

CHUMS of the RANCH!

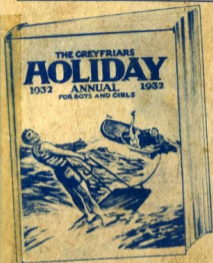


By
Owen Conquest

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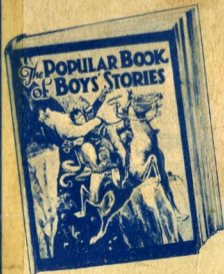
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CHUMS of the RANCH!

by
Owen Conquest



An enthralling book-length complete story of mystery and adventure in the Wild West, starring JIMMY SILVER & Co., the cheery chums of Rookwood School.

CHAPTER 1.

In Direst Peril!

"HALT!"
"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy was riding at a trot on the Mosquito trail, heading for the Windy River Ranch. He was thinking chiefly of supper, having spent a long afternoon in the saddle. Certainly he was not thinking of a "hold-up."

But it was a hold-up that was destined to happen before supper.

A shadowy figure loomed up from a belt of larches by the trail, and Jimmy caught the glimmer of a revolver.

He reined in Blazer at once.

A dark face, with scintillating black eyes, peered at him in the gloom. And Jimmy's

heart sank a little as he recognised Red Henri, the half-breed.

"So it was you!" said the half-breed, with a savage grin.

"Little me!" answered Jimmy.

"You know me?"

"I know you, you horse-thief!" retorted Jimmy Silver. "And I warn you that if the cowpunchers get hold of you you're as likely as not to be lynched on the nearest tree!"

"Light down from that horse."

Jimmy Silver set his teeth. A week ago he had encountered Red Henri, the half-breed, in the foothills in possession of a stolen horse. Evidently the horse-thief had not forgotten him.

But Jimmy Silver did not intend to lose Blazer if he could help it.

He dismounted at the half-breed's order. His riding-whip was in his hand, and he watched for a chance to use it as a weapon.

The half-breed came a little nearer, his black eyes gleaming at the Rookwood junior.

It was evidently only the fear of consequences that kept him from pulling trigger.

"Put up your hands!" he snapped savagely.

"You're not stealing my horse, you scoundrel!" said Jimmy Silver, between his teeth.

"Hands up, or——"

Jimmy Silver's hand swept up, and the riding-whip crashed against the revolver, knocking it high. There was a sharp report as the weapon exploded, but the bullet flew a yard over the Rookwood junior's head.

The next instant Jimmy Silver was springing at the startled half-breed, and his fist crashed in the dusky face.

Red Henri staggered back.

Jimmy was upon him at once. He knew that if the ruffian had a chance to use the revolver he would use it now ruthlessly. The riding-whip crashed on Red Henri's arm, and the revolver went to the ground.

A fierce exclamation rang out from the half-breed, and he grasped at Jimmy Silver.

His muscular hand closed on the Rookwood junior, and Jimmy struggled for his life.

"Help!" he shouted.

The trail was a lonely one, and night was falling. But there was always a chance that some cowpuncher of the Windy River outfit might be within hearing.

"Help!"

Jimmy had no time to shout again. In the fierce grasp of the horse-thief, he was borne to the ground.

He went down into the grass, resisting fiercely, with the half-breed over him.

Two savage hands gripped his throat, and the half-breed's eyes blazed down from above.

"Now!" panted Red Henri.

With his left hand he pinned the junior down, and with his right he groped in his belt for a knife.

Clatter, clatter!

It was the sound of hoof-beats on the

hard trail in the direction of Mosquito, from which Jimmy had come.

Clatter!

The half-breed started and listened. For a second his grasp on Jimmy Silver's throat relaxed.

"Help!" yelled Jimmy.

The grasp closed on his throat again. Red Henri dragged at the knife in his belt.

From the shadowy trail a horseman dashed up, with a clatter of galloping hoofs. He drew his horse in so suddenly that it came almost upon its haunches, and leaped to the ground. The knife of the half-breed was flashing in the air, when the newcomer seized the ruffian and dragged him back.

The blow descended, but the weapon struck only the earth.

Red Henri turned like a tiger on his new assailant.

Jimmy Silver sat up, panting.

The two men were struggling fiercely, and Jimmy scrambled to his feet to go to the aid of his rescuer.

There was a sharp cry from the newcomer; the half-breed had used his knife. Jimmy sprang breathlessly to his aid, and his fist crashed on the side of Red Henri's head.

The half-breed rolled over, the knife flying from his hand. Jimmy Silver caught it up.

"Now, you scoundrel——"

Red Henri scrambled to his feet.

Jimmy made a rush at him, but the half-breed leaped back and, turning, fled into the shadows of the larches. For a moment or two his fleeing footsteps could be heard, and then Red Henri had vanished into the dusk of the wide prairie.

CHAPTER 2.

Nothing Doing.

JIMMY SILVER turned quickly to his rescuer.

In the dusk he made out a young man, apparently only a few years older than himself—a sturdy, handsome fellow, dressed in riding-clothes.

"You're hurt!" panted Jimmy.

"Only a scratch, I think!" answered the rescuer cheerily. "Pd caught his wrist,

and the knife gashed along my arm. He meant business, though, the brute!"

"Let's see it," said Jimmy.

There was blood running from under the stranger's sleeve. He drew back the sleeve coolly.

"Only a cut," he said. "I can bind it up with my handkerchief."

"Let me bind it," said Jimmy Silver. "I've been a scout in the Old Country, and I know how to bandage."

And Jimmy proceeded to bind up the cut. The young man looked at him curiously.

"You're from the Old Country?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!" answered Jimmy. "I'm staying at present with my cousin—Hudson Smedley—at the Windy River Ranch. My name's Jimmy Silver."

"Mine's—Smith. Montague Smith—Monty, for short."

There was a momentary hesitation in the stranger's manner as he gave his name. Jimmy Silver did not note it then, but he remembered it afterwards.

"Jolly glad to meet you, Mr. Smith!" said Jimmy, with a smile. "I dare say you know you've saved my life?"

"Yes; I fancy that brute meant murder," said Smith. "Who and what was he?"

"A horse-thief—a half-breed. I've met him before," said Jimmy. "I'm sorry he's got away. Jolly lucky for me that you came along the trail just when you did!"

"Lucky for me, too, perhaps."

"How's that?"

"You've mentioned that you're staying at the Windy River Ranch. I'm going there, and I'm not at all sure of the way. I'm a stranger in this section."

"You know Hudson Smedley?"

"Not at all. I'm going to the ranch to look for work."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy, in surprise.

Monty Smith smiled.

"You don't think there's any chance for me?" he asked.

"You don't look much like a cow-puncher," said Jimmy Silver. "Have you worked on a ranch before?"

"Never!"

"Anyhow, Mr. Smedley will put you up at the ranch for to-night," said Jimmy.

"He'll be jolly glad to see you, after what you've done for me."

"But he's not looking for new hands?"

"Well, you see, the round-up's over," explained Jimmy. "There was plenty to do when the busy season was on, but now—"

"I see! Not much chance for a new-comer, especially one who doesn't know the ranch business?"

"I—I'm afraid not. But it won't do any harm to ask, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver. "Let's get on. You're pretty late on the trail for a man looking for work."

"I've missed the trail about six times since leaving Mosquito."

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy.

"I suppose I'd better not mention that when I'm asking the boss of the ranch for a job?" said the young man, laughing.

"Better not," said Jimmy, laughing, too. "Anyhow, you won't miss the trail again. I know it like a book. This way."

Jimmy Silver jumped on Blazer, and Monty Smith remounted his horse. They rode on together by the trail over the darkening prairie.

"Fresh from the Old Country?" Jimmy Silver asked.

"Oh, no! I've been in Canada for years."

"Not in the West?"

"In a town," answered Monty Smith; "not on the ranches. I've been working for my daily bread; now I'm looking for a change."

"I—I see," said Jimmy.

As a matter of fact, Jimmy Silver did not see. It was unusual, at least, for a townsman to "fire" himself from his job, and look for work on the ranches at the end of the summer. Even if the young man had been "fired" by his employers, and had no choice about seeking a new job, it was odd enough for him to come up into the North-West to look for one.

But that was not Jimmy's business, and he certainly wished his new acquaintance the best of luck, and had privately resolved to put in a word for him, if he could, with Hudson Smedley. The young man evidently knew very little about the ranches, but he certainly had saved Jimmy Silver's life.

A light gleamed over the dusky prairie at last.

"That's the ranch!" said Jimmy.

The two horsemen rode up to the ranch-house at Windy River. Some of the outfit were grouped by the bunkhouse, and Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, took his pipe out of his mouth and called to Jimmy.

"Hallo, Jimmy! You're late back."

"Came jolly near being later," answered Jimmy. "I was held up on the trail—that horse-thief, Red Henri."

"By gum! Who's the stranger?"

All the Windy River men were eyeing Monty Smith in the light from the bunkhouse.

"Chap looking for a job on the ranch," said Jimmy.

"Take him away and bury him," said Pete Peters.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I guess, stranger, this hyer isn't the time to look for jobs," said Skitter Dick. "It's arter the round-up."

"He's a tenderfoot from the town," said Red Alf. "Look at them bags."

And the cowpunchers laughed again.

"All serene—only their fun," whispered Jimmy Silver, as Monty Smith flushed red.

The young man nodded.

Baldy Bubbin came out of the cookhouse, his fat face ruddy. He grinned at the stranger.

"I guess I've seen you afore," said Baldy.

"I think not."

"I guess I have," persisted Baldy. "What's your name?"

"Smith."

"Waal, that ain't a gol-darned uncommon name," said the cook. "I guess I've struck heaps of Smiths in my time. Where was it I struck you, stranger? Been in Mosquito afore?"

"I've never been in this part of Alberta before," said the newcomer briefly.

"Waal, I've seen you somewhere," said Baldy, "and I don't seem to remember that you was named Smith, neither."

And with that Baldy, the cook, went back into the cookhouse, looking a little huffed. Apparently he was assured that he had met Monty Smith before, and was annoyed at the young man's disclaimer.

"Come on," said Jimmy Silver. "I'll put up your horse."

"Is that tenderfoot camping here, Jimmy?" demanded Red Alf.

"Yes, to-night, anyhow."

"There ain't any job going, and you know it," said Pete Peters.

"He saved my life," said Jimmy. "Red Henri had his knife only a foot away when this chap butted in."

"Oh, Jerusalem! I guess it's time the fire-eater was rounded up by the Mounted Police," said Pete. "All the same, there's no jobs going on this hyer ranch till next summer."

"And then I guess they ain't going for tenderfeet in bags like that," remarked Red Alf.

"Bow-wow!" was Jimmy Silver's reply.

And he led his new friend on. The horses were turned into the corral, and Jimmy Silver led the way into the ranch-house.

CHAPTER 3.

What's in a Name?

HUDSON SMEDLEY gave the stranger a hearty greeting when Jimmy explained how matters stood. The taking on of new hands was a task for Pete Peters to attend to; but Hudson Smedley made the young man very welcome. He was not likely to fail in hospitality towards one who had saved his cousin's life. Woo Sing was ordered to get a room ready at once, and the rancher chatted with his unexpected guest while waiting for supper, and Lovell and Raby and Newcome made his acquaintance. Their verdict was that the young man seemed quite decent, and his service to their chum made them feel quite kindly towards him.

At the supper-table, Monty Smith sat down with the rancher and the Rookwood juniors, and there was a cheery buzz of conversation. But Jimmy Silver could not help noticing that the newcomer talked very little about himself. That he had worked in a town, and that he had left his job for a change, was about all that he said on his own account; he did not mention the name of the town or the nature of his former work.

That was all his own business, of course; but such reticence was rather unusual. Indeed, it was not likely to do if he ex-

pected to get a new post. A new employer would naturally want to know something about him.

Jimmy Silver & Co. bade the young man a cheery good-night after supper, and went to their rooms. Monty Smith was given the next room to Jimmy's, looking over the veranda. Jimmy, looking out into the night before turning in, caught sight of a face at the next window. Monty Smith was looking out, too.

He smiled and nodded as he caught Jimmy Silver's glance.

"Topping fine night," he said.

"Yes, rather," assented Jimmy Silver. "How do you like it here?"

"Fine! Not much chance of catching on, though, I'm afraid," said Monty Smith. "It seems that this is a time on the ranches when hands are more likely to be sacked than taken on."

"Well, that's so," agreed Jimmy. "Mr. Smedley wouldn't turn off any of the outfit, but taking on fresh men is another matter, of course. Is it—" He hesitated. "If you don't mind my asking, is it important for you to get fixed?"

"Well, a little. I'm not quite down to bedrock, but very nearly. I've got to find something."

"Wouldn't there be more chance in a town?"

"I'm fed up with towns."

"You should have tackled the ranches in the spring or early in the summer," remarked Jimmy.

"Yes, I know, but I hadn't any choice. I fancy I'll get on my way to-morrow, and try at the Sunset Ranch—that's the next in this direction, I believe?"

"Yes," assented Jimmy. "But I hope something can be done here."

He bade the young man good-night, and went to bed. But for a long time Monty Smith stood at his window looking out at the stars and the dusky prairie. He sighed when he turned away at last and turned in.

The next morning Monty Smith breakfasted with the Fistical Four of Rookwood; Hudson Smedley was already out on his horse. After breakfast, Arthur Edward Lovell was riding to Mosquito for letters, and Raby and Newcome went with him. Jimmy Silver would probably have gone with his chums, but he stayed on as Smith

was there. As the rancher was still absent, Jimmy walked round the place with the tenderfoot, pointing out things of interest to him. All things on a ranch were evidently new to the young man, and Jimmy concluded that if he had been in Canada for years it must have been in an eastern province.

By the corral Jimmy and his companion came on Pete Peters. The foreman of the ranch nodded to Jimmy and stared at Smith.

"Still lookin' for that job?" he asked.

"That's why I'm here."

"I guess there's nothing to it," said Pete. "Sorry, as you seem to have played up like a little man in helping Jimmy here. You've got a cut on your fin, I hear."

"Only a scratch."

"I guess I'll give you a tip in looking for a job at the next shebang," said Pete, with a grin. "Don't go around in them bags, looking like a town dandy. Get yourself some cowboy clothes. See?"

"Let's see the tenderfoot on a hoss," said Red Alf, lounging up. "Know how to sit on a horse, tenderfoot?"

"He came here on a horse," said Jimmy Silver.

"Not much of a hoss," said Red Alf, with a nod towards the tenderfoot's steed in the corral. "How much did you give for that gee, stranger?"

"Two hundred dollars."

"Gee-whiz! I guess you was done out of a hundred and fifty then."

"I'm not a judge of horses," said Monty Smith.

"No need to mention that," grinned Red Alf. "You ain't sure. Put him on Blazer and see him fall off, Jimmy."

"Rats!" retorted Jimmy.

"I can ride, though," said Monty Smith.

"I used to ride a good bit in the Old Country. I'll try Blazer, whatever Blazer is."

"You won't," said Jimmy, laughing.

"He's a buck-jumper, and too much of a handful for a man that doesn't know him well."

"Here's a nice quiet critter," said Spike Thompson, entering into the joke on the stranger and leading out a raw-boned horse with wicked eyes. "Like to try him, stranger, if I saddle him for you? You'll

have to ride, you know, if you get a job on this hyer ranch."

"I'm ready!"

"Look here——" began Jimmy.

"You ease off, young 'un," said Pete Peters. "Let the tenderfoot show us what he can do."

Spike saddled the big raw-boned brown, who stood quiet under the experienced cowboy's hands. But it was a different matter when the tenderfoot mounted him.

The horse was a buck-jumper, and he began to buck at once. His forefeet went high into the air, and the cowpunchers stood round grinning, expecting to see the tenderfoot slip off over the lashing tail.

But Monty Smith sat tight.

Down came the forefeet with a crash like thunder, and up into the air went the horse's hind legs.

Still the tenderfoot sat tight.

"He can ride!" said Peter Peters rather grudgingly.

The brown horse broke into a sudden rush, and Monty Smith still sat tight. His hat flew off, but his knees gripped the horse hard, and his hand was firm on the rein. The cowpunchers watched the flight of the horse, and saw the tenderfoot wheel it at last and ride it back to the corral. Monty Smith jumped down.

He was a little breathless, but cool.

"I fancy I can ride that horse," he remarked.

"You ain't such a greenhorn as you look in them trousers!" admitted Red Alf.

He drove the horse into the corral again. Baldy Bubbin was looking on from the doorway of the cookhouse, and he had stepped out to pick up the young man's hat. There was quite a curious expression on Baldy's fat face as he stood with the hat in his hand. When Alf took the horse away Baldy came over to the group.

"Your hat, Mister Smith!" he said, with a peculiar accent on the name.

Monty Smith took the hat, flushing a little.

"Thanks!" he said.

"I told you yesterday that I knowed you," said Baldy. "I seem to disremember your name, but it ain't Smith."

"Cheese it, Baldy!" said Jimmy Silver sharply.

"Leastways," said Baldy deliberately. "if your name's Smith, I reckon you lifted that hat from the owner, tenderfoot."

"What the thump are you driving at?" demanded Jimmy.

Baldy grinned.

"There's a name wrote in the hat," he said, "and I guess galoots don't write other men's names in their hats."

"What rot!" snapped Jimmy. "If there's a name written in the hat it's this chap's name, of course."

"I allow that's so."

"Smith, of course," added Jimmy angrily.

"Tain't Smith."

"Oh, rats!"

All eyes were turned curiously on the young man. Baldy's statement had made an impression.

"You've given your name here as Smith, stranger," said Pete Peters abruptly. "If you've got another name written in your hat I guess we'd like to know what it means."

"I guess so," said Baldy emphatically.

"On this hyer ranch, stranger, galoots don't sail under false colours."

Monty Smith's face was crimson. He had replaced the hat on his head, but Spike Thompson, with a sudden movement, jerked it off and held it up. Every eye read the name that was inscribed inside.

"M. de Courcy!"

"De Courcy!" exclaimed Pete Peters. "Great gophers! Where did you dig up a name like that, stranger? It's a pesky duke in disguise, boys."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver looked anxiously at his new friend. He was quite sure, in his own mind, that Monty Smith was "square," but the incident was certainly a very curious one.

"I guess you ought to have bought a new hat, along with a new name, tenderfoot," chuckled Skitter Dick.

"I suppose I can explain easily enough," said the young man, his face red. "My name is De Courcy, but I've been chipped about it so much since I came West, that I've changed it to Smith."

"Waal, I guess a galoot with a name like that would be chipped!" chuckled Pete Peters.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There ain't many galoots named De Courcy on the ranches, for a fact," remarked Spike Thompson. "Fust I've ever struck."

"Smith's an easier handle to get about with in the West, I allow," said the foreman. "But was that your only reason for changing it, stranger?"

"It's the only reason I have to give," said Monty Smith quietly.

"And a good enough one," said Jimmy Silver.

And he drew Monty Smith away from the spot. The cowpunchers were left chuckling—much entertained by the discovery that the tenderfoot bore the uncommon and aristocratic name of De Courcy."

Baldy Bubbin rubbed his fat nose thoughtfully.

"I guess he's got me beat, all the same," he remarked. "I reckon I know that galoot's face, and I reckon I know his name, though I disremember it—and it ain't either Smith or De Courcy! I calculate I've got my suspicions of that galoot. He's got too many names to please me."

And Baldy, the cook, went back to the cookhouse, shaking his bald head seriously.

CHAPTER 4.

Dark Doubts!

MONTY SMITH stayed on at the Windy River Ranch.

Hudson Smedley was a little perplexed to know what to do with him. He was not required on the ranch; the outfit was more than numerous enough for the period following the round-up. But he had saved Jimmy Silver's life, and he was keen for work, and the rancher was hospitable. There was no likelihood of the young man getting a job in North-West Alberta, and the rancher had a shrewd idea that he was near the end of his resources. And for some days his arm was likely to be useless from the gash of the half-breed's knife. The wound had bled again after the exertion of riding the buck-jumper—a reckless proceeding in the circumstances—and it needed care. So Monty Smith was given leave to bunk down with the outfit, and to make himself as useful as he could till some better opening should turn up.

In a few days Monty Smith—or De Courcy—was quite well liked by the outfit.

He was a frank and good-natured fellow, always ready to do anybody a good turn,

and he was made welcome in the bunk-house.

On the subject of his name the outfit were satisfied. It was natural enough that a man named De Courcy should prefer to look for work in the democratic West under the less remarkable name of Smith.

Only Baldy, the cook, was not satisfied.

He persisted that he had seen the young man before somewhere when he was not called either Smith or De Courcy; and Monty persisted in disclaiming all knowledge of Baldy.

Baldy's opinion, therefore, was that the new man had a secret to keep, and he hinted darkly that Monty had had good reasons for "lighting" out to the West under an assumed name.

Jimmy Silver had accepted Monty Smith's explanation, and dismissed the matter from his mind.

All four of the Rookwood fellows liked the newcomer, and they were friendly with him.

And Smith, tenderfoot as he was, showed keenness and intelligence, and quickly picked up the ways of the ranch. After he had been a week at Windy River he spoke to Pete Peters.

"Am I worth my keep yet?" he asked.

Pete eyed him.

"I guess you are," he replied.

"Good! If I'm got, I'm clearing," said Monty Smith. "I'm not taking advantage of Mr. Smedley's kindness because I helped his cousin. See?"

"I see," assented Pete. "Waal, young man, you're worth your keep, and that's about all."

"That's all I want," said Monty.

So he stayed on.

It was a day or two later that Jimmy Silver had his first shock. He had heard some of Baldy's dark surmises, without paying any attention to them. But a little incident brought the matter very sharply into his mind.

Red Henri, the half-breed, had been seen again in the vicinity, and he had succeeded in annexing a horse from the Sunset Ranch. And there was news on the ranch that a couple of troopers of the Mounted Police were coming up from Kicking Mule to look for the horse-thief.

Jimmy Silver mentioned the matter to Monty Smith in the afternoon, as they rode back from a visit to Coyote Creek.

Monty made no answer for a full minute. Jimmy, glancing at him, saw a very strange expression on his face.

"I should have thought an outlying region like this was outside the beat of the Mounted Police," Monty Smith said at last.

"That's so," said Jimmy. "But they come when they're needed, and they're needed now, to run in that horse-thief."

"Likely to come to Windy River?"

"Sure to," said Jimmy. "I know one of them—Trooper Bright. Now that the rush of work is over, I dare say some of the outfit will help them in hunting for Red Henri. I shall get along if I can."

Monty Smith rode on in silence for some minutes.

"That's a rather lonely post down at Coyote Creek, where we've just been," he remarked at last.

"That's so," assented Jimmy.

"I'm not a regular member of the outfit, but I think I ought to take my turn there," said Monty.

Jimmy did not answer that.

"I think I'll ask Mr. Smedley to send me there for a week or so," the young man went on.

Still Jimmy was silent.

He liked Monty Smith, and Monty had saved his life. But he could not help seeing what the young man's words implied. He thought the matter over, and decided to speak out plainly.

"Look here, Smith—"

"Well?"

"You know Baldy has got all sorts of ideas in his fat head about you."

"I know. He's told me. Nothing underhand about Baldy Bubbin," said Monty Smith, laughing.

"Well, it's all rot, of course. I know you're square," said Jimmy. "But better not ask to be sent to Coyote Creek just at the time when the Mounted Police are coming to the ranch. It will really look as if you don't want to see them, or to let them see you. Excuse my putting it plain, won't you?"

Monty coloured a little.

"You think it would look like that?" he asked slowly.

"Well, yes."

"Then I won't ask."

"Good!"

The subject dropped with that, but the ride was finished in a rather uncomfortable silence.

Jimmy Silver had had a shock, and it worried him a little. He was rather anxious to see Monty Smith show up in the presence of the troopers when they arrived, which would prove that Baldy's wild surmises were groundless, and that Monty Smith had nothing to conceal.

The next day Troopers Bright and Dodson rode into Windy River Ranch.

Jimmy Silver found them eating a substantial lunch at the cookhouse when he came in from a morning's ride. Baldy, who was looking after their wants, gave Jimmy a wink.

"Where's the tenderfoot, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Somewhere about the ranch, I suppose," answered Jimmy carelessly.

"You figure it out he'll let the Mounted see him!"

"Of course!"

"Waal, I reckon not," said Baldy.

"Oh, rot!" granted Jimmy Silver.

He went to the ranch-house for his dinner, and found Hudson Smedley there with the Rookwooders. Monty Smith was not at the table.

"Where's Smith?" asked Jimmy. "Not come in?"

"He's not coming in," answered Lovell. Jimmy Silver started.

"How's that?" he asked quickly.

"He's gone to Mosquito."

"There's some stores coming up from Kicking Mule," said Hudson Smedley. "Smith offered to go over and see about them. He will be away a couple of days, Jimmy."

"Oh!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

It was another shock for him. He simply could not help asking another question:

"Did Smith go before the troopers got here?"

"Oh, yes—some hours before."

"Are they staying long?" asked Jimmy.

"Only to-day. They're going after Red Henri's scalp at sun-up in the morning," answered the rancher.

"Smith won't see them, then?"

"No. He's not likely to be back till to-morrow afternoon."

Jimmy Silver said no more. There was a weight on his mind and on his heart.

He liked Monty Smith, and Monty had held back the murderous hand of the horse-thief. But there was no longer the slightest doubt in Jimmy's mind that Monty Smith had reasons—good reasons—for not desiring to meet members of the police force of the North-West, and that he had deliberately avoided coming into contact with them.

What was it that he had to fear from the Mounted Police? For that he had something to fear was the only possible explanation.

CHAPTER 5.

A Startling Discovery!

BALDY, the cook, came out of the cook-house a few days later, with a grin on his fat face and a newspaper in his fat hand.

Baldy looked in high feather.

"I knowed it!" said Baldy to the world in general.

Nobody gave any special attention to Baldy Bubbin's remark. The fat cook looked round him.

"I tell you galoots that I knowed it!" he exclaimed, raising his voice.

"Well, what did you know, fatty?" asked Arthur Edward Lovell.

"About that man Smith!"

"Oh, give Smith a rest, old chap!" said Lovell. "We're rather tired of you on the subject of Smith!"

"Yes, rather!" remarked Raby.

"I guess I've got him placed!" said Baldy impressively. "Hyer, you, Pete Peters, listen to a galoot, will you?"

"Too busy," answered the foreman of Windy River, without turning his head. "Why ain't you washing up?"

"Waal, if you want a bank-robber on this hyer ranch——" said Baldy Bubbin.

"What?"

"What's that, Baldy?"

Baldy, the cook, had succeeded in interesting his hearers at last. There were a dozen of the outfit about, and they all turned their attention upon the fat cook. Jimmy Silver came up, his face pale with anger.

"You fat dummy——" he began.

Baldy waved a fat hand at him.

"Let up, young Jimmy! Don't I keep on telling you that I've found him out?"

"You fat fool!"

"Waal, what have you found out, anyhow?" demanded Pete Peters sharply. "You're always chewing the rag, Baldy, and generally there's nothing in it!"

Baldy sniffed.

"There's suthin' in it this time!" he said emphatically. "Didn't I tell you 'uns that I'd seen that galoot before, and dis-remembered his name? Waal, I know now where I saw him!"

"Where?" asked Skitter Dick.

"In a newspaper."

"In a newspaper!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver blankly. "Have you gone off your rocker, Baldy, or have you been at the fire-water again?"

"This hyer newspaper," said the cook, holding it up. "It's got his picture in it!"

There was a buzz of interest now.

"It's an old paper," said the cook—"I guess, a couple of months old. I'd used it to line the bread-box, and, cleaning out the box this hyer afternoon, I came across it. There was the face I remembered—fairly staring at me! That galoot's name ain't Smith any more than it's De Courcy! His name's Lagden!"

"Lagden!" said Jimmy.

"Lagden!" said Pete Peters. "I seem to remember having heard that name talked of somewhere."

"I guess you have!" said Baldy. "It was in the papers. Lagden is the man that robbed the bank at Prince Albert, in Saskatchewan, a couple of months ago, and lighted out with ten thousand dollars in his clothes, and left the watchman with a cracked head!"

"Phew!"

"And you mean to say that Monty Smith has any connection with that rogue?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver angrily.

"I mean to say that he's the galoot himself," said Baldy Bubbin coolly, "and here's his picture to prove it."

Baldy held up the paper, and all eyes were fixed on it.

Jimmy Silver became pale.

The picture in the paper was taken from a photograph, it was evident, and, though scarcely well printed, it gave a good rendering of a handsome face the whole Windy River outfit knew well.

"That's Smith!" said Pete Peters, with a deep breath.

"Smith or his pesky twin!" said Skitter Dick.

It was the face of Monty Smith. Under it was printed in large type:

**"LARRY LAGDEN.
THE CROOK WHO GOT AWAY WITH
10,000 DOLLARS!
WANTED AT PRINCE ALBERT!"**

Baldy gave Jimmy Silver a lofty, reproving look.

"Don't that prove it!" he demanded.

"I guess it does!" said Pete Peters, knitting his brows. "The durned hypocrite, coming up here where there ain't many newspapers, and nobody to recognise him! No wonder he changed his name now and then!"

"Waal, I guess he couldn't travel as Larry Lagden!" chuckled Baldy. "He would have been roped in so quick it would have made his head swim! What you got to say now, young Jimmy?" grinned the cook.

Jimmy Silver was silent.

He had nothing to say.

His heart was sick within him. The whole outfit had been deceived by a cunning criminal, skulking into the North-West to hide from the police, with his stolen booty still about him. It was a sickening thought.

And yet—

"Hyer's the boss," said Skitter Dick. "Better tell Mr. Smedley, and he can decide what's to be done. The critter oughtn't to be allowed to vamoose the ranch now we know him!"

Hudson Smedley came up to the excited group.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

Baldy, the cook, almost bursting with importance, proceeded to explain. He showed the photograph in the paper as a proof of his explanation. All eyes watched the rancher's darkening face.

"I guess that's purty clear, boss!" said Pete Peters.

"It looks so!" said Hudson Smedley. "That's Smith's picture, I guess. The eyes seem a bit closer together than Smith's, but if it isn't his picture it's surprisingly like him. If he's the man, he's going to be handed over to the police!"

"Let him speak first!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver huskily. "There—there may be a mistake somehow!"

"I guess there ain't room for any mistake!" said Baldy.

"He saved my life!" muttered Jimmy, with an appealing look at the rancher.

Hudson Smedley nodded.

"The man won't be condemned unheard," he said. "I guessed he was square, and took him on trust. Fetch him here, some of you, and let him speak up for himself."

"Where is he?" asked Pete Peters, looking round. "He was at work in the corral half an hour ago."

"Seen Smith, Spike?" called out Lovell, as Spike Thompson came from the direction of the corral.

"Yep! He's just gone!"

"Gone!" yelled the cowpunchers.

"Gone!" said Hudson Smedley.

"Yep!" Spike stared at the excited crowd. He had heard nothing as yet. "He came running into the corral ten minutes ago, and collared his hoss. Never answered when I asked him what was up. He's lit out; I reckoned the boss had sent him somewhere in a hurry."

There was a roar.

"He's the man!"

"I guess that settles it."

"After him!" shouted Pete Peters.

"Which way did he go?"

"Saddle up and follow him!" exclaimed the rancher.

A dozen men rushed for their horses. Skitter Dick clambered to the roof of the bunk-house, and swept the sunlit prairie with his keen glance. His hand rose to point.

"He's making a bee-line west!" he shouted. "Lighting out for the foothills, I guess. After the galoot!"

He jumped down and ran for his horse.

In a minute or less an excited crowd of horsemen went tearing over the prairie on the track of the fleeing man. At their head rode Hudson Smedley, with knitted brows.

Jimmy Silver stood rooted to the ground.

"Well, who'd have thought it?" said Lovell, with a whistle. "The chap's fairly taken us in, Jimmy."

"Blessed if I'd have thought it!" said Newcome. "I fancied he was as straight as a string."

"Blessed if I can quiet believe it now!" confessed Raby. "I—I'd have thought there was some mistake, only—only—"

He was silent. The sudden flight of the

suspected bank-robber settled the matter for all minds. Evidently Monty Smith had heard Baldy's excited announcement of his discovery, and while the outfit were listening to Baldy, he had rushed for his horse and fled, without losing an instant.

"He'll never get away," said Lovell. "If he's taken his own horse, he'll never win a race on that animal."

"He's taken his own horse," said Jimmy, speaking at last. "Whatever he is, he's not a horse-thief."

"Well, he's a thief, if he robbed the bank at Prince Albert," said Lovell. "I fancy he would take the best horse he could, with his liberty at stake."

"He took his own critter!" said Spiko Thompson.

"I was sure of it," said Jimmy Silver quietly; "and—and I can't quite believe—I—I think there's some mistake—some ——" He broke off.

"You're an ass, old chap!" said Lovell.

Jimmy did not reply. He waited for the returning hoof-beats of the cowpunchers, his brain in a whirl. The proof was overwhelming, yet somewhere in his heart Jimmy found a vestige of faith in the man who had saved his life, and he hoped, almost unconsciously, that the cowboys would return without a prisoner.

CHAPTER 6. Roped In!

MONTY SMITH cast a hunted look over his shoulder.

He had a good start; but he did not expect to escape from the Windy River Ranch unpursued.

Stetson hats bobbed on the prairie in the westerling sunlight, strung out behind the hard-riding fugitive. A dozen at least of the Windy River cowpunchers were in hot pursuit.

Monty Smith set his teeth and rode on. He was not so well-mounted as many of his pursuers, and he knew it. But he had a start, and the foothills were not far away; and once in the rocky ravines and trackless canyons of the foothills, he could hope to elude the pursuers. With set teeth, he rode as if for his life.

Behind him, the cowpunchers came on, whooping.

The discovery that Monty Smith was Larry Lagden, the bank-robber, had naturally turned against him every man at Windy River. The outfit were indignant at being deceived; and they were keen to let Larry Lagden learn what they thought of him. So long as one of the crowd could use whip and spur, the bank-robber was not likely to escape.

Was he the bank-robber of Prince Albert?

There was anxiety in the face of the hunted man, there was keen distress, yet it could not be said that there was guilt. But his hurried flight, as soon as he had heard of Baldy's discovery, was enough for the Windy River men. Without that, the proof was conclusive enough; and what could the flight mean but guilt?

"I guess we're having him," grinned Skitter Dick, as he spurred on his horse.

Foot by foot, the pursuers gained on the hunted man. The rocks of the foothills were still distant when he was within easy revolver-shot, and Red Alf loosed off his six-shooter. He did not aim at the fugitive, but sent a bullet over his head as a warning.

Monty Smith did not heed.

He rode right on, as if he had not even heard the warning shot.

Crack, crack, crack!

Three or four of the cowpunchers loosed off shots round the fugitive; and Monty Smith did not even turn his head.

"I guess he knows we ain't wanting to hit him," growled Pete Peters. "But we're roping him in, all the same, boyees."

Harder and harder rode the cowpunchers, nearer and nearer they drew to the desperate, straining horseman ahead.

"Halt!" roared Hudson Smedley.

Monty Smith did not seem to hear.

"Leave him to me, boss!" chuckled Skitter Dick.

He held his lasso in hand, waiting till he was near enough to use the rope.

Foot by foot he gained on the fugitive, and suddenly his right arm shot up, and the coiled rope whirled.

Whiz!

The loop descended over the straining horseman in front. Right over his head it dropped, over his shoulders, and down round him.

Skitter Dick drew in his horse.

The well-trained animal halted, planting his forefeet firmly for the shock.

The tautening rope twanged like a fiddle-string.

There was a gasping cry from Monty Smith, as he was plucked from the saddle as if by a giant's hand.

Crash!

"I reckoned I had him!" remarked the Skitter complacently.

Monty Smith sprawled in the thick brown grass, dazed by the fall from his horse. He stared dizzily at the cowpunchers, as they rode triumphantly up and surrounded him. His horse was dashing away, but was promptly roped in by Red Alf.

Monty Smith lay in the grass and panted. Hudson Smedley looked down on him grimly.

"Put him on his horse," he said. "I guess we'll keep him at the ranch till the troopers can come for him."

"Git up, you galoot," said Skitter Dick.

Rough hands dragged the captured man to his feet. He seemed too dazed to speak; but he realized that the game was up, that escape was impossible now.

He did not utter a word, as the cowpunchers lifted him on to his horse, and bound him there with a trail-rope.

Skitter Dick held the lasso to lead the prisoner back in triumph to the ranch.

With the cowpunchers whooping gleefully round him, Monty Smith rode back to Windy River.

"Here they come!" shouted Lovell suddenly, and Jimmy Silver, who had gone into the ranch-house, came hurriedly out.

"Have they got him?" he panted.

"Yes."

Jimmy compressed his lips.

The Windy River outfit rode up, with Monty Smith in their midst, bound to his horse.

He was unbound, and lifted from the horse's back. Baldy Bubbin gave him a cheerful grin.

"I guess the game's up for you, Mr. Smith de Courey!" he chuckled. "Didn't I tell you that I knowed you."

The hapless man made no answer.

"Put him in the stores cabin," said Hudson Smedley. "And you, Alf, ride to Kicking Mule and warn the Mounted Police that we've got Lagden, the bank-robber, here."

"You bet, boss!" said Red Alf.

Then the prisoner spoke, as Alf rode away.

"You're making a mistake, Mr. Smedley! I am not Larry Lagden, the bank-robber of Prince Albert."

The rancher shrugged his shoulders.

"You're like him enough to be arrested for him, then," he said. "I'm bound to send for the police."

"I'm not the man."

"Why did you vamoose, then, you gold-darned critter?" demanded Pete Peters derisively.

Monty Smith's lip quivered.

"Mr. Smedley has stated the reason," he said. "I look so much like the bank-robber as to be arrested for him."

"And you ain't the man?" grinned the foreman of Windy River.

"No."

"I guess that yarn won't do. Anyhow, the Mounted will know whether you're the man or not."

"Put him in the stores cabin," said Hudson Smedley. "Monty Smith, or Lagden, or whatever your name may be, I'm bound to keep you a prisoner and hand you over to the Mounted Police. If you're not the man, as you say, you've nothing to fear; there's good law in Canada for every man between the Atlantic and the Pacific. But I'm taking no chances with a man who came here under a false name, and ran for it when he was found out."

"I guess not!" said Pete Peters.

Monty Smith bowed his head, and did not speak again. The cowpunchers led him into the stores cabin. Jimmy Silver followed them, and caught Monty Smith by the sleeve. His eyes searched the handsome face of the captured man.

"You give your word that you're not Larry Lagden, the bank-robber?" muttered Jimmy.

The young man nodded.

"I—I'm sorry for this, Jimmy," he said. "I'd never have stopped at Windy River if—if— But my luck's been rotten. But I've not deceived you, my boy. I swear I have not!"

"I believe you," said Jimmy huskily.

"Now then, out of it, young Silver," said Pete Peters, and the Rookwood junior, with a pale and troubled face, left the cabin.

The door was closed and locked on Monty Smith.

That evening, Baldy, the cook, was in

high feather. In the stores cabin, Monty Smith was under lock and key; and Red Alf, the cowboy, was riding hard for Kicking Mule to fetch the Mounted Police. And in all the Windy River crowd, there was only one who believed in the innocence of the hapless prisoner—Jimmy Silver. And even Jimmy Silver's loyal belief was beset with dark doubts.

CHAPTER 7.

Innocent or Guilty?

"JIMMY!"

Jimmy Silver's face clouded. The voice that called his name came from the barred window of the stores hut.

"Jimmy!"

The Rookwood junior stood hesitating, but at last he approached the barred window. It was early morning, and the glimmer of the rising sun was on the prairie and the rolling waters of the Windy River. Jimmy Silver was down very early that day. Lovell and Raby and Newcome had not yet turned out.

Slowly Jimmy came up to the window of the stores hut. Monty Smith watched him eagerly.

"I'm a prisoner now, Jimmy," he said.

"Yes. I—I'm sorry."

"And yet I'm innocent," said Monty Smith. "I—I suppose there's no chance for me here. Hudson Smedley has sent word to Kicking Mule, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"The Mounted Police are coming for me?"

"To-day," said Jimmy.

Monty Smith shivered a little.

"And I'm shut up here like a wild animal in a trap!" he said bitterly. "To be taken away in irons, like a thief!"

Jimmy moved uncomfortably.

"If you're not Larry Lagden you can prove it, I suppose," he said. "But if you're not, you're his double!"

"I am his double!" answered Monty Smith. "And that's easily explained, too. He is my cousin!"

"Oh! Then you know him?"

"I've known him all his life, though we've never been very good friends. He was in the bank at Prince Albert, in Sas-

katchewan, while I was there working with a wheat firm."

Jimmy Silver looked steadily at the prisoner in the stores cabin through the barred window.

The story was plausible enough. Such a resemblance was not surprising in near relations. But—

"You left Prince Albert and came out to Alberta?" said Jimmy.

"Yes."

"After the robbery at the bank?"

"Yes."

"Didn't it occur to you that you might be spotted by the police, and taken for your cousin—that it would have been safer to stay where you were known and could be identified?"

Monty Smith coloured.

"I thought of all that," he answered.

"Yet you gave up your job and left the place where you were known and came looking for work among the ranches?"

"Yes."

"Well, why?" asked Jimmy Silver bluntly. "I want to believe you if I can, You know that. But it's steep."

Monty hesitated.

"You've never been in such a position," he said. "I was respected in the Saskatchewan town, but everybody knew that Lagden was my cousin. He robbed the bank, injured a man there, and fled with some thousands of dollars plunder. After that how could I stay—pointed at on all sides as the relative of a thief and almost murderer! And my likeness to my cousin made it worse. I was twice seized in mistake for him, and released again. The firm where I worked were very decent to me, but they wanted me to go. I was bringing notoriety on the place. I had to clear."

Jimmy Silver nodded. He could understand that Monty Smith's position in the town where he was known had grown intolerable—if his tale was true. But was it true?

"I came West," continued Monty. "I hoped to get away from anyone who had ever seen or heard of Larry Lagden. I dropped the name of De Courcy and took that of Smith. I wanted to bury myself in the wilds of the West till Lagden was dealt with by the police, or until the affair had died away. What else could I do?"

Jimmy was silent.

Monty Smith watched him anxiously. It was very clear that he was keen to make the Rookwooder believe in him.

"And if the Mounted Police take you and you're sent back to Prince Albert?" said Jimmy at last.

"I shall be released when I get there. There are dozens of people to swear that I am Monty de Courcy."

Jimmy breathed quickly.

"Then you've nothing to fear."

"Nothing," echoed Monty Smith. "Nothing—only a long journey by road and rail with handcuffs on my wrists, with crowds staring at me and believing me a captured criminal! I'd rather be shot!"

Jimmy shuddered.

"That's why I ran for it when that fat fool Baldy found the photograph in the paper," said Monty. "What would you have done?"

"I—I don't know! I don't think I should have run," said Jimmy. "But—but—"

"You don't believe what I've told you?"

"I'm trying to," said Jimmy desperately. "But—but—"

"Then you won't help me?"

"Help you?" repeated Jimmy.

"Help me to get out of this," muttered Monty Smith. "You could get me out somehow—lend me a horse. Jimmy—"

"I can't! It's impossible," said Jimmy Silver. "If—if you could, give me any proof of what you say—"

"How can I? But—but I can't stand the disgrace, the shame, the humiliation of it!" muttered the tenderfoot. "I can't! I can't face it!"

"I'll speak to Hudson Smedley, and tell him what you've told me," said Jimmy at last. "I'll do my best, Monty."

"He will not believe a word of it."

"I—I'm afraid; but I'll try."

Jimmy Silver moved on with that; he felt that if he had listened to the appeals of the man who had been his friend he would yield—and he knew that he had no right to yield. Monty Smith, through the bars, watched him go with hopeless eyes.

Until breakfast Jimmy Silver paced by the corral fence, in deep and troubled thought.

He had trusted Monty Smith—he felt that somehow he still trusted him. But the story he had told was too strange—too steep, as Jimmy had said. If Jimmy believed it, it was pretty certain that no

one else on the Windy River Ranch would do so.

To help him escape—to help a hunted criminal to escape the police who were in search of him—it was impossible. Would an innocent man have asked it?

"Jimmy!"

Arthur Edward Lovell's voice bawled from the direction of the ranch-house.

"Jimmy! Brekker!"

Jimmy Silver went into the ranch-house with a troubled brow.

CHAPTER 8.

Painful for Baldy.

HUDSON SMEDLEY glanced curiously at his young cousin from the Old Country at the breakfast-table. He could see that Jimmy Silver had something on his mind.

"What's the trouble, Jimmy?" the rancher asked at last.

Jimmy started and coloured.

"I—I was thinking—"

"About young Smith?"

"Yes."

"It's a pesky, rotten affair," said the rancher. "But you've no call to worry, Jimmy."

"He helped me when Red Henri, the half-breed, had drawn a knife on me," said Jimmy, in a low voice.

Hudson Smedley nodded.

"I know. It's a gol-darned pity; but we can't shelter a thief who came to the ranch to hide himself from justice."

"I've spoken to him this morning," said Jimmy Silver, his colour deepening. "He—he's told me—"

"It would have been wiser to keep clear of the fellow!" said the rancher, frowning a little. "But what has he told you?"

Jimmy Silver explained.

His chums listened with deep attention; the rancher listened, too, but he shrugged his broad shoulders when Jimmy had finished.

"You don't believe him?" asked Jimmy.

"Well, I should want a lot of proof before I believed a yarn like that," said Hudson Smedley, with a smile. "It might be true, of course. If so, he will be all right when they get him back to Saskatchewan."

"It's rather thick, Jimmy," said Lovell,

with a shake of the head. "You're a bit soft, old chap; you let people pull your leg."

"Fathead!" said Jimmy.

"It sounds steep, anyhow," said Raby. "Dash it all, Jimmy, anybody would spin a yarn like that when he was lagged."

"I know; but—"

"Anyhow, there's nothing doing," said Newcome. "You can't help him, Jimmy, so it doesn't matter much whether you believe him or not."

Jimmy Silver did not answer that. He had not mentioned that Monty had asked him for help to escape.

"You're bound to hand him over to the Mounted Police?" Jimmy asked, looking at the rancher.

"Sure!"

"You—you couldn't give him a chance—"

Jimmy hesitated.

"What chance could I give him?" said Hudson Smedley. "His story might be true, but the chances are a thousand to one against it. It's a matter for the police to deal with. If he's innocent he seems to have done everything he could do to make himself look guilty."

"Yes, rather," said Lovell.

"The troopers will be here for him this morning," added the rancher. "They will have an accurate description of Lagden, the bank-robber. If they think that Monty Smith is the man they must take him."

"You believe he is the man?"

"Sure!"

Jimmy Silver said no more. He turned away, and went into the corral for Blazer, and saddled the horse for a ride on the prairie. He could do nothing; and that look on Monty Smith's white face haunted him.

In the stores hut the tenderfoot paced to and fro, his hands clenched and his face white and set. Innocent or guilty, there was despair in his heart; his faint hope in Jimmy Silver had left him now.

A fat face was framed in the little window, and Baldy, the cook, grinned in at him.

Monty Smith gave him a fierce look.

"I hear you've been spinning a good-sized yarn, young man!" grinned Baldy. "You ain't yourself, but somebody else—what?"

"You fat fool!"

"What?" roared Baldy indignantly.

Monty Smith came to the window with a gleam in his eyes. There was no glass to the window, and the shutter was open. Baldy's fat face was close to the bars.

The tenderfoot reached out suddenly between the bars, and caught Baldy's fat nose between finger and thumb.

"Tweak!"

There was a yell of anguish from the cook.

"Yoooooohoooo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Pete Peters, staring at the scene from the bunk-house. "You're caught, Baldy."

"Groogh! Led do by dose!" spluttered Baldy. "You durned galoot, led do by dose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the cowpunchers.

"Groogh! Oh! Ow! By gum, I'll drill you if you don't led do!" shrieked the Windy River cook.

Baldy dragged at a gun and jerked it out of his pocket. He shoved the barrel of the revolver fairly in the prisoner's face between the bars of the window.

"Now, then, you durned galoot, if—"

Monty Smith's eyes blazed. He let go Baldy's fat nose and instantly gripped the barrel of the revolver.

Baldy had not the least intention of pulling the trigger. He carried the gun for swank, certainly not for use. But as the prisoner jerked at the pistol Baldy's fat finger unconsciously pressed the trigger, and there was a sharp report. The bullet scored along Monty Smith's arm, tearing his sleeve and grazing his skin. The next moment he had torn the revolver away.

A moment more and the butt of it was in his hand, and the barrel was aimed through the window at Baldy Bubbin.

"Vamoose, you fat fool!" rapped out Monty Smith.

Baldy gave him one blink, and then dodged back and ran for it. Fat as he was, Baldy disappeared round the corner of the stores hut with the speed of a prairie rabbit. There was a roar from the cowpunchers.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, holy smoke!" gasped Baldy, halting when he was safe in cover. "Oh, Jerusalem! Oh, my nose! Ow!"

Pete Peters strolled over to the window and looked in. The barrel of the captured revolver flashed before his eyes, but the foreman of Windy River did not even blink.

"I guess you'd better hand over that gun, Smith!" he drawled.

Monty Smith gave him a black and bitter look.

"I'm keeping it," he said.

"I reckon——"

"I'm not going to be taken away alive!" said Monty Smith between his teeth. "I've told you I'm an innocent man——"

"Can it!" said Pete tersely.

"Believe me or not, as you choose! I'll never be taken out of this hut alive!" said Monty Smith.

Pete Peters looked at him fixedly, and his hand went to the gun in the holster at his belt. Monty Smith levelled the revolver.

"Touch that gun and you drop in your tracks!" he said.

"By gum! You've got sand!" said the foreman of the ranch calmly. "I guess I'll hide that fool Baldy for letting you get hold of a gun! But you'd better hand it over, Smith."

"I've told you what I mean to do."

"I'll calculate you'll sing to a different tune when the troopers come for you!" drawled Pete, and he strolled away, turning his back carelessly on the levelled revolver.

A few minutes later loud yells were heard from the cookhouse. The ranch foreman was letting Baldy, the cook, know what he thought of his folly with the help of a heavy cowhide boot. Some of the cowpunchers came along and stared in at the hut window.

"What do you reckon you're going to do with that gun, tenderfoot?" inquired Pike Potter.

"Shoot any man who lays a finger on me," answered Monty Smith.

"I guess you're going to have a warm time, then, when the troopers come!" said Skitter Dick. "Take it quiet, tenderfoot -- the penitentiary ain't a pleasant place; but if you pull trigger an' kill a man you'll be hanged, and that's a darn sight worse."

"I mean what I say."

"Lucky the round-up's over, boyses!" grinned Skitter Dick. "We'll be able to set around and watch the tenderfoot wipe out the Canadian Mounted Police!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Smith slammed the shutter in the faces of the cowpunchers.

CHAPTER 9.

Wanted!

JIMMY SILVER, as he trotted on the prairie trail on Blazer's back, caught sight of a couple of khaki coats and Stetson hats. He recognised Corporal Cayley and Trooper Bright, whom he had seen at the post at Kicking Mule. He joined them on the trail, to ride back to the ranch with them.

"You've got Lagden there, what?" the corporal asked.

"Either him or his double," said Jimmy. "He says that his name is De Courcy, and he's Lagden's cousin and very like him."

"I guess I can prove that at Prince Albert if it's the case," the corporal remarked. "I should have expected Larry Lagden, the bank-robber, to put up a better yarn than that."

"Too thin!" observed Trooper Bright. "Anyhow, he's our mutton!"

"We've got his description and his picture," said Corporal Cayley. "If he fits them he's our man."

"He fits them right enough," said Jimmy Silver. "But——"

"I guess it's O.K., then. Sergeant Kerr was pesky glad to get the news at Kicking Mule," said the corporal, with a grin. "He's telegraphed to Saskatchewan that he expects to rope in Larry Lagden here. I guess it's a leg-up for the Kicking Mule post. It ain't often that a chance like this comes our way."

The two troopers were evidently keenly anticipating the capture; but Jimmy Silver could not share their satisfaction. His face was clouded and his heart was heavy as he rode to the Windy River Ranch with them.

Hudson Smedley met them as they dismounted at the ranch-house. His bronzed face was very grave.

"You've got the man?" asked the corporal. "You haven't let him vamoose?"

"He's locked up in the stores hut yonder."

"Good!"

"But he's got hold of a revolver," said the rancher. "He says there will be shooting before he's taken."

The corporal smiled.

"I guess Larry Lagden is wanted, alive or dead," he answered. "If he's keen on shooting I guess we can give him all he wants."

"I guess so!" smiled Trooper Bright, and he unslung his carbine.

"He seems to be desperate," said the rancher.

"We've handled desperate men before."

Corporal Cayley and the trooper strode away at once to the stores hut. A crowd of the Windy River cowpunchers gathered round, looking on with keen interest, and ready to help if required. But few of them believed that there would be "trouble." Monty Smith, in the short time he had been at Windy River, had impressed them as a good-natured tenderfoot, and nothing at all in the style of a "bad man." Their belief was that he would "wilt" at the sight of the uniforms.

But Jimmy Silver was doubtful. He looked on with a clouded face, wondering miserably whether the sun was to look down upon a terrible tragedy that morning.

The stores hut was locked on the outside. Corporal Cayley turned back the key, but the door did not open.

A voice called from within:

"Stand back!"

"I guess not!" returned the corporal. "We want you, Larry Lagden!"

"I am not Larry Lagden!"

"Step out and let's get a look at you, then. I guess we don't want you if you ain't our mutton!"

"I am Lagden's cousin, and like him."

"Can it! You're our man!" said Corporal Cayley. "You've got this hyer door jammed somehow! Quit fooling, and let us in!"

"Listen to me," said Monty Smith quietly. "I'll come out and surrender on condition that you allow me to go a free man to Prince Albert and prove that you've made a mistake in identity, but I will not go as a handcuffed prisoner. Is that agreed?"

The corporal laughed.

"I guess not! You're going to have the darbies on as soon as I get hands on you, Larry Lagden! You're too slippery a customer, and I guess I ain't taking any chances with you! Open this door!"

"Take care! I am armed!"

"Mr. Smedley, the man's blocked the door. I guess you'll have to let us break it in."

"You're welcome to do what you think fit," answered the rancher.

"Bring an axe here, boys!" called out Pete Peters.

Pike Potter came up with the axe from the cookhouse, which Baldy used for chopping logs. Corporal Cayley took it in his sinewy hands.

He lifted the axe, swung it back over his shoulder, and brought it down on the door of the stores hut with a terrific concussion.

Crash!

The door was thick and strong, of stout pinewood, but it quivered* and groaned under that hefty stroke.

There was a sharp cry from within the hut:

"Keep off, I tell you!"

"Monty's getting his mad up!" grinned Skitter Dick.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crash!

The heavy axe rang again on the door with all the strength of the Canadian corporal's brawny arms.

Trooper Bright stood by, carbine in hand, ready to shoot if shooting was wanted.

In a grinning half-circle the cowpunchers stood, evidently looking on the whole proceedings as more or less of a joke.

Only Jimmy Silver's face was very grave.

He knew Monty Smith better than the outfit did, and he knew that there was courage and determination beneath the careless, good-natured exterior of the Windy River tenderfoot.

His heart throbbed to the crashing of the axe, and at every instant he expected to hear the ring of the revolver from within.

Crash, crash!

Strong as the door was, it was not built to withstand attacks like this. A long crack showed down the centre now.

Crash!

"There she goes!" said Pete Peters.

The door split into halves. One half hung on the hinges, the other slipped out and fell to the ground. Within stood a heap of packing-cases and lumber that Monty Smith had stacked into a barricade.

"Coming out now?" shouted the corporal.

"No!"

"I guess we'll get you!"

"I warn you to keep off!"

"Can it!" said the corporal.

Crash, crash!

The heavy axe dashed on the barricade within the doorway and sent it flying. Half the doorway was unblocked, and in the opening the white, desperate face of Monty Smith appeared, the eyes gleaming behind a raised revolver.

"Stand back, or——"

Crack!

It was Trooper Bright's carbine that rang out, and a loud cry came from the man in the hut. Jimmy Silver sprang forward, his heart throbbing. But there was a shout from the cowpunchers, and a laugh.

"Well done!"

"I guess that was a bullseye—sure!"

The bullet from the carbine had struck the revolver from Monty Smith's hand, sending it spinning across the hut, smashed. Monty Smith, his arm jarred by the shock, staggered back, hardly knowing what had happened to him. Save for the numbing jar to his arm, he was not hurt; but for the moment he was too bewildered to act.

"Come on!" the corporal panted.

He dropped the axe and plunged through the tumbling barricade into the hut with Trooper Bright at his heels.

CHAPTER 10.

Dead or Alive!

MONTY SMITH backed across the hut, white, desperate, savage. Innocent or guilty, he was desperate now, and fighting for his freedom. His arm tingled and hung helpless, but he had recovered his wits. The corporal and the trooper hurled the packing-cases aside, and came plunging through. The cornered man was unarmed now, and they did not think of shooting. It only remained to collar him and snap the handcuffs on his wrists.

But they had not counted on the desperation of the hunted man. For a few moments, as they cleared away the barricade, Monty Smith stood leaning on the farther wall, panting. But as they came at him he made a sudden movement. Catching up a heavy stool, he leaped forward instead of waiting for the attack.

The stool crashed on the broad chest of

the corporal, sending him sprawling on the floor. He went down with a yell.

Trooper Bright leaped on the tenderfoot, dodging the swing of the stool, which dropped to the floor.

They closed and struggled.

The powerful trooper had no doubt of bringing down his man in a hand-to-hand struggle, and already the corporal was staggering up. But somehow Monty Smith hooked the trooper's leg, and Bright went whirling over.

He crashed on the corporal, sending him to the floor again and sprawling across him.

Monty Smith stood free and unassailed.

He made a spring for the open doorway. But before the troopers could gain their feet the tenderfoot was outside in the free air.

There was a roar from the outfit.

"He's loose!"

"Seize him!" shouted Hudson Smedley.

There was a rush.

Monty Smith's desperate eyes blazed round him for a moment, but every way of escape was blocked.

The hands of the cowpunchers were almost upon him.

But he was not captured yet. He turned and grasped at the low roof of the stores hut, and dragged himself up with the activity of a lynx. Skitter Dick grabbed at him and caught his ankle; but Monty's other foot kicked back, and the Skitter let go his hold with a loud roar as he caught a boot-heel with his chin.

The next second Monty Smith was on the roof of the hut, and clambering thence to the ridge of the cookhouse roof.

Corporal Cayley and the trooper came rushing out of the hut breathlessly and furiously. But the tenderfoot was already far out of their reach.

"Surround the cookhouse!" ordered Hudson Smedley.

"You bet, boss!" said Pete Peters. "He ain't getting away!"

The shouting cowboys spread out in a wide circle enclosing the cookhouse.

From the ridge of the roof Monty Smith stared down at them. On all sides his escape was cut off. He could not descend without falling into grasping hands.

Jimmy Silver called up to him:

"Monty! Chuck it, old man! There's no chance!"

"That's good advice, I guess!" said Pete Peters. "Cut it out, Smith! You're booked!"

"Not while I'm alive!" answered Monty Smith.

Corporal Cayley set his teeth.

"I guess you're our mutton, Larry Lagden!" he said. "Are you coming down off that roof?"

"No!"

"Trooper Bright, draw a bead on him, and pull trigger when I give the word!"

"Yep!"

Bright fetched his carbine from the hut, where he had dropped it. He loaded it carefully, and took aim at the figure sitting astride of the the roof-ridge.

There was a breathless hush.

Jimmy Silver's heart was sick within him. Lovell and Raby and Newcome stood very still, their faces pale.

Monty Smith looked down, and his handsome, flushed face showed no sign of fear as he looked almost into the barrel of the carbine.

"Are you coming down?" shouted the corporal.

"No!"

"You're wanted, Larry Lagden, dead or alive! I guess I'd rather take you along to Prince Albert Town alive, but take your choice! Trooper Bright, fire when I say 'three'!"

"You bet!"

The whole crowd stood icily silent now. All eyes were upon the desperate man on the roof of the cookhouse. Even Baldy had come out into the open to look on with breathless interest.

Trooper Bright took a steady aim. His eye glanced along the barrel, and the carbine bore full upon the wanted man.

Monty Smith made no movement.

"One!" said the corporal.

Steady as a rock the hunted man sat astride of the cookhouse roof ridge, looking down.

"Two!"

There was a buzz of deep-drawn breath among the watching cowpunchers. Hudson Smedley bit his underlip. But he uttered no word. It was for the Mounted Police to deal with the situation in their own way.

"Three!"

The last word was followed by the crack of the carbine.

Crack!

Jimmy Silver gave an involuntary cry.

His startled eyes watched Monty Smith, in the expectation of seeing the hapless man roll from the roof and crash to the ground. But Monty Smith did not fall. He was seen to jump violently and clutch harder at the ridge. The bullet had struck a lock of hair from his head.

"Ge-whiz!" murmured Pete Peters tensely.

"I guess you were off your shot, Trooper Bright!" rapped out Corporal Cayley. "You'll have to burn powder again."

Jimmy Silver, watching the corporal intently, saw for a second a deflection of his eyelid, answered by a similar sign from Trooper Bright. And he realised that the shot, which had gone so close, had not been intended to strike the man on the roof. Trooper Bright was trying to scare him into surrender.

The trooper took aim again.

"Coming down?" roared the corporal.

"No."

Crack! rang the carbine.

There was a sharp cry from Monty Smith. He clapped his hand to his shoulder.

"Winged, by thunder!" ejaculated Pete Peters.

But Monty Smith did not fall. The coat on his shoulder had been cut, the bullet had grazed his skin. But that was all, and Monty Smith realised now that he was being played with, and he burst into a scornful laugh.

The corporal muttered an emphatic word.

"I guess that jay can't be scared," he said. "Mr. Smedley, can your men lend me a ladder?"

"Sure!"

And in a few minutes a long ladder was reared against the side of the cookhouse, and the corporal mounted, followed by the trooper. Monty Smith slid down the slope of the roof, and the onlookers caught their breath, fully expecting him to slip over the gutter and come to the ground. But he stopped at the ladder, and, lying on the slope, kicked it outward.

"Look out!" roared Skitter Dick. But the warning was no use to the corporal and his follower. The ladder flew from the wall, crashing over to the ground, and Corporal Cayley and Trooper Bright dropped from it. Monty Smith clambered back to the roof ridge, panting, and on the ground the corporal and the trooper picked themselves up, breathless, bruised, and shaken.

"That tenderfoot, is some lad!" said Skitter Dick admiringly.

Corporal Cayley dragged the revolver from his belt.

"You god-darned fire-eater, will you come down?" he roared.

"No!"

For a moment it was even chances whether the corporal pulled trigger or not. Monty Smith looked down at him coolly. But the corporal gritted his teeth and thrust the revolver back into his belt.

"I guess we'll have you all the same," he said.

Monty Smith shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER 11.

Startling News!

JIMMY SILVER went into the ranch-house to dinner. For a time there was a cessation of hostilities. Corporal Cayley and the trooper were giving the hunted man a rest, and Monty Smith was still on the roof of the cookhouse watching for a chance to escape. But there was little chance for him. Half a dozen cowboys had been told off to watch him, and they had their lassos ready. Monty Smith could not descend without being roped in at once. Perhaps the corporal considered that he would get tired of his hopeless resistance and surrender of his own accord, but the hunted man gave no sign of it. After dinner the corporal smoked his pipe and watched his quarry, sitting on a fence-rail, and Trooper Bright sat by, with his carbine across his knees.

But there was no sign of surrender from Monty Smith. Doubtless he hoped that if the capture could be staved off till dark he would have a chance of slipping away in the gloom after sundown. Jimmy Silver wondered whether he would be given that chance.

But when the sun was sinking towards the Rocky Mountains in the west, the corporal made a move.

He rose from the fence-rail and yawned and called up to the fugitive.

"I guess you're tired of sitting up there like a hen on a roost, Larry Lagden! Are you coming down?"

"No."

"Then I guess I'm after you."

He spoke a few words to Bright, who

walked away to the bunkhouse and came back with a coiled lasso on his arm. Monty Smith looked down at him, and Jimmy saw the hapless man set his teeth with a desperate expression.

"Corporal Cayley!" exclaimed Jimmy, catching his breath. "You're not going to rope him down——"

The corporal looked at him.

"Sure!" he answered.

"He will break his neck, or a leg at least, crashing on the ground!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Sure!" assented the corporal again.

"But—but——"

"I guess it's his own funeral," said Corporal Cayley. "I've given him plenty of chances to come down."

Jimmy ran towards the cookhouse.

"Monty," he shouted, "come down, for goodness sake! What's the good of keeping this up?"

Monty Smith did not reply.

"You see what they're going to do!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"I see."

"It means death, or being crippled——"

"I'm not coming down."

Jimmy suppressed a groan. Trooper Bright was already swinging the lasso.

"I guess this is the finish," said Skitter Dick, coming over from the bunkhouse. "He's asked for it, Jimmy."

Whiz!

The lasso flew.

The noose dropped neatly over Monty Smith's head and shoulders. He made a frantic attempt to throw it off, but did not succeed. The loop was round his waist, and a jerk of the rope tightened it there. Monty Smith clung to the ridge.

"I guess we've got him," said the corporal coolly. "Now then, Larry Lagden, are you coming down quietly?"

"No!" shouted Monty Smith.

"Then it's your funeral. Drag on that rope, Trooper Bright."

"You bet!"

Jimmy Silver was white as chalk. Monty Smith was clinging to the roof ridge, but the steady drag on the rope was certain to tear him away from his hold. Then would come the glide down the slope of the roof, the fall over the edge, the sickening crash on the earth below. Hudson Smedley rapped out an order, and three or four cowpunchers rushed into the bunkhouse, and came back with a big blanket.

They ranged themselves under the taut rope, holding the corners of the blanket for the lassoed man to fall into.

It was all that they could do, and it was something, but if Monty Smith missed the blanket as he came crashing down—

The corporal lent the trooper his aid in dragging on the taut rope. Monty Smith was torn from the roof ridge.

He shot down the slope and rolled over the edge.

"Steady!"

Bump!

It was in the blanket that the hunted man landed, with an impact that almost tore it from the strong hands of the cowboys.

The blanket sagged down, almost touching the ground. But the cowpunchers held it, and Monty Smith was saved. He rotted dizzily out of the blanket, into the hands of Corporal Cayley and Trooper Bright.

He struggled feebly, but there was no chance now. There was a sharp click, as the handcuffs fastened on his wrists. Then he stood up between the corporal and the trooper, and the lasso was slipped from him.

"I guess you're our mutton now, with the wool on," smiled the corporal. "You've given us a lot of trouble, Larry Lagden."

"I am not Larry Lagden, you fool!"

"Oh, can it!" snapped the corporal.

He glanced round.

"You're lending us a hoss, Hudson Smedley, to get this man to Kicking Mule?"

"Of course."

Pike Potter led up a saddled horse. Monty Smith was lifted into the saddle, and his feet were lashed to the stirrups.

The unhappy man's face was white and set.

Thud, thud!

There was a sound of rapid hoof-beats on the prairie trail. In the westerling sunlight a horseman was seen spurring towards the ranch. He wore the uniform of the Canadian Mounted Police.

Corporal Cayley glanced at him.

"That's Trooper Grey, from Kicking Mule," he remarked. "I guess Sergeant Kerr is keen on news of Larry Lagden. Hallo, Grey!"

The newcomer reined in his horse.

"Message from the sergeant, corporal," he said.

"Right! We've got the man."

"You've got him?" repeated Trooper Grey, staring curiously at the bound man on the horse.

"Sure! Here he is."

"Who is he?"

"What? He's Larry Lagden. I guess," said the corporal testily. "Ain't you seen his description and his pesky picture?"

Trooper Grey grinned faintly.

"Here's the telegram," he said.

"What gol-darned telegram?"

"You know the sergeant wired to Saskatchewan this morning, corporal. Here's the answer from Prince Albert. It came through, and the sergeant sent me off at once with it."

Corporal Cayley took the telegram. He stared at it blankly.

"Gee-whiz!" he stuttered.

He held it, staring at it, and a dozen others read it as he held it. It was startling news from the police headquarters at Prince Albert, in Saskatchewan.

"Larry Lagden here, under arrest."

CHAPTER 12.

Cleared!

JIMMY SILVER gave a gasp of relief. Amazed faces surrounded the bound prisoner on the horse. Corporal Cayley looked like a man in a dream.

The words of the telegram were repeated from lip to lip.

"Larry Lagden here, under arrest!"

"Larry Lagden under arrest at Prince Albert!" said Hudson Smedley blankly. "Then—then—"

Monty Smith gave a cry.

"What's that?"

"Then he's not Larry Lagden!" ejaculated the corporal.

"I guess not, if that telegram is the straight goods!" chuckled Skitter Dick.

Monty Smith panted.

His vindication had come suddenly, dramatically. There was no doubting the official telegram. While the troopers had been hunting down Monty Smith, the the "wanted" man had been under arrest all the time—already in the hands of the Saskatchewan police.

Corporal Cayley drew from his pocket the official description of the wanted man. He read it through slowly, and stared at Monty Smith. The description was that of the tenderfoot of Windy River; the attached photograph might have been Monty Smith's

photograph. But it was evident that Monty Smith was not the man.

Monty Smith was smiling now.

Corporal Cayley thrust the document back into his pocket, with a grim brow. He had made his capture; but it was not of much use to him now. He ought to have been glad, perhaps, that the news had come in time, before he had carried off his prisoner by the long prairie trail to Kicking Mule. But he did not look glad.

"Well," said Hudson Smedley, at last, "Monty Smith isn't the man you want, corporal."

"I guess not," said Corporal Cayley slowly.

"Got that at last?" inquired the tenderfoot sarcastically. "I think I mentioned that I wasn't Larry Lagden, corporal."

"I guess you're as like him to be taken for him," said the corporal gruffly; "and if I didn't know that this was an official telegram, I'd take you along all the same. And don't be saucy. I guess I can take you, if I choose, for resisting the Mounted Police in the execution of their duty."

"So you could, old bean," said Monty Smith; "and I guess I'd have you afterwards for wrongful arrest and false imprisonment. But cut it out, corporal; it's a mistake any man might have made, on my looks, and I don't bear any malice. You've given me a high old time to-day, and I'm not the man you want. Who's going to let me loose?"

He looked round, smiling.

Trooper Bright, at a sign from the corporal, began to unfasten the rope that secured Monty Smith to the horse. The corporal himself removed the handcuffs.

Pete Peters stepped forward to help the late prisoner down. A dozen cowpunchers pressed forward to shake his hand or smack him on the back.

He was cleared now, in the eyes of the Windy River outfit, and he was their comrade again.

"I guess we're done here, Bright," said the corporal, and he mounted his horse.

Trooper Bright followed his example.

The two horsemen rode away, Trooper Grey joining them, leaving Monty Smith a free man.

Monty Smith watched them disappear over the rolling prairie, in the sunset, with a curious expression on his face.

Then he turned to Hudson Smedley.

"I guess you're satisfied now that I'm

not the bank-robber of Prince Albert, boss," he said.

"Quite!" said the rancher.

"Sure!" said Pete Peters. "But I ain't blaming myself, for one, for thinking that you was that galoot, Monty Smith. You've got only yourself to thank, and your looks."

Monty Smith nodded.

"That's so; I'm not blaming anybody," he said.

"You should not have resisted arrest," said the rancher sharply. "It was a mistake, as it has turned out; but the Mounted were doing their duty, and you were in the wrong."

"I—I know! But I couldn't face it," said Monty Smith. "I'd rather they put a bullet through my head." He looked at Jimmy Silver. "You know now that I told you the truth, Jimmy."

"Yes," said Jimmy. "I—I tried to believe you all the time, Monty. I—I think I did believe you."

"Well, you all know the facts now," said the tenderfoot. "And I guess, boss, that I know you don't want me on the ranch any longer. You don't want the cousin of a bank-robber at Windy River, and I know it. I'm not waiting to be fired. Good-bye, all!"

The tenderfoot walked away to the corral. Jimmy Silver caught him by the arm and swung him back.

"Hold on, you ass!" he said.

"Let up, Jimmy! I'm going."

"You need not go," said Hudson Smedley quietly. "I guess I'm not the man to be down on you for what your relation has done. You can go if you like, but if you don't like, you're welcome to stay at Windy River."

Monty Smith's handsome face brightened.

"I guess I'd like to hang on," he said.

"If the boys haven't got it up against me —"

"Cut that out!" said Pete Peters. "Now we know you're square, it's all right."

"You're staying," said Jimmy.

Monty Smith nodded.

"I'm glad to," he said. "I guess I'll try to make myself useful, boss, so you won't be sorry for giving me a chance."

And the tenderfoot stayed.

It was a couple of weeks later that Trooper Bright rode up to the Windy River Ranch, and drew rein at the bunkhouse.

"That tenderfoot galoot about?" he asked. Baldy, the cook, looked out of the cook-house.

"He's here," he answered. "You ain't after the man again, Bright?"

"I guess not; but I've got news for him, and for all the boys," answered the trooper. He tossed down a newspaper. "Chew on that, you 'uns."

And the trooper rode on to the ranch-house to carry his news to Hudson Smedley.

Monty Smith picked up the paper. A dozen of the outfit gathered round him to read a marked paragraph, Jimmy Silver & Co. among them. Monty Smith's face changed colour as he read:

"Larry Lagden, the bank-robber, broke gaol yesterday, and so far the police have failed to find him. A man answering his description was seen on a west-bound train, and there is a rumour that he has stolen a horse in the Blackfoot Hills and fled to the west. The police in Alberta have been warned to look out for him."

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Pete Peters. "That ornery galoot ain't done with yet. If he came west from the Blackfoot Hills, I guess he's heading for Alberta."

Monty Smith set his lips.

"I calculate that Monty had better stick close to the Windy River Ranch," chuckled Skitter Dick. "On his looks, he will be roped in, in any town in Alberta now."

"I guess the boss had better put the Windy River brand on him," suggested Pike Potter, and there was a laugh.

Monty Smith stood with a thoughtful, clouded brow as the group dispersed. Jimmy Silver stayed with him.

"The man's not likely to come up here to Windy River, Monty," said the Rookwood junior.

"I reckon that's just what he's likely to do," said Monty quietly, with a troubled look. "If he knows I'm here——"

"How could he know?"

"It must have been in the Saskatchewan paper, about a man like him being taken in Alberta by mistake. He may have seen it. If he knows——" Monty's face was deeply troubled.

"He's bound to be taken before long," said Jimmy Silver.

Monty Smith nodded, and went back to the cookhouse, sorely troubled. As day followed day, and there was no news of the

recapture of the bank-robber, Jimmy Silver wondered what had become of the hunted man, and whether he would ever be seen on the banks of the Windy River.

He was soon to know!

CHAPTER 13.

Baldy Wants to Know!

"LETTERS!" sang out Jimmy Silver. Jimmy rode in from the Mosquito trail and drew rein outside the bunkhouse at the Windy River Ranch.

There was a rush at once.

Letters came up to the Windy River section twice a week on the post-wagon from Kicking Mule, and twice a week a horseman rode over to Mosquito from the ranch to fetch in the mail. That duty often fell to Jimmy Silver or one of his chums, Lovell or Raby or Newcome. It was always an event on the ranch when the letters came. Jimmy Silver was surrounded at once by the cowpunchers, and Baldy put a fat, inquiring face out of the doorway of the cookhouse.

"Quite a bag this time," said Jimmy Silver. "One each for you chaps from the Old Country." He sorted the letters from the leather "grip" in which they were packed, and tossed one each to Lovell and Raby and Newcome.

"Any for me?" called out Baldy, the cook.

"Not this time, Baldy. One for you, Skitter." Jimmy sorted out letter after letter. "One for Pete Peters. Where's Pete?"

"Out on the range," said Monty Smith.

"One for Pike Potter; one for Thompson—here you are! One for little me—but I've read that already. One for Alfred Dawson, Esquire. Anybody ever heard of Alfred Dawson, Esquire? It's addressed to the ranch."

"I guess that's me," said Red Alf, with a grin.

"Here you are. Seven for Mr. Smedley," said Jimmy Silver. "And here's one for Montague de Courcy."

"What?"

Monty Smith uttered that exclamation in startled tones.

Monty had gathered round with the rest of the outfit who happened to be at hand.

but certainly he had not been in expectation of receiving a letter.

"Are you pulling my leg?" he asked.

"Not at all," said Jimmy, with a smile. "Here it is. Montague de Courcy, Windy River Ranch. You're Montague de Courcy, I think."

There was a laugh from some of the cowpunchers. The tenderfoot had come to Windy River under the homely name of Smith; but it was known that his real name was De Courcy—a magnificent name that was the cause of many little jokes among the cowpunchers.

"But—but it's queer!" said Monty Smith. "Nobody knows I'm in Alberta, excepting perhaps—"

He broke off abruptly.

"Well, whoever it is, he doesn't know that you've adopted the jolly old name of Smith," said Jimmy. "Here you are!"

He tossed the letter to Monty, who caught it, and then rode on to the ranch-house.

Monty Smith stood with the letter in his hand, staring at it.

Baldy, the cook, who never saw any reason for restraining his inquisitiveness, stared at it over his arm.

"That letter ain't come far," said Baldy. "That's Mr. Leago's postmark on it, so it was posted in Mosquito."

Monty Smith flushed and thrust the letter into his pocket and walked away. Baldy, the cook, bestowed a fat grin on the cowpunchers.

"Who's writing to Monty Smith from Mosquito?" he said.

"Perhaps he'll tell you if you ask him," suggested Skitter Dick.

"Well, the galoot don't know anybody in the section," said Baldy. "He's a stranger here. And he goes around calling himself Smith, not De Courcy. He said it was queer himself. So it is."

"I guess it's queer, too, that you should worry about what doesn't consarn you," remarked Spike Thompson.

"It may be something from the Mounted Police," said Baldy. "Something about that cousin of his—the bank-robbin', Larry Lagden. That fire-eater is supposed to have lit out for Alberta, and the Mounted haven't run him down yet. Why"—Baldy's little, round eyes danced with excitement—"it might be a letter from Lagden himself—"

"Oh, can it!" said Skitter Dick. "You keep that fat nose of yours in the cook-

house, Baldy, and don't poke it into other galoots' affairs!"

Evidently the cowpunchers did not share Baldy's curiosity with regard to the letter from Mosquito for Monty Smith.

Baldy grunted and walked away. He did not return to the cookhouse. He followed Monty Smith, who had gone into the bunkhouse with his letter.

Baldy was curious—and when Baldy was curious he wanted to know. And Baldy never hesitated to ask questions when he wanted to know.

Monty Smith was sitting on the edge of his bunk in the room, with the open letter in his hand.

He was reading it, with a fixed gaze, and Baldy noted with keen interest that his handsome face was almost white. Baldy did not need telling that the letter had come as a shock to the tenderfoot of Windy River.

Monty Smith was so deeply immersed in his letter that he did not notice Baldy's fat form framed in the doorway.

He read the letter through, and without looking up he proceeded to read it through a second time. All the colour had faded from his face.

"Good heavens!" he muttered aloud. "He has come here!"

Then he looked up and saw Baldy, and crushed the letter in his hand.

Baldy rolled into the bunkhouse, almost on tenterhooks of inquisitiveness by this time.

"Bad news, pard?" he asked.

"Eh? Yes! No!" said Monty confusedly.

"Some sort of trouble—what?"

"It's nothing!"

"Something from the police?" asked Baldy sympathetically. "Are them guys worrying you about that cousin of yours what's so like you?"

"You're mistaken," said Monty Smith haltingly. "This letter is not from the police."

"Ain't it?" said Baldy cheerfully. "Then who's it from?"

Monty Smith did not reply to that question. He thrust the letter into his pocket.

"You can tell a pard all about it," said Baldy encouragingly.

Instead of telling the cook all about it, Monty Smith pushed past him to the door.

Baldy caught hold of his arm.

"Look here, pard—"

"Let go, you fat fool!"

"What?" gasped Baldy.

"Mind your own business!"

"Waal, search me!" exclaimed Baldy, greatly offended. "I guess that— Oh! Ow! Whoop!"

Bump!

Apparently out of patience, Monty Smith gave the fat cook a violent shove on his chest, and Baldy sat down quite suddenly. Monty Smith left him sitting, and walked out of the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER 14.

A Mysterious Meeting!

"JIMMY!"

"Hallo!"

It was after supper, and the stars were gleaming in the sky. Jimmy Silver had come out on to the veranda of the ranch-house, and he was leaning on the pine rail, looking out over the starlit prairie, when a low voice spoke to him from below. Jimmy looked down over the rail.

"It's I—Smith!"

"You, Monty! Come up!" said Jimmy Silver.

"You come down, will you?"

"Yes, if you like," said Jimmy Silver, rather puzzled.

He descended the wooden steps of the veranda, and joined the tenderfoot. Even in the shadows he could see that Monty Smith's face was strangely white.

"Anything the matter?" Jimmy asked.

"No—yes! Well, yes! I—I've got an appointment to keep," said Monty Smith in a low voice.

"Have you?" said Jimmy, still more puzzled. He could not understand the tenderfoot's suppressed excitement, neither could he see what appointment Monty Smith could possibly have for that evening.

"Going over to Mosquito?"

"Oh, no! A man wants to see me," said Monty. "That's all. But—" He broke off and hesitated.

"Pile in," said Jimmy good-humouredly. "That letter you brought me to-day—"

"Oh, I see," assented Jimmy.

"I'm going to keep the appointment," said Monty Smith. "But—but—" He hesitated again.

"Anything I can do?" asked the perplexed Rookwood junior. It was clear that Monty Smith wanted to ask him something, and Jimmy Silver was growing mystified.

"Yes—if you will."

"Give it a name," said Jimmy.

"I can't tell you who it is I'm going to meet. There are reasons. It's a man—a man I know," Monty Smith stammered a little. "I want to keep the whole thing dark, Jimmy."

"Right-ho! Keep it dark, then."

"Will you come with me?"

"Certainly, if you like. Where's the place?"

"Down to the river—it's not far. You've got a revolver, Jimmy?"

Jimmy started.

"Yes, in my room. But what—"

"You can get it without being noticed?"

"Of course. But—"

"Get it, then, and come along."

Jimmy Silver paused. He was on the best of terms with the Windy River tenderfoot, and he liked Monty very much. But he was puzzled now, and a little disquieted.

"I'd rather understand a little more, Monty," he said. "If you've got to go armed to this giddy appointment, that means that it's an enemy you're going to meet."

"I don't know—friend or enemy—I can't tell, yet," said Monty Smith. "But I want to be on my guard."

"I see," said Jimmy, though he did not quite see. "But wouldn't it be better to see the man, whoever he is, by daylight—"

"You don't understand—"

"No, I don't quite!" agreed Jimmy.

"I can't explain. But if you'd rather not come it's all right." Monty Smith made a movement to go, and Jimmy caught him by the arm.

"Hold on," he said. "I'll come, of course. You seem to be jolly mysterious all of a sudden, but you can rely on me. Wait a tick while I bag the shooter."

"I'll wait."

Jimmy Silver went back into the ranch-house. Arthur Edward Lovell's voice hailed him.

"Jimmy!"

Jimmy Silver turned a deaf ear. He went quietly to his room, and slipped the revolver into his pocket. A minute later

he had rejoined Monty Smith in the shadows under the veranda.

"Lead on, Macduff!" said Jimmy cheerfully.

"Come on, then," said Monty Smith. And he led the puzzled and rather uneasy Rookwood junior away into the gloom.

Avoiding the ranch buildings, Monty Smith struck into the well-worn trail down to the banks of the Windy River. In a short time they were under the trees by the water's side. The Windy River, low in the summer months, was now swollen by the autumn rains, and it rolled on, deep and murmuring, between brimming banks.

Overhead, branches dripped with late rain. But the night now was calm and clear.

At the landing-place Monty Smith halted, and stood looking up and down the shadowy bank of the river.

Jimmy Silver waited.

They were out of sight and sound of the ranch buildings, and the spot was silent and lonely. Jimmy Silver held his hand on the butt of the revolver in his pocket. He was perplexed and growing very anxious. He started violently as there was a footstep in the darkness under the trees. A voice came from the shadows.

"Monty! Is it you?"

"Yes," answered Monty Smith.

A dim shadow loomed up. Jimmy Silver had a glimpse in the darkness of a black beard and two keen, gleaming eyes. The shadow seemed to start back suddenly.

"You're not alone!" rasped the voice.

"No."

"I told you—"

"I'm not at your orders."

Jimmy heard a muttered exclamation.

"You fool! Who is it with you?"

"A friend."

"His name?"

"What does that matter?"

"There's no secret about that," put in the Rookwood junior. "My name's Jimmy Silver."

"A boy?" said the unknown, peering at him.

"Just that!" said Jimmy.

"Monty, you fool! Why did you bring this boy with you?"

"The boy is armed, and is a dead shot," said Monty Smith coolly. "As a stranger in this section, you may not know that he has handled a road-agent, and helped in his capture. You may as well know it—it may prevent you from trying on any trickery."

"What trickery do you fear?"

"I fear nothing," answered Monty Smith. "But if anything should happen to me Jimmy Silver will let all the ranch know it, and you will take the consequences."

The half-seen man muttered again under his breath.

"I've left your letter, too, in my locker at the bunkhouse," went on Monty Smith. "That letter will be taken to Hudson Smedley by Jimmy Silver if I do not return to the ranch to-night. Keep that in mind if you are thinking of treachery. Now—"

"I am thinking of nothing of the kind, Monty." The man's voice was quieter, calmer. "Neither have I come here to trouble you. I told you in my letter that there was news—news that I think has not reached you yet."

"What is it?"

"We cannot talk here. What I say is for your ears alone. This boy is not concerned."

"I will think of that. But if you have news tell me what it is. If you are not here for villainy, prove your good faith."

"Lord Erdingford is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Is that true?"

"I have an English paper with the news in it, if you doubt my word."

Monty Smith breathed hard.

"Then I am wanted in England—at home. Poor old fellow! When did he die?"

"Some weeks ago; and he was, I think, too distant a relation for your grief to be very deep." There was a sarcastic inflexion in the man's voice. "It's true, Monty. And you might never have heard the news for months—if at all—hiding up here in the North-West under an assur'd name. You have to thank me for it."

"And why did you come to tell me?"

"I have my reasons. But let us talk in private. Monty, I have only an hour—my horse is saddled ready—"

"You are going?"

"At once—when I have had a talk with you. What are you afraid of? Have I any motive for harming you?" exclaimed the man impatiently.

"Only your evil nature. But I am not afraid. If you mean treachery, it will be known at the ranch, where I have friends—and your name will be known. Take care!"

Monty Smith turned to Jimmy Silver.

"Jimmy, thank you for coming with me. If I do not turn up in the bunkhouse in an hour's time, will you take the letter out of my locker—it's not locked—and take it to Hudson Smedley, and tell him all this?"

"Certainly I will," said Jimmy. "But if you don't trust this man, Monty, don't go with him. Come back to the ranch, and if he wants to see you, let him come there openly."

"He cannot come, Jimmy. I am safe enough, when he knows that he will be hunted down if anything happens to me. Go back now, Jimmy."

"You'd better——"

"No, no; go back!"

"Very well! Keep this!" Jimmy passed the revolver into Monty Smith's hand. "A shot will be heard at the ranch, you know."

"Good!"

Jimmy Silver went back along the dark trail under the trees. He was feeling very anxious about the tenderfoot; and yet it seemed difficult to see how Monty could be in danger now. He was armed—and if he did not return in an hour's time to the ranch, he would be searched for. And the letter in Monty's locker apparently was to give a clue to the unknown man's identity, and to enable the rancher to rope him in. Who was the man?

Like a flash it came into Jimmy Silver's mind, as he walked back to the ranch.

"Larry Lagden!" he muttered.

The bank robber of Prince Albert—the cousin of Monty de Courcy—the man who had broken gaol in Saskatchewan, and was known to have fled westward into Alberta.

Jimmy felt certain of it.

That was why Monty Smith had met him—criminal as he was, the claim of blood could not be disregarded. That was why Monty had met him, and distrusted him; troubled and disturbed by the rascal's visit, yet unable perhaps to believe that Lagden intended him harm, or indeed had any motive for intending him harm. At all events, Monty was distrustful, and on his guard.

"It must be Lagden!" said Jimmy to himself. "And yet——"

He was puzzled and doubtful. He joined the cowpunchers who were gathered, smoking and yarning, round the stove in the bunkhouse, and waited for the stipulated hour to elapse.

CHAPTER 15.

Struck Down!

"HE'S gone! And now——" said Monty Smith.

He stood with his hand in his pocket, resting on the butt of the revolver. In the darkness he could see little of the mysterious man, save his thick black beard and gleaming eyes. But he was watching him intently, on his guard.

"And now——" said the other.

"What do you want, Lagden?"

"You had sense enough not to speak that name while the boy was here!" sneered the bank-robber.

"I do not want to give you away, if you do not mean mischief. You ought to be in prison, but it is not my duty to send you there," said Monty Smith. "Why have you hunted me out here? How did you know I was at Windy River?"

The bank-robber laughed.

"I owe that to the police. It seems that your likeness to me caused you to be arrested in my place."

"That's true; I should have been sent back to Saskatchewan, but the news of your arrest came through by telegram to Kicking Mule, in time to stop it."

Lagden laughed softly.

"The police were satisfied that you were me, on the printed description and photograph," he said.

"Naturally. We were often taken for one another when we both lived at Prince Albert," said Monty. "There's nothing surprising in that, though it was pretty rotten for me."

"Why did you leave Prince Albert?"

Monty's lip curled.

"Could I stay in a place where my cousin, and double, had been gaoled for a bank robbery?" he said.

"You were always sensitive," said the bank-robber, in a tone of mockery. "Our resemblance has given you a lot of trouble. Were you glad to hear that I had escaped!"

"No!"

"You are very candid," Lagden laughed. "Well, I did escape, Monty, and one of the first things I read in a newspaper afterwards was the story of your arrest in Alberta, at the very time I was in gaol. That is what made me head for Windy River."

"And why?" demanded Monty Smith.

"I'm in need of help. It's known that I

am in Alberta, and I may be roped in any day. I want a safe refuge."

"And you have come here for it?" exclaimed Monty, his voice trembling with anger.

"The call of the blood," said Lagden. "Are you not going to help your cousin? You must know this country pretty well by this time—you can help me—"

"I could, but I shall not! You—a thief—with your plunder still in your pockets!" said Monty Smith fiercely.

"Only a few thousand dollars left, Monty."

"While you have a single dollar that was stolen, you need not expect help from me."

"That is your last word?"

"My last word!"

"I expected that," said Lagden coolly. "But don't you see that the situation has changed, now that Lord Erdingford is dead? You are the next heir."

"I know that!"

"And, after you, I," said Lagden. "I could not inherit the title, but the Erdingford fortune would come to me, with you out of the way, Monty."

"Is that your game?" asked Monty Smith; and his grasp closed on the butt of the revolver.

"Think again!" said Lagden banteringly. "It might have been my game, if Lord Erdingford had died before I robbed the bank at Prince Albert. But he did not—and I have known the news only a few days. A bank robber, hunted by the Canadian police, cannot turn up in England to claim the Erdingford fortune—instead of a fortune, I should get ten years in the penitentiary after being extradited."

"That is true! Even were I out of the way, you would be helpless."

"So that is why I am here as your friend, Monty, instead of as your enemy—asking your help."

"You will have no help from me!" said Monty Smith steadily. "I've helped you before, trying to keep you straight. Now you have become a thief, almost a murderer, and I'm done with you! Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Then you had better go. I will say nothing of your visit here—that much I will concede, on the score of our relationship. But that is all. Go, while you are safe. There is a reward on your head."

"Then good-bye, Monty—"

"Good-bye, for ever!"

Monty Smith moved away. He did not turn his back on the bank robber—and his hand still rested on the revolver in his pocket. But Lagden made no move. He stood quite still by the river bank, watching his cousin as he moved up the shadowy path under the trees towards the ranch.

Twice Monty Smith looked back at him, and saw him standing motionless there, a black shadow against the pale gleam of the river. Then he fairly turned his back on the bank robber, and released his hold of the revolver in his pocket. Lagden evidently meant no hostility—and Monty Smith felt that he had been over-suspicious.

He strode on, and a gleam of light from the distant ranch buildings caught his eyes.

There was a rustle under the trees.

Crash!

A stunning blow fell upon Monty Smith's head, and he dropped like a log in the wet grass.

A dark figure bent over him, breathing hard. For a second a light gleamed out on the still unconscious face of Monty Smith. He was stunned and insensible. In the glimmer of light the face bending over him showed dark and savage—the face of Red Henri, the half-breed. The light was shut off at once.

The half-breed gave a low whistle.

From the river, Lagden came running softly up the path.

"You've got him?"

"Yes."

"Safe?"

"For an hour at least."

"Good!"

Lagden bent over the senseless man. He lifted him by the shoulders. Red Henri took up his feet. Between them the two rascals carried the insensible tenderfoot away into the darkness.

Down the bank of the river a canoe was moored to a tree. Monty Smith was dropped into it, and Lagden and Red Henri followed him in. The half-breed dipped the paddles, and the canoe glided out on the swollen surface of the Windy River.

Across the swollen waters, in the pale gleam of the stars, winding among masses of driftwood that floated down from the foothills, the half-breed guided the canoe. It stopped under a steep bluff on the northern bank of the river.

Monty Smith knew nothing of what was passing. An hour had passed, when his eyes opened with a wild stare.

He lay on damp earth in a glimmer of light, with earthen walls round him, and for some minutes he lay half-dazed, wondering dizzily whether this was some fearful dream.

His brain cleared at last, and he rose on one elbow and looked about him.

He was lying in a cave under the bluff, and the water of the river washed into the mouth of the cave with a dull murmur amid a mass of tangled thickets. A lantern burned dimly. On a heap of skins a man sat smoking, a stranger to Monty Smith. But as he looked at him Monty realised that he had seen the man once before. It was Red Henri, the half-breed, from whose murderous attack he had rescued Jimmy Silver on the day he had come to Windy River.

Monty Smith pressed his hands to his aching head. Red Henri removed the pipe from his mouth and looked round.

"What does this mean?" said Monty Smith faintly. "What am I doing here?"

The half-breed grinned.

"This cave is your prison," he said.

"Where is Lagden?"

Red Henri shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall be missed already. You will pay for this!"

The half-breed laughed.

"You will not be missed," he answered.

"You are a confederate of Lagden's?"

"Sure."

"I—I never thought—I never guessed"—Monty Smith gritted his teeth as he realised how the bank-robber had tricked him—"you were lying in wait while I talked to him."

Red Henri nodded and grinned.

"Where is he now?"

"Can't you guess?" jeered the half-breed. He pointed to a thick black beard that lay on a rude bench in the cave. Monty recognised the beard that had disguised the bank-robber. "That is finished with. Cannot you guess? Monty Smith will not be missed from the Windy River Ranch, because he is already there!"

"What? I am here!"

"The Mounted Police took you for Larry Lagden. The Windy River Ranch will take Larry Lagden for you!"

"What!" panted Monty.

The half-breed laughed again and resumed

his pipe. Monty Smith sat dazedly staring at him while the meaning of the ruffian's words sank slowly into his mind and brought despair to his heart.

CHAPTER 16.

In Another's Name!

JIMMY SILVER stepped out of the bunkhouse, where the cowpunchers were yarning round the iron stove, and strolled up and down outside in the light from the windows.

The hour had almost elapsed, and Jimmy's uneasiness was growing.

He was anxious for Monty Smith to return. And if Monty did not reappear in the stipulated time Jimmy intended to carry out his instructions without the loss of a moment. The tell-tale letter was to be taken from Monty's locker in the bunkhouse and placed in Hudson Smedley's hands, with a description of the evening's strange events—and the rancher would take steps at once. Jimmy Silver looked at his watch. Ten minutes yet remained. He waited anxiously for them to pass.

Light was gleaming from the windows of the cookhouse, and Jimmy strolled across to give Baldy, the cook, a passing word, to pass a few of the minutes. Baldy was seated on a bench by his cooking-stove, his task of washing-up neglected. He was deep in a letter, reading it with avidity.

Jimmy looked at him curiously.

There had been no letter for Baldy in the mail that day, and it was odd that the fat cook should be so intensely engrossed in an old letter.

"Hallo, Baldy!"

The cook, startled, jumped up suddenly.

"I—I ain't got it!" he stammered.

"Eh! You haven't got what?"

"N-n-nothing!" stammered Baldy.

Guilt was written in every line of Baldy's fat, startled face, and the letter was clutched in his fat hand nervously. An envelope lay at his feet, and Jimmy's eyes fell on it. It was the envelope of the letter he had brought from Mosquito that day, addressed to Monty de Courcy at the Windy River Ranch.

Jimmy Silver knitted his brows. He understood now. Baldy, the cook, unable to restrain his inquisitiveness, had purloined

the letter from Monty's locker in the bunk-house.

"You fat rascal!" exclaimed Jimmy indignantly.

"Look hyer——"

"That's Monty Smith's letter you've got there!"

Baldy put his hand behind him.

"Look hyer, young Silver——" he stammered.

"Give it to me at once!"

"This hyer letter ought to be seen, I guess," said Baldy, the cook, defensively.

"The police want that fire-eater Larry Lagden, and I guess Monty Smith ain't no right to hide him around this hyer ranch!"

"You've read his letter!"

"You can read it," said Baldy. "I'm going to take this letter to Boss Smedley. He will want to rope in that fire-cater!"

"It's Smith's letter! I'm going to put it back in his locker!" said Jimmy Silver angrily.

"You ain't!" said Baldy. "That tender-foot has gone to meet the bank-robber, and I guess Hudson Smedley will want to know."

Jimmy Silver breathed hard. Baldy's words verified his suspicions. The letter from Mosquito had come from the bank-robber. It was Larry Lagden whom Monty had met in the shadows by the river. There was no further doubt upon that point.

"Give me the letter!" snapped Jimmy. "You've no right to read it, anyhow!"

"I'm going to take it to Hudson Smedley," answered Baldy very obstinately, "and you ain't going to stop me!"

Jimmy Silver paused. In a few more minutes it would be time for the letter to be taken to the rancher—if Monty Smith did not appear. He looked out of the doorway of the cookhouse, and his glance fell upon a well-known figure sauntering up from the direction of the river.

"Monty!"

Jimmy ran out of the cookhouse, for a moment forgetting Baldy and the purloined letter in his relief at seeing Monty Smith again safe and sound.

The newcomer stopped, breathing rather quickly.

Any man at Windy River would have said, without a shadow of doubt, that this was Monty Smith. Not a doubt crossed Jimmy Silver's mind at the moment.

The same handsome face and dark eyes,

the same clothes, the same rather shabby Stetson hat. Not for a moment did Jimmy Silver suppose that this was the black-bearded man he had seen in the shadows on the river bank.

But Lagden's heart was beating fast.

He was playing a sure game—success was in his hands if he played his cards carefully. But he knew that he was taking risks in supplanting Monty Smith at the ranch.

On his looks he was Monty Smith, without question, but of the Windy River Ranch he knew little or nothing—he had to feel his way, as it were, and learn from moment to moment what it was necessary for him to know. That was a task to test the nerve even of the hardened adventurer and thief. Yet, severe as the test was, it was the safest game for the rascal to play. It was known to the Alberta police that a man exactly resembling the hunted bank-robber lived at the Windy River Ranch, and so long as he could satisfy the outfit he was safe there, even if the troopers came.

Of Jimmy Silver he had had only a glimpse in the shadows, but he remembered his voice, and Monty had mentioned the junior's name. So far he was on safe ground.

He gave the Rookwood junior a nod and a smile.

"I'm glad you're back safe, Monty," exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "Time was nearly up, you know."

"That's all right, Jimmy," said Lagden easily. His voice, as well as his looks, resembled Monty's, but there was a slight difference of tone that made Jimmy glance at him for a moment.

"Here's your shooter," he went on, and handed Jimmy the revolver he had left in Monty's hands.

Jimmy slipped it into his pocket.

"Then it's all right?" asked Jimmy.

"Oh, yes!"

"I'm glad!"

Jimmy Silver looked round at the sound of scurrying footsteps. Baldy, the cook, had scuttled out of the cookhouse, and was heading for the ranch-house at a run.

"Stop!" shouted Jimmy.

Baldy scuttled on.

"Ho's got your letter, Monty!" exclaimed the junior.

"What?"

"The letter you left in your locker. That fat rotter has bagged it to read!"

Lagden snapped his teeth together.

"What! My letter—the letter——"

"You told me to take it to Hudson Smedley if you didn't turn up in an hour," said Jimmy Silver. "Baldy's bagged it. You know what an inquisitive animal he is."

Lagden did not listen to more. He dashed away in pursuit of Baldy Bubbin.

But the fat cook had a good start. With the bank-robber racing behind him, he pounded up the wooden steps of the veranda, where Hudson Smedley was smoking his evening cigar in the light of the stars. Jimmy Silver followed fast.

"Boss!" gasped Baldy, panting on to the veranda.

"Eh? What? What's the row?" exclaimed the rancher, rising to his feet in astonishment.

"This hyer letter——"

Hudson Smedley mechanically took the letter Baldy held out to him. A moment later Lagden was on the veranda, clutching the fat cook by the shoulder.

"You hound! Give me——"

"Keep him off, boss!" yelled Baldy.

Hudson Smedley, for a second, stared at the supposed Monty Smith in blank astonishment. Then he grasped him by the shoulder and wrenched him away from the cook and pushed him angrily back.

Lagden reeled against the veranda rail, panting.

"I guess this isn't a place for your rows, Smith," said Hudson Smedley. "Keep your temper, my man."

"I—I——"

Jimmy ran up the steps.

"It's his letter, Cousin Smedley," he exclaimed. "Baldy's taken a letter from his locker."

"Has he?" said Hudson Smedley. "Then what the thunder, Baldy, do you mean by stealing a man's letter and bringing it to me?"

"It's from Larry Lagden!" panted Baldy.

"What?"

"That fire-eater has come to Windy River, and Monty Smith knows it!" howled Baldy. "It's in the letter—it's there, boss. And Monty Smith's been to meet him by the river. He's helping that fire-eater to

get away from the Mounted!" Baldy gasped for breath.

"That's my letter, sir!"

Hudson Smedley's fingers closed tightly on the letter.

CHAPTER 17.

A Desperate Game!

JIMMY SILVER stood at the top of the veranda steps, looking on in silence. Hudson Smedley did not heed him. His eyes were fixed on the man before him, and his hand gripped the letter. Baldy stood panting for breath, keeping the rancher's stalwart form between him and the tenderfoot.

"That's my letter, sir!" repeated Monty Smith's double, setting his lips hard.

"You've heard what Baldy says?"

"Yes."

"You can take the fat galoot along and rope him hard for stealing your letter, if you like," said Hudson Smedley. "I guess a quirting would do him good, so far as that goes."

"Oh, I say, boss!" exclaimed Baldy indignantly.

"Hold your tongue, you prying jay!" snapped the rancher. "That much for Baldy! But I guess if what he says is true this letter must be handed over to the authorities, Smith."

"But——"

"As that rascal Lagden is your blood relation, I don't know that I blame you for not handing him over if you had the chance. But you can't expect to be allowed to screen him. The man's a thief, and very nearly a murderer. There's a bank watchman at Prince Albert in a pretty serious state from being knocked out by him. If Larry Lagden, the bank-robber, is in this locality, he's going to be roped in."

It did not even cross the rancher's mind that the man he was addressing was Larry Lagden himself. He, as well as Jimmy Silver, was completely deceived by the likeness between the cousins.

The adventurer breathed hard.

"Now, are you willing to have this letter handed over to Sergeant Kerr at Kicking Mule?" asked the rancher.

"No."

"You admit it is from Larry Lagden?"

The man hesitated a second.

"Yes."

"Is the man near about here?"

"He was, but he's gone."

"You've seen him?"

"Yes."

"And helped him?" demanded the rancher, frowning.

"Silver can tell you whether I did, sir."

"No, no!" exclaimed Jimmy, eager to speak up for his friend. "I was present, Cousin Smedley, part of the time, though I didn't know then that the man was Lagden, the bank-robber. Monty met him as an enemy—he borrowed my revolver—and asked me to tell you about the matter if he did not come back safe in an hour."

"Very good!" said the rancher. "But the rascal must have come here for help from his cousin—he couldn't have come for any other reason."

"I gave him no help, sir," said the man quietly. "He is twenty miles away by this time, on a swift horse. I believe he is making for the passes of the Rocky Mountains, to escape into British Columbia. In fact, I know he is."

"I am bound to report that to the Mounted Police, now that you have told me, Smith."

"I have no objection—I am not the man's friend. If they capture him so much the better."

"And this letter—it ought to go to Sergeant Kerr," said the rancher. "It may give him some clue to finding the bank-robber."

"It contains nothing of the kind. Read it yourself and see," said the young man.

"You ask me to do that?"

"Yes," muttered the adventurer.

"Very good."

Hudson Smedley glanced at the letter in the light from the windows. It ran:

"Dear Monty,—I am here and must see you. I have news that concerns you closely. I come as a friend, and you have nothing to fear. I will wait for you by the Windy River at nine o'clock this evening, at the end of the path from the ranch.

"Your cousin,

"L. LAGDEN."

Hudson Smedley handed the letter back to the man before him.

"That's enough," he said. "You ought to have had the rascal laid by the heels.

But I suppose that couldn't be expected of you, as you're his relation, and he trusted to you."

"Thank you, sir!"

"I shall send a messenger to Kicking Mule at once," went on the rancher. "You believe that Lagden has headed for the Rockies?"

"I am sure of it."

"Then they should have a good chance of catching him. You can go. As for you, Baldy, I advise you to let other galoots' letters alone in the future. Get out!"

"I say, boss—"

"Get out!"

Baldy, the cook, got out, with an apprehensive eye on the tenderfoot. But Monty Smith took no heed of him.

He left the veranda, and Jimmy Silver joined him as he walked away.

"No harm done, after all, Monty," said Jimmy.

"I guess not."

"The sooner that brute Lagden is laid by the heels the better," said Jimmy. "His resemblance to you will always be giving you trouble, so long as he is at large."

The adventurer grinned.

"That's true."

"By the way, Monty—"

"Well?"

"I'm not inquisitive, like Baldy," said Jimmy Silver, smiling. "But what did the man mean by talking about Lord Erdingford? Don't tell me if you'd rather not, but—"

"It's no secret, or will not be in a few days," said Monty Smith the Second. "Lord Erdingford was a relation of mine, and I am next heir to the title and estates of Erdingford. My cowpuncher days will be over soon. I am going back to England as Lord Erdingford."

"Great Scott!"

"Rather a surprise—what?"

"It will be no end of a surprise for the boys here," said Jimmy, laughing. "They don't know that they've had a real live lord in the outfit. It's odd that Lagden should have taken the trouble to tell you."

"Yes. I suppose he saw it in the papers. No doubt the lawyers are advertising for Montague de Courcy now. We don't get many papers up here in the North-West, or we might have seen it, too. Well, good-night, Jimmy!"

"Good-night!"



In the instant the runaway horse was tearing past Texas Lick, the lasso flew and the loop descended over the horse's tossing head. Then keeping pace with the buggy containing his father, the boy from Texas put a gradual pull on the rope.

Jimmy Silver would rather have liked a further talk with his friend, but Monty Smith bade him good-night, so the Rookwood junior walked back to the ranch.

The impostor stopped at the door of the bunkhouse.

Some of the cowpunchers hailed him or nodded to him. All evidently accepted him as Monty Smith, the tenderfoot of Windy River.

So far as that went, the impostor had achieved a complete success. There was only one weakness in his scheme—the fact that Baldy, the cook, had purloined the letter, and that it was now known for certain that Larry Lagden was in the vicinity. That was sure to lead to an interview between the impostor and Sergeant Kerr, of Kicking Mule, who would want to glean whatever information he could regarding the movements of the bank-robber.

And a keen, clear-headed sergeant of the Canadian Mounted Police would not be so easy to deceive as the unsuspecting ranch outfit; Lagden knew that.

But the die was cast now. It was too late to retreat, even if he had desired to do so. And he did not think of retreat.

Once established beyond question as Montague de Courcy, or Monty Smith, of Windy River, he was safe from pursuit for his crimes, and safe to claim the title of Erdingford in Monty's place. That double triumph was within his grasp if he played his cards well. And the hardened adventurer had nerve enough for that desperate game.

He strolled carelessly into the bunkhouse and took a seat on the bench by the stove.

The outfit were turning into the bunks, but Lagden sat by the stove and lighted a cigarette, to remain till the last.

He did not know yet which was Monty Smith's bunk, and he could not afford to show his ignorance.

Skitter Dick gave him a cheery nod as he sat down.

"How's the bump?" he asked. "Sore?"

Lagden almost caught his breath.

He had not the remotest knowledge of the meaning of that sudden question, which, of course, Skitter Dick supposed that he was addressing to Monty Smith.

"Oh, no—not very," said Lagden, wondering desperately what the cowpuncher was driving at.

"I guess you want to look after it," said Skitter Dick. "A kick from a boss is no joke."

"I guess it isn't," agreed Lagden, realising that Monty Smith must have had a bump caused by a kick from a horse.

"Leg stiff?" asked the Skitter.

"N-n-nearly all right now."

"Waal, search me!" said Skitter Dick in surprise. "I guess that was a pretty bad bump when you showed it to me this mornin'. I reckoned you wouldn't get rid of that under a week."

"Oh, it's nothing to make a fuss about!" said Lagden easily, anathematising the good-natured cowpuncher in his heart. "I say, I'm getting sleepy. Turning in yet?"

"Say, you're losing your memory," said Skitter Dick. "Didn't you know I was on duty to-night?"

"Oh! I—I guess I'd forgotten."

Dick Leo rose, and knocked out his pipe and quitted the bunkhouse. Lagden rose also.

The rest of the outfit had turned in, and several bunks remained empty. It was seldom that the whole outfit were quartered at once in the bunkhouse. Lagden looked at the unoccupied bunks, and wondered savagely which was Monty Smith's.

Pike Potter called out to him.

"Put out that there lamp when you turn in, Monty."

"Right-ho!"

"Ain't you turning in yet?"

"I guess so."

There was no help for it. The impostor had to turn in, or else draw the general attention of the bunkhouse upon himself. But he knew that he could not venture to make a false step. If Monty Smith made a mistake about his bunk, it would cause great surprise, at the least.

But the adventurer's quick wit came to his aid. As he moved towards the bunks he staggered, and gave a sudden sharp cry.

"Hallo, what's the trouble with you, Monty?" asked Pike Potter, sitting up.

"I guess it's my leg—that kick I got from the boss," said Lagden, turning to account what he had heard a few minutes ago from Skitter Dick. "I guess it hurts some. Say, will one of you galoots give me a hand? I guess my leg's bad, and no mistake."

There was a laugh from the cowpunchers.

"I guess you're a soft tenderfoot," said Pike Potter; but he turned out of his bunk to give Monty Smith a hand.

The adventurer leaned on him, and Pike helped him to Monty Smith's vacant bunk. Lagden limped painfully. He was duly to give Monty Smith a hand.

"Now you squat down and let's have a look at it," said Pike Potter.

Lagden's heart almost ceased to beat for a moment.

There was, of course, no bruise on his leg from a horse's kick. He did not even know which of Monty's limbs was bruised.

"It's all right," he said. "Don't you worry."

"Oh, you're a durned silly tenderfoot, you are!" said Pike Potter, staring at him. "I tell you you may get a bad leg and be laid up. You ain't used to the ranches, Monty, and you've got to be careful. Now then, let's see that bump!"

One glance at Lagden's perfectly sound limbs would have revealed the fact that he was not—could not be—Monty Smith.

"Oh, don't bother!" he said.

It was against his policy to quarrel with any of the Windy River outfit, but there was no help for it now. Pike's good-natured attentions had to be choked off somehow.

"Waal, you're an ornery galoot, you are," said the cowpuncher in disgust. "I guess I've a good mind to punch your head, instead of looking arter your god-darned leg for you, you jay!"

And Pike tramped back to his bunk, greatly offended.

Lagden did not answer him.

He was only too glad to get the light out and turn in, and escape observation for a time.

It was long before he slept.

His thoughts were busy. In the cave under the bluff by the Windy River Monty Smith was hidden, a prisoner in the hands of the half-breed Red Henri, safely hidden from discovery. That Lagden had been in the vicinity would be known, but the search for him would be carried on in the direction of the mountains—a direction opposite from that of the cave.

All was safe, if he could play his part successfully and keep up the deception. He had only to wait—wait at Windy River, in the name of Monty Smith—wait till he was claimed from England as the heir of Lord

Erdingford. His resemblance to Monty would carry him through, and Larry Lagden would disappear for ever. And the real Monty—

If he lived he could not always be kept a prisoner. Exposure and punishment would haunt the successful impostor, to fall upon him some day. Safety could only be bought by a crime—a crime from which even the hardened adventurer shrank. When he left the Windy River Ranch as Lord Erdingford, Monty Smith could not be left in the hands of Red Henri, a prisoner. He must be in a grimmer, safer keeping—silent for ever beneath the waters of the Windy River. It was a terrible and troubling thought, even to the unscrupulous impostor, but he knew that it was the price that must be paid for success.

But that thought he strove to drive from his mind. All depended upon the success of the imposture, and that remained still to be put to the test. So far, he had succeeded, but the morrow was certain to bring fresh difficulties and dangers. If he failed to carry through the daring game, his only resource was swift flight. If he succeeded, Monty Smith would never be seen again by mortal eyes.

It was no wonder that sleep was late in coming to the desperate adventurer who lay in the midst of enemies under another name.

CHAPTER 18.

Monty Smith is Wanted!

"JIMMY!"

Hudson Smedley leaned over the rail of the ranch-house veranda, and called to Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy, who was chatting with Lovell and Raby and Newcome by the corral fence, came over towards the ranch-house at once.

"Yes?"

"Is Monty Smith about?"

"In the corral," answered Jimmy.

"Bring him here, will you? Tell him that Sergeant Kerr has come over from Kicking Mule to see him."

"Right-ho!" said Jimmy.

The rancher went back into the house, and Jimmy Silver hurried to the corral. He heard the voice of Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, as he went in at the corral gate.

"You gol-darned tenderfoot! You don't know how to handle a hoss! I guess it's time you l'arned!"

Jimmy Silver frowned a little. He was very friendly with Monty Smith, the tenderfoot of Windy River. At the present moment it was evident that Monty was in trouble with the foreman.

Pete Peters was looking angry when Jimmy arrived on the scene. The man who was known at Windy River as Monty Smith looked sullen.

"I say—" began Jimmy.

Pete Peters went on without heeding him.

"You was a gol-darned tenderfoot when you lighted down hyer, Monty Smith, but I reckoned you was l'arning to make yourself useful. Now you seem to be a bigger jay than ever, and lazy into the bargain. I tell you we don't want any dead-heads on this hyer ranch. You'll have to be spry if you don't want to be fired."

"I say—" repeated Jimmy.

"Don't you butt in, Jimmy!" growled the ranch foreman. "I'm talking to this galoot. The best-thing you can do, Monty Smith, is to leg it down to Calgary, and ask for a salesman's job in a store. That's about your mark, I guess."

"Mr. Smedley wants Monty Smith!" interjected Jimmy Silver.

"Take him away!" snapped Pete Peters. "Take him away, and bury him if you like. He ain't any carthly good hyer!"

And Pete Peters turned an angry back upon the tenderfoot and Jimmy Silver. Jimmy touched Monty on the arm.

"Come on, old chap!" he said. "You're wanted, Monty!"

"What is it?"

"Sergeant Kerr's come over from Kicking Mule to see you!"

The tenderfoot started.

"He wants to see me?"

"Yes; nothing to worry about," said Jimmy. "He wants to ask you about that cousin of yours—Larry Lagden, of course. He's bound to question you, as it's known that you've seen the man since he got away into Alberta. Lagden's far away enough by this time, I fancy."

Monty Smith nodded without replying. He walked out of the corral with Jimmy, who left him at the ranch-house, and returned to his chums.

"The sergeant will jump when he sees him," remarked Arthur Edward Lovell, with a grin. "He fits the description of Lagden, the bank-robber, to a hair! Blessed if I should like to have a cousin like that knocking about!"

"It's rotten for Monty!" said Raby. "The sooner they lay Lagden by the heels, the better it will be for him."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"It's rotten!" he agreed. "I fancy it's getting on poor old Monty's nerves. He hardly seems the same man since the other night when he saw Lagden. I hear that there's been trouble in the bunk-house."

"He's losing his jolly good temper," said Newcome. "He snapped at me this morning. You remember he had a kick from a horse last week, and a tremendous bruise on his leg. I asked him how it was going on, and he snapped. I shan't ask him again in a hurry."

Jimmy Silver frowned thoughtfully. For the last two or three days he hardly knew his old friend Monty Smith, so changed were his ways. Monty Smith, tenderfoot as he was, had been a favourite on the Windy River Ranch, owing to his good temper and good nature—two qualities which seemed to have quite deserted him of late. The man who had always been ready to "swap yarns" with the cowpunchers had become reserved, silent, almost morose. Even Jimmy, with whom he had been very friendly, he seemed to want to keep at arm's length.

Jimmy attributed it all to the worry that Larry Lagden's appearance in the Windy River section had caused him. It was not a light matter to be the cousin, and the double, of a bank-robber who was hunted by the Canadian police.

The visit of the sergeant from Kicking Mule meant more trouble for the tenderfoot, for undoubtedly Mr. Kerr would take the view that Monty Smith should have handed over Lagden to arrest.

Pete Peters came out of the corral while the chums of Rookwood were chatting, and paused. The ranch foreman was frowning.

"I guess that pal of yours will get fired if he don't mend his ways, Jimmy," said Pete. "I can tell you I'm fed-up with him!"

"Oh, go easy!" said Jimmy. "He's a bit worried now, you know, owing to that rotter Lagden."

"That's all very well," said the foreman. "But there's a limit. He seems to have forgotten all he's learned on the ranch, and he's getting thundering lazy!"

"Oh, he's not lazy!" said Lovell.

"I guess you know better than I do—it's generally so!" snapped the foreman. "I tell you he's a shirker, and I came near to laying my quirt about him for the way he's handled a horse this morning. I ain't chicken-hearted myself; but no galoot is going to ill-use a beast on this ranch while I'm Mr. Smedley's foreman."

Jimmy flushed.

"I know that Monty Smith has never ill-used a horse!" he exclaimed indignantly. "Last week he was kicked by a horse, and he never touched the brute for it."

"Last week ain't this week," grunted Pete Peters. "I guess I found him in the corral hiding a horse in a way an Injun half-breed would be ashamed of, and I stopped him. Next time I catch him at it out he goes with my boot behind him to help him, and you can tell Mr. Montague de Courcy so."

And Pete Peters tramped on with knitted brows.

Lovell whistled.

"That's something new for Monty," he said. "I'd never have thought he would ill-treat an animal."

Jimmy Silver was uncomfortably silent. He knew that Pete Peters would not have spoken as he had done without good cause; and it was amazing and distressing to him to learn that there was a streak of cruelty in the nature of the man he had made a friend of. Somehow Monty Smith seemed to have changed utterly since the night he had gone down to the Windy River to meet Larry Lagden, the bank-robber. In looks he was still the same, but in nature and ways different—strangely different. He did not seem the same man—and that the actual truth was that he was not the same man was an explanation that did not yet occur to Jimmy's mind. He did not suspect, so far, at least, that on that dark night Monty Smith had vanished, and his cousin and double had taken his name and his place at the Windy River Ranch.

CHAPTER 19.

His Lordship!

"HERE'S the man!" said Hudson Smedley.

Sergeant Kerr fixed his eyes on "Monty Smith" as the man entered the room in the ranch-house.

The bank-robber was breathing hard, though in looks he was cool and collected.

The trick he had played at Windy River had been a success. No one suspected that Monty Smith was a hidden prisoner, far from the ranch, or dreamed of suspecting that his place had been taken by Larry Lagden, the bank-robber of Prince Albert.

But the rascal was well aware that he had a sharper ordeal to pass through, under the eyes of a sergeant of the Canadian Mounted Police.

But he played out his game with a cool head. He stood by the table, with his Stetson hat in his hand.

"You sent Jimmy for me, Mr. Smedley," he said.

"Yes. Sergeant Kerr has something to say to you."

The sergeant's eyes never left the man's face.

"Your name's Monty Smith?" he asked.

"Montague de Courcy," said the man, with a slight smile. "I use the name of Smith on the ranches."

"Yes, I've been told so," assented Mr. Kerr. "You're the cousin of Larry Lagden, who robbed the bank at Prince Albert and injured the watchman."

"Yes."

"I suppose you know that you're exactly like him to look at."

"I guess so. Your man, Corporal Cayley, arrested me for Lagden, as Mr. Smedley can tell you; and I should have been taken away to Prince Albert if the news had not come through that Lagden was taken. Since then he has got away again."

"And you've seen him?"

"Well, yes."

"I guess I want to know about it."

"I got a letter from Mosquito saying that he was here and wanted to see me. I met him, told him I would not help him, and left him. He lit out for the Rockies."

The sergeant nodded.

"You know you ought to have given information as soon as you knew he was around?"

"Perhaps so. But the man is my cousin, and——"

"I understand. Did you intend to let it be known that you had seen him near the ranch?"

"Well, no. I didn't see any need."

"It was through the letter being purloined and read by Baldy, the cook, that it came out," said Hudson Smedley.

"Where's the letter now?"

"I destroyed it," said the tenderfoot.

Sergeant Kerr gave a grunt.

"Tell me what happened at your meeting with Lagden."

"We had a talk. He asked me for help, and I refused it. He told me that my great-uncle, Lord Erdingford, was dead."

"Oh, he told you that, did he?" asked the sergeant. "Well, we've had an inquiry come through at Kicking Mule for Montague de Courey, late of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. He's wanted in the Old Country as the heir of a lord who's died recently. And you're the man!"

"I'm the man!"

"I guess you'll have to prove your identity."

"There are plenty of people at Prince Albert who can swear to it; and I have my papers, of course."

"What papers?"

"My Army discharge papers. I served in the War. And private papers and letters from home."

There was a short silence.

"You know this man well, Mr. Smedley?" the sergeant asked at last.

"Yes. He has been more than a month on the ranch," said Hudson Smedley.

"You can swear that he's Monty Smith and not Larry Lagden, the bank-robber?"

"Sure! He was here when Lagden was taken in Saskatchewan. Every man in the outfit can swear to him, if necessary."

"I guess that's square," said the sergeant. "I reckon it's rather awkward for you, Monty Smith, having a man who's your double and a bank-robber as well. The sooner you get safe back to the Old Country the less likely you'll be to get roped in by mistake again."

"I know. If what Lagden told me is confirmed I shall go home at once to claim my inheritance," said the adventurer. "From what you tell me, it seems to have been true."

"It's true enough, and I reckon I told

the inquiry agent that I'd put you wise," said Sergeant Kerr. "As Lagden is still at large, and his picture and description published all over Alberta, I guess it won't be safe for you to travel without somebody who can swear to your identity till you get clear of Western Canada. If you like you can ride with me to Kicking Mule, when I go back, as Mr. Smedley answers for you to me. You'll do that, sir?"

"Certainly," said the rancher.

"I'll be glad, sergeant, and I thank you for your offer," said the adventurer, a glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes. "Might I ask when you are going back?"

"To-morrow."

"I'll be ready, if Mr. Smedley will let me leave so suddenly."

"That's all right," said the rancher, with a nod.

"Thank you, sir!"

The adventurer left the ranch-house, and Hudson Smedley looked rather curiously at the sergeant.

"You're staying on till to-morrow?" he asked.

"Sure, if I'm welcome."

The rancher smiled.

"You're welcome to stay till the spring, if you like. Do you figure it out, then, that you might pick up Lagden's tracks near the ranch?"

"I guess it's possible."

"Monty Smith says he's lit out for the Rockies. He's had time to get right into the mountain passes."

"Very likely," assented the sergeant.

"But Monty Smith mayn't be quite a George Washington; and as his cousin came to him for help once, maybe he might come again. Anyhow, I'll hang on till to-morrow," said Sergeant Kerr.

"I'll tell Woo Sing to get your room ready."

When Jimmy Silver & Co. came in to dinner, they found the sergeant from Kicking Mule at the table, and learned that he was staying. After dinner Sergeant Kerr strolled about the ranch, talking a good deal with the cowpunchers he came across, and all the ranch learned the news that Monty Smith, the tenderfoot, was now Lord Erdingford, and a rich man at home. It was rather exciting news to the ranchmen, and some of them congratulated Monty on his good luck. Even Pete Peters told him that he was glad to hear it. As the

foreman remarked, it wasn't every ranch in North-West Alberta that had a real live lord in the outfit.

Baldy, the cook, could have kicked himself when he heard the news. It was Baldy who had purloined the bank-robber's letter to Monty Smith; Baldy whose chatter had revealed that Monty had met the bank-robber one dark night near the ranch; but for Baldy Bubbin, no one at Windy River would have known that Larry Lagden had ever been in the Windy River section at all. If Baldy had only known that Monty Smith was a real live lord, Baldy would never have given him any offence—not if Baldy knew it!—not if he had held a hundred surreptitious meetings with bank-robbers who were wanted by the police. At dinner Baldy provided "Monty Smith" with a very special feed, and expressed a hope that his lordship liked it. There was a roar of laughter from the cowpunchers as Baldy brought out "his lordship."

"You fat fool!" said Skitter Dick. "Stow it! Monty Smith is Monty Smith so long as he hangs out on this hyer ranch, and don't you forget it."

"Don't you mind these hyer low cowpunchers, your lordship!" said Baldy. "They ain't got no manners."

"You fat idiot!" was his lordship's ungrateful response.

"Oh, I say, my lord!" ejaculated Baldy.

"Shut it, Baldy!" growled Pike Potter.

"Hand out the stew and don't chew the rag."

"I'm looking after his lordship," said Baldy loftily. "Oh, I say—Ow—wow—whoop!"

Pike Potter introduced a heavy cowhide boot into the discussion, and Baldy roared.

"Now, are you going to hand out the stew to a common, low cowpuncher?" demanded Pike.

"Ow! Yes! Owl! Sure!" gasped Baldy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

When dinner was over, and "his lordship" was smoking a cigarette by the corral fence, Baldy—regardless of the duty of washing up—rolled up to him with a confidential grin. He leaned on the fence beside the tenderfoot, and began to talk genially, Baldy was determined to get on a friendly footing with a real live lord in the short space of time that remained at his disposal.

"Don't your lordship take any notice of

that low crowd," said Baldy. "They're a low lot, my lord. There ain't a decent man in the outfit, excepting me, your lordship. I say, don't move off when a galoot's talking to you."

The adventurer shifted along the fence. Baldy rolled after him.

"I say, my lord—"

"Leave me alone, you fat idiot!"

"Oh, my lord—"

The adventurer took Baldy by one fat ear, which was amply large enough to give him a hold, and sat him down forcibly on the ground. Baldy roared as he landed there.

"Yarooooop!"

His lordship walked away. Baldy sat and blinked after him, in breathless wrath. Jimmy Silver came up laughing to give the fat cook a hand up.

"Ow!" gasped Baldy. "I say, young Silver—ow!—I've a darn good mind to boot that ornery galoot! Wow! I don't go much on lords, anyhow. What's a pesky lord? If that galoot thinks I'm going to be civil to him because he's a lord, he's sure making a mistake. Ow!"

And Baldy, the cook, rolled back to the cookhouse, and devoted himself to washing up, instead of cultivating the acquaintance of the new Lord Erdingford.

CHAPTER 20.

The Shadow of Death!

RED HENRI, the half-breed, rose from the log upon which he had been seated, and stood in a listening attitude. A lantern burned in the cave under the bluff on the Windy River, casting a dim light. At the mouth of the cave thick bushes hid the opening, and through the bushes, here and there, the waters of the river lapped and murmured. It was a dark and dismal lair, where the half-breed lurked in hiding with his prisoner. On a ragged blanket Monty Smith, the tenderfoot of Windy River, lay stretched, his handsome face white and worn in the dim light. There was a stout rope fastened round his waist and secured to a stump. The confinement in the gloomy cave had told on Monty Smith, as well as the hard and scanty fare that Red Henri doled out to him. Already he seemed almost like the ghost of his former self.

Red Henri did not glance at him. He stood with his head bent, his keen ears on the alert.

There was a faint footfall in the gloom outside the cave. The thickets rustled, and Red Henri's revolver almost leaped into his hand.

"Oh, it is you!" he said, in a low voice, as the newcomer stepped into the cave.

Larry Lagden, the man who had taken Monty Smith's place at the Windy River Ranch, nodded.

"Yes. How is your prisoner?"

"Safe enough," said the half-breed. "Another week of this and he will be safer still. Look at him!"

Lagden glanced across at the hapless man stretched on the blanket. Monty Smith sat up, and his eyes blazed at the sight of the bank-robber.

"You scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "Have you come to set me at liberty?"

"Scarcely!" Lagden laughed. "You had better make up your mind to it, Monty. You will never see the outside of this cave again!"

"You cannot keep me here for ever."

"Fortunate for you if I could," said Lagden, with a gloomy look. "It is because I could not keep you here for ever that you must be put in a safer place."

Monty Smith's lips quivered as he caught the meaning of the adventurer.

"You dare not!" he muttered.

Lagden shrugged his shoulders and turned away from him. He sat down on the log and talked to the half-breed in a low voice. Monty Smith lay on the blanket again, silent, as the voice of his rascally cousin came in low tones to his ears.

"It's all clear now," Lagden was saying. "There is no suspicion at the ranch. I'm accepted there as Monty Smith. I've played the game for three days now, and not a soul is any the wiser. Even the boy Silver has no suspicion, and he knew Monty Smith better than any of the others. Sergeant Kerr came to-day—"

Red Henri gave a start.

"The Mounted Police? That is dangerous."

"He came to question me about Larry Lagden."

The half-breed grinned.

"He was completely satisfied," went on Lagden. "He told me that an inquiry agent has come to Kicking Male to find

Monty de Courcy, wanted in England as the heir of Lord Erdingford. I am to ride to Kicking Male with the sergeant to-morrow as Monty Smith. I have all my cousin's papers. Everything he had at the ranch is in my hands. All is plain sailing now."

"It is a bold game," said the half-breed musingly. "But it is often the boldest game that is most successful. You will go back to England as Lord Erdingford?"

"Yes."

"And you will be rich?"

"Ten thousand a year."

"And you will not forget an old friend who has helped you to so much?" said the half-breed, with a cunning glitter in his eyes.

"You can depend on that, Red Henri," said the adventurer coolly. "It will always be in your power to give me away if I do not pay your price. Now to business. The sergeant leaves Windy River to-morrow and I ride with him. Until he is gone you will lie low here in the cave. You have plenty of food here, and you need not venture outside the bushes."

Red Henri nodded.

"Pest! I am not anxious to meet any of the Canadian Mounted Police," he said. "I shall be careful."

"But after that—" said Lagden.

"Well, after that!"

"When the coast is clear you can go. But your prisoner?"

"If he goes there is an end of your scheme," said the half-breed, with a grin. "The new Lord Erdingford will be arrested as Larry Lagden, the bank-robber."

Lagden drew a deep breath.

"There is only one way to safety," he said. "Larry Lagden's body must be found. After I am safe out of Alberta a body, supposed to be mine, can be found floating in the Windy River. For the last time my cousin's resemblance to me will buy my safety. The Alberta police will be satisfied that it is Larry Lagden whom they have found. There will be letters and papers of mine in his pockets—plenty of proofs of identity, to back up the resemblance. Monty Smith will be buried under the name of Larry Lagden, and I shall be safe in England under the name of Lord Erdingford."

"It is easy enough."

"And you—" Lagden hesitated.

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders. "He will not be my first," he answered. "Peste! It is nothing to me. To-morrow or the next day. You have only to give the order."

Lagden sat silent on the log, his face pale and lined. Villain as he was, he shrank instinctively from this last and worst crime of his career of wickedness.

The half-breed watched him with a mocking grin. A knife thrust, the death of a defenceless man, counted for little with the savage Ishmael of the North-West, the outcast whose hand was against every man.

"It is the only way to safety," said Lagden at last.

"The only way!" assented Red Henri.

"And you—and you—"

"Rely on me."

Lagden rose to his feet, and shook himself as if to shake away haunting and troubling thoughts.

"It is settled," he said. "You will not see me again in Alberta, Red Henri. But afterwards—"

"Afterwards you will see me," said the half-breed significantly. "The rich Lord Erdingford will not lose sight of the old pard who helped him to his title and his fortune."

Lagden gave a last glance at the bound man stretched on the blanket, and shivered a little. Then he moved to the mouth of the cave under the high bluffs.

"Take care," said Red Henri. "The water is high. Shall I ferry you in the canoe?"

"No—no! Good-night!"

"Bon soir, mon ami!"

Lagden pushed through the bushes and left the cave. Outside, the stars gleamed in the clear sky of Alberta, reflected on the swollen surface of the Windy River.

It was necessary to wade through the shallows for a dozen yards to reach the point where the bank could be gained. Lagden splashed along with the water to his knees.

He reached the bank and climbed it, and strode away in the direction of the Windy River Ranch.

His face was thoughtful and gloomy.

He was quite resolved; there was no repentance in his hard heart. But, in spite of his efforts to banish it from his mind, his contemplated crime haunted and tormented him.

He turned into the path at last that led to the ranch from the river, and tramped along under the trees. The ranch buildings were in sight when a shadowy figure loomed up in his way.

Lagden caught his breath and halted.

"Hallo!"

It was the voice of the Canadian sergeant from Kicking Mule.

"Oh, you, sergeant!" exclaimed Lagden.

"Yes. Is that Monty Smith?" asked Sergeant Kerr, peering at him in the shadows.

"Yes. You're out of your bunk late, sergeant."

"I guess I was going to say the same to you."

"I couldn't sleep," said Lagden, in as easy a manner as he could assume. "It isn't every day that a man down on his luck comes into a title and a fortune. I'm a bit excited about it."

"I guess that's natural enough," assented the sergeant. "So you were taking a walk to think it over?"

"Well, yes."

"You've met nobody?"

Lagden set his teeth for a moment.

"No. The outfit have turned in before this."

Sergeant Kerr walked back to the ranch with the adventurer. Lagden parted with him at the door of the bunkhouse, and the sergeant went on to the ranch-house.

The adventurer looked after him with a glitter in his eyes. He knew, as well as if he had been told, that the Canadian sergeant had been watching him—that he had missed him and looked for him. Lagden's lips curled in a sneering smile. The sergeant suspected that he, as Monty Smith, was still in communication with Lagden, the fleeing bank-robber. For that reason the sergeant was keeping a wary eye upon the tenderfoot of Windy River.

"Fool!" muttered Lagden. "He does not believe a word I have told him! He thinks that I know where Lagden is!" He chuckled involuntarily. "But—but if he had followed me to the cave—"

The adventurer shivered at the thought.

His good fortune and the darkness had saved him from that danger. But his heart was beating fast as he went into the bunkhouse and turned in.

But he slept soundly enough. It was his last night at Windy River. On the morrow

he would be far away—and safe—on his way to claim the fortune of the man who was left to die. But the unscrupulous impostor would not have slept so soundly had he dreamed of what was to happen on the morrow.

CHAPTER 21.

Under Arrest!

JIMMY SILVER came out of the ranch-house in the keen autumn morning, and looked round for Monty Smith.

Monty was to leave that day, in company with the Canadian sergeant, and Jimmy was rather surprised to realise that he was not very sorry to part with his friend.

Somehow, since that dark night when Monty Smith had met Larry Lagden by the Windy River, Jimmy's feelings had changed towards the tenderfoot. How and why it was, he hardly knew; but there it was!

Monty Smith did not seem to be the same man that he had been so chummy with.

He was, of course, the same man—so far as Jimmy knew! But he seemed utterly different.

Jimmy was glad enough to hear of his good fortune, and he was a little ashamed of his indifference towards him. It was not like Jimmy Silver to be fickle, but he felt that he had been fickle in this instance—for certainly he was feeling rather relief than anything else to know that Monty Smith was going.

He could not help it. But he determined to be as cordial as he could to Monty Smith until the hour of departure came. He caught sight of the tenderfoot at the corral, rubbing down a horse. The horse jibbed, and Lagden gave it a savage cut with a quirt, at which the animal squealed.

Jimmy knitted his brows.

This was another example of the change in his friend. Monty Smith had never been cruel, but in the last few days he had revealed a vein of brutality that Jimmy had never suspected. The startled horse reared and backed away, and Lagden dragged savagely at the halter, and brought down the quirt again on the flanks.

Jimmy ran up.

"Monty, what are you up to?"

"Mind your own business!"

"What? Let that horse alone!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, as Lagden raised the whip again.

Lagden gave him a savage look; but he recollected himself and lowered the whip.

Jimmy Silver stood for a moment or two, and then walked away without another word. His intention of being very cordial to Monty Smith that day was abandoned now.

"Morning, young 'un!"

Sergeant Kerr nodded cheerily to Jimmy Silver and joined him in his walk. Jimmy understood that the sergeant had been a witness of the little scene with Monty, and he felt very uncomfortable.

"Big stroke of luck for that young man," remarked the sergeant, with a nod towards Lagden, who was rubbing down the horse at a distance.

"Eh? Oh, yes!" said Jimmy. "All the outfit are quite excited at finding a jolly old nobleman at Windy River—especially Baldy."

"He's a friend of yours?"

"Oh, yes!"

The sergeant's keen eyes dwelt on Jimmy's face with a penetrating look that puzzled the Rookwood junior a little.

"I hear from Mr. Smedley that this man Monty Smith was no end of a friend of yours," he said.

"Well, he chipped in to help me the day he came to Windy River," said Jimmy. "There was a horse thief—Red Heart—going for me with a knife, and Monty stopped him."

"So you became friends?"

"That's it."

"You like him—what?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Noticed any change in him lately?"

Jimmy started.

"Well, yes," he said. "He—he doesn't seem quite the same since—since—"

"Since the night he met Larry Lagden?"

"My hat!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "Are you a wizard, Mr. Kerr?"

"Not quite!" said the sergeant, laughing. "But is it so? I want to know, you know."

"Yes, it's so," said Jimmy. "I'm blessed if I know how you can guess, but there's been a queer change in him ever since that night. Of course, he's worried a lot by that rotter coming to this section, and the matter

getting to be the talk of the ranch through Baldy stealing his letter and reading it." "Yep, I guess that would worry him some," said Sergeant Kerr. "He looks just the same, but he seems different somehow, is that it?"

"That's it," said Jimmy.

"A good many of the cowpunchers have noticed it, I guess," remarked the sergeant. "You see, I've been looking around, and talking some. He ain't so popular as he was."

"I—I'm afraid so," assented Jimmy reluctantly.

"He don't have a light hand with a hoss," said the sergeant. "You chipped in just now on that account, I should say that he was rather a brute in dealing with animals."

Jimmy coloured. He would gladly have spoken up in defence of the tenderfoot of Windy River; but he could not deny what the sergeant himself had witnessed.

"He never was cruel," said Jimmy at last. "I put it all down to the worry on his mind from that fellow Lagden."

"I've heard the boys say he was very tender with animals," remarked Sergeant Kerr. "Is it so?"

"It's so," said Jimmy eagerly. "There never was a fellow kinder to animals than Monty Smith. It beats me, the change that's come over him."

"I guess it's queer," assented the sergeant. "I hear that he was kicked by a hoss last week, and he never touched the animal afterwards, though most of the cowpunchers would have laid it on."

"That's true," said Jimmy, glad to have something to say for Monty Smith. "I saw it all, and he had a tremendous bruise on his leg. He was limping the rest of the day."

"So I've heard," said the sergeant genially. "When I heard that I reckoned that Monty Smith was as kind-hearted a guy as you'd find in Alberta or all the Western provinces. And yet, since then, Pete Peters has threatened to fire him for ill-treating a hoss, and you had to chip in just now for the same reason. It's a pesky remarkable change in a galoot—what?"

Jimmy Silver was silent.

"Well, his cowpunching days will soon be over," said Sergeant Kerr lightly. "He's going off with me to-day, I suppose you know?"

"Yes," said Jimmy.

The big Canadian sergeant nodded to him and strolled away. Jimmy Silver looked after him rather curiously.

Jimmy was no fool; and he was well aware that Mr. Kerr had some motive for asking so many questions about Monty Smith. He knew that the sergeant had talked with almost every man on the ranch on the same subject. He suspected Monty—of what?

Of being in communication with the escaped bank-robber? It was likely enough, though Jimmy's own belief was that Larry Lagden was many a long mile from Windy River by this time.

Whatsoever the sergeant suspected undoubtedly he was learning every possible detail with regard to Monty Smith. But the actual form the sergeant's suspicions had taken, came as a startling surprise to Jimmy, when Mr. Kerr at last showed his hand.

It came suddenly and dramatically.

Sergeant Kerr dined with Mr. Smedley and the Rookwood juniors, and, after dinner, he "guessed" that he would be getting ready to ride back to Kicking Mule. He guessed he would give Monty Smith the tip to saddle his horse.

"You ready to start?" he called out to Monty, who was lounging by the corral fence.

"I'm ready when you are, sergeant."

The adventurer's face brightened a little. He was keenly anxious to get away from Windy River, under the Canadian sergeant's escort, taking the first step thereby to establish himself as Montague de Courcy, heir of Lord Erdingford.

"I guess we'll get the hosses out, then," said Mr. Kerr.

He strode to the corral gate, and the adventurer followed him. Hudson Smedley and the Rookwood juniors came out of the ranch-house to say good-bye. Some of the outfit gathered round. At the corral gate Sergeant Kerr stopped.

What happened next passed like a flash.

The big Canadian's powerful grasp was laid upon the tenderfoot so suddenly that the impostor had no chance. He was whirled round and jammed with a crash against the gate, and before he knew what was happening there was a metallic click, and his wrists were fast in the handcuffs.

Sergeant Kerr stepped back, and regarded him with a satisfied smile.

"I guess you're my prisoner!" he remarked.

The trapped rascal staggered against the gate, white and panting. He made one terrible effort to drag his hands free, but the cold steel held good.

"What—what—" he stammered.

"Sergeant!" shouted Hudson Smedley. "What the thunder—"

"Mr. Kerr!" panted Jimmy Silver.

"I guess that's the man I want, and I ain't giving him a chance to draw a gun," said the Canadian sergeant coolly. "Larry Lagden, you're my prisoner, on a charge of bank robbing at Prince Albert, in Saskatchewan, and on the charge of murder in Alberta."

"Of murder?" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Yep!"

"You're dreaming! What—who—"

"The murder of whom?" yelled Pete Peters in amazement.

"Of Monty Smith!"

And there was a roar of amazement from the Windy River cowpunchers.

CHAPTER 22.

Unmasked!

MONTY SMITH!"

"The man himself is Monty Smith!"

"Are you mad, sergeant?"

"Look hyer—"

The Windy River crowd gathered round the corral gate in amazement and excited expostulation. The sergeant stood like a rock, a revolver in his hand now, his face hard as bronze. The wretched impostor leaned heavily on the gate, panting for breath.

Hudson Smedley strode forward.

"Sergeant, what does this mean? I answer for it that this man is Monty Smith."

"I guess you've been taken in, Mr. Smedley."

The rancher looked impatient.

"Your men made this mistake before," he said. "Monty Smith was arrested by Corporal Cayley, on his resemblance to

Larry Lagden. He's been at the ranch ever since, while Lagden was in prison at Prince Albert. Every man here can answer for him."

"I guess so," said Skitter Dick. "You're right off'n the trail, sergeant."

"It's a shame!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver indignantly. "We can all prove that he is Monty Smith!"

The sergeant stood grimly between the prisoner and the surging crowd of cowpunchers.

"Stand back—"

"Look hyer, sergeant—"

"That man's my prisoner!" said Sergeant Kerr grimly. "I guess I'm going to put you galoots wise. But keep back!"

"You ain't taking him away a prisoner," said Pike Potter. "I guess I don't like the man so much as I did; but we're standing by any Windy River man to see fair play."

"Sure!" said Pete Peters emphatically. "I guess I want to see him fired off the ranch; but he's going to have a fair show of cards. He's been taken once for that fire-eater Lagden, and once is enough."

"Hold on," said Hudson Smedley quietly. "Let the sergeant speak. He must have some reason for supposing that Monty Smith is Larry Lagden, apart from the resemblance."

"I guess so," assented the sergeant. "Didn't I say I was going to put you wise? But the galoot knows now that the game is up, and he'll own up. Is that so, Lagden?"

The wretched man panted.

"I'm Monty Smith!" he exclaimed in a choking voice. "Mr. Smedley—all of you—I call on you to stand by a man! You all know me—you know I was taken for Lagden before; but if they get me away they'll make out that I'm Lagden, if they can't find the right man. Stand by me!"

"We're standing by you, old pard," said Skitter Dick. "I don't like the way you handle a hoss; but you're going to have a fair show."

"You bet!" said Spike Thompson.

"We'll all see to that, Monty," said Jimmy Silver.

"Keeping it up, Lagden?" said the sergeant. "Well, I guess I'll put you 'uns wise to this galoot. I reckon I suspected him as soon as I saw him yesterday. What did Lagden come out to this section for, to

see Monty Smith? It wasn't for money—Monty Smith hadn't any money; and Lagden had the thousands he'd stolen from the bank at Prince Albert. He didn't want any help that Monty Smith could give him. What he wanted, I reckon, was to borrow Monty Smith's name, and hide at Windy River as the safest place."

There was a murmur of incredulity.

"If that fat galoot Baldy hadn't stolen the letter nobody would have known that Lagden had been near the place," went on the sergeant. "I guess he would have been safe then, and could have played out the game to the end. I guess Baldy ought to be booted for stealing a man's letter; but, as it turns out, it's put me on the track of this fire-eater. As soon as I knew Larry Lagden had been here to see Monty Smith, I guess I turned over in my mind every possible reason he could have had—and there was only one that held water. I came along to Windy River yesterday to put it to the test. And I reckon I've learned from nearly every man on the ranch that Monty Smith has seemed different somehow since the night he met Larry Lagden by the river."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"I reckon I've kept my eyes open," went on the sergeant. "A man who was always kind to animals suddenly becomes a cruel brute to a hoss. It ain't in reason. A man who was always open and chatty suddenly becomes reserved and sulky. No reason why Monty Smith should; but plenty of reason why Lagden should, if he had borrowed Monty Smith's name. He would be afraid of giving himself away with every word he spoke."

"By Jove!" murmured Lovell.

"But—" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Let me finish, kid. I don't say I knew it for certain; I was finding out. I reckoned it was likely enough that Larry Lagden got Monty Smith to meet him in a lonely place, and knocked him on the head in the dark, and borrowed his clothes."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Hudson Smedley.

"Getting wise—what?" smiled the sergeant.

"That's all very well!" said the rancher.

"But, after all, it's only supposition. If there's nothing stronger than that—"

"I guess there is. Last week Monty

Smith was kicked by a hoss, and a tremendous bruise raised on his leg."

"We all know that."

"He never touched the brute for doing it, but since that night he met Lagden he's had to be slanged for ill-treating the horses. I guess a man don't change like that in a night. But I guess it's known in Larry Lagden's record that before he started as a bank-robber he was in trouble once at Prince Albert for ill-using a horse. He's a cruel brute, and his nature's given him away. But that ain't all. Monty Smith's got a big bruise on his leg. If this galoot has a big bruise in the same place I guess I shall be surprised."

"That's easily proved, one way or the other," said the rancher.

Lagden's pale face became as white as chalk.

"Show up, my man!" said the sergeant. "I guess you're spry enough to have got a bruise ready, but you never looked for this. You 'uns know which of his legs was kicked. Show it up!"

Lagden made a sudden spring.

Manacled as he was he drove his way through the circle of staring cowpunchers and attempted to flee.

But the attempt was hopeless. A dozen hands were upon him at once, and he was dragged back, struggling furiously, and almost foaming at the mouth with rage.

"By gum, I guess the sergeant's right!" said Pete Peters. "But that's soon proved."

While the adventurer struggled in the grasp of the cowpunchers Pete dragged the boot from his right foot and rolled back the trouser-leg.

There was no sign of a bruise on the limb when it was revealed.

"He ain't Monty Smith!" said the ranch foreman. "Monty's got a big black bruise there, and I guess it won't go for weeks to come!"

Hudson Smedley's face set grimly.

"The scoundrel!" he said. "It is Larry Lagden, after all! You villain, what have you done with your cousin?"

Jimmy Silver breathed hard. The man before him was Lagden, the bank-robber. Where was the genuine Monty Smith? Had he fallen that dark night by the Windy River, struck down by a murderous hand? Jimmy shuddered at the thought.

"Are you giving us the straight goods now, Larry Lagden?" asked the sergeant. "Anyhow, you're coming to Kicking Mule with me, with the handcuffs on. You're going to stand your trial for the murder of Monty Smith, as well as for the robbery at Prince Albert."

Lagden panted for breath.

"You fool! I never killed him!"

"I guess the evidence is against you."

"He is living!" yelled Lagden.

The sergeant shrugged his broad shoulders.

"So you say! Anyhow, you're arrested on the murder charge."

Lagden struggled as the sergeant gripped his shoulder. His senses almost swam with terror now. Monty Smith still lived; but that very night Red Henri was to carry out the bank-robber's instructions, and put the rope round his confederate's neck.

"You fool!" yelled Lagden. "If you take me away now Monty Smith is doomed. He is a prisoner in the hands of a man who will kill him to-night—after you are gone from Windy River."

"Is that the truth?" gasped Hudson Smedley.

"I swear it!"

"I guess we'll put it to the test," said Sergeant Kerr. "If Monty Smith is alive, and there's time to save him, I guess this galoot will be keen enough to keep the rope from his neck. Where is Monty Smith?"

"Hidden in a cave under the bluffs, down the river!" groaned Lagden.

There was no hope, no thought of further concealment. Only the rescue of Monty Smith could save him now. For if the body of his cousin was found, as he had planned, it would undoubtedly condemn him to the gallows.

"If that's true, I guess you've got a pard looking after him," said the sergeant.

"There's a man, a half-breed—Red Henri—"

"You'll give us the office how to find that cave, and you'll come and guide us," said Pete Peters. "And I reckon that if we don't find Monty Smith alive, you rascal, we'll hang you on a tree by the Windy River, and save the hangman the trouble!"

Five minutes later Hudson Smedley and half a dozen cowpunchers were heading for the cave, with the sergeant and the bank-robber, to search for Monty Smith.

CHAPTER 23.

At Last!

RED HENRI sat on a pile of skins in the cave under the bluff and yawned and rubbed his eyes. It was the afternoon, and the half-breed had been sleeping. A half-empty bottle lay beside him. He yawned and muttered a savage exclamation and rose unsteadily to his feet. He did not give a glance towards Monty Smith, lying bound on his blanket, silent and in despair.

Something had awakened the half-breed, and he approached the mouth of the cave and stood listening, his head bent, his eyes gleaming, like a wild beast roused in its lair.

There was a sound of splashing in the shallows, and of voices. Men were wading along by the bushes that covered the mouth of the cave.

Red Henri gripped his revolver and listened. He had little fear of the hidden cave being discovered by chance. But the sounds were coming closer, as if unseen comers were being guided to the spot.

A voice came clearly at last through the bushes.

"Is this the place?"

"Yes." It was Lagden's voice that answered, and Red Henri started and gripped his revolver convulsively. It was his employer and confederate who was guiding the party to the cave.

"Yes; the cave's behind those bushes. Lock out for the half-breed."

"I guess we'll take care of the breed. Get on!"

There was a rustle in the bushes as they were dragged aside.

Red Henri backed away a few paces, his black eyes glinting with rage. Of what had happened at the ranch he knew nothing; but he knew that Larry Lagden had betrayed him into the hands of his enemies.

Many hands dragged the bushes aside, and in the opening of the cave, with the afternoon sun behind them, stood the figures of Sergeant Kerr, of Kicking Mule, and Larry Lagden, the bank-robber.

Behind them came Hudson Smedley and Jimmy Silver and half a dozen of the Windy River outfit, all with revolvers in their hands.

"Hyer's the place!" said the sergeant. "And hyer— Hands up, you galoot!"

Crack!

Red Henri fired as the sergeant spoke. But it was not at the Canadian that he fired. His aim was at the white face of Larry Lagden, and the man who had sold him to save his own skin.

There was a terrible cry from Lagden, and he pitched over on the damp earthen floor of the cave, his face covered with blood.

The next instant Hudson Smedley had fired at the half-breed, and Red Henri dropped before he could pull trigger again.

Monty Smith staggered up.

"Monty!" shouted Jimmy Silver.

He ran forward and caught the prisoner by the arm. A white, worn, emaciated face was turned dazedly upon him.

"Monty!"

"You, Jimmy!" said Monty Smith huskily.

"Little me, old man! You're saved!" said Jimmy Silver softly. "Oh, if we'd only known! If we'd only guessed!"

He drew his knife and cut the prisoner loose. Monty Smith leaned heavily on the Rockwood junior's shoulder. The sudden reaction from the depths of black despair had dazed him.

Sergeant Kerr was leaning beside the groaning Lagden. Red Henri's hurried shot had scored across the bank-robber's face, and the blood was flowing freely.

"I guess that was a close thing," said the sergeant coolly. "But a miss is as good as a mile. You won't go under this time, Larry Lagden. You'll live to face your trial, and I guess you're lucky that it ain't a murder trial you've got to face."

Lagden only groaned in answer. Red Henri sat up dazedly, his hand to his head. The rancher's bullet had gone close enough to stun him. He was in the hands of the cowpunchers before his senses fully returned, and his hands were bound.

Heedless of the bank-robber and the half-breed, Jimmy Silver led the tenderfoot of Windy River from the cave.

Late that afternoon Sergeant Kerr left the Windy River Ranch with two prisoners in a wagon—Red Henri, the horse-thief, and Larry Lagden, the bank-robber. Neither was seriously hurt, though they groaned as the wagon jolted away over the prairie. Lagden's face was a mass of

bandages, from which his eyes gleamed full of savage rage and despair. The long trail of the bank-robber was over, and he was going back to Saskatchewan to stand his trial, with long years in prison before him.

"And I guess," remarked Pete Peters, "that that galoot will never be taken for Monty Smith again! I guess he will have a scar across his face that you could put a finger in. That god-darned breed has spoiled his good looks for him!"

Monty Smith remained at Windy River, too exhausted by his imprisonment in the cave to accompany the sergeant to Kicking Mule. But in a few days Monty was himself again, and when he reappeared among the Windy River outfit they gave him a rousing welcome. Baldy, the cook, greeted him as "your lordship," and Monty chuckled.

For a week longer Monty Smith remained. Although his inheritance awaited him in the Old Country he was reluctant to leave his friends of the ranch, and especially Jimmy Silver. But one day the inquiry agent arrived from Kicking Mule, and then the tenderfoot could no longer delay. The whole outfit turned out to give him a send-off, and Jimmy Silver & Co. rode with him as far as Mesquito on his way.

"You'll look me up when you come back to the Old Country," said Monty Smith as he shook hands with Jimmy Silver, and Jimmy promised that he would.

The railroad cars rolled eastward with Monty Smith—now Lord Erdingford. But it was only Baldy, the cook, who ever spoke of him as "his lordship." To the rest of the Windy River outfit he remained Monty Smith, the tenderfoot.

CHAPTER 24.

Baldy's Resolve.

"I GUESS I'm fed-up!"

Baldy, the cook, made that announcement.

Baldy's fat face was wrathful, and his little round eyes gleamed. Even the bald spot on the top of Mr. Bubbin's head, from which he derived his nickname, glowed with wrath.

"Fed-up!" he repeated. "Fed right up

to the pesky chin, young Silver, and don't you forget it."

Jimmy Silver smiled.

"What's the trouble now, Baldy?" he asked.

"Trouble!" repeated the ranch cook. "Heaps of trouble! That there Pete Peters—"

"What's our jolly old foreman done?" asked Lovell.

"Booted me!" roared Baldy.

Jimmy Silver & Co. chuckled; they could not help it. Baldy, the cook, had been booted before—not once, but many times. And undoubtedly Baldy, the cook, generally asked for it. Baldy would forget his bounden duty of having meals ready to time, while he sprawled in the cookhouse reading a "dime" novel or a newspaper serial. And when the hungry sheep looked up and were not fed, so to speak—that is, when the cowpunchers came in to dinner and dinner was not ready—Baldy, the cook, was liable to be slanged in the most emphatic manner, and to feel the weight of a cowhide boot.

Nevertheless Baldy, the cook, did not like it.

Often had Baldy threatened to turn his plump back on the Windy River Ranch for ever, and to seek fresh fields and pastures new.

But he never did.

Wages were good at Windy River, and jobs were a little uncertain, and, upon the whole, Baldy, the cook, realised clearly upon which side his bread was buttered.

But the patience of Baldy Bubbin was sometimes strained nearly to breaking-point, and on the present occasion it seemed that breaking-point was reached.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had dropped in to see Baldy that afternoon. Baldy ought really to have been busy upon washing up, but he wasn't. Jimmy found him seated on his bench with a stump of pencil in his hand and a grubby sheet of paper before him. Baldy appeared to be drawing up a document of some sort with considerable difficulty.

"How many z's in desires, young Silver?" asked Baldy.

"None at all," said Jimmy, with a smile. "What's the trouble? Writing a letter, Baldy?"

"I'm drawing up an advertisement," said Baldy, with dignity.

"An advertisement?" repeated the Rookwood junior, a little puzzled.

"That's the size of it," said the cook. "I'm going to put this hyer advertisement in the 'Times.'"

"The 'Times'?"

"The 'Kicking Mule Times,'" explained Baldy.

"Oh!"

"You jest look over it, and tell me if the spelling is all O.K.," said Baldy.

Jimmy, with some interest, read the advertisement that was to appear in the columns of the "Kicking Mule Times." It really was a rather interesting document. It ran:

"First-class cook dezzires engagement on a ranch. Excellent testimonials. Good celery rekired. Rite or corl, James Fortescue Bubbin, Windy River Ranch, near Mosquito, Alberta."

"That O.K.?" asked Baldy.

"Well, some of the words want touching up a little," said Jimmy Silver diplomatically.

"You touch them up for me, young Silver."

"Certainly! I suppose 'celery' means 'salary'?"

"Celery," assented Baldy. "Wages, you know."

"Right-ho!"

Jimmy Silver put in a few orthographical touches. Baldy took back his document and peered at it critically.

"You've put an 's' in 'celery,'" he remarked doubtfully.

"That's the usual style," said Jimmy.

"Sure?"

"Quite! But I say, Baldy, you're not really going, are you?"

"I am," said Baldy, the cook. "I'm fed-up with Windy River! I guess I'm going to light out as soon as I get another job. And there'll be plenty of jobs for a cook like me. 'Tain't as if I was a cow-puncher like Pete Peters or Skitter Dick."

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy.

"Cooks is different," explained Baldy loftily. "I guess I'll have a dozen letters when this hyer advertisement shows up in the 'Kicking Mule Times.'"

Skitter Dick looked in at the doorway. He was booted and spurred for a ride.

"Hand it out, Baldy!" he said. "I'm getting off to Kicking Mule now. You said

you wanted me to take aithin' there for you. Hand it out!"

"Hyer it is," said the cook. "You know the office of the 'Kicking Mule Times,' Dick Lee?"

"Sure!"

"You drop in with this hyer advertisement, and ask them to put it in the paper this week for me. It's a dollar, and I guess the dollar's hyer ready."

Skitter Dick took the advertisement and stared at it. Then he stared at Baldy.

"Getting out of Windy River, what?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Good man," said Skitter Dick. "You can cook, Baldy, but I guess you're a lazy jay, and not worth your keep! I hope you'll get another job quick, and that you'll get booted if you don't do your work."

"None of your lip!" roared Baldy. "You take that there advertisement and git!"

"Hand over the dollar!"

"Hyer you are!"

Baldy, the cook, parted with a dollar, and Skitter Dick walked away from the cook-house. Baldy turned to his washing up, and he paused to frown at Jimmy Silver and point the washing-mop to the doorway.

"You vamoose!" he snapped.

"Fathcad!" said Jimmy.

And he strolled out, leaving Baldy, the cook, to his clinking pots and pans. Over his washing-up the fat cook hummed a tune, apparently in cheery spirits. Perhaps he looked forward to getting a better job in reply to his advertisement in the "Kicking Mule Times," a job where the pay would be long and the work short. The longer the pay and the shorter the work, the better the job would suit Mr. Bubbin. But such jobs were not to be picked up every day.

CHAPTER 25.

Skitter Dick's Little Joke!

"H A, ha, ha!"

"Ho, ho, ho!"

"Hallo, that sounds as if somebody's merry and bright!" remarked Arthur Edward Lovell.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were trotting on the prairie in the golden autumn afternoon when they heard the sound of merry chortling under a clump of trees by the Kicking

Mule trail. The Rookwood juniors glanced round and spotted Skitter Dick and Pike Potter sitting on a grassy bank under the trees, their horses grazing near them.

Skitter Dick had a grubby, greasy paper in his hand, evidently Baldy's advertisement for the "Kicking Mule Times." It was that document over which the two cowpunchers were chuckling. Jimmy drew rein.

"Hallo! What's the giddy jest?" he called out.

The Skitter looked up, grinning.

"It's one on old Baldy," he answered.

"Light down and look at this hyer docky-ment, if you can keep a secret."

Somewhat curious, the chums of Rookwood dismounted and joined the cowpunchers under the firs.

The Skitter and Pike were on their way to Kicking Mule, on cattle business for the boss. It was natural enough for the Skitter to take Baldy's document to the newspaper office. Little errands of this kind were always performed by members of the outfit for one another, for it was half a day's ride to Kicking Mule. A man on the ranch who was out of tobacco or anything else only had to mention the fact to any man who was riding to town. Skitter Dick and Pike Potter had a dozen errands to perform at Kicking Mule for their comrades. Taking Baldy's advertisement to the "Times" office was only one of them. Baldy Bubbin, therefore, had handed his document to Skitter Dick as a matter of course. It had not even occurred to his fat mind that anything might happen to it in transit. He had reckoned without the Skitter's sense of humour.

Skitter Dick had spread the grubby paper on his knee, and made certain alterations in it with a stump of pencil. It was over these alterations that the cowpunchers were chuckling.

"What's the game?" asked Newcome.

The Skitter smiled broadly.

"You see, we're pulling the galoot's old leg," he explained. "Hyer's Baldy, the best cook in Alberta, and the laziest mug-wump between the Atlantic and the Pacific, advertising for a new job after Hudson Smedley's kept him on for years when any other boss would have booted him off the ranch. Wanl, Baldy is a fust-chop cook, and we don't want to lose him. He doesn't like work, but he'll work if he's kicked hard enough—see?"

The juniors grinned.

"And that ain't all," went on the Skitter. "Baldy won't get as good a job anywhere else. He'll find it out and stick on. But for a week or two we're going to hear him swanking about chucking it up, and makin' hisself a general nuisance. When he finds out that he's best off where he is, he'll give the boss some soft sawder and stay on."

"That's about the size of it," said Pike Potter.

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"Just what I expect," he answered. "But you're going to put the advertisement in for him, I suppose."

"Sure! But Baldy's going to have a lesson, I guess. I've wrote it out fresh. Look at it!"

Skitter handed over the paper, and the Fistical Four of Rookwood read it curiously.

Then they roared.

The advertisement read very differently now. Under Skitter Dick's improving hand, it ran as follows:

"Picked up in Main Street, Kicking Mule, a five-hunder-dollar bill, name of J. Robinson written on the back. Owner must apply personally to Baldy Bubbin, cookhouse, Windy River Ranch, and pay cost of this advertisement."

"Oh, my hat!" roared Arthur Edward Lovell. "Why, that will bring half the town riding over to the ranch!"

"I guess so!" assented Skitter Dick. "Every tramp and hobo and sneaking half-breed in the county will hump it for Windy River as soon as he hears of this hyer. Baldy figures it out that the ranchers are going to compete for his services. I guess he will be surprised some when they drop in."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skitter Dick rose from the grassy bank.

"Now that's done I reckon we'll get on," he said. "We've got to raise Kicking Mule before dark."

And the chuckling cowpunchers rode on their way.

"My hat!" said Jimmy Silver, laughing. "I fancy Baldy will get more than he bargains for."

"Serve him jolly well right!" said Lovell. "He's a fat tick, and he wants a lesson. It's a jolly jape."

The chums of Rookwood rode away laugh-

ing. It was at dusk that they returned to the ranch, and the light was gleaming cheerily from the windows of the cookhouse Baldy was there, preparing supper and talking to two or three cowboys who were lounging in the doorway.

The juniors caught his voice as they passed.

"I guess you 'uns won't often see a stev like this hyer agin. Arter next Saturday you'll know what you've lost!"

"I guess we'll have lost the fattest, laziest loafer in the Windy River section!" remarked Red Alf.

To which Baldy responded with a contentuous snort.

CHAPTER 26.

Mr. Robinson Looks In!

PETE PETERS' boot was not required in the cookhouse during the next few days.

Baldy, the cook—rather against his principles—was on good behaviour, so far as attending to his duties went. He was tired of Pete's hefty boot.

But in other respects Baldy was on bad behaviour. He seemed to be expecting a flood of replies to his advertisement in the "Kicking Mule Times." Ranchers and storekeepers were to fall over one another, as it were, in competing for Baldy's valuable services. It was not likely to happen, but Baldy seemed to think it likely.

"Jest you 'uns wait till you get a low-down half-breed cooking for you," Baldy would say, "or some durned Chink, or a pesky Pole! You'll see the difference then. I guess you'll come arter me, begging me to come back. And I'll jest laugh at you!"

It was evident that Baldy considered a cook to be the most important member of a ranch outfit. Nobody else agreed with Baldy on that point.

Baldy's airs and graces might have earned him some more bootings but for the fact that the cowpunchers were aware that his advertisement had never appeared in the paper at all, and consequently that Baldy was building air castles on a foundation of sand. The advertisement that had appeared, owing to Skitter Dick, was certainly not likely to bring the result Baldy anticipated.

The Windy River outfit chuckled among

themselves when Baldy was blowing off steam.

The fat cook was not likely to discover the trick. The Kicking Mule newspaper never found its way to Windy River unless a man rode over to the town and brought a copy back with him.

Certainly a copy of the "Kicking Mule Times" was brought to the ranch, with the advertisement in it; but it was carefully kept away from Baldy's knowledge. The outfit roared over it, and the Rookwood juniors chuckled over it; but Baldy, the cook, remained in cheerful ignorance of it. It was a case when ignorance was bliss.

It was on Thursday afternoon, when most of the boys were out on the range, that a visitor arrived at Windy River. Baldy, the cook, as it happened, was the first to spot him.

He was an exceedingly dusty and dirty and shabby gentleman, dressed in garments that seemed to have been borrowed from a variety of scarecrows. His face was stubby, and red patched from the excessive use of the cup that cheers and also inebriates. He came down the trail with a slinking gait, blinking round him suspiciously, in the manner of a man who was accustomed to being kicked out wherever he appeared.

Baldy waved a fat hand at him and shouted:

"Hyer, you hobo, you git!"

The man looked round.

"This hyer Windy River Ranch?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"Where's the cookhouse?"

"Right hyer," answered Baldy. "What the thump do you want? This ain't a free lunch counter for heboes."

"Mebbe you're Baldy Bubbin'?"

"Mebbe I'm Mister Bubbin," answered the fat cook disdainfully.

"My name's Robinson."

"Go back to Mrs. Robinson and tell her that her husband wants washing," answered Baldy sarcastically.

"If you're Baldy Bubbin, I'm the man you want to see," explained Mr. Robinson.

"I guess I don't want to see any hobo around hyer, whether his name's Robinson or Robinson Crusoe!" said Baldy. "Git!"

"I'm after the dust."

"What?"

"Five hundred dollars."

"Mad!" said Baldy.

"I dropped that there bank bill in Main Street, Kicking Mule," said Mr. Robinson eagerly. "I own up I'd been on a bender, and I jest dropped it and lost it. You're an honest man, Mr. Bubbin, to keep it for me. I'm ready to pay for the advertisement—out of the five hundred, of course."

"Eh?"

"Got it about you, I s'pose?"

"Got what?"

"The five-hundred-dollar bill."

Baldy, the cook, gazed at him in hopeless perplexity. The tramp was evidently accustomed to the use of potent liquor, but he did not appear intoxicated at the present moment. But if he was not wildly intoxicated there was no accounting for the way he talked—to Baldy, at least.

"Waal, where is it?" asked Mr. Robinson, approaching the fat cook, who stood glaring at him from the doorway.

"Where's what?" howled the amazed Baldy.

"The bill!"

Baldy gasped.

"Look hyer, you, Robinson!" he said. "See that gate over thar?"

"Eh—yes," said Mr. Robinson, looking round. "What about it?"

"Git on the other side of it—sharp!"

"But I want—"

"I don't know what you want," said Baldy, "but I know what you're going to git if you don't hop it lively! See?"

"Them dollars—"

"I ain't any dollars for a gol-darned hobo!"

"Five hundred—"

"Oh, can it!" roared Baldy, exasperated. "I've warned you to git! If you don't travel, look out for trouble!"

And Baldy went back into the cookhouse to pick up a frying-pan.

The tramp peered in at the doorway after him.

"I say—it's mine, Mr. Bubbin!" he said breathlessly.

Baldy gripped the frying-pan.

"Going?" he demanded.

"Look hyer, that five hundred dollar bill's mine!" exclaimed Mr. Robinson angrily. "Don't I keep on telling you that I dropped it in Main Street, Kicking Mule? If you've changed your mind since you let out about it, that's your funeral! I'm arter the stuff. You jest hand it over. Savvy?"

"Hand over what?" shrieked Baldy.

"My dollars!"

"You durned hobo, do you figure it out that I've got any dollars of yours?" howled the cook.

"'Course you have, like you've admitted. Look hyer, I'll stand you a hundred out of the bill."

"What bill?" yelled Baldy.

"My bank bill, what you found."

"I never found any bank bill——"

"Look hyer, that won't wash now, arter you've admitted it. You ain't going to rob me!" exclaimed Mr. Robinson indignantly. "My name's wrote on the bill, like you said, and I'm arter it!"

"Rob you?" said Baldy. "Oh, holy smoke! I'll give you rob you, you unwashed hobo!"

And the wrathful Baldy charged at the tramp with the frying-pan brandished in his fat hand. Mr. Robinson dodged out of the doorway with marvellous celerity.

"Look hyer——"

Bang!

There was a terrific yell from Mr. Robinson as the frying-pan caught him on the side of the head.

"Now!" gasped Baldy. "Ow! Wow!"

The hobo at that point probably relinquished any hope of annexing the five hundred dollar bill. But he had tramped many a long mile that day in the hope of annexing it, and he was naturally disappointed and angry. He turned on Baldy Bubbin, and hit out with a bony set of knuckles. Baldy caught those bony knuckles with his fat little nose, and sat down in a breathless heap.

The tramp seized the frying-pan as he dropped it.

Whack! Whack! Clang! Clang!

"Oh! Ow-wow! Yooop! Help!" roared Baldy.

"That's for you!" gasped Mr. Robinson. "Robbing a man whose bank bills you've picked up! Take that, and that, and that!"

Bang! Bang! Whack!

"Yooop! Help! Yaroooooh! Help! Murder!" roared Baldy, as he squirmed frantically to dodge the whacks from the frying-pan, heftily wielded by the indignant Mr. Robinson.

Jimmy Silver came running breathlessly from the ranch-house.

CHAPTER 27.

Another Mr. Robinson!

"HELP!"

Bang! Whack!

Jimmy Silver came up panting, riding-whip in hand. He did not stop to ask questions; he started on the tramp with the riding-whip. Mr. Robinson roared in his turn, and fled.

Baldy sat up and yelled.

"Ow, ow, ow! Arter him! Smash the guy! Lam him! Ow, ow, ow!"

Jimmy Silver followed Mr. Robinson up. Lovell and Raby and Newcome were speeding on the scene, and Pike Potter ran across from the corral and Pete Peters from his cabin. Mr. Robinson realised that it was time to go, and he went—hurriedly. Jimmy Silver, close behind, laid the riding-whip round his legs as he went, and Mr. Robinson emitted a wild howl at every bound.

He reached the gate on the trail, but he had no time to open it or climb over it. He took it at a flying leap, and landed on the other side on his hands and knees, roaring.

Then he picked himself up and ran, and vanished down the trail in a cloud of dust.

Jimmy Silver walked back rather breathlessly to the cookhouse. Lovell had helped Baldy up, and the fat cook stood leaning against the wall, crimson and panting.

"Well, what was the trouble, Baldy?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"That pesky guy was mad, I reckon!" gasped Baldy. "Made out that I'd got a five hundred dollar bill belonging to him!"

"What!" yelled Jimmy.

"That's jest what he said, and he didn't seem drunk, either!" gasped Baldy. "Mad as a hatter, I guess!"

"Ha, ha ha!"

"This hyer ain't a larfing matter!" roared Baldy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"After a five hundred dollar bill, hay!" roared Pete Peters. "Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Oh, go and chop chips, the lot of you!" snarled Baldy, and he stamped back into the cookhouse.

There was a roar of laughter outside. The advertisement in the "Kicking Mule Times" was evidently beginning to produce its effect. Mr. Robinson was the

first claimant! That there would be more claimants, and that they would all give the name of Robinson, was pretty certain—as the advertisement stated that “J. Robinson” was written on the back of the mythical five hundred dollar bill. But Baldy was not aware of that as yet, and he was both puzzled and annoyed by the roars of laughter outside the cookhouse.

As the afternoon waned the cowboys came in from the plains, and among the horsemen who rode in came a thin, lantern-jawed man with a little goatee beard and a knife-blade nose, who was a stranger at Windy River. He was mounted on a bony horse, and did not look as if he were in a prosperous way of business. He drew rein before the ranch buildings, and looked round with keen and shifty eyes.

“I guess this hyer is Windy River!” he called out.

“You guess right, stranger!” called back Skitter Dick.

“Where’s the cookhouse?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared the Skitter.

The lantern-jawed man stared at him. He seemed surprised by the Skitter’s involuntary outbreak of merriment.

“What’s the joke?” he demanded.

“You are, stranger, if your name’s Robinson,” answered Skitter Dick.

“I guess that is my name—J. Robinson, of Noo Yark,” answered the bony gentleman. “You’ve got a guy round hyer answering to the name of Baldy Bubbin.”

“Sure! There’s the cookhouse, and there’s Baldy Bubbin,” said the Skitter, and he pointed.

“Thanks!”

Mr. Robinson the Second rode on to the cookhouse and dismounted. He rapped on the door with a bony set of knuckles.

“Nope! It ain’t ready yet!” called out Baldy, without looking round. “Supper in half an hour, and don’t you worry a galoot!”

“I guess I ain’t arter any old supper,” said the second Mr. Robinson. “I’m after the five hundred dollars!”

Baldy spun round from the cooking-stove.

“What’s that?”

“You Baldy Bubbin? You’re the man what found my five hundred dollar bill in Main Street, Kicking Mule!”

“I guess I ain’t!”

“My name’s wrote on the back, I guess

—J. Robinson. Look hyer, are you Baldy Bubbin, or ain’t you Baldy Bubbin?”

“Oh, git!” said Baldy impatiently, and he turned to his stove again. A pot was boiling over.

Mr. Robinson kindly waited till Baldy had attended to the pot. Then he resumed:

“I guess I’m ready to pay for the advertisement. And I’ll tell you what, Mr. Bubbin; I’m goin’ to stand you twenty dollars over and above for handing me that bill! Now cough it up!”

“If this hyer’s a joke, I don’t see it,” said Baldy. “You git out of my cookhouse!”

“Where’s the bank bill?”

“There ain’t any bank bill!” shrieked Baldy, in great exasperation.

Mr. Robinson shook his head.

“It’s a bit too late for you to try that game,” he said. “I’m waiting for that bill to be handed over. Now, then—sharp!”

“Git!” howled Baldy.

“Are you going to pony up five hundred dollars?”

“No, I ain’t!”

“I guess I’ll make you!”

“Gol-darn my boots!” gasped Baldy.

“I do believe everybody in the Windy River Valley’s gone mad this arternoon! Hyer, you ’uns! Come and boot this man out!”

Pete Peters put a grinning face in the doorway.

“Time for you to travel, Robinson!” he said.

“I’m arter—”

“I know what you’re arter! Here’s your hoss! Git on it!”

“I guess I ain’t going without my five hundred dollars!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” came in a roar from the cowpunchers.

“Shove him out!” shouted Baldy.

“The man’s mad!”

“He’s a pesky thief, at least!” said Pete Peters. “Now, then, Robinson, it’s you for the trail!”

“I ain’t—”

“You are! Come agin to-morrow, but we ain’t letting you delay old Baldy jest before supper!” explained the foreman of Windy River. “Now, then, travel!”

“Not without the dust!”

Pete Peters stepped in. Mr. Robinson groped in a hip-pocket and produced a revolver. There was a howl of terror

from Baldy, and he dodged behind the stove.

Pete Peters' quirt twirled in the air, jorking the revolver out of Mr. Robinson's hand. Then the burly foreman grasped the claimant by the back of his neck and the seat of his trousers, and ran him out of the cookhouse. Yelling wildly, Mr. Robinson was heaped on the ground beside his bony horse.

"Now you can git, or you can stay there!" said Pete. "But all the time you stay there I'm going to boot you!"

"Whoooooop!" roared Mr. Robinson.

And he started.

In record time Mr. Robinson, of "Noo Yark," was on his horse and riding wildly down the trail from Windy River, heading at frantic speed for parts unknown.

At supper that night the Windy River outfit were in a state of uproarious merriment that amazed and puzzled Baldy, the cook. Where the joke came in was a mystery to Baldy. And he was to be still more puzzled on the morrow, when he was to discover what a surprising number of persons in that part of Alberta bore the name of J. Robinson.

CHAPTER 28.

Raining Robinsons!

JIMMY SILVER & Co. turned out quite early the following morning. They were keen to see the further outcome of Skitter Dick's little joke on Baldy, the cook, and they wondered whether any more strangers would drop in to answer to the name of J. Robinson, and claim the five hundred dollar bill that Baldy had not found in Main Street at Kicking Mule.

Jimmy Silver strolled down to the gate on the trail. Within two minutes three horsemen rode up, giving one another suspicious looks. All three inquired for Mr. Bubbin, and Jimmy blandly directed them to the cookhouse. A few minutes later two dragged hoboes arrived on foot, and they were followed by another horseman, and then by a man in a buggy. Then four more horsemen rode up. Every one was cheerfully directed to the cookhouse, and Jimmy, looking from the gateway, could see the trail towards Kicking Mule dotted with approaching heads.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Jimmy. "This is richer than I expected. We shall be swamped with Robinsons at this rate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The cowpunchers were standing about the cookhouse, roaring with laughter. The cookhouse was surrounded by the newcomers, who banged on the door and rattled the window and shouted to Baldy Bubbin. Baldy, in amazement and rage and terror, had slammed the cookhouse door and bolted it. All the callers looked rough fellows, and there were already a dozen on the scene—and more coming. And every one of them was shouting to Baldy that his name was Robinson—J. Robinson—and that he had called for the five hundred dollar note.

"Go away!" yelled Baldy from the cookhouse. "Go away! Git! Vamoose the ranch! Absquatulate! I ain't got any five hundred dollar note! Go away! Boys, turn 'em off the ranch! Oh, dear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let me in, Baldy Bubbin! I'm J. Robinson—"

"You ain't! I'm Robinson—"

"It's my five hundred dollar note, you guy—"

"I guess I'll have this door down if you don't let a galoot in!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Go it!" roared Lovell. "It's raining Robinsons to-day!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Crash! Crash! Crash! Three or four of the excited claimants were heaving rocks at the cookhouse door. There was a yell of terror from Baldy.

"Drive 'em off! Oh, dear! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hyer, that won't do!" exclaimed Pete Peters, wiping his eyes. "They ain't going to damage the cookhouse! Take your quirts to 'em, boys, and clear the place!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The joke on Baldy had reached its climax, and was looking like developing into a riot. But the cowpunchers waded in now, and with yells of protest and loud threats the claimants were driven off. They departed unwillingly; but there was no arguing with heavy cattle-whips wielded by sinewy hands. Nearly every rogue in Kicking Mule had turned up by this time to lay claim to the mythical five hundred dollar bill—and more were coming up the trail. The yelling crowd, driven off by the cowpunchers, surged out

of the gate and met the newcomers on their way. Pete Peters closed the gate and locked it.

"Enough's as good as a feast!" grinned the foreman of Windy River. "If any more galoots come along and give the name of Robinson, hand out a quirt instanter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And so at last the wicked ceased from troubling, and Baldy, the cook, was at rest.

Baldy was long puzzled by the strange occurrences of that day when it had almost rained Robinsons at Windy River. Later on he saw a copy of the "Kicking Mule Times," and understood at last. The wrath of Baldy was great, and he threatened loudly to wipe up the ranch with Skitter Dick and Pike Potter—a threat which, however, Baldy did not carry out, for good reasons.

The following week Baldy rode over to Kicking Mule himself to place his advertisement in the paper. After that he was no more troubled by a swarm of applicants. Crowds had answered the advertisement for a five hundred dollar bill. Not a single person answered the advertisement offering the services of the Windy River cook.

In the days that followed Baldy's airs and graces gradually left him, and he was a subdued Baldy.

"Hallo! You still here, Baldy?" Jimmy Silver asked, looking into the cookhouse one morning.

"Yep!"

"Staying on, after all!"

Baldy coughed.

"I guess I've thought it over," he said. "I ain't going to desert Hudson Smedley. Wher'd he find a cook like me?"

"Oh!"

"This place ain't good enough for me," said Baldy. "But I'm a good-natured galoot, I am. I'm sticking on."

"But Mr. Smedley—"

"He seems to have forgot that I gave him notice to quit," said Baldy, "and—and—you needn't remind him, young Silver."

And Jimmy Silver chuckled and promised that he wouldn't.

CHAPTER 23.

The Boy from Texas.

"IT'S been jolly!" remarked Arthur Edward Lovell.

"No end jolly!" agreed Jimmy Silver.

"Ripping!" said Raby.

"Top-hole!" declared Newcome.

The Fistical Four of Rookwood did not always agree upon all points, but they were quite unanimous now.

"All the same," went on Lovell, "I shall be glad to see old Rookwood again!"

"Yes, rather!"

The Rookwood juniors were standing on the veranda of the ranch-house at Windy River, looking out over the wide prairie. Their stay in Conada was coming to an end now, and though they looked forward to seeing Rookwood School again and all the fellows there, they were sorry to bid farewell to the scenes that had grown familiar to them.

Over by the corral Skitter Dick was rubbing down a horse. Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, was standing in the doorway of his cabin, smoking a pipe. Baldy, the cook, was washing up in the cookhouse, with a musical clink of pots and pans, and the autumn sun shining on his bald head. In the distance cattle grazed on the plains. Far off, the Windy River wound like a streak of silver.

"We'll come over again some day—if Mr. Smedley isn't fed-up with us," remarked Raby.

"You bet!" said Lovell.

"Only a week more," said Jimmy Silver, "and then we get on the cars at Calgary and say good-bye to Alberta. We'll have some yarns to spin in the studies at Rookwood, anyway."

Hudson Smedley stepped out on to the veranda. The big Canadian rancher nodded to the Rookwooders.

"You youngsters care to ride to Kicking Mule this morning?" he asked.

"Anywhere you like," said Jimmy, with a smile.

"I think I told you I was expecting a visitor at the ranch," said Hudson Smedley. "Mr. Lick, from Texas. He's at Kicking Mule now, and will be coming over to-day. I should ride over to meet him, but I guess I've got rather important business at the

Sunset Ranch. If you young fellows care to go—

"Yes, rather!"

"Likely enough you'll meet him on the trail if he started early. If not, you'll inquire for him at the Post Hotel at Kicking Mule. He's a stranger in this part of Canada, and a guide may be useful to him. I guess you know your way about the prairie by this time, and won't lose yourselves or Mr. Lick."

"No fear!" said Lovell.

"He will drive over from Kicking Mule, so you'd better hail any buggy you pass on the trail."

"Right-ho!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. descended the steps of the veranda and walked over to the corral.

It was a bright autumn morning—cold, but fine—and the chums of Rookwood were prepared to enjoy a gallop over the prairie trails. They led out their horses and saddled up. Then they mounted and rode out on the prairie trail.

It was many a long mile from Windy River to Kicking Mule, and Jimmy Silver & Co. rode at a gallop. They were rather curious to see Mr. Lick, of Texas.

Mr. Lincoln Polk Lick was said to be a millionaire. He had started life as a cowboy on a Texas ranch, and now he was the owner of tens of thousands of acres in that State, with ranching interests in Wyoming, California, and Canada. His visit to Windy River probably meant that he was extending his interests to Alberta, and his arrival had caused some excitement among the innumerable dealers in "real estate" in that growing province. A millionaire with money to burn was a great prize to the enterprising gentlemen who lived by selling "town lots to tenderfeet."

"Hallo! There's a giddy stranger on the trail!" remarked Lovell, when the chums of Rookwood had passed the ford at Coyote Creek, some fifteen miles from the Windy River Ranch.

"It's not Lincoln P. Lick!" said Jimmy Silver, with a smile.

Evidently it was not.

A boy of about Jimmy's own age was sitting his horse at a short distance from the creek, looking about him with a very

keen pair of eyes under the shade of a Stetson hat.

At this point several trails, marked by the hoofs of horses and cattle, branched off—one to Kicking Mule, another to Mosquito, another to Windy River.

Signposts were quite unknown on the Alberta trail, and the young stranger was apparently at a loss.

The four juniors rode on towards him, and he observed them keenly as they rode up. They observed him, also.

He was a sturdy fellow, with a bronzed face and bony cheeks. His nose was sharp and prominent, his eyes remarkably keen. He would not have been called handsome even by a fond parent, but he certainly looked like a fellow who could take care of himself.

"Say, you guys!"

The young stranger called out to the Rookwood juniors as they came up, with a slight nasal twang in his speech. Jimmy Silver decided at once that he did not belong to Canada.

"Hallo!" replied Jimmy.

"You 'uns belong hereabouts?"

"More or less," answered Jimmy.

"Lost your way?"

"I guess I ain't lost it," replied the other cautiously. "Texas Lick ain't the galoot to lose his way on the prairie."

"Texas Lick!" repeated Jimmy.

"I guess that's my name."

"Oh, my hat!"

"What's the matter with it?" demanded Lick warmly.

"Oh, nothing!" said Jimmy Silver blandly. "I thought Texas was the name of a State—"

"Yep. I guess I was raised in that State, and named after it," said young Lick. "I guess it lays over anything on this side of the border. You 'uns ever heard of Windy River?"

"Just a few," said Lovell. "We've come from there."

"Oh, that's real good! Then you can tell me which of these pesky trails leads to Windy River. I guess I hired this gee at Kicking Mule, and started out to get in ahead of the popper. I've been a good hour here, waiting for some galoot to show up, and I reckon the popper will soon be along. It will be one on me if I don't get

in first, after leaving him hanging up at Kicking Mule!"

"Is Mr. Lincoln P. Lick your father?" asked Jimmy.

"Sure!"

"Mr. Smedley sent us to meet him on the trail and guide him," said Jimmy.

"I guess you won't have far to go. He was scheduled to start an hour after I lit out." Master Texas Lick turned in his saddle and stared back along the trail. "Thunder! I reckon that's the popper in the buggy, and he's coming along hell-for-leather, and no mistake!"

The juniors followed Lick's glance along the trail to Kicking Mule. From that direction a buggy had appeared in sight, coming towards them at a rattling speed. A man in a Stetson hat, with a brown beard, held the reins, and it could be seen that he was tugging at them. From the distance the thudding of furious hoofs reached the ears of the juniors.

"That horse is running away!" said Arthur Edward Lovell. "By gum, there will be trouble if he isn't stopped before he reaches the creek."

Texas Lick's face set hard.

The buggy was bumping over the rough prairie trail, threatening to upset at every stride of the excited horse. And it was clear that the horse was quite out of control. One of the reins, as the juniors could see now, was broken. It had snapped under the strain. The horse tore on madly towards the creek, the buggy rocking behind him.

Jimmy Silver jerked his lasso free from his saddle.

"Clear off the trail, you fellows!" he exclaimed. "I'm going to rope him in. It's the only chance."

Texas Lick pushed his horse towards Jimmy.

"Give me that that rope."

"Keep back!" snapped Jimmy.

"Give me that rope, I tell you!" roared Lick. "I guess I can handle a rope better'n you. I was raised in Texas."

Jimmy Silver did not heed.

He rode to meet the oncoming buggy, the lasso in his hand. Jimmy Silver had acquired great skill in the use of the lasso during his stay at the Windy River Ranch. He held the coiled rope ready for a cast, his eyes on the oncoming horse. The run-

away was tearing on straight for the creek.

"You hear me yaup?" shouted Lick.

"Look here, young fellow—" began Lovell warmly.

Texas Lick did not heed Lovell. He gave his horse a touch of the spur, and rode at Jimmy Silver.

Before Jimmy could guess his intention, Texas Lick was close beside him, and had grasped the coiled lasso.

"Let go!" panted Jimmy.

"You pesky guy, give me the rope!"

"I tell you—"

With his free hand the Texan struck Jimmy Silver on the chest, so suddenly and forcibly, that the Rookwood junior reeled out of the saddle.

He let go the rope as he fell, and Texas Lick rode on with the lasso in his hand, leaving Jimmy Silver sprawling in the grass.

CHAPTER 30.

A Close Call.

JIMMY SILVER sat up dazedly.

Lick was riding away up the trail with the speed of the wind, as if designing to meet the runaway face to face. Jimmy sat and stared blankly after him.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Lovell.

All four of the Rookwood juniors watched Lick.

Only a couple of dozen yards in front of the tearing horse and vehicle, Lick wheeled aside from the trail, and dragged in his horse, his right arm shooting up, the coiled rope in his hand.

An instant more, and the runaway horse was tearing past him, and in that instant the lasso flew.

The loop descended upon the runaway horse's tossing head, and slid over the neck.

The Rookwooders, as they saw the success of the cast, looked to see the runaway dragged to a halt.

Lick, letting the rope run, rode with the runaway, keeping pace, and putting a gradual pull on the lasso.

The man in the buggy hardly looked at him; he was holding on to the seat now, to keep himself from being tossed bodily out of the rocking vehicle.

Closer to the creek, and to the staring Rookwooders, the runaway swept.

Jimmy Silver scrambled to his feet.

In his anxiety for the fate of the man in the buggy, he forgot to be angry at his unceremonious handling by Texas Lick.

He stood holding his horse and staring on breathlessly.

The Rookwooders wondered, for a minute, why Lick did not haul in the lasso; but they quickly divined his reason. A sudden stopping of the careering horse would have wrecked the buggy, going over the rough trail at such a terrific speed.

Lick, riding after the runaway, was gradually putting a harder and harder pull on the stretched rope, and the horse diminished its mad pace under the gathering strain.

But the muddy slope down to the creek was terribly close now. Jimmy Silver & Co., helpless to interfere, looked on with beating hearts.

Lick's face was set and hard, and quite cool. Almost on the very edge of the creek he gave the taut rope a sharp jerk, and dragged the runaway round.

The buggy whirled round after it on the trail, but the speed was so reduced by this time that it turned in safety.

Then Lick, gathering in the rope, rode up to the runaway's head, and secured him.

The buggy came to a halt.

Lick looked round.

"I guess you 'uns can hold this animal!" he called out.

Arthur Edward Lovell took charge of the horse's head at once. The runaway was subdued now, standing trembling, with the sweat pouring down its limbs.

Texas looked at the brown-bearded man in the buggy, and grinned.

"Close call for you, popper," he said.

"I guess so!" said Mr. Lincoln P. Lick. "The gol-darned reins broke, I guess, after this hyer gol-darned critter was skeered and tuck to its heels. I guess I was going to lambaste you, Texas, for vamoosing without leave this morning."

"Oh, can it, popper!" said Lick.

"Waal, I won't lambaste you now, anyhow!" said Mr. Lick.

"I guess you wouldn't, anyway," said young Lick independently. "Don't you give me any guff, popper."

Mr. Lick did not appear to be offended by this reply from his hopeful son. He laughed.

"That hoss safe now?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"Then you get the reins fixed, Texas."

"I'll sure fix them."

Texas Lick proceeded to examine the broken reins and splice them. Mr. Lick turned his attention to the Rookwood juniors.

Mr. Lick was a rather bulky gentleman, with a bronzed, bearded face. He was dressed in "store" clothes, only his Stetson hat being reminiscent of the one-time cowboy. He had very keen eyes, like his hopeful son. Jimmy Silver raised his hat as he met the glances of the Texas rancher.

"Mr. Smedley sent us to meet you, Mr. Lick," he said. "We're going to guide you to Windy River."

"I guess I'd have found the way, but I'm real glad to see you," said Mr. Lick cordially. "You belong to the ranch?"

"No; we're visitors from England; we're going home next week," said Jimmy.

"Going back to school," added Lovell.

"School!" repeated Mr. Lick, seeming to regard the Rookwooders with a new interest. "You're schoolboys?"

"Yes."

"I reckoned you was tenderfeet," assented Mr. Lick, with a nod.

"We're not exactly tenderfeet," said Arthur Edward Lovell stiffly. "We know our way about in Canada."

"No offence," said Lincoln P. Lick. "I could see you was from the Old Country, that's all. How long's that goin' to take you, Texas?"

"Jest finished!"

"Then let's get a hustle on."

Mr. Lick gathered up his mended reins. Texas Lick took the horse's head, and guided him across the ford to the creek with the Rookwooders riding alongside. From the ford the trail lay fairly well-marked to Windy River.

"Straight on, sir," said Jimmy Silver.

"If you trust the horse—"

"I guess I can handle him now!"

And the Texas millionaire drove on. Ten minutes before, Mr. Lincoln P. Lick had been in imminent danger of a broken neck, and he had certainly had a very

narrow escape. But the incident had already passed from his mind. He drove on at a good rate towards the distant ranch, the buggy bumping on the rough trail, and the Rookwooders and Texas Lick rode behind.

CHAPTER 31.

Bumptious.

JIMMY SILVER looked rather grimly at Texas Lick.

There was no doubt that the young Texan had handled Jimmy's lasso extremely well, and saved his father from serious injury, perhaps from death. But that did not alter the fact that he had grabbed the rope from Jimmy, knocking the Rookwooder out of his saddle for the purpose. Jimmy expected the American to offer some apology, or at least to express a hope that he hadn't hurt him. But Texas Lick seemed to attach no importance whatever to the occurrence. Indeed, he seemed to have forgotten it.

Jimmy, who had several bruises from the fall, naturally did not forget it so easily. He did not want to quarrel with Master Lick; but he did want to impress on that breezy youth's mind the fact that Rookwood fellows could not be handled so cavalierly. He rode by the side of Master Lick and spoke to him.

"You pushed me off my horse, Lick," he said.

Lick nodded.

"Sure!" he assented.

"You might say you were sorry!" suggested Jimmy.

"I might!" assented Lick. "But it wouldn't be true. I ain't sorry!"

"What!"

"I guess I told you to give me the rope. I had to have it."

"It didn't occur to you that I could have handled it as well as you did?" asked Jimmy sarcastically.

"Not much! You, a gol-darned tenderfoot from the Old Country," said Texas Lick derisively. "You make me smile. I guess I was born to the lasso. And you ain't the first tenderfoot I've handled, not by a jugful!"

Jimmy Silver looked at him.

"It seems that you're going to be a guest at the ranch, and Mr. Smedley is my cousin," he said. "I can't very well pick a row with you, Lick. But if it wasn't for that, I'd mop you off that horse, and wipe up the ground with you."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Texas Lick.

"What are you cackling at?" demanded Jimmy Silver angrily.

"Ha, ha! Why, you guy, you wouldn't last me two shakes of a coyote's tail," said Texas Lick. "I've whopped galoots twice your heft down in Texas. I guess there isn't a critter in Canada that I couldn't whop!"

"You cheeky ass!" exclaimed Lovell.

Jimmy Silver breathed hard. But he remembered that Mr. Lick and his son were guests of Hudson Smedley, and he restrained his wrath.

"Come on, you fellows," he said.

And the Fistical Four rode on a little faster to relieve themselves of the company of Master Lick. Texas Lick rode after them, chuckling.

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ON SALE

THURSDAY, NOV. 5th.

No more remarks were exchanged between Lick and the Rookwooders till Windy River Ranch came in sight. Texas Lick glanced over the ranch-house and the corral and the buildings, with a keen, appraising eye.

"This hyer Windy River?" he asked.

"Yes," said Newcome shortly.

"I guess you could put the whole shebang into the corral at Lick Ranch in Texas, and never notice it was there."

"Rats!"

Hudson Smedley came out to meet Mr. Lick, as the Texan descended from the buggy. Lick senior and junior went into the ranch-house with the Canadian rancher.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked their horses to the corral.

"What do you think of that merchant, Jimmy?" asked Lovell.

"I think that a jolly good hiding would do him a lot of good," answered Jimmy Silver; "and I think he'd get it if he wasn't a guest here."

"I never wanted to punch a chap's head so much," said Lovell, with a frown. "I suppose Mr. Smedley wouldn't like a chap to punch the cheeky cad's head."

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Not likely! We'd better try to keep clear of him."

But that did not prove to be so easy. The Rookwooders went into the ranch-house to dinner, and Mr. and Master Lick were at the table. Lincoln P. Lick was discussing ranching with Hudson Smedley. It appeared that he was visiting Alberta, to get first-hand information before investing any of his innumerable dollars in that province. But after a time he switched off ranching as a topic, and asked the juniors questions about their school in England. Why that subject interested Mr. Lick, Jimmy Silver & Co. could not guess; but evidently it did interest him.

He wanted to know all about Rookwood—its size, its numbers, its age, its history, its situation. He was interested to learn that its headmaster, Dr. Chisholm, was a Doctor of Divinity; he even inquired into the curriculum. Mr. Smedley was as surprised as the juniors by his thirst for knowledge on a subject that could scarcely be supposed to interest a Texas rancher.

But Lincoln P. Lick enlightened his hearers at last.

"I guess that will suit Texas!" he said.

"Texas?" repeated Mr. Smedley.

"My boy Texas."

"Oh!"

"I guess I've planned for a long time to send him to a tip-top school in the Old Country for a few years," explained Mr. Lick. "Now, I never had much school. Readin' and writin' was about all I ever roped in. That ain't stopped me from becoming the biggest ranch-owner in Texas, and I guess it won't stop me from becoming the biggest ranch-owner in Canada if I set my mind on it. I reckon I generally get what I want, though I never knew a word of Latin or Greek, and don't even know the names of the counties in England." He grinned at Jimmy Silver. "All the same, my boy Texas is goin' to have the best. It's you for Rookwood School, Texas."

"Can it, popper!"

"Don't you want to go?" exclaimed Mr. Lick, glaring across the table at his son.

Lick grinned derisively.

"No fear! No Old Country on my plate. I was raised on a ranch, and I guess I ain't gone on school. All very well for these tenderfeet. Not good enough for me."

Politeness to Mr. Lick held the Rookwood juniors silent. But they longed to tell Master Lick just what they thought of him, and of his fitness for Rookwood School.

"I guess I mean it," said Mr. Lick. "I'm going to fix it up, Texas, and you're going to toe the line."

"I guess not," said Texas.

"And if you give me any more guff, I'll borrow a cowhide from Mr. Smedley and larn you!" exclaimed Mr. Lick.

"Can it!" answered his dutiful son.

"You boys would like to show Mr. Lick's son round the ranch, I think," remarked Hudson Smedley, dinner being over.

As a matter of fact, Jimmy Silver & Co. had no desire whatever to show Mr. Lick's son round the ranch. But they politely assented, and left the ranch-house with Texas Lick, leaving Mr. Lick and the rancher deep in discussion, amid a cloud of cigar-smoke.

CHAPTER 32.

The Fight.

TEXAS LICK walked round the ranch with the air of a fellow to whom the whole place belonged. He expressed opinions freely on all he saw, and most of his opinions were disparaging. Nothing he had seen in Canada apparently was equal to what he had seen in the United States, and he held the opinion that the Old Country was undoubtedly an inferior edition of Canada. His self-satisfaction was really remarkable. He was greatly amused by his father's "stunt," as he called it, of sending him to Rookwood, and he cheerfully informed the Rookwooders that he wouldn't be found dead at Rookwood. No considerations of mere politeness prevented Master Lick from expressing his opinions. Arthur Edward Lovell burst out at last.

"Look here, you young ass, if you think that you could shove in at a school like Rookwood, it only shows that you don't know what you're talking about. You wouldn't be admitted there."

Lick looked at him.

"Why not?" he asked, quite cheerfully.

"You're not good enough."

"And you'd jolly soon be put in your place in a school like Rookwood," said Raby. "You'd have the cheek taken out of you pretty fast."

"I guess the popper could buy up Rookwood, lock, stock and barrel, and never miss the money," said Lick.

"Only Rookwood doesn't happen to be for sale," said Jimmy Silver. "There are some things that even dollars can't buy."

"I reckon I'd go to Rookwood if I got-darned well chose!" retorted Lick.

"Rats!"

"The popper's set on it," said Lick thoughtfully. "I don't take any nonsense from the popper; but I don't mind letting him have his way sometimes. I guess I'll go to Rookwood to please him."

"Well, my hat!" said Lovell.

"If I don't like it, I shall jest clear," went on Lick. "No harm in giving it a trial. Can't be much of a place if it turns out green tenderfeet like you 'uns."

"You cheeky ass!" roared Lovell. "I jolly well wish you weren't a guest here. I'd punch your cheeky head."

"I guess I shouldn't let that worry you," said Lick cheerily. "Look here, young Silver, you ain't pleased with the way I shoved you off'n your hoss. Come round the corral and be whopped. I won't hurt you much—just knock the stuffing out of you!"

Jimmy Silver breathed hard and deep. It was a great temptation to knock some of the conceit out of this Western youth.

But he shook his head.

"Better not," he said. "Mr. Smedley—"

"Oh, bother Mr. Smedley! Is it a case of cold feet?" asked Texas Lick. "I guess that's about the size of it."

Lovell was red with wrath.

"Look here, Jimmy, if you don't lick this cheeky cad, I'm going to!" he bawled. "He's been asking for it all the time."

"I guess I'm asking for all you can give me," grinned Texas Lick. "You're mighty slow at coming on."

"I'll come on fast enough!" exclaimed Lovell, and he made a stride towards the bumptious youth from Texas. Jimmy Silver caught his arm and pulled him back.

"Hold on, Lovell—"

"I'm going to thrash him!" shouted Lovell.

"Leave it to me!" said Jimmy.

"Well, get a move on, then!" growled Lovell. "I'm not going to stand any more of his cheek, I can tell you."

Jimmy Silver led the way round the corral fence, out of sight of the windows of the ranch-house. He did not want Mr. Smedley or his guest to witness what was on.

"You cut up to my room for the boxing-gloves, Raby," he said.

"Right-ho!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Texas Lick.

"You afraid of getting hurt? Don't I keep on telling you I won't hurt you much?"

Jimmy Silver crimsoned.

"Never mind the gloves, then," he said. He threw off his jacket. "Ready? Will you have rounds?"

"Nope! I guess I want only one round to make shavings of you."

"Then come on."

Texas Lick was not slow to come on. With all his bumptiousness, he certainly did not lack courage. He came on at once, with bony fists thrashing out.

Lovell & Co. stood looking on. Three or four of the Windy River downpunchers strolled round the corral to look on, too. They had heard the disparaging opinions loudly expressed by Master Lick, and they hoped to see him soundly "whopped" by Jimmy Silver.

It was probable that Master Lick had seen a great deal of scrapping at home in Texas, but it must have been in a rough-and-ready style, for certainly he displayed no great knowledge of the noble art of boxing. He depended on quickness, sheer strength, and a grim endurance of punishment.

In those qualities Jimmy Silver was at least his equal, and as a boxer the chief of the Fistical Four of Rookwood was leagues ahead of the Texan.

Texas Lick's attack was headlong and hard to stop, and Jimmy Silver gave a good deal of ground at first. The Texan grinned as he followed him up, pressing harder and harder.

But there came a change all of a sudden.

Jimmy Silver closed in—how, the Texan did not even know—and his right came home on Lick's jaw, followed by his left in Lick's eye, and the youth from Texas went to the grass with a crash.

"Man down!" grinned Lovell.

"I guess that was some sockdolager!" ejaculated Skitter Dick.

Jimmy Silver stood, a little breathless, and waited for his opponent to rise.

Lick sat up.

He put one hand to his jaw and the other to his eye. He seemed to be in a state of great astonishment.

"Waal, search me!" he ejaculated.

Lovell gave the Texan a hand up, helping him to his feet. Lick stood unsteadily on his "pins."

"Had enough?" smiled Lovell.

Arthur Edward was in quite a good humour now.

"Nope!" gasped Lick. "I—I guess I'm going on as long as I can stand. I'm sure not going to be whopped by a son of John Bull—not if this hyer critter knows it. Come on, you galoot!"

He staggered towards Jimmy Silver with his hands up. Jimmy stepped back.

"That's enough," he said. "You're not fit to go on, Lick."

"I guess I am."

"Better chuck it."

"I guess I'm going to wallop you some."

Lick came on breathlessly, and Jimmy Silver had to put his hands up. From that point he played with his adversary, tapping and rapping him here and there, while the Rookwooders and the cowpunchers looked on and grinned. Texas Lick went down again at last, and sat in the grass gasping for breath.

"That all right?" asked Jimmy, with a smile.

"Oh, gee-whiz!" groaned Texas Lick.

Skitter Dick picked him up and set him on his feet. He leaned against the corral fence, panting. Lovell helped Jimmy Silver on with his jacket. It was evident that the fight was over now, and equally evident that its result was a matter of great astonishment to Texas Lick.

For several minutes the Texan leaned on the corral fence, gasping. He detached himself from the fence at last, with a feeble grin on his damaged face.

"You're some fighting-man, young Silver," he said. "I never reckoned you had it in you. Put it there!"

He held out his hand to Jimmy.

"You're a sportsman," said Jimmy Silver, and he shook hands cheerfully enough with the bumptious youth from Texas, who certainly looked anything but bumptious now.

"You've done me," said Lick. "I guess I'll give you another trial when we get to Rookwood."

"When!" murmured Lovell.

"But I sure give you best now." Lick blinked round him dizzily. "I guess I want to bathe my face before the popper sees me. Oh, gee-whiz! I reckon I look some guy!"

"This way," said Jimmy.

And the heir of the ranch millionaire was led away to repair damages.

CHAPTER 33.

Bound for Home.

ALL Windy River turned out in great style to see the Rookwood juniors off the following week. Lincoln P. Lick and his hopeful son had departed after a couple of days' stay, and Jimmy Silver did not expect ever to see

either of them again. In fact, during the last few days at the ranch he forgot their existence, only reminded occasionally of it by a lump that Texas Lick's bony fist had left on his chin. The last days at the ranch were busy ones. The chums of Rookwood rode over all the old ground, said innumerable good-byes to all sorts of people, and felt all the time a queer mixture of regret and anticipation—regret at leaving the Canadian ranch, and the hearty, friendly outfit, and anticipation of seeing Rookwood School again and their old friends there.

When the last day came the four juniors mounted their horses to ride to Kicking Mule. Most of the baggage had already been sent on by the post-wagon. Hudson Smedley was to accompany them in their journey back across Eastern Canada. Now that the round-up was over the rancher was able to get away for a week. But as far as Coyote Creek, on the way to Kicking Mule, nearly the whole outfit rode.

Baldy, the cook, shook hands with Jimmy Silver—a rather greasy handshake, which Jimmy did not mind in the least—and Pete Peters gave him a grip that nearly doubled him up. Then the crowd of cowpunchers rode off with the departing guests. At Coyote Creek the numerous escort halted, and, amid the cracking of stock-whips and revolvers, and the shouting of farewells, Jimmy Silver & Co. and the rancher trotted on to Kicking Mule.

It was at Red Deer that the horses were left, and the travellers boarded the cars, which carried them down to Calgary.

In that city a halt was made for a couple of days. Hudson Smedley had business there, and Jimmy Silver & Co. were glad to roam round the Canadian city and see the sights.

Then they boarded the East-bound cars and the Canadian Pacific express roared away with them by Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

It was too late in the season for the St. Lawrence route home, and Hudson Smedley conducted his proteges to New York for the steamer. On the big liner the Canadian rancher bade them farewell, promising to look them up when he came "home" the following year.

Once more the Atlantic rolled under Jimmy Silver & Co., and their faces were set towards their native land.

"Not long before we're at Rookwood now," Arthur Edward Lovell remarked, as the chums walked on deck the second day out. "By the way, do you remember that that cheeky kid, Lick, told us he was coming to Rookwood? Like his cheek!"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Not likely!" he said. "We shall never have the pleasure—or otherwise—of seeing him again!"

"Great Scott!" yelled Raby suddenly. "Look!"

Walking the deck, only a dozen paces away, was a sturdy, bony youth with a sharp, bronzed face and keen eyes. Only the Stetson hat remained of the garb they had last seen Texas Lick wearing, but it was Texas Lick. The chums of Rookwood stared at him.

Lick came across to them, grinning.

"You 'uns hyer?" he said.

"And you?" said Jimmy Silver.

"Going hum to school?"

"We're going home to school," said Lovell. "And what the thump are you doing on a ship bound for England, Lick?"

"I'm going to school, too!"

"Not Rookwood?" yelled Newcome.

"Yep, little old Rookwood."

"Gammon!"

"I guess it's all fixed," said Texas Lick.

"The popper was set on it, and I reckoned I'd please him—all the more because you guys said I couldn't go if I liked."

"Is your father on board?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"The popper? Nope! I guess the popper is too busy to spare time for a voyage across the pond."

"And you're really going to Rookwood School?" asked Raby.

"Yep! I get a few days in London, and then you'll see me at your old show. Ha, ha, ha!"

Texas Lick walked away chuckling.

Lovell gave a grunt.

"So that wild and woolly hoodlum is going to be landed on us at Rookwood," he said. "Well, if he comes into the Fourth Form we'll jolly well teach him manners!"

"We will!" agreed his comrades.

And it remained to be seen how the Texan boy would fare in a strange world, amid people and customs wholly new to him.

JUNGLE THRILLS.

IT isn't the big-game hunter who collars all the excitement that's going in the world's most dangerous jungles; for sheer hair-raising thrills he has to take second place to the wild-animal photographer. For one thing, the cameraman, out after a really worth-while snap of some ferocious beast, has to get a good deal nearer his quarry than the hunter does before he can take his "shot," and if by some unlucky chance he happens to betray his presence to his wary "sitter" then his hopes of getting away with a whole skin, let alone his precious photograph, are very small.

Cornered by Elephants.

One famous explorer-photographer, Major Dugmore, who has stalked wild animals with his camera in almost every corner of the globe, stood motionless as a statue for age-long minutes with a suspicious "killer" of the jungle only a few yards away, and secured one of the most amazing close-ups ever taken. His hairbreadth escapes from death or injury read as thrillingly as any fiction; the full story of his stirring adventures would fill book after book.

Probably the most nerve-wracking of all this intrepid photographer's experiences happened while he was taking shots of a herd of wild elephants in Central Africa. He had been busy with his camera for half an hour before one of the females suddenly spotted him and gave the signal to the rest of the herd. Elephants aren't lacking in intelligence by any means, and slowly they began to close in on Major Dugmore in a steady, ominous march.

Yard by yard, in a silence that was uncanny, the giant brutes advanced, not a twig crackling under their feet. Cornered, with only a thousand to one chance of escape, the explorer was at his wits' end. Apart from a few trees and some scrubby bushes, the herd's grazing ground was absolutely bare. Climbing one of the trees was hopeless, for a full-grown tusker can uproot a tree in a twinkling; to start running would have meant a swift but ghastly death under one of those giant feet, and his rifle was no earthly use against so many foes.

A Step from Death.

There was just one faint hope, however, and on this the major staked everything. He knew that, although possessing a sense of smell that is keenness itself, elephants are nearsighted; and he managed to crawl under a bush without being observed. The herd came on, trunks waving in the air to catch his scent, until the female who had first given the alarm was standing right beside the bush that hid him.

Stretched out on the sun-baked, dusty ground, not daring to move a muscle, the explorer's life hung by the proverbial thread. Then the elephant took a step—backwards—and Major Dugmore breathed again. No camera-man was ever more glad to see the last of his sitters than the major after that ordeal.

It takes a man with a nerve like iron to remain still in the face of terrible danger, and it is this extraordinary ability that time and again has saved Major Dugmore's life.

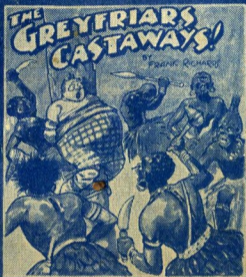
Baffling the Bear.

Once, when photographing big game in the Canadian Rockies, he stopped out of his tent to see a grizzly bear and her two cubs devouring the butter that had been hidden, with other supplies, in a frozen brook. Not dreaming of danger, he dashed towards the marauders, waving a pillow-case and yelling at the top of his voice, in the hope that that would drive them off.

It didn't. With a growl the grizzly rose to her hind legs and shuffled menacingly towards him, so swiftly that he had no chance to turn and run, and cutting off his retreat to the tent. The one thing the major could do was to stand still, and somehow, though his knees felt as if they had turned to water, he managed it. This puzzled the bear and brought her to a halt—wondering and uncertain. She didn't know what to make of an animal that neither attacked nor retreated. Finally, after a lot of very unladylike growling and snarling, she lumbered back to her cubs and butter. That finished, she broke open a tin of pears with her teeth, tipped her huge head back, and drank the juice. S.S.

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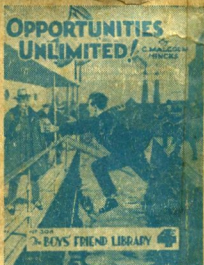


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