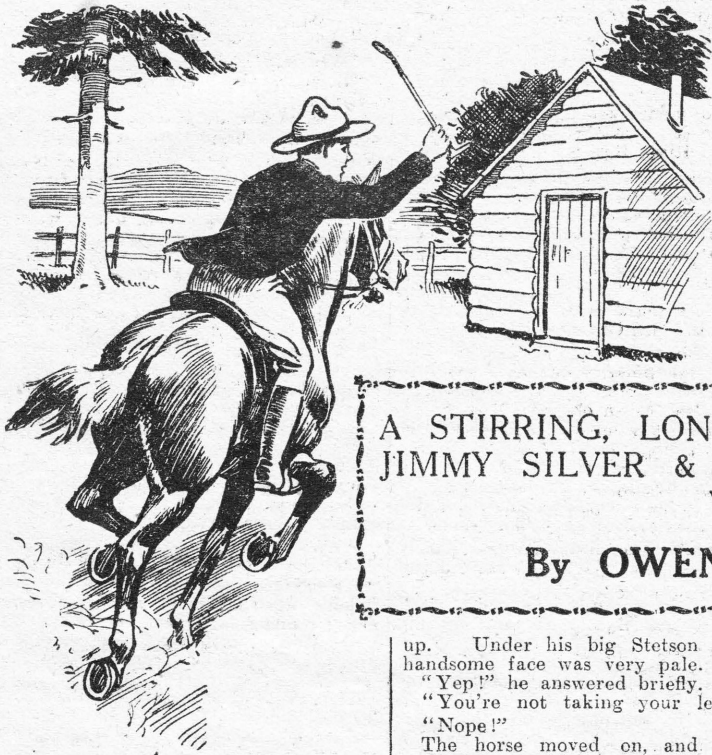


A COWPUNCHER IN TROUBLE!

When Skitter Dick is faced with a grave danger he finds a ready ally in Jimmy Silver, who does not hesitate to render aid to his cowpuncher chum!



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Strangeness of Skitter Dick!

SKITTER DICK, the handsome cowpuncher of Windy River, came riding up the trail from Mosquito, and Jimmy Silver glanced at him in surprise. Only that morning Skitter Dick had ridden away cheerily to the township on a three days' leave, and here he was back again in the golden Alberta afternoon.

He had ridden away in his best clothes, bright and cheery, waving his Stetson hat to the crowd of cowpunchers at the bunkhouse. He looked very different now.

His reins dangled over his horse's neck, the animal being left to its own guidance. The rider's handsome, sunburnt, usually reckless face was pale and troubled, his lip drooped, and he did not raise his eyes for a moment. A glance was enough to tell that something had happened to Skitter Dick, though Jimmy Silver could not venture a guess at what that "something" was.

But the Rookwood junior felt concerned. He liked Skitter Dick, as all the Windy River outfit did. His chums liked him.

Dick had taught the juniors how to handle a lasso and all they had been able to learn of handling a Canadian canoe on the Windy River. He was always good-natured and good-tempered, and generally in the best of spirits. Jimmy could not help feeling concerned.

He stepped out into the trail as the horseman came up at a walking pace, and waved his hand.

"Back already, Dick?" he called out. Skitter Dick gave a start, and looked

A STIRRING, LONG COMPLETE TALE OF
JIMMY SILVER & CO'S ADVENTURES OUT
WEST!

By OWEN CONQUEST.

up. Under his big Stetson hat his handsome face was very pale.

"Yep!" he answered briefly.

"You're not taking your leave?"

"Nope!"

The horse moved on, and Jimmy walked by its side towards the ranch.

"Anything up?" he asked.

The cowboy did not reply.

"Nothing gone wrong, I hope?" asked Jimmy Silver.

He remembered that Skitter Dick was much given to the game of draw-poker, and he wondered whether the cowpuncher had been "skinned" at that game by the men at Mosquito, and had lost his little all on the first day of his leave. That was not a very uncommon experience for a reckless cowpuncher.

Dick nodded.

"I've seen a man!" he muttered, speaking more to himself than to the Rookwood junior.

"Is that all?"

"That's all!"

"And he cleaned you out?" asked Jimmy Silver sympathetically.

"Eh! Nope! Just seen him, that's all."

"Well, my hat!" said Jimmy, in amazement. Why "seeing a man" at Mosquito should produce this startling effect on Skitter Dick was a deep mystery to Jimmy.

Skitter Dick gave his horse a touch of the spur, and the animal broke into a trot. The usually sociable fellow apparently did not want Jimmy Silver's company just then.

Jimmy Silver looked after him, and followed on towards the ranch. He saw the cowpuncher alight at the bunkhouse, where three or four of his comrades surrounded him, with questions, evidently astonished by his sudden and unexpected return.

Skitter Dick hardly replied to their questions. He hitched his horse, and went into the bunkhouse.

Jimmy Silver's chums, Lovell and

Raby and Newcome, met Jimmy as he came up to the ranch-house.

"Seen Skitter Dick?" asked Lovell.

"Yes. He looks knocked over."

"He does, and no mistake! The boys are all wondering about it," said Lovell.

"He's had some bad luck at Mosquito."

"He told me he'd seen a man there,"

said Jimmy.

"How could that hurt him?"

"Blessed if I know—unless the man had a face like yours, old chap!"

"Fathead!"

"I'm sorry if he's down on his luck," said Raby. "He's a good chap."

"One of the best!" said Newcome.

"What about tea?"

The juniors went into the ranch-house, where they joined Mr. Hudson Smedley in the dining-room.

"Skitter Dick's back, Cousin Smedley," said Jimmy, as he sat down.

The rancher raised his eyebrows.

"Back already?"

"He's just ridden in."

Mr. Smedley smiled.

"That's a change for Skitter Dick. He generally hangs out leave till the latest possible moment."

Woo Sing, the chore-boy, put his pig-tailed head in at the door.

"Skittie Dickee wantee speakee boss," he said.

"Tell him to come in."

The chore-boy retired, and a minute later the cowpuncher's heavy tread was heard.

Skitter Dick came in, looking troubled and uneasy, twisting his Stetson hat nervously in his brown hands.

"Well, what's the trouble, Dick?" asked the rancher, with a smile. "Anything I can do?"

He concluded, as Jimmy Silver had done, that the reckless cowboy had been trying his luck at the fascinating but extremely uncertain game of draw-poker; and having gone for wool, had returned shorn. But it was soon clear that the trouble was deeper than that.

"Yes, boss," said Skitter Dick. "I—

I ain't gone on having a holiday jest now. I've come back."

Skitter Dick's Secret!

"How much?" asked Hudson Smedley, laughing.

"It ain't dust, boss!"

"Then what—"

"Spike Thompson's for Lone Pine," said Dick.

"Yes."

"I've spoken to him, and he's agreeable. Will you send me on duty at Lone Pine, boss?"

Rancher Smedley looked fixedly at the cowpuncher, who stood before him, still twisting his hat in nervous fingers, with his eyes on the floor. Skitter Dick's peculiar request made the juniors look at him, too, in surprise.

Lone Pine was a good five miles from the ranch-house, and it was a solitary stockman's hut, with boundless prairie on three sides, and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains on the other. It was the least pleasant duty of a Windy River man to be put at Lone Pine. Nobody liked spending days and days by himself, with no company but the steers and a dog.

Anybody at Windy River was welcome to anybody else's turn of duty at Lone Pine; but nobody ever wanted it. For a man to request to be sent there out of his turn was simply amazing.

"What on earth's the trouble, Dick?" asked Mr. Smedley at last. "You can't want to relieve Spike at Lone Pine."

"That's jest what I do, want, boss!" mumbled the cowpuncher, his troubled face reddening. "Spike's agreeable."

Hudson Smedley smiled.

"I've no doubt he is—he would be. Well, if you want to take Spike's place for the week, Dick—"

"Jest that, boss."

"You can arrange it with Spike, of course. But don't you want your leave?"

"Nope!"

"Well, suit yourself, of course," said the puzzled rancher.

"Thanks, boss!"

And Skitter Dick ducked his head and backed out of the room, plainly relieved to be gone.

Mr. Smedley wrinkled his brows in a perplexed way.

"That's the first time on record that a man has asked to be sent to Lone Pine," he said. "I hope there's nothing wrong with Dick. He's one of my best men."

And the juniors echoed the hope. A little later they went out to see Dick off. But the handsome cowboy was already gone. When the outfit gathered at the cook-house, where Baldy handed out supper, they were all discussing Skitter Dick, and wondering what it meant.

Jimmy Silver & Co. wondered, too, little dreaming of what they were to learn on the subject in a very short time.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Sampson Smith of Sacramento!

"Hi!" "A giddy stranger!" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

It was the following day, and the chums of Rookwood were riding on the prairie trail, a few miles from the ranch, when a horseman came in sight from the direction of Mosquito.

He stopped his horse, and waved his hand to the juniors and shouted:

"Hi!"

The Fistical Four of Rookwood good-naturedly turned their horses in his direction. They could see that the man was a stranger in the locality, and guessed that he had lost his way, or was uncertain of it.

They did not much like the stranger's looks as they drew nearer.

He was dressed in town clothes, only his riding-boots and Stetson hat being in keeping with his surroundings. His face was not prepossessing. It was a hard, grim face, with thin features and hard, thin mouth, and little grey eyes that looked as sharp as gimlets. But though the Rookwood chums were not taken with the stranger's looks, they were civil and obliging.

"Lost your way?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"I guess I haven't exactly lost it, but I ain't too durned sure of it," answered the horseman. "Is this trail right for the Windy River Ranch?"

"Right as rain," answered Jimmy. "Keep straight on, and you'll see the chimneys of the ranch house soon."

"Good!" The stranger's penetrating eyes scanned the juniors. "You youngsters belong to Windy River, perhaps?"

"We're staying there."

"From the Old Country, what?"

Jimmy Silver grinned. The Rookwooders were picking up the ways of the Canadian West, but apparently it was still clear to an observer that they were tenderfeet from the Old Country.

"That's so," answered Jimmy.

"I reckoned so."

"Well, there's your way," said Lovell, who was not overpleased at being recognised for a tenderfoot at the first glance. And he made a move to ride on.

"Hold on, will you?" said the hard-faced man. "I reckon I'd like to speak to you if you're at Windy River."

"Go it!" said Jimmy.

"Hudson Smedley is boss there, I'm told at Mosquito?"

"Yes; he's my cousin," said Jimmy.

"Stayed there long?"

Jimmy grinned again. He did not think that the hard-faced man was a Canadian; and he was sure now that the man came from the other side of "the line." He had already had some experience of the American way of asking questions without ceremony.

"A few weeks," he said. "You're from the States, I suppose?"

"How did you know that?" asked the man, giving him a quick suspicious glance.

"Oh, I sort of thought so!" smiled Jimmy Silver. "Anything more you'd like to know, Mr.—"

He paused.

"Smith," said the stranger. "Sampson Smith—that's my name. I'm a drummer, I guess."

The juniors already knew that a "drummer" was American for a commercial traveller.

"Not much drumming to be done at Windy River, I should think," said Raby.

"Oh, you never know!" said Mr. Smith. "Besides, I'm expecting to see a friend there. As you belong there, maybe you'd know him."

"Most likely," said Jimmy. "We know all the outfit, of course."

"Name of Lee," said Mr. Smith, his keen eyes on the juniors.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"I haven't heard the name of Lee there," he said. "Of course, he may go by a nickname—most of the men do."

"Very likely, I guess," said Mr. Smith, with a peculiar grin. "But I've got his picture here. You'll know it if you've seen him."

He felt in an inside pocket of his coat. The juniors waited, sitting their horses, and feeling not wholly easy. There was something about the

man they distrusted; his keen, penetrating eyes were so sly and watchful. He had said that it was a "friend" he was going to see at Windy River, but something in his look and tone put the idea into their heads that the man he was seeking was rather an enemy than a friend.

Mr. Sampson Smith drew out a small photograph, and held it up for the juniors to look at.

"Skitter Dick!" exclaimed Lovell, in surprise.

Mr. Smith's eyes gleamed.

"You know him?" he exclaimed.

Jimmy looked keenly at the photograph. It was that of a handsome young fellow, with clean-shaven face and close-cropped chestnut hair. Skitter Dick wore his hair rather long; but, excepting for that difference, it was obviously Skitter Dick.

"That's one of the cowpunchers, Mr. Smith," said Jimmy Silver, rather reluctantly. "Is that your friend?"

"I guess so," grinned Mr. Smith. "Skitter Dick, hay? That's his name in these parts. A queer name."

"It means Mosquito Dick," said Lovell. "They call mosquitoes skitters."

Sampson Smith nodded.

"Ever heard him talk about California?" he asked.

"No."

"No!" said Mr. Smith thoughtfully. "He wouldn't."

"Why shouldn't he, if he's been there?" asked Newcome.

"Waal, he might have his reasons, you know," said Mr. Smith, with a dry, unmusical laugh. "So he's a cowboy, is he?"

"Yes."

"Been long at the ranch, has he?"

"He was there when we came out from England," said Raby.

"And longer, I guess," remarked Mr. Smith.

"Look here, Mr. Smith," said Jimmy Silver abruptly. "Skitter Dick's one of the best fellows on the ranch. I don't know whether his name's Lee—I've never heard his surname that I remember. But he's a good chap, and if you've got anything against him—"

"Sure!" said Mr. Smith calmly. "I guess I saw him in Mosquito yesterday, but he lit out mighty sudden."

Jimmy gave a start.

"Oh! You're the man he saw in Mosquito!" he ejaculated.

"Oh, he saw me, did he?" grinned Sampson Smith. "I reckoned he had, by the way he lit out."

Jimmy bit his lip.

"Then he's not a friend of yours?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, he is!" grinned Mr. Smith. "A very old friend I'm keen to see. So old a friend that I'm going to take him away with me."

"Take him away?" exclaimed Raby.

"Sure! He's wanted in California, where he ain't been seen for some years now. I guess I've been looking for him a long time," said Mr. Smith, grinning. "You're talking to Detective Smith, and your Skitter Dick is Richard Lee, who shot a man at Sacramento and has been wanted ever since."

And with that stunning statement the hard-faced man jerked at his reins and rode away towards the ranch, leaving Jimmy Silver & Co. dumb-founded.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Jimmy Silver's Resolve!

JIMMY SILVER'S face was pale as he looked after the American detective. Mr. Sampson Smith, evidently greatly pleased by what he had learned from the juniors, was riding off at a gallop—sure of his prey now. Jimmy Silver was pale—and he was angry.

"The rotter!" he broke out at last. "He's after that chap, and he's tricked us into giving away a man who's been decent to us."

"I—I suppose that's his business," said Raby slowly. "But—but I say—it can't be true! He's a fool, and he's made a mistake!"

"He didn't look like a fool," said Newcome. "He doesn't look a nice man, but he certainly doesn't look a fool."

"That's so," said Raby.

Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath.

"I don't believe a word of it!" he exclaimed. "We know the chap; we know he's a decent fellow. There's a ghastly mistake somewhere. He had no right to tell us he was Skitter Dick's friend, and get us to help him. It was a dirty trick!"

"The harm's done now," said Lovell dismally. "Anyhow, he would soon have found out what he wanted to know at the ranch."

"Yes; but—"

"It looks pretty bad, too," said Lovell, in a low voice. "Skitter Dick saw him at Mosquito yesterday, and came back, though he was on leave. Then he asked to be sent to Lone Pine. Looks as if he wants to keep out of sight."

Jimmy Silver nodded slowly.

"I—I suppose so. All the same, I believe that Skitter Dick is a decent chap, and that he's accused of something he never did," said Jimmy Silver. "I'm going to warn him."

"Phew!"

"We don't even know the man's a detective at all," argued Jimmy. "We've only got his word for it, and he doesn't look a man to trust. All we really know is that he's Skitter Dick's enemy, hunting for him. We're bound to put the chap on his guard. I'd rather trust Skitter Dick than that hawk-faced bounder any day."

"Yes, rather!" said Lovell heartily. "I never thought of that. If he wanted us to believe him he should have shown us his official papers."

"But now—" said Newcome.

"I'm going to ride to Lone Pine," said Jimmy. "You fellows get on to the ranch, and don't say a word about me. Keep an eye on that fellow, and find out whether he's genuine, if you can."

"I suppose that's the best thing," said Lovell.

Jimmy nodded, and rode away without saying more. There was no time to be lost if Skitter Dick was to be warned.

Lovell & Co. followed the trail to the ranch, with very thoughtful looks. They rode hard, and soon came in sight of Mr. Sampson Smith again. They overtook the lean, hard-faced gentleman as he dismounted at the ranch.

Hudson Smedley came out into the porch, and Sampson Smith was speaking to him as the three juniors rode up.

"You've got a man here named Skitter Dick?"

"He's in the outfit," said the rancher.

"Send for him, will you?"

The big rancher eyed the hard-faced man coolly.

"What do you want?" he asked.

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"The man's away from the ranch at the present moment."

Mr. Sampson Smith smiled.

"He's wanted for shooting a man at Sacramento three years ago," he said tersely. "There's a sergeant of the Canadian Police at Mosquito, with authority to take him and hand him over to me. I look to you, sir, to see that he doesn't vamoose the ranch."

The rancher's face set grimly.

"If what you say is correct, every man here will stand by to back up the law," he said. "But Skitter Dick's in my outfit, and he's going to have a fair show, and I'm going to see that he gets it."

"Sure!" assented Mr. Smith amicably. "Will you send a man to Mosquito to fetch Sergeant Kerr, with a message from me?"

"Certainly. Come indoors."

The hard-faced man from California followed Mr. Hudson Smedley into the ranch house. Lovell & Co. exchanged looks of dismay.

If Sampson Smith's statement was correct, and there was a sergeant of the Canadian Mounted Police assigned to help him in securing the wanted man, it looked black enough for Skitter Dick. And Jimmy Silver had gone to warn him—to warn a fugitive from justice! That was a serious enough reflection for the chums of Rookwood. But they clung to the hope that there was a mistake somewhere—that their faith in the handsome cowpuncher was well-founded, in spite of appearances.

Mr. Sampson Smith was at the supper-table that evening, enjoying the hospitality of the Canadian rancher, and Hudson Smedley was civil to him: but there were three at the table, at least, who wished Mr. Sampson Smith anywhere else on the American Continent, from Cape Horn to Alaska—and the farther off the better!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Warning!

JIMMY SILVER dashed up to the stockman's hut at Lone Pine with Blazer at full gallop.

It was a lumber hut, with only one room, standing by a little spring, by which grew a single tall pine-tree, from which the place took its name. There were two or three horses in a barbed-wire corral, and a dog lay asleep outside the door of the hut; but there were no other signs of life.

Jimmy Silver drew in Blazer and jumped down.

The dog opened his eyes and gave a low, threatening growl. Jimmy called to him cheerily. Fortunately he had already made the canine guardian's acquaintance, and the dog recognised him.

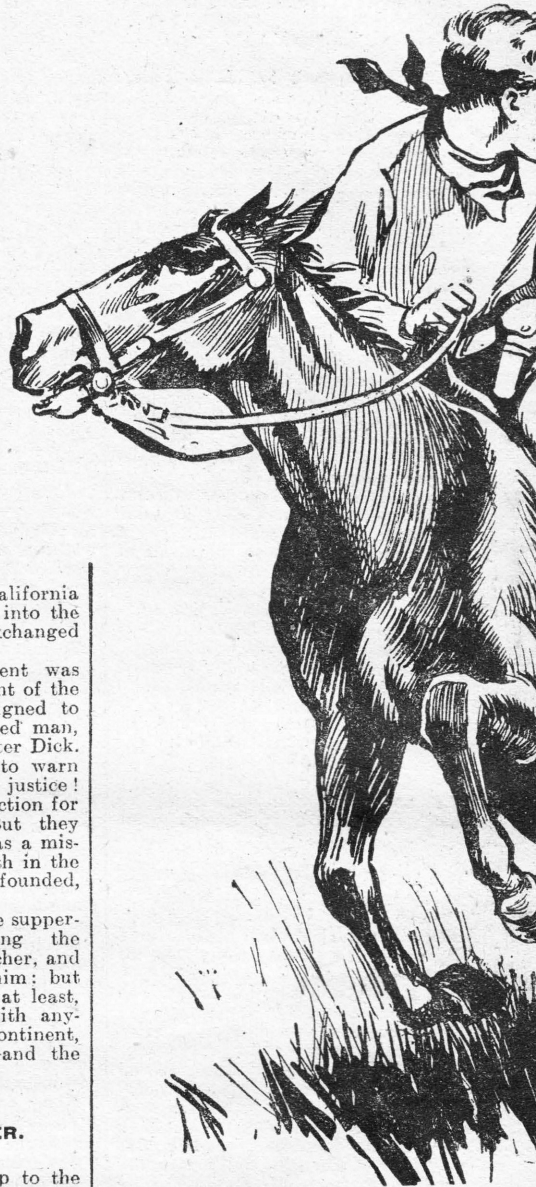
"All serene, old dog!" called out Jimmy, and he strode up to the door of the stockman's hut.

"Skitter Dick!"

He knocked on the door with the butt of his riding-whip as he called. There was no answer from within, and Jimmy pushed the door open. It was not fastened.

"You here, Dick?"

The Skitter was not there. Jimmy glanced round the interior of the shack. The fire was cold in the iron stove, and



there were the remnants of a cold meal on the rough table. Skitter Dick was absent on his duties.

Jimmy set his lips.

It had not occurred to him that the cowpuncher might not be at the hut; though he might have foreseen it, for of course the stockman would not spend much of his time indoors—little more than was needed for meals and sleep, in fact.

"Dash it all! What's to be done?"

Jimmy stood in the doorway and scanned the surrounding plains. There were grazing steers in sight, but no rider. In the distance the foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains shut out the view, bathed in red light by the sun that was now sinking towards the far Pacific.

In which direction the Skitter had gone Jimmy could not guess. As for picking up his trail, that was out of the question for the schoolboy fresh from Rookwood. There were, indeed, crowds of horse-tracks and cow-tracks on the trampled ground before the hut, leading in almost every direction, and there would have been a wide choice even for a Canadian plainsman.

Jimmy Silver decided that he could only wait. It was getting on to sun-

THE ESCAPE! There was a yell from the troopers as Skitter Dick appeared mounted on his horse. The next moment the cowpuncher was riding like the wind for the foothills. Sampson Smith yelled to the troopers. "After him! Five hundred dollars to the man who takes him!" (See Chapter 7.)



likely to be anxious on this occasion, as Lovell & Co. would explain that their chum had gone for a ride, though they would not mention whither. Nevertheless, Jimmy would have been glad for Skitter Dick to come in, so that he could ride back to the ranch as quickly as possible.

Once or twice he started up at the sound of hoofs; but it was only the stirring of the animals in the corral, and he settled down again.

He had not found any lamp in the hut, and so when darkness had fallen the room was only dimly lighted by the glow from the stove. Lights and shadows danced round the dim room.

There was a sudden dash of horse's hoofs, and he heard a rider alight and a welcoming bark from the dog. Evidently the Skitter had returned at last.

Jimmy Silver rose from the bench as the athletic figure of Skitter Dick loomed in the open doorway.

The cowpuncher was startled to find the door open, apparently, and he stopped there, and Jimmy started as he heard a sudden ominous sound.

It was the click of a revolver.

"Hands up!"

Jimmy did not answer; he was too astonished to speak. The glow from the open front of the stove fell on the handsome cowboy in the doorway, and showed his right hand raised, with a revolver in it.

It did not occur to Jimmy for the moment that he was hidden in shadow beside the stove. All that Skitter Dick could see was that someone was in the shadowy hut.

Savagely, fiercely, the command was rapped out again.

"Hands up, you pesky skunk, or I'll drop you where you stand! By gum, I guess I'll drop you anyhow, you sneaking coyote!"

"Dick!" shouted Jimmy.

"Wha-a-at?"

"It's me—Jimmy Silver."

"Gee-whiz!"

The cowpuncher hurriedly thrust the revolver back into his belt. He came rather uncertainly into the hut.

"You, Jimmy!"

He tried to speak in his ordinary tones, but his voice was shaking.

"Yes."

"I—I reckoned—I couldn't see you in the dark, kid," stammered the cowpuncher. "What are you doing here, in the dark, too?"

"I couldn't find a lamp," said Jimmy. "I guess there isn't any old lamp. There's a candle."

Skitter Dick did not make any move to find the candle just then, however. He stood peering at Jimmy in the gloom.

"You ought to be indoors now, young Silver."

"I know."

"I—I guess you startled me," said Skitter Dick. "I reckoned you was some hobo that had dropped in." He paused a moment, and Jimmy saw his handsome face flush in the dim light of the stove. "No, darn it, I didn't, either! What's the good of lyin'? I reckoned you was a man I didn't want to see, Jimmy."

"The man you saw at Mosquito yesterday," said Jimmy.

Skitter Dick started.

"What do you know about that, young 'un?" he asked roughly.

"He's at the ranch now."

The Skitter drew a deep breath. His hand went to the butt of his revolver again for a moment.

"How do you know, Jimmy?"

"I met him on the trail from Mosquito," said Jimmy Silver quietly. "His name's Sampson Smith."

"You've got it."

"I—I came to warn you, Dick," faltered Jimmy.

"To warn me?"

"Yes. He's after you."

"He told you so?"

"Yes, and showed me your photograph."

"By gum, he did!"

"Dick"—Jimmy Silver's voice was low and earnest—"I know you're a decent man. I don't believe a word against you. But—but that man is after you, and he says he's a detective. He says that you shot a man in Sacramento."

The Skitter laughed huskily.

"He told you that, and you came to warn me?"

"Because I don't believe it," said Jimmy Silver stoutly. "But I know you're keeping out of his way. That's why you asked to be sent to Lone Pine instead of Spike, isn't it?"

"Sure."

"Well, then—"

"I guess I might have saved the trouble," said Skitter Dick drearily. "Soon as I saw his face in Mosquito I knowed that he was after me, and that he wouldn't let up. He was after me in California, and in Oregon, too, and I reckoned he never knew I was in Canada. But he nosed me out. Sampson Smith's the man for that. I figured it out that p'r'aps he hadn't seen me when I saw him at Mosquito, and that I'd keep out of his way by coming to Lone Pine. But he saw me. So he's at the ranch?"

"Yes."

"Asking after me, of course?"

"I—I suppose so," said Jimmy Silver.

"The boss'll tell him I'm at Lone Pine," said the Skitter, slowly and thoughtfully. "He won't come out here alone after me. He knows that I can handle a shooter. But they'll round me up now that he knows where I am. They'll have the Mounted Police on it as soon as he's sure of his game!"

Jimmy Silver shivered.

His faith in the handsome, good-natured cowpuncher was strong; but Skitter Dick's words sounded like a confession of guilt.

"Dick," faltered Jimmy—"Dick, old man, you've been jolly decent to me since I've been at the ranch. I don't believe what the man said. He looked like a rogue to me."

"He is a rogue," said Skitter Dick moodily. "One of the hardest cases in Frisco."

"But—but why should you fear him, then? I—I'd like to hear you say that it isn't true, Dick."

There was a long silence. Jimmy Silver felt as if his heart were sinking into his boots. Was it true? Had he ridden out to Lone Pine to warn a murderer against the officers of justice? It was a sickening thought to the Rookwood schoolboy.

"It was decent of you to come and give me the office, Jimmy," said the Skitter at last. "I'm obliged to you. I guess it's easy for me to make a break for the foothills from here if I

want. You'd better be humping it back to the ranch now."

He turned away, and fumbled in a cupboard and produced a candle. He lighted it at the stove, and stuck it in the neck of a bottle. It shed a glimmering light through the hut.

Jimmy Silver looked at the cowpuncher in the candle-light. Skitter Dick's face was pale and worn, but it did not, to Jimmy's eyes, look like that of a guilty man.

Jimmy laid his hand on the cowpuncher's arm.

"Is that man really a detective, Dick?"

"Sure!"

"And—and the Canadian authorities will help him to capture you?"

"I guess so."

"But—but it isn't true that—that—"

Jimmy stammered.

"True that I shot a man at Sacramento?" said Skitter Dick heavily.

"Yes, I guess that's true, too, Jimmy!"

Jimmy Silver gave an involuntary cry of horror and backed away.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Jimmy Silver's Trust!

SKITTER DICK passed his hand across his brow. The involuntary action of the schoolboy brought a crimson flush into his cheeks.

"I—I'd better go!" stammered Jimmy.

"I guess so."

Jimmy moved towards the door. The cowpuncher's eyes followed him, and he spoke again as Jimmy reached the doorway.

"Hold on a minute, kid!"

The Rookwood junior turned back.

"It's true that I shot Pablo Xemas at Sacramento," said Skitter Dick.

"But the man didn't tell you that there were three of them at me, with knives in their hands, and that if I hadn't used the shooter they'd have finished me."

Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath of relief.

"I might have guessed that," he said. "You fired in self-defence."

"Sure!"

"But—but can't you prove that?" asked Jimmy anxiously.

"I guess not. They got it all cut and dried," said Skitter Dick.

"There was two to swear agin me, and Sampson Smith, who was on the case, went in with them. They let him into the gang to get me fixed. I guess it's me for the electric chair if Smith gets his hands on me."

Jimmy Silver shuddered.

"He's a bad egg is Sampson Smith," said the Skitter. "Him and the other two—they won't let me rest. I reckoned I was clear of the whole gang here in Canada. But they'll have me for sure. It's the Gold Brick Mine they're after."

"The Gold Brick Mine!" repeated Jimmy blankly.

"They killed a man for it," said the cowpuncher, "and they never got the gold brick, either."

Skitter Dick paced restlessly to and fro in the stockman's hut, his sun-burnt face wrinkled with troubled thought. Jimmy Silver watched him in silence.

Outside there was a glimmer of silver light as the moon came up.

Skitter Dick stopped at last, and faced the schoolboy.

"I reckon they'll be here for me in the morning, if not to-night," he said.

"They'd have had me, sure, if you

hadn't come. I guess there's time for me to light out and give them the slip. I can hang around in the foothills, I guess, till there's a chance to run clear. But, look here, Jimmy, you believe me, don't you?"

"Every word!" said Jimmy.

"Will you do something for me?"

"Anything you like."

"I guess I've a chance to get clear, but Sampson Smith is like a bloodhound. He's nosed me out here, and he may run me down in the foothills. If he does, he's not going to have the gold brick. It's not his, Jimmy—it belongs to a dead man, but it's what he's after. He don't care a Continental red cent about putting my neck in the rope, if he can get hold of the gold brick. Will you take care of it?"

"Of—of what?"

"This."

Skitter Dick opened his shirt, and felt in an inside pocket. There was a glimmer of gold in the candlelight.

"Gold!" exclaimed Jimmy.

It was a nugget, oblong in form, about three inches in length, an inch wide, and half an inch thick. It was worn smooth on the surface, and looked like pure gold.

Jimmy Silver eyed it in astonishment as Skitter Dick placed it in his hand.

He noticed that on the flat surface of the gold brick there were deep markings, graven with a knife, and letters scratched.

"Put it out of sight," said the cowpuncher, with an uneasy glance at the door. "Don't look at it, Jimmy—it won't bring you luck."

"You want me to take care of this?"

"Sure!"

Jimmy Silver slipped the nugget into his hip-pocket.

"Safe there," he said. "I'll keep it till you ask me for it again, Dick."

"And not a word about it, kid."

"Not a word!" said Jimmy Silver.

Skitter Dick drew a breath of relief.

"You're only a kid and a tenderfoot, but I guess I can trust you," he said. "There's been lives lost for that bit of gold, Jimmy—more lives than you could count on the fingers of your hands. There'll be more, I reckon—mine as like as not. If I live, I reckon I'll ask you for that agin, Jimmy; but if you hear I'm dead, chuck it into the deepest part of the Windy River, and make an end of it. I guess I'd give it to you, but it wouldn't bring you any luck."

"I'll take care of it till you ask me for it," said Jimmy Silver. "But what are you going to do, Dick?"

"Light out at sun-up for the foothills," said Skitter Dick. "They'll get to Lone Pine and find me gone. I reckon you've saved my life by coming here, Jimmy. And now you get back to the ranch. Good-night, kid!"

Jimmy Silver held out his hand. His heart was full of sympathy and compassion for the hapless cowpuncher, whose every word he firmly believed. That handsome, simple, good-natured fellow was cast in a very different mould from Mr. Sampson Smith. Instinctively Jimmy Silver trusted him, and he knew that his faith was not misplaced.

Skitter Dick gripped his hand, with a faint smile; and then Jimmy left the stockman's lonely hut. A couple of minutes later he was in the saddle, riding in the moonlight for the Windy River Ranch.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Mounted Police!

"YOU'RE late, Jimmy."

"Yes." Hudson Smedley said no more than that. There was a shadow on the big rancher's frank face. He was smoking on the veranda with Mr. Sampson Smith when Jimmy came in.

"I reckon the messenger's at Mosquito by this time," Mr. Smith was saying as Jimmy went in.

"Sure!"

"Sergeant Kerr will be here before morning, then?"

"I guess so, if he saddles up at once."

Mr. Sampson Smith chuckled.

"Oh, I guess he'll do that," he said.

"How far did you tell me it was to Lone Pine?"

"Five miles."

"And the galoot can't get a warning from here?"

"No."

"I reckon I'm not taking chances, though," remarked Mr. Smith. "I start as soon as the sergeant gets here with his men. We ought to get to Lone Pine by sun-up."

"Very likely."

The rancher was trying to be civil to his guest, but it was not difficult to see that he did not like Mr. Smith of California. He glanced down at Jimmy Silver, who was hesitating in the porch.

"You'd better get your supper and get to bed, Jimmy," he said.

"Yes," stammered Jimmy.

He went into the ranch-house. But the words he had heard troubled him deeply, and he came out again. Mr. Sampson Smith was not letting the grass grow under his feet, and Jimmy remembered that Skitter Dick did not intend to quit Lone Pine before sunrise.

"Come, come, Jimmy!" said the rancher a little impatiently, as the Rookwood junior reappeared. "Where are you going?"

"I—I was thinking I—I'd have a ride before bed," said Jimmy.

The rancher gave him a very sharp look.

"You've ridden enough for to-day," he said curtly. "Go in, Jimmy."

"But I—I—"

"Get in!"

There was nothing for it but to obey. Jimmy was conscious that cousin Smedley had read his thoughts. He went in dismally, and found his chums waiting for him.

Mr. Sampson Smith gave a little chuckle. He had not been blind to the scene.

"I guess that kid heard what we were saying," he remarked.

"Obviously."

"You figure it out that he was going to ride over to Lone Pine and give Dick Lee the griffin?"

"The thought crossed my mind," said the rancher coldly.

"And mine!" said Mr. Sampson Smith. "That's the kid I met on the trail coming here; and I reckoned he was gone on Dick Lee by the way he spoke. I'm glad to see you're giving me a fair show here, Mr. Smedley."

The rancher gave him a grim look.

"If the Canadian authorities want Skitter Dick, they've a right to have him," he answered. "I know the man, and like him, and I don't believe a single word that you've told me about him. But if a party of the Canadian Mounted Police are after him, that's good enough for me; as soon as I see the uniforms I'm satisfied. A man gets a fair show in Canada, and

if Dick's extradited to answer for something he did in California, it's not for me to buck against the law. I believe that Skitter Dick's as innocent as a baby, and that he wouldn't dream of running. At the same time, nobody here is going to warn him that the Mounted Police are coming for him—if they're coming."

"You don't believe that?"

"I'll believe it when I see the M.P.'s," answered the rancher briefly. "I'm giving you a fair show—that's all."

Mr. Sampson Smith pursed his thin lips.

"I guess, if you'd lend me some of your men, the man could be rounded up with no more delay," he said.

The rancher shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Not a man here would lift a finger against Skitter Dick, even if I gave the order," he said. "He's a general favourite on the ranch, and right enough, too—he's a good fellow. And I guess, Mr. Smith, that the less you say about your job here the better."

"And why?"

"Because if the outfit knew you were after Dick, I reckon they'd run you into the Windy River, without troubling much whether you ever got out again!" said the rancher grimly.

Mr. Sampson Smith grinned.

"Then I reckon that mum's the word until the Mounted Police come," he drawled coolly. "They'll be here before sun-up, anyhow. And you'll see that that kid doesn't sneak out and ride over to Lone Pine?"

"I will."

The rancher left his guest smoking on the veranda, and entered the house. He found Jimmy Silver in troubled discussion with his chums. They ceased to speak as Mr. Hudson Smedley came in.

"You won't be going out again to-night, any of you young 'uns," said the rancher.

The juniors were silent.

"If you're fixing it up to drop from a window, and take a horse from the corral, forget it," said Mr. Smedley. "This is a case of the law, Jimmy, and it's a serious matter to buck against the Mounted Police. You know that I can't allow it."

"I—I know," stammered Jimmy.

"I don't believe a word against Skitter Dick, any more than you do," added Mr. Smedley. "But the law's the law, my boy, and the Mounted Police are not to be fooled with. I want your promise not to go out again till sun-up."

There was no help for it, and Jimmy Silver & Co. gave their word, and then went rather dismally to bed.

Jimmy slept little; and at the earliest gleam of dawn he was wide awake, listening to the sounds of trampling hoofs outside the ranch-house. He guessed that the Mounted Police had arrived.

He jumped out of bed and ran to the window.

Four men were dismounting before the ranch—a sergeant and three troopers. Among the latter Jimmy recognised his old acquaintance, Trooper Bright of Red Deer.

Mr. Sampson Smith, very wide-awake, had come out to meet the party in the dim half-light of dawn.

Jimmy Silver dressed hurriedly, and went down. Lovell and Raby and Newcome joined him on the stairs.

"They've come!" muttered Lovell.

Jimmy Silver nodded; and the four juniors of Rookwood went out of the ranch-house, to find Mr. Sampson Smith mounting his horse, and the troopers preparing to remount. It was clear

that not a moment was to be lost in reaching Lone Pine.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Skitter Dick's Last Chance!

PETE PETERS, the foreman of the ranch, came out of his cabin rubbing his eyes. Three or four cowpunchers turned out of the bunkhouse, hitching on their clothes as they came. The trampling of hoofs that announced the arrival of the Mounted Police had awakened others as well as Jimmy Silver.

"I guess you're an early bird, sergeant," said the foreman of Windy River. "I'll rouse out Baldy for some breakfast for your crowd."

Sergeant Kerr shook his head. "I guess we're not stopping, thanks," he said. "We're on duty. We want a guide to Lone Pine, if there's one handy."

Pete Peters eyed him, and eyed Mr. Sampson Smith with a very unfavourable eye.

"What's up?" he asked.

"That's not a question I can answer just now," said the sergeant. "I want Mr. Smedley to give me a guide to Lone Pine."

The rancher came out.

"That's soon done," he answered.

"Any man here knows the trail."

"Skitter Dick's at Lone Pine, boss," said Pete Peters, looking puzzled. "I say, Dick's not in trouble, is he?"

Mr. Smedley did not answer that question. He had his own causes for anxiety. To "buck" against the Canadian Mounted Police was impossible, as well as undesirable; but the rancher knew the wild spirits of the Windy River outfit. They were the men to stand by a comrade in trouble, recking very little of the consequences. It needed very little to make the Windy River Ranch the scene of a fearful outbreak that day.

"The men are doing their duty, Pete," said the rancher at last. "Will, you ride with them? I'd rather send you than a man."

"Count me in," said Pete.

And he strode away towards the corral.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked away with a careless air; but they did not walk far. They were too anxious about their cowpuncher pal to think of breakfast or anything else but Skitter Dick's danger. They led their horses out of the corral at the same time as the foreman. Pete glanced at them, and dropped a whisper to Jimmy Silver.

"You 'uns know anything of this?"

"Yes," whispered Jimmy; "Skitter Dick booked for trouble?"

"Awful trouble—and I know he's innocent."

"Well, I guess I don't savvy how you can know that, but I reckon I'm banking on Skitter agin that lantern-jawed American," said the ranch foreman. "Skitter's a good man. But dooty's dooty."

Pete Peters slung a gun on his saddle, and mounted, and joined Mr. Sampson Smith's party. They rode out over the prairie, and Mr. Smedley went back into the house, without noticing the Rookwood juniors. Jimmy Silver & Co. rode away after the Mounted Police.

The miles passed rapidly under the galloping hoofs.

The sun rose higher in the east, lighting the rolling prairie far and wide. In rosy sunlight the lonely stockman's hut came into sight at last.

Jimmy Silver eyed it anxiously. Had Skitter Dick already gone?

There was a sudden exclamation from Mr. Sampson Smith, and his keen, narrow eyes glittered.

"I guess we've got him!" Jimmy Silver's heart sank.

From the chimney of the lonely hut a thin column of smoke was rising against the sky. It was a proof that the hut was occupied. The cowpuncher was not yet gone.

Pete Peters looked round. "He's at home!" he remarked.

"I calculate!" grinned Mr. Smith.

"You want him bad?"

"I guess so."

"Well, you've got him, then!" drawled Pete Peters. "No need for me to go any farther, I reckon. I want some breakfast."

"Get back as soon as you like," said Sampson Smith.

And he rode past the foreman, followed by the Mounted Police. Pete Peters looked after him with a slow grin.

Crack!

Through the clear Alberta air the sudden report of the rifle rang out.

Sampson Smith swung round savagely in his saddle.

"You fool!" he roared. "Are you firing to warn him?"

Pete Peters looked at him over the smoking rifle.

"Can't a galoot shoot a rabbit for breakfast?" he asked.

The man from California muttered savagely.

"You were warning him!"

"You don't say!" said Pete Peters.

The man from the States spurred his horse furiously towards the hut. In the doorway of the hut a figure could be seen now, staring towards the advancing cavalcade.

The report of the rifle had reached the lonely cowpuncher.

For a second Skitter Dick was seen staring from the doorway of the hut. Then he disappeared within. A second later he emerged with his hat on, and darted into the barbed-wire corral; a few seconds more and he was mounted and riding like the wind for the foothills.

"Hurrah!" roared Lovell.

Sampson Smith yelled to the troopers.

"After him! Five hundred dollars to the man who takes Dick Lee!"

The sergeant and his men changed their course. They no longer headed for the hut, but struck across the prairie towards the fleeing figure of the long-haired cowpuncher.

Hunted and hunters disappeared over the rolling prairie towards the hills, riding furiously. Pete Peters gave the juniors a grin.

"Onlucky for Mr. Smith, me shooting at a rabbit jest then," he drawled. "And I never even hit the rabbit. I guess I never even seed one. I reckon we've got to get back to the ranch for grub."

And he grinned as he rode homeward.

"Skitter Dick's got his chance!" muttered Lovell. "Good for old Pete!"

"I hope he'll get clear!" muttered Jimmy.

From somewhere in the far distance the echo of firing rolled back from the mountains. It had a grim, boding sound to the ears of the Rookwood juniors as they rode home to the ranch with anxious hearts.

THE END.

(There will be another topping long complete tale of Jimmy Silver & Co. in the Wild West next week, entitled: "The Captive Cowpuncher!")

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