

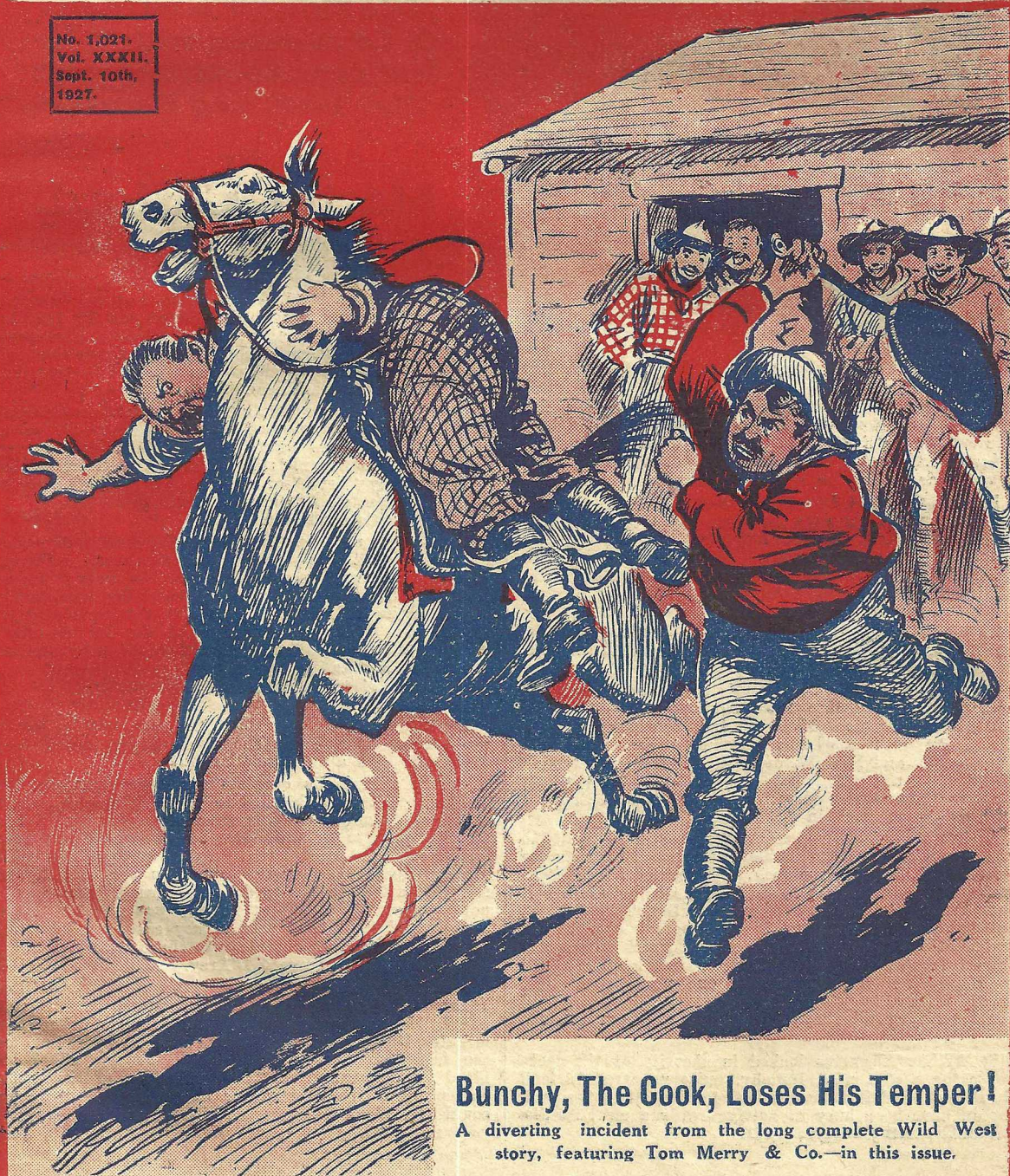
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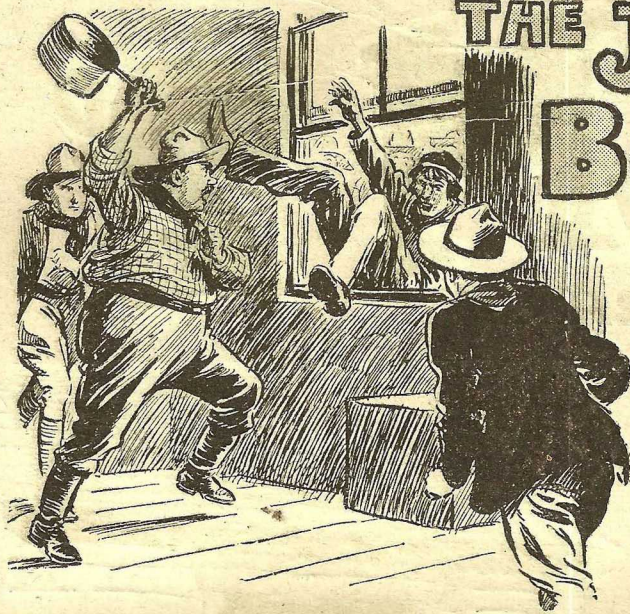
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Bunchy, The Cook, Loses His Temper!

A diverting incident from the long complete Wild West story, featuring Tom Merry & Co.—in this issue.

MONTY TRIES IT ON! Monty Lowther's highly developed sense of humour and his propensity for pulling other people's legs has led to some astonishing results at St. Jim's. But his latest leg-pull, staged at the Boot Leg Ranch in British Columbia, outshines all his previous efforts!



THE JAPER OF THE BOOT LEG RANCH!

A Grand New Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., dealing with their Holiday Adventures at the Boot Leg Ranch.

By
Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. Bunchy's Luck!

"OH!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus uttered that ejaculation as he glanced in at the open doorway of the cookhouse at the Boot Leg Ranch.

The swell of St. Jim's was rather at a loose end that morning.

Tom Merry & Co. had ridden out early, with Kit Wildrake and Long Jim and the cowpunchers, to help in rounding up a bunch of cattle on a distant pasture.

Arthur Augustus had been busily engaged upon a letter home, and so he had not ridden with his chums.

Life on the Boot Leg Ranch was strenuous, and the juniors found their days full up, and had little time for letter-writing. Arthur Augustus had put off that letter home for many days. Now he had made an effort and got it off his mind, and the man who was driving the chuck wagon to Lone Pine for stores had taken it to the post.

Then Arthur Augustus wandered forth from the ranch-house, feeling rather at a loss with all his friends away.

He walked round the corrals, and looked at the horses; he looked into the bunkhouse, and found it quite deserted. Tom Merry & Co. were far away on the plains; all the punchers seemed to be out on the range. Mr. and Mrs. Wildrake had driven off early to Rainbow in the car. There seemed to be nobody left but the Chinese chore-boy, and a Kootenay, who was rubbing down horses in the corral.

Arthur Augustus loafed about for a while, till he was tired of his own noble company, and then he remembered Bunchy, the cook, and strolled to the cookhouse. Bunchy, at least, was sure to be at home; and Arthur Augustus rather liked Bunchy. The fat and shiny ranch cook had his weaknesses, especially a weakness for the potent fire-water, which frequently caused trouble for him. But he was a plump and good-humoured fellow, and on one occasion he had saved Arthur Augustus from a savage Redskin, and that was a matter that the swell of St. Jim's was not likely to forget.

So Arthur Augustus looked in cheerily at the cookhouse for a chat with Bunchy, quite prepared to lend Bunchy a hand if he wanted it, for just then the cook should have been busy in getting ready a meal for the

punchers, who would soon be coming in hungry from the range.

It was then that Arthur Augustus ejaculated "Oh!"

Bunchy was not busy with his stove and his pots and pans, as he should have been. There was no appetising aroma of cooking about the cookhouse. The stove had gone out; a saucepan that had been simmering had ceased to simmer. Bunchy was busy, but he was not busy with his own business.

He was seated on a box, and another man—a stranger to Arthur Augustus—was seated on a stool facing him. Between them was a bench, which was serving the purpose of a card-table. Both of them were busy with a greasy "deck" of cards.

"Oh!" repeated Arthur Augustus.

He shook his head seriously.

Bunchy did not even look up as the elegant figure of the swell of St. Jim's appeared in the sunny doorway. His fat face was keen and eager, his podgy fingers trembling as they held the cards. He was deeply engrossed in his game, flushed with the excitement of gambling. Poker was another of the fat Bunchy's weaknesses, second only to fire-water. Bunchy fancied himself as a poker-player.

"Bunchy!" said Arthur Augustus gently.

The cook did not answer.

He threw a ten-dollar bill into the beef-tin which was serving as a pool. The other player immediately covered it with a twenty-dollar bill.

D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon the stranger. He had noticed a horse hitched to the rail, outside, which evidently belonged to this newcomer. He was not a pleasant man to look at. His face was hard and keen and lean, and his narrow eyes were shifty. He glanced up at D'Arcy, and gave him a curt nod, and then his attention returned to the game. Bunchy did not even seem aware that D'Arcy was present at all. He scanned the "hand" of greasy cards he held, and then dropped twenty dollars into the pot.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

Bunchy was a good cook, and he was well paid. But it was quite obvious that no cook on any ranch could afford to play poker to this tune. In a couple of minutes Gussy had seen Bunchy put thirty dollars on the table—six pounds in English money. The cook, blind to everything but the fascination of the game, was plunging far out of his depth, so far as Gussy could see. And Gussy, while feeling a little shocked, was also feeling concerned for the cook. He liked

Bunchy, who had many faults and weaknesses, but was really nobody's enemy but his own.

"Bunchay, old chap!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"Still the cook did not heed.

"Bunchay, old man, what about dinnah?" hinted Arthur Augustus.

Evidently the cook had forgotten that, though he was likely to be reminded of it most emphatically when the hungry punchers came in.

The cook looked up at last.

"Vamoose!" he said briefly.

"Eh?"

"Beat it!" said Bunchy.

"Weally, Bunchay——"

"Don't spill any more. Beat it!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Show!" said Bunchy, covering his opponent's last stake, and laying his own cards face up. "Four kings, and I guess you can't beat it, Mister Smith."

The stranger, who appeared to have given his name as Smith, shook his head with a grin.

"You win!" he said, and threw away his cards.

Bunchy grinned with glee, and collared the beef-tin and turned out his winnings.

There were nearly two hundred dollars in the pot.

"I guess this is my lucky day!" chuckled Bunchy.

"You're too good for me," said the stranger. "But I calculate I'll keep on till I'm bust. Say, you're some poker-player!"

"That jest where I live!" grinned Bunchy. "Your deal."

He gathered the cards, and handed them to Mr. Smith to shuffle. Then he cut, and Mr. Smith dealt.

"My deah Bunchay——" murmured Arthur Augustus.

Bunchy gave him a glare.

"You still chewing the rag, Mister Dude?" he said.

"You beat it. Don't I keep on telling you to beat it?"

And he grabbed up the hand Mr. Smith had dealt him.

"Vewy well," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "I will wettire. I will not intewwupt you furthah, Bunchay. I will only wemark that I am vewy sowwy to see you engaged in this mannah."

"Git!"

"Gamblin' is wathah disweputable, Bunchay, and there will be a wow when the punchahs come in and find that dinnah is not weady."

"Are you moving?" roared Bunchy. "By gum, if you keep on chewing the rag in that there doorway, I'll take the frying-pan to you. Shut your head and vamoose!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus retired from the doorway of the cookhouse. Bunchy, as a rule, was a good-natured and amiable fellow, but under the influence of poker, he seemed very like what Gussy had seen of him under the influence of fire-water.

Arthur Augustus strolled away, shaking his noble head. From the looks of that hard-faced, shifty-eyed stranger, D'Arcy had expected to see Bunchy cleaned out of all his cash; and he had been greatly surprised to see the cook winning a substantial sum. So long as he was winning, Bunchy was not likely to "quit." Only the loss of his last cent was likely to stop him, or the winning of his opponent's last cent.

Arthur Augustus strolled round the corrals, and waited for his friends to come in to dinner. It was past noon when he observed the stranger, at last, come out of the cookhouse, unhitch his horse from the rail, and mount and ride away. There was a grin on the hard, lean face of Mr. Smith, and D'Arcy observed that he looked quite satisfied with himself as he rode away. He noticed, too, that as soon as the man was out of the gate, he rode at a rapid gallop, as if eager to get clear of the Boot Leg Ranch as soon as possible.

"Poor old Bunchay!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I suppose that wotah has cleaned him out. It serves him right, of course; but—— Poor old Bunchay!"

And Arthur Augustus strolled back to the cookhouse, expecting to see the cook in a flabby and dismal state, and to offer a word of sympathy.

To his surprise, Bunchy was not looking dismal at all.

Bunchy was executing a sort of war-dance round the

stove, his fat face beaming with satisfaction and triumph.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "Then you have not been cleaned out, Bunchay?"

The fat cook ceased his triumphant gyrations and turned to the swell of St. Jim's.

"Cleaned out!" he ejaculated. "I'll tell the world I've pesky near cleaned out that galoot Smith. He reckoned he could play poker. He knows better now, I guess."

Bunchy held up a fat hand crammed with bills.

"Eight hundred dollars!" he said impressively.

"Gweat Scott! You've won eight hundwed dollahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in amazement.

"You've said it!" grinned Bunchy.

"This is weally extwaordinawy, Bunchay."

"I guess I can play poker," said the cook complacently.

"But that fellow certainly did not look as if he had such a sum of money about him," said Arthur Augustus. "It is weally extwaordinawy. But what about cinnah, Bunchay?"

"Blow dinner!"

"The punchahs——"

"Bust the punchers!"

"Mr. Wildwake——"

"Old Man Wildrake don't cut no ice with me," said Bunchy derisively. "I guess I'll talk to him if he chews the rag in my cookhouse! Eight hundred dollars! I guess with that I can start a joint in Rainbow and make money hand over fist. All I ever needed was capital. I've got the brains."

"Have you weally, Bunchay?" asked Arthur Augustus innocently. "You have nevah stwuck me as a wainy chap, you know."

"What!"

"I have wathah looked upon you as an ass, old fellah, if you don't mind my mentionin' it."

Bunchy looked expressively at the swell of St. Jim's. Apparently he did mind Gussy mentioning it.

There was a clatter of hoofs on the trail.

"Bai Jove! Heah come the fellahs! I'm afwaid there will be twouble with the punchahs now, Bunchay."

"Oh, shucks!" said the cook contemptuously.

Even now, at the eleventh hour, as it were, Bunchy did not light up his stove, or turn his attention to cooking. He was counting over the bills in his fat fingers with a gleeful, gloating face, as Arthur Augustus walked away to meet the riders who were coming in from the prairie.

CHAPTER 2.

Trouble for the Cook!

TOM MERRY & CO. jumped cheerily from their horses. The St. Jim's juniors were tired with a morning's hard riding, and hungry, too, but they looked as if they were enjoying life. Indeed, the holiday on the Canadian ranch had only one drawback. Like all things, it had to come to an end, and the end of the vacation was drawing near now, and ere long it would be time for the juniors to ride for the railway, and take the Canadian Pacific cars back across Canada for the steamer that was to take them home. And they were not at all keen to say good-bye to the rolling prairie and the free, open spaces of the Canadian West, though St. Jim's certainly had its attractions also.

"Hallo, here's the slacker!" said Blake, as Arthur Augustus came up.

"Weally, Blake——"

"We've put in a morning's work while you've been loafing around, Gussy," said Monty Lowther severely.

"Wats!"

"And we're jolly hungry!" said Manners.

"I guess I could wolf anything now," said Kit Wildrake. "We shall find dinner ready. Have popper and mommer come in yet, Gussy?"

"Not yet, deah boy."

"I reckon we won't wait. Come on, you 'uns!"

The juniors went towards the ranch, while Long Jim

and half a dozen punchers, who had ridden in with him, started for the cookhouse.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy glanced after them rather anxiously.

He could not help thinking that there would be trouble when they found that Bunchy had made no preparations whatever for the punchers' dinner.

The juniors entered the ranch-house, and the Chinese chore-boy served their dinner, and they sat down to it with keen appetites. Arthur Augustus kept an ear open towards the window, on the alert for sounds of trouble from the cookhouse. Those sounds were not long in coming.

"The punchers seem to be kicking up a lot of row," remarked Wildrake, as loud shouting came in at the open window.

"They sound rather excited," remarked Tom Merry. "That fat ass Bunchy late with their dinner again," said Wildrake. "If he's been at the tanglefoot he's very likely forgotten all about dinner. They roped him up and dragged him through the horse-pond once."

"I am afraid Bunchy is booked for twouble," said Arthur Augustus. "I know that he has not done any cookin'."

"The pesky gink!" exclaimed Wildrake. There was a roar of voices now from the direction of the punchers' quarters. Evidently they had discovered that there was no "chuck" ready, and were telling Bunchy about it.

Wildrake stepped to the window. "Oh, holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "Bunchy's woke up trouble this time."

"You let up!" came the cook's voice in a yell. "You hear me yap! You let up on a galoot!"

"Lynch him!" roared the punchers. "Ride him on a rail!" "Duck him!" "Boot him!"

"Bai Jove! I wathah thought there was goin' to be a waw," said Arthur Augustus, as he joined Kit Wildrake at the window. "Poor old Bunchy!"

"Serve him right!" growled the Canadian junior. Tom Merry & Co. hurried to the window to stare out at the scene. Bunchy, the cook, came sprawling out of the cookhouse in the grasp of many hands, yelling at the top of his voice.

The angry punchers dragged him bodily out, not gently, and sent him sprawling on the ground. Bunchy lay and roared.

"Now, you fat gink!" shouted Long Jim. "Where's dinner?"

"Ow!" "Where's the chuck?" roared the ranch foreman wrathfully.

"Wow!" "I guess you've been sampling tanglefoot again!" hissed Long Jim.

"I ain't!" gasped Bunchy, sitting up breathlessly. "I ain't touched it since I signed the pledge at Rainbow."

"Why haven't you got the chuck ready, then?" demanded the foreman of the Boot Leg Ranch.

"I've been playing poker—" "Playing poker!" roared Long Jim. "And I guess I've won a pot, too!" said Bunchy defiantly. "Don't you give me any lip, Long Jim. I won't stand for it, I'll tell the world. I don't care a Continental red cent if I ask for my time this afternoon. You get me?"

"Lynch him!" roared Nosey Rogers. "You let up on a galoot!" snorted Bunchy. "You're a gang of low-down cattle-punchers, that's what you are. I've won eight hundred dollars from a gink what calculated he could play draw poker. I ain't cooking for this god-darned outfit any more. I'm aiming to start a joint in Rainbow, and I tell you that low-down punchers won't be allowed at my joint. You get me? Go and chop chips, the lot of you!"

"Rope him!" roared Sam Peters. "Rope him up and give him a ducking!"

"That's the talk!" snorted Long Jim. "I'll give him playing poker with the stove cold, and fellers coming in hungry! Get a rope round the fat gink!"

"Hands off, you punchers!" yelled Bunchy. But the enraged cowpunchers did not heed. Bunchy, with such a sum as eight hundred dollars in his possession, was a new Bunchy. He seemed to have lost what little sense he had, and was prepared to take up a lofty attitude towards the outfit, pouring scorn upon the punchers from his new altitude. But the hungry bunch, regardless of the cook's new importance in his own eyes, collared him without ceremony and ran a lasso round him. Then all hands grasped the lasso, and Bunchy, the cook, was dragged along to the horse-pond. There was a terrific splash as he went into it.

"Groooooogh!" came from Bunchy. "Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "Bai Jove! Poor old Bunchy!"

Nosey Rogers jumped on his horse and hooked the end of the rope to his saddle-bow. He rode through the horse-pond, dragging the hapless cook after him. Bunchy sprawled and splashed through the pond and landed in oozy mud on the other side, gasping like a grampus.

"Ooch! Grooooch! You let up on a galoot!" he spluttered.

"Give him blue blazes!" shouted Long Jim.

"Yooop! Ooooch! Let up!" Back went Nosey Rogers through the horse-pond, and after him went Bunchy the cook, sprawling, splashing, and spluttering.

By the time he landed again the hapless cook hardly knew what was happening to him. He rolled in the mud, and gasped and gurgled, and snorted and spluttered, in a state of dizzy confusion.

"I guess that will do," growled Long Jim. "By gum, the pesky gink ought to be fired off the ranch! Now, then, Bunchy—"

"Groooogh!" "Lay the end of the rope round him and stir him up!" roared the ranch foreman.

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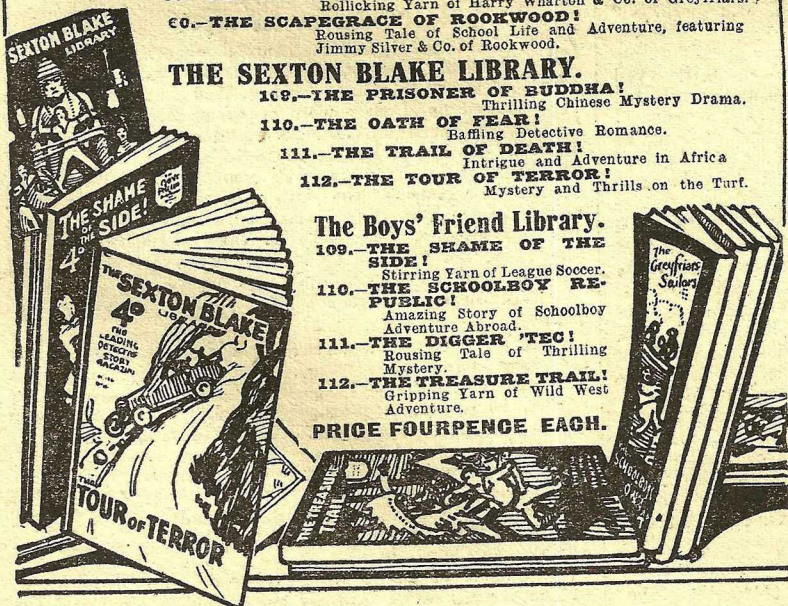
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Billy Pink grasped the loose end of the rope and began to lay it round Bunchy. It stirred the cook in a very short space of time. He leaped to his feet and staggered away for the cookhouse.

The crowd of punchers followed him there with dire threats.

"Now you hand out grub lively!" said Long Jim. "You'll be a dead cook if you keep us waiting long!"

"Gol-darn the lot of you!" spluttered Bunchy. "I ain't got any use for a gang of low-down punchers. I'm chucking up this job. You hear me?"

Bang!

Long Jim's .45 roared, and the bullet clipped a scanty lock of hair from Bunchy's bullet head. The cook jumped clear of the floor.

"I'll hook an ear off you with the next!" roared the foreman of Boot Leg Ranch. "Get down to it!"

And Bunchy, controlling his wrath and indignation, got down to it. Tins of meat and cans of tomatoes and other preserved goods formed the dinner of the punchers, and Bunchy handed them out rapidly, though with an indignant face. But even the fatuous Bunchy realised that the outfit were not to be trifled with—until the edge had been taken off their hunger, at least.

Tom Merry & Co. returned to their lunch and finished it. By the time they came out of the ranch-house the punchers had nearly finished their improvised meal, and good humour was somewhat restored. Bunchy, however, did not share in the good humour. He was wet and muddy, and panting with haste and exertion, and his round red face was redder than ever with wrath. Bunchy was, in fact, in a towering rage; but his wrath did not worry the punchers, who were not used to taking the ranch cook very seriously. Now that they had fed, they were in a better frame of mind, and they chipped Bunchy with rough good-humour instead of throwing cans and plates at him, as they had been doing when the meal started.

Blind to everything but the fascination of the game, Bunchy was plunging far out of his depth, when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy appeared in the sunny doorway. "Bunchay, old chap," he murmured. "What about dinnah?" The cook looked up at last, and pointed towards the door. "Beat it!" he said briefly. "Don't spill any more. Beat it!"

(See Chapter 1.)

"You play poker after you've done your job next time, Bunchy!" Long Jim advised him.

"There ain't going to be no next time!" hooted Bunchy. "I'm done with this pesky outfit!"

"So you've said afore," grinned Nosey Rogers. "But you're still hyer. There ain't another ranch in Canada would take on a boozy waster like you, Bunchy, and there ain't any rancher but Mr. Wildrake what would pay you wages for loafing around in a cookhouse."

"Ain't I the best cook in British Columbia?" demanded Bunchy indignantly.

"Ain't you the gol-darnest gink that ever tied himself up with tanglefoot?" derided Nosey. "Playing poker! Search me! Who've you been playing poker with instead of cooking dinner?"

"Pilgrim from the States, name of Smith, who dropped in on his way to Rainbow," said Bunchy, "and I guess I nigh cleaned him out. I guess I'm the goods at a poker game."

"Can it!" jeered Nosey.

"Can you believe your eyes, you gink?" hooted Bunchy, and he flourished a handful of hundred-dollar bills under Rogers' nose.

"By gum! That's the real stuff!" exclaimed Nosey Rogers in astonishment. "How much did you touch the stranger for, Bunchy?"

"Eight hundred dollars."

"Gee-whiz!"

"I guess that galoot was plumb loco, if he let you beat him at draw poker," said Long Jim.

"I guess he won a few pots, little pots," said Bunchy. "But I pulled it in all the time on the big pots. I

guess he's walked off with fifty dollars of mine, and left eight hundred dollars of his'n. Money talks! And I'll tell you galoots, you can't handle a man of my means as if he was a man of no account. Got that?"

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

"You can snicker!" howled Bunchy. "But I mean it. I'll tell the world! As soon as Old Man Wildrake gets back from Rainbow I guess I'm putting it to him. You bulldozers are going to be fired!"

"I should smile!" grinned Leng Jim.

"You've roped me, and you've ducked me!" snorted Bunchy. "I don't stand for it, and I tell you! You hear me whoop? If Old Man Wildrake don't fire the whole bunch of you on the spot, he loses the best cook in Canada!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Think I want to hang on hyer, cooking for a crowd of low-down cowpunchers?" sneered Bunchy. "Not little me! Not for Joseph, sir! I've got the dust to start a joint in Rainbow where cowpunchers won't be allowed to come in and feed. And that's what I aim to do, I tell you, if Old Man Wildrake don't boot the lot of you off the ranch."

There was the hoot of a motor-car on the trail.

"Hyer comes the old man!" grinned Billy Pink. "Now's your chance to put it to him, Bunchy."

"You can stand around on your hind legs and see me do it!" retorted the cook, and he rolled out of the cookhouse, the punchers following him in a laughing crowd.

CHAPTER 3.

Bunchy Asks for It!

MR. WILDRAKE stepped from the car. He gave Tom Merry & Co. a nod, and Mrs. Wildrake gave them a smile as she passed into the ranch-house. But the rancher did not follow her in. He was already aware that something was "up," from the looks of the juniors and from the roars of laughter that came from the punchers' quarters.

"What's going on, Kit?" he asked.

Wildrake laughed.

"I guess Bunchy has been playing the goat again, father. He seems to have been playing poker with a pilgrim this morning, and there was no grub when the bunch came in. They roped him through the horse-pond."

"The dog-goned fat gink!" said the rancher. "I guess I shall have to fire Bunchy, though he's a good cook when he's sober. I guess he makes me tired."

"He is wathah an ass, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "But he is a vewy good sort in his way. He saved my life, sir, when that Wedskin, Hawk Nose, collahed me up in the foothills."

The rancher nodded.

"Oh, I guess I'll let him run on!" he said. "I've been going to fire him these ten years, but he's still here."

"Old Man Wildrake!" roared a fat voice.

The rancher spun round.

That disrespectful address came from Bunchy the cook. He came rolling round the car and confronted his employer with a belligerent look. The punchers halted at a little distance, still chuckling.

"Eh, what?" rapped out Mr. Wildrake. "Have you been drinking again, Bunchy, you gol-darned son-of-a-gun?"

"I guess that's my own business, but I ain't!" retorted Bunchy. "I've been handled by a gang of low-down cattle-punchers!"

"Serve you right!"

"I don't stand for it!" roared Bunchy. "I'm asking you to sack that mob of punchers, Old Man Wildrake."

"You can ask, you loceod gink!"

Bunchy pointed a fat forefinger at the group of grinning punchers.

"You're going to fire that bunch!" he snorted.

"I guess not."

"Or else," said Bunchy impressively—"or else you'll lose me."

"The sooner the better," said Mr. Wildrake coolly.

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"If you want to ask for your time, my man, go to Long Jim for your wages, and hoof it!"

Bunchy looked at him, evidently rather taken aback. Bunchy was one of those fellows who are blessed with a good conceit of themselves. Bunchy rated himself much more highly than any man on the ranch rated him. Often and often, when the rancher had been on the point of "firing" him, he had relented and allowed Bunchy to stay on. That, however, had the effect of confirming Bunchy in the high opinion he entertained of his own value. He was persuaded that the rancher was extremely unwilling to lose his valuable services, and could not grasp the fact that Mr. Wildrake kept him on partly for old acquaintance sake, and partly because such a very unreliable cook would have found it difficult to get a job on any other ranch in British Columbia.

"You mean that?" gasped Bunchy, at last.

"Just that!—The fact is, you make me tired, Bunchy," said Mr. Wildrake. "It ain't fair on the boys to keep on a cook who forgets to have the chuck ready on time. If they weren't such a good-tempered bunch as they are, they'd have asked me to fire you, Bunchy, and I couldn't have refused."

"Well, search me!" ejaculated Bunchy.

"Now, you've had a lesson," went on the rancher. "Let it do you good, and go back to your job, and do it better if you want to stay on."

"Want to stay on!" hooted Bunchy. "I guess I was willing to stay on for your sake, 'cause you can't do without me, Old Man Wildrake."

"I guess I'll try," said the rancher. "If that's the talk, you can clear! Beat it, lively!"

"Bunchay, deah boy!" urged Arthur Augustus. "Pway don't be such an ass! It's wotten bad form to cheek your employah, you know!"

"Employer be durned!" sneered Bunchy. "Do you think, Mr. Wildrake, that I'm going round the ranches asking for a job?"

"I guess so—and I guess you won't find one easy," said Mr. Wildrake, with a smile.

"Forget it!" jeered Bunchy. "If I leave this ranch I'm going to Rainbow to start a joint there—a high-class joint, mind you, where low-down punchers won't be allowed in. I've got the money. Look here!" Bunchy flourished his wad of bills at the astonished rancher. "Money talks! I've won eight hundred dollars at poker this morning."

"What?" ejaculated Mr. Wildrake.

"Eight hundred of the best!" hooted Bunchy. "Think I want to hang on in a ranch cookhouse? No, sir! Not little me! You talk about firing me, sir! Shucks! It's me firing you! Got that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a roar from the punchers.

Bunchy glared round at them.

"Snicker as much as you like!" he shouted. "I'm through with this bunch! I guess I'm hitting the trail pronto. As for you, Old Man Wildrake, don't you give me any guff! I'm as good a man as any man here, and better'n most! You hear me whoop?"

Bunchy, the cook, was evidently "above himself." His wonderful run of luck at poker had turned his head—never very steady.

Mr. Wildrake eyed him quietly.

"That's enough!" he said. "Git!"

"I'll tell you what I think of you before I hit the trail!" retorted Bunchy derisively. "You cut no ice with me, Old Man Wildrake, and so I tell you. I gives you a last chance. Fire that gang of low punchers, and I'll stay on. But they goes or I go!"

"You go!" said Mr. Wildrake. "And if you don't go quick, you'll get a drive of my boot to help you."

"Oh, can it!" jeered Bunchy. "There ain't a man on this ranch what could give me his boot!"

"Are you going?"

"Not till I choose! I don't give a Continental red cent for you, Old Man Wildrake, nor for all that snickering bunch. I'll tell a man! And see here—Yaroooooh!"

Bunchy broke off with a sudden roar, as the rancher strode at him and grasped him by his collar.

Bunchy, heavy-weight as he was, was swung round easily in the Canadian rancher's powerful grip.

Bunchy gave a yell as he swung—a yell of apprehension. His apprehension was well founded.

Mr. Wildrake's heavy boot was planted on Bunchy's greasy trousers, and the fat cook fairly flew.

"Oh, cwumbs!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunchy, the cook, sprawled on his hands and knees half a dozen yards away. Mr. Wildrake strode into the house.

The fat cook picked himself up and blinked round dazedly. The juniors could not help grinning at the bewildered expression on his fat, shiny face, and the punchers roared.

"Ow!" gasped Bunchy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunchy limped away towards the cookhouse. The rancher had bestowed only one kick, but it had been a hefty one, and the cook evidently did not want a second.

With a frowning, wrathful face Bunchy went into the cookhouse, and a few minutes later he came out with an untidy bundle on his arm.

"I want a hoss!" he snarled.

"You're really going, you gink?" asked Long Jim.

"I guess this hyer ranch won't see me agin!" sneered Bunchy. "I'm fed-up with the lot of you! You sure get my goat. Lend me a hoss to get to Lone Pine. Arter that I'm travelling in the hack, like a gentleman! I sure despise the lot of you!"

"You fat gink, chuck up playing the fool and ask the boss to let you stay on!" said the ranch foreman.

"I should smile! I wouldn't stay on if Old Man Wildrake was to ask me on his bended knees!" retorted Bunchy. "I guess I shall be making dollars hand over fist when I start a joint in Rainbow, and maybe I'll come back hyer some day and buy up the ranch, leek, stock, and barrel. And then I tell you I'll fire the whole outfit!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you lending me a hoss?" roared Bunchy.

"I guess you can take a critter from the corral, and leave it at the hotel in Lone Pine for one of the boys to call for," said Long Jim. "Now, hit the trail and give us a rest."

"Oh, shucks!" said Bunchy contemptuously.

And Bunchy, the cook, mounted a horse, with his bundle, and hit the trail, and so shook the dust of the Boot Leg Ranch from his feet.

CHAPTER 4.

Phantom Wealth!

"JUST a week!" said Tom Merry.

"The jolly old holidays seem to have gone even quicker than usual!" remarked Monty Lowther.

"Blessed if I want to leave Canada," said Blake. "You've got a nice little country here, Wildrake, tucked away behind the Rocky Mountains."

Wildrake smiled.

"Still, there'll be football next term at St. Jim's," said Tom Merry cheerily. "And I want to see old Talbot again, and Levison, and all the fellows. It will be rather a change after cattle-punching, and gold-hunting, and bucking bronchos. We've had a good time."

"Ripping," said Blake.

"I've taken a good lot of photographs," said Manners of the Shell, thoughtfully. "I thought at first that I shouldn't be able to get fresh films out here. But I got them all right from Canpac Creek."

The juniors chuckled. As Manners had been able to get a supply of films for his beloved camera, everything was satisfactory, from Manners' point of view.

In the golden sunset Tom Merry & Co. were chatting in the long cane chairs in the ranch veranda before going to bed. Mr. and Mrs. Wildrake had motored over to the Sunset Ranch for the evening, and were not expected back till after the schoolboys' bed-time. Only a week remained of Tom Merry & Co.'s stay at the Boot Leg Ranch, as they were expected at their various homes for the last week or two of the vacation. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a thoughtful expression

on his noble face, seemed plunged into a reverie, and was not joining in the discussion. Jack Blake woke him up, as it were, with a sudden slap on the shoulder.

"Penny for 'em, Gussy," he said.

"Yawwooh!"

"What on earth's the matter?"

"You uttah ass! You have vevy neahly dislocated my shouldah!" wailed Arthur Augustus.

"You see, I thought there was something the matter with you," explained Blake. "You haven't been speaking for two or three minutes."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Gussy has been thinking," said Monty Lowther. "I could see by the dreamy look in his eye that he was thinking. I've often wondered what he does it with."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Anything up, Gussy?" asked Wildrake.

"Yaas, wathah! I was thinkin' about that ass Bunchay," said Arthur Augustus. "I am vevy sowvy the man is such a howlin' ass, you know. He saved my life when that howwid Wedskin, Hawk Nose, collahed me in the foothills. A fellow can't vevy well forget that, you know. He is vevy howwid when he is intoxicated, and it is wathah howwid of him to gamble at pokah, and I am afwaid he has vevy little wegard for the twuth when he is spinnin' yarns; but othahwise he is a vevy decent sort of chap. I weally wish he had not pwovoked your patah into kickin' him out, Wildwake."

"He fairly begged for it," said Blake. "But I'm sorry, too, that the man was such a duffer. I liked him."

"I guess he'll come back," said Wildrake, with a smile. "I can't understand his bagging eight hundred dollars from a sportsman from the States. But that kind of thing won't happen twice. He won't get as far as Rainbow. He will go on a bender at Lone Pine, and the galoots will soon have his eight hundred dollars off him at poker and euchre—what he doesn't blow on tanglefoot. Then he will come rolling home."

"Bai Jove! Will your patah take him on again, Wildwake?"



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Cadbury's

2nd Turkish Delight 2nd

Try 2d Marshmallows too.

See the name 'Cadbury' on every piece of chocolate.

The Canadian junior laughed.

"Sure! This isn't the first time that Bunchy has gone off on his ear. He turns up again like a bad penny."

"Your patah is a vewy good-natured chap, old scout. The poor chap did not know when he was well off," said Arthur Augustus. "As he saved my life, you know, I could not help feelin' wathah concerned about him. He is weally a good sort in his own way, though he is a frightful ass."

Buzzzzzzzz!

It was the ring of the telephone-bell in the ranch-house.

Wildrake rose.

"I guess I shall have to take the call, as the popper's out," he said.

He went into the house, and to his father's business-room. The telephone was buzzing incessantly. Wildrake picked up the receiver.

"Hello!"

"That Boot Leg?" came a deep voice over the wires.

"Correct."

"Mr. Wildrake wanted."

"I guess popper's over at Sunset. Kit Wildrake speaking."

"I guess you'll do. It's about that man of yours—Bunchy."

"Oh, gum!" said Wildrake. "Is Bunchy in trouble already? I reckon that is Robinson Jacks' voice?"

"Yep. Speaking from the Continental, Lone Pine. We've got your man Bunchy tied up to hand over to the Mounted Police."

"Oh, my hat! What's he been doing? Shooting up the town?" exclaimed Wildrake, in dismay.

"Nope! Passing counterfeit bills."

"What?" yelled Wildrake.

"That's it! He rolled in here, spending money right and left, and I reckon he gave it off that he won the money in a poker game from a pilgrim named Smith, out of the States. My bar-keeper suspicioned them bills, and he soon got it that they was duds."

"Great Scott!"

"We've roped in Bunchy, and he's going to the calaboose at Rainbow. But seeing that he belongs to your outfit, I reckoned I'd ring you up and ask if there was any truth in his story. He's such an ornery liar that there's no telling. But if he's been done by some Yankee, we don't want to hand him over to the Mounted."

Wildrake whistled.

He had wondered—as all the Boot Leg punchers had wondered—how Bunchy had succeeded in winning eight hundred dollars from a poker man.

The mystery was explained now.

Mr. Smith from the States was a dealer in counterfeit currency.

As his paper money was of his own manufacture, it did not cost him much to let Bunchy win eight hundred dollars from him—the bills for that amount being worth precisely the paper they were printed on—just that and nothing more.

The man from over the border had cheerily allowed Bunchy to win his worthless bills, while he, on his side, was capturing Bunchy's good money for a smaller nominal amount, certainly, but worth face value.

"Here, Gussy!" called out Wildrake.

Through the open doorway, the juniors on the veranda could hear Wildrake's voice at the telephone, and they knew that he was getting news of Bunchy.

"Yaas, deah boy!" called back Arthur Augustus.

"Come here, old scout!" called Wildrake. "You other fellows can come, too. It's about Bunchy."

"Is he in twouble?" asked Arthur Augustus, as the juniors joined Wildrake in the rancher's office.

"Yep!"

"Painting the town red?" grinned Blake.

"Worse than that," said Wildrake gravely. "That American galoot who was playing poker with him this morning was a green-goods man—"

"A—a what?"

"A sawdust man."

"What on earth is a sawdust man?" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"A feller who makes a living by passing false bills—"

counterfeit banknotes," explained Wildrake. "They're called sawdust, and green goods, and lots of other names, for that matter. He was winning all Bunchy's loose change, and letting him win spoof banknotes in return."

"Oh, my hat!"

"That accounts for the milk in the giddy cocoanut," chuckled Blake. "I wondered—"

"Poor old Bunchay!"

"Robinson Jacks, the landlord of the Continental at Lone Pine, has rung up," explained Wildrake. "He's got Bunchy a prisoner, to be handed over to the police for passing false money."

"Great pip!"

"You're a witness that he won it from that pilgrim Smith, Gussy," said Wildrake. "Jacks is a good fellow, and he knows that Bunchy is a born fool, so that will put it right."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I actually saw Bunchay winnin' the money, you know."

"Thank goodness for that!" said Tom Merry. "This might be an awfully serious matter for poor old Bunchy."

"Five years in the pen, if he couldn't prove that he came by the forgeries innocently," said Wildrake.

"And I guess Gussy is his only witness."

"Bai Jove!"

Kit Wildrake turned to the telephone again.

"Mr. Jacks—hello!"

"Hello!"

"A friend of mine here can prove that Bunchy won the money from a pilgrim who passed this way to-day. He saw the game."

"Then Bunchy was giving us the straight goods?"

"Sure! You know young D'Arcy, who is staying here?"

There was a chuckle on the phone.

"The dude?"

"Yes. He saw the game, and will speak to you."

"Put him on."

"Here, Gussy!" Wildrake handed the receiver to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Give him the office."

"Good-evenin', Mr. Jacks!" said Arthur Augustus into the transmitter. "I twust you are well?"

There was another chuckle. In the camp of Lone Pine, Arthur Augustus, with his elegant manners and customs and his remarkable accent, was regarded from a rather humorous point of view.

"That the dude?" asked the proprietor of the Continental Hotel.

"Weally, Mr. Jacks—"

"Get down to it," said Robinson Jacks. "This man Bunchy swears he got the green goods from a sportsman who played poker with him this morning in the cookhouse at Boot Leg."

"That is quite cowwect. I saw the game, and I was wathah shocked—"

"Eh?"

"I was wathah shocked at Bunchay. I wegarded him as a vewy weckless ass. I can witness that he won the money from that hard-faced wottah who called himself Smith. I noticed that the man was in a great hurry to get away aftah the game."

"I guess he would be," chuckled Mr. Jacks. "Bunchy says that the man got about fifty dollars off him, and lost eight hundred in sawdust. Bunchy didn't notice till afterwards that the galoot was keepin' his loose money when he won it, and losing his own back. Bunchy's fool enough, sure. If you was a witness to the game, Mr. Dude—"

"Yaas, wathah! And I am pwepared to give evidence for Bunchay in a court of law, if necessary."

"I guess that won't be necessary. I only wanted to get it straight, Bunchy being such a gol-darned liar! If you answer for it it's all right, and we'll turn him loose."

"Yaas, wathah!"

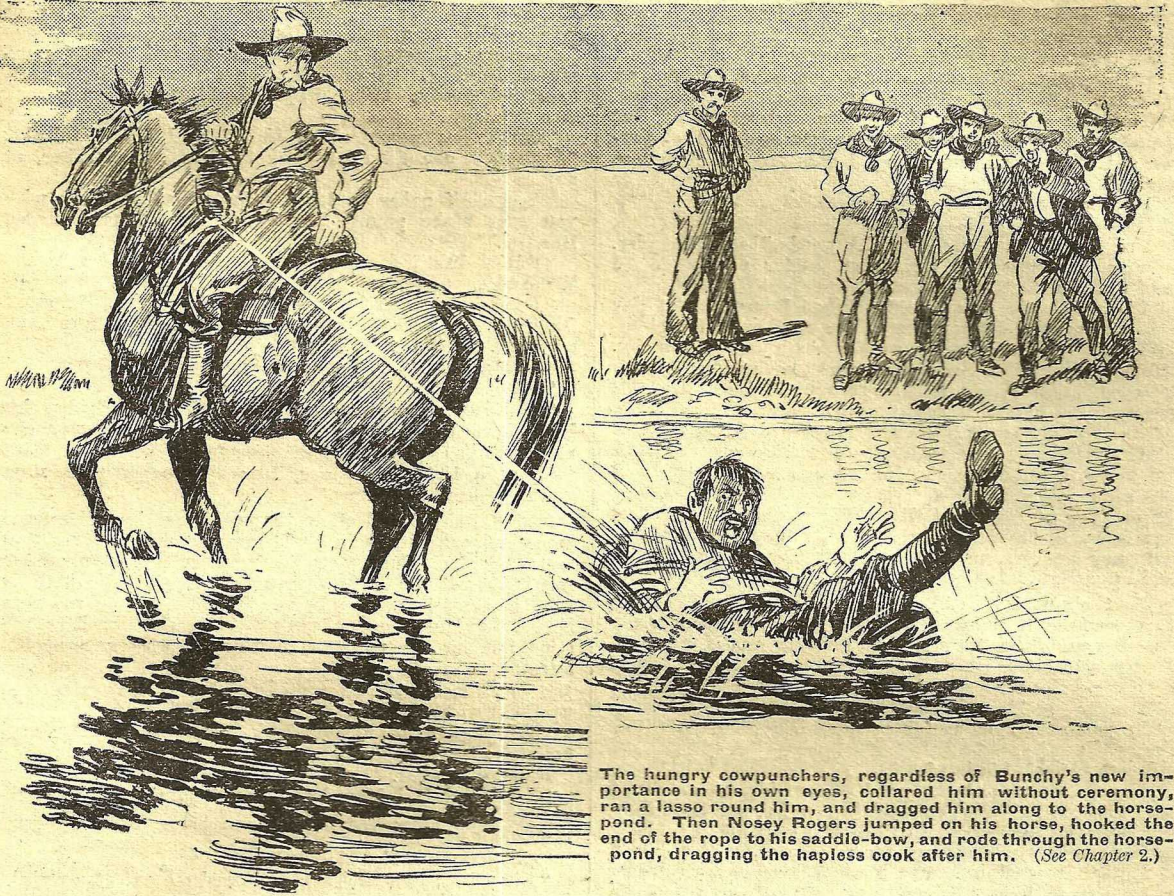
"It's a cinch, then."

"Wight-ho!"

D'Arcy handed the receiver back to Wildrake.

"There's no harm in Bunchy, Mr. Jacks," said the Canadian junior. "I guess you know he's a born fool."

"I gress I do, some!" said Mr. Jacks. "That's why I took the trouble to ring up Boot Leg, instead of putting him in the stone jug. We'll turn him loose."



The hungry cowpunchers, regardless of Bunchy's new importance in his own eyes, collared him without ceremony, ran a lasso round him, and dragged him along to the horse-pond. Then Nosey Rogers jumped on his horse, hooked the end of the rope to his saddle-bow, and rode through the horse-pond, dragging the hapless cook after him. (See Chapter 2.)

He's sitting in my cellar now with a rope round him, looking dog-goned sorry for himself. He doesn't know I've rung up Boot Leg, and he's expecting five years in the pen. I guess I'll drop around now and kick him out."

And Robinson Jacks rang off.

"Poor old Bunchy!" said Arthur Augustus, as the juniors returned smiling to the veranda. "The awful ass has got himself sacked, and his eight hundred dollahs is only waste papah, aftah all. What will happen to him now, Wildwake?"

"I guess he will be kicked out and turned loose, and he will sure come moseying back here," said Wildrake. "As he don't know that Mr. Jacks has told us about it, I guess he will spin some yarn about the dollahs—make out that he lost them in a big poker game, or something."

"Bai Jove!"

"And your father will let him back into the cook-house?" asked Blake.

"Sure!"

Bunchy had shaken the dust of the Boot Leg Ranch from his feet in a lofty and independent mood. But when Tom Merry & Co. went to bed that night they fully expected to see the fat cook again in the morning. And they were right.

CHAPTER 5.

Telling the Tale!

"BUNCHY!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here comes the gink!"

Bright and early in the morning, Bunchy the cook blew in.

Tom Merry & Co. had gone out after breakfast, when they sighted him. Long Jim, coming out of the bunk-house, spotted him far out on the prairie trail, and grinned. Wildrake had reported the telephone talk to his father, and the story was already round the bunk-

house of the simple explanation of Bunchy's wonderful run of luck at poker. The cowpunchers roared over it. Every man in the outfit expected to see Bunchy again, and everyone wondered what story he would tell to account for his return. That was a matter of surmise. The only thing that was certain was that Bunchy was not likely to tell the facts.

The cook was looking dismal and despondent as he rode up to the ranch on the horse he had borrowed the day before. He hitched his horse at the gate and rolled in, eyeing the grinning cowpunchers who had gathered to greet him. As a matter of fact, all the bunch were glad to see Bunchy again, for, with all his faults, he was an excellent cook, though somewhat unreliable in the matter of punctuality; and, moreover, Bunchy was liked on his own account, though he sometimes exasperated the outfit into drastic measures.

"Hallo, you back!" greeted Long Jim.

"Yep," grunted Bunchy.

"Forgot something?" asked the Boot Leg foreman.

"Nope."

"Then what do you want?"

Bunchy eyed him dolorously.

"I've hit up agin hard luck," he said. "I've been held up."

"What!" roared the punchers.

"A galoot in a mask," said Bunchy. "He held me up on the trail with a six-gun, not a mile from Lone Pine, and went through my rags. He had the drop on me, and what could a feller do? He cleaned me out to the last cent."

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated Long Jim.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove, that fellow weally does take the cake!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Evidently, Bunchy did not know that the facts were known at the Boot Leg Ranch. He had no intention of confessing that he had been taken in by a "sawdust" man in that great poker game. That he had led a

stranger win his good money, while letting him win worthless counterfeit bills just to keep the game going, was a confession the fatuous Bunchy was not at all eager to make. Hence his invention of a hold-up on the trail.

"You can snicker," said Bunchy sorrowfully. "But it ain't no joke to me. Eight hundred dollars that firebug got off me—all the money I won from that galoot Smith!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Bunchay——"

"I'm giving you the straight goods," said Bunchy. "I was held up with a six-gun under my nose. I hadn't a chance."

"What was the man like?" grinned Long Jim. "You can sure give a description of the road-agent?"

"Sure! Man about my own size," said Bunchy.

"He was dressed up in a flour sack, with holes cut for the eyes. Nobody could have recognised him. But I'd swear to his hoss if I see it agin."

"Oh, you'd swear to his hoss?" gasped Long Jim.

"Yep. Brown hoss with white stripes on the neck and a white patch on the forelegs," said Bunchy.

"Great gophers!"

The juniors gazed at Bunchy speechlessly. These details would have convinced them, if not the punchers, had they not known the fact that there had been no hold-up at all.

"So there it is!" said Bunchy. "Scandalous, I calls it, a road-agent holding up an honest man and grabbing his wad like that! What are the Mounted doing, letting a firebug like that go around loose? Cleaned me out as clean as a whistle. Not a red cent left."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So you never got as far as Lone Pine?" roared Long Jim.

Bunchy shook his head.

"Nope. What was the good of keeping on arter my dust was took? I jest camped in a motte for the night, and moseyed back here to have my month out. Mind, I ain't come back asking for a job. But there's my month—that ain't up. Old Man Wildrake can't refuse to let a man have his month out."

"You gol-darned, dog-goned son of a gun!" said Long Jim. "You want to make us believe that you was held up on the trail by a man in a flour sack on a hoss with white stripes! You all-fired gink! What'll you say when I tell you that Mr. Jacks telephoned from Lone Pine last night?"

"Wha-a-at!"

"Why do you reckon you was let go?" demanded the Boot Leg foreman. "You was caught passing false money. It would have been you for the calaboose if Robinson Jacks hadn't rung up the ranch, and young Kit put him wise."

Bunchy's plump jaw dropped.

The expression on his fat face made the punchers roar.

"You—you—you know?" gasped Bunchy.

"Yep, you fat gink. That galoot from the States was a sawdust man, and he was letting you win his green goods while he got hold of your thirty or forty dollars good money. And you started spreading yourself at Lone Pine, and was roped in for a green-goods man yourself. And now you tell us a yarn of a hold-up on the trail."

"Oh!" stuttered Bunchy.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Bunchay, you should dwaw the line some-whah, you know," murmured Arthur Augustus.

"I—I—I guess——" gasped Bunchy, utterly taken aback. "I—I—I——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunchy stared round at the yelling punchers. He was quite at a loss. He rolled on at last to the ranch-house, leaving the punchers roaring.

Mr. Wildrake had come out of the house. He was not at all surprised to see Bunchy. He would have been surprised not to see him that morning. But he gave the cook a severe glance.

"Hallo, you here?" he asked. "What do you want, Bunchy?"

"Good-morning, boss!" said the cook feebly.

"Oh, it's boss this morning, is it?" asked the rancher.

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"It was Old Man Wildrake yesterday. I guess you've got civil all of a sudden, Bunchy."

"I allow I never meant to be uncivil, boss," murmured Bunchy. "I wouldn't leave you and the outfit, boss, not really. Cause why? You'll never get a cook like me agin."

"Don't you worry about that," said Mr. Wildrake. "I guess I can fix up a cook that will keep sober, at any rate."

"You ain't going to fire a galoot what has been with you ever since young Kit was a hand high?" urged Bunchy.

"But I didn't fire you—you fired yourself," said Mr. Wildrake.

"I guess I take it back, boss," said Bunchy. "I guess I could start a joint in Rainbow and make dollars hand over fist. But I ain't leaving you."

"You've left."

"I've come back," said Bunchy.

"You ornery galoot, you!" said Mr. Wildrake, his bronzed face breaking into a smile. "I guess you can mosey back into your cookhouse; but if you don't learn to have a little hoss-sense, Bunchy, one of these days you'll be fired for keeps."

And Bunchy rolled off to the cookhouse in a chastened mood. Breakfast was a little late at the cookhouse that morning; but Bunchy turned out such an appetising meal that all the outfit agreed that it was a good thing that Bunchy had come back. Bunchy was on his very best behaviour that morning. When the punchers had gone out on the range, and Bunchy was washing innumerable crocks and pots and pans in the tub outside the cookhouse door, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sauntered up for a word with him.

"Vewy glad to see you back, deah boy," said Gussy amiably.

Bunchy nodded.

"I knowed Old Man Wildrake couldn't get on without me," he said. "That's why I come back, I'm that kind-hearted."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Likewise, that road-agent cleared me out of my eight hundred dollars," said Bunchy, with a sidelong glance at the swell of St. Jim's.

Arthur Augustus stared.

"But there wasn't any woad-agent, Bunchay!" he ejaculated.

"Man in a flour-sack, on a brown hoss with white stripes," said Bunchy. "He held me up with a six-gun and raked in the dollars."

"But Mr. Jacks told us——"

"Don't you believe that man Jacks," said Bunchy. "I hate to say it of any feller, but he ain't truthful."

"Oh cwumbs!"

"He was jest pulling your leg," said Bunchy, with a sorrowful shake of the head. "Jest fooling you with that story. I never could understand myself why a man can't stick to the truth. But that man Jacks can't! Now the facts of the case is this—I was held up on the trail——"

"Weally, Bunchay——"

"By a man in a flour-sack, with a six-gun——"

"Weally——"

"On a brown horse with white stripes——"

"But weally——"

"With white patches on the forelegs," said Bunchy. "I'd swear to the hoss anywhere. And——"

But Arthur Augustus strolled away, and left Bunchy to his clinking pots and pans in the washtub. He felt that Bunchy was a little too much for him.

CHAPTER 6.

Bunchy Means Business!

"SIR!"

"Yaas, Bunchay?"

"How many K's in 'excellent'?" asked Bunchy.

"Bai Jove!"

It was two or three days later, and Arthur Augustus, who took a kindly interest in the ranch cook, had strolled round for a chat with Bunchy. He knew that the hapless cook was having rather a thin time.

The cook was chipped unmercifully on the subject of

his wonderful poker game, in which a "sawdust" man had planted counterfeit bills on him; on the subject of his "firing" himself and coming back again for his job; and, above all, on the topic of the story he had told of a road-agent to account for the loss of his eight hundred dollars. Bunchy, in sheer self-defence, stuck to that story, and almost came to believe himself that he had been held up on the trail and robbed by a rustler disguised in a flour-sack.

The punchers made him tell the story over and over again, punctuating it with roars of laughter. Bunchy, who took himself very seriously, did not enjoy furnishing comic relief, as it were. He had a permanent "grouch" these days, and Gussy dropped in one morning with the benevolent intention of cheering him up.

He found Bunchy engaged with a sheet of dirty wrapping paper and a stump of pencil. Bunchy was chewing the pencil, apparently in a difficulty about spelling. His fat face brightened as Gussy's eyeglasses gleamed in at the doorway.

"One or two?" asked Bunchy.

"I am afraid there are no K's at all in 'excellent,' deah boy," answered Arthur Augustus gently. "There is an X."

"Good!" said Bunchy.

He scribbled on the paper again.

"If you are witin' a lettah, Bunchay, I will look in anohtah time," said Arthur Augustus.

"Not at all," said Bunchy. "I'm drawing up a notice. I guess I'd like you to squint at it and see if the spelling's proper."

"Certainly, deah boy."

Arthur Augustus waited politely, and Bunchy, having finished his composition, handed it to him for perusal.

"You see," explained Bunchy, "when a man wants something in this hyer section, he sticks up a notice at the Continental Hotel at Lone Pine. There ain't any noospapers in this section. You lose a hoss, or you want to buy a dog, or you want a job on a ranch, and you sticks up a paper at the Continental, on the wall over the stove. Savvy?"

"Yaas, wathah! But—"

"I'm arter a job," said Bunchy.

"But you've got a job heah, deah boy."

Bunchy sneered.

"Fat job hyer," he said. "All them punchers guying a galoot. I tell the world, I'm fed up with that bunch—fed right up to the back teeth. They allow that I couldn't get a job on any other ranch atween the Rockies and the Pacific. I'm goin' to put them wise. Why, there ain't a rancher in this section that wouldn't jump with both feet to get a cook like me!"

"Oh!"

"You can run a ranch with almost any kind of an outfit," said Bunchy. "Look at the Boot Leg Ranch, frinstance. Any kind of a boss can run a ranch. Any old foreman will fill the bill. Any old gang of punchers can punch the cows. But a cook's a different matter. You hear me shout."

Arthur Augustus smiled.

Evidently Bunchy was of opinion that all the rest of the Boot Leg outfit were very small beer, in comparison with himself. In his view, the cookhouse was the centre of the Boot Leg world, the hub upon which the whole thing revolved.

"Some galoot has said that an army marches on its stummick," said Bunchy. "And in the same way, a ranch is run on the cookhouse. See?"

"I—I see."

Arthur Augustus did not quite see, but politeness came before everything.

"Well, we're going to see how they'll get on without me," said Bunchy bitterly. "We shall see how they like a breed cooking for them! Why, my stews alone would get me a job anywhere in the section."

"Bai Jove!"

"And look at my flapjacks!" said Bunchy argumentatively.

"I am suah they are wippin', Bunchay. But—"

"So that notice is goin' up at the Continental, and then I'm quitting," declared Bunchy. "You look it over and see if it's writ in good spelling."

Arthur Augustus read over the document. It ran:

BOYS, THERE'S A TOPPING FREE RAILWAY GAME INCLUDED IN THIS WEEK'S "MAGNET"!



All Gemites are strongly urged to get a copy of our popular companion paper to-day!

"Excellent ranch cook looking for a job, at seventy-five a month and orl found.—William Bunch, Boot Leg Ranch, Rainbow."

"If it isn't spelled right, you ride herd over it for me, sir, and put in the letters," said Bunchy.

"Yaas, wathah! But I twust you are not weally leaving, Bunchay."

"Course, I shall be sorry to leave Old Man Wildrake stranded," said Bunchy magnanimously. "Goodness knows what sort of a cook he will get in my place. But I don't stand for being guyed all the time by the bunch. There ain't a galoot on Boot Leg that believes that that road-agent robbed me, excepting yourself, sir."

Arthur Augustus coughed.

As a matter of fact, he did not believe it, either. But really he almost wondered whether the cook believed it himself.

"I allow that things will go to pot arter I'm gone," said Bunchy. "If so be as they ask me soft and civil, p'raps I'll come back. I don't say I won't! But it's up to me to show them galoots that they can't guy a man like they're doing. Now, that there notice has got to go to the Continental at Lone Pine, sir, and I ain't keen on asking Old Man Wildrake for a day's leave jest now. P'raps you might be riding into Lone Pine for letters and sich."

"One of us will be widin' in for lettahs this aftahnoon, Bunchay. But I weally wish you would think better of it, old chap."

"I guess not!" said Bunchy determinedly. "You take that paper, sir, and you or your friends stick it up for me at Lone Pine. Show it to young Kit Wildrake. Let him know what to expect."

Long Jim looked in.

"Chewing the rag as usual, Bunchy," he said. "If you're late with dinner, you look out for the horse-pond!"

Bunchy snorted.

"I guess I'll soon be far enough away from the horsepond," he said darkly.

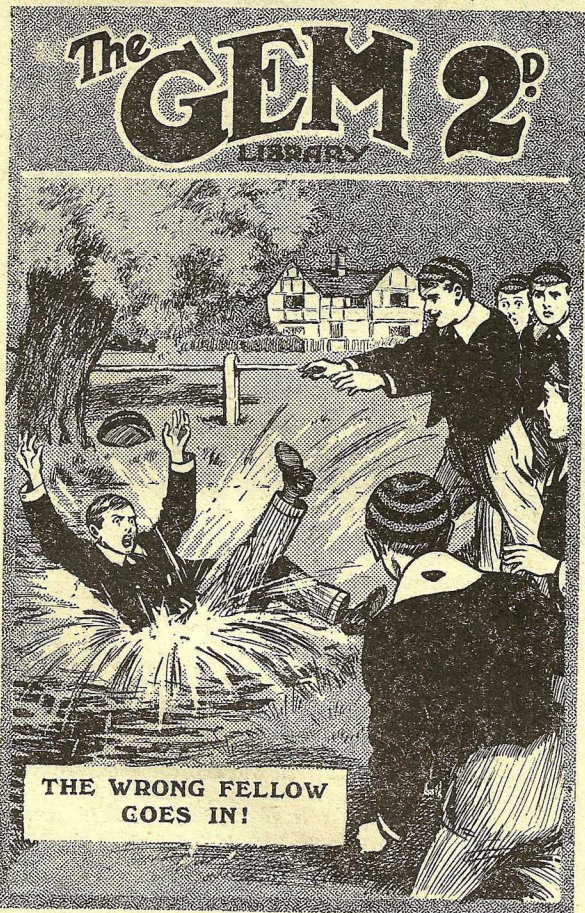
"Look out for road-agents!" roared the foreman of Boot Leg. "The trail is fair haunted by galoots got up in flour sacks and a six gun, watching out for pilgrims about your size."

Bunchy snorted again and turned to his stove. Arthur Augustus smiled as he walked away, taking the cook's "notice" with him. He was concerned for Bunchy, but he could not help smiling. The cook regarded his coming departure as a calamity from which the Boot Leg ranch was never likely to recover. Bunchy's view of his importance was an exaggerated one. Without the fat cook the Boot Leg Ranch would have gone undisturbed on the even tenor of its way.

Arthur Augustus had no doubt about that. What he doubted was whether Mr. Wildrake's patience would hold out under any further strain imposed upon it by the fatuous Bunchy.

"Any letters for Lone Pine?" Kit Wildrake was

MEET THE NEW BOY WITH A "JUICY REPUTATION" IN NEXT WEEK'S GEM, CHUMS!



THE WRONG FELLOW GOES IN!

Next Wednesday's spiffing yarn of Tom Merry & Co., entitled:

"UNDER GUSSY'S WING!"

By Martin Clifford.

:- Look out for this cover! :-

asking, as D'Arcy came back to the house. "I'm riding in this afternoon, while you-uns are gone over to the Sunset Ranch with popper."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus at once. "Pewwaps you would take this papah, Wildwake—"

"Sure!"

"I have pwomised Bunchay to put up a notice for him in the hotel at Lone Pine. I twust you have no objection, Wildwake?"

"I guess not. But what—"

"Bunchay told me to show it to you, deah boy."

Wildrake stared at the paper and burst into a laugh.

"That dog-goned galoot again!" he exclaimed. "He will get fired in earnest one of these times. I guess I'll take that paper, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus handed the paper over to Wildrake. The Canadian junior laughed over it, and then he frowned. He was growing a little fed-up with the vagaries of William Bunch. A jyouus grin broke over Monty Lowther's face as he looked at the paper. At the Boot Leg Ranch, the humorist of St. Jim's had not found much scope for his exuberant sense of humour. Now it seemed to Monty that an opportunity had come along.

"Hand over that giddy document, Wildrake," he said. "I think I can improve on it a little."

Wildrake gave him the paper, and Lowther proceeded to make some alterations. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had gone into the house, but the other fellows gathered round. They chuckled as they read the amended notice.

Altered by Monty's humorous hand, it read:

"Found wandering—Black horse, sixteen hands, with three hundred dollars in saddle-bag. Owner can have same by applying to William Bunch, Boot Leg Ranch, Rainbow."

"Oh, great gophers!" ejaculated Wildrake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mind, I'm doing this on Bunchy's account, because I like the chap," said Monty. "That notice of his won't get any answers, you know that. But a notice like this will get a lot of answers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lots of merchants in Lone Pine will be glad to hear of a chance of getting a horse of sixteen hands for nothing, especially with three hundred dollars in the saddle-bags."

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

"Oh, gum!" gasped Wildrake. "I'll tell a man, if that notice is put up over the stove at the Continental, every loafer and hobo in the section will be coming along to ask Bunchy for that horse."

"That's where the giddy jest comes in. Won't it be entertaining to stand round and watch his face?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Poor old Bunchy!" exclaimed Tom Merry, laughing. "He really ought to have a lesson about playing the giddy ox."

"That goes!" said Wildrake. "I guess I'll type it out on popper's machine, and it goes up at the Continental. I guess Bunchy will get fed up with callers by the time he's through."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunchy looked out of the cookhouse when Kit Wildrake mounted his horse that afternoon to ride into Lone Pine for letters.

"Say, young Kit!" he shouted.

Wildrake looked round.

"Mister Dude allows as he's given you my dockyment to put up at the Continental."

"Sure!"

"You ain't forgetting it?"

"Nope."

"Shove it up over the stove where all the Lone Pine crowd can see it," said Bunchy.

"Leave it to me."

And Wildrake rode away, leaving Bunchy staring after him. Bunchy had, no doubt, expected expostulation or remonstrance from the rancher's son, but apparently the prospect of losing Bunchy left Wildrake unmoved.

"But they'll see," said Bunchy, addressing his stove confidentially. "They'll sure see. When galoots come riding in hyer from all the ranches, jumping at a

chance to rope in the best cook in British Columbia, then I opine that they'll see. Yes, sir, just a few!"

And Bunchy thought with great anticipation of the morrow, which was to demonstrate his great value to all the Boot Leg outfit. And Tom Merry & Co. were also looking forward to the morrow with considerable anticipation.

CHAPTER 7.

An Early Morning Call!

"BUNCHY!"

No answer.

It was early in the morning, and dawn was glimmering over the Boot Leg Ranch. At that early hour Bunchy, the cook, was still safe in the arms of Morpheus. Bunchy was not an early riser when he could help it.

So when he heard a banging at the door of the cook-house, and a shouting voice, Bunchy did not heed. He turned his head on the pillow, regardless.

"Bunchy! Turn out, you fat coyote! Bunchy!"

ever had a prospective employer ride in at the first glimpse of dawn to secure him before others could apply. Yet that was what was happening now—or, at all events, so it seemed to Bunchy, who knew nothing of the humorous alterations Monty Lowther had made in the "document" stuck up at Lone Pine.

There was a sharp knocking on Bunchy's door, after Long Jim had gone. The man from Lone Pine was there.

"Hold on a shake!" called out Bunchy. "I guess I want to get into my rags!"

"Pronto!" called back the man from Lone Pine. "I reckon I wanted to get here first."

"Won't keep you waiting a tick."

Bunchy chuckled gleefully as he hurried on his clothes. He would have liked the whole Boot Leg outfit to witness this. It would have been an eye-opener for them.

He had the door open in a few minutes.

"Step in, sir!" said Bunchy.

He blinked in surprise as the stranger stepped in. Bunchy had naturally expected to see a rancher, or, at

JUST as poverty is said to find strange bed-fellows, so does time bring strange changes in the football field. In the first Final tie played at Wembley—that Final tie which made fame for a white horse ridden by a policeman—Joe Smith was the captain of Bolton Wanderers, and George Kay was a captain of West Ham United. This season both these men are playing for Stockport County.

The Football Association recently declared that greyhound racing must not be allowed on big football grounds. Our tame humorist says that this is a dog in the manger policy.

It is not generally known that Walter Hammond, who has made cricket history this season, used to be a professional footballer. His club was Bristol Rovers, but he gave up football to devote himself entirely to cricket.

The "plums" of the football world go to the managers of the big clubs. Peter McWilliam, the manager of Middlesbrough, is said to receive a salary of fifteen hundred a year, and there are several other managers in receipt of a four-figure income. It isn't all honey, managing a football club, though, and the "order of the boot" has been issued to many managers in recent years.

There's no accounting for tastes. Lewis, the Arsenal goalkeeper, got the ball which was used in the last Cup Final. Yet it was Lewis who made the blunder which cost the Arsenal a goal and the match. One would have thought he would not wish to be reminded of the game by keeping the ball under a glass case.

Bang, bang, bang!

"Ow! Let a galoot alone!" howled Bunchy, from his bunk. "Think I'm turning out afore daylight? No, sir!"

"You pesky gink!" shouted Long Jim. "There's a galoot from Lone Pine to see you, and he won't take no for an answer."

Bunchy sat up and took notice, as it were, at that.

"A galoot from Lone Pine?" he called back.

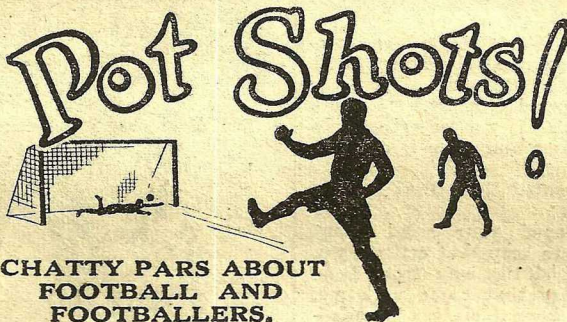
"Sure!" growled Long Jim. "He's seen some dockyment you've had stuck up at the Continental, he allows."

"I guess I'm moving."

Long Jim grunted and strode away. Bunchy turned out of his bunk with a fat chuckle.

He had expected demands for his valuable services to follow the sticking up of his notice at the Continental Hotel at Lone Pine. Bunchy knew his value, if no one else did. But certainly he had not expected eager callers to ride in so very early in the morning.

It was proof—if proof was needed—how very valuable Bunchy was. No other ranch cook, asking for a job,



CHATTY PARS ABOUT FOOTBALL AND FOOTBALLERS.

go to Wigan," he said. The booking clerk looked at him from the port-hole. "I don't believe it. You don't want to go to Wigan—you've got to!"

During the last few months four players who were previously with Southend United have been signed by Clapton Orient. So it is now suggested that the new name for the Orient should be Southend by the Lea.

When Cookson was with Chesterfield he once broke the record for goals scored by one player in a season. He has now gone to West Bromwich, where they say they can't have too many Cooksons.

Major Buckley, the manager of Wolverhampton Wanderers club, suggests that in all big Association games the players should be numbered like they are in the Rugby game. This is an idea which ought to have been adopted years ago.

least, a man from a ranch, seeking the services of the best cook in British Columbia. But the man who stepped in was not a rancher, or a ranch man at all. Certainly he did not look as if he could afford to pay Bunchy "seventy-five a month." He looked as if he could not even afford a wash.

Bunchy stared at the loafer of Lone Pine blankly.

"You Bunch?" asked the newcomer.

"Yep. But—"

"You put up that paper at Lone Pine?"

"Yep."

"Then you're the galoot I want to see."

"Where are you from?" asked Bunchy. "Some rancher asked you to call and see me for him?"

The roughly-dressed, unwashed hobo stared at him.

"I guess not," he answered. "I've horned in on my own account."

"You!" said Bunchy blankly.

"Why not?" demanded the man roughly.

"Eh! And who are you?" asked Bunchy, quite bewildered. If this man wanted a cook—the best cook in

British Columbia—certainly Bunchy did not want him for an employer.

"Me! I'm Rube Parker, and the hoss is mine."

"The—the what?"

"The black hoss," said Mr. Parker. "I guess I'm ready to identify it. Where's the critter?"

Bunchy blinked at him, feeling as if his head were turning round. Mr. Parker's words were riddles to him.

"Look here, my man, you've come to the wrong show," said Bunchy. "You ain't the sort of man to want a ranch cook—"

"Ranch cook nothin'!" said the man from Lone Pine. "I'm arter the hoss, and I says again, where is the critter?"

"What critter?" yelled Bunchy, exasperated and bewildered.

"That critter you found wandering on the perarer. Three hundred dollars in the saddle-bags," said Rube Parker.

"Oh, go home and sleep it off!" said Bunchy scornfully.

"I'm hyer arter that critter. You're William Bunch, ain't you?"

"Sure."

"Then you've got the hoss. There ain't been anybody afore me, sure, asking about that hoss?" inquired Rube Parker anxiously.

"There ain't any hoss!" snorted Bunchy. "I don't know what you're talking about. If you've got outside too much tanglefoot, you go home and sleep it off, and let a man get back to his bunk."

"There ain't any hoss?" repeated Rube Parker.

"Nope, there ain't."

"Meaning that you've changed your mind about handing it over, and you want to keep that critter, you dog-goned hoss thief!" exclaimed the man from Lone Pine heatedly. "You can't play that game with me, Mr. William Bunch. Black horse, sixteen hands—that's the critter. Three hundred dollars on him—that's it. You hand it over!"

"I guess you're plumb loco," said the bewildered Bunchy. "You hit the trail pronto, afore something happens to you!"

"I ain't going without that critter!" roared Mr. Parker.

"There ain't any critter!" shrieked Bunchy.

"Oh, sho!" snorted Mr. Parker. "Don't give me that guff! Ain't I rode more'n fifteen miles to lead him home? Where's that critter?"

Bunchy almost wondered whether he was still dreaming. He had been expecting callers, certainly, that day, but not a caller who, for some inexplicable reason, supposed that he had in his charge a lost horse and three hundred dollars.

"You're loco!" gasped Bunchy. "That's what's the matter with you—you're plumb loco! You hit the trail!"

"You hand over that critter!"

"Git!" snapped Bunchy, and he slammed the door angrily.

Mr. Parker was in the way of the door, and it slammed on him with great force. Mr. Parker was strewn outside the cookhouse, roaring. Bunchy shot the bolt, and went back to his bunk, very much ruffled.

"Gee-whiz!" gasped Mr. Parker, as he picked himself up. "Great snakes! Hyer, you lump of fat, you come out and give me my hoss, afore I kick the endboards out of your shebang!"

And as there came no reply from Bunchy, Rube Parker commenced on the door with his heavy boots, with terrific kicks that made the cookhouse fairly tremble.

Crash, crash, crash!

Long Jim came over from the corral, with a frowning brow. The Boot Leg foreman had not liked Mr. Parker's looks in the first place. He had seen a good many hoboes in his time, and Rube Parker was about the most frowsy and unwashed of them all.

"Let up on that!" snapped Long Jim.

"I guess I want my critter!" roared Rube Parker.

"Black hoss, sixteen hands, with three hundred dollars on him. You get me?"

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"Waal, do you think your hoss is hyer, if you ain't lying, which I allow you are!" snapped Long Jim.

"That fat gink's got him!" shouted Rube Parker.

"Oh, shucks! Bunchy, you fat rabbit, have you got any critter belonging to this galoot?"

"No, I ain't!" yelled Bunchy.

"That's good enough," said Long Jim. "This is where you hit the trail, you hobo! Pronto!"

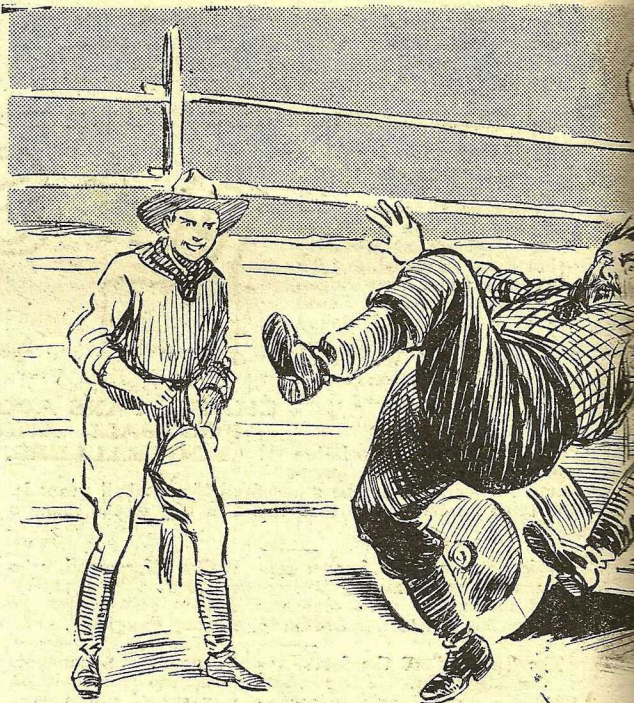
"Not without the critter."

"I've told you to hit the trail," said Long Jim.

"I guess I want—"

"Never mind what you want—this is what you're going to get," said the Boot Leg foreman, and he strode at the hobo, and grasped him by the collar, and then by the slack of his trousers.

With a wild yell, Rube Parker went into the air,



"I don't give a Continental red cent for you, Old Man Wildrake. I'll tell a man! And—yaroooh!" Bunchy broke off with a sudden roar, as the rancher strode at him, swung him round, and planted a heavy boot on his greasy trousers. The cock fairly flew, to sprawl on his hands and knees half a dozen yards away. (See Chapter 5.)

and was swung along easily by the sinewy foreman of Boot Leg. In a yelling, struggling heap, his arms and legs wildly flying, Rube Parker was rushed down to the gate, and pitched over it into the trail. He landed with a heavy bump.

"Now git!" said Long Jim tersely.

Rube Parker scrambled up.

"I'm going to have that critter—"

A six-gun appeared in the foreman's hand, looking over the gate at the hobo, with Long Jim's finger on the trigger.

"Hit the trail afore your funeral happens," said the Boot Leg foreman laconically.

And Rube Parker, with a string of oaths, scrambled on his horse and hit the trail, riding away towards Lone Pine—without the prize he had sought. He had hoped to lead away a black horse of sixteen hands with three hundred dollars in the saddle-bag, as described in the document stuck up over the stove in the Continental Hotel at Lone Pine. Instead of which, all that Mr. Parker had received was a rough handling, which undoubtedly he deserved for his dishonesty. He turned several times in the saddle to shake his fist at the Boot Leg Ranch, and then vanished over the prairie, a sadder if not a wiser hobo.

Long Jim strode back to the cookhouse, and thumped on the door.

"You Bunchy!" he shouted.

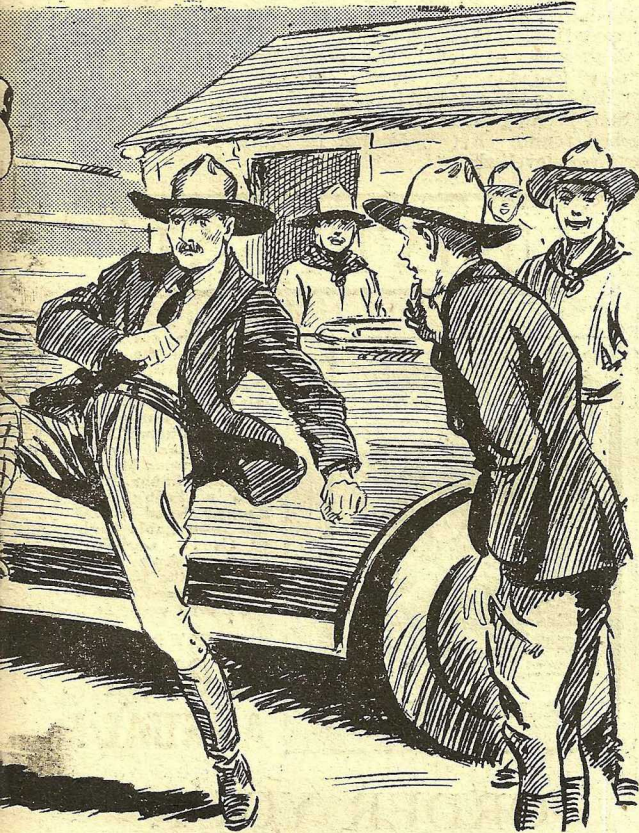
"Is he gone?"

"Yep! But what's this game? What fool game are you playing now, you dog-goned loco gink?" exclaimed Long Jim. "What did that hobo hit the Boot Leg Ranch for?"

"I'll tell a man!" answered Bunchy. "I don't know more'n you do. I guess he was loco."

"Waal, don't let there be any more of it, you fat scallywag!" growled Long Jim, and he strode away, frowning.

He was quite mystified by the strange occurrence, and so was Bunchy. But it was only the first mysterious occurrence of that morning. There were more to come.



CHAPTER 8.

Looking for a Horse!

"**W** EMARKABLE!"

That was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's opinion.

"What's biting you now, old scout?" asked Blake.

"Nothin' is bitin' me, Blake, and I wegard the question as wiculous. I have just seen Bunchy——"

"Oh, Bunchy!" said all the juniors together, and there was a general grin. Only Arthur Augustus, of the St. Jim's party, was unaware of the startling alteration that had been made in Bunchy's paper at the Continental in Lone Pine.

"It's weally we remarkable, you know," continued Arthur Augustus. "A man came along ffrom Lone Pine at dawn, thinkin' that Bunchy had a horse belongin' to him, with three hundwed dollahs in the saddle-bag. The man kicked up a wov and Long Jim booted him out. Now, isn't that vevy we remarkable?"

"Remarkable isn't the word," said Monty Lowther. "It's amazing! Flabbergasting, in fact!"

"Astounding!" said Tom Merry gravely.

"Let's go along and see Bunchy, in case another man comes after a horse and a bag of dollars," said Lowther. "It ought to be entertaining."

"Weally, Lowthan, it is not likely to happen again,"

said Arthur Augustus. "It was vevy we remarkable for it to happen once. It is extwemely unlikely that anotheah duffah will come along——"

"Now I think it's quite likely," said Lowther. "In fact, I'll bet you ten to one in doughnuts, to be settled next term at St. Jim's."

"Done!" said Arthur Augustus. "You will lose your doughnuts, deah boy. You see, such a vevy we remarkable and impwobable thing could not happen twice."

"You never can tell," said Monty, and the grinning juniors walked down to the cookhouse, convinced that the remarkable thing would not only happen twice, but probably many more times than that. Rube Parker was not the only unscrupulous fellow in Lone Pine, and that notice at the Continental was likely to bring along many claimants for the horse and the three hundred dollars.

"Bai Jove, there's a widah in a huwvy!" remarked Arthur Augustus, with a glance towards the trail on the prairie.

A horseman was coming towards the ranch at full gallop, spurring on his steed. The juniors looked at him, wondering whether it was another claimant for the imaginary black horse.

The man did not look like a "hobo"; he was quite unlike Rube Parker. He had a hard, clean-shaven, clean-cut face, with sharp, hawkish features and penetrating eyes. He was quite well dressed in "store" clothes. Wildrake whistled as he looked at him.

"That's Four Kings," he said.

"Bai Jove! Is that a name, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus in astonishment.

"A nickname," said Wildrake. "He's what they call a sport—a professional gambler. Plays poker with the punchers by way of making a living, you know."

"What a vevy howwid pwofession!"

"Not nice," agreed Wildrake.

"But why is he called Four Kings?" asked Gussy, mystified.

"Four of a kind is a hand at poker—four kings is a strong hand, only beaten by four aces or a royal flush," said Wildrake. "Some of the boys think he is rather too clever at dealing cards—his reputation isn't good, even in his own line of business. He can't have any affair at this ranch, except——"

"Except a lost horse!" grinned Blake.

"I guess so."

Four Kings came up to the gate with a clatter of hoofs in a cloud of dust. He hitched his horse to the gate and came striding in, looking about him inquiringly. Long Jim was out on the range now, but two or three punchers were about, and Four Kings called to one of them.

"Galoot named Bunch hang out here?"

"Sure!" answered Nosey Rogers.

"Where'll I find him?"

"In the cookhouse yonder."

Four Kings strode towards the cookhouse. Tom Merry & Co. exchanged grins. Obviously the "sport" was after Bunchy.

The sport rapped on the open door of the cookhouse, and Bunchy came with a saucepan in one hand and a rag in the other. He had been polishing the saucepan when his caller arrived.

"You William Bunch?" asked Four Kings.

"Yep."

"You've got a notice up at the Continental."

"Sure!" said Bunchy, eyeing the gambler with considerable disfavour. "But I reckon I ain't looking for a cook's job along of a card expert. I'm wanting a job on a ranch."

The sport stared at him.

"That's nothing to do with me," he answered. "I guess I didn't ride here to look for a cook. I want the horse."

"Horse!" said Bunchy.

"Yes; it's mine."

"Yours?" said Bunchy.

"Just that! Wandered away from me yesterday," said Four Kings easily. "I'd dismounted to pick up a deck of cards I'd dropped. You see, I was getting something out of my pocket, and the cards slipped out.

I got down to gather them up, and the pesky cayuse bolted. I was sure mad, for there was three hundred dollars in the saddle-bag. I am plumb glad to hear that the hoss has been found, I'll tell a man."

Tom Merry & Co. gazed at the sport as he rattled off this story with perfect glibness. As the lost horse with the dollars in the saddle-bag was purely an invention of Monty Lowther's, it was obvious that the man could not be telling the truth.

"Some romancer, I guess," murmured Wildrake.

"Bai Jove, you fellows, this is weally vevy wemarkable!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "He is aftah the same thing as the othah man."

"You owe me a doughnut next term," said Monty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunchy was staring in open-mouthed astonishment at the gambler. Rube Parker had surprised him by butting in to claim a non-existent horse. Now a second man had arrived from Lone Pine on the same quest. Bunchy did not know what to make of it, unless all Lone Pine had gone "loco" that morning.

Four Kings glanced round at the group of school-boys as he heard their remarks. His sharp eyes glistened.

"What's that?" he exclaimed. "Has another galoot been here after that black hoss?"

"Yep, quite early," said Wildrake with a smile.

"He didn't get the horse?" exclaimed Four Kings anxiously.

"Ha, ha! No, he got no horse!"

"Good!" said the sport, in evident relief. "He was a liar if he said that the hoss was his'n."

"I guess he was," assented Wildrake; "and I reckon he wasn't the only liar in Lone Pine, either!"

Four Kings gave him a quick look.

"I guess I can prove my claim," he said. "I've a friend in Lone Pine who can identify the horse, if necessary."

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors yelled. The idea of Four Kings' friend in Lone Pine identifying a horse that did not exist was too much for them.

The gambler gave them an angry stare, puzzled and irritated by the laughter. He turned impatiently to Bunchy, who was still staring at him open-mouthed.

"Where's the cayuse?"

"What cayuse?" gasped Bunchy.

"My horse that I lost on the prairie!" rapped out Four Kings. "I guess I'll stand you fifty dollars for your honesty. Now hand over the horse."

"You'll stand me fifty dollars for my honesty?" said Bunchy dazedly.

"Sure! Where's the critter? I'm leading it away with me—I've come over specially."

"If you ain't loco," said Bunchy, "I guess you've been sampling the firewater too early in the morning, Four Kings. But if you want to stand me fifty dollars, I allow I ain't any objection. Shell out!"

And Bunchy held out a fat and greasy hand.

"Talk sense!" rapped out Four Kings. "I'm standing you a reward of fifty dollars out of what's in the saddle-bags."

"What saddle-bags?"

"Them on the hoss."

"What hoss?" howled Bunchy.

"The horse you found wandering—my horse that bolted!" exclaimed Four Kings impatiently. "Black horse, sixteen hands."

"Is this a game?" gasped Bunchy. "Have the galoots in Lone Pine put up a bluff on me, or what? Fust there comes along a dog-goned hobo telling me he's looking for a horse and a bag of dollars, and now you comes telling the same yarn. If it's a game, you tell the boys at Lone Pine that they can't put it over on me. I don't stand for it."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" snapped Four Kings. "Look here, your name's Bunch, isn't it?"

"Jest that—William Bunch, the best cook in British Columbia," said Bunchy, "and a better trade than skinning the punchers at poker, Mister Four Kings!"

"You're the man that found the horse, then?"

"Oh, can it!" snorted Bunchy. "Go back to Lone Pine and tell the boys it won't wash. Hit the trail!"

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"I want that horse!" snapped the mystified Four Kings. "Don't I keep on telling you I've come over for it, and I've got a friend who can identify it and swear to the ownership?"

"What horse?" yelled the exasperated cook.

"The one you found, you durned fat gink!"

"Who says I found a horse?"

"What? Who? Why, you said so yourself!" exclaimed Four Kings, by this time as angry and exasperated as the Boot Leg cook.

"Oh, you're loco!" snorted Bunchy. "I ain't no more time to waste on you. Hit the trail afore I give you a lick with this saucepan."

And Bunchy, quite out of patience, stepped back into the cookhouse. Four Kings, with a black scowl, followed him in.

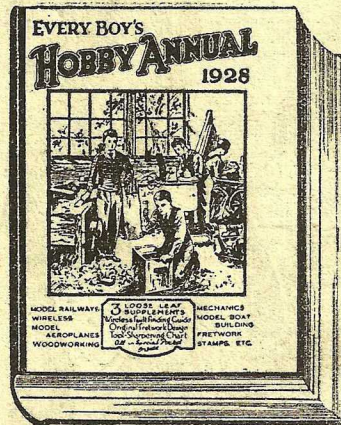
"That won't do, my man," he said. "I'm here for that horse, and I mean to have it. Now, then, hand it over!"

A six-gun appeared in the sport's hand, and his sharp eyes glittered over it at the startled cook.

"Hold on!" said Wildrake's quiet voice.

Still keeping Bunchy covered with his gun, the sport looked round. Kit Wildrake, in the doorway, held a revolver levelled.

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"Put that gun back," said the Canadian junior. "Sharp's the word, before I drop you in your tracks."

Four Kings gritted his teeth.

He was tempted to swing his gun round at the Canadian junior, but he was wise enough to resist that temptation. He had no desire to be lynched by the Boot Leg outfit.

He jammed the gun back into his holster, with a curse.

"That's the music," said Wildrake, with a nod. "We don't let bulldozers flourish guns on this ranch, Four Kings."

"Look here, I'm after my horse!" roared Four Kings. "This man Bunch found it, according to his own statement. I guess I'm going to have that cayuse."

"I guess not," grinned Wildrake. "Talk to Bunchy all you like, but I warn you that if you touch a gun again I'll drop you so sudden you won't know what hit you."

"Where's that horse, you Bunch?" shouted the enraged Four Kings.

"You quit talking to me about a horse!", shouted back Bunchy, his face red with rage. "You get out of my cookhouse. Got that? If you ain't outside this

hyer cookhouse in two shakes of a beaver's tail I goes for you with this saucepan. You hear me whoop?"

"I want that horse!" yelled Four Kings.

"Are you levanting?"

"I want—"

Crash!

Bunchy was quite out of patience now. His saucepan flashed in the air and descended upon the gambler, fairly bonneting him. Four Kings staggered back and rolled over in the doorway.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove!"

With a yell of rage Four Kings clutched at his gun. Bang!

It was Wildrake's revolver that rang, and the bullet took a strip of skin from the hand grasping the gun at the gambler's belt.

"The next smashes your paw!" said Wildrake. "Go slow."

Four Kings, panting with rage, released his gun. He staggered to his feet. His face was crimson with fury; his hat, battered shapeless by Bunchy's saucepan, was squashed over his ears. Wildrake's revolver looked him in the eye.

"Git!" said the Canadian junior curtly.

"But I weally do not undahstand—"

"Lots of things you don't understand, old man!" chuckled Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Hallo!" roared Lowther. "Here come some more!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A fat man—the German storekeeper at Lone Pine—rode up, passing Four Kings on the trail. At a distance another horseman could be seen, and farther away on the prairie, five or six more strung out in the direction of Lone Pine. Rube Parker and Four Kings had come early to avoid the crush, as it were—but the crush was coming now. The German storekeeper rolled off his horse at the gate, ahead of the others.

"Dere is man named Bunch here, isn't it?" he inquired.

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"I gomes to see him apout a horse—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Right on to the cookhouse!" chortled Lowther.

And the podgy German waddled on, the juniors following him with many chuckles.

CHAPTER 9.

Getting Bunchy's Goat!

BUNCHY, the cook, was in a bad temper. The mysterious happenings of that morning were "getting his goat." And he had dented his saucepan on the sport's head—and it was his best saucepan. Probably Four King's head had suffered more than the saucepan; but it was the culinary utensil that Bunchy was concerned about.

Bunchy was not in a mood to greet any caller with courtesy just then. Indeed, a rancher who had come along to inquire for a good cook would not have found a good-tempered or courteous cook in the cookhouse at Boot Leg. Not that the notice at the Lone Pine hotel was likely to bring along anyone in quest of a cook.

"Goot-morgen!" greeted the fat storekeeper, as he blinked in at Bunchy's doorway.

Bunchy glared round at him.

Whether this was a prospective employer or not Bunchy did not care. Bunchy had no use for Huns.

"Hyer, you—git!" he snarled.

"You are one name Punch?"

"Punch!" snorted Bunchy. "I'll give you Punch if you don't quit! Git!"

"But I gum here looking for one man name of Punch—"

"Bunch, you pesky Hun—Bunch!"

"Dat is vat I says pefore, Punch," said the fat man. "It is you, Punch, who puts up one notice at der Continental in Lone Pine, isn't it?"

"I guess so," snorted Bunchy. "But I ain't doing any business with you. I've got no use for you. I guess I wouldn't cook for you if I was the worst cook in British Columbia, instead of the best. You levant!"

"I do not vant gook," explained the storekeeper. "It is not matter of gooking. I vants my horse."

Bunchy almost fell down.

"Horse!" he stammered.

"Ja, ja wohl! Mein horse," said the storekeeper. "You him have, ain't it?"

"Carry me home to die!" gasped Bunchy. "It's a game of the Lone Pine boys—I see that. They've put this up to get my goat. But I ain't taking any jokes from a Hun. Got that? Wasn't I with the Canadian Contingent, you guy, wiping out your sort in the War? I'm sure sorry you was left over. You hit it for your store while you're safe. You get me?"

The storekeeper blinked at him in astonishment. He could not understand this excitement on the part of a man who had—as he supposed—found a wandering horse and put up a notice to that effect in Lone Pine.

"It is all right—all right," he said soothingly. "Dat you listen to me, and go not off on your ear, mein friend. I gums to take dat horse—"

"Will you stop chewing the rag about a horse?" roared Bunchy. "Will you give a galoot a rest?"

"But I tells you—"

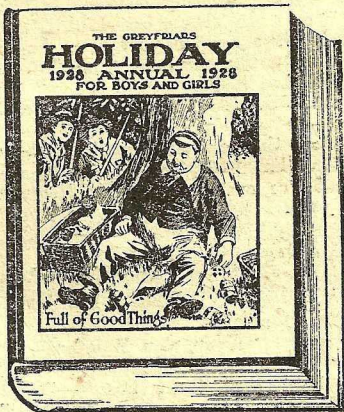
"Tell me nothing!" hooted Bunchy. "Don't I know the whole story? You're arter a black horse—"

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And Four Kings "got."

Two or three Boot Leg men were coming up, drawn by the shot. Four Kings shook a fist at Wildrake as he stamped away. At the gate, as he unhitched his horse, he shouted back:

"I guess the sheriff will be here after that horse. I guess I ain't letting a horse-thief keep my cayuse!"

"Send along the sheriff," chuckled Monty Lowther. "We'll explain to him that the notice at the Continental is a jest on Bunchy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Four Kings started.

"What?"

"There isn't any horse, you gink!" grinned Wildrake. "It's just a joke on Bunchy, and on any low-down rascals at Lone Pine who are rogues enough to claim a boss that don't belong to them."

"Oh!" gasped Four Kings:

He climbed into the saddle and rode away without another word, leaving the juniors and the punchers roaring.

"Bai Jove, you fellows!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I do not quite undahstand—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ja, ja!"

"Sixteen hands high——" roared Bunchy.

"Ja wohl!"

"Three hundred dollars in the saddle-bag——"

"Das ist gewiss. You hand him ober."

"Hand him over!" hooted the cook. "Hand over nothing! What I'm handing over is this here saucepan! I guess another dint won't make it wuss. Look out for your cabeza, Jerry!"

"Mein cootness!" gasped the storekeeper, jumping back in alarm as Bunchy whirled the saucepan in the air. "Is dat man mat?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dat you keep off!" shrieked the storekeeper, dodging the descending saucepan by a hair's breadth. "I gums here for a horse——"

Crash!

At the second Hick Bunchy got his man. There was a terrific yell from the German storekeeper as he staggered through the doorway into the midst of the almost hysterical juniors outside. There was a second dint in the saucepan now, and, to judge by the storekeeper's fearful yell, there was a dint in him, too.

"Mein cootness! Help! Himmel! Mein Gott! Yaroooh! Keep off!" shrieked the helpless Hun, as Bunchy pursued him from the cookhouse, with crimson face and whirling saucepan.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hook it, Fritz!" roared Blake.

"Run for it, Jerry!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The fat storekeeper was already running for it. His hat had been knocked off, but he did not stop for it. He streaked for the gate as fast as fourteen stone could streak.

"After him, Bunchy!" yelled Lowther. "Strafe him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm arter him!" gasped Bunchy. "You watch out!"

"Mein Gott! Help! Whoop!"

Crash!

The saucepan got the storekeeper again, and a yell floated almost to the wide limits of the Boot Leg Ranch. The fat man put on a desperate spurt and reached the gate. The gate was shut, and there was no time for the alarmed fugitive to open it. He clambered desperately over.

"Now's your chance, Bunchy!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! Ha, ha, ha!"

The storekeeper was half over the gate when Bunchy got him again. The saucepan came down on his tight trousers with a terrific smite.

The hapless claimant of the non-existent horse roared and rolled off the gate, and strewed himself on the trail.

"Mein Gott! Ooooooch! Mein cootness! Wow!"

Bunchy was not finished yet. He tore at the gate with his left hand, his deadly saucepan gripped in his right.

The fat German staggered up and made a desperate attempt to get on his waiting steed. In his hurry he pitched right over and landed on the prairie on the other side of the animal.

Bump!

"Go it, Bunchy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ach! Mein Gott! Dot man is mat! Mat as a hadder! Help!" yelled the storekeeper of Lone Pine, scrambling desperately out of the way of the swiping saucepan.

He clutched at his horse again, and threw himself on the saddle. He did not stop to get his leg over—with his fat waistcoat on the saddle, sprawling across the horse, he started, the saucepan taking toll all the time. Like a sack of wheat the German storekeeper rode away, a last kick of the dinted saucepan catching him as he went.

Bunchy stood and panted, while the juniors and the punchers gasped for breath, almost exhausted with merriment. The morning's entertainment was turning out more entertaining than anyone had ventured to expect.

As the sprawling German careered away, only too glad

to get out of reach of a man whom he regarded as a dangerous maniac, another rider stopped at the gate. It was a half-breed from Lone Pine.

He stared after the storekeeper, evidently surprised by Fritz's remarkable departure. Then he addressed Bunchy.

"Man named Bunch about here?"

The cook glared at him.

"I'm Bunch! What do you want, you durned breed?"

"I guess I've come about the horse——"

"Horse!" breathed Bunchy.

"The horse you found—— Hallo! What! Keep off! Is the man loco? Help!"

Bunchy was not wasting words. The saucepan beat a tattoo upon the new claimant before he could explain himself. One swipe nearly knocked him out of the saddle, and then another swipe righted him again. Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!

Bunchy was not finished by the time the breed had had enough. But in less than a minute the breed was riding away across the prairie as if for his life, convinced that he had woke up a lunatic. With a terrified face, and clatter of hoofs, the half-breed vanished along the trail.

"I guess he got what was coming to him!" gasped Bunchy. "There ain't nothing for you guys to snicker at——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, shucks!" snorted Bunchy, and he strode back to the cookhouse and slammed the door after him.

"Oh, dear!" gasped Tom Merry, wiping away his tears. "Oh, dear! This is better than a circus! And there's more coming——"

"I can see seven or eight!" gasped Blake. "Oh, dear! Bunchy will begin to be sorry that he stuck up that notice at Lone Pine."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! You know, I weally do not compwehend——"

"Here they come!" chortled Manners.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And five or six horsemen dismounted in a bunch at the gate.

CHAPTER 10.

Bunchy Besieged!

"G O away!"

"Hyer, you Bunch——"

"Go away! Git!"

"About that there hoss——"

"Vamoose the ranch, you guys!"

"That there cayuse——"

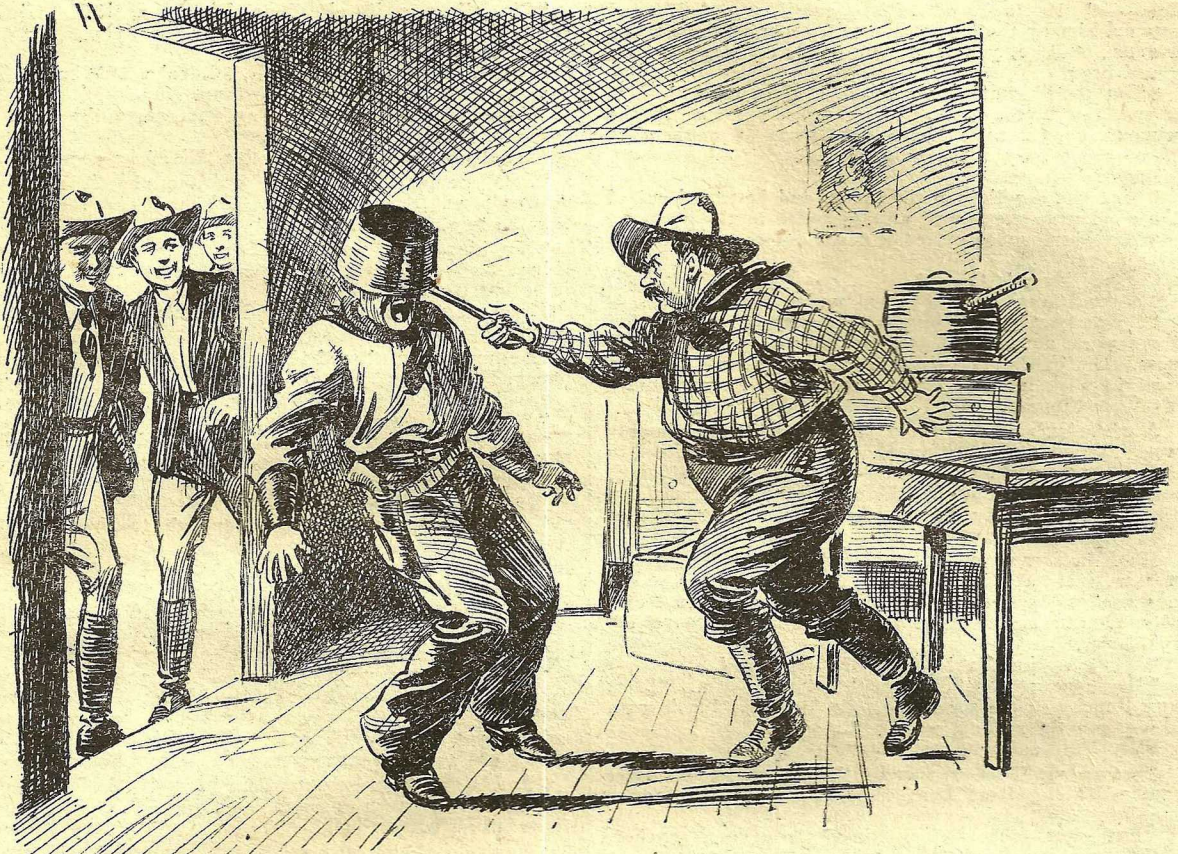
There was a chorus of voices round the cookhouse. It was getting towards noon now, and many claimants had had time to arrive. Most of them rode in on horse or mule, but some came tramping in on foot, tired and dusty, but hopeful. Every one, as he arrived, glared in surprise and wrath at the other claimants. Every man in the mob was obviously a rogue, since he was claiming a horse that could not possibly belong to him, as it had no existence outside Monty Lowther's inventive brain. Yet every one seemed surprised to find others with the same unscrupulous game on hand.

In a hard-working camp like Lone Pine there were few wasters or slackers, but such characters drifted through. Every bad character who belonged to the camp, or happened to find himself at the camp, seemed to have been struck by the bright idea of annexing the horse and the three hundred dollars that had been found, or, rather, that had not been found, by William Bunch of the Boot Leg Ranch.

The Continental was the general meeting-place at Lone Pine, and all the population, fixed or floating, smoked round the stove of an evening, and so a notice pinned up there was as effective as an advertisement in a daily newspaper in the towns. All Lone Pine, by this time, had heard of the horse that had been found wandering, and clearly every rogue in the place was bent on putting in a claim.

Lowther had foreseen something like a rush, but he had not dreamed of a rush like this.

Like the oysters in the story, thick and fast they came at last, and more and more and more.



"If you ain't outside this here cookhouse in two shakes of a beaver's tail, I goes for you with this saucepan!" shouted Bunchy. "You hear me whoop!" "I want that horse!" yelled Four Kings. Crash! Bunchy was quite out of patience. His saucepan flashed in the air, and descended upon the gambler, fairly bonneting him. (See Chapter 8.)

Bunchy had bolted the door of the cookhouse against them. Even his redoubtable saucepan was of no use against such a mob.

More than a dozen men surged round the cookhouse, shouting, yelling, banging on the door, tapping on the window and shoving one another roughly. The rivals for the mythical horse were not friendly rivals. Every rogue there wanted the horse and the three hundred dollars, and they all looked at one another with deadly looks. Two of the claimants were already at blows, punching one another fiercely, and most of the others were quarrelling. But all of them wanted to see William Bunch, and wanted to see him badly.

"Where's that critter, you Bunch?"

"Montrez moi!" yelled a French half-breed. "Le cheval, coquin, le cheval!"

"Where's that hoss, you hoss-thief?"

"Open this here dog-goned door!"

"By the holy smoke, if you don't come out and gimme my critter, I'll kick in the walls! You hear me shout!"

Tom Merry & Co., in a group at a little distance, were almost helpless with laughter. Arthur Augustus, who comprehended at last, had shaken his noble head severely at Lowther's little joke, but he was wiping his eyes now. Monty Lowther was in a state of great elation. Not since he had been in Canada had the humorist of St. Jim's had a real chance. Now that a chance had come along, he had made the most of it. It was a jape that was not likely to be forgotten at the Boot Leg Ranch for many a day—least of all by Bunchy, the cook.

Bunchy was in a state of mingled rage and bewilderment.

Why all these galoots from Lone Pine were claiming a horse from him was a deep mystery to the cook. He

had concluded that it was a joke on the part of the Lone Pine boys at first; but he realised now that it was no joke. All these men were in earnest; all of them believed that he had found a horse and three hundred dollars, and all of them were rogues—at least, all but one, if a horse really had been lost and found. Bunchy felt his fat brain turning round with the puzzlement of it; and he perspired in the cookhouse while the excited claimants raged and prowled outside.

It was a varied mob—an American machine-man, who was in Canada to sell wonderful American agricultural machines that would not work; a Chinese laundryman; three or four half-breeds, a couple of "sports," one or two disreputable punchers, three or four "hoboes," or tramps, a store assistant, and two or three others—and more were coming. All the flotsam and jetsam of Lone Pine had gathered at the ranch, and were besieging the cookhouse.

"I guess this is getting too thick!" gasped Wildrake. "What on earth will popper say when he comes in from the range?"

"You funnay ass, Lowthah——"

Lowther chortled.

"It's one of the best," he said. "It will be something for Boot Leg to remember us by. As good a jape as I've ever pulled off at St. Jim's—and that's saying a good deal."

"But what a set of awful wogues!" said D'Arcy. "Not one of those wottahs has weally lost a horse or three hundred dollahs."

"Some of 'em don't look as if they ever had three hundred cents to lose!" chuckled Manners.

"There'll be a riot soon!" gasped Tom Merry. "Look, there's that Yankee merchant trying to get in at the window."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The machine-man had succeeded in getting the window open, and he was head and shoulders in before Bunchy observed him. Then Bunchy gripped his saucepan.

"Say, bo," gasped the gentleman from over the border, "don't get your mad up! I'm arter my

hoss——” He broke off with a growl as a half-breed gripped him by the legs and dragged him back from the window. “Here, you take your hands off me, you dog-goned breed!”

“You tief!” snarled the breed. “Hoss mine!” And the breed, taking the Yankee’s place at the window, shoved in. He was half-way through when Bunchy got busy with the saucepan.

Bang!

There was a yell from the breed, and he rolled out of the window half stunned, and sprawled to the ground.

“Have him out!” roared a dozen voices. “Have the door down!”

Crash! Bang! Crash!

The cookhouse almost rocked under the attack.

“Go away!” yelled Bunchy desperately. “I tell you there ain’t no hoss! I tell you I’ve never heard of a hoss. I’m expecting callers this morning, and how’s a gent to walk in with all you hoboes hanging around? Vamoose the ranch, I tell you. You get your goat.”

A threatening roar answered him. The claimants were all enraged by this time, and more anxious to get at Bunchy than even to secure the mythical horse and the three hundred dollars. Blows roused on the door, and there was a scattering of fragments of glass as the window was knocked in.

Hoof-beats rang on the trail, unheeded in the general uproar. Mr. Wildrake was riding in with Long Jim and five or six punchers. The rancher stared in blank astonishment at the sight of the riot raging round the cookhouse.

“What in thunder is this?” he exclaimed.

“Dog-gone my boots!” ejaculated Long Jim. “That guy Bunchy up to something. Looks like a lynch mob. Hyer, you Billy Pink, what’s this game?”

Billy Pink came up grinning

“Search me!” he answered. “All them galoots have moseyed along from Lone Pine to ask Bunchy for a hoss.”

“But what—why——” exclaimed the amazed rancher.

“I guess somebody’s stuck up a notice in Lone Pine, that Bunchy’s found a hoss and three hundred dollars!” chuckled Billy Pink.

“And he hasn’t, I suppose?”

“Nope! It’s a joke on Bunchy.”

“A joke on Bunchy is all very well, but we don’t want the riffraff of Lone Pine rioting here!” exclaimed the rancher. “Follow me, boys.”

Mr. Wildrake rode up to the cookhouse, with the bunch of punchers. Tom Merry & Co. were rather glad to see them arrive. Even Monty Lowther was of opinion that the jest had gone far enough.

“Now, then, cut out that rumpus!” called out the rancher. “Let that door alone, and hit the trail for home! You hear me?”

A roar answered.

“We’re arter a hoss——”

“I guess it’s my horse——”

“You’re a dog-goned rogue! It’s mine!”

“That feller Bunch——”

“Horse of sixteen hands——”

“Three hundred dollars——”

“We’ll lynch him!”

“Stand aside!” rapped out the rancher, and his prancing horse drove a path clear to the door of the cookhouse. “You Bunchy! Open the door!”

Bunchy opened the door at once. He was greatly relieved to see the boss of Boot Leg and the punchers.

“I guess I’m sure glad you’ve arrove, boss!” he gasped. “Let the boys take their quirts to this gang, and clear ‘em off.”

“You fat gink!” said the rancher. “What have you been doing?”

“Nothing!” said Bunchy. “I sent a notice to the Continental to put up over the stove, but there was nary a word about a hoss in it. It was a notice about a cook’s job. But all these scallywags make out that I put up word about a hoss that was found with three hundred dollars in the saddle-bag. It sure gets my goat.”

“I guess I read your notice with my own eyes!” yelled the American machine-man. “I sure read every word.”

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“We all saw it—all Lone Pine saw it!” yelled another.

“Where’s that critter, you gink?”

“Silence!” rapped out Mr. Wildrake. “Who took your paper to Lone Pine to post up, Bunchy?”

“Young Kit took it yesterday,” answered the cook. The rancher glanced round.

“What do you know about this, Kit?” he demanded.

“Lots, popper,” answered Wildrake cheerfully. “I figured it out that Bunchy was asking for trouble, and that he might as well get it.”

“My idea, sir,” said Lowther modestly. “A poor thing, but mine own, as Shakespeare says. We’re all in it but Gussy.”

The rancher stared at the St. Jim’s fellows rather grimly.

“I suppose you altered the wording of that fat gink’s paper?”

“Just a few,” agreed Wildrake.

“Wha-a-t?” gasped Bunchy.

“You see, the silly old scallywag asked for it,” said Wildrake. “It’s been no end of a joke on Bunchy. Hasn’t it, Bunchy?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Weally, you know, it was wathah too bad,” said Arthur Augustus. “You should weally keep these japes for St. Jim’s, Lowthah.”

“Waal, search me!” gasped Bunchy. “So that is the how of it, is it? You pesky young scallywag, Kit Wildrake——”

The rancher burst into a laugh.

“It serves you right, Bunchy!” he said. “You’re more trouble than you’re worth, and one of these days I shall fire you off the ranch for keeps. Now, all you galoots, you see how the matter stands—it was a joke on that gink, and there never was a hoss lost at all.”

“And we’ve been brought here for nothing?” howled the American machine-man. “I guess I’ll lambaste them jokers before I go!”

“You’re a rascal, and so are all the rest,” said Mr. Wildrake. “You’ve come here to tell lies and claim a horse that was not yours. Get off the ranch. Half a minute to go.”

“I guess——”

“The circus is over, gentlemen,” said Monty Lowther politely. “This is where you gracefully retire.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

But the crowd of claimants did not seem in a mood to retire peaceably. They seemed more disposed to lynch the humorists who had brought them over so many miles of prairie for nothing. But the rancher did not stand on ceremony. When the half-minute had expired, and the crowd had not cleared, he signed to the punchers, and the Boot Leg bunch rode into the crowd, cracking their cattle-whips. And as the cracking of the whips did not suffice, the leather thongs rang round legs and shoulders, amid a chorus of yells and howls. The scallywags of Lone Pine started for the gate fast enough then.

“See them right off,” said the rancher.

“You bet, boss!” grinned Long Jim.

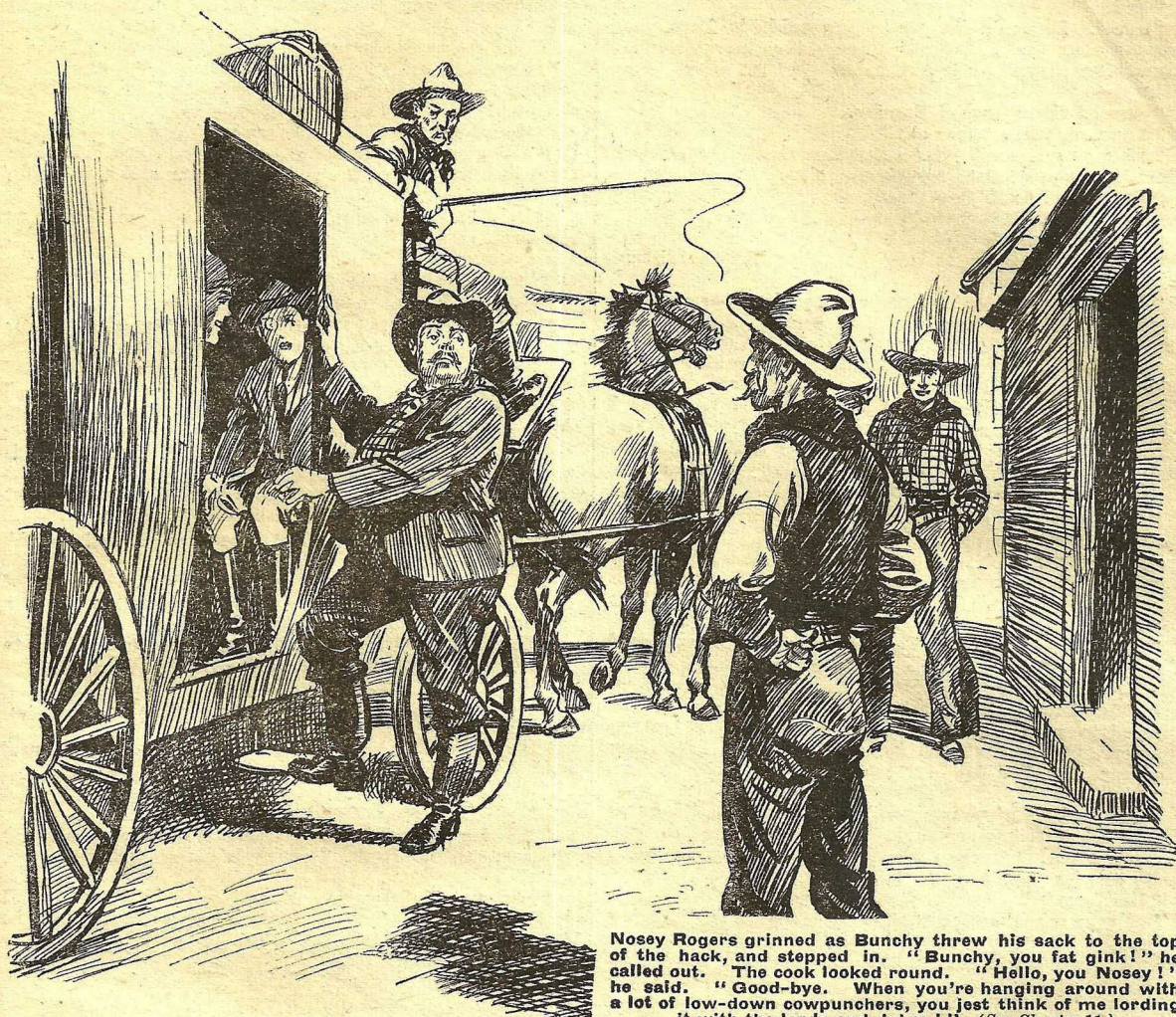
There was a wild scramble to escape, as the quirts cracked and whacked among the crowd. Man after man bolted out of the gate and fled, on horse or on foot, yelling. They were cleared off at last, and it was a dismal crew that straggled back to Lone Pine along the dusty trail.

Tom Merry & Co. wiped their eyes and went in to dinner. Mr. Wildrake, fortunately, took the episode good-humouredly; but it was very probable that, having had one sample of the St. Jim’s humorist’s sense of humour, he considered that one was enough.

CHAPTER 11.

Bunchy Too!

TOM MERRY & CO. chuckled long over that episode, and the Boot Leg punchers roared over it. Bunchy did not seem to see anything humorous in it, and for a day or two he gave the St. Jim’s fellows rather morose looks when he came in contact with them. This was rather disconcerting to Arthur



Nosey Rogers grinned as Bunchy threw his sack to the top of the hack, and stepped in. "Bunchy, you fat gink!" he called out. The cook looked round. "Hello, you Nosey!" he said. "Good-bye. When you're hanging around with a lot of low-down cowpunchers, you jest think of me lording it with the lords and dukes!" (See Chapter 11.)

Augustus, who had had no hand in the jest on Bunchy, and who really had a regard for the fat cook, and could not forget that Bunchy had saved his life in the foothills.

But Bunchy made no distinction. The whole St. Jim's party had got his goat, as he expressed it, and he frowned upon all alike. When the swell of St. Jim's dropped into the cookhouse for a chat, Bunchy gave him the marble eye; when Gussy came on him about the ranch, and greeted him with polished urbanity, Bunchy only grunted in response. Bunchy had his back up—or had, as Wildrake put it, gone off on his ear. And as Tom Merry & Co.'s holiday was now drawing to an end, and they wanted to leave Boot Leg on good terms with everybody there, they were rather sorry to see old Bunchy taking the matter like this, and Arthur Augustus was deeply concerned about it.

But that cloudy state of affairs lasted only a day or two. Then the sun came out from the clouds, as it were, and Bunchy smiled again. Once more plump good humour and good temper reigned in the Boot Leg cookhouse. Bunchy not only smiled, but he grinned, and sometimes laughed—as if over a good joke—and the juniors, observing it, supposed that the humour of Lowther's great jape had dawned on him at last. Or perhaps Bunchy was thinking of some little jest of his own, of which the St. Jim's party as yet knew nothing.

Bunchy had not posted up another notice at the continental. Mr. Wildrake genially offered him a day's leave to go there and see to it personally. Bunchy declined. Apparently the cook had given up the idea of looking for another job, and settled down once more to his job on Boot Leg. It might even have dawned on Bunchy, after reflection, and after quite a lot of plain

speaking from the punchers, that the ranchers of the Rainbow section were not likely to fall over one another in the rush to secure his services. At all events, Bunchy seemed to have settled down in a cheery mood—indeed, in a merry mood—and the juniors were glad to see it.

On the day before that fixed for their departure, Tom Merry & Co. were making their preparations for the journey, packing all sorts of souvenirs and curiosities to take home from Canada, Manners especially packing with great care an extensive assortment of photographs which were to adorn Study No. 10 in the Shell at St. Jim's, and others to be distributed to various affectionate relatives and friends. Arthur Augustus dropped into the cookhouse for a last chat with Bunchy, and found that fat "galoot" with a large bag open, and various goods and chattels spread around, which he was packing in it.

Bunchy greeted him with a genial grin.

"Goin' on a journey, old bean?" asked Gussy, with a glance at Bunchy's preparations.

"Sure," said Bunchy.

"Bai Jove! Is it a holiday?" asked D'Arcy.

"Sort of," agreed Bunchy.

"Good! If you happen to be twavellin' our way, you might start at the same time and let us have the pleasuah of your company part of the way, what?"

"I guess I'm travelling your way," said the ranch cook, with a nod.

"Vevy glad to heah it, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus heartily. "We're getting on the cars at Canpac Cweek. Are you goin' as fah as that?"

"Farther," said Bunchy.

"On the railwoad?"

"Yep."

"Good! It would be weally agweeable to have your company on the twip back across the Wocky Mountains, Bunchay," said Arthur Augustus, with great politeness.

"Sure of that?" asked Bunchy.

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy."

"Seeing as I saved your life when that Injun, Hawk Nose, had you dead to rights in the foothills, sir, you'd naturally feel that way," said the ranch cook, eyeing him curiously.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You ain't the guy to forget a thing like that," said Bunchy.

"Certainly not," said Arthur Augustus warmly. "I assuah you that I am gwateful, Bunchay, and nevah likely to forget it."

"You'd be glad to do anything you could, young D'Arcy, seeing as I got you away from that Redskin."

"Wely on me, Bunchay, if there is evah anythin' I can do for you," said the swell of St. Jim's. "You have only to give it a name. I have said so befoah, Bunchay, several times, and I twust that you know that I am a fellow of my word."

"Jest what I allowed you was," agreed Bunchy heartily. "You're the real goods, you are, I'll tell the world. So thinkin' that over, sir, I figured it out that you'd be glad for me to come back to England with you."

"Eh?"

"I ain't seed the Old Country since the War," said Bunchy, "and I was only a young feller then. I heered that your popper is a lord. We don't go much on lords in Canada; but, all the same, I guess I'd be pleased to meet a lord friendly like. Seeing as I saved his son's life, and all that, his lordship will be feeling chummy, I reckon."

"Oh!"

"That school of yourn, too," said Bunchy. "I guess I'd be interested to see that. If you're allowed to keep a cook there, I reckon I'd be glad to stay on there and cook for you."

"Bai Jove!"

"If your schoolmaster got too fresh any time, I'd bring him up with a round turn," said Bunchy. "I guess he would climb down when he found himself lookin' at a gun, what?"

"Goodness gwacious!" gasped Arthur Augustus, almost overcome by the mental picture of Dr. Holmes, the reverend and reverend Head of St. Jim's, looking at Bunchy's "gun."

"You like the idea?" asked Bunchy cheerily.

Arthur Augustus' manners and customs were moulded upon those of the celebrated Chesterfield. Seldom, if ever, did his polished politeness fail him. But it came near to failing now.

It was true that he owed Bunchy his life; it was true that he liked the fat cook, and was really anxious to show his gratitude for the great service Bunchy had rendered him. But the idea of taking Bunchy home to Eastwood House had certainly never occurred to his noble mind. What he would do with him there was a mystery. Bunchy, no doubt, would be prepared to take possession of the cook's quarters and turn out first-class flapjacks—if Lord Eastwood could be imagined dining on flapjacks. It was only with great difficulty that Arthur Augustus succeeded in concealing his dismay—and perhaps he did not quite succeed in concealing it. But if Bunchy noticed it, he gave no sign. He proceeded cheerily with packing his sack.

Arthur Augustus had a mental struggle for some moments. But it was borne in upon his noble mind that it was up to him to play up. Bunchy had saved his life—and he had said, and meant, that he would be glad of a chance to show that he was grateful. Here was the chance.

"Bai Jove! That—that will be wippin', Bunchay," said Arthur Augustus at last. "You will be vewy welcome, deah boy."

"Of course," assented Bunchy. "I knowed you'd be glad to hear it. How this hyer ranch will get on without me, I dunno. But Old Man Wildrake has fair

asked for it, and he can't deny it. I'm coming with you."

"Good!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"It's a cinch," said Bunchy cheerily. "I guess I'm looking for a good time, mixing with the lords and dukes and sich. Call it a go."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's face was very thoughtful as he walked back to the ranch. Bunchy looked after him from the doorway of the cookhouse with a fat, grinning face.

"Early to bed to-night, Gussy," said Tom Merry, as the swell of St. Jim's came in. "We turn out early in the morning, you know. Bunchy's driving the baggage as far as Lone Pine in the chuck wagon."

"Bunchay! Oh, yaas!"

"And we're riding," said Blake. "It will be our last ride in Canada—these holidays, at least."

"Pewwaps I had bettah mention to you fellows——" D'Arcy hesitated. "Pewwaps I had bettah tell you——"

"What have you on your little mind?" asked Blake. "You look worried, old bean!"

"I did not mean to look wowwied, Blake. There is nothin' to wowwy about."

"Nothing at all," agreed Blake. "But you've got something on your poor old brain. What is it?"

"Nothin', deah boy. But pewwaps I had bettah mention——"

"Go it," said Tom, looking curiously at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Bunchay is comin' with us, deah boy."

"Yes; he's driving the baggage to Lone Pine, to take the hack there."

"Bunchay is comin' all the way."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"He is comin' home to Eastwood House with me," said Arthur Augustus calmly.

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"What guff is this?" exclaimed Wildrake, staring at the swell of St. Jim's. "Bunchy's doing nothing of the sort."

"The mattah is awwanged and settled, Wildwake. I have invited Bunchay to come home with me, and he is comin'."

"Great gophers!"

"Gussy, you ass," said Blake. "Don't play the goat! What on earth will Bunchy do at Eastwood House?"

"Bunchay saved my life, Blake."

"I know that, but——"

"It is settled, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, in a tone of finality.

And settled it was. The next morning Tom Merry & Co. bade farewell to Mr and Mrs. Wildrake, and all their numerous friends at the Boot Leg Ranch, and started for Lone Pine. Bunchy, the cook, drove the wagon piled with baggage, and among the baggage was his own sack.

At Lone Pine the horses and the wagon were left, and Tom Merry & Co. boarded the hack for Rainbow. Bunchy, the cook, boarded it with them. Nosey Rogers had ridden as far as Lone Pine with the party to take back the horses and the wagon, and he grinned as Bunchy, the cook, threw his sack to the top of the hack and stepped in.

"Bunchy, you fat gink!" called out Nosey.

The cook looked round.

"Hallo, you Nosey! Good-bye! When you're hanging around with a lot of low-down cowpunchers, you jest think of me lording it with the lords and dukes," said Bunchy.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Nosey.

"Them punchers has bad manners," said Bunchy, as he settled down in the hack. "They ain't fit to mix with lords and sich."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Blake.

"Anything biting you, young Blake?" asked Bunchy.

"Hem! No."

"Look here, Bunchy," began Wildrake, "you ornery old guy——"

"You stow it, young Kit!"

"What!"

"Remember your manners when you're travelling

with me and my friend, what is a lord's son," said Bunchy.

"Oh, my hat!" said Wildrake.

"Look at young D'Arcy, how happy he looks at having his old pardner with him," said Bunchy.

Arthur Augustus started.

"Yaas, wathah!" he gasped.

And the hack rolled away to Rainbow.

CHAPTER 12.

Bunchy's Little Joke!

TOM MERRY & CO. boarded the cars at the depot at Rainbow, on the branch line that ran to Canpac Creek, to the main line of the Canadian Pacific. Bunchy and his sack boarded the cars with them.

As the cars ran on southward Tom Merry & Co. were in a rather thoughtful mood. Wildrake was in a restive frame of mind. Arthur Augustus made continual efforts to rouse himself from fits of deep reflection. Only Bunchy, the cook, was merry and bright.

His fat, shiny face positively beamed with satisfaction.

"Sorry to be leaving Canada, young D'Arcy?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, yaas, wathah!"

"I guess you look sorry," agreed Bunchy.

"Bai Jove! I di! not mean—"

"But having ol' Bunchy along will sort of break it gently, what?" said the cook.

"Oh, yaas!"

"Fancy me setting with his lordship and her ladyship a-squirting baccy juice across his noble hall pleasant and home-like," said Bunchy.

And he ejected a stream of tobacco-juice across the car by way of a sample.

"Oh, yaas!" gasped Gussy.

"Look here, Bunchy—" began Wildrake.

"Anything biting you, young Kit?" demanded Bunchy. "You jest bear in mind that I ain't your popper's cook now—a-cooking flapjacks for a bunch of pesky punchers. No, sir! You get me?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" grunted Wildrake.

"But—" murmured Blake.

"But what, kid?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"I guess you galoots had a good time on Old Man Wildrake's ranch," said Bunchy. "Naterally you're sorry to be parting. But you sure do look uncommon sorry, I allow. Think of that leetle joke you played on me; all them galoots coming along from Lone Pine to claim a hoss and a bag of dollars, what? I allow it was funny."

And Bunchy roared.

The juniors looked at him rather oddly. It came into their minds that perhaps Bunchy was getting his own back, as it were, in a rather peculiar way.

"The laugh was agin me, wasn't it?" said Bunchy. "But bless your boots, I guess I can take a joke! I'm some joker myself." And Bunchy chuckled.

"You've done this, Monty, old man," said Tom Merry, when Bunchy strolled along the train presently and left the juniors to themselves. "Bunchy's getting his own back. You should have kept your japes for St. Jim's, old bean. What are you going to do with Bunchy, Gussy?"

"Goodness knows, deah boy!"

"I guess I'll give him my boot at Canpac," said Wildrake.

"Nothin' of the sort, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I am bound to tweek Bunchay as a friend. He is a vewy good sort."

The train stopped at Red Pine, the last stop before Canpac, to take on passengers and baggage. Then the cars hummed on their way again. Bunchy did not return to the juniors' car, however, and he was so long absent that they wondered what had become of him. Arthur Augustus surmised that he might have fallen off the cars, to which Blake rejoined that there was no such luck.

Onward rolled and hummed the cars, and Canpac

Creek was reached at last. Still Bunchy had not rejoined the party.

The juniors turned out of the train, wondering where he was, and Arthur Augustus was quite anxious.

"We had bettah look for Bunchay, you fellows," he said.

"Bother Bunchy!"

"Bless him!"

"I'm goin' to look for Bunchay," said Arthur Augustus.

The conductor of the train came up to the group, with something in his hand. He looked from one to another.

"Guy named D'Arcy in this bunch?" he inquired.

"That is my name," said Arthur Augustus.

"Then I guess this is for you."

"A lettah for me?" asked Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"A fat galoot from 'way back handed it to me, and asked me to deliver it at Canpac, and not before," said the conductor. "Here it is."

"By Jove! That must have been Bunchay!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, mystified. "Where is he now?"

"He got off at Red Pine."

"Bai Jove!"

In utter astonishment Arthur Augustus glanced at the note, scrawled in pencil, on a fragment of a bill-of-fare. He gazed at it, and gazed again, and then ejaculated:

"But what—"

"Wead it, deah boys!"

And Tom Merry & Co. read it and stared, and then burst into a laugh.

"Deer Kid,—This here will be give to you arter you get to Canpac. I'm dropping off at Red Pine to get back to the ranch. I guess you fellers ain't the only jokers going around.

"Yores,
"BUNCHY."

"I rather reckoned that the fat gink was only pulling our legs," said Wildrake, laughing. "I couldn't be sure, but I reckoned so. The pesky old scallywag!"

"It's one on us!" said Tom Merry, with a smile.

"Only a jape," said Monty Lowther. "And he got away with it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus read the note again and smiled.

"Pullin' our legs, bai Jove!" he said. "Weally, you know, I am wathah sowwy to part with old Bunchay! He is a vewy good sort."

"One of the best," grinned Blake. "You do go around asking everybody to pull your leg, don't you, old bean?"

"Weally, Blake—"

And the St. Jim's juniors boarded the Pacific cars for the east.

Day after day the great cars rolled on, over the Rocky Mountains, over the wide wheatlands, bearing Tom Merry & Co. homeward. Montreal at last, and then Quebec, and then the steamer for England.

"Once more upon the watahs!" said Arthur Augustus, when the steamer glided out on the St. Lawrence.

"You're repeating yourself, old bean," said Blake.

"You started with that quotation at Liverpool."

"Weally, Blake—"

"And now for England, home, and beauty—not to mention St. Jim's and football," said Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

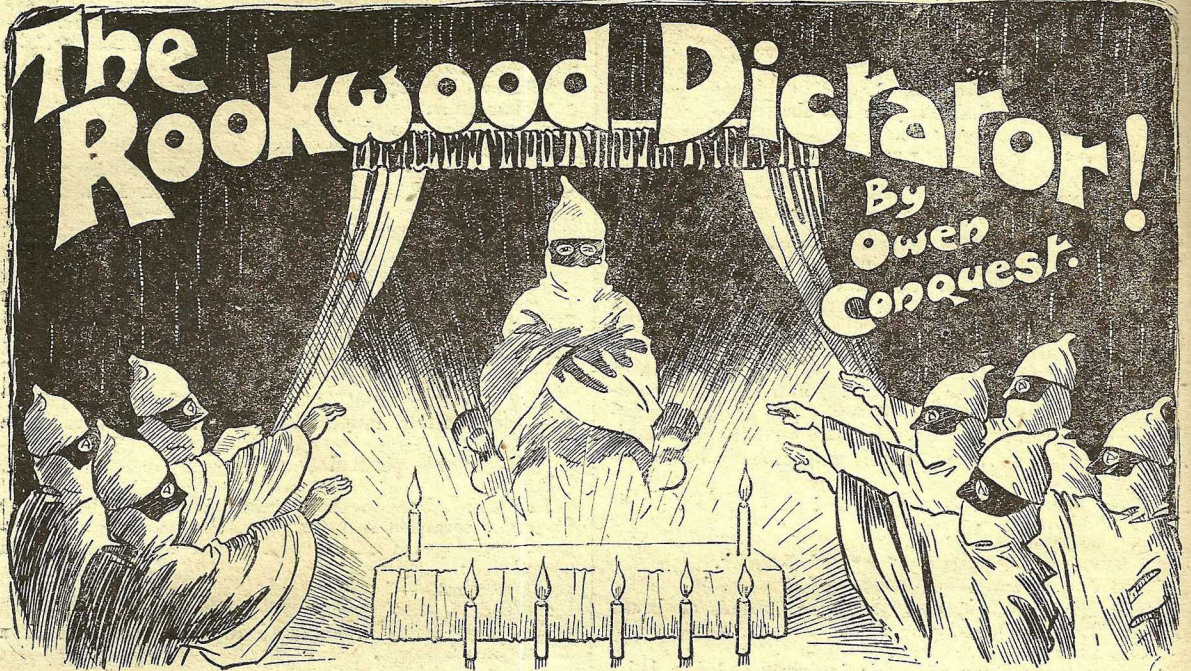
It had been a great holiday, and Tom Merry & Co. had enjoyed almost every hour of it. But they were glad to tread, once more, the old quadrangle at St. Jim's, and to stroll round the studies greeting the fellows they knew. A good time was past—but good times lay before them at St. Jim's.

THE END.

(And there's a good time in store for you too, chums, in next week's splendid school story. Look out for "UNDER GUSSY'S WING!" It's a winner!)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,021.

A TASTE OF HIS OWN MEDICINE! For a long time now, Carthew of the Sixth, has played the tyrant over Jimmy Silver & Co. And now comes the time for retribution—such retribution as Carthew the bully never dreamed of!



A GRAND NEW STORY OF JIMMY SILVER & CO., THE CHEERY CHUMS OF ROOKWOOD.

At Dead of Night!

QUITE unaware of the plot against him, Carthew retired to bed fairly late that night. He dismissed Captain Punter from his mind with an effort.

"Hang Punter and all his works!"

And with that Carthew turned in and composed himself to sleep. For some time slumber refused to come, but he dozed at length. A faint scratching sound caused him to roll over, but he did not wake.

His deep, regular breathing testified that he was asleep at last. A further scratch passed unnoticed, and a third. The faintest murmur of voices came from the corridor without. Then, infinitely slowly, the door handle began to turn.

Still Carthew slept.

The handle turned and the door opened, half an inch at a time. There was a cautious whisper in the darkness:

"Quiet!"

Faint sounds of movement must have reached Carthew's ears; he grunted, and rolled over again. A fresh movement, closer than the rest, startled him into wakefulness. He stared about him in the dark, unable to make out a thing.

But there was somebody—something—in the study. Of that Carthew was sure. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Silence!" hissed a voice.

Carthew shivered.

Icey fingers touched his forehead, and for a moment he felt frozen with horror. But in a few seconds the thought that he was the victim of a reckless jape flashed through his mind, and his nerve returned.

"Who—who is it? You young villains—"

"Silence!"

"What?"

"Do not speak unless you are spoken to," came a deep, unrecognisable voice from the darkness.

"You—you—if this is a jape, I'll smash you!" snarled the prefect, sitting up in bed and reaching for his ashplant.

He gave a gasp as unseen hands gripped his shoulders and forced him back on his pillow. The deep voice sounded again:

"Resistance is useless. You have fallen into the hands of the Fascist Band of Rookwood. I am the Dictator!"

"The—the what?"

"The Dictator."

"What's that, you young fool?"

"My word is law," responded the deep voice, utterly without emotion. "Your fate depends entirely upon my will."

"You young jackanapes—"

"Silence!"

Carthew stuttered.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,021.

In spite of his conviction that it was a jape of the juniors, he could not help being impressed by the stately dignity of the self-styled Dictator. There was something implacable about the Dictator's utterance that sent a shiver down the prefect's spine.

Staring in the dark, he could make out dim white forms—crowding in the study and in the corridor beyond. Their faces seemed to be concealed—they were a jet mass. White cowls on their heads and white draperies to their feet rendered recognition impossible.

"Look here, chuck this tomfoolery at once, and—and I'll see what I can do about it!" finished Carthew lamely. He could have bitten his tongue off the moment he had said it. It showed that he was unnerved—and nothing more was needed to encourage the mysterious Fascist Band, if they needed encouragement at all.

"Are you prepared to answer for your crimes to the council of the Fascist Band?" demanded the Dictator grimly.

"No!" snapped Carthew decidedly. "Get out of my study, all of you! I shall investigate this in the morning."

"Ha, ha! The prisoner seeks to intimidate us!" said the Dictator, with a faint chuckle. "So! Bring him along, brothers!"

"You dare—" began Carthew.

His protests ended in a gasp of alarm, as seemingly numberless hands grasped him and dragged him bodily out of bed.

"If you resist, it will go all the more hardly with you!" rapped the Dictator.

"You—you—you're not going to take me out of the study in my pyjamas!" roared Carthew indignantly. "I'll—"

"Gag the prisoner!" snapped the Dictator. "He will raise his voice and bring succour. Good!"

"I'll shout! I'll— Gerruugh! Gerrroooooogh! Mmmmmmm!"

Something soft and clinging was thrust into Carthew's mouth, and he bit savagely on it. It was a rubber sponge, and it defied Carthew's wildest champings.

"Let the prisoner have his dressing-gown," ordered the Dictator considerably. "He will have to stand a lengthy trial."

"Mmmmmooooogh! Gerrroooooogh!"

"If he ejects the gag see that it is replaced," commanded the Dictator coolly. "Blindfold him! Good! Now, quickly! This way with him."

Carthew, gurgling and spluttering, did not know where his mysterious captors hustled him. He only knew that they had left the Sixth Form passage behind, and that he was being rushed willy-nilly up a flight of stairs and along a corridor. Then he was shoved through a doorway and the bandage and the gag were removed.

Gasping from the exertion, Carthew stared round the

room. He was familiar with every nook and corner of Rookwood's ancient pile, but with a startled sensation he realised that he had never seen this place before.

Shadowy figures moved silently on every side, but that was not the most surprising circumstance.

The walls appeared to be draped with a dark material, and a canopy overhung the farther end of the room. Beneath this, on a dais, was a draped throne—or so it appeared in the light of half a dozen candles.

Carthew gave a gasp. "Mum-mum-my hat! Where on earth is this?" he ejaculated involuntarily.

"Usher the prisoner forward!" commanded the Dictator coolly. "The mystic rites of the accused will now be performed."

Carthew set his teeth. He had an uncanny feeling that he was hopelessly in the power of these white-robed beings. And the uncertainty of their identity was maddening.

With measured steps, the Dictator paced his way to the throne, before which he bowed three times. Carthew watched almost fascinatedly. The Dictator turned and held up a short wand.

"Let the prisoner approach!" Carthew suffered himself meekly to be led forward, half-way to the throne. Two white-robed figures stood on each side of him, and two more followed behind. He had no chance of escape.

"You are required to answer the questions of the council," announced the Dictator grimly. "You will do so with accuracy, and I may warn you for your own good to adhere closely to the truth."

"What's the meaning of all this—this nonsense?" snarled the prisoner.

"In accordance with the ancient rites of our court," continued the Dictator, unmoved, "you are given the choice of three tests of innocence. You are accused of misdeeds to the common woe in this our school of Rookwood. You have overridden the rights and privileges of freedom in a tyrannical manner; you have vented personal spite in the guise of authority. Now you are called before the Grand High Council of the Fascist Band of Rookwood, before the Dictator whose lightest word is law, unto the death. Do you prefer the alternatives to a full and fair trial? If you can pass the tests, you may go scot-free."

"T-t-tests?" stuttered Carthew dazedly.

"The test of water," responded the Dictator coolly. "You may place your hand in boiling water in view of the court. If your hand is unhurt, you will be acquitted without a stain on your character."

"You young fool!"

"The prisoner refuses the test of water. The test by the mouth is second. Take a handful of rice, place it in the mouth, and blow. If the rice comes forth dry, the prisoner is guilty. If it remains in the mouth, innocent. Do you accept the test?"

"No!" snarled Carthew.

"The test by iron is the third and last alternative. Have we the iron bar heated?"

"Red-hot and glowing," answered one of the robed figures.

"You are required to carry the red-hot bar three paces, when you may let it drop," announced the Dictator. "If your hand is not burnt—"

"You cheeky fag—"

"We shall release you," continued the Dictator imperturbably. "If it is burnt, you will be judged guilty. Do you accept this test?"

"No!" hooted Carthew, beside himself with anger.

"Very well. The prisoner refuses all three of the tests for innocence. He will now have a full and fair trial—at his own request. The weight of evidence proving his guilt notwithstanding, he is entitled to his defence. Do you wish to defend yourself, prisoner?"

Carthew ground his teeth. Anger and apprehension were making it difficult for him to speak.

"He does not. Does any one wish to defend him?"

Apparently no one did.

"Then the council itself will state its charges. I hereby administer a last warning to the prisoner. If he refuses to defend himself, the court may deal harshly with him. So harshly that he will remember their sentence for the rest of his days. I warn him that the weight of evidence is overwhelming."

"I'll—I'll—wait till I get you to-morrow!" hissed Carthew.

The Dictator did not reply.

With stately dignity he ascended to the dais and took his seat on the draped throne, the wand grasped in his hand.

In dead silence the Dictator waved the wand three times over the assembly.

"The court of the Grand High Council of the Fascist Band of Rookwood is now open. Mark Carthew, you are standing on trial!"

In the Hands of the Fascists!

"PRISONER, you are arraigned—"

"You fool—"

"Arraigned upon a number of charges," continued the Dictator evenly.

"You—you, oh, just you wait, you young imps!" gasped Carthew.

"Most of these, I find," went on the Dictator, referring to a paper which was handed to him by an assistant, "to be of considerable magnitude. The prisoner will do well to contain his impatience and answer these charges in a manly and straightforward manner."

Carthew spluttered. "This court is not prejudiced," said the Dictator judicially. "But it is to be hoped that the prisoner will realise the seriousness of his position."

There was the faintest suspicion of a chuckle at that, but a motion of the Dictator's wand of office silenced it at once. There was no chuckle from Carthew. The prefect was almost inarticulate with anger.

The startled sensation which he had felt at first was wearing off, and giving place to a deep and burning rage. Carthew yearned to lay his hands on the robed forms—to rip off their black masks and reveal their identities. But the masks concealed their faces completely, and the robes and cowls rendered them totally unrecognisable.

Possibly Carthew did not realise the seriousness of his position. He regarded it as a reckless jape on the part of the Fourth—and he had a pretty shrewd suspicion of the identity of the Dictator. That he was entirely in the hands of the Fascist Band did not occur to him with any force.

His eyes glittered as the Dictator's steady voice droned on.

"The first charge which I have to bring against you, Mark Carthew, is one of chastising one Arthur Edward Lovell for no justifiable reason. Have you any plea to make?"

"Hang you!" snarled the prisoner.

"You are recommended to plead bad temper," advised the Dictator solemnly. "It is the only chance of mitigating the sentence."

"You—you—" Carthew's utterance trailed off again as his rage overcame him.

"The prisoner refuses to plead," announced the Dictator calmly. "The next charge will be brought. The prisoner, having been amply repaid for the chastisement he gave Lovell, by bringing Mr. Dalton into the matter, got the whole of the Fourth gated. What do you say to that?"

"I'll skin you by inches!" promised Carthew grimly.

"The prisoner has nothing to say in his defence. The third charge is that he deliberately took advantage of the position of the Fourth in their Form master's eyes, to inflict summary and unjust punishment on various members of the Form. Think well before refusing to plead, Carthew. This court cannot commend your present attitude."

"Look here, how much more of this tomfoolery?" roared Carthew savagely. "Release me at once—do you hear? By gad, I'll make it warm for you in the morning, if you don't!"

"It is of no avail for the prisoner to raise his voice," responded the Dictator evenly. "We are to take it, brothers, that Carthew refuses to plead. You have all heard the case against him stated. Is he guilty or not guilty?"

Every robed arm in the dim-lit chamber was raised simultaneously. From every throat came the same pronunciation: "Guilty!"

The Dictator bowed.

Carthew's anger abated a little. There was something ominous about the calm deliberations of the Fascists. His wrath had failed signally to cow them. To what lengths might they go—feeling themselves secure behind their disguises? Carthew shivered at that thought.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE.

LOVELL minor, a fag 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 Fiscal Four, he meets the rascally bookmaker and forces him to give up the fag's I.O.U. To level matters, Punter offers to liquidate the debts of CARTHEW of the Sixth, providing he will help him score off Jimmy Silver & Co. Carthew realises he must obey the captain or face the consequences of an exposure at the school.

And whilst the bullying prefect is pondering uneasily over the subject, Jimmy Silver & Co. are scheming a deep plot against him, which they feel sure will level all the old scores between them.

(Now read on.)



He clenched his fists as the Dictator faced him again. "The sentence of the Grand High Council will now be carried out," announced the Dictator grimly. "The prisoner is requested to bear in mind that this is the first punishment—the warning. If the Band is called upon to deal a second time with the same offender, much more serious measures will be taken. Seize him!"

Carthew began to struggle, but he had no chance. Many hands pinioned him, and he was dragged towards a chair which stood in a shadowy corner of the chamber. Plumped on the chair, the prefect could do nothing but gasp and splutter and glare ferociously at the masked and hooded heads which gathered round him.

"Brother Ivan, have you the shears?" asked the Dictator coolly.

Carthew jumped.

"O Mighty One, I have!"

"Then kindly proceed."

"You—you dare!" hooted Carthew, in dire alarm. "You touch my hair with those, and I'll—I'll—"

"Silence!" thundered the Dictator.

Carthew relapsed into silence involuntarily. He hardly knew whether he was awake or dreaming as a hooded figure leaned over him, and a huge pair of shears began to clip among his hair.

Clip, clip, clip!

The shears were not suited to the work, but that circumstance did not appear to trouble the Fascist brother who wielded them.

As it happened, Carthew needed a hair-cut. In the next few minutes he received one—gratis. Locks of hair began to fall in Carthew's lap, and he gave a gasp of dismay. It was not a dream—far from it. At each clip of the shears a fresh lock fell from Carthew's head.

"You—you young criminals! What shall I look like after this?" hissed the prefect.

"Rather distinguished, I shouldn't wonder!" answered the Dictator, with a sound that might have been a suppressed chuckle. "Let him down lightly, Brother Ivan. He will be able to get a close crop at the barber's, and hide it afterwards."

"Lots more left yet, O Mighty One. The punishment of the Grand High Council must be executed in full."

"So be it."

Clip, clip!

To Carthew, it did not seem possible that there could be a solitary hair left intact on his scalp. And still the shears continued their deadly clipping—and still the locks fell into the prefect's lap. But the clipping ceased at last, and the operator stepped back.

"I think that satisfies the sentence, O Mighty One. If we go any further he will be disfigured for weeks."

Carthew needed a haircut, and in a few moments he received one—gratis!

"And that is not the intention of the council—at present," agreed the Dictator.

Carthew gritted his teeth, and his eyes gleamed burningly on the masked faces. At that moment he would willingly have given a term's pocket-money to know who was behind those masks—so that he could bring them to an awful justice when he escaped.

"The second part of the sentence will now follow," announced the Dictator calmly. "Brother Vladimir, have you the scissors?"

"You—you touch me again, you young villains, and I'll have you flogged till you can't crawl!" vowed Carthew desperately.

"Here are the scissors, O Mighty One," answered one of the robed figures.

"You will trim the prisoner's eyebrows," commanded the Dictator.

"Just you dare!" breathed Carthew.

His face was crimson as Brother Vladimir bent over him. He jerked his head back as the scissors tweaked at his eyebrows.

"Mind your eye!" warned the operator. "Keep steady, and I'll do my best. If you move, you never know, do you?"

With eyes that fairly burned, Carthew watched the operator attending to his eyebrows. He had no choice. He did not want his eye poked out.

Trimming Carthew's eyebrows did not take long. But the prefect had a peculiar appearance by the time it was done.

"You—you— What do I look like?" demanded Carthew, torn between fear and anguish.

"Just civilised—but no more," answered the Dictator. "Prepare for the third part of the sentence."

"Wha-a-at?" Carthew gasped. The next moment he opened his mouth and began to yell in good earnest. Whether he could be heard he did not know—but anything was better than meekly submitting to his fate.

"Help! Help! Help!"

"Gag him!" snapped the Dictator.

"Help! Help! Hel—wurrroogh! Gug-gug-gug! Crooogh!"

With a sponge impeding his speech, Carthew relapsed suddenly to wild gurglings. A handkerchief was whipped out and bound round his face, preventing him from ejecting the gag.

"Brother Serge, have you the oils?" said the Dictator.

"Here, O Mighty One."

"Then begin your task."

(The mysterious Fascist band have not finished with Carthew yet. Don't miss next week's long instalment of this fine story, chums.)

A WORD WITH YOUR EDITOR.

A NOVEL RAILWAY GAME!

IN this week's bumper issue of our companion paper, the "Magnet," there is included a novel railway game which two, three, or four people can play at a time. All Gemites should get a copy of this week's "Magnet," for there are hours of fun and amusement to be obtained from this railway game. In addition there is, of course, a stirring story of Harry Wharton & Co., the chums of Greyfriars, dealing with their extraordinary holiday adventures in Southern Seas, and another long instalment of "Gold For The Getting!"—an epoch-making yarn of a gold-rush to the Land of the Midnight Sun. As most of you fellows read our grand companion paper you know the high quality of its stories, and I'll be content to wind up with remarking that if any of you miss this week's treat you won't feel so pleased with yourselves when your pals tell you how wonderfully good it was.

HIDDEN NAMES!

Now for a word about our own programme of good things. In this week's number you have sampled our new feature "Pot Shots"—verbal footer shots that find the net every time! I venture to think that this small footer corner will be a great success. Now in next week's GEM there's another new feature to look forward to, which takes the form of an anagram. For the benefit of those of you who are unacquainted with the word, let me give you the dictionary reading of it. "Anagram: A word or sentence formed by transposing the letters of another word or sentence." Sounds rather dull, doesn't it, but there's nothing dull in next week's anagram. Under the title of "Hidden Names" you will find a number of sentences which, when

you have studied them carefully, reveal the names of several well-known St. Jim's characters. Gemites will get quite a lot of amusement out of this new feature, believe me. Look out, then, chums, for the first of our "Hidden Names" anagrams.

ANNUALS YOU SHOULD HAVE!

Most of you fellows know by this time that an old friend of ours, the "Holiday Annual," is again on the market, as fresh and as interesting as ever. For six shillings this jolly volume is a real bargain. Now if you are a hobbyist there is a special annual prepared for you, which deals in fascinating style with practically every hobby under the sun. Experts have contributed their knowledge of subjects ranging from boatbuilding to wireless and stamps in a delightfully easy-to-follow manner. This volume will make a fine extra to your workshop library. It costs six shillings, and it will pay for itself many times over in the course of a year. Ask your newsgent to show you a copy of "Every Boy's Hobby Annual," then you will be able to see for yourselves just how good and really useful it is. 'Nuff said.

NEXT WEDNESDAY'S PROGRAMME:

"UNDER GUSSY'S WING!"

By Martin Clifford.

That's the title of next week's long complete story of Tom Merry & Co., who are now back at St. Jim's after their adventurous holiday in the West. Don't miss this yarn whatever you do, boys.

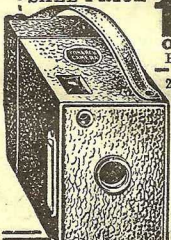
"THE ROOKWOOD DICTATOR!"

By Owen Conquest.

Look out, as well, for another instalment of this grand school serial. It's well up to standard. Don't forget, either, our footer corner, "Pot Shots," or the first of those anagrams I spoke about early on, which will appear under the title of "Hidden Names."

YOUR EDITOR.

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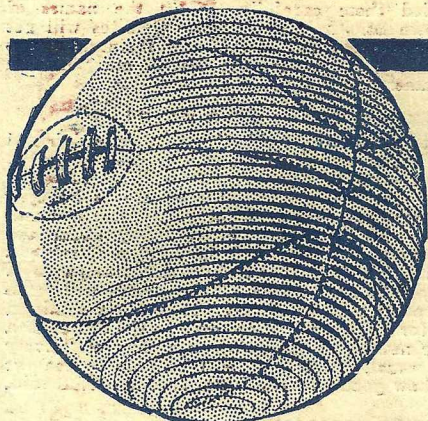
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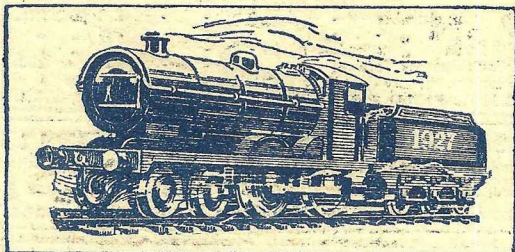
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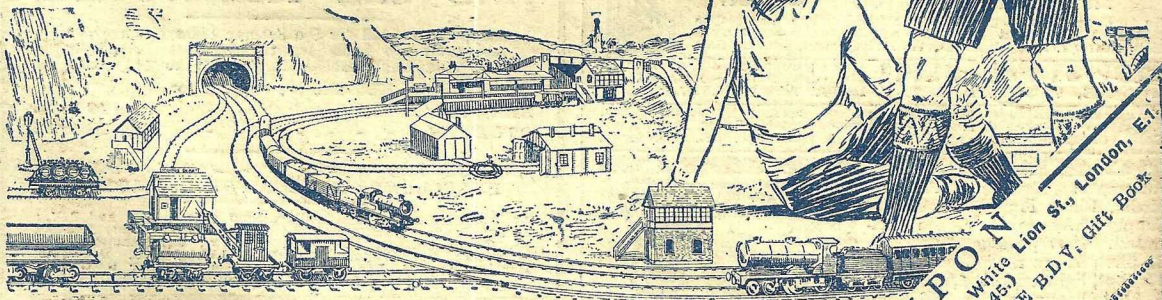
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