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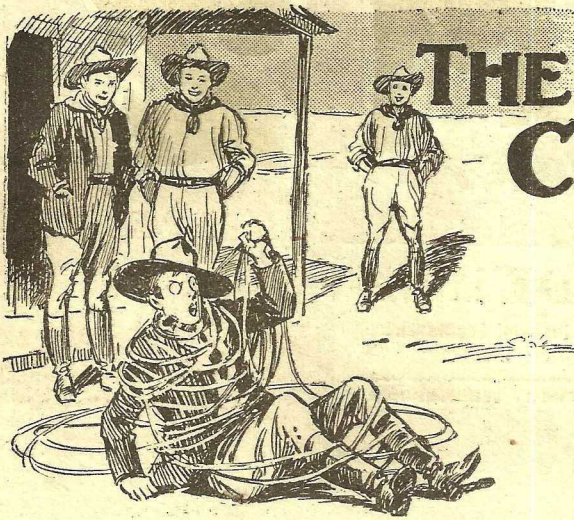
A perilous moment for Kit Wildrake and his Chums on the Boot Leg Ranch!

(Read *THE SCHOOLBOY COWPUNCHERS* inside.)

No. 1,020. Vol XXXII. September 3rd, 1927. EVERY WEDNESDAY.



NOT SO SOFT AS HE LOOKS! Arthur Augustus D'Arcy can't throw a lasso to save his life. In fact he comes near to hanging himself when he does essay this difficult task! But, for all his elegant ways and affected speech, D'Arcy proves himself of great service to a number of experienced cowboys when they are confronted with a problem which to them seems insoluble!



THE SCHOOLBOY COW-PUNCHERS!

A New Long Complete Story dealing with the Thrilling Western Adventures of Kit Wildrake and his Chums on the Boot Leg Ranch.

By
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Gussy Knows How!

"PWAY, count me in!"

"Hem!"

"I twust, Wildwake, that I shall be able to make myself useful."

"Um!"

Kit Wildrake seemed doubtful.

"Of course, I have not been vewy long in Canadah," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "But I have been heah long enough to learn how to punch cows. I believe that is the expression, deah boy?"

"Sure!" agreed Wildrake. "But——"

There was an audible laugh from Tom Merry & Co. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon the St. Jim's juniors severely. He did not see anything to laugh at, himself.

"I guess it will be a rough trail, Gussy!" said Wildrake. "We're herding a thousand head of cattle a hundred miles across the plains. It will be rough riding and hard camping!"

"Yaas, wathah! I can wuff it all wight!"

"I know you can, old scout; but——"

"Pway say no more, deah boy; it's settled," said Arthur Augustus. "But I do not feel suah that these fellows ought to come. Gweenhorns will pwobably be of vewy little use on a cattle-twail!"

"What?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Cheek!" said Blake.

"Of all the nerve!" said Monty Lowther.

"Fathead!" remarked Manners.

"Pway do not go off at the deep end, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus mildly. "You have heard Wildwake say that it will be a wuff twail, and though I am wathah new to the West, I am quite awah that it is no easy mattah to herd a thousand head of cattle across the plains. I do not want to dispawge you fellows, of course; but I cannot help thinkin' that you will be wathah in the way!"

"Ass!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"If we're greenhorns, what are you, fathead?" demanded Manners.

"Pway do not get excited, Mannahs. We shall have twouble enough with the steeahs, without a lot of tendahfeet botherin'!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had apparently forgotten that he was a tenderfoot himself. No doubt he supposed that his aristocratic brain had assimilated most of what there was to be learned about ranching in the Canadian West. He was quite prepared to take a lead-

ing part in the cattle drive; indeed, he would probably have taken over the entire management of the Boot Leg Ranch, nothing doubting, had Mr. Wildrake requested him to do so.

Wildrake laughed.

"I guess the whole family will go," he said. "The popper's busy these days, and he can't spare many hands to drive the herd to the railway. You fellows will be useful if you care to ride with the herd. I'm only warning you that it's more hard work than fun!"

"I twust that hard work will not hurt me, deah boy."

"I hope not, old bean! Anyhow, if you get fed-up, you can ride back to the ranch any day—you know your way about the plains now."

"Yaas, wathah! But I shall not get fed-up. I shall be all wight. And I've got an ideah," added Arthur Augustus brightly. "If these fellows ewack up, they can take a passage in the 'chuck' wagon."

"Why, you—you—you——" gasped Jack Blake. "Do you think we're as likely to crack up as you are, you—you image?"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Bump him!" said Manners.

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"Lynch him!" said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Order!" said Wildrake, laughing. "It's settled. We start at dawn to-morrow, and we shall be away from the ranch a week. Pack your things this evening, and turn in early."

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry.

"Noscy Rogers will be trail-boss, and there will be three punchers," said the Canadian junior. "That's all popper can spare. I guess I'm as good as a puncher—and you-'uns will be useful. It's a cinch!"

"And if there's a stampede, we'll see Gussy roping in steers!" said Blake sarcastically. "It will be worth seeing!"

"I twust that I can wope in a steeah, Blake, if necessary," said D'Arcy, with dignity.

"I trust that I shall be out of reach of the lasso when you try it on," remarked Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! I have watched the punchahs lassoin', and I feel suah that I can handle the wope all wight," said Arthur Augustus. "Of course, I am awah that it wequiah some pwactice."

"Just a few!" grinned Wildrake.

"Pway lend me your rope, Wildwake."

"Hem!"

"I will show these sillay asses that I can handle a wope," said Arthur Augustus. "I have seen the punchahs doin' it, and it looks easy enough."

"I guess it's not so easy as it looks, kid."

"Wats!"

"Oh, give him his head!" said Blake. "Let's stand round and see him tie himself up in knots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wildrake grinned, and handed his coiled lasso to Arthur Augustus. Tom Merry & Co. were lounging before the ranch-house in the golden sunset of British Columbia, enjoying a spell of idleness. There was plenty of hard work to come on the morrow, if they joined in the cattle-drive to the depot on the Canadian Pacific Railway.

"Now, what shall I wope in?" asked Arthur Augustus, looking round for a victim, as it were. "Blake, deah boy, you think that I cannot wope in anythin'?"

"I don't think, old chap—I know!"

"Vewy well; then you can stand up to be woped in."

"Eh?"

"If you are suah that I cannot wope in anythin', it will not hurt you, deah boy!"

Blake stared for a moment, while the other fellows grinned. But Blake was a man of his word.

"It's a go!" he said. "I mean, it would be a go at St. Jim's. It's a cinch here! I'll stand up to be roped, and if you drop the noose over my head I'll eat it!"

And Blake took up his stand, and the other fellows retreated out of reach of the rope as Arthur Augustus whirled it round his noble head preparatory to the cast.

He whirled it—and went on whirling it.

Arthur Augustus had seen the cow-punchers on the Boot Leg Ranch whirl a rope and hurl it, and he had seen a galloping steer roll over in the noose. It had looked easy to him. Wildrake did it as well as any puncher on the Boot Leg domain. But now that he came actually to do it, it seemed a more difficult feat to the noble Gussy. He realised that roping had to be learned like anything else.

But D'Arcy was not a fellow to admit defeat. The juniors were already grinning, and Monty Lowther called out to inquire whether he was doing something new in physical jerks. Arthur Augustus let the rope go at last.

What happened next surprised him.

Properly speaking, the lasso ought to have flown through the air, uncoiling as it flew, landing the loop fair and square over Jack Blake's grinning face and over his shoulders.

Instead of which the whole rope somehow became entangled round Arthur Augustus' own elegant and noble person, and he staggered and stumbled and fell over, clad in tangled rope as in a garment.

CHAPTER 2.

Catching The Cook!

"HA, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter greeted Arthur Augustus as he sat dazedly in the midst of tangled rope, blinking.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

"Do it again, Gussy!" yelled Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Sort yourself out, old man, and try again!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Oh, deah!"

Arthur Augustus, with a crimson face, struggled to disentangle himself from the coiling rope. Wildrake ran forward to give him a helping hand.

"I guess you have to learn these things, Gussy, old scout," he chuckled.

"Wats!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came another roar.

It seemed to Arthur Augustus, as he struggled out of the encircling rope, that all the Boot Leg ranch had gathered to look at his performance. Mr. Wildrake had stepped out on the ranch veranda; Bunchy, the cook, had come out of the cookhouse; two or three punchers from the bunkhouse; a Kootenay herdsman perched himself on the corral fence; Long Jim, the foreman of the ranch, who

was riding in, halted his horse to look on; three or four other spectators turned up at various points.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the cynosure of all eyes.

As a rule, Arthur Augustus had no special objection to the limelight. But he was not enjoying it now.

His noble face was crimson as he extricated himself at last from that unfortunate rope.

"You see, old chap—" grinned Wildrake.

"Pway stand back, deah boy."

"But I guess—"

"I am goin' to wope in that gwinnin' idiot Blake."

"Oh, all O.K., old bean—go it!" said the Canadian junior, as he retreated to join the chuckling juniors again.

"Go it, Gussy!" chortled Monty Lowther. "Don't lynch yourself, old man, if you can help it."

"Wats!"

"Wait a minute while I get my camera!" yelled Manners.

"Bai Jove! If you get your camewah, Mannahs, I will punch your sillay head!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus got the rope coiled at last. Once more he whirled it round his noble head.

The delighted spectators gazed on, to see the swell of St. Jim's tie himself up in knots again.

But this time Gussy had better luck.

His cast, perhaps by a lucky fluke, was more effective. The lasso flew through the air, uncoiling as it flew, in quite a masterly manner.

Certainly, it flew nowhere near the grinning Blake. Arthur Augustus had yet to learn how to judge the direction of a cast.

But every bullet has its billet, and the same applies to a lasso-cast. The loop dropped over a head, as Gussy intended, though it was not the head over which he intended it to drop.

There was a sudden roar from Bunchy, the cook.

He was standing in the opposite direction from Blake, and for that reason had doubtless supposed himself safe, not knowing of what Gussy was capable when he handled a lariat.

He gave a startled roar as the loop dropped over his head, slipped round his shoulders, and tightened.

Arthur Augustus dragged on the rope.

He had turned unconsciously in whirling the lasso and making the cast, and he was not aware, for the moment, that he had bagged the wrong man. He dragged on the rope, and Bunchy, the cook, was up-ended as it plucked at him, and the fat ranch-cook went sprawling heels over head.

"Bai Jove! That's done it!"

Excited with his success, Arthur Augustus dragged harder on the rope. He knew that he had caught somebody, and it did not occur to him that it was not Blake. The hapless cook sprawled and roared.

There was a shriek of merriment from the delighted spectators. This was better than they had expected.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Waal, carry me home to die!" gasped Long Jim, wiping tears of merriment from his eyes.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus ran gleefully along the rope, coiling it up as he ran, to his capture. It was then that he realised that the fat figure sprawling on the ground was not Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's got Bunchy!" sobbed Blake.

"He's got the cook! Oh dear!"

"Bunchay!" gasped D'Arcy.

The cook sat up dizzily.

"You onery scallywag!" he roared.

"What's this hyer game? You pesky, slabsided galoot, what's biting you?"

"Bai Jove!" D'Arcy gazed at the cook in wonder and consternation.

"I am weally sowwy, Bunchay—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you plumb loco, you galoot?" yelled the cook.

"Weally, Bunchay—"

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The cook struggled free from the lasso. His fat face was red with wrath.

"What did you get in the way for?" demanded Arthur Augustus.

"Wha-a-t?" gasped Bunchy.

"I weally wish you had kept out of the way, Bunchy——"

"Out of the way!" said Bunchy, dazedly. "Why, you blind mule, I was jest ahind you, I guess! You pesky guy——"

"Here, hold on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as the wrathful Bunchy, having shaken himself free of the rope, rushed at Arthur Augustus.

"Bai Jove! I—I—— Pway keep your tempah! Oh, dear!" stuttered the swell of St. Jim's.

Fortunately, the juniors rushed between in time. The wrathful and indignant Bunchy was headed off, and Arthur Augustus dragged away. Kit Wildrake coiled up the lasso.

"Pway do not take the wope away, Wildwake!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "I have not finished yet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm still waiting to be roped in," said Blake, patiently. "Let him rip, Wildrake. He will get one of you fellows next, or perhaps your pater off the veranda. I'm the only fellow that's safe. Keep on aiming at me, Gussy—I like to feel safe."

"Weally, Blake, you ass——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As a mattah of fact, I do not think much of the lasso," said Arthur Augustus. "And I see nothin' to cause all this widiculous mewwiment——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows cannot leave off cacklin'——" roared Arthur Augustus.

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

"Oh, wats!"

Apparently the fellows couldn't leave off cackling; at all events, they didn't. And Arthur Augustus, with a heightened colour and a lofty frown, walked into the ranch-house and left them to it.

CHAPTER 3.

The Cattle Drive!

"BURNING daylight!" came Wildrake's cheery voice, in the first glimmer of dawn, and Tom Merry & Co. started out of slumber and rubbed their eyes.

There was a glimmer at the windows, a pale rosy flush in the sky in the east. It was daylight, though there was not much daylight to "burn" so far. But it was time to turn out, for the fellows who were to ride with the cattle drive.

"Bai Jove! It's feahfully early!" murmured Arthur Augustus, as he sat up in bed.

"Slacker!" came from Blake's bed.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Breakfast in ten minutes, you-'uns," said Wildrake; and he went on his way whistling cheerily.

Arthur Augustus detached himself from his warm bed.

Blake sat up and yawned. Arthur Augustus glanced at him severely.

"Turn out, Blake, deah boy. You called me a slackah just now. I twust you are not goin' to slack!" "Yaw-aw-aw-aw!"

Blake was sleepy. He had been quite keen on joining the cattle-drive, and he was more than willing to make himself useful during that eventful vacation in the Canadian West. But the hour was very early, and undoubtedly Blake was sleepy. He blinked at Arthur Augustus and yawned deeply.

"Slackah!" said D'Arcy, as he groped for his trousers. "Turn out, or you will be late for bwekkah!"

"Yaw-aw-aw! Rats! Yaw-aw-aw!"

"You are wastin' time, Blake, makin' those widiculous noises. Make an effort, deah boy, and woll out," said Arthur Augustus encouragingly. "We've hardly time to dweess, you know, and no time at all for slackin'."

"I don't need so much time as you do, fathead! I haven't got to curl my hair."

"Weally, Blake——"

"Yaw-aw-aw!" yawned Blake. "Oh, ah, ow! You fathead! Yarooop!" he went on, as Arthur Augustus squeezed a wet sponge over his neck.

Blake leaped out of bed as if he had been electrified.

"You howling ass!" he roared.

"If that is how you thank a chap for givin' you a helpin' hand, Blake, I should pwefer you to dwy up!"

"You burbling image!"

"Hallo, you kids rowing already?" asked Tom Merry, looking cheerily in at the door. "I'm surprised at you, Gussy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"You're not in Study No. 6 at St. Jim's now, Gussy, old man!" said Monty Lowther over Tom's shoulder. "Behave yourself!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Manners looked in.

"You Fourth Form fags ragging?" he asked. "Oh, my hat! Grooogh!"

Blake had picked up the sponge with the intention of bestowing it upon Arthur Augustus. He bestowed it on Manners of the Shell instead.

"Who are you calling fags?" he inquired politely.

"Grooogh!"

"Whom, dear boy, whom!" said Monty Lowther chidingly. "Don't mix up your cases because you're out of reach of your Form master's cane!"

Blake reached for a water-jug, and the Terrible Three of the Shell faded out of view.

They came down cheerily to breakfast in the dawn, and Blake and D'Arcy were down soon after them. Mr. Wildrake was already up and out, and they found the rancher's son at the breakfast-table and joined him in a substantial meal served by the Chinese chore-boy. By the time breakfast was over, the early sunshine was gleaming down on the Boot Leg Ranch, and the St. Jim's juniors went out cheerily.

There was a lowing and a grunting from the great herd of cattle out on the plain rounded up for the drive to the railhead. Nosey Rogers, who had been assigned to the position of "trail boss," was in charge of the herd, with three punchers to help him. Bunchy, the cook, was stacking the "chuck" wagon which was to accompany the drive, driven by Bunchy himself. The juniors led their horses out of the corral and saddled them and looked to their bed-rolls and other "fixings." They noted that Kit Wildrake had "packed a gun," and they did not neglect to do likewise. Wildrake also packed a rope, but Tom Merry & Co. had not yet mastered the mysteries of the lasso. And even Arthur Augustus did not provide himself with a rope.

"All ready, Bunchy?" called out Mr. Wildrake.

"Sure, boss!"

"Hit the trail, then!"

And Bunchy gathered up his reins, grunted something at his two horses, and the "chuck" wagon rattled and bumped away on the prairie trail.

"You lads are sure you want to ride with the drive?" asked the rancher, with a smile to Tom Merry & Co.

"Yes, rather, sir," said Tom Merry.

"I guess so, some!" remarked Monty Lowther gravely.

"It will be a hard journey," said the rancher.

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Kit Wildrake put spurs to his horse and dashed out to intercept the runaway. The steer bellowed and roared, and turned on the Canadian junior, with lowered head, and threatening horns. With wonderful horsemanship, however, Wildrake eluded the charge of the enraged animal. (See Chapter 3.)

"That's all wight, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "I shall be lookin' aftah these youngstahs!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Wildrake.

"I assuah you, sir, that you can twust them to my care," said Arthur Augustus reassuringly.

Mr. Wildrake laughed.

"Very well; good-bye, then. You'll see that you bring your guests safe back to the ranch, Kit?"

And the juniors mounted their horses and rode out on the plains under the strengthening sunlight to join the drive.

There was a shouting and a loud cracking of cattle-whips like the reports of pistol-shots. The great herd lumbered into motion, with the punchers scattered on its skirts, driving back restless steers that sought to wander from the herd. Wildrake was riding with the cattle-men, and Tom Merry & Co. rode behind the herd for a little distance. But the dust kicked up by four thousand hoofs was too thick for them, and they scattered and rode on the flanks of the cattle like the punchers.

Tom Merry joined Wildrake.

"We're heading for Lone Pine?" he asked.

The Canadian junior nodded.

"Yep! We camp by Lone Pine to-night, first stop. It's good going as far as that."

"After that, Rainbow?" asked Tom.

"Nope. We're hitting the railroad at the junction—Canpac Creek. It will take us some days. A herd travels slow."

"It doesn't seem a hard job, so far," said Tom.

Wildrake laughed.

"You'll find it hard enough if the cattle should take a scare and stampede. That happens sometimes. A thunderstorm might cause it to happen. And I guess there's a good many half-breed cattle-thieves between here and Canpac Creek—and we want to keep our eyes peeled for them. I reckon we might lose a bunch of

steers every night if we don't watch out. And the grub will be rough and ready. Bunchy's a good cook, but we don't pack first-class restaurant fare in a chuck wagon."

He broke off.

"Look at that steer! I've got to head him back!"

A powerful steer had plunged out of the herd and was heading for the open prairie on his own at a lumbering gallop. Wildrake put spurs to his horse and dashed out to intercept the runaway.

In a few moments he had headed the steer back, driving it to the herd with clattering quirt. The steer bellowed and roared, and once turned on the rider with lowered head and threatening horns, and Tom watched breathlessly. With wonderful horsemanship, Wildrake eluded the charge of the enraged animal and headed him again and drove him back to the herd. Kit rejoined Tom Merry with a smile.

Mile after mile passed slowly under the innumerable tramping hoofs, while the sun rose higher in the sky and the burning heat of the Canadian summer poured down on the herd and the riders. In the blaze of noon there was a halt for rest and food, and Bunchy handed out the rations from the chuck wagon with a fat and shiny, grinning face. And the St. Jim's juniors were glad to quit the saddle and rest in the shade of a clump of cedars, while the great herd lay at rest in the grass.

CHAPTER 4. Not a Success!

"WHAT about milk?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Milk!" said Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry & Co., stretched in the grass in the

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grateful shade of the cedar branches, sat up and stared at the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus, evidently, had been thinking. In fact, his aristocratic brain had been working at full pressure.

"You fellows feel dwy, I suppose?" he inquired.

"Just a little," said Tom. "But we can get water from the chuck wagon—though we mustn't waste it."

"What about a dwink of fwesh milk?"

"There isn't any, fathead!" said Blake. "Bunchy hasn't brought cans of milk in the chuck wagon. There was no milk in the coffee we had."

"I have been thinkin'—"

"Don't, then. You know your brain won't stand it. We don't want an accident now."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Well, where are you going to get the milk, anyhow?" asked Lowther, puzzled. "Do you suppose that coconuts grow on these trees?"

"Nothin' of the sort." Arthur Augustus waved his hand towards the resting herd. "There are plenty of cows."

"Oh!" said Tom, with a stare.

"I have seen girls milkin' cows on farms at home," explained Arthur Augustus. "We have a model farm at Eastwood, you know, and I have often given them a look-in, and seen how they do things. I am quite suah that I could milk a cow. And we have lots of cows heah."

"Not the milking variety, I fancy," said Tom, with a laugh.

"Wubbish! All cows can be milked, I suppose," said Arthur Augustus. "That is what cows are for."

"Not this sort," said Manners.

"Wats! A cow is a cow," said Arthur Augustus. "Whethah it is in England or Canadah, a cow is still a cow. That stands to reason."

"My dear ass," said Blake, "if these cows could be milked, do you think the punchers wouldn't know?"

"They do not know everythin', Blaké. It takes an intelligent fellow to think of things sometimes. Besides, I dare say they pwefer some dwink stwongah than milk."

Arthur Augustus detached himself from the grass.

Evidently he intended to obtain a refreshing beverage, and had no doubt of being able to do so.

Nosey Rogers, who was resting under the tree, gave a husky chuckle, but made no remark. Wildrake was out on the plain, or doubtless he would have made a remark, though probably he would not have convinced Gussy that he could not obtain milk when there were plenty of cows at hand.

Arthur Augustus walked over to the chuck-wagon.

Bunchy, the cook, after handing out the "chuck" and disposing of a considerable quantity of it himself, had stretched himself in the wagon, under the shade of the canvas cover, to take a little nap, with a spotted handkerchief over his fat face to keep off the flies, which were, like the language of Truthful James, "frequent and painful and free."

Arthur Augustus gave him a nudge.

"Bunchay, deah boy—"

"Moooooooh!" murmured Bunchy.

D'Arcy gave him a poke.

"I am sowwy to disturb you, Bunchay—"

"Mmmmmmmmmmm!"

Arthur Augustus proceeded to a shove. That had the effect of bringing back the ranch cook from the land of dreams.

"You ornery beast!" came a muffled voice from under the spotted handkerchief. "Git back to your feed and leave a galoot alone! You ornery cayuse, I'll rope you raw!"

Arthur Augustus grinned. Evidently Bunchy was under the impression that one of the chuck-wagon horses was poking his head in.

"Bunchay, deah boy—"

The cook sat up.

"Oh, you!" he grunted. "Ain't you had enough? Can't you let a galoot sleep for a minute?"

"I am sowwy, Bunchay—"

"Standin' there chewing the rag, when a man's only got a few minutes for a nap!" snorted Bunchy.

"I am weally sowwy—"

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"Waal, don't spill any more!" snapped Bunchy.

"Eh? I am not spillin' anythin'," said the perplexed swell of St. Jim's.

Snort from Bunchy.

"Don't you understand plain Canadian?" he hooted

"You've sure spilled a bibful already. Shut up!"

"Oh, I compwehend your meanin' now, Bunchay!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am sowwy to disturb you, but I want to bowwow a pail."

"And why the thunder do you want to borrow a pail?" demanded Bunchy.

"I am goin' to milk one of the cows."

"Eh?"

"In this feahful dust and sunshine, deah boy, a dwink of milk would be vewy wewfeshin'. Don't you think so?"

The fat cook stared at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He rubbed his round eyes and stared at him again.

"You're goin' to milk a cow?" he stammered.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Where's there a cow to milk?"

"There are lots of cows quite neah us, Bunchay. I do not see what you are gwinnin' at."

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Bunchy.

"Weally, deah boy—"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"I twust you have not been dwinkin', Bunchay," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy severely. "Aftah your wotten conduct at the Pine Twee Patch you undahtook to sign the pledge. But your unseemly mewwiment weally looks as if you have been dwinkin' again."

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"Pway stop that wow, Bunchay, and lend me a pail!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus impatiently.

"Oh, Jerusalem crickets!" gurgled Bunchy. "You can borrer a pail—there's a pail—take it and go!"

"Haw, haw, haw!"

"I pwesume that there is no objection to my milkin' one of the cows."

"Haw, haw, haw! I guess not—if she'll let you."

"I twust that I know how to milk a cow, Bunchay. I have watched the cows bein' milked on the model farm at home."

"Haw, haw, haw!"

Bunchy, no longer looking sleepy, fairly rocked with laughter among his pots and pans in the chuck-wagon. Arthur Augustus, frowning at this unseemly merriment, picked up a pail and retired. Bunchy's unseemly merriment followed him as he went.

Tom Merry & Co. were sitting up in the grass, watching their noble chum and grinning. But Arthur Augustus cared no more for their grinning than for Bunchy's laughter.

Pail in hand, he marched over to the nearest bunch of cows.

Most of the animals were reposing in the grass, half-asleep in the hot noontide; but several were standing about, with the sleepy meditative look common to their kind all the world over.

Arthur Augustus marched up to the nearest standing cow, who glanced round at him without interest.

"All wight, old bean," murmured Arthur Augustus soothingly, "I'm not goin' to hurt you, old lady. Just stand still."

The cow stood still.

She seemed taken by surprise. Certainly she had never been milked, and probably did not know anything about such proceedings. Arthur Augustus set the pail under the cow in readiness. He regretted that he had no milking-stool, but he squatted down to it. Still the cow gave no sign.

From the chuck-wagon Bunchy's gurgling mirth could still be heard. Under the cedars Tom Merry & Co. stared, and Nosey Rogers rolled over in the grass in a paroxysm of merriment.

Arthur Augustus started milking.

He did not succeed so far as a produce of milk was concerned. But he succeeded in rousing the cow from her solemn and serious deportment. What Gussy's object was, clearly the cow had no idea. But she took a sudden alarm, and all of a sudden she woke into motion.

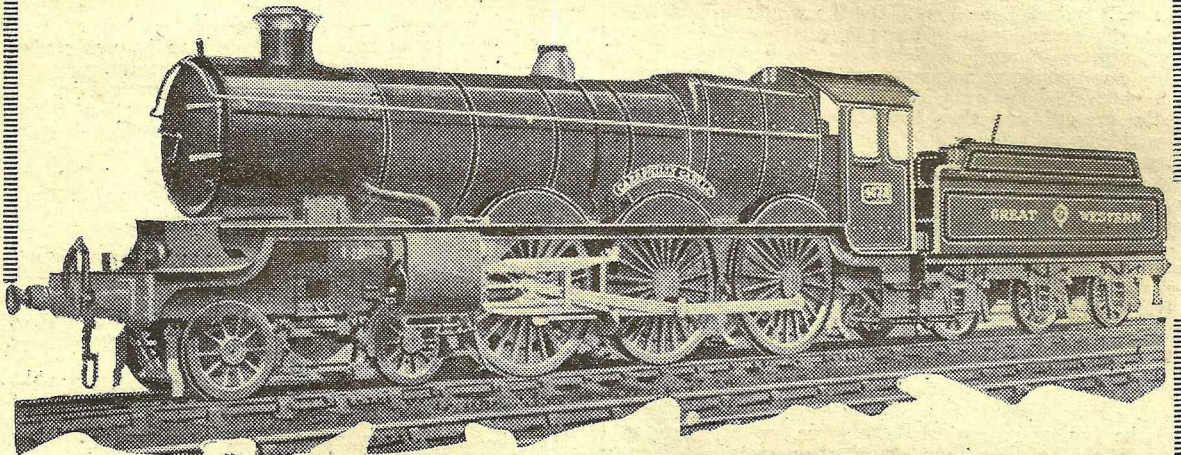
"Look out, Gussy!" shrieked Blake.

But the warning came too late. The cow made a sudden startled jump, and Arthur Augustus went flying

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backwards. The next instant the cow kicked the pail away after Gussy, and there was a crash as it landed on him. Arthur Augustus gave a wild howl as he was bonneted by the tin pail, and for the moment the landscape was shut out from his view.

"Oh! Ow! Gwoooogh! Help!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" yelled Bunchy. "He's milking the cow! Haw, haw, haw!"

"Yawoooh! Help!"

The cow, having been roused out of her customary placidity, seemed excited. Having kicked the pail and Gussy over, she was not satisfied. She turned on the hapless milker, and tramped over him, bellowing. Wild yells came from the swell of St. Jim's.

Tom Merry rushed forward, though he was laughing almost too much to move. He seized the cow by the horns and dragged her aside from the sprawling swell of St. Jim's.

"Hook it, Gussy!" he gasped.

"Oh, cwumbs!"

Arthur Augustus staggered up and hurled aside the clattering pail. He gazed at the cow in wrathful astonishment.

"The howwid beast! I——"

"Hook it, you ass!"

Tom Merry dodged away from the cow, who was thoroughly excited and angry now. The bellowing animal charged at Arthur Augustus, and he ran for it. The cow rushed after him.

"Oh, cwikey! Help!"

Nosey Rogers jumped up, and, with cracking quirt, drove the enraged cow back to the herd. Arthur Augustus leaned on a cedar and panted for breath. Kit Wildrake came running up, a little alarmed.

"What's the row?" he exclaimed.

"Gussy's been milking a cow——"

"What?" yelled Wildrake.

"Oh, cwumbs! I suppose there is no harm in milkin' a cow, Wildwake; but the howwid beast did not seem to undahstand——"

Wildrake shrieked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Wildwake——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Wildrake. "Oh, Gussy, you'll be the death of me! Did you think these cows were milking cows?"

"Eh! I suppose all cows are milkin' cows!" ejaculated Gussy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What is the use of the beastly animals if you cannot milk them?" demanded Arthur Augustus warmly.

"Oh, dear!" Wildrake wiped his eyes. "They're beef, old man, not for milking. That cow must have been surprised—just a few. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Haw, haw, haw!" came from the chuck wagon.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, you fellows——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats!" said Arthur Augustus. "I see nothin' whatevah to cackle at. I wegard you as a set of cacklin' asses!"

And Arthur Augustus brushed down his clothes, with a frown on his noble countenance, which did not clear away till the camp broke up and the cattle drive "hit the trail" once more for Lone Pine. And though, during the ride in the dust and the hot sun that afternoon, all the fellows were athirst, and all of them asked Gussy several times to milk a cow for them, it was useless to ask. The swell of St. Jim's only replied to such requests with an indignant sniff. He was "through" with milking cows.

CHAPTER 5.

The Bad Man From Red Dog!

NIGHT on the prairie!

It was a warm summer's night; the dark, velvety sky spangled with myriads of glinting stars. In the deep shadows the resting cattle lay in the grass, and the cowpunchers loomed like dim shadows themselves as they guarded the herd. There was cold "chuck" for supper, and after supper Tom Merry & Co. looked away towards the twinkling lights of Lone Pine, at a little distance across the plain. The trail boss had picked a camp near the creek, a quarter of a mile out of Lone Pine. On the wind, through the clear air, sounds came from the cattle-camp of Lone Pine, strains of music softened by the distance. Probably some jamboree was going on in the frontier camp.

A clatter of hoofs in the dusk drew the attention of the juniors, and they looked round to see a horseman riding up the bank of the creek from the south. Apparently it was a traveller heading for Lone Pine, and he had not expected to ride into a sleeping herd on the dark prairie. His horse stumbled at a sleeping cow, and the juniors heard a loud and angry caw, in a voice that had a strong nasal twang, which hinted that the stranger came from the southern side of the American border.

The horseman came on, and the juniors picked him out clearly in the starlight—a big, powerful man, with a ragged Stetson hat and a shaggy beard, mounted on a large, bony cayuse. He drew rein near the chuck-wagon, on the bank of the creek, and jumped off his horse. His bearded, rugged face had an angry look, and the juniors noticed that he wore two revolvers at his belt, the holsters slung low, gunman style.

"What's this hyer circus?" exclaimed the big man, in an angry, booming voice. "Search me! Who are you-'uns, anyhow?"

The juniors looked at him quietly. Nosey Rogers and the cowpunchers were out among the herd, but all the juniors were gathered near the chuck-wagon, where Bunchy, the cook, was washing dishes in a bucket of water drawn from the creek. The newcomer's manner was overbearing and bullying, all the more, perhaps, because he saw that he had only boys to deal with. To Tom Merry & Co. the man with the low-slung guns was a new specimen; but Kit Wildrake knew the kind—he had seen the "bad men" of the West before.

"You hear me yaup?" went on the stranger. "I guess I've more'n half a mind to wade in and clean up this caboodle."

"Bai Jove!"

The man stared at Arthur Augustus, evidently struck by his accent.

"A dog-goned dude!" he ejaculated.

"Weally, sir—"

"Oh, carry me hum to die! What sort of an outfit have I struck hyer?" boomed the big man.

"What a vewy unpleasant chawactah, you fellows," remarked Arthur Augustus, surveying the towering stranger through his eyeglass.

The juniors grinned.

"Say you," interjected Wildrake quietly. "Are you following this trail for Lone Pine?"

"Sure!"

"Well, follow it," said the Canadian junior. "The sooner the better."

"You talking to me?" demanded the big man.

"Yep!"

"Do you know who you're talking to?" The big man came a stride nearer, with a threatening scowl. "When I'm at home at Red Dog, they call me Dandy Bill. That's me! I've killed more men than I've got fingers and toes! I tell the world, I'm a bad man!"

"You look it, bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "Would you mind pwoceedin' on your way?"

"Eh?"

"Hook it!" suggested Monty Lowther.

To the St. Jim's juniors the man was simply an unpleasant bully, and they regarded his talk as so much "gas." But Wildrake had dropped his hand on the revolver in his pocket, ready for trouble. He knew that Dandy Bill was a gunman of the ruffianly

kind, and capable of any act of lawless ruffianism under the stars on the prairie.

He was not mistaken.

Dandy Bill's hands dropped on his guns—low-slung from his belt so as to be within immediate grasp of his hands.

Wildrake's hand came out of his pocket in a flash. Before Dandy Bill could draw his guns, handy as they were, he found a revolver looking him in the face.

"Drop those guns!"

Wildrake's voice rang out sharply, like the crack of a whip.

The gunman glared at him.

"Why, you—you—" he stuttered.

Wildrake's hand, with the revolver in it, was steady as a rock. His eye gleamed along the barrel.

Tom Merry & Co. stood looking on breathlessly. It came into their minds, with a shock, that there might be shooting and bloodshed under the peaceful stars that twinkled down on the grassy prairie.

"Put 'em up!" said Wildrake calmly. "I've got you covered, you hulking bully, and if you don't put 'em up, you go down!"

For a moment the gunman hesitated.

Had a man been behind the Canadian junior's revolver, doubtless the "bad man" would have grasped the situation and put up his hands promptly enough. But he was not aware that the junior from the Boot Leg ranch was prepared to play a man's part without hesitation.

"You talk to me!" he gasped. "By gum, I'll wipe up the hull outfit! I'll tell the world I'm a bad man!"

And he grabbed the guns from his holsters.

Crack!

Wildrake fired with a steady hand, and there was a hoarse, gasping cry from the bad man from Red Dog as he pitched heavily into the grass.

One movement he made and then lay still.

Wildrake lowered the revolver.

"I guess he wanted it bad!" he remarked.

Tom Merry & Co. stood quite still, as if frozen with horror. They stared at the still form lying in the grass and then at Wildrake, whose sunburnt face was perfectly composed.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus faintly.

"Wildrake!" muttered Tom.

"Great Scott!"

The Canadian junior laughed lightly.

"Don't be alarmed. He's not dead," he said. "I've creased the rotter—same as we do to a cow that's too ornery to be roped. He will be all right in five minutes."

"Oh!" gasped Tom Merry, in great relief.

"He—he—he looks—" faltered Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"I guess he's all O.K., unless I've forgotten how to shoot," said Wildrake coolly. "I've taken a strip of skin off the top of his head and stunned him!"

"Bai Jove!"

"You have to do it to a cow sometimes, when there's need. Any cowboy can crease an ornery cow," said Wildrake. "I could do it before I was ten. I tell you he's not hurt!"

There was a fat chuckle from the chuck wagon.

"I guess you should have put it through his cabeza, young Kit," said Bunchy. "We don't want that sort of bulldozer on this side of the Line. What was the matter with giving him his ticket for soup?"

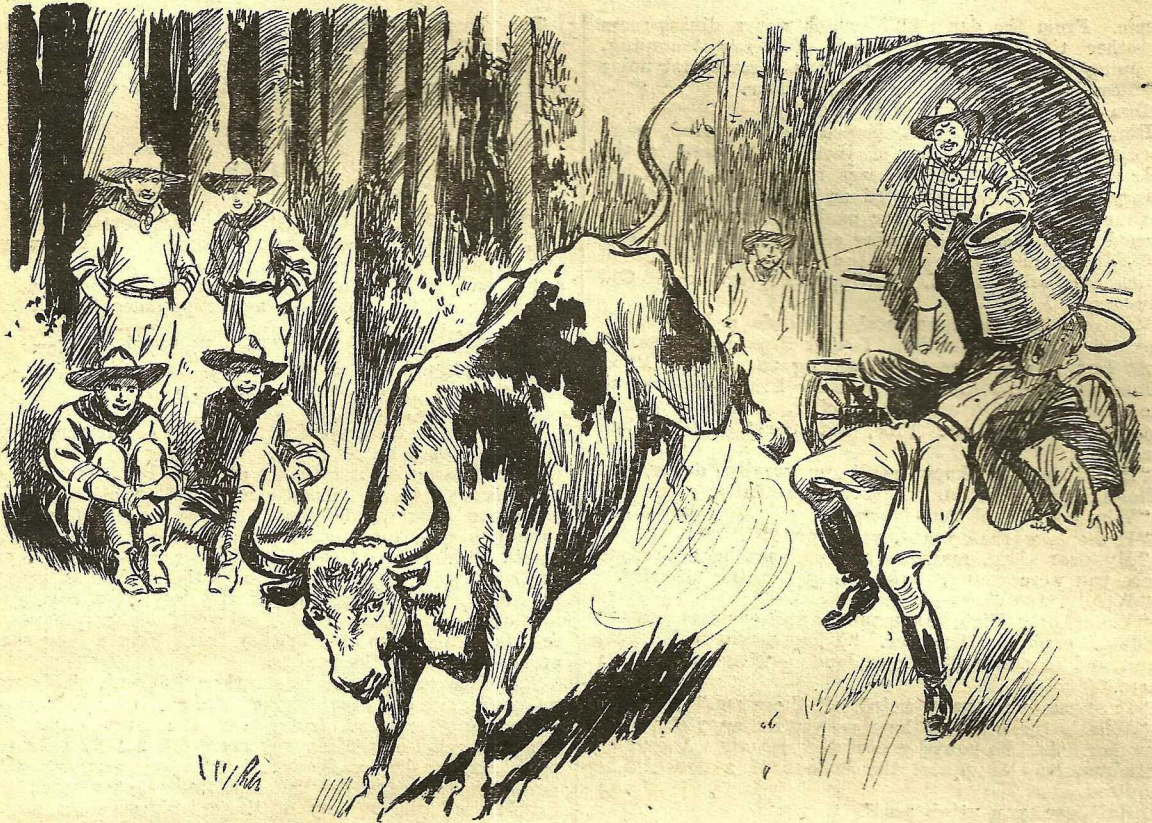
"Lots, old man," said Wildrake, laughing. "If he goes on to Lone Pine and hunts for trouble there, he will get what is coming to him. There! He's stirring already, you fellows!"

"Thank goodness!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

The St. Jim's juniors were glad enough to see the ruffian stirring. He stirred and groaned in the grass.

Wildrake stepped to him, picked up his revolvers, and removed the cartridges from them. Then he dropped them back into the holsters.

A minute or two later the bad man from Red Dog sat up in the grass dizzily, with streaks of blood running down his rugged, harsh face. He blinked dazedly at the group of juniors.



"Look out, Gussy!" shrieked Blake. But the warning came too late. The cow made a sudden startled jump, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy went flying backwards. The next instant the cow kicked the pail away after Gussy, and Arthur Augustus gave a wild howl as he was bonneted by it. (See Chapter 4.)

"Thunder!" he gasped. "Oh, thunder!" He clawed at his head with his stubby fingers and they came away red from his thick hair. "I guess I've been creased! Oh, thunder!"

He staggered to his feet.

"There's your cayuse," said Wildrake. "Get on it, and git! You're not wanted here!"

The gunman glared at him dizzily. He dabbed at his head, and set the Stetson hat on it again. Without a word, he staggered to his horse, clambered on its back, and rode away towards the twinkling lights of Lone Pine. And Tom Merry & Co. were glad enough to hear the hoofbeats die away in the distance.

CHAPTER 6.

The Dance at Lone Pine!

"WHAT about a walk round the town before we turn in?"

Tom Merry made the suggestion.

"Yaas, wathah!" assented Arthur Augustus.

"Good egg!" said Lowther.

"I guess we've got to turn in early," said Wildrake.

"But a stroll round Lone Pine won't hurt us. I guess there's a dance going on at the Continental, from the row we can hear on the wind. We might give it a look-in."

"Bai Jove! We haven't any evenin' clothes with us, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus.

Wildrake chuckled.

"Evening clothes are not de rigueur at a dance in Lone Pine, old bean," he answered. "I guess a galoot who turned up there in evening clothes would get more attention than he might like. The dance costume at the Continental is Stetson hats and cowboy boots, with the spurs on."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Then we're dressed for the dance!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "Gussy's evening clothes were left behind with two or three tons of other luggage owing to Blake looking after the baggage when we started."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you are suah, Wildwake, that we can go as we are—" said Arthur Augustus slowly.

"Quite, old scout!"

"I suppose you know most of the people in Lone Pine?"

"Correct."

"You will be able to give us some intwoductions, then?"

Wildrake chuckled again.

"I guess there won't be any ladies at the dance, Gussy. Lone Pine is a frontier camp, you know. The punchers dance with one another."

"Oh, cwikey! But, weally, I do not think I could dance with a cowpunchah!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"You can dance with me, old bean," said Blake, "so long as you don't tread on my toes!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Or give me any of the killing looks I saw you giving your partners last Christmas!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass!" roared Arthur Augustus.

"Come on, then," said Wildrake, laughing. "Let the hosses rest. We can hoof it into town. Bunchy, tell Nosey that we'll be back in a couple of hours if he blows in."

"Sure," said Bunchy.

And the juniors, following the trail up the creek, walked away towards Lone Pine.

They were not long in reaching the camp.

Outside the Continental Hotel there was a blaze of naphtha lamps, which lighted up almost the whole of the rugged, unpaved street. From the lumber building came sweet strains of music—less sweet at close quarters. A fiddle that was not quite in tune mingled with a piano that was very considerably out of tune. The fiddler seemed a rather more rapid performer than the pianist; but every now and then he slowed down for his comrade to come up, as it were. But the patrons of the Continental were not particular on the score of

music. From the dance-hall—which was a dining-room at other times—came a sound of heavy tramping. Tripping the light fantastic toe was a somewhat noisy business in cowboy boots on a plank floor.

Tom Merry & Co. walked in cheerily.

Big, lean cowpunchers, booted and spurred, were dancing in couples, some of them with guns in the holsters at their belts. All was rough and ready, but cheery good humour prevailed on all sides. Certainly, Arthur Augustus would have made a sensation had he turned up in the natty evening clothes he had carefully packed for his journey to the Canadian West, and which were still packed, awaiting his return to the Old Country.

Wildrake greeted innumerable friends and acquaintances in the joyous throng. Two or three men from the Boot Leg Ranch were there, among them Billy Pink, whom the juniors knew well. Billy Pink was dancing the Charleston with another puncher. The railway had not yet reached Lone Pine, but the Charleston had reached it.

"Bai Jove, you know, shall we weally dance, you fellows?" asked Arthur Augustus doubtfully.

"Why not?" said Tom Merry.

"It seems wathah weird, you know!"

"My dear chap, manners and customs have changed since you were young," said Monty Lowther cheerily.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Your Early Victorian manners and customs are out of date," explained Lowther. "I had a trip to Margate once, and saw lots of fellows dancing with one another there."

"It seems to me vevy weird, all the same."

"What's the odds, so long as you're 'appy?" argued Lowther. And he bowed gracefully to Arthur Augustus. "Madam, may I request the honour of a dance?" he inquired.

"Bai Jove, you uttah ass!"

"If you will honour me, miss—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you as a howlin' ass, Lowthah, and I wufuse to dance with you!" snapped Arthur Augustus.

"Floored again!" said Monty, with a sigh. "But perhaps you would prefer to sit out with me? I'm considered rather good at sitting out."

"Pway don't be a howlin' ass, Lowthah. I wegard your wotten jokes as bein' in the vevy worst of bad taste."

"These spoiled beauties are all like that," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus moved off with his noble nose in the air. But Tom Merry & Co. cheerily joined in the dancing, and Arthur Augustus, after reposing on his dignity for a little while, and finding it uncomfortable, followed their example. And he soon found that he was enjoying his noble self, though the fiddle was wheezy, the piano tin-canny, the floor anything but polished, and his partners, as he described it, "weird."

It was about an hour later that the juniors gathered, with the intention of quitting the Lone Pine dance, and walking back to the camp on the prairie. But the adventures of the night were not over yet. Suddenly from the street there came the sound of a galloping horse and a deafening burst of pistol-shots.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

Crack, crack, crack!

"Bai Jove, what on earth is the wow?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

Crack, crack, crack!

Billy Pink rushed to the door and slammed it. As he did so, a bullet crashed and splattered on the wood. A horseman was riding up the rugged street, past the lumber hotel, firing his revolvers recklessly on either side as he rode. As the door slammed Wildrake had a glimpse of the reckless rider.

"Dandy Bill!" he ejaculated.

"But what—"

Crack, crack, crack!

"I guess that's a guy shooting up the town!" drawled Billy Pink. "You-uns had better keep on this side of the door—it ain't healthy in the street jest now."

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The dance had stopped; the fiddle and the piano were silent. And in the dance-hall a breathless crowd listened to the tramping of wild hoofs, and the incessant ringing of revolvers and the spattering of bullets.

CHAPTER 7.

"Shooting Up" Lone Pine!

TOM MERRY & CO. listened in amazement.

Up the rugged street trampled the horseman, galloping, a revolver in either hand, blazing away recklessly. This was what Billy Pink called "shooting up the town"—a new experience for the St. Jim's juniors.

"The man must be mad!" said Blake, in wonder.

"Or squiffy!" said Manners.

"Or both!" grunted Tom Merry.

Crack, crack, crack!

The sounds of slamming doors and hurrying feet could be heard on all sides. "Shooting up" the town was an uncommon indulgence at Lone Pine, but it was not unknown there. Sometimes a wild puncher fresh in from the ranges, who had "hoisted" more fire-water than was good for him, was liable to celebrate in that emphatic manner. Generally there was no harm done, reckless shots whizzing away over the roofs, and people in the street hopping out of the way of a carcering mustang. The Lone Pine folk could make allowances for the exuberance of a cowboy fresh from a long spell of hard work on the ranges.

But the present case was rather different. This was no exuberant cowboy blowing off his high spirits, but a bullying gunman from over the line. And the bullets from his rattling revolvers did not fly over the roofs, but crashed on doors and walls and windows, with an utter disregard for life and limb that amazed the St. Jim's juniors. Any of those reckless shots might have struck down a man or a horse, and the gunman apparently did not care. Billy Pink, with a grim look on his bronzed face, released a big Colt from his belt.

"I guess that guy is asking for it," he said. "You-uns watch out and see him drop."

The puncher placed the door a few inches open to watch the street.

Dandy Bill had ridden through Lone Pine from one end to the other, and at the upper end of the camp he whirled his horse round and reloaded his revolvers.

His rugged face was flushed with the fire-water he had consumed since he had "struck" Lone Pine. Probably his encounter with Wildrake on the plains had put the ruffian into an unusually bad temper, but the fierce rye whisky at a "div" in Lone Pine had done the rest. The man, always a reckless and dangerous character, was utterly irresponsible now, ready to shoot anyone who opposed him, regardless of consequences, determined to kick up a terrific shindy and cause reckless damage on all sides, relying—so far as he gave any thought to the matter at all—on his readiness with his guns to save him from punishment or vengeance.

It was difficult for fellows like Tom Merry & Co. to understand the mentality of such a character, and to realise that the bullying brute was willing to risk other lives and his own in a frantic freak like this.

Crack, crack!

The shooting was beginning again. The gunman was riding back through the single street of Lone Pine, blazing away at the cabins.

Billy Pink set his bearded lips grimly.

"Hold on, feller," said Wildrake quietly.

"I guess I'm dropping him, young Kit. We ain't letting a gunman from over the line bulldoze this hyer camp."

"Bai Jove! If the wuffian is weally intoxicated—"

said Arthur Augustus.

"Half-drink and half-devilment," said Wildrake.

"But I guess he will get all he wants. Put that gun away, Billy."

The Canadian junior had taken down a looped lariat which some cowboy had hung on a hook near the door.

He stepped into the half-open doorway, watching the street, but keeping carefully in cover.

Billy Pink grinned, rather reluctantly shoving the Colt back into his holster.

"It's your say-so, young Kit!" he assented.

"I guess I can get him."

Trample, trample! Crack, crack, crack!

The horseman came careering back past the Continental. A bullet crashed on the doorpost a foot from Wildrake; but he did not stir. The wild rider dashed past, still firing right and left.

Wildrake stepped out as he swept by, and the lasso flew.

What happened next was a startling surprise to the Bad Man from Red Dog. One moment he was going at full career, a terrifying figure; the next he was plucked from the saddle as if by a giant hand, and sprawling dazedly on the rugged street.

Crash!

The riderless horse went galloping on, while the gunman sprawled at the end of the tautened lasso.

"Roped in, by thunder!" chuckled Billy Pink.

There was a rush from the building.

The sprawling ruffian was still gripping one of his revolvers, and undoubtedly he would have used it had he been able. But the crash on the hard ground had dazed him.

Before he could think of resistance a dozen punchers had reached him, and the revolver was kicked out of his grasp.

He was dragged up in the grasp of many sinewy hands.

"Lynch him!" somebody shouted.

"String up the dog-gone bulldozer!"

"Let 'em up!" roared the man from Red Dog. "I guess I'll wipe out the whole caboodle. I guess

"Duck him in the creek and clear him out of town!" said Billy Pink. "Give me a hold of that rope."

The puncher called to his horse, which came trotting up from the hitch rail outside the Continental. He mounted, with the lasso in his grasp, and secured the rope to the horn of his saddle. Then he rode down the street towards the creek outside the camp.

With a roar of laughter the whole crowd followed him.

Dandy Bill, the Bad Man from Red Dog, was jerked off his feet as the rope tautened, and went sprawling along after the puncher's horse.

He scrambled up frantically, but the pull of the rope dragged him over again, and he stumbled and sprawled wildly.

Billy Pink put his horse to a rapid trot.

Once more the gunman scrambled up, and this time he kept his feet. He followed the horse at a frantic run, with a series of bounds, and managed to keep on his feet and save himself from being dragged over again by the rope.

Behind him almost the whole population of Lone Pine surged, roaring with laughter.

Dandy Bill yelled and panted and gasped inarticulately as he was dragged after the puncher's horse. But he was helpless to free himself from the dragging rope; all he could do was to keep his feet and avoid being dragged headlong over the rough ground.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I wathah think that wuffian is sowwy he spoke by this time."

"Just a few!" grinned Wildrake. "I guess he wishes he had stayed back in Montana; he will be fed-up with Canada."

Billy Pink reached the creek, rolling wide and shallow in the starlight. He rode on direct through the water, and rode up the bank on the other side.

Splash!

Headlong into the creek went the hapless gunman, splashing and sprawling and spluttering.

He was dragged out of the water on the other side, sprawling and bumping over the rough prairie.

The crowd stopped on the hither side of the creek, watching the scene and roaring with laughter.

Billy Pink halted and dismounted, and bent over the breathless, bruised ruffian who lay gasping on the ground. He loosened the lasso and jerked the rope off Dandy Bill.

"I guess you'll hit the trail now, pronto," he remarked. "You'll be lynched on sight if you show up in Lone Pine again. You get me?"

The man from Red Dog sat up dizzily.

"Pronto!" snapped the puncher.

"I guess—"

"Hit the trail, I'm telling you."

"Whar's my critter?" spluttered

the man from Red Dog. "Do you figger that I'm hitting the trail afoot, you guy?"

"I guess you can round up your critter on your own, feller—you'll find him somewhar on the perarer," said Billy Pink. "What you've got to do is to light out, pronto, afore I shoot. Now, then!"

Billy Pink loosened his revolver.

The Bad Man from Red Dog staggered up. He was hardly on his feet when the puncher began to shoot.

Bang! Bang!

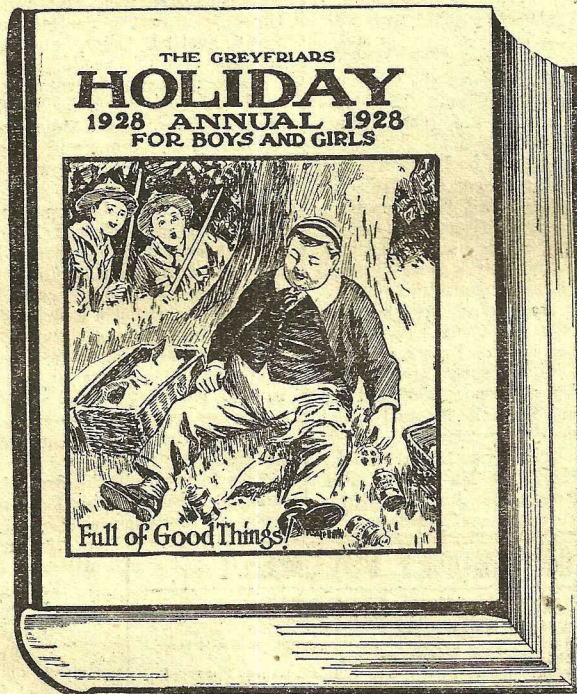
The bullets struck the ground close by the feet of the Bad Man, and he hopped away, panting and cursing.

Bang! Bang!

The ruffian broke into a run for the open prairie. Billy Pink pumped out bullets after him, spattering the ground round his feet as he ran. The yells of the man from Red Dog hinted that some of the lead went close enough to cut his skin.

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In a few minutes he vanished into the shadows of the prairie, and the laughing crowd poured back into the camp. The Bad Man from Red Dog was gone, and he was not likely to "wake up" Lone Pine again.

Tom Merry & Co. walked back to the camp by the creek, discussing that exciting episode. Bunchy put a sleepy face out of the chuck wagon as they arrived.

"Trouble in Lone Pine?" he asked. "I guess I've heered a lot of shooting."

"Only a galoot from Montana shooting up the camp," said Wildrake, laughing. "Nobody hurt, excepting the man from Red Dog. I guess he will take a few bumps over the line with him."

And the schoolboy punchers turned into their blankets and slept peacefully till dawn, what time the Bad Man from Red Dog was tramping away wearily over the prairie, and wishing fervently that he had never "hit the trail" over the frontier.

CHAPTER 8.

The Tale of the Vanished Cows!

"O H, shucks!" said Nosey Rogers, derisively. "I'm telling you—"

"Shucks!"

Bunchy, the cook, was red with wrath. "Shucks!" apparently, was a reply to the same effect as "Rats!"

"I'll tell the world!" said Bunchy.

"Shucks!"

The trail boss, evidently, did not want to hear Bunchy tell the world. He grinned, and filled his pipe, and stretched himself at ease in the grass. And the ranch cook glared at him.

It was noon again, and the outfit had halted for rest and feed. Far across the sun-scorched prairie stretched the lines of resting cattle, and the punchers were getting what shade they could from the chuck wagon. There was no other—not a tree, and hardly a straggling bush, to be seen. The earth was baked, the grass scorched under the blazing Canadian sun.

It was hot, as all the juniors remarked to one another. They sat and baked, propped against their saddles in the grass, and mopped their perspiring brows. Heat and dust and mosquitoes, flies of all sorts and conditions, such as inevitably haunted the march of cattle, bothered them incessantly. But they kept smiling.

The chums of St. Jim's realised the truth of Wildrake's warning that a cattle drive was hard work, much more work than fun in it. But they did not object to a little hard work. And if they were tired and thirsty and dusty, and bitten by

flies, they were thriving on it. Their faces were tanned brown, they were feeling fit as fiddles, they breathed deep the pure invigorating air of the open spaces.

Far to the south a line of low hills broke the level, barring off the horizon on the way they were heading. The next halt, at nightfall, was to be at the hills—dim and blue in the sun-haze in the far distance. And Bunchy, the cook, had a tale to tell of those hills, to which the trail boss only replied "shucks."

"I'll tell a man—" went on Bunchy.

"Can it, cookey," said Nosey Rogers. "I guess I've heered you tell that yarn before, and it's too thin."

"Oh, give Bunchy his head!" yawned Wildrake. "Let's hear it! I guess Bunchy dreamed it after too much firewater!"

"You ornery galoots!" said Bunchy, indignantly. "I got the yarn from Slim Pete, of the Sunset Ranch, and I guess he was handing out the straight goods. And what will Old Man Wildrake say, Nosey, if you drop a hundred head of cattle in them hills?"

"I guess he would say something that would turn the air blue," grinned Nosey Rogers. "But there ain't going to be hair nor hide of this hyer outfit dropped between Boot Leg and the railroad. Nary a one! If there was cattle rustled in them hills, it was breeds what rustled them, and I guess I've got a six-gun to talk to any breeds that try rustling on this bunch."

"Breeds or not, rustlers or not, the steers went," said Bunchy. "A hundred head, jest dropped out of sight. The Sunset boys put in two hull days rooting around for them, and never a hide nor a hair did they see agin. They went on to the railroad without them."

"I guess if I'd been the Sunset boss I'd have fired the whole outfit," said Nosey Rogers.

"But how did it happen, Bunchy?" asked Tom Merry, interested in that strange tale of the prairie.

Bunchy shook his head.

"I guess nobody ever got wise to it," he said. "The Sunset bunch was driving cattle to the railway, jest as we are now, and they camped a night in them hills, just as we're going to camp. And when they saddled in the morning there was a hundred cows short."

"Some rustlers!" jeered Nosey Rogers. "Did they pack up the cattle in their bed-rolls and ride off with them?"

"And it warn't the first time it had happened, either," said Bunchy. "Slim Pete knowed a man who was trail boss on another outfit, and he told him of missing cattle in a drive through them hills."

"But what became of the cattle, then?" asked Blake.

"Nobody knows."

"A hundred cows couldn't be driven off without leaving a trail big enough for a blind tenderfoot to follow," said Wildrake.

"Don't I know that?" grunted Bunchy.

"Well, then, why didn't the Sunset bunch follow up the trail and get back the cows?"

"I keep on telling you that the bunch put in two days hunting for them cows. And nary a cow did they find, and nary a trail."

Nosey Rogers chuckled.

"Pr'aps they was rustled off in an airplane," he suggested, with humorous sarcasm.

"How they did it I ain't guessing," said Bunchy. "But I tell you, Nosey, you want to watch out when we camp in them hills, 'cause what's happened once may happen agin."

"I calculate your pard Slim Pete must have been blind if he couldn't follow up a trail of a hundred cows," said Rogers. "Blind or full."

"I'd tell the world, there wasn't a trail to foller."

"Shucks!"

Bunchy, with a snort, went back

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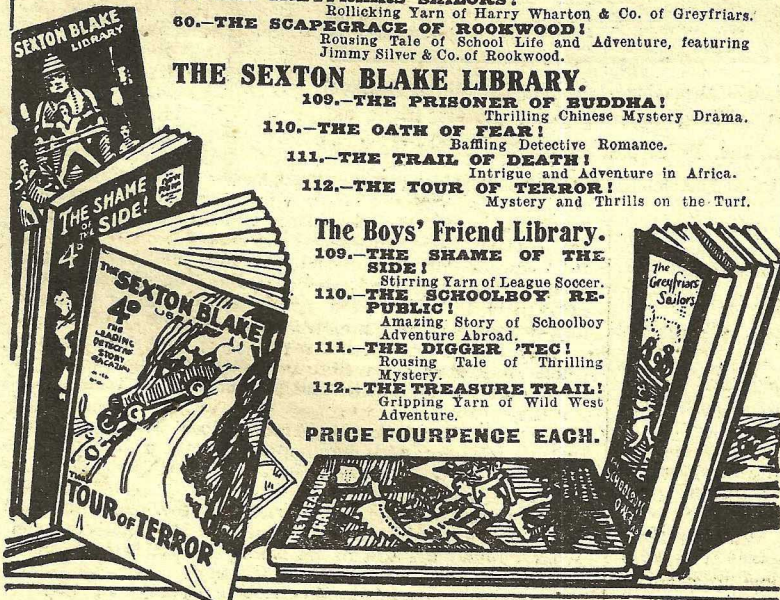
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to the chuck-wagon. He left Nosey Rogers laughing and the juniors smiling. The tale of the vanished cattle was rather too steep for belief, though apparently the ranch cook believed it himself. Only Kit Wildrake was looking a little thoughtful.

"I guess I've heard before some yarn of cattle disappearing in the hills yonder," the Canadian junior remarked. "It can't be anything but a yarn, I reckon."

"What else could it be?" said Nosey Rogers. "Any man in this bunch could pick up the trail of a single steer and foller it from British Columbia to Labrador. And a hundred head! Why, they must have left a trail as wide as the Canadian Pacific, and as easy to foller. I reckon if any cattle disappeared in them hills, there was a half-breed camp not far away, and I guess the trail would run right to where the breeds was. I'll tell a man! Slim Pete must have got outside a whole barrel of tanglefoot if he couldn't find the trail—that is, if he wasn't pulling Bunchy's leg with that yarn."

"Looks like it," agreed Wildrake.

The trail boss laughed scornfully.

"If I go back to Boot Leg and tell your popper I've lost a hundred head of cows, I guess I'll ask for my time," he said. "I reckon I'll give up cow-punching and buy a sewing-machine! Yes, sir."

And Nosey Rogers went for his horse and gave the signal for the march to be resumed.

The great herd was set in motion again, with the Boot Leg men and the schoolboy punchers riding on its skirts.

Tom Merry drew his horse beside the chuck-wagon as Bunchy drove on with a wrathful, frowning face. Evidently Bunchy did not like the reception of the startling tale he had told.

"Bunchy, old bean," said Tom, with a smile.

The cook glanced round at him.

"Were you pulling our leg, or is it true that cattle disappear in those hills without leaving a sign?" asked Tom.

"Straight as a string," said Bunchy. "You believe me?"

"They must have been taken by rustlers," said Tom.

"Sure! They didn't fly away," agreed Bunchy.

"Some gang of breeds at the bottom of it, I'll tell a man! But how did they blind the trail of a hundred cows? That's what's got me beat! But they did it."

He jerked a fat thumb towards the trail boss, riding at a distance on the flanks of the slow-moving herd.

"Nosey knows best!" he jeered. "But I reckon he'll sing shucks to a different tune if there's a hundred cows gone to-morrow morning and no trail to foller. You hear me smile!"

Evidently Bunchy believed in the story, strange as it was. Tom Merry rode on in a thoughtful frame of mind. A hundred cows represented a good many hundred dollars; indeed, it was likely enough that such a loss would swallow up the whole of the rancher's profit on the herd. That would be a serious matter enough for Wildrake's father. And Tom Merry, impressed by the cook's earnestness, resolved to keep a very wary look-out that night when the bunch camped in the mysterious hills.

CHAPTER 9

The Stampede!

RED in the west, the sun sank towards the far Pacific. The blaze of heat was over, and gladly enough the schoolboy cowpunchers welcomed the first cool breath of coming evening. On the edge of the range of low hills that barred their way to the south, the herd was halted again. On the morrow the way lay by a broad, low canyon that pierced the range, and led by rocky cliffs and sun-baked ravines and draws to the plains beyond. The juniors off-saddled and staked their horses in the grass, which grew sparsely at the foot of the range. Cold chuck was handed out from the wagon, and while they ate, Tom Merry & Co. turned many glances towards the hills that grew duskiest and duskiest in the deepening shadows of falling night.

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The range was a low one; the highest peak was not a hundred feet above the prairie. But among the irregularly piled masses of rock and bunches of scrubby pines there were a thousand hiding-places, hidden gulches, rock-walled ravines, where stolen cattle could have been hidden. If some gang of half-breeds had camped in the hills, it was likely enough that a cattle-drive passing that way would miss some of the cows during the night. Two or three cows would not be worth the trail boss' time in searching for them, and a cunning cattle-thief might very likely take toll of the herd to that extent under cover of darkness. But the rustling of a hundred cows was a different matter. For such a consideration as that the trail boss would call a halt until he ran down the cattle and the cattle-lifters, and it was likely to go hard with the latter in that case. Every man in the bunch packed a gun, and was more than ready to loose it at any breed who took toll of the Boot-Leg herds.

And that a large bunch of cattle could vanish without leaving a trail was not an idea that any puncher was likely to entertain. Certainly, if it happened, the trail boss would be at a loss, for it was impossible to search all the recesses of the hills at random. But Nosey Rogers and the other punchers grinned at the idea of such a happening.

Only Bunchy shook his head solemnly as he handed out the chuck for supper. Bunchy, at least, believed that strange tale of the hills, perhaps because he was the teller thereof, for even Bunchy did not pretend to explain that mysterious vanishing of cattle without a trail.

Night fell on the plains and the hills. The juniors camped by the chuck-wagon, and the punchers rolled themselves in their blankets at various points around the sleeping herd. Tom Merry noticed that Wildrake made no preparation for turning in.

"Keeping watch?" asked Tom.

The Canadian junior nodded.

"Bai Jove! Do you think there is somethin' in that remarkable stowy Bunchay told us?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Well, no," said Wildrake. "But a galoot can't be too careful. I reckon popper would sit up and take notice if we missed a hundred cows. Popper isn't in the ranching business just for his health, you savvy."

"I suppose not," said Tom, with a smile. "I suppose it's likely enough that some gang of breeds is camped in the hills yonder."

"Yep. Where there's a chance of rustling cattle I guess you'll find breeds as thick as fleas in a Mexican dog. But it isn't easy to cut out more than a small handful of cows from a bunch without being spotted, and I guess that a rustler who was spotted here would go up the flume so sudden that he wouldn't know what had hit him. Any man in the bunch would shoot without stopping to ask questions."

"Bai Jove!"

"Cutting out a hundred head—that's a tenth part of this herd—simply couldn't be done—unless—"

Wildrake paused.

"Unless what?" asked Blake.

"Unless there was a stampede." The Canadian junior looked up at the calm, velvety sky. "Cattle are scared of thunder, and a thunderstorm might set the whole herd galloping, and it would be some job rounding them up again, and I guess that's where a rustler might come in. But there won't be any storm to-night. Of course, a herd can be stampeded by a trick—a galoot might creep among the cows and begin blazing off a gun and startle them. Once a few get going the rest will follow, and when a herd gets out of hand they go like blazes. But—"

Wildrake paused, thoughtfully.

"I guess if a gang of breeds started a stampede they could cut out a bunch of cows. But we'd follow on if they led us as far as the Pacific on one side, or the Rocky Mountains on the other. They'd be bound to leave a trail that a babe in arms could pick up. Still, I guess that yarn of Bunchy's has set me thinking, and I'm keeping my eyes peeled to-night. You-uns turn in."

"Wathah not!" said Arthur Augustus warmly.

"We're goin' to keep watch, too, deah boy."

"Yes, rather!" said Manners.

"Just as you like!" smiled Wildrake.

As a matter of fact, the juniors dropped off to sleep one after another, as Wildrake expected them to do. But Tom Merry resolutely kept awake, sitting up with his back resting against a wheel of the chuck-wagon. Wildrake kept on his feet, moving about restlessly, and peering intently at intervals into the shadowy starlight of the plain.

It was midnight, and Tom, in spite of himself, was nodding drowsily when a sharp exclamation from Wildrake brought him to his feet with a jump.

"By hokey!"

Tom Merry sprang up.

"What?" he exclaimed.

"Look!"

Wildrake pointed.

Far away on the plain, in the very midst of the billowing dim lines of sleeping cattle, a red light gleamed out.

"What's that?" exclaimed Tom, staring towards the glimmer.

"I guess it's a trick of some sort. None of the bunch would light a flare. Oh, Jerusalem!"

Three or four flashing lights flared in the darkness of the plains. Following the flares came a sudden rattle of firearms. From the herd came a low murmur, which grew into startled bellowing. There was a rushing sound in the night, as innumerable cattle struggled to their feet. Louder and sharper rang the cracking of firearms. Loud, shouting voices rang across the dark

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plain, in the midst of which Nosey Rogers' powerful tones could be distinguished.

Wildrake set his teeth.

"Breeds, I reckon," he said savagely. "They're working a stampede. Get on your hoss. We may stop it yet."

Wildrake was on his horse almost before he had finished speaking and galloping away into the night.

All the juniors were awake now. They leaped up, startled and questioning. The air was almost shaking with the bellowing of startled and frightened cattle.



As the wild rider dashed by, Wildrake stepped out from the corner and dashed over the head and shoulders of the Bad Man from Red Dog, and the riderless horse went galloping on, while the gunner

"Bai Jove! What's the wow?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus breathlessly.

"It's a stampede!" said Tom, between his teeth. "Some rotters have crept in among the cattle and started it!"

"Oh crumbs!"

The juniors quickly mounted their horses. There was a thunder of hoofs on the plain now as the cattle broke out of the herd. Tom Merry & Co. had never seen a stampede; but they had heard the punchers talk of such happenings in the bunkhouse at Boot Leg, and they knew well the danger. If the frightened herd rushed in their direction, no unmounted man could have escaped being trampled to death. Even a mounted man with a good horse needed to keep his wits about him

to save himself. Once off his horse in the midst of the plunging, careering cattle and his doom was sealed.

"Oh, holy smoke," came a yell from Bunchy, "they're going! Look out, you guys! What did I tell you? Nosey knowed best, did he? I'll tell the world there will be cattle missing to-night!"

Bunchy plunged into the chuck wagon as the safest refuge.

Tom Merry stared through the gloom, peopled now with the moving forms of terrified cattle. The lighting of the flares, the rattling of firearms in the midst of



and his lasso flew. Whiz! It circled through the air and landed plucked from his saddle as if by a giant's hand. Crash! The awl at the end of the taut lasso. (See Chapter 7.)

the herd had done the work; the whole herd was excited and maddened now, and once on the run they were not to be stopped. The plains shook under the thunder of countless hoofs.

Wildrake came galloping back to the juniors.

"Look out, you-uns!" he roared. "They're coming this way. Ride for your lives!"

"Bai Jove! Can't we head them off?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus

"Ride, I tell you!" shouted Wildrake.

From the gloom of the prairie hundreds of tossing heads and gleaming eyes loomed and glinted as the stampeding herd swept along, right for the spot where the juniors had camped. Wildrake grabbed D'Arcy's bridle and forcibly whirled his horse round away from

the herd. To attempt to stop or head off the cattle was death; it was only possible to ride away ahead of the herd, and there was little time even to get a start of the tossing horns and trampling hoofs.

"This way!" roared Wildrake. "Ride!"

He dashed on across the dark plains at a gallop, and the juniors rode with him. Behind them came the thunder of maddened hoofs. Tom Merry glanced back, and his heart thrilled at the sight in the dim starlight of the ranks of tossing, bellowing heads behind. More than one cow went down stumbling in that mad rush, and was trampled shapeless by the innumerable hoofs that thundered on and over. That was the fate that threatened the schoolboy punchers if they did not keep ahead of the stampede.

"Bai Jove! Wide like anythin', deah boys!" gasped Arthur Augustus, quite giving up his idea of heading off the frantic herd.

On the flanks of the racing herd Nosey Rogers and his men were riding, with cracking quirts and furious shouting, striving not to stop the herd—for that was impossible—but to keep the cattle together. Not till the scare had worn off, or the cattle were tired, would the stampede cease. And, in the meantime, all the punchers could do was to keep them from scattering and spreading over the plains.

"Follow me!" shouted Wildrake, his voice barely audible above the thundering and bellowing behind the juniors.

"Wight-ho!"

Tom Merry & Co. were riding hard—harder than they had ever dreamed of riding in their lives. Fortunately for them, the horses were accustomed to wild riding on the rough prairie and knew their work. One stumbling steed in that wild ride would have meant death to the rider. Wildrake, while taking care to keep ahead of the pursuit, was bearing off to the left, taking a diagonal course which would at long last take the juniors off the course the stampede was following and allow the frantic cattle to pass them.

It was a race for life or death, and all the schoolboy punchers knew it. Hard and grimly they rode with set teeth, and at last they drew out of the path of the stampede, and the cattle thundered by them, bellowing, with tossing heads.

"I guess that was a near thing," Wildrake spoke quietly. "All you-uns here?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"All here!" panted Lowther. "Oh, my hat! What a night! What's the game now, Wildrake?"

"Ride with the herd and keep them from scattering. If they scatter we've got weeks of work in rounding them up again!"

Nosey Rogers came thundering up on his broncho on the flank of the rushing herd. His face was crimson with exertion and rage.

"Ride 'em!" he shouted, and rode on.

And the schoolboy punchers proceeded to "ride 'em" as the trail boss directed. Keeping on the flank of the rushing herd, they kept pace with the stampede, and with shouting and dashing whips drove back the cows that sought to leave the mass.

But well they knew that many of the cows must have scattered—that whole bunches must have been detached from the herd. And they could guess that while they were riding with the stampede, labouring to keep the herd together, the unknown and unseen rustlers were driving off stolen bunches of cows in a quite different direction. It was for that that the stampede had been started, and there was no time now even to think of the rustlers and their booty; the one great task was to keep together the main herd. And to that task the Boot Leg bunch and the schoolboy punchers devoted themselves with unremitting toil, while the stampede swept on through the darkness of the prairie.

CHAPTER 10.

A Mystery of the Prairie!

"OH cwumbs!"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy mopped his perspiring brow.

Dawn had flushed up over the prairie; the stampede

was at an end. Twenty miles from the spot where it had started the rush had petered out and the punchers, at last, had been able to get the herd in hand. Fatigued, sweating, dusty, dry with thirst, the Boot Leg bunch were able to halt at last and give their horses and themselves a much-needed rest.

Fatigue, or the coming of the new day, had quietened the cattle. The herd—or what remained of it—rested in the grass, heavy and dull and bovine as before the outbreak. Nosey Rogers jammed a thick quid of tobacco into his cheek, spat, and swore. The trail boss as in a towering rage, with no civil words for anybody. Fatigued as he was, he did not think of rest. The stampede was over; but one glance showed the trail boss that many cattle were missing.

A day at least would be lost on the drive to the railroad; but that was not the worst. Of the cattle missing from the herd, how many would be recovered? Large bunches could be followed and secured, but stray cows would have to be left to their own devices and to the slender chance that they would be rounded up on other ranches and known by the Boot Leg brand.

There was little chance of that. Thievish hands had been at work, as all the bunch knew, while the stampede was going on. The cattle that were not recovered at once were not likely to be recovered at all. The day before Nosey Rogers had scoffed at the bare idea of losing a hundred head. Now it was clear that at least twice that number were gone, and it remained to be seen how many would be found and driven in again.

"It's breeds," hissed the trail boss—"breeds hiding in them hills and looking for a cattle drive. That's what's the matter, you guys. Any galoot hyer that sees a breed, loose off at him! You hear me?"

"You bet!" said one of the punchers. "We'll get most of the cows on, Nosey. Unless, as that galoot Bunchy was telling us——"

"Oh, don't give me that stuff over agin!" snorted Nosey Rogers. "I'm sick to the chin of that! Get the herd going!"

"I guess——"
"Is there time to chew the rag now, Sam Peters?" roared Nosey. "Get to the herd!"

"Bai Jove! Mr. Wogahs seems wathah ewoss!" Arthur Augustus remarked to his comrades.

"Just a few!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Of course, we have had a vewy twyin' night. But that is no weason for losin' a pwopah wepose of mannah," observed the swell of St. Jim's. "Pewwaps if I were to wemonstwate gently with Mr. Wogahs——"

"Keep off the grass, old bean!" chuckled Blake. "I think Rogers will bite!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Did the young ginks come along hyer to chew the rag?" interposed Nosey Rogers, in a voice not unlike that of one of the bulls on the Boot Leg ranch. "Can't you make yourselves useful? Hay?"

"Weally, Mr. Wogahs——"
"Are you gittin' a move on?" snorted Mr. Rogers. "My sufferin' Samuel! What did the Old Man plant that dog-goned dude on this outfit for?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy groped for his eyeglass, jammed it into a tired eye, and regarded the trail boss with lofty disdain.

"You must allow me to wemark, Mr. Wogahs——"

"That's enough!"

"—that your mannahs——"

"Shut it!"

"—leave much to be desiahed," pursued the swell of St. Jim's calmly. "We are all feelin' wathah wowwied and watty, but that is no weason whatevah for cuttin' up wusty! I considah——"

Nosey Rogers gripped his quirt, with the obvious intention of laying it round the noble person of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Fortunately, he restrained that natural impulse, and spurred his horse away.

"Pway do not wide away while I am speakin' to you, Mr. Wogahs!" called out Arthur Augustus, with undiminished calmness. "Bai Jove! He has gone! I wogard this as uttably wude! What are you fellows gwinnin' at?"

"You old image!" chuckled Blake. "You'd make a

stone statue grin! Come on, you men! We've got to work!"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Come on!" said Manners.

The schoolboy punchers piled in with the Boot Leg men, and the cattle were herded back towards the hills. The tired animals showed no disposition now to wander, and little disposition to stir at all, and the march was slow. As it went on, Nosey Rogers made attempts to count and calculate the number of missing cows, and the lowest figure he could guess at was two hundred. It was a heavy blow for the trail boss. He was not to blame for the stampede, which was the work of treachery; nevertheless, he was in charge of the drive, and the responsibility was on his shoulders. Had a half-breed cattle-thief showed up at that time, undoubtedly Nosey Rogers would have shot him at sight. But the cattle-thieves who had started the stampede were not to be seen anywhere on the plains.

"I am feelin' wathah anxious, you know," D'Arcy remarked to Blake, as they herded the cattle onward to the spot where the run had started. "I am afraid that somethin' must have happened to poor old Bunchay."

"I think he got in the wagon," said Blake.

"Yaas, but——"

D'Arcy shook his head doubtfully.

All the juniors were feeling rather concerned about the cook, as a matter of fact. He was the only one of the Boot Leg bunch who had not ridden with the stampede.

But what had happened to Bunchy, the cook, could not be ascertained until they reached the camp at the foot of the hills. It was slow work herding the tired and obstinate cattle back the way they had come, and the sun of noon was blazing down by the time the lost ground had been recovered. By that time, the whole bunch of punchers were worn down with weariness.

But the drive was over at last, and the herd halted at the spot where they had rested the night before. The juniors spotted the chuck wagon lying on its side. Heavy as the vehicle was, it had been overturned in the rush of the stampeding cattle. They looked round anxiously for the cook, and shouted his name.

"Bunchy!"

"Bunchay, deah boy!"

A fat figure rose from the shade of the overturned wagon. Bunchy waved a fat hand to Tom Merry & Co.

"All serene!" he called out cheerily.

"Bai Jove! I'm jolly glad to see you safe," said Arthur Augustus, as he rode up.

Bunchy grinned.

"Safe as houses," he said. "I guess I was in the wagon when them critters butted it over, and I reckon I kept under it till they was past. But I'll tell a man, you came near losing the best cook in British Columbia."

"Stow chinwag, you fat gink!" roared Nosey Rogers. "Hand out the chuck to the boys!"

"I guess the chuck's in the wagon, and I can't set up that there shebang without help," said Bunchy.

"We'll help," said Tom.

Many hands laboured at the chuck wagon to set it on its wheels again. Then the "chuck" was handed out, and the tired and hungry punchers fed.

The trail boss did not rest, however. He was as fatigued as the rest, but his responsibility lay heavy upon him. With Wildrake's help he counted the cows that lay resting in the grass. A good many strays had rejoined the herd on its return, and others had been sighted and driven in. But the result of the census was that two hundred animals were proved to be missing.

"Two hundred head!" groaned Nosey, when the count was over at last. "But we'll get 'em, young Kit."

"I guess so," assented Wildrake.

"Get going, you-uns!" shouted Nosey Rogers. "We ain't come here to loaf around chewing terbacker."

The trail boss was undoubtedly in a savage and aggressive temper. But no one in the bunch resented that. It was a time for work, not for argument. The Boot Leg punchers were tired; and the St. Jim's juniors felt as if they would drop from their saddles

if they mounted. Nevertheless, every member of the party went to his horse. Tom Merry & Co. were game.

All through the hot afternoon there was riding and roping, lashing and driving. While three of the bunch kept watch on the herd, with orders to shoot at sight if a "breed" showed up, the rest scattered on the plains to herd in the strayed cattle. Cow after cow was herded in, bunch after bunch of wandering animals trailed and tracked and driven back to the herd. Late in the afternoon a hundred head had been recovered. But a hundred head were still missing when the worn-out punchers came in, at last, for an indispensable rest and feed. Nosey Rogers sat and ate flapjacks with black wrath in his rugged face.

For many a long mile on every hand the punchers had rounded up stray cows and driven them back to the herd. Every trail, either of a bunch of cows or of a single animal, had been followed up and the cows driven in. Yet a hundred cows were still missing.

Bunchy, the cook, had a subdued grin on his face, and the juniors knew what he was thinking, though he did not venture to utter his thoughts to the trail boss. The story of the cattle that had vanished in these mysterious hills, without leaving a trail, was in all minds now. Strange as the story was, it seemed proved by what had happened to the Boot Leg drive. For every trail had been followed, and yet a hundred cows were still missing from the Boot Leg herd. No doubt Nosey Rogers was thinking of that as he sat chewing tobacco after supper and scowling blackly. He had laughed Bunchy's story to scorn, yet what had happened seemed to demonstrate the truth of the cook's strange tale. The trail boss was not disposed to admit it, but he could not help thinking of it. For where were the missing cows?

"What's the programme, Nosey?" asked Kit Wildrake, interrupting the black reflections of the trail boss at last, as the sun dipped behind the western prairie.

Nosey Rogers gritted his teeth.

"We ain't going on to-morrow!" he snapped. "We're staying here till we've rounded up the whole herd!"

"Sure!" assented Wildrake. "But where are the cows? We've followed every track of a cow that's shown on the prairie, Nosey."

"We've missed some trail," growled Rogers. "We'll pick it up in the morning."

"I guess we've been over the whole ground, boss," said Sam Peters.

"Guess again, and shut your head!" snarled the trail boss.

"It's like Bunchy was telling us—"

"Dog-gone Bunchy and his silly yarns!" hooted the trail boss. "Don't give me that guff! I'm telling you we'll trail down them cows to-morrow! Now shut your head!"

There was little sleep in the cattle camp that night. Snatches of sleep were taken by turns, while a keen watch was kept, gun in hand, for any return of the unknown thieves who had started the stampede. But there was no alarm in the night, and the bunch turned out to an early breakfast, after which the hunt for the lost cows was resumed.

Nosey Rogers persisted savagely that a hundred cows could not clear without leaving a trail that a blind man could have followed. That, indeed, seemed to stand to reason. Yet no trail could be found of such a considerable bunch of cattle. Three or four strays were

discovered during the morning, and roped in and brought back to the herd. At noon nearly a hundred were still missing. Every trail of a cow that led away in any direction had been followed to its end, and the ground had been gone over so thoroughly that it was impossible that a trail could have been missed by the keen-eyed punchers.

Some of the cows had wandered into the hills, and had been caught in the ravines and draws. There were unmistakable traces that a large number of them had gone into the shallow canyon, through which the way lay to the south. But all trace of them was lost there. That cattle-thieves had been at work, that a big bunch of cattle had been stolen, was obvious. It was clear, too, that the thieves were somewhere in the hills, and that wherever they were the stolen cattle were also. But where?

Any man in the outfit could have

followed the slightest trail. The smallest "sign" would have been enough. But there was no trail.

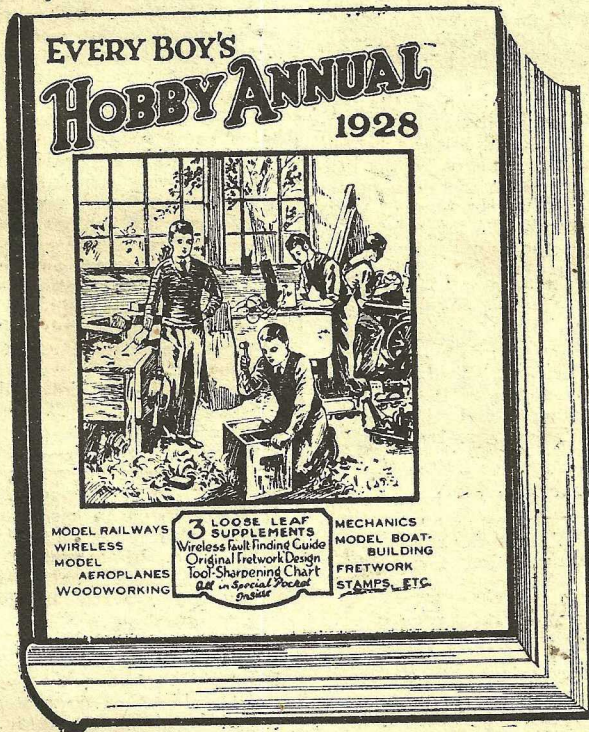
"I guess it's spooks!" Sam Peters declared.

Something like a superstitious feeling was coming over the Boot Leg bunch as night descended once more. Nearly a hundred cows had vanished and left no sign. It was as if they had melted into thin air, or sunk into the earth. Obviously, now, the tale of the Sunset Ranch bunch was true; but there was no explanation of the mystery. And the opinion of the punchers was that the herd had better get on to the railway at dawn, leaving the mystery of the vanished cows behind them.

That idea Nosey Rogers refused to entertain for a moment. Somewhere in the range of low hills was a gang of cattle-thieves with the stolen cattle. Hunting for them at random in the endless canyons and ravines and draws was a work, not of days, but of weeks and months. But the trail boss was not to be beaten, and

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he declared savagely that he would hang on where he was till the end of the summer rather than resume the route and leave a hundred Boot Leg cows behind.

And so, when another day dawned, the herd was still at rest, watched and guarded, while the fruitless quest of the missing bunch went on, persistently, but without hope.

CHAPTER 11.

Gussy Does Some Thinking!

"IT'S got me beat!"

Wildrake made that remark as he stopped and fanned himself with his Stetson hat.

It was blazing hot in the rocky hills. The search on the open plain had been dropped; it was clear now that there were no more cows loose on the prairie. The missing bunch was somewhere in the hills. Up and down and round about in the winding recesses the Boot Leg outfit hunted and searched.

Bunchy, the cook, sitting in the chuck-wagon with a loaded rifle across his fat knees, was watching the herd. It was not likely that the cattle-thieves would be seen in the daytime; but if any breed had shown up within range of Bunchy's rifle the cook was ready to drop him at sight. All the rest of the Boot Leg party were on the hunt.

Wildrake fully concurred in the decision of the trail boss to remain on the spot till the missing cows were discovered. Yet even he acknowledged himself beaten.

Tom Merry & Co. had entered the canyon in the hills with the Canadian junior. For some distance on the rocky ground it was easy to pick up the trail of many animals. There were many signs that a large bunch of animals had been driven into the canyon by unseen raiders, during the alarm of the stampede. The bunch had been cut out from the herd, and driven into the hills; so much was clear.

That, evidently, had been the object of the unknown cattle-thieves. But the trail faded away from sight less than half a mile in the canyon. Wildrake could pick up sign showing that the stolen cattle had been driven for a considerable distance, and then driven back the way they had come. There were tracks going both ways.

But where were they?

The sides of the canyon were split by innumerable ravines, some of them shallow and easy of access, some almost inaccessible. Into any of them the cattle might have been driven for concealment, but not without leaving ample sign.

And there was no sign.

A superstitious man might have agreed with Sam Peters that it was the work of "spooks." Tom Merry & Co. were not superstitious; but they were utterly puzzled and mystified.

To search every ravine and draw that opened out of the canyon was impossible. Some of them ran for miles into the hills in various directions.

Wildrake fanned himself and owned that he was "beat."

"I guess it's a cinch for those thieves, wherever they are," he said. "It's plain enough now that there's a gang in these hills, and they watch out for cattle-drives coming this way to the railroad. That's clear. But—"

"Suppose they drove the cattle wight on, to the plains on the other side?" suggested Arthur Augustus. Wildrake shook his head.

"Not without a trail—and the trail ends," he said. "And Canada isn't like Texas or Arizona, where a bunch of stolen cattle can be driven across the border into Mexico. There are ranches on the south side of these hills, and the Boot Leg brand is well enough

known. I guess the thieves have got the cows hidden away somewhere, till they can blot out the brands, and then they'll get rid of the cows in small bunches, a few at a time—selling them most likely to Indians and breeds. But where have they got them—and without leaving a trail?"

"It's frightfully mystewious."

"Bunchy was right, after all," remarked Tom Merry.

"Sure! It's happened before. We know that now, but that don't help us much."

Wildrake made an angry gesture.

"It means that Nosey will have to get on and leave the missing cows behind, the same as the Sunset trail boss had to, according to Bunchy," remarked Blake.

"Looks like it," said Wildrake. "But it goes against the grain. It will hit my popper hard, too."

The Canadian junior resumed the hunt, and the other fellows followed him.

In the silent, sun-baked hills there was no sign of life. But the juniors knew that somewhere, probably within a few miles of them, the stolen cattle were hidden, with the dusky breeds who had "lifted" them so cunningly. But where?

"Oh, it's enough to make a galoot cuss!" said Wildrake. "No wonder Nosey has got his mad up. What will popper say to him when he reports losing a hundred head of cows? We've got to find those dog-goned cows, you-uns."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus; but he did not speak very hopefully.

The search for sign went on.

At noon the juniors stopped to rest, sitting in the shadow of rocks while they ate lunch. They discussed the baffling mystery as they ate, though with no hope of discovering a solution.

Arthur Augustus did not join in the discussion.

He sat with his Stetson hat tilted over his noble face to keep the sun off, and appeared to be plunged deep in thought.

"I wondah—" he said at last.

"Gussy's got it!" murmured Monty Lowther, satirically.

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"May as well get going again," said Wildrake restlessly. "It's no dog-goned use, but we may as well."

"Pway listen to me a moment, Wildwake. I have been thinkin'."

"What with?" inquired Blake.

"Go it, Gussy!" said Wildrake, with a faint smile.

"I guess this puzzle has got me beat. But if you can suggest anything—"

"If!" murmured Monty.

"I have been thinkin'," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "It appears to be certain, Wildwake, that about a hundred cows were dwiven into this canyon the night of the stampede."

"Sure!"

"They must have been dwiven out of the canyon into one of the openin's—gulches I think you call them."

"Well, as they're not here still, I guess so. But there's no trail, so they can't have been. It's a dead puzzle."

"I wemembah a dance at my patah's town house—"

"What?"

"A dance at my patah's house in London—"

"What the merry thump has that got to do with it?" demanded Manners. "Are you going off your chump?"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"What do you mean, if you mean anything?" yawned Blake.

"I mean pweicisely what I say, Blake," answered the swell of St. Jim's, calmly. "I wemembah a dance at my patah's town house. Wed carpet was laid acwoss the pavement frowm the woad to the door."

The juniors stared at Gussy.

Unless he was wandering in his noble mind, they were quite unable to account for his observations.

"You have pwoably seen such things often enough," continued Arthur Augustus. "The carpet is laid acwoss the pavement on such occasions, as you are no doubt aware, to keep the dancin'-shoes clean frowm the cawriage to the house."

"What about it?" asked Tom Merry, almost dazedly.

ANSWERS

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"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Are you fellows weally goin' to dance?" "Sure thing," said Lowther. "What's the odds, so long as we're happy? Come on, join up!" "Wats!" Arthur Augustus moved off, with his noble nose in the air, while Tom Merry & Co. cheerily joined in the dancing. (See Chapter 6.)

"Lots, deah boy. Suppose anybody was twainin' a chap who came to the dance. The twail would be lost aftah the carpet had been taken up."

"I—I suppose so. But—" "My only Aunt Sempronia!" ejaculated Monty Lowther. "Is Gussy going to tell us that the cattle-thieves laid down carpet for the cows to walk on, so as not to leave a trail?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" "Not carpet," said Arthur Augustus placidly. "Probably there are no carpets to be had. But something."

"Great gophers!" Wildrake was staring almost blankly at the swell of St. Jim's. Now he fairly shouted: "Gussy! Oh, you prize-packet! And to think that I missed that!"

"Wildrake! You don't think—" "Think!" snapped Wildrake. "I don't think, I know! Gussy's done it! I guess those breeds have roped in enough cattle to have plenty of skins to handle. Not a word more—we've got to work!"

He drew his revolver and fired two rapid shots into the air. That was the agreed signal for news. In a few minutes there was a clattering of hoofs in the canyon, and ere long the whole of the Boot Leg bunch had gathered on the spot.

CHAPTER 12.

Tracked at Last!

NOSEY ROGERS gazed at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in silence for a full minute. Then he said soberly:

"Mister D'Arcy, I called you a dude! I've been figgering it out that if your brains was put in the

barrel of a pistol it would leave plenty of room for the bullet to pass. Mister D'Arcy, I takes off my hat to you!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus. From which the juniors gathered that the trail boss saw something in the suggestion made by the noble Gussy.

Obviously, Nosey had changed his opinion of that elegant youth, as other members of the Boot Leg outfit had seen fit to change early impressions where the swell of St. Jim's was concerned.

Blake slapped Gussy on the back, with a grin of admiration.

"Looks as if you've done it, Gussy!" he said. "Seems awfully steep to me, but the punchers think there's something in it."

"Good old Gussy!" said Tom Merry. Arthur Augustus smiled modestly.

"It just flashed into my bwain, you know," he said, "that's all."

"Thank goodness Gussy's pater gives swanky dances in the West End, with carpet on the pavement, whenever he feels inclined to shake a leg!" said Monty Lowther. "This idea wouldn't have occurred to a chap who had only been to dances in Lone Pine. There, they don't put carpet on the pavement for the giddy guests."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Good humour was generally restored in the Boot Leg outfit now. Gussy's brainy suggestion had done the trick. With that point to start from Wildrake and the punchers easily worked out what had happened.

Since early in the summer the unknown thieves had

been in the hills, stealing cattle from passing drives. Much of it, doubtless, they had turned into beef, for their own sustenance, and perhaps for sale among Indians and breeds. No doubt they had plenty of hides if they wanted them. And a number of hides stretched over the rocky ground would, as Wildrake described it, work the oracle. Every member of the bunch was now convinced that the mystery of the cows that had vanished without leaving a trail was solved.

The search was greatly narrowed down now.

For if such a trick had been employed to blind the trail, it was clear that it was only for a certain moderate distance that the ground could have been covered with hides, or anything else, for the stolen cattle to tread upon.

Beyond that section the trail would be picked up again. And that was not all.

"I guess they blinded the trail with hides as far as they could," Wildrake said to Nosey, "and that means that it was a narrow trail. A wide trail, covered with hides for any distance, would want more hides than the thieves could carry about easily."

"Sure!" said the trail boss.

"They'd find it easiest to fix up the trail if the cows were driven in single file."

"Sure!" said Nosey again.

"We want to find the narrowest of all the gulches and draws that branch off from this canyon, then—the narrower the better, so long as there was room for a cow to pass."

Nosey nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"You've said it, Kit."

"They laid down a string of hides, where there wasn't room for the cows to step off them on either side, what?"

"Sure!"

"My hat!" said Tom. "So, instead of looking for a place where a herd would naturally be driven, we want to look for a place where a single cow would find just room to walk."

"That's it!" said Wildrake.

"Bai Jove, that's wight!" said Arthur Augustus. "Naturally, they would want to leave the longest possible section with no twail upon it. Layin' the hides in single file would be the ideal."

"I guess we've got them where their hair is short now," said Wildrake. "I can step from here to a likely place, I reckon."

"Lead on, Macduff!" grinned Lowther.

Five minutes later the whole bunch followed Wildrake into a narrow gulch, little more than a crevice, opening between two high walls of rock in the canyon side.

The trampled trail of many cows passed the opening, but there was no sign that a single animal had turned aside.

But the punchers knew now why that was the case.

They knew, too, why the stolen cattle had been driven far past the narrow gulch and back again. Had the trail ended at that precise spot it might have furnished a clue. The cattle-thieves had left nothing to chance.

Not the faintest sign was seen on the rocky ground that any living thing had passed that way. But it was with hopeful faces that the Boot Leg bunch tramped into the narrow opening.

The way was steep, rising before them; but after a little distance it levelled again.

Still there was no sign of passing cattle.

A hundred yards—two hundred yards and the gulch, winding deep into the heart of the hills, narrowed still more. But there was room to pass between the steep walls of rock that shut it in on either side, and where a horseman could pass, a cow could pass.

Wildrake stopped suddenly.

"Look!"

"Bai Jove!"

It was the trail of cows again. Suddenly it appeared, the unmistakable traces where many animals had trodden. But for what the trailers knew, the finding of those tracks would have astounded them; they came into existence suddenly there as if the animals that had made them had dropped from the sky.

Nosey Rogers grinned gleefully.

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"Smell anything?" he chuckled.

A strong and decidedly unpleasant smell was perceptible, and the juniors wondered what it was. It reminded them of a tannery.

Wildrake stepped into a narrow cave that opened in the rocks and called back to his companions.

"Here are the hides, you-uns. This is where they keep them!"

The cave was stacked with ill-cured hides. The smell of them at close quarters was extremely unpleasant. But the Boot Leg men were glad enough to see them. This was a proof, if proof had been needed, of the cunning trick played by the cattle-thieves.

Right up from the canyon to that little cave in the narrow gulch the hides had been spread on the night of the stampede. After the stolen cattle had been driven over them in single file the hides had been gathered up and stacked in the cave—evidently for use on another occasion.

"No wonder the Sunset trail boss gave it up," chuckled Nosey Rogers. "Who'd have guessed this?"

"Nobody—but Gussy!" grinned Blake.

"Weally, you know, Blake——"

Nosey smacked Gussy on the shoulder.

"Good man! Oh, good man! It's all O.K. from here, you fellers. Keep your eyes peeled and your guns handy!"

"You bet, Nosey!"

From the cave the traces of many cows were plain enough, leading on along the narrow gulch deeper and deeper into the hills. Further on, the gulch widened out, and the punchers were able to ride in a bunch instead of strung out in single file.

Every man had a gun in his hand now, and his eyes keenly on the alert. It was clear that they were drawing near to the hiding-place of the cattle-thieves.

"I guess that's the lay-out," said Wildrake at last.

The gulch, a dozen yards wide now, opened out before them into a green valley locked in the heart of the hills. It was a green and fertile spot, in striking contrast to the barren rocks surrounding it. A silvery creek glimmered in the sunshine, and by its bank a dozen rude huts had been built. Knee-deep in the rich grass, more than three hundred head of cattle could be seen grazing idly, and others were resting in the grass, drowsy in the summer sunshine.

"Our cows—and a lot more!" chuckled Wildrake. "The Sunset bunch along with them, I guess, and more. Those rascals have been making a good thing of this!"

Crack!

It was the report of a rifle, evidently a signal of alarm from some cattle-thief who had spotted the arrival of the Boot Leg bunch. And from the huts by the creek a crowd of dusky half-breeds poured, with alarmed faces and weapons in their hands.

CHAPTER 13.

Beating the Cattle-Lifters!

"RIDE 'em!" Nosey Rogers snapped out the words. "Shoot if they raise as much as a finger!"

"You bet!"

And the Boot Leg bunch, spreading out to offer less of a target for the enemy, swept at a gallop towards the huts by the creek.

"Bai Jove! There's goin' to be a swap, you fellows!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry & Co. had no doubt about that. But they were ready to take their part in the scrap. They rode as hard as the Boot Leg punchers.

There were six or seven of the breeds, rough-looking, roughly-dressed, shaggy ruffians, all of them armed. They gathered in a bunch by the huts, staring at the invasion, evidently taken utterly by surprise. It was plain that they had never dreamed that their hiding-place would be discovered and penetrated—and success after success in their rascally game had justified their confidence—till now.

All through the summer the hidden gang had taken toll of the cattle-drives that came down from the north

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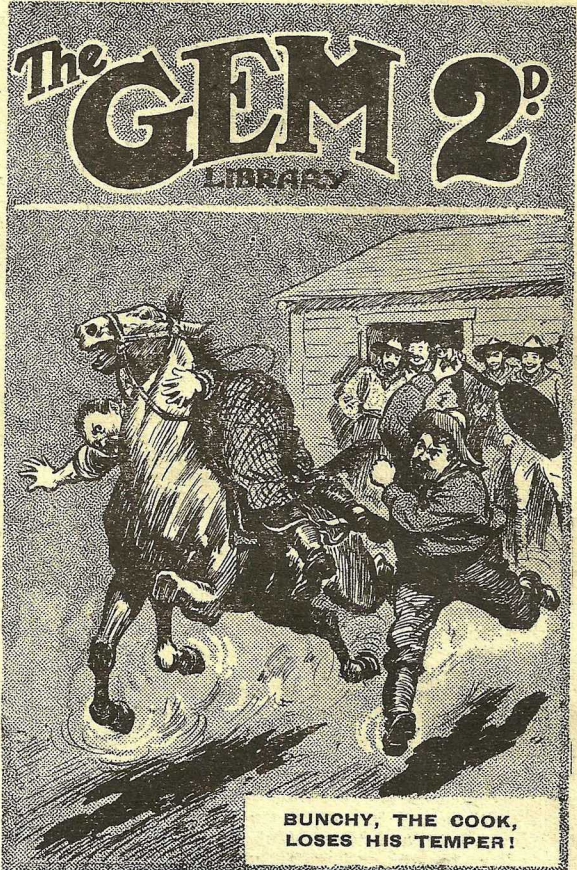
But one jape has to come. The born Jester can't put away his cap and bells for keeps! And thus we see the one and-only Monty putting a real prize jape across Bunchy, the cook, at the Boot Leg Ranch. Bunchy, of course, doesn't see any humour in the extraordinary position he gets landed in, but all his companions do!

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and passed the hills. And never till now had danger even distantly threatened them.

Now it not only threatened, but was actually upon them. And the rough gang, glaring at the oncoming punchers, were undecided and unnerved. They had guns in their hands, but seemed to hesitate to use them. Their game was stealing cattle, not desperate fighting with the owners of the beasts.

But as the Boot Leg bunch came sweeping on, the cattle-thieves evidently decided to make a fight for it; for guns were lifted and firing started. But at the first lift of a gun among the gang of dusky rascals the punchers began to shoot.

Crack, crack, crack, crack!

The feeding cattle lifted their heads and stared drowsily round and resumed their cropping.

"Oh cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as he felt the wind of a bullet and his Stetson hat was torn from his head.

Crack, crack, crack!

For a few minutes the valley rang and echoed with deafening reports. But it was over almost as soon as it had started. At the distance the firing was rather wild on both sides; but two of the breeds were seen to fall, and the others a minute later were seen to bolt round the huts.

A minute more and they were seen beyond the line of huts, plunging through the creek and running for the hills.

Crack, crack, crack!

Still loosing off shots at the running cattle-thieves, the Boot Leg bunch swept up at a wild gallop to the huts.

"Our win, I guess!" chuckled Wildrake breathlessly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Thank goodness they bolted!" said Tom Merry, averting his glance from the two breeds who had

dropped into the grass, and who did not stir again. Two of the gang, at least, had found the way of the transgressor very hard.

Four or five running breeds were vanishing up the hillside in the distance, seeking safety among the rocks. The cowboys pumped out bullets after them as long as they could be seen and long after they were out of effective range. For some time there was a wild jamboree of shouting and shooting and prancing in celebration of the Boot Leg victory.

But Nosey Rogers soon called his exuberant followers to order.

Two men were assigned to watch for the half-breeds, in case they returned to renew the conflict—which was not likely. The rest of the bunch proceeded to round up the cattle in the valley.

"Three hundred head, at least!" chortled the trail boss. "Here's our cows, young Kit—here they are—and plenty besides. I guess we'll drive them all, and their owners can sort them out at Canpac Creek. Fellers, I can tell you that I feel good!"

There was no doubt that the whole bunch "felt good." There was joyful satisfaction on all sides. Not only had the stolen cows been recovered, but the gang of cattle-thieves had been broken up; the breeds would take no more toll of the herds driven down from the northern ranches. The cows were soon rounded up and started on their way; and Nosey stayed only to fire the huts, leaving the cattle-thieves' camp in a blaze behind.

Back along the narrow gulch went the punchers with the cattle, the cows going in single file till the lower canyon was reached.

It was a slow drive; but the canyon was reached at last, and the cows bunched again.

Then they were driven out of the hills to the main herd on the plain, and Bunchy, the cook, stood up in
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the chuck-wagon and stared at them as they came, with his eyes almost bulging out of his fat face.

"You've got 'em!" he ejaculated. "Waal, I'll tell a man! You've got them cows, you-'uns! I'll tell the world!"

Bunchy rubbed his eyes, as if he could scarcely believe them.

"We've got 'em, old scout!" chuckled Wildrake. "Our cows and some of the Sunset brand, and some other brands, too. And I guess those thieves are sorry for themselves—they lit out in too big a hurry to call their horses, and we've driven off their horses, too, Bunchy. And it was D'Arcy that worked the oracle."

"You never found a trail!" said Bunchy. "I'll tell a man! Did you find a trail now?"

Wildrake explained, and the cook whistled with astonishment.

"So that was the how of it!" he ejaculated. "Mister Nosey Rogers, does you believe now the story I told you about the Sunset bunch?"

Nosey Rogers grinned.

"Seeing as we've found more'n fifty Sunset cows in the hands of them breeds, I allow I do," he answered. "But they won't play that game any more, I reckon. Two of the gang have got theirs, and I reckon the others ain't stopped running yet."

"What did I tell you?" said Bunchy. "I told you that cattle vanished in them hills without leaving a trail. You jest snickered, you did, Nosey. What do you say now?"

"I say that you'd better hand out the chuck and give your chin a rest," answered the trail boss.

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am feahfully hungwy, Bunchay!"

"Your deal, Bunchy!" said Wildrake.

And the cook handed out the chuck, and a tired but very satisfied party sat down in the glow of the sunset to supper.

Arthur Augustus seemed very thoughtful over supper. Something seemed to be weighing on his noble mind.

"When shall we get to Canpac Cweck, Wildwake?" he asked, after a long and thoughtful silence.

"Day after to-morrow, with luck," answered the Canadian junior. "Anything biting you, Gussy?"

"I am wathah wowwied. One of those wottahs sent a bullet through my hat, you know."

"Lucky it wasn't through your head," remarked Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! I quite admit that, Blake. But my hat is wuined," said Arthur Augustus.

"Awful!" said Tom Merry sympathetically.

"Well, pewwaps it is not exactly awful, deah boy, but it is wathah a sewious mattah," said the swell of St. Jim's. "I have a vewy stwong objection to wearin' a wagged hat. Are there any shops at Canpac Cweck, Wildwake?"

The Canadian junior laughed.

"I guess there's a store," he answered.

"Can I get a new hat there?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors. The worry on Gussy's noble mind was explained now.

"Weally, you fellows——"

"Dear old scout, you can get a new Stetson at Canpac Creek," said Wildrake, laughing.

"So you can smile again, old bean," said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the cloud disappeared from the noble brow of Arthur Augustus.

CHAPTER 14.

The End of the Drive!

TOM MERRY & CO. watched in turns through the night with the Boot Leg punchers. But nothing was seen or heard of the breeds. The survivors of the gang of cattle-thieves had evidently "lit out" for safer quarters, and were not likely to be seen in that section of British Columbia again.

Soon after dawn the drive started again, and the Boot Leg herd went winding through the wide canyon into the hills. The punchers rode gun in hand, ready for any reappearance of the half-breeds.

But the way was clear, and the herd, now more than twelve hundred in number, wound through the hills to the plains beyond.

Nosey Rogers could hardly be recognised now as the trail boss who had stamped and sworn and snapped after the stampede.

He was in high good-humour, and a continual grin of satisfaction wrinkled his rugged visage.

Instead of leaving behind a hundred head of "Old Man Wildrake's" cattle, as had at one time seemed inevitable, he had all his herd with him, and a couple of hundred head of cattle of other brands, recaptured from the breeds. Those cows were to be restored to their rightful owners; but a dozen horses that had been captured at the same time were lawful booty to the Boot Leg punchers, and a compensation for the trouble that they had been given.

So the trail boss had reason for the grin of satisfaction that haunted his bronzed face, and his satisfaction was shared by all the outfit.

The hills were left behind at last, and the drive went on across the green prairie to the next halting-place.

Another day dawned, and the march was resumed, the prairie trail now turning into a road in a more settled section, and, instead of rolling plains and barren hills, the schoolboy cowpunchers now passed cultivated lands and farmhouses and snorting motor-cars.

Canpac Creek was reached at last, and the cattle-drive was over.

For the first time since they had arrived at the Boot Leg ranch the St. Jim's juniors heard the humming of the railroad cars. Nosey Rogers and the punchers were busy shipping the cattle in the cars, what time Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, greatly to his delight, found that he was able to purchase a brand-new, handsome Stetson to adorn his noble head in the place of his damaged hat.

"I guess we hit the trail again to-morrow," Wildrake remarked at supper in the Canpac lumber hotel. "Nosey and the boys will be busy here for some time with the cattle, and after they're through I guess they'll be



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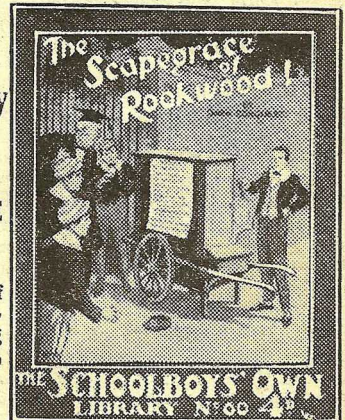
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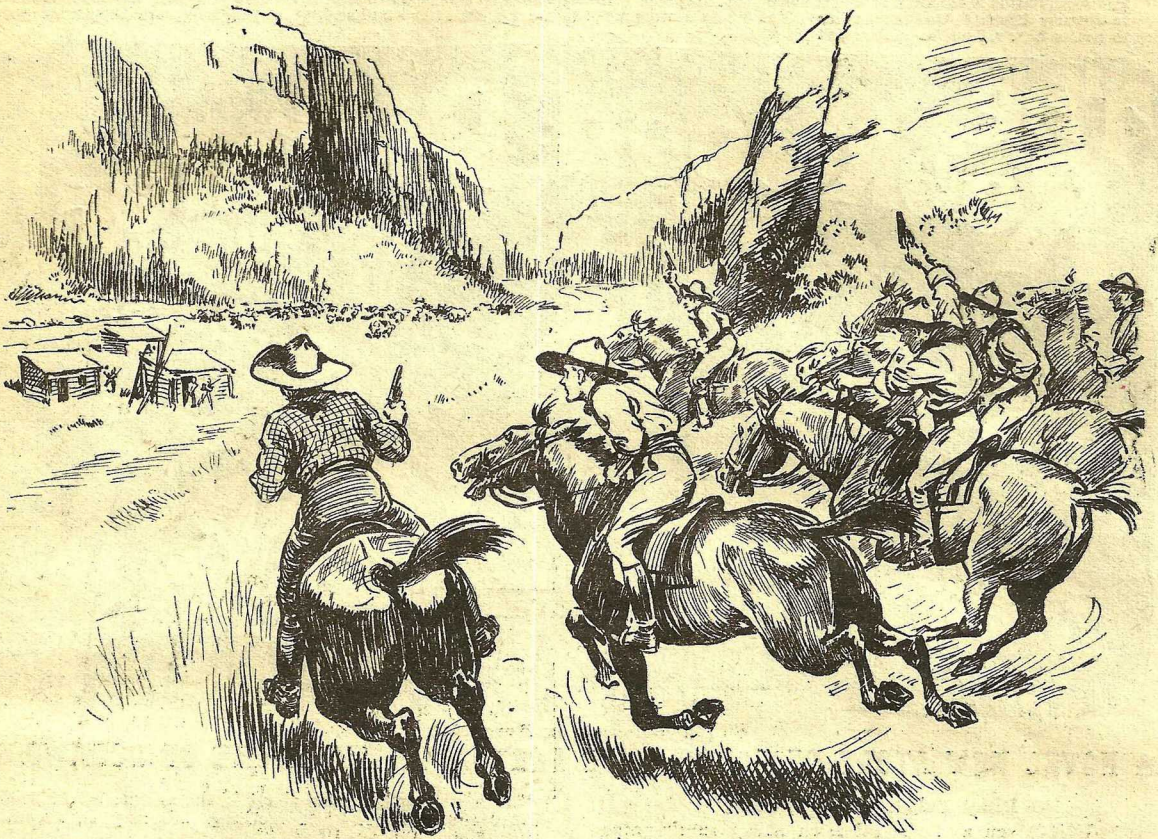
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"Ride 'em!" Nosey Rogers snapped out the words as he sighted the cattle thieves on the banks of the silvery creek, "Shoot if they raise as much as a finger!" The Boot Leg bunch, spreading out to offer less of a target for the enemy, swept at a gallop towards the huts. (See Chapter 13.)

going on a bender. You-uns don't want to join them on a bender?" he added, with a laugh.

"Bai Jove! Pewwaps we might as well," said Arthur Augustus. "We came to Canadah to see all the sights, you know. The vac will be ovah wathah soon now, and we shall have to start for the old country and St. Jim's. Let's join the punchahs on a bendah."

"Hem!"

"Oh, Gussy!" murmured Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"We shall have to look after Gussy," remarked Monty Lowther. "We got Bunchy to sign the pledge. We'd better get Gussy to sign another."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass reprovingly on his grinning chums.

"Pway, Wildwake, what is a bendah?" he inquired.

"It is wathah a new word to me."

Wildrake chuckled.

"It's a sort of jamboree," he explained.

"And what exactly is a jambowee, deah boy?"

"A giddy celebration."

"Well, we sometimes have a celebvation in the study at St. Jim's," said Arthur Augustus. "That is all wight, deah boy."

"A bender is a rather more emphatic celebration than the sort you're used to at St. Jim's, old bean," grinned Wildrake. "I'm afraid it may include filling up with fire-water——"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"And a fight or two——"

"Oh!"

"And possibly a few days in the stone jug to wind up. But if you're keen on it, of course——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus. "On second thoughts, deah boy, we will not join the punchahs on a bendah."

And Tom Merry & Co. didn't.

Bright and early in the morning the schoolboy punchers mounted their horses again and took the road for the Boot Leg Ranch.

The return ride was much more rapid than the long, slow cattle-drive. There was only one night to camp out, and on the second evening the juniors rode cheerily up to the ranch-house.

Mr. Wildrake met them with a smiling face. The juniors were almost as brown as berries, and looking and feeling very healthy and fit.

"Well, do you like cowpunching?" asked the rancher.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Topping!" said Tom Merry. "I think Nosey Rogers will tell you that we made ourselves useful."

"Especially Gussy," said Blake.

"Not at all, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus.

"Nosey has told me," said the rancher, with a smile. "I owe you my thanks, D'Arcy, my lad. I guess I sat up and took notice when Nosey told me it was owing to you that he did not lose a hundred head of cows to those rascally breads."

"Nosey told you!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "But he has not come back from the wailwoad yet. Oh, I forgot the telephone!"

"I was getting rather uneasy, as I expected Nosey to call me up from Canpac Creek much sooner," said the rancher. "It turns out to be very lucky that you lads went with the cattle-drive. I guess if you want to take up ranching when you leave school you'll only have to come out to Boot Leg and join the outfit."

"I wathah think I shall, sir," said Arthur Augustus.

"That's a wathah wippin' ideah."

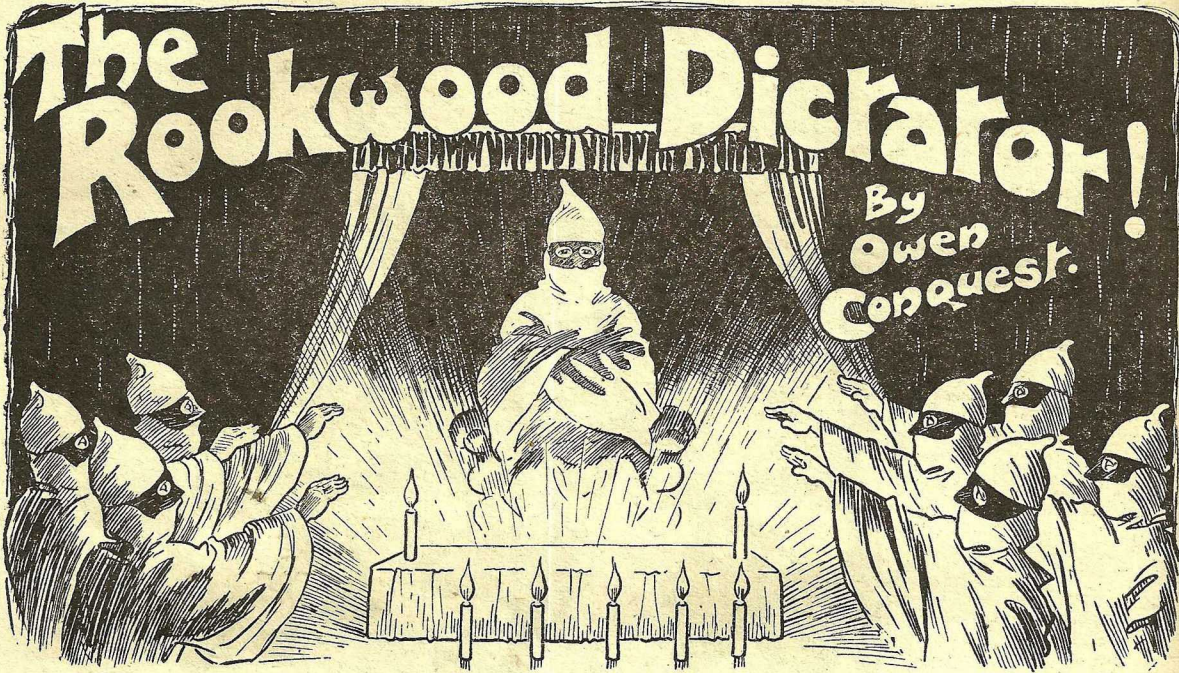
And so said all the schoolboy cowpunchers.

THE END.

(Whatever you do, chums, don't miss the next rattling fine story in this magnificent series, entitled: "THE JAPER OF BOOT LEG RANCH!" It abounds in thrills and amusing situations.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,020.

UP AGAINST A BULLY! Carthew of the Sixth at Rookwood—a prefect—believes in making himself as unpleasant to Jimmy Silver & Co. as he can. But Uncle James and his merry men have had enough of Carthew, and they arrange to make him sit up for a change!



(Introduction on Page 25.)

A NOVEL NEW STORY OF SCHOOL LIFE FEATURING THE CHUMS OF ROOKWOOD.

Dicky Dalton to the Rescue!

QUIET, you ass! You'll fetch Dicky out!" gasped Lovell.

The footballers broke up the lane at a good pace. They had arranged for a charabanc to meet them at a distance of a few hundred yards, and once they could board that all would be well.

"Put it on! We're not stopping now!" panted Jimmy Silver.

Lovell glanced back and gave an exclamation.

"Here he comes! Halt, you men!"

"All together!" rapped out Jimmy Silver.

As Carthew came after them the Rookwood footballers halted. Carthew came up with a rush right in the midst of the juniors. He had time for one word, and one only. Then a score of hands seized him, and he was whirled off his feet like a feather.

"Stop! Yarooooop! Wooooooop! Groooooogh!"

What Carthew said did not interest the Fourth-Formers. They whirled him over and rolled him in the dusty lane. Lovell jerked his tie out, and Jimmy Silver jammed his cap down the back of his neck. Mornington dragged off his jacket and threw it over his head like a hood, tying it there by the arms.

As the juniors released him, Carthew rolled wildly across the lane, and disappeared into a ditch. A fiendish yell testified that the ditch was full of nettles.

"Pile in!" rapped out Jimmy Silver. "We're late as it is!"

The footballers piled in.

The charabanc rolled away just as Carthew, having dragged the jacket from his head, looked over the edge of the ditch. He shook his fist in mute rage, and Lovell, grinning, blew him back a kiss.

The charabanc rolled on between green hedges, and Carthew was, for the moment, forgotten. There was one thing, and one thing only, that mattered just then—the chastising of Pankley, Putter, & Co. on their own native heath. All else was for the nonce dismissed from the Rookwooders' minds.

"We shall lick 'em," opined Raby. "I can feel it in my bones."

"Of course, when they beat us a month ago, at cricket, it was a fluke—just that," agreed Newcome. "But I wasn't playing then—that may have had something to do with it."

"Well, I had your place, and now I'm twelfth man," remarked Putty Grace. "I shall expect to see something special from you to-day, Newcome."

"Don't worry, old son, you'll see it. Hallo! What's up?"

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,020.

"Man waving his paws about in the middle of the road," said Jimmy Silver. "Something blocking it ahead, I expect."

The charabanc slowed down and came to a stop. The man—an aristocratic gentleman with a bowler hat and malacca cane—approached and bowed.

His keen eyes searched the car and alighted on Lovell. A shade crossed his face, rendering it brutal and venomous.

"My hat! Punter!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"What's wrong ahead, sir?" asked the chauffeur.

Captain Punter did not answer. He threw up his hand, and from the hedges on either side broke half a dozen of the loungers who were to be found any day outside the Bird-in-Hand, waiting on the chance of stray drinks. Unshaven for the most part, unwashed to a man, they were all smelling strongly of spirits.

In a trice the car was surrounded, and the ruffians eyed the juniors grimly, awaiting the captain's command.

"Here, I say, what's the idea?" ejaculated the chauffeur indignantly.

"Keep your mouth shut and you'll not get hurt," observed Captain Punter curtly. "Now, young gentlemen, you can take your choice. Come out of your car, or be dragged out! Whichever it is, make up your minds quickly."

"Why, you rotter—" burst out Arthur Edward Lovell.

"Steady!" whispered Jimmy Silver grimly. "All make a rush together—we may stand a chance!"

As Punter opened his mouth to speak again, Jimmy gave the word. Like one man the footballers leaped out of the charabanc and engaged fiercely with the ruffians. The chauffeur sprang out as well, and in a moment a wild and whirling combat was in progress. Punter wisely kept back, leaving the struggle to his men.

"Take that! And that! And that!" panted Lovell, hitting out recklessly at a bearded face.

"Back up!" panted Jimmy Silver. "Oh, crikey!"

Uncle James of Rookwood went down with a fast-closing eye and a crimson nose, and in a few moments the rest of the team were in little better condition. Game as they were, they were no match for the hulking ruffians Punter had brought to deal with them. The chauffeur put up a good fight, but was overpowered at last. After that the fight was brief.

Reeling in their captors' grasp, the footballers were dragged across the lane and through the hedge, Punter following.

A couple of hundred yards across a ploughed field stood a deserted barn. This was their destination.

Captain Punter, smiling grimly, threw open the door, and the prisoners were forced inside. While one of the men closed the door, Punter lit an oil-lamp and stood it on a beam.

By the dim light it threw he surveyed the juniors. They in turn glared back at him. The Fistical Four, at least, knew why they had been captured, but they were far from cowed. Indeed, Arthur Edward Lovell was boiling with rage. He eyed the captain wolfishly as he spoke.

"I guess my business is with four of you boys only. Silver, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome. Stand forward, you four!"

Released, the Fistical Four stood forward grimly.

Captain Punter leered at them.

"You low hound!" ground Lovell fiercely. "I suppose, now you've got us, you think we're going to beg for mercy? Well, we're not, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"Hear, hear!" chorused Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome.

"You'll sing a different tune when I've finished with you!" snarled the captain. "Hold them, Casey! I'll begin on Lovell."

No time was wasted in ceremony.

One of the ruffians stepped forward and gripped Lovell by the arms. Bending his shoulders, he "hoisted" the junior in the same manner as old Mack was wont to do for flogging in Hall. Lovell struggled, but he was powerless against the man.

Captain Punter, with a malicious smile, swished his cane through the air.

"The last time I met you, you young hound, you robbed me of ten pounds and took the liberty of handling me. Well, we'll see how you like a dose of your own medicine. That's for a start!"

Thwack!

The cane whistled through the air, and there was a report like a pistol-shot as it smote Lovell's trousers. The junior gave no sign, but he could not have helped feeling that brutal slash.

A murmur of anger from the juniors greeted it.

"You hound!"

"You howling rascal!"

"Hard words!" sneered the captain. "The young villain will remember Captain Gerald Punter by this!"

Thwack!

The cane swept down again and Lovell shivered. But still he gave no cry. If the man had cut him to pieces he would not have spoken. Punter should not have that satisfaction, at least.

"The—the craven skunk!" gasped Jimmy Silver, his face white with rage. "If—if only a fellow could lay hands on him!"

"By heck! I'll make you squeal this time, my beauty!" ejaculated the captain, swinging his cane high.

Jimmy Silver made a desperate plunge as it descended. His captor grabbed at him, but missed. Jimmy's clenched fist took Punter behind the ear and he reeled over. Jimmy Silver glanced round him desperately. He was surrounded. There was no escape!

Crash!

It was a crash at the door of the barn, and a voice that the Rookwooders knew well shouted to them—the voice of Mr. Dalton.

"Silver! Lovell! Are you here? Open the door!"

"We can't, sir!" shouted Jimmy Silver, sudden hope leaping in his breast. "We're prisoners!"

"One moment!"

Crash! Crash! Crash!

There was a lock on the barn door, and Captain Punter had turned the key in it. But no lock was made to resist that terrific crashing—caused by a log of wood wielded vigorously by the athletic Form master without. There was another voice, too—that of Bulkeley, the captain of the school.

The ruffians in the barn grouped round the door as it creaked and groaned under the assault. With a sudden crash, the lock burst, and the door was thrown open.

"Wade into 'em!" shouted Mornington.

"Smash 'em!"

Mr. Dalton and Bulkeley did not stop to ask questions. As the juniors rushed from the rear, master and senior attacked from the front, and between the two fires, so to speak, the ruffians faltered.

Mr. Dalton was in the champion light-weight class as a boxer, and Bulkeley was the best fighting man at Rookwood. With that addition to their forces, the juniors were able to deal with their adversaries. And the ruffians, finding the battle going against them, were keen enough to surrender.

Captain Punter stopped a straight left from Mr. Dalton, and went down and out like a log. Several of the ruffians were groaning on the ground and nursing aching jaws and bruised faces by the time the Form master had finished with them.

Mr. Dalton wiped a streaming nose and paused for breath. "Silver, who is this man?"

Captain Punter had raised himself on one elbow. As the Form master spoke, the rascally captain made a sudden leap. Lovell grabbed at him, but he was just too late. The fleeing figure of the captain was followed, as if at a command, by the rest of the ruffians. Bulkeley sprang to intercept them, but it was impossible to stop them all. And the captain and his men disappeared across the fields, running hard.

"It was a fellow styling himself Captain Punter, sir," said Jimmy Silver, as Mr. Dalton repeated his question. "We—we fell foul of him, and I suppose this was his way of getting revenge."

"You would not have been here if you had not cut detention," observed Mr. Dalton grimly.

"Ahem!"

"You will return to the school—all of you," said the Form master. "Whatever the reason for this escapade, you should not have been out of bounds. I shall deliberate upon your punishment. In the meantime, you had better get back and bathe your hurts."

"Oh dear! Certainly, sir!"

There was no help for it.

And it was with dismal faces that Jimmy Silver & Co. walked haplessly back to Rookwood.

Fed-up with Carthew!

"O W!"
"Yow!"
"Oooooogh!"
"Grooh!"

Four juniors of the Classical Fourth were coming along the Fourth Form corridor.

They did not look happy.

Jimmy Silver's face was screwed up as if in direst agony; Lovell was squeezing his hands under his armpits and gasping. Raby and Newcome appeared to be imitating the performance of professional contortionists. They punctuated their movements with grunts and moans.

The Fistical Four had had it hot; there was no doubt about that.

"Wow-wow! My paws are skinned, I believe!" gasped Raby.

"Ow! Oh dear! Gated!" groaned Lovell. "Gated for the next two half-holidays. And a licking! Oh, my hands!"

"All through Carthew!" grunted Newcome vengefully. "Oh, don't I wish I could give him my giddy paws for a minute or two just now! What a life!"

To which Jimmy Silver, with an excruciating smile, responded:

"Keep smiling!"

"Ass!"

"Fathead!"

"Jabberwock!"

The Fistical Four did not keep smiling; even Uncle James himself found it a difficult feat at that moment.

Certainly Mr. Dalton had laid it on thick. In his opinion, it was necessary.

The junior team had broken bounds, and only the fact that he had glimpsed them leaving had saved them from a very rough handling from Captain Punter and his rascally crew. Added to that, on his return to the school, the Form master had met Carthew—a bruised, dusty, and vengeful Carthew. The story of Carthew's ragging had come out, and had been added to the list of Jimmy Silver & Co.'s sins.

Mr. Dalton had said he would consider their punishment; and he had done so.

They were to be gated for two half-holidays, and in order to drive home the lesson, the Form master had followed up with a record licking apiece. Carthew had looked on.

Mr. Dalton's arm must have ached after those severe inflictions, but Jimmy Silver & Co. ached still more. The Fistical Four had escaped from their friends and were heading for the end study to recuperate—and to slang Carthew.

They turned dimly into the study and stared.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE.

LOVELL minor, a fug in the Third Form at Rookwood, in debt to CAPTAIN PUNTER, appeals to his major, ARTHUR EDWARD, for monetary assistance. Lovell major bluntly refuses, but in company with his chums, JIMMY SILVER, RABY, and NEWCOME, known as the Fistical Four, he meets the rascally bookmaker and forces him to give up the fug's I.O.U. To level matters, Punter offers to liquidate the debts of CARTHEW of the Sixth, providing he will deliver Jimmy Silver & Co—who incidentally are to be detained during the occasion of an important football fixture with Bagshot—into his hands. Carthew's cunning is equal to the task, but his nerve is not, and when he hears of the Co.'s intentions of breaking detention he attempts to make some effort to stop them.

(Now read on.)

A fat figure rose from the easy chair to greet them. At the sight they presented, Tubby Muffin grinned. Then he chuckled.

"He, he, he! I say, you do look a lot of moulting owls, you know. Dicky laid it on thick, what?"

"No!" hooted Lovell. "We're doing all these contortions just to make you laugh, you fat, cackling dummy!"

"He, he, he! Well, it's enough to make a fellow grin, you know. Bear up, Jimmy. It's not so bad as all that, is it? I say, I've come to tea."

"You've—you've what?"

"Come to tea," repeated Muffin. "That beast Higgs won't let me tea in my study—just because I can't pay my whack to-day. I promised to stand treat to the whole study to-morrow, but he didn't believe me. Now I shan't. I'll treat you fellows instead, if you like."

"To-day?"

"Nunno—to-morrow," corrected Muffin hastily. "I shall have a cheque—"

"Out with him!" rapped Lovell grimly. "I'm not in the mood to be foisted on by a fat scoundrel, for one! All together!"

"Here, I say—you rotters!" roared Muffin in alarm.

The four juniors did not pause to heed Muffin.

They were hurt, and they were savage. Muffin appeared to them almost in the light of a godsend. Four pairs of hands grasped Tubby, and he was whirled to the doorway.

"One—two—three!" rapped Jimmy Silver.

And Tubby flew.

He landed with a crash and a howl in the corridor, and rolled over. The door of the end study slammed after him. Four juniors plumped down miserably into chairs and continued their interrupted lament.

"Carthew wins!" growled Lovell sulphureously. "We've got it—did you see how the cad was chuckling at us, Jimmy?"

"The rotter!" groaned Newcome.

"I saw him," answered Jimmy Silver. "There's no denying Carthew wins this time—"

"All along the line," added Raby.

"He gets us gated—" began Lovell afresh.

"All through his rotten bullying," agreed Newcome.

"We trap him over that—and then that man Punter steps in and puts a stopper to our match. If I meet Punter again I shall brain him! But the rotter will keep. As soon as we get back, Carthew's on the trail again, and Dicky comes down on us—"

"Like an avalanche," finished Raby.

"Keep smiling," urged Jimmy Silver. "We shall get over it."

"But are we going to let a howling cad like Carthew put it across us—us, you know—like that?" roared Lovell indignantly. "Not jolly well likely!"

"We'd slaughter him, if only we had the chance!" assented Raby. "But how—"

"That's what I'm trying to think out!" snapped Lovell. "Carthew's a beast and a bully of the first water—"

"Cave!" gasped Jimmy Silver abruptly.

There had been a rap on the door, but Lovell, in his excitement, did not appear to notice it. If he noticed it, it was beneath him to stop. He went on fiercely:

"A cringing worm, in fact—"

"Shut up, you blithering idiot! It may be Carthew!" gasped Raby.

"A rotten, smoking, gambling cad!" roared Lovell at the top of his voice.

"Who is?"

Lovell condescended to glance round at that.

The door had opened—and Mark Carthew stood on the threshold of the study. His eyes, gleaming at Lovell, suggested that he had overheard some of that junior's reckless tirade.

Lovell eyed him back coolly enough. Even after a severe licking, Lovell was still Lovell—with nerve unlimited.

"What do you want?" he asked bluntly.

Carthew's eyes glittered.

"Whom were you talking about just now?" he demanded.

Lovell's lip curled.

"Eavesdropping, what?"

"If you were speaking of me—"

"If I was, are you going to take me to Mr. Dalton?" asked Lovell coolly. "Anything you may have heard you heard before you came into the study. You can explain that to him."

Carthew bit his lip.

He knew that Mr. Dalton would not approve of his acting on a remark overheard by chance. The Form master had decided views on eavesdroppers.

"We'll let that drop," answered Carthew calmly. "I've looked in about another matter entirely. Muffin!"

Tubby Muffin appeared behind Carthew. He threw a beseeching glance at the occupants of the study. Tubby was not a sneak—but his tongue had an unfortunate habit of running on.

"You were thrown out of this study just recently?" demanded Carthew, in his most bullying tone.

"Ow! Yes, Carthew."

"Why did you throw Muffin out, Silver?" queried Carthew grimly. "You should know better than to play dangerous pranks with your Form-fellows. Muffin might have been hurt."

"Oh, he'd bounce," answered Lovell coolly.

"I am waiting," said Carthew grimly.

"The fat idiot had come to palm himself off on us for tea," said Jimmy Silver, after a pause. "We weren't in the mood to put up with him. You can report us to Mr. Dalton if you like, Carthew!"

"Mr. Dalton doesn't want to be worried by your fag disturbances every five minutes!" snapped Carthew. "I'm dealing with this. You will each write me two hundred lines—and hand them in before bed-time. Mind they're done!"

"You—you rotter!" gasped Lovell ferociously.

"You will write me three hundred!" said Carthew coolly. "And if they're not done, look out for a licking—that's all!"

In deep, expressive silence the Fistical Four watched the door close behind Carthew. For some moments even Lovell could find nothing to say.

But when it came it was a storm.

"Of all the rotten, sneaking bullies—"

"He's going for us at every turn, now that Dicky's down on us!" growled Lovell.

"Thinks he's got us taped," gasped Raby. "Two hundred lines—by supper-time. We shall have to work like niggers to get our prep done as well."

"That doesn't matter to Carthew," said Jimmy Silver, between his teeth. "I must say he's overstepped the mark a bit this time."

"Look here—are we standing it?" demanded Lovell.

"Can't do much else, can we?" asked Newcome.

"We can!" snapped Lovell.

"Well, what?"

"For one thing," said Lovell grimly, "we're not going to do those lines!"

"And get a licking in dorm?"

"If we knuckle under now, we shall be under dogs for good!" said Lovell impressively. "Carthew knows that Dicky's got his eye on us, and he thinks he can do as he jolly well likes. He's out to make our lives a misery—any fellow with half an eye can see that."

"Carthew always was down on this study," agreed Newcome.

"Can't you think of anything, Jimmy?" asked Raby.

"You're leader," reminded Lovell. "It's up to you, Jimmy. We're not standing any more rot from Carthew—that's plain."

Uncle James smiled.

"I've got an idea," he admitted. "It might work—"

"Cough it up!"

"But it would need a lot more fellows to help. Something's got to be done about Carthew—I can see that. Suppose you scout along the passage for some of the fellows, Raby? Then I can unfold my scheme."

"Good egg!"

George Raby left the end study to rally the principal members of the Classical Fourth. He returned in a few minutes with Mornington and Erroll and Conroy and Van Ryn, Oswald and Flynn and Higgs and a dozen more. Those who could squeezed into the study. The rest congregated in the passage.

"On the ball, Jimmy?"

"We're all fed-up with Carthew!"

"He licked me in the passage for cuffing young Wegg!" said Higgs sulphureously. "Just as if a fellow can't cuff a cheeky fag without a cheeky senior butting in. What are we going to do with Carthew, Silver?"

"Boil him in oil!" suggested Oswald feelingly. "I've just got lines off the beast—sliding down the banisters. Any decent fellow would have looked the other way—but not Carthew. Blow him!"

"Silence for Uncle James!" called Mornington.

Jimmy Silver rose to his feet.

"I take it we're all fed-up to the neck with Carthew?" he asked.

"Carried nem. con.!" shouted Flynn. "Bejabbers, I'd like to flay the spalpeen alive, for one!"



With a sudden crash the lock burst, and the door was thrown open. "Wade into 'em!" shouted Mornington. "Smash 'em!" As Jimmy Silver & Co. rushed from the rear, Mr. Dalton and Bulkeley attacked from the front. Between the two fires the ruffians faltered. (See page 25.)

"This has got to be kept dark," said Jimmy Silver coolly. "It's a risky scheme—but if everybody keeps as mum as an oyster, it should work. And we shall be able to snap our fingers at Carthew."

"That's the idea! Cough it up!"

"I can't very well shout it into the passage," said the Rookwood junior captain. "As many of you as possible crowd into the study. The rest will be told as soon as we've discussed the details."

There was a hasty movement to crowd into the end study. That celebrated apartment had never been so full in its long career as it was when Lovell squeezed the door shut and turned the key.

"Higgs! I say, Higgs!" called Lovell through the door.

"Hallo! Room for one more?"

"No. Hang about outside, will you? If anybody comes, clear them off, or give us the tip!"

"Oh, all right."

And while Alfred Higgs mounted guard over the council chamber, Uncle James of Rookwood unfolded his scheme whereby Mark Carthew of the Sixth was to be brought to his senses.

There was scepticism at first, but on consideration, the juniors began to like the scheme. In the end, there was a burst of applause for Jimmy Silver.

"By Jove! You've hit it, old man!"

"Poor old Carthew!"

"What a surprise for him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And, still chuckling with gleeful anticipation, the meeting broke up. By bed-time all the Fourth—or all the trust-worthy element—knew the details of Jimmy Silver's tremendous scheme for the discomfiture of Carthew.

And when Carthew saw lights out for the Fourth that night—having first with great enjoyment given the Fistical Four one on each hand for forgetting their lines—he did so without a suspicion of what was coming to him.

He was soon to learn.

The Fate of Carthew!

"Oh gad! What's a fellow to do?"

Mark Carthew of the Sixth gazed dismally at a letter which he held.

He had seen lights out for the Fourth some time ago; according to the customs of Rookwood, he should have

been in bed and asleep. No objection was raised if a senior wanted to burn the midnight oil, "swotting" for an exam, but Carthew was not swotting.

He was looking very worried, and the letter appeared to be responsible.

It had come by the afternoon post, addressed in neat, quite distinguished caligraphy. A Form master glancing at the envelope would not have suspected that it emanated from a gambler and cheat of Captain Punter's calibre. Within, the letter was curt and to the point. Carthew read and re-read it with deep misgivings:

"Dear Carthew,—I guess you know by now how our little arrangement of yesterday turned out. Whether it was your fault or not does not interest me. I warn you that I intend getting even with those four boys somehow—and you have got to help me. I don't care what it is, or what risks you run. Remember what will happen to you if you can't pay at the end of the fortnight's grace I have given you.

"GERALD PUNTER."

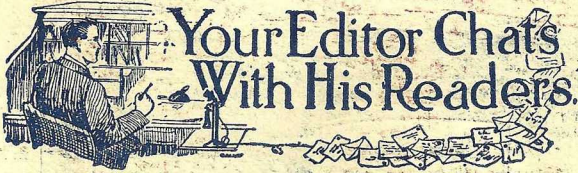
"Dash it all, why can't the man forget it?" ejaculated Carthew angrily. "What if he was handled? By Jove, though, I expect Dalton gave him something to remember him by yesterday. Serve the cad right!"

And the prefect grinned for a moment at the thought of the weedy captain opposed to the attack of the athletic Form master. But his face was serious again as he returned to grapple with his problem—how to escape from the man's clutches, clear of debt.

In Carthew's hour of stress, it was some comfort to "take it out" of his old enemies in the Fourth—and Jimmy Silver & Co. were quite unwittingly paying for a few of Captain Punter's sins. In his irritable and harassed mood, Carthew, the bully, was not likely to become more kind-hearted and forbearing; and he was finding considerable solace in his feud with the chums of the end study.

That the junior footer eleven should be gated for the next two half-holidays did not seem to Carthew a very serious matter. It paled into insignificance beside his own worries and fears. But Carthew was destined to learn that the junior eleven was not taking its gating quietly.

(Mind you read next week's thrilling instalment of this popular serial, chums.)



Address all letters: The Editor, The "Gem" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Write me; you can be sure of an answer in return.

FREE GIFT NUMBER FOUR.

THIS week's issue of our topping companion paper the "Magnet" contains another unique metal model of a famous express engine—the "Caerphilly Castle" of the Great Western Railway. It will make a splendid addition to the set of these models which, I take it, you have been collecting. Additional interest is attached to this model, for its giant parent, you fellows will remember, was on "show" at Wembley Exhibition, where millions of people must have seen it, and marvelled at the engineering skill that had made it possible. Well, in this week's "Magnet"—I must rub it in—you will find an accurate metal model, painted in full colours that will serve as a lasting souvenir of what Britain can do in railway construction. No Gemite should miss this fourth Free Gift, for without it his set of models will be incomplete. I've given you the tip, and now it's up to you, boys. But don't leave your order for the "Magnet" too late, or you will be disappointed.

TWO NEW FEATURES.

Quite a number of Gemites have written in asking for a small corner to be devoted each week to our grand winter game of football. My idea, too! In fact, next week's bumper issue will kick off with a number of snappy pars, interesting and informative, that deal with footer from all angles. And while we are on this subject of new features I can mention that in a fortnight's time there will appear in our pages the first of a series of puzzles in the shape of anagrams. A number of sentences will be given each week which contain several names of well-known St. Jim's characters. At first sight these sentences may puzzle you—which is what they are intended to do—but a careful study of them will reveal the names of St. Jim's characters that are very familiar to you. I feel sure you chaps will derive

many moments of enjoyment from solving these puzzles. Don't forget the first will appear in a fortnight's time.

GOLD FISH!

A reader from Coventry writes in and tells me that his goldfish have died, and he's puzzled to know what has brought about their sudden end. Of course, I can't answer that question without knowing all the circumstances. But this much I can tell him: goldfish are very sensitive, and it has been proved that loud noises and strong smells kill them off very rapidly.

"WHY SHOULD I?"

"Tom," of Bradford, has been scrapping. He got a licking, and when his opponent offered to shake hands with him Tom declined. Now Tom writes in and wants to know "Why should I?" Well, old lad, if you were fairly and squarely beaten, and if that scrap settled a difference of opinion between you, why on earth shouldn't you shake hands. Are you going to make a vendetta of it? Are you keen to be pointed out on all sides by the fellows amongst whom you mix as being a bad sportsman? Not if I can judge character, for your letter, apart from that "Why should I?" is quite manly. Now, Tom, it won't do. Your opponent offered to shake and you refused. Why not go up to him in a frank sort of way and tell him that you are ready to shake and let bygones be bygones? If he's any sort of fellow he'll be only too keen to settle the affair like this. Try it, anyway. And cut out the "Why should I?"

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"THE JAPER OF THE BOOT LEG RANCH!"

By Martin Clifford.

This story will conclude the brilliant series of Western yarns, featuring Tom Merry & Co. and Kit Wildrake, and all Gemites should make a point of reading it, especially as the "japer" is Monty Lowther. Nuff said.

"THE ROOKWOOD DICTATOR!"

By Owen Conquest.

Look out, too, for another topping instalment of our new school serial, also a number of footer pars under the heading of "Pot Shots!" Order early, chums.

Your Editor.

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