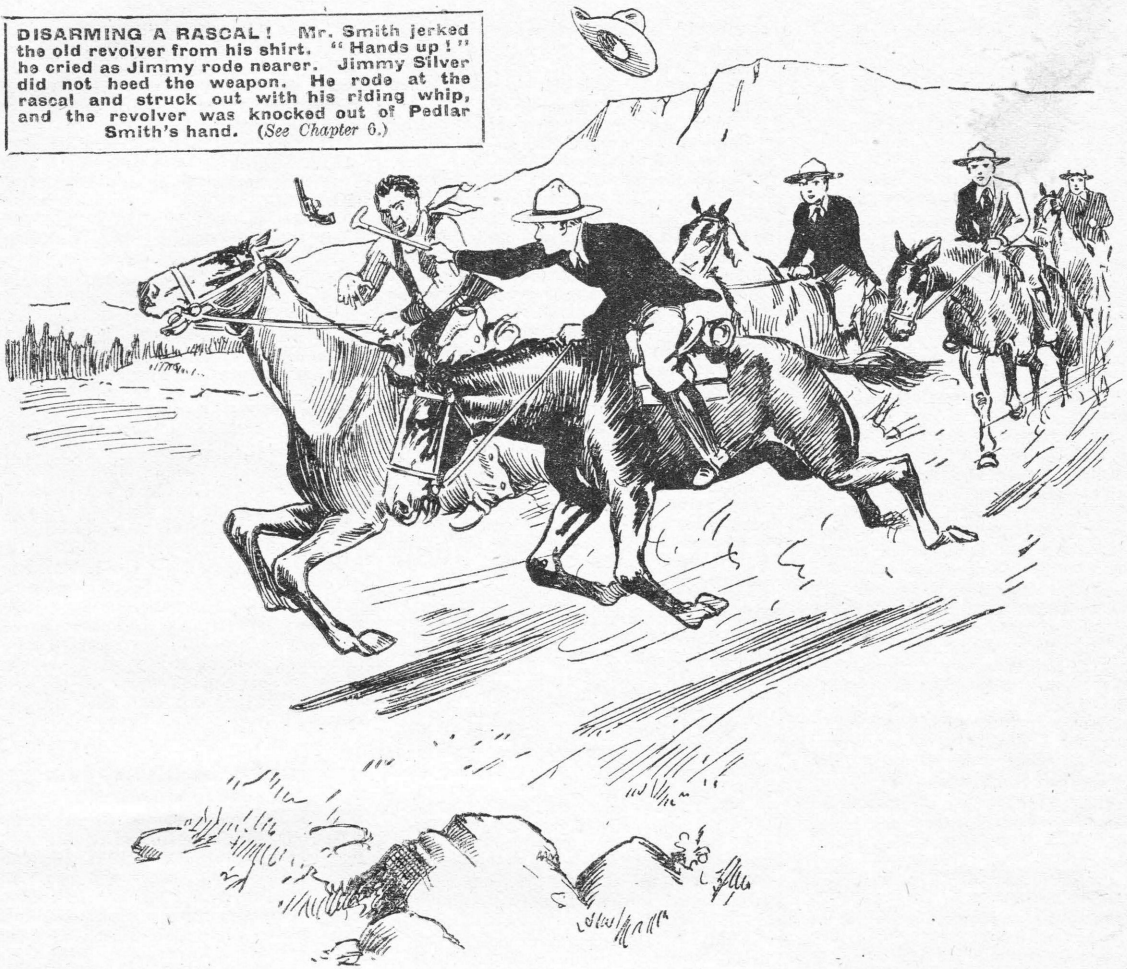
Mr. Smith thought it out.

Having thought it out, he detached himself from the tree-trunk, grinning, and in the dying sunset took his way towards the ranch buildings, visible in the distance.

The first person he came upon was Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch. Mr. Peters was not in his usual good temper, having been kept waiting for his supper, a serious matter with a hungry foreman. And, anyhow, Pete was down on tramps. Mr. Smith wasn't exactly a tramp. He would have described himself as a travelling merchant. But undoubtedly he looked like a tramp, and Mr. Peters judged him on his looks.

"Hyer, you!" called out Pete.

DISARMING A RASCAL! Mr. Smith jerked the old revolver from his shirt. "Hands up!" he cried as Jimmy rode nearer. Jimmy Silver did not heed the weapon. He rode at the rascal and struck out with his riding whip, and the revolver was knocked out of Pedlar Smith's hand. (See Chapter 6.)



Mr. Smith looked round.

"Get!"
"What?"
"Git!"

Pedlar Smith eyed the burly foreman warily. He was quite accustomed to dodging boots and cowboy whips.

"No, hoboes wanted round hyer," said the foreman. "Git, afore I come across to you!"

"I ain't a hobo!" said Mr. Smith warmly. "I've come here on business."

"There's no chickens here for you to steal," said Pete Peters, "and we string up hoss-thieves in these parts. So you'd better light out and do your business somewhere else."

"I've called to see a man," said Mr. Smith—"a galoot of the name of Bubbin."

Pete Peters eyed him suspiciously. "You want to see Baldy, the cook?"
"Sure."

"Waal, I guess you can wedge into the cookhouse and see him, but don't let me find you around arter."

Mr. Smith rather hurriedly went on to the cookhouse.

There was a glow of light and warmth from the cook-house. Baldy, in his shirt-sleeves, was washing up after an extensive supper.

He did not look happy.

The cowpunchers had talked to him about the late supper, and they had talked to the point. Pete Peters had told him, in picturesque language, that if he didn't attend to his duties better he would be "fired" from Windy River, with a number eleven boot behind him to start him on his way into the wide world.

Having a soul above cookery, and a firm conviction that he only needed a chance in order to make his mark, Baldy might have been expected to be indifferent as to whether he was sacked or not. But he wasn't. He had an easy job at Windy River, and the pay was unusually good, and when it came to the pinch Baldy was by no means willing to leave the comfortable cook-house, and seek his fortune elsewhere. Although his looks and his natural gifts fitted him to adorn the highest station—in his own opinion, at least—he could not help realising that if he left Windy River he would have no resource but to look for another job as ranch cook. It was hard, but there it was!

So Baldy, looking and feeling very cross, washed up, and relieved his feeling by breaking some of the crocks.

He scowled when Mr. Smith put his coppery face into the doorway of the cookhouse.

Like Pete Peters, he addressed him laconically:

"Git!"
Instead of "getting," Mr. Smith stepped in. Baldy Bubbin picked up an iron saucepan by the handle.

"Where will you have it?" he asked.

It was not a propitious moment for asking Mr. Bubbin for a meal and a shakedown for the night. But Mr. Smith's plans were cut and dried. He held up his hand.

"Easy does it, pard," he said agreeably. "Are you Mr. Bubbin?"

"I'm Bubbin!" growled Baldy. "I don't know you."

"Are you the son of Silas Bubbin—I mean, the supposed son of Silas Bubbin

—who lived in a cabin on the Saskatchewan River?"

Baldy started. He lowered the saucepan in his surprise.

"That's me!" he answered at last. "Then you're the galoot I'm hunting for," said Mr. Smith affably. "Mind, I shall want proofs of your identity."

"Proofs of my identity?" stammered Baldy.

"Sure! You don't reckon you're getting hold of a title and a fortune without proving your identity, do you?"

"Wha-a-at?"
"But I reckon it's all right," said Mr. Smith soothingly. "The resemblance is striking enough."

"The resemblance?"
"Yep!"

"What are you getting at?" gasped Baldy.

He blinked in absolute amazement at the stranger, but he was feeling an inward thrill. Was it possible—was it barely possible—that his life-long dream was coming true?

"I reckon you don't guess who I am," said Mr. Smith, "and you don't cotton on to what I'm arter. I'm arter a reward of five hundred dollars, and I guess I've earned it now. Five hundred dollars is the reward for finding the missing heir of—of—of De Courcy. You're the man!"

"What?"
"Don't deny it!" said Mr. Smith. "I—I ain't denying it," gasped the bewildered Baldy. "But—"

"Ain't you jest the likeness of the old baronet over again?" said Mr. Smith.

"You can't keep it dark, sir! I've found you!"

Clang! The saucepan dropped to the cookhouse floor, and Baldy Bubbin sank on a bench, quite overcome, and blink at the stranger like a startled owl.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Missing Heir!

BALDY BUBBIN sat for a full minute without speaking, blinking at the shifty Mr. Smith. His fat brain was in a whirl.

It was not surprising to Baldy, of course, to hear that he was the living likeness of a baronet. None knew better than Baldy how truly aristocratic was his look, though nobody at Windy River had ever noticed it.

But this confirmation of his wayward fancy was really startling.

Duffer as Baldy undoubtedly was, he was not quite convinced at the first shot. Yet how could he doubt? This man was a stranger to him—a complete stranger. He had come to the ranch in search of the "supposed" son of old Silas Bubbin, of Saskatchewan. How could he know anything at all about Baldy if it was not all "straight goods"? That shifty Mr. Smith had overheard the talk under the trees by the river, naturally, did not occur to Baldy's mind.

Mr. Smith insinuated himself into the cookhouse and closed the door. He sat down on a bench and smiled at Baldy in the light of the kerosene lamps.

"Surprised you—what?" he asked.

"Yep!" gasped Baldy.

"You ain't heard the news yet?"

"Nope!"

"Ain't you seen the 'Montreal Star' lately?"

"The Montreal papers don't get here for weeks," said the cook.

Mr. Smith was well aware of that.

"Then it's news to you?" he said.

"Mind, I'm the man that found you, sir."

Baldy puffed out his fat chest. "Sir" had a pleasing sound to his podgy ears.

"You'll bear me out when I claim the reward?" said Mr. Smith. "I've found you, and you're going to see me through, sir. You'll bear witness to—Sir Tudor de Courcy that I'm the man what found you?"

"Sir Tudor de Courcy?" stammered Baldy.

"Your honoured father, sir."

"Oh Jerusalem crickets!"

"The old baronet is at Montreal now," rattled on Mr. Smith airily. "He's offering five hundred dollars' reward for anybody who finds his long-lost son and heir, what was left in charge of Silas Bubbin many years ago. Why, there's scores of galoots on the search for you at this very minute, sir!"

"For me?" gasped Baldy.

"Jest for you, sir. Five hundred dollars ain't to be sneezed at in these hard times," said Mr. Smith. "Of course, it ain't much to you, sir, seeing as you're the heir of the richest nobleman in the Old Country. I dessay you'll soon be throwing around dollars as if they was cents. But it's a lot to me."

"Holy smoke!" mumbled Baldy.

"Now, to be candid, sir," said Mr. Smith, "ain't you never thought yourself that there was a secret attached to your birth? Did you really believe that you was the son of old Silas Bubbin? I can't believe, sir, that you ever did

really think that you was a common person."

Baldy nodded.

Mr. Smith's words struck a responsive chord in his fat breast.

"With your looks," said Mr. Smith—"your—if I may say so, sir—your distinguished appearance!"

Baldy inflated his chest.

"What beats me," continued Mr. Smith, "is why you ain't been found before. Anybody with half an eye could see that you ain't like these common cowpunchers. Even if I hadn't known anything about you, as soon as I seed you I'd have said to myself, this hyer galoot is no common person."

Mr. Smith paused a moment, wondering whether he was laying it on a little too thick. But it could not be laid on too thick for Baldy. Flattery seldom came his way, and when it came he liked it, like pineapple, in chunks.

Baldy's head was very erect now. His glance, as it wandered round the cookhouse, was lofty and contemptuous. He rose from the bench, and drew himself to his full height, which was not great. Baldy was more imposing sideways than vertically.

"This hyer is straight goods?" he asked, with a lingering spasm of doubt. Mr. Smith's words were as sweet as honey, and like balm to Baldy's spirit; but the news seemed too good to be true, as, indeed, as a matter of fact, was the case.

"Straight as a die," said Mr. Smith. "Think I've come all the way from Montreal, at my own expense, to pull your leg?"

"Waal, it don't seem likely, I allow."

"I'm arter the reward, of course," said Mr. Smith. "That's my game. Once I hand you over to the baronet at Montreal, I pocket five hundred dollars. It's a matter of business with me."

"I—I see."

Baldy, dazzled by the vision before him, respired with happiness. His glance dwelt on Mr. Smith with the greatest benevolence now.

"Did my father"—he gasped over the word—"did Sir Tudor tell you why I was left with Silas Bubbin when I was a kid?" he asked.

Mr. Smith shook his head.

"I ain't in the nobleman's secrets," he said. "Very proud and stiff old gentleman, sir—very reserved. Jest stated the facts in the advertisement for you in the Montreal paper, that's all. Jest enough to have you hunted for and found. The rest is wrapped in mystery."

That familiar phrase thrilled Baldy to the depths of his podgy heart. To be wrapped in mystery was almost as agreeable to his romantic mind as to be the missing heir of a proud old nobleman.

"When can you leave this hyer show?" asked Mr. Smith. "I'm anxious to get you back to Montreal. In the morning—"

"Start at sun-up!" said Baldy eagerly.

"Good!"

"You'll be wanting some supper," said Baldy hospitably.

"Well, I had a big dinner at the Grand Pacific in Mosquito," said Mr. Smith; "but I dessay I could peck a bit."

Mr. Smith did "peck" a bit—quite a large bit. During his supper he talked—generally with his mouth full—about the proud old baronet waiting at Montreal for news of his missing son, bowed down with grief, according to Mr. Smith. Several times Mr. Smith was struck afresh by the remarkable likeness between Baldy and Sir

Tudor de Courcy. The likeness, he pointed out, was especially strong in Baldy's aristocratic nose and noble brow. Baldy rubbed his pug nose appreciatively as Mr. Smith made these agreeable observations.

His last doubt had long vanished.

He was thinking with glee of the effect of this stunning news on the Windy River outfit.

Nobody at Windy River had ever taken Baldy seriously; they never believed that there was a secret of his birth, or that he had rescued a beautiful girl from the Red Deer River, or overcome six Mexicans, armed with knives, in single combat. Baldy almost believed these yarns himself, but nobody else ever came anywhere near to believing them. Well, the outfit would have to respect him now.

He would take a lofty farewell of Windy River, expressing his aristocratic contempt for the whole show before he went. Baldy felt quite bucked at that enticing prospect.

Mr. Smith was accommodated with blankets on the floor for the night. Baldy, in his bunk, dreamed golden dreams. Mr. Smith thought of the supper he had had, the shelter he was having, and the breakfast he was going to have. And he felt that destiny had been very kind to him in providing him, when he was fairly on his uppers, with so complete and unmitigated a "jay" as Baldy, the cook.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Doubting Thomases!

BALDY, the cook, when he turned out on the following morning, had some thought of refusing further duty as ranch cook and firmly declining to soil his aristocratic hands with the menial task of getting breakfast. But he dismissed that thought from his mind. Certainly it was miles below the dignity of the missing heir of a proud old baronet to cook for the outfit. But it was no use arguing with hungry cowpunchers, who were only too likely to resort to booting if disappointed about a meal. So Baldy turned out to breakfast us usual, and was kept very busy—so busy that he almost forgot that he was a missing heir.

Pete Peters, spotting the presence of Mr. Smith in the cookhouse, wanted to know what he was doing there.

"What's that loafer hanging round this shebang for?" demanded the foreman. "Didn't I warn you to clear, you hobo?"

"You let him alone!" said Baldy.

"He's a friend of mine." "Friend of yours be blowed!" snapped the foreman. "He's a sneaking hobo, looking for something to steal!"

"He came here looking for me," said Baldy, getting out his great news at last. "I'm advertised for in all the Canadian papers, if you'd like to know it, Mr. Peters."

"You are?" ejaculated the foreman.

"Me!" sniffed Baldy.

Mr. Smith, who was eating a secluded breakfast in a dusky corner, keeping out of sight as much as possible, did not look happy. He did not expect the outfit to swallow the egregious yarn he had spun Baldy for a night's lodging and a meal. He had debated in his shifty mind whether it was safe to stay to breakfast, and decided to take the risk. But he did not feel at all easy.

"Advertised for!" said Skitter Dick.

"Why?"

"I'm wanted," said Baldy loftily.

"What have you been doing?" asked Spike Thompson.

"I ain't been doing anything, you jay!" roared Baldy. "It isn't the police that want me, you mugwump!"

"They advertise for escaped lunatics," remarked Pete Peters. "Is that it, Baldy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, can it!" snapped Baldy. "I don't want any of your familiar jokes, Peters. Keep your distance!"

"Eh?"

"I'm wanted in Montreal," said Baldy impressively, "because my father is there waiting for me, and Mr. Smith has brought me the noos."

"What's old Silas Bubbin doing in Montreal?" asked Skitter Dick.

"I'm alluding to my real father—the baronet."

"What?"

"Eh?"

"Great gophers!"

"I've often told you galoots there was a mystery to my birth—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now my true name has been discovered—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's five hundred dollars' reward for whoever finds me," roared Baldy, exasperated by this unbelieving merriment. "Smith here has earned the money, and I'm starting for Montreal with him this morning."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baldy wasn't able to give further particulars; what he had stated already had thrown the outfit into convulsions. He was interrupted by roars of laughter, and the cowpunchers were still chortling when they dispersed after breakfast. "Baldy's latest," as Skitter Dick called it, had taken them quite by storm. Only Pete Peters stopped to speak a word in season to Pedlar Smith. He dropped a heavy hand on the shabby shoulder of that shifty gentleman.

"You've touched that fat fool for grub stakes by spinning him a yarn," said Pete. "Now you can clear. Let me find you on this ranch when I come back in an hour's time, and I'll quit you. That's a cinch."

And, without waiting for a reply, the ranch foreman strode away. He left Mr. Smith feeling very uneasy, and quite anxious to depart under the hour.

"That's all right," said Baldy, when the foreman had gone. "We'll get off together, Smith. I'll see you through."

Pedlar Smith gazed at Baldy, the cook.

He had played on poor Baldy's credulity to supply his immediate needs. With all his shifty cunning, he had not plumbed the depth of Baldy's credulous obtuseness. It almost took his breath away to learn that the ranch cook was prepared to throw up his job and start for the East to claim his mythical inheritance.

"Waal, I swow!" murmured Mr. Smith.

"These chumps will cackle on the other side of their face when I come along one day in a motey-car, with liveried funkeys, what?" said Baldy.

"Oh, ah! Yep!" gasped Mr. Smith.

"Let's get off while the coast is clear," said Baldy. "The boys'll be mad at my chucking up my ob sudden and leaving them without any dinner. Let 'em! I ain't going to argue the point, and I ain't going to speak to Boss Smedley afore I go. We'll jest light out, what?"

"Oh! Ah! Exactly! Oh, my eye!" said Mr. Smith, eyeing Baldy with great admiration. Pedlar Smith had come across fools in his time—many of them;

in fact, he thrived on them. But so complete a specimen as Baldy Bubbin was new to even his extensive experience.

Mr. Smith had not the remotest intention of going to Montreal, or of annexing Baldy's company as a travelling companion. His first thought was to get out of Baldy's sight, and out of reach of vengeance, and bolt. But Baldy's eagerness put a new idea into his shifty mind. It was borne in upon him that he had not squeezed the fatuous cook dry yet, by any means. If Baldy was so keen to be "done," Mr. Smith felt that there was no good reason why he shouldn't "do" him brown while he was about it.

"I guess I've spent all my money coming this far—from Montreal," he said. "Of course, we can telegraph to Sir—Sir Tudor de Courcy from Calgary. That'll bring him west as far as the cars can carry him. But—are you heeled to get as far as Calgary?"

Baldy smiled.

"I've got two hundred dollars put by," he said.

Mr. Smith beamed.

That was great news for Mr. Smith. He had no hope whatever of handling a

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reward of five hundred dollars from an imaginary baronet in Montreal. But he had high hopes now of annexing two hundred dollars much nearer at hand.

"That's good!" he said. "I can fix it as far as Calgary for myself, and if you can manage—"

"Sure."

"Can you lend me a horse?" hinted Mr. Smith. "I was—was robbed of my horse on my way here by a gang of half-breeds."

"I ain't got a hoss myself," said Baldy. "I shall borrow one from the corral. I'll borrow one for you, too. I can pick a moment when there ain't nobody around."

Smith's eyes glistened.

This was the fatuous fellow he had set out to "touch" for a meal and a lodging! He had never dreamed how much there was in Baldy for a galoot who knew how to pull the strings. It really looked as if Baldy was going to make his fortune, though he wasn't going to make Baldy's. Two horses, and two

hundred dollars! It was Pedlar Smith's biggest stroke of business in Alberta.

"Then the sooner we're off the better," he declared.

"The horses can be sent back from Calgary," said Baldy. "I can buy some noo clothes there, too. I don't want Sir Tudor to see me in this truck."

"You'd look a nobleman in anything, sir," said Mr. Smith.

"I guess so," assented Baldy. "But there's s'ich a thing, my man, as appearances for a galoot in my rank of life."

Mr. Smith turned away, almost choking. Baldy looked out of the cookhouse. The coast was clear, and he proceeded to the corral, and led out a couple of horses. As Baldy had no mount of his own, he was permitted to use an animal from the corral when he wanted one, but he did not want to be observed taking two. Behind the cookhouse the two horses were saddled and bridled.

Pedlar Smith, scarcely daring to believe in his good luck, was all impatience to be off.

"I'll jine you in a tick," said Baldy, the cook. "I've got to get a few things from my room."

"Oh, leave 'em!" said Mr. Smith. "You'll have everything you want when—when we join the—the baronet."

"I can't leave the two hundred dollars."

"Oh, no! I guess not!" exclaimed Mr. Smith heartily. "No, sir! Get the dollars."

Baldy hurried back to the cookhouse, leaving Mr. Smith with the horses. As Baldy came out again, with his dollars in a little bag in his pocket, and his best clothes on, Jimmy Silver greeted him cheerily. Jimmy had heard the cowpunchers talking of "Baldy's latest," and he was naturally interested by Mr. Bubbin's rise in life.

"Hallo, Baldy! Going on a holiday?" he asked, noting that Baldy was arrayed in his best raiment.

"I'm orf!" said Baldy. "Good-bye, young Silver! P'raps I'll meet you ag'in in the Old Country."

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy.

"That is, of course, if you move in the highest suckles," said Baldy, with a superior and aristocratic smile. "I'm not likely to meet any middle-class folk in the future."

"No?" gasped Jimmy.

"Nope! My persition will be a high one. But, for the sake of old times, I'm going to ask you, Jimmy, to visit me at the ancestral hall."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

Baldy glared.

"It's turned out," he said, "that my father is a baronet—Sir Tudor de Courcy."

"Great pip!"

"I told you there was a mystery to my birth."

"You did," gasped Jimmy.

"Sir Tudor has come to Canada to find me, and he's at Montreal now, offering huge rewards for his long-lost son," said Baldy. "Can't stop any longer, young Silver. So-long!"

"Baldy," exclaimed Jimmy Silver, catching the fat cook by the arm as he was turning away, "for goodness' sake don't be such a silly ass! You've had your leg pulled."

"That's enough!"

"You're being spoofed, you duffer!" "I guess I'm used to envy," said Baldy calmly. "There ain't a galoot in the outfit that don't envy my good looks. Now I'm envied for my rank."

"Oh crumbs! Look here, Baldy!"

"Can it!"

Baldy Bubbin jerked his fat arm free, and hurried away. Jimmy Silver, like a fellow in a dream, watched him mount with Pedlar Smith, and watched the two ride away on the prairie. Then he walked back to the ranch-house, still feeling dazed.

"What's up?" asked Arthur Edward Lovell.

Jimmy explained.

There was a howl of laughter from the Co.

"Poor old Baldy! He takes the cake!" said Raby. "He will get the sack for this!"

"He seems to want the sack," said Jimmy. "That shifty-looking rogue is making no end of a fool of him. Baldy's lent him a horse belonging to the ranch, and, of course, he will steal it—if he doesn't rob Baldy, too, as soon as they're out of sight of the ranch. I think we ought to chip in, you chaps."

"What can we do?" asked Newcome.

Jimmy Silver reflected.

"Well, we can ride after them," he said. "Baldy has no right to take Mr. Smedley's horses away. We ought to see that they're not stolen."

"Right-ho!" said Lovell. "Let's!"

And the Rockwood chums led out their horses from the corral, mounted, and trotted away on the track of Sir Baldy, of Windy River.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Baldy Wakes Up!

BALDY, the cook—or no longer the cook—smiled a happy and expansive smile as he rode away with Pedlar Smith.

Glorious anticipations filled Baldy's obtuse mind. Already he felt every inch a baronet—if not a baron, or a duke. His manner to Mr. Smith was distinctly patronising.

Mr. Smith had brought him the glorious news, it was true; but, after all, Smith was only a hireling, a common person, unworthy of Baldy's regard. Already Baldy was addressing him as "my man!"

Mr. Smith did not mind. He was smiling, too; he was as happy and satisfied as Baldy himself.

No longer did he regret his unhappy mistake in revisiting Mosquito. It had turned out quite handsomely for him. Two good horses, and two hundred dollars in cash—it was a fortune for Mr. Smith if he got away safe with the loot. And he had no doubt upon that point.

The ranch dropped out of sight behind, as the two riders pushed on at a good speed over the prairie. Mr. Smith avoided the Mosquito trail. He struck across the prairie by as solitary a route as he could find. He wanted to have the missing heir all to himself when the time came for action.

About ten miles from the ranch Mr. Smith drew rein under a tree. He was aware that within a certain distance of that spot there was a camp of half-breeds—old acquaintances of his—where he could dispose of two stolen horses to advantage. So he was done with Baldy now. The fat cook had, as it were, out-lived his usefulness.

"Halt!" said the pedlar.

Baldy pulled in his horse.

"Whatter we stopping for?" he asked.

"Business," answered Mr. Smith.

He fumbled in his ragged coat, and jerked out a revolver. Baldy, the cook, stared at it with distended eyes as it was levelled at his fat face.

THE POPULAR.—No. 448.

"Wha-a-at—" he gasped.

"Get off'n that hoss!"

"I—I say!"

"Do you want a bullet through your thick head?" asked Mr. Smith, with sudden ferocity. "Light down."

"Back agin that tree!"

Baldy obeyed. His fat brain was in a whirl. He simply could not account for the strange action of Mr. Smith, unless that gentleman had gone suddenly mad.

"That's right!" said the pedlar.

He dismounted, took the trail-ropes from Baldy's horse, and ran it round Baldy and the tree-trunk and knotted it. Baldy, the cook, was tied to the tree, a helpless prisoner.

"Wha-a-at—" stammered the hapless Baldy.

Mr. Smith grinned at him.

"Don't you be afeared of this hyer revolver," he said kindly, when Baldy was safely tied. "It ain't loaded, and it don't work, anyhow. You'll be all right here, my fat pardner. If you ain't found, I reckon you can wriggle yourself loose in about a couple of hours, and walk home. You see, I want your hoss."

"You ain't stealing these hyer hosses!" gasped Baldy.

Mr. Smith shook his head.

"Not at all," he answered. "Jest bornerin' them, same as you did from your boss. I'm going to lend them to some friends of mine, and they're going to lend me some dollars back. See?"

"But—but—" stuttered Baldy.

"Now I'll trouble you for the dust," said Mr. Smith; and his fingers—not unused to such work—ran through Baldy's pockets till they landed on the bag containing the two hundred dollars.

"You don't mind lending me this?"

"You durned thief!" roared Baldy.

"What language for a nobleman!" said Mr. Smith, looking shocked. "Is that all afore I go?"

Baldy gasped.

"Look here! You'll lose the five hundred dollars reward!" he spluttered. "You play this rotten trick, and I'll see that you don't get the reward from my father, the baronet. Savvy?"

Mr. Smith looked at him in wonder.

"Carry me home to die!" he ejaculated. "You are a prize-packet, you are, Baldy Bubbin! Why ain't there more like you in Canada and the States? It would make life easier for gents like me, it would!"

Baldy's heart sank.

The dreadful truth began to sink even into Baldy's obtuse mind. Indeed, Mr. Smith's conduct was quite unaccountable in a man who was taking a long-lost heir to a titled parent of great wealth.

"You—you—" Baldy's voice almost failed him. "You—you mean to say you was taking me in?"

"He's getting on to it," said Mr. Smith, in admiration. "What a brain!"

"You never came from Montreal to search for me?" yelled Baldy.

"I guess I ain't been near Montreal in my life," said Mr. Smith cheerfully. "It ain't on my beat."

"Oh!" gasped Baldy.

"There ain't nary an old baronet nosying round in search of a fat cook that I knows on!" grinned Mr. Smith.

"There might be; but if there is, I ain't heered tell of him."

Baldy groaned.

"I never knowed there was sich a jay as Baldy Bubbin in this hyer Dominion of Canada, till yesterday," continued Mr. Smith; "and durn my boots if I'd believe it now, if I hadn't seen you! You are the genuine jay

from Jaysville, you are! If I'd come across a few more like you, I'd be a millionaire by now."

Another groan from Baldy.

His castle in Spain had come down with a crash. His house of cards was shattered. His rosy dreams were gone.

He was not a missing heir. He was a fat cook—and a cook who had "chucked" his job, and lost all his savings, as well as helping a horse-thief to get away with two of his master's horses. Poor Baldy groaned in anguish of spirit.

Baldy was not a fighting-man; but had he been free at that moment, certainly he would have rushed on Mr. Smith, and smitten him hip and thigh. But the trail-ropes held him safely to the tree.

Mr. Smith regarded him humorously.

"This hyer," he said kindly, "will be a lesson to you. Next time you read newspaper serials, and talk out of the back of your hat, make sure that there isn't a galoot on the other side of the tree takin' it all in. Catch on?"

"Oh!" groaned Baldy.

"I reckoned," said Mr. Smith, "that I'd be able to touch you for a meal by pulling your leg—you being the biggest fool in Alberta from your talk. But you turned out the biggest fool between Alaska and Cape Horn, and you was better game than I expected—and all I can say is, I'm obliged to you. I'd let you have ten dollars back out of this bag, but what's the use? Some other pilgrim would get it off you, by telling you you looked like a nobleman, or askin' you if your name wasn't Montmorency. It's safer with me. Good-bye!"

Mr. Smith mounted one horse, and took the reins of the other, and rode away cheerily.

Baldy the cook gazed after him.

Even Baldy realised how thoroughly and cruelly he had been "done," and partly realised that he owed it to his own folly and presumption. But even the loss of his two hundred dollars did not hit him so hard as the loss of his baronetcy.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Rough Justice!

JIMMY SILVER dragged in Blazer.

"Baldy!" he shouted.

"Oh, my hat!" roared Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fistical Four of Rockwood reined in their horses under the lonely tree on the prairie. Baldy, the cook, wriggling in the knotted trail-ropes, blinked at them with lack-lustre eyes.

Jimmy Silver jumped down.

He opened his knife and cut Baldy loose. He hardly needed to be told what had happened, but Baldy poured out the dismal story in dispirited tones.

"It was all bunkum!" groaned Baldy.

"There never was a baronet at Montreal, and there never was a reward, and he was a-pulling my leg all the time, and he's got my two hundred dollars in a bag, and he's stolen the hosses, and he's gone!"

Baldy almost wept.

"What the thump did you expect?" hooted Lovell. "You take the bun, Baldy, and no mistake!"

Baldy groaned deeply.

"We're after him!" said Jimmy Silver. "Lucky we came after you, Baldy. You hoof it back to the ranch, and we'll look after Mr. Smith."

Jimmy Silver & Co. rode on, at full gallop, on the track of Pedlar Smith. The trail of the two horses lay fresh

(Continued on page 27.)

"SIR BALDY OF WINDY RIVER!"

(Continued from page 12.)

and plain in the thick grass; and in the far distance they could see a Stetson hat bobbing over the prairie. They were not very far behind the horse-thief.

Jimmy Silver let out Blazer to full speed. His chums dropped behind, still riding hard; and Jimmy Silver drew closer and closer to the horse-thief. It was not till his horse's hoof-beats reached Mr. Smith's ears, that that gentleman looked round and discovered that he was pursued.

Mr. Smith gave a convulsive start at the sight of Jimmy Silver riding like the wind on his track. He urged on his horse to greater speed. But Blazer was twice as quick as Mr. Smith's horse, and Jimmy came up fast. The horse-thief, in desperation, abandoned the led horse, and devoted all his energy to escape. But Jimmy Silver, leaving the loose horse for his chums to rope in, galloped harder and harder on his track, and he was soon riding alongside the pedlar.

"Better chuck it, Smith!" he called out.

Mr. Smith, with a glare, jerked out the old revolver, and reined round his horse.

"Hands up!" he shouted.

Jimmy Silver did not know that the revolver was unloaded; but he did know that a fellow of Mr. Smith's calibre was not likely to shoot, with three more pursuers coming on fast. He rode at the rascal, and struck out with his riding-whip.

The revolver was knocked out of Pedlar Smith's hand. The next minute Pedlar Smith was knocked out of the saddle.

He landed on the prairie with a heavy bump.

Jimmy Silver jumped down.

He stood over the rascal, with the butt of his riding-whip raised, ready to deal with him if he gave more trouble. But Mr. Smith was not thinking of giving more trouble—he was a cunning and a shifty gentleman, but he was not a fighting-man.

"Let up!" he howled. "Let up! Don't you hit a galoot! Let up!"

Lovell and Raby rode up breathlessly. Newcome was looking after the loose horse. The juniors dismounted.

"Got him!" grinned Lovell.

"I ain't done anything!" groaned Mr. Smith. "I only borrowed them hosses for a joke. I swear that I only came to the ranch for a supper and a lodging, and that fat fool fair drove me to taking him in. It was all his fault. Didn't he ask for it?"

"He did," said Jimmy Silver, with a chuckle. "Hand over the money you took from him, you rascal!"

Mr. Smith groaned as the two hundred dollars were transferred.

"Now we'll take him back to the ranch, and let Mr. Smedley deal with him," said Lovell.

There was a howl of terror from Mr. Smith. He had only too clear an idea of how the rancher was likely to deal with a horse-thief.

"Let up!" he howled. "I'll git—I'll vamoose—I'll make straight for the border! Let a galoot clear off!"

"Turn him over!" said Jimmy Silver, taking a business-like grip on his whip.

Whack, whack, whack, whack!

Jimmy Silver laid it on well. Mr. Smith, howling dismally, received a dozen of the best. Then the Rookwood juniors, leaving him howling, mounted and rode away; and Mr. Smith sat up and shook a dispirited fist after them.

Jimmy Silver & Co. overtook Baldy, and gave him a lift to the ranch. Fortunately for Baldy, he was back in time to hurry up with dinner, and he was somewhat solaced by the recovery of his two hundred dollars. But for quite a long time afterwards Baldy the cook thought of his golden dream that had not materialised, and, like Rachel of old, he mourned and could not be comforted. And, indeed, there was little comfort to be found in the chuckles and chortles of the Windy River outfit, nor was the fat cook solaced by being addressed—as he was for long afterwards—as "Sir Baldy!"

THE END.

(You'll enjoy: "The Prairie Smugglers!" next week's splendid long complete tale of Jimmy Silver & Co., the chums of Rookwood, out West.)

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