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CHAPTER I.

The Mysterious Wagon.

"SAY, LUB!"

A strident voice with a strong nasal twang hailed Jimmy Silver. The sun was sinking behind the rugged peaks of the Rocky Mountains, and Jimmy, who was a good many miles from home, was riding hard for the distant Windy River Ranch.

Jimmy and his chums, Lovell, Baby and Newcome, of the Fourth Form at Rookwood, were far from the old school now. For some weeks they had been staying at the ranch of Jimmy Silver's cousin, Hudson Smedley, in Canada. They were guests, of course, but they made themselves useful in many ways. Many were the hours that Jimmy Silver spent in the saddle of his favourite

horse, Blazer, ranging the prairie in search of strayed cattle.

Jimmy Silver gave quite a start as the nasal voice hailed him on the lonely prairie, and drew rein.

"Say!"

Jimmy Silver glanced round. A man had emerged from a hollow of the prairie at a little distance, and was waving his hand as he shouted. Jimmy wheeled Blazer round towards him.

"Hallo!" he called back.

"Hold on, lub! I guess I want to speak to you!"

Jimmy Silver did not share the stranger's desire for speech. He had spent rather a long day looking for stray steers, and he had not found them, and he wanted his supper. But he good-naturedly rode back to where

the man was standing knee-deep in grass on the edge of the hollow.

He did not need telling that the stranger belonged to the other side of the American border.

"Stranger here?" he asked.

"I guess so."

"Lost your way on the prairie?" asked Jimmy Silver, wondering what the man wanted with him.

"Not exactly. But I guess we want help," said the man, eyeing Jimmy Silver curiously with a pair of very keen eyes under shaggy brows. "You belong to these parts?"

"I belong to the Windy River Ranch," said Jimmy. "I'm saying there with my cousin, Hudson Smedley."

"That's a good horse you're riding."

"First-chop!" said Jimmy, with a smile. "But I suppose you didn't call me to tell me Blazer is a good horse. What's the trouble?"

"I guess that horse could pull!" went on the stranger, eyeing Blazer critically. "He would be some use hitched on to a wagon, I reckon."

"Very likely. He's not going to be hitched on to a wagon, though."

"We're stuck up," said the stranger.

"A wagon?"

"Yep!"

"Where?" asked Jimmy, looking round him. He could see no signs of a wagon on the grassy plain.

The man from over the border jerked a bony thumb towards the hollow behind him.

"Down yonder. Will you lend us that horse to pull out? I guess we shall be all right when we git out of the hollow. The old shebang is stuck in the mud at the bottom."

Jimmy Silver hesitated.

"Then you've lost your way?" he said. "There's no trail for a wagon about here. Are you heading for Moquits?"

"Nope!"

"Or Kicking Mule?"

"Nope!"

"Then where the thump are you heading for?" asked Jimmy Silver, puzzled.

"I guess we're going north from here."

"Then you're heading for nowhere—there's nothing in that direction but the Blood Indian reserve," said Jimmy, "and that's a good way off."

"You don't say!"

"But I do!" said Jimmy, puzzled. "The best thing you can do is to get your wagon out and trot along to the ranch. Hudson Smedley will put you up for the night."

The man eyed him oddly.

"I guess we ain't troubling Mr. Smedley," he said. "We jest want to get on our way. And I guess it was luck sighting you on the prairie. We want that horse."

Jimmy looked at him.

He did not feel inclined to refuse help to a stranger in distress on the wide prairie, far from help. But he certainly did not like the man's looks, and there was something like a threat in his manner, too, that did not please Jimmy Silver.

"This way!" said the man, and he made a move to descend into the hollow from which he had emerged.

"Hold on!" said Jimmy Silver coolly.

"I haven't said that I'm helping you yet."

The man's eyes gleamed.

"I guess we've got a long way to go afore dark," he said, "and it's close on sundown now. I've no time to waste. You'll come along with me, young 'un—and you'll come at once!"

"Sure of that?" said Jimmy.

"Yep!"

And the man caught the bridle of Blazer in a bony hand and led the horse towards the hollow.

"Let go that bridle!" said Jimmy Silver sharply.

The man did not heed, or even look at him.

Jimmy Silver slid his hand into his pocket. Having had an encounter on one occasion with a road-agent, he now carried a small revolver. It came in useful now.

"Drop that bridle!" he rapped out,

and the revolver was levelled at the man from over the border.

"Gee-whis!"

The man dropped the bridle as if it had suddenly become red-hot. He glared at Jimmy Silver, who looked at him coolly over the revolver.

"I guess I never knowed you was heeled," he said. "You ain't such a gal-darn tenderfoot as you look."

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"But look hyer, youngster," said the man, his manner changing, "we're stuck, and we want help. I guess I ask it as a favour. Put up your shooting-iron; nobody wants to hurt you."

"I'm willing to help you," said Jimmy Silver. "I can't imagine what you're taking a wagon across this prairie for, but I suppose that's your business. I'll help you out if I can. Show me the way."

"Good enough!"

Without touching Blazer's bridle again, the man led the way into the hollow, and Jimmy, putting away his revolver, rode after him at a walk.

The hollow, almost a ravine, extended for a great distance across the plain from east to west. In the winter it was flooded almost to the level of the plain, but in the summer heats only a trickle of water oozed along the swampy bottom. The sloping banks were encrusted in thick mud.

The American tramped along the muddy hollow, Jimmy Silver riding after him, and in a short time they sighted the wagon. Coming from the south, it had descended into the hollow which lay in its path, but had not succeeded in climbing out on the opposite side. The wheels were deep in the mud, and two horses strained at the traces in vain.

A half-breed teamster sat on a wheel, smoking, evidently waiting there for the American to return. He stared at his comrade as the latter came up, followed by Jimmy Silver, crunching through the mud.

"You've got him, Bunker?"

"I've got him," said Bunker. "Git a move on, Lebel; we've no time to cut to waste now."

The half-breed eyed Jimmy Silver grimly and suspiciously.

But he nodded, and rose from the wheel.

Jimmy Silver looked at the wagon, which seemed well filled, though as it was covered with thick canvas he could not guess the nature of the contents. The two men puzzled him considerably. They did not look in the least like emigrants seeking a new abode in the backwoods of Alberta, neither could he suppose that they were traders, as they were following a lonely route away from the settlements. The suspicious looks of the half-breed were not lost on him, either.

Jimmy Silver could not help feeling that he had fallen into extremely doubtful company, and he was on his guard. He dismounted from Blazer, and helped the half-breed to trace his horse to the wagon.

Blazer showed some strong objections to such a menial task, but Jimmy soothed him.

The half-breed, whose measures with horses were evidently of a rougher kind, seized a heavy teamster's whip and lifted it. Jimmy caught his arm in time and shoved him back.

"Let my horse alone!" he snapped.

Lebel's eyes glittered at him.

"Let the kid manage his horse, Lebel," said Bunker. "Keep your whip for your own beasts!"

"You'd better!" growled Jimmy Silver. "If you touch Blazer with that whip, you'll feel his teeth in you the next second!"

The half-breed grunted, and gave up the point. Jimmy soothed the indignant Blazer, and the powerful animal was traced to the wagon.

"You lead the horses up, kid, while we shove along!" said Bunker.

"Right-ho!"

Jimmy went to Blazer's head, and led him on. Blazer pulled, and the two weary horses behind him pulled, and Bunker and Lebel grasped each an embedded wheel, and turned with all their strength.

The wagon moved.

"I guess it's shifting!" panted Bunker.
 "Keep her going!"
 "Come on, old boss!" said Jimmy Silver.

With a dead-lift effort of horses and men, the wagon was dragged out of the mire.

Up the northern slope of the hollow it rolled, rumbling and creaking, slowly but surely.

"Good luck!" gasped Bunker.

The wagon came out on the grassy prairie at last, and the clinging mud of the swampy hollow was left behind. Then the panting horses and men came to a halt.

CHAPTER 2 In Danger!

"I GUESS we're through!"

Bunker spoke in breathless tones of satisfaction. Somewhat to Jimmy Silver's surprise, he mounted upon the wagon and scanned the prairie to the southward, beyond the Swampy Hollow that had now been safely negotiated.

For the first time it came into Jimmy's mind that the men he had helped were possibly in fear of pursuit.

If that was the case, it could only mean that they were law-breakers. That was a troubling thought to Jimmy Silver.

He cast loose the traces from Blazer, anxious to have done with his new acquaintances. Lebel, the half-breed, glanced up at Bunker as the latter scanned the darkening plain.

"You see anything, Jude Bunker?" he called out.

"Nope!"

"I guess we're clear, anyhow."

"I guess so, pard," said Bunker, jumping down from the wagon. "It's all O.K. But if we'd stayed stuck up in that swamp, I guess our name would have been Dennis."

The half-breed drew him aside, and spoke in a low voice. His dark, gleaming eyes glanced several times at Jimmy Silver as he whispered.

Jude Bunker shook his head.

"Not aiter he's helped us through, Lebel!" he said, in a tone that reached Jimmy's ears.

The half-breed muttered again.

"I guess I'll speak to the kid!" said Jude Bunker at last, and he left the half-breed and came over to Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy had loosened Blazer by that time, and he stood ready to mount. He was keeping his hand near his revolver, too, quite aware that the whispering of the savage half-breed implied a threat to him. He eyed Jude Bunker coolly.

"You've helped us through, bub," said Bunker. "I guess I'm obliged. We was fair stuck up, and no mistake."

"That's so!" assented Jimmy. "It's all clear now, and you can get on. Good-night!"

"Hold on a spell!" said Bunker. "I reckon you told me you was hanging up at a ranch hereabouts."

"The Windy River Ranch," said Jimmy.

"Fur from hyer?"

"About seven or eight miles," answered Jimmy. "This land belongs to the ranch."

"It do, do it?" said Jude Bunker.

"Wall, now let me tell you how it stands, bub! We don't want you to talk about us at the ranch."

"No?" said Jimmy.

"The fact is, we've got some enemies in this section," said Bunker. "We'd rather you forgot about meeting us, and never let on a word."

"I'm not likely to remember the meeting for long," answered Jimmy Silver. "You see, I've got my own affairs to think about."

"Correct! I take it that you ain't going to say a word at the ranch about dropping on us here?"

"That's as may be," answered Jimmy Silver coolly. "If you mean you want me to promise that, I shall do nothing of the kind."

"I guess that's what I mean."

"Well, there's nothing doing."

"Would you trust him, you fool?"

said the half-breed, coming closer. "I tell you the only safe way—"

"I guess the kid's straight," said Jude Bunker, "and if you git out that sticker of yours, Label, I'll punch your ugly face! Savvy that?"

The half-breed's dunky hand was fumbling at his belt.

Jimmy Silver, with a quick jump, vaulted into the saddle and backed Blazer away, at the same time jerking out his revolver.

"Is that your thanks for being helped?" he asked. "You can go and eat coke, the pair of you!"

"I guess I'm standing by you, ain't I?" said Jude Bunker. "I won't let him use his sticker, I tell you. But this long and the short of it is that you can't go back to the ranch to blab. You're coming along with us for the present."

"Coming with you?" said Jimmy Silver, staring.

"That's about the size of it. You ain't going to be hurt," said Bunker reassuringly. "Just a few days in our company won't hurt you. But that's how it is—we ain't letting you go!"

Jimmy Silver smiled grimly.

"How are you going to stop me?" he asked. "I warn you that I shall shoot if you come a step nearer."

"I guess if it comes to shooting, you won't get the best of it," said Jude Bunker. "You've got to mosey along with this outfit for a spell, and that's how it is. Take it smiling."

"That means," said Jimmy Silver quietly, "that you two are law-breakers of some kind, and that I've helped you without knowing it. If I'd known it, you'd still be stuck in the mud yonder, I can tell you."

Bunker shrugged his bony shoulders.

"That ain't neither hyer nor thar," he said. "Will you come quiet along with this outfit?"

"No!"

There was a growl from the half-breed teamster, and his knife glimmered in the dim light. Jimmy Silver's voice rang out sharply.

"Drop that knife, or I'll put a bullet through you!"

There was no doubting that the Hockwood junior meant what he said, and his revolver bore full upon the teamster. With a muttered exclamation, Label dropped his weapon into the grass, and stood gritting his teeth with rage.

"You god-darned jay!" said Bunker. "Don't I keep telling you to leave that sticker alone?"

"If he goes, we are done!" muttered the half-breed in choking tones. "A word to the Mounted Police at Mesquite will be enough, and—"

"Take a cinch on your jaw, and leave it to me!" said Bunker gruffly. "Look hyer, bub—"

"That will do!" said Jimmy Silver, and he backed Blazer farther away. "I'm going!"

"I guess—"

"Put up your hands, Mr. Bunker! I'm not trusting you!"

Jude Bunker put up his hands without demur. His eyes met the half-breed's for a moment, and Label slouched back to the wagon.

Blazed backed and backed. Jimmy Silver was in a difficult position. For some reason that he could not fathom, the teamsters were determined that their presence there should not become known. They were breakers of the law, and dared not let Jimmy return to the ranch to tell what he had seen. If he turned his back on the two rascals, Jimmy felt that he had a bullet to expect.

So he backed Blazer further and further away, keeping his revolver at a level.

Then suddenly, when he had gained a good start, he wheeled Blazer round and spurred his horse into full flight.

He trusted to his start and to the thickening dimness of the twilight for safety. And as he dashed away at a gallop he bent low over his horse's neck, to offer as slight a target as possible.

Crack!

The moment Jimmy's revolver no

longer threatened, the half-breed was on the wagon with a single bound, and grasping a rifle from under the canvas cover.

He fired the instant the weapon was in his hands.

Hurried as the shot was, and fast as Jimmy Silver moved in the dim, falling light, the bullet went near. Jimmy Silver felt the wind of it as it whistled by.

Crack!

The half-breed fired again, but by that time the galloping rider was almost swallowed up in the darkness, and the shot went wide.

"Go it, Blazer!" panted Jimmy.

He rode hard in the gloom, and once again he heard the rifle ring out behind him. But the third shot was at random.

Jimmy Silver rode on, out of danger now. He had to make a wide detour to get back to the ranch, but the glimmering lights of the house at Windy River came in sight at last.

CHAPTER 1. The Smugglers.

SUPPER was nearly over at the ranch-house when Jimmy Silver came in after turning Blazer into the corral. Lovell and Baby and Newcome were at the supper-table with Hudson Smedley and a stranger, whom Jimmy had never seen before. He was a powerfully-built man, with keen grey eyes and a square chin, and his uniform showed him to be an inspector in the Canadian Mounted Police. Jimmy Silver wondered what an officer of that well-known force was doing there. Windy River was in an outlying quarter, "off the beat" of the Canadian Police as a rule. It came almost instantly into Jimmy's mind that the inspector's presence might have some connection with the two "bulldozers" he had met at Swampy Hollow. That the two men were "crooks" of some kind was beyond a doubt.

"You're late, Jimmy," said Hudson Smedley. "I guess you went a long way after the steers."

"Yes, and never found them," said Jimmy Silver ruefully. "I'm not a full-sized cowpuncher yet."

The rancher laughed.

"You're getting on," he said. "You'll be a first-rate cowpuncher in the long run if you stay in Canada." He turned to the inspector. "This is my cousin, Jimmy Silver, from the old country, Inspector Steel."

The Canadian inspector shook hands with Jimmy, with a smile.

"I guess you'll be able to ask him questions, if you like," added the rancher. "He's been far afield to-day, looking for some stray cattle, and it's possible he's seen something of the boot-leggers you're looking for."

"Boot-leggers!" repeated Jimmy Silver.

It was a new word to him, though he was well up by this time in Western parlance.

"Well, I guess I've asked every man in your outfit, Mr. Smedley, and they've been able to tell me nothing," said Steel. "I guess I'll ask the kid, too. You haven't lit on a wagon or any sort of a shbang on wheels on the prairie to-day, young 'un?"

"My hat!" exclaimed Jimmy. "I jolly well have!"

"You have?" exclaimed the inspector. "I mean, of course, a stranger's outfit—not a store wagon for Mosquito."

"Of course," said Jimmy. "Well, I've seen one, with two thumping rascals in charge of it."

"How do you know they were rascals?" asked Hudson Smedley with a smile.

"Because they fired on me after I'd helped them out of a fix," answered Jimmy Silver.

"What?"

"What's happened, old scout?" asked Arthur Edward Lovell eagerly. "I knew you'd jolly well land in trouble if I wasn't with you."

"Tell the inspector just what you know, Jimmy," said the rancher.

Woo Sing was bringing in Jimmy's supper, but Jimmy did not heed supper for the moment, hungry as he was.

He proceeded to explain succinctly what had happened at Swampy Hollow, seven or eight miles west of the ranch.

Inspector Steel listened quietly, but with the keenest interest.

"My hat!" murmured Raby when Jimmy had finished. "You were lucky to get out of that, Jimmy."

"And they were the boot-leggers?" said Newcome.

"What the thump is a boot-legger?" inquired Jimmy Silver. "Some sort of a cobbler, or what?"

"A liquor-smuggler," said the rancher.

"Oh!" exclaimed Jimmy, remembering the carefully covered cargo in the wagon. "Liquor?"

"They sell liquor to the Indians, which is against the Canadian law, of course," said Hudson Smedley. "It looks to me as if you've landed on the very gang Mr. Steel is looking for."

"My hat! And helped them to get through!" said Jimmy ruefully. "Of course, I couldn't guess—"

"You're not to blame," said Inspector Steel. "That's all right. But let's have it clear. Two men, you say, in the outfit?"

"Yes, an American and a half-breed."

"Did you catch their names?"

"Jude Bunker and Lebel."

"Good! Bunker is pretty well known as a boot-legger, at all events. And they were going north?"

"Yes. I told them that way would only lead to the Blood Indian reservation," said Jimmy. "I couldn't make out what they were heading in that direction for. They didn't look like Indian traders."

"And they fired on you?"

"The half-breed did, three times, with a rifle," said Jimmy. "They were awfully keen that I shouldn't tell that I'd seen them."

"No wonder," said the rancher. "I guess they know that Mr. Steel has

come up from Kicking Mule to look for them."

"I guess so," said the inspector. "You're a lucky man to have got away, my boy."

"The white man wanted to rope me in as a prisoner," said Jimmy. "He's a bulldozer, but not so bad as the half-breed. Lebel would have stabbed me as soon as I'd done helping them—a savage beast, and no mistake."

"They've got a good cargo at stake," said Steel. "I guess there's more than a thousand dollars in fire-water in that wagon. And to think it was stuck in the mud only eight miles away! If you hadn't lent them your horse it would be stuck there now."

Jimmy crimsoned.

"I couldn't know—"

"Of course you couldn't," said Steel. "I don't blame you. You were bound to help strangers in distress, and you couldn't guess that they were law-breakers—though I reckon you guessed so when the shooting began."

"Yes," said Jimmy. "I was going to tell Mr. Smedley about it, and ask him what he thought of it. I wondered whether they had stolen the wagon, perhaps, or what was in it."

"Worse than that," said the inspector. "There'll be worse than robbery happening among the Blood Indians if that cargo gets through. But it won't if I can help it. You'll excuse me, Mr. Smedley; I guess I'm not losing a minute. Can you lend me a guide to the hollow Silver speaks of?"

"Let me guide you," exclaimed Jimmy. "I can take you straight to the spot."

"Well, if you're not too tired, my boy," said Hudson Smedley. "Anybody on the ranch could guide you to the hollow, Steel, but the exact spot where the wagon crossed is a different matter. They were not following one of the trails, Jimmy?"

"Right away from any trail," said Jimmy. "I'm ready. Lovell will saddle a horse for me while I bolt a mouthful or two, won't you, kid?"

"You bet!" said Lovell, and he hurried out.

"Not Blazer!" called out Jimmy.

"He's had enough to-day!"

"Right-oh!"

"You are more careful of your horse than of yourself, my boy," said the Canadian inspector, with a smile. "Well, if you think the boy can come, Mr. Smedley——"

"Certainly. And I shall come, too, with a couple of the hands," said the rancher. "You may need help, and your men are not here."

"Thanks!"

The inspector and Hudson Smedley hurried out together to see their horses saddled. Jimmy Silver was attacking his supper now, and it was disappearing at a great rate.

"We're jolly well going with you, Jimmy," said Newcome. "Come on, Baby, and get the horses out!"

And Jimmy was left to finish his supper alone. Arthur Edward Lovell came in in a few minutes.

"All ready, Jimmy!" he announced.

"The inspector ready to start?" asked Jimmy.

"Ready and waiting, and Skitter Dick and Pete Peters as well. They've got their guns, too," said Lovell, in a voice thrilling with excitement. "There may be a scrap. I've asked Mr. Smedley to lend me a revolver, and he said I'd better go to bed."

Jimmy Silver laughed, and rose from his unfinished supper.

"I say, Jimmy, you've still got that revolver Mr. Lesage gave you?"

"Yes."

"Hand it over, old chap. It will be better in my hands than yours," urged Lovell. "You see that?"

"Not quite," grinned Jimmy Silver.

"You've got your faults, Lovell, old chap, but I should hate to see you commit suicide. Come on!"

"Look here!" roared Lovell.

But Jimmy Silver was gone, and Arthur Edward snorted and followed him. Outside, the ready horses were pawing the ground, and the rancher

and Mr. Steel, Skitter Dick and Pete Peters, Baby and Newcome were already in the saddle. Jimmy Silver and Lovell mounted hastily. Inspector Steel gave a rather dry glance at Lovell & Co., but he raised no objection to their presence, as the rancher said nothing. The eight riders dashed away from the ranch in a bunch, in the glimmer of stars from the soft velvety sky.

Jimmy Silver pushed a little ahead as guide. Hardly a word was spoken in the outfit as they rode at a gallop over the starlit prairie. Some of the faces were grim. Pete Peters and Skitter Dick had rifles with them, and the inspector and Mr. Smedley were armed with revolvers. If the boot-leggers were run down, it was only too probable that there would be shooting. The men engaged in the nefarious business of smuggling fire-water to the Indians were of a desperate character, and their smuggled cargo was too valuable to be yielded up without a struggle, if they could help it.

Inspector Steel's men were out on the wide prairie in different directions, hunting for traces of the boot-leggers; too far off to be recalled in time for this pursuit. But the Canadian inspector would not have hesitated to ride alone in pursuit of the desperadoes; it was his duty to prevent the liquor reaching the Indian reserve, and risk did not count. But he was glad enough to have the help of the rancher and the two stalwart cowpunchers.

Gallop, gallop, gallop!

The cludding of the hoofs rang and echoed over the silent prairie.

Mile after mile of dim grass vanished under the hoofs. Jimmy Silver led the way almost as the crow flies, towards the spot where the boot-leggers' wagon had crossed the hollow.

The outfit rode down into the muddy swamp at last, and in the starlight the ruts left deep by the wagon-wheels were clearly visible.

They rode up on the northern side, but did not stop there. Right on through the grass lay the trail of the

lumbering wagon. Jude Bunker and Lebel had evidently pushed directly on after Jimmy Silver had escaped from them.

"We're a good three hours behind them, I guess, if not four," the inspector remarked to Hudson Smalley, as they dashed on side by side, in the lead now.

"Sure!" said the rancher.

"I guess, if I'd been certain they were heading straight for the Indian reserve, we'd have taken a line farther north from the ranch, and cut them off ahead," said the inspector. "But there's no telling. I guess they're not running that wagon into the reserve—too many eyes to see, and tongues to wag afterwards."

"You think—"

"I reckon they've got some hiding-place for the smuggled liquor handy to the reserve," said Steel. "They'll attack it there in safety, and it will be fetched away by some of the red bucks later. So the only thing is to follow the trail of the wagon itself, and take no chances. At present the trail is heading straight for the reserve, but I guess it will break later."

The inspector was right.

For nine or ten miles the outfit rode in an almost straight line heading north across the rolling prairie. Then the trail of the wagon, plain to see from the saddle, turned off towards the foothills, and the outfit followed it.

Overhead, the full, round moon sailed out in a sky of dark blue, and the waving prairie became almost as light as by day. Several times the inspector rose in his stirrups and stared eagerly ahead. Long as was the start of the boot-leggers, the slow pace of the wagon made it certain that the pursuers were gaining ground at great strides. At every moment now Steel expected to sight his quarry.

He uttered a sudden ejaculation.

"I guess that's the shebang."

Jimmy Silver stared ahead. The outfit were riding across "bad lands" now, and the grassland was behind. Under the rattling hoofs of the horses was

sandy and stony soil, patched with bunches of scrub and prickly bush. Here and there, however, the heavy wheels of the wagon had left unmistakable traces; there was no doubt of the trail. The inspector pointed with his riding-whip for a moment, and rode on harder. And far ahead, in the moonlight, Jimmy Silver spotted a moving, dark dot.

"That's it!" he murmured.

"We've got 'em!" said Lovell breathlessly. "I say, Jimmy—"

"Well?"

"Gimme your shooter, old man. We may be scrapping soon."

"Then there'll be enough danger from the giddy enemy without you adding to it," said Jimmy affably.

"Patience!" roared Lovell. And Baby and Newsoms chuckled.

"We're gaining hand over fist, I guess," said Skitter Dick. "We'll be on them under the half-hour, Pete."

"I guess so," said Pete Peters. "They're up agin it."

The bunch of horsemen rode on hard. In the bright moonlight the wagon was plainly to be seen now. It was mounting an acclivity in the "bad lands"—broken country at the base of the foothills. The upward path added to the fatigue of the already wearied horses traced to the wagon, and the pace of the fugitives was slow. That they knew now that they were being pursued was pretty certain. The wearied horses were being driven on ruthlessly.

"We've got 'em, I guess," said Steel.

And that was the opinion of all the outfit as they swept on in galloping pursuit.

CHAPTER 5.

Hard Pressed!

"DURN you, you god-darned breed, make 'em move!"

Jude Bunker, standing up in the wagon and looking back, roared out the words to his associate.

Lebel, the half-bred, did not need the injunction.

He was driving on the two horses with savage, ruthless, cruel energy. His long whip rose and cracked every minute, the lash ringing on the perspiring hides of his team.

But the horses were weary with a long pull over rough ground, and the way was steep. The tormented animals did their best, but the pace was slow, maddeningly slow to the two rascals whose dollars, invested in illicit liquor, were at stake, and whose liberty was also at stake.

"Another mile!" panted Jude. "One mile more and we're all hunky. Oh, make 'em move—make 'em move!"

The half-breed did not trouble to answer. His dark face was set and savage.

"I guess that's Steel arter us," went on Jude Bunker, staring back. "It's a galoot in uniform, anyways; and he's got half a dozen with him. And we've kept clear all the way from the railroad, and now——"

"It was your doing!" snarled the half-breed, without looking round from his straining team. "The boy has betrayed us."

"I guess it was that kid," said Jude Bunker. "But you're a fool, Label; you'd never have got at him with your knife, if I'd let you. He was watching like a cat all the time, and he was mighty ready to shoot. And I ain't sure that it was that kid put Steel on the track, either. Anyways, we're all hunky if we do another mile. Make 'em move! Oh, make 'em move!"

The half-breed muttered a savage exclamation, and lashed and lashed at the weary horses.

"They'll have us! They'll have us!" groaned Jude Bunker, watching the bunch of horsemen bobbing in the distance in the moonlight. "Oh, what luck—almost at the finish."

"They won't have us!" snarled the half-breed. "At the worst, we'll cut the horses loose and get away, and leave he wagon."

Jude Bunker gave a yell.

"Leave the abebang! Leave fifteen hundred cool dollars in liquor to be

split! Arter we've brought it so far! I tell you if they come up before we're unloaded we've got to fight."

"Try a shot at them now!" growled the half-breed. "It won't stop them, but it may delay."

"Sure!"

Jude Bunker picked up a rifle from the wagon and sighted it over the canvas cover. The horsemen were still at a good distance, and in rapid motion, and the wagon was rocking as it rolled. A shot was not likely to take much effect under such conditions. But the hoot-legger took aim and pulled trigger.

Crack, crack, crack!

Thrice the Winchester rang out, but the bullets flew wide. The horsemen swept on, unheeding.

Bunker dropped the rifle and cast an anxious glance round. The wagon had almost reached the crest of the declivity, and his hard face flushed with hope.

"We're doing it, Label! We're doing it! Make 'em move! Cut their hides off, but make 'em move!"

Over the crest of the rise the wagon rolled at last, the horses perspiring and panting under the savage lashes of the teamster's whip.

On the other side was a descent, rocky and rough, but Label did not heed the danger of the way. There was worse danger behind. The horses, relieved by a downward instead of an upward path, ran harder, the wagon rolling and rocking fairly on their heels. For half a mile the wagon and team careered down the rough declivity, in danger every moment of whirling over into utter ruin. But the half-breed's hand was like iron on the reins, and the horses kept their feet as if by a series of miracles.

"Halt!"

In tones of intense relief Jude Bunker rapped out the word. Label drew in his panting, exhausted team.

The wagon stopped.

The hoot-leggers evidently knew the spot that they had now reached. Jude Bunker jumped down and cast a hurried glance back. The pursuers were still on the other side of the rocky ridge,

which hid them from sight so far. They were now riding up the rough ascent the wagon had already covered, gaining at every stride of the horses, but still out of sight.

"We're got time, I guess!" panted Bunker.

The wagon had stopped by a clump of pine-trees that grew against a high rock. Without a second more the two boot-leggers set to work in feverish haste unloading the wagon.

Lebel handed out case after case to Jude Bunker, who hurried through the pine-trees with them. Each trip occupied him less than a minute, and each time he came back empty-handed. Evidently they had 'a secret hiding-place behind the trees.

The two men worked—or, rather, slaved—with frantic haste. In an incredibly short space of time the last of the crates containing the illicit liquor had been dropped in the hidden den.

Breathless, exhausted, streaming with perspiration, the two boot-leggers clambered into the wagon again, and Lebel took up the reins. His whip cracked, and the weary, unwilling horses were set in motion.

The wagon rumbled on past the clump of pines.

Jude Bunker stood up in the vehicle and stared back. In the bright moonlight the rocky ridge behind was clear to the view, as clear as if the sun were shining. Beyond rocks and boulders Bunker caught sight of a moving dot, and knew that it was a Stetson hat.

The horsemen had almost reached the crest of the ridge; a minute more and they would be in full view.

Bunker chuckled.

"Just in time, Lebel!" he said. "Don't you feel thankful, you durned, pesky half-breed?"

Lebel did not answer.

He was whipping the horses on savagely. The wagon was lighter now without its load, and the path was still to some extent downward. The horses, tired as they were, gathered speed.

"Hyer they come!" grinned Bunker.

Over the crest of the ridge, now a good mile behind, rose a bunch of horsemen against the moonlit sky.

Bunker grinned at them.

"Come on as soon and airly as you like, you gal-darned galsots!" he chuckled. "Come on, and you're welcome to all you find! Keep it up, you breed! Make 'em move—make 'em move! We're innocent traders, and we figure it out that we're chased by a gang of rustlers! That's what we are, and what we think! And the farther off we are from the liquor when they overhaul us the better! Make 'em move!"

And the boot-legger chuckled gleefully as the wagon jolted and rattled on.

CHAPTER I

(Seeten)

"THERE they are!"

The Candian inspector pointed with his riding-whip.

"Good!"

"We've got 'em!" chuckled Lovell.

In the clear moonlight the wagon was plainly seen as the horsemen swept over the ridge. Down the descent they went galloping. The overhauling of the wagon was only a matter of minutes now.

That the boot-leggers had halted under cover of the ridge and got rid of their tell-tale cargo did not occur to the pursuers yet. They had no means of knowing that Jude Bunker had been so near to the smugglers' hiding-place. During the time that the intervening ridge had hidden the wagon from sight the pursuers did not yet guess that it had halted at all. If it was now nearer at hand than they had expected to see it, the evident weariness of the horses accounted for that fact. Indeed, it was plainly only the savage cruelty of the teamster that was keeping the team going at all.

The horsemen swept on.

Jimmy Silver could recognise the wagon now, and could recognise the

bony, muscular man standing up and looking back. He had no doubt that Jude Bunker and Lebel were the boot-leggers that Steel was looking for. At all events, their conduct at Swampy Hollow in firing upon him showed that they were breakers of the law, and their hurried flight was another proof of their guilt.

But they were being overhauled hand over hand now. Closer and closer swept the horsemen. Steel and the rancher had revolvers in hand, and Pete Peters and Skitter Dick grasped their rifles as they rode. They more than half expected a sudden blaze of rifle-fire from the wagon now that capture was certain, and doubtless their expectation would have been fulfilled had the illicit cargo been still on board.

But no shot came from the wagon, and the horsemen rode closer, and divided to pass on either side of it.

Inspector Steel hailed the dusky teamster.

"Halt!"

Jude Bunker stared at the officer from the wagon and uttered an exclamation in surprised tones.

"Gol-darn me if it ain't one of the M.P.'s! Pull in them critters, pard, there ain't nothing to run from."

Lebel pulled in the horses.

The wagon came to a halt, and the inspector rode closer. His keen grey eyes searched the grinning face of Jude Bunker.

"I guess I want you," he said.

Bunker nodded coolly.

"I guess I'm right here, if you want me," he said. "Glad to see you, too. I guess you 'uns have given us the scare of our lives, you have. We reckoned a gang of rustlers was arter us."

"Did you?" said Steel grimly.

"Jest that! Ain't I seed you afore somewhere?" asked Bunker affably.

"Yep—I reckon you're Inspector Steel, what I've met down at Red Deer. You had a fancy that I'd something to do with running fire-water to the Indians, but you found out it was a mistake."

"I did not find proofs of it, you mean."

"Have it as you like, old pard," said Jude Bunker cheerfully. "I ain't arguing the point. Anything I can do for you now?"

"You can get off that wagon, and put up your hands," said the inspector sharply.

"Anything to oblige," said Bunker.

He jumped from the wagon, and stood with his hands over his head. He was perfectly cool and self-possessed, like a man who had nothing to fear. Jimmy Silver wondered whether he was bluffing; yet he wondered that even this impudent rascal should attempt a bluff that would so soon be "called." For a search of the wagon would prove whether it contained a consignment of illicit liquor or not.

Jude Bunker glanced at Jimmy, and smiled at him and bestowed a wink on the surprised Bookwood junior.

"Ain't you the young galoot that helped us out, way back at the swamp?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Jimmy.

"And you've come arter us, to see if we want any more help?" asked Bunker.

"Now, that's kind—that's real kind!"

Skitter Dick burst into a chuckle, and Pete Peters grinned. Hudson Smedley sat his horse, with his revolver in Bunker's direction. The rancher was ready to shoot, if the boot-legger attempted any trickery. But Bunker was submissive and good-humoured.

Inspector Steel had entered the wagon. Lebel sat motionless in his seat, and did not offer to hinder him. He sat silent and sullen, chewing tobacco.

Steel was busy in the wagon for some ten minutes, evidently making a thorough search. He stepped down at last, and though his bronzed face was still quiet and impassive, Jimmy Silver could read the signs of a bitter chagrin there.

"Satisfied, old pard?" asked Jude Bunker. "I don't know what you want, but if there's anything in that shebang what takes your fancy, I'm open to trade."

"Where's the liquor?" snapped the inspector.

"The what?"

"Liquor."

"Liquor!" repeated Jude Bunker. "You're joking, inspector. It's agin the law to run a cargo of fire-water, and nobody should know that better than you, seeing as you're an officer of the Canadian police. I'm surprised at you, Mr. Steel—I really am!"

Steel compressed his lips.

"You deny having had a cargo of liquor on board this wagon, Jude Bunker?" he demanded.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" said Jude Bunker. "I never was so surprised! I'd be glad if you could find any liquor on that there shebang, Mr. Steel; I'm dying for agdrink."

Rancher Smedley looked curiously at the inspector. If there had been an illicit consignment on the wagon it was clear that the liquor was no longer there. That wild chase over long miles of prairie in the moonlight had been in vain.

Steel was silent for some moments. His defeat was bitter enough to him, though he strove hard to betray no sign of what he was feeling inwardly.

"Why didn't you stop when you saw us after you?" he asked suddenly.

"We reckoned you was a gang of rustlers, as I've told you. Never dreamed you was the Canadian M.P.'s," said Jude Bunker calmly. "How was a galoot to guess? I ask you that, Mr. Steel. This hyer moonlight is mighty onsartain. Never reckornised you for a minute."

"Don't you think that story's a bit too thin?" snapped the inspector. "You knew very well that I was after you, and you never took us for rustlers."

"Gee-whie! Then why do you think we put it on as we did?" asked Jude Bunker innocently. "Why, we lit out like steam, Mr. Steel, and why, if we didn't think you was a gang of rustlers?"

"Because you had a cargo of illicit

liquor on board," said the Canadian inspector sternly.

Jude Bunker sighed.

"There you go agin!" he said. "If you can prove that, Mr. Steel, you're safe for the good books of your superiors at Calgary. Can you prove it, do you think?"

The inspector did not answer that question. There was no possibility of proof, now that the illicit liquor was gone.

"What are you doing up here in Windy River, anyhow?" he asked suddenly.

"Looking for a chance to trade," answered Bunker readily. "I've got some notions on that shebang—and there's honest money to be made in trade, I reckon."

"You're a way off from the settlements."

"Yep—through running away from you, taking you for rustlers," said Bunker. "You've made me lose a lot of time, inspector."

"And why did you fire on this boy, Silver, after he'd helped you get the wagon out of the mire?"

"I swow I never did," said Jude Bunker. "I allow Lebel yonder let loose his rifle, but he was shooting at a turkey-buzzard. Mebbe the kid fancied he was being shot at."

"It came pretty close, for a fancy," said Jimmy Silver.

"I've allers warned that breed to be more keetful with firearms," said Jude solemnly. "He missed the turkey-buzzard, too."

"Luckily, he missed me," said Jimmy. Bunker shook his head.

"He's ready to swear, and I'm ready to swear, that he was shooting a turkey-buzzard," he said. "I don't allow, inspector, that you can worry me any on that. But I'm ready and willing to go along with you, if that's your game. Always respected the law, I have, on both sides of the border, and I guess I've got a great respect for your uniform, Mr. Steel."

There was a faint grin on the stolid, dusky face of the half-breed. Evidently the inspector was at a loss, and the winning card, as it were, was in the hands of the boot-leggers.

That they were boot-leg smugglers, and that they had brought a cargo of forbidden liquor northward for sale to the Indians the inspector was assured—as certain as he could be without proof. But the law required proof, and the only satisfactory proof was the seizure of the liquor in possession of the smugglers. Somewhere en route the cargo had been dropped and hidden, the inspector was sure of that, but in what point from the Swampy Hollow, in the many miles covered, he could not guess.

At all events, it was clear that it was hidden now, and that there was no clue to its hiding-place. And, without the actual presence of the forbidden liquor, the inspector was helpless. He knew it, and the boot-leggers knew it.

Hence the slow, mocking grin of Lebel, the half-breed, and the impudent good-humour of Jude Bunker. Both of them were enjoying their triumph over the officer of the Canadian Police.

"Well, Steel?" said the rancher at last.

The inspector drew a deep breath.

"May as well be getting back," he said. "I guess I'm sorry I've brought you so far on a wild-geese chase."

"I guess I'm sorry it hasn't ended better," said the rancher. "We know they had the stuff."

"No doubt about that."

Inspector Steel stepped to his horse. He bore his disappointment admirably.

"What rotten luck!" breathed Arthur Edward Lovell. "I made sure we'd get the rotters, Jimmy."

Jimmy Silver nodded glumly.

He had felt sure of it, too. He was as certain of the boot-legger's guilt as the inspector himself, but he realized that it was a question of proof. Proof was lacking, and it was impossible to arrest the two rascals on the bare suspicion of having had a cargo of illicit

spirits on board their wagon. Jude Bunker's explanations were plausible enough, too, though nobody believed them.

"Going?" asked Jude Bunker cheerily. "Waal, I guess I'm sorry I can't offer you refreshment arter your long ride, but the fact is, I'm a tentstaller myself."

Skitter Dick chuckled.

"And the breed here can't stand the sight of it, can you, breed?" went on Bunker.

Lebel grinned.

"Oh, can it!" grunted Pete Peters. "Somebody will rope you in sooner or later, you pesky mugwump. Keep your chin-wag till you're before a judge; you'll need it then."

Inspector Steel mounted his horse, and the outfit moved off. Jude Bunker and the half-breed, grinning, watched them go.

The Canadian inspector was very silent as the party rode away, back the way they had come, over the ridge. With a clatter of hoofs on the rocks, they mounted the slope, leaving the two boot-leggers standing by the wagon, watching them and grinning.

"I suppose nothing could have been done, Steel?" said the rancher, after a long silence.

Steel shook his head.

"Not after they dropped the liquor."

"You're sure they had it?"

"Quite!"

"They hadn't a chance to drop it unseen, after we got sight of them, I guess."

"Not till they got over this ridge," said the inspector. "They were out of sight for a bit then. I reckon they dropped the cargo somewhere between the top of this ridge and the place where the wagon stopped. That's about a mile of rough country to nose into. They were frantic to get away before they passed the ridge; after that they stopped at the order and surrendered." His gaze swept round over the rough rocks and boulders and pine-trees.

"Somewhere within a mile, I guess—if a man knew where to look."

"It's a big order."

"Sure."

"I feel as if it's my fault," muttered Jimmy Silver. "If I hadn't helped them get the wagon out of Swampy Hollow—"

"That's all right. If you hadn't found them, we shouldn't be on their track at all," said Steel. "They'd dodged my men. I owe you some thanks, my boy; I'm not done with them yet."

The party rode over the ridge, and descended the southern side. Then the inspector drew rein.

"You're coming on to the ranch?" asked Hudson Smedley.

"I guess not. Jude Bunker can think so," said the inspector coolly. "We're out of their sight now, and I guess I'm stopping. You'll see my men around the ranch to-morrow. Mr. Smedley, and you'll send them on to join me here. I guess I'm going to watch those two critters like their own shadows."

"So-long, then!" said Hudson Smedley.

The horsemen rode on, and the inspector dismounted. Jimmy Silver glanced back, a hundred yards further on. Inspector Steel and his horse had already vanished from sight among the rocks.

The moonlight was fading into dawn when the tired riders reached the Windy River Ranch. Jimmy Silver turned into bed, but, tired as he was, he could not help thinking, long ere he slept, of the intrepid Canadian inspector, alone in the wilderness of the "bad lands" on the track of the desperate boot-leggers.

CHAPTER 5.

Seeking for Strays

"LEAVE it to me!" said Arthur Edward Lovell.

Jimmy Silver sighed, and Raby and Newcome grinned.

It was Arthur Edward's way, when

there was a difficulty, to consider that he was the fellow to tackle it. Lovell was blessed with complete confidence in himself. Unnumbered failures had not discouraged him.

There was a difficulty now.

The chums of Buckwood had ridden out from the Windy River Ranch early in the sunny morning. It was the busy season at the Alberta ranch, and Hudson Smedley and the "outfit" had plenty to do, for which reason Jimmy Silver & Co. naturally desired to make themselves useful.

A bunch of "strays" had disappeared—half a dozen valuable steers—and they had to be found. It was possible that the steers had been "run off" by some cattle thief, or by some wandering "bucks" from the Indian reserve. But the probability was that they had wandered from the grasslands round Lone Pine, and were lost somewhere in the "bad lands" north of the ranch. And Jimmy Silver & Co. had taken on the task of searching for them.

They had been some hours in the saddle that morning, but so far no trace had been discovered of the strays. Jimmy Silver, who had picked up by this time a considerable knowledge of trails and prairie-craft, had not succeeded in finding any "sign." Jimmy's idea was to ride direct to the bad lands, and resume the search there among the ravines and ridges. But Lovell shook his head with an air of superior wisdom.

"Leave it to me," he said. "The fact is, Jimmy, old man, you're too keen on baying your own way."

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy.

"You're a bit obstinate, old fellow, if you don't mind my mentioning it," said Lovell.

"Not at all," said Jimmy sarcastically.

"You see, a chap ought to take a back seat when another chap knows better," explained Lovell. "You see that?"

"Quite!" assented Jimmy. "I'm only waiting for you to take the back seat."

Raby and Newcome chuckled. Lovell frowned.

"Don't be an ass, Jimmy. Now, I don't suppose for a moment that the cattle have wandered into the bad lands. They're on the prairie somewhere."

"They'd have been seen before this," said Raby.

"Oh, there's lots of hollows and gullies and so on where they might be out of sight," said Lovell. "We've simply got to pick up their trail and—and follow it, and—and run them down, and there you are. It's perfectly simple."

"Simple as Euclid," said Newcome.

"I'll tell you what," said Raby. "Let's take a rest while Lovell picks up the trail. He's so good at these things that it would be a pity to stop him."

"Good egg!" said Newcome. "I could do with some lunch."

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"That's a cinch," he said. "Go it, Lovell. We'll give you an hour to root around, and then we'll ride on to the bad lands and search for them there."

"I don't suppose I shall want an hour, if you fellows won't keep on interrupting and bothering," said Lovell.

"Go it, then!"

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome proceeded to camp in the shade of a tree. The hot summer sun was blazing down on the plain, and they were glad of the rest and shade.

They unpacked food from their saddle-bags and lunched, while Arthur Edward Lovell hunted for the trail of the lost cattle. Lovell disappeared from their sight, busy on the quest. The three juniors smiled as they watched him go.

They did not share Lovell's confidence in his powers as a trailer. But they were willing to give him his head, so to speak, while they lunched and rested.

Having finished their meal, they stretched themselves in the grass, while their horses cropped the herbage round them contentedly. Overhead the sky was blue and cloudless; westward, the sun glistened on the snow-capped peaks of

the Rocky Mountains. Innumerable insects buzzed round them in the grass, and every now and then there was a sharp smack as one of the juniors squashed a mosquito.

Jimmy Silver sat up at last.

"The hour's up!" he remarked. "Lovell doesn't seem to have found that trail."

"I suppose it would take him about ten years," remarked Raby thoughtfully.

"We can't wait so long as that."

"Hardly!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "We'd better be getting on, I think."

It's practically certain that the strays are in the bad lands, and we want to find them before sundown if we can."

"Hallo, here he comes!"

"Looks as if he's found something, too," said Newcome.

Arthur Edward Lovell was coming back to the camp at a gallop. Jimmy Silver & Co. rose from the grass to meet him. They observed that Arthur Edward was looking jubilant. Evidently he had returned to report a success.

"Got it?" asked Raby, as Lovell jumped down from his horse.

"Yes."

"Great pip!"

"I've found the trail," said Lovell carelessly. "I think I told you fellows that I should."

"You did!" said Jimmy, with a nod.

"Well, you see, then—"

"We don't see the trail yet."

"You will when I've had a snack," said Lovell. "Hand out some of the grub. I'm hungry. I've picked up the trail of one of the strays, but, of course, one will lead us to the others. They generally keep together, I believe."

"And where's the trail?"

"Half a mile from here," said Lovell. "I'll show you. I can eat while we're riding. Come on!"

The juniors remounted their horses and followed Arthur Edward Lovell across the plain. Jimmy Silver was wondering whether Lovell really had found the desired trail. There was, as he privately remarked to Raby, such a thing as fool's luck.

"Here you are!" exclaimed Lovell triumphantly, slipping from his saddle at last. "Here it is, plain as a turn-pike! What do you think now, Jimmy Silver?"

CHAPTER 7. On the Trail

JIMMY SILVER dismounted from Blazer and examined the trail.

There was no doubt that it was a trail, and a clearly-marked one, and it looked fresh. It ran from south-east to north-west—the direction, as Jimmy noted, from the Windy River Ranch to the bad lands. Undoubtedly it was a fresh trail, easy to follow, and perhaps Lovell had cause to feel triumphant. There was only one detail that had escaped Arthur Edward's eagle eye, but did not escape Jimmy's. The trail was that of a horse—not of a steer.

Lovell had not observed that trifling detail. As the juniors were looking for steers, not for horses, the trail was not of much use in Jimmy's estimation. He smiled.

"Well, isn't it a trail?" demanded Lovell.

"No doubt about that!" assented Jimmy Silver.

"And I found it," said Lovell.

"You did, old chap."

"If we'd pushed on to the bad lands, as you wanted us to, we should have missed this," said Lovell.

"We should!" agreed Jimmy.

"It leads towards the bad lands," said Lovell. "But the steer can't be as far as that yet; the trail's so fresh."

"The steer?" said Jimmy.

"The stray that made this trail, I mean."

Jimmy smiled again. Raby and Newcome had not dismounted. They were leaving the leadership to Jimmy Silver. They saw the trail, but from the saddle they did not notice its special characteristics.

"Well, let's get on," said Lovell, remounting. "We can follow this steer up, and he's pretty certain to lead us

to the whole bunch. What are you grinning at, Jimmy?"

"Was I grinning?"

"Yes, you ass! What's the joke?"

"You are, old fellow."

"Look here!" bawled Lovell. "Are we following this trail or not, now I've found it?"

"Certainly!"

Jimmy Silver jumped on Blazer again, and the four youthful cowboys rode off, Lovell in the lead, keeping ahead with his eyes on the trail. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome rode behind him abreast. Raby and Newcome eyed Jimmy Silver inquiringly from either side.

"Is the trail all right?" asked Raby.

"That depends," answered Jimmy cheerfully. "If we're looking for a horseman who rode away from the ranch this morning to join Inspector Steel in the bad lands we're all right."

"A—a horseman!" ejaculated Newcome. "Is that a gee-gee's trail?"

"Just that!"

"That ass—Lovell!"

"What the blump are we following it for, then, if it isn't the trail we want?" demanded Raby.

"It's all right," said Jimmy. "My idea was to make for the bad lands, and this trail leads us right there, so we may as well follow it as not. But we shan't come up with a stray steer. We shall come up with Trooper Bright, of the Canadian Mounted Police, if anybody."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It will be quite a pleasant surprise for Lovell," said Jimmy. "Only I hope he won't rope-in Mr. Bright with his lasso before he discovers that he's not a stray steer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Raby and Newcome roared, and Lovell looked round suspiciously. He had not heard the talk, but he heard the roar of laughter.

"What's biting you fellows?" he snapped.

"Only mosquitoes," said Jimmy Silver blandly. "Keep going, Lovell. We're following our leader, you know."

Lovell started, and rode on ahead again. His three comrades followed him cheerfully. They were going the way they wanted to go, and it did not matter whether there was a false trail under their horses' hoofs or not.

The trail was so plain in the thick grass that there was no mistaking it, and Lovell left his horse to the gallop. The Co. galloped after him contentedly.

Jimmy Silver kept his eyes on the prairie ahead, expecting to see, sooner or later, the stalwart uniformed figure of Trooper Bright, of the Canadian Mounted Police. Lovell was watching the plain for a steer, which he was not so likely to behold.

But no moving figure broke the expanse of rolling plain. The juniors drew nearer at a gallop to the bad lands, the stretch of broken, stony country that lay between the plains and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The herbage grew sparser under the horses' hoofs, and sand and rocks cropped out of the soil. The ground was broken up into rocky ridges and gullies, and the galloping hoofs clinked on loose stones.

Lovell reined in his horse. The trail, which he had followed for miles, by this time was lost on the hard soil.

"Stopping!" asked Jimmy Silver, reining in Blazer, as Lovell wheeled back.

"You can see the trail's lost!" snapped Lovell. "I shall have to look for sign."

Jimmy Silver did not answer. His glance was turned to the sky. Overhead, a short distance in advance, a buzzard was wheeling on its pinions in the blue. It shot down suddenly, and disappeared into a rocky gully.

From the westward came sailing another of the obscene birds of prey, and from the east another. Both of them wheeled round over the gully, and shot down into it with the speed of arrows.

Jimmy Silver's face was grave now.

He knew what the settling of a buzzard meant—that some dead carcass lay below, hidden by the rocks. From near and far the hideous birds were gathering to the feast.

"Of course, we're not stopping here!" said Lovell. "I shall pick up plenty of sign. I fancy that steer isn't far away.

What the merry thump are you staring at the sky for, Jimmy? Star-gazing in broad daylight!"

Jimmy did not heed.

Another bird on sweeping pinions came speeding from the foothills, and darted down into the rocky gully, which was about half a mile ahead of the juniors.

"Come on!" said Jimmy hurriedly.

"I haven't found the trail yet."

"Never mind the trail! Come on!"

"Look here—" roared Lovell.

"Don't you see the buzzards, you say?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver impatiently. "There's something, or somebody, dead in the bad lands ahead of us. Come on, I tell you!"

He rode on at a gallop, giving Arthur Edward Lovell no further heed. There was a fear in his heart that some mischance had happened to Trooper Bright, who had ridden away from the ranch so cheerily that morning.

Lovell stared after him.

"Look here, you fellows—" he said.

"Oh, come on, old chap, and give your chin a rest!" said Raby.

"It's possible that that steer has pegged out," said Lovell. "The buzzards would nose it out at once, of course. But I'd rather look for sign—"

"Look for it and be blowed!" said Newcome.

Raby and Newcome galloped on after Jimmy Silver, and Lovell, after expressing his feelings in an expressive snort, rode after them. Jimmy Silver had put Blazer to a gallop, and the horse's hoofs were rattling and clattering at a great rate over stony soil. Buzzard after buzzard was now dropping into the gully ahead, and Jimmy could hear the discordant cries of the obscene birds. He rode breathlessly into the birds of prey, gathering in clamorous quarrel over the carcass of a horse.

Jimmy Silver sprang down, and lashed round with his riding-whip, and the buzzards, with savage and raucous cries, scattered under his attack, reluctantly leaving their prey. They settled on rocks near at hand, fearful to venture nearer, but watching with greedy eyes

CHAPTER I.

The Redskins!

LOVELL and his companions came up clattering, and jumped from their horses. Jimmy was bending over the dead animal lying on the rocky ground. There was a bullet hole in the head of the dead horse, and already the carcass had been torn by the beaks of the birds of prey. Jimmy recognised the horse—a black with white patches, which Trooper Bright had ridden that morning from the ranch. But, to his great relief, there was no sign of the trooper himself at hand. It was only the body of a horse, not of a man, that the buzzards had been clamouring over.

"What—what's this?" exclaimed Lovell, staring at the dead horse. It was a steer that he had expected to find there.

"Bright's horse," said Jimmy shortly.

"Oh!" said Lovell. "Bright's taken a tumble, then?"

"It's been shot through the head."

"Phew! But where's the steer?"

"The what?"

"The steer whose trail we've been following all this time."

"We've been following this horse's trail, you say?" exclaimed Jimmy Silver impatiently.

Lovell jumped.

"This—this horse?"

"Yes, fathead! Now give us a rest."

Arthur Edward Lovell blinked at the slain horse and blinked at Jimmy Silver. The expression on his face would have made his chums choke at any other time. But the discovery of Trooper Bright's horse, shot dead, made them too serious to think about Lovell and his egregious mistakes. An enemy's hand had shot the horse down; and what had happened to the trooper?

"Then—then it was a horse's trail all the time!" stammered Lovell at last. But nobody heeded Lovell.

He blushed unseen, as it were.

Jimmy Silver looked about him with keen eyes. The stray cattle of which the juniors were in search were forgotten now. The fate of the trooper was a more important matter.

Close at hand Jimmy found Trooper Bright's carbine. It had been smashed by a heavy blow on a rock and tossed into a crevice. The lock was in fragments.

Jimmy picked it up.

"That was done to make it useless, and it was thrown away," he said. "Bright never did it, of course. He's been collared and disarmed. He was ambushed as he was riding through this gully, it's pretty clear, and his horse shot down from cover. Then they collared him before he could handle his carbine."

"They? Who?" said Newcome.

Jimmy's answer was direct.

"The bootleggers!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Lovell.

"It's lucky that Lovell hit on that trail, after all," said Jimmy quietly. "It's no use us looking for the stray steers; but never mind the steers now. We've got to help Trooper Bright out of a scrape—that's our duty. Hudson Smedley won't mind our letting the steers slide for that."

"You—you think he's still alive?" asked Raby.

"I'm sure of it. They could have shot him down as easily as shooting his horse; but they wouldn't have troubled to take the body away."

"Oh!" gasped Lovell.

"He's a prisoner," went on Jimmy Silver. "I dare say he was knocked out by falling on the rocks when his horse went down, and was collared without a fight. It's the bootleggers, of course—Jude Benker and Lebel, the half-breed—and perhaps more of the gang. This is only a short distance from the spot where their wagon was run down, and you know that Inspector Steel stayed in the bad lands to watch them; he believed that they had hidden their cargo of liquor before the wagon was overtaken. He was after the smuggled liquor. Trooper Bright came on here to join him."

"And instead of joining him he fell in with the bootleggers!" said Newcome.

"That's it. And they've got him."

"Then they've very likely got the inspector, too."

"I shouldn't wonder. He was watching them, to find out where they had hidden the liquor; and very likely they guessed and were watching him, too."

Raby looked round at the wild, solitary rocks, with clumps of pine and fir and straggling bush. Save for the croaking of the buzzards, the bad lands were silent in the blaze of the sun. But the juniors realised that every boulder, every patch of

hush, might give cover to a hidden, watching enemy.

"Blessed if I know how we're going to help them!" said Ruby. "If we ride back to the ranch for help, we shan't get there before dark."

"No time for that," said Jimmy Silver decidedly. "It's what we can do ourselves that counts."

"They've got hold of Trooper Bright and Inspector Steel," said Lovell. "Well, all we've got to do is to follow up their trail."

"It's not easy to pick up sign on these rocks."

"Leave it to me."

"What?"

"Leave it to me," said Lovell, while his comrades stared at him almost dazedly. "You know how good I am at a trail. I'll manage it all right."

"Well, my word!" murmured Newcome.

Evidently Arthur Edward was not discouraged by failure. Having picked up a horse's trail in mistake for that of a stray steer, he was prepared to distinguish himself again—doubtless with results equally good.

"Lovell, old man," said Jimmy after a pause, "be good and chuck it. This is a serious matter."

"That's why you'd better leave it to me," explained Lovell.

"For goodness' sake, old fellow, dry up!" said Jimmy, almost losing patience at last.

"Look here, Jimmy Silver—"

"Oh, rats!"

Leaving Lovell in a somewhat wrathful and excited frame of mind, Jimmy Silver proceeded to make his own investigations. At Rockwood Jimmy had been one of the best of the Boy Scouts, and he had picked up a great deal of practical knowledge from the cowboys since he had been on the Windy River Ranch. He needed it all now if he was to help the victims of the liquor smugglers. Somewhere in the bad lands, probably near at hand, were Jude Dunbar and the breed, with the cargo of liquor they were smuggling to the Redskins in the Blood Indian reserve farther north. And probably in the hands of the bootleggers were Trooper Bright and Inspector Steel, of the Canadian Mounted Police. Jimmy Silver hunted for sign which would indicate in what direction Trooper Bright had been taken by his captors. From the fact that the birds of prey had not yet devoured the

slain horse, he could calculate that it was not long since the attack on the trooper had been made; so the trail, if any, should have been fresh.

But sign was difficult to find on hard rocks, and for a long time Jimmy Silver hunted in vain. At length, at a little distance up the gully, he came on a fragment of cloth caught on a bush, with traces where two men, at least, perhaps three, had trampled through. He called back to his chums:

"This way!"

Beyond the bushes were rocks again, with no trace of a trail. But Jimmy Silver was hopeful now.

"They went in this direction, at least," he said.

"I don't feel so jolly sure of that," said Lovell, with a shake of the head.

"Well, we'll try this direction, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver mildly.

And the four juniors rode on up the gully, keeping their eyes well open on all sides. They had covered about half a mile, when Jimmy suddenly pulled in his horse.

"More sign?" asked Lovell sarcastically.

"Stop!" said Jimmy. "Listen!"

From somewhere ahead came a rumbling sound, echoing through the rocky ravines and gullies of the bad lands.

"Sounds like distant thunder," grunted Lovell. "I suppose we're not going to stop for a storm, are we?"

"It sounds like it," said Jimmy quietly, "but it isn't."

"What is it, then?"

"Hoofs," said Jimmy, "and at least twenty horse, I should say."

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Lovell.

"There's only two of the bootleggers, and even if they've got a gang about here, there wouldn't be twenty of the rotters."

"They're smuggling the liquor to the Blood Indians," said Jimmy. "I remember the inspector said that they wouldn't be likely to drive the wagon openly to the reservation. It's more likely that a party of the Redskins would come to meet them here in the bad lands and take the liquor away."

"Oh, you think they're Redskins?"

"I'm pretty sure of it."

"Well, they won't hurt us," said Lovell.

"The Indians in Alberta are all peaceful."

"Not if we came between them and

smuggled fire-water," said Jimmy Silver quietly.

"Oh!" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver bent his head and listened intently. The rocks were so full of echoes that it was difficult to "place" the sound of the trampling hoofs, growing louder every moment now. Beyond the gully that the juniors were following a rocky ridge rose against the blue sky, running north and south. As the trampling grew clearer Jimmy decided that the unseen horsemen were riding from the north, the rocky ridge hiding them from the sight of the juniors.

He signed to his chums to remain where they were—a sign rather unwillingly heeded by Lovell—and crept forward on foot. In a cleft of the rocks a tall pine-tree grew, and Jimmy Silver clambered actively up the tree to a height that enabled him to look over the ridge. He needed only one glance. That glance showed him a troop of Red Indians riding at a trot—twenty or twenty-five in number. They were not in war-paint, and so evidently not upon the warpath, and at any other time Jimmy Silver would not have hesitated to let the bucks see him, but he knew now that they were a party of the Bloods on their way to meet the bootleggers. And to come between a Redskin and his fire-water was about as safe as to come between a panther and his prey.

Jimmy slid back down the tree and rejoined his chums. The trampling of the Redskins' horses grew fainter beyond the ridge to the southward.

CHAPTER 3.

In Ruthless Hands!

"I GUESS we're all hunky now!"

Jude Bunker, the bony, lantern-jawed bootlegger, spoke in tones of satisfaction. His companion, the sullen, savage half-breed, nodded without speaking.

Jude Bunker stood under a clump of trees in the bad lands, looking to the north. The breed was seated on a rock near at hand chewing tobacco.

Behind the trees was a mass of irregularly piled rocks, in which a fissure opened. Beyond the fissure, which was nearly concealed by bush, was a cave, and in the cave

was stacked the contraband cargo of the bootleggers.

On the ground, bound hand and foot, lay two men, whom Jimmy Silver & Co. would have recognised as Inspector Steel and Trooper Bright, of the Canadian Mounted Police.

"All hunky and O.K.," continued Jude Bunker, blowing out a cloud of smoke from his pipe. "Leaping Elk will be here before sundown with his bucks, Lebel."

The half-breed nodded again.

"And then, I guess, we're going to clear," said Bunker. "The sooner we vacate the ranch, old pard, the better for our health. I guess there might be some more of the M.P.'s nosing along into the bad lands when Mr. Steel don't turn up at Mosquito again."

Lebel showed his teeth, brown with tobacco.

"And leave them to tell what has happened?" he asked, jerking a dusky thumb towards the two prisoners. "Do you think we should be safe in Canada afterwards?"

"I guess not," said Bunker thoughtfully, staring at the two prisoners.

"I tell you," said the half-breed, "they shall not live to hunt us down. We fooled them before, but they have seen the fire-water now, and their word is good enough to send us to prison. Are you thinking of getting over the border into the States and throwing up the game, then?"

Bunker shook his head.

"I guess not," he answered. "Bootlegging among the Reds is a paying game, breed, and I guess I ain't quitting."

Lebel rose from the boulder and drew a knife from his belt. There was no mercy in his dark, savage face as he stepped towards the prisoners.

"Then it is settled," he said. "If you are afraid to look on it, Jude Bunker, turn your back."

A revolver glittered in the hand of the bootlegger.

"Put up that knife, breed!"

He rapped out the order sharply.

Lebel swung round towards him, his black eyes glinting, the knife clutched in his hand.

"I tell you——" he hissed.

"Put it up or, by gum, I'll drop you in your tracks!" shouted Bunker angrily.

Suddenly the breed drove the knife back into the case in his belt.

"But they shall not live in betray us, all the same," he said sullenly.

"I guess, breed, that it's a serious matter to spill the juice of the Canadian Mounted Police," said Jude Bunker coolly. "Ain't that so, inspector?"

"I guess you'll find it so if you go that far," answered Inspector Steel quietly.

"Just so," assented Bunker. "Why, it's enough to bring all the Mounted Police in the North-West scurrying hyer to the bad lands to find out what's happened, and to get hold of Jude Bunker. What?"

"Sure!" said Steel.

"That breed is just an Injun savage, Mr. Steel," said Bunker, taking a seat on a rock near the prisoners and regarding them while he smoked and talked. "He's allers too mighty spy with that sticker of his. Why, what would our necks be worth, Mr. Steel, if you was found out up, or if you wasn't found at all, for that matter?"

"Very little, I guess."

"Promachy!" assented Bunker. "All the same, I guess that at this blessed minute you're thinking of getting your men from Mosquito and rounding us up."

"Correct!" said the Canadian inspector calmly.

"You wouldn't think of letting us rip, not if we offered you a stake in the game?" said Bunker.

"Not if you offered me all the profits of your raceality ten times over," said Steel.

"Just so!" assented Bunker. "Don't I know you. You can't bribe the Canadian Mounted, and if you stick one, as that breed wants to do, you have the whole b'iling on your trail, and they won't let up this side of Tophet, I guess. I reckon we can hand over the fire-water to Leaplog Elk and his bucks, inspector, and finger the dust they're handing out for it, and light out for the States before you can get your galoots arter us. But that means keeping clear of Canada and bootlegging arter, and that ain't our game, Mr. Steel."

The inspector did not answer. Trooper Bright watched the bootlegger's thin, hard face in silence. Neither of the Canadians had any hope of escaping alive from the hands of the bootleggers, and they wondered why Bunker had restrained the hand of the savage half-breed.

"You shouldn't have tutted in, Mr.

Steel," said Bunker. "If you'd gone back arter finding the wagon empty, you'd have been safe. You had to hang on and watch us and nose out where we'd hid the liquor. You've asked for it, Mr. Steel, and if you get it you've got yourself to thank. If we hadn't roped you in you'd have run us in, you would, and the same with your man hyer, what dropped into our hands as obliging as possible."

Trooper Bright knitted his brows.

"You're goin' back to Mosquito," went on Jude Bunker. "That's where you're goin'—back to Mosquito."

The breed uttered a fierce exclamation.

"Can it, man, can it!" said Bunker impatiently. "I tell you your sticker ain't wanted. They're going back to Mosquito by way of the Windy River."

Lebel stared at him.

"I guess accidents will happen in the bad lands, even to an inspector of the Canadian Police," said Bunker, with a savage grin. "We ain't far hyer from the head-waters of the Windy, inspector. When you float down as far as Mosquito they'll fish you out, and I reckon they'll figure it out that you tumbled into the water. Cause why, there won't be a mark on you to tell different."

Steel drew a deep, hard breath, and Trooper Bright started. The breed burst into a harsh chuckle.

"Savvy now?" asked Bunker, grinning at his companion in crime.

The breed nodded.

"Plenty savvy! Good!"

"I guess a good many galoots, riding careless in the bad lands, have taken a tumble," remarked Jude Bunker reflectively. "I guess it ain't nothing new for a careless galoot to pitch into a river in the bad lands and get drowned. And who's to guess that you was held under water with your hands tied till you was a gone coon, and then untied and set floating? I ask you that, Mr. Steel?"

Steel did not speak.

He comprehended now the dastardly scheme of the bootlegger for covering up his tracks. If either the inspector or the trooper escaped alive Jude Bunker's occupation was gone as a bootlegger, and the profits of the illicit liquor trade with the Indians were too great to be relinquished. And probably it was not the first time that

his rascally trade had driven the bootlegger to desperate deeds.

Two dead men would be found floating in the Windy River, with nothing to show that they had met with violence. Even before the bodies were found Jude Bunker and his associate would be gone. And even if foul play was suspected, there would be little to fix suspicion on Bunker; but it was not likely that his dastardly scheme would be even suspected. The bodies would not be the first that had been "found drowned" in the waters of the Windy River.

The sound of hoofbeats came echoing among the rocks, and Jude Bunker rose to his feet.

"The Indians, I guess!"

A few minutes later Leaping Elk and his band of braves came in sight. The crowd of Blood Indians came sweeping up to the rendezvous and halted. Leaping Elk alighted from his shaggy horse and saluted Jude Bunker gravely and courteously. It was evident that they were old acquaintances.

"The Leaping Elk is glad to see his white brother," said the Blood in English, and in the stately fashion of an Indian chief.

"And I guess I'm glad to see you, chief," said Jude Bunker, stepping out from the trees. "More'n glad, I guess. I ain't been on hanging on in this part of the country."

"My white brother has brought the fire-water?" said Leaping Elk, with an eagerness that could not be wholly hidden under the habitual gravity of a Redskin.

"Sure! I guess we're ready to trade," said Bunker.

"The Leaping Elk is glad."

Some of the Redskins glanced curiously at the two bound men lying under the trees, but they made no comment. For a considerable time Jude Bunker and Leaping Elk were engaged in talk, apparently settling the details of their "trade." Fur and other articles were unloaded from the Indian ponies, with little buckskin bags of gold-dust, painfully sought in the beds of mountain streams by the Indians, to be exchanged for the potent fire-water which they loved, and which the wise laws of Canada forbade them to taste. For the Redskin, however puncheon and law-abiding in these latter days, is restored at

once to all the irresponsible ferocity of his savage ancestors once the fiery spirit mounts to his brain. Jude Bunker's consignments of fire-water, if once landed safely in the Indian reserve, meant serious trouble to the Redskins in the Windy River section—a circumstance which did not trouble the hardened trafficker in poison in the least.

The bootleggers' wagon was at hand, and the larger articles were stacked in it—the gold-dust being stacked by Jude Bunker in his own pockets. Then the cases of liquor were carried out of the cave and loaded on the Indian ponies.

That transaction completed, Leaping Elk bade a grave adieu to his white brother, and the Bloods rode away to the northward in a state of great delight. That night, and on the morrow, there were to be great times in the Blood reservation—with, in all probability, a wild outbreak and bloodshed to follow.

Jude Bunker grinned a satisfied grin.

"I guess we're all hunky, breed," he said. "I calculate that we only want two more trips like this to set up as perky millionaires in the States, with a mansion on Fifth Avenue, and founding free libraries for common folk." He chuckled. "We're starting in the wagon at sundown, and afore then we've got to say good-bye to our friends byer."

"The sooner the better," growled the breed.

"You galoots ready to moony on?" asked Jude Bunker, with ferocious good humour.

The two bound men were lifted from the ground and thrown like sacks over a couple of horses. Jude Bunker led one and the half-breed the other, and they moved away, following the course of a ravine which led towards the upper waters of the Windy River, at a distance of a quarter of a mile. From the bad lands the Windy River, with many a rosh of rapids in its course, flowed down long miles to the plains, past the grass lands of the Windy River Ranch, and on to the town of Mosquito, and on beyond Mosquito to the great Red Deer River. Somewhere in its turbid course—doubtless at Mosquito, where there was a ford—the bodies would be found sooner or later—at all events, they would be found. There was no hope in the hearts of the two hapless Canadians as the bootleggers led the horses away towards the river.

CHAPTER II.

Turning the Tables!

"THERE they are!"

Keeping in the cover of the rocks, Jimmy Silver pointed.

"The Redskins!" said Lovell.

"And the bootleggers!" added Raby.

From the rocks the Rookwood juniors looked down on the scene. Jimmy Silver & Co. had followed on the track of the Redskin riders. They had no doubt that the Blood Indians were on their way to meet the liquor smugglers, and so they had followed, keeping at a safe distance behind the Redskins.

Now they were looking down on the scene, distant, but plain to the view in the clear Alberta air. They watched the two bootleggers, whom they recognised at once, in talk with the Indians, and saw the cases of liquor loaded on the horses.

"The awful rascals," said Raby. "No doubt now that they're smuggling fire-water to the Indians."

"I don't see anything of Bright," said Lovell.

"It's pretty certain that the bootleggers have got him," said Jimmy Silver. "But we can't chip in now. Those Redskins wouldn't make more than a mouthful of us. Keep in cover."

The Rookwood juniors watched. The Redskins were evidently making preparations for departure.

They started at last, and came riding up the ravine, directly towards the spot where the juniors stood. Lovell uttered a startled exclamation.

"They're coming this way, Jimmy!"

"Naturally! They're going back to the reserve," said Jimmy Silver. "They've got the fire-water now and they're going home with it. When they've gone we may get a chance at the bootleggers."

"If the Redskins don't drop on us and scalp us," suggested Lovell.

"Keep in cover, all!"

The juniors backed their horses among the rocks, and crouched in cover as the Redskin party came riding up the ravine. Leaping Elk and his braves rode by with a thunder of hoofs, never dreaming that four anxious schoolboys were crouching in the rocks on the rugged side of the ravine, waiting with beating hearts for them to pass.

The Blood Indians clattered by, and

turned along the bank of the Windy River and disappeared.

The clattering hoofbeats died away in the distance, and Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath of relief.

"Thank goodness they're gone!" he said.

"Yes, rather!" said Raby. "But what's the game now, Jimmy?"

"I think—" began Lovell.

"Never mind what you think, old chap," said Raby affably. "Let's hear what Jimmy thinks."

"Look here," started Lovell, "my idea is that Jimmy is on the wrong track. There's the bootleggers, but I don't believe that Trooper Bright is there, and—"

Jimmy caught his arm.

"Look!" he said quietly.

"Oh!" ejaculated Lovell.

Jude Bunker and Lebel, the half-breed, appeared from the trees, with the two prisoners in their grasp, and placed them on the horses. Even at that distance, in the clear light, the chums of Rookwood could recognise the two bound men.

"Trooper Bright and Inspector Steel," said Jimmy Silver. "Do you think they're there now, Lovell?"

"H'm!" said Lovell, taken quite aback.

"What on earth are they up to?" asked Newcome, puzzled. "They're taking them somewhere. They're coming this way, by Jove!"

Jimmy Silver looked perplexed.

"They're not breaking camp," he said.

"You can see they're leaving the wagon—there it is, backed up near the trees. They're taking the prisoners away somewhere."

"To the Indian reserve, perhaps," said Raby.

Jimmy shook his head.

"If they were handing them over to the Indians, they'd have done it before the Redskins left, I should think," he answered. "But certainly they're going in the same direction."

"Blamed if I catch on!" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver had to admit that he did not catch on, any more than Lovell. Jude Bunker and Lebel were loading the horses up the ravine, with the prisoners flung on the animals' backs. What their intention was Jimmy Silver & Co. could not guess.

"Anyhow, they're coming this way, and the Redskins are gone," said Jimmy Silver. "I fancy this is where we chip in."

"You've got your revolver?" asked Lovell.

"Yes, rather!"

"Hand it to me, then," said Lovell quickly. "I'm unarmed, you know. You can get hold of a rock."

"Farhead!"

"Look here, Jimmy Silver——"

"Dry up, old chap!" Jimmy Silver looked out from the cover of the rocks, taking his revolver from his hip-pocket as he did so.

Up the middle of the ravine Bunker and the breed were leading the laden horses. Their way led towards the river; but unless they were following the Bloods to the Indian reservation, the juniors could not guess what their destination was. But the band of Redskins were out of sight and out of hearing now, and it was clear that if an attempt was to be made to rescue the prisoners, now or never was the time.

Jimmy Silver examined his revolver carefully with a grave face. He knew that he would need it soon.

His comrades were only armed with riding-whips. Both the bootleggers were armed, and a struggle was likely to be a desperate one.

The surprise would be on the side of the Rockwood juniors, however, for it was plain that Jude Bunker had not the remotest suspicion that enemies were at hand in the lonely wilderness of the bad lands. And Jimmy Silver & Co. indeed, would not have been at hand, had not their search for the stray cattle brought them so far from the Windy River Ranch that day.

"We've got to tackle them," said Jimmy Silver in a low voice. "I don't know what their game is now, but this is our only chance. If we let them pass we may as well chuck up."

"We're ready!" muttered Raby, his grasp closing on a heavy, jagged chunk of rock.

"You give the word, Jimmy," said Newcome quietly, and he also grasped a fragment of rock to use as a weapon.

Lovell had his riding-whip in hand. Jimmy Silver peered out from the screening rocks and bushes. The bootleggers, leading the horses, were almost abreast of the spot where the juniors crouched in cover. In the distance the murmur could be heard of the Windy River, rushing down in a torrent to the lower plains.

Jimmy sat his lips.

"I could not both the brutes from ever before they knew what had hit them," he muttered. "Only—only I can't do it. I'll give them a chance!"

He waited a few moments more. Then suddenly he rose into full view, revolver in hand, the barrel levelled at the bootleggers.

"Hands up!" rapped out Jimmy Silver.

There was a yell of surprise from the bootleggers. They stared in blank astonishment at the Rockwood juniors.

"Them kids agin!" gasped Jude Bunker.

"Hands up!" shouted Jimmy Silver.

"I guess not!" snarled the bootlegger.

He was already grasping at a revolver in his belt. Jimmy Silver did not hesitate longer. Life was at stake now.

Crack!

The ring of the revolver was followed by a fearful yell from Jude Bunker. He rolled over, his own weapon clattering on the rocky ground.

Jimmy Silver dropped back into cover only just in time. There was a six-shooter in the half-breed's hand now, and the rascal fired point-blank. The bullet whizzed over Jimmy Silver's head as he dropped back.

Through an opening in the bush that screened him Jimmy Silver fired again.

The half-breed fired at the same moment into the bush, and the bullet tore away the leaves and almost grazed Jimmy's cheek, so close did it come. But Jimmy Silver's bullet had not missed.

With a groan the breed dropped.

He raised himself on one knee, his dusky face was drawn and white, and, with a terrible effort, took aim and fired again. But the bullet flew wide, splattering on the rocks a dozen yards away; and the wounded breed, his strength exhausted, sank back on the ground, the revolver falling from his hand.

"Come on!" muttered Jimmy.

He ran forward, his revolver ready for another shot if it was needed. But it was not needed.

The half-breed was unconscious, and Jude Bunker was groaning and writhing in the agony of a broken arm.

"We seem to be dead in this act!" growled Lovell.

The conflict was over.

The two startled horses were rearing and whinnying. Jimmy Silver and Raby caught at their bridles, and the two bound men were lifted off and lowered to the ground.

Lovell opened his knife and cut through the bonds that fastened their limbs.

"All wrong, Mr. Steel," he grinned.

The inspector rose rather painfully to his feet. The bonds had been upon his muscular limbs a long time, and he was stiff and numb. But his bronzed face was full of satisfaction.

"I guess you kids take the cake," said Trooper Bright. "I reckon we'd be glad of you 'uns in the Canadian Mounted, for a fact."

"I guess so," said the inspector, with a smile. "Better tie the hands of those scallywags, Silver, before they can do any more harm."

"Right-ho!" said Jimmy.

He followed the inspector's directions, while Mr. Steel chafed his numb limbs. The half-breed's dark eyes opened, and he glared at his captors like a savage animal caught in the toils, but he spoke no word. Jude Bunker was still groaning dismally.

"I guess it's a clean rope-in," said the inspector. He stepped towards Bunker and examined his wound, the bootlegger glaring at him as he groaned. "You've slipped up on it this time, you see, Bunker. There won't be any body found floating in the Windy River at Mosquito feed, after all."

Bunker only groaned. His game was up, with a vengeance, and he was in despair.

"What's that?" asked Jimmy Silver.

The inspector smiled grimly.

"I guess you've saved our lives," he answered.

"You don't mean—"

"That was the game—to put us under water and send us floating down the Windy River," said Mr. Steel. "And I guess the game would have been played out to a finish if you 'uns hadn't blown in—I can't guess how."

"The awful villains!" exclaimed Jimmy, aghast. "We couldn't guess what their game was, but—"

"Well, that was the game; but they've slipped up on it, thanks to you," said Inspector Steel. "It's unlucky that the fire-water has been handed over to the blind; but I guess we're pretty pleased to save our lives."

"I guess so, for sure!" said Trooper Bright.

"But how the thunder—"

"We were looking for strays from the ranch," explained Jimmy Silver, with a

smile. "Then Lovell came on Mr. Bright's trail, and we followed on, and so—"

"I guess I'm glad you did," said the inspector. "But why did you follow Bright's trail?"

Lovell blushed.

His comrades grinned. They could not help it.

"That was Lovell's idea," explained Ruby, with a chuckle. "Lovell thought it was the trail of a stray steer."

"Eh? Bright wasn't riding a cow, I suppose!" exclaimed the inspector in astonishment.

"Ha, ha! No. But Lovell doesn't mind a little thing like that when he's picking up a trail, do you, old man?"

"Oh, rats!" growled Lovell, whose face was crimson. "Anyhow, it's jolly lucky we did follow the trail, as it turns out, even if I did take it for a cattle-trail."

"I guess there's no doubt about that," said Inspector Steel, pouring oil on the troubled waters as it were. "Whatever brought you 'uns here, you came in mighty useful. I guess we two would have been gone home by this time else. Now, I reckon we'll borrow that wagon to get these two scoundrels to Mosquito, where we can get a doctor to them."

The two wounded men were put upon the horses and led back to the bootleggers' camp. Save for the dismal groans of Jude Bunker they were silent. Their defeat was overwhelming. They were in the hands of justice, to meet a proved charge of fire-water smuggling, as well as in answer for their attack on the inspector and the trooper of the Canadian Mounted Police. The bootleggers' game was up in the Windy River section of Alberta with a vengeance.

Under the setting sun the wagon rumbled away over the rocky soil of the bad lands, with Trooper Bright driving, and the inspector sitting inside, watching two wounded men, his prisoners. Four cheerful youths rode by the wagon, a triumphant escort. The stray cattle from the Windy River Ranch were still astray; but Jimmy Silver & Co. gave them no thought now, and they knew that Hudson Smadley would not give them a thought when he learned that the bootleggers had been rounded up.

The sun disappeared and the moon came up, and the wagon still rumbled on, over grassy plains now, heading for the Windy

River Ranch, on the way to Mosquito town. It was a late hour in the night—or, rather, early hour in the morning—when the ranch was reached, and the Windy River cow-punchers turned out of the bunk-house, and Baldy, the cook, out of the cookhouse, and Hudson Smedley came down, half dressed, to learn what was "on." And when they learned there was a buzz of excitement and jubilation.

"Got the scallywags!" said Pete Peters, staring into the wagon. "Got 'em, by gum! You kids have anything to do with it?"

"Oh, we just looked on!" said Jimmy Silver, with a smile.

"You haven't found the strays?"

"Nonsense! We've been so busy rounding up bootleggers," said Jimmy, laughing. "We'll look for the strays again to-morrow."

And as the wagon rumbled on its way to Mosquito, the Fistical Four of Rockwood went into the ranch and went to bed. By dawn the bootleggers were safe in the timber calaboose at Mosquito, with Doc Jones to look after their wounds. And Jimmy Silver was glad to hear, later, that the doc pronounced that they were in no danger, but would be fit to stand their trial at Calgary in a couple of weeks.

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not go out to hunt for the "strays" the next day. Hudson Smedley had them not to ride out of sight of the ranch-house. The news that the cargo of fire-water had reached the Indian reserve made the rancher very grave.

"I guess that means trouble with the bucks," he told the juniors. "Ten to one they'll break out of the reserve hunting for trouble. You keep to the ranch."

And Jimmy Silver & Co. wondered whether to their other experiences of the Canadian West was to be added the rarer experience of seeing Red Indians on the warpath. They were soon to know.

CHAPTER 11.

Just Like Lovell!

"ROT!" That was Lovell's opinion. Arthur Edward Lovell never hesitated to express his opinion; opposition only made him express it with additional emphasis.

"You see——" said Jimmy Silver.

"I don't see!" interrupted Lovell.

"You understand——" said Baby.

"I don't!" contradicted Lovell.

"Well, that's about right," remarked Newcome thoughtfully. "Lovell never does understand anything."

Short from Lovell!

"The fact is——" recommenced Jimmy Silver.

"My dear chap, I know what the facts are," said Lovell. "Somebody has been smuggling fire-water to the Indians on the reservation, fifty miles from here, and a lot of people think there is going to be trouble with the Redskins. Well, I don't."

"You know all about it, of course!" murmured Baby.

"I suppose that's meant for sarc," said Lovell. "But the fact is, I do. It's all rot."

"Look here——"

"Mr. Smedley wants to keep us hanging about in sight of the ranch," said Lovell warmly. "Way, it's just like being kept in House bounds at Rockwood. We didn't come to Canada to be kept in bounds."

"We're bound to respect Mr. Smedley's wishes, as his guests, I should think," said Newcome.

"Yes, that's all right. I respect him no end, of course," said Lovell. "He's a splendid chap. But he thinks we can't take care of ourselves, and that's where he's off-side. The cowpunchers go out on the plains just the same as usual."

"They take their guns now, since there's been rumours of trouble with the Blood Indians," said Jimmy Silver.

"Well, we'd take guns, too, if Mr. Smedley would hand them out," said Lovell. "He won't."

"You'd be jolly dangerous with a gun," remarked Baby. "Not to the Indians, though!"

"Look here——" roared Lovell.

"Peace, my infants—peace!" said Jimmy Silver. "The fact is, Lovell, we've got to toe the line. I'd like a gallop as much as you would, and I'm no more afraid of Leaping Elk and his jolly old warriors than you are. But duty's duty."

"Rot!"

"We're not going out of sight of the ranch, just as Hudson Smedley told us," said Jimmy Silver decidedly. "We're bound to play up."

"Rubbish!"

Arthur Edward Lovell was growing more

and more emphatic. He was faked by restraint, and he did not like it; and he never made any secret of his likes and dislikes. He was, indeed, rather given to shouting them from the house-tops.

The National Foot of Rockwood had ridden out on the prairie that sunny morning, north of the Windy River Ranch. Far in the distance over the rolling plains, the tip of a chimney-stalk could be seen. The juniors were out out of sight of the ranch—not quite out of sight. But they were sailing very near the wind, so to speak. And so Jimmy Silver had ridden in Blazer.

"Hooting round the blessed old ranch like schoolboys kept within bounds!" snorted Lovell.

"Well, we are schoolboys, you know," said Jimmy Silver mildly.

"Boh!"

"What I like about Lovell," said Baby, "is his polished style in argument. Beats Chesterfield hollow."

"Shitler Dick's at Lone Pine," said Lovell. "He's all on his own, five miles from the ranch. That doesn't look as if they really expected a Redskin raid."

"Well, the cattle have to be looked after," said Jimmy Silver. "Mr. Smedley doesn't want us to run the same risks as the cowboys."

"Why shouldn't we?"

"No, reason at all, excepting that we're under orders. We'll trot along home now, shall we?"

"Let's!" said Newcome.

"I suppose if I made a break you'd feel it your dashed duty to yank me back to the ranch—what?" asked Lovell.

"Yes, old chap—by your ears, if necessary," said Jimmy affably. "Luckily, they're big enough to give a good hold."

"You silly ass!"

"Thanks! Shall we start?"

"I'll give you a chance," said Lovell.

"How's that?"

"Like this!"

Arthur Edward Lovell suddenly put spurs to his horse, and dashed away to the northward, where the far horizon was shut in by the rugged rocks of the "bad lands."

"You silly chump!" roared Jimmy Silver. "Come back!"

Lovell laughed, and rode on. Jimmy Silver stared after him in great consternation, and then looked at his chums. Arthur Edward Lovell was evidently in a wilful mood.

"The silly owl!" exclaimed Baby.

"After him!" asked Newcome.

Jimmy Silver hesitated a moment or two. To follow Lovell was to ride completely out of sight of the ranch, and Jimmy was anxious not to disregard Hudson Smedley's commands. Whether the Indian outbreak would ever materialize Jimmy could not know; but he knew that the rancher's orders should be respected, irksome or not.

But if there was danger for the juniors on the open prairie, evidently Lovell could not be left to ride into it alone. Jimmy Silver loosened the lasso that hung from his saddle.

"After him," he said. "I'll jolly well rope him in, and load him back at the end of the lasso!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good egg!"

And the three juniors rode on the track of Lovell, who was heading at a break-neck gallop for the bad lands, obviously determined to have the ride he had set his wilful mind upon, and to give his comrades a long chase before they came up with him.

CHAPTER II.

Laughing Wolf in Luck!

LAUGHING WOLF pricked up his ears and listened.

He was alone in a rocky ravine in the bad lands. Round him were rocks and sandy ridges, with here and there a clump of pines and fir; overhead, the blue summer sky of Alberta. His horse was drinking at a pool in the rocks; and Laughing Wolf, seated on a boulder, was sharpening a knife—already keen—on a stone.

There were daubs of red ochre on Laughing Wolf's coppery face. The wolf's head depicted on his bare, brawny chest was newly painted. Laughing Wolf, a young brave of the Blood tribe, was on the war-path.

It was long since the Bloods had taken the war-trail. The days were long over when hordes of painted warriors had swept down on the settlements—over, and almost forgotten.

When the young braves, ignorant of the white man's power, showed signs of impatient restiveness, the sage old chiefs knew how to keep them in check. In North-Western Alberta, an Indian rising was the last thing the ranchers and lumbermen would have thought of.

And an Indian rising on a large scale was never likely to come. But for once the authority of Leaping Elk, the great chief of the Little Blood Reserve, had been set at naught. A smuggled cargo of fire-water had reached the Indian reservation, and the young men of the tribe were out of hand.

Under the influence of the potent fire-water, the war-dances had been danced, and the buried hatchet dug up. Leaping Elk and the other old chiefs remained in the lodge, knowing full well that the outbreak would be followed by stern measures which the red men could not possibly resist. But a crowd of young braves, reckless of consequences, had ridden out of the reserve, and already cattle had been run off from outlying ranches, and the crack of rifles had been heard along the valley of the Windy River.

Laughing Wolf was on the trail of his first scalp. For days, from the rocks of the bad lands, he had watched the plains for a wandering cowpuncher, but so far he had watched in vain. His scalping-knife, keen as a razor, was still untailed. No gory trophy was suspended from his belt, to be shown off before the squaws in the tepees of the Bluffs.

And now, as he roamed in the ravine, the sound of galloping hoofs came to his sharp ears; and he listened intently, with an expression on his face not unlike that of the animal from which he derived his name.

Gallop, gallop!

A rider, riding fast, had entered the bad lands from the prairie, and was galloping up the rocky ravine in which Laughing Wolf sat sharpening his scalping-knife.

The young Indian rose to his feet.

His black eyes, keen as an eagle's, swept round him searchingly. But the rider was not yet in sight.

Laughing Wolf slipped to his horse and jerked loose the raw hide lariat. Then he drew the horse out of sight amid a stack of rugged rocks.

Silent as a panther, keen as a wolf, the Blood watched from the rocks.

The hoof-beats were drawing closer, louder; the horseman was coming up the rugged ravine, as yet hidden by the irregular rocks and jutting pines. But unless he stopped, he had to pass within a lance-cast of the Indian's hiding-place.

Laughing Wolf watched, his eyes glittering.

Gallop, gallop!

The Blood's eyes blazed, as the rider came in sight. It was not a cowpuncher, as he had expected—or if so, it was the youngest one Laughing Wolf had ever seen. It was, in point of fact, Arthur Edward Lovell.

Lovell rode on gaily, utterly unsuspecting of danger in his path. He never dreamed that a pair of keen black eyes, with a savage glitter in them, watched him as he came; that a sinewy arm was preparing to hurl the lasso. Laughing Wolf had no fears, for Lovell would probably have been shot dead on sight. As it was, he rode on carelessly into the range of the rope.

Whiz!

What happened next, Lovell hardly knew.

The clutch of the lasso was so sudden that he was plucked out of the saddle before he could realise what was happening.

He came down on the hard ground with a crash, dazed by the fall, and his startled horse went careering up the ravine at full gallop.

"Oh!" gasped Lovell.

For a moment or two he did not move. He was almost stunned by the sudden shock.

Then, as he sat up dazedly, he sighed the Indian.

Laughing Wolf was coming down the rocks, the rope gripped in his left hand, and something that shone and glittered in his right.

Lovell stared at him blankly.

The war-paint on the Redskin's face, the savage glare in his eyes, the drawn knife, told their own tale. Lovell had jeered at the Indian danger, but he realised now, with a terrible shock, that it was real, and that it was fearfully close.

He staggered up.

A drag on the lasso sent him whirling again, and he crashed down. The Indian, fleet as a deer, ran towards the sprawling schoolboy.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

Laughing Wolf was only a few yards from Lovell, when the clatter of another horse's hoofs on the rocky soil caught his ears. A second horseman was following the first.

For a moment the Indian hesitated.

The pursuing horsemen were coming on fast; he might burst into view at any second.

It behoved Laughing Wolf to get on his

guard against a second enemy. But the temptation of the scalp was too strong for him. For three days Laughing Wolf had watched for his chance, and now his chance had come. The Paleface lay at his mercy.

Laughing Wolf gripped his knife and rushed on the fallen schoolboy, his yell ringing among the rocks as he did so.

Lovell strove to rise, but the grasp of the Indian was upon him, and he was forced down again.

"Oh, crumbs!" panted Lovell, his eyes dilating, as the coppery, painted face crouched over him, and the scalping-knife glinted in the sun.

He made a frantic clutch at the Indian, and caught his wrist. Laughing Wolf showed his teeth in a snarl, and dragged at his right arm to free it. He was stronger than Lovell—twice as strong—but desperation lent Lovell strength. He knew that if the Indian's arm were freed, the knife would be in his heart the next moment.

He held on desperately, wildly, shouting hoarsely, hardly conscious that he was doing so.

Clatter, clatter, clatter!

Horses' hoofs crashed on the rocks—closer and closer! But the Redskin tore his arm loose at last, and the bright blade flashed as it rose in the air, and Lovell, with a groan, closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 12.

Hunted on the Frontier.

JIMMY SILVER dashed up the rocky ravine at a gallop. He knew that he was close behind Lovell. Blazer had covered the ground in great style, and Itaby and Newcome were left behind. Lovell had ridden as far as the bad lands, but Jimmy was sure of running him down before he had penetrated very far into the broken country. Jimmy had his lasso in hand, being quite determined to rope in his headstrong chum, and lead him back to the ranch, as a lesson to him. And then suddenly, as he came round a bend in the winding ravine, Jimmy Silver caught sight of his chum, on his back on the rocks, struggling in the grasp of the Blood Indian.

It was fortunate for Lovell that Jimmy Silver did not lose his presence of mind at that startling sight.

He came on at a frantic gallop, and his

lasso flew, uncoiling as it sailed through the air.

It was at that moment that Laughing Wolf freed his hand, and drew back the knife for the death-thrust.

The cast was too hurried to be successful; Jimmy's only thought had been to stop that thrust, and in that he succeeded. The whirling rope struck the Indian, and he started under the shock. The drive of the knife came down, but it missed Lovell by two or three inches, and the blade snapped on the rocks beside him.

Laughing Wolf leaped to his feet.

He cut aside the snapped knife, and jerked the tomahawk from his belt. But Jimmy Silver, at full gallop, was right upon him now, and Blazer crashed into the Indian.

Laughing Wolf was hurled away sprawling on the rocks. He would have been up again in a moment, but Jimmy Silver did not give him time. It was not a moment for mercy. Before the Redskin could gain his feet, Blazer's hoofs were trampling him down. Blazer had been a savage backslider in his time, and Laughing Wolf was not the first man he had trampled. The heavy hoofs crashed on the Indian as Jimmy Silver rode him down, and the Blood yelled wildly and crumpled up under the attack.

Lovell dragged himself to his feet, dazed dizzy, and hardly knowing whether he was alive or dead.

Like a fellow in a dream, he looked on at the terrible scene, of the sprawling Indian yelling and struggling under Blazer's deadly hoofs.

The struggle was brief.

Laughing Wolf lay on the rocks with broken limbs, senseless; and Jimmy Silver, with a white, set face, backed his horse away.

"Good heavens!" breathed Lovell, pale as chalk. "Good heavens!" He turned his shuddering gaze away from the trampled Indian.

Jimmy Silver cast a quick, anxious glance around.

His only thought had been to save Lovell. He did not know yet whether Laughing Wolf was the only foe he had to face. But the ravine was still and silent—no fierce war-whoops swept the echoes, no painted face showed glaring among the rocks.

"Lovell, you dummy!" Jimmy panted. "There's your horse!"

"I—I don't know!" stammered Lovell. Jimmy hurriedly dismounted and coiled his lasso. He avoided looking at the wretched Redskin, stretched senseless on the rocky ground.

"The—the horse ran on, I think," said Lovell, staring up the ravine. "I—I was lassoed, Jimmy!"

"I can see that."

"Thank goodness you came!" Lovell shivered. "I—I was nearly—nearly—"

"You've seen no more of them?"

"Only that one. He was hiding in the rocks when I came by. I—I never saw him till he was on me."

There was a sound of galloping hoofs. Raby and Newcome were riding into the bad lands.

"We've got to get out of this," said Jimmy Silver. "Goodness knows how many of the brutes we may run into if we go after your horse. You'd better mount behind me."

"But the horse——"

"Never mind the horse. Better lose the horse than lose your scalp," said Jimmy Silver tersely.

Lovell glanced at the senseless Redskin.

"I—I suppose we—we've got to leave him like that?" He shuddered. "He tried to kill me, but——"

"The rocks may be swarming with them," snapped Jimmy. "Get up behind me on Blazer."

"All right!" said Lovell, with unaccustomed meekness.

He mounted behind Jimmy Silver. It went against the grain with Jimmy to leave Laughing Wolf as he lay, but there was no time for delay. At every moment Jimmy Silver expected to hear the war-whoop of the Bloods ringing out over the bad lands.

He wheeled his horse to ride back to the plains, when Raby and Newcome came galloping up.

They reined in, with exclamations of horror, at the sight of the Indian.

"What's happened?" panted Raby.

"That haai!" said Jimmy Silver, with a nod towards the Blood. "Let's get back to the ranch before we get a hornet's nest round us."

"That's, Lovell——"

"Come on!"

The juniors lost no time. As they rode away there was a clinking of hoofs behind

them, and Jimmy Silver jerked the revolver from his holster, and glanced round anxiously. But it was only Laughing Wolf's horse emerging from its hiding-place and trotting back to the pool. Jimmy rode on.

Even Lovell had no objection to offer to getting back to the Windy River Ranch in the shortest possible space of time. But the return to the ranch was not so easy as Jimmy Silver had hoped. Laughing Wolf was not the only "back" of the Blood tribe abroad that day.

The juniors rode out of the bad lands, and the grassy prairie was under the galloping hoofs. And then suddenly Jimmy drew rein.

Ahead of the juniors, on the open prairie, feathered head-dresses and bright spear-points flashed in the sun.

"Halt!" panted Jimmy.

He sat in the saddle and scanned the anatomy. There were six of the Indians, and they were between the juniors and the ranch. The half-dozen Bloods were riding across the path the juniors were following. But the discovery was mutual, and the Redskins turned their horses at once towards Jimmy Silver & Co.

"We're cut off from the ranch," muttered Newcome.

"Make a dash for it," said Lovell. "We may get through."

"We should not get through alive," snapped Jimmy Silver. "They're heading for us now, and they mean business, the same as that brute in the bad lands!"

"What are we going to do, then?" muttered Raby. "We can't turn back—we may ride into a whole horde of them, now they're out of the reservation."

Jimmy Silver thought hard.

"Make for Lone Pine," he said, after a moment or two. "If we get there first we can hold them off till help comes. Skitter Dick will be there, too."

"But——" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver did not heed. He wheeled his horse to the left and put Blazer to the gallop. Raby and Newcome followed fast.

There was a yell from the Bloods, which reached the ears of the juniors, distant as the Indians were as yet. On their wild, shaggy ponies the Redskins were riding hard. To reach Lone Pine Jimmy Silver & Co. had to turn almost at right angles to their previous course, which gave the pursuers an advantage. The nodding

feathers and gleaming spears drew closer as the bloodwood juniors rode.

Crack, crack!

One or two of the Bloods, at least, had firearms. A bullet knocked up the soil within a yard of Blazer's forefeet.

Jimmy Silver set his teeth and spurred on. Blazer, double-loaded as he was, easily kept pace with Raby's and Newcome's horses. The grass seemed to fly under the galloping hoofs.

Long Pine came in sight at last—a tall, solitary pine, with the wooden stockman's hut at its foot. The hut was strongly built. It had been put up in the old days when Indian raids were not so rare. If Skitter Dick was not there the door would be on the latch, Jimmy Silver knew. Once inside the hut there was a chance of holding off the Indians till help could come—at least, it would be a respite. And if the Skitter was there, he would have his rifle.

But Skitter Dick was out on the plains—Jimmy Silver soon knew that. Had the ranchman been in the hut he would have been drawn out by the sight of the fleeing schoolboys with the Redskins galloping in pursuit.

Faster and faster Jimmy spurred on, and Blazer played up gallantly. The Bloods were still at a distance when the Fustled Four of Redwood dashed up to the hut.

CHAPTER 14.

Rescued by the Reds!

JIMMY SILVER sprang to the ground. The door of the stockman's hut was closed, but it opened to his hand. The juniors crowded inside.

"The horses!" panted Lorell.

"Bring them in!"

Blazer had followed his master in. Raby and Newcome drew their steeds into the hut after him.

"Bar the window!" panted Jimmy.

He slammed the door shut and felt for the bar. There was a clatter of hoofs outside, and a wild yell from the Bloods. They were on the scene now.

Crash!

A rifle-butt crashed on the stout pine-wood door, as Jimmy Silver, with furious haste, jammed the bar into place. The next moment there was a steady pressure on the door from two or three brawny shoulders. But the solid wooden bar, in iron

sockets, held. And Jimmy stooped and placed the lower bar in position.

Raby had jammed the shutter over the window, and Newcome barred it as he held it shut.

For the moment the juniors were safe, but it had been tough and gay. Through a crack in the wooden shutter a wild, glaring eye looked into the dusky hut.

Jimmy Silver put his revolver to the slit, and the eye was withdrawn instantly.

There was a galloping outside—an innocent thunder of hoofs. The Indians rode round and round the hut, yelling furiously. The wild yells and howls of the braves rang through the hut, almost chilling the blood of the schoolboys within.

"If they get at us!" breathed Raby.

"They're trying to rattle our nerves," said Jimmy Silver quietly. "So long as they do nothing but yell we're all right. They won't frighten us with yelling."

The galloping and yelling stopped at last, and the juniors heard the Redskins gather outside the door. There was a murmur of voices, and they heard muttered words in the Blood dialect—orange and incomprehensible to their ears.

Then there came a knock at the door. A voice called to the juniors in English:

"Let my white brothers listen to the voice of Running Water."

"Go it!" shouted Jimmy Silver.

"What do you little white brothers fear?" went on the Blood, softening the harshness of his voice and speaking in friendly tones. "The young men of the Blood tribes are on a visit to the ranch, and they think of no harm to the Palefaces. Let my white brothers open the door of their house, and smoke the pipe of peace with the Bloods."

"I don't think," said Jimmy Silver, almost laughing at the impudence of the request.

"Running Water does not understand."

"We are not opening the door."

"Running Water and his young men are the friends of the Palefaces," said the Blood. "Let us smoke together in peace."

"Yes, with the door shut," said Jimmy Silver.

"The little white man does not trust his red brother."

"Not an inch," answered Jimmy Silver.

"No jolly fun!" said Raby. "The man must be a silly one to think he can take us in like that."



Round and round the Redskins galloped, their blood-curdling yells echoing across the prairie. Jimmy Silver & Co. lay crouched beside the horse with Skitter Dick, trying vainly to hit the swiftly moving horsemen!

"Clear off, you animals!" shouted Lovell.

There was a muttering again in the Indian dialect. Probably Running Water had not expected his trickery to succeed. At all events, he knew now that the door would not be opened.

"Hallo, they're going!" exclaimed Lovell.

There was a trampling of hoofs.

From the cracks in the timber the juniors were able to see the Blood warriors remount their horses and ride away.

They swept off at a gallop to the west, and then, turning by the corral fence, vanished from sight.

"Thank goodness!" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver did not speak. He did not believe for a moment that the Bloods were gone.

"We'll give 'em time to clear," said Lovell. "With a good start, we can get back to the ranch, even if the brutes get after us again."

"I fancy we shouldn't get much of a start," said Jimmy dryly.

"Why not? They're gone!"

"They're not gone."

"Fathead!" said Lovell. "They're half a mile away already, I should say."

"I should say about fifty yards," answered Jimmy.

"You can't hear their horses now."

"Because they halted as soon as they were under cover of the corral fence," said Jimmy. "They've not gone."

"Oh, rot!" said Lovell.

Arthur Edward put his eye to a crack and stared out on the plain before the hut. The corral fence, of pine stakes and wire, stretched away to a good distance.

"You think they've turned the corner of the corral and stopped there, Jimmy?"

"Yes."

"We should see them over the fence."

"Not if they dismounted."

"It's a trick, of course," said Ruby, with a nod. "They want us to think that the coast is clear, and to tempt us to come out."

"That's it," agreed Newcome.

"Well, I don't think so," said Lovell, with a shake of the head. "My idea is that they're gone, Jimmy. How long do you think we're going to stick in this hut with the horses? We can't stay here for ever."

"We're going to stick here till it's safe to go out," said Jimmy Silver quietly.

"I fancy it's safe now, old man."

"You can fancy what you like, but we're sticking under cover, Lovell. For goodness' sake, don't start playing the goat again."

Lovell grunted.

There was absolute silence from the plains outside; by eye or ear no one could have told that there were human beings within miles of the stockman's hut. That half a dozen watchful Redskins, with crouching horses, were bunched behind the turn of the corral fence Lovell could not believe. He believed that Running Water and his men had given the juniors up now that the party had taken shelter, and were off on some other trail.

"Well, hang on if you like, Jimmy," said Lovell at last. "Tain't very nice in here with three dashed horses, I can tell you."

"Better than being scalped," remarked Newcome.

"Oh, rot!"

"There's grub in the place," said Ruby.

"The cowpuncher who's stationed here always has grub enough for a week. Let's get some lunch."

"Good egg!"

"I say, suppose Skitter Dick comes back while these Redskins are around!" exclaimed Newcome suddenly. "He may drop in any minute."

"He's bound to spot them," said Jimmy. "All the cowpunchers are on their guard now, and armed. We can't see the Redskins from here. But Skitter Dick would spot them from the prairie."

"Unless he comes back after dark, and they're still here," suggested Newcome.

"It's a long time to dark," said Jimmy Silver.

"And they're not around, anyhow, in my opinion," said Arthur Edward Lovell. "They're gone, you know."

"Fathead!"

The Fiskal Four of Rockwood lunched on the cowpuncher's provisions in the hut. There was, fortunately, a can of water in the hut also; but that was all the supply, as the man on duty at Lone Pine was accustomed to getting water as he wanted it from the spring outside.

But Jimmy Silver was fairly certain that the party would not be besieged long enough to suffer from the want of water. If the

Redskins failed to trick them into leaving the hut, there would be an attack, and Jimmy, though his courage did not falter in the least, could not help realising that the chances were in favour of the enemy.

The only weapon in the Rookwood party was Jimmy's revolver; and there were six of the Indians, all armed. But if the attack were beaten off, as Jimmy hoped, it was probable that help would come later, for the news of the Indian raid would not be long in spreading all through Windy River country. By the next day, at all events, the ranchers would know that fighting was going on at Lone Pine; and at any moment, too, Skitter Dick might turn up and sight the enemy. So the pressing danger, in Jimmy's mind, was that of the blood attack which he felt would come before long.

After lunch was over Lovell yawned, and moved off restlessly about the stockman's hut. He peered again and again from rifts in the timber of the hut, and saw only stillness and lifelessness on the prairie. It seemed incredible to Lovell that six savage men, with murderous intent, were crouching near at hand, so silent, so motionless for long hours. It was two hours or more since the Redskins had ridden away from the corral fence, and in that time there had been no sound, no sign.

"Look here, let's chance it!" said Lovell at last.

"Fathead!" was Jimmy Silver's reply.

"I'm fed up with this, I can tell you."

"You shouldn't have played the fool this morning," answered Jimmy Silver tersely.

"It's all your fault, Lovell."

"Oh, yes!" said Lovell.

"We should be safe at the ranch now if you hadn't played the goat," said Baby.

"It's up to you to shut up, Lovell."

"Oh, rubbish!"

Lovell moved restlessly about. Baby and Newcome occupied themselves with rubbing down their horses. Jimmy Silver sat on the pine-wood table, his revolver in his hand, ready for what might happen. Arthur Edward Lovell halted at last at the door.

"Look here, I'm fed up," he said. "You fellows can stick in here as long as you like, but I—"

From the silence outside came a sudden uproar—a trampling of hoofs, a ringing of savage yells, and then the crashing of hatchets on the door of the stockman's hut.

It was the attack!

CHAPTER 35.

Hard Pressed!

JIMMY SILVER sprang from the table, revolver in hand.

Crash! Crash! Crash!

The attack had come so suddenly that it almost took away the breath of the Rookwooders. Lovell staggered back from the door aghast. Evidently the Redskins had given up the hope of enticing the juniors out of the stockman's hut; and when they changed their plans they changed them with startling suddenness. Six shaggy horses ran loose round the hut, while six savage braves assailed the door with their hatchets, crashing blow after blow on the stout pine.

Crash! Crash!

"My hat!" gasped Newcome. "They—"

A gleaming edge came through the door. Jimmy Silver stepped closer to the door, and as the arc was dragged away he put the muzzle of the revolver to the narrow slit.

Crack!

A yell answer'd from outside.

Crack!

Another wild howl.

Then the crashing of the hatchets went on again. But Lovell, peering from a crack in the window shutter, saw one of the Redskins crawling painfully away, while another was binding a strip from his blanket round his arm. Two had been hit.

But that was a game two could play, as Jimmy quickly discovered. A rifle-muzzle was jammed to the door outside, and the trigger pulled. The bullet came whizzing across the hut, missing Jimmy by a few inches.

The juniors stepped aside quickly from the door.

Again and again the rifle rang out, and the bullets crashed through the slits in the door.

Then the hatchets crashed again.

Jimmy Silver looked from the slit in the window-shutter. There was, of course, no glass in the window, only the shutter covered the small opening. Less than six feet away from Jimmy four Redskins were raining blows on the door.

Jimmy silently unbarred the shutter.

His clumps watched him in silence. It was a terrible risk to take, but it was the only way of stopping the attack on the

door, which was becoming dangerous now, as huge splinters flew under the sharp axe.

Sottly, silently, Jimmy Silver drew the shutter a few inches open on its hinges.

The attention of the Indians was fixed on the door, a few feet to the left of the window, in the front wall of the hut. They were not looking towards the shuttered window. Jimmy had a few seconds in which to act, and he acted promptly.

He thrust the revolver out, and fired at the group outside the door. It was hardly necessary to take aim at such short range, and with the enemy bunched together.

Crack! Crack!

He fired twice, and slammed the shutter. Baby was ruddy with the bay, and it was jammed instantly into place. The next moment a hatchet quivered in the wood.

A deep groan was heard from without. The crashing blows on the door ceased.

From a slit in the timber wall Jimmy looked cautiously out. Both his bullets had taken effect; and one of the Redskins was seriously hurt, for his comrades were carrying him away.

The attack on the stockman's hut ceased as suddenly as it had begun. To the terrible uproar a deep silence succeeded.

Jimmy Silver reloaded the empty chamber of his revolver. His face was a little pale, but set and grim.

"Four of them hit!" muttered Newcome. "One fairly knocked out, I think. All right for us, so far."

"Perhaps the brutes have had enough," said Lovell hopefully.

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"They're after scalps," he said. "They won't let up on us unless they have to. But we're holding our own."

The juniors waited. The Bloods did not approach the hut again, and a long interval of silence followed. It was trying enough to the nerves of the juniors.

But a sound broke the silence at last.

"They're behind the hut!" muttered Baby.

Faint sounds reached the ears of the juniors. The Indians were creeping round the hut, for what purpose the Rockwooders could not yet guess. The back of the hut, against the tall pine tree, had neither door nor window. The strong pine-wood wall was between them and their enemies, and it could have defied for a long time the hatchets of the Bloods. But no blow was struck; only these faint creeping and brush-

ing sounds continued to reach the straining ears within.

"What are they up to?" muttered Lovell. "Blessed if I know. Whatever it is I will sense suddenly," said Jimmy Silver.

Something moved outside the window shutter in the front. The tiny gleam of daylight that had come through the slit in the wood was suddenly blotted out.

Something had been placed against the shutter.

A moment more and Jimmy Silver knew what it was. He drew a deep, hard breath.

"They're stacking stuff up round the hut," he said. "That's a heap of brushwood."

"What on earth for?" asked Lovell.

Jimmy did not answer.

"You—you don't mean—" Baby caught him by the arm. "Jimmy, they're going to fire the hut!"

"I'm afraid so."

"Good heavens!"

The juniors understood now the new scheme of the savage Bloods. The faint movements on the part of the enemy had a meaning now.

Dry grass from the prairie, brushwood from the thickets, wooden stakes from the corral fence, were being stacked up round the stockman's hut. After the hot Canadian summer, the fuel would burn almost like tinder; there had been no rain for weeks. It was the funeral pyre of the shams of Rockwood that was being stacked up by the Redskins.

A tomahawk crashed on the door suddenly, and the voice of Running Waters was heard calling, in mocking tones:

"Will my little white brothers come out of their lodge, or will they wait for the fire to drive them out?"

There was no answer from the juniors. To go from the hut was to go to immediate death; and in spite of the terrible imminence of their peril, they had not given up hope.

They waited in tense silence.

Lovell's face twitched.

"I—I say, this is all my fault," he said humbly. "I—I'm sorry, you chaps. I've landed you in this."

"That's all right," said Jimmy. "Can't be helped."

Lovell gave a groan. Death, in its most terrible form, hovered over the Rockwooders. At that moment Lovell would

willingly have given his own life to ransom his comrades. It was his willful recklessness that had brought about the disaster, and he realized it. But repentance came too late.

An astringent smell penetrated to the hut. "They've lighted it!" muttered Newcome.

Through a score of interstices in the timber walls the smoke came eddying into the interior of the stockman's hut. It boiled to the roof in a thickening cloud.

The juniors looked at one another in the thickening vapour. The three horses stirred uneasily, whinnying with fear. The heat increased fast, till the stockman's hut was like an oven.

Through cracks in the walls red glimmering of flames could be seen. The horses, terrified, began to trample wildly in the hut.

Through the crackle of the fire came a yell from the Indians. It was a yell that told of triumph.

CHAPTER 18.

Skitter Dick Chips In!

JIMMY SILVER ran to the door at last. He threw down the bars, and dragged the door wide open.

Outside a stack of brushwood and piled fence-rails burned fiercely. The smoke came rolling in.

"We've got to chance it now, you chaps," said Jimmy Silver huskily. "We can't stay here—"

"All together!" muttered Lovell. "Look out, Jimmy!"

One of the horses, maddened by the smoke falling sparks, for the walls and roof were catching fire now, rushed wildly for the open doorway. Jimmy jumped aside, and the horse, with a shrill squeal of pain and terror, plunged blindly through the pile of burning brushwood, scattering it right and left as he went. The open prairie and the blue sky were seen again. The other two horses rushed after the first, squealing wildly, and the juniors heard a yell from a Blood brave, knocked down by one of the horses.

"Come on!" breathed Jimmy. He led the way.

With a desperate rush he came through the scattered burning embers outside the doorway, and his chums followed him fast.

Blinded by the smoke, the juniors staggered out into the air, hardly conscious of anything but of the relief of the fresh air to their tormented lungs.

Jimmy Silver stumbled over a sprawling Redskin—the man who had been knocked down by the horse. The Blood clutched at him, and they rolled to the ground together, struggling.

Two savage figures, with uplifted tomahawks, closed in on Lovell and Baby and Newcome.

The juniors, unarmed and blinded by smoke, were utterly at their mercy. The tomahawk of Running Water flashed over Lovell's head.

The sharp report of a rifle came suddenly from the prairie.

Like one in a dream, Lovell saw the flashing tomahawk sink down to the Indian's side, as Running Water staggered, a terrible change coming over his coppery painted face.

He reeled back and collapsed on the ground at Lovell's feet.

Crack!

The rifle-shots were so close together that they seemed blended into one.

Somehow—how, they were too dazed to understand—the Rookwood juniors found themselves free of their foes.

Jimmy Silver was on the ground, struggling with his enemy. A horseman came dashing up at a furious speed, and leaped to the ground, leaving the horse rearing. A rifle-butt crashed on the Redskin's head, and Jimmy Silver found himself suddenly released from the grasp of the Blood.

He lay panting. "Skitter Dick!" exclaimed Baby. "Dick!" panted Jimmy Silver.

The cowpuncher, with his finger on the trigger of his rifle, stared round him, amid the eddying whirls of smoke from the burning hut. But the remaining Redskins, all of them wounded men, were creeping away in the grass, and the fight was over.

Skitter Dick caught his plunging horse. "I guess this hter circus is over," he remarked. "Any of you 'uns hit?" "I—I think not!" gasped Lovell, hardly knowing whether he was safe or not. "I—I—No."

Jimmy Silver staggered up. "You came at the right time, Dick," he said breathlessly.

The cowpuncher nodded. "I guess I saw the fire a good way off."

he said. "I've been out on the range all day, and I shouldn't have got back hyer till sundown; but I saw the fire, and reckoned it was Injuns. I was surprised to see you 'uns hyer, though, and I reckon I didn't ship in any too soon. What are you kids doing hyer? Wasn't the boss keeping you on the ranch?"

"It was my fault," said Lovell, cringing. "I—I cleared off, and they came after me."

"I guess you're a pesky young jay then," said Skitter Dick. "You was gone ooono, the crowd of you, if I hadn't seen the fire from the prairie, and come back to see what was doing."

"I know," said Lovell.

"Thank goodness you did come," said Baby. "There isn't much of the lot left now, Skitter Dick."

"I reckon I haven't use for Lone Pine now that I know for sartin the Injuns are out," chuckled Skitter Dick. "They'd have the scalp off me if I hung on hyer, before you could say 'No sugar for mine.' I'm going back to the ranch, I guess. That gang of Bloods 'n't the only crowd that's broke out of the reserve, I guess—they'll be as thick as skitters on the prairie till the Mounted Police take them in hand and run them back to the reserves. You 'uns had better move along with me."

"You bet," said Jimmy Silver.

"Our horses are gone," said Baby.

"I guess they're nearly at the ranch by this time," said Skitter Dick. "It's legging it for you 'uns."

"We can leg it," said Lovell.

"Come on."

Skitter Dick remounted his horse, and the party started, the cowpuncher walking his steed to keep pace with the schoolboys. He held his rifle across his saddle before him, and his keen eyes scanned the prairie on all sides, watchful for foes. Jimmy Silver, looking at him, could guess that Skitter Dick did not expect to reach the ranch without trouble.

"Put it on, you fellows!" said Jimmy.

The Bloods tramped as fast as they could over the rough prairie. In this distance, against the blue sky reddened by the sunset, the chimneys of Windy River ranch-house rose into view at last; and never had the juniors been so glad to see them.

CHAPTER 17.

For Life or Death!

SKITTER DICK reined in his horse.

"I reckoned so," he said coolly. From a belt of scrub at a little distance, a bunch of horsemen suddenly shot into sight. Waving feathers and shaggy manes tossed in the wind, as the horsemen rode to cut off the party from the ranch. Evidently Running Water's war party were not the only gang of Bloods out on the prairie that day.

Skitter Dick could have ridden to safety, but the juniors were on foot, and they had no chance of getting through. The cowpuncher jumped from his horse.

"Take cover!" he rapped out.

Skitter Dick threw himself into the grass, his horse lying down, and he sighted his rifle across the horse. The Bloods were worn down in the thick grass the next moment. Skitter Dick pushed back his Stetson hat, and watched the horsemen with keen eyes. The crack of his rifle rang far over the prairie. Crack, crack, crack!

The Indians, riding at full speed, circled round the baited party, at a rate that made good shooting almost impossible. Good shot as Dick Lee was, his bullets flew wide.

"I guess they'll hear that at the ranch," said Skitter Dick. "If these hyer Injuns don't wipe us out in five minutes, I reckon the boys'll be on them. Zovy!"

He fired again, and this time the ball went closer, cutting a waving feather from the head of a Blood warrior.

There were nine or ten Indians in the bunch, and they circled round and round, the circle drawing gradually in. The juniors watched them through the grass with anxious eyes. Well the Redskins knew that they had a good marksman to deal with, and a direct rush would cost them the lives of at least three or four of their band. But the circling rush, closing in gradually on the surrounded whites, made it difficult to hit the whirling target.

Sooner or later would come the rush, suddenly and without warning. And when it came the surrounded party would be ridden down and "wiped out" for a certainty. But Indian caution held back the braves from making the rush till they were close enough to make it with the least danger to themselves.

Round and round they swept, leaning down from their steeds, half hidden by their

swarm, and yelling incessantly. Skitter Dick loosed off his rifle every minute, knowing that every shot would now be heard on the ranch. And at last a bullet told, and an Indian horse went plunging to the earth, throwing its rider into the thick grass.

Still the wild horsemen swept round and round, the circle narrowing, and the riders going at so terrific a speed that it was almost impossible to plant a bullet with effect.

"Here they come!" breathed Skitter Dick. "I reckon this is the last round."

The circling horsemen suddenly swerved, and rode directly at the little party crouched in the grass, yelling and brandishing their weapons.

In less than a minute all would have been over. Skitter Dick fired point-blank, and a yelling savage rolled from his horse, his yell stifled for ever. Jimmy Silver blazed away with his revolver, and another of the Redskins tumbled into the grass. And then—

Then the earth seemed to be shaking under the thunder of hoofs. But it was not only the hoofs of the Indian ponies that rang on the prairie—from the direction of the Windy River Ranch came a crowd of horsemen—Pete Peters, and Spike Thompson, and Red Alf, and a dozen more cowpunchers, headed by Hudson Smedley. They came on at a mad gallop, and crashed into the Indian band in wild collision.

Skitter Dick gave a yell.

"Hurrah! It's the outfit!"

"Hurrah!" shouted Lovell.

The juniors sprang to their feet. The Woods had broken and scattered under the charge of the rancher and his men. Three or four of them were yelling in the grass, under the thundering hoofs; the rest were already in wild flight, lashing their shaggy horses to terrific speed.

Hudson Smedley reined in his horse and jumped down.

"Jimmy—"

"We're all here," said Jimmy Silver breathlessly. "All serene."

"All safe?" asked the rancher.

"Right as rain."

"Your horse, Blazer, got back to the ranch," said Hudson Smedley. "I reckoned there had been trouble, Jimmy. I was starting out to hunt for you when we heard the shooting. Thank goodness we came in

time. What's happened at Lone Pine, Skitter Dick?"

"Burnt out!" said the cowpuncher innocently.

"And the cattle—"

"I left 'em on the range, but I guess some of the reds are running them off into the bad lands by this time, boss."

Hudson Smedley compressed his lips.

"The Mounted Police will be up from Red Deer to-morrow," he said. "The trouble will be stamped out pretty quick. Get back to the ranch, boys."

The outfit rode home to Windy River. More than one "gang" of the Bloods was sighted on the prairie before the ranch was reached, but the Redskins did not venture too near so numerous a party. In the sunset Jimmy Silver & Co. reached the ranch, and glad enough were the Rookwood juniors to find themselves in the safe shelter of its walls again.

"Well," remarked Arthur Edward Lovell at supper, "I wanted to see an Indian rising—and now I've seen it. I don't want to see another. I'm blessed if I quite feel the scalp safe on the top of my head, Jimmy. It's lucky for you fellows I was with you to-day—what?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Looks for you chaps," said Lovell. "I hardly think you'd have got through if I hadn't been there. Until the trouble with the Indians is over, I'm jolly well going to keep you under my eye."

"Well, my hat!" said Jimmy Silver.

That was all he could say!

CHAPTER II.

Left Behind.

"WHAT about us?" asked Lovell.

Hudson Smedley's answer was brief.

"Nothing about you."

"But—"

"No time to waste, I guess. Get a move on, Jimmy!"

Hudson Smedley strode out of the Windy River ranch-house, slinging on his rifle as he went.

Jimmy Silver gave Lovell a sympathetic glance. Raby and Newcome smiled. Arthur Edward Lovell breathed hard with indignation.

"Nothing about me!" he said. "Well, my hat! As if I shouldn't be as much use as you, Jimmy—more, in fact."

"Mr. Smedley doesn't seem to think so," murmured Baby.

"He's an ass!"

"Oh!" said Newcome.

"Just an ass," said Lovell with emphasis. "I'm sorry to say it about your cousin, Jimmy, but he strikes me as being just a silly ass!"

"You see—" murmured Jimmie.

"If he left us behind it would be far-headed," said Lovell. "But to take you and leave me—well, it's asinine."

"It's barely possible that Mr. Smedley knows what he's about!" suggested Newcome.

"It's pretty plain that he doesn't," answered Lovell.

Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, looked in.

"You going with the outfit, Jimmy?" he asked.

"Yes, rather," answered Jimmy Silver.

"They're starting!"

"Right-ho! Good-bye, you chaps!" said Jimmy Silver hurriedly. "I'm sorry you're not coming."

Jimmy Silver hastened out of the ranch-house. Lovell and Baby and Newcome stood in the doorway to watch the outfit start.

Six sturdy cowpunchers had mounted with Hudson Smedley, and Jimmy Silver jumped on Blazer and joined them. Jimmy waved his hand to his chums as he rode away with the cowpunchers, and Baby and Newcome waved back; but Arthur Edward Lovell was too indignant to do anything but frown. He frowned portentously.

With a cloudding of hoofs, the party disappeared over the prairie. Pete Peters watched them out of sight, and then turned to the three juniors.

"I guess you 'uns are well out of it. It won't be a soft trail in the foothills after Lone Wolf and his gang."

Lovell snorted.

"No reason why we shouldn't go," he said. "I suppose we should be useful in a scrap with the Indians."

"We'd like to join up," said Baby.

"But I dare say Mr. Smedley knows best."

"You bet he does!" said the foreman of Windy River. "The boss knows best. There'll be some hard trailing and tough scrapping before Lone Wolf is roped in.

He's got a dozen of the Blood braves with him, and they mean business."

Pete Peters strode away, leaving Arthur Edward Lovell still frowning. Lovell felt it very keenly that he was left behind. Lovell had a fixed belief that he would have been very useful in the party; much more useful than Jimmy Silver, as a matter of fact.

But on that point the ranchers' word was law, and there was no gainsaying it. Lovell took it out in growling, as it were.

The trouble in the Windy River section with the Indians of the Little Blood reservation was not quite over. There had been some days of excitement at Windy River, and a contingent of the Canadian Mounted Police had ridden up from Red Deer to deal with the matter—promptly and effectively. The warlike "bucks" were rounded up or driven back to the reserve, and the "trouble" ended as suddenly as it had begun. There had been danger for a time of the movement spreading to the Great Blood reserve farther south. But it had been dealt with too promptly; and Teapung Elk, the chief of the Little Blood Reserve, had received a visit from the Mounted Police, and bowed his grey old head to their commands, and delivered up what remained of the smuggled fire water in the Indian village.

But a dozen of the Bloods, more desperate and more guilty than the rest, persisted in defiance, and they had fled to the foothills. Peace was restored on the prairie, but in the rocky recesses of the foothills, under the shadow of the mighty Rockies, the gang of outcasts lurked—a constant danger to the cowpunchers and their herds on the grassy plains below.

For which reason contingents were gathering from the various ranches in the section to hunt down the outcast gang. Hudson Smedley had ridden away to the rendezvous with half a dozen of his men, and he had taken Jimmy Silver as a recruit.

It was a busy season on the ranch, and Pete Peters was left short-handed to carry on. So Jimmy came in useful as a recruit in the place of a cow-puncher. But Hudson Smedley did not deem it advisable to take Lovell and Baby and Newcome into danger. Jimmy Silver was a splendid rider and a crack shot, and quite useful in the outfit; but the rancher did not look on his comrades as equally useful. Which

was extremely exasperating to Lovell, though Raby and Newcome admitted that the Canadian rancher probably knew what he was about.

As a matter of absolute fact, Arthur Edward Lovell would probably have been in the way; but he was far from admitting it. It was a little weakness of Arthur Edward's to believe that he could do anything that another fellow could do—and do it; indeed, a little better than the other fellow. He liked Jimmy Silver immensely, but he could not somehow see that Jimmy could ride harder and shoot straighter.

Raby and Newcome looked at Lovell's frowning face and smiled a little. They would have liked to ride with the outfit, but they knew well enough that they were not so tough as Jimmy, and much more likely to "crack up" on a hard trail in the foothills.

"Anyhow, we can make ourselves useful here," remarked Raby, after a long silence. "The cowpunchers have plenty to do, and they're shorthanded now. We can help with the cattle."

Smart from Lovell, Arthur Edward was not keen on helping with the cattle.

"We'd better join up and do something, if it's only helping Baldy, the cook, when everybody else is hard at it," urged Newcome.

"You fellows can go and wash dishes for Baldy, the cook, if you like," said Lovell sarcastically. "I'm not gone on washing dishes, personally. But don't let me stop you from enjoying yourselves."

"Well, I'm going to ask Mr. Peters what I can do, anyhow," said Raby. "I'm not going to slack while everybody's at work. You coming, Newcome?"

"Yes, rather! Come on, Lovell!"

"Oh, rats!" said Lovell crossly.

Raby and Newcome walked over to the foreman's hut, leaving Arthur Edward Lovell alone with his indignation. There was plenty of work to be done, and they soon forgot about Arthur Edward Lovell. But when they came into the ranch-house to dinner Lovell did not appear, and Woo Sing, the chure-boy, did not know where he was, save that he was not in the house.

"Tinkoo gousee lidee," said Woo Sing. "Me see takee hois."

"Gousee riding," said Raby. "Well, he must be an ass to miss his dinner."

And in the afternoon Raby and New-

come rejoined the cowpunchers and made themselves useful again, and did not think any more about Lovell till they came in to supper. And at supper Arthur Edward Lovell was still conspicuous by his absence.

"My hat," said Newcome. "He can't have been an enough to go after the outfit—"

Raby shook his head. "Even Lovell wouldn't be an enough for that," he said uneasily.

"I wonder!"

"Anyhow, he would be bound to miss them, and then he would come back," said Raby.

"He might miss the way back, too."

"Oh, my hat! He might."

The night fell, and Arthur Edward Lovell had not returned. And Raby and Newcome, anxious enough now, scanned the starlit prairie from the ranch-house, and wondered where he was.

CHAPTER 19.

Lovell's Luck.

"THE silly dummiest!" said Lovell. He was referring to the outfit. The shades of night were falling on the plains and the foothills, and Arthur Edward Lovell was quite alone.

"The silly chump!" he said aloud. "The duffer!"

It did not occur to Lovell that he was the duffer in the case. He had missed the outfit, and he did not attribute that misfortune to himself.

Lovell was aware that the Windy River party was to meet contingents from other ranches at a point farther up the river, where the whole body, numbering more than fifty men, were to take the trail into the foothills in search of Lone Wolf, the outcast Blood.

Lovell had borrowed a rifle from Pete Peters' cabin, and mounted his horse and ridden away; intending to follow the outfit. Once he had joined them, many miles from the ranch, Lovell considered astutely, that Mr. Smedley would not send him back. The rancher would be faced, as it were, with a "fait accompli"; and the accomplished fact would be too much for him. He might be angry, but just as his concern was chiefly for the junior's safety.

obviously it would be safer for Lovell to continue with the outfit than to return to the ranch alone.

Lovell was quite satisfied with his process of reasoning. He was in no hurry to join up with the riders, as he sagely considered that the farther from the ranch the juncture took place, the less chance there was of Hudson Smedley sending him back by himself.

So, after getting clear of the ranch, he rode at a leisurely pace, and did not reach the place of rendezvous on the upper waters of the Windy River till late in the afternoon.

That did not matter, he considered; the outfit, of course, would be gone on, but Lovell would follow their trail into the foothills. Fifty horsemen would leave a trail on the prairie that could almost be followed by a blind man.

Lovell reached the rendezvous, and found plenty of traces of the horsemen who had gathered there from various ranches. As he had anticipated, a broad and trampled trail led away westward from the winding Windy River.

Lovell trotted cheerfully on the trail. His idea was to come up with the outfit just before sundown, which would make it absolutely impossible for him to be sent back, as assuredly he could not have found his way back to the ranch after dark, from the distance.

His cheery and satisfied face grew a little more serious, however, when the broad-marked trail turned from the plain into the bad lands.

In the bad lands that stretched along the foothills, the soil was sandy and rocky, and gave little trace of the passage of horsemen, and it occurred to Lovell that he might miss the trail here.

That misgiving was soon realized.

He came to a halt in the bad lands, in a rocky ravine, with the happy knowledge that he had lost the faintest idea in which direction Hudson Smedley and his men had ridden—and an equal ignorance of his own way back to Windy River Ranch.

Lovell had plenty of dogged pluck, and he was not scared by finding himself alone in the bad lands with night falling. But he was very considerably damaged.

He was exasperated, too. He had not foreseen this; though really he might have foreseen it.

"The silly chump!" he said a dozen times. "The stupid owl! I shan't find them now, that's a cert. The dummies!"

"Stanging" the mischievous outfit relieved Lovell's feelings a little. But it did not help him on his way.

He set his horse in motion again at last. In which direction to ride, he simply could not guess; and he left it to the horse, hoping that the animal's instinct would lead him to take the direction where there were other horses.

This was as likely to lead the horse back to the ranch, as after the outfit; but Lovell would have been quite pleased to find himself back at the ranch by that time.

He did not realize that he had acted with utterly reckless thoughtlessness; but he did realize that he was in a scrape.

The night fell, and shadows, deepened over the bad lands, as Lovell's horse trotted on with him by ridge and ravine.

The horse stopped at last by the bank of a rippling stream, doubtless one of the headwaters of the Windy River. Lovell let him drink, while he pondered on the situation anew.

By following the stream downward he thought that he might reach the Windy River, and by following the river, the ranch. But he discovered on observation that at a little distance the stream plunged in a cascade over a rocky precipice, where certainly a horseman could not follow.

"Nothing doing!" said Lovell aloud.

He drew his horse away from the stream at last and rode on, following a deep and shadowy ravine, over which the pine-trees tossed strange shadows in the starlight.

The hoofs of his horse struck eerie echoes from the rocks as he rode. The ravines widened into a great canyon, and it dawned upon Lovell that he was leaving the bad lands behind and entering the foothills.

It was into the foothills that the outfit must have ridden, in search of Lone Wolf and his gang, and Lovell hoped that his horse's instinct was, after all, leading him on the track of the outfit. It was a slender hope, but it was all Lovell had to cling to.

He listened to the echo of his horse's hoofs, coming eerily back from the rocks and pines, and it occurred to him after a time that the echo was stronger before him than behind him. From that it slowly came into his mind that there was an echo

of other hoofs within his range of hearing—that some other horseman was riding through the dusky canyon in advance of him.

He drew in his horse to listen.

As he sat motionless in the saddle, with his head bent to listen, he heard the sound distinctly.

It was distant, but it was clear, and Lovell's face brightened as he heard it.

Somewhere in advance of him, in the shadowy canyon, was a horseman, and he had no doubt that it was a member of the outfit, probably a rear-guard riding behind the main body. Lovell started again, and urged on his tired steed to a gallop, heedless of the rough rocks in his path.

Now that his attention was drawn to it, and he was listening carefully, he could distinguish the stranger's hoof-beats from his own. Suddenly the hoof-beats ahead stopped.

"He's heard me," murmured Lovell. "He's stopped! I'll jolly soon be up with him now!"

He rode on cheerfully, and shouted as he rode.

"Hallo! Hallo!"

His voice rang with thunderous echoes among the rocks.

"Hallo!"

The echo came back from a dozen directions, echoing and re-echoing; but there was no answering voice. Neither was there any further sound of the stranger's hoof-beats.

"Hallo!" shouted Lovell again.

Then the answer came unexpectedly. A shadowy figure leaped from the rocks, and before Lovell knew what was happening, a sinewy hand grasped him, and he was dragged from the saddle.

"What—" gasped Lovell.

In the starlight he caught a glimpse of a coppery face, with red ochre daubed on it, and a pair of flashing black eyes.

His heart almost died in his breast.

It was not a member of the rancher's outfit that he had been following. It was no friend in need to whom he had shouted. It was one of the Blood Indians—one of the desperate gang of outcasts who had fled into the foothills to escape the Mounted Police.

Lovell sprawled on the rocks, staring at the Redskin who had dragged him down. His rifle was still in his hands.

By chance rather than by design, the startled junior pulled the trigger, and the report of the rifle rang in thunderous echoes among the rocky foothills.

The bullet flew yards from the Redskin. The next moment the Blood had planted his knee on the fallen junior, and his knife gleamed in the starlight.

Lovell gave himself up for lost.

But the blow did not fall.

He stared up at the Indian brave with dilated eyes. The drawn knife still threatened him, as the Indian, with his left hand, took away the rifle. Lovell made no resistance. He was at the mercy of the Blood, and he realised, too, that it was not the red man's intention to despatch him.

Keeping his sinewy knee planted on the hapless Lovell, and holding the knife in readiness, the Indian seemed to listen. The heavy echoing of the rifle-shot died away, and was followed by deep silence. For a full minute no sound broke the tense stillness of the starlit hills.

Then the Indian spoke at last, in English.

"Little white man alone!"

"Yes!" gasped Lovell.

"Where you come?"

"I came from Windy River Ranch."

"You lose way!" said the Redskin, comprehending:

"Yes."

"You tink me white man when you call?"

"Yes."

"Little white man great fool!"

The Redskin spoke with contemptuous scorn. Certainly no Indian youth would have rushed recklessly into terrible danger as Arthur Edward Lovell had done.

Lovell winced. By that time he did not need telling that he had acted foolishly. He realised it clearly enough. Perhaps he realised, too, that Hudson Smedley had had good reason for leaving him out of the Indian hunting outfit.

The Redskin still listened intently. He seemed hardly able to believe that Lovell's reckless proceedings had been caused entirely by folly, and he suspected a trap of some kind.

But the dead silence seemed to reassure him at last.

"You go to join white man's outfit?"

he asked, after a long pause, his black eyes glittering down at Lovell.

"Yes."

"You know where find?"

"No."

"Me know," said the Redskin. "Me watch! Me scout!"

Lovell comprehended now how the Redskin came to be alone in the foothills. He guessed, too, that the outfit must be at some distance, or the cautious Indian would never have allowed his horse's hoofs to be audible.

Doubtless the Redskin was returning to his haunt in the foothills, after spying on the ranchers' outfit.

"You know where they are?" said Lovell.

The Indian nodded.

"Let me go, and—and——"

The Redskin removed his knees.

"Fool, get up!" he said.

The "fool" got up. The Redskin returned his knife to his belt, and, taking a strip of hide, bound Lovell's hands together.

"You come with Lone Wolf!" he said.

Lovell gave a start.

"Lone Wolf!" he exclaimed. "You are Lone Wolf!"

"Me Lone Wolf—great chief of the Bloods," said the Redskin. "Take little white man to lodges in the hills—to-morrow. burn him at stake. I have spoken!"

He remounted his horse, which came at his call, and leading Lovell's horse, with the bound junior mounted upon it, pursued his way into the depths of the foothills.

CHAPTER 20.

The Trail.

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL sat his horse in stony silence. His heart was like lead in his breast.

The Indian had attached his trail-rope to Lovell's horse, and the latter followed a couple of yards behind Lone Wolf. Lovell's hands were bound together at the wrists, and it was hopeless to think of escape. He could have thrown himself from the saddle upon the rocky ground, at the cost of a painful concussion, but it was useless to think of flight on foot from a mounted Indian.

The threat of Lone Wolf had chilled the blood in Lovell's veins. His life had been spared, in order that he might perish at the stake, and he knew that Lone Wolf was in earnest. The gang of Redskin outcasts had thrown off the white man's rule, when they abandoned the reservation and fled to the hills; and in doing so they had resumed the old habits and customs which had had to be abandoned in the reserve. With the war-hatchet and the scalping-knife came the torture-stake, and the hapless Lovell was to be the first victim.

Somewhere in the foothills there was help; but it was far away. The outfit were hunting for the Indian outcasts, but Lovell knew that it might be days, perhaps weeks, before they hunted the gang down in the trackless wilderness. Sooner or later Lone Wolf and his gang would be brought to book; but not in time to save the life of the reckless junior who had fallen into their hands.

Even if the ranchers' outfit came by this very canyon, there was no trail on the hard rocks to tell that the Indian had passed that way.

But in the depth of despair a glimmering came into Lovell's mind—a glimmering of hope. The Redskin did not even look back at him as he rode on; his attention was given to the rough and rocky way he was following, deeper and deeper into the shadows of the mighty Rocky Mountains.

Lovell could not free his hands; but he could use his fingers. When the idea glimmered into his mind at last, he acted on it at once.

Slowly, cautiously, silently, he moved his bound wrists, and got his fingers into his pocket. With his fingers he drew out his handkerchief, and let it fall.

The handkerchief fluttered to the ground, and was at once left behind by the horse.

Lovell's heart beat almost to suffocation.

If Lone Wolf should glance round, the white speck on the ground in the starlight would be certain to catch his hawkish eyes. And then—either a savage thrust from the Indian's knife, or more secure bonds. But the Redskin did not glance at him, and the riders moved on, and the handkerchief, lying on the rocks, disappeared from view behind.

After that, Lovell's fingers did not remain idle long.

There was a loose button on his jacket, and he worked it off, and let it drop.

Faint as the sound was that the button made in falling, it caught the keen ears of the Indian, and he glanced back.

But the button was invisible on the ground, and doubtless Lone Wolf attributed the sound to some loose stone clinking under the hoofs. He gave Lovell one look, and turned his gaze forward again.

Lovell's heart beat faster.

He was leaving a trail—little enough, but sufficient—for the keen trailer in Hudson Swadley's outfit, if they came that way. At least, it was something.

Several times Lovell succeeded in dropping articles to the ground—a button from his shirt-cuff, an old letter from his pocket, a stump of pencil, a little leather purse.

He was working with his fingers to loosen another button, when Lone Wolf halted and dismounted.

The Blood warrior took the reins of both horses, and led them through a thicket of stunted pines. Lovell heard the murmur of rippling water in the gloom.

A voice called from the shadows, and Lone Wolf answered in the dialect of the Blood tribe.

From among the rocks a second Indian appeared.

He glanced at Lovell, and spoke to Lone Wolf in the language of the Indians. The two braves talked together for a minute or two, Lovell hearing their words without comprehending a syllable of them. But he could guess that Lone Wolf was telling his comrade what he had learned of the movements of the ranchers' outfit.

The two Indians moved on together, leading the horses. A moment more, and Lovell was in sight of the encampment of the outcast Bloods.

A dozen lodges were grouped beside the mountain stream, with the dark hills looking down on all sides. From the lodges nine or ten Indians emerged as Lone Wolf came up.

They surrounded Lovell, and there was a low jabbering among them in the Blood dialect. One of the warriors drew his tomahawk and made a threatening motion towards the prisoner.

Lone Wolf interposed.

The tomahawk was withdrawn, and Lovell breathed again. Lone Wolf talked for several minutes, addressing the Indians, and finally there was a general "Ugh!" of satisfaction. Lovell wondered whether the chief was explaining that the prisoner was to be reserved for the torture-stake on the morrow.

The junior was lifted from the horse and led into one of the lodges. If he had hoped that he would be freed from his bonds now, he was disappointed.

Several of the Redskins examined the hide bound round his wrists, and another hide thong was knotted securely round his ankles.

Then he was left lying on the ground in the lodge.

Lone Wolf entered the lodge a little later, and rolled himself in a dirty blanket to sleep. Lovell heard his deep and steady breathing only a yard away in the darkness and silence of the night.

But there was no sleep for Lovell.

Through cracks in the branches of which the lodge was built came gleams of starlight, which gradually faded into the grey of dawn.

Lovell closed his eyes, but he could not sleep.

Faintly the murmur of the stream came to his ears, and faint sounds from the Indians' horses during the long and weary watches of the night.

As he lay, with limbs numbed by the thoughts of hide, with despair in his heart, he thought of the ranch, where his chums would be wondering what had become of him; he thought of Jimmy Silver, riding with the outfit in search of the Bloods, little dreaming that his comrade was a doomed prisoner in the hands of the Redskins' outcasts. He thought, too, of Rockwood, the old school he was never to see again.

The dawn came at last.

As the sun rose higher, and there were sounds of movement in the Indian encampment, Lone Wolf rose and threw aside his blanket.

He glanced down at Lovell, and strode out of the lodge.

And then at last exhausted by long, weary watching, the hapless junior slept.

How long he slept he did not know, but

he was awakened at last by the sound of voices and the grasp of rough, dusky hands. He started from slumber, dazed and confused, and his eyes fell on savage, dusky faces and glittering eyes, and he knew that the hour had come.

CHAPTER XI.

"Sign!"

"SADDLE up!"

Dawn was breaking over the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Darkness lay yet in the deep canyons and arroyos, but the high ridges and the feathery pines and firs were silvered in the dawn. Jimmy Silver threw aside his blanket, and rose and stretched himself.

Fifty horsemen were encamped on the rough hillside—men from all the ranches in the Windy River section, and from Mosquito town and Kicking Mule. Hudson Smedley was in command, and the outfit had full confidence in their leader. Every man had his horse, his blanket, his rifle, and revolver, and a week's provisions. It was hard and rough work upon which the outfit was engaged, as Jimmy Silver had already discovered. But Jimmy was glad he was there; his only regret being that his chums were not with him.

He ate his breakfast of dried meat and drier bread, washed down by cold water from a mountain stream, with a keen appetite. Hard riding and trailing in the foothills gave an edge to his hunger that he had never dreamed of in the old days at Rockwood School.

There was no camp fire; the smoke would have betrayed the outfit to the Redskins they were hunting. In the dawn it was chilly in the rocky foothills, but the Alberta cow-punchers did not heed the cold. Breakfast was frugal and brief, and then the order to saddle up was given.

Skitter Dick and six or seven other cow-punchers had already left the camp to scout. So far, the outfit had not succeeded in getting on the trail of the gang of Bloods.

Before entering the foothills they had found many traces of the desperate gang of outlaws—tracks of stolen steers driven off into the hills, tracks of moccasined feet by prairie ponds; but in the foothills, on hard, rocky soil, all trails had been lost.

Lone Wolf and his gang were hidden somewhere in the barren hills, but the necks told no tale.

But Hudson Smedley was quietly determined. That the gang were not very distant he was certain, for the raids on outlying herds of cattle were almost incessant since the quelling of the Indian rising. Lone Wolf was keeping in touch with the ranches; indeed, it was upon stolen cattle that he and his followers were subsisting. Sooner or later Hudson Smedley was sure that his scouts would pick up "sign"; and, once the Bloods were run down to their hidden lair, the rest would be simple. Lone Wolf was known to have no more than a dozen braves with him, desperate bucks, who had refused to submit to the law when the tribe was rounded up into the reservation by the Mounted Police. And there were fifty men in Hudson Smedley's outfit, all hard riders and dead shots.

During the night a rifle-shot had been heard in the camp, faint and distant, from the shadowy hills. Jimmy Silver had heard it, little dreaming that it was Lovell's rifle that he heard. So far as he knew, Lovell was still at the ranch with Baby and Newrums.

Hudson Smedley had noted the direction of the shot, and when the outfit saddled up at dawn that was the direction taken. Jimmy Silver rode beside his Canadian cousin as the horsemen trotted through the rugged paths of the hills. In the brightening sunlight Skitter Dick appeared ahead of the outfit, and waved his hand.

"Dick's found something," remarked Hudson Smedley.

"Somebody was shooting hereabouts last night," said Buck Williams, of the Sunset Ranch. "I guess it wouldn't be a white man wandering around on his lonesome, with the Indians up. A red shooting a loose steer for the meat, I guess."

"Very likely," said Hudson Smedley.

The outfit halted, and Hudson Smedley called to Skitter Dick.

"What is it, Dick?"

"I guess there was a red around hyer last night, boss," said Skitter Dick. "There's been a tussle, I reckon."

The rancher dismounted, and Jimmy Silver followed his example. Skitter Dick was standing by the spot where Lovell had encountered Lone Wolf under the stars.

The Skitter held up a feather that had evidently belonged to an Indian's head-dress. In his other hand he held a flattened bullet between finger and thumb.

"I guess Mr. Somebody loosed off his rifle," said Skitter Dick. "He hit that big rock yonder; you can see the mark, and that's where I picked up the bullet. The red got him byer"—he tapped the rocky ground with his boot. "There was a bit of a tumble, and that there feather came off the Injun."

Jimmy Silver scanned the rough rocks keenly. Dick with a smile pointed to a fragment or two of what looked like a grey thread, evidently rubbed from a rough tweed jacket on sharp edges of rock that crapped from the ground.

"There's sign yonder where a hoss was left standing," went on the cowpuncher. "I figger it out that the Injun left his horse there, and laid for the other galoot just here, among the rocks, and jerked him off his horse. The galoot fired and missed. The Injun didn't kill him; no sign of him byerabouts. Maybe he got away, maybe he didn't."

"A white man?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"I guess he would be a white man, as he was scrapping with a red," said Skitter Dick. "Some gold-darned tenderfoot, I reckon, or he wouldn't have been caught napping like that. Any man in the Windy River outfit wouldn't have missed the Injun with his rifle."

"I guess not!" said Spike Thompson, with a nod.

"It's odd that a tenderfoot should be riding here at night, when the Indians are up," said Hudson Smedley.

"Folks rush in where angels fear to tread," said Jimmy Silver, little dreaming of the identity of the tenderfoot.

"That's so. And what after that, Dick?"

Skitter Dick shook his head.

"I guess you've got me beat, boss. There ain't nary a sign to be picked up arter that—the rocks don't bear the ghost of a trail."

Hudson Smedley looked along the great canyon, which led like a corridor into the heart of the foothills.

"You don't figure out which way the Indian was going—up into the hills or down to the plains?" he asked.

"Not even that, boss. There ain't nary a sign."

"I guess some will be found," said Hudson Smedley, and he gave directions. A dozen scouts left the outfit, to search above and below the spot for sign.

"I guess that Indian was one of Lone Wolf's gang," said the rancher. "The tribe are being kept pretty strictly to the reserve, now. If we get hold of that buck, we shan't be far from the rest of them."

Jimmy Silver went up the canyon with Skitter Dick and Spike Thompson, walking the horses, and scanning the surrounding rocks for possible sign. But the rocks told no tale of the passing Indian and his prisoner.

But suddenly Skitter Dick uttered an exclamation, and made a dive for a speck of white that showed among the boulders.

He came back holding a handkerchief in his hand.

"I guess Mr. Somebody came this way, and dropped his nosebag," he remarked with a grin.

Spike Thompson looked at the handkerchief.

"Tenderfoot, right enough," he said.

"That ain't a cowboy's goods!"

Jimmy Silver took it in turn. The colour changed in his face, and he uttered a startled exclamation.

"That's Lovell's!"

"What!"

"It's Lovell's! Look!" Jimmy Silver pointed to the initials. "A.E.L." worked in a corner of the handkerchief.

"Young Lovell's!" said Skitter Dick in amazement. "But young Lovell was left at the ranch."

Jimmy drew a deep breath.

"It's Lovell's!" he said. "Of—of course, he might have lost it another time—the wind may have blown it about—"

"That hanky ain't been in the open air long," said Spike Thompson. "I guess it would be another colour if it had been blowing about in the hills for days."

"But Lovell couldn't—"

Jimmy Silver paused, his heart sinking. Only too well he knew his obstinate and reckless chum, and he knew how Lovell had felt being left behind by the outfit. It was only too probable that Arthur Edward Lovell had taken the bit between his teeth, as it were, and followed the outfit without leave. That he had fallen in with the Redskins, instead of the outfit, was a natural enough consequence.

"Lovell! And the Indians have got him!" muttered Jimmy, his face white.

"Looks like it!" said Skitter Dick.

The Skitter mounted his horse, and dashed back along the canyon at a gallop to rejoin the outfit with the news. In a very short time the whole force was gathered on the spot. Hudson Smedley examined the handkerchief, and his bronzed face was grim.

"The young fool!" he said. "Heaven knows what has happened to him. But this proves that the Indian made him a prisoner and brought him this way. I should guess. That young ass couldn't have got away, when once the Blood had him in his hands."

"And I guess it proves that the Injun was heading for the hills, boss, and we know the way to follow," said Skitter Dick.

"That's so. Ride on!"

Fairly certain of their direction now, the outfit rode at a trot up the great canyon, deeper and deeper into the wilderness of rocks and pines. Skitter Dick and the other scouts were watching with hawk-eyes for sign, and "sign" was to be found now. There was a shout from Red Alf, as he pounced upon a button among the rocks.

A dozen of the outfit examined the button eagerly. Torn shreds still attached to it showed that it had been jerked from a garment. Hudson Smedley's eyes gleamed.

"This cannot be chance," he said. "First the handkerchief, and then this button. Lovell is not such a young fool after all. He must have dropped them on purpose to leave a trail."

"Hain't hains enough, that young jay," said Spike Thompson.

"Well, it looks like it. Keep on, and watch for something of the kind again," said the rancher.

"You bet, boss!"

Jimmy Silver's face was pale and troubled as he rode on with Hudson Smedley. He had no doubt now that his reckless chum had followed the outfit, and missed them, and fallen into the hands of the outcast Bloods. What had happened to him since then?

That was a torturing thought to Jimmy. That the Redskin had not killed the tenderfoot was clear—there was no sign of the body to be discovered. But long hours had passed since Lovell had been led away a prisoner into the rocky wilderness, and the

desperate pursuits were not likely to spare any white man's life.

"Keep a stiff upper lip, Jimmy," said Hudson Smedley. "We're on the track, at least, and we can hope—"

"You think Lovell's still alive?" asked Jimmy, his lip trembling.

"I hope so. Anyhow, he was not killed at once, and that is something," said the rancher.

"Why should they have taken him prisoner instead?"

The rancher did not answer.

"You—you think—" Jimmy remembered what he had heard of the customs of the "wild" Indians. "Is it possible that—that that he would be tortured?"

"I'm afraid so," said the rancher reluctantly. "They would not spare a white man's life in the present state of things, for any other reason that I know of. But there's still hope, Jimmy, and at all events, Lovell has left a trail that may guide us to the hiding-place of the Bloods."

"But—if we come too late—"

"We must hope for the best."

Jimmy was silent, with an aching heart. He longed to break into a gallop, to ride at top speed to the rescue of his chum, but that was impossible. It was necessary to pick up the trail step by step; and then it was only by the greatest skill and keenness that the task could be performed.

More than one of the smaller articles that Lovell had dropped had been lost in fissures of the rocks, and escaped even the keen eyes of the cowboys. But Buck Williams came up with a letter in his hand, after a time—and Jimmy, looking at it, saw that it began: "Dear Arthur,"—it was a letter of Lovell's, evidently dropped by him to mark the trail and guide a possible rescuer.

"That young tenderfoot ain't the fool he looks," said Skitter Dick. "He's leaving a good trail—and he's done it without the Injun spitting him, either. I guess that with luck we shall run right into the den of Lone Wolf."

Half a mile further on a little leather purse was picked up—Jimmy recognized it as Lovell's. The outfit rode on, with rifles at the ready, keen eyes watching for a foe. Suddenly, from in advance, came two rifle-shots, so close together as to be almost blended into one. Skitter Dick clapped his hand to his head, whence a bullet had torn away his Stetson hat. From a thicket of

pinos, a dusky figure in a tattered blanket reeled, and crashed down in the sunlight.

"It was an Indian in war paint. 'I guess I got him as he was pulling trigger,' said Skitter Dick. He rubbed his curly head. 'But it went close. We're on them, boys—that there Injun was a sonof-a-bitch.'"

Jimmy Silver's heart thumped. The Indian, who lay stretched by the rocks, with Skitter Dick's bullet in his heart, had been keeping watch in the pines—a sentinel set by the outcast gang of Bloods. The lair of Lone Wolf was close at hand.

With grim faces, the outfit dismounted from their horses, and, rifles in hand, plunged through the pines.

CHAPTER XX.

At the Stake.

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL blinked in the sunshine as he was dragged out of the lodge in the midst of the Indians.

He knew that his hour had come and that there was no hope. His wild glance swept round the Indian encampment, shut in on all sides by high rocks and ridges and thickets of pines and firs. Round him surged the throng of braves, a dozen of them, hideous in their warpaint.

In the midst of the circle of lodges a stake had been set up in the earth, and round it brushwood was piled. Lovell shuddered as he saw it. He knew what it meant.

The Redskins bore him to the upright stake, and the hapless junior was bound to it with thongs of hide.

Then the brushwood was stacked more closely round him.

It seemed like some terrible dream to Lovell. He could hardly believe that the scene was real—the wild, desolate rocks, the nodding pines, the savage, dusky faces of the Indians, the staring, merciless, glittering eyes. It was like some fearful nightmare from which he felt that he must soon awaken in his room at the ranch or in the old dormitory at Hookwood.

Bound to the stake, with the fuel piled round him, he stared dazedly at the savage crowd.

Lone Wolf was talking, and the Indians, their attention turned from the prisoner for the moment, stood round their chief, listening to his address. Lovell understood no word of the Blood dialect, but he could see

that the braves were deeply moved by their chief's eloquence. In the dramatic fashion natural to the Redskin, Lone Wolf was making oratorical capital out of the wild scene. In his guttural but not unmusical tongue he spoke of old days when the great land of Canada, from the mighty mountains as far as a horseman could ride towards the rising sun, was the hunting-ground of the red man. From that historical retrospect Lone Wolf jumped to the recent rising, when the smuggled fire-water had inspired the younger and more reckless bucks to make their desperate attempt to throw off the white man's yoke. Then he spoke of the coming of the Canadian Mounted Police, and the collapse of the rising, and the tame yielding of the braves who had returned to their reservation at the order of the khaki-clad troopers. Then he dwelt on the heroism of his few followers and himself, who had fled to the hills rather than bury the hatchet so recently dug up. And so he came to his own exploit in capturing one of the hated Palefaces, upon whom the outcast Bloods could wreak the vengeance due to their many and overwhelming enemies. And at that point a ferocious yell burst from the listening braves, and they turned from the orator towards Lovell.

A dozen hands were raised and a dozen tomahawks were flung, and Lovell closed his eyes in expectation of instant death. But the tomahawks flew by him, grazing him in several places, even cutting his clothes, but doing him no injury. He opened his eyes again, his heart throbbing. He realised that this was only the beginning of the torture, and that he was not intended to die by so easy a death.

Two of the gleaming axes stuck in the high stake where it rose above Lovell's head, and hung quivering there.

For ten minutes or more the tomahawk play went on, and the hapless junior almost hoped that one of the glittering, whirling weapons would strike him and put him end of his torment. But the play ceased at last, and one of the braves kindled a brushwood torch to light the pile round the prisoner.

It was the end at last—the terrible end. But as the smoke was rising from the kindled torch there came a sudden cracking of rifle-shots, echoing among the rocky hills, and a yell—the death-yell of a fallen Redskin.

Lone Wolf spun round towards the belt of pinewood that screened the Indian encampment from the open canyon.

It was there, at the only spot where the encampment could be approached by an enemy, that the sentry had been set—and that wild, ringing yell told that the sentry had fallen before a bullet.

There was a wild outburst of exclamations among the Bloods, and the braves rushed for their rifles.

Far the moment the prisoner bound to the stake was forgotten.

Lovell, unable to move hand or foot, watched the strange, wild scene dizzily. He saw the real braves clutch up their weapons and rush across the rocky ground towards the belt of thickets. The enemy was at hand, and the Redskins knew it. They had no time for the torture of their prisoner now.

Was it the outfit? The trail he had left when Lone Wolf led him, a prisoner, into the mountains—had the outfit found it and followed it? Was it rescue at hand?

Lovell's heart beat almost to suffocation. The brushwood was still stacked round him, the sun blazed down on his face. At a little distance the torch lay on the ground, smoking, where it had been dropped in the moment of alarm.

Was it rescue?
From the belt of pines there came a rush of white men—brawny cowpunchers with grim, set faces under their Stetson hats and rifles in their hands.

It was the outfit!
Crack! Crack! Crack!
With a sound like thunder, the heavy firing rolled echoing among the rocky hills.

CHAPTER 22.

At the Eleventh Hour!

JIMMY SILVER was one of the first through the thickets, with Hudson Smedley and Skitter Dick. He saw the encampment of Indian lodges close by the rippling mountain stream. He saw the crowd of desperate Bloods rushing to defend their lair, and he loosed off his rifle without an instant's pause. For some minutes the firing was hot and heavy, and shrieks and groans filled the air. Jimmy Silver saw Lone Wolf spring at Hudson Smedley with brandished knife, and saw

the rancher parry the stroke with the barrel of his rifle. The next instant Lone Wolf and the rancher were grappling in a desperate struggle.

Hudson Smedley's foot slipped on the rocks and he went down, the Indian upon him, clinging like a panther. A yelling buck dropped almost at Jimmy Silver's feet—whether by Jimmy's own bullet, or another, the Redwood junior never knew. Jimmy rushed towards the struggling rancher, clubbing his rifle.

Lone Wolf's knife gleamed in the air, over the head of Hudson Smedley.

But before the blow could fall Jimmy's rifle-butt reached the Indian, and Lone Wolf, with a fearful cry, rolled from his victim and lay senseless on the rocks.

"Good for you, tenderfoot!" panted Skitter Dick.

Hudson Smedley struggled up dizzily. "Good man, Jimmy!" he said.

Jimmy Silver ran on towards the lodges. The handful of Bloods had scarcely stemmed the onward rush of the cowpunchers. Half of them were down, and the rest broke into flight as Lone Wolf fell, scattering wildly among the rocks, pursued by the victorious cowpunchers.

Jimmy Silver found himself on the track of a fleeing Indian as he ran among the lodges. The Blood turned on him, snarling, knife in hand—and Skitter Dick's rifle rang behind Jimmy, and the Redskin pitched over and lay still.

Scarcely heeding him, Jimmy Silver ran on, thinking only of his chum. Was Lovell there? Was he living?

"Jimmy!"

A husky voice panted out his name. Jimmy Silver stared round. For the moment he did not see Lovell. Then he saw the white, strained face that looked at him over the top of the pile of brushwood stacked round the torture-stake.

"Lovell!"

"Oh, Jimmy!"

Jimmy Silver tore away the brushwood, and in a moment his knife was busy on Lovell's bonds.

The prisoner staggered away from the stake, and Jimmy caught him as he fell. Lovell leaned on him heavily.

"Lovell, old man, you're hurt!"

"No; stiff, that's all!" gasped Lovell. "I'll be all right soon. I'm ashamed I've been tied up a long time."

Jimmy Silver helped him to a boulder, where he sat down. For long minutes Lovell sat in silence, with a strained face, tormented by the pain of the restored circulation in his numbed limbs. Jimmy stood and watched him, heedless of the scattering shots and yells along the rocky hillside. The last two or three of the outcast Bloods were being run down, to surrender or die desperately fighting. By the time the last shot died away in a thousand echoes among the hills Lone Wolf and his gang had been completely wiped out—dead or prisoners.

"I—I say, Jimmy!" Lovell spoke at last. "Yes, old chap."

"You knew I was here?"

"Yes."

"You—you found the trail I left?"

"The cowpunchers found it, old chap," said Jimmy Silver. "Thank Heaven they did! We didn't get here any too soon."

"That's a fact, and no mistake!" said Lovell, with a faint grin. "Hallo, here's Mr. Smedley, and he doesn't look very good-tempered."

Hudson Smedley surveyed the rescued prisoner with a grim brow.

"So you're safe?" he said.

"Quite, thanks," said Lovell. "Only a bit stiff."

"I guess you've had a close call."

"As close as ever I want to have, Mr. Smedley," said Lovell, with a shiver. "I thought it was all up when I heard the shooting."

"Well, I guess I'm glad you've come through," said the rancher. "But if ever a silly young fool deserved to have his scalp raised, you deserved it, Lovell. Why did you leave the ranch?"

"You've just said it," said Lovell. "Because I was a silly young fool. I'm sorry."

"Oh!" said Hudson Smedley. "Well, if you see it in that light I'll say no more about it, I guess, though I've been promising you a trail-ropo well laid on. As it turns out, you've helped us round up the Bloods and saved us a long trail in the mountains. But if you ever play such a game again, Master Lovell, you go on board the first train running out to Alberta!"

And the rancher turned away.

"So that's that!" said Lovell. "I was rather an ass, Jimmy! I admit it!"

"You were!" agreed Jimmy Silver.

"Still, it wouldn't have happened if I'd

gone with the outfit," argued Lovell, "and so—"

"And so you're a silly chump!" interrupted Jimmy Silver. "And I've a good mind to punch your silly nose!"

To which Lovell replied:

"Rats!"

Windy River Ranch was glad enough to greet the return of Hudson Smedley and his men, with the news that Lone Wolf's gang had been rounded up and finished with. And Raby and Newcome were immensely relieved to see Lovell ride in with Jimmy Silver and the cowpunchers.

"So you joined the outfit, after all?" asked Raby.

Lovell grinned.

"No; the outfit joined me," he answered. "I've been through it, you chap."

"Serve you jolly well right," said Newcome.

"If I hadn't gone, the outfit would still be hunting for Lone Wolf's gang in the foothills," said Lovell, who was quite his old self again by this time. "So, you see, I was right. I generally am." The fact is—

"The fact is," said Raby, "that you ought to be jolly well bumped for making your old pals anxious about you; and another fact is, that you're jolly well going to be. Collar him!"

"Hear, hear!"

"You silly asses— Oh, say hat!"

And Arthur Edward Lovell was duly bumped on the hard, unsympathetic prairie!

CHAPTER 24.

Pete Peters Is Not Pleased!

"WHERE going?"

"You bet!"

"I fancy all the outfits are going," said Jimmy Silver, with a laugh. "All that can get away, at any rate. It isn't often that a theatrical company gets so far into the North-West."

"About the first time, I should say," remarked Lovell.

There was quite a little outburst of excitement on the Windy River Ranch, and Jimmy Silver & Co. fully shared it.

Skitter Dick had brought the news from Mosquito.

In that little timber town of North-West Alberta entertainments were few and far between, so the visit of the Hiram H. Hunker Theatre Company interested all the citizens.

Positively for three nights only, the H. H. Hunker Company were to perform "Hamlet," "Othello," and "As You Like It" in turn, thus acquainting the Windy River section with the works of the immortal William Shakespeare.

"Dollar admission, in Busch's Hall!" Skitter Dick had announced at the ranch. "There's a dozen posters stuck up on the dead walls in Mosquito about it. Genuine Shakespeare."

"I guess I've heard of that galoot afore," said Baldy, the cook.

"It's the Hiram H. Hunker Company," continued Skitter Dick. "They've played to crowded houses in every city from Quebec to Calgary in their Canadian tour."

"How do you know that?" inquired Spike Thompson.

"It says so on the posters."

"I guess if they'd got crowded houses in Calgary they wouldn't want to money along to the Windy River," remarked Red Alf.

"Well, everybody at Mosquito will roll up," said Skitter Dick.

"About a couple of dozen galoots."

"And all the cowpunchers roared about who can get leave."

"In the busy season!" said Red Alf. "I guess there won't be a crowd get off from this hyer ranch."

Red Alf proved to be a prophet. The Windy River cowpunchers were not specially "gone" on Shakespeare. As a matter of taste, they would probably have preferred lurid film drama, with plenty of galloping and shooting in it. But any entertainment was too rare to be despised, and if they could not get film-thrills they were willing to put up with William Shakespeare. But there were difficulties in the way.

Jimmy Silver, Ruby, Lovell and Newcome resolved to go at once, and there was no difficulty about that. The chums of Rookwood were guests at the Windy River Ranch, and, as the guests of Mr. Hodson Smedley, they were free to do as they liked. It was different with members of the outfit, as they soon discovered when they interviewed Pete Peters, the foreman of the ranch, on the subject.

Pete Peters didn't care "hecks" for Shakespeare, and said so with unnecessary

emphasis. As for letting men off in the busy time to go to see "god-darned play-acting," that apparently was the last thing that Mr. Peters dreamed of.

As Jimmy Silver & Co. were helping the outfit in the work of the ranch, they felt that it was up to them to ask leave. So they sought out Mr. Peters and asked for leave to ride into Mosquito that afternoon. Pete Peters looked them up and down grumly.

"You ain't under my orders," he said gruffly. "If you was I'd give you a piece of my mind! Play-acting! Pook!"

"It isn't often—" began Jimmy.

"Once is too often," said Mr. Peters. "But you kids can go, and be blowed to you! Get off!"

"If we're wanted—" began Arthur Edward Lovell rather warily.

"How could you be wanted?" demanded Mr. Peters. "Tenderfoot ain't much use on a ranch. You ain't no use, and your best friend wouldn't go so far as to say that you're any ornament. So hike off!"

And Pete Peters turned on his heel and strode away.

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"Peter isn't in the best of tempers," he remarked. "I suppose he knows that the whole outfit will want to go. It doesn't look a lively prospect for them."

Skitter Dick was the first of the outfit to try his luck. He approached Mr. Peters with an ingratiating smile.

"If you've got no use for me this afternoon, Mr. Peters—"

"Never have had any use for you, Dick Lee!" answered Mr. Peters. "Why the boss pays you to loaf around this ranch is a darn mystery to me, and always was."

Skitter Dick laughed.

"Then you give me leave—"

"Not in your lifetime!" said Mr. Peters. "You ain't no use, but it's my duty to see that you earn a tenth part or so of what Boss Smedley pays you for loafing around. Cut it out!"

Apparently Skitter Dick was of some use on the ranch, though the foreman declined to admit it. The Skitter retired discomfited, and a little later Spike Thompson put in a word for himself.

"There's a theatrical show at Mosquito, Mr. Peters—" he began.

"I guess I've heard of it."

"I'd like to go."

"Of course you would!" agreed Mr.

Peters disagreeably. "There ain't a loafer in the country that wouldn't like to chuck his work on that excuse, or any other."

"It's jest this once," urged Spike.

"It isn't!" said Mr. Peters.

"Nothing doing!" asked Spike.

"Less than nothing!" Mr. Peters assured him.

Baldy, the cook, was the third. But Baldy had no better luck than the others.

"You want to amble into Mosquito to-day?" asked Mr. Peters when Baldy preferred his request. "Your leave is due, is it?"

"Nopel! But—"

"But you want double leave in the busy season?"

"Not exactly. But—"

"What you really mean is that you're asking for the loan of my boot!" suggested Mr. Peters. "Waal, I'm your man! Turn round!"

Baldy, the cook, retired hastily into the cookhouse. It was only too clear that Pete Peters was deaf to argument on this subject.

And so it came to pass that only four riders started from the Windy River Ranch on the Mosquito trail, and those four were Jimmy Silver & Co., of Hookwood. But they promised to tell the outfit all about it when they returned—which was slight comfort in the cowpunchers who remained under the grim eye of Pete Peters.

CHAPTER III.

The Integrity of H. H. Hunker!

"HERE we are!" announced Arthur Edward Lovell.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had arrived.

Bunch's Hall, in Mosquito. On ordinary occasions it was the dining-room of the lumber hotel. After being a dining-room, it was generally a smoking-room. But as the only room of any extent in the little township, it was used for all the local meetings—and on this occasion it had been hired by the H. H. Hunker Company for Shakespearean representations.

Seats were a dollar apiece. Standing room, which predominated, was half a dollar a head. With crowding, Bunch's Hall could have accommodated an audience of about a hundred. But Jimmy Silver & Co., after lunching at the Grand Pacific, did not see

any sign of a hundred turning up. Mosquito was a busy and energetic little township, but its citizens were few in number—and generally hard at work. Mr. Bunch, who sold tickets of admission at his desk, did not seem hopeful.

"Four!" he said. "Four at a dollar each? That makes nine!"

As it was getting near time for the performance, this statement did not indicate bright prospects for the Hiram H. Hunker Company.

"Perhaps they'll pay at the doors," remarked Lovell.

"P'raps," assented Mr. Bunch, "and p'raps not. I guess it don't matter so long as Hunker takes enough to pay me for the hall. I guess he'll just about do that."

A slim young man came in while Mr. Bunch was speaking, and the juniors glanced at him, guessing that he was a member of the theatrical touring company. He was slim, good-looking, and a little effeminate in appearance, and he looked worried.

"Soon Mr. Hunker?" he asked, addressing the hotel-keeper.

Mr. Bunch shook his head.

"Not since breakfast," he answered.

"Neither have I," said the slim young man. "I've had my suspicions for some time. How many tickets did we sell last night, Mr. Bunch?"

"Fifteen."

"How many, so far, to-day?"

"Nine."

"Holy smoke! What I want to know is, why did Hiram H. Hunker bring us here at all?" groaned the slim young man. "What a place to land us in when he fitted!"

"Fitted!" said Mr. Bunch.

"I guess that's about the size of it," said the slim young man dolorously. "There ain't a member of the company that's had any pay for three months, and what cash there is is in Hunker's hands. I guess the ghost won't walk this time."

Mr. Bunch nodded.

"I wondered why he was asking questions about the post-wagon for Kicking Mule," he remarked.

"When did it leave?" asked the slim young man hurriedly.

"Six hours ago."

"Then Hunker's at Kicking Mule by this time, and our name is Dennis," groaned the young man. "How much do I owe you for my room and grub, Mr. Bunch?"

"Five dollars."

"Then you have my sympathy!"

"I guess I'd rather have your dollars!" said Mr. Bunch gruffly. "You can cut that out, Mr. Orlando Fitzroy."

"It's not a matter of choice," explained Mr. Fitzroy. "Hunker's got the cashbox, and, if he's fitted, the cash is nearly at Kicking Mule by this time. Anything else I can do for you?"

The expression that came over Mr. Bunch's plump face made Jimmy Silver & Co. smile.

"Why, you—you—you—" gasped Mr. Bunch. "You been eating up my grub, and you tell me, as cool as you please, that you can't pay for it!"

Mr. Fitzroy shrugged his slim shoulders.

"The whole company's in the same box," he said. "There'll be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth when they find out that Hunker's fitted. 'You're only one of the sufferers, Mr. Bunch.'"

"1-1-1—" spluttered Mr. Bunch.

"If you young gentlemen have just paid for admission, you had better take your money back," said Mr. Fitzroy, addressing the Rookwooders. "There won't be any performance."

"Oh, my hat!" said Lowell.

"Look hyer, Mr. Fitzroy—" roared Mr. Bunch.

"Patience, patience, my friend!" said Orlando Fitzroy. "What have you lost? A miserable five dollars! I've lost a job and three months' salary, and now you're going to kick me out, and I haven't ten cents for a meal in my clothes."

"I guess you're right there!" roared Mr. Bunch. "I'm going to kick you out—hard!"

"It's not the first time," sighed Mr. Fitzroy. "I've been there before. This is the eleventh time I've been stranded in Canada or the States. Get it over!"

"Hold on!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver furiously, as Mr. Bunch, in great excitement, clapped round from behind his desk. "Hold on! Perhaps we can help."

"I'm going to have it out of his hide!" growled Mr. Bunch.

"Hold on, I tell you! Here's the five dollars."

"Oh!" said Mr. Bunch.

A five-dollar bill placated the hotelkeeper, so far as Mr. Orlando Fitzroy was concerned. The slim young man thanked

Jimmy Silver in tones of heartfelt gratitude, with a dramatic thrill in his rather musical voice, evidently so accustomed to what Pete Peters called "play-acting" that he never quite freed himself of the manners of the stage. Then he walked away to acquaint the rest of the company with the dismal news that Hiram H. Hunker had disappeared, and that the "ghost" would not walk. Jimmy Silver & Co. went to lead out their horses. Shakespeare evidently was "off," and, as there was to be no performance, owing to the sudden departure of the iniquitous Mr. Hunker, the Rookwood clowns had nothing to do but to ride back to the ranch.

"What a go!" said Reby. "We've paid a dollar each, and Bunch doesn't look like parting again, performance or no performance."

"It's a sell," said Lowell. "Peters will cackle at us when we get back, too."

"Hard cheese on those people," said Newcome. "What an awful rascal a manager must be to strand them in an out-of-the-way place like this!"

"Awful rotten!" said Jimmy. "I dare say they'll get some help from the Mesquite folks. They're good sorts here. Even old Bunch barks more than he bites, and I think he'll go easy with them. But it's rotten hard lines for them."

And Jimmy Silver & Co., disappointed, but feeling a good deal more for the hapless touring company than for themselves, mounted their horses to ride back to Windy River.

CHAPTER 26.

Looking for a job!

"HOLD ON A MINUTE!"

The Fictical Four were riding out of the only street of Mesquite to the dusty trail on the prairie, when they were hailed by Mr. Orlando Fitzroy. The slim young man held up his hand to them as a signal to halt, and the clowns of Rookwood drew rein, wondering what he wanted, Lowell—who thought that he could guess—slid his hand into his pocket.

Mr. Fitzroy had a little bag in his hand, apparently containing all his worldly property.

"Getting out of it?" asked Jimmy.

"Yes, my young friend. The attractions of Mesquite, though doubtless great, do not

appeal to me," said Mr. Fitzroy. "As you so kindly settled my little bill at the hotel—I believe that shed is called an hotel—I am venturing to intrude still further upon your kindness."

"Go ahead," said Jimmy good-naturedly.

"There is talk of a committee of generous-hearted citizens subscribing to help the company as far as the railroad," said Mr. Fitzroy. "But after that the prospects are not dazzling. In short, I have made up my mind to abandon, for the present, the Thespian art. Needs must when there is not a shot in the locker. I have heard that it is a busy season now on the ranches."

"That's so," said Jimmy.

"No doubt you young gentlemen belong to some ranch in this section?"

"We're staying at the Windy River Ranch."

"Perhaps you can tell me whether there is a chance of getting a job there?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Jimmy Silver.

He didn't think so—not in the least! Mr. Fitzroy, with his soft hands and good-looking face and pencilled eyebrows, did not look a likely recruit for the Windy River outfit. Indeed, he looked as if he would crumple up helplessly under a day's work on the ranch.

Orlando Fitzroy read the junior's look.

"You think there's no chance for me?" he asked.

"Well——" Jimmy hesitated. "Can you ride?"

"Certainly."

"And use the lasso?"

"Hem! I can learn."

"Know anything about cattle?"

"Nothing."

"Hem! I'm afraid——"

"After all, a man can only be refused," said Mr. Fitzroy. "I'm willing to work, anyhow. Is Windy River the nearest ranch?"

"Yes."

"Then it's me for Windy River," said Mr. Fitzroy decidedly. "I suppose they can't do more than toss me off the ranch."

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"They won't do that," he said. "But I think you'd do better to get back to a town; and if ten dollars would help you, we can find it."

"Yes, rather!" said Lovell.

Orlando Fitzroy shook his head.

"Thanks, all the same; but no," he said.

"You've helped me once, and I'm not a beggar. Is this the trail to the ranch?"

"Yes; but it's a good many miles," said Jimmy. "If you really mean to go there——"

"I do."

"Then I'll give you a lift on my horse. He's carried double before."

"You overwhelm me with kindness," said Mr. Fitzroy in his theatrical way.

But the poor young man was evidently glad of the offer, and he mounted behind Jimmy Silver on Blazer's powerful back, in great relief.

Jimmy Silver & Co. trotted away in the golden sunset for the Windy River; and Orlando Fitzroy enlightened the route by talking—chiefly about himself. It appeared from Mr. Fitzroy's conversation that there was only one really great actor at present in existence, that great man's name being Orlando Fitzroy. It was by the cruel persecution of Fate that Mr. Fitzroy found his lot cast among touring theatrical companies in the West. He alluded to his fellow-players as "barn-stormers" and "strolling players," and admitted that the failure of the tour was only to be expected since it was impossible for one good player to pull through such a crowd of duds.

It was obvious that Mr. Fitzroy had an excellent opinion of himself and his abilities; but the chums of Rookwood listened with great politeness, and allowed him to run on.

If he could find consolation for his misfortunes in "swank," there was no reason why that solace should be denied him.

He told the juniors tales of his touring adventures—of the parts he had played. Owing to his good looks—as he said—he was often cast for feminine parts when ladies were not available. He had played Rosalind and Ophelia, as well as Hamlet and Othello and Julius Caesar, and always with success—marked and remarkable success. The juniors did not ask him whether this included financial success. Only too obviously it didn't!

There was many a long mile to be covered on the trail to Windy River, though the juniors now knew all the short-cuts; but

Mr. Fitzroy's cheery chat beguiled the way, and the Rookwooders were quite glad of his company. The sun had long set when they reached the ranch, and most of the outfit had turned in at the bunk-house.

A light was burning in Pete Peters' cabin, showing that the foreman had not yet gone to bed. But Jimmy Silver deemed it unwise to disturb Mr. Peters just then. Pete Peters made the outfit work; but he worked harder himself than any, and there was no doubt that he was tired now, and not likely to be in the best of tempers.

"Speak to the foreman in the morning, Mr. Fitzroy," Jimmy suggested. "I can arrange with Baldy to give you a supper and a shakedown for the night. Anyhow, you'll want that."

And Orlando accepted gladly.

Baldy, the cook, was hospitable, and he stood the stranded Thespian a supper in the cookhouse, and provided him with a rug and a blanket on the floor for the night.

Jimmy Silver & Co. went into the ranch-house to supper, and Hudson Smedley greeted them with a ready smile.

"Back already? Weren't you going to put up at the Grand Pacific after the performance?" he asked.

"No giddy performance," said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver explained how, the "ghost" having failed to walk, the Hiram H. Hunter company had broken up, instead of continuing their representations. He ventured, also, to mention Mr. Fitzroy, and put in a word for him.

The rancher looked rather grave.

"The man's not likely to be of any use on a ranch," he said. "Anyhow, it's left to Peters to take on new hands. Your prestige had better apply to him in the morning."

"Yes, he's going to do that," said Jimmy. "I—I hope Mr. Peters will give him a chance."

"I guess it's not likely. Men here have to work," said the rancher dryly. "A theatre isn't exactly the place to train for rough work on a Western ranch. But, if he's any good, Pete will know."

And it was left at that; but Jimmy Silver could not help thinking that Orlando Fitzroy's chances of getting a "job" at Windy River were slim—very slim indeed.

CHAPTER 27.

Nothing Doing!

"NOPE!"

Pete Peters was speaking, or, rather, hawling. He was, as Lovell remarked, putting on his highest gear.

"Nope! Git!"

The powerful voice of the ranch foreman was heard far and wide, as Jimmy Silver & Co. came out early in the morning. They were rather anxious to know what was to happen to Mr. Fitzroy, and they came out before breakfast to learn. Now they were learning!

Pete Peters, with a quirt tucked under one arm, stood with his big boots firmly planted, and his hands in his pockets, staring with a grim frown at Orlando Fitzroy.

The hapless young man was asking for a job, and getting some exceedingly plain talk from Mr. Peters.

Pete Peters was irritated by the whole business. There had been some "grouching" among the compunchers, on account of the refusal of all leave to go to the "show" the night before. Pete, who really was a good-natured man, though his manners were rough and ready, had been made to feel that the outfit regarded him as a tyrant—as they did for a few hours, though they soon forgot all about it. This was annoying to Pete Peters; and, at the same time, he was hard-worked and anxious. Even his iron frame was not insensible to fatigue, and he had spent sixteen hours in the saddle the day before; and now he was up at dawn for another sixteen. And a bunch of steers had gone astray—possibly stolen by some rascally gang of half-breeds and run off into the foothills. On top of all this, here was one of the actors—a slim, baby-faced nincompoop, in Pete's opinion—asking for a job on the ranch, just as if he was a real man, as the foreman said in utter disgust. So Pete let himself go; and when Pete let himself go he could be eloquent.

His eloquence almost scorched the hapless Orlando.

"Nope!" he roared. "There ain't no job going on this here ranch for a baby-faced play-actor, with hands like a gal! No, sircs! You take that from me—there ain't! You hike back to the railroad, and steal a ride to town, and ask for a

murderer's job there. That's your halt!"

"I can work," mumbled poor Orlando.

But Pete Peters did not listen.

"You work! You don't look healthy enough to play!" he roared. "Why, I could pick you up and break you 'twice my finger and thumb!"

"I say—" began Lovell.

The foreman gave him a glare.

"Has Mr. Goodley asked you to run this best ranch for him, young Lovell?" he asked.

"Oh? No."

"Then don't you butt in."

"Look here, Pete—" said Jimmy Silver.

"Has the boss made you foreman in my place, young Silver?"

"No, you see! But—"

"Then you shut up till he does. Now, you nincompoop, your apology for a moon-faced milkmaid," continued the foreman, "you git! Hear me? You ramcose the ranch instanter, before I push you with my little finger and you fall down dead. Catechism?"

There was a chorus from half a dozen cowpunchers looking on. The Windy River outfit were rough, good-natured fellows, but they had little sympathy with softness. And undoubtedly Orlando Fitzroy did look most exceedingly "soft."

But, soft as he looked, there was a streak of obstinacy in Orlando. Instead of "getting," as it would have been wise to do, he stood his ground, and tried to argue the point.

"I can ride—" he recommenced.

"A rocking-horse, I guess," snorted Mr. Peters. "Get out my sight, do, before you make me ill."

"But I say—"

"Not going," roared the foreman. "Then, by gum, I'll give you a start! Hop it, lively!"

The quirt slid down into Pete's hand, and he cracked the thong with a report like a pistol-shot. The long lash sang round Orlando's legs, and Mr. Fitzroy had to "hop it" very "lively" indeed. He made a backward jump, and the foreman followed him up, still cracking the whip about his slim legs.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

"Look here, chuck that, Mr. Peters!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver indignantly.

"You shut up, young Silver!"

Headless of Jimmy's remonstrances, Pete

Peters followed Orlando up, driving him along with the cracking whip.

The lashes of the whip did not touch Orlando as he "hopped" each time and escaped any hurt; but certainly, had he ceased hopping, he could have been hurt.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "I'll go! I'm going, ain't I?"

"You are!" snorted Pete. "You're going, and I'm helping you! Hop it lively."

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

The whole crowd followed on, roaring with laughter. Jimmy Silver & Co. followed, sympathising with the hapless victim, and yet hardly able to help smiling at the scene. It certainly had its comic side—for all but Orlando.

Hopping frantically to escape the cuts of the quirt, Orlando retreated, but as fast as he retreated, Pete Peters followed him up, cracking the whip round his legs.

Orlando was breathless, and his face streamed with perspiration; he was very nearly at the end of his tether.

"Let up!" he gasped faintly.

The foreman "let up" at last.

"Are you going?" he booted.

"Ow! Yes! Oh, dear!"

"Leg it, then!"

Pete Peters dropped the whip under his arm, and the breathless, perspiring Orlando "legged" it as fast as his breathless state would allow, amid roars of laughter from the outfit.

Pete, grinning, walked back to the ranch with his whip tucked under his arm, satisfied with having given a cheeky tenderfoot a salutary lesson.

Orlando Fitzroy sprinted on to quite a distance, and stopped at last, sinking into the grass from sheer fatigue. Jimmy Silver & Co. joined him, and he bloated at them pathetically.

"Rough luck, old man," said Lovell. "It's too bad."

"Ow!"

"I was afraid there was nothing doing," said Jimmy Silver. "You'll have to hoof it back to Mosquito now."

"I've left my bag in the cookhouse," groaned Orlando.

"I'll get it for you. Better not show up there again."

Jimmy Silver went back for the bag, while his chums consoled with Mr. Fitzroy. When Jimmy rejoined them, Orlando had recovered his breath, and was on his

feet again. The chums of Rookwood made a collection among themselves, and handed Orlando fifteen dollars, which after some hesitation he accepted.

"Sorry you haven't had a better time at the ranch, old top," said Jimmy. "But that will see you as far as a town on the railway, anyhow."

"I guess I'm not troubling the railroad yet," said Mr. Fitzroy darkly. "I ain't finished with that foreman of yours."

Jimmy looked rather anxious. It was natural that Orlando should be annoyed. But any attempt at retaliation was likely to be disastrous for him. The hefty foreman of Windy River certainly could have picked up the slim young man with one hand, and thrown him about like a rabbit.

"It was only his fun, you know," said Jimmy. "Pete's a good sort—only a bit wary at times."

"So am I—at times," said Mr. Fitzroy. "I'm not thinking of handling him—I guess that's too big for me. But I'm going to make him sorry for himself before I've done with him. His name's Peters, what?"

"Pete Peters," said Baby.

"Is he a married man?"

"Eh! No!" said Jimmy Silver, astonished by the question.

"Sure of that?"

"Yes, quite," said Jimmy. "What does that matter?"

Mr. Fitzroy grinned.

"It might," he said. "Anyhow, I'm not done with him. There's more ways of killing a cat than choking it with cream, I guess. Mr. Pete Peters can handle a galoot about my size, but when it comes to brains, I'll undertake to walk all round any cowpuncher in Alberta. You tell him from me that I'm going to make him squirm."

"Catch me," said Jimmy, laughing.

"He might come after you with the quirt again, if I gave him that message."

"Then I guess I'll go back and tell him."

"Hold on!" exclaimed Jimmy, in alarm. "I'll tell him if you like. I don't want to see you squashed like a pancake, Mr. Fitzroy."

"Good enough," said Orlando. "Thank you for what you've done, young gentleman—you'll see me again. And don't forget to tell Peters that I'm going to make him squirm."

"Right-be!"

Orlando Fitzroy shouldered his bag, and marched off up the trail towards Mosquito. Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one another, and smiled.

"Gee!" remarked Lovell.

"Yes—and I'll jolly well wait till he's some miles off, before I deliver his message," said Jimmy.

And it was not till dinner-time that Jimmy Silver acquainted Mr. Peters with the fact that Orlando Fitzroy had undertaken to make him "squirm." Pete received the information with a stare—he had almost forgotten the existence of Orlando by that time. Then he burst into a roar of laughter, which was echoed by the cowpunchers who heard of Orlando's threat.

It really did not seem probable that the slim young man who had played Rosalind and Ophelia would be able to make the burly foreman of Windy River "squirm." But, as the event was to prove, there was more in that slim young man than met the eye.

CHAPTER 21.

Mrs. Peters Looks In!

THE sun, sinking westward to the Rocky Mountains, glowed golden as the wide prairie. Outside the bunkhouse at Windy River, the outfit, tired with the day's work, sat on benches and smoked before turning in. Pete Peters, astride of a barrel with his back against the bunkhouse, blew out thick clouds of smoke, with a face of placid contentment. A hard day's work had been done, and the cowpunchers were enjoying a little well-earned rest after supper; and Pete—satisfied with the day's work—was in the best of tempers. From the cookhouse came a musical clink of dishes and pots and pans, where Baldy, the cook, was washing up. Jimmy Silver & Co. were lying in the grass, listening to the yawns of the cowpunchers, as the sun sank towards the Rockies. It was a pleasant evening in the late Canadian summer, and peace and contentment seemed to reign on all hands.

From the rough prairie trail came a sound of wheels, and heads were turned to look. A buggy came into view, driven by a man from Mosquito—Silas Smith, who was Mr. Leauge's assistant at the Mosquito store. There was a passenger in the buggy; and the cowpunchers peered, with interest,

that it was of the feminine variety—a graceful, cloaked figure, with the face covered by a veil.

There was a hasty movement among the Windy River cowpunchers at this unexpected sight. Pipes were taken out of mouths, as all the crowd jumped to their feet. Every hand was ready to lift a Stetson hat at a glance from the lady in the buggy. Jimmy Silver & Co. jumped out of the grass at once. The buggy stopped at a little distance, and Silas Smith jumped down and hitched his horse to a post. Then he came over to the group outside the bunkhouse, with a serious, not to say solemn, expression on his red-brick countenance.

"Peters, here?" he asked.

"Hyar!" said the foreman.

"She's come!"

"What?"

"She's come!" said Silas, in a low voice full of mystery. "Sorry, old man, but it had to be. She comes into Mr. Lesage's store at Mosquito, and asks if we knowed where you was. Could we refuse to answer, now!"

Pete Peters stared at him blankly. He seemed too astonished to speak. There was a murmur of surprise and interest among the outfit, and all glances were turned on the veiled lady sitting in the buggy, at a short distance, just out of hearing.

"Know him?" says Mr. Lesage. "Silas went on. 'Certainly, miss; he's foreman at Windy River!' And then she asks how she's to get over hyer, and the boss lends her the buggy, and tells me to drive. Could a man do less!"

"What the thunder!" gasped Pete Peters. "Are you trying to fool me, Silas Smith? What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's come."

"I can see she's come. Who is she?"

"You don't know?" exclaimed Silas.

"How the thunder should I know?"

"Ain't you never expected her to get arter you, then?" demanded Mr. Lesage's assistant, in surprise.

There was a murmur among the outfit. This smacked of mystery; and all eyes, instead of being fixed on the veiled lady, turned on Pete Peters. That burly gentleman grew crimson.

"Get arter me?" he repeated. "Why should she, or any other shemale, get arter me. Silas Smith?"

"Well, I reckoned you'd be expecting it more or less," said Silas. "When a man leaves his wife behind him in Ontario, and promises to send for her to come out to Alberta, and doesn't send, why, ain't it natural that sooner or later she should get arter him?"

"His what?" gasped Pete.

"His wife!"

"Whose wife?" yelled the foreman of Windy River.

"Yours!"

Pete Peters' bronzed face grew redder than the sunset with wrath. He clenched a huge fist, and made a stride towards Silas Smith.

That young man dodged back hurriedly, and took refuge behind Spike Thompson.

"Let up, Pete!" he called out. "I ain't come hyer to punch you. I've come to bring your deserted wife."

"Let me get at him!" roared Pete. "I'll teach him to make jokes about deserted wives to me! All you galsots know that I never was married."

"We know you've said so," answered Spike Thompson.

"Don't you take a man's word, then?" howled the foreman, turning his wrath upon Spike.

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"Sure! But if that she-critter says she's Mrs. Peters, I s'pose she knows what she's talking about. I know I ain't oon to give a lady the lie, Pete Peters."

"Hear, hear!" murmured Red All.

"There's lots of galsoots, name of Peters, I s'pose," growled the foreman. "It's a mistake, and well Silas knows it. The lady won't say I'm her missing husband when she sees me."

"That's soon settled," said Skitter Dick.

The Skitter walked over to the buggy. Skitter Dick was a handsome young cow-puncher, with polished manners that were rather rare on an Alberta ranch. He helped the veiled lady to alight with a graceful courtesy that was all his own.

"My hat!" Lovell murmured to Jimmy Silver. "This is a queer bimey. What do you think, Jimmy?"

"Blamed if I know," answered Jimmy Silver.

"Here she comes!" murmured Baldy.

Leaving on Skitter's arm, the veiled lady approached the group. Every hat went off at her approach, excepting Pete's. The burly foremen seemed too dazed even to raise his hat.

There was a sudden cry from the veiled lady.

"Pete!"

"She's calling him Pete," whispered Spike. "Looks as if he's the real Peters—what?"

"I guess so!" said Red All.

"Pete! My dear husband!"

Leaving Skitter Dick's helping arm, the veiled lady ran towards Pete Peters, with outstretched hands. The foreman of Windy River stared at her blankly.

"My dear husband, I have found you at last!" cried the veiled lady, and she threw herself into the foreman's arms.

"Oh, snake!" gasped Pete.

He started back, almost feverishly pushing off the veiled lady's encircling embrace.

"You're making a mistake, mum!" he gasped. "I ain't your husband!"

"Pete!"

"I ain't anybody's husband!"

"Pete! Have you forgotten your own Charlotte?"

"I—I—I never had any pucky Charlotte!" exclaimed the bewildered foreman of Windy River. "It's a mistake, mum—I give you my word it's all a mistake! I never was married."

The veiled lady sobbed.

"I never, never believed that you had deserted me, Pete!" she wailed. "I always hoped to hear from you. I always believed that you would send for me as you promised when you left me in Ontario years ago. Pete! Pete! How can you be so cruel?"

"Shame!" shouted Spike Thompson indignantly.

The harnessed foreman glared at him.

"I tell you——"

"His own wife!" said Skitter Dick. "I'm surprised at this, Pete—more surprised than I can say. Don't be a brute!"

"A Injun half-breed wouldn't treat his own wife like that!" commented Silas Smith.

"Pete!" wailed Charlotte.

"I tell you I ain't married, and therefore I never had no wife, no Charlotte, no nobody!" yelled Pete Peters incoherently.

"This hyer is a mistake, or else it's a trick!"

"Pete!"

"Keep off!" yelled Pete Peters. "I won't be hugged by a shemale—and I won't be kissed! You orter be ashamed of yourself, ma'am, a-bugging a man you don't know!"

"Shame!" roared Skitter Dick.

The veiled lady tottered back as the foreman rudely repulsed her. She sank down on a bench, and her face dropped into her hands. Her slim form was shaken by sobs.

There was a long silence, broken only by the hysterical sobbing of Charlotte.

Every eye was fixed accusingly on Pete Peters.

The Windy River foreman stood rooted to the ground. Baldy, the cook, came out of the cookhouse, with a frying-pan in his hand, and indignation in his fat face.

"Don't you take on, ma'am," said Baldy comfortingly. "We're all your friends hyer, ma'am, even if your husband is a brute!"

"I ain't her husband!" roared the foreman.

"Oh, ran it!" said Baldy. "Think we're going to believe that this hyer shemale came all the way from Ontario, looking for you, and you a stranger to her! Can it?"

"Shame!"

"I swear that I never was married in Ontario, nor anywhere else," said Pete

Peters huskily. "I don't want to be rude to any young ehemale, but I ain't her husband, and never was."

"Pete! Dear Pete!"

"Don't you go calling me dear Pete, ma'am, when I ain't no relation of yours."

"My dear husband!"

"I ain't your husband!" shrieked Pete Peters. "If you was a man, I'd quilt you for saying so!"

Sob!

The hapless Charlotte continued to sob bitterly, and the whole outfit gazed at Pete Peters with scorn and reproach in their gaze. And then Hudson Smedley was sighted, coming from the ranch-house.

"Hyar's the boss!" said Skitter Dick. "The boss will see right done, or I don't know him! He won't have a man on this hyar ranch who deserts his own wedded wife."

"I tell you——"

"What's the trouble here?" asked Hudson Smedley quietly; and a dozen voices were raised to explain all at once.

CHAPTER 23.

Not Pleasant for Pete!

CHARLOTTE continued to sob, while Hudson Smedley listened, in great amazement, to the explanation of the strange scene. He gave Pete Peters a very dubious look.

"You believe me, boss?" said the foreman huskily. "I give you my word, Mr. Smedley, that I've never seen that young ehemale before this evening."

"I'm bound to take your word, Peters," said the rancher. "There must be some mistake. Madam, calm yourself——"

Sob!

"Calm yourself, I beg," said Hudson Smedley. "You claim this man, Pete Peters, as your husband?"

"Yes," whispered the veiled lady.

"Where were you married?"

"In Ontario, seven years ago."

"Seven years is a long time," said the rancher. "You have mistaken Pete Peters for your husband, I imagine."

"His name was Pete Peters, and he came to Alberta," said the veiled lady. "He wrote to me once that he had a job at a ranch on the Windy River, and hoped to send for me later. He did not tell me the name of the ranch."

"Have you that letter about you now, madam?"

"It is in my trunk at the hotel in Mesquite."

"A man could ride over there," said the rancher, with a very keen look at the veiled lady.

"Let a man go," gasped Pete Peters. "If I ever wrote any such letter I'll eat it!"

"You are the owner of this ranch, are?" asked Charlotte.

"That is so, madam."

"Then if you will be so kind, will you send a man for my trunk? I shall stay here. I must."

"Stay here?" gasped Pete Peters.

"It is my duty to stay with my husband, even if he repudiates me," said Charlotte firmly, in spite of her weeping. "When my trunk is brought here everyone shall see the letter you wrote me, and know that I am your wife. These gentlemen will not see a poor, deserted woman cruelly treated."

"That we won't, ma'am!" exclaimed Spike Thompson. "You say the word, ma'am, and we'll lynch him."

"I tell you——" roared Pete Peters.

"You've said enough, you have, Pete!" snapped Spike. "Ain't the lady offered to perduce your own letter, in your own fist? What more proof does any galoot want than that?"

"Sure!" said a dozen voices.

Hudson Smedley looked utterly perplexed. Pete Peters looked like a man in the grip of a nightmare.

"It ain't true," he said faintly. "It's a mistake, or it's a peaky game of some sort. I never was married."

"Shame!"

"Look hyer, ma'am——"

"Oh, Pete—Pete!" cried Charlotte hysterically, and she threw her arms round the foreman's neck before he could elude her. "Unsay those cruel words! Tell me that you have not forgotten me—that you do not wish to desert your poor little Charlotte! Pete! Dear Pete!"

"Ow! Leggo!" roared the foreman.

"Madam——" gasped Hudson Smedley.

"Pete! Oh, dear, dear Pete——"

"Make her leggo!" gasped the foreman of Windy River in muffled accents. "She's choking me! Make her sheer off!"

"His own wife!" said Spike Thompson. "I never knowed Pete was that sort of a hoodlum! Shame!"

"Shame!"

"Own your own wife, Pete," said Skitter Dick.

"This lyer shemals ain't nothing of the sort!" shrieked Pete Peters.

"Sham!"

The foreman fairly dragged himself away—so forcibly that the veiled lady tuttered. Arthur Edward Lovell sprang to catch her, and glared at Mr. Peters.

"You brute!" he shouted.

"Look' hys!"

"Let me help you, ma'am," said the chivalrous Arthur Edward, and he assisted Charlotte to the bench.

The veil had partly fallen aside, disclosing a pretty face with red cheeks and dark lashes. Charlotte hastily readjusted it, as if to hide her blushes from the crowd of cowpunchers.

"This is a strange business," said Hudson Smedley at last. "You are very welcome, madam, to remain this night at the ranch. I will order a room to be prepared for you. When your trunk arrives from Mesquite to-morrow the matter will be cleared up."

"Thank you, sir!" said Charlotte, weeping. "I should have brought proofs with me if I had even dreamed that my dear husband would deny my claim. Oh, Pete, how can you?"

"I ain't—"

"Can't!" interrupted Skitter Dick. "Don't you tell this lady she's lying, or you'll land into trouble, Pete Peters!"

"The matter must be left over till to-morrow," said Hudson Smedley. "Then it will be proved one way or the other."

"Proved enough already, boss," said Silas Smith. "I ask every gent present, would that lady come here and claim a perfect stranger for her husband when he wasn't such?"

"Sure!" said Skitter Dick. "It's plain enough."

Certainly it seemed plain enough to all the Windy River crowd. Proof was to arrive in the morning, and the veiled lady was ready to slide by it. What could be clearer? Indeed, the unhappy Pete Peters was almost wondering by this time whether he really was a married man or not.

"It's a rotten shame!" said Lovell hotly. "Don't take any notice of the man, ma'am. He ain't worth it."

"You cheery young cub!" roared Pete Peters.

"You brute!" retorted Lovell.

"Silence!" exclaimed Hudson Smedley. "Silence, all of you! This matter cannot be settled until to-morrow. Madam, will you take my arm to the ranch-house?"

Charlotte rose to her feet.

"Thank you, sir!" she said in a shaking voice. "You are very kind. All the gentlemen here are kind, excepting the one from whom I have a right to expect kindness—my husband. He only is cruel."

"Shame!"

"Coro gal!" murmured Baldy, wiping away a sympathetic tear with a greasy sleeve. "It's a shame!"

"Come, madam," said the rancher, anxious to put an end to the scene.

The veiled lady hesitated. Then, with a cry, she flung herself at Pete Peters again.

"Pete! Dear Pete!"

Dear Pete jumped backwards.

"Keep off! I guess— Oh, thunder!"

The burly foreman fairly broke into a run as Charlotte ran at him with outstretched hands.

He headed for his cabin, and the hysterical Charlotte pursued him to the very door.

Slam!

The door slammed almost on Charlotte's nose, and there was a sound of bolts being shot.

Pete Peters, gasping for breath, sank down on his bunk, overcome with dismay and wrath and bewilderment. The next moment a face was looking in at the window.

"Dear Pete!"

Slam!

The window shutter was slammed and bolted. Charlotte tuttered back with an agonized cry.

"Pete! Pete! Dear Pete!"

"Go away!" roared the foreman of Windy River hoarsely. "Go away!"

"Dearest Pete!"

"Go away!"

"Madam—" gasped Hudson Smedley.

"Say the word, ma'am, and we'll burst in that door and have him out!" shouted Spike Thompson.

Charlotte sobbed bitterly.

"Come, madam!" urged the rancher.

The veiled lady shook her head.

"No!" she said. "My husband repudiates me. He does not desire me to

stay here. I shall go. I will not remain where I am not wanted."

"You cannot return to Mosquito to-night, madam!" exclaimed the rancher anxiously. "I beg you—"

"I must go!" wept Charlotte. "My husband does not want me. He deserted me in Ontario, though I would never believe it. I will go. I will not see him again. He shall not hear my reproaches. Pete! Dear Pete! One last word before I go!"

"Go away!" came a frenzied yell from the interior of the cabin.

"I forgive you, Pete!"

"Go away!"

"You shall never see me again!"

"Go away!"

The veiled lady sobbed and tottered away towards the buggy. There was a rush of the chivalrous cowpunchers to help her. Silas Smith took up the reins.

"I'll look after you, ma'am," said Silas. "As for that brute, you're well rid of him, ma'am, you take my word."

The veiled lady took pencil and paper from a little bag on her arm, and the cowpunchers stood round respectfully while she wrote a little note and placed it in an envelope. Then she signed to Jimmy Silver.

"Will you give this to my husband?" she said. "Not now; he is very angry now. In the morning. It is my last farewell to the dear Pete, whom once I loved."

"Certainly, madam!" said Jimmy.

He slipped it into his pocket.

The buggy drove away over the darkening prairie. Mrs. Peters disappeared from the Windy River Ranch—for ever!

Until a very late hour that night indignant cowpunchers prowled round Pete Peters' cabin, telling him through the wooden walls what they thought of him. They thought many things of him, apparently, and they told him all with emphasis.

And the door did not open. For once the helty foreman of the Windy River Ranch took "back-chat" without a word; and, indeed, if he had ventured out of his cabin that evening, even Hudson Smedley's authority would hardly have saved him from a severe handling on the part of the shocked and indignant outfit.

Jimmy Silver presented the farewell letter the following morning. Pete Peters had to emerge from seclusion to face the

new day and its work, and he came out looking quite worn and weary. Dark looks were cast at him on all sides, and there were murmurs among the cowpunchers. Pete glared at Jimmy when he handed over the letter.

"What's that?" he snorted.

"Mrs. Peters left it for you last night," answered Jimmy.

"There ain't any Mrs. Peters!" roared the foreman.

"Well, there's the letter, anyhow," said Jimmy.

Pete Peters tore it open savagely. He looked at it, and the expression on his face was extraordinary. He frowned, and then he gave a gasp of relief.

"The cheery bound!" he roared.

"What?"

"I guess I'll skin him!"

"Him! Who?" ejaculated Jimmy.

"That pesky, crafty gold-darned play-actor!" roared Pete Peters. "Look at this hyer note, you gang of pesky jays, and then tell me whether that there play-actor was a deserted wife from Ontario!"

He flung the letter at the staring cowpunchers. In a minute more all Windy River had read it, marvelling. It was an amazing letter, and it ran:

"Pete Peters,—You made me hop, and I've made you squirm, as I said I would.—Signed—

"CHARLOTTE, ALIAS ORLANDO FITZROY."

The Windy River outfit fairly gasped as they slowly comprehended. Then there was a roar of laughter that rang far over the Windy River.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What are you cackling at, you pesky jays!" roared Pete Peters.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Jimmy Silver.

"Orlando all the time. Ha, ha, ha! He said he would make you squirm. Oh, my hat!"

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

Pete Peters did not laugh. He dashed into his cabin for his gun, and then rushed to saddle his horse. Heedless of the morning's work, heedless of anything, Pete Peters dashed away at a frantic gallop in search of Orlando Fitzroy. And it certainly was fortunate for both parties that Orlando was already far beyond the borders of the Windy River section!

THE HIKING HOLIDAY.

IF you are stumped this year about your holiday, either because you don't know where to go or because the scarcity of cash seems likely to cramp your choice, consider a hiking holiday—one of the best and cheapest ways of spending a holiday that any healthy chap could wish for.

First, it is understood that it is going to be a holiday, and you will therefore cut out all ideas of creating mileage records. Decide your district, but if you are wise you will leave the detailed route to shape itself as you go.

Forming the Party.

Being a sociable sort of chap you will want company. Opinions on the ideal number for a hiking party vary, but certainly four is a good figure. It's small enough to be intimate, and sufficiently big to provide variety of interests and companionship. Four is a useful number if, being beginners, you decide to put up each night at an inn or cottage, wherever fancy and the road land you. Two double rooms will work out cheaper.

You have got your party fixed up. You know where your starting-point is, and you have a vague idea where you are going to finish. So far so good. Now comes the question of necessary kit.

The first item, of course, is the rucksack. You can get quite a serviceable one in a waterproof material for 3/6, or, if you can afford it, and want to get something to last for all time, you can get one of the steel-framed haversacks, scientifically constructed to fit the back and carry the greatest weight with the maximum of comfort. These run from 22/6 upwards. Whichever you buy, have a trial tramp with it before you start on the big hike so that you get the straps adjusted to perfection. A common mistake is to have the rucksack too low.

Foot Comfort.

The next big item—in importance, that is—in your list. Look after them, for on them is going to depend the enjoyment of your holiday. Be advised and get two pairs of shoes. The weight of the extra pair in the bag is cancelled out by the comfort of a change of footwear, a heavy pair, to be your mainstay, and a lighter pair, as reserve. Some experi-

enced hikers have their shoes a trifle larger, so that they can wear two pairs of socks. That's a matter of taste. In any case, you want to pack a liberal supply of socks. Changing them every day is a good method of keeping your feet easy.

Don't get a new pair of shoes for your hike. An old pair, reinforced with a stout sole, and studded, if you are going in rough country, will be the best.

For a simple walking holiday, where you will rely on inns and hotels for food and accommodation, you need no more now than the barest necessities. When you pack for the first time you will probably find that you have a good many items over. Go through the list again and rigorously exclude everything that can be dispensed with. You will bless the Spartan decision when you are climbing a hill with a hot sun warning you up.

Have, in addition to the necessary shirt, underwear, and toilet items, a good soap, a light mac, a "bachelor's" set of needles, thread and buttons, a small first-aid outfit, and a torch.

This last is for night-walking. If you come to a delightful spot by the sea or river and are tempted to laze, do so, and hit the road at night. There is a fresh charm and a delightful experience in store for you if you have never done night-walking before.

Do No Damage

If you want to do a hiking and camping holiday combined, then your expenses naturally will be more. Tent, ground-sheet, stove, cooking utensils, etc., will cost about £3 minimum. Remember, also, that they have to be carried!

Being on foot, you will be able to go far out of the way of the dusty high roads with their motor traffic. But be careful not to damage green ground or crops of any description.

It's a good rule, and a safe one, to keep to paths in private fields, and remember to shut all gates behind you. Being on somebody else's property, if asked to leave you will have no choice but to comply, but the days of spring-guns and man-traps to catch unruly ramblers have passed.

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