

JIMMY SILVER & CO OUT WEST!

by
Owen Conquest



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By
OWEN CONQUEST.

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CHAPTER I. Rotten Luck!

"I WONDER—" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"Same here!" whispered Lovell. Baby and Newcome nodded.

They also wondered.

The Platsal Four, of the Rookwood Fourth, were, in fact, very much exercised in their minds.

They had food for thought.

The food for thought was not supplied by Mr. Dalton, their Form-master; though at that hour, all their attention ought to have been fixed upon Mr. Dalton and his valuable instruction. The Fourth Form of Rookwood were in class; and Mr. Dalton was taking them upon a personally conducted tour, as it were, into the history of Imperial Rome. But never had Jimmy Silver & Co. been so slightly interested in

the Twelve Cæsars. In fact, two dozen Cæsars would not have interested them just then.

On the previous day Jimmy Silver's cousin from Canada had arrived at Rookwood. Mr. Hubert Smalley was staying for a few days as the guest of the Head.

The big bronzed Canadian made quite a conspicuous figure at Rookwood, and Jimmy Silver was immensely proud of him. Jimmy felt that the Head might very well have given him a special holiday, while Mr. Smalley was there—but the Head did not seem to have thought of it.

But what interested Jimmy chiefly was the fact that the Canadian gentleman's visit had something to do with the coming vacation. There was an appointment in the end study, fixed to follow morning classes. Mr. Smalley had some proposition to make regarding the holidays, and Jimmy

was very anxious to host it. So were his chums. Never had morning classes seemed so long—never had the Fictical Four been so willing to let the Twelve Caesars rest undisturbed in the dim past. Every other minute they glanced at the Form-room clock. And every time Mr. Dalton's eye was not upon them, they discussed in whisper that appointment in the end study, and wondered what Mr. Smedley had to suggest about the holidays.

"I wonder—" murmured Jimmy. Mr. Dalton being just then busy with Tubby Mullin. "I wonder—"

"Canada isn't so jolly far off in these days!" whispered Lovell, with quite an ecstatic look. "Suppose he asks you on a visit to his ranch, Jimmy—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Of course, you'll mention that you can't possibly go without your pals."

"Of course," murmured Baby. "I say, Jimmy—"

"If he doesn't think of it, you might mention it in a careless sort of casual way," remarked Nowcome.

"After all, we might be useful on a ranch," breathed Lovell. "We can ride—You fellows know how I ride, at least."

"Like a sack of coal!" came from Cyril Peele, who was on the form behind the Fictical Four.

Lovell glared round at the humorous Peele.

"You cheeky ass—" he began.

"Shush!" murmured Jimmy Silver. "Dicky Dalton's looking this way."

Morning lessons came to an end at last, and Jimmy Silver & Co. made a rush from the Form-room to the end study. Two minutes later Mr. Hudson Smedley arrived.

"Come in, Cousin Smedley," said Jimmy Silver cordially. "We were waiting for you. You had something to say to us after class, I believe!"

"I guess so," said Mr. Smedley. "At least, I had something to say to you, Jimmy."

The Co. looked at one another.

"Better pitch it to the lot of us, sir," murmured Lovell. "You see, we're really Jimmy's keepers—"

"You cheeky ass!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver warily.

"Come, come," said Mr. Smedley. "It's about the vacation, Jimmy. I've talked to your father about it, and he is agreeable. He thinks it would be a good thing for

you to see a little of the world. How do you like the idea of a holiday on a ranch in Canada?"

Jimmy Silver's eyes danced.

"Oh, ripping!" he exclaimed.

Lovell & Co. exchanged another glance and drew to the door. They felt it was up to them to leave Mr. Smedley and Jimmy to themselves; but as they went they gave their chum extremely expressive looks. Those looks told him, as plainly as looks could, that, unless he fixed it for his chums to accompany him to Canada, the consequences would be dire—so dire that Jimmy, indeed, would not be in a condition to cross the ocean. Lovell added to the effect of his expressive looks by shaking a warning fist at Jimmy as he left the study—Mr. Smedley's back being turned to the door. But just as Lovell's fist was shaken, the Canadian gentleman glanced round, and Arthur Edward Lovell met his astonished glance, with his fist still brandished in the air.

Lovell crimsoned, and shut the door hastily. Jimmy Silver's face was red as he met his cousin's amused look.

"Well, what do you think, Jimmy?" asked the rancher.

"That's soon said," answered Jimmy. "I'd like it no end."

"Mind, it won't be like Rockwood or like your home," said Mr. Smedley. "The Windy River Ranch is in the west of Canada, and you won't find electric light and warm baths and French chefs there."

Jimmy laughed.

"I fancy I can rough it," he answered. "But—"

"A 'but' already!" grinned Mr. Smedley.

"N-no! But—" Jimmy coughed.

"Could my pals come?"

"How many?"

"Three," said Jimmy, at once. "They'd like it no end—and—I don't think I ought to desert them for the vac. You see, we always fix it up to spend the holidays together."

Mr. Smedley looked thoughtful.

"The more the merrier, in a way," he said. "But it will really mean roughing it, Jimmy. Any galoot that is soft would not have a good time on the Windy River Ranch."

Jimmy flushed.

"We're not soft at Rockwood," he said warmly.

"Good enough!" said Mr. Smedley. "I'll

hit it with the Head, both for you and your pals, if they can get permission to come from their people."

"Oh, thanks awfully!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver, overjoyed.

CHAPTER 2.

ON to Canada!

MR. HUDSON SMEDLEY left Rookwood the following day, having made all arrangements with the chums of the Fourth. That day Lovell, Baby, and Newcome were busy writing home, explaining their intentions for the coming vacation, and asking permission for the trip to Canada—which was duly accorded. And during the remaining days of the term, Jimmy Silver & Co. were making great preparations, and dreaming extensive day-dreams, what time they were objects of great envy to the rest of Rookwood.

Rookwood School broke up at last, and the Fictical Four went to their homes to make the final preparations for their wonderful trip. They gathered at Jimmy Silver's home to meet Mr. Hudson Smedley again. Under the rancher's charge they were to make the journey to the great Dominion.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were full of joyful anticipations.

"I guess we're off at last!" said Arthur Edward Lovell, as the chums of Rookwood stood on the big steamer and watched the shores of England receding.

"You what?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Guess!" said Lovell freely.

"I calculate—" grinned Newcome.

Lovell shook his head.

"You don't calculate in Canada," he said. "That's American. You guess and reckon. I'm taking notes from Mr. Smedley; and by the time we get to the Windy River Ranch I guess I shall be able to talk the lingo, sure. We don't want to be sized up as tenderfoot by the cow-punchers."

"What on earth is a cow-puncher?" demanded Baby. "I don't believe they punch even in Canada. It wouldn't be allowed."

"You're an ass, old chap!" said Lovell. "I mean, you're a pesky guy—"

"Ho, ha, ha!"

"The cattlemen are called cow-punchers," said Lovell, with the loftiness of

superior knowledge. "I don't know why, but they are—sure. I guess I wish I'd brought a shooting-iron."

"A—a—a what?"

"Shooting-iron!" said Lovell.

"What on earth's that? Anything like a flat-iron?"

"No, you guy. It's a revolver," said Lovell witheringly. "Suppose a galoot—"

"A what?"

"A galoot. Suppose a galoot fell in with a road-agent—"

"A which?"

"Oh, sure you don't know anything," said Lovell. "There are road-agents out West—"

"Do you mean a house-agent?" asked Baby.

"No," roared Lovell. "I don't mean a house-agent!"

"But they don't sell or let the roads in Canada, do they?"

"I guess not."

"Then what is a road-agent?"

"Fathend! It's what we should call a highwayman or a footpad."

"Well, if we meet any road-agents," grinned Jimmy Silver, "I shall be sure glad that you haven't a shooting-iron, old chap! It would be more dangerous to us than to the house-agents—I mean road-agents!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"B-r-r-r-r!" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver & Co. enjoyed the run across the Atlantic, and still more the passage up the great St. Lawrence River. They gazed about them at new scenes with never-ending interest. Mr. Smedley and his party landed at Quebec, and the Rookwood juniors were allowed a day or two for exploring that ancient city. Then the railroad bore them westward—the railroad, not the railway, as Lovell was careful to explain to his comrades. Lovell having made further progress in the language, railways were left behind in the Old Country. They had become railroads now, and luggage, at the same time, had become baggage.

Many a long hundred miles disappeared under the ever-rolling wheels, as the great train rolled westward. The Canadian Pacific Railway was a novelty to the Rookwooders. Day and night succeeded one another as the great cars rolled on. The first sight of the suburbs of the Rocky

Mountains, in the dim distance, gave the Rookwooders quite a thrill.

"The Rockies!" said Lovell in quite an awed voice—"the real Rockies, you know!"

And the chums of Rookwood gazed and gazed, and Mr. Hudson Smedley looked at them with a kindly smile. Rookwood School seemed a long way behind Jimmy Silver & Co. now.

But before the Rockies were reached, the Rookwood party left the train. The great cars rolled on towards the Kicking Horse Pass and British Columbia; and Jimmy Silver & Co., in boots and riding breeches and Stetson hats, with sun-browned faces, headed for the Windy River Ranch.

CHAPTER 2.

Out West!

JIMMY SILVER sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes in the blaze of sunshine from the window.

For a moment or two Jimmy expected to find himself in the old dormitory at Rookwood School, with its washed walls, and high windows, and long rows of beds.

He had been dreaming of Rookwood. But he had awakened to very different surroundings.

He was in a room ten feet by six, with walls of bare pine, and a window three feet by three.

From without came unaccustomed sounds—unaccustomed to the ears of a Rookwood junior.

He could hear a trampling of horses and a jingling of harness, and a creaking of heavy wheels.

It was yet early in the morning, but sunshine blazed in at the little window. Jimmy, blinking in the light, viewed a snow-capped mountain-peak in the far distance from the window. Then he remembered where he was.

He tossed the blankets aside, and jumped actively out of the little camp-bed.

He looked from the window.

At a short distance from the shack hotel the Windy River gleamed in the sunlight. Far away to the west loomed the great mountain ridge of the Rocky Mountains against the blue sky.

From the window he could see almost all the building of the little Alberta town-

ship—not more than a dozen, and all built of lumber.

Below the window was what the inhabitants of Mosquito called "Main Street." It was a rough and rugged trail, winding in from the boundless Alberta prairie, and winding out again on the other side of Mosquito town, along the Windy River. It was tramped hard by hoofs of horses and cattle and the heavy boots of the cattlemen, treading where, in earlier days, moccasined Indians had trod.

"Oh, ripping!" murmured Jimmy.

He drew a deep breath of the clear air, pure as crystal.

"Real Canada at last!" he murmured.

It was not Jimmy's first day in Canada by any means. The Rookwood party had landed at Quebec, on the St. Lawrence, far away in the east. The railroad had borne them westward, long hundreds of miles. From Calgary the cars had carried them northward into Northern Alberta. Then the railroad had been left far behind.

Mosquito was the last stage of the journey, the last stop before arriving at the Windy River Ranch, the home of Hudson Smedley. After a rough journey by prairie trails, Jimmy Silver & Co. had slept like tops in the lumber hotel. Mr. Smedley was going on to the ranch that day, and starting at sunrise, which he called sun-up. But it was long past sun-up now, and Jimmy wondered whether the Canadian rancher had overslept that morning. Mr. Hudson Smedley was so extremely energetic that he seemed the last man in the world to oversleep; but certainly it was long past sun-up.

There was a bang at Jimmy's door, and it flew open, and Arthur Edward Lovell presented himself, half-dressed.

"Hallo, you up, Jimmy?"

"Looks like it," said Jimmy cheerily.

"Seen Mr. Smedley yet?"

"No."

"Where does a chap wash?"

Jimmy grinned.

"Better ask downstairs," he answered.

"We're roughing it here, old bean."

"Oh, I guess I can rough it some!" said Lovell.

"The other chaps up yet?" asked Jimmy.

"No. Let's rout 'em out."

Baby and Newcome were routed out—rather unwillingly. They were tired after the hard journey of the day before, and

still sleepy. But Lovell had no mercy on them.

"You see, we're up first," he said. "Mr. Smedley's still snoozing somewhere. I guess we shall take a rise out of that galoot by being ready to start before he's turned out of his bunk. He thinks we're rather soft, because we're tenderfoot from the Old Country. I guess we shall have the laugh of him this morning."

"I guess I'd rather have my snooze out!" argued Baby.

"Rats!"

"You see——" began Newcome.

"Roo-woah!"

Accommodation was limited at the Mosquito Hotel. Baby and Newcome had shared a straw palimpsest on the floor of Lovell's room, with brown blankets to cover them. But they had slept soundly for all that. The Fictitious Four of Rockwood had plenty of "horse-sense," and they did not expect home comforts in an outlying region of North-Western Alberta.

A narrow stair, a good deal like a ladder, led down to the lower regions. The lumber hotel was very quiet, and seemed deserted. But in the doorway, meditatively chewing a plug of tobacco, they found the landlord—a big, burly, much-be-whiskered gentleman with a mahogany complexion and very keen twinkling eyes. He turned his head slowly, and bestowed a nod on the juniors.

"Good morning, Mr. Bunch," said Jimmy Silver politely.

"'Mornin'!"

"Where does a chap wash?" asked Lovell.

Mr. Bunch jerked a stubby thumb in the direction of the back-door. He seemed to be a man of a few words.

"Come on!" said Jimmy.

In the yard behind the lumber hotel were a pump and a trough. Evidently the "outfit" at Mosquito was primitive. But the Rockwooders performed their ablutions cheerily; they had not come to Alberta to grouse. They came in to breakfast with cheery faces and keen appetites.

Breakfast was substantial, and Jimmy Silver & Co. did it full justice. Still they saw nothing of Mr. Smedley, and they grinned at the idea of the rancher coming down at last and finding that they had already breakfasted. Kind and considerate as Hudson Smedley was to his young charges, the juniors realised that the rancher regarded them as "greenhorns," and doubted whether they were quite equal

to roughing it in the Western way. It really was a great joke, as Lovell declared, to be ready and waiting for the resumption of the journey, when the rancher should turn out of bed at last. Doubtless he supposed that the four tenderfeet would sleep on till about noon, if they were not called up.

Breakfast over, the juniors strolled out of the lumber hotel. They found Mr. Bunch at the front, leaning against a post, and still chewing a plug of tobacco in a meditative way.

"Lovely morning, Mr. Bunch," said Jimmy.

Mr. Bunch nodded.

"Didn't Mr. Smedley ask to be called?"

Mr. Bunch stared.

"I believe it's a good distance from here to the ranch, isn't it?" asked Baby.

"Sure."

"Well, then, hadn't Mr. Smedley better be called?"

"I guess he wouldn't hear."

"Eh? Why not?" asked Jimmy in surprise.

Mr. Bunch swept a hand towards the western horizon.

"I reckon Hudson Smedley is twenty miles on his way," he said.

"Gone!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"Sure."

"Gone without us!" asked Lovell blankly.

Mr. Bunch's mahogany features wrinkled into a grin.

"Laf out at sun-up!" he answered.

The Fictitious Four of Rockwood looked at one another. This was rather a surprise to them. It seemed that the rancher had turned out earliest, after all.

"But what has he left us behind for?" exclaimed Baby. "Didn't he leave a message?"

"Yap!"

"If it's not too much exertion, Mr. Bunch, you might hand out the message," said Lovell, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Sure! Mr. Smedley reckoned that you 'uns, being kid tenderfeet, would be tired, and he figured it out for you to rest here to-day. He's sending the burger over for you to-morrow."

"Oh, my hat!"

"What after that?" exclaimed Lovell, in disgust.

"I guess that's the message!" said Mr. Frank Bunch stolidly.

And he opened a six-inch knife to cut a fresh plug of tobacco.

CHAPTER 4.

On Their Own!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. walked down Main Street in a state of wrath and indignation.

It really was too bad. They were agreed upon that.

Possibly the rancher was right. They were fatigued from their long journey. Doubtless a day's rest at Mosquito would not have done them any harm. Probably it would have done them good. But the claims of Rockwood were far from seeing it in that light. The imputation of being tenderfoot, who needed more rest and repose than the native Canadians, was not to be borne.

"Utter rot!" said Lovell. "If your blessed munda could go on at sun-up, Jimmy, we could go on."

"Of course we could!" said Jimmy.

"Does the blessed man think we're made of jelly at Rockwood?" exclaimed Raby. "I believe it's only about thirty miles to the ranch, too."

"Nothing if a chap had a bike," remarked Newcome.

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"A bike would get rather rough going over these trails," he said. "But we could ride it. Mr. Smedley knows we can ride."

"I've told him that I can ride as well as any giddy cow-puncher on his ranch!" said Lovell warmly.

"He, ha, ha!"

"Anyhow, we could ride thirty miles," said Jimmy. "Look here, you fellows, we're not going to hang about all day in this one-eyed camp. There's no need to wait for the buggy to come to-morrow. Let's go on."

"Good!"

"What about horses?" asked Raby doubtfully. "We couldn't walk it."

"We can beg, borrow, or steal horses here. There seem to be plenty about," said Jimmy Silver. "Let's ask Bunchy."

The juniors turned their steps back to the lumber hotel. Mr. Bunch was now seated on a bench outside, chewing tobacco; but he was not alone. His companion was a man who drew curious glances from the juniors.

He was a man of like frame, with a dark face and extremely dark glittering eyes. He was not an Indian, but the juniors could see that he was partly of

Indian blood—what they had already heard called a "breed." He was dressed in shabby moleskin trousers and shirt, with a ragged Stetson hat on his thick, black hair.

The expression on his dark, bronzed face was far from amiable as he stood before the landlord of the Mosquito Hotel. Mr. Bunch was jerking his thumb towards the trail.

"That's your way," he was saying, as the schoolboys approached. "I guess it will be healthier for you to leave, Pequod. I guess you're not forgotten in Mosquito."

The half-breed muttered something under his breath that the juniors did not catch.

"Oh, git, do!" said Mr. Bunch. "You're too well known around here for it to be healthy for you."

The half-breed fixed his black eyes on the burly Canadian, and his dusky hand slipped to the belt behind his moleskin trousers. It was evident that he carried a weapon there.

Mr. Bunch saw the movement, but did not trouble to stir.

The contempt and indifference of the white man seemed to quell the half-breed. He muttered savagely in French, and, turning away, tramped along the dusty trail.

Mr. Bunch shrugged his broad shoulders scornfully.

"Who's that merchant, Mr. Bunch?" asked Lovell.

"A galoot that you 'uns had better keep clear of, I guess," answered Mr. Bunch. "He's a breed."

"A half-Indian?" asked Jimmy.

"More'n half, I guess; bad Injun and bad white mixed," said Mr. Bunch. "I guess he would get the end of a trail-rope round them trousers of his'n if the boys caught him around. There's too many steers and horses misin' when Pequod le Couteau is around, I guess."

"Le Couteau?" said Jimmy. "That means the 'knife'."

Mr. Bunch nodded.

"That galoot is powerful handy with the knife," he said. "I guess he will end on a rope some day. But I don't want to see him hanging over my porch, I reckon. Good for him he's gone. They say that he's killed more men than he's got fingers and toes. The Mounted Police will have him some day."

Jimmy Silver glanced after the active figure of the half-breed—moving swiftly out on the dusty trail with all the like activity of a wild animal. Pequod le Couteau dis-

appeared on the prairie, and Jimmy turned to the lumber hotel-keeper again.

"We're going on to the ranch to-day," he said.

"I guess you're waiting for the buggy to-morrow."

Jimmy shook his head.

"No; we're going on. I suppose we can hire some horses in this town?"

"I guess you could hire them," said Mr. Bunch, with a grin. "But that ain't saying that you could ride them."

"We'll chance that," said Jimmy good-humouredly. "We want to hire four horses to ride to the ranch, and they can be sent back later. Where can we get them?"

"I guess I can lend you the critters if you're set on it," said Mr. Bunch. "But if you'll take advice you'll hang on where you're safe. Then pararies ain't the place for little tenderfeet, what don't know their way about."

"No Redskins on the warpath, I suppose?" asked Lovell sarcastically.

"Nope! You'll get lost," explained Mr. Bunch. "You'll be sleeping to-night on the pararie, must eaten up by skitters."

"Skitters!" exclaimed Lovell.

"Sore!"

The Rockwooders eyed Mr. Bunch. They had thought they were well up in such matters, but they had never heard of a wild animal called a skitter before. Bears and wolves might be found in the hills, and deer and coyotes elsewhere, but skitters—

"What is a skitter, Mr. Bunch?" asked Jimmy, wondering whether the burly gentleman was amusing himself by pulling the tenderfoot leg.

Mr. Bunch stared.

"Skitters!" he replied. "Skitters is skitters, of course."

"We don't have them in England," explained Jimmy. "We haven't happened to come across them so far."

"You'll come across them fast enough if you sleep out on the pararie," said Mr. Bunch, "specially if you camp in a hollow, as, being tenderfeet, you're 'most certain to do."

"Are they dangerous?" asked the puzzled Jimmy.

"I dunno 'bout dangerous, but they bite powerful hard."

"Well, we're not afraid of the skitters, whatever they are," said Jimmy Silver, not at all convinced, as a matter of fact,

of the real existence of such fearsome beasts. "We'll chance their bites."

"I guess it's your own business," said Mr. Bunch. "The horses is here if you're set on it. I guess it's a free country. You'll want a guide."

"We'll be glad of one," said Jimmy. "Can we get a guide here?"

"I guess I'll lend you my chore-boy."

Mr. Bunch gave a shout.

"Billy!"

"Hallo, boss!"

A rather lanky youth, with his red flannel shirt-sleeves rolled up, came round the lumber building. This was Billy, the chore-boy, otherwise a man-of-all-work.

"I guess you can guide these tenderfeet to the Windy River Ranch, Billy?" said Mr. Bunch.

"Sure, boss!"

"You'll find a trail-rope somewhere, an tie them on the horses," said Mr. Bunch humorously.

The chore-boy grinned.

"Sure, boss," he answered.

"Oh come off!" said Lovell, "we can ride all right. Trot out the gee-gees, and you'll see, Mr. Bunch."

Mr. Bunch gave directions to the chore-boy to fetch round the horses, and Jimmy Silver & Co. went into the lumber hotel to get their "truck"; they had already learned to call their baggage "truck." The Rockwood juniors were travelling light, each of them having his possessions packed tight in a handy "grip."

There were five horses roped to the rail outside, when the juniors came out. Mr. Bunch had considerably picked out quiet horses—restraining a humorous desire to "take a rise" out of the tenderfeet by giving them skittish animals to ride. Billy saddled and bridled the horses, and the Rockwooders mounted quite smartly. Mr. Bunch stood staring at them, apparently expecting them to fall off. But they did not fall off.

"Ready, gents?" sang out Billy.

"Yes, rather."

The chore-boy mounted, and the five riders clattered down the trampled trail of Mosquito and out upon the prairie. They turned their faces to the west. Jimmy Silver spoke to the chore-boy as they rode out of the camp.

"Have you ever seen any wolves about here, Billy?" he asked.

Billy blinked at him.

"Skitters! You bet."

"What are they like?"

"Like," said Billy, "well, I guess they're like skitters."

"Lucid?" murmured Lovell.

"Are they common in these parts?" asked Jimmy.

"Specially later in the summer," answered Billy.

"And they bite?"

"Like thunder."

"Well, I shall be glad to see a skitter, whether they bite or not," said Lovell, not wholly convinced.

"Is it safe to meet them unarmed?" asked Raby.

The chore-boy blinked at him.

"Unarmed," he repeated. "You're a tenderfoot, you are. Unarmed! Haw, naw, naw!" And Billy roared with laughter as he rode along the trail; and the Rookwood juniors—not being at all desirous of adding to his merriment—let the subject drop. Apparently there was something mysterious about these fearsome creatures, the skitters, which the tenderfeet could not yet fathom—they could only hope to be enlightened when they knew Canada better. In the meantime, they rode on cheerily over the rolling prairie, under a sunny sky, quite pleased—tenderfeet as they were—in be making the journey to the Windy River Ranch "on their own."

CHAPTER 5.

Across the Plains!

BILLY the chore-boy was, what he would have described himself, as a "humorous guy." Finding himself guide to four tenderfeet from the Old Country, Billy allowed his sense of humour a loose rein. As an old hand, he felt himself entitled to take a rise out of a gang of greenhorns. Jimmy Silver & Co. were not specially green, not nearly as green as Billy Benson supposed. But they were in a new land, where most things were strange to them. Their questions with regard to the skitters had given the finishing touch, as it were, to Billy Benson's opinion of them. In the chore-boy's opinion they were greener than the greenest—hazened "from way back"; and when the township was left behind the chore-boy proceeded to pull their leg to his heart's content. Mosquito was less than a mile behind them when

Billy waved his hand suddenly to the juniors, and yelled in tones of wild alarm:

"Injuns! Ride for your lives!"

"What?" shouted Lovell.

Billy looked at his horse and went helter-skelter over the prairie at a wild gallop. Jimmy Silver and Co. rode after him hard for a few minutes, staring round them for the Indians. There were no Indians to be seen, however; and Jimmy slackened down.

"Ease off, you fellows," he called out. "We shall tire the horses at this rate."

"But the Indians—" exclaimed Raby.

"Gammer!" answered Jimmy.

"There are Indians in Alberta, you know," said Raby doubtfully.

"That young ass is pulling our leg," answered Jimmy. "Let's see what he does, anyhow. I can't see any Indians."

The juniors rode on at a steady trot. Billy Benson glanced back over his shoulder and waved to them. As they did not increase their speed the chore-boy slackened down for them to come up. His first little joke at their expense had fallen flat.

"Well, where are the Indians?" grinned Jimmy Silver.

Master Benson did not answer that question. He looked rather disappointed, and rode on in silence. These tenderfeet were not so easy to "draw" as he had supposed.

After a time, however, Billy, who was riding a little apart, drew in closer to the Rookwood party.

"I suppose you geeboots are hooked?" he asked.

"Hooked!" repeated Jimmy.

"Yep!"

"I don't raise on. Do you mean our boots?" asked Jimmy, puzzled. "They are both soled and heeled."

"Haw, haw, haw!" roared Billy. "I mean armed."

"Oh, heeled means armed, does it?" said Lovell.

"Where was you raised?" asked Billy, in profound contempt for a tenderfoot who did not know that heeled meant armed. "Have you got a shoulder spicer?"

"No," answered Jimmy. "Mr. Smedley told us it wasn't necessary to carry arms in Alberta."

"That's all very well if you was with his party," said Billy, shaking his head. "But if we drop on a road-agent—"

"A what?"

"A road-agent is a highwayman," said

Lovell. "Do you mean to say that there are robbers here, young fellow?"

"Well, if you ain't heeled, just put up your hands if you're called on to do it," said the chore-boy. "I guess it will be safest."

"We shouldn't do anything of the kind," said Lovell warningly. "Catch me putting up my hands."

"You watch out!" said Billy.

Jimmy eyed the chore-boy as they rode on. He had not forgotten the alarm of Indians. Billy Benson eyed the plains on right and left, and peered suspiciously into every thicket or fringe of low trees they passed, and Jimmy wondered whether there really was danger of meeting some lawless character in the solitary prairie. The four juniors became rather serious. They were unarmed, and it would be no joke to meet some lawless ruffian who might present a revolver at them with the order to "shell out."

Billy drew in his horse suddenly on the edge of a patch of straggling thickets in a hollow of the prairie.

"You 'uns hold on here a few minutes," he said. "I guess this here wants looking into. Don't make a sound."

And Billy rode into the thickets, and dismounted there and disappeared. The juniors waited in a bunch looking at one another. The Canadian boy's manner had been so serious that they could not help being impressed.

"Is the young ass trying to pull our leg again?" grunted Lovell.

"Blessed if I know," confessed Jimmy Silver. "He looked pretty serious this time. After all, he's our guide, and we can't go on without him."

"There can't be danger," muttered Newcome. "Mr. Smalley would have told us—"

"Well, he expected us to wait at Mosquito to be sent for," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully. "I wonder where that cheeky young ass has got to."

The juniors waited impatiently.

There was no sign of the chore-boy, he had vanished into the scrub, leaving no trace behind.

A quarter of an hour passed, and the chums were beginning to feel uneasy. If there were enemies lurking in the scrub it was possible that the chore-boy had fallen a victim to them.

"Hallo, here's somebody!" cried one of

Lovell, as there was a sudden rustle in the thicket.

A figure sprang into view, and the sunlight glinted on the barrel of a revolver flung up to a level.

"Hands up!"

"Great Scott!"

The juniors stared blankly at the newcomer. His form was almost hidden by a rough blanket wound round him and circled by a belt, and a mask made of a dirty handkerchief covered his face, with two rents in it for eye-holes. Over the masked face a Stetson hat was jammed down low.

The stranger's hand gripped a revolver, levelled at the four riders.

"Hands up!" he rapped out again. "Light down and pony up your dollars, or I guess it's you for the cemetery."

"Oh, god!" gasped Lovell.

The four juniors jumped off their horses. There was no arguing with a levelled revolver.

They put up their hands, standing in a startled row in front of the masked enemy.

But a sudden glint came into Jimmy Silver's eyes.

The handkerchief mask and the belted blanket hid the road-agent almost entirely from view; but the ends of his trousers and his boots could be seen. They were boots sadly in need of repair; and Jimmy Silver had noticed them before that day—on the feet of Master Billy Benson, the chore-boy.

Jimmy understood in a flash.

He made a stride towards the masked robber.

"Stand back! Hands up, I tell you!"

The revolver was pointed straight at Jimmy Silver's head.

"Jimmy!" gasped Lovell.

"Jimmy, old chap—"

Jimmy Silver did not heed. He made a jump at the road-agent, who did not fire! He grasped the knight of the road, and sent him spinning to the ground.

"Ow!" roared the masked one, as he sprawled on the rough prairie.

Jimmy jerked at the handkerchief mask. It came off, revealing the rather sheepish countenance of Billy Benson, the chore-boy.

"That blessed kid!" roared Lovell.

"Palling our leg again!"

Billy Benson sat up.

"Wal, I'm durned!" he remarked.

"You young ass!" said Jimmy Silver,

laughing. "How many more silly tricks are you going to play before we arrive at the ranch. I'd like to know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Benson picked himself up, looking rather sore. He whistled, and his horse came trotting out of the scrub.

"I guessed I should scare you stiff, sure!" he said.

"My dear chap, you couldn't scare us in a month of Sundays!" said Arthur Edward Lovell loftily.

"Not in your lifetime!" chuckled Raby.

Billy Benson grunted, and unbelted the blanket, and rolled it up and replaced it on his horse. He was evidently disappointed. The juniors grinned as they rode on with their guide. The chore-boy's face was deeply thoughtful, and they could guess that he was revolving in his mind some new scheme for "taking a rise" out of the tenderfoot. They came past the belt of scrub, and trotted out cheerily over the open prairie, which stretched vast and boundless on all sides.

"Look out hyer!" called out Billy Benson.

Lovell chuckled.

"What is it now, Indians, or road-agents?" he asked.

"Grinly bear this time!" grinned Newcome.

"Or wolves!" asked Raby.

"I guess it ain't," said Billy Benson. "But there's rabbit-holes in the prairie, and if you don't watch out, you'll lame your horses. Savvy?"

"Oh, that's a bit more serious!" said Jimmy Silver, with a smile.

"Trust a tenderfoot to stick his horse's leg into a prairie rabbit's hole!" grinned Billy Benson. "I guess it's about ten dollars to a red cent that one of you lames his horse afore we're through."

"Careful, you chaps!" said Jimmy Silver.

"What-ho!"

"Better string out fast behind me, and keep in my trail," said Billy Benson. "I don't want you all lauded on my hands in carry home to the ranch. Haw, haw, haw!"

The juniors obediently string out behind the chore-boy. The rabbit-burrows were difficult to perceive, and they did not want to take risks of laming their horses. Being stranded on the prairie without a horse was a decidedly serious matter.

All of a sudden Billy Benson's horse was seen to plunge almost over, and the chore-boy was quickly hurled from his saddle. He clung on, however, and jumped clear as his horse fell.

The juniors drew rein.

"What's the trouble now?" asked Lovell.

Billy Benson did not answer.

He stood looking at his horse, with a most extraordinary expression on his rugged, sunbaked face.

"Well, aren't we going on?" asked Jimmy.

The chore-boy shook his head slowly.

"I guess not!" he answered.

"Why not?"

"Can't be did!"

"But why?"

The crimson showed through the tan on the chore-boy's face. It was obvious that he had a difficult confession to make.

"I guess my gee ain't up to a run of thirty miles," he said slowly. "I kinder guess that he—"

"He what?" asked the puzzled Lovell.

"I guess he's trod in a rabbit-hole," confessed Billy, "and—and—and I reckon he's doid lame."

The juniors stared at the guide for a moment. Then they burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER E.

An Outcast of the Prairie!

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. roared. They could not help it. They were sorry for the horse, and sorry for Billy's mischance; but they could not help laughing. The "old hand," who had looked on the tenderfoot from such a lofty standpoint, had been the one to come to grief.

Billy Benson's face was very red. He felt his humiliation deeply. Not one of his scares had come off, and now here he was, stranded, like the veriest greenhorn, with a lamed horse, and the tenderfoot enjoying the joke. He blinked at the horse, and he blinked at the juniors.

"What rotten luck!" said Lovell. "I'm sorry, kid! Ha, ha, ha! How are you getting on if your horse is lame?"

"I guess I ain't going on," answered

Billy gruffly. "I guess we're going back to Mosquito. Lucky it ain't far."

"Going back!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"That's the size of it."

"We're jolly well not going back," said Jimmy decidedly.

"No fear!"

"If you'd been thinking a little less of japes on strangers, and a little more of business, this mightn't have happened, young 'un," said Lovell. "You can walk your horse home if you like. We're going on."

"I guess you'll get lost, then," said Billy.

"We'll chance it."

"Better come back," said the chore-boy.

"You'll wander over the Rockies into British Columbia, or else meander into the Blackfoot reservation and get chewed up, you pesky tenderfoot!"

"Give us directions as well as you can, and we'll chance it," said Jimmy Silver.

"We're certainly not turning back."

"I guess I'll look at the horse."

Billy Benson proceeded to attend to his hapless steed. The juniors watched him; they were not able to help. The horse was lamed, and obviously could not finish the journey.

"I guess Mr. Dunch will be mad about this," said Billy Benson dolefully. "Can't be helped, I reckon. I'm going to walk him home. If you tenderfoot are set on keeping on—"

"We are!" said Lovell.

"Yes, rather."

"Wal, you keep steady on from here, and keep that peak in your eyes," said Billy, with a wave of his hand towards the distant mountains. "Keep on till you strike the creek—"

"The what?"

"The creek."

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy. "We—we don't quite know what a creek is!"

"Jerusalem!" said Billy Benson. "A creek's a creek. You'll know it when you see it. I guess—a creek, with a lot of skitters round about, I reckon."

"But what does a creek look like?" demanded Lovell.

"Eh? It looks like a creek," said Billy Benson. "You'll have to ford it—"

"For it!" said Jimmy Silver. "Then is—it's water!"

"Course it's water. What did you think a creek was?"

"Oh, I know!" yelled Lovell. "He means a creek."

"Oh! A creek!" exclaimed Rely.

"I guess that's what I said—a creek," said the chore-boy. "You keep on till you strike the creek, and ford it. From the creek you'll see the cattle-trail running, and you'll follow it till you sight the river again. Follow the river till you sight the ranch. That clear?"

"Clear as daylight," said Jimmy Silver. "We'll get on. Come on, you fellows!"

"Good-bye, Billy!" chuckled Lovell. "Be more careful next time you're showing off to tenderfoot."

The juniors rode on, leaving Billy, the chore-boy, to make his way back to Mosquito Camp.

"I guess we shall find our way all right," said Arthur Edward Lovell, as they trotted contentedly on. "We don't really need a guide."

"Easy enough to find a creek—or creek—and then follow a cattle-trail," remarked Rely.

"Easy as falling off a fence."

Jimmy Silver & Co. rode on, keeping their eyes well about them. The peak Billy had pointed out was a good guide, so long as the weather remained clear for them to keep it in sight, and there was hardly a cloud on the blue expanse of the sky. Mile after mile vanished under the trotting hoofs. A glimmer of water in the sunshine ahead caught their eyes at last.

"The giddy creek!" exclaimed Lovell.

It was past noon when the schoolboys rode on to the bank of the creek. The water came from the slopes of the Rocky Mountains, in winter probably a deep and roaring torrent. But now only a couple of feet of water flowed between high, muddy banks. At the bottom of its channel the creek wound away over the prairie, to join the Windy River at a great distance.

"We feed here," said Jimmy, jumping from his horse.

"I'm ready!" grinned Lovell.

They led down the horses through crackling mud to give them drink, and then camped on the bank, where a clump of trees grew in a patch of scrubby thicket. The shade of the trees was a welcome relief from the sunshine. Jimmy Silver was very careful to water the horses, and the juniors unpacked the lunch they had brought from the lumber hotel at Mosquito.

They sat down, leaning their backs

against tree-trunks, and enjoyed their meal with the keen appetite of fellows who had been riding for some hours over the open prairie.

Round about them, as far as the eye could reach, stretched the boundless plains, bounded only on the west by the range of mountains, beyond which lay British Columbia and the Pacific Ocean. The level of the prairie seemed broken only by the winding channel of the creek. Immense solitude surrounded the juniors.

But the patch of timber by the creek was not so deserted as they imagined.

As the juniors sat chatting over their meal a hidden figure moved in the thicket, with the caution of a wild animal, and a dark face looked out on the campers. Had the juniors seen it they would have recognized the half-breed who had been talking to Mr. Bunch, in Main Street at Mosquito that morning. It was Pequod le Couteau who was watching them from the thicket, with scintillating black eyes—Pequod the Knife, as he was nicknamed by his "breed" associates.

For some minutes the half-breed watched the juniors in silence, a great deal like a wild animal preparing to spring. Apparently he had been resting in the timber when they arrived, after a long and weary tramp over the prairie trail.

"This beats Rookwood—what!" asked Lovell, as he impaled a chunk of cheese on the end of his pocket-knife.

"Yes, rather!" said Baby. "I'm blessed if I'm keen on going home for the new term, either. Jimmy, old man, can't you persuade your jolly old cousin to give us jobs on the ranch and keep us out in Canada?"

Jimmy chuckled.

"Just what I was thinking of," he said. "After all, we should learn more here than in a term at Rookwood," argued Lovell. "I'm willing to go home for the winter term. I believe it's a bit parky out here in the winter."

"By the way, where are the skitters?" said Newcome. "That kid Billy said there were skitters around the creek."

"Can't see anything around, except a few mosquitoes," said Jimmy Silver, sleeping one of those troublesome insects on his knee, and slaying it instantly. "There goes one! Blessed if I believe in the existence of the skitters, wherever they are."

There was a rustle in the timber.

Lovell jumped up.

"Something's there!" he exclaimed.

"It may be a skitter. Great Scott! It's the half-breed!"

Pequod le Couteau stepped out of the timber and aimed before the startled juniors. His hand rested on a hunting-knife in his belt, which he had hitched round to be within easy reach. There was a grim, smoking, threatening look on his dark face that struck rather a chill to the schoolboys. They remembered Mr. Bunch's warning with regard to the breed. Certainly they had not expected to fall in with him on the prairie.

"Bonjour, mesieurs!" said the half-breed, grinning and showing a double row of sharp, white teeth that flashed in the sunshine.

"Good-morning!" said Jimmy Silver, rising to his feet.

He could not help seeing that the man evinced mischief.

"I think I saw you in Mosquito this morning!" said Pequod.

"We saw you," answered Jimmy.

"You saw me turned out of the camp," said Pequod, showing his teeth again, not in a grin this time.

The juniors did not answer. They drew a little closer together. Mr. Smedley had told them that they did not need to go armed in Alberta; but this was evidently an occasion when a gun would have been useful. On the solitary prairie trails a man like Pequod le Couteau was not a safe man to meet.

"You are travelling alone?" said Pequod, apparently puzzled by finding the four boys there at all.

"We're going to the Windy River Ranch," said Jimmy. "Mr. Smedley is my cousin."

"Rancher Smedley your cousin? I have been whipped off the Windy River Ranch with cattle-whips!" said the half-breed, his eyes gleaming.

"What on earth for?" asked Jimmy, in astonishment.

The breed shrugged his shoulders.

"There had been horses missing," he said.

"Oh! And you had taken them?"

Another shrug.

"Well, if you're a blessed horse-thief, you got off cheap!" said Lovell. "Dows

in the States they might have lynched you."

The half-breed looked at him and smiled. He did not answer Lovell, but crossed over to where the horses were tethered, and began to cast loose the trail-ropes.

Jimmy Silver started forward.

"Let that rope alone!" he exclaimed.

"What the thump is the fellow doing with our horses?" exclaimed Raby.

Pequod glanced at them over his shoulder.

"You will do well to keep clear of me," he said quietly. "I do not wish to harm schoolboys. I am taking the horses."

"Do you mean to say that you're going to steal our horses, and leave us stranded on foot?" exclaimed Lovell blankly.

"Sure!"

The juniors looked at one another. The man was a lithe, active rascal, but he was not likely to be a match for four sturdy schoolboys. Jimmy Silver & Co. had no idea of submitting patiently to a barefaced robbery. But there was the ruffian's knife to be reckoned with, and the chums of Rookwood were unarmed.

Jimmy drew a deep, hard breath.

"We're not standing this, you fellows!" he said.

"No jolly fear!" said Lovell emphatically.

"Come on!"

The juniors advanced towards the half-breed. He dropped the trail-rope and stood up, his dusky hand on the handle of his knife.

"Stand back!" he said, showing his white teeth.

"Let those horses alone!" said Jimmy Silver determinedly.

Pequod laughed.

He jerked the knife from his belt. It was a long, keen hunting-knife, the blade a good foot in length. It was a terrible weapon in the hand of a desperate and unscrupulous outcast.

"I am called Pequod in Couteau!" grinned the half-breed. "I have killed men in my time—before the railway came. I will spare your lives if you keep your distance."

He made a threatening circle in the air with the flashing blade, and the juniors involuntarily jumped back. Bare hands were not of much use against that weapon.

"You awful villain!" roared Lovell.

"Back!" snapped the half-breed.

The juniors backed away from the sweep of the knife. And Pequod in Couteau, with a laugh, proceeded to cast the horses loose.

CHAPTER 7.

The Fight!

JIMMY SILVER set his teeth.

He realised—rather late—that the Rookwooders would have done well to wait at Mosquito till Mr. Smedley sent the buggy for them from the ranch. There were rough characters in Alberta, as well as everywhere else, and the Rookwood juniors had happened upon the hardest case in the whole province.

But Jimmy Silver & Co. were not beaten yet.

The half-breed evidently concluded that he was finished with them, for he did not even glance at them again. His contemptuous indifference to their presence while he took possession of their horses was a bitter pill for the schoolboys to swallow.

Jimmy's eyes glinted.

He stooped quietly and picked up a heavy stone bottle which had held cold coffee among the supplies brought from the Mosquito lumber hotel for the midday meal. It was the only weapon that came to hand, and an effective one enough if used at close quarters. He held it in his hand behind him as he stood watching the half-breed.

"Jimmy——" breathed Lovell.

Jimmy's face was tense. He knew that the chums would be risking life itself in a struggle with the ruffian.

But Jimmy Silver did not falter.

"You fellows are game?" he whispered.

"Yes, But——"

"We're not going to be robbed," said Jimmy quietly. "We couldn't turn up at the ranch and tell them that we let a rough rascal take away our horses and leave us to hoof it—four of us! We've got to handle that rotter!"

"We're game!" muttered Raby.

Jimmy moved towards the half-breed again, his hand behind him. His face was steady.

Pequod was securing the horses in a string, intending to ride the foremost and lead the others after him. He glanced

rooms as the juniors approached and made a threatening gesture.

"Keep your distance if you wish to be safe," he snapped.

"Look here—"

"Enough! Get back!"

"You're not taking our horses," said Jimmy resolutely. "I warn you to let them alone!"

The half-breed gave an angry snarl, and turned from the horses towards the Rookwood junior, his hand on his knife.

"Is that so?" he said between his teeth. "Well, I will take not only the horses, but what money you have also. Put up your hands, all four of you, and if you make a movement I will use the knife."

His stride right towards the juniors, the knife gleaming in his hand and his black eyes scintillating. Jimmy set his teeth hard. It was now or never—and Jimmy decided upon "now." His hand came from behind him like a flash, and the heavy stone bottle was hurled full in the dark face of the half-breed.

Pequod le Couteau was taken utterly by surprise. He had not looked for resistance.

Before he knew what was happening the stone bottle crashed full in his face, hurling him backwards like a bullet.

A hoarse cry broke from the half-breed as he staggered back and fell.

"Back up!" panted Jimmy Silver.

He leapt forward like a tiger.

There was not a second to spare; the knife was still gripped in the "breed's" sinewy hand, and if he were given a chance to use it—

Stunning as the blow had been, it was only for a moment; or two that Pequod le Couteau was dazed; he was already attempting to rise as Jimmy Silver leaped on him.

Crash!

It was no time for standing on ceremony with life at stake, and Jimmy dealt with the savage half-breed as he would have dealt with a poisonous reptile. His boot crashed in the dusky, bruised face as Pequod lifted it, hurling the ruffian back again. The next instant Jimmy's knee was on his chest and both his hands gripped the ruffian's right wrist to keep him from using his knife.

"Quick!" he panted.

His knee did not need telling. The ruffian was not long in getting on his hands. He

was down—and unless he was kept down grim murder would be done under the timber by Windy Creek.

Lovel' grasped the rascal's left wrist and captured his arm. Baby stamped rocklessly on his sprawling legs. Newcome grasped his thick, black hair with both hands and held on tenaciously.

A hoarse growling came from the half-breed, struggling frantically under the desperate grasp of the juniors.

He strove furiously to free his right arm—and had he freed it the keen knife would have done the rest. But Jimmy Silver knew what was at stake, and he did not weaken. With both hands he held on to the sinewy wrist and twisted it without mercy, till the half-breed yelled with anguish, and his relaxing fingers let the knife drop. The next instant Jimmy Silver had grasped it, and its keen edge was shoved against the panting, dusky throat.

Not for words would Jimmy have used the knife on his enemy. But Pequod le Couteau fully expected a thrust now that the weapon was in Jimmy Silver's hand. His struggling ceased as if by magic, and he lay inert in the grasp of the juniors.

Only his black eyes glittered up at them like the eyes of a serpent, full of rage and hatred and malice.

"You rotten hound!" panted Jimmy Silver. "Keep quiet, or—"

He pressed the sharp edge of the knife to the bronze skin.

It was merely a threat; but it had its effect.

"You have beaten me," said Pequod, panting. "Morbleu! I am in your hands, mon petit!"

"Looks like it, by gum," chuckled Lovel' breathlessly. "My hat! You're going to have a beautiful nose, Mr. Pequod!"

The half-breed ground his teeth. His nose was swollen and bleeding from the crash of the bottle upon his face, and both his eyes were blackening.

"Hold the brute tight," said Jimmy. "The rotten word told on us at once if we let him loose!"

"We'll take jolly good care he doesn't," panted Baby.

"Take off his left and fasten his paw with it."

"What for?"

The half-breed made no resistance. His "rotten word" was taken off and his wrist

dragged forcibly together, the belt buckled right round them to keep them secure.

Then the breathless juniors rose. The half-breed lay in the grass, breathing hard and snorting like a wild animal.

"Better get off now," said Lovell.

"Yes, rather!"

The juniors saddled the horses again. "You are not leaving me like this, men pal!" called out the half-breed, wrenching in vain at the belt which secured his wrists.

Jimmy Silver looked at him.

"We've got no choice," he said. "You can wriggle yourself loose in the long run. Serve you right, you thieving rascal!"

"I shall remember you, petit!" said the breed, grinding his teeth. "Pequod le Couteau has a long memory."

"Remember as long as you like, my pippin," said Jimmy Silver. "But you'd better change your jolly old name to Pequod sans Couteau—I'm taking away your knife!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the juniors rode through the ford, and rode up the muddy bank on the opposite side of the creek, and started at a trot across the prairie, leaving Pequod writhing savagely under the timber with the leather belt.

"I guess we're well out of that," remarked Lovell.

"I jolly well guess we are," said Jimmy Silver. "I fancy we were rather asses, now I come to think of it, to start out on our own at all. We've had a jolly narrow escape. The sooner we see the Windy River Ranch the better I shall be pleased."

"Hear, hear!"

And the juniors rode on under the sinking sun. From the ford the trail was marked by countless trampling hoofs of cattle, and they followed it easily enough across the prairie. Jimmy Silver tossed the long, keen "couteau" he had taken from Pequod into a rift in the plain as he passed it, and the knife vanished from sight. It was safer there than in the hands of the half-breed.

The sun sank lower to the high ridge of the distant Rocky Mountains as the juniors rode on. They looked anxiously ahead for a sign of the river, which was to be their next guide. From a hollow of the prairie a horseman emerged, riding directly towards them.

CHAPTER 5.

None at Last!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. drew rein.

Before the meeting with Pequod le Couteau it would not have occurred to them that the horseman ahead on the plain might possibly be an enemy. But now they were very much on their guard.

The man sighted them, and they saw him pull down his Stetson hat a little to shade his eyes and stare at them. Then he urged his horse to a greater speed, riding straight towards them.

"Some giddy cowboy, I suppose," said Ruby.

"Or a blamed road-agent," remarked Lovell.

"May belong to the ranch," said Jimmy Silver hopefully. "We'll keep our eyes open, anyhow."

The horseman rode up. He was a burly fellow with a sunburnt face, wearing fringed "chaps" and a flannel shirt open at the neck. His face looked good-natured enough, and he was evidently surprised.

"Say!" he ejaculated, as he drew rein. "Where did you 'uns blow from?"

"From Mosquito," said Jimmy Silver. "Can you tell us whether we're far from the Windy River Ranch?"

"I guess I can," said the cattleman, eyeing them.

"Perhaps you belong to the ranch?" asked Jimmy.

"P'raps I do," assented the rider.

"Well, where will this trail lead us?" asked Lovell, rather impatiently.

"That depends," drawled the rider. "If your keep on far enough, it will lead you across the Rockies into British Columbia."

"Look here——"

"And if you keep right on arter that, it'll land you in the Pacific."

"But——"

"Arter that, you'll have to swim, and I reckon you'll get to Japan if you keep right on."

Jimmy Silver laughed. Apparently the cattleman had recognised the juniors as tenderfeet, and was disposed to be humorous.

"We're not going quite so far as that to-night," said Jimmy good-humouredly. "We're stopping at the Windy River

Ranch. If you know the place, you'll know my cousin, Hudson Smedley.

The horseman started.

"Waal, carry me home to dad!" he ejaculated. "Are you 'uns the kid greenhorns that was left at Skitter?"

"At—at where?"

"The boss told me about four kid tenderfeet left behind at Skitter, what was to be fetched in the buggy to-morrow."

"At—at Skitter!" gasped Lovell.

The mystery of that fearsome animal was explained at last. "Skitter" was the local pronunciation of Mosquito. The mysterious skitters that Mr. Ranch had alluded to were mosquitoes.

"So you're the kids!" said the burly cattleman, staring at them. "How did you wander out of Skitter?"

"We didn't wander out," said Jimmy warily. "We decided to come on to the ranch without giving Mr. Smedley the trouble of sending for us. If you belong to the ranch, then—"

"I guess I'm Mr. Smedley's foreman," drawled the big man. "Name of Pete Peters, at your service, kid. Lucky I found you wandering—"

"We weren't wandering!" roared Lovell.

Mr. Peters laughed.

"Lucky I found you," he repeated. "Gee! You'd have got lost for good on the prairie, if some rustler hadn't dropped on you and chewed you up for supper. Haw, haw, haw!"

"A rustler might have found us rather tough," said Lovell, with dignity. "We've met what you'd call a rustler. Ever heard of a half-breed chap called Pequod in Custer?"

"Sure!"

"Well, he tried to steal our horses, and we knocked him out and left him tied up in the timber by the creek."

Pete Peters stared at Lovell blankly.

"You're giving me that!" he ejaculated.

"Eh? I'm telling you!"

"Good for you," said Mr. Peters cordially. "I've met a few lars in my time, but you cap the stack, young 'un. You lay over every storyteller I've ever heard. You've knocked out Pequod in Custer. Oh, Jerusalem!" Mr. Peters roared with laughter. "That's good! The toughest rustler this side of the Rockies. Haw, haw, haw!"

The juniors glared at Mr. Peters.

"It's true," roared Lovell.

"Haw, haw, haw!" jollied Mr. Peters.

"We did it!" shouted Baby.

"Jhs, ha, ha!"

"We took away his knife!" howled Lovell.

"Got it with you?" asked Mr. Peters.

"I—I cracked it away, in a rift," said Jimmy Silver.

"Course you did," chuckled Mr. Peters. "You couldn't have kept it to show, young, 'cause why you've never touched it, and you're never even seen Pequod in Custer; only heard tell of him at Skitter Camp."

"I tell you—"

"Can it, kid; can it!" said Mr. Peters soothingly. "Wait till you've been in the country a bit longer, and then spin them yarns to newcomers. Catch on! Now you follow me on, and I'll take you to the ranch, this side up with care. I reckon I can't quit looking for lost steers, but I kinder guess the boss will be better pleased with me for finding lost greenhorns, and taking them safe home."

"We can find our way without help," exclaimed Lovell angrily. "You can go and eat cake, Mr. Foreman."

But Mr. Peters only chuckled.

"Foller on, you 'uns," he said.

And he wheeled his horse and started at a gallop. The juniors decided to follow. The ranch foreman was evidently taking the shortest cut to the ranch, and they were fatigued with the day's riding, and anxious to get in to supper and rest.

"Cheeky!" growled Lovell. "The silly chump fancies we're gassing about landing that half-breed rustler."

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Perhaps he'll know us better later on," he said. "I'm jolly glad you've met him, anyhow. I want to get in."

Dusk was deepening over the prairie. Night was closing in when the juniors caught a glimmer in the distance of the Windy River, and they rode up, tired but cheerful, to the ranch-house.

A tall, stalwart figure appeared there, with an exclamation of surprise.

"Jimmy! Why—"

"We thought we'd come on, Cousid Hudson," said Jimmy Silver cheerily. Hudson Smedley stared at them.

"You young duffers!" he said. "Thank goodness you've landed safely, anyhow. Where did you pick them up, Pete?"

"I was 'em wandering on the prairie, 'Gave 'em a hot, hot," grinned the foreman.

"We weren't wandering!" roared Lovell. "We were coming straight here, Mr. Smedley. We know our way about."

The rancher smiled.

"Well, now you're here—and thank goodness you're here safe—trot in," he said. "I guess you'll be wanting supper, and bed."

"You guess right," said Jimmy Silver.

And the Rookwood chums gladly followed the Canadian rancher in, under the hospitable roof, at last, of the Windy River Ranch.

CHAPTER 2.

On the Ranch!

WOO SING, the Chinese chore-boy at the Windy River Ranch, tapped on Jimmy Silver's door, and entered with a big tin can of steaming hot water. Jimmy Silver sat up in bed and blinked at him. A day's ride on the Alberta prairie had tired Jimmy out, and from the moment his head had touched the pillow till Woo Sing knocked at the door Jimmy had been deep in dreamless slumber. But he awoke fresh and cheery in the bright morning.

"Hallo, kid!" said Jimmy cheerily.

Woo Sing blinked at him with long, almond eyes.

"Molnin', Mass' Silver!"

Woo Sing set down the can beside the white-enamelled iron washstand, and Jimmy stared at him.

"Say that again, will you, kid?" asked Jimmy.

"Molnin'!"

"Don't you speak English?" asked Jimmy. Woo Sing was the first Chinese Jimmy had come across in Canada.

"Speaks English," said Woo Sing. "Dose Smedley say breakfast ready at eight."

"Oh!" ejaculated Jimmy.

Woo Sing glided from the room, and Jimmy grinned. He remembered having read somewhere of the Chinese trick of turning the "r" into an "l." "Molnin'" was evidently Woo Sing's way of saying "Good-morning."

Jimmy looked at his watch. It was a quarter to eight. One minute more, and the Rookwood junior was splashing merrily in a big blue bath.

He came out of his room fresh and

bright, and met Lovell and Ruby and Newcome on the broad landing.

"Here we are again!" said Arthur Edward Lovell cheerily.

"Looks jolly!" remarked Ruby.

He pointed from the big landing window. Outside, the early sun was shining on a wide stretch of grassland.

In the distance, towards the river, could be seen the long bunkhouse where the cattlemen slept, and the cookhouse near to it, and the long range of stalls for the horses. Big, lanky Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, was standing in view, talking to three or four of the "hands." The Rookwood juniors looked at them with interest—at their healthy, sun-tanned faces, open-necked shirts, wide Suction hats, big boots. These were the "cowpunchers" of whom they had heard. Among them was a lad who looked about sixteen, with a sharp nose and a jaw like a vice. This youth caught sight of the schoolboys at the window, and motioned something to his companions, jerking his thumb towards the window and grinning. The cowpunchers glanced across, but Pete Peters quickly brought their attention back to business. Jimmy Silver & Co. drew back from the window.

"Cheeky young cnd, that fellow!" grunted Lovell. "Painting us out as tenderfeet, I suppose!"

"Like his cousin!" said Newcome.

"Oh, let him rip!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Let's get down to brekker!"

The Fictical Four of Rookwood went downstairs. Mr. Hudson Smedley greeted them cheerily. Jimmy Silver's Canadian cousin was all kindness and hospitality to his schoolboy guests from the Old Country.

"Had a good sleep?" he asked.

"Topping, thanks!" answered Jimmy Silver.

"Still tired after your ride?"

"Not in the least!"

"Not the least little bit!" said Lovell.

"We're not made of putty at Rookwood, you know, Mr. Smedley!"

The rancher laughed.

"All the better!" he said. "Sit down, my boys!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. sat down to an ample and substantial breakfast. Woo Sing poured out steaming coffee.

"How do you like Canada?" Mr. Smedley asked, with a smile.

"Ripping!" said the four juniors together.

"Rather a change from Rookwood School, I guess!"

"Well, rather," said Jimmy. "Of course, we're jolly fond of old Rookwood. But I think we'd like to get in a year or two in Alberta."

"I guess so!" said Lovell. "I say, Mr. Smedley, you're not going to keep us in a handkerchief! You're going to let us help on the ranch!"

"Hum!" said the rancher dubiously.

"We can handle horses, you know!" said Itaby. "I—I think I could learn to milk a cow, too!"

"And drive steers!" said Newcomb.

"You see, cousin Smedley, we want to learn the game," said Jimmy. "We're not going to hang around and eat the bread of idleness. I've heard that in Canada there's lots of work for every pair of hands."

"Sure!" assented Mr. Smedley.

"Well, then, here's four handy fellows, fit as fiddlers, and keen to learn the business!" said Jimmy Silver. "You'll have to make use of us somehow! We're not really soft, you know!"

"I guess we'll see!" said the rancher, smiling. "Anyhow, you can ride, and you seem to have been able to find your way here from Mosquito yesterday on your own. I'm glad you didn't get lost on the prairie."

"Not likely to get lost, I hope!" said Lovell jeffily. "We were coming straight here when Mr. Peters fell in with us!"

"Pete thinks you were wandering around lost."

"Pete's an ass! I—I mean, he would be an ass if he wasn't your foreman, Mr. Smedley!"

"I guess I haven't heard what happened on your way here," said Hudson Smedley. "Pete has mentioned that you spun him a yarn about meeting that half-breed Pequod in Couteau."

The rancher looked keenly at the juniors. Jimmy Silver & Co. had turned in the previous night immediately after a sleepy supper, and as yet the rancher had not heard from them the exciting happenings of their journey from the township.

Jimmy flushed a little.

"Mr. Peters thought we were drawing the long bow," he confessed. "He doesn't know as yet. But we did fall in with the

half-breed Pequod, and he tried to steal our horses."

"And what happened?"

"We downed him!" answered Jimmy.

"Jimmy—"

"We did!" exclaimed Lovell warmly. "Jimmy biffed him with a stone bottle, and we collared him and downed him and took his knife away! Dash it all, Mr. Smedley, I suppose you know we should tell the truth!"

The rancher made a soothing gesture.

"Of course, I take your word," he said.

"But you can't be surprised if the boys don't swallow a tall story like that. Pequod is Couteau's the all-finest ruffian on this side of the Rocky Mountains. Even the Mounted Police wouldn't care to drop on him without a gun handy. He's got a murderous reputation, and he's more or less suspected of having killed half a dozen galoots, and he's pretty well known to be a horse-thief and a cattle-thief. I guess it sounds tall for Pequod to Couteau to be downed by tenderfoot schoolboys—"

"Well, it happened!" said Lovell, rather gruffly.

"It did, if you say so," assented Mr. Smedley amiably. "But—buts it sounds too tall for the boys, so I reckon I shouldn't talk about it too much."

Jimmy looked at the rancher. Mr. Smedley did not disbelieve in the exploit of the schoolboys, but it was very probable that he supposed that some exaggeration had crept in.

Mr. Smedley rose from the breakfast-table, and the subject dropped.

"Now, you youngsters want to have a look about the place, I guess," he remarked.

"Yes, rather!"

"I've got to ride over to the Sunset Ranch this morning on business. I guess I'll hand you over to Pete to show around."

"Any old thing?" said Jimmy.

And the Rookwood juniors followed Hudson Smedley from the ranchhouse.

CHAPTER 18.

The Buck-Jumper!

PETE PETERS, foreman of the Windy River Ranch, ducked his head politely to the Rookwood juniors, and grinned. Mr. Smedley, after a few words to the foreman, mounted his

horse and rode away on the prairie trail. The juniors were left with Pete.

"Boss says you youngsters want to make yourselves useful," he remarked, giving the juniors a droll glance.

"Just that!" said Lovell, not very amiable.

He did not see any reason why the long-legged foreman should conclude that they were helpless, useless tenderfeet simply because they were fresh from school in the Old Country, but it was obvious that that was just what Mr. Peters did conclude.

Jimmy Silver & Co. would have been very glad of an opportunity to show Mr. Peters the stuff they really were made of, but it did not seem likely that there would be an opportunity. Pequet le Couteau was not likely to come along to the ranch, to be "downed" again, as an example of what they could do, though, as a matter of fact, the chums were not anxious to encounter that ruffian again. They realised now, more clearly than before, that they had been fortunate to escape at his hands.

"You can ride!" asked Mr. Peters.

"Didn't you see us riding yesterday?"

"When I found you—"

"You didn't find us!" howled Lovell.

"We weren't lost! We told you so at the time!"

"Well, you can ride," said the foreman, with an amiable grin. "Let it go at that, Hyer, Kentucky!"

The youth whom the juniors had seen from the window came lounging over from the bunkhouse. On closer view, they liked that youth still less than before. His sharp nose and vice-like jaw were not prepossessing, and his mocking look was still less pleasing. His contempt for the tenderfeet was still more obvious than Mr. Peters', and it was not so good-natured.

"These hyer are the boss' guests, Kentucky," said Mr. Peters. "Pick out horses for them from the home corral, and show them round the ranch. I guess I'll see you later, gents."

And the tall Canadian strode away with his long, swinging stride. Jimmy Silver & Co., thus handed over for the second time, looked at Kentucky. From his name, or nickname, they guessed that he did not belong to Canada.

Kentucky did not seem pleased with his duty. He looked the juniors up and down, and shrugged his shoulders and grunted.

"Wal, this is good!" he said.

"Where are the horses?" asked Jimmy Silver.

Kentucky grunted discontentedly.

"Setting a galoot to look after dandy tenderfeet!" he mumbled.

"You needn't look after us!" exclaimed Lovell warmly. "We can look after ourselves!"

"And what'll the boss say if you fall into the pond and get drowned?" asked Kentucky.

"Do you think we're likely to fall into a pond?" howled Lovell wrathfully.

"I guess it's just about what you would do!" answered Kentucky coolly. "Carry me home to die! If ever I set eyes on such a set of pesky greenhorns! But orders is orders, so hump it with me!"

"You're not a Canadian?" asked Jimmy Silver as the juniors followed the young cattleman.

Kentucky glanced at him over his shoulder.

"I guess not. I'm American! I guess I was raised in Kentucky!"

"Are they all as vice-mannered in Kentucky?" asked Newcome.

Kentucky stared at him, but did not reply. He led them to the corral. Two cowboys were standing by the rail, and they saluted the juniors civilly.

"I guess I'm looking for bosses for the tenderfeet," said Kentucky. "Suthin' tams that they won't fall off'n! You 'uns had better stand by to lift them on!"

The cowboys grinned.

"We can manage without that," said Jimmy Silver good-temperedly. "Just trot out the horses!"

"I fancy I could ride anything you could ride, Master Kentucky!" said Lovell warmly.

"Same here!" said Jimmy Silver.

Kentucky chuckled.

"Shall I give the galoot Blazer?" he asked, addressing the cowboys.

"Don't you play the guy with the boss' guests, Kentucky!" said one of the cattle-men.

And he strolled away.

The other remained, grinning. He was a tall, sunburned fellow, with a shock of red hair, and the juniors learned that he was called Red Alf, nicknames being almost universal among the ranch-hands.

"I guess the young gent. wouldn't care for Blazer!" said Red Alf, with a chuckle.

"I kinder reckon Blazer would light out

over the Rockies with a tenderfoot on his back!"

"Has Blazer been ridden before?" asked Jimmy.

"I guess the boss has rode him, but he's a tough lot!" said the cowboy. "You let him alone!"

"I guess you'd better!" sneered Kentuck. "I reckon what you want is a clothes-horse!"

Jimmy Silver's eyes glinted. He really was a good horseman, and he was very keen to "show up" credibly in the eyes of the cowpunchers, who so obviously looked down upon tenderfeet from a lofty height of scorn.

"Trot out your Blazer!" said Jimmy. "I'll try my luck with him, at any rate!"

Red Alf became serious.

"Give it a mile, youngster!" he said. "Don't you pull the kid's leg, Kentuck! It ain't safe for you, young Silver!"

"Course it ain't safe!" grinned Kentuck. "It wants some pluck to put a leg over Blazer!"

That remark settled Jimmy Silver's determination. He was going to show these cowpunchers that, tenderfoot or not, there was no lack of pluck in the east.

"I'm going to mount Blazer!" he said quietly. "Will you point him out?"

"Sure!" grinned Kentuck.

He winked at Red Alf, who laughed. Two or three other men gathered round the corral gate, and all of them were grinning. Jimmy Silver did not need telling that the cowpunchers expected him to "back down" as soon as he saw Blazer led out for riding. And at that moment Jimmy would not have backed down to save his life—or a dozen lives. He was going to ride Blazer, if Blazer killed him!

His claims looked serious, but they did not speak a word to dissuade him. Jimmy was the best rider in the Rookwood party, and it was up to him to play up for the honour of Rookwood and the Old Country.

"You mean it?" asked Red Alf, grinning.

"Yes," said Jimmy.

"I guess we'll cut him out for you!"

"Oh, we'll cut him out!" said Kentuck.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not know in the least what they meant, but they soon discovered.

Kentuck and Red Alf and another man entered the corral. There were more than a dozen horses inside the pine rails in a

hunch, and Blazer was among them. Separating the horse from the rest of the herd was "cutting out."

With brandished whips, the horse was driven out of the herd, and then the juniors had a clear sight of him.

Jimmy's teeth set.

Blazer was a rather bony and extremely wiry beast of about thirteen hands. His head was small and well shaped, his eyes gleaming with malice and bad temper. His teeth looked capable of shearing off a man's limb; indeed, his jaws, when they opened, made the Rookwood juniors think of a shark.

Blazer tore fiercely round the corral, seeking to escape. He came thundering down to the gate where the Rookwooders stood. Instinctively they jumped aside out of the way of the thrashing hoofs and coming head.

There was a roar of laughter from the other onlookers, who had not stirred an inch. Red Alf's lasso had shot out, and circled the taming neck, stopping the flying horse a few yards from the corral gate. The cowpunchers had seen that the horse would be stopped, or they would have jumped aside fast enough. The juniors, naturally, had not seen so much, and their sudden movement was natural. But they flushed crimson as the laugh went up.

Every fellow in the little crowd was good-natured with the exception of the malicious Kentuck. But evidently they were all disposed to make merciless fun of the tenderfeet, and Jimmy Silver & Co. felt annoyed and exasperated, and far from cordial towards any of them just at that moment.

Later on they were to find good and cheery friends among the Windy River cowpunchers, but for the moment they would have enjoyed a general punching of noses.

Blazer had been stopped, but not subdued. Red Alf and Kentuck were holding him, with the lasso tight on his neck, and Blazer was submitting because he did not want to be choked. But the gleaming of the whites of his wicked eyes showed that he was only waiting for his chance.

A saddle belonging to Kentuck, which was about the size for Jimmy, was secured upon Blazer. Jimmy had shown no sign of weakening so far, and he had no intention of doing so. As he looked at the

savage horse he realised that he had taken on a terrible task—a task that was undoubtedly dangerous, and might even be fatal. But no danger could have made Jimmy Silver eat his words now, in the presence of the grinning cowpunchers.

"I guess he's ready!" chuckled Kentucky.

"Leave it alone, kid!" said Red Alf.

Jimmy Silver stepped forward.

"Let's see that the stirrups are right before you let go, please," he said quietly, determinedly, subduing a slight shake in his voice.

"Making out that he's really going to ride him!" grinned Kentucky.

"I am going to ride him!"

"Haw, haw!"

"Well, you'll see!" said Jimmy Silver boldly.

"Jimmy—" muttered Newcome.

Jimmy did not heed. He carefully adjusted the stirrups; he was not taking any unnecessary chances. The horse quivered under the holding hands, the eyes rolling with suppressed fury.

"Now, if you mean it—" said Red Alf, still unbelieving.

Jimmy's reply was in action, not in words. He leaped lightly into the saddle.

The horse quivered and shook under him with fury. Red Alf shot the reins under the lasso where it gripped the horse's neck, and Jimmy took them in his hands.

"Now let him go!" he said.

"Bluff!" said Kentucky.

Jimmy's eyes gleamed.

"Let go!" he shouted.

Red Alf, convinced at last, in sheer wonder at the tenderfoot's temerity, cast loose the lasso. He leaped away instantly, and Kentucky leaped still faster as the horse shook himself free. Jimmy Silver was left alone with the unbroken beast beneath him, and for a second nothing happened. Then what happened next seemed to Jimmy Silver like the last crash of the universe.

CHAPTER 11.

Jimmy Silver's Wild Ride!

CRASH! crash, crash!

Blazer was leaping and foaming, and his hoofs came down like thunder in a series of lightning-like

How Jimmy Silver kept the saddle he never knew.

But he kept it—though half the time he was half out of it—and the wonder was that he was not tossed away like a pip from an orange.

Up and down the horse went reeling, with crashing hoofs on the hard ground—crashing swift and sharp as pistol-shots.

Blazer no doubt expected to hurl off his presumptuous rider with that volcanic exhibition of buck-jumping, a new experience to Jimmy Silver. But Jimmy clung on.

His teeth were set, his hands hard on the reins, his knees gripping. He was holding his own—so far, at any rate.

Blazer's nose almost touched the ground as he crashed down on his forefeet, then it soared into the air, and his mane flashed over Jimmy as he rose on his hind legs till he almost tumbled over backwards. Up and down, up and down, with movements that seemed as swift as lightning to the hapless rider.

The cowpunchers had crowded back out of the way, Lovell & Co. with them, for at any instant the horse might bolt, and a wrist of iron could not have stopped Blazer then.

There was a shout as Pete Peters came striding towards the scene, his brow dark with anger.

"What the thunder's this? Do you call it a joke to kill the tenderfoot? You ornery fools, you!"

"The tenderfoot wanted Blazer!" said Kentucky sullenly.

"You young rascal! He'll be killed! Haven't you any more sense than this—you, Red Alf, and you, Spike Thompson?"

"I guess—"

"Rope him in!" shouted the foreman.

But it was too late. Blazer, finding that he could not unseat his limpet-like rider by buck-jumping, bolted.

He came through the gateway of the corral like an arrow.

Red Alf made a cast with his rope, but it fell wide as the frantic animal fled by with lightning-like speed.

"He's killed!" gasped the foreman. "You'll answer for this to the law!"

All eyes were on Jimmy Silver. His cheeks were white as chalk. Jimmy himself had no time to be conscious of fear. He

was fighting for his life, and he knew it, and all his faculties were concentrated upon the struggle with the savage horse.

Blazer was bending for the bunk-house as if he intended to dash himself to death upon the pine-wood walls. Jimmy dragged at him in vain. He could as easily have stopped a locomotive with full steam on.

But it was not Blazer's intention to commit suicide in that way. Six yards from the bunkhouse he swerved to the right so suddenly that Jimmy was almost torn from the saddle.

But not quite. He held on as the horse dashed along furiously by the fence of the outer corral and headed for the open prairie.

Clatter, clatter, crash! went the beating hoofs on the hard trail.

"Jimmy!" panted Lovell.

Blazer stopped suddenly.

It was no more of his tricks—to send his rider shooting over his head. But Jimmy Silver held on.

Pete Peters came speeding up, lasso in hand. But long before he was near enough for a cast Blazer had leaped into motion again and was tearing away at frantic speed.

"Bring my horse here!" roared Peters.

Pursuit was useless, and he knew it. There was no animal on the Windy River Ranch to equal Blazer in speed when the savage horse was fairly going. And already Blazer and his rider were little more than a speck on the prairie. But Peters meant to do what he could.

Meanwhile, Jimmy Silver was speeding across the grasslands at a rate that took his breath away. It was a calm morning on the Alberta prairie, but it seemed to Jimmy Silver that a fierce torrent of wind rushed down upon him.

Blazer, having failed to throw his rider, was apparently depending on speed to tire him out. Stopping the horse was out of the question, and Jimmy could only sit tight and give him his head.

The speed of the savage animal was amazing to Jimmy; he had never supposed that four legs could cover the ground at such a rate. Yet, in spite of the incessant danger, there was something exhilarating in that wild ride. His hat was blown away, and his hair tossed out in the wind. There was colour in his cheeks and brightness in his eyes. And, almost to his own

amazement, he found himself enjoying that furious gallop.

Windy River Ranch had vanished in the distance behind, if Jimmy had thought of looking back—which he did not. The Windy River was out of sight, around the racing horse was the rolling prairie—unmarked even by a tree—and in the west the soaring ridges of the Rocky Mountains. And the great mountains were drawing visibly nearer as Blazer raced on and on into the west.

How many miles he had already covered Jimmy could not even guess. Mile upon mile flashed back under the tireless, galloping hoofs. Blazer was sweating now, and Jimmy was aching in every limb, though he was scarcely conscious of it.

Clatter, clatter, clatter! There was stony ground under the racing hoofs now as the horseman topped a rise, with the wide, stretching foothills of the Rockies before him. Jimmy Silver strove to turn the horse, but Blazer kept on regardless. His strength and determination were too much for the schoolboy. All that Jimmy could do was to stick on his back and wait for his fury to exhaust itself.

On right and left of the rider now rose sweeping hillsides. He was riding along the verdant bottom of a valley, where a creek glistened in the sun, with pine-woods beyond. He was in the water foot-hills now, and nappy a long mile from the ranch. Blazer had slackened speed a little now, but only a little. Jimmy made another attempt to pull him in, and, to his surprise, Blazer allowed him to have his way. But he soon saw the reason. The horse was heading for the creek, and he allowed himself to be stopped—to drink! The wild ride had ended at last in that wild and solitary valley in the spurs of the Rocky Mountains, and Blazer, breathing hard after his exertions, sank his savage head to the glistening water, standing knee-deep in the stream as he drank.

Jimmy gave him his head; he could do nothing else. He did not venture to dismount, knowing only too well that it was unlikely that he would be able to mount the untamed brute again. Blazer was quiet for the moment, but his trickery might begin again at any second. Jimmy sat tight while the horse was drinking.

He glanced across the valley before him, at the thick woods that clothed the slopes

and the high rocks beyond. He gave a start as he caught sight of a human figure in the shadow of the trees, standing motionless and observing him. The dark face, the black eyes, the coloured feathers twisted in the matted hair, and the blanket drawn round the figure told that the stranger was a Redskin. Jimmy's heart beat a little faster as he wondered whether it was a savage Indian in that remote solitude of the foothills. As his eyes fixed on the red man, Blazer made a sudden movement, and Jimmy, his attention taken away for the moment, was taken by surprise.

The treacherous brute had beaten him at last. Possibly some instinct had told Blazer that his pertinacious and troublesome rider was off his guard. His hind-legs flew up, his head down, and, before Jimmy knew what was happening, he was plunging, head first, into the middle of the creek. And Blazer, with a shrill squeal, clattered on the rocky bank and fled.

CHAPTER 12.

A Friend in Need!

SPLASH!
"Ooooh!"

Jimmy Silver spluttered wildly as he plunged in. In the middle of the mountain creek the water was deep, and it ran hard and swift. Jimmy came up to the surface in a twinkling, striking out, and he caught a glimpse of Blazer vanishing on the rocky bank. But he had no time to think of Blazer, or of the fact that he was stranded in the foothills at least twenty miles from the ranch. A much nearer and more pressing matter occupied his thoughts now.

The midstream current swept him away as he swam, and twice or thrice he barely managed being dashed upon a sharp rock or a drift-log that jacked on the water. The turmoil of the rushing water was drowning into a roar, and Jimmy realised that he was being swept down towards one of the numerous cascades that marked the descent of the stream from the upper slopes to the lower prairie.

He struggled desperately to reach the shore, but the current tore him away and drove him onward. He was not a dozen yards from the gleaming, foaming edge of

the waterfall when he caught hold of a jagged spur of rock, and hung on to it desperately. The water rushed and foamed round him, swirling over him, striving like a fierce animal to tear him away from his hold.

He held on to the rugged rock with both hands, panting for breath. The bank at this point was high and steep, the rock slippery and wet, and Jimmy's heart sank as he looked up at it. A deafest roar from him the water roared over the cascade falling thirty feet to its lower bed in seas of foam and spray.

Once swept over the verge, Jimmy knew that it was the end of all things for him, and he clung on tenaciously, with a dizzy brain, to his precarious hold. He strove to drag himself from the water, but his grasp slipped on the rock worn smooth by the stream. Only by digging his fingers into a rift in the rock was he able to maintain his grasp at all.

In the swirl and dash of the fierce water Jimmy Silver was near in losing his senses. It seemed inevitable that he must be swept away over the cascade, and the almost icy cold of the water was chilling him to the bone and weakening the desperate grasp of his hands. His despairing gaze swept upward again, and over the top of the rocks above him a bunch of brightly-coloured feathers showed against the sky. A dark, coppery face looked down on him from a height of twenty feet above.

It was the Indian.

Jimmy had forgotten the Indian, the sight of whom had been the original cause of his disaster by taking his attention off the treacherous Blazer. He wondered dimly whether the man was friend or foe; in either case, the Redskin could not reach him over the steep rocks. The dark-bronze face that looked down was expressionless.

The Redskin scanned him for a few moments, and then waved a hand. Then a hide-rope came hurtling down the rocks.

So skillfully was it flung that the end, needing as it flew, dropped fairly upon Jimmy Silver. He understood at once, and, releasing one hand from the rock, he caught at the rope as it touched him.

He caught it, and wound it round his arm, and again round his elbow. It was well that he secured a good hold, for the rush of the water tore his left hand from its hold upon the rock, and he was wadded

away towards the waterfall. Even as he was swept away, he clucked at the rope with his left hand also and caught it. Buffeted by the water that foamed and swirled over him, Jimmy clung to the rope, his last chance of life.

He felt himself dragged against the rocks, and slowly but surely pulled from the stream.

In a few minutes his wet boots were clattering on the rock to which he had lately clung.

He was too dazed and dizzy now to do anything but cling blindly to the rope and trust to his rescuer.

Like a fellow in a dream, he felt himself dragged up and upward, the slippery arms of the Redskin pulling in and coiling the rope, in spite of the weight of the schoolboy hanging to it.

He was pulled over the top of the high rock at last, the Redskin grasping him with a muscular hand and landing him safely.

Jimmy sank on the top of the rock in a pool of water, and lay for some time without motion, panting for breath and trying to collect his scattered senses.

The Redskin coiled the rope, and sat on a boulder watching him. His dark, coppery face was grave and stolid, and he did not speak.

Jimmy Silver pulled himself together at last and sat up.

Then the Redskin moved. From a deer-skin bag fastened to his belt he took a flask, unscrewed the stopper, and held it out to Jimmy.

Jimmy could guess what it contained, and he shook his head, with a faint smile. He was not far enough gone to need a dose of spirits. The Redskin raised his eyebrows.

"Fire-water?" he explained.

"No, thanks!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Good!" said the Redskin. "Make um warm! Fire-water good water! Good, you bet! I have spoken!"

Jimmy shook his head again. The red man gave a shrug of the shoulders, applied the flask to his own mouth, and took a deep draught. He drank slowly and with relish, turning the flask up and up till it was upside-down, and the last drop had come from it. Then he returned it to the Redskin, and his grim features relaxed and grin.

"Good!" he said. "Make um feel good!"

Jimmy eyed him curiously. The red man was a tall, stalwart, muscular fellow, clad in deer-skin, with buckskin moccasins. His rifle stood against a pine-tree near at hand, and a game-bag that seemed well-packed lay beside the butt. Apparently, it was an Indian hunter that Jimmy had chanced upon in the foothills.

Jimmy Silver was well aware that there was a strict law against supplying intoxicating spirits to the Red Indians in Canada. The red man had obtained the contents of his flask in some surreptitious way from some "boot-legger" who found a raceably profit in evading the law.

"You speak English?" asked Jimmy.

"Blackfoot speak all same as white man."

"Oh, you are a Blackfoot?" exclaimed Jimmy, with interest.

He knew that in Alberta there were extensive "reserves" belonging to the Blackfoot and the Blood tribes of Indians.

The red man nodded.

"Cloudy Face, Blackfoot chief!" he said proudly.

"You've saved my life, I think!" said Jimmy.

"Cloudy Face see little white man fall," said the Blackfoot. "Follow along bank, and see um in water."

Jimmy Silver rose to his feet, shaking the water from his clothes. The sun, climbing higher in the sky, was streaming down warmth into the little valley, and the junior, wet as he was, did not feel cold.

He was thinking of getting back to the ranch; but he was dismounted now, and Blazer was probably a dozen miles away by that time. And Jimmy was only too well aware that he would find it exceedingly difficult to discover the way back to Windy River on the trackless prairie.

"I'm very much obliged to you, Cloudy Face!" he said. "It was jolly lucky for me you were here! Do you know the Windy River Ranch?"

"Cloudy Face know."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Jimmy, much relieved. "Perhaps you have met Mr. Hudson Smedley?"

The Blackfoot nodded.

"Blackfoot know Miss Smedley."

"He's my cousin," said Jimmy. "My

relation, you know. Can you help me get back to the ranch? I can reward you for your trouble."

The Blackfoot looked at him thoughtfully. He looked so imposing an Indian warrior, every inch a great chief, that Jimmy had felt some difference in mentioning a reward. But the noble red man was a business man as well as a great warrior.

"You gib um five dollar?" he said.

Jimmy smiled.

"With pleasure!" he answered. "Five dollars and my very best thanks, Cloudy Face, if you can guide me back to the ranch!"

The Indian rose from the boulder.

"It is good!" he said. "Let my little white brother follow the footsteps of the Blackfoot chief."

"Will it take us long to get there?" asked Jimmy.

"The steps of the Blackfoot chief are like the wind on the hills," said Cloudy Face.

"Oh, my hat! Then you'll have to put the brake on a little for me!" said Jimmy Silver.

The Blackfoot looked puzzled. But he led the way up the creek, and Jimmy Silver followed, to a spot where the stream narrowed and could be jumped across. They crossed the creek and descended the opposite bank, reaching the spot where Blazer had thrown his schoolboy rider. Jimmy Silver paused there and looked round; but there was, of course, no sign of the horse.

Cloudy Face led the way onward, but he did not lead the Rockwood junior directly back to the plains. Instead of that he led through a pinewood, and stopped at a little skin tepee built under the shelter of a towering rock in the hillside. Jimmy guessed that this was the camp of the Indian hunter.

"For first," the Blackfoot explained laconically.

It was past noon, and Jimmy Silver was hungry enough. He was glad to accept the Blackfoot's invitation. From the tepee Cloudy Face produced dried deer meat, which he ate with his fingers, Jimmy using his pocket-knife as an aid to that primitive method. The Blackfoot sat on the ground to eat; Jimmy Silver stood leaning against a pine-tree. He had quite recovered from the effects of his misadventure now, and was feeling very strong—though he was

anxious to get back to the ranch and relieve the fears of his friends. He could hardly imagine what Lovell & Co. would suppose had become of him.

The halt was brief, and the Indian, slinging his rifle on his back, started down the valley, Jimmy Silver trotting by his side. Jimmy was sturdy and strong.

His legs were soon aching with fatigue as mile after mile of rough prairie disappeared under his feet. Cloudy Face showed no sign whatever of fatigue, and Jimmy, feeling that there was nothing else for it, tramped desperately on. Jimmy would have given a great deal for a sight of Blazer just then. Indeed, he was feeling that he would have given all his worldly prospects for a mount. He would, like Richard the Third, have offered his kingdom for a horse.

He was a little worried as to what Mr. Smedley would say on the subject of Blazer. The horse was lost, and it was at least doubtful whether so wild and swift an animal would be caught again. That meant a loss to the rancher, through Jimmy's rather reckless essay as a horse-breaker. But considerations of that kind soon disappeared from Jimmy's mind as he tramped on after the tireless Redskin. After a time nothing occupied his mind but a painful wonder as to whether his hapless legs would hold out much longer.

It did not seem to occur to the iron-jimbed Blackfoot that his young companion was tired. He tramped on, with the grato stolidity of an Indian, without a word and without even a glance at Jimmy.

How many miles they had traversed Jimmy Silver did not know. He felt as if he had covered about a hundred. But at last the Blackfoot came to a halt, and pointed to the northwest sky. Behind Jimmy the sun was setting in the west, and shadow was creeping over the eastern heavens.

"See!" said the Blackfoot.

Jimmy stared at the sky.

"What is there to see?" he asked.

"White man's house."

Jimmy started.

"The ranch?" he exclaimed.

"I have spoken."

Jimmy scanned the sky to the east. There was no trace whatever of the ranch that he could see.

"Smoke," added the red man.

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy.

There was a faint blur which might have been smoke from the chimney of the ranch or the cookhouse at Windy River. Certainly Jimmy Silver unaided would never have guessed that it was smoke.

"You watch smoke and you find um ranch," said the Blackfoot, apparently meaning to convey that he had guided the schoolboy as far as was needed.

"You're sure—" said Jimmy dubiously.

Cloudy Face looked at him.

"The Blackfoot chief has spoken!" he said, with dignity.

"Right-ho!" said Jimmy. "I'll chance it! Here's the dollars!"

He sorted out a five-dollar bill and handed it to the red man. Cloudy Face tucked it away in some recess of his deer-skin garments.

"Good-bye, Cloudy Face!" said Jimmy Silver.

The red man gave a brief nod in farewell, and set his face to the mountains again. Apparently he was going to tramp back to the foothills; he seemed as tireless as if his limbs were made of iron and his muscles of steel. Jimmy Silver set his face to the north-east, and tramped on under the shadowing sky.

The blur that the Redskin had told him was smoke disappeared in the gathering shadows of night. But Jimmy had fallen into a trackless trail on the plain now, and it was pretty clear that it led to the ranch. He tramped along the trail, scarcely able to drag one leg after another, but keeping on resolutely. And the gleam of a lighted window cheered him at last.

CHAPTER 12.

Jimmy Silver's Return!

M R. HUDSON SMEDLEY stood in the porch of the ranchhouse, his brows knitted. Lovell and Ruby and Newcome were with him, and they looked utterly dismal and miserable. Pete Peters had ridden up to the ranch, and he had just dismounted and was holding his horse's reins outside the timber porch. Night had fallen on the plains of Alberta, but from the hunkhouse there came a suddy gleam of light. In the clear, gentle sky a myriad of stars glistened.

"Well!" rapped out Mr. Smedley, as Pete Peters stood before the porch.

"No news, boss!"

The rancher compressed his lips.

He had ridden home to the ranch soon after noon, to learn of what had happened to Jimmy Silver. Since then half the hands had been out on the prairie hunting for the lost schoolboy. But one by one they had ridden in at sundown, bringing no news. Pete Peters was the last to come, and his search had been as vain as the others.

"Then he's lost!" said Mr. Smedley.

"I hope it ain't any worse than that!" said Pete lugubriously. "That there boy Blazer is a demon! The kid ought never to have touched him!"

"He ought not to have been allowed to touch him!" rapped out the rancher. "I left the boy in your hands!"

"My eye was off'n him!" said Peters. "The boys seem to have shipped him into making a fool of himself, like a darn underfoot! He ought to have known that he couldn't ride Blazer!"

"It's no good crying over spilt milk, anyhow!" said the rancher shortly. "Nothing more can be done to-night, but turn all the hands out at sun-up, Pete, for a big search!"

"There's the cattle to be drove to Moquito—"

"Hang the cattle!" snapped Mr. Smedley.

"There's the bunch of stocks to be fetched in from Lone Pine—"

"That's enough, Pete!"

"Just as you like, boss! It's your say-so!" And the big cattleman slouched away with his horse, apparently under the impression that the rancher was making an unbecomable fuss over a mere tender foot.

"You kids had better come in to supper and bed," said Mr. Smedley, with a kind glance at Lovell & Co.

Lovell shook his head.

"We're not likely to sleep, with Jimmy lost!" he said. "That beast of a horse may have trampled him to death on the prairie, for all we know!"

"I guess it's not likely," said Mr. Smedley, though evidently he was not blind to the terrible possibility. "More likely Blazer's carried him twenty or thirty miles and dropped him, and he's lost. He'll be

found to-morrow, if I have to search the plains from here to the Rockies with a magnifying glass. Keep a stiff upper lip!"

He went into the ranchhouse. The three juniors could see plainly enough that he was more troubled than he cared to say.

"Rotten, isn't it?" muttered Lovell. "It's all the fault of that bony-faced rotter they call Kentuck! Jimmy would never have mounted the beast at all if that cud hadn't chipped him!"

"I dare say he's sorry now," said Ruby.

"He ought to be!" growled Lovell savagely.

The juniors did not feel disposed for either supper or bed. They strolled away from the house towards the bunkhouse, where the cowpunchers of Windy River were gathered. Some of them were seated on benches outside, eating their supper and chatting; others were smoking, some leaning against the wall, two or three stretched lazily on the eard. One or two had already turned in inside the bunkhouse, which was lighted by a couple of swinging oil-lamps.

Kentuck was talking as the juniors came up, and some of the cowboys grinned as they listened to him. If Kentuck was repentant of the harm his malice had done, his looks and words did not indicate as much. He seemed to be highly entertained.

"That there gee was worth three hundred dollars, now you believe me," he said. "The boss will never see him again! No wonder he's given some of us the rough edge of his tongue!"

"It's the tenderfoot he's bothering over, Kentuck," said one of the cowpunchers.

Kentuck sniggered.

"You can believe that, Skitter Dick, if you like! I kinder guess it's three hundred dollars' worth of hoss-flesh that's troubling the boss!"

"Oh, slow it!" said Skitter Dick.

"Sure, you slow it, Kentuck!" said Spike Thompson. "The kid wouldn't have ridden Blazer but for you, and you know it! It's too thick on a kid greenhorn what doesn't know the ropes!"

"I guess he was free to back out if he liked," said Kentuck. "And there ain't nothing happened to him, I reckon. Blazer pitched him off afore he'd gone a mile or two, and then he wandered about without knowing his right hand from his left. I

calculate he's wandered nearly as far as Calgary by this time."

There was a chuckle from some of the punchers.

"Like enough he's sticking it out on purpose, too!" said Kentuck maliciously. He saw that Lovell & Co. had joined the group by the bunkhouse, and he raised his voice a little so that the Rookwoodlets should not miss his remarks. "Didn't he come in yesterday with a tall yarn of downing Pequot? Wal, I calculate he's going to roll in with another yarn presently. He'll tell us that he's ridden right across the Rockies into British Columbia, and come back by way of the Yukon and Mackenzie this time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell flushed with rage. The fear that his elum was lying out on the lonely prairie, injured or dead, was heavy at Lovell's heart. He was in no mood to listen patiently to the Kentuckian's mockery.

"That's a lie!" burst out Lovell savagely.

Kentuck looked round.

"Hallo! What's hitting you?" he asked.

"You're a rotter and a rascal to talk about Jimmy Silver like that when he may be dead at this very minute owing to your rotten trickery!" shouted Lovell. "And if you say another word about him, I'll knock it back down your sneaking throat, and some of your teeth along with it!"

Lovell's eyes blazed at the cowboy. He was quite prepared to translate his words into action.

Kentuck rose from his bench.

He was a year or two older than Lovell, and a head taller. It did not look as if the Rookwood junior would have a good chance in a "scrap" with the American cowpuncher.

"You're shooting off your mouth a lot, young 'un!" grinned Kentuck. "Wal, hyer I am, ready to be knocked into the middle of next week if a tenderfoot can do it! Wade in!"

"Shut up, Kentuck!" said Red Alf.

"It's the boss' guest, Kentuck!" said Spike Thompson. "You're going on the way to get fired from the ranch!"

"I ain't taking lip from a tenderfoot kid!" said Kentuck. "And I says again, I guess that young Silver is very likely

hanging out on the prairie, and meaning to come home with a tall story! I guess he couldn't stick on Blazer's back for ten minutes, so he ain't gone far!"

Lovell made a spring at the cowboy, with his hands up and his eyes blazing. A fight would have started the next moment, but a muscular hand grasped Lovell's shoulder and swung him back.

"Let up!" said Pete Peters quietly.

It was the foreman of the ranch who had stopped Arthur Edward.

"Let him go!" shouted Lovell. "Do you think I'm going to listen to that rutter telling lies about Jimmy?"

"Easy does it!" said the foreman, still grasping Lovell, who was as helpless as an infant in his powerful hand. "I guess the boss wouldn't be best pleased by his guests rowing back with the hands, young'un. As for you, Kentucky, you'll keep your tongue between your teeth, or you'll get the weight of my boot!"

"Hallo!" shouted Red Alf. "There comes the kid!"

"Jimmy!" yelled Lovell.

An exhausted figure tottered into the light of the bunkhouse, and would have sunk down there had not Lovell caught him. Jimmy Silver had returned at last!

CHAPTER 14.

Straight from the Shoulder:

JIMMY SILVER leaned heavily upon Lovell. He was so utterly fatigued that he hardly knew how he had held out to the end. Lovell threw an arm round him to support him, and for some minutes Jimmy was only half conscious.

"Jerusalem!" ejaculated Pete Peters. "So he's got back!"

"What did I say?" sneered Kentucky. "Now let's hear the yarn that he's going to spin."

"Jimmy, old man!" whispered Baldy.

"Jimmy!" muttered Newcome, with tears of relief in his eyes.

In that happy moment, seeing their chum again alive and well, though evidently worn out, the Rookwooders did not heed Kentucky.

Jimmy pulled himself together. He gave his chums a faint smile.

"I've been through it!" he muttered. "Let's sit down!"

Spike Thompson pulled forward a bench, and Jimmy Silver sank on it. His legs were scarcely equal to supporting his weight. Baldy, the cook—a plump gentleman with a head completely innocent of hair, and a round, red, jolly face—brought a pannikin of hot soup from the cookhouse, and handed it to the junior, grinning. Jimmy thanked him with a glance, and sipped at the pannikin. He felt better when the soup was inside.

"Where's Blazer?" asked Pete Peters at last.

"Blazer?" repeated Jimmy. He was recovering a little now, though his limbs were still heavy as lead with sheer fatigue. "I'm afraid Blazer's lost, Mr. Peters!"

"Where did he chuck you, then?"

"In the foothills. I let him drink at the creek, and he took me by surprise and pitched me into the water," said Jimmy ruefully.

"Wal, carry me hum to dio!" ejaculated Mr. Peters, staring at Jimmy.

There was a loud laugh from Kentucky.

"What did I tell you, boysce?" The tenderfoot is telling us that he rode Blazer as far as the foothills—thirty good miles from here!"

"That depends on where he struck the foothills," said Spike Thompson. "Might be only twenty."

"I guess I can see him riding Blazer twenty miles!" chuckled Kentucky. "Twenty yards, if you like!"

"Jimmy Silver smiled.

"And how did you get back if Blazer loaded you twenty miles or more away, young'un?" asked Baldy, the cook.

"Walked," said Jimmy. "There was no other way."

"You legged it twenty miles on the prairie!" ejaculated Red Alf.

"Yes."

"Oh Jerusalem!"

"Don't you believe me?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver savagely.

Red Alf grinned.

"Don't fly out at a man, young'un!" he said. "Course I believe you! I can see you riding Blazer to the foothills and hoofing it twenty miles home!"

"If you don't believe me, you can do the other thing," said Jimmy Silver quietly. "I don't want a row with you, so I'd better not say any more. You can go and eat cake!"

"No offence, lad!" said the red-headed cowboy soothingly. "But you do lay it on thick for a tenderfoot!"

"I guess I've heard some tall stories in my time!" remarked Kentuck. "Why, I've drawn the long bow myself occasionally——"

"You have!" chuckled Spike; and there was a laugh.

"But this hyer caps the stack!" said Kentuck. "I takes of my hat to this tenderfoot, and own up best! I do sure! A fresh kid from the Old Country down the durndest rustler in Alberta one day and the next day he rides an unbroken horse to the foothills and walks twenty miles arter! Oh, I own up best! There ain't a liar like that in Kentucky, and I own it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Jimmy Silver's eyes glinted. He rose from the bench, seeming unconscious of his fatigue for the moment.

"You're calling me a liar, then!" he asked quietly.

Kentuck grinned.

"What do you call yourself?" he asked. "We ain't been raised in the Old Country, but we ain't soft enough to swallow a tall story like that! Make it easier! Tell us that Blazer dropped you a mile out, and you sat down and rested all day till you felt well enough to walk a mile home——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've told you what happened!" said Jimmy, his eyes burning.

"Oh, come off!" said Kentuck. "Give us something easier! You want galoots to believe that you could find your way back to the ranch from the foothills? And you fresh hyer!"

"I had a guide," said Jimmy. "I met an Indian in the hills—a Blackfoot—who pulled me out of the creek and guided me back."

"Well, the galoot's got a ready tongue—I own up to that!" said Kentuck.

"Where's the Indian?"

"He pointed out the ranch to me, and left me a mile out," said Jimmy.

"What a pity he didn't come on to the ranch and show up!" grinned Kentuck.

"But I suppose he couldn't have done that, seeing that there never was any Indian!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let up, Kentuck—let up!" said Red Alf.

Pete Peters tapped Jimmy on the shoulder.

"Let's have it straight, kid!" he said rather gruffly. "Where did you leave Blazer?"

"I've told you!" snapped Jimmy.

"That there horse is a demon for temper," said the foreman, "but he's a valuable animal. We've got to rope in that horse if so be we can find him. Give us the odds as well as you can, then, and spin your yarns arter! Where is Blazer?"

Jimmy turned his back on the foreman without replying. Pete Peters shrugged his shoulders and walked away to his cabin, which adjoined the bunkhouse.

Jimmy Silver looked round at the ring of grinning faces. In his anger and resentment, he forgot that he was tired. He made a step nearer to Kentuck.

That youth grinned at him mockingly. It was evident that he had taken a dislike to the English schoolboy, as his conduct with regard to Blazer that morning had sufficiently shown.

"I don't care twopence for your opinion!" said Jimmy Silver, looking him in the face. "You can believe what you like, and be hanged to you! You've told me your opinion pretty plain, so I'll tell you mine! You meant me to be injured when you bantered me into mounting that savage horse this morning! That was a dirty trick—a rotten, dirty trick that only a cur would have played on a stranger new to the country! You're a cur—and if you say another word like what you've said already, I'll knock you spinning!"

"I guess I'll risk it!" said Kentuck, with a wink at his companions. "I guess you're most chin-music, young 'un, and you can't do anything but spin tall stories! I guess I've said, and I guess I'll say again, that you're the biggest liar—— Oh!"

Kentuck got no further.

Jimmy Silver rushed straight at him, hitting out, and the Kentuckian caught Jimmy's knuckles with his chin. He staggered back, with a howl, and as there was a bench just behind him, he fell over it and went sprawling heels over head.

There was a roar of laughter from the cowpunchers.

"Kentuck's got it!"

"Well hit, tenderfoot!"

"The kid's got pluck, anyhow!" grinned Red Alf. "But me if I don't half believe his yarn!"

Kentuck scrambled up savagely, his hard face red with rage.

He came over the bench with a jump and rushed at Jimmy Silver.

It would have gone hard with Jimmy's old Capa had there been no interruption, for he was almost sinking with fatigue, and he could not have stood up for ten seconds against the cowboy. But at that moment a sharp voice rang out.

"Stop! What does this mean?"

Mr. Smadley strode up, with an angry brow.

Kentuck dropped his hands at once. He gave Jimmy Silver a malevolent look.

"I guess I'll see you to-morrow!" he muttered.

"Any time and anywhere you like!" answered Jimmy Silver disdainfully.

Kentuck glanced into the bunkhouse. Mr. Hudson Smadley glanced round at the cowboys and then fixed his eyes on Jimmy Silver. He made no further allusion to the rather startling scene which his arrival had interrupted.

"So you've got back, Jimmy?" he said. "I guess I'm glad to see you safe and sound! You look tired!"

"I'm tired out!" said Jimmy.

"Where did you leave Blazer—or where did he leave you?"

"In the foothills."

"Oh!"

Some of the cowpunchers grinned.

"Come up to the house!" said Mr. Smadley abruptly.

Jimmy Silver & Co. followed the tall figure of Hudson Smadley as he strode up to the ranchhouse. They heard a low laugh among the cowpunchers as they went.

"I'm getting fed with this!" Lovell muttered angrily. "Those dammies seem to get as down as a set of dragging dollers."

"We've had bad luck!" said Jimmy. "They think a tenderfoot can't do anything but say 'Dof' to a goose, and—and all that's happened to us hasn't happened where they could see it! But they may think a little differently to-morrow—Kentuck, at least!"

"You're going to scrap with him?" asked Reby.

"I suppose I must, after punching his butt!"

"He's big for you!"

"No bigger than old Gunner at Rockwell and Van Heked Gunner!" said Jimmy. "I'm going all out to lick him, anyhow! And we're going to find Blazer

somehow and bring him home! Those grinning axes are going to see that there is something in us somehow! It's no good getting rattled! We've simply got to show them, somehow, the stuff we're made of!"

"Quite a good idea, I guess!" It was Hudson Smadley who broke in. "Now come in to supper!"

Jimmy Silver almost nodded to sleep over his supper that night. He was glad—very glad—to get to his room and stretch his tired limbs there in repose. He slept the moment he had closed his eyes—and dreamed that he was riding Blazer on the prairie, with a wild Blackfoot in full chase. But he awoke rested and refreshed in the morning when Woo Sing knocked at his door, and he came down to breakfast with a firm determination to keep his hostile appointment with Kentuck at the earliest possible opportunity.

CHAPTER 15.

Exasperating!

MR. SMADLEY looked keenly, and rather suspiciously, at Jimmy Silver & Co.

The four juniors were standing in a group on the ranchhouse veranda, enjoying the morning sunshine, and talking quite busily, until the rancher came along.

They ceased suddenly as Rancher Smadley came into hearing.

Apparently the Rockwood chums had been discussing some matter that they did not care to confide to the Canadian rancher, and they coloured a little under his keen gaze.

"Well!" said Hudson Smadley.

"Doxely morning, isn't it, cousin Smadley?" said Jimmy Silver, with a rather embarrassed smile.

"I guess it is," assented the rancher.

"It's topping," said Arthur Edward Lovell.

"I'm sending a batch of steers away to Mesquite this morning," said Mr. Smadley. "If you kids would care to ride with the cowboys—"

"Oh!"

"Ah!"

"Um!"

Apparently Jimmy Silver & Co. didn't want to ride with the batch of steers to the townships that morning.

The rancher grinned.

"Something else on?" he asked.

"Well, you—you see—"

"I see," assented Hudson Smadley. "I see more than you think, perhaps."

"Oh!"

"Hem!"

"Well, I guess you will find something to do while I'm gone," said the rancher good-humouredly. "So-long!"

Hudson Smadley swung out of the veranda with a smile on his sun-browned face. The juniors watched him mount his horse and ride out on the range. The horseman disappeared beyond the corral, and Jimmy Silver & Co. resumed their interrupted discussion.

"Couldn't let Mr. Smadley know!" remarked Raby.

"No, jolly fear!" said Newcome.

"I don't know whether he would chip in," said Jimmy Silver thoughtfully, "but he might. Anyhow, it's better with cousin Smadley off the scene. He mightn't like a scrap between his guest and one of his cowboys."

"We'll give him half an hour to get clear, as he's going to Mosquito," suggested Lovell.

"Good!"

The juniors chatted on the veranda. Jimmy Silver was not sorry to be resting. He was still feeling the effects, to some extent, of his fatigues of the previous day.

Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, came riding in from the plains, and dismounted at his cabin near the bunkhouse. The juniors left the veranda and intercepted Mr. Peters at his cabin door. The burly Canadian foreman gave them a nod and a grin.

"I guess I ain't found him," he said.

"Blazer?" asked Jimmy.

"Yep. That horse has gone for good, I reckon."

"We're going to find him," said Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Pete Peters.

The Windy River foreman seemed immensely tickled by the idea of the tenderfeet finding a lost horse on the boundless prairie. He laid back his head and roared.

"What's the joke?" demanded Lovell warmly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you'll see!" snapped Lovell.

"But never mind Blazer now. Where's Kentuck?"

"You want Kentuck?" asked Mr. Peters, still grinning.

"I've got a scrap on with him," explained Jimmy Silver. "I punched him yesterday, and I'm going to fight him to-day. Of course I don't want to butt in when he's at work. I only want to speak to him now, and fix it up. I haven't seen him about the ranch this morning."

"I guess I catch on!" assented the grinning foreman. "That's why the boss was pertickler to take Kentuck with him this morning to Mosquito, I guess."

"Ob, my hat!"

"I reckon Mr. Smadley figured it out what you was up to," said Mr. Peters, "and he didn't want you chawed up by a wild man from Kentucky."

"Do you think that lanky bounder could chaw me up?" demanded Jimmy Silver indignantly.

"Sure!"

"Well, you'll see differently later on. I suppose it's off for to-day, as he's gone to Mosquito," said Jimmy. "Never mind, Kentuck will keep. Now, Mr. Peters, we're going out."

"Don't go out of sight of the chimney stack," warned the foreman. "You'll get lost, sure!"

"We're going to hunt for Blazer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blazer ran away with me yesterday," continued Jimmy Silver. "He landed me in the foothills and dodged away there. A Blackfoot Indian pulled me out of the woods that Blazer pitched me into—"

Pete Peters held up his hand.

"You're new here," he said, "but bust me if you don't spin a yarn as tall as the oldest hand in Alberta. How did you pick it up?"

Jimmy Silver eyed him. He had punched Kentuck for giving him the leg; but it was not feasible to punch the huge and muscular Mr. Peters, who towered over him. But Jimmy did not want to punch Mr. Peters. The foreman's reception was quite good-natured. He had been, as he had said "raised on tall stories," and he was in the habit of believing about a tenth of what he heard in the way of personal exploits. Which, as a rule, was quite

judicious of Mr. Peters, though a mistake in this particular case.

"Well, I'm not going to let Mr. Smooley lose a valuable horse," said Jimmy. "I'm going to ride to the foothills to-day and hunt for him."

"Poke it on!" said Mr. Peters.

"Oh, rats!"

"You are sonny, you lay it on too thick," said Mr. Peters. "First day here you spin a yarn of meeting Pecos in the prairie, and getting the better of the dullest horse-thief in the West—"

"So we did!" roared Lovell.

"Then you spin us a yarn of riding Blazer—the wildest horse on the ranch—as far as the foothills and legging it twenty miles home, after saving Red Indians, and so on," continued Mr. Peters. "Now, I put it to you—isn't it laying it on too thick for a beginner? I've heard a tender-foot slapping off his mouth before, but darn my boots if you don't beat the oldest hand here at chewing the rag!"

And Mr. Peters, with a shake of the head, went into his cabin, leaving the Rockwood juniors pink with wrath.

"The silf'rs are—" began Lovell hotly.

"Oh, let him rip!" said Jimmy, with a shrug of the shoulders. "He will sing to a different tune when he knows us better. We're going to find Blazer and bring him home, and then they'll have to admit that we know our way about a little."

"It won't be jolly easy," said Nonsense deliberately. "I'm game to try, but—"

"I've got an idea," said Jimmy confidently. "There's that Blackfoot chap I met in the foothills yesterday. We can go him to help, and an Indian, of course, can follow a trail. He will pick up Blazer's trail for us and give us a start. I can find my way to him but in the hills. I'm corn of that."

"That's a jolly good idea," said Ruler.

"Let's start," said Jimmy. "We'll take grub with us, and camp out for the night if necessary, and to-morrow night, too, for you know, Mr. Smooley mightn't agree if he were at home, thinking we can't take care of ourselves. So it's a good chance while he's gone in Mosquito."

"Good!"

And the Eastern Four of Rockwood made their preparations for the expedition at once.

CHAPTER 16.

Taking the Trail!

RED ALF, the cowpuncher, was found at the corral, and he picked out four horses for the juniors and saddled them. On the previous day the malicious Kevrick had mounted Jimmy on Blazer, and very nearly caused a disaster by exposing the weakness to the new experience of back-jumping. Mr. Smooley's subsequent talk on the subject had quite eliminated any desire on the cowboys' part to play such dangerous tricks again, and Red Alf picked out horses for them that were not given to "bucking." But when he learned that they were going out to hunt for the missing Blazer, Red Alf appeared to be on the verge of a fit. When Jimmy Silver & Co. rode away they left the red-headed cattleman doubled up with mirth, and looking back as they passed the bunkhouse, they saw him retelling the joke to three or four other cowpunchers, who roared with laughter.

"Cheeky asst!" growled Lovell. "We'll show 'em!"

"Somehow," said Ruler.

The juniors forgot their annoyance as they galloped over the prairie, heading south-westward toward the dim line of foothills, the first barrier of the mighty range of the Rocky Mountains.

They had made preparations for several days out, if need should arise. Woon Sing, the chow boy of the ranch, had provided the necessary provisions, which were packed in buckskin bags. Jimmy Silver had brought a box, though as yet he had barely a nodding acquaintance with that useful article. And each of the juniors had strapped on a belt with a hunting-knife attached. Firearms were not at their disposal, which was perhaps just as well.

The horses, though fortunately not given to back-jumping, were full of spirit. The juniors enjoyed the ride, and they covered the ground at a good rate. The ranch and its buildings disappeared behind them on the rolling prairie, and the last wire fence was left out of sight. They passed a herd of grazing steers, with Spike Thompson in charge, sitting like a statue on his horse. They saluted the cowpuncher in passing, and Spike waved his big Susan hat. Then he suddenly galloped after them.

"Hello, you 'uns!" he shouted.



Jimmy Silver and Co. clung on to their roughly-made raft for dear life: it rushed on, downwards to the lower stream, in a wild whirling of water!

"Hallo!" called back Jimmy.

"Where are you 'uns bound?"

"Hunting Blazer!"

"Oh, Jerusalem crickets! Say, hadn't you better go home and fish in the creek?"

"Hars!"

"You reckon you're going to find Blazer?" roared Spika.

"Yes."

"Oh, holy smoke! Ha, ha, ha!"

Spika's roar of merriment rang in the ears of the juniors as they galloped on. Their ears were pink.

"Silly ass!" said Lovell.

"We'll show 'em somehow!" said New-pome.

"Sure!" said Lovell, who prided himself on already speaking the language of the country. "Some!"

Mile after mile vanished under the galloping hoofs, and the great mountains drew visibly nearer. The low line of the foothills was quite close at hand now, and Jimmy Silver scanned them keenly, looking for the opening of the valley into which Blazer had carried him the previous day. Nobody on the Windy River Ranch would have supposed the "kid tenderfoot" capable of finding his way on the boundless prairie. But Jimmy was an observant fellow, and he was not at a loss. The sight of a slender stream trickling across the plain was a guide to him.

"Follow the creek!" he called out.

The quartet rode up the rough bank of the creek, and soon afterwards they were in the valley, with the pine-clad hillsides stretching to right and left. Up in the valley the creek was deeper and wider, and here and there its descending course was marked by foaming cascades. Jimmy Silver drew rein at last on the very spot where Blazer had pitched him into the stream the day before.

"This is the place where I was ducked," he said.

"And where's the giddy savage who pulled you out?" grinned Lovell.

"I know where to find his hut," said Jimmy. "I kept my eyes open yesterday. If he's at home it's all right."

"Lead on, Macduff!"

"Dismount here!"

The juniors alighted, and led their horses through the pine-woods. Under a great pine they found the skin tepee of the Indian.

Back to Jimmy's satisfaction, the Blackfoot

sitting on a boulder outside the wigwag, engaged in skinning an antelope.

The Blackfoot looked up, and evidently recognized Jimmy Silver. He gave a brief nod.

"That the chap?" asked Lovell, eyeing the red man curiously.

"That's the chap."

Jimmy raised his Bieten hat politely to the Blackfoot. Cloudy Face was drying his keen knife on the antelope without interruption.

"I've come to see you, Cloudy Face," began Jimmy.

"The little white man and his brothers are welcome to the lodge of the Blackfoot."

"Oh, good!" murmured Lovell, much taken by the red man's stately mode of speech. He decided to answer in the same exalted strain. "We are honoured by the welcome of the great Blackfoot chief."

"We want you to help us, Cloudy Face," said Jimmy. "We've come to hunt for the horse that stranded me here yesterday. You can follow a horse's trail!"

The Blackfoot made a lofty gesture.

"Cloudy Face is a great hunter," he said. "He can follow the trail of the west wind on the mountains."

"Some trailer, then!" murmured Lovell.

"Well, will you help us hunt down Blazer?" asked Jimmy Silver.

The Blackfoot eyed him thoughtfully.

"The Blackfoot is a hunter," he said. "He has been away from his lodges for many moons and his warriors look for his return. But the Blackfoot will serve the little white chief. What you give Blackfoot!"

The last question was scarcely in accordance with the great chief's lofty mode of address. It was evident that the warrior was a business man as well as a hunter.

"Ten dollars!" said Jimmy Silver.

The Blackfoot considered, and then shook his head. How long the task might prove, and what the worth of it might be, Jimmy Silver had no idea, and he had spoken at a venture.

"Twenty!" said Cloudy Face.

"It's worth it if we find the horse," said Baby. "I heard Peters say it was worth two hundred dollars."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"I agree!" he said. "Point out the horse to us, Cloudy Face, and a twenty dollars!"

"I have spoken!" said the Blackfoot, with dignity.

He rose from the boulder and lifted the entrance of the archedop into the tepoo, closing the entrance with a great rock. In a very few minutes the Indian's preparations were completed. He slung on his rifle and made a movement to start. The juniors followed him back to the bank of the mountain creek.

Without a word the Blackfoot began to make an examination of the story and, the juniors watching him curiously.

They had heard and read a great deal of the skill of the red men in picking up a trail, and it was interesting enough to watch the Blackfoot at work. So far as Jimmy Silver & Co. could see, there was no trace of Blazer to be discovered. The ground showed faint tracks here and there, but these were made by the Rookwooders' horses. But the Blackfoot was evidently at no loss, for after a few minutes he started down the bank of the creek at a steady, loping trot.

The juniors mounted their horses to follow him.

The Blackfoot led them out of the valley into the prairie without a halt.

"I say, he's jolly clever if he's on the right track!" said Lovell in a low voice. "Blessed if I can see anything to follow!"

"Same here!" said Raby.

"And the track he's following is twenty-four hours old, too!" said Newcome. "I—I suppose he isn't stuffing us, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"I'm sure not!" he answered.

The foothills were left behind, and the fireless Indian continued to trot over the plain, his eyes on the ground before him. The horses had occasionally to break into a trot to keep pace with him. Three miles were covered in almost a direct line towards the distant Windy River. Then the Blackfoot, turning suddenly, set his face towards the hills again. Jimmy spurred nearer to his guide.

"The horse turned back to the hills?" he asked.

"My little brother speaks the truth."

"What a long-winded way of saying yes!" murmured Lovell; and Raby and Newcome grinned.

The Indian kept on, and the riders followed. The trail—unseen by the juniors, but plain as the print in a book to the eyes of the Indian hunter—turned northward

away from the hills again, and then again turned westward. Possibly Blazer, in his flight, had known by some instinct that by keeping on across the open plains to the east he could land himself at the ranch again and be recaptured. The present trail led towards the foothills, approaching them at a spot five or six miles from the creek valley.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were more than ready for horses by that time, for it was long past noon. But they did not wish to stop. They helped themselves from the buckskin bags, and ate while they rode. Cloudy Face, unstriding without a single halt, loped on ahead.

"The giddy gee-gee went into the hills again, at this rate," remarked Lovell, as the juniors found themselves riding up a grassy valley.

"Looks like it," said Jimmy.

The Blackfoot halted at a pool of clear water. The juniors stopped, also, and waited for him to speak.

"Horse stop here," said the Blackfoot.

"Sleep at night."

"I wish he'd waited for us!" murmured Lovell.

"White man find him here," added the Blackfoot.

The juniors stared.

"A white man here!" exclaimed Jimmy. "It couldn't be one of the ranchmen, or the horse would have been roped in."

"See track," said Cloudy Face.

"How do you know it wasn't an Indian's track?" asked Lovell.

The Blackfoot looked at him and then pointed to his own foot.

"Indian moccasins," he said briefly.

"White man boot."

"Oh!" said Lovell. He had overlooked that circumstance.

"White man or breed," said the Indian.

"No red man."

"Whoever he was—did he catch the horse?" asked Jimmy.

Cloudy Face shook his head.

"How do you know?" asked Lovell.

"Cloudy Face read sign. White man go on foot—track there," said the Blackfoot.

"If white man take horse, go on horse."

"Good man!" said Newcome. "Whatever he was and whatever he was doing here, he didn't bag Blazer! That's good!"

"Little white chief follow white man trail or follow horse!" asked the Blackfoot.

"Oh, the horse!" said Jimmy. "Neither the white man or half-breed, or whatever he is! Blazer is our mutton!"

The Blackfoot led the way onward again.

CHAPTER 17.

Tracked Down!

JIMMY SILVER & CO. followed the Blackfoot, with interest growing keener and more eager. How long the missing horse had remained on the spot they did not know, but they felt that they were closer on the track now. It had really been a great idea to call on the services of the Blackfoot, without his skillful aid the juniors certainly never would have approached anywhere near the elusive Blazer. They might have searched through Alberta from Mackenzie to the "Line" without getting any "ferrander," and they were aware of it. They were hoping for success now, and it was very agreeable to picture the astonishment at the Windy River Ranch when they should ride in leading the recaptured Blazer.

The valley they were following narrowed to a mere rocky gorge. The juniors were compelled to dismount and lead their horses. On the rocky soil, they wondered that the Blackfoot could find any sign to guide him; but their guide, though moving more slowly now, did not halt. He had not stopped since leaving the pool in the valley, a mile behind. Arthur Edward Lovell began to wear a doubtful expression.

"It's jolly odd for a horse to follow a way like this, isn't it?" he murmured. "A horse would naturally look for grass. He might clear off the plains, because he would know the cowpunchers would look for him there. But why—"

The Blackfoot glanced round. There was the faintest trace of a smile on his bronze face.

Evidently his hearing was remarkably keen, and he had caught Lovell's muttered words.

"Horse run away from white man," he said.

"What?"

"When man follow horse."

"Oh!" exclaimed Lovell. "You mean the chap whose tracks you found by the pool was after Blazer?"

The Blackfoot nodded.

"Following him on foot?" asked Jimmy. Another nod.

"I see. Keep on."

The juniors understood, but they were a little puzzled. The sign had told the Blackfoot that some man wearing boots, and therefore not an Indian, had come on the horse feeding at the pool. The man had attempted to get hold of the horse, and followed him in his flight up the gorge. Blazer's flight up that rocky way was explained if there were someone on his track, trying to rope him in. But who could the stranger be? It was uncommon enough for a white man to be stranded in the country without a horse. Any man belonging to the Windy River or a neighbouring ranch would naturally have been mounted.

"Some dashed tramp, perhaps!" said Lovell. "A 'hobo,' they would call him here. He was on foot, and thought he would like to get a mount for nothing. We'll jolly soon put a stopper on him if we come across him!"

"Yes, rather!" said Jimmy Silver emphatically.

The gorge narrowed still more, so that it was not easy to walk beside a led horse. But suddenly it opened out in front of the party into a wide, green, verdant valley. It was what is called a "locked" valley, shut in on all sides by steep hills. So far as the juniors could see, there was only one entrance to the valley—the narrow gorge by which they had arrived. The locked valley looked about half a mile in extent each way, and in the distance a lake glimmered in the sun, fed by a stream that tumbled down the hillside.

"My hat! What a lovely spot!" exclaimed Lovell breathlessly. "Who'd have thought of hitting on a little Eden like this in the very heart of these stony hills?"

"If Blazer's there, we've got him," said Raby confidently. "There's only this way of getting out. We can watch that he doesn't give us the slip here."

"But is he here at all?" murmured Newcome.

Cloudy Face halted at the end of the rocky gorge. He raised an arm to point down into the locked valley.

"You see?" he said briefly.

The juniors eagerly followed the direction pointed out by the Blackfoot. Across the green valley, near the lake, they caught sight of a moving figure—the figure of a

quadruped. It was a horse, contentedly cropping the rich grass by the water's edge.

Jimmy had slung on his field glasses before leaving the ranch. He clapped them to his eyes now.

"Blazer!" he exclaimed.

With the aid of the glasses he made out the horse easily enough. It was Blazer, still saddled with the stirrups and reins dangling.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Lovell.

"You know horses!" asked the Blackfoot.

"Yes, that's the right animal, Cloudy Face," said Jimmy Silver. "We'll get hold of him all right now."

"Injun glad."

The Blackfoot held out his hand, evidently for payment.

He had tracked down the missing horse, and pointed him out to the juniors, and his task was done. Jimmy Silver & Co. were now prepared to take on themselves the task of catching Blazer.

Jimmy placed two ten-dollar bills in the Blackfoot's hand.

Cloudy Face ducked his feathered head in salute, draped his ragged blanket round him, and strode away down the gorge.

In a couple of minutes he had disappeared from sight, leaving the juniors on the edge of the locked valley, watching the distant horse by the lake.

"All seems now," said Jimmy Silver.

"Right as rain!" said Lovell, with great satisfaction.

"We haven't caught him yet," hinted Newcome.

"We've got him pretty fairly fixed, though," said Jimmy. "I'm going to try my hand at roping him in with the lasso. I haven't had much practice yet, but—Anyhow, you fellows can stay here and see that he doesn't get away. He can't possibly pass you in this narrow passage."

"We'll see that he doesn't," said Lovell. "Just here it isn't more than three feet wide, and we can block it up with branches so that he can't get through if he tries. So long as we keep him in the valley we're bound to have him sooner or later. Our luck is in."

"Yes, rather!"

"You go ahead with the giddy lasso, old chap," added Lovell, with a grin. "You won't catch him in a month of Sundays!"

"Fathead!"

"But when we've blocked up the passage we'll ride after you and help. We'll

corner him somehow, four of us, and collar him sooner or later."

"Well, I'm going to try," said Jimmy.

And with his lasso in his hand Jimmy Silver rode into the locked valley, leaving his chums at the rocky entrance of the gorge.

CHAPTER II.

In the Shadow of Death!

BLAZER was cropping quietly by the lake when Jimmy Silver rode down from the gorge into the verdant-locked valley. Jimmy rode at a gentle trot, hoping to approach close to the elusive Blazer without being observed. He had his lasso ready, though he was considerably doubtful as to the result of a cast.

He had watched the Windy River Ranch cowpunchers throwing the rope, but he knew well enough that a great deal of practice was required for success. However, there was no harm in trying, and Jimmy meant to do his best if he could get near enough. But Blazer soon showed that he was not to be caught napping. Jimmy was still a hundred yards distant, when the horse threw up his head, cocked his ears, and cast a wild, restless glance round him.

The next moment Blazer was at the gallop, with his long, loose tail turned towards Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy set his lips.

"The rotten beast!" he murmured, intensely exasperated with Blazer at that moment.

He put his horse to the gallop in pursuit. Blazer was stretching away across the little valley, but ahead of him was a rising hillside which no horse could have climbed. Blazer was soon bound to swerve, and then Jimmy hoped for a chance.

Blazer rushed on, as if intending to hurl himself at the hill, but swept round suddenly and galloped along the foot of the rise. Jimmy Silver hurled the lasso, and it uncoiled as it flew. The noose struck on the horse's tossing head, but did not slip over the neck, as it would have done if hurled by an experienced hand with the lariat. Blazer tossed his head with a shrill squeal, evidently irritated by that sudden and unexpected whack, and galloped on faster.

Jimmy Silver had to slack down while he

dragged in the rope and coiled it. Blazer shot away triumphantly, and, as if in contempt of a puerile pursuit, stopped at a distance and began to crop the herbage.

Jimmy coiled his rope, and glanced back towards the gorge across the locked valley where he had left his chums, wondering whether Lovell's critical eye had watched his failure. But the three Rockwooders were not to be seen. They were stacking pine branches across the narrowest neck of the gorge to block it against flight on the part of Blazer, and the bulging rocks hid them from sight. Jimmy was rather glad of that circumstance. He did not yearn for an audience while he made his early escape with the "rata."

The lasso ready again for another cast, Jimmy rode on towards Blazer, striving to bend the wild horse in against the hillside. Blazer lifted his head and watched the schoolboy rider with wickedly glooming eyes, and made a sudden dart away, plunging through a thicket of young pines at great speed.

"Oh, the brute!" gasped Jimmy, as his lasso flew.

The loop did not settle on Blazer. It glided over his back and down his lashing tail, and settled on a young pine. Jimmy stopped his horse just in time to save himself from being jerked out of the saddle. Blazer dashed away beyond the thicket, leaving Jimmy Silver to dismount and disentangle his hapless lasso.

He did not hurry himself. It dawned upon him that, unskilful as he was, he had little chance of success in this tangle with Blazer. When his chums came to his aid it would be a different matter. The four riders would be able to surround the obstinate animal, and perhaps drive him into the narrow way of the rocky gorge and hem him in there. The sun was setting now beyond the western foothills, and shadows were lengthening over the cliff and pine and ravine. The Rockwood chums were booked for one night out, at least.

Jimmy Silver scowled the tangled rope from the tree with what patience he could muster, while Blazer trotted contentedly across the valley, and settled down to feed at a distance. Jimmy was coiling his rope again over his arm, when something in the grass under the trees caught his eye, and he gave a start.

The soil was soft. Jimmy stared at it keenly.

He remembered—what he had forgotten in the excitement of chasing Blazer—the unknown white man, who, according to Claude Fawn, had followed the runaway horse up the gorge as far as the locked valley. That footprint had evidently been made by the unknown, and it came into Jimmy's mind that the man must be somewhere near at hand. If he was in the valley at all he must have seen Jimmy Silver riding in chase of Blazer, and it was a little strange that he had not shown himself or hailed the schoolboy—if he was an honest man. If he was some wandering "hobo," looking for a chance to steal a horse, he would naturally keep out of sight. Jimmy Silver wondered, as he stared at that fresh track under the pines.

He was still examining the track, his coiled lasso hanging loosely in his hand, when a sudden thrill ran through him—a thrill of a sense of impending danger. Perhaps some slight wound had struck his ear only half-consciously. He spun round, and at the same moment sprang away, and it was only in time. A dark, savage face scowled within a couple of feet of him, and a bright blade gleamed in the light of the setting sun.

Jimmy Silver panted, his heart thumping. He recognized at a glance Pequet in Courteen, the horse-thief and ruffian, whom the Rockwood juniors had encountered on their way to the Windy River Ranch, and whose attempt at robbery they had defeated.

"You!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

The half-breed did not answer. He rushed at the junior, his hunting-knife crimped in his dusky hand.

Jimmy, hardly knowing what he did in the sudden terror and excitement of the moment, struck at him with the coiled lasso.

The heavy rope smote the half-breed's arm and swept it back, and the drawn knife went to the ground.

"You villain!" panted Jimmy.

Pequet, with a muttered exclamation, sprang at the knife to recover it. Jimmy Silver dropped his hand on his own knife, but did not draw it. He knew that he had no chance in a hand-to-hand fight with deadly weapons with the muscular, murderous half-breed.

He swung back the coiled lasso, and lashed it with all his force at the ruffian.

It was the print of a boot on a spot where

Pequod, on the side of the head as he stooped for the knife, and threw him over sideways. Le Cousteau rapped out a string of French words as he fell.

Jimmy Silver cast an almost despairing look at his horse. The animal, startled by the rush of the savage half-breed, had started he ran out of the trees, and Jimmy had no chance of reaching him before the ruffian came at him again. He was standing close to a thick tree, and, acting rather upon instinct than upon thought, he grasped a low branch and swung himself up with frantic speed.

Pequod, on his feet almost in a twinkling, caught up the knife and sprang at the junior again. A slash of the keen steel raised Jimmy's boot by an inch as he clambered nimbly into the tree.

"Mochlen!"

The half-breed stared up after him savagely with glittering black eyes. Jimmy, standing on a branch out of his reach, and holding on to another above, looked down at him, with palpitating heart. Jimmy Silver was no coward, but the sudden encounter with a murderous outcast had shaken him deeply, and for the moment his nerves were in a jungle.

Pequod showed his white teeth in a savage snarl.

"You only as well descend, petit!" he said, with a sneer. "You cannot escape me now!"

Jimmy breathed hard and deep.

It was Pequod le Cousteau, that was clear, who had been following the runaway horse, and whose tracks the Blackfoot had discovered. The thought of it had not even crossed Jimmy's mind; it had never occurred to him that he would ever meet the ruffian again. But they had met, and evidently Pequod had not forgotten or forgiven their last encounter. Jimmy's brain worked quickly in those terrible moments. He realized that Pequod supposed him to be alone there; he had not seen Lovell and Baby and Nawasme, who were still in the gorge across the valley, hidden by the rocks. The half-breed's look and manner showed plainly enough that he did not know that he had other foes to deal with. His eyes were fixed on Jimmy with a look of savage, malicious triumph.

"Will you come down, petit?" he asked mockingly.

"No, you wounded!"

"Then I shall come up for you!"

Jimmy sat his teeth.

"Come up, if you dare, you rotter!" he answered undauntedly.

Pequod picked up the lasso. He scanned the tree and the junior in the branches, weighing the chance of a cast. Jimmy could guess that Pequod was skilled in the use of the rope. The Rookwood junior clambered up higher into the tree, and Pequod gave up the intention. It was clear that a *amocast* could not be made among the branches.

Jimmy expected him to climb at once into the tree, and he prepared for a desperate resistance. But the half-breed, after a dark and threatening look at him, turned away, the lasso in his hand. Jimmy watching him through the trees, saw him stealthily approaching the junior's horse, which was cropping the grass at a little distance. The lasso flew, and the horse was roped in with ease. Pequod led the animal back into the trees, and tethered it. Then he looked up at Jimmy again.

"A mount for me to catch the other!" he said. "You are very kind to bring me a horse, mon petit!"

Jimmy did not speak; he knew that the struggle was coming now. The 'breed had only delayed to secure the horse, evidently with the intention of going after Blazer when he had dealt with Jimmy Silver.

Pequod approached the trunk of the tree and began to climb, and in a few seconds he was on a branch below Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy climbed higher.

He thought of shouting to his chums; but he was doubtful whether they would hear him at the distance, and they couldn't have come in time to help him. And as they were totally unaware of Pequod's presence, a call would have brought them into terrible danger. The ruffian, knife in hand, would have had little to fear from the schoolboys. But in his present position, Jimmy Silver was quite prepared to take care of himself. He had fully recovered his nerve now.

He drew the knife from his belt, and hacked off a short branch to use as a club. Then, astride of a bough jutting from the trunk, he waited for the half-breed to come nearer.

Pequod climbed till he was close below the junior. He ducked his head back as Jimmy struck at him.

"Not so easy, mon petit!" he said mockingly.

Leaning back, holding on to a branch by his little legs, the half-breed poised his knife in his hand, to hurl it at the junior above like a javelin.

But Jimmy Silver did not give him time. He could not reach the half-breed with his club, but he hurled it suddenly full at the dark, threatening form as the villain was taking aim with the knife.

Crash!

The result was startling.

Poqued le Corcoran, with a shrill scream, toppled off the branch, and went whirling to the ground.

He caught at a lower bough as he swept by, and clung to it for a second, but he could not keep his hold. With a heavy thud he dropped to the earth.

Jimmy Silver panted.

The half-breed lay gasping on the ground for several minutes. But for the lower bough breaking his fall, he would probably have broken his limbs in the crash. As it was, he was lumping painfully as he scrambled to his feet, and a stream of evil words poured from his lips in a dialect of mingled Indian and French.

He shook a furious fist at the junior above, but he did not essay to climb the tree again. He was too bruised and shaken for that.

"You can wait, mon petit!" he said, between his teeth. "You cannot escape me! I shall return and finish you!"

He picked up his knife and sheathed it, cast loose the horse, and led it out of the trees. From the tree-top Jimmy Silver saw him mount and ride away, lone in hand, towards the distant Blazer. Jimmy climbed to the highest branch and stared away across the valley in the gorge, and he was thankful to see that Lovell & Co. were now in sight. Had the half-breed known that they were at hand, it was extremely probable that he would have attacked them before riding in chase of Blazer.

Blazer was in motion again now, running and dodging, with the half-breed riding on his back with ready laser. But Blazer had a different kind of pursuer to deal with now. Jimmy Silver watched the chase from the tree-top. Under the red sunset, pursuer and pursued were in his full view all the time; and very soon he saw the latter descend upon Blazer, fastening on his neck, and dragging him, half-throttled, to the ground. The runaway was captured as well as the half-breed. But the horse,

savage as ever, was struggling and rearing, and for the present the blood had his hands full. Jimmy Silver slipped down from the tree, and started for the gorge to rejoin his chums, only hoping that Blazer would keep the villain long enough to allow him to make his escape.

CHAPTER 19.

Turning the Tables!

"JIMMY!"

"What's up?"

"Been a giddy ghost!"

Thus Lovell & Co. exclaimed together, as Jimmy Silver ran breathlessly into the rocky gorge. In the gorge it was now deep dusk, though in the valley beyond the sunset was still red.

Jimmy Silver panted for breath.

"Look out, you fellows!" he gasped.

"What's the row? You haven't got Blazer."

"No. I've dropped on the man who was tracking him!" said Jimmy breathlessly. "And it's Poqued le Corcoran—that scoundrel who attacked us on the prairie the other day!"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Lovell.

"Keep in cover of the rocks," said Jimmy hastily. "He's got my horse, and he's loaded Blazer with my laser. He doesn't know you fellows are with me."

"You let him take your horse!" asked Lovell.

Jimmy gave Arthur Edward Lovell an expressive look.

"I haven't time to punch your silly head now!" he said, breathing hard.

"Look here—"

"Shut up, Lovell, old chap!" said Baby. "What's happened, Jimmy?"

Jimmy Silver hurriedly explained.

"Phew!" murmured Lovell. "Well, I suppose you couldn't help it, Jimmy."

"Of course I couldn't, fathend! I was jolly lucky to get away alive!" growled Jimmy Silver.

"If I'd been there—"

"Lucky you weren't! I shouldn't like to see you stuck like a pig, silly as you are!"

"Look here—"

"Oh, cry up, Lovell!" said Jimmy crossly. "The question is, who's going to

he done! We could clear off now, while that brute is busy with Blazer, but—"

"But we're not going to," said Lovell. "We don't want to be grinned to death at the ranch."

"There's four of us," said Newcome. "Four fellows can handle even a ruffian like that half-breed."

"If you fellows are game—" said Jimmy.

"Oh, we're game!"

"Yes, rather!" said Lovell emphatically.

"Then we'll fight it out with the rascal," said Jimmy Silver. "I wish to goodness we had a gun! Anyhow, we're not giving him best. He thinks I'm alone here after that confounded horse. And, of course, he thinks he has nothing to fear from a school-boy. We're going to tackle the ruter and down him. And if we get the best of him we'll make him a prisoner and hand him over to the police. He can be charged with attempted murder as well as stealing a horse."

"Let's get after him now!" said Lovell, at once.

Jimmy shook his head.

"We've got to be careful," he said. "It's no good making out that we can handle a desperado like that easily, because we can't do it."

"Four of us—"

"There wouldn't be more than two or three of us after a fight with knives with that murderous villain."

"Well, what's the idea, then?" asked Lovell. "We're jolly well not letting him get away with Blazer, I know that!"

Jimmy, keeping in cover of the rocks, stared back into the locked valley. The shadows were deepening into darkness, and there was no sign to be seen of the half-breed now.

"I've thought it out," said Jimmy. "If he tries to leave the valley with the horses he will have to come through this gorge. If we stop here we shall stop him, with the advantage on our side. We can cut cudgels with our knives, and rush him all at once, with a jolly good chance of downing him."

"That's so. But suppose he stays where he is? He's not likely to start travelling at nightfall."

"If he stays in the valley we shall find it out, and we'll get at him somehow when he's camped. He won't be looking for an attack, thinking that he has only a school-

boy to deal with. If he thinks about me at all he will suppose I am logging it as fast as I can. We got to wait and watch."

"I'd rather go for the ruter!" granted Lovell.

"Fathead!"

That was all the reply Jimmy Silver deigned to make. Lovell gave a snort, but he acquiesced, and on reflection—which always came rather late with Arthur Edward Lovell—he admitted that Jimmy's plan was the best. With the odds against him the half-breed might have been overcome in a fierce fight with deadly weapons, but it was pretty certain that success would have to be purchased with the lives of one or two of the Rookwood party. It was evidently a case for strategy, so long as strategy was possible.

The juniors concealed the three horses in a narrow ravine, and tethered them there. Then they cut thick cudgels from the trees for use as weapons when the struggle came. By that time it was deep night, and the stars were glimmering over the foothills and the waving pines. In the narrow gorge the four Rookwooders watched and waited, ready to tackle the half-breed if he came.

But, as Lovell had said, it was unlikely that the ruffian would take the trail at nightfall. If he came up the gorge with the horses, ignorant of an ambush, it would be easy enough to rush him and beat him down with the cudgels before he even saw them in the gloom. But their task was not to be so easy as that.

They watched and waited, and suddenly from the darkness of the locked valley, there came a ruddy gleam of light.

"That's a camp-fire!" said Raby.

Jimmy nodded.

"It's Pequod's camp," he said. "He's lighted a camp-fire. That means that he's camping there for the night."

"Let's go—" began Lovell.

"Fathead!"

"Look here Jimmy Silver—"

"Shut up, Lovell!" implored Raby.

"Jimmy's leader. Besides, you know you're an ass."

Lovell grunted.

"We'll wait till about midnight," said Jimmy quietly. "We've got a chance then of catching him off his guard, perhaps asleep! We don't want to come to knifing if we can help it."

And the juniors waited. They ate their

sniper in the dark, sitting on the boulders in the gorge. Then they watched the ruddy gleam of the half-breed's camp-fire across the valley.

The ruddy light died down at last.

There was still a faint glow to be seen, and the juniors could guess that the breed had hunked up the fire, to burn on while he rolled himself in his blanket and slept.

Jimmy Silver made a move at last.

"Come on!" he said. "It's close on midnight now."

"I know I'm getting sleepy!" grumbled Lovell.

"You wait!" assented Jimmy.

"Look here——"

"This way, and don't jaw! Give your chin a rest till we get back to the ranch, old goat! Quiet!"

The juniors, gripping their roughly-cut outcrops in their hands, crept down from the gorge into the locked valley. Their hearts were beating fast. They realized clearly enough the deadly danger before them, but they did not falter.

Overhead the stars glittered in a velvety sky. Through the darkness of the valley the dull glow of the camp-fire was like a beacon to guide them.

Over the hilltops a crescent moon sailed into sight.

There was a rustle and a bark in the thicket and the juniors stopped with thumping hearts. But it was only a coyote, and the animal, more startled than the juniors, backed away stealthily and fled. Jimmy Silver & Co. pressed on, closer and closer to the dim, burning glow of the banked fire.

It was in the little wood, close to where he had met Jimmy, that the half-breed had camped.

Treading softly and cautiously, feeling every inch of the way before they made a step, the juniors approached the camp.

They heard a faint stirring, and, peering ahead in the darkness, they made out the figures of two horses lying in the barbage, tethered to saplings. One was Jimmy's horse and the other was Blazer. Between the horses and the glowing fire a figure lay rolled in a blanket, the feet towards the outliers.

The juniors felt their hearts beat faster as they discerned it.

It was the half-breed.

He was sleeping, that was clear. Not a hint of danger was in his mind. Jimmy

Silver alone would scarcely have ventured an attack upon the horse-thief's camp, and of his companions the ruffian knew nothing. An occasional tongue of flame shot up from the fire and revealed the sleeping figure of the half-breed clearly as the juniors crept closer.

But the half-breed, though he slept, slept like a man accustomed to incipient peril. Blazer, scenting the approach of the juniors, stirred uneasily, and jerked at his tether. The half-breed's head was raised, and his black eyes swept round suspiciously.

The juniors stood quite still. They were among the trees now, not six yards away from the horse-thief, and the darkness hid them. Pequod le Couteau muttered savagely at the horse that had disturbed him; but caution was second nature to him. He reached out and seized a loose stick, and thrust it at the fire, stirring the banked-up wood into flame.

Ruddy flames shot up, lighting the camp and dancing among the surrounding trees.

"At him!" panted Jimmy breathlessly. He knew that the juniors would be seen in an instant now.

Like an arrow from a bow Jimmy Silver rushed forward, his comrades close at his heels.

The half-breed leaped to his feet with the agility of a tiger. His hand was on his knife, and it flashed out in the bright firelight.

But he had no time for more. Jimmy Silver was upon him, and his cudgel swept down.

Pequod sprang back, throwing up his arm at the same moment, and the blow landed upon his forearm instead of his head. A yell of pain and rage broke from the half-breed.

"Down him!" shrieked Lovell.

Pequod sprang farther back and back, changing his knife to his left hand. His right arm was nerveless from the heavy blow. The juniors rushed right on.

Crash, crash!

The knife went clattering to the ground as Lovell's cudgel crashed on the half-breed's shoulder. Baby and Newcome got in with their outcrops the next moment, and Pequod was stretched on the ground.

He made a desperate effort to rise, but Jimmy Silver struck again, and, with a groan, the ruffian rolled over.

Jimmy snatched up his knife and hurled

le far into the trees. Then he fairly jumped on the struggling ruffian.

His knee was planted on Pequod's chest, and the breed clutched at him like a wild beast. Jimmy swung up the cudgel.

"Will you give in?" he said savagely. And, as the half-breed still clutched, the cudgel came down with a crash, and Pequod's Coutreau's struggles ceased. His head fell heavily on the ground, and he lay stunned.

"Good!" panted Lovell. "That does it!" "Get hold of the lasso!" said Jimmy breathlessly.

"Right-ho!" Baby stirred the fire into a brighter blaze, and Lovell quickly bound the lasso. The end of the rope was knotted round Pequod's wrists. Another length was cut off and knotted round his ankles. And only just in time. The half-breed's fierce black eyes opened as Lovell finished binding his limbs, and Pequod began to struggle again. But he was helpless now, and the juniors left him lying on the ground, to struggle as he liked.

CHAPTER 12.

Jimmy Silver & Co's Triumph.

DAWN dashed up over the plains of Alberta and over the foothills and the locked valley in the heart of the hills. Jimmy Silver threw aside his blanket, and turned out and yawned. Through the night the juniors had kept watch in turn, and Lovell, who was taking the last watch, was sitting by the camp-fire on a log, with his eyes on the bound half-breed. He grinned at Jimmy.

"All serene, old top! What about breaker?"

"That's the next item," said Jimmy cheerily, "and then for the ranch! I fancy we shall surprise them when we ride in."

"You bet!" grinned Lovell. "We've got Blazer, and we've got the darndest horse-dief in Alberta!"

"And we're not letting him get away this time!" said Jimmy Silver. "Now, then, turn out, you slackers!"

Baby and Newcome turned out and yawned. The juniors dipped their faces in the creek by way of ablutions, and then prepared breakfast at the camp-fire. Pequod's Coutreau watched them with black eyes

that scintillated with hate, but he said no word. When the juniors offered him a share of the meal he ate sullenly and in silence; and they fed him, not venturing to untie his hands. Pequod was too slippery and dangerous a customer to be trusted loose.

Breakfast over, the heroes of Rockwood prepared for departure from the locked valley. Pequod was mounted on the horse Jimmy had ridden the day before, and his legs were secured to the animal with lengths cut from the lasso. Jimmy was going to ride Blazer, buck-jumper as he was. But the horses were led as the juniors made their way back to the gorge.

In the gorge the horses belonging to Lovell, Baby and Newcome were still tethered. They were released and fed and given water, and then the juniors led them away down the gorge. The half-breed broke his savage sullen silence at last.

"Where are you taking me?"

Jimmy looked at him.

"To the Windy River Ranch," he answered.

"Confound you!"

Jimmy held up his riding-whip.

"That will do!" he said. "Shut up!"

And Pequod relapsed into sullen silence again, and did not speak a word further during the journey.

Once out of the rocky gorge, the juniors mounted their horses and rode cheerily to the plain.

Two ropes were attached to the half-breed's horse, held by Lovell and Baby, to lead him, one on either side. Newcome rode behind. Jimmy Silver for a time was busy dealing with Blazer, who had not overcome his objection to being ridden. But Blazer had apparently learned that Jimmy knew how to deal with him, and he ceased to buck at last and allowed himself to be ridden quietly. The contest ended in Jimmy Silver's favour, though he was careful to keep a wary eye on his mount and a tight hand on the rein. If the horse had been in his wildest mood, Jimmy was determined to ride him up to the ranch; but he was glad enough when Blazer decided to take it philosophically.

It was close on noon when the ranch-house chimneys came in sight. The first "hand" seen was Spika Thompson, who came careering across the prairie with blank amazement written on his bearded face at the sight of the cavalcade.

"What you got there?" yelled Spike.

Jimmy Silver chuckled.

"Blazer and a giddy horse-thief!" he answered.

"Pequod!" yelled Spike. "Oh, thunder! You has have roped in Pequod in Pequot!"

"Looks like it—what!" grinned Lovell. "Waal, carry me home to die!" gasped Spike. "I guess I'm telling them this at the ranch, some!"

And Spike put spurs to his horse and dashed away to the ranch at top speed to spread the wonderful news. Jimmy Silver & Co. grinned with satisfaction. Pete Peters was not likely to talk of "tall stories" when he saw them ride in with Blazer and the half-breed, both captured.

Spike got in well ahead of the Rook-wonders. By the time they rode up to the ranch every man who was within call had gathered to stare at them. Hudson Smedley stood in the porch of the ranch-house with an astonished face. Pete Peters sat on his horse, and Red Alf, Skitter Dick, and a dozen other men were grouped before the bunkhouse or by the corrals, all amazed by Spike's amazing news, and not believing a word of it till the Rookwood cavalcade rode into sight.

Then there was a roar from the cow-punchers.

"Pequod, the horse-thief! They've got him!"

"Young Silver's riding Blazer!"

"Jerusalem crickets!"

"Bravo, tenderfoot!"

The Rookwooders rode up to the ranch-house. Hudson Smedley came to meet them, quite an extraordinary expression on his beamed face.

"Jimmy!" he stammered.

"I hope you don't mind our clearing off like that!" said Jimmy. "You see, we felt bound to hunt down Blazer."

"I guess I was mad when I came back from Mosquito and found you gone," said the rancher "but—but—Holy smoke! This caps the trick, I guess! How did you rope in that breed?"

"He came for me with a knife, and he stole my horse, so we thought we'd rope him in," said Jimmy, with exaggerated carelessness.

"Oh, Jimmy!"

Hudson Smedley seemed able to say no more. The juniors dismounted, in a mood of great satisfaction with themselves and

things generally. Pete Peters came over and clapped Jimmy Silver on the back.

"I guess I'm sorry, sonny!" he said. "I guess I take back some things I've said, and a lot more that I've thought! You've got 'em beat!"

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"All serene, old scout!" he answered.

"Cheers for the tenderfoot, boys!" shouted Red Alf.

And the cowpunchers gave a thunderous cheer that made the rafters of the Windy River Ranch rung again.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had made good, and no one grudged the "tenderfoot" their triumph.

CHAPTER 21.

Roped In!

WHIZ!

"Oh!"

Bump!

It happened so quickly that Jimmy Silver hardly knew that it was happening.

A few seconds before Jimmy had been riding cheerily across the plain towards the Windy River Ranch. Then came the whiz of the hurtling lasso, the grip of the noose about his shoulders, and the bump on the hard prairie as he was plucked from the saddle.

Jimmy Silver sprawled on the ground every bone in his body jarred by the heavy fall, half stunned by the shock.

His horse, Blazer, ran on at a gallop, with empty saddle, and reins and stirrups dangling.

It was a full minute before Jimmy Silver was able to sit up and stare about him in a dazed way.

Jimmy was not often caught napping, but "roping in" on his Canadian cousin's ranch was about the last thing he would have have looked for. Dazed as he was, he could guess that it was a trick of some cattlemen. There were no warnings to be feared on the wide grasslands of the Windy River Ranch.

There was no pull on the lasso. The noose bound fast round Jimmy Silver, and he would have been helpless if there had been a pull on the rope. But it lay on the prairie, and a wrench of his arms unloosed the gripping noose, and he was free.

Jimmy staggered to his feet.

His head was still stinging from the shock, and he had an ache all over him.

No one was to be seen. In the distant south the smoke from the chimney of the ranch ranch-house curled against the blue Alberta sky. A dozen yards away a belt of pines and sassafras ran, and it was from the cover of the timber belt that the lasso-cast had come.

The lassoer did not show himself, and the fact that the rope lay idle on the ground showed that it had been abandoned by the cowpuncher who had made the cast.

He could not have recovered it without approaching Jimmy and betraying himself, and it was clear that the practical joker wished to keep his identity a secret.

Jimmy Silver gritted his teeth.

That rough tumble on the prairie was rather more than a practical joke, in Jimmy's opinion. He took a hard grip on his riding-whip, and ran towards the timber belt, with the intention of taking instant vengeance. In a minute more he was among the trees, searching for the man who had thrown the lariat.

But the lassoer was gone.

"Show yourself, you rotter!" shouted Jimmy Silver. "You skulking cad, come out and show yourself!"

There was no answer.

Jimmy Silver moved to and fro among the trees, his eyes glinting with anger. In the earth were traces of the heavy boots of the cowpuncher who had waited there, and Jimmy scanned them. But the "sign," which would have told much to a native plainsman, was useless to the schoolboy who, only a few weeks before, had been at school in England. Jimmy had learned much during his few weeks in Canada, but still in seamcraft was not to be picked up so soon.

"The rotter!" breathed Jimmy.

It was useless to search for an experienced plainsman who chose to keep himself hidden in the cover. Jimmy might have searched for hours, if not for days, without success. He quit the trees at last, and picked up the abandoned lasso that still lay on the ground.

Jimmy did not intend to let the matter end there.

The cowpuncher who had played that trick upon him had to answer for it, and the lasso was a clue.

Jimmy coiled the lasso, threw it over his arm, and started for the ranch on foot. His horse had already vanished from sight. Blazer was now Jimmy's own horse.

Ransder Smedley had handed him over to his English cousin—a very acceptable present to Jimmy Silver. But Blazer, though tamed, was not yet a reliable mount, and was liable to take advantages when his master's eyes and hand were not upon him. Finding himself without a rider, Blazer had galloped home to the corral, and Jimmy was left with a three-mile tramp before him.

No doubt the practical joker in the timber belt had counted upon that; it was part of his trick on the "tenderfoot."

Tramping on the rough prairie was not pleasant, especially after a long ride. The cowboy on the vast grasslands is almost helpless without his horse. Jimmy Silver tramped on with tired legs over the rolling plain, with a frowning brow.

He turned over in his mind, as he tramped on, the question of his assailant's identity. He knew all the men on the Windy River Ranch, and he was friendly with all of them, from Pete Peters, the gigantic foreman, to Baldy, the cook, and Wao Sing, the chow-boy. Red Alf, Shitter Dick, Spike Thompson, and the rest—not one of them would have played that ill-natured trick, he was sure.

"Kentuck!" he muttered.

He tramped on savagely.

Three riders loomed up ahead on the prairie, and he recognised Lovell and Raby and Newcome, his chums. They were riding towards him from the ranch.

"Hallo! Here he is!" shouted Lovell.

Jimmy stopped, and the three Book-wooders rode up. They grinned down at Jimmy.

"Your gee-goo came trotting in," said Lovell, with a grin. "We guessed he had given you the chuck, so we came out for you."

"Blazer isn't quite safe yet, Jimmy," remarked Raby.

"Bad luck, old thing!" said Newcome sympathetically.

Jimmy grunted.

"Blazer's all right when I'm in the saddle," he said.

"But not when you fall off," chuckled Lovell.

"Fathead! I've been lassoed," Jimmy Silver held up the captured lasso, and explained what had happened.

Arthur Edward Lovell whistled.

"Kentuck, of course!" he said. "That scolding cad came back from Mosquito yet-

today. This is in return for the punch you gave him, Jimmy. I suppose he didn't care to punch his boss' cousin, so he's taken it out this way."

"I'm going to find out," said Jimmy Silver grimly. "If it turns out to be Kentuck, he won't have any choice about the punching. You can give me a lift, Lovell."

"Jump on, old chap."

Jimmy Silver mounted behind his cousin, and the Rockwooders rode on to the ranch.

CHAPTER 22.

Not Guilty!

PETE PETERS, the foreman of the Windy River Ranch, was standing by the bunkhouse when the juniors rode up. He was grinning, and he grinned still more at the sight of Jimmy Silver riding double with Lovell. Jimmy jumped to the ground.

"Blaze too much for you, after all, what?" grinned Mr. Peters.

"Not in your lifetime, Mr. Peters," answered Jimmy, and he explained once more what had happened and exhibited the lasso. "I want to know to whom this rope belongs."

Peters became grave as he listened.

"That was a dirty trick!" he said. "I guess the boss will come down heavy on a galoot playing a trick like that on his guest. You'd better tell Boss Smedley."

Jimmy shook his head.

"I'm not going to bother Mr. Smedley about it," he said. "I can deal with the matter myself."

"Going to wallop a six-foot cowpuncher—what?" asked Mr. Peters humorously.

"If it turns out to be a six-foot cowpuncher, we'll see," said Jimmy. "I fancy it wasn't! anyhow, I want to know who was the owner of this rope."

"Might not have been one of the ranch hands at all," suggested Mr. Peters. "Might have been a man belonging to the Sunset Ranch, or some galoot from up the river. Though it's queer for a cowpuncher to throw away his rope like that."

"He couldn't get the rope back without showing himself," said Jimmy, "and if it had been a stranger playing a rotten trick on a newcomer, he wouldn't have been able to show himself."

"Boss!" repeated Jimmy after a moment's thought.

"Anyhow, I want to know who's lost this rope," said Jimmy. "Where is Kentuck just now?"

"Out on the prairie."

Pete Peters took the coiled lasso and examined it attentively. His brows became knitted.

"This ain't Kentuck's rope," he said.

"You know it isn't?" asked Lovell.

"Sure."

"Do you know whose it is?"

"Ye-es!" said the ranch foreman slowly. "I guess this fyer rope belongs to Skitter Dick."

"Where is Mosquito Dick now?"

"Up the range, looking after the steers," said the foreman. "You leave it to me, Silver, and I guess I'll speak to Skitter Dick when he comes in at sundown."

"I'll speak to him when he comes in at sundown, Mr. Peters," said Jimmy Silver quietly.

And he took back the lasso, and walked away to the ranch-house with his chin up.

Jimmy Silver was longer after his ride, and that was the next matter to be attended to, as Skitter Dick was not to be back till the sun set. Jimmy Silver was rather puzzled, and considerably annoyed and exasperated.

Skitter—or Mosquito—Dick was a young fellow, rather a steady among the ranchmen, and he had always seemed good-natured enough in the "tenderfoot." Certainly he would have been prepared at any time to "take a rise" out of the school-boys. Once or twice he had done so, but in a good-natured way, and Jimmy Silver & Co. had been quite friendly with him. It was a shock to discover that he was guilty of a treacherous trick like this.

Hudson Smedley was away from the ranch that afternoon on one of his frequent visits to the Sunset Ranch down the river, and Jimmy was glad that his Canadian cousin was out of the way. He did not want to involve the authority of the rancher in this affair—that favoured rather too much of "telling a master" in the old school days at Rockwood.

Jimmy meant to deal with the matter himself, though how he was to handle Skitter Dick on his own was rather a problem, for the young cowpuncher stood five-feet-ten, and there was twice as much of him in the way of muscle and stony as there was of Jimmy Silver, sturdy fellow as Jimmy was.

that Jimmy was quite ramblous. It was not a matter that could be passed over and forgotten. After tea Jimmy visited the corral, to make sure that Blazer was all right, and then he strolled with his chums towards the bunkhouse, the gathering-place of the cowboys when they came in from the ranges.

There his caught sight of Kentucky, the lanky and ill-mannered youth from the States. Kentucky did not look at him, and did not seem to be aware of his existence, and Jimmy did not approach the fellow. Kentucky was the only cowpuncher on the ranch with whom Jimmy could not "pull," and he did his best to keep out of the Kentuckian's way and avoid further trouble.

One by one horsemen came in from the plains, and Baldy in the cook-house was very busy now.

Skitter Dick rode up at last.

He was a handsome, well-built young fellow, with a sunburnt face and white teeth. He wore his hair rather long, and brown curls escaped under the Stetson hat.

Jimmy Silver watched him as he dismounted and turned his horse into the eneral. Skitter Dick came back towards the bunkhouse, and Jimmy stepped to meet him.

"Is that your lasso?" he asked, holding it up.

The young man glanced at it.

"I guess it looks like it," he said. "Let's see."

He took the rope and examined it.

"Sure, that's mine," he said.

"That settles it!" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver's eyes glistened.

"I suppose you know where I picked it up?" he said.

"On the peg of the bunkhouse, I reckon," said Skitter Dick, staring at him. "What are you driving at? What are you handling my rope for, anyhow?"

"I picked it up three miles from the ranch, after it had been used to rope me off my horse."

"Hey!"

Skitter Dick looked astounded.

"You didn't expect me to bring it in, and inquire as to whom it belonged, I suppose?" said Jimmy, with a curl of the lip.

"You peaky fool, Dick!" broke in Pete Peters.

"What you want to play fool tricks on the kid for? You're too big for

him to handle, and he don't want to complain to Boss Stedley and get you fired from the ranch. You've got him there, and it's a cowardly trick, I tell you!"

"What's started you chewing the rag, old Peters?" asked Skitter Dick. "Who's been playing tricks with the kid?"

"You have!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver savagely. "And whether you're too big for me or not, I'm going to handle you for it, so you can put up your hands, you rotter!"

And Jimmy Silver advanced on the cowpuncher with his fists clenched and a blaze in his eyes.

Skitter Dick stepped back.

"Keep cool, young 'un!" he said, with a laugh. "Don't lide off more'n you can chew in too big a hurry."

"Will you put up your hands, or are you afraid to stand by what you've done?" shouted Jimmy Silver.

"I guess there's no man between Labrador and the Rockies that I'm afraid of, kid!" said the cowpuncher. "Keep cool, I tell you! If you was a foot taller, I guess I wouldn't waste time in chewing the rag; but afore I handle a kid of your size, I want to know, I guess. I left this hyer rope on the peg over my bunk this morning when I saddled up, and I ain't seen it again till this minute. If it's been used to rope you off your horse, it wasn't in my hands at the time."

Jimmy Silver checked himself.

The young cowpuncher's manner was so frank, and it was so clear that he had nothing to fear from an encounter, that Jimmy could not help being impressed.

The rope was not so valuable a clue, after all, as Jimmy had supposed.

"You—you mean that somebody else borrowed your rope to play that trick on me?" stammered Jimmy.

Skitter Dick laughed.

"I guess that's plain enough," he said.

"Tell me what's happened to you, kid, afore you begin chawing up a man what could swallow you with one gulp."

"I—I'm sorry!" said Jimmy, reddening.

"I—I take your word, of course. But as it's your rope—"

"That's all right! I guess I know how it looks!" said Skitter Dick santhingly. "I guess I'm going to talk to the ganoet what borrowed my rope without saying 'By your leave.' How did it happen?"

Jimmy—yes, told him. The corner of

cowpunchers standing round and looking on curiously.

"I guess I shouldn't have hidden away after, if I'd roped you in, sonny!" grinned Skitter Dick. "It wasn't a galoot of my size. You see, I didn't want the rope today, and I never took it with me. Some pilgrim that has his knife in you borrowed it, I reckon, and laid for you on the prairie, and used my rope to keep himself dark. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough," said Jimmy Silver. "I'm sorry, Skitter Dick. I was surprised to think it was you. But—"

"All O. K.," said the cowpuncher good-humouredly. "One of us two has had a narrow escape of an awful walloping."

"Ha, ha, ha!" The cowpunchers laughed loudly, and Jimmy coloured. He turned towards Kentuck, who was lounging on the doorstep of the bunkhouse, watching the scene. Now that Mosquito Dick was cleared, Jimmy's earlier suspicion returned in full force.

"Was it you, Kentuck?" demanded Jimmy.

The Kentuckian looked at him insolently. "Was what me?" he drawled.

"Did you borrow Skitter Dick's rope and lay for me on the prairie?"

"I guess I'm too busy to waste my time on greenhorns," drawled the cowboy.

"That's not an answer," said Lovell.

"Isn't it good enough?" asked Kentuck.

"No, it isn't!" snapped Jimmy Silver.

"I guess it's all you'll get. Are you going round the ranch bull-dozing the punchers because you're the boss relation?" sneered Kentuck. "I guess you won't find them nice and gracious go down on the Windy River Ranch, young Silver. Go to blazes!"

And Kentuck turned and lounged into the bunkhouse.

Jimmy Silver's eyes blazed, and he made a step to follow him. Pete Peters' hand dropped on his shoulder.

"Let up, young 'un," said the foreman. "You've got no proof agin Kentuck."

"I know! But—"

"Let up, then." Jimmy Silver felt that the foreman's counsel was good. There was no shadow of proof that Kentuck had purloined the Skitter's rope and played that trick on the prairie. Jimmy Silver was pretty certain in his own mind; but that was not proof.

He turned away, and as he walked towards the ranch with his chains he was aware that Kentuck was looking after him from the window of the bunkhouse, and he caught the mocking grin on the Kentuckian's face. Jimmy Silver breathed hard, but he walked on.

CHAPTER 23.

On the Island!

MR. HUDSON SMEDLEY heard nothing of the occurrence. Jimmy Silver was not likely to tell him, and the matter had been dropped. After careful reflection, Jimmy realised that there was nothing to be done in the matter.

Jimmy would have been glad to dismiss the whole matter from his mind, and forget and forgive; but he could not help thinking that the malicious Kentuckian was only hiding his time for another attack. Next time the ill-natured fellow showed his hand, Jimmy intended to be more upon his guard. But several days passed, and he did not come into contact with the cowpuncher in any way, and the affair almost passed from his remembrance. He had a matter that was much more agreeable to think of. Mr. Hudson Smedley had had a Canadian bark canoe brought up from Mosquito town for the use of his distinguished guests, and Jimmy Silver & Co. were taking instruction in paddling the canoe from Skitter Dick, who was a skilled man on the river.

The Skitter had quite forgiven Jimmy for his suspicion, founded on the misleading clue of the lasso. He was on the best of terms with the schoolboys, and willingly taught them all he knew in the management of the river craft. The weather was glorious, and the Rockwood juniors thoroughly enjoyed days on the river in the canoe as soon as they knew how to handle it. There was an island in the Windy River about four miles from the ranch-house, thickly wooded and tenanted only by wild birds and prairie rabbits, and as soon as they felt confident in their management of the canoe the Rockwood juniors determined on a picnic on the island. It was just like one of their old stunts at Rockwood, as Arthur Edward Lovell remarked.

Early one morning the Flatfoot Four

carried their bundles down to the river, placed them in the canoe, and launched it. They took provisions for the day and other camping necessaries. Kentucky, the cow-puncher, came out of the bunkhouse as they were starting, and he glanced rather curiously at the juniors. He stood on the bank while they were launching the canoe, and gave the craft a push off when they were on board—a little service they had hardly expected of him.

"You want to be careful going down stream," he called out to them. "You want to make a portage when you get to the rapids."

"We're going up stream," answered Jimmy.

"I guess there's a portage a mile up, too," said Kentucky. "Are you going as far as that?"

"We're going to picnic on Woody Island."

"Oh, gum! How are you going to get there?"

"Paddle, of course."

"Not in your lifetime," grinned Kentucky, and he turned away, laughing.

"Cheeky as!" growled Lovell. "We'll jolly well show him whether we can paddle as far as the island. I'd undertake to paddle as far as the Rockies if the water was deep enough."

And the juniors started.

They were accustomed to the use of the paddles by this time, and they made good headway against the stream, swift as it was. Like most of the streams that flowed down from the slopes of the Rocky Mountains, the Windy River had sharp descents where the water ran in "rapids." They did not amount to cascades, but it was impossible to pull a boat or paddle a canoe up stream at such points. As soon as they neared the rapids, the canners had to land and carry the canoe to a point higher up the river. This was a "portage," so called from the French word for "carry."

The light Canadian bark canoe was easy enough to carry for four sturdy school-boys.

They landed, drew their little craft ashore, and lifted it, and bore it up the steep bank.

Well above the rapids they launched it again and floated off, and paddled up to the island.

Though only four miles from the ranch, the island in the Windy River seemed as

solitary as in the dawn of Creation. Thick woods covered it down to the water's edge, and from the thickets the little bright eyes of prairie rabbits blinked at the juniors as they landed.

More experienced canners would probably have lifted the craft ashore, but Lovell tied the painter to a sappling, mooring the canoe as he was accustomed to mooring a boat at home at Rockwood.

The juniors jumped ashore, tossing out their bundles.

Overhead the sun blazed in the blue sky of Alberta; far to the west the great range of the Rocky Mountains blotted the sky; but the juniors were used to the Rockies by this time. They had thrilled at the first sight of the mighty mountains, beyond which lay British Columbia and the Pacific Ocean; now they did not give the snow-clad peaks even a glance.

"Topping here, isn't it?" remarked Baby. "I believe I'm getting hungry already."

"I know I am," remarked Newcome.

"I'll knock over one of those rabbits for lunch," said Lovell.

"We've brought the grub."

"Still, a rabbit stew—"

"Let the little buggers alone," said Jimmy Silver. "We've got plenty of grub. No need to make even the rabbits sorry we're even here."

"You're an ass, Jimmy, old chap," said Lovell loftily. "Let's look for game, like real hunters."

"But we're not hunters."

"Oh, rats!"

Argument generally was wasted on Arthur Edward Lovell. It was one of his little ways to be confirmed in his views by opposition.

"You haven't brought a gun, I suppose," said Baby.

"No; Mr. Smedley doesn't like us handling firearms," grunted Lovell. "Seems to think something might happen."

"So it might," grinned Newcome. "Not to the rabbits either, if you started in with a gun, Lovell."

"Rats!" roared Lovell. "Don't be an ass. As for those bunnies, I'll jolly soon knock one over with a stick!"

"Let them alone, ass," urged Jimmy Silver.

"Fairhead!"

That was the only reply that Lovell considered to make. He cut a stick in the

wood and started. There seemed to be scores of the prairie rabbits on the island, and they were so unaccustomed to the sight of that exceedingly dangerous animal, the human being, that they scuttled about in full sight of the juniors, seeming little alarmed by the visitors. Knocking one of them on the head seemed to be an easy proposition. But when Lovell started in, the case vanished. His first rush startled every rabbit on the island, and they vanished as if by magic. Lovell plunged after them furiously; the grinning faces of his chums spurred him on. He was going to catch a rabbit now, if it cost him a leg.

As it turned out, it very nearly did.

Jimmy Silver & Co., getting the camp-fire ready, heard a loud yell from Lovell in the thickets.

"Help! Come and lend a hand, you silly idiots!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Raby. "There's Lovell cornered by a ferocious bunny!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come and help me, can't you?" roared Lovell.

The three juniors ran quickly into the trees. Lovell's voice came in muffled tones as he yelled. The first Jimmy Silver & Co. saw of him was the soles of his boots sticking up through the tangled vegetation of a deep hollow. Evidently Lovell had not seen the hollow, and he had plunged in head-first in his pursuit of the elusive rabbits. He was quite unable to extricate himself, and he could only wriggle and yell.

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

"Groogh! Help me out! Ow! Groogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly owls! You chortling jabber-wackets! You—" spluttered Lovell.

"All together!" grinned Jimmy Silver.

He seized Lovell's left ankle. Raby and Newcome seized the right. With a lung pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, the three juniors dragged Lovell out, a good deal like a cork from a bottle.

It was a flustered, crimson, and infuriated Lovell that came into view and sprawled on the ground.

"Ow! Oh! Groogh! Oooosh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at?" roared Lovell.

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

"You silly clumps! You—you hurbling slugs!" Is this your thanks for a fellow

getting you fresh meat for lunch?" howled Lovell.

"Where's the fresh meat?"

"O where and O where can it be?" sang Newcome.

"Yards down in the burrows by this time," chuckled Jimmy Silver. "Lovell, old man, you weren't cut out for a Nimrod. Give it a miss."

Lovell staggered to his feet, gasping.

"I've had a slight accident—"

"You have!" agreed Raby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fellows get a fire going. I'll bring in a rabbit all right."

"Hagin' we better follow you, to pull you out of the nest hole?" asked Raby.

Lovell's reply to that question was not in words. He grasped his stick and made a rush at his grinning comrades, who scattered and fled, still chortling.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had the camp-fire ready and lunch prepared before Lovell returned. When he came back at last he was tired and grubby and flustered—and empty-handed.

"Rabbits out when you called?" asked Raby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Grunt from Lovell.

"Too many giddy victims for you to carry home?" inquired Newcome. "Shall we all go with the biggest bag?"

Lovell gave a more expressive grunt. Then his chums mercifully let the subject drop, and handed Lovell a helping of the lunch that had been brought from the ranch. And even Arthur Edward realised that it was fortunate that the party had not depended for their lunch upon his skill as a hunter.

CHAPTER 34.

By a Hidden Hand!

"WHAT the merry thump!"

Jimmy Silver uttered that exclamation in tones of amazement. He sat up and stared.

After lunch the Rockwood juniors had been resting and chatting under the trees on the island before going on a voyage of exploration. Jimmy Silver was seated with his back to a tree, facing the stream at the spot where the canoe had been moored to the sapling.

He was astounded to see the canoe in motion.

His glance fell upon it carelessly for a moment, but it became fixed as he discerned the motion in the floating craft.

Some hidden force seemed to be plucking at the canoe, pulling it away from its moorings. The cord Lovell had used to tie it to the sapling was stretched tight, at full length, as the canoe was drawn away by the stern. The light sapling bent over under the pull, arching towards the canoe.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Lovell.

All eyes followed Jimmy's astounded stare.

In a South American river it might have been suspected that an alligator had seized upon the canoe, but in a Canadian river there was no such formidable creature to be feared. It was not the current that was sucking the canoe away—the pull was too steady and powerful for that. Something, somehow—unknown—had a grip on the stern of the canoe, and was tugging it away forcibly.

Jimmy Silver sprang to his feet. He had been so startled for the moment at the amazing sight that he could scarcely believe his eyes. But he saw that the light branch to which the canoe was tied was yielding under the strain, and might crack off at any instant. Once the canoe was loose on the river the juniors would have been in a serious plight. Jimmy dashed down towards the water, his chums at his heels.

Crack!

The branch parted, and the sapling shot up straight again. The canoe darted out from the island like an arrow from a bow, the cord trailing behind it with a fragment of branch attached. Under the force of the pull, and aided by the current, the canoe shot a good fifty yards away in little more than a second.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were a full minute in reaching the water's edge from their camp. By that time the canoe was a dancing speck on the river, rocking on the current towards the southern shore.

The chums stared after it blankly.

"What does it mean?" gasped Lovell.

Jimmy rubbed his eyes.

It had crossed his mind that perhaps some thievish Indian had swum off to steal the canoe, and was dragging it away from underneath; but that, of course, was an impossible theory in view of the sudden darting away of the released craft.

Something's got hold of it somehow!"

said Baby.

Jimmy watched breathlessly.

The canoe was drawing nearer and nearer to the southern bank of the Windy River, as if attracted and guided by an unseen hand. It came into contact with a mass of floating driftwood, and then the secret was revealed.

Once the latter rose a stretched rope into view, extending from the stern of the canoe to the bank.

Hitherto, the rope had been floating or sunken, and had not caught the eyes of the juniors.

Now, as the canoe jammed on the driftwood, the pulling rope fastened, and was brought into plain view.

The jam lasted only a few moments, the driftwood floated clear, and the canoe swung on towards the bank again, the rope sinking once more on the water.

Jimmy Silver gritted his teeth.

He understood now.

Someone, hidden on the rocky bank of the Windy River, had made a lazoerast at the canoe—insured off the island. The loop had settled over the stern of the canoe and fastened there. After that the lazoerast had only to pull. Probably he had taken a turn of the loop round a rock, to give him a greater purchase on the rope; that would account for the strength of the tug.

"Taped in!" said Lovell, understanding.

Yes.

"Kentuck!" said Jimmy between his teeth. "I know now why he was so curious to know where we were going. He's stranded us."

The juniors strained their eyes towards the distant bank. Nothing was to be seen of the lazoerast.

It was easy enough for him to keep in cover in the broken rocks of the bank. But that he was still there was quite evident, for the canoe was being pulled steadily shoreward.

The chums of Rockwood could only watch its progress in growing rage. They had no means of reaching the canoe.

Even if they had cared to trust themselves to the rapid river, there was no time to swim to the canoe before it was loaded by the unseen lazoerast.

They watched in savage silence.

The canoe bumped on the bank; and even then the lazoerast did not show himself. The little craft of light bark was easily dragged up the bank on the sand, and it disappeared

from sight in an opening between two high rocks.

Jimmy Silver clenched his hands.

"The rotten!" It's Kentucky, of course. He must have followed us up the river to play this dirty trick on us."

"No proof—same as before," said Lovell.

"He doesn't mean to let us see him," said Newcomb. "Hudson Smedley would kick him out of the ranch for this, and he knows it. We can't accuse him unless we see him at it."

Jimmy set his teeth.

"We'll make the rotten sit up for it, anyhow!" he said. "But what the thump are we going to do? How are we getting off this dashed island now?"

"Hallo! There's the canoe again!" exclaimed Lovell.

"My hat!"

From behind a big rock the canoe came into sight, its nose pushed out into the water. The big rock completely hid from the island the form of the man who was handling it. The canoe floated in the water again, and a powerful shove sent it spinning out almost into the centre of the stream. The current caught it, deflecting it down stream. It floated away, swift on the current, rocking and swaying, growing smaller and smaller in the distance as the hapless Rock-wanderers watched it.

They understood the manœuvre easily enough. The lassoer had pulled it ashore in order to recover and detach his rope. The trickster was not abandoning the lasso this time as in the previous case; doubtless this time it was his own rope. Now the canoe was drifting downstream, hopelessly out of reach of the juniors on the island, drifting towards the rapids, over which it would go whirling. It was most likely that it would fill and sink in the rapids, if it was not dashed on a rock and wrecked. In any case, it was lost to the Rockwooders on Woody Island.

It disappeared from sight, floating away among the driftwood that dotted the river.

Jimmy Silver & Co. stood and looked at one another, their feelings almost too deep for words.

Once more Jimmy's malicious enemy had tricked him, and in a way that could never be brought home to the trickster. Indeed, if the chance had happened to be exploring the island out of sight of the canoe, in those minutes they would never have known

themselves that a trick had been played. Finding the canoe gone on their return, they would have supposed, naturally, that it had fallen loose and floated away. Even as it was, they had no evidence that anyone belonging to the Windy River Ranch had played the trick; Kentucky, if it was Kentucky, had taken no chance and they had not had the slightest glimpse of him.

"It's a rotten trick!" said Lovell at last. "But—the brute can't mean to leave us here—"

He broke off. It was only too clear that the "brute" meant to leave them there—for the night—and for a good many nights and days; as long in fact, as they were unable to escape. And that prospect was serious enough to make Jimmy Silver & Co. look very grave.

CHAPTER 25.

Sink or Swim!

EXPLORING Woody Island was dropped—by tacit consent. The Rockwood juniors had more important matters to think about now.

It was still hours to sundown; they had plenty of time to act, if there was anything to be done. But what was to be done?

They were stranded on the island. Obviously the trickster, Kentucky or not, had no intention of helping them. No doubt he was already gone, grinning over his success, and utterly regardless of the results to the victims.

Jimmy Silver & Co. debated the possibility of swimming to the shore. The ranch was on the southern side of the Windy River, four miles or so downstream. But the branch of the river between the island and the southern bank was wide, and the current ran swift and strong, fed by the stream freshets up in the mountains. Jimmy Silver looked at it, and looked at it again, and shook his head. A strong swimmer like Jimmy might have jacked the crossing successfully, but he could not feel sure of success. And it was fairly certain that his chums could not leave home safely to land. Lovell's opinion was that he could have done it; but he was assured that his comrades could not. Jimmy did not argue the point—swimming ashore was out of the question, and there was an end.

The alternative was waiting to be rescued.

"After all, they'll come for us," said Baby. "If we don't turn up at dark, your cousin will know that something has happened, Jimmy."

"Yes. But—Mr. Smedley was not at dawn, and we didn't see him before we started," said Jimmy Silver. "He doesn't know that we were coming up to the island at all. He will know we went out in the canoe, and that's all."

"We mentioned to Kentuck—"

"Who won't say a word, of course," said Jimmy. "Nobody knows we're on the island except that rotter, and he will keep mum. Anyhow, they wouldn't search till dark, and that means a night for us here."

"We can camp out," said Newcome.

Jimmy Silver nodded, but he was very thoughtful. Nights were cold and keen so early in the summer, and the juniors had no protection against it. They had no intention, of course, of staying out for the night, and they had no rugs or blankets—not even their coats.

"We'll build up a jolly big fire, and snore round it like jolly old Indians," said Lovell. "We can stand it, Jimmy."

"Looks as if we shall have to," said Newcome. "Well, we came to Canada to rough it. Here's our chance."

"The grub will run out to-day," remarked Lovell, "but you fellows can rely on me to knock over some rabbits, you know."

The juniors did not even smile; the situation was too serious for that. Jimmy Silver was thinking hard.

"We can't swim ashore—all of us," he said. "If we did, it's a tramp of four miles down the river to the ranch. We can rough it for to-night—though it will be rather hard cheese. But—Mr. Smedley will be alarmed. If the canoe's picked up below the rapids when they search for us—and they'll most likely find it—what will he think?"

Arthur Edward Lovell whistled.

"He will think we capsized, and that we're all drowned," he said.

"Sure to!" said Baby, looking very grave.

"That's it," said Jimmy. "I—I don't want to worry Mr. Smedley like that. And thinking the canoe was up to, and on in the water, they will never dream of searching four miles up-stream. They'll look for us below the rapids; in fact, down the river towards Mosquito, expecting to find our bodies."

"Oh, my hat!" said Lovell.

The juniors looked very grave indeed now. Apart from the alarm Mr. Smedley would feel, which was serious enough, there was the certainty that the island would not be visited in a search. If the canoe was found, it was fairly certain that the juniors would be supposed to have come to grief at the rapids. The search would be below the rapids—down the river in Mosquito, and across the river on the chance that the capsized juniors had landed there. Nobody was likely to think of penetrating four miles up-stream—two miles above the rapids.

"We shan't be looked for here!" said Newcome at last.

"It's not likely!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"We may be here for days and days, weeks perhaps," said Jimmy. "We may sight a cowpuncher on the plains and signal to him; but even that's not likely; and this part of the river, so high up the stream, is in a rocky country, where the cattle do not come. It will be an awful blow to my cousin to think we are dead—and goodness knows how long we shall be stranded here—till we starve, perhaps—"

"The rabbits—" began Lovell.

"We've got to get out of it, and get back to the ranch," said Jimmy Silver. "Of course, Kentuck couldn't have foreseen all this—he doesn't know that Mr. Smedley is ignorant of our whereabouts. He's stranded us worse than he supposed."

"He'll be jolly glad of it!" growled Lovell.

"We've got to get out," said Jimmy quietly. "You fellows are game to take a risky chance?"

"You bet!"

Jimmy pointed to the river, wide and shining in the sun.

"If we could get together a stack of those drift-logs we could make a raft. That's the idea."

"Phew!"

"I know it's frightfully risky," said Jimmy. "We couldn't steer a dummy raft ashore in this current, I'm afraid. We shall have to go on down the rapids in it—shooting the rapids, as the Canadians call it. I know it's risky."

"The verdict at the inquest was 'Found drowned'!" said Lovell in a thoughtful sort of way. "But, as the novelists say, we must not anticipate."

"Oh, don't be an ass, old chap!" said Raby uneasily.

"I know it's risky," said Jimmy. "If you fellows would rather rough it here, and take the chance of being found——"

"Not!"

"Or one of us could chance it, and send for help, if he got through all right," said Jimmy slowly.

"Little me!" said Lovell.

"Fathead! Me, of course!"

"Yes!" said Lovell.

"All — none," said Newcome. "Sink or swim together."

And so it was settled. It was a desperate expedient and the chums of Rookwood well understood the risk they were taking. But it was settled, and they lost no time in putting the plan into execution.

It was not a difficult task to gather floating logs for the raft. Many of them, rolling downstream, bumped on the island in passing, and some were tangled in the thickets where the latter grew down to the water.

Jimmy Silver and Lovell waded into the shallow water, and gathered in the logs, while Raby and Newcome cut snags in the wood, to fasten the raft together. The juniors worked hard and quickly, without wasting a minute; for the sun was sloping westward now, towards the far Pacific. The danger of shooting the rapids in daylight was great; but after darkness had fallen, the danger would have been a hundredfold greater. It was necessary to get away well before sundown.

Waist-deep in water, heedless of the wet and the damage to their clothes, the juniors worked at the raft. It was no time to think of such slight considerations.

Log after log was bound with strong snags, strengthened by a rope the juniors had with them. After long and hard work, the rough raft floated on the water by the island, held by the rope.

A dozen logs had been bound together, forming a floating platform that was secure enough in calm water. What would happen to it on the rush down the rapids, the juniors preferred not to consider. They had made up their minds to take the chance, and it was useless to meet troubles halfway.

Four stout branches were cut in the wood to serve as oars, or, rather, as sweeps. All tying materials were left on the

island, to be fetched away on another occasion.

Ready! said Jimmy at last.

"Go it!" said Lovell.

The four juniors stood on the rocking raft, at which the current was plucking greedily. Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath, and cast off.

In a moment the raft was whirled out into the stream, oscillating so violently that the juniors were thrown over instantly. But they clung on the logs—the straps of broken branches gave plenty of hold for the hands. Kneeling on the raft, holding on, they floated down the middle of the Windy River.

CHAPTER XX.

Shooting the Rapids.

JIMMY SILVER rose cautiously to his feet at last, as the raft floated down midstream with a more level motion. So far, there was little danger, so long as the voyagers were careful. Holding his long branch in both hands, Jimmy swept it through the water, striving to steer the raft towards the southern shore. There was not much chance of making a successful landing on the high, rocky bank, but Jimmy would not leave a chance untried. His chums, as they saw his object, backed him up, steering as well as they could with the branches.

The raft was worked out of midstream, and slowly approached the southern bank. The hopes of the Rookwooders rose. A tramp across country to the ranch was infinitely preferable to the terrible peril of shooting the rapids on their frail craft.

But it was not to be.

The raft was already feeling the quickening of the current above the rapids. It was whirling on with increased momentum. It went yards downstream for every inch that it crept shoreward. And when the bank at last was near, it was steep and rugged, and the raft collided with a projecting point of rock, and whirled completely round with the shock, sending the four juniors sprawling. They sprawled on the logs, while the raft whirled and spun down the river, rocking and splashing.

"All here!" panted Jimmy Silver, gaining his knees.

The raft was almost in midstream again, rushing down.

"I'm here!" gasped Baby. "Here's Newcome—where's Lovell?"

"Lovell?"

"Lead a hand!" gasped Arthur Edward.

He was trailing in the water behind the raft, holding on to a stump. Jimmy crawled along to help him, and caught his hand. Baby and Newcome crowded to the other end, or the clumsy raft might have capsized as Lovell crawled on board again.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Lovell. "I—I slipped off, you know. The blessed thing went round like a blessed humming-top! Jolly queer, though, that I should slip off when you fellows didn't!"

That seemed quite a problem to Lovell. In the midst of danger Arthur Edward was still Arthur Edward!

"We're in for it!" said Baby.

The roar of the rapids was in the ears of the juniors now. The raft, with a dozen drifting logs swaying and bobbing round it, was caught onward as if in the clutch of a giant's hand. There was no hope of resisting the force of the current now.

"Lie down, and hold on!" said Jimmy.

"It will be touch and go!" murmured Lovell. "Oh, won't I make that villain Kentucky sit up for this!"

The raft was close on the rapids now. Ahead of them, red in the sunset, the juniors could see the whirl of rushing water and driftwood whirling out of sight in a sea of foam.

Their hope now was that the raft would keep in midstream. On either side there were dangerous rocks, with driftwood jammed here and there—and a collision in that racing tide meant instant destruction. The strongest swimmer could never have hoped to come through alive.

Jimmy Silver's face was pale and set as the raft rushed on, in the grip of the rapids. He realized now that the danger was greater than he had dreamed, in his inexperience. At every moment it seemed as if the raft would be torn apart on the whirling waters; but the oars and the rope held good. Lying on the raft, holding on with both hands, with their feet jammed into interstices of the logs, the Rookwood juniors rushed down upon their fate. The roar of rushing waters was a conclusive din in their ears now.

Lovell was shouting in Jimmy's ear—but it was difficult to hear a word in the din. Jimmy moved his head—

"Hold on!"

"I'm holding on all right! But wasn't it queer——"

"What?"

"Wasn't it queer that I fell off when you fellows didn't?"

"What?" gasped Jimmy.

Lovell went on shouting; but Jimmy did not trouble to listen any more. It was evident at least that Arthur Edward Lovell was not under the influence of anything like fear.

The raft was gathering more and more momentum now. There came a crash, as a whirling log struck it on one side, and the raft rocked and plunged violently, and a sheet of water rushed over the juniors.

For a second Jimmy thought it was the end; but he set his teeth and held on to the only chance of life, as did his chums. The raft held together, and floated on, whirling and tossing, with the four juniors still upon it, panting for breath.

They were going down now—down—in what seemed a slope of rushing, tearing, roaring waters.

"So this is shooting the rapids!" was Jimmy Silver's thought, which he could not utter. He had to keep his mouth closed against the splashing, dashing water that flooded the raft.

Jimmy knew that the Indians sometimes "shoot the rapids" in a canoe; but even in a canoe skill and iron nerve are needed to come through safely. Shooting the rapids on a roughly constructed raft was a new thing—which probably no old hand on the Canadian rivers would have thought of attempting. In that wild moment of peril, Jimmy could not help saying to himself that it was a case of fools rushing in where angels feared to tread. But it was too late now to think of the recklessness of the attempt.

The raft rushed on, downward to the lower stream, in a wild, whirling of waters.

Crash and again crash as it collided with floating logs, and whirled and dived in the shock. The water was over Jimmy Silver's head—it was smothering him—drowning him—weighing him down under a weight that seemed hundreds of tons.

Was it the end?

Instinctively, for thought was impossible in those dizzy moments, he clung on to the whirling raft, choked, blinded, almost senseless.

The water cleared.

Panting, almost suffocated, dazed and

dingy, Jimmy Silver raised his head. The raft was rushing on, whirling among drift-wood, flooded with water—but the roar of the rapids was behind now.

Behind—and decreasing in volume every moment. The current was still madly swift, and the raft rushed before it—but the rapids were passed. Jimmy Silver stared round him dazedly under the red glow of the dying sunset. His first thought was for his clothes.

Three shaggy scowling figures lay clinging on the logs round him. Jimmy panted with relief.

"We're through!"

He tried to shout the words; but only a husky whisper came from his throat. He lay back on the logs, waiting for his strength to return, while the raft, with lessening speed, floated on into calm water.

Arthur Edward Lovell raised his head at last, and looked feebly round him. Then he dragged himself into a sitting position.

"Oh crumbs!" was Lovell's remark.

Ruby and Newcome stirred. By this time the motion of the raft was slower, and growing steady. The widened river was calm, a mile below the rapids.

Jimmy Silver stood up at last.

"We're come through!" he said.

"You are, Jimmy!" gasped Lovell.

"What?"

"You are, to talk about shooting the rapids on a shabby raft! We jolly well deserved to be drowned!"

Jimmy grinned.

"I rather agree," he assented. "Still, we've done it. We shall be in all right for supper."

"How supper! I've swallowed a ton of water!"

"All's well that ends well," said Ruby, with a shiver. "But if anybody talks to me about shooting the rapids again, I'm going to dot him in the eye! That's a tip, Jimmy."

Jimmy Silver laughed. He was feeling more like himself now, and he stood on the raft, reaching the bank for the much longed-for place. In the wide, calm river two miles below the rapids, it was easy enough to reach the bank, where the level grasslands were little above the water. The bunches the juniors had brought on board had been swept away; and Jimmy Silver had found in the hope of catching up some floating branch to steer the raft shoreward. There was a shunt from the bank; the raft was almost opposite the ranch now.

The tall, lanky figure of Pete Peters showed up in the sunset.

"Hi!"

"Send on a rope!" Jimmy shouted back, waving his hand.

"Stand by!"

The ranch foreman threw his lasso, and Jimmy caught it, and hooked the nose to a stump on the raft. Pete Peters grasped the rope with both hands, and rapidly drew them shoreward.

Gladly enough Jimmy Silver & Co. scrambled off the raft to the safety of terra firma. Pete Peters recovered his lasso, and then turned to the juniors, who were shaking and squeezing the water from their clothes.

"Upset the canoe?" he asked.

"Somebody roped it away from the island, and left us stranded there," said Jimmy. "We had to build the raft to get away."

The ranch foreman jumped.

"The island—above the rapids?"

"Yes."

"You've shot the rapids on that raft?" roared Peters.

"Looks like it."

"Well, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the foreman.

Jimmy Silver & Co. grinned, and started at a run for the ranch. They wanted to get out of their wet clothes. Pete Peters followed them, still in a state of amazement; while the raft went floating on towards the distant town of Mosquito, on the lower reaches of the Windy River.

Jimmy Silver and his comrades came at a brisk trot round the corner of the bunk-house, heading for the ranch. Three or four cowpunchers, in from the ranges, were standing there, and among them was Kentucky. The latter was speaking, his back to the juniors as they came up.

"Them tenderfeet is in trouble, I guess. I reckon the boys will be searching for them down to Mosquito. Greenhorns like them thinking they could handle a canoe——"

The juniors paused.

"What's happened to the kids?" drawled Skitter Dick.

"Ask me another!" grinned Kentucky.

"Red All picked up their canoe a mile below the rapids an hour ago. I guess they didn't even know enough to make their portage—I reckon they paddled into the rapids——"

"Holy smoke!" said Skitter Dick. "Even

tenderfoot deffers wouldn't be sick fools as that!"

"Well, Red Alf's picked up the canoe, and he's got to report to the boss, when Mr. Smedley comes in. I reckon about four dead tenderfoots are floating down to Mosquito this time."

"That ain't a joke, if it's true, Kentuck," said Spike Thompson gruffly.

Kentuck laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. Jimmy Silver & Co. had stopped, and they looked at one another. They were quite convinced that it was Kentuck who had stranded them on the island; and that he was talking in this strain to give a false impression to the cowpunchers—and also, probably, to keep the search away from the vicinity of the island if he could, in order to leave the tenderfoots stranded there as long as possible.

Jimmy Silver tiptoed towards the Kentuckian.

Spike Thompson and Skitter Dick saw him, and grinned. Kentuck, with his back to the juniors, had not seen them, or heard them. He grinned back at the two cowpunchers.

"I guess if those tenderfoots are ever found alive, the boss had better get a lady governess up from Calgary to look after them," he said. "I do calculate they've got wet this time. I guess I shan't worry if we don't see them around this hyer ranch ag'in—and as for young Silver—"

"Well, what about young Silver?" asked a quiet voice in Kentuck's ear.

"Wha-a-at—"

The Kentuckian spun round. He stared blankly at the four Rookwooders, as if unable to believe his eyes.

"You!" he stammered.

"Little us!" said Jimmy coolly. "Quite a surprise—what?—after you stranded us on Woody Island, and stole our canoe, you recall?"

"I—I—I—" Kentuck stammered helplessly. He was so taken by surprise at the sudden appearance of the juniors that he hardly knew what he was saying. Their harshly could scarcely have startled him more.

"I—I don't stand in any canoe—"

"Who said anything about riding it?" said Jimmy at once. "I said slide, myself. How do you know it was you?"

"I—I guess—"

"Prefer deer now," said a

"You'll hear from me about this, Kentuck. This is the second time you've played a dirty trick on me, and it's going to be the last. Come on, you fellows!"

The Rookwood chums trooped on towards the ranch-house. Kentuck stared after them blankly, still amazed and confused. He muttered an exclamation at last, and turned towards the cowpunchers. Skitter Dick and Spike Thompson, with cool deliberation, turned their backs on him, and walked away.

CHAPTER 17.

Pequod's Vengeance!

"MIBUR!"

Jimmy Silver started a little, and looked round. It was a low, soft, almost hissing voice that fell upon his ears. Jimmy had come out of the veranda of the Windy River ranch-house, and was striding away towards the river, by the bank-house, when he was called.

Close by the bank-house stood a little cabin, generally used for stores. It was being used for quite another purpose now.

The door was barred on the outside, and the little window had been secured by several bars of pine, strongly secured into the wooden frame.

From the barred window a face was looking—a swarthy, hard-featured face, with glittering black eyes under black brows.

"M'sieur!"

It was the prisoner in the barred cabin who had called to Jimmy Silver. The Rookwood junior glanced at him and hesitated. He did not want any talk with Pequod, the half-breed horse-thief, who was shut up in the cabin waiting for the Mounted Police to come for him.

Since the day when Jimmy Silver & Co. had captured him the "breed" had been a prisoner at the ranch. His well-known desperate character had caused Boss Smedley to take the greater care of him. Word had been sent to Red Deer, where there was a post of the Mounted Police; but as yet the desperado had not been sent for. In the meantime, he was a prisoner in the barred cabin, and escape was impossible. Jimmy Silver had almost forgotten his existence.

Jimmy came up to the cabin window at

last. The man inside was a desperate ruffian; but he was a prisoner, and there was the penitentiary ahead of him, and Jimmy was not unwilling to give him a civil word.

"You called me, Pequod!" he said. "What is it?"

The eyes glittered at Jimmy through the bars of the window. Pequod le Contreau had not forgotten to whom he owed his capture.

But his manner was calm as he answered the half-breed junior. Only the glitter of his black eyes betrayed his feelings.

"I have been long here, m'sieur," said the half-breed. "Will you tell me when I am to be taken away?"

"I believe to-morrow," said Jimmy.

"To-morrow? Then the Mounted Police are coming?"

"Mr. Smedley told me that he expected a trooper to ride in from Red Deer to-morrow," answered Jimmy. "He will take you away either to-morrow or the next day, I expect."

"And then—prison!" said the half-breed.

"I suppose so," said Jimmy Silver.

"You will have a fair trial, Pequod."

The half-breed laughed.

Jimmy Silver was turning away. He had an important appointment—on the bank of the Windy River, and his chums, Lovell, and Reby, and Newcome, were already there. But the half-breed called to him.

"Ous moment, mon petit."

Jimmy turned back.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I have something to tell you, m'sieur," said the half-breed, sinking his voice.

"Come closer."

Jimmy Silver unsuspectingly came nearer to the barred window. There was no glass in the window; only the wooden bars separated him from the breed.

What followed took Jimmy quite by surprise, though he knew enough of Pequod to have been on his guard against treachery.

The scarily hand of the half-breed came between the bars with the swiftness of lightning, and before Jimmy could sedge back—before he knew what had happened, in fact—the sinewy fingers had grasped his throat.

Jimmy gave a choked gasp.

The grasp of the half-breed's fingers was like the grip of steel. As Jimmy choked

in it the other hand of the desperado whipped out and seized him.

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Ooooooh!"

He clutched at the ruffian's wrists with his hands, striving to drag the deadly grip from his throat.

But it was in vain.

The half-breed's grasp, dragged him closer to the window, close up to the wooden wall and the bars, and through the interstices his black eyes glittered at the junior with savage triumph and ferocity.

His grip on the schoolboy's throat compressed harder and harder, and Jimmy struggled in vain.

His breath came short, and his eyes almost started from his head. He could not utter a cry; only a faint gurgling came from his throat.

Harder and harder the vengeful breed gripped. He had tricked the junior within his reach, and vengeance was in his hands now.

Had there been no help, Jimmy Silver would have hung lifeless from the dusky hands in a couple of minutes. But a loud exclamation reached his dizzy ears.

"You varmint!"

A tall, burly figure came tearing up from the direction of the bunk-house. Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, had witnessed the desperate attempt of the savage half-breed, and he was running to the rescue.

He came none too soon.

"Let up!" he roared.

The half-breed's black eyes glittered at him, and he snarled like a wild animal, but he did not loose his grip. Jimmy Silver was almost senseless now, and he scarcely breathed under the cruel grip on his throat. The foreman of the Windy River Ranch seized the breed's dusky wrists and wrenched at them.

Strong as Pequod's grasp was, the foreman of the ranch was stronger.

The dusky hands were fairly torn away from Jimmy Silver, and the junior staggered back, panting.

"Morbleu!"

Pequod le Contreau dragged his hands back through the bars, snarling savagely. Pete Peters turned to Jimmy Silver and took him by the shoulder to steady him.

"You young jay!" he said. "Didn't you know better than to trust that wildcat an

back. Lucky I spotted his game from the window yonder!"

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy, rubbing his aching throat. "Oh! I-I never thought—never suspected—oh—"

"I guess you'll keep your eyes open another time," grinned Mr. Peters. "You was nearly a gone soon, I reckon."

Jimmy gasped for breath.

"I—I think you've saved my life, Mr. Peters," he gasped. "That brute—he's just a wild animal!"

"And I guess," said Mr. Peters, taking a grip on his quirt, "that I'm going to teach him a lesson." He moved towards the door of the cabin.

"Hold on," said Jimmy. "It's all right, Mr. Peters. The police are taking the brute away to-morrow. Don't thrash him on my account."

"I guess I'm going to quirt him on his own," answered the foreman. "I guess he wants it bad. Hyer. Skitter Dick, Spike, come hyer."

Two of the ranch hands were coming up. They removed the bars from the door and opened it, standing ready to stop the half-breed should he make a desperate attempt to escape. The burly foreman strode into the cabin, gripping his heavy cattle-whip.

Jimmy Silver did not stay to see what followed. Pete Peters was giving the savage ruffian the hiding of his life, and as Jimmy hurried away he heard the crashing blows of the quirt and the furious yells of the horse-thief squealing under the castigation.

CHAPTER 25.

A Struggle for Life!

JIMMY SILVER was not sleeping so soundly as usual that night. As a rule, Jimmy seldom opened his eyes, after placing his head upon the pillow, till it was time to rise. But to-night, it was otherwise.

The window was half-open; the night was warm, and Jimmy was used to open windows and fresh air. Then, as he looked towards the glimmering distance, he heard a faint sound from without, and listened. Below his window was the roof of the wooden veranda that stretched along the front of the ranch-house. There was no reason to be feared on the peaceful plains

of Alberta; but the thought crossed Jimmy's mind that an active animal might climb the veranda and penetrate to the house—it was not so very long since the panther and the lynx had been fairly common in that part of Alberta.

But he smiled at the thought as it came into his mind. A panther was not likely to venture within the precincts of the ranch.

But as he laid his head on the pillow again he started a little, as a faint but unmistakable sound came from the direction of the window. It was a creak of wood under weight. He knew it. He sat up in bed and listened intently.

It was impossible—at least, very improbable—that any wild beast of the woods had penetrated to the ranch-house. But unless his ears were deceiving him something, or somebody, was climbing the veranda roof under his window.

With all his senses on the alert now, Jimmy Silver listened. The sound was repeated and repeated again. It was faint, almost imperceptible, but it was indubitable.

Even then Jimmy did not sense danger.

SPARKLING SCHOOL STORIES FOR THE MONTH OF MAY!

THE SCHOOLBOYS' OWN LIBRARY

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By FRANK RICHARDS.

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ON SALE
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Keep Your Eye on the Calendar,
But Order in Advance!

But he resolved to see what was "up," and he stopped quietly from his bed and approached the window.

Keeping in the shadow of the curtain that flapped gently in the breeze from without, Jimmy Silver looked. A gleam of moonlight fell on the open space before the ranch-house, and glimmered on the sloping roof of the veranda.

Jimmy's heart gave a sudden throb.

Clinging like a cat to the sloping roof, a sinuous form was working its way towards his window.

Dim as the light was, Jimmy Silver recognized the half-breed, Pequod le Coureau, the dusky horse-thief whom he and his chums had roped in and brought a prisoner to the ranch.

He knew the swarthy face, the thick black hair, the gleaming eyeballs of the half-savage breed. The glimmer of bare steel caught his eyes, too; it was the gleam of a hunting-knife stuck in the breed's belt.

Jimmy's heart beat hard.

He could not mistake the ruffian's intention. He had somehow emerged from the prison cabin, and was thinking of revenge before escape. Had Jimmy been sleeping when he reached the window—

The Rookwood junior shuddered at that thought.

As he stood in deep shadow, looking out, the half-breed was not more than six or seven feet from him.

Jimmy Silver looked silently away from the window.

There were some minutes yet before the winged breed could get in at the window. Lurid and active as he was, Pequod had a difficult task to negotiate the sloping roof.

Jimmy opened his door and stepped out on to the landing. His first impulse was to give the alarm, but he checked it. The alarm given, Pequod le Coureau would have abandoned his attempt and fled, and it would have been easy for him to secure a horse from the corral and dash away on the plains.

That was not good enough. Jimmy was thinking not only of baffling the ruffian, but of securing him.

He stepped into the next room, which was touched by Arthur Edward Lovell. He struck Lovell by the shoulder, at the same time placing a hand over his mouth.

Arthur Edward came out of the land of sleep with a jump, and certainly would have uttered a startling exclamation

but for the restraining hand. As it was, all he uttered was:

"Mmmmmmm!"

"Quiet!" breathed Jimmy Silver. "Danger, old chap! Not a word!"

He removed his hand, and Lovell sat up.

"What on earth—" whispered Arthur Edward.

Jimmy hurriedly whispered an explanation. Lovell suppressed a whistle of astonishment, and turned out of bed at once.

"We can handle him between us," whispered Jimmy. "You're game? There's no time to waste the other chaps."

"Of course I'm game, fathead!"

"Get hold of something to knock him with—"

"I've got my riding-whip here; the butt's metal."

"Good!"

Silently the two juniors crept into Jimmy Silver's room. Jimmy would have been glad to call Ruby and Newcome on the scene, but he knew that there was no time for that.

Slowly, with the cautious patience of his Redskin ancestors, the half-breed worked his way in at the window till he was more than half-in, his finger-tips resting on the floor of the room. He made scarcely a sound. A few moments more and Le Coureau would have been in the room, but the time had come to act.

Jimmy Silver made a sudden rush towards the window, the hickory in his grasp.

Lovell was at his heels.

Pequod gave a sudden start, and raised his fierce face to glare before him; but he had no time to advance or retreat. Even as he saw Jimmy rushing down on him, the hickory swept through the air and crashed on the back of his head.

It was a terrific blow. The half-breed gave a stifled yell and pitched headlong into the room.

But he was very far from disabled. He touched the floor, and left it again with a spring like a cat, leaping to his feet and clutching at the heels in his belt, before Jimmy had recovered the stick for a second blow.

But Lovell was there. The heavy metal butt of the riding-whip crashed full in Pequod's face as he gained his feet, and sent him spinning back to the window.

"At him!" roared Lovell breathlessly,

Jimmy Silver stuck again, and the buckery crashed on the breed's arm, and the knife went to the floor. With his left hand Pequod clutched the stick and caught hold of it. He struggled it away with a strength Jimmy could not resist. But he had no time to use it. The metal butt crashed on his head again, and he fell to the floor. Even as he fell he clutched at Jimmy Silver and dragged him down in a desperate grip.

"Help!" panted Jimmy, as he struggled with the half-stunned but still desperate half-breed.

Lovell grasped the ruffian at once. There was a shout as Baby and Newsome came rushing into the room. The din of the struggle had roused them, and, indeed, the whole ranch. Mr. Smedley's deep voice was heard calling. Woo Sing, the Chinese chore-boy, stared into the room, and yelled with alarm.

"Help!" roared Lovell.

The half-breed was severely hurt; but, even so, he was almost a match for the two juniors. They struggled with him desperately. Baby and Newsome rushed into the fray, and their help was timely. In the grasp of the four juniors, Pequod le Contreau was hurled to the floor, but still he struggled.

There was a heavy tread as Boss Smedley came into the room, with a revolver in one hand and a lamp in the other.

One glance was enough for the rancher. He placed the lamp on a table, and levelled the revolver at the struggling figures on the floor.

"Pequod, by the holy smoke! Let him go, boys. I've got him covered!"

The juniors tore themselves away from the half-breed.

Le Contreau staggered to his feet. His wild glance went to the knife on the floor, but he did not attempt to reach it. The rancher's revolvers were full upon him.

"Hands up!" rapped out Hudson Smedley.

A second more, and the bullet would have sped. The half-breed's hands went up as if by magic.

"That's better," said the rancher grimly. "Keep your paws there, my man. I guess I'd rather plug you than not."

He called to the chore-boy.

"Woo Sing! Bring a ball rope here and tie up that galoot."

"Yes, Mass' Smedley."

Woo Sing—grinning now—came up with a rope, and under cover of the rancher's revolver the hands of the half-breed were tied behind his back.

CHAPTER XX.

"Fixed!"

"I GUESS this wants looking into."

The rancher spoke with a frowning brow. Lights were gleaming now in the ranch-house and in the bunk-house—the alarm was general. All the cowpunchers had turned out. Pete Peters was already in the ranch-house, and the half-breed was in his charge. The long-legged foreman had a revolver in one hand, and the other fastened to the collar of the prisoner.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had dressed themselves, still in a state of great excitement. Outside the open porch of the ranch-house most of the cowpunchers were gathered, half-dressed. There was a buzz of excited voices. Rancher Smedley came downstairs fully dressed, and with a grim expression on his bronzed face.

"This wants looking into. How did that galoot get out of his calabasse, and where did he get that knife?"

"You've got me guessing, boss," said Pete Peters, shaking his head. "I reckon he must have had it hid about him somewhere."

"He was searched!"

"Sure! But these breeds are plain cunning."

"That's not good enough," said the rancher fiercely. "I reckon Pequod had help in getting loose. Bring him along to his quarters."

Pete gave the cullen prisoner a shake.

"Git moving!" he rapped out.

He marched the breed out of the ranch-house, still gripping him by the collar. Boss Smedley followed with the Rookwood juniors. The cowpunchers gathered round, and the whole party approached the barred cabin.

"I guess the door's still fast!" said Skitter Dick.

"The window——" said Spike.

"So that's where he got out," said the rancher, fixing his eyes on the hooked and broken bars. "He got the knife and cut his way loose. Who handed you that knife, Pequod?"

The half-breed struggled his shoulders and curled his dusky lip, but made no other response. It was evident that he did not intend to speak. Pete Peters made a motion with his revolver.

"I guess I'll make the galoot talk, if you give me the word, boss," he said. "Lease blow off one of his ears, and I'll guess he'll talk fast enough afore I blow off the other!"

The rancher laughed.

"Leave his ears alone, Pete. The galoot's a wild beast; but we can't use his own methods on him. Will you answer me, Pequod?"

"Bah! I will tell you nothing!" snarled the half-breed. "And I will yet have the life of that boy!"

"Not in your lifetime, old bean," said Jimmy Silver, with a smile. The brawl gave him a deadly look, and was silent.

"Has anyone been awake during the night?" asked the rancher, looking round at the grim faces of the cowpunchers. "Boys, there's a traitor in this crowd, and we've got to find him!"

"I guess Kentuck was up for a spell," said Skitter Dick. "Kentuck might have seen somebody—"

"Where's Kentuck?"

"He ain't turned out."

"Call him!" said the rancher.

Skitter Dick put his head into the doorway of the bunkhouse, and shouted:

"Kentuck! Rise up, Kentuck! You're wanted!"

Jimmy Silver & Co. exchanged a startled look. At the mention of Kentuck it was borne in upon their minds to whom that attempt on Jimmy's life was due. It was the vengeful Kentuckian who had released the half-breed—for vengeance on Jimmy Silver. The Bookwood chums were sure of it, and they wondered whether the same suspicion was in the mind of Hudson Swadley.

Kentuck came slowly out of the bunkhouse. He was half-dressed, and rubbing his eyes as if aroused from sleep.

He realized his danger clearly enough. Had the half-breed executed his purpose, and stolen a horse and fled, he would have had little to fear—nothing could have been known. But with Pequod in the hands of the cowpunchers, the matter had taken a very different turn. If the yellow chums to betray him—

With all his nerve, Kentuck could scarce keep his knees from knocking together as he came out of the bunkhouse.

"What's the trouble?" he asked, as carefully as he could. "By gum, how did the breed get out?"

His eyes turned on the half-breed, but the latter gave no sign. It was not faith or loyalty that kept Pequod so contented silent; but doubtless he hoped for another chance of help from the Kentuckian. That would be the price of his continued silence if Kentuck escaped suspicion now. The Kentuckian understood that, and breathed more freely.

"We're going to find out how he got loose, Kentuck," said the rancher grimly. "It seems that you were up in the night?"

Kentuck nodded.

"I guess I took a turn in the open air," he said.

"Did you see anything of this?"

"Sure, no, boss. I guess I'd have stopped the galoot fast enough if I'd seen anything going on."

The rancher held up the hunting-knife which Pequod had dropped in Jimmy Silver's room.

"Have you seen this before, Kentuck?"

"Never, boss," answered the cowman, but his voice faltered. He had never expected to see that hunting-knife again; but it remained as a witness against him.

Boss Swadley handed the knife to Pete. "Look at it, and hand it round to the boys, Pete," he said. "I guess we want to find the owner of that knife."

"I calculate we ain't fur to look," answered Pete, examining the knife. "This hyer is yours, Kentuck!"

"Mine!" stammered the Kentuckian.

"Sure! I've seen it afore."

"And I guess I have," said Skitter Dick, with a grim look at the Kentuckian. "That knife is yours, Kentuck. You pizen varmint, that was why you sneaked out of the bunkhouse!"

Kentuck's face was deathly pale now. He cast a hunted look round him, and backed away.

But the cowpunchers, with a deep growl of anger, closed round him. The traitor was not to escape so easily.

"I guess you can own up, Kentuck," said Skitter Dick. "You let that breed loose to pick the trailhead. You pizen rat—"

"I-I-I—" stammered Kentuck.

"You awful rascal!" burst out Lovell savagely. "You jolly well ought to be lynched!"

"So that's the truth, Kentuck!" said Boss Smedley, with his grim eyes fixed on the Kentuckian.

"I-I guess I never meant—" muttered the Kentuckian. "I-I never meant—"

The rancher looked at him.

"I guess I've never trusted you, Kentuck," he said. "But I wouldn't live a man without a good reason. You're known in your true colours now, you scoundrel. You're fired from this ranch; take your horse and go. If you're here at dawn I'll give you my quit to remember me by!"

"I guess I'm ready to go," snarled Kentuck. "I reckon there's some here that will hear of me again, too!"

"What he wants is a rope and a branch," said Spike Thompson. "You leave him to us, boss."

The rancher shook his head.

"There's going to be no lynching on this ranch," he said. "The galoot deserves it; but we're in Canada, not Kentucky. Kick him off our land, and let him go."

"Then we'll ride him on a rail out of the ranch!" exclaimed Skitter Dick.

"As you like about that!"

"Keep them off, boss!" yelled Kentuck, as Boss Smedley turned away again. But the rancher did not heed. He knew that his order would be obeyed, and that there would be no lynching.

"You got ten minutes to pack your traps and put them on your horse," said Pete Peters. "Then you're for the rail. Git moving!"

Kentuck, gritting his teeth, went into the bunk-house to pack his few possessions in a "grip." He came out again, and found his horse ready for him; Spike Thompson had "cut it out" in the corral, and led it round to the bunk-house.

Jimmy Silver & Co. stood looking on curiously at what followed. They did not take a hand in the proceedings, but they watched with interest. Skitter Dick brought a long pine rail, which was mounted upon his shoulder at one end, and upon Spike's brassy shoulder at the other. On that rail Kentuck had to sit to take his departure; which was the peculiar Western punishment of being "ridden on a rail."

"Got mounted, Kentuck!" growled Pete Peters.

With a face like a demon, Kentuck clambered awkwardly on the rail, and sat astride of it.

Spike Thompson and Skitter Dick started, with the hapless Kentuckian clinging like a cat to the rail between them. They moved out on the plain, in the light of the moon, with the whole crowd following round them, and a cracking of whips like the discharge of pistol-shots.

Jimmy Silver & Co. followed. Red Alf was leading the Kentuckian's horse. Out over the moonlit prairie went the shouting crowd, the whips cracking, and sometimes curling round the legs of the yelling rascal on the rail. Kentuck lost his balance, and swept over to one side, hanging on to the rail with hands and knees. In that position he was rushed on, yelling with rage and terror as he went.

"Crack! Crack!" rang the whips. The Rookwood juniors halted at last, staring after the strange procession that moved on out of the wide prairie.

"There he goes!" exclaimed Raky.

Kentuck had pitched off the rail at last, and landed with a bump on the rough ground. The chums heard his yell as he landed. He squirmed in the grass, yelling.

"Let up, boys!" said Pete Peters. "You can vamoose the ranch, Kentuck; and if you're ever seen on the Windy River again, look out for bad trouble."

The outcast cowboy staggered to his feet, and, with muttered exclamations, scrambled upon his horse. The quirts lashed and cracked, and Kentuck urged his steed to a gallop. At a little distance he turned in the saddle and shook a furious fist at the Windy River outfit. Then he drove on his horse again, and disappeared from sight in the moonlit distance.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked back to the ranch, and they were in their rooms when they heard the cowpunchers come whooping back from the prairie. The chums of Rookwood returned to bed, and, in spite of the exciting experiences of the night, they slept soundly enough till morning; while in the dark hours the solitary outcast rode on his lonely way over the prairie, farther and farther from the ranch, where he would never dare to show his face again.

OUR MAGAZINE CORNER.

THAT AMAZING CUP!

ONCE again the scene is almost set for football's greatest attraction—the Cup Final, at Wembley Stadium; and April 24th is looming large in the minds of twenty-two Cup-tie heroes and countless football "fans" all over the country.

The Game of the Season.

There's not the slightest doubt that the competition for the Football Association Challenge Cup—to give the English Cup its real name—arouses more wild excitement, especially as the fateful last round draws near, than the most closely-fought match for International honours or League championship. It is the game of the season.

What is the secret of its amazing popularity? Perhaps it's the glorious uncertainty of every fight for the Cup, the knowledge that almost anything can happen, that works the crowd up into the real Cup-tie fever. It's anybody's cup!

Proof of this, if any were needed, is soon forthcoming when we glance through Cup history. Leaving out of account those far-off days when amateur teams had the field all to themselves, we chide outside the two top professional Leagues has ever won Soccer's most coveted trophy; and yet, think of some of the shocks that humble, almost unheard-of teams have handed out to the aristocrats of the football world.

"Giant Killers."

This season, for instance, Exeter City and Southport, both Third Division teams, have shown once again that such a thing as a Cup-tie certainly simply doesn't exist. Perhaps the most startling of these "giant-killing" clinches, however, was Worksoop Town, who, in 1923, with a side composed mainly of young lads from the mine, covered themselves with glory by holding Tottenham Hotspur to a draw at the 'Spurs' ground. Worksoop lost the replay by a big margin, but they had had their brief hour of fame.

Charlton Athletic, too, caused some groups of surprise in 1923, when they lost such

luminous Cup-fighting teams as Manchester City, Preston North End and West Bromwich Albion before losing to Bolton Wanderers, the ultimate winners, by a single goal. A wonderful performance!

Spectators Overcome.

Two historic Cup finals, picked at random from the records, show what sudden, unexpected thrills the Cup can provide. When Aston Villa met Everton in the last round at the Crystal Palace, in 1891, they won by 3 goals to 2, and all five scoring shots were made in the first twenty minutes! The excitement was so intense that many of the spectators fainted and had to be carried out of the ground.

Thrills were just as plentiful in that never-to-be-forgotten Final in 1899, between Derby County and Sheffield United. With less than half an hour to go the County were leading 1-0, but before the final whistle went, Sheffield had completely turned the tables by obtaining an four wonderful goals.

Surely every kind of Cup-tie imaginable must have been played since the competition started, way back in 1871, but it would be hard to find two more widely dissimilar games than Preston North End v. Hyde in 1887, and Leyton v. Hleet in the Third Qualifying Round, 1924-25. The first was won 26—all by Preston, and might be described as "all over from the kick-off," while in the other four replays were necessary before a decision could be reached. When Leyton finally ran out winners of the last grueling game it was calculated that the two teams had been playing each other, all told, for 9 hours 40 minutes.

Stories of Cup-finals that have been won and lost as a result of a hotly-disputed goal would fill a book. The most sensational one of recent years was the penalty goal with which Huddersfield Town won the Final of 1922. The referee awarded the kick as the result of a flying, unfair tackle by one of the Preston North End backs, and yet it seems certain that he blundered, for the mark made by the back's boot was plainly visible in the turf—and that mark was outside the penalty area!

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