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by
OWEN CONQUEST



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by
OWEN CONQUEST

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CHAPTER I.

Just Like Lovell!

"SUREN Lovell!"
Pete Peters grinned.
"I guess you need him!" he admitted.

"Well, I want to see him, too," said Jimmy Silver, rather puzzled by the wide grin of the foreman of the Windy River Ranch. "We were going for a ride. Where is he?"

"I guess you won't see him any more," said Pete Peters, shaking his head.

And from two or three of the Windy River cowpunchers there came a loud chuckle.

"How's that?" asked Jimmy.

"He's riding Buster."

"Oh!"

"The billy hog!" said Baby. "Lovell

knows jolly well that he can't ride Buster, and he will do it."

"Do you mean that Buster's run away with him?" asked Norcross.

"The ranch foreman nodded, and chuckled. "I'm not as though he was sent for," he said. "I guess you won't see him any more!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the cowpunchers.

Jimmy Silver did not laugh, however. Arthur Edward Lovell believed that he could ride Buster, because Jimmy Silver could ride Buster—which was not logical, but just like Lovell. Lovell was a good rider on a safe mount, but Buster was far from safe. The Windy River outfit evidently regarded the matter as a joke, but Jimmy remembered that Lovell had had a fall from Buster already, and he was worried.

"Which way did he go?" he asked.

Pete Peters waved a large hand southward.

"I guess Butler was going to Red Deer," he said. "He might go on to Calgary. (Yes-uh!) He might go right on to the States, for all young Lovell will have to say about it. Lovell was sittin' on him when he started. I darn say he's hanging on by his tail, by this time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better go after him," said Raby.

"Oh, you'll never catch Buster, with the start he's got," said Pete Peters. "Let him rip! He may stop at Grimes' ranch—that's a good ten miles. He'll pass it, anyhow, and one of the punchers may rope him in. Very likely he won't break his silly neck this time."

"Very likely!" In such a case was not good enough for Jimmy Silver. He hurried away to the corral for his horse.

In a very few minutes the three Rockwood chums were mounted and riding away on the southern trail.

Jimmy Silver and his chums, Lovell, Raby and Newcome, were the guests of Jimmy's cousin Hudson Smedley on the Windy River Ranch in Alberta, Canada.

The four Rockwoods were having a glorious time; the only drawback, as Newcome humorously pointed out, being that Lovell was still Lovell, even in Alberta!

Jimmy Silver, and Blazer, quickly drew ahead of Raby and Newcome, and soon left them far behind.

He was anxious about Lovell. It was no use arguing with Arthur Edward, who was generally confirmed in his opinion by opposition. It was just like Lovell to ride Buster to show that he could, when in actual fact he couldn't. And Jimmy would not have been surprised, at any moment, to come upon his chum stretched on the prairie, possibly with a damaged limb.

Blazer was the fastest horse at Windy River, and Jimmy Silver got his best speed out of him. There was no sign of Lovell to be seen ahead, and the trail was not plain enough for Jimmy to follow riding; so he headed straight for Grimes' ranch, as Pete Peters had declared that Buster would pass there.

Only on his chum's account, however, would Jimmy have ridden to the Grimes' ranch. He had heard a good deal of talk at Windy River about Grimes, who was

known locally as Grudger Grimes, and said to be a miser. There was something like a feud between the Grimes' outfit and the men of Windy River, and when they met in the township of Mosquito, it was not infrequently that trouble resulted. Mr. Hudson Smedley had counselled his guests to keep clear of the Grimes' Ranch, and his counsel had been followed—but if Lovell was being borne thicker on a runaway horse, there was no choice about the matter for Jimmy Silver.

He rode Blazer hard, and was soon out of sight of Raby and Newcome, who galloped on far behind him.

Jimmy Silver swept the prairie ahead of him with anxious eyes. The wide green grasslands shimmered in the summer sun of Alberta. A wire fence ahead of him, at last, marked the boundary between Windy River and Grudger Grimes' land. Beyond the fence lay Coyote Creek Ranch.

Jimmy did not pause there.

If Buster had gone that way, Buster would not have stopped at the wire fence, and Jimmy did not stop. He put Blazer to the leap, and cleared the fence, and rode on.

On the further side of the fence, he noted a Stetson hat lying in the grass. He had no doubt that it belonged to Lovell, and had dropped there from his head after Buster had jumped. Jimmy was relieved that Lovell himself was not lying there.

He bent down in the saddle as he passed the hat, and picked it up without stopping—a feat he had learned from the cow-punchers of Windy River. He hooked it on to his saddle, and galloped on, looking out for Lovell.

Ahead of him now the Grimes' ranch-house and buildings were in view.

They had a very different aspect from that of Mr. Hudson Smedley's ranch at Windy River.

Bunkhouse and cookhouse, barns and sheds and fences, had a worn and broken look, as if badly in need of repair. There seemed to have been no new paint about the place for years. Grudger Grimes was, apparently, worthy of his local nickname.

The whole place looked poor and stinted and dilapidated.

A group of men stood by the bunkhouse, talking and laughing, and they turned to look at Jimmy Silver as he rode up.

They were a rough-looking crowd, with one exception—a rather tall, lithe, dark-skinned fellow, who was dressed with almost dandified care and neatness, and wore gold earrings in his swarthy ears. He was obviously not a Canadian, and Jimmy guessed that he was a Mexican—Spanish Kit, the foreman, of whom he had heard the Windy River men speak.

"Here is another!" said the Mexican, as Jimmy pulled in Blazer, and there was a laugh.

The foreman stepped towards Jimmy.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Looking for my friend, who came this way," said Jimmy. "His horse ran away with him, I think."

"You must have jumped the wire fence, the way you came."

"Yes."

"We do not want visitors from Windy River here, Senorita."

"Sorry," said Jimmy. "I'm not exactly a visitor—I'm looking for Lovell. Where is he?"

"How should I know?"

"He is here, isn't he?" exclaimed Jimmy.

"If he is here, you can see him, I suppose."

"Do you mean to say he's gone on?" exclaimed Jimmy. "You might have roped in the horse, when you could see that it was running away with him."

"It is not our business to look after tenderfoot," said Spanish Kit, with a grin. "How do you know he came this way at all?"

"I picked up his hat on this side of the wire fence."

"Then you had better ride on and look for him!"

Jimmy Silver glanced round the grinning group. He was puzzled and irritated; but it was no use to bandy words with the Grimes' outfit. He rode on, looking round for Lovell.

What?

Jimmy Silver knew that what. And he knew that, as his back was turned, one of the cowboys had thrown a lasso. But the knowledge came too late. Before he could make an effort to escape the rope, the loop settled over his shoulders, and there was a jerk—and Jimmy Silver was plucked from the saddle, coming to the ground with a crash.

CHAPTER 2.

In Rough Hands!

"O Hi!"

Jimmy Silver gave a yell as he landed.

He was hurt, and all the breath was knocked out of his body by the concussion.

There was a roar of laughter from the Grimes' outfit.

One of the cowboys ran forward to catch Blazer by the rein, and the horse was secured. The rest gathered round Jimmy Silver as he lay sprawling and dazed on the ground.

"You rotted!" gasped Jimmy.

Spanish Kit grinned down at him.

"I told you we did not want visitors from Windy River," he said. "You asked for it."

Jimmy struggled to his feet and attempted to throw off the gripping mass of the lasso. The rope was jerked roughly, and he went spinning to the ground again.

"Put him in the barn," said Spanish Kit.

Two or three pairs of hands grasped Jimmy Silver, and he was hustled away. The lasso was taken off him, and he was pitched headlong into a barn.

The door was closed on him, and he heard a bar rattle into place.

He stumbled among straw, and fell, dazed by the sudden change from the bright sunshine without to the semi-darkness of the interior of the barn.

"Jimmy!"

"You here, Lovell!"

Jimmy Silver picked himself up. He was feeling very bruised and shaken. In the dimness he made out Arthur Edward Lovell. The only light in the barn came from a little dirty window high up in the wall, festooned by cobwebs.

Jimmy gasped for breath.

"So they shared you in here!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. How did you come here?"

"I came after you," said Jimmy. "Buster ran away with you I suppose!"

"Not exactly," said Lovell. "I—I gave him his head—you know. I believe in giving a horse his head when he's a bit fresh."

Jimmy Silver granted.

"Well, he brought you here, anyhow," he said. "If it wasn't running away you might have stopped at the fence. There's always

trouble if a Windy River man gets on to Grimes' land."

"Well, I thought of stopping at the fence," said Lovell cautiously, "but—hat Buster seemed keen on the jump."

"Fathood!"

"Look here, Jimmy, if you think I can't ride Buster—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Jimmy gruffly. In present circumstances Jimmy was a little led-up with the subject of his chum's horsemanship. "You've lauded us both in a precious row, anyhow. I suppose one of those rollers roped in your horse."

"Yes. I nearly ran into an old Johnny—I suppose it was Mr. Grimes," said Lovell. "A skinny old beggar with a face like a knife. He raved at me like a Hun."

"No wonder, if you biffed into him on a runaway horse."

"The horse wasn't exactly running away—"

"And! What have those brutes shoved us in here for!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver savagely. "I suppose this is their idea of a joke on tenderfoot. They don't look any too good to steal our horses, but I suppose they won't do that."

"They're a rough crowd, and no mistake," said Lovell. "That Spanish-looking chap is a regular brute. That's the man who was in trouble for using a knife in a row at Mosquito once, I've heard. The whole crew are a lot of rotters who'd never get a job on any other ranch in Canada, I've heard Peters say. I punched one of them when I was clucked in here."

Jimmy turned to the door.

He thumped on it and shouted, but there came no reply from outside. Once he heard a laugh from a passing man, but that was all.

"Let us out of this, you rotters!" howled Jimmy Silver.

But it was in vain, and he desisted at last.

"Well, this is a go!" remarked Lovell. "I wonder how long they mean to keep us here?"

"Goodness knows."

The juniors could only conclude that they were the victims of a rough joke on the part of the Grimes' outfit, but Jimmy Silver could not help feeling uneasy about the horses. Both Blazer and Buster were valuable animals, and the Grimes' outfit looked

more like a gang of horse-thieves than anything else. Still, he reflected that it was scarcely possible that even that rough crew would venture upon so open a theft, even if they were tempted.

"Where's Baby and Newcome?" asked Lovell at last.

"They were following me," said Jimmy. "I fancy they'd stop at the fence, though."

"All the better for them; those brutes would rope them in and pitch them in here along with us."

"I suppose so."

Jimmy Silver moved restlessly about the barn, looking for a way of escape, but there was no way. The minutes passed on leaden wings, and lengthened into hours.

The dim, cobwebby windows grew dimmer as the sun sank lower and lower in the west.

"What the thump can be their game?" exclaimed Jimmy angrily, at last. "They can't mean to keep us shut up here all night, I suppose?"

"Mr. Smedley would send to look for us," said Lovell.

"I suppose so. Thank goodness the other chaps kept clear of this!" said Jimmy.

It was clear by that time that Baby and Newcome had not jumped the Grimes' fence and followed on. That was a consolation, but it did not help the prisoners of the barn.

There was a sound of footsteps outside at last, and of fumbling with the bar at the door. Lovell jumped up from the straw.

"They're coming at last! Thank goodness!"

"We'll make them sit up for this somehow, later on!" growled Jimmy Silver.

"Yes, rather!"

The door was thrown open, and the red sunset glimmered into the dusky barn. It was not Spanish Kit or one of the cow-punchers who appeared in the doorway, however.

"It's the old fellow I nearly knocked over," whispered Lovell.

Evidently it was Grudger Grimes.

He was not a pleasant man to look at. His age was probably sixty, but he looked older. His face was thin and hard and leathery, and his little sharp eyes looked like a rat's. He was dressed in old shabby clothes, with a rag of a hat. He blinked at the two juniors.

"You can come out of that," he said, in a high-pitched, cracked voice. "You young rascals, come out of it!"

The two juniors emerged from the barn. At a short distance, two or three men were standing, and they looked towards the schoolboys and laughed.

Grudger Grimes raised a skinny hand. "Get out of it!" he said. "The boys told me they'd shut you up here as a warning to keep off my land. Quite right, too! If you come this way again, you'll get a trail-rope round your hides. Now get!"

"Is that your brand of hospitality?" asked Lovell, with sarcasm.

The miser blinked at him. "Get out!" he repeated. "Get off my land!"

"We'll go fast enough when we've got our horses!" said Jimmy Silver tartly. "Where are they?"

"I don't know! Get out!" "We're not going without our horses!" bawled Lovell.

The old man looked round towards the grinning cowpunchers.

"Where are their horses, boys?" "I guess they ran away down the trail, boys," answered one of the cowboys. "Half-way to Red Deer by this time, I guess."

"You've let our horses run away!" shouted Lovell.

"Tain't our business to look after Windy River horses, I guess."

"Quite right, Texas—it ain't!" said Grudger Grimes. "You kids can go and look for your horses, only get off my land, and be sry about it."

Jimmy Silver slurred hard. "Better get!" he said. "Come on, Lovell!"

The two juniors tramped away. A mocking laugh followed them from the Grimes' outfit.

CHAPTER 3.

Saddle-up!

THE sun was setting, and there were ten miles of rough prairie-land between the juniors and the Windy River Ranch. But there was no help for it; and Jimmy Silver and Lovell tramped away together, with the mocking laugh of the Grimes' outfit ringing in their

ears. Jimmy's face was set and savage. So far, although he had heard a good deal of the trouble between Windy River and Grimes', he had seen nothing of the latter crowd till to-day.

His first encounter with them had not been an agreeable one. He remembered talk at Windy River of missing horses and steers, which the cowpunchers suspected, at least, could have been accounted for by Grudger Grimes' rowdy crew. And Jimmy did not believe in the least that the juniors' horses had been allowed to run free, and were lost on the prairie. He was quite assured, in his own mind, that they were inside the corral at Coyote Creek.

"What a pal!" mumbled Lovell, after the first mile. "We shall be out all day to-morrow, looking for those gee-goes, Jimmy. They may have wandered as far as the foothills."

"We shan't have to look any farther than Grimes' ranch, I think," grunted Jimmy Silver.

"You don't think they've lagged them?" "Yes."

Lovell whistled. "It's too thick, Jimmy. Old Grimes is a miser and a beast, but he's a rancher, at least; not a thief, anyhow."

"Not old Grimes," asserted Jimmy. "But Coyote Creek is run by that Mexican foreman and his gang, and they're not too good to hold a man up on the trail and go through his pockets. I've heard Pete Peters say that Grimes' ranch is a sort of plague-spot. They've stolen our horses right enough."

"And we're going to leave them there?" ejaculated Lovell.

"What can we do, fathead?"

"Nothing, I suppose," admitted Lovell. "But it's pretty rotten. If they've really got the gees, I don't see how they're to be got back—they can keep them out of sight. Mr. Stedley couldn't have their corral searched without a sheriff's order, or something."

"I suppose not."

"Looks like good-bye to Blazer and Buster, then," said Lovell dismally. "They'll run them far enough away before a sheriff's order can be got, if they're really sticking to them."

Jimmy Silver tramped on in silence. He was deeply worried about Blazer, his own

linen—the was food of Blazer. But there was no help for it, and the juniors tramped on in the gathering dusk with their backs to Coyote Creek.

Darkness fell when they were still miles from Windy River. It was fortunate that Jimmy Silver had cultivated the habit of taking note of his surroundings. Otherwise the two chums certainly would have been lost on the dusky plains that night.

"Dear to the right here, I think," said Lovell, as they came on a clump of trees about three miles from Windy River.

"Left!" Jimmy said laconically.

"Now look here, Jimmy—"

"Pathed!"

Arthur Edward Lovell, as usual, was quite certain that he was right. He reluctantly yielded the point, and every few minutes pointed out to Jimmy that they must be getting farther and farther away from Windy River—till the lights of the ranch-house came in sight, and then Lovell suddenly dropped the subject.

Thoroughly tired, the two juniors tramped up to the ranch-house. They found Ruby and Newcomers in the porch.

"Thank goodness you're back!" said Ruby. "We were getting jolly anxious, Jimmy."

"Where are the horses?" asked Newcomer.

"Stolen, I think."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Let's get in to supper," said Lovell.

"I'm simply famished!"

And they tramped in.

Supper was over at the ranch, but Woo Sing, the chore-boy, brought in fresh supplies. Jimmy Silver and Lovell did them more than justice. Mr. Hudson Smedley was absent, at the Sunset Ranch across the river; but he came in by the time the juniors had finished their late supper.

The big Canadian rancher eyed the two juniors curiously as he came in.

"I hear from Skitter Dick that you came back without your horses," he said. "Anything happened?"

"Lots," said Jimmy.

And he proceeded to relate the afternoon's happenings, Lovell interrupting him once or twice to explain that Buster hadn't exactly run away, but had only been judiciously given his head. Mr. Smedley did not heed Lovell's interruptions, however. He listened very keenly to Jimmy's

story, his sunken face growing grim and stern.

"Let's have this clear," he said at length. "I don't want trouble with neighbours, if it can be helped—though Coyote Creek is a pecky bad neighbour. You think the horses are still there, Jimmy?"

"I'm almost certain of it," said Jimmy Silver. "They shut us up in the barn all the afternoon, and spun us a yarn of the horses wandering away. I'm sure it was all bunkum. They look like a crowd of thieves."

"Some of them are, that's certain," said Mr. Smedley. "There are stories going about of the half-breed dealers getting horses and cattle from Coyote Creek that never were bred there. It's not Mr. Grimes' fault; that Mexican galoot runs the whole show. There are men there who have been fired from other ranches for stealing—I know that; rowdy galoots from over the border. I guess there isn't one Canadian in the whole bunch—Mexicans and bad men from Montana, mostly. But I reckon we're not going to lose two good horses so easily as all that."

"I—I was thinking—" said Jimmy.

"Well?"

"Blazer's trail ought to tell us something. You've got men here who can pick up trails like the Reddies. If we get over them, we could figure it out whether Blazer left or not, perhaps."

"I guess it's possible."

Hudson Smedley walked to the window and looked out. The summer night was clear and fine; a crescent of moon showed over the prairie. For some minutes the rancher was deep in thought.

The juniors watched him silently.

They were keen to make an attempt to get back the horses, or, at least, to make sure whether they were still at Coyote Creek. But it was for the rancher to decide.

"There'll be bright moonlight to-night," said Mr. Smedley at last. "I reckon a ride under the moon won't hurt the boys. You kids had better go off to bed."

The rancher strode out, and a minute or two later was in talk with Pete Peters at the door of the foreman's cabin. Jimmy Silver & Co. watched them from the window, not taking the hint to get off to bed. Peters went towards the bunkhouse, where

most of the Windy River outfit were preparing to turn in for the night.

There was a buzz of voices at the bunk-house, and some shouting. What Pete Peters had said to the "boys" seemed to have aroused enthusiasm. The whole outfit came crowding out, in a state of considerable excitement. Mr. Smedley came back into the ranch, and, without noticing the juniors, unlocked a drawer, took out a revolver, and secured it in a holster to his belt. The sight of it gave the Rookwood chums a thrill. Evidently there was going to be serious business that night under the moon.

"Cousin Smedley—" began Jimmy Silver.

"You not in bed yet?"

"You're going over to Coyote Creek?"

"Sure!"

"Let us come!"

"You're better out of it," said the rancher. "It's quite on the cards that there may be more scuffling. There's a lot of feeling between this outfit and Grimes'."

"Do you think we can't scrap?" demanded Lovell indignantly.

Mr. Smedley laughed.

"The more the merrier, anyhow!" urged Jimmy Silver. "Besides, Blazer knows my voice. If they've got him there, he'll make himself heard if I call to him."

"Something in that," said Mr. Smedley. "I don't want to keep you kids in a hand-lax, I guess. You can get out your horses."

"Oh, good!"

The juniors rushed out of the ranch-house. They were only too glad to be included in the party for Coyote Creek, and the prospect of a possible "scrap" with Spanish Kit's gang did not worry them.

Outside the ranch the Windy River outfit were gathering, evidently in a joyous mood. So far from objecting to trouble with Coyote Creek, the Windy River crowd welcomed it joyously. A dozen cowpunchers were saddling up, and the juniors joined them with their horses.

"You 'uns coming along?" grinned Skitter Dick.

"You bet!" said Lovell.

"I guess Coyote Creek won't have a look in this trip!" remarked Spike Thompson. And there was a laugh.

"Mind that boss don't run away with you, young Lovell!" called out Red Alf.

Lovell grinned, but he made no rejoinder. He was mounted now upon a quiet steed, much more amenable to reason than the festive Buster.

Mr. Hudson Smedley came out of the ranch-house and mounted. Over the ranch the moon sailed in a velvety sky.

"Ready, boss!" called out Pete Peters.

"Ready to wipe Coyote Creek off'n the face of the earth, boss!" chimed in Slim Johnson.

"Hold on!" said Hudson Smedley.

"We're not going over to Coyote looking for trouble, boys!"

"Oh, ain't we?" murmured Spike.

"I guess it's not sure that the bosses are there! But we want to know!"

"Missing bosses have been found at Coyote before now, boss," remarked Red Alf.

"I know. That's why we're going. But Mr. Grimes is a neighbour, and we want to be civil. Bear that in mind, boys!"

"It's your say-so, boss!" said Pete Peters.

And the cavalcade started.

With a jingle of bridle and stirrup, the bunch of horsemen dashed away across the prairie in the moonlight. It was an exciting ride for the Rookwood juniors. Jimmy Silver and Lovell were tired after their long tramp, but in the saddle they forgot fatigue.

Thud, thud, thud, thud! Jingle, jingle! Under the moon, the Windy River outfit rode at full gallop, and mile after mile fled under the galloping hoofs.

CHAPTER 4.

The Horse-Thieves!

"HALT!"

Grimes' ranch lay before the riders in the moonlight. They had reached Coyote Creek by way of the Mosquito trail, and before them was the big timber gate, set in heavy posts between the lines of wire. The outfit would have jumped their horses over the gate, but Hudson Smedley gave the word to halt.

The cowpunchers clattered to a standstill.

"You can open the gate, Jimmy."

"Right-ho!"

Jimmy Silver dismounted, and went to the gate. Beyond it he could see the ranch-house—a black mass in the moonlight—and the ranch buildings. From the bunkhouse came a gleam of light. Spanish Kit's crowd were not gone to bed, evidently.

The bunkhouse door was thrown open, and a stream of ruddy light came out from it.

The lithe figure of the Mexican foreman showed in the doorway. He had a cigarette in his mouth and a "deck" of cards in his hand. The tramping hoofs at the gate had interrupted a poker game.

Spanish Kit came striding down to the gate.

"What's this game?" he called out.

"Windy River, by gosh!" came a rough voice, as the crowd followed the Mexican out of the bunkhouse.

"Is that Hudson Smedley?" asked the Mexican, staring over the timber gate.

"Yes. I want to see Mr. Grimes."

Spanish Kit laughed.

"I guess you'd better come around tomorrow, then!" he answered. "The boss has gone to bed long ago."

"My business won't wait," said Hudson Smedley coolly.

"I guess it will have to! Let that gate alone, kid!" snapped the Mexican.

"It's fastened, Mr. Smedley," said Jimmy.

"I guess it's staying fastened, too!" grinned Spanish Kit. "You 'uns are not wanted here!"

Hudson Smedley rode up close to the gate.

"Hand out the two horses belonging to these boys, and we'll get!" he said.

"No horses of yours here."

"That won't do!"

"I guess it will have to do!" said Spanish Kit. "No Windy River galoot is coming in here."

"Will you open the gate?"

"No."

"Jump it, boys!"

"You bet, boss!"

The Windy River outfit backed away for distance, and then rode at the gate at a gallop. The Mexican snarled savagely as the horsemen came leaping over, one after another.

Hudson Smedley rode direct to the door of the ranch-house, taking no further heed of the Mexican. The Coyote Creek crowd

gathered round their leader, eyeing the invaders savagely.

Spanish Kit was evidently at a loss. The invaders meant business, and were only to be stopped by force. Hot numbers were spun, and Windy River were a dangerous crowd to tackle. The Coyote Creek gang were a desperate set, but they hesitated.

Bang, bang!

The butt of Mr. Smedley's riding-whip crashed on the ranch-house door.

A light gleamed from a window above in a few minutes.

Bang, bang!

The window was thrown open, and the head of Mr. Grimes, surmounted by a swollen nightcap, was thrust out.

"What's this row?" he yelled in his high, cracked voice. "Can't you let your boss get a wink of sleep, you sneaky cow-punchers?"

"Tain't us, boss," called out Spanish Kit. "It's the Windy River crowd."

Mr. Grimes snorted.

"What do you want here, Hudson Smedley?"

"Only a word or two with you, Mr. Grimes," said the rancher politely.

"Won't you come down?"

"No, I won't!"

"I guess——"

"Are you taking up ranch-rustling at night, Hudson Smedley?" yelled the man from the window.

"I guess I can talk to you from here," said Hudson Smedley, without answering that question. "Two of my boys rode over here to-day, and were shut up in a barn——"

"Serve them right! I'll order my men to give them a dose of the quirt if they trespass on my land again!"

"That isn't the question, Mr. Grimes. Their horses were taken away from them. We want those horses!"

"The horses ran off. Didn't you tell me the horses ran off, Cactus?" yelled Mr. Grimes.

"They did, boss," answered the man.

"You hear that, Hudson Smedley?"

"I hear it, but I don't take any stock in it, Mr. Grimes. Your outfit are a bit too well known. Have we your permission to look round the corral?"

"You can look round the corral all night if you like, and be jiggered to you!"

yelled back Grudger Grimes, and he slammed the window shut.

"That's good enough!" said Hudson Smedley, and he wheeled his horse round.

Between the Windy River riders and the corral, however, the Grimes' outfit had gathered. They stood in a crowd, with heavy quirts in their hands and savage and defiant looks.

"You heard what your boss said, Spanish Kit?" said Hudson Smedley quietly.

The Mexican shrugged his slim shoulders. "Largely I run this show for Mr. Grimes," he answered, "and your crowd aren't butting into our corral."

"Run them off'n the ranch, boys!" shouted Cactus.

Hudson Smedley ran his eyes over the crowd.

"We're going through these corral," he said. "If your galoots try to stop us, Spanish Kit, there'll be trouble."

"I guess we'll give you all the trouble you want," answered the Coyote Creek foreman insolently.

"Are you standing out of the way?"

"No."

"Then we shall ride you down!"

"Wade in, boys!" yelled Skitter Dick.

The Windy River horsemen spurred on their horses, brandishing their quirts. Spanish Kit and his men broke under the rush, leaping and scrambling aside.

The Mexican, with a fierce blaze in his eyes, whipped out a revolver. The moonlight gleamed on the barrel as it came up to a level.

"Back!" he shouted. "Or— Oh!"

A whip-lash curled round the revolver, and jerked it from his hand. Skitter Dick caught it deftly, and grinned at the Mexican.

"Not this trip," he chuckled.

Hudson Smedley, with a grim look, jerked his revolver from the holster at his belt.

"I guess I'm going to drop the next man that shows a weapon!" he said.

"Boys, go through the corral!"

The Windy River outfit dismounted. The Rockwood juniors held the horses, while the cowpunchers unbarred the corral gate. In the bright moonlight, the interior of the corral was almost as light as by day.

There were not more than twenty horses to be seen, and Pete Peters soon "rounded"

them out, and they were scanned in the moonlight. There was none that looked like either Blazer or Buster.

From a short distance the Coyote Creek crowd looked on with surly, savage faces. But it was clear that they did not care to enter upon a determined conflict with the Windy River outfit.

"Not there, boss!" said Skitter Dick. "I guess they may be shot up in a harn, though."

"You can search the outbuildings if you like, while you're so busy," called out Spanish Kit scoffingly.

Jimmy Silver looked at the Mexican.

The Coyote Creek foreman seemed to have decided that there was nothing to be done, and to have made up his mind to let the Windy River outfit have their way. But it struck Jimmy that he had been keen to prevent a search of the horse-corral, and that it was only after the search of the corral had failed to discover the stolen horses that he decided to take things philosophically.

Jimmy wondered whether, after all, Blazer and Buster were hidden in the corral somewhere. It did not seem possible—every corner of the space enclosed by the corral fence was open to inspection in the bright moonlight—every horse that was there could be seen by the cowpunchers. But Jimmy preferred to trust his own eyes, and he stepped into the corral to look for himself.

"Not there, kid," said Skitter Dick. "I guess I've looked at every horse there."

"No harm in looking," said Jimmy, and he went in.

"The tenderfoot's goin' to rust 'em out!" grinned Spike Thompson. "Look in the rabbit holes, Jimmy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver did not heed. He scanned the horses, which were moving about in the corral, startled by the disturbance of their slumber. Then he gave the whistle with which he was accustomed to call Blazer. Blazer had learned to answer his master's whistle, and Jimmy was sure that if he was within hearing he would come. The whistle rang out shrill in the corral.

A grey horse, with black fetlocks—utterly unlike Blazer to look at—lifted his head with a whinny, and came trotting towards Jimmy Silver.

For the moment Jimmy did not under-

stared, till he felt Blazer's muzzle snuggling under his arm.

"Blazer!" he exclaimed.

"That ain't Blazer!" grinned Skitter Dick. "Gee-whir! Don't you know your own boss by sight, Jimmy?"

"It's Blazer—painted!" shouted Jimmy.

"Great Scott!"

Jimmy led the horse from the corral.

CHAPTER 1.

Fired!

THERE were loud exclamations as the Windy River cowpunchers gathered round the disguised Blazer. It was Blazer, though, even at a foot's distance, it was hard to recognize him. He had been through the hands of a skilled horse-thief, and was disguised from nose to tail. But it was Blazer.

Hudson Smedley knitted his brows as he looked at the animal. He had expected that there were horse-thieves at Coyote Creek; but he had never looked for this. It is an old trick with the horse-thief of the prairie, to disguise a stolen horse, in order to get it away in safety; and Blazer had been through the process. But for Jimmy's whistle the horse would have remained in the corral under the eyes of the Windy River cowboys.

"I guess they're some crowd hyer, boss," said Pete Peters. "I reckoned there was horse-thieves on this hyer ranch, but this looks like a regular business. This is the way Old Man Grimes makes his money, I calculate!"

Hudson Smedley shook his head.

"Old Man Grimes has nothing to do with it," he said. "It's the foreman and his men—they're running this game under their boss's nose. Old Man Grimes never knew the horses were here."

"I reckon he'll have to answer for what his men do on his ranch!"

"That's w!"

The Coyote Creek crowd were exchanging looks. Spanish Kit lighted a fresh cigarette, with a look of indifference.

Hudson Smedley turned to the Mexican foreman,

"That's one of the horses," he said.

"He's been got up—by some old hand at the game!"

"I guess I've never seen that boss before," said Spanish Kit.

"You can spin that yarn to the sheriff. Boys, go through the corral again, and look for Buster—you'll find him disguised."

"I guess so!" said Skitter Dick.

Half a dozen of the cowpunchers went into the corral, examining each of the horses very closely. There was a shout when Buster was discovered. He had been a brown horse when Lovell had ridden him away from Windy River. He was a black horse now, with a white nose and fetlocks.

"Hyer's Buster!" grinned Skitter Dick, leading him out. "Gosh, boss, I wonder how many more stolen critters there are in Old Man Grimes' corrals!"

"That's for the sheriff to look into," said Hudson Smedley grimly. "I guess there's a good deal here for the sheriff to look in; now, bring them along to the house."

The two stolen horses were led away to the ranch-house, and the butt of Hudson Smedley's riding-whip crashed on the door again. Spanish Kit and his comrades looked on with lowering faces. Horse-stealing had been brought home to them beyond a doubt; and horse-stealing was a serious offence on the Western prairies.

Bang, bang, bang!

The window opened at last.

"Can't you let a man rest?" roared Old Man Grimes, from above.

"We've found the horses here, Mr. Grimes!"

"Waal, take 'em and go."

"They're got up with horse-thieves tricks," said Hudson Smedley. "I want you to come down and look at them!"

For a full five minutes Old Man Grimes stood at the window and blew off steam in picturesque language. Then he came down, and the big door was unboltsed, and the miser, in nightcap and an old overcoat, appeared in the doorway.

Hudson Smedley's cool, clear voice interrupted his angry objurgations, and Mr. Grimes was forced to listen. When he realized the state of affairs, his wrath turned from the Windy River outfit to his own men.

"You, Spanish Kit!" he yelled. "You, Kit Pelayo, you skunk, come here!"

The handsome, swarthy foreman swaggered up. He was quite cool. Old Man Grimes pointed a skinny, trembling forefinger at him.

"What you got to say about this?" he yelled. "Horse-stealing on my ranch! What you got to say?"

"I guess I don't know anything about it, boss," said Spanish Kit coolly. "One of the boys—"

"Who's foreman here?" howled the miser. "Haven't I left it all in your hands? Now I shall have the sheriff down on me. Horse-stealing on my ranch! You're sacked!"

"I guess—" "Sacked!" yelled the miser, his skinny forefinger trembling with rage, as it was pointed at the Mexican. "Sacked! Fired! Do you hear?"

"I reckon I ain't deaf, boss," answered Spanish Kit coolly. "But I guess it's a bad day's work for you when you fire me!"

"You're fired!" roared the old man. "I'll get a new outfit! I'll fire the whole crowd of you!"

Slam! The door closed.

"I reckon Old Man Grimes is mad, sure!" chuckled Skitter Dick. "He will have a hard time explaining to the sheriff."

"We're finished here," said Hudson Smedley. "Mount!"

Jimmy Silver mounted Blazer, glad to be on his own horse again. Lovell would have mounted Buster, but was gently but firmly restrained by Pete Peters.

"I guess we've had enough trouble with you riding Buster, young 'un," said the Windy River foreman, with a grin.

"Look here," began Lovell wrathfully, "if you think I can't ride Buster—"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"I'll jolly well—"

"There's your horse," said Pete Peters, and he led Buster away, thus ending the argument.

A sullen crowd watched the Windy River outfit as they rode down to the gate. The gate was opened, and the horsemen poured out, with two led horses.

Spanish Kit and his followers were muttering together. They had no doubt that Old Man Grimes meant every word that he had said; the whole outfit was to be "fired." The game the gang had played for a long time of stealing horses and

castle and using Old Man Grimes' ranch as their headquarters was finished for good. Black and lowering were the looks they cast after the Windy River riders.

heedless of their black looks, Hudson Smedley rode away with his men in the moonlight.

From the direction of the ranch buildings there came a sudden report that rang and echoed over the prairie. Hudson Smedley gave a start as his Stetson hat spun from his head.

"Gee-whiz!" ejaculated Skitter Dick.

The rancher caught his hat, and coolly replaced it on his head.

"That's one more item for Kit Pelago to answer for when the time comes!" he said. "Ride on."

"Ain't we going back to wipe 'em out?" demanded Skitter Dick hotly.

"Ride on."

And the Windy River outfit rode on in the moonlight, home to the ranch.

CHAPTER 6.

The Rancher.

JIMMY SILVER & CO. slept soundly during the remainder of that eventful night. They were late down in the morning, and the smiling Woo Sing brought them a late breakfast. After breakfast, Jimmy went out to look at Blazer. The horse was looking his old self again now. Arthur Edward Lovell followed his chum to the corral.

"I'm going to take Buster out," he remarked.

"You silly ass!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"If you think I can't ride Buster, Jimmy—"

"Ass!"

"Looking for Buster?" asked Pete Peters, with a grin, as Lovell came up to the corral. "He's been sent away to Moquito this morning."

"Sent away!" exclaimed Lovell.

"Just that!" grinned the foreman. "The boss has selected a nice, quiet horse for you, if you want to ride."

"I don't want a quiet horse!" growled Lovell. "I say, Jimmy, would you like to let me have Blazer?"

"Are you insured?" asked Jimmy.

"Insured? No."

"Then I can't let you have Blazer."

"You silly clump!" roared Lovell.

Lovell had to be satisfied with the quiet horse for his morning's ride. As a matter of fact, he found his new mount much more comfortable than the old; Buster had been a tough handful for Arthur Edward, though he declined to acknowledge the fact.

The juniors trotted away from the ranch for a ride over the prairie. Jimmy Silver was thinking of Coyote Creek and of Old Man Grimes. He had no doubt that Mr. Grimes meant every word he said when he had "fired" Spanish Kit and the whole outfit.

The horse-thieves had probably involved him in legal troubles, though Jimmy believed that Mr. Grimes had been quite in ignorance of the rascally game that had been played under his nose on his ranch.

But Spanish Kit and his friends were a rough crowd to "fire," and if they chose to cut up rusty, Old Man Grimes was quite at their mercy. Jimmy was thinking of that when a rider came in sight on the prairie.

"Grimes, by Jove!" exclaimed Lovell.

It was Grudger Grimes. He was mounted upon a skinny, bony old horse, that was proceeding at an easy walk, apparently undirected by the rider. Something strange in Mr. Grimes' aspect caused the juniors to ride towards him, and they soon discerned what the matter was. Old Man Grimes was sitting in a saddle in which he was tied, and his feet were tied by a cord under the old horse.

He shouted to the juniors as they came riding up:

"Here! This way! Help!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Baby.

The juniors dashed up, and drew in their horses round the old miser of Coyote Creek.

"Here on earth did you get into this fix, Mr. Grimes?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

"Let me loose!"

"Oh, certainly!"

Jimmy Silver opened his knife, and cut through the cord that bound Mr. Grimes to his horse. The old man was shaking with rage.

"They fixed me up like this," he gasped. "Spanish Kit and Cactus and the rest! Thunder! I've been on this horse since dawn. Oh, thunder!"

The juniors tried not to smile.

"What is it—a joke?" asked Newcome.

Old Man Grimes clenched his hands.

"They rouled me out at dawn," he gasped. "I told 'em the whole crowd was fired! They turned on me! Fixed me up like this and set me going on the pesky prairie—me, their boss!"

"Great pip!"

"And they're off!" howled Grudger Grimes. "Off to the foothills, the whole gang of them. Horse-thieves, the lot of them! I never know. I felt it all to Kit, the villain!"

"They're cleared off!" asked Jimmy Silver.

"Yep. And I guess they've taken every horse and steer about the place that they could lay their hands on in the time!" growled Old Man Grimes. "I'm ruined!"

"Not so bad as that, I hope," said Jimmy Silver, with a smile. "You ought to have picked your man a bit more carefully, Mr. Grimes."

"They came cheap," muttered the miser. "There never was any trouble about wages. No, I know why, the skunks! I know it now. I guess that all the cattle and horses that have been missing in these parts for years, passed through their hands. Now they've cleared out, and cleared out the ranch!"

"Like us to see you home!" asked Jimmy politely. He felt some sympathy for the wretched old man, whose miserliness had been so severely punished.

Grudger Grimes did not answer. But now that he had control of his horse he started at a trot for Coyote Creek. The Roundwood juniors rode with him.

There was an air of desolation and desertion about Coyote Creek Ranch when they arrived.

Even at a distance they could see that the outfit was gone. Spanish Kit and his gang had had to wait till the sheriff called. The running game they had long played in severity was up at last, and the rascals had lost no time in getting clear.

Only the Chinese cook remained, and he looked out of the cook-house as the juniors and Grudger Grimes rode up.

"Allen gone?" said the cook, with a grin. "Lighted out realy quick. Taken all horse."

Grudger Grimes jumped down, and ran into the ranch-house. The juniors heard his high-cracked voice raised in lamentation as he moved from room to room. Apparently the fleeing gang had taken away

anything that seemed valuable enough for them to lay their hands on.

Grudger Grimes came out of the house again, wringing his hands. He roamed into the empty corral. There was not a horse to be seen.

"Every critter gone!" he gasped. "I'll set the sheriff on them. I'll set the Mounted Police after them."

"Best thing you can do," agreed Jimmy Silver. "I suppose they're in the foothills by this time, though."

"Anything we can do for you, Mr. Grimes?" asked Lovell. "Take us to stay to lunch and keep you company!"

"No," snapped Old Man Grimes. "Then we'll get off."

The old man yelled to the juniors as they rode out at the gate.

"Tell Hudson Smadley! Tell him to send a messenger to the sheriff."

"Right-ho!" called back Jimmy Silver.

Leaving Old Man Grimes lamenting his misfortune, the Rookwood chums rode back in Windy River. They reached the ranch in time for dinner, and found Hudson Smadley there.

Jimmy Silver told his news, and delivered Old Man Grimes' message.

"Might have reckoned on that," said the rancher thoughtfully. "I wonder what their game is now? It's Grimes' own fault. His outfit was made up of the pickiest rogues between Mackenzie and the Line. I guess he's paid for it now! I fancy those galoots will sell the horses they've stolen to the half-breeds in the foothills, and light out for the States. But there may be a chance of laying them by the heels. I guess I'll send a message to Sheriff Dawes, anyhow."

And the rancher hurried out.

There was a good deal of excitement at Windy River when the news was known of the flight of Spanish Kit and his crowd. But there was little sympathy for Grudger Grimes. The cowpunchers chuckled when they heard that the fleeing outfit had cleared off all his stock that they had had time to lay hands on.

"I guess he asked for it," said Skitter Dick. "Old Man Grimes has got what he asked for. And the Mounted Police will soon lay those galoots by the heels."

But Skitter Dick was wrong in his surmise.

Spanish Kit and his gang had vanished

into the trackless foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and the Mounted Police hunted for them in vain.

For a week there was no news of them at Windy River.

Then news came in an unexpected form. Jimmy Silver & Co. were at supper with Hudson Smadley at sunset one day when there was a tramping of hoofs outside, and Spike Thompson rushed in breathlessly.

"Skuss me, boss!" he gasped. "Them galoots—"

Hudson Smadley rose quietly.

"What's happened?"

"Them horse-thieves!" gasped the cowpuncher. "Spanish Kit and his gang. They came on me at Luna Pine, and when I lit out they was driving off a hundred head of steers."

"Phew!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

The Rookwood chums exchanged glances. It was exciting news, such news as had seldom been heard in the prairie ranches of Alberta. Hudson Smadley compressed his lips.

"So that's the game," he said. "Spanish Kit is starting in business as a rustler. He fancies he's back in Mexico or Texas. I guess he will soon learn that he can't pay that game in Canada."

The Windy River Ranch buzzed with excitement when Spike Thompson's startling news spread. There were "old hands" on the ranch who remembered the days of ranch-raiders—days that were long gone.

"I guess it's like old times!" said Pete Peters, to the crowd at the bunk house. "But it ain't lasting. That gang are up against a snag! The Mounted Police will rope them in inside a week."

But the week passed, and Spanish Kit and his gang were still loose in the foothills, and there were wild days coming for that section of Alberta where the Windy River flowed down from the Rocky Mountains.

CHAPTER 7.

Taking the Trail

"U S, too!"

Four voices spoke all at once—the voices of Jimmy Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcombe. The Fatal

Four of Rookwood were all of one opinion—which did not always happen.

Rancher Smadley shook his head.

"Impossible!"

"But—" Four voices in chorus again.

"Can't be done."

"But—" repeated Arthur Edward Lovell.

"I can't let you risk your lives," said Hudson Smedley. "There will be hard riding, and hard shooting, I guess. You kids will stay at the ranch."

"But—"

The boss of Windy River Ranch did not stay to listen to any more "buts." Outside the ranch-house there was a thrashing of hoofs, a clatter and jingle of bridles and stirrups. The Windy River outfit were in the saddle, waiting for "Boss" Smedley.

Hudson Smedley strode out to his horse, which Woo Sing, the chore-boy, was leading for him.

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked on glumly.

"Rotten!" growled Lovell.

"Beastly!" grunted Baby. "We should be quite as useful as any of the cow-punchers, I fancy."

"More!" said Lovell.

"Well, we'd try," remarked Neprone. "Still, I dare say Mr. Smedley is right. Anyway, we've got to toe the line."

"We've got to toe the line, but he isn't right," said Lovell. "I can handle a gun as well as any of these chaps, if it comes to shooting. But we've got to stick here."

"Rotten!" said Jimmy.

The Rockwood chums could not help feeling that it was rotten. They were left out.

Boss Smedley and his outfit were going to look for the missing bunch of steers. It was quite probable that there would be shooting when the outfit came upon Spanish Kit and his gang. Naturally, Boss Smedley did not want his schoolboy guests to be on the scene when the shooting began. Possibly, too, he doubted whether they could hold out over a long and arduous prairie trail. On those points Jimmy Silver & Co. did not agree with him in the least.

But Hudson Smedley's word was law at the Windy River Ranch; and the Rockwood chums could only grumble and give in.

While a clatter and a jingle, the outfit rode off in the setting sun to the south-west, towards the distant line of the Rocky Mountains. Jimmy Silver & Co. watched them from the porch; Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, from his cabin; Baldy, the cook, from the door of the cookhouse. They and Woo Sing were all that remained behind.

"Rotten!" said Jimmy Silver, for about the tenth time, when the bunch of horsemen had vanished upon the prairie.

Pete Peters went to the corral for his horse. He came towards the ranch-house with the reins looped over his brassy arm.

"I guess I've got plenty to do afore dark, with all the boys away," he remarked. "You kids won't be shivered here afore!"

"We'll try not to be," said Lovell, with deep sarcasm.

The foreman grinned.

"I guess I may not be back," he explained. "I'll tell Baldy to shift his blankets into the house, if you like."

"You can tell Baldy to go and eat oo's, and follow his example!" grunted Lovell.

"Waal, you 'uns had better look up safe, and get to bed," said Pete Peters good-humoredly. "Don't you be mind about the boss not taking you; you ain't big enough yet to eat up a gang of rustlers. And, guess Spanish Kit's gang are a tough bunch; they wouldn't make more than a mouthful of you 'uns. So long!"

And the foreman mounted and rode off.

"Silly ass!" commented Lovell.

"Supper leady!" said the soft voice of Woo Sing behind the Rockwood juniors.

"Rather supper!" grunted Lovell. Arthur Edward was exceedingly exasperated at being left behind by the outfit.

"Allee leady. Velly nice!" murmured Woo Sing.

"Come on!" said Jimmy Silver, and the Rockwood chums went into the ranch-house.

In spite of their exasperation, they contrived to make a very good supper. After supper they walked down to the ranchman to have a chat with Baldy before going to bed. The sun was sinking behind the Rockies, in a blaze of purple and gold. Jimmy Silver shaded his eyes with his hand and looked westward.

"They're out of sight hours ago," said Lovell.

"There's somebody!" said Jimmy.

"Peters, perhaps."

"He went towards Lone Pine. I can see a horseman, all the same. He's just sitting still on his horse and looking this way," said Jimmy.

"Blessed if I can see him!" said Lovell, staring in the same direction. "There's a bush—"

"Just beside the bush— There! He's gone now."

Lovell smiled—the slightly superior smile that even his best chums sometimes found a little irritating.

"Only the bush," he said. "There wasn't any horsemen, Jimmy."

"Fadhead! I saw a Stetson hat."

"Well, I didn't," said Lovell, making that statement as if he regarded it as settling the matter beyond dispute.

Jimmy Silver restrained a strong inclination to tell his chum what he thought of him and strolled on towards the cookhouse. Baldy, with the lamps gleaming on the smooth, shiny top of his head, was washing dishes and plates. He gave the Rookwood juniors a cheery nod.

"I guess I take this kindly," said Baldy.

"Eh, what?" asked Jimmy.

"Coming in like this to help a galoot wash up."

"Oh!"

"Here you are," said Baldy. "Pile in!" Jimmy Silver laughed and piled in. The juniors had come along to chat to Baldy because there was nobody else left; but the fat cook had chosen to misunderstand. Four juniors were soon busy with washing up, and as soon as they were fairly going Baldy sat down on a bench and filled his pipe. Baldy, the cook, sometimes got through quite a lot of work, but he never got through any if he could help it.

"I guess this is real good of you," said Baldy, as he lighted his pipe. "The real white article, and no mistake!"

And he smoked in fat contentment.

Washing up finished, Jimmy Silver & Co. moved to the door, having had enough of Baldy's company.

"I guess if you 'uns want another job, there's a broom handy!" said Baldy.

"Guess again," said Jimmy Silver. "Good-night, fat!"

And the juniors walked back to the ranch under the dusky sky. Baldy did not take the broom himself; he sat and smoked, and looked out of the open door of the cookhouse into the soft starlight. It was very warm in the cookhouse, and when he had finished his pipe Baldy leaned his bald head back on the wall and dozed. He did not move as there was the sound of a soft footstep, but murmured drowsily:

"Ain't you 'uns in bed yet? Time you was."

Then all of a sudden Baldy, the cook,

came back to wakefulness, as a round metal rim was pressed to his fat neck. He started so violently that his bald head cracked on the lumber wall behind him, and he gave a howl of pain.

"Quiet!" said a low, menacing voice. "Put up your paws!"

And Baldy, the cook, as he blinked at a threatening figure, revolver in hand, in the lamplight before him, promptly put up his "paws" as high towards the cookhouse roof as they would reach.

CHAPTER 8.

The Attack on the Ranch!

"BED!" yawned Lovell.

"Locked up?" asked Raby.

"Woo Sing's done that—except the front door."

Woo Sing, the chore-boy, was gone to bed already. Lovell and Raby had been playing chess, Newcome reading the last available "Holiday Annual," and Jimmy Silver was sitting on a bench in the porch, looking out at the starlit sky and thinking of home and Rookwood.

Lovell looked out at the door.

"Ready for bed, Jimmy?"

"Yes."

Jimmy Silver rose, and took a last glance into the soft, starlit night before he went in. And as he did so, a shadowy figure came running from the direction of the cookhouse.

For a moment Jimmy fancied it was Baldy; but almost at the same moment he noticed that the figure was too burly for Baldy's. And behind it came another, shadowy, and running.

"What—" stammered Jimmy.

He did not stay to finish the sentence, or the thought. He made a backward bound into the house, crashing into Lovell, and sending him spinning. There was a yell of wrath from Lovell as he reeled.

"What the thump—"

Jimmy did not heed Lovell.

He grasped the big, thick pinewood door, and dragged it to, with all his strength.

Crash!

The door slammed home, and Jimmy set his foot against it as he felt for the bolt.

"Lovell—quick—help here!" he panted.

Lovell was staggering against the wall.

"What game's that?" he asked warmly.

"You silly ass, Jimmy, what game are you playing now?"

Crash!

This time the crash came on the outside of the door, and it would have been hurried open but for Jimmy Silver's foot planted against it.

Before the attack could be repeated, Jimmy had partly shot the bolt.

Crash!

Two heavy bodies were hurled on the door at the same time. It shook and creaked; but the bolt held.

With a set face Jimmy Silver drove the bolt right home, and then drove home the other. Then he looked for the thick wooden bar, and placed it in position across the door.

Lovell watched these proceedings with growing amusement. It was one of Lovell's fixed beliefs that he had practically all the brains in the Hackwood party. But it had to be admitted that Lovell's brain worked rather slowly at times.

"What on earth's the game?" he asked, in amusement.

"The windows——"

"What about the windows?"

"Fathead!" hissed Jimmy Silver. "Are they closed?"

"Yes. Woo Sing fastened the shutters before he went to bye-bye. What does it matter?"

Crash, crash, crash! came on the door.

"What are you keeping old Baldy out for, Jimmy?" asked Lovell.

Jimmy Silver did not answer that question. Baby and Newcome came out into the hall in surprise.

"What's the row?" asked Baby.

"Rustlers!" answered Jimmy Silver briefly.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh, don't be funny, old man!" urged Lovell. "You can't pull out legs, you know. Draw it mild."

Bang, bang! came on the door. It was a rifle-butt that was being used now.

"Rustlers here!" murmured Newcome. "Ye gods! And Mr. Smedley and all the outfit away!"

"Rot!" said Lovell. "Did you think you saw rustlers, Jimmy?"

"I saw two," said Jimmy breathlessly. "They were running across from the cookhouse, and I got the door shut only just in time. They can't be anything

else—they weren't any of our crowd, and they had rifles."

Lovell grinned.

"You saw double," he suggested. "It was Baldy, of course."

"Fathead!"

Crash, crash! came on the door.

"Does that sound like Baldy, you born idiot, Lovell?" asked Newcome.

"I dare say he wants to come in. You can't stuff me up with your rustlers, Jimmy. I'd better let Baldy in, if he wants to come," said Lovell, and he stepped towards the door.

Then he stopped as a loud, angry voice was heard from without.

"Open this door!"

Certainly that was not the voice of Baldy, the cook. The juniors all knew the voice; it was that of Spanish Kit, the justice. They had heard that voice before.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Lovell.

Bang, bang!

"Open this door, you 'uns!" shouted another voice. "We know you're there! Let us in!"

"Go to Jericho!" was Jimmy Silver's answer.

"Do you want us to shoot you young fool?"

"Shoot and be hanged!"

"Look round at the windows, boys!" came Spanish Kit's voice again. "I know there's nobody at home excepting the underfeet—I watched the whole outfit ride off hours ago. The kids won't keep us long."

"So that was the man I saw!" muttered Jimmy.

There was a sound of tramping feet round the ranch-house. Blows were struck on the windows, but the defenses were good. Every lower window was protected by thick shutters, which fastened and locked inside; and Woo Sing had fastened them all before going up to bed. Rifle-batts crashed on the shutters, but the stout pine held good.

"Rustlers here!" said Lovell dazedly.

"My only hat! Why, they must have watched Mr. Smedley and his men clear off, you know! They reckon the coast is clear now."

"Just thought of that!" asked Baby.

"Look here——"

Jimmy Silver ran to the back of the house, to make sure that the door there was secure. He reached it as a heavy rifle-butt

crashed on the outside. Woo Sing came down the staircase, with a scared look on his face, his almond eyes wide open in alarm.

"Lastlers, Mass' Jimmy!" he said.

"Looks like it, Woo Sing. They can't get in, though," said Jimmy, with more confidence than he was feeling.

"I wonder what they've done with Daddy!" said Raby.

Crash, crash, crash! Blows rained on the door of the ranch-house as the disappointed raiders gathered there again.

"They won't get that down in a hurry," muttered Jimmy Silver. "But the upper windows! They could clamber on the veranda roof! We've got to keep them out, you chaps."

"You bet!" said Lovell. "We've got to get hold of something and hit out, if they tackle the windows."

"Get upstairs," said Jimmy.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome hurried in the upper rooms. Lovell had taken Woo Sing's kitchen poker; Raby and Newcome had a stick each. Jimmy ran into Mr. Smedley's room. He knew where the rancher kept a revolver locked up. It was no time to stand on ceremony, and Jimmy smashed open the drawer and took out the revolver and a box of cartridges.

He loaded the revolver hurriedly but carefully. Then he stepped to a window.

There were three windows at the front of the upper part of the house, far out of reach of the ground but for the veranda below. By climbing on the veranda roof it was easy to reach them. In the starlight Jimmy could see that the enemy had drawn back from the porch, and were looking up. Evidently the scheme of climbing to the windows had already occurred to them. A big, burly man, whom Jimmy recognized as Cactus Bill, once of the Coyote Creek Ranch, pushed his horse close to the veranda, and, standing up on the saddle, secured a hold and began to climb.

Jimmy Silver partly opened the window, softly and quietly. Lovell joined him, starting a little at the sight of the weapon in Jimmy's hand.

"You've got a revolver!" he muttered.

"Yes. And I shall use it if it's needed," said Jimmy Silver grimly.

"Better give it to me, old chap. I'm a better shot than you are, you know."

Jimmy Silver did not load that remark.

From the window he watched Cactus Bill. With the room dark behind him, he was invisible to the raiders below.

The bulky ruffian was dragging his heavy bulk upon the veranda roof, which sloped almost up to the sills of the upper windows. Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath, and called out:

"Stop!"

Cactus Bill stared round.

"I have a revolver here," said Jimmy Silver quietly. "I give you one minute to jump. After that I shall shoot!"

"I guess you don't dare!"

"You'll see—if you come on another inch!"

"Get on, Bill!" shouted Spanish Kit from below. "If he pulls the trigger we'll riddle him!"

Cactus Bill hesitated. He was a plain shot from the window. The clumsiest marksman could scarcely have missed at the range.

"I guess—" he began.

"Get on with it!" shouted half a dozen voices. "We're waiting for you to let us in."

Thus urged on, Cactus Bill made another movement up the sloping roof of the veranda.

"Get back, Lovell," muttered Jimmy. "They'll shoot as soon as I do. Better keep low down."

"I'm safe enough. You look out," answered Lovell. "They're putting up their rifles."

Jimmy Silver was watching. Five or six of the raiders had lifted their rifles, aiming at the window where Jimmy Silver stood. They could not see him, but a volley would have riddled the window and torn across the room like a torrent of death.

But Jimmy did not hesitate.

He was quite determined to defend the ranch-house in his Canadian comrade's absence. He dropped on his knees, and took careful aim at the man on the veranda roof.

Crack!

The instant he had fired Jimmy ducked below the level of the window. It was only just in time.

Half a dozen rifles rang out together, and the bullets smashed through the window and whistled over him as he crouched.

There was a loud yell and a crash outside. Cactus Bill was no longer on the veranda roof.

Jimmy, in the midst of his own danger, felt a sudden sickness of heart. He had done his duty; but if the man was killed

His mind was soon relieved on that score. The voice of Cactus Bill was heard, pouring out a stream of picturesque expressions. There was no doubt that he was hurt.

Crack, crack, crack!

Each of the windows was a target for bullets now, and the glass was shattered to fragments. But the Rockwood chums easily kept below the level of the shooting, and no harm was done, excepting to the windows.

"Get on with it, Bill!" shouted Spanish Kit.

"I guess——"

"You're not hurt, boob!"

"I guess it clipped my year!" howled Cactus Bill. "And I guess I've took some tumble!"

"Fool! I will do it!"

"You're welcome!" growled Cactus Bill.

Jimmy Silver heard the crack that announced that a weight was on the slanting roof outside again. He set his teeth. Every moment now a bullet tore in at the window from one of the raiders below. But Jimmy Silver had to take the risk, and he rose quietly and looked out, favoured by the darkness behind him, and keeping back from the window. The Mexican was climbing much more actively than the burly Cactus, clinging to the slanting roof like a cat. He was making for the farthest window, and his side was turned to Jimmy Silver.

A bullet sang in, missing Jimmy by a foot. He felt the wind of it as it passed. Then he fired.

There was a terrible cry from Spanish Kit, and he rolled down the slanting roof, and crashed down in the midst of the rustlers.

CHAPTER 9.

A Close Shave for Galdy!

JIMMY SILVER'S heart throbbed painfully.

He had had no choice in the matter, and he could not regret what he had done. But the cry of the Mexican as he fell rang terribly in Jimmy's ears.

"He's down!" came Raby's panting voice from the farther room.

There was a shouting among the rustlers below. The rifles poured a scattering volley at the shattered windows.

But as the firing slackened Jimmy Silver peered out in the clear starlight. He saw Spanish Kit limping. Theascal was not killed. But evidently he was hurt.

His wound was slight, but the fall from the veranda roof had hurt him. He limped painfully, and his voice was soon heard pouring out a stream of savage words in Spanish.

Crack, crack!

Jimmy Silver loosed off a couple of shots from the window, sending them close enough to startle the raiders. Pete Peters, in his place, would probably have laid a rustler dead in the grass with each bullet. But the junior of Rockwood was content to see the bunch of shadowy figures fall hurriedly back.

The rustlers were fully exposed where they stood to fire from the window.

As the bullets flew close they backed away with almost ludicrous haste, Spanish Kit limping after them into the shelter of the bunk-house and the veranda fence.

"Thank goodness they're gone!" muttered Lovell. "They're not gone far, though, I fancy."

"Keep in cover!" called out Jimmy.

"You bet!"

From the rustlers, looking out of sight now, an occasional rifle-shot rang, whizzing in at the shattered windows, or spattering on the stout timber of the walls.

But after a few minutes that ineffective fire ceased.

"What a night!" murmured Raby. The Fiskal Fear gathered on the landing. Here there was a little window, from which it was safer to keep watch than from the room.

"Well, we're keeping them off," said Lovell. "I haven't had a chance to see the poker yet."

"They'll clear at dawn if they don't get in before then," said Newcome hopefully. "They wouldn't dare keep this up in the daylight!"

Jimmy Silver nodded.

But it was long, long hours to dawn, and the gang of rustlers were not likely to allow themselves to be baffled by four schoolboys if they could help it.

There was a lull silence, and Lovell

offered the opinion at last that the raiders were gone.

"They're not gone!" said Jimmy quietly. "I dare say they'd like to make us think so. But they're not gone."

"I've heard a lot of horses moving," said Lovell.

"They've cleared the horses out of the corral, I think. That's what they're here for—to steal horses and cattle!" growled Jimmy Silver. "But they won't lay hands on anything in the house so long as we can keep them out."

"No fear!"

"Hallo, here comes somebody!" said Newcome suddenly.

There was a sudden pattering of footsteps, and a shadowy figure came bolting towards the ranchhouse. Two or three shots rang out.

"Shoot, Jimmy!" shouted Lovell. "Here, give me the revolver! Shoot, you ass!"

"It's Baldy," said Jimmy Silver quickly. "Oh!"

Baldy, the cook, was hammering at the door below. Round him bullets spattered on the porch. His voice came up to the juniors in a howl of terror.

"Let me in! You hear me, young Silver! Let a galoot in! They're arier mol! Open the door, young Silver! Help!"

Hammer, hammer, hammer!

Baldy, the cook, was almost dancing with terror as he hammered at the barred door. Every bullet that struck the timber near him brought a fresh howl from the fat cook.

Jimmy's face set hard.

"I—I say, we—we've got to let him in," muttered Lovell uneasily.

"We can't open the door."

"But—but they're shooting—"

"If they were shooting at Baldy, he would be riddled before now," said Jimmy. "They're frightening him."

"Bah, I say—he's got away from them and—and—"

"Don't be an ass," said Jimmy. "It's a trick to get the door open. If we open it for Baldy there will be a rush. We could never get it shut again in time. A volley and rush would rattle us, with the door open. It's a trick."

"Let me in!" yelled Baldy.

He hammered madly at the door.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

A bullet, closer than the others, grazed

Baldy's fat ear, and he let out a fearful yell.

Lovell and Baby and Newcome looked very uneasy. But Jimmy Silver remained as firm as iron.

It was clear to him that the raiders had let Baldy run, and were firing round him, and not at him, as a trick to get the door open—a trick that Jimmy was determined should fail.

Peering from the little window, he could catch glimpses of moving shadows, as the raiders crept nearer, to be ready for the rush if the door opened.

Jimmy Silver did not falter.

It was his duty to hold the fort, if he could, till Hudson Samdley returned; and Baldy had to take his chance.

One of the creeping, shadowy figures came recklessly near, and Jimmy pushed his revolver from the window and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud yell, and the raider scuttled back.

Then there came a wild howl from Baldy, and the juniors heard a heavy fall below in the porch.

"He's got it!" muttered Lovell, white as chalk.

Jimmy's heart throbbed.

There was no further sound from Baldy; no movement. The fat cook lay still in the black shadow of the porch.

Spanish Kit's voice was heard from the bunkhouse.

"You darn fools, you've plugged the cook now."

"That shows what they meant," said Jimmy. "I'm sorry for poor old Baldy. But we've got to hold the ranch."

Newcome shivered. The trick was transparent enough; but with so many bullets whizzing round the cook to frighten him one had apparently found a billet. But the juniors knew that Jimmy was right. If the door was opened the ranch was captured; and it was the duty of the garrison to hold the fort. Baldy was the only member of the Windy River outfit who would have yelled to be let in, in the circumstances. But poor Baldy was not made of stern stuff like the cowpunchers.

The voices of the raiders, muttering, came faintly through the still night. Then Spanish Kit's voice, raised in angry tones, became clearly audible to the juniors.

"We've got to get the ranch! I tell you,

Boss Smedley's got thousands of dollars there—it's close on pay-day. I've got a scratch on the shoulder, and I'm going to make that kid pay for it! I tell you, we've got to get the ranch."

A growling voice answered:

"It's the rope for somebody now, now that darn creek is laid out."

"If you've got cold feet, Cactus, you can get on your horse and ride out of the show."

"Wal, how are we getting the ranch?" growled Cactus Bill. "Chewing the rag won't do it."

Low muttering followed.

Jimmy Silver had reloaded the empty chambers of the revolver. He was prepared for a desperate rush.

He started as he felt a light touch on his elbow. He looked round and saw Woo Sing, his almond eyes glimmering in the gloom.

"Baldy, romee windee!" murmured the Chinese.

"What?"

"Fatso Baldy, tappee at hakee windee. Letsee in!" asked Woo Sing.

Jimmy Silver stared at him blankly. He had been under the impression that Baldy, the cook, was lying still in the dark porch, stretched there by a chance bullet!

"Baldy?" he repeated.

"At windee. Tappee."

"Thank goodness. I suppose he was spoofing them," said Jimmy, with a deep breath of relief. "Keep watch here, you chaps, while I go down."

Jimmy followed the little Chinese down the stairs. On the shutter of the kitchen window there was a faint tapping. A voice, barely heard in its agitated whispering, reached Jimmy.

"Give a galoot a chance! Let me in."

"Him sleepes round the house," grinned Woo Sing. "Nottee hittee—only pretend."

Jimmy hurriedly unfastened the window shutter. The raiders were all gathered at the ranch buildings in front and to the left of the ranchhouse. But Jimmy kept the revolver in readiness as he opened the shutter.

Baldy, the cook, did not need that injunction. Fat as he was, he slithered in at the window with the activity of a boy of ten. Jimmy jammed the shutter tight again and fastened it.

CHAPTER 14.

Facing the Enemy!

BALDY, the cook, stood panting, hot Jimmy heard a fat chuckle in the gloom. He hurried back to his place on the landing, and Baldy stumbled up the stairs after him.

"You fat fraud," growled Lovell. "You made us believe you were shot."

"I guess I made that gang believe it, too," grinned Baldy. "and I reckon I should have been drilled if I hadn't."

"You weren't hit?" asked Raby.

"Nary a bit," answered the cook. "Only a bit of skin off my year, and I can spare it. I reckoned I'd play possum. But you can bet that I felt awful skinned while I was crawling round the house to the back—you bet your boots on that. If they'd spotted me—"

"They weren't shooting at you," grinned Jimmy Silver. "It was only a trick to get the door open. We thought you had been hit by a bullet."

"I guess it came near enough, accident or not," said Baldy. "They got me in the shoulder, you know—made me put my hands up! I'd have waded in and wiped out the hull crowd, only there were a dozen of them, and I reckoned I couldn't handle more'n six."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. roared. They had not expected to have any cause for merriment during that wild night; but the fat and fatuous Baldy was rather too much for them.

The idea of Baldy, the cook, handling six of the burly raiders made them yell.

"Look hyer—" said Baldy gruffly.

"Couldn't you have managed seven?"

asked Lovell, chuckling. "Or even eight? I suppose, as a matter of fact, you were too scared to move a finger till they kicked you and made you run for the house."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Even Woo Sing was grinning; and Baldy, the cook, gave it up. He was glad enough to be in the shelter of the ranchhouse without damage to his fat skin. Silver & Co. were glad enough to have him there, though he did not bring much increase of strength to the garrison. The juniors had often heard Baldy, the cook, describe deeds of "derring-do" in which he had taken a leading part, but those exploits had always occurred at a con-

considerable distance from Windy River, and had never been witnessed by any member of the Windy River outfit. Baldy had a much more fertile imagination than was necessary to a crook.

"Isn't there a gun about for me?" asked Baldy, after a pause. "You'd better hand me that shooter, Jimmy, in case they come on."

"Get hold of a club," said Jimmy. "Better give me the shooter. I'm the only man byer," said Baldy. "Last year, at Leaping Springs, I got into a row with a gang of half-breeds, and laid out five of them—"

"Here they come!" shouted Lovell. There was a rush outside, and Jimmy Silver promptly pulled trigger from the window and missed. Five or six burly figures reached the porch, and were out or range from the upper windows.

Crash, crash, crash!
"They've got axes!" said Raby.
"Come on!" said Jimmy. "You watch from here, Lovell, in case they try the veranda roof again."

"Leave that to me!" said Lovell. Jimmy ran down the stairs followed by Raby and Newcome and Woo Sing. Baldy did not follow.

What became of Baldy just then the juniors had no time to inquire. They forgot his existence.

Crash, crash!
Two heavy axes were being wielded together, and the blows fell with terrible force upon the ranch-house door.

Crash, crash, crash!
Right as the door was, that fierce attack was told upon it. Jimmy Silver & Co. stood in the darkness inside with thumping hearts. The danger was very close now.

A gleaming edge came through the door, and as it was withdrawn there was a glimmer of light from without.

"That's out through!" breathed Newcome.

Jimmy Silver waited.

Crash came the axe in the same spot, and the streak of starlight was blotted out for a second. The axe was withdrawn, leaving a gash in the thick timber of the door.

Jimmy Silver stepped close to it and placed the muzzle of the revolver to the narrow slit and pulled the trigger.

There was a fearful yell without.

The bullet flew into the thick of the hunched figures in the porch, and it could scarcely fail to hit. Jimmy heard a fall.

"Roper's got it!" shouted Cactus Bill.

Crash, crash! came the axes again. The door trembled and shook. In two or three places the bright starlight glimmered through.

Jimmy placed the revolver again to the lowest crack and pulled trigger. Another fearful howl answered.

There was a sound of hurriedly retreating footsteps, and a heavy, dragging sound, as a wounded man dragged himself away.

The attack on the door ceased.

A burst of rifle-fire followed, and bullets splattered on the thick timber door. One of them found a slit by chance, and came whizzing through and struck on the stair-case.

"You fellows stack the dining-table against the door!" whispered Jimmy Silver, and he hurried up the stairs to the landing above.

"They've gone again!" said Lovell.

Raby and Newcome and Woo Sing below dragged out the heavy pine-wood table and stacked it against the door. Jimmy Silver watched from the landing window.

In the distance he could faintly make out shadowy figures that moved, and there was a distant mutter of voices. The attack had failed, but the ranch-raiders were not finished yet.

Jimmy watched, his eyes gleaming like steel, determined that another rush should not be made without the revolver taking its toll.

The shadowy figures came nearer and clearer in the starlight. Half a dozen of the raiders were carrying a long slender pine trunk among them. Evidently it was for use as a battering-ram.

"By Jove! That looks like business," muttered Lovell. "Will the door stand that, Jimmy?"

Jimmy did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the raiders as they advanced with the pine.

As they came out clear in the starlight he took aim and fired. One of the men holding the trunk staggered and let go.

Jimmy fired again. He was not wasting a shot now. Another man yelled and let go the pine.

The heavy trunk went to the earth with a crash, and the raiders—two of them—scuttled back into cover like rabbits.

"That's stopped them!" said Lovell gleefully.

Jimmy Silver breathed hard. He was deeply thankful now that since coming to Windy River he had practiced his shooting assiduously, and could depend upon his aim. Only Hudson Smalley's revolver, in Jimmy's steady hand, had saved the ranch-house so far.

The pine trunk remained where it had fallen. The ranch-riders kept out of sight, only an occasional bullet whizzing at the house—launched off rather from anger than from any hope that it would damage the garrison.

Jimmy Silver looked at his watch. The night was growing old.

"Three o'clock," he said. "It's not long to daylight now, at this time of the year. Lovell. They'll chuck it at dawn, I should think."

"If we're still alive at dawn!" said Lovell. "After this, Jimmy, they'll make a clean sweep if they get in."

"Not much doubt about that."

"Hallo! That's a flag of truce!"

Spanish Kit, with a white cloth held above his head, stepped out of the shadow of the bunkhouse and advanced towards the ranch.

CHAPTER II.

In the Shadow of Death!

"STOP!" shouted Jimmy Silver from the window.

The Mexican halted.

"If you want to talk, talk from that distance," called out Jimmy Silver. "I don't trust you, white flag or not!"

"No fear!" murmured Lovell.

"I've got you covered, too!" continued Jimmy Silver. "If one of your men advances, Spanish Kit, I'll shoot you where you stand!"

Spanish Kit stood where he was, his dark face darker with rage. He knew that the revolver at the window bore full upon him, as he stood clear in view in the starlight. But he showed no sign of fear.

"I guess I want to speak to you 'uns," he said.

"Go ahead—from that distance—and don't let your men fire, either. If there's a shot, look out!"

"We're getting the ranch," said Spanish

Kit coolly. "We're having it before morning, somorito."

"I don't think!" remarked Lovell.

"I'm here to give you a chance. Open the door to us, and your lives shall be spared—you shall not be harmed."

"Thank you for nothing," answered Jimmy Silver.

"If you refuse—"

"We do refuse, as you can see that out," answered Jimmy Silver contemptuously. "You've tried to get hold of the ranch by force, and failed. Do you think you can win by waggling your chin?"

"I guess I haven't finished yet," said the rustler coolly. "We're after Hudson Smalley's dust, and other things in the ranch-house. We mean to have them. But if we don't—"

"Well, you won't!"

"If we don't," said Spanish Kit, "we're setting fire to the house, and you 'uns will be roasted in it. We've got a drum of kerosene in the cookhouse yonder."

Jimmy Silver felt a chill.

That the desperado was desperate enough to carry out his threat he was assured. But it made no difference to his determination. Neither did he trust the rustler's words that the lives of the defenders should be spared, if they surrendered. The exasperated ruffians, of whom several were severely hurt, were not likely to pay much attention to that promise—they were far more likely to shoot right and left as soon as they were within the house.

"Well, what's your answer?" called out the Mexican, as Jimmy Silver did not reply.

"We're holding the ranch!"

"Keep this in mind," said Spanish Kit savagely. "If we have to burn down the ranch, and go empty-handed, this will be the last night for you in this world. You won't get out alive!"

"We're changing that!"

"I give you five minutes to throw the door wide open."

"I give you five seconds to get out of reach of my aim!" answered Jimmy Silver.

"Better get a move on, quick!"

Spanish Kit did not neglect that warning. With a bound he was in the cover of the bunkhouse again.

Jimmy Silver stepped back from the window as firing started again. His face was pale now, but quite steady.

"I—I suppose the brute means that, Jimmy!" muttered Lovell.

"I think so."

"Then—"

"We've got to fight to a finish, old chap."

"I'm game!" said Lovell.

Jimmy peered from the window. Shadows moved in the distance, too dim and far for a shot. The raiders were preparing to carry out the threat.

"Peters may get back," muttered Lovell. "He said he might be back before morning."

"Better if he doesn't," said Jimmy. "They would shoot him down; he couldn't do anything single-handed against that gang."

"I—I suppose not."

A crashing volley broke out from the raiders, and bullets spattered at the windows. Jimmy Silver could guess that that heavy firing was to cover an advance; and he took the risk of peering out from a corner of the landing window. A man was running forward with a huge bundle of brushwood, and the breeze bore a scent of kerosene. Evidently the brushwood, soaked in inflammable oil, was to be lighted at the door, and the outcome of that was easy to guess.

Bullets spattered every moment at the window; but the risk had to be taken. Jimmy Silver took aim at the man with the brushwood.

Crash!

The revolver spun from his hand, and clattered on the floor. Jimmy gave a sharp cry of pain.

"Jimmy!" panted Lovell.

"It's all right!" Jimmy clasped his right hand in his left, his face white with pain.

"The revolver was hit— Oh!"

"You're not hit?"

"No. Only the shock!" Jimmy clenched his teeth. "Pick up the revolver, Lovell! I can't use my hand for a hit; it's numbed!"

Lovell groped on the floor, and found the revolver.

"It's smashed," he said. "The cylinder's smashed!"

"Can't be helped!" muttered Jimmy, trying to speak cheerfully, though there was despair in his heart now. "I was lucky not to get that bullet in my head."

His weapon was gone; but in any case it was too late now. The rustler had reached the porch, and stacked the kerosene-soaked brushwood against the door.

He threw a lighted match into it, and there was an instant rush and roar of flames.

The raider darted back—escaping unscathed now that Jimmy Silver was disarmed.

Red flames rushed and roared below, licking over the porch and the veranda. The clear starlight was blotted out by fierce illumination. Another man rushed forward with another drenched bundle, to throw on the fire. There came no shot from the windows, and the rustler escaped after adding the bundle of fuel to the fire.

Almost as high as the roof the red flames soared, and the veranda caught fire, and it could not be long before door and door-jambes were burning also. The light blazed and flickered at the windows, lighting the rooms within with a ghastly, dancing glare.

"The game's up!" muttered Lovell.

"Anyhow, they can't say we didn't stick it to the finish."

Ruby and Newcome came up the stairs, with white faces. Woo Sing followed them, shuddering. Baldy, the cook, was not to be seen.

"This is the finish!" muttered Newcome.

"What about bolting from a back window?" asked Ruby. "It might be a chance. We can't hold the ranch against that!"

As if in answer to Ruby's words there came a rattle of rifles from the back of the house, and bullets spattered on the shutters and the walls. There was no need for Jimmy Silver to answer.

The disappointed rustlers, robbed of their plunder in the ranch by their own desperate action, had nothing left but revenge. Spanish Kid had strung out his men round the ranch-house, encircling it, and all escape was cut off for the defenders.

"We've done what we were bound to do," said Jimmy at last. "We've got to stand the result."

"They're stopped firing!" said Lovell suddenly. "Hark! What's that?"

Above the roar of the flames there came a sound that was like thunder, but when the rustlers knew to be the tramp of galloping hoofs on the hard prairie.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

Then a sudden burst of wild firing.

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one another, breathless. They could not speak. Was it the outfit returning? Had Hudson Smedley come back? It was impossible;

they knew that could not be! And yet—
(Gallop, gallop!)

Wild yells from the raiders made the night hideous. Jimmy Silver sprang to the window, reckless now of flying bullets. In the glare of the flames he saw the raiders leaping to their horses, mounting in frantic haste. Spanish Kit, with a face like a demon, threw himself on his horse and galloped frantically away into the night. Others of the gang followed, but not all were able to follow. Some of the raiders round the ranch-house were engaged in conflict; with whom, Jimmy Silver could not guess, for he knew that Hudson Smedley could not have come back. Loud yells and the cracking of revolvers made a pandemonium in the night.

"Wade in, boys!" roared a powerful voice, and Jimmy recognised the tones of Pete Peters, the foreman of Windy River. "It's Pete!" he shouted. "He's got help from somewhere, and come back. Hurrah!"

Pete Peters came in sight the next moment, spurring his horse towards the ranch-house. He was brandishing a revolver in his hand, and his bronzed face blazed with excitement.

But the raiders were gone—several riderless horses careered about wildly; but there were no more foes. Pete Peters reined in his horse.

"Pete!" shouted Jimmy from the window.

"You 'uns all right?" shouted back the foreman.

"Right as rain!"

"That's daisy!"

Peters sprang from his horse. More than a dozen riders had joined him now, and they were not the Windy River outfit. But the juniors recognised some of them as belonging to the Sunset Ranch across the river.

The foreman shouted orders. The cow-punchers dismounted, letting their horses run loose, and rushed to carry out Pete's instructions. A string of men with fire-buckets passed and repassed from the well, at which a powerful man laboured incessantly with the pump. Bucket after bucket was emptied on the flames.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were not idle. It was impossible to pass through the front door, but from the back one they rushed out, and joined the throng working with the buckets. Woo Sing joined them;

but of Baldy, the cook, there was still nothing to be seen—if anyone had thought of him.

Pete Peters had arrived in good time; the fire had not had time to take a firm hold. A quarter of an hour later the ranch would have been in flames; but now the stream of hissing water drove the fire down, and the roaring flames changed into sudden smoke.

Half the veranda had been burnt away, the porch was a heap of smoking stumps; the door was blackened and scarred. But the house was safe, and at length the last red ember was stamped out.

CHAPTER 12.

Where is Baldy?

PETE PETERS clapped Jimmy Silver on the shoulder. The burly foreman was streaming with perspiration, blackened with smoke—burnt in two or three places, as indeed were almost all the crowd. Jimmy Silver looked, and felt, like a sweep.

"You 'uns had a pretty time, I reckon," said the foreman.

"Just a bit exciting," said Jimmy, with a rooky grin. "Thank goodness you came when you did! How did you manage it?"

"I guess I was riding home when I heard the shooting," explained Pete Peters. "I reckoned something was up, and I scouted round to see what it was. No good riding into the middle of that gang and getting drilled, that I know of."

"And then——" said Jimmy.

The foreman grinned.

"I guess I spotted Spanish Kit and his gang, and knowed that you 'uns were holding the ranch," he said. "So I cleared off, and rode to Sunset, and shouted out the boys. I guess we didn't let any grass grow under our feet on the way here, neither. I reckon we covered that distance in record time, Jimmy."

"Good for you," said Jimmy. "We should have been done in pretty soon if you hadn't turned up."

"I reckon you'd be gone soon, kid!" said the ranch foreman. "It was plucky of you to hold the house agin that gang! You kids are the real goods, I guess! Why, it's lucky that Boss Smedley left you behind, arize all!"

"Lucky, or it turns out!" said Arthur

Edward Lovell, with a grin. "Have you bagged many of the rustlers, Pete?"

"I guess we've got six—some of them wounded. And there's two who won't ever steal a horse again," said the foreman coolly. "That Spanish Kit has got away. I guess I'd rather have had him than all the rest of the gang. But there's a rope waiting for that greaser before long. Boss Smokey will be mad when he hears of this. You 'uns are all safe, but where's Baldy?"

"Baldy?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, remembering the existence of the fat cook. "Dressed if I know!"

"They wouldn't have hurt that fat clam, I guess! God-darn them if they have! He's the best cook in Alberta, though he ain't any other use!" said the foreman.

"He was in the house with us," said Baldy. "I—I haven't seen him since the rustlers started attacking—"

"Then I guess he's there still and don't know we've arrived!" grinned Pete Peters. "Let's rouse him out!"

The front door was open now, and Pete strode into the ranch-house, followed by the juniors. Now that the anxiety was over, they were curious to know what had become of Baldy, the cook.

"Woo Slog, where's Baldy?"

"No savvy," answered the choreboy. "No see Baldy!"

Pete chuckled. "Hiding somewhere and don't know it's all over! That's Baldy! Rouse him out!"

The juniors were laughing now as they hunted through the house for Baldy Bubbins.

The lower rooms were searched in vain, and Pete Peters mounted the stairs. There was no man to be seen in the bed-rooms; but Jimmy Silver, looking into Hudson Smokey's room, noticed that the bed-clothes were dragged out of place so that they covered the bed to the floor all round.

He grinned and caught hold of the blankets and dragged them up, to reveal a fat figure crouched under the bed.

"There was a fearful yell from Baldy, the cook.

"Let up! I ain't here! I guess I'll do anything you want! Don't shoot! Let 'er, you gals!" Don't shoot!"

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

"Yank him out!" shouted the foreman.

"Oh, Jehoshaphat!" gasped Baldy, as he

realised that he was surrounded by friends and not by foes.

He crawled out from under the bed. Hidden there, draped round with blankets for concealment, he had seen nothing even of the fire, and remained in complete ignorance of all that had passed since he had taken cover. He blinked at Pete Peters in great relief, but with a mingling of other feelings. Baldy, the cook, realised that he had not cut an heroic figure.

"I—I guess—" he stammered.

"You pesky coyote!" growled Pete Peters. "I guess I've a mind to lay my quirt round you!"

"I—I wasn't hiding—" gasped Baldy.

"What?"

"I guess I ain't the sort to keep back when there's a fight on!" said Baldy. "I—I was just tired, and went to sleep—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just went to sleep and—forgot!"

Pete Peters took Baldy by the collar and propelled him down the stairs. His heavy boots helped Baldy out of the ranch-house, and Baldy went with a loud howl.

"You made in and get breakfast for the boys!" said Pete Peters. "Dan's give us any chin-wag, Baldy! By Jehoshaphat, if you wasn't the best cook in Alberta I'd take my quirt to you and wallop you all the way to Mosquito!"

Baldy, as he crawled away to the cook-house, had real reason to be thankful that he was the best cook in Alberta!

Jimmy Silver & Co. joined the Sunset crowd at breakfast in very cheery spirits, in spite of the events of that wild night. And, quite unlike poor Baldy, they found themselves treated with considerable respect by the Sunset newspapermen, and they realised that they were no longer looked on as "tenderfeet." They had won their spurs, as it were, by their gallant defence of Windy River Ranch.

CHAPTER 13.

Missing!

"HERE they come!"

"It's the outfit back!"

Jimmy Silver ran eagerly out of the ranch-house at Windy River. Lovell and Raby and Nowcome followed at his heels.

It was nearly sundown, and against the

real sky to the west a bunch of horsemen had appeared in sight.

For three days Hudson Smedley and his outfit had been absent from the ranch, on the trail of the cattle-thieves.

What had happened to them in those three days Jimmy Silver did not know, and he was growing very uneasy about his Canadian cousin. Somewhere in the western foothills the Windy River men were hunting for the outlaws; that was all that was known at the ranch. And Jimmy was glad and relieved when the horsemen appeared in sight, heading for the ranch by the Windy River.

Pete Peters, the foreman, came out of the corral as the Rookwood chums ran from the ranch-house.

He shaded his eyes with his hand, and stared into the sunset.

"I guess they've slipped up on it," he remarked.

"How's that?" asked Jimmy.

"They ain't got the steers, I reckon."

"Never mind, so long as they're safe back," said Lovell. "I've been wondering what had happened."

"I guess Boss Smedley knows how to take care of himself," grunted the foreman of the ranch. "But I'm glad to see the boys back, steers or no steers."

Jimmy Silver watched the riders as they came on at a tired trot. He recognised among them Skitter Dick and Spike Thompson and Red Alf, and others of the cow-punchers. But Hudson Smedley was not to be picked out in the bunch of riders.

Jimmy felt his uneasiness deepen.

The rancher did not seem to be returning with his men. Where was he?

"I don't see Mr. Smedley," said Baby in a low voice. "He may be behind, though."

Nowcome ran into the ranch-house for the field-glasses. Jimmy Silver noticed a grim look on Pete Peters' bronzed visage.

"The boss ain't there," he said. "What the thunder—"

He broke off and shouted to Baldy in the cookhouse:

"Get a move on, Baldy! Here come the boys, and they'll be hungry, I reckon."

"I guess supper'll be ready," called back Baldy. Pots and pans were clinking in the ranch cookhouse.

Nowcome came back with the glasses,

and silently handed them to Jimmy Silver. Jimmy stared through the binoculars at the approaching riders. One by one he counted them—the whole outfit, with one exception, and the exception was Hudson Smedley, the "boss" of the Windy River Ranch.

"He's not there," said Jimmy in a low voice.

"The rustlers can't have got him!" muttered Lovell.

"Goodness knows!"

Jimmy's heart was heavy. He knew only too well the desperate nature of the gang of rustlers who had established themselves in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, and during the past few weeks had levied tribute on half the ranches in the section. Nothing had been seen of Spanish Kit and his gang since the raid on the ranch. Had Hudson Smedley fallen in with them in some lonely pass in the foothills, and fallen in the fray?

The horsemen rode in at last, tired and dusty and worn, and evidently in independent spirits. Pete Peters' powerful voice hailed them as soon as they were within hearing.

"Where's the boss?"

"He ain't with us," said Skitter Dick.

"Where is he?"

"You've got me guessing."

Skitter Dick almost tumbled from his horse. The long and weary trail had tired even his iron frame.

Jimmy ran towards him.

"What's happened to my cousin?" he exclaimed.

The Skitter shook his head.

"Nobody knows," he answered. "For three days we was after that gang, and never saw hide nor hair of them. They're tucked away pretty deep, I reckon, in the foothills. Boss Smedley left the camp to scout last night, and never come back."

"He is not—not—" Jimmy faltered.

"We never heard any shooting. I guess he was roped in."

"A prisoner?"

"Sure!"

"And you've come back without him!" exclaimed Lovell hotly.

Skitter Dick looked at him.

"I guess we've been hunting hard for a whole day without a step," he said.

"There was no trail on the rocks, and

nothing doing. It's a job for the Mounted Police now."

And Skitter Dick tramped away to the bunkhouse. The rest of the tired and dispirited cowpunchers followed him.

"Well, I think——" began Lovell.
 "Choose it, old chap!" muttered Jimmy Silver. "They did all they could. Don't say!"

Lovell granted, and was silent. Jimmy Silver turned to Pete. The ranch foreman was looking blankly dismayed.

"What's going to be done, Pete?" asked Jimmy.

"They've got him," said Pete Peters. "I guess they won't dare to do him any harm; but they've got him. The Mounted Police are at Mosquito now, and I guess I'm sending them a messenger. It's too big a job for a handful of cowpunchers. I guess it may be weeks before they get the rustlers cornered. Spanish Kit is a top card, and I shouldn't wonder if he comes right over the Rockies into British Columbia when the trail grows hot."

"And—and my cousin——" muttered Jimmy.

"I guess they won't hurt him—more likely to make him pay ten thousand dollars to be let loose."

"And if he wouldn't?"

"No good thinkin' about that, I guess."

And the big foreman strode away to send a messenger with the news to the Mounted Police at Mosquito township.

Jimmy Silver went back into the bunkhouse with his chums. His brow was wrinkled in thought. Hudson Smedley, his Canadian cousin, the bluff and kind-hearted teacher, was in the hands of the rustlers. But knowledge was enough to drive every other thought from Jimmy's mind. Supper was on the table. Lovell and Raby and Newcome discussed the news over supper. How tense. Jimmy Silver hardly spoke a word. He was thinking hard.

After supper he went round to the bunkhouse by himself, to speak to Skitter Dick. A cowpuncher told him of the long trail of incidents. Jimmy listening attentively.

"But where were you camped when my cousin disappeared?" asked Jimmy.

"Gopher Creek canyon. I guess you got that way once, when Blazer ran away from you," said Skitter Dick.

"I remember," said Jimmy.

Jimmy Silver left the bunkhouse, but he did not return to the ranch. His steps led him towards the corral.

Lovell & Co. did not see him again that evening, and wondered where he was. At bedtime Jimmy Silver was still absent. Woo Sing, the Chinese chore-boy, brought a note to Lovell then.

"From Misty Jimmy," he said.
 "What the thump!" said Lovell, in astonishment. "What the dickens is Jimmy sending me a letter for? Where is he, Woo Sing?"

"No savvy."

"When did he give you this note?"

"Soonest after supper."

"You young heathen! Why didn't you give it to me then?" exclaimed Lovell.

"Misty Jimmy sayee givee at bed-time."

"Let's see what's in it, for goodness' sake, Lovell," exclaimed Raby. "Jimmy's up to something, and he's left us out."

Lovell opened the note.

"Oh, my hat!" he ejaculated.

Newcome jerked it away from him, and read:

"I'm off to look for Cousin Smedley! Don't worry.—Jimmy."

The three Buckwood juniors stared at one another in silence for some moments.

"The awful am!" said Love at first.

"He was anxious about him," said Raby.

"But—but we ought to have gone together, if he went at all."

"He oughtn't to have gone! I'd have jolly well stopped him," exclaimed Lovell warmly.

"Perhaps that's why he sent the note," said Newcome, smiling faintly. "We'd better show this to Mr. Peters."

The juniors hurried out of the bunkhouse. They found Pete Peters in his cabin, and the ranch foreman stared when he saw Jimmy's note.

"The pecky young guy! How long's he been gone!"

"Three hours at least, from what Woo Sing says."

Pete Peters strode away to the corral. Blazer was gone from among the horses. The foreman stared away into the darkness of the plain. Jimmy Silver was gone—swallowed up in the night. There was nothing to be done. Lovell & Co., in great silence, returned to the ranch.

CHAPTER 14.

Loss of the Foot-hills:

JIMMY Silver rode at a gallop under the stars:

Blazer, under him, was covering the ground in great style, and many a long mile had glided under his hoofs since Jimmy had turned his back on the Windy River Ranch.

Jimmy's face was grave and very determined.

He knew well enough how rashly he was acting. The whole outfit had sought for Hudson Smedley after his disappearance in Gopher Creek canyon, and failed to find him. What chance had the Rockwood schoolboy of succeeding where they had failed?

Common sense told him, none. And yet, somehow, there was a hope in his breast. Fortune might favour him, and at least he would be doing all he could.

Jimmy had said no word to the outfit before he left. He was aware that Pete Peters would have stopped him from the foolhardy enterprise, even if the foreman had had to lock him in his room at the ranch. Quietly, in the dusk, Jimmy had saddled and bridled Blazer and led him out. From Won Sing, who asked no questions, he obtained provisions for his walk; He had borrowed a revolver and cartridges from the weapons the outfit had laid aside at supper, leaving the circumstances to be mentioned afterwards. And then, quietly, he had led Blazer behind the pines, mounted, and started to ride to the hills.

It was rash and reckless; and he knew it. But he could not have slept while Hudson Smedley was in danger of death at the hands of the rustlers. He knew Hudson Smedley's determined character well enough. The rancher would never consent to pay a ransom for his freedom, whatever threats Spanish Kit and his gang might use. And the lawless rascals were not likely to smother their movements long with a useless prisoner—and that prisoner the man who had been most active in hunting them down. Ere many days had passed—perhaps ere many hours had passed—Hudson Smedley's life would pay for it. Jimmy knew it—he felt it—and he was resolved that at least he would not be idle.

The night was fine; stars glimmered in the velvet sky of Alberta. Through the silence rang the steady staccato beat of Blazer's hoofs on the hard earth.

Like a black mass against the heavens, the vast structure of the Rockies shut out the stars to the west. But the foothills were nearer already. As the night grew old the ground rose under Blazer's hoofs, and the hoofs rang on outcropping rock.

Jimmy Silver did not mistake his trail. He had been long enough in the Canadian West to learn his way about on the plains. And this trail he had ridden more than once before. He knew the Gopher Creek well enough.

The creek, glimmering in the stars, was in sight at last—a slender stream trickling down from the hills to the plains below.

Jimmy Silver had to slacken speed now. Following the bank of the creek, he rode into the wide, rocky canyon of the foothills, the hoofs ringing sharp on the rocky soil.

From what Skitter Dick had told him, he knew where to find the spot where the outfit had been camped. Higher up in the hills, the creek was a torrent, leaping from level to level in cascades. Blazer dropped into a walk at last.

It was not yet dawn when Jimmy Silver dismounted and led Blazer by the bridle into the abandoned camp.

There were plenty of signs to show that this was the spot where the Windy River outfit had camped the night before.

The charred embers of the camp fire remained, and three or four empty beef tin glimmered in the starlight.

Jimmy Silver looked about him.

The silence of the foothills was broken only by a howl from a distant cañon, and the murmur of the tumbling waters of the torrent.

Somewhere in the hills—perhaps within two or three miles, perhaps fifty miles away—was the retreat of the rustlers. And the hard rocks bore no trail that could guide even a skilled hand of the Windy River outfit.

Now that he was on the spot alone in the silent immensity of the hills, Jimmy Silver realised more clearly the hopelessness of his attempt. But he did not regret the he had come.

He asked out Blazer on a patch of herbage by the water, and unrolled a blanket. He could hope to do nothing to dawn. And then he rolled himself in the blanket and lay down to get what rest he could before sunrise.

He did not expect to sleep, but, as

of last, before he had been in the tenderfoot five minutes, he was sleeping soundly.

His eyes opened on a sunny morning. Jimmy Silver sat up and tossed aside the blanket. The sun was high on the plains in the east. It was long past dawn.

The Hookwood junior rose to his feet. His first proceeding was to examine the revolver and make sure that it was in good working order. Then he ate a hasty breakfast from his wallet, washed down by clear, cold water from the stream.

"And now—" murmured Jimmy, staring around him.

He missed his chums sorely; but he was glad that he had told them nothing. He had no right to drag them into the perils of such a desperate enterprise. And they could scarcely have helped him. An open attack on the gang of rustlers, if they were found, would not have been practicable. Jimmy had formed no definite plans in his head. His only plan so far was to find Hudson Smalley, somehow, and help him if he could.

The great canyon, growing warmer now as the sun rose higher, stretched rocky and desolate, deserted and silent as if fresh from its creation. But for the remnants of the cowboys' camp at lunch, it would have seemed that no human foot had ever trodden these rocky fastnesses.

Jimmy Silver snatched Blazer at last, and mounted. There was no trail to follow—no clue to guide him—and he left the guidance in the horse. It occurred to him, too, that Blazer might scent out the neighbourhood of other horses, if the rustlers' camp was near. But as he rode up the canyon, his hope was slight. He realised that nothing but chance could help him. But it is the unexpected that happens; and as Jimmy Silver rode round a great bolging rock he almost rode into a horseman coming from the opposite direction.

"Cactus Bill!"

He recognised the man at once—one of the gang that had raided the Windy River Ranch during the absence of the outfit—Pamela Kiva's right-hand man. Jimmy Silver moved promptly. The astonished rustler was staring at him blankly, when Jimmy whipped up his revolver and levelled

"Put up your hands, Cactus Bill!"

"What, I say?" ejaculated Cactus.

Jimmy's eye twinkled broadly over the

revolver. The rustler stared at him and hesitated, and then his hands went up. He read the schoolboy's determination in his face. Jimmy Silver had taken his life into his hands, and he would not have hesitated to pull the trigger if the rustler had reached for a weapon.

Cactus Bill's hands went up over his Station hat.

"I guess you've got me fixed!" he remarked. "Where the thunder did you spring from, tenderfoot?"

"Where's Hudson Smalley?"

"Lookin' for him?" grinned Cactus.

"Yes."

"I guess you won't find him."

"He's alive!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Sure! I guess I wouldn't answer for his life to-morrow, but he's sure alive!"

Cactus Bill was watching the junior keenly, as he sat in the saddle on his halted horse. The grin on his face puzzled Jimmy a little.

"Get off that horse!" snapped Jimmy. "Mind, I mean business! Touch a gun and I'll put a bullet through you!"

"I guess you're spy for a tenderfoot," said Cactus. "I ain't taking chances. I've used you shoot."

He dismounted without attempting to touch the revolver in his belt, and raised his hands over his head again. The grin was still on his rugged, stubbly face.

"I'm going to tie your hands, Cactus Bill!" said Jimmy. "You know what to expect if you give trouble."

"Sure!"

Cactus Bill's glance passed Jimmy Silver. He seemed to be staring at something behind the junior. Jimmy almost turned his head; but he realised that if he took his eyes off his enemy the game was up. He realised, too, that this was probably a trick to divert his attention. If there was an enemy behind him he had to take his chance.

He slipped from Blazer's back, still keeping the muzzle of his revolver turned on Cactus Bill.

Whirl!

The loop of a lasso dropped on Blazer's back a moment after Jimmy had left the saddle. Had he been sitting Blazer he would have been roped in without a chance of escape. Cactus Bill's grin was explained now. There was another of the gang abroad in the canyon.

Jimmy gave a start as Blazer jumped under the blast from the rope.

Crack!

A rifle shot rang through the canyon, and the bullet smashed on the rock a foot from Jimmy's head. He sprang away, and as he did so Cactus Bill, no longer covered by the revolver, leaped on him like a tiger. Jimmy fired desperately, but the revolver was knocked aside, and the bullet sang away into the waters of the current. The next moment he was on the ground, struggling in desperation in the powerful grasp of the rustler.

CHAPTER 11

Among the Ravellers

"G. OF you fixed, I guess!"

There was no doubt that Jimmy Silver was "fixed."

He was stretched on his back on the rocks, with a brawny knee planted on his chest, the stubby, gripping face of Cactus Bill looking down on him.

The Rockwood junior had put up a fierce fight. But, sturdy as he was, he had no chance against the muscular rustler. He was down and out, grasping painfully for breath under the gripping knee.

The other outlaw, who had made the unsuccessful lasso cast, came up, colling his rope.

He glanced down at the helpless prisoner. He was a dark-skinned half-breed, as were most of Spanish Kn's gang.

"Hitch that rope on to his fins, Black Henri," said Cactus Bill. "I guess he wants lying up! Reglar calamouni. Keep still, you 'un!"

"Let me go, you rotten!" panted Jimmy. Cactus Bill laughed.

"I guess you're my mutton!" he remarked. "Hitch him up, Henri."

The half-breed grinned, and fastened the end of the rope to Jimmy Silver's wrists, securing them together. Then Cactus Bill removed his knee, and Jimmy staggered up.

"Keep on the look-out down the canyon!" Cactus Bill said to the breed. "There's Mounted Police at Mesquite, and I reckon we want to keep our eyes peeled."

Black Henri nodded, and went down the bank of the torrent, disappearing among the rocks.

"What's your game now?" muttered

Jimmy Silver, tying his capote sash. Cactus jerked on the rope.

"I guess I'm takin' you home," he jeered. "You'll feller me, savvy?"

He did not trouble to explain further, but mounted his horse, taking Blazer reins. As he staid on his way Jimmy Silver was forced to follow by the rope fast on his wrists.

His face was black and savage as he stumbled along over the rough rocks. This was the wretched end of his reckless enterprise, an end that he might have foreseen. He had, indeed, foreseen it among the possibilities, but it had not stopped him. Now it was too late. But even now Jimmy did not regret that he had left Wind River to look for Mr. Smedley. Hope died hard, it lasts while there is life. Jimmy Silver, enraged as he was by the trick fortune had served him, still hoped for the best.

He stumbled on after the horses, Cactus Bill every now and then turning a grinning glance back towards him.

On the way through the canyon they passed more than one member of the outlaw gang, who peered out of cover as the two rode by, and exchanged signs with them.

It was clear that the rustlers were keeping careful watch in their mountain lairs, and that the Mounted Police would not have an easy task in getting them cornered.

Indeed Jimmy felt something like despair at the thought of an attack on Spanish Kn's gang in the rocky, remote wilderness. The bleak hillsides, rugged and studded with boulders, forested with thickets, could have been held by a handful of men almost against an army. If the outlaws were desperate enough to resist—as Jimmy knew that they were—the toll of life would be heavy before Spanish Kn was brought to book.

Deeper into the untrodden wild Cactus rode, over rocky paths, where his horse had to pick a way, and Blazer to pick a way after him, with Jimmy Silver stumbling wearily behind at the end of the rope. Almost all sense of direction was lost to the Rockwood schoolboy now, though Cactus never seemed for a moment at a loss.

A rule-shot rang out in a patch of timber, and Cactus Bill started, and pulled in his horse with a savage exclamation.

There was a rustle of branches, and a lilted-limped half-breed stepped into view, and waved his hand.

"Oh, you!" said the rustler. "What are you having off for, Pequod? I guess there ain't any punchers so deep in the hills as this here!"

The half-breed pointed to the body of a bear that lay under the trees. Cactus nodded.

Jimmy Silver was staring hard at the breed.

The name of Pequod had struck on his ear. He had seen the man before. He remembered Pequod in Coutau, and his deep-set face, his cruel lips, and glittering black eyes.

The breed glanced at him carelessly, and then gave a start as he recognised the junior.

"You here?" he exclaimed.

"You seen the kid afore, Pequod?" asked Cactus Bill.

The half-breed smiled strangely.

"I have seen him. It was he who roped me in, and made me a prisoner at the Wundy River Ranch before I joined your crowd."

Jimmy looked fixedly at Pequod. Well he remembered the day when the breed, roped as Jimmy was now roped, was led away a prisoner at the tail of Trooper Bright's horse. He had been a savage enemy to the junior who had captured him, yet Jimmy had risked his life to save Pequod when the breed fell from a cliff in an attempt to escape. Pequod's eyes glittered strangely at him.

"You remember me, petit?" he said.

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Kim on!" rapped out Cactus Bill.

Jimmy stumbled on after the horses. Pequod, leaning on his rifle, stood looking after him, still with that strange expression on his coppery face.

Some faint hope had awakened for a moment in Jimmy's heart. He had saved the breed's life on his way to Red Deer and prison. Even a ruffian and desperado like Pequod in Coutau might have remembered it. But the hope died as soon as it rose. Jimmy wondered idly how Pequod had escaped from behind prison walls. He remembered having heard the breed tell Trooper Bright that there were no walls of stone or timber that could hold him, and the trooper had shrugged his shoulders and laughed. But it seemed that the breed was right, after all, for here he was, free as the trackless mountains.

"I guess we're close on home, tender-

foot," grinned Cactus Bill half an hour later.

From a rocky trail they turned into a deep valley, where a silvery stream glimmered in the sun. In the heart of the barren foothills the valley was a sheet of verdure, clothed in rich grass, with thick timber on the slopes about it. In the grass along the stream some scores of cattle and horses were lying or grazing—cattle that bore the brands of a dozen different ranches. A group of rough shacks stood near the stream, and five or six men were loafing or smoking about them. It was the camp of the rustlers, and Cactus Bill drew rein and dismounted as he reached the shacks.

CHAPTER 16.

The Sentence!

SPANISH KIT came out of one of the shacks, with a Mexican cheroot between his teeth.

He nodded to Cactus, and fixed his eyes upon Jimmy Silver.

"Where did you pick up the kid?"

"I guess he was arter us," said Cactus Bill, with a grin. "Looking for Boss Smedley."

The Mexican laughed.

There was a loud laugh from the rest of the gang as they gathered round to stare at Jimmy Silver. The schoolboy's face crimsoned.

"So you came to look for Boss Smedley?" asked the Mexican.

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"Well, you've found him. He's here."

The rustlers laughed again.

"I guess he got me covered with a six-shooter," said Cactus Bill, with a loud chortle. "I really reckon he'd have fixed me sure, but for Black Henri chippin' in. But I reckon I've got his shooter, and his horse, and him—if he's any good."

"It's a good horse, anyhow," grinned one of the rustlers.

"Sure!" assented Cactus.

Jimmy Silver felt a pang. Blazer was lost to him for good now, in the hands of this thievish gang. The Mexican signed to some of the men, and Jimmy Silver was placed against a tree near the shacks, and the lasso run round the trunks and secured there.

There was a cruel grin on the Mexican's swarthy face. Several times he passed his

and wore a severely bearded scar on his cheek.

"You remember this, niner!" he said, commanding it. "You gave it to me the night we attacked the ranch."

"I wish it had gone through your head," answered Jimmy Silver.

Spanish Kit laughed. But his laugh had a ring in it that sent a chill to Jimmy's heart.

"It was you who stopped the attack on the ranch, and held it till that fast Peters came up with the Sunset crowd," he said.

"I'm glad of it," said Jimmy.

"You came here to see your cousin, Boss Smudley. Well, you shall see him. He is here. Bring out the ransier, boys!"

Two of the rustlers entered a little shack, and reappeared, dragging out Hudson Kit.

The rancher's hands were bound behind him, and his legs were shackled so tight he could barely stumple along. He was bare-headed, and there was a cut on his forehead under the dark hair. But his bronzed face was stern and composed.

His lips quivered for a second at the sight of Jimmy Silver.

"You here, Jimmy?" he muttered.

"The nino came to hunt for you," grinned the Mexican. "He has found you."

"Jimmy! You should have stayed at the ranch! What in the name of thunder—"

The rancher broke off. Jimmy was paying dearly enough for his recklessness.

"You're a plucky lad, Jimmy," said Hudson Smudley. "But I guess you're in the soup now as well."

"Looks like it," said Jimmy Silver dismally. "I—I suppose I was rather on aw. But I couldn't help it. I thought I might be able to help—"

The mocking laugh of the Mexican broke in.

"Nothing could have happened better," he said. And he walked away, blowing snuff clouds of smoke from his cherner.

The two prisoners were left together. They were too securely bound to be able to help one another. At a little distance Spanish Kit and Cactus and several of the rustlers talked together in low tones.

"I guess it was my fault, Jimmy," said Hudson Smudley. "I let them rope me in. I reckon I didn't figure it out they were coming round our camp in the canyon. I was roped in and hagged nearly

enough. I've been here since. What are the boys doing?"

"The niffls came back at sunset yesterday," answered Jimmy. "Pete Peters sent off a man to the Mounted Police at Mesquite."

"They're at Mesquite already then?" The rancher's face lighted a little. "I guess they'll have this gang to rights before long."

"But you—" said Jimmy.

"You shouldn't have tried your luck, my boy," said the rancher kindly. "What did you think you could do? As for me—" He paused and shrugged his broad shoulders.

"They'll never dare—" muttered Jimmy, his heart beating.

"I guess I've got my ticket," answered Hudson Smudley coolly. "I'm not game long—after having them rope me in like a tenderfoot. They want ten thousand dollars' ransom, and they won't get it."

"But to save your life!" muttered Jimmy.

The rancher shook his head.

"Not to save a thousand lives, if I had them," he answered steadily. "I guess I'm not knocking under to a gang of rattle thieves! And who's to trust them? Spanish Kit's word to let me go after he's fingered the dollars? What's his word worth?"

"Nothing, I suppose," said Jimmy.

"Less than that! I reckon he would break faith. But, good or bad faith, he doesn't touch a dollar of mine, excepting what the sundrils grabbed from my pockets. There's one comfort—this game won't last long in Canada. Spanish Kit founds he's back in Mexico or Texas by this time, but he's making a mistake. It won't be weeks before the rope's round his thievish neck."

Jimmy Silver nodded, but his heart was heavy. He was of the rancher's opinion—the gang of rustlers would be rounded up and exterminated by the Mounted Police sooner or later. Canada was not Texas or Mexico. That outbreak of savage ruffianism would be stamped out. But that would not come in time to save the life of Hudson Smudley.

Spanish Kit, his discussion with his comrades finished, came over to the prisoners, and set on a log near a tree, his cherner in his teeth. He grinned as he met the rancher's grim stare glance.



"Put up your hands, Cactus Bill!" snapped Jimmy. He looked steadily along the revolver, and the outlaw after a moment's hesitation raised his arms. But behind Jimmy crept a silent figure, with a lasso.

"I guess I've got all fixed for you to write the draft on Red Deer for ten thousand dollars, Hudson Smedley," he remarked.

"I've given you my answer."

"I guess I'm waiting for another."

"I gave you my answer with a rifle held to my head," said the rancher quietly. "I'm not changing it."

"But matters are altered now, since the senorito has visited us," said the Mexican. "You will write out the draft in half an hour."

The rancher gave a shrug, but no other answer.

"Otherwise," continued Spanish Kit, "here is the revolver that will send a bullet through your brain—in the hand of the senorito."

Jimmy Silver started convulsively.

"You villain!" he gasped. "You dare to think—you fancy that I would—"

The Mexican laughed his cruel laugh.

"Si, senorito, si! I think you will when a red-hot branding-iron is touching your skin," he answered. "How's that, Hudson Smedley?"

The rancher did not speak.

"Thirty minutes!" said the Mexican; and he strolled away again, still blowing out little clouds of blue smoke.

Jimmy Silver and the rancher were left alone again. They did not speak. There was nothing to say. But the face of Hudson Smedley was grimmer and harder than before, and Jimmy Silver's face pale with horror. One of the breeds walked over to a half-extinct camp-fire and stirred its embers together with his boot. As the embers glowed he thrust into them a branding-iron such as is used for marking cattle at the round-up.

Then the rancher broke silence at last.

"You'll do it, Jimmy."

"Never!" said Jimmy Silver huskily.

"You'll do it. It won't be your act, but his. What does it matter whose finger touches the trigger?"

"I never will!"

"You will!" said the rancher quietly.

"You cannot force the branding-iron, Jimmy, boy, and that demon means every word he says. Jimmy, for your sake I'd pay the ransom, if the brute meant to keep faith. But he does not. There would be the same to face again—I know it. The circumstance, and that wounded ten thousand dollars, return. You wounded him in the

leg the ranch the other night—he's told me so. He was already planning another raid to get you. This is his revenge. Jimmy, you'll pull the trigger when you're told, and keep safe from the branding-iron. It's my last demand to you, my boy."

Jimmy Silver did not answer.

His heart was sick within him.

There was no hope of reason—none. Long, long miles of barren rock and trackless hill lay between the premises and their friends, with watch and ward kept by sharp eyes. There was no logic of reason, and Hudson Smedley was doctored! But Jimmy Silver vowed passionately, silently, that he would not carry out the Mexican's savage purpose, though his flesh thrilled with horror as his eyes turned upon the branding-iron, beginning to glow red in the embers of the fire.

CHAPTER 17.

Shot Down!

SPANISH KIT snarled back towards the spot, a smile on his dusky face. His swarthy finger ran along the scar on his cheek. The savage outlaw was enjoying the situation, but the same could not be said of his followers. Cactus Bill's stubble face was gloomy and angry, and the other white men in the gang showed by their looks how strongly they disapproved.

They were brutal and ruffianly fellows, but they lacked the Southern ferocity of their leader. The blood of half a dozen races ran in the veins of Spanish Kit—Mexican, Indian, negro—and his nature was drawn from the worst of each. Lush as a tiger, handsome in a bold, theatrical way, the outlaw was little more than a wild beast within.

Even the "breds" in the camp, with the blood of Blackfoot and Sioux in them, looked gloomy. Spanish Kit was the only one that enjoyed the situation. But he was the captain of the wild gang, and his word was law in the camp in the heart of the foothills. Even Cactus Bill, reckless ruffian as he was, did not venture to dispute the will of the Mexican.

"You have decided, amigo?" asked Spanish Kit as he lounged up and took a shiver from his teeth.

"I've given you my answer," said Hud-

son Smedley. The rancher's malignant face was grim, but steady and composed.

"And it is still a 'No 'T'!"

"Sure!"

The Mexican's black eyes blazed for a moment.

"Let it be so, then," he drawled. "Count the remainder of your life in minutes, Hudson Smedley."

"I guess I'm ready!"

The Mexican freed Jimmy Silver's right arm, fastening the lasso so that the junior's left arm and the rest of his person remained tightly secured to the tree.

"And you are ready also, nino?" he asked.

"Never!"

"We shall see! Cactus Bill, bring the branding-iron. It is hot!"

Cactus did not stir.

"You hear me?" shouted Spanish Kit.

"I hear you," answered the ruffian sulkily. "Do your dirty work yourself! I'll have no hand in it!"

Again Spanish Kit's eyes blazed, but he laughed. Crossing over to the fire he took hold of the handle of the branding-iron and drew it from the embers.

The iron glowed a dull red in the sunshine.

From a short distance the outlaws looked on, gloomy and sullen. Cactus Bill made a movement, as if he would have intervened, but he checked himself. It was easy to see that the whole gang went in fear of the Mexican.

Spanish Kit approached the tree with the hot iron glowing in his hand. Cactus called out hoarsely:

"Kit! Let up on it!"

The Mexican did not seem to hear. He drew nearer to Jimmy Silver, and the heat of the iron scorched the boy's face.

Jimmy's was as white as a chalk.

Hudson Smedley stood like a rock, bound and powerless, but unconquered. His face was set, but there was no sign of fear in it.

"Jimmy, you'll do as I've said!"

"I can't!"

"You can't help me, boy! If you do not pull the trigger, another will," said the rancher. "Save yourself! I order you, Jimmy!"

With his left hand the Mexican took the revolver from his belt, and held it by the barrel towards Jimmy.

Jimmy Silver felt his brain swim. The

horror of the glowing iron so close to his face almost overcame him.

His grip closed on the revolver, and the Mexican grinned.

"There is still time, Hudson Smedley," he said in his soft, silky voice. "The draft waits to be signed."

The rancher did not speak.

"For the last time!"

No reply.

"Shoot, then!" shouted the Mexican, his whole dusky face blazing with passion. "Shoot! Do you hear, or—"

Jimmy Silver gripped the revolver convulsively. He turned a haggard glance round him.

"Shoot!" shouted the Mexican, and he made a threatening movement with the branding-iron.

Crack!

Jimmy Silver pulled the trigger.

But it was not at Hudson Smedley that he fired.

At the last moment he swung the revolver round full in the savage, dusky face of the Mexican. That desperate thought had risen in his mind as soon as his fingers grasped the butt. It might not be in time to save him from the hot iron; but the Mexican, in his rage, had given the boy the chance, and he used it.

Crack!

Right in the savage face of the outlaw the revolver cracked, and Spanish Kit gave a fearful cry and staggered back.

Every nerve in Jimmy's body quivered from the touch of the hot iron; but it did not touch him. Within an inch of his face it dropped from the Mexican's nerveless hand.

There was a shout from the rustlers, and they ran forward in a bunch.

Spanish Kit sprawled in the grass with a red gush along his cheek where the bullet had ploughed deeply.

The blood streamed down his dusky skin, and his eyes were like the eyes of a wild beast.

But the revolver was still in Jimmy Silver's hand, and the raiders could not reach him for a few seconds. Those seconds were his to use to save himself from death by torture. Crack, crack! rang the revolver twice again before Cactus Bill reached him and struck the weapon from his hand. And both bullets struck the savage Mexican as he rolled in the grass.

"By thunder!"

The revolver was struck from Jimmy's hand. Cactus Bill picked it from the grass, and for a moment seemed about to turn it on the prisoner. But he held his hand, and sprang towards the Mexican instead.

Spanish Kit lay still in the grass.

"By thunder, he's out!"

Jimmy Silver heard the words with a racing brain. He shut his eyes so that he should not see the Mexican lying before him.

But he opened them again. The Mexican was stirring feebly. He was not dead.

Once his black, gleaming eyes opened a little, and he muttered something in Spanish, too faint to be heard. Then he sank back insensible.

Hudson Smalley looked down on him grimly. He felt none of the emotion of the schoolboy. His burned face was grim and hard.

"Well done, Jimmy!" he said between his teeth.

Cactus Bill, bending over the Mexican, bared his wounds and examined them. One of the riders fetched water from the stream.

Spanish Kit lay like a log.

"I guess this will be a close call," said Cactus. "He ain't out. He's got the lives of a cat, I reckon. One in the shoulder, one in the chest, and a gash along his face. By thunder, Spanish Kit has got it at last!"

"Ho—ho is not dead!" panted Jimmy.

Cactus glanced round at him.

"No thanks to you if he ain't," he snapped. "I guess you will pay for this when Kit comes round!"

"It was his own doing!" said Jimmy resolutely.

"Lead me a hand with him, you 'uns," said Cactus Bill, and the Mexican was lifted and carried into his shack.

Two or three of the rustlers hustled Hudson Smalley back into the shack from which he had been taken. He disappeared from Jimmy Silver's sight.

Round the Mexican's shack most of the rustlers had gathered, muttering in low tones. Cactus Bill was with the sorely-wounded man. In the grass at Jimmy Silver's feet the branding-iron lay cooling.

Cactus Bill emerged at last.

"I guess it will be a close call," he said. "I've done what I can. He may come round by this morning, but I guess he will

be laid up for some weeks if he pulls through."

"And the Mounted Police at Mesquite!" growled one of the rustlers. "What are you going to do with the tenderfoot?"

"Leave that to Kit!"

Cactus Bill crossed over to the tree. Jimmy Silver's right arm was still free, and the rustler secured it carefully. He did not speak, and Jimmy did not open his lips. As the long hours of the day wore on, Jimmy Silver remained bound to the tree, unheeded by the gang, and from the Mexican's shack there came to his ears at intervals the wild mutterings of a man fevered.

CHAPTER 15.

A Friend Among Foes!

NIGHT fell on the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

The long, long day was ended at last. How he had got through that terrible day Jimmy Silver hardly knew.

He remained bound to the tree, aching and dizzy, the rustlers taking no heed of him. All through the sunny hours there came at intervals sounds of delicious babbling from the Mexican's shack. Jimmy Silver ceased to heed it at last.

If the Mexican came to his senses, Jimmy could guess what his first order would be. But until Spanish Kit was able to deal with the prisoners they were left alone. How from his delirious mutterings it did not seem likely that the Mexican would come to his senses soon. Life was flickering in his wiry frame. He might lay for days in the same state, even if he pulled through. Jimmy Silver hoped that he would pull through. It was terrible to think of having the life even of that ruthless desperado on his hands. But he could not swear that he had won a respite from torture and death, even at the cost of the rustler's lawless life, if it came to that.

And soon he ceased to think of it as he leaned wearily on the tree in the last sunshine of the valley. The approach of night was an unspeakable relief to him with the shade and coolness it brought.

Some of the rustlers came and went. Once he noted a couple of the gang driving steers into the valley, evidently stolen from some outlying band on one of the ranges. The man, Black Horse, came in from the

gules and spoke to Cactus Bill, and then departed again to keep his watch. It was in the sunset that the little figure of Pequod le Contreau came lounging in.

Jimmy's glance turned on him dully.

The half-breed stopped and stared at the bound figure at the tree. Again that strange look came over his coppery face.

After a long stare at the boy, Pequod crossed over to where Cactus Bill was sitting smoking on a log outside the Mexican's shack.

Jimmy saw them talking together, and guessed that Cactus was telling the half-breed what had happened at the outlaw camp.

Several times Pequod glanced round at Jimmy while Cactus was speaking. But the schoolboy hardly heeded him. He was worn out with that aching day.

The half-breed spoke in a low tone, and Cactus Bill gave a careless nod. His reply, spoken more loudly, reached Jimmy Silver's ears.

"Just as you like! I guess it makes no difference. Spanish Kit will fix him dead when he comes to."

Pequod lounged over to the tree.

He did not speak, but he proceeded to unfasten the lasso that bound Jimmy's wrists, and the schoolboy staggered away from the trunk. His limbs were so stiff that he staggered and fell, and one or two of the riders laughed.

"Get up, you young fool!" growled Pequod roughly. "Do you think I am going to carry you, *petit*?"

If Jimmy had hoped anything from the half-breed, that savage growl would have destroyed his hope. This was the man for whom Jimmy had descended on a rope into a raging torrent—his enemy, whose life he had saved. But the half-breed only seemed to remember that he was his enemy, and did not care to remember the rest.

"Get up!" he growled again.

But poor Jimmy could not move for some minutes; he was too stiff and numb.

Pequod le Contreau stooped, seized him by the collar, and dragged him roughly to his feet. Jimmy uttered a faint cry.

"Get into that shack!" growled the half-breed.

He pointed to one of the rough shacks, built of roughly-hewed timber and branches, that stood empty. Jimmy staggered towards it. He had not realised until then how utterly he was worn out.

The half-breed picked up a quirt, and made the thong ring and crack in the air.

"Get moving, or—"

"Go easy, Pequod!" called out Cactus Bill from the log. "Use him for it to-morrow! Leave him alone with that whip."

"Mordieu! I have not forgotten that he roped me in in these very hills, and handed me over to the troopers!" snarled Pequod.

And as Jimmy almost interred towards the shack the half-breed cracked the whip round his legs.

Jimmy turned on him with blazing eyes. Pequod le Contreau laughed roughly, grasped him by the shoulder, and dragged him into the shack.

There he flung him on the earthen floor and proceeded to bind him again hand and foot.

Cactus Bill lounged across and stood looking in at the opening that formed a doorway to the shack.

"Make the young idiot safe, Pequod," he said. "There'll be thunder to pay if Spanish Kit doesn't find him here when he comes to. I guess there would be some shooting if that young guy got away."

Pequod laughed.

"Leave that to me, *Pami*," he answered.

"Do you think I have forgotten that he handed me over to the troopers? To-morrow, when the chief gives the order, it is I who will handle the branding-iron."

"You're the sort of sneaking coyote that would!" said Cactus Bill, and he lounged away.

The half-breed glanced after him, his dark lips curling in a sneer. He finished binding Jimmy Silver securely enough; but Jimmy could not help noticing that the ropes no longer galled his aching limbs. And his hands, though well secured, were left free enough for him to move them. Pequod left the shack, and Jimmy was left lying on the floor, wondering. Brutally as the man had handled him, he had been merciful; and it was to Pequod, too, that he owed his release from the tree. The relief of lying down and resting was delicious.

Jimmy's heart beat as he reflected.

Was it possible that some trace of gratitude for a service rendered lingered in the outcast's savage heart? If not, why had he taken any trouble about the prisoner at all?

Was the brutality he had shown assumed to double the shame upon the masters?

Pegaud was evidently a new member of the gang, and perhaps not fully trusted.

In a few minutes the half-breed returned. He carried a lump of corn-cake and a tin pailful of water.

Jimmy's eyes glistened. Food or drink had not passed his lips since he had fallen into the hands of the rustlers.

He took the pailful in his shakled hands and drank the water. The half-breed watched him. Then the junior started on the corn-cake. It was stale and hard, but it seemed delicious to the hungry boy.

"Thank you!" he said at last.

"For nothing," said the half-breed. "It is to keep you alive till Spanish Kit can deal with you. If you had remained bound to the tree you might have been dead in the morning."

"I guess that's so," said Cactus Bill, looking in at the opening. "You've made him safe, Pegaud?"

"Look!" snapped the half-breed.

"I guess I ain't taking any risks with him. I don't want Spanish Kit arguing with me in the morning," grinned Cactus. "He's too darned sudden on the shoot."

The ruffian stooped over Jimmy Silver and examined every knot in the rope carefully. He nodded, satisfied.

"I calculate he won't get out of that!" he said, and he lounged back to the log by the Mexican's shack and refilled his pipe.

Pegaud bent over the junior and seemed to make a final examination of the ropes. Through the opening of the shack he was visible to the rustlers.

But as he fumbled with the rope, he spoke in a low whisper that could only reach Jimmy Silver's ear.

"Be careful! Not a word—listen."

Jimmy lay breathless, silent.

"I have not forgotten, *petit*," went on the breed, in the same barely audible whisper, "you saved my life when I would have killed you. Did I not tell you that Pegaud le Couteau would not forget?"

Jimmy Silver gazed at him in silence, his heart thumping. Was it possible, after all, that he had a friend to help him in the midst of this gang of savage outcasts, and that friend the most savage of the whole crew?

"You savvy?" muttered the breed. "If they suspect—if they half-suspect—I am a dead man! If I abuse you, *mon petit*,

it is so that they shall not suspect. You understand?"

"Yes!" breathed Jimmy Silver.

"I can do nothing now. But in the night—when the camp is sleeping, I shall be on the watch. I will save you, *mon petit*, as you saved me, or else this is the last night on earth for Pegaud. Now they believe that I am your bitter enemy—and it is safe! Not a word. Sleep if you can; I shall wake you when the time comes."

He left the shack hurriedly, without waiting for Jimmy Silver to whisper a reply.

Jimmy Silver felt his brain in a whirl. That day, long ago, on the trail to Red Deer, he had risked his life to save the desperate outcast, never dreaming that a day might come when Pegaud would stand between him and a terrible death in his turn—never dreaming that what he did would make any impression on the breed's savage heart. But a good deed is never wasted; he had cast his bread upon the waters, and it had returned after many days!

There was hope now in Jimmy's heart. Darkness fell on the outlaw camp, and a fire blazed and gleamed among the shacks. The delirious mutterings of the Mexican were still; the wounded man had sunk into repose at last. One by one the outlaws rolled themselves in their blankets round the camp-fire, or went to sleep in the shacks.

But no sleep came to Jimmy Silver. In the darkness he watched and waited—waited with beating heart and sleepless eyes as the outlaw camp sank into silence.

CHAPTER 15.

With the Mounted Police

"**W**E'RE going!" said Arthur Edward Lovell emphatically.

"We jolly well are!" said Raby.

And Newcome nodded.

There was a bustle and bustle at the Windy River Ranch that sunny morning. Soon after sun-up a troop of the Mounted Police had ridden in from Mesquite—a dozen brawny troopers. Their splendid horses were tethered by the corral, and the troopers, on the benches outside the cook-house, were breakfasting. Keeping Baldy, the cook, very busy.

Sergeant Kerr, who was in command of the detachment, was talking with Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch. Lovell and Baby and Newcome were looking on—and thinking of their absent chum, Jimmy Silver. Half a dozen of the Windy River outfit were preparing to ride with the troopers on the trail of the rustlers, and the three Rookwooders had taken out their horses with the intention of accompanying the party. Pete Peters had shaken his head when Lovell mentioned the matter.

"I guess tenderfoot would only be in the way," he said.

Lovell nearly said "Rats!" in reply, but, fortunately, restrained himself.

"We're going!" he repeated to his chums. "Jimmy's gone, like an ass, and we're going after him."

The Rookwood chums were quite determined on that.

Sergeant Kerr rose from the bench, his breakfast finished. Then Arthur Edward Lovell came up to him.

"We want to come, sergeant," he said.

The sergeant shook his head, just as Mr. Peters had done. Apparently he, too, was under the impression that the tenderfoot would be in the way.

Lovell looked dogged.

"You see, our pet Jimmy went after the rustlers last night," he explained.

"Mr. Peters has told me. I guess it's to be hoped that he never found them," said the sergeant dryly.

"They've got his cousin, Mr. Smedley, a prisoner," said Lovell. "That's why Jimmy went. Of course, he was rather an ass to go alone."

"Sure!" assented the sergeant.

"He ought to have told us, and we'd have gone with him," said Baby.

Sergeant Kerr glanced.

"That would mean four missing instead of one," he said. "You tenderfoot are safer on the ranch."

"Only we don't specially want to be safe," said Newcome warmly. "If Jimmy's got into danger, we're going to help to get him out."

"Can't you leave it to us?" asked the sergeant, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Well, we want to be in it," said Lovell.

"You're taking some of the cowpunchers. Take us, too."

The sergeant shook his head again.

"Look here, my lads," he said, "this is going to be rough work. There'll be

shooting before we've finished with Spanish Kit and his gang. They've got hold of Mr. Smedley, and most likely they've got young Silver by this time. We may be days on the trail—perhaps weeks; we're going to scout the foothills far that gang till we find them. You'd be hospital cases long before we got through. So drop it."

And with that the burly sergeant turned away to his horse.

"Check!" said Lovell.

Fortunately, the sergeant did not hear the remark.

At the word of command the troopers mounted. Skitter Dick and Spike Thompson and four more of the Windy River outfit mounted to ride with them.

With a jingling of bridles and a clattering of hoofs the party rode out on the western trail towards the blue line of the foothills, beyond which rose in the far distance the mighty range of the Rocky Mountains.

"Come on!" said Lovell.

"What ho!"

The three Rookwood juniors mounted, too.

"Stop that, you young guys!" shouted Pete Peters wrathfully. "Didn't you hear the sergeant tell you to hang on?"

"Rats!"

Lovell said "Rats!" at last. It was all he had to say to the excited and indignant Mr. Peters.

The three Rookwooders rode away at a gallop, leaving the ranch foreman staring after them. If Mr. Peters had had a briar in hand at that moment Lovell would probably have been jerked out of his saddle before he got out of reach of the rope.

As it was, the three juniors rode away cheerfully, leaving Mr. Peters to stare and to shrug his shoulders.

They galloped on the track of the Canadian troopers, and came up with the party a quarter of a mile from the ranch.

"I guess you 'uns will be sent back," said Skitter Dick, with a grin, as the Rookwooders joined the cowpunchers.

"Guess again!" said Lovell. "We're coming, anyhow!"

Lovell & Co. rode with the cowpunchers. Sergeant Kerr, riding with the troopers, gave them one glance and smiled slightly, and then bestowed upon them no further attention. It was probable that the

sergeant considered that Lovell & Co.

would stop out of their own accord when the fatigues of the trail began to tell upon them.

But the chums of Rookwood were resolute.

Mile after mile vanished under the clattering hoofs as the sun rose higher and higher in a cloudless sky.

Before noon the troopers rode into the foothills, and the rocks and pines of Gopher Creek Canyon afforded a welcome shade from the blaze of the sun.

"This is where the boss was roped in by the rustlers somewhere about here," Skitter Dick told the juniors.

"And this is where Jimmy came to look for him," said Lovell.

"I guess we may come on him wondering about if the rustlers haven't got him," said Skitter Dick.

The troopers camped in the canyon.

They shared the midday meal of the cow punchers, while the more skilled of the party were hunting for "sign."

"Sign" was found along the banks of the stream of the canyon, and the party took the trail again in the afternoon, the juniors, at least, feeling hopeful. But it did not take them long to discover that Sergeant Kerr was at a loss.

Somewhere in the foothills the rustlers had their camp, to which stolen cattle were driven after raids on the ranches. But hard rocks and gravel gave little sign that even the most experienced trail rider could pick up.

Deeper and deeper into the foothills the troopers rode, but it was almost at a snail's pace, and more than once Lovell & Co. fancied that they were returning on their own tracks.

The high hope with which the juniors had started had faded away by the time the sun was sinking beyond the peaks of the Rockies.

They were tired by the day in the saddle, but they were determined to take no heed of fatigue until they had found their chum. But it was borne in upon their minds that the sergeant's warning was well founded; the trail was likely to be a long one, extending, perhaps, over weary weeks among the rocky foothills.

"But we're not giving in!" said Lovell when the party camped at last at night-fall.

"No jolly fear!" said Raby.

"Not till we find Jimmy, anyhow!" said Newcombe. "We can stick it out as long as these chaps do."

"You bet!"

But the Rookwood chums were very glad to roll themselves in their blankets after a cold supper. The night was cold in the hills, but there was no campfire. The light of a fire would have given warning to any lurking outlaw on the watch for an enemy.

To the hardy troopers, and the equally hardy cowpunchers, it was all in the day's work. But it was likely to tell upon the schoolboys from the Old Country. They awoke in the night and shivered, and wrapped their blankets round them more closely, and slept again; but they found it difficult to drag themselves from their blankets when the camp turned out at the first glimmer of dawn.

"You kids feel-up!" asked Sergeant Kerr, as Lovell & Co. rubbed their eyes and stretched their tired limbs.

"No fear!" answered Lovell promptly.

"You'd better ride home."

Lovell grunted.

"I can put you on the right trail for the ranch," said the sergeant. "Another day of it will knock you up."

"We're not made of pussy at Rookwood!" said Lovell sarcastically. "If you turn us out, sergeant, we shall keep on, on our own, and look for Jimmy Silver."

The sergeant shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Stick to it, then," he said.

And Lovell & Co. stuck to it manfully.

CHAPTER 26.

A Friend in Need!

JIMMY SILVER stirred uneasily. The night was dark in the valley, in the heart of the foothills, the darkness broken only by the glimmer of the stars overhead.

All was silent in the camp of the outlaws.

In the group of rough shacks the rustlers were sleeping, save for the member of the gang who was keeping watch.

Jimmy Silver lay in a little shack,

on the hard earth, with ropes on his limbs—a prisoner.

In another shack near at hand he knew Hudson Smedley lay, bound hand and foot.

Jimmy had rolled to the opening that served as a doorway of the shack, and lay looking out at the camp.

The camp-fire had burned low, almost extinct. Around it he could dimly make out the figures of three or four of the rustlers rolled in dirty blankets, their feet in the dying fire. The rest of the gang were in the shacks.

From the surrounding darkness came faint sounds that told of the neighbourhood of horses and cattle. In that hidden valley in the untrodden recesses of the Alberta foothills the plunder of the ranches had been gathered, concealed from all eyes until the cattle-thieves could dispose of it. Jimmy thought of his own horse, Blazer, somewhere among the stolen animals.

A figure moved in the dim starlight. It was that of the outlaw on guard. Jimmy saw him dimly—a rough figure in a Stetson hat, with a rifle sloped under his arm.

Where was Pequod?

All Jimmy Silver's hopes were centred on the half-breed, Pequod by Cactus, the desperado whose life he had saved, and who had not forgotten. In that gang of law-breakers he had one friend—one of the most desperate, as he knew—a man whose life had been a series of crimes. But somewhere in Pequod's hard heart was a spark of good, and he had not forgotten how Jimmy Silver had dragged him from the torrent long ago. But it was long past midnight now, and Pequod had not come.

There was a sound in the stillness of the camp—the sound of a low groan. It came from the shack occupied by Spanish Kit.

Through half the night Jimmy had heard him babbling deliriously. The groan was repeated, and a figure stirred by the fire. Jimmy made out the burly form of Cactus Bill.

Cactus crossed over to the Mexican's shack and stooped his head and entered it.

"Agua! Agua!"

In the silence the faint voice of the Mexican came across the intervening

space to Jimmy Silver's ears. The delirium had passed. Spanish Kit was himself again, but the voice sounded low and weak. He spoke, unconsciously, in his own language.

"I guess you'll have to say it agin, boss!" said the rough voice of Cactus Bill.

"Water!"

"Sure!" said Cactus.

He came out and filled a tin pansikin at the stream, and returned to the Mexican's shack.

Jimmy's heart was sinking.

As yet Pequod had not been able to aid him—or had the breed forgotten his promise, scared by the terrible danger from his associates if they discovered him? And now Spanish Kit had come to his senses.

Jimmy listened.

The voice of the Mexican, faint and low as it was, reached his ears again in the stillness.

"The prisoners—they are safe?"

"Sure, boss."

"The boy—the boy who fired our me—"

"I guess he's safe—roped up head and foot," said Cactus.

"Look, and make sure!"

"I guess he's all O.K."

"Look, I tell you!" snapped the Mexican. "If he escapes before I can deal with him, lives will answer for it."

"I guess I'll take a peep, boss."

Jimmy Silver rolled back hastily from the opening, and closed his eyes as the heavy tread of the outlaw approached the shack. Cactus Bill entered and struck a match.

The glimmer of light showed Jimmy Silver lying bound on the floor, apparently asleep.

The rustler bent over him and felt the knots of the rope with his fingers. Jimmy Silver opened his eyes.

"What's that?" he muttered drowsily.

Cactus Bill did not take the trouble to reply. He left the shack and returned to the Mexican.

"He's all right, boss."

"Muy bien! I shall sleep now."

"Good!"

Cactus Bill returned to his blankets by the dying fire, and his deep snore soon showed that he was sleeping.

From the Mexican's shack there came

a groan, now and then, and it was followed by silence. Spanish Kit was sleeping.

Jimmy rolled back to the opening, and looked out with almost despairing eyes into the dim starlight. Had Pequod forgotten his promise? If the half-breed failed him it was the end of all things for him, as he knew only too well. With the dawn would come the vengeance of the Mexican upon the schoolboy who had shot him down.

The dim figure of the outlaw on guard moved into view again and stopped at Jimmy's shack.

"You are awake?"

It was a faint whisper, and it thrilled Jimmy Silver—for it was the voice of Pequod le Contreau.

The sentinel was the breed! Pequod silent and swift, entered the shack.

"I'm awake!" breathed Jimmy Silver.

"Silence—on your life! It is death to both of us if they find out!"

"I know!" whispered Jimmy.

A keen knife glided over the ropes. The fragments of cut rope fell away, and Jimmy Silver was free.

He ran to his feet and clasped his hands. His heart was beating hard. In the darkness of the interior of the shack he could scarcely see the half-breed, but he caught the glimmer of Pequod's eyes.

"I have the horses ready!" breathed Pequod. "It was not easy, but I have cut out two and saddled them. They are hidden in the pines yonder."

"And you—"

The half-breed laughed softly.

"I must ride with you, mon petit. They will know that it was the man on guard who released you. We must be far away by dawn."

"My cousin—"

The half-breed gave a shrug.

"Don't Smedley is nothing to me. I did not bargain to save him. Come! There is no time to lose." He grasped the junior's arm.

Jimmy Silver held back.

"I can't go without Mr. Smedley. They will kill him—Spanish Kit intends his death. You know that!"

"I know."

"I can't go without him."

The breed muttered a savage exclamation, his eyes glowering like a cat's in the gloom.

"I tell you I will risk nothing for Don Smedley. It was he that handed me over to the police at the ranch. Let him die!"

Jimmy shook his arm free.

"You've helped me," he said. "Save yourself now, Pequod! You've done more than I should ever have hoped. Save yourself now, and leave me to take my chance. I cannot go without Mr. Smedley."

"Oh, you are a fool—a fool!" breathed the half-breed. "If Spanish Kit awakens again he may send to see that you are safe. At any moment—all may be lost!"

"Leave me to it!"

A muttered exclamation was the only reply.

"Help me to save my cousin, then," whispered Jimmy. "Mr. Smedley is rich. He will reward you."

"Bah! I am not selling my comrades for money!" growled the half-breed sulkily.

Jimmy Silver was silent. Even that desperate outcast had his point of honour.

"But you will not stir without him?" muttered Pequod.

"I cannot."

"If it were not for giving the alarm, I would force you to it," said the half-breed in a savage whisper. "But I will save you, as you saved me, and if you will not go without him, I will do my best. Wait here for me, in silence."

The half-breed glided silently from the shack.

CHAPTER 21.

Hunted!

JIMMY SILVER waited.

He could not distrust the breed, who was risking his life to save him.

But his ally was as savage, so desperate an outcast, that the Rockwood junior was full of uneasiness.

But he could do nothing but wait as Pequod had bidden him.

The minutes passed on leaden wings.

Once or twice Jimmy thought that, in the stillness, he caught a faint sound of whispering from the next shack. But he could not be sure. In the gloom he could not even be certain that Pequod le Contreau had entered the shack where the rancher lay a bound prisoner.

His heart beat painfully as he waited. One of the sleepers by the fire stirred and rolled over, dragging his blanket about

him, and Jimmy felt his heart jump. Not the man settled down to sleep again.

"Jimmy!"

It was a whisper at last, and in the voice of Hudson Smudley. The breed's dusky hand gripped Jimmy's arm, and drew him out of the shack.

"Cousin Smudley!" breathed Jimmy.

"I'm here!"

The rancher's bony figure loomed up in the shadow between the two shacks. Pequod whispered:

"Follow me, and not a sound."

His dark form glided away, and the rancher and Jimmy Silver followed him.

Pequod led them down the bank of the stream.

He plunged knee-deep in the shallow water by the bank without hesitation, and held on down the course of the stream. Without hesitation Jimmy and the rancher followed him into the water.

It struck icy-cold to Jimmy's limbs, but he hardly noted it. He understood why Pequod had taken to the stream. The slapping bank hid them from the camp as they crept away, and they stooped low over the water as they crept.

The thumping of Jimmy Silver's heart was painful as he crept along the sandy bed of the stream, the icy waters swirling round his knees—here and there splashing round his waist as he stepped into a hollow. There was no sound of alarm from the camp. But for the fact that Pequod had been the man on guard, the escape would have been impossible. Even now, if one of the rustlers should awaken and look about him the sentry would be missed. In the swishing, murmuring water, treading on soft sand, it was impossible to hurry, but every second seemed an hour to Jimmy Silver.

Farther and farther they went, down the stream with the murmuring current, and still there was no sound of an alarm behind.

The half-breed stopped at last, and held up his hand.

"Prenez garde! Careful here!"

He clambered through bushes up the bank, and Jimmy Silver and Hudson Smudley followed, and found themselves in a clump of pines. Pequod, with a gesture, indicated a spot of glowing red in the distance—it was the last glow of the

dying camp-fire, and looked very distant in the surrounding gloom.

There was a rustling movement in the pines, and Jimmy made out the forms of two horses tethered there. There was a faint whinny, and a soft muzzle snuggled under his arm.

"Blazer!" whispered Jimmy, rubbing his favorite's neck.

"It is your horse," said the breed. "I got him for you, and another for myself; but now there are three of us. We cannot delay to get another. I shall go ahead. Mount!"

"But—"

"Silence, and follow!"

The half-breed was leader, and the others mounted. Jimmy Silver mounted Blazer, and the rancher the other animal. Pequod took the bridles to lead them.

Leaving the clump of pines between them and the camp of the outlaws, they moved away along the stream for a short distance. Then the breed turned away from the water. The darkness hid all but dim shapes of mountains from Jimmy Silver's eyes; but Pequod did not pause for a moment.

He broke into a rapid trot, and the horses were put to a trot to keep pace with him.

There was rich grass under the animal's hoofs now. The hoof-strokes made little sound. From the night came an echo of hoofs, and Jimmy started and listened.

"Only the cattle!" said the breed. "There are many here."

Two or three dim shapes loomed past the fugitives in the gloom—across they had disturbed from grassy couches in their passage.

The red point of the distant camp-fire was long out of sight. Only the brooding night, the silent hills, surrounded them.

Hudson Smudley spoke at last.

"This isn't the way down to the plains, Pequod."

Jimmy started, and looked sharply at the half-breed in the gloom. Pequod shrugged his shoulders.

"The trail to the plains is watched," he said. "Black Henri and three others are posted to watch for the trouper."

"Then where are we going?"

"Into the hills."

"I guess you're kinda of this outfit."

Pequod," said the rancher. "We follow your lead!"

"Silence!" hissed the half-breed suddenly.

He threw his rifle forward. A shadowy form loomed up ahead.

"Halt!"

The sharp voice rang in the gloom.

Jimmy Silver obeyed Pequod's swift gesture, and drew in his horse. It was one of the rangers ahead. Watch was kept in more than one point in the hidden valley.

"Who's that?" demanded the voice. "Speak up, or I guess—"

Crack!

Pequod's gleaming eye was looking along his rifle, and the challenging voice was his guide for the shot. The voice broke off in a yell of alarm and pain, and there was the sound of a crashing fall in the grass.

"Quick, now!" breathed Pequod. "That will be heard at the camp."

He plunged away in the darkness, and seized the riderless horse. A man was groaning in the grass, but the breed did not give him a glance.

From the distance came a sound of calling voices. The shot in the valley had alarmed the camp of outlaws.

"Follow me!" called Pequod.

He leaped upon the horse of the fallen outlaw, and rode on in the darkness. Jimmy and the rancher followed him fast. The stars were paling now, and in the east there was a glimmer of grey. Dawn was at hand.

Low and confused shouting sounded behind, in the distance, and Jimmy could guess that the escape of the prisoners had been discovered. The three riders rode on at a desperate gallop.

Jimmy felt the ground rising under his horse's feet. He knew that they were close now on the hills that shut in the lonely valley. The bar of grey in the eastern sky was whitening; dimly, like phantoms, objects became eerily visible.

Pequod had turned from his course, almost at right-angle, and the fugitives followed without question. As the dawn strengthened Jimmy could see the face of the breed, and he saw that it was drawn and tense.

A grassy slope, ending in a precipitous rise of rock, was on their right hand as

they rode. All escape from the valley was shut off in that quarter.

And now that there was light Jimmy Silver could see that the present course they were following would take them back towards the stream that flowed across the valley—nearer to the outlaw camp. He saw a grim look come over the bronzed face of Hudson Smootley.

"A rat-trap, and no way out!" muttered the rancher.

He swept his glance back towards the stream.

In the dim dawn the group of cliffs could be made out in the far distance. In any direction the hidden valley was only a few miles in extent. And on all sides, as it seemed, rugged walls of rock shut them in. There was one way out—the opening of the canyon where Black Henri and his comrades kept watch and ward, and that way was impassable. Pequod le Chateau dragged his horse to a halt at last.

"What now?" asked Jimmy Silver quietly.

"There is no path for horses here. We must abandon them, and take to the rocks."

"Right!"

It gave Jimmy a pang to part with Blazer again, but there was no help for it. He understood that the half-breed had hoped to find a path that horses could follow; but time was not granted. Already, they knew, horsemen must have started from the outlaw camp to follow the trail of the fugitives.

Jimmy looked up at the steep cliff, and he wondered how it was to be negotiated, even without the horses. But Pequod was not at a loss.

He dismounted, and gave his horse a smart blow, and sent it galloping off. He signed to his companions to do the same.

"The trail will lead them away from this spot," the half-breed muttered. "They will follow it till they find the horses. That will give us a chance."

The breed sought along the rugged cliff, grasped a cleft, and drew himself up the precipice. A dozen feet above a ledge jutted from the rock, and with the agility of a mountain-goat the half-breed reached it.

Jimmy Silver essayed to follow him, and a root came out in his hand, and he rolled

back. Hudson Smedley caught him as he fell.

"Wait!" called back the breed.

Kneeling on the narrow rocky ledge, he uncoiled a lasso, and the rope came slithering down.

Pequod fastened the end in a spur of rock, and signed to them to climb. From the distance came the sound of hoof-beats. The outlaws had picked up the trail, and the trail of the horses in thick grass was plain enough to follow at a gallop.

"They're coming!" breathed Jimmy Silver.

"Quick!" panted the half-breed, above.

"You first, Jimmy," said Hudson Smedley.

He helped Jimmy up the rock, and the junior, clinging to the rope, climbed actively, and joined Pequod on the ledge. Hudson Smedley came clambering up after him.

The ledge was not more than two feet wide, jutting upward from the face of the cliff. Pequod signed to them to lie down as close to the rock as they could get, and followed their example. Lying on the ledge, they were invisible from below.

Gallop, gallop!

A bunch of horsemen swept by, but did not halt. The trail of the three horses turned loose, led them onward, and they rode past the cliff without a suspicion.

Jimmy Silver caught the voice of Cactus Bill as the riders swept by.

"They can't get out of the valley! There's nary a road for a horse 'cepting the canyon—"

His voice was lost as he rode on. The galloping hoofs grew fainter in the distance.

CHAPTER 12.

Cornered!

PEQUOD LE COUTEAU stirred at last. He rose on his knees, and looked from the ledge over the valley, and his comrades rose also. The sun was now high in the sky, and the lonely valley in the heart of the foothills glowed with morning light. From that perch on the face of the cliff the whole valley was spread before their eyes, with the stream and the group of shacks in the distance, and the bunches of cattle moving about in the rich grass.

Far away was a black gap in the wall of hills, where the canyon opened the way down to the plains. In that direction several tiny figures of horsemen could be discerned.

They guessed that the only outlet from the hidden valley was doubly guarded now.

Cactus Bill and his men, on the trail of the loose horses, had ridden on out of sight. But Jimmy realised that now it was bright day it would not take the rustlers long to discern the trick; and the sight of the horses without their riders would warn Cactus Bill that the fugitives had taken to the rocks.

"The sooner we get on the better," Jimmy Silver remarked.

"I guess so!" assented the rancher. "You're the guide, Pequod."

The breed shrugged his shoulders.

"It is only three days since I joined Spanish Kit's outfit," he said. "I have not before been in this part of the valley."

"You can't do more than your best," said Jimmy Silver. "Anyhow, we're better off here than in the stacks yonder."

"That's so, sure!" said Hudson Smedley. "We can put up a fight if they get after us, I guess!"

Both Jimmy and the rancher were unarmed. Hudson Smedley glanced at the breed's rifle and then at the revolver in his belt. A grim smile came over Pequod's face.

"Our lives are not worth much if Spanish Kit is able to get on the trail," he said. "But if we come through, Hudson Smedley, I am still an outlaw, and there is a price on my head."

"But after what you're doing for us—" said Jimmy Silver eagerly.

"I guess, Pequod, that if you choose to go straight after this I can see you through!" said Hudson Smedley.

"Je sais ce que je suis!" muttered the half-breed. "What I have done was because the pot's saved my life—you I would not have saved. It was because he would not go alone. If we get through, Hudson Smedley, we part, and you raise no hand to stop me. That is agreed!"

"Sure! I guess I shouldn't be likely to raise a hand to stop you after that!" said the rancher.

"It is a promise!"

"Yes."

Without a word more Pequod handed his

rifle to the rancher. Then he led the way along the ledge.

"A steady head here, Jimmy," whispered Hudson Smedley.

"You bet!" said Jimmy.

He needed all his nerve. The rocky ledge wound along the face of the cliff, with a bulging wall of rock on the right. It wound upward, and on the left was a sheer drop, growing steeper at every step that was taken.

Against the bare rock of the precipice the three figures showed up in the sunlight, in full view from below if anyone had been at hand to see.

Pequod suddenly halted, and pointed over the valley below.

Five or six horsemen, with Cactus Bill at their head, were riding back towards the hillside. Evidently they had found the riderless horses, and were riding back for the spot where the fugitives had abandoned them.

Crack!

Jimmy Silver gave a sudden start as the rifle-shot rang, and there was a crash on the rock a foot from his head. A bullet had flattened there, and it dropped to the ledge at his feet.

They had been seen.

"Down!" shouted the half-breed.

They threw themselves on the ledge on their faces, and only just in time. Five or six bullets struck the rock above them, and rebounded or fell flattened.

There was a thunder of hoofs, and the horsemen below rode up to the cliff and halted. The ledge, at this point, was thirty feet above the heads of the riders, and the figures lying on it out of their sight. A shouting voice came up to them.

"We've got you. You 'uns had better come down, or you'll be riddled!"

Cactus Bill received no answer. A volley rang from below, but the bullets struck the rock wall above the figures on the ledge.

"You ride back and tell Spanish Kit we've got 'em cornered!" Cactus Bill was speaking. "I guess he'll be loosing off his shooter at somebody if he don't get news of them."

Jimmy Silver heard the hoof-beats of a departing horseman riding back to the outlaw camp.

"Fellow me!" whispered the half-breed.

Pequod le Couteau was crawling along

the ledge with a serpentine motion. His companions followed him. Jimmy Silver raised himself as far as his hands and knees, and a moment later his back was grazed by a bullet from below, and he promptly dropped at full length again.

Below, the voices of the outlaws could be heard in savage consultation. More and more of the gang rode up, gathering at the spot, till Jimmy guessed that fifteen men at least were gathered there. Occasionally a shot rang out, and a bullet clattered on the cliff.

"We got to get arter them!" came Cactus Bill's voice at last, in savage tones. "There'll be shootin' if we get back to camp without them. Spanish Kit's as mad as a hornet already. Where they can go we can go. Leave the horses and feller."

And a sound of heavy boots scraping on the cliff was heard as the outlaws sought for ways to clamber up to the ledge.

Pequod le Couteau stopped suddenly. Jimmy Silver looked past him, and saw the reason. The ledge had come to an end, shut off by the bulge of the cliff above.

Jimmy Silver felt a chill.

"Cornered!" muttered the rancher.

Pequod le Couteau turned on his elbow and surveyed the cliff above him. It sloped back from the ledge to a height of a hundred feet to the top of the cliff. It was possible to climb it, but to rise from the ledge was to expose themselves to the firing from below.

"Morbleu! We are trapped!" said the breed coolly. "If we live through the day we can climb the cliff when the stars come out. But if—" He finished by dragging his shoulders.

"They can only follow us by the way we came," said Hudson Smedley. "It will not be easy for them."

The rancher turned back with a quick movement, and lay on his chest, looking along the ledge, with his rifle stretched out before him. His eye was steady along the barrel, his finger was on the trigger.

"Good!" muttered the breed.

Jimmy Silver waited tensely.

Neither party could see the other now. But as soon as an outlaw clambered on the ledge he would be in sight, and the advantage now was with the rancher.

At a distance along the rugged cliff, at the lowest point of the jutting ledge, a Stetson hat rose into view. The rancher shifted his aim a trifle, and waited.

The Stetson rose higher. Under it a bearded face appeared, the green eyes staring watchfully. Cactus Bill had one glimpse of the villain lying on the edge, and then the rancher pulled the trigger.

Crack!

There was a terrible yell from Cactus Bill, and the Stetson and the bearded face disappeared in an instant. The fugitives heard the sound of a heavy body rolling down the cliff to crash on the earth below.

A yell of rage rang out from the rustlers, and a volley of bullets spattered on the rock above the ledge. Two or three climbers were heard to scramble back into safety.

"I guess that's stopped them!" said Hudson Smadley grimly.

And the rancher was right. No head rose again above the level of the rocky ledge. But from below came almost without intermission the ringing of the rifles, and incessant bullets spattered and clattered on the rocky cliff.

CHAPTER XI. Lovell in Luck!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL stopped.

He felt dismayed.

The sun was blazing down with all the heat of a Canadian summer's day. Lovell's face streamed with perspiration under his Stetson.

And he was alone.

There was no doubt of it. He had called again and again, and there had come no answering shout.

Lovell stood still, and stared round him.

Sergeant Kerr and his party had left their camp on foot. The horses had been left in charge of one trooper. In the high rocky gulches and gullies before them there was little foothold for the horses. But the tramping on foot told hard upon Lovell & Co. They stuck it bravely; they were determined to stick it to the finish. But even Arthur Edward Lovell was beginning to realize that he was not quite

equal to sharing the arduous work of a Canadian Mounted man.

By what "sign" the sergeant was led the juniors did not know; but they had read in Kerr's bronzed face that he was hopeful. The way had lain through a rocky gulch, piled with great boulders, patched with fir and pines, and the members of the party were seldom in one another's sight. Rocks and pines hid them from each other. Lovell, for an hour or more, had not been able to see more than one or two troopers at a time. And when, after a hard clamber up a rocky acclivity, he had sat down on a boulder to rest for a few minutes, they had all passed from his sight.

That did not make him uneasy. He had only to hurry, on and rejoice them. But, as it happened, when he hurried on, he did not rejoin them. The rocks and firs, all of a bewildering sameness, perplexed him, and after a time he realized that he had missed the party.

Then he had shouted, at the risk of being heard by the rustlers if they were at hand.

But no answer came, not even from Rahy and Newcome. His chains were still with the troopers and the oc punchers. They had not stopped for a brief rest as Arthur Edward Lovell had.

Feeling rather alarmed now, Lovell plunged to and fro among the rocks and stunted trees, searching for a sign of the party, without finding one. He stopped at last, with the knowledge that he was lost.

Round him stretched the barren foothills, ridge rising over ridge, shaggy hillside over shaggy hillside, cliff over cliff. No trace that Lovell's eye could read was left on the barren rocks.

Whether the troopers had passed where he stood he could not guess. They might be miles away now, or they might be hidden only by the next ridge. At all events, they were out of range of his voice, that was certain.

"Better keep on, I suppose!" grunted Lovell. "Silly asses to miss me like this. I'd better look for them."

And he tramped on, tired and irritated, keeping his eyes well about him, both for friends and for foes.

Suddenly he stopped again, bent his head, and listened. Through the clear mountain air came a distant sound—dis-

fant, but unmistakable. It was the crackling of rifles.

Lovell's face brightened.

"Good egg! That's a signal to me."
And he hurried on.

Keeping on towards the round he heard it more clearly, sometimes a single sharp shot, sometimes five or six reports blended together. Doubts assailed him as he tramped on. His first thought was that Sergeant Kerr was signalling to him, to enable him to rejoin the party. But he wondered now whether the sergeant would betray his presence in the hills to the outlaws by such continuous firing. It was more likely that fighting was going on, that the troopers had met the enemy.

"And me out of it!" muttered Lovell.

He fairly ran now, forgetting his fatigue, and bounding from rock to rock. Still the firing continued, at short intervals, louder and clearer to his ears.

"Oh, rotten!" gasped Lovell at last.

He had to halt, for he had almost reached the verge of a cliff. From that high, rocky upland he caught sight of a glimpse of green far below. There was a valley beyond the cliff, but the drop was almost sheer. And it was from the valley that the firing came.

Lovell dropped on his hands and knees and crawled forward. The dizzy height of the cliff made his head swim a little, but he set his teeth and pulled himself together.

He crept closer and closer to the verge of the precipice.

Where the downward drop began he stopped. A steep slope was below him, a slope that might have been climbed from below by an active climber with a foot as sure as that of a mountain goat, but almost impossible to descend. For a hundred feet the steep slope ran down, and then there was a ledge, and below that the drop was sheer.

And below, as he looked over the cliff, Lovell could see a group of men in rough garb and Stetson hats, mostly with rifles in their hands. Every now and then one or another of them fired at the ledge on the face of the cliff.

Lovell wondered why. He did not need telling that that savage-looking crowd was a gang of rustlers—undoubtedly the gang Sergeant Kerr was in search of. But why

they were firing at the blank face of the cliff was a mystery to him.

He could see the jutting ledge for most part, but in places it was hidden from his eyes by a bulge in the cliff. But he guessed at last that on some part of the ledge, which he could not see, someone had taken refuge, and that it was at the unknown refugees that the rustlers were shooting. Lovell moved along the top of the cliff slowly and cautiously, and looked down again, getting a view of the ledge hitherto hidden from his eyes.

Then he gave a gasp.

Three figures were stretched face down on the ledge, squeezed close against the cliff for protection from the fire from below. One had a rifle stretched out before him.

"Jimmy!" breathed Lovell, staring down blankly at the middle figure.

It was Jimmy Silver. And the man with the rifle was Hudson Smedley. The third man Lovell did not recognise, only he guessed that he was a half-breed.

"I've found them!"

Lovell's impulse was to shoot to his friends below, but fortunately he checked it and drew back. Not one of the rustlers thought of glancing up to the summit of the cliff, but a shout would have drawn their attention at once, and bullets would have followed.

Lovell thought it out.

He—Arthur Edward Lovell—had found the rustler gang, and found Jimmy Silver and Hudson Smedley. They were out of reach, and he could not help them; but he had found them. While the troopers were vainly exploring distant hillides and shadowy canyons, Lovell had done the trick, as it were. For the moment he did not remember that he had happened on the spot by sheer chance through losing himself in the hills. He was not anxious to dwell on that circumstance.

"Well, I've found them!" said Lovell, with a satisfied grin. "They look safe enough there, too, for a bit. Now all I've got to do is to bring up the troopers."

And then Lovell remembered that he was lost. He stared round him rather hopelessly.

Where were the troopers? To find them and bring them to the rescue of Jimmy and his comrades was the next step. But, how?

Lovell tramped back from the cliff with something like despair in his breast. To find his chum without being able to help him was too bitter. Where were the troopers? He realised that they must be out of hearing of the rifles, and that meant a great distance in the clear mountain air. If they had heard the shooting it would have drawn them to the scene, as it had drawn Lovell.

He desperately resolved that he would find them somehow. He tramped away from the great cliff, and found himself descending a dark canyon that rived the hillside. He tramped on wearily, venturing now to call out occasionally, as the sound of the rifle-fire grew fainter in the distance behind him.

"You young lay!"

It was Skitter Dick's voice. The cowpuncher waved to him from a distant slope, and Lovell, his heart beating with joy, hurried towards him. He was glad to see Skitter Dick; but for once the good-tempered cowpuncher was angry.

"You young lay! I've been hunting for you!" he growled. "We're two miles from the camp. Come on!"

"I say—"

"Come on, I tell you!"

Skitter Dick tramped away without listening to a word. Lovell followed him. After all, it was to the sergeant he had to tell his news. He grinned at the thought of Skitter's surprise when he heard it.

He was almost limping when the Skitter led him at last into the new camp of the troopers. They had stopped to rest at noon in a shadowy canyon, but they were preparing to move again when Skitter Dick arrived with Lovell. Raby and Newcome gave their chum a welcoming hail, but Sergeant Kerr fixed a frowning glare on him.

"You're going back to the ranch," the sergeant said, without waiting for Lovell to speak. "I'm sending a cowboy, and you're going back, too."

Lovell laughed.

"Don't you want to hear my report?" he asked.

Snort from the sergeant.

"You see, I've found the rustlers," explained Lovell airily.

"What?"

"Jimmy Silver and Mr. Smedley and

another man have got away from them somehow, and are stuck on a ledge on a cliff. I've seen them. I can take you straight to the place."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Raby.

Sergeant Kerr stared at Lovell unbelievably. But he signed to him to go on, and Lovell gave a full description of what he had seen.

"By thunder!" said the sergeant at last. "You're a young ass, but you've come in useful. You can remember the way back to the cliff?"

"If Skitter Dick guides us to where he met me I can show the way from there," said Lovell confidently.

"Good!"

The troopers were all in motion at once. Skitter Dick slapped Lovell on the back.

"Good for you, tenderfoot!" he said heartily. "It was just such luck, but mighty handy now."

Whereas Lovell frowned and Raby and Newcome grinned. But Arthur Edward looked cheerful again as the Rockwooders tramped on after the active troopers. Fool's luck or not, Arthur Edward had done it, there was no doubt about that, and it was a score for Rockwood. Lovell & Co. were fired to the bone, but their faces were very bright as the party came out at last on the high cliff overlooking the hidden valley, and the troopers, lying on their elbows along the verge of the cliffs, turned their rifles upon the gang of rustlers below.

CHAPTER 22.

The Last of the Rustlers!

JIMMY SILVER, as he lay on the rocky ledge in the hot sun, wondered whether flesh and blood would hold out till nightfall. It was almost impossible to move without exposing himself to a shot, and when the sun passed the zenith the rock was hot to the touch and there was scarcely any shade for the hapless trio. Below the ledge the whole gang of the rustlers had gathered now, and every now and then a rifle still rang out and a bullet clipped the rock. Twice Jimmy's Stetson had been pierced by bullets as he moved to ease his position, and one ball had cut a lock of hair from his head. Pequod la Quintana, in spite of all his

caution, had a red streak along his dusky forehead, where a bullet had grazed. And the sun was still high in the heavens. Long, long hours intervened before the fugitives could hope to make an effort to escape by climbing the dizzy cliff above them.

More than once Jimmy Silver felt himself growing dizzy, and had to pull himself together hard. One moment's loss of caution would have been enough to cost him his life. There were twenty ruffians below now—the whole gang—and every man had a rifle in his hands, watching for a chance. It seemed inevitable that in the long hours of sunshine that had still to elapse, the end must come. Among the ruffians below Jimmy had caught an instant's glimpse of Spanish Kit—wounded, white as chalk, savage as a wild beast. The Mexican had been carried to the spot, and lay on blankets in the shadow of a rock, watching the ledge above with sleepless, savage eyes. When the firing slackened down, his bitter voice was heard, and the rifles recommenced.

And then suddenly—it seemed like the strange change in a dizzy dream to Jimmy Silver—there came a blaze of rifle-fire from the top of the soaring cliff.

Like thunder the volley rang and pealed with a thousand echoes in the hollows of the hills.

For the moment Jimmy fancied that another party of rustlers had gone by long, steep paths over the hills to attack the ledge from above.

But he was quickly undeceived by the chorus of yells and groans that rose among the rustlers.

It was the enemy that was being fired upon from the summit of the cliff.

"Morbleu!" muttered Pegaud le Couteau. "It is the troopers!"

"The troopers!" repeated Hudson Smedley.

"Hurrah!" gasped Jimmy.

The rustlers were no longer firing. Five or six of them were on the ground, out of action, and the rest were being hock across the valley towards the shacks. They were fully exposed to the rifles on the cliff-top, and their only thought was for cover.

But the rifle-fire continued, and more than one of the ruffians reeled as he ran, and dropped into the grass.

The voice of Spanish Kit was heard exclaiming, but his followers did not heed

him now. They were thinking only of their own safety.

Jimmy Silver sprang to his feet. There was little danger now. He hunked down from the ledge. Seven or eight wounded men lay in the grass, and the rest were disappearing in flight, some of them flinging themselves upon horses hastily caught. Spanish Kit had staggered to his feet, but he sank down again from sheer weakness, groaning.

Jimmy looked up the steep, rocky slope above him. A well-known face looked down. Lovell waved his hand.

"Buck up, Jimmy!"

"Hurrah!"

Half a dozen lariats came slithering down the cliff. Clinging to the ropes with the activity of panthers, the troopers clambered and slid down, and one by one reached the ledge, and clambered down to the ground. They did not stop for a word. Headed by Sergeant Kerr—who stayed only to clap the handcuffs on Spanish Kit—they rushed in pursuit of the rustlers across the valley.

Last down the ropes came Lovell and Baby and Newcome, and they stopped on the ledge.

"Here we are again!" yelled Lovell, hugging Jimmy Silver. "What price Rockywood now?"

"Hurrah!"

It was hard for Jimmy Silver to realize that the danger was past, that the enemy were gone, and that his old chums were round him once more. Hudson Smedley was gone; he had rushed on with the troopers to attack the remnant of the rustler gang in their camp.

Pegaud le Couteau stood on the ledge, impassive. Lovell, as he turned to see who Jimmy's companion was, recognized him.

"That blessed breed!" exclaimed Lovell in amazement. "What—"

"He saved us," said Jimmy.

"Great pip!"

Pegaud looked across the valley, and then up at the cliff. Then he grasped the rope that hung from the summit.

"You're not going!" exclaimed Jimmy.

The half-breed grinned.

"There is a price on my head. When the troopers have finished with the rustlers, if they see me I am a prisoner, if not a dead man."

"But—" exclaimed Jimmy.

"You could not help me."

The half-breed grasped the rope to climb. Then he paused a moment, and held out his dusky hand to Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy grasped it warmly. Whatever the man was—and would be again—Jimmy could not forget what he had done.

"I—I suppose you'd better go. Good-bye and good luck!" said Jimmy. "But I shan't forget. And if you want a friend, Pequod, you'll find one at the Windy River Ranch as long as I stay there."

And the half-breed clambered up the rope. Jimmy Silver & Co. watched him pass the summit of the cliff. There he waved a dusky hand and disappeared.

It was a triumphant party that set out from the hidden valley in the late afternoon. Spanish Kit's gang of rustlers had been "wiped out," as the troopers expressed it. Spanish Kit himself was a prisoner, with all, or nearly all, that survived of his gang. Cattle and horses, raided from a dozen ranches, were driven away by the Windy River cowpunchers, and Jimmy Silver, mounted on Blazer, helped in the driving. And there was a real "jamboree" at the Windy River Ranch when the victors arrived there.

"I guessed that rustler game wouldn't last long in Canada," Pete Peters remarked sagely, "and it hasn't."

"It might have lasted longer if there hadn't been any Rookwood chaps here!" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

As which the foreman of Windy River chuckled.

CHAPTER 25.

Hard Lines!

BALDY, the cook, stood in the doorway of the cookhouse at Windy River and looked out on the ranch.

Baldy's fat face was covered with perspiration and corrugated by a frown.

Evidently Baldy was dissatisfied.

The scene he looked upon was cheery enough: the timber ranch-house, with its green-painted veranda and shutters, the grove of pines behind it, the long corral, and on all sides the wide stretch of the grasslands, stretching away to the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Jimmy Silver, coming out for his horse, stopped to look

about him at the scene, and thought that it was very cheery indeed.

But Baldy, the cook, was frowning.

"Morning, Baldy!" called out Jimmy Silver.

The fat cook granted.

"Anything wrong?" asked Jimmy, coming over to the cookhouse.

He rather liked Baldy. Baldy Indian was, perhaps, every known kind of a sufferer; but he was a wonderful cook, and he was generally as good-tempered as he was fat. And Baldy's little weaknesses added to the gaiety of existence on the Windy River Ranch. Baldy, as Jimmy Silver & Co. had learned with surprise, was of a poetic temperament, with a romantic mind, that soared far beyond the unromantic surroundings of a ranch cookhouse.

"Oh, nothin'!" said Baldy.

He had a frying-pan in one fat hand and a greasy rag in the other. He resumed polishing the pan, with a grunt.

"Fed up?" he added by way of explanation.

"Why, what's the matter?" asked Jimmy. "Have the cowpunchers been sleeping now again, old man?"

Baldy frowned more darkly.

"It's too bad," said Jimmy sympathetically, though he could not help smiling.

The Windy River outfit had not forgotten that Baldy had hidden under a bed when the rustlers raided the ranch. Poor Baldy was cast in an heroic mould, so far as his imagination went. But his fat body refused to play up to his imagination. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was very weak. Often and often had the cowpunchers heard Baldy relate tales of "derring-do"—deeds of reckless daring that had always, somehow, taken place somewhere beyond the ken of Windy River. And then the test had come; and while the schoolboys were holding the ranchhouse against the rustlers, Baldy had palpitated in hiding under a bed. And it really seemed that Windy River would never forget that circumstance.

Any other man in the outfit who had shown a want of so common a quality as courage would have been ridiculed, and hoisted off the ranch. But Baldy was always taken as more or less of a joke. The cowpunchers chipped him good-naturedly; but they seldom allowed the topic to rest.

They did not realize how poor Baldy felt

it. Indeed, they would not have expected a policeman to have any feelings at all. A man who was afraid was scarcely reckoned a man in their estimation. But Baldy was sensitive. His great desire was to shine. He wanted all Windy River to understand that he was wasted in the cookhouse; he wanted fellows to listen with respect when he spoke. And, in actual fact, nobody ever noticed whether Baldy Bulbin was speaking or not, and anybody who had anything to say would interrupt him ruthlessly. Sometimes, by way of diversion, the "punchers" would lead him on to tell one of his thrilling tales of great deeds done at some other time, in some other place, and Baldy would quite enjoy himself till he was interrupted by a roar of laughter, when his listeners could keep serious no longer.

"Jest figger it," Baldy would say. "There was me with me back again the wall and six greasers with knives coming right at me. And what do you reckon I did?"

"Got under a bed!" suggested Skitter Dick.

And then a roar would drown the rest of Baldy's narrative.

And all the time Baldy was a paladin for courage, if only his fat nerves would not fail him in the moment of danger. He could picture himself facing fearful odds, and charging recklessly at innumerable foes. But in these mental pictures he was always the conqueror, and he never got damaged. In real encounters it was quite a different matter—and when rifles were going off in reality Baldy preferred cover. His spirit wandered free, as it were; but undoubtedly his fat carcass bolted for cover.

Baldy, the cook, looked morosely at Jimmy Silver. Jimmy's sympathy was not much use when Baldy could detect the lurking smile on the schoolboy's face. Baldy was, indeed, tempted to take the schoolboy by the scruff of the neck and shake him as a reward for that lurking smile, in spite of the sympathy.

"I guess I'm fed up!" he grunted. "There'll be trouble hyer, young Silver. I shall break out."

"Don't do that, Baldy," said Jimmy as gravely as he could. "They'll get another joke later on, and then they'll forget you."

"This 'ere morning Mr. Peters looks in," said Baldy. "He didn't see me for a second, so he calls out, 'Where are you, Baldy?'

Is that galoot hiding under a bed again?'"

Jimmy tried not to smile.

"And I never did hide under that bed, young Silver," said Baldy. "I was—was jest taking cover. You know that, don't you, as you was on the spot?"

"Hem!"

"Do you know it, or don't you?" roared Baldy.

"Well, I knew you were found under the bed, old man," said Jimmy.

"You know that I didn't show the white feather!" said Baldy, almost imploringly. Baldy would have given six months' wages to find somebody who would believe in him.

Jimmy Silver coughed. He hated to hurt poor Baldy's feelings; but the fact was absolutely indisputable that Baldy had not only shown the white feather but shown it in the most flagrant manner.

"You ready, Jimmy?" came Arthur Edward Lovell's voice, and it was a welcome interruption. It saved Jimmy from replying to a very awkward question.

"Hem I am," called back Jimmy Silver. "So-long, Baldy!"

Baldy grunted.

Jimmy Silver walked away to join Lovell and Raby and Newcome, and the four Rookwooders led their horses out. It was a busy time at the ranch, and Jimmy Silver & Co. were going out on the range to help the cowboys. Spike Thompson and Skitter Dick joined them at the corral, and the party mounted. Thompson called out to Baldy as they started:

"Hi, Baldy!"

"Hallo!" grunted the cook.

"Look out for rattlers while we're gone," shouted Spike; "and, I say, Baldy, ask Bow Smedley to have a bed put in the cookhouse. You can't hide under that bunk of yours."

And the cowboys rode off laughing, leaving Baldy, the cook, glaring after them ferociously.

CHAPTER 26.

Baldy's Chance!

SLIM HOOKEY approached the Windy River cookhouse cautiously.

A long career as a "hobo" had taught Mr. Hookey caution.

Slim Hookey was a tramp, or, in Western parlance, a hobo. For more years than he

could remember Slum Hookey had tramped the plains and the hills and the streets of cities, like a lion seeking what he might devour—though he looked more like a jackal than a lion. He toiled not, neither did he spin, but he contrived somehow to extract sustenance from a hard world.

Like a gentleman of leisure, Slum Hookey spent his winters in the south, picking up the crumbs that fell from rich men's tables at holiday resorts in Florida, or annexing precarious meals at free-lunch counters in Texas. But in the summer he drifted north, stalling rides in cattle-trucks—and stealing anything else that he could lay his hands on. This summer he was giving Canada a turn—though, as a general rule, Mr. Hookey did not like Canada. In that hard-working land there was little use for hobos, and a calculating-machine would have been required to figure out the number of times a heavy boot had been applied to Mr. Hookey's ragged trousers since he had crossed the "line."

A delicious scent floated from the cook-house, and Mr. Hookey's nostrils dilated as he drew it in.

Baldy was cooking, ready for the boys when they came in from the range, forgetting his troubles for the moment in his art, as it were.

Cautiously Slum Hookey drew nearer to the open doorway.

Hospitality in the Canadian West is great; but so flagrant a specimen of the hobo as Mr. Hookey was not likely to be welcome anywhere. The chances were nine in ten that Mr. Hookey would be kicked out dinnerless; but it was the tenth chance that Mr. Hookey banked on.

There were no compunchers to be seen, which was a comfort to Slum Hookey. Cautiously he reached the doorway of the cookhouse and peered in.

Baldy stood at the stove, red, and perspiring, and busy.

Slum Hookey watched him.

There was no apparent chance of stealing anything, so Mr. Hookey gave up that idea. He had no hope of representing himself as a man looking for work; his whole appearance gave him away as a hard case. But he hoped that the cook might prove good-natured.

He coughed at last, to draw Baldy's attention.

The fat cook looked round,

Slum Hookey staggered into the cook-house and sank on the floor. Foam appeared on his lips.

"Water!" he groaned hoarsely.

Baldy Bubbin looked at him, and crossed over to the corner and picked up a barrel-stave.

Baldy had dealt with hoboes before, and he was not to be taken in with fainting-fits and convulsions and a little soap-lather on the lips.

"Where will you have it?" asked Baldy.

Slum Hookey jumped up. His first doctor had failed, but Mr. Hookey was unabashed.

"Don't hit a galoot," he said. "I'm starving."

"Time you did, I guess," said Baldy unsympathetically. "You've never done any work, I s'pose."

"Luck has been agin me," said Slum.

"Cut it!" said Baldy. "I give you one second to clear."

"What about a meal?"

Baldy paused. He was a good-natured man, and it was very probable that Slum Hookey was hungry. It was no more than he deserved for his illness, perhaps; but there it was.

"Squat on that bench, and I'll find you something," said Baldy, throwing down the barrel-stave.

Mr. Hookey squatted. Baldy handed him a tin plate with a pile of victuals upon it, and Mr. Hookey started in.

Slum Hookey put away an enormous meal. He also put away various fragments in recesses of his rags, for future use. Then he gave Baldy, the cook, a winning smile.

"You're a gentleman, sir, you are!" he said.

"Cut it," said Baldy.

"Anything to drink?"

"Plenty!"

Mr. Hookey's face brightened under its layers of lean.

"Now you're talking," he said cheerily.

"Where is it?"

"River just handy."

Slum Hookey's jaw fell. It was not water that he wanted to drink.

"Nothing else?" he groaned.

"I guess not. Alberta's dry."

Mr. Hookey winked.

"I've tramped through every dry State in the Union," he said. "They was always wet in places."

"You'd better tramp back to the Union,

then," said Baldy, "and I guess you'd better get a move on. Mr. Sunday don't like hoboes round his ranch."

Mr. Hookley sighed.

"I guess it will have to be water," he said dejectedly.

And Baldy good-naturedly gave him a pannikin of that fluid, which was ever so much better for Mr. Hookley's inside than liquor would have been, but which he drank without enjoyment, all the same.

"I desay you've got some hooey," he remarked.

"Cut it!" said Baldy again. He had no tobacco to waste on a tramp.

Then his fat good nature overcame him again, and he cut a chunk from his plug and handed it to the hobo. It disappeared whole into Mr. Hookley's mouth, and he chewed with enjoyment.

Baldy turned to his work, leaving him chewing.

Mr. Hookley leaned back against the wall behind the bench and chewed tobacco, and rested his weary limbs. Baldy had been so good-natured that Slim wondered whether he could "touch" him for a dollar or so.

But the good-natured expression left Baldy's fat face, and he turned away from the stove, and went to the doorway for a breath of clear air.

He was thinking again!

Soon the cowpunchers would come riding in, and Baldy knew that dinner would not come off without some of the chipping that made him wince so bitterly.

If only some ferocious rustler would have ridden up to the ranch just then, revolver in hand, Baldy felt that he would have had his chance. He would have seized the frying-pan and rushed upon the rustler, smitten him down, and kept him a prisoner for the boys to see when they came in. His fat face brightened as he thought of it.

But, of course, no rustler would come just when he was wanted. And perhaps, deep down in Baldy's fat mind, there was a consciousness that at the sight of a "bad man" he would have bolted like a rabbit for cover.

He turned a discontented stare on Slim Hookley.

Even Baldy was not afraid of a hobo, and he could have taken the barrel-stave and chased Mr. Hookley off the ranch. That would have been an exploitation with a few touches of Baldy's fertile fancy, it would

have grown into a much greater exploit, to be related to the outfit.

At that moment, Mr. Hookley, all unconsciously, was in danger of seeing a new side of Baldy Bubbins.

But Baldy reflected in time. It was no use "telling the tale" to the outfit; they wouldn't believe him.

But Baldy's mind was working, and his glance at Mr. Hookley became more fixed, and very thoughtful.

Evidently it was of no use telling the outfit of something that had happened in their absence. Nobody was likely to believe in Baldy's feats of courage unless they were witnessed. But Baldy was feeling more and more that he had to do something to retrieve his character; he couldn't stand much more of the present state of affairs. The alternative was to "vamoose the ranch," and Baldy didn't want that; he had too comfortable a job at Windy Haven.

In his desperation, poor Baldy had even contemplated knocking down some 'puncher who chipped him. That would have set the matter right. But Baldy dared not contemplate what would happen after the astonished 'puncher got up again!

No! Baldy had to recognize the fact that there was nothing doing in the way of personal deeds of prowess. But his imagination was at work now! There was such a thing as strategy.

Slim Hookley rose at last.

"Making it a dollar, old sport!" he asked.

"I guess I haven't a cent to chuck away on a hobo," answered Baldy. "Going! Hold on a tick!"

Mr. Hookley sat down again. He still nourished hopes of the dollar. Baldy leaned on the door, and stared at Slim contemplatively.

"Can you swim?" he asked sleepily.

"Eh?"

"Swim?"

"I guess I've never tried," said Mr. Hookley, with a look of distaste.

It was evident that he did not like the application of water, within or without.

"Well, I can swim," said Baldy. "Like a fish."

He paused.

"I'll tell you what happened once! Canoe turned over in the rapid—beautiful girl swept away—drowned to a certainty, but I happened to be there. I jumped in."

"Into the rapids?" asked Slim.

"Yep!"

"You look that sort!" said Mr. Hookey admiringly.

After that Slim felt that he had earned the dollar, whether he received it or not.

Baldy nodded complacently. He had an inward feeling that the hobo did not believe a word of it; but it was pleasant not to be derided, at all events. A gentleman in Slim Hookey's position could not venture on the plain speech of the cowpunchers.

"Fought for my life in the raging waters!" said Baldy impressively. "Just managed to get ashore with the beautiful girl in my arms! You should have heard the cheers!"

"Fine!" said Mr. Hookey.

"I don't get justice here!" said Baldy.

"Not a splendid man like you?" asked Mr. Hookey incredulously.

"I got chipped," said Baldy meekly—"misunderstood! I guess I've been thinking of a way to set it right! You can help me!"

"Eh?"

"You'd like five dollars?"

"Sure!" said Mr. Hookey eagerly.

"You'll have to earn it."

"Oh!" Mr. Hookey looked less eager. "I—I guess I'd better be moving! You said your boss wouldn't like me around!"

"Tain't work!" snapped Baldy. "Falling in a river!"

"You—you—you'll give me five dollars for falling in a river?" ejaculated Slim Hookey blankly.

"Current!"

"Well, I don't like it; but I'll do it at the price, I guess. But what's the game?"

"Five dollars, and a bed for the night in a barn and a good breakfast afore you clear in the morning," said Baldy. "How's that?"

"That hits me just where I live!" said Slim Hookey. "But what—"

"You ain't hangin' on in this section, I suppose?" asked Baldy.

"No fear! I've been booted fifteen times yesterday and to-day!" said Mr. Hookey dimly. "I'm striking out south-east. I guess I might do better in Saskatchewan. Couldn't do worse, anyhow!"

"That's good! Well, this hyer little stunt will give you a start," said Baldy. "After

it's over, the sooner you git the better. Now, jest you listen to me."

And Baldy, the cook, proceeded to explain, and Slim Hookey listened, with his eyes growing wider and wider with amazement.

CHAPTER 27.

Rescued from the River!

"H RIP!"

That shout came from the direction of the river.

The sun was setting, and in the fine, warm summer's evening a crowd of the Windy River men were seated on the benches outside the bunkhouse, smoking and yarning.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were there, though they, of course, were not smoking, and only listening to the yarns. The chums of Rookwood had had a busy day on the range, and Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, had been pleased to say that they had made themselves useful. The schoolboys felt almost like real cowpunchers themselves as they sat and talked with the outfit after a day in the saddle.

Baldy, the cook, was not in the bunkhouse. Supper over, Baldy ought to have been washing up—a lengthy task at which Baldy often groused. But just now Baldy was sawing logs for the stove, washing up being left over for the time.

Baldy was not distinguished for industry, and he was not bound to saw the logs, so there was some surprise when he started on that job. But no one wanted to say him nay. Indeed, Pete Peters told him it might bring down his fat, at which he could spare several tons without missing them. At which Baldy asserted, Mr. Bulkin having a fixed belief that he was the happy possessor of the only really graceful figure at Windy River.

The trees by the river landing-place had been thinned out, and lay ready for cutting. There was plenty of sawing and chopping to be done. So while the 'punchers' smoked and yarned Baldy was working the saw in the sunset by the bank of the Windy River, all on his lonesome.

That was the situation when a sudden yell for help broke the quiet of the calm evening.

Some of the 'punchers' rose and looked

towards the river, Jimmy Silver & Co. pumped up at once.

"That as Baldy fallen into the river?" growled Pete.

"It wasn't Baldy's last!" said Skitter Dick.

"Help!"

"Well, it's somebody up against it!" said Jimmy Silver. "I'm going!"

"Help! I'm drowning!" came the yell.

Jimmy Silver broke into a run on the path through the trees to the river bank. Three or four of the row-punchers ran after him. Lovell and Baby and Newcome joined up.

Skitter Dick passed Jimmy Silver on the way, though Jimmy was going at a good rate. The voice was calling frantically now.

"Help, help, help!"

Jimmy put on a spurt, and came out of the trees on the crazy bank at the same time as Skitter Dick.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" exclaimed Skitter Dick, in amazement at what he saw.

"My last!" yelled Jimmy.

"Great pip!" came Lovell's voice behind.

"Good for you, Baldy!"

The sight was surprising enough.

Baldy Bubbins, streaming with water, was dragging a drenched, ragged farm through the shallows to the bank. He dumped it down, and stood gasping and streaming in full view of an astonished crowd.

"Oh!" gasped Baldy. "That was a near thing!"

Jimmy ran up to him.

"Who is it, Baldy?"

"Ask me another! Some stranger, I guess!" said Baldy.

"I guess it's a hobo," said Skitter Dick. "I've seen him hanging about to-day along the river."

There was a groan from Slum Hookey, who lay in the grass.

"He looks purty far gone!" said Baldy, looking down on the prostrate loafer. "Touch and go, it was, pard! Never thought I'd get him out, I didn't, but I done it!"

"You went in for him?" ejaculated Skitter Dick.

Baldy looked at Skitter.

"Looks like it, don't it?" he said curtly.

"How did the galoot get into the water?"

"Fell in, I reckon," said Baldy. "I beered him yell for help when I was sawing

the logs. Lucky I was there! You galoots wouldn't have come up in time!"

"I guess it wasn't very lucky!" said Pete Peters. "Nobody would have missed him if he'd stayed in, I reckon! We don't want hoboes around this river ranch!"

"Give me some spirits!" moaned Mr. Hookey.

"You won't get any fire-water here!" said the foreman. "I guess you've got enough on board, too, falling into a river like a baby!"

Mr. Hookey sat up. If there was no strong drink to be had, it was useless to be overcome by his painful experience. Jimmy Silver gave him a helping hand as he struggled to his feet.

"I ain't been drinking!" said Mr. Hookey.

"I jest fell in! Caught me foot in a pesky root, and afore I knowed what was happening, there I was, drowning! Somebody pulled me out, I reckon! Who was it pulled me out?"

"There he is," said Skitter Dick.

Mr. Hookey looked at Baldy and gripped his hand. He shook it and shook it again, working it a good deal like a pump-handle.

"You've saved me life!" he said.

"Well, I reckon you was a gone coon if I hadn't heard you yapping!" said Baldy.

"You jumped in for me!" said Slum, still wringing Baldy's fat hand. "You might have been drowned along of me! You've saved my life! You're a brave man, you are—the bravest man I've ever struck agin! I may be only a pesky hobo, like that galoot says, but I've got gratitood in me! I shan't ever forget that! You saved my life!"

"That's all right!" said Baldy modestly. "No galoot would have stood by while a critter was drowning!"

"I guess I'd have thought you would, Baldy!" said Pete Peters, in amazement. "Where did you get the pluck from all of a sudden?"

"Look here——" began Baldy warmly.

"Jerusalem!" said Skitter Dick. "Baldy—jumping in to save a drowning man! I guess this caps the stack!"

"Good old Baldy!" said Jimmy Silver.

"It beats me," said Pete Peters blankly. "Why, the water's thundering deep a couple of yards out! I'd never have believed Baldy had the grit to jump in."

"Look here——" roared Baldy.

"Oh, draw it mild, Mr. Peters!" ex-

claimed Lovell, rather hotly. "Baldy might jolly well have been drowned himself."

"I guess I nearly was with that hobo hanging on to me, and him not able to swim a stroke," said Baldy.

Pete Peters nodded.

"Well, it beats me to a frazzle," he said. "But you've done it, Baldy, and it shows that you're a lot of a white man somewhere down under your fat. I guess I'll never chuck up that bad ag'in you any more. You ain't much on rustlers, for a fact, but you've done a plucky thing this time."

"Hear, hear!" said Raby.

"Better cut in and change your clothes, Baldy; you'll catch cold," said Newcome.

"And what about me?" exclaimed Slim Hooley indignantly. "Ain't you got a word for a galoot what's been near drowned?"

"Oh, you git!" snapped Pete Peters. "We don't want hoboes. Like your darned check to come and get drowned in our river."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, I've saved that man's life," said Baldy. "I don't keer if he's a proky hobo; I've saved his life. I'm going to give him a square supper, and a shake-down for the night after that."

"The boss," said Spike Thompson, "he's dead on hoboes."

"I guess I'll chance it with the boss," said Baldy. "You come alonger me, my man, and I guess I'll see you fixed."

And Baldy Bubbin led the rescued man away, the two of them followed by the amazed cowpunchers.

CHAPTER 22.

Baldy the Dravel

BALDY, the cook, changed into his other suit of clothes, and came out into the red sunset, looking quite a new man.

His treatment at the hands of the outfit showed a marked difference now.

Two or three of the 'punchers called out cheerily:

"Here you are, Baldy!"

"Come and squat down, old man."

"Feel any worse for it?"

"Come and tell us all about it, Baldy!" called out Jimmy Silver.

The fat man came along to the cheer-

group of 'punchers, feeling—and, indeed, looking—as if he were walking on air.

He was quite a new Baldy.

If there was one thing that the Windy River outfit admired in a man, it was pluck. Without that necessary quality no man could have held up his head at Windy River.

Baldy's unfortunate way of hanging of imaginary deeds, coupled with his way of bolting like a rabbit at a sign of danger, had condemned him in the eyes of the outfit hopelessly. He was only tolerated as a butt, with more or less good-humour.

But he had retrieved himself now.

As Pete Peters had put it, he wasn't "much" on rustlers, for a fact, but he had shown sterling quality in another way.

Certainly, there was not a man at Windy River who would have stood idly by while even a hobo drowned. But most of the 'punchers would rather have faced a "bad man" in combat than have jumped into a deep river into the frantic clutches of a drowning man.

Baldy, in his own way, had shown as much courage as could be expected of any man, and it was agreed on all sides that not a word more was to be said about his cowardice.

He had redeemed himself now, and he was "one of them." Spike Thompson, who had been keenest in ridiculing poor Baldy after his display of funk, made room for the fat cook to sit beside him on the bench. Red Alf offered his tobacco-pouch.

Skitter Dick slapped him on the back. Pete Peters gave him an agreeable nod and a grin. Baldy was feeling quite happy, and only too ready to give a full account of his perilous experience in rescuing the hobo.

Jimmy Silver gave him a match for his pipe. Baldy blew out a cloud of smoke and looked round cheerily.

"It was tough and go," he said. "Nip and tuck, you know. I heard him yelling for help—"

"We all heard him here," said Lovell.

"I guess he must have kept on yelling after you got hold of him, Baldy," said Spike.

"He did," said Baldy. "Scared stiff, you know. Couldn't swim a stroke, and hanging on to me like a clam. Three times I went under, and guess I'd never come up ag'in."

"And you never let go!" said Raby.

"Nary a let go!" said Baldy. "I went in for the swimmer, and I meant to have him out. I wasn't the man to let go, I guess. And the way he struggled, too! Got me round the neck and dragged me under. I tell you, boys, I came near hitting him and knocking him off, but I wouldn't."

"I guess I'd have given him a sock-dolager if he'd been dragging me under," said Spike, "and pulled him out after."

"Well, I got my head above again, and came up," said Baldy. "We was swept right on into the middle of the river by that time. But I held on like thunder, and swam for my life, with him in my arms—"

"How the thump did you swim with the man in your arms?" asked Lovell, a little puzzled.

"I—I mean, I guess I had him by the collar," said Baldy.

"And swam with one hand?" asked Baby.

"Some swimmer!" said Pete Peters.

"I guess I could swim the Windy River with one hand tied," said Baldy. "I guess there's no other galoot in Alberta could beat me at swimming. I've told you, boys, how I rescued that beautiful girl long ago in the Saskatchewan River—"

"It was the Thompson River, in British Columbia, last time you told us," grinned Shifter Dick.

"And now time it was the Fraser River," remonstrated Red All. "But it was a beautiful gal every time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look hyer—" roared Baldy.

"Oh, let Baldy go it!" said Pete Peters, laughing.

And Baldy "went it," and for once the fat cook was fairly given his head as a reward for his courageous rescue of Mr. Hooky.

Even his story of the seven greasers who had attacked him with knives, and whom Baldy had knocked out with a log snatched from a table in the nick of time, was related three more, and was not followed by the usual roar of laughter, though it was hard to listen to it with gravity.

Baldy had regained the good opinion of the outfit, but they did not expect him to be fine himself to facts. That would have been expecting too much of Baldy.

It was quite an enjoyable evening for

the cook, and he was sorry when the outfit turned in, and he wended his way back to the cookhouse.

For once Baldy had filled the centre of the picture, so to speak, and to the full. The respect of his comrades restored his own self-respect, and Baldy felt that life was worth living for a really plucky fellow like himself.

With the help of his powerful imagination, he had almost forgotten the slender basis upon which his new reputation rested.

He was reminded of it when he came into the cookhouse. Baldy had a room built on to the cookhouse for his occupation. In that room was his bunk. On his bunk, when Baldy arrived there, was stretched the ungainly form of Slim Hooky.

"Hyee, you git outer this!" said Baldy warmly. "I've asked the boss to let you sleep in a barn, and he's said yes. You hook it out of my bunk."

Mr. Hooky eyed him curiously.

"I guess I'm comfy hyer," he answered.

"Wash, git out of it!"

"I'm staying here."

"What?"

"You can have the barn," said Mr. Hooky lazily.

Baldy glared at him, and went back into the cookhouse for the barrel-stave. He had no intention of taking "hip" from a holo.

"Git!" said Baldy, as he came back with the stave.

"I've heard what you was saying to them 'punchers,'" remarked Mr. Hooky. "You know how to tell the tale, you do."

"Are you absentminded, or do you want this hyer stave?" inquired Mr. Bubbin.

"I guess not, old man," said Slim. "You keep that stave away from me, or it won't be healthy for you. Them 'punchers' would like to know what really happened, I guess."

Baldy Bubbin started back.

"What?" he said faintly.

"Getting hold of it?" asked Mr. Hooky agreeably. "I thought you would in time. Better keep civil."

"I've paid you your five dollars and given you supper," said Baldy in a hoarse whisper. "That was the bargain."

Slim Hooky nodded.

"That was it," he agreed. "It wasn't a bad supper either. But I've had my

self in the cookhouse since then. You didn't mind my taking the cold chickens, I suppose?"

"What?"

"And I found your bottle of liquor," went on Slum Hookey. "I reckoned you wasn't so dry in Alberta as you let on."

"Why, I-I—" gasped Baldy.

"Now I'm going to sleep," said Mr. Hookey, stretching himself in the bunk luxuriously. "Weeks and weeks since I slept in a bed. Thank you, old man."

"You're not having my bunk!" gasped Baldy.

Mr. Hookey waved a dirty hand at him. "Go away!" he said.

"Wha-a-t!"

"You're disturbing my repose," said Mr. Hookey with dignity. "I ain't going to be disturbed by a low-down, common cook. You clear!"

Baldy Bobbin gazed speechlessly at the rascal. It had not even occurred to the unhappy Baldy that Mr. Hookey might "go back" on the bargain he had made. A day's liberal meals, a barn for the night, and five dollars in cash formed a handsome reward for what Mr. Hookey had done. It was a handsome reward indeed for sprawling for a few minutes in shallow water and bawling for help!

But Baldy, whose simple mind was not equal to penetrating the unscrupulous rascality of Slum Hookey until it was too late, realized that the loafer had the upper hand now.

Baldy had tasted the delight of shining; of being recognized by the outfit as a man worthy of their association. And a few words from the hobo would dash his house of cards to the ground again.

He trembled at the thought.

The previous state of affairs had been bad enough. But what would Baldy's life be like if the "punchers" learned the facts? The ridicule that had hitherto been heaped on him would be as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine compared with the utter ridicule and contempt that would be his portion then.

Slum Hookey, sprawling luxuriously in the bunk, watched the changing expressions on Baldy's fat countenance with grim amusement. Evidently the unscrupulous Mr. Hookey derived entertainment from poor Baldy's dismay.

"Get me!" he asked affably.

"You awful villain!" groaned Baldy.

"Get it!" suggested Mr. Hookey. "And git!"

"Git!" gasped Baldy. He was ordered out of his own room by this lary, dirty, rascally loafer whom he had befriended.

"Yep! Git!" said Mr. Hookey tersely. "Find me another blanket first, and then take your face away! I don't like it."

Baldy's grip closed convulsively on the barrel-stove; but he did not dare to use it. He was at the hobo's mercy.

Silently he found another blanket for the luxurious Mr. Hookey, and then he went out of the room. Mr. Hookey grinned contentedly and settled himself down to sleep.

Baldy passed the night in a blanket on the floor of the cookhouse. His dreams were plentiful, but not happy.

CHAPTER 29.

Desperate Measures!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. joined the cowpunchers at an early breakfast in the sunrise the following morning. They had another day on the plains before them, and turned out as early as

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the outfit. Steaming cans of coffee were handed out by Baldy Bobbin, whose fat face wore a worried look. Baldy, so happy the evening before, did not seem happy in the morning.

"That hobo gone, Baldy?" Pete Peters asked, remembering the existence of Slum Hooky.

Baldy started, and coloured.

"Not yet," he answered.

"I guess I'll rouse him out, then, before I get going," said the foreman. "Which of the horses did you dump him in?"

"Oh, dear!" mumbled Baldy.

"Klar! What's the trouble?"

"Nothing," said Baldy hastily. "Don't you worry about the hobo, Mr. Peters; I'll clear him off presently."

Pete Peters shook his head.

"That kind of sneak-thief ain't safe about the place," he said. "You can give him some breakfast if you like; but he's going."

"I—I guess he's a bit seedy," stammered Baldy. "Let him rest."

"Boh! Let him vamoose!" grunted the foreman.

"I—I saved his life, you know," said Baldy feebly.

"You ain't adopting him for that, I s'pose?" asked Pete sarcastically. "Where is the saloon?"

"I—I let him have my bunk last night," said Baldy. "He's in my room."

"Well, you are a jave that hobo in your bunk!" said Shifter Dick.

"Waal, as I saved his life, I feel bound to look over him a bit," said the wretched Baldy. "The law won't mind him hanging on here till he'll be rested. He's a washed-up lot of water, you know."

Pete Peters grunted.

"Waal, don't hove him around when I get back," he said. "No hoboes for me. If I find him here, I'll take my quiet to him, or chuck him back into the river. You ought to be well gone left him there for all I care—let him look the loafer!"

And Pete Peters went to his horse.

"Cheerio, Baldy!" said Jimmy Silver. "Whef! He worry! You don't want to keep that hobo hanging round, do you?"

"Cheerio, Silver, I don't," said Baldy loyally. "But—but—" he stammered.

"Not a bit, old man?"

"Nothin'," said Baldy heavily.

Jimmy Silver & Co. rode away with the seven horses, and Baldy stood in the doorway of the cookhouse and looked after

them with a heavy heart. His little scheme, which had seemed so masterly to Baldy's fat mind at the time, had recoiled on himself with a vengeance. A little too late, Baldy realized that honesty is the best policy.

But now that the cowpunchers were gone he hoped to get rid of his incubus.

What would happen if the foreman came back and found the loafer still there? Baldy shuddered to think. Slum Hooky was only too likely to blurt out the facts of the case if Baldy failed to protect him.

There was a shout from the loafer's room, and Baldy started. Mr. Hooky was calling him.

Baldy went slowly in.

Slum Hooky sat up in bed and blinked at him.

"Where's my breakfast?" he asked.

"You can come out and feed," growled Baldy. "I'm giving you some breakfast afore you go."

"I guess I ain't going yet. Bring my breakfast in here."

"What?"

"Getting deaf?" asked Mr. Hooky.

"You god-darned cheeky loafer!" roared Baldy.

"Cut it!" said Mr. Hooky. "Bring me some grub sharp."

Baldy went back into the cookhouse with feelings too deep for words. Evidently Mr. Hooky was one of those gentlemen who, having a little power in their hands, like to use it to the uttermost.

The unhappy cook suppressed his feelings and prepared breakfast for Mr. Hooky. The loafer sat up in the bunk to eat.

He kept Baldy busy for some time. After that he condescended to roll out of the bunk and slouch into the cookhouse. Morning ablutions did not trouble Mr. Hooky—it was years since he had washed himself in the morning.

"Got any harcy?" he asked.

Baldy handed over tobacco, and Mr. Hooky crammed it into his pipe and lighted up. He sat on the bench by the door and smoked in lazy comfort. There was a clinking of pots and pans as Baldy washed up in the cookhouse.

Baldy looked out at last. He was getting desperate. Suppose Hudson Smedley should walk down from the ranch-house and see the loafer smoking there? He would want to know why.

"Look here, it's time you was legging it!" said Baldy.

Mr. Hookey grinned at him over the pipe.

"I guess I'm well fixed hyer!" he said. "I ain't going!"

"You've got to go!" howled Baldy.

"Cut it out!"

"S'pose the boss sees you?" snarled Baldy. "You bet he'll hoof you off the ranch fast enough!"

Mr. Hookey considered that thoughtfully.

"I ain't going!" he said. "I'm all right hyer! I guess I'm going to put in a week hyer, and get a good long rest and plenty of grub and haccy and fixings! You bet your hat on that, pard! You'll have to spin your boss a yarn! Tell him you've took me on as handyman!"

"That's all right if you turn to and work!" said Baldy. "The boss would give you a job, if you came to that. There's logs to be sawn and—"

Mr. Hookey shuddered.

"You can sweep and wash up, and so on, for a day or two," said Baldy. "If you make yourself useful I can get round Mr. Peters."

"Oh, cut it!" said Slim Hookey. "I did a day's work once—nigh on twenty years ago, it was. I never wanted no more of it! Call me a handyman, if you like—"

"It won't wash if you don't wade in and work!" howled the cook.

"Then say I'm your cousin from the States, and you've just reckornised me!" said Mr. Hookey. "Say I'm ill from the duckin' in the river. Say anything you darn well like, but I ain't going!"

"The boys'll skin you if they find you loafing here!"

"Will they?" said Mr. Hookey unpleasantly. "If you don't find out some way to stop 'em, Mr. Bubbin, you're up agin trouble! I'll give the whole show away."

Baldy, the cook, drifted back into the cookhouse in the lowest of spirits.

Mr. Hookey grinned and smoked. Somehow or other Baldy had to see him through. He "barked" on that. If Baldy failed, Mr. Hookey would be kicked off the ranch—no new experience for him. But before he went he would give Baldy away to the outfit he had imposed upon. Slim Hookey had not the slightest scruple on that point. Baldy had to stand as his friend or suffer for it.

The hapless Baldy realised it; but he realised, too, that there was "nothing doing." If the man would have worked, Baldy could have got him a job from Mr. Smooley. But the mere mention of work made Slim Hookey shudder. As soon as the cowboys came in and found the idle rascal loafing about he would be kicked out. Baldy knew that. And then, in revenge, he would give Baldy away.

Baldy almost wept at the thought of it. Somehow or other the loafer had to be got rid of before the cowboys came in. That thought hammered in Baldy's mind. He had to go. And if he would not go he had to be driven off, at the risk of what might follow. Baldy made up his mind to that.

Having made up his mind by about noon, Baldy proceeded from thought to action.

He took the barrel-stave, and came out to speak to Mr. Hookey again. Slim had stretched himself in the grass, in the shade of the corral fence, to enjoy a nap before dinner.

He was suddenly awakened by a barrel-stave prodding into his ribs. He jumped.

"Out of it!" said Baldy.

"What?"

Crack! The stave came down across Mr. Hookey with a loud concussion. There was a wild yell from the loafer.

He leaped to his feet and jumped back, glaring at Baldy furiously.

"What's this game?" he roared.

Baldy did not trouble to answer. He charged at Slim Hookey, brandishing the barrel-stave.

Whack, whack, whack!

Slim Hookey yelled and dodged. He was taken quite by surprise, having supposed that he had the fat cook quite under his thumb.

"Stop it!" he roared. "Let up! Let up, I tell you! I guess I'll give away the whole caboodle—Yarooooop!"

Crash!

The barrel-stave broke across Mr. Hookey's bullet head. The yell the loafer gave rang to a great distance, awakening the echoes.

With the remaining half of the stave in his hand, Baldy set to work on Mr. Hookey, thrashing him unmercifully.

All the base ingratitude he had suffered from the rascal was paid for just then. Baldy was enjoying himself. Slim Hookey had to go, and this was the way to make

him go. But there was policy as well as vengeance in Baldy's proceedings. The more thoroughly Mr. Hooker was thrashed the more likely he was to keep clear of the Windy River Ranch afterwards. And that was what Baldy wanted. He had to risk the moral coming back and giving him away, but the more he thrashed the faster the less was the risk. So Baldy fairly let himself go.

The stove crashed and crashed on the yelling, dodging loafer. Slim Hooker took to his heels, and after him went Baldy, still thrashing with the remnant of the stove.

Slim let out a wild yell at every step, and still the blows descended as Baldy parted in pursuit.

"Hello! What's all this, Baldy!" It was Hudson Smudley's voice.

The rancher stared as he came on the scene.

"A damned hole that won't ramrope, eh?" gasped Baldy. "I'm making him git."

"Just listen to me, sir!" howled Slim Hooker. "I tell you— Yoump! Whooooo!"

The threatened revelation was stopped by another crashing whack from the stove. Mr. Hooker rolled on the ground.

Hudson Smudley burst into a laugh.

"Don't kill him, Baldy!" he said. "You mustn't kill even a hoboe, you know!"

"Yow! Help!"

Mr. Smudley walked away, much to Baldy's relief. The fat cook leaned over the sprawling loafer and whacked and whacked again. Mr. Hooker scrambled to his feet and "lit out," as he would have expressed it, for the plains. Still on his track went Baldy, thrashing away as hard as his tired right arm could go.

Baldy was fat and brist of health, but he exerted himself in a way that was really surprising. The hapless hoboe sprawled, catching his foot in a root, and Baldy panted over him.

"You'll give me away, will you?" gasped Baldy. "After I've given you five dollars and fed you like a millionaire! I'll give you within' to remember me by! You show your face on this ranch again, and I'll give you some more of the same! Savvy?"

"Yow-ow-ow!" was the miserable Mr. Hooker's reply. "Let up! Let up, ole man! I've had enough! Let a galoot go!"

"You ain't had enough!" said Baldy,

and, invigorated by a brief rest, he started in again with the slave.

Whack, whack, whack!

Slim Hooker squirmed away, yelling, leaped up, and ran. After him rushed the breathless cook till breath at last failed him and he had to stop. Mr. Slim Hooker vanished over the prairie, still howling, and Baldy slowly took his way back to the cookhouse.

He threw down the fragment of the stove and grunted.

"I guess that was the way!" he remarked. "He won't come back arter that! I got to chance it, but I reckon he will keep clear! He won't want any more!"

Baldy felt relieved. He had done all that he could, and he kept another barrel-stave handy for immediate use if Mr. Hooker should show up on the ranch again. He hoped that all was safe now. But a lingering uneasiness remained, and Baldy, the cook, was not a happy man that day.

CHAPTER 25.

Peace for Baldy!

JIMMY SILVER rode up to the ranch in the sunset and stopped at the cook-house.

"Baldy!" he called out.

The cook came into the doorway. He gave a hurried glance round, and was relieved to see that the horizon was not blotched by the figure of Slim Hooker.

"The boys coming in?" asked Baldy.

"Yes," Jimmy looked down at Baldy with a curious expression on his face. "You turned that hoboe out?"

"Yes, he's gone!"

"I wish he had!" said Jimmy. "I'm sorry, Baldy, old man—" He paused.

Baldy, the cook, felt his heart sink.

"What's up?" he faltered. "You ain't seen anything of the man, have you?"

"I've ridden ahead to tell you, old bean," said Jimmy. "You were an awful ass, Baldy, to play such a silly trick. The man was hanging about waiting for us to come in to tell us. You seem to have scared him from coming back to the ranch, so he hung about on the trail."

Baldy gasped.

"He's spun us the whole yarn," said Jimmy. "Oh, you ass, Baldy! I—I

"I thought I'd ride on and give you the tip before the boys came in."

And Jimmy Silver, having thus good-naturedly prepared poor Baldy for what was to come, rode on to the corral.

Baldy, the cook, leaned against the door, quite limp.

"Oh, holy smoke!" he groaned.

There was a shudding of horse, and a bunch of riders came up. Lovell and Baby and Newcome were with them, and Skitter Dick and three or four more cowpunchers, and Pete Peters. The whole band were laughing uproariously. Worst of all, there was Slum Hooky, thrown like a sack of wheat across Pete's horse.

The riders halted at the cookhouse, and Mr. Hooky rolled to the ground with a howl.

"We've brought your pard back, Baldy!" roared the foreman. "Met him on the trail."

Groan from Baldy.

"He's spun us a yarn!" yelled Skitter Dick. "He says you gave him five dollars to be rescued!"

Groan!

"He never went into deep water at all!" shrieked Lovell. "Just sprang in the shallows to get wet, and howled for help for us to hear! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, Baldy!"

Groan!

"Just squinted in the shadows till we came in sight," howled Skitter Dick. "Just to let us see you rescue him, Baldy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baldy, the cook, gazed at the yelling punchers with a lack-lustre eye. He was too utterly dismayed even to take the barrel-stave to the grinning Mr. Hooky.

"I reckoned we'd bring him back and make him say so afore you, Baldy," said Mr. Peters. "Of course, we know you were lying, old man, like you always are. But there he is. Now then, you loafer, cough it up again!"

Mr. Hooky grinned. He was still aching from his thrashing, but that thrashing was to be paid for now.

"He gave me five dollars to do it," he said. "Five dollars," he says, 'to let me rescue you from drowning,' he says. 'I'm misunderstood hyer,' he says, 'and they say I'm funky,' he says, 'and I'm going to show 'em better,' he says, 'with your help,' he says. 'Five dollars,' he says. Little enough, hun, for getting wet all over. I ain't been wet all over for thirty years."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What do you say now, Baldy?" roared Pete Peters.

There was nothing for Baldy to say. He could only blink at the yelling cowboys and wish, from the bottom of his heart, that that wonderful scheme for establishing his reputation for courage had never occurred to him.

"Go it, Baldy!" howled Lovell. "Give us another yarn! Tell us how many times he dragged you under water in the middle of the river."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Waal, this beats me," said Skitter Dick. "Hyer's Baldy, the biggest liar in Alberta. Without a lie left to tell. He's used up all his stock."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh dear!" groaned the unhappy Baldy.

He backed into the cookhouse and slammed the door. A terrific roar of laughter followed his disappearance.

Pete Peters wiped his eyes.

"I guess this puts the lid on," he said.

"We was jays to believe a word of it—goddarned jays! And so for this critter, who's given Baldy away after touching him for five dollars. I guess we'll make him learn that the Windy River section hasn't any use for him. Quirts, boys!"

Slum Hooky gave a yell as the horsemen circled round him with the long whips cracking. For the second time that day Mr. Slum Hooky fled for his life, and this time he shook the dust of the Windy River Ranch from his feet for ever.

"Jest a joke on you, boys!" Baldy said feebly when he handed out supper. "Jest a joke! Jest pulling your legs, you know! Of course, I—I was going to tell you."

"Cut it!" said Pete Peters. "Cut it, Baldy! You're jest a liar, Baldy, and a funk, Baldy, and a mean, deceiving son, Baldy; and if you wasn't the best cook in Alberta, I'd boot you off the ranch with these hyer boots!"

"I—I tell you—"

"Cut it!" roared Mr. Peters.

And the hapless Baldy did. The game was up, and Baldy, the cook, found his last state worse than his first, which doubtless was just what he deserved.

WHERE IT'S REALLY WARM!

MOST of us have made some pretty strong remarks at one time or another about our weather's little peculiarities, especially when our annual holiday has been completely "messed up" by a few of those deep depressions from Iceland. Certainly, it can be very annoying, but the next time you start to wonder sarcastically whether summer will come on a Wednesday this year and wish that England was somewhere near the Equator, thank your lucky stars instead that you don't happen to be living in one of the world's really hot places.

Siding Heat.

New York, for instance, is in practically the same latitude as London, but a real 100 per cent heat-wave such as New Yorkers have learned to expect every summer makes the English variety seem quite chilly in comparison. Like a siding, smothering blanket, the heat proceeds on the city of skyscrapers, making life almost unbearable for those unfortunate who haven't been able to get away to the coast, in spite of electric fans by the dozen, millions of ice-water, and the absolute minimum of clothes.

What makes a heat-wave "over there" even more to be dreaded is the fact that it usually stays for weeks, or even months, while all the time the death-roll is mounting higher and higher. Some idea of what a baking New York gets during one of its typical summers is provided by two incidents that took place there last year.

A girl had only got half-way across one of the principal streets before she found herself stuck fast in melting asphalt. Unable to move an inch, she stood there helpless, while motorists hooped and traffic jammed for half a mile on each side. Finally, two stout-hearted men from the gathering crowd came to the rescue, untied her shoes, and carried her to the pavement.

During the same heat-wave someone made a bet that it was hot enough to fry eggs on the pavement. To settle the matter, a local grocer laid one of his eggs over the pavement and put it down. Four minutes later it was scraped off and found to be perfectly fried.

Death Valley.

Thousands of miles to the west of New York, in the most desolate region of southern California, lies Death Valley, that fearful graveyard of men and animals that is probably the hottest place on the face of the earth. Nothing grows there. Not the hardiest desert cactus could live in the bitter alkali dust of Death Valley, where in some parts rain never falls and the heat of the burning sun strikes back from brilliantly coloured cliffs in waves that seem almost solid.

By six o'clock the sun is scorching hot; by eight not a living thing is to be seen—not a buzzard, not even a rattlesnake. The walking man will dry and crack a traveller's boots, half-blind his bandaged eyes. However much he may cover himself up the heat will turn his flesh a fiery red.

How many desperate pioneers have left their bones in Death Valley will never be known. Lured on by tantalising mirages, tortured by unbelievable thirst, their bleached skeletons are scattered over the desert, untouched by human hand since the day that they sank down to die.

120 Degrees on Deck.

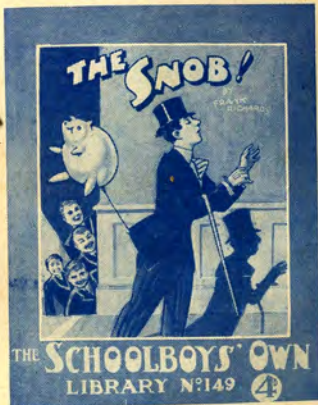
A sailor's life takes him into many places where sometimes he would give a king's ransom for a breath of cooling air and a drink of ice-cold water.

Few places are more dreaded for their heat than the Red Sea, through which scores of ships pass on the Suez Canal route to India and Australia. In that region, where the thermometer often registers 120 degrees on deck, and 155 degrees in the stokehold, only the very lightest work on board ship can be attempted. Even that makes the sweat simply pour out.

Under a pitiless, flaming sun the pitch huddles in the deck seams, iron rails grow blistering hot, the sea is glassy, motionless. Nothing stirs. Everything is still—still "as a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

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