

JIMMY'S HELPING HAND! Jimmy Silver plays an important part in turning the tables on Mr. Sampson Smith, the ruthless enemy of Skitter Dick, the cowpuncher!

The Captive Cowpuncher!



A THRILLING LONG COMPLETE TALE DEALING WITH THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMY SILVER & CO. IN THE WILD WEST.

BY
OWEN CONQUEST.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Comrade in Peril!

THERE'S going to be trouble!" Arthur Edward Lovell made that remark, and Jimmy Silver nodded gloomily.

It did not need a very keen eye to see that there was trouble in the air at the Windy River Ranch.

Outside the bunkhouse the Windy River outfit were gathered in a crowd, talking in low tones, with grim and expressive looks. Even Baldy, the cook, who ought to have been washing up pots and pans in the cookhouse, had forgotten his duties, and was standing in the cookhouse doorway, with a frying-pan in his hand, and an excited look on his fat face.

The Windy River outfit were not thinking of the usual business of the day that morning, it was clear.

Jimmy Silver & Co. loafed by the porch of the ranch-house, looking thoughtful and troubled. Boss Smedley was seen, once or twice, glancing from a window—evidently aware that there was trouble coming.

Every man in the crowd glanced now and then across the sunlit prairie, in the direction of the distant stockman's hut at Lone Pine, five miles from the ranch. From that direction, evidently, something was expected to happen.

"The cowpunchers are getting excited," went on Lovell. "If they bring Skitter Dick back a prisoner, there'll be trouble. His pals won't let him be taken away."

"Good for them!" said Raby.

"But it means jolly bad trouble if they start scrapping with the Mounted Police!" said Jimmy Silver glumly.

"They're coming this way!" muttered Newcome.

Pete Peters, the burly foreman of the ranch, had been addressing the cowpunchers. The Rookwood chums were too far off to hear what he said, but they noted its effect on the cowboys. All of

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a sudden the whole crowd started towards the ranch-house.

"Better tell Mr. Smedley!" murmured Lovell.

Jimmy Silver nodded and stepped into the ranch-house. But Mr. Hudson Smedley was already coming out.

The big Canadian rancher stood before the porch waiting for the outfit to come up. The cowpunchers seemed to hesitate as they came under his clear, steady eyes. They halted and looked at him, and looked at one another and shifted uncomfortably. Jimmy Silver noted that several of them had revolvers in their belts—a very unusual circumstance on the Alberta ranch.

"Wade in, Pete," said Spike Thompson. "It's you for the chinwag."

"Go it, Pete!"

The burly foreman "went it."

"Mr. Smedley, sir, the boys want to know—" he began.

"Well?" rapped out the rancher.

"It's about Skitter Dick, sir, up there at Lone Pine."

"Well?"

"We all know the Skitter, boss," said Pete Peters. "He's a square man. He's been one of this outfit a long time, and we all know him down to the ground. We hear there's an American detective arter him, and he's brought the Mounted Police. Waal, boss, the boys say that Skitter Dick is going to have a square deal."

"That's it!" said Red Alf.

"Jest that!" chimed in Spike.

And there was a murmur of approval from a dozen burly fellows.

"Skitter Dick's lit out from Lone Pine with the Mounted arter him," went on Pete Peters. "I saw him ride away for the foothills. But the M.P.'s ain't the sort to let him get clear if they can help. I guess it's the odds on Dick being roped in!"

"I fancy so!" assented Hudson Smedley.

"The boys say that they ain't taking him away if so be they rope him in," said Pete Peters.

"Not by a jugful!" said Spike emphatically.

And he dropped a brown hand on the butt of a six-shooter in his belt.

"He's one of us, and we're seeing him through, boss," said Pete Peters. "We figger it out that it's a frame-up agin him. We know the Skitter's all right."

Hudson Smedley's brows contracted.

All his sympathy was with Skitter Dick, the handsome cowpuncher who was a general favourite at Windy River. But the law was the law, and a warrant in the hands of a sergeant of the Canadian Mounted Police was not to be gainsaid by all the cowpunchers in Alberta.

"We want you to stand in with us, boss," said the foreman.

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked on silently.

They fully believed, with the cowpunchers, that the charge against Dick Lee was a "frame-up." But the law was the law.

"Can't be done!" said Hudson Smedley abruptly. "I tell you how it stands. The American, Sampson Smith, is a detective from California, with a charge against Dick for something that happened at Sacramento two or three years ago. He's accused of shooting a Mexican named Pablo Xenas. Sergeant Kerr and his men have a warrant to take him to Calgary, and if the authorities are satisfied, he will be sent to the States. They'll give him a fair show at Calgary. Canadian law is all right."

"We ain't bucking agin Canadian law," said Pete Peters. "But we ain't letting Skitter Dick be taken over the Line. They ain't pertickler in the States, that I know of. It's a frame-up agin Dick, and how's a cowpuncher to stand up agin a crowd of lawyers and argify? Dick ain't going, boss!"

"Not by long chalks!" said Red Alf.

"This won't do, men," said the rancher quietly. "If it was Sampson Smith alone, I'd chuck him into the river before he should touch a man of

my outfit! But the Mounted Police stand for the law of Canada, and that's that!"

Pete Peters shook his head slowly.

"Then you ain't with us, boss?"

"No."

"Can't be helped," said the foreman. "You can fire the whole outfit if you like, boss, though we'll be sorry to go. But if they bring Dick back here a prisoner, we're taking a hand in the game, Mounted Police or no Mounted Police!"

The Rancher smiled slightly.

"Is that all, Pete?"

"That's all, boss."

"Then get about business!" said the rancher. "They won't come back here. If Sergeant Kerr gets his man, he will light out for Red Deer across the plains, and Windy River won't see hide nor hair of him."

"Oh!" ejaculated Pete.

There was a deep murmur from the cowpunchers. That was a new view of the matter to them, and it looked as if the affair was right out of the hands of the Windy River crowd.

"Saddle up!" shouted Spike Thompson. "Let's get out and look for them, boys!"

"Stand where you are!" rapped out Hudson Smedley.

"Look hyer, boss—"

There was a sudden yell from Baldy, the cook. He jumped out of the doorway of the cookhouse, brandishing his frying-pan in his excitement.

"They're coming!" yelled Baldy.

He pointed across the plain with the frying-pan. Every eye turned in that direction.

From the Lone Pine trail came a bunch of horsemen. The morning sunlight glimmered on the uniforms of the Canadian Mounted Police. And in the midst of the cavalcade, bound to his horse, rode Skitter Dick, a prisoner!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Prisoner!

RANCHER SMEDLEY gritted his teeth.

He had hoped that the last had been seen of the party of M.P.'s at Windy River. They had their prisoner; and common prudence dictated that the captive should be taken away as quickly as possible, without coming near the ranch, where he had determined and reckless friends. Why, in the name of wonder, had they brought him back to the ranch, where the cowpunchers were ready for trouble?

Skitter Dick rode quietly, with downcast eyes, in the midst of his captors. Evidently his flight from Lone Pine had failed, and the troopers had roped him in before he could get clear away to the foothills of the Rockies. Ahead of the party, with the sergeant, rode Mr. Sampson Smith, the hard-faced detective from California. Three troopers rode round Skitter Dick, watchful for an attempt to escape.

The horsemen rode up to the ranch, amid a deep murmur from the cowpunchers.

Skitter Dick raised his eyes, and the colour flooded into his handsome face at the sight of his comrades. He felt deeply the humiliation of his position.

"We're standing by you, Dick!" shouted Red Alf.

The party halted at a word from the sergeant, and the troopers closed up round the prisoner, with their carbines handy. Their looks were quiet and cool, not in the slightest degree threatening; but there was no mistaking their

determination. Any attempt at rescue would have led at once to shooting.

That consideration did not trouble the Windy River outfit. They gathered in an excited crowd round the bunch of horsemen.

Sampson Smith looked at them, and his greenish eyes glinted.

"Mr. Smedley!" he rapped out.

"Well?"

"Better keep your crowd in hand, You don't want shooting here!"

"Why have you come back?" snapped Hudson Smedley. "You've got your man. Hadn't you horse-sense enough to keep clear? Didn't you know enough to go in when it rains?"

"I guess I've got the man, but I ain't got all I want," said the detective.

"I've come back for it."

"What do you want?"

The Californian gritted his teeth.

"I've searched him," he said. "He ain't got it on him. I reckon it will be among his things here. He shot a man in Sacramento to get hold of a gold nugget. I'm after the gold brick, as well as the man. And I guess I ain't going without it."

Jimmy Silver's eyes met Skitter Dick's for a second. The cowpuncher smiled slightly.

Jimmy compressed his lips.

The gold brick that Mr. Sampson Smith was so keen to possess, reposed at that moment in Jimmy's hip-pocket. Skitter Dick had trusted him to take care of it; and Jimmy had no intention of betraying the trust. Not for a moment did he believe the hard-faced man's statement; his faith in his cowboy pal was too strong for that. Not even Jimmy's chums knew that the gold brick was in his possession—it was a secret between him and the Skitter.

Certainly, Sampson Smith was not likely to guess that the gold brick was in the keeping of the schoolboy. His belief was that Skitter Dick had hidden it somewhere in his quarters at the ranch.

Rancher Smedley hesitated a moment or two.

"I guess I'm not dealing with you, Mr. Smith," he said, at last. "American law and American detectives cut no ice on this side of the border. The sergeant for me. What do you say, Mr. Kerr?"

"I guess it's Mr. Smith's deal," said the sergeant, with obvious reluctance.

"I'm placed under his orders for this job, Mr. Smedley. We've got his man, and we're bound to see him through in searching for what he wants."

"That plain enough?" sneered Sampson Smith.

"You'll never make me believe that Skitter Dick's laid hands on anything that isn't his," said the rancher quietly.

"But you're welcome to search, if you choose. Dick had his quarters in the bunkhouse here—he's got a bunk, and a bed, and a grip or two there—and you can look into them."

"That's good enough," said Sampson Smith. "I reckoned he'd have the gold brick in his clothes, but he ain't, and so I guess it's hidden here somewhere. I ain't going without it!"

"I guess you're booked for a long stay in Alberta, then, Mr. Smith!" said Skitter Dick.

The detective gave the bound man a savage look.

"Where's the gold brick, you pesky varmint!" he snarled.

"Find it!"

"You won't let on?"

"Nope!"

Sampson Smith pushed his horse

closer to Skitter Dick, his hand clenched, his eyes glinting.

"You hound! Tell me where it's hidden, or—"

His clenched hand was raised.

A moment more, and there would have been a rush of the cowpunchers. But Sergeant Kerr interposed, shoving the detective back so violently that he rolled from his horse, and came to the ground with a crash.

"None of that, I guess!" said Sergeant Kerr.

Sampson Smith scrambled to his feet, red with rage.

"What do you mean by that?" he yelled. "You're under my orders, Sergeant Kerr."

"Only for duty!" said the sergeant.

"Lay a finger on that man, and I'll give you my riding-whip next, Mr. Smith!"

"Hear, hear!" chirruped Lovell.

Mr. Sampson Smith scowled round at the grinning cowpunchers. But he did not continue the dispute with the sergeant.

"Where's the man's bunk?" he snarled.

"Jimmy, show him Dick's quarters, will you?" said Mr. Smedley.

"Certainly! This way, Mr. Smith," said Jimmy Silver politely.

The detective followed him.

Jimmy Silver led the way into the bunkhouse, which was vacant. He pointed out Skitter Dick's bunk.

The bunk, and a bag or two, and a few odds and ends, were all the goods that belonged to Skitter Dick at the Windy River Ranch. A cowpuncher's worldly possessions were generally limited to the amount that could be carried on a horse.

Mr. Smith proceeded to search.

Jimmy Silver stood by, watching him, with a cheery smile on his face. It was rather entertaining to watch Mr. Smith searching for the article that was, at that moment, reposing in Jimmy's pocket.

The Californian detective's search was thorough enough.

Had the gold brick been hidden there, indubitably Mr. Smith would have unearthed it. But it was not hidden there; and the Californian had his trouble for his pains.

He ceased at last, with a savage scowling brow.

"I guess he's put it somewhere safe," he muttered.

"Very likely!" assented Jimmy.

"Finished here, Mr. Smith?"

"Yep!"

The detective strode out of the bunkhouse.

The group still stood before the ranch, Skitter Dick in the midst of his captors.

The handsome cowpuncher grinned as Sampson Smith came scowling up, followed by Jimmy Silver.

"Any luck?" he asked.

Sampson Smith did not reply to that question.

"We're ready, Mr. Smith!" the sergeant grunted. "We've got a long trail to cover."

There was a murmur from the cowpunchers, and they closed round the riders. Three or four revolvers were in full view now, and the troopers handled their carbines.

"Stand back, men!" shouted Hudson Smedley.

"They ain't taking Dick away!" answered Pete Peters. "Sorry, boss; but if they try to take him, there's goin' to be bad trouble."

Sergeant Kerr gave the ranch foreman a grim look.

"We're doing our duty, Mr. Peters," he said. "Any man raising a hand to stop us from taking away our prisoner is breaking the law. We shall shoot!"

There was a derisive laugh from the cowpunchers.

"Shoot, and be darned!" said Spike Thompson. "I guess we know how to pull triggers, too, at Windy River!"

"Hold on, boys!" broke out Skitter Dick anxiously. "No shooting on my account. Let up, old pards!"

"They ain't taking you, Dick!"

"I guess I've got to go," said the cowboy. "Don't make matters worse all round. You can't buck agin the law."

"Are you ready, Mr. Smith?" said the sergeant grimly.

Sampson Smith ground his teeth.

"Not yet! Hold on!"

He stepped up beside the bound cowpuncher, and fixed his eyes savagely on Skitter Dick's face.

"Where's the gold brick?" he muttered, sinking his voice.

"Where you'll never find it—you or your gang!" answered Skitter Dick coolly.

"Hand it over, and go free!" whispered the detective.

Skitter Dick looked at him.

"Free?" he repeated.

"Free! You know I don't want you. It's the gold brick I'm after, and the clue to the mine!" growled Sampson Smith. "Make it a deal," he whispered so that only the cowboy could hear him. "Hand over the gold brick, and you're a free man, and I'll see you clear of this charge, too!"

The cowpuncher's lip curled.

"You own it's a frame-up?" he said. "I'll own up anything you like, I guess, with the gold brick in my hands!" muttered the detective.

Skitter Dick laughed aloud.

"Nothing doing!" he said.

"You won't hand it over to save your neck?"

"No!"

Sampson Smith gave him a malignant glance.

"I'm ready, sergeant!" he growled. "Get a move on, and let's get back to Mosquito!"

The horsemen closed up. In their path grouped the cowpunchers, with grim, menacing looks, weapons in hand.

"Halt!" snapped Pete Peters.

"Clear the way!" shouted the sergeant. "Stop us, and we fire!"

"I guess we'll shoot, too, darn your hide! Stand up to them, boys!"

"You bet!"

"Hold on!" Skitter Dick's voice broke out. "Boys, stand back! You know I'm innocent of this charge. I'll get clear. Don't shoot! Stand back and let them pass. It's the last thing I ask."

"Look here, Dick—"

"Boys, you don't want me to go knowing I've left black trouble behind for my friends! Stand clear, for my sake!"

There was a murmur among the cowpunchers, and hesitation. But the earnest appeal of the prisoner had its effect. Slowly the crowd of cowpunchers parted, leaving a path free for the horsemen.

"You're a darn fool, Dick!" said Pete Peters. "You won't get a fair deal. Say the word, and we'll—"

"Good-bye, old pards!"

The Mounted Police moved on, surrounding their prisoner. Grim and angry looks watched them go. But

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Skitter Dick had had his way; and no hand was raised, no shot was fired. Over the rolling prairie the cavalcade went at a trot, and they vanished from the angry eyes of the Windy River outfit.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Jimmy Silver on the Trail!

"BLAZER!"

Jimmy Silver called to his horse, and Blazer trotted up. At the gate of the corral Jimmy saddled him.

"Whither bound?" asked Lovell, coming up to the corral.

Arthur Edward's face was glum, as was every face at the ranch since Skitter Dick had been taken away by the troops.

Jimmy glanced round.

"I'm going after them!" he muttered.

"They're at Mosquito before now," said Lovell.

WITH THE ROOKWOOD
CHUMS
IN
CANADA!



"LOVELL,
The
LOVE-LORN!"

By OWEN CONQUEST.

Next Week.

"They won't stay at Mosquito long, only to feed, and feed the horses," said Jimmy. "They'll be heading for Red Deer, to get on the cars for Calgary."

"That's so. But—"

Lovell eyed his chum very doubtfully.

"What can you do?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Jimmy Silver frankly. "But—but I want to see the last of poor old Skitter Dick."

"They'll be a good many miles ahead," said Lovell.

"Blazer can beat any horse in that outfit."

"But—"

"Anyhow, better be riding than worrying," said Jimmy Silver, and he jumped on his horse, waved his hand to Lovell, and rode away.

Arthur Edward Lovell stood looking after him rather dubiously. He wondered whether Jimmy had some reckless scheme in his head for helping Skitter Dick to escape from his captors.

As a matter of fact, Jimmy had no formed plan in his mind at all. He was anxious about Skitter Dick, and wanted

to help him if he could. And the gold brick in his pocket weighed on his mind, too. He knew that that was what had brought Sampson Smith to Canada.

The arrest of the Skitter was only a pretext for seizing the gold brick. With that, the cowpuncher could have ransomed himself, had he chosen. Sampson Smith was acting under cover of the law; but he was only using the law for his own ends, as Jimmy was well aware.

Once away from the ranch, booked for a foreign country, and a trail for his life, it seemed to Jimmy likely enough that Skitter Dick would regret that he had not taken his chance and ransomed his freedom. That chance, at least, Jimmy could give him if he overtook the party on the prairie trail.

What the value of the gold brick was, Jimmy did not know. It was worth, perhaps, fifty pounds as metal; but it was not for its intrinsic value that Sampson Smith had followed the long trail from California in search of it. Jimmy wondered whether the markings on the gold brick gave it its value, forming a clue, perhaps, to the mine where it had been found. He had not looked at it since placing it in his pocket—the secret of it was not his. But he had seen it once, and he remembered that it was graven with lines and words.

Jimmy Silver did not head for the Mosquito township. He knew that the troopers had probably left that spot by this time—it was now late in the afternoon. They were somewhere on the boundless plains, heading for Red Deer, and that night, it was certain, they would camp out on the prairie. Jimmy was riding for the Red Deer trail, a dozen miles south of Mosquito.

The sun was setting when he came on the well-worn trail—worn by countless hoofs of horses and cattle.

He halted on the trail, and surveyed the plain, here and there dotted by clumps of trees or thickets.

There was no one in sight, and he could not be certain whether the troopers had passed that point on the trail yet. Jimmy was learning to read "signs," but he was not yet skilled enough to pick out a late trail from the crowded tracks before him.

He sat Blazer, thinking, uncertain. The sound of hoof-beats from the direction of Mosquito startled him.

He looked up quickly.

Three riders came in sight, and he recognised Sampson Smith and a trooper, with Skitter Dick riding between, bound to his horse.

Sergeant Kerr and the other two troopers were not to be seen.

Jimmy sat his horse in the trail, waiting for the trio to come up. Sampson Smith scowled at him, and the trooper, who was Jimmy's old acquaintance, Mr. Bright, nodded and smiled. Skitter Dick looked at him in surprise.

"You here, Jimmy!" he exclaimed, as he came within hearing.

"Here I am," said Jimmy. "Fancy meeting you again!"

"Keep away from that prisoner, boy!" said Sampson Smith harshly. "You're not wanted here!"

Jimmy did not heed him.

"I can speak to Skitter Dick, Mr. Bright?" he asked.

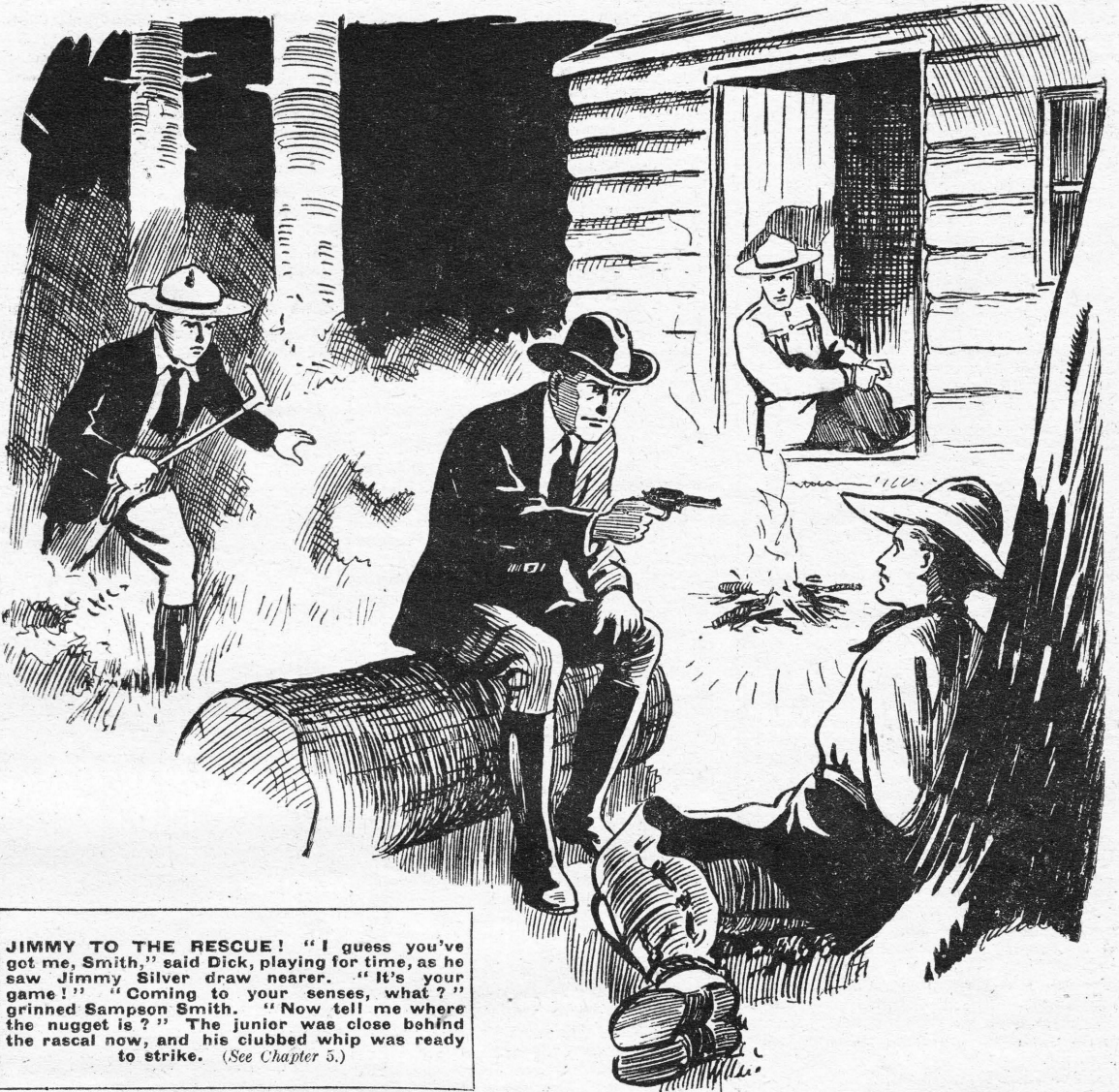
"No harm in it that I know of," answered the trooper. "Mind, no monkey tricks, kid!"

"Of course not!"

"You're under my orders, my man!" snapped Sampson Smith. "That boy isn't joining us!"

Trooper Bright looked at him.

"I've got my sergeant's orders to take



JIMMY TO THE RESCUE! "I guess you've got me, Smith," said Dick, playing for time, as he saw Jimmy Silver draw nearer. "It's your game!" "Coming to your senses, what?" grinned Sampson Smith. "Now tell me where the nugget is?" The junior was close behind the rascal now, and his clubbed whip was ready to strike. (See Chapter 5.)

Skitter Dick safe to Red Deer," he answered. "That's enough for me! Your orders cut no ice, Mr. Smith! The kid shall please himself whether he rides with us! The trail's free to every man in Canada!"

Sampson Smith gritted his teeth, but made no rejoinder. But it was evident that, for some reason, he was extremely unwilling for the addition to be made to the party.

Jimmy rode beside the cowpuncher. "I'd like a last word with you, Skitter," he said.

"Glad to see you again, Jimmy, if it's for the last time!" said the cowpuncher, with a faint smile.

"I can't hold you, old chap—"

"I don't want you to, Jimmy—nobody's going to get on the wrong side of the law on my account," said Skitter Dick.

Jimmy nodded.

"The sergeant's stopped behind?" he asked.

"Yes; at Mosquito. Other business up-country as well as roping me."

"Bootleggers!" said Trooper Bright, glancing round. "Sergeant Kerr's after the bootleggers, who're selling fire-water to the half-breeds. One man's enough to take a prisoner to Red Deer,

Jimmy. I guess you ain't going to hook him out of my hands—what?"

And the big trooper laughed.

"No!" said Jimmy, smiling.

"Good man!"

"Dick" said Jimmy, sinking his voice, "it's pretty clear what that man Smith is after. He would loose his hold on you if you let him have what he wants. Isn't it worth while?"

"So that's why you came along, kid?"

"Yes. I thought—"

Skitter Dick shook his head.

"I've been thinking it over pretty hard, I guess," he said. "But I ain't handing anything over. I had that brick, Jimmy, from a man who was killed on the Sacramento road three years ago—a white man and a Canadian, he was. It's the clue to a mine in British Columbia. They'd laid for him—Pablo Xenas and his gang, I guess, and let him have it—I came up in time, and they scuttled. He gave it to me, Jimmy—it's a dead man's property, and I can't give it away. He's got people somewhere, and if ever I find them, it's for them. Savvy?"

"I—I see!" said Jimmy slowly.

"He gave me his name," went on Skitter Dick, "nearly with his last breath. He gave me the gold brick to keep. Next day Pablo Xenas and

his gang cornered me, they knew I had it—or they guessed. I shot Xenas to save my own life. But his friends worked it that I shot him in a row, and I reckoned I'd clear—and that's how the detective Sampson Smith got put after me. It was just a case for him, at first—he got hold of me in Sacramento; and then Pablo's friends took him into the secret, and when he knew what was at stake, he joined them after the gold brick. I'd hidden it safe before he roped me in—and I got away again, Jimmy, and after that I got hold of the gold brick, and lit out at once for Canada. That's a long step from Sacramento, and I reckoned I was clear of the whole crowd of them."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

The strange story was clearer to him now.

"I never blamed myself for winging Xenas," went on Skitter Dick. "He was at me with a knife, with two or three more, when I pulled trigger. But there's a charge of murder waiting for me in Sacramento, and I reckon my vamoosing would tell against me at the trial. But I wasn't going to take the risk, with three or four rascals ready to swear my life away. It wouldn't be the first time a frame-up had cost a man

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his life in the Western States. I never reckoned I'd see any of them so far north as Alberta. I guess I got a shock when Sampson Smith blew in the other day."

Jimmy Silver was silent.

It was a dead man's trust that the cowpuncher was keeping, and Jimmy could not urge him to give the hard-faced detective the plunder he was seeking; it was not Dick Lee's to give.

He rode on in silence, with a troubled face.

Skitter Dick was troubled, too; but his determination was unshaken. Whether life or death waited for him over the line, the gold brick should not pass into the hands of his enemies.

After a long silence Skitter Dick glanced at Sampson Smith, and then spoke to Jimmy in a whisper that the hard-faced man could not hear.

"But I reckon, Jimmy, there suthing more afoot. I figure it out that that galoot don't intend to take me to Calgary for extradition."

"But—" said Jimmy.

Skitter Dick shook his head.

"He's used the law to get me into his hands," he muttered. "Here I am bound to do as he likes with. I guess I've got doubts whether I shall get as far as Red Deer, let alone Calgary."

"But the trooper—"

"I guess Sampson Smith wouldn't stick at much if the trooper was in his way," said the Skitter coolly.

Jimmy shuddered.

"But—but surely—"

"You saw he didn't want you to join up, Jimmy," whispered the Skitter. "Old son, I reckon, now I've figured it out, that you can come in on this deal if you like. I'm a bound prisoner, and the trooper doesn't suspect an American detective of trying to double-cross him."

"I'll stick to you all the way to Red Deer."

"Not by a jugful. Clear off, as if you was going back to the ranch—and follow the trail," whispered Skitter Dick. "I guess I don't want Smith to drill you, if he means treachery. He's got a shooter, and he's quick on the shoot. You ain't throwing your life away on my account, Jimmy. But if you foller on without being seen you may be able to help me when I need it bad—pesky bad."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"But if you think that—if you suspect Smith—you must warn Trooper Bright!" he whispered.

"I guess I've given him the griffin, and he grinned," said Skitter Dick. "He don't take any stock in it. Sampson Smith's got his credentials all O.K., and Trooper Bright's told off to guard him and his prisoner. That's enough for him."

"You couldn't do more than warn him," muttered Jimmy.

"I've done that!"

They rode on in silence. Sampson Smith cast evil looks at the schoolboy, and his looks seemed, to Jimmy, to bear out the black suspicion that Skitter Dick had whispered. Why else should Jimmy's presence irritate the hard-faced man so keenly? If there was no treachery in his mind, Jimmy's presence made no difference to him one way or the other. Certainly he could not have supposed that Jimmy could attempt to rescue the Skitter from Trooper Bright.

The trooper slacked down in speed, looking about him. The sun was low in the west; it was close on time for camp. Jimmy caught Skitter Dick's eyes fixed on him.

He gave a slight nod.

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"Time I was off, I think," he said to Mr. Bright.

"More than time, I guess," said the trooper, with a smile. "You won't be back at the ranch this side midnight."

Sampson Smith, who rode a little ahead, looked round quickly. His sudden look showed plainly enough that he was glad that Jimmy was going.

"Good-bye, Dick!"

"Good-bye, kid!"

"And good-night to you, Mr. Bright!"

Jimmy turned his horse from the trail.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Whip-Hand!

A RED glow of flame glimmered out on the plains under the dark, velvety sky of Alberta.

Where the Red Deer trail ran by a ford over a sluggish stream an old cabin stood—used as a rest-house by travellers on that lonely trail. It was the roughest and rudest of shelters; a roof of pinewood, fastened on pine uprights, with wattled walls that had a dozen openings in them, the largest of which served as a door, the others, perhaps, as windows. The three horses were tethered in the grass outside the rude shelter; inside, under the slanting pine roof, the blankets were thrown for three men to sleep.

A camp-fire glowed before the hut, and Trooper Bright prepared his supper and the prisoner's supper. Mr. Sampson Smith looked after himself. There was nothing in common between him and the trooper, and they exchanged hardly a word. The burly, good-natured Canadian trooper hardly troubled to conceal his repugnance for the hard-faced, sly-eyed man from the States. He had his duty to do, and that duty was to bring his prisoner safe to Calgary with the Californian detective; and nothing would have turned Trooper Bright from his duty—not all the guns of the whole Windy River outfit, had they been there. But, apart from his duty, all his feelings were with the handsome cowpuncher whom he was guarding, and he kept the hard-faced man at more than arm's length.

Skitter Dick's hands were freed while he ate his supper, Trooper Bright keeping watch on him, revolver in hand. He liked the frank, handsome cowboy, personally, but he would have shot him dead without the slightest scruple had that been the only means to prevent an escape. Alive or dead, Trooper Bright was going to bring his prisoner to Calgary.

After supper, and when the party prepared to turn into their blankets, Dick Lee's hands were secured again—not in a way to cause him discomfort, if it could be helped, but in such a way that he had not the remotest chance of getting loose. And the trooper, ere he lay down to rest, fastened a cord from the prisoner's arm to his own. Any movement on Skitter Dick's part was bound to awaken him.

"Sorry, old pard," he said. "Duty's duty; I hope you'll get clear of this business; but I've got to land you at Calgary."

The cowpuncher nodded.

"I guess I ain't blaming you, sonny," he said. "You're going to sleep?"

"You'd better, too."

"I've given you the griffin about that lantern-jawed 'tec."

Mr. Bright grinned.

"Forget it, old pard!" he said.

And he rolled himself in his blanket, with his feet to the fire, to sleep.

Skitter Dick shrugged his shoulders, and lay down also. He had warned the trooper of his own vague suspicion, and he could do no more.

It was natural enough that Mr. Bright should not heed the warning. He put it down to Dick's natural dislike of the detective who had tracked him all the way from the Sacramento valley.

Dick did not intend to sleep; but he was weary. From his blanket he watched for a time Sampson Smith, stretched on the other side of the rest-hut.

The Californian was seemingly in slumber; he did not move. Skitter Dick wondered whether his suspicion had been unfounded.

Skitter Dick dozed at last. He started out of a half-slumber at the sound of a low, hissing voice.

"You're for it if you stir a finger!"

It was the voice of Sampson Smith.

Dick's eyes opened wide.

Trooper Bright's eyes were wide open, too; his hand was on his carbine. But kneeling over the trooper, clear in the glow of the fire, was the hard-faced man from California, and a revolver in his hand was jammed fairly into the trooper's startled face.

Bright did not stir. He knew when he was helpless, and he read savage determination in the face above him.

But his cool voice did not falter as he spoke:

"What's this game, Mr. Smith?"

"Are you taking it easy?"

"Sure!"

The man from Sacramento grinned. "You'd better!" he said. "A bullet through the brain would keep you quiet enough, I guess; but I'd rather not spill your juice if I can help it. But I ain't taking chances. Stir, and you're a dead man!"

"Your game!" said the trooper tersely.

His glance fell for a moment on Skitter Dick. But the bound prisoner could not help him. He could only stare on the scene in the dancing red light of the camp-fire, helpless, expectant.

"Loose that carbine!"

Trooper Bright released his weapon.

"You've got handcuffs on you?"

"Sure."

"Hook them out!"

With stolid self-control, Trooper Bright hooked out the handcuffs. The revolver-muzzle almost touching his eyes enforced obedience. It was futile to ask for sudden and merciless death; and it was clear that it was only concern for his own neck that was holding back Sampson Smith's finger, now on the trigger. But at the slightest sign of resistance he would have fired ruthlessly.

"Put your paws together!"

Click!

The trooper's own handcuffs fastened on his own wrists. Sampson Smith grinned and rose to his feet.

"Neat, I guess!" he remarked.

Trooper Bright nodded.

"You've done me," he said quietly.

"I don't blame myself; I was put under your orders by my superiors; it's their funeral, not mine. Let me get a chance, and I'll muzzle you fast enough!"

Sampson Smith did not even trouble to answer. He turned to Skitter Dick, and his eyes fixed on the bound cowpuncher with a deadly look.

"I guess it's me for the gold brick!" he said.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

For Life or Death!

SKITTER DICK drew a deep breath. His eyes were fixed on the ruffian before him, at whose mercy he now was, and from whom he expected little mercy.

"You're my mutton, Dick Lee!" grinned the man from Sacramento.

"Looks sure like it!" agreed Skitter Dick. "You ain't banking on taking me back to Sacramento, then?"

Sampson Smith laughed.

"Not in your life-time!" he said. "I reckon I've got the warrant for you fair and square—it was the only way to rope you in. The Mounted Police have done that for me. I've done with the law now, Dick Lee—and now I'm for the gold brick. Where is it?"

"Where you'll never find it!"

"I guess I shall make you talk! Give me the gold brick, and go free—without a stain on your name, either! I can fix that charge at Sacramento. I can tell you something that you'd give ten years' pay on the ranch to know! Is it a trade?"

"No."

"Think it over," said Sampson Smith, lighting a cigar, standing and looking down at the bound man as he did so. "I'll put all my cards on the table, Lee. I can make it worth your while to hand out the nugget. I ain't taking you back over the Line. I don't care a Continental red cent what becomes of you, so long as I handle the clue to the old mine in British Columbia. What would you give to know that Pablo Xenas is alive still—that I can prove it and clear you?"

Skitter Dick gave a violent start.

"Alive!" he muttered.

"I guess I can produce the man!" said Sampson Smith. "If you hadn't been a god-darned mug you'd have guessed that your bullet only laid him out for the time. He kept out of sight after that, while the frame-up was worked on you. Savvy? Plenty of witnesses to prove that you shot him and you know where you put the body. But what if I could produce the man alive and well?"

He watched the cowpuncher's face.

Skitter Dick drew a sharp breath of relief.

"I guess I'm glad that I never finished for keeps even a greaser scum like Pablo Xenas," he said. "And if he's living he'll be found if I come to trial at Sacramento."

"You won't come within a thousand miles of Sacramento! You're a free man, with Pablo Xenas to prove that you never killed him, if you hand over the gold brick. He's in this game with me, I guess. Is it a trade?"

"No."

"You're not telling?"

"No."

Sampson Smith's eyes glittered.

"What's the good of the gold brick to you, Lee? You've never used it as a clue to the mine."

"It belongs to a dead man, and you ain't touching it, nor I either," said Skitter Dick steadily.

"I guess we shall see about that."

Sampson Smith bent and grasped the bound cowpuncher and dragged him out of the hut. It was useless for Skitter Dick to struggle; Mr. Bright had done his work with the cords only too well.

Trooper Bright's glance followed them bitterly. But he was powerless to intervene.

"You're not talking yet, Dick?" asked Sampson Smith.

"Nope."

"Then I guess your feet are going into the fire, pard. Call out when you've had enough."

Skitter Dick's handsome face was white, and great beads of perspiration were on his brow.

There was no ruth or mercy in the hard face of the man who had come north seeking, not a fugitive from justice, but a clue to a fortune. He stood over the helpless cowpuncher, grim and menacing.

"You villain!" came from Trooper Bright. "You durned villain! If my hands were loose—"

Sampson Smith did not even glance towards him.

"I give you till I've finished this cigar, Dick Lee," he said. "Then I guess you're talking one way or another."

"Not a word!" said Skitter Dick between his teeth.

The man from California shrugged his shoulders. He sat on a log facing the prisoner, puffing slowly at the cigar. The handcuffed trooper looked on in tense, savage silence.

Skitter Dick lay on his elbow, looking past the man who was sitting on the log, looking past him into the night.

He knew that the Californian's threat was no idle one; he knew that his life was to pay for the gold brick. His only hope was in Jimmy Silver, and that hope was faint.

"Another minute, I guess!" said Sampson Smith, breaking the silence.

He blew out a cloud of smoke.

A sudden gleam shot into Skitter Dick's eyes. From the darkness outside the radius of the camp-fire a shadow moved for a moment—directly behind the Californian sitting on the log.

The cowpuncher felt his heart throb.

If Sampson Smith should look over his shoulder? But he did not. Not for an instant did a suspicion cross his mind that there was anyone else at hand. Not a sound came from the darkness of the plains.

Trooper Bright saw the shadow that moved, but his bronzed face expressed nothing.

Skitter Dick broke into sudden talk, to keep the Californian's attention riveted on himself, to keep him from the chance of looking behind him. For it was an unarmed schoolboy with whom he would have had to deal had he discovered his danger.

"I guess you've got me, Smith," said the cowpuncher. "It's your game, and I may as well pass in my chips."

"Coming to your senses, what?" grinned Sampson Smith. "I reckoned you'd talk when you found I meant business. Where's the nugget?"

The shadow was close behind the Californian now.

Jimmy Silver, silent, tense, his face hard-set, his whip clubbed in his hand, was almost within hitting distance. Well he knew that if he failed to take the rascal by surprise he would have no time for a second blow. One ring from the Californian's revolver, and Jimmy Silver's intervention would have been ended.

Sampson Smith threw away the stump of his cigar.

"Time's up, Dick!" he said. "I guess I want to know where the nugget is. I reckon I— Ah!"

Crash!

Right on the head of the rascal came the heavy metal butt of the riding-whip with all the strength of Jimmy Silver's arm in the blow.

Sampson Smith gave a gurgling cry and fell sideways from the log.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Turning the Tables!

JIMMY SILVER sprang forward. His weapon whirled up for a second blow.

The hard-faced man from the Sacramento, half stunned, rolled on the ground, but his hand was gripping his revolver.

Crack!

The bullet flew wide—a yard from the Rookwood junior. Sampson Smith had no time for a second shot.

Crash!

Down came the riding-whip, and the man from California sank back in the grass. The second blow had stunned him.

Jimmy Silver panted.

He bent over the senseless man and jerked away his revolver. Then he turned to Skitter Dick.

"I was in time," he panted.

"I guess so, Jimmy. You've saved my life!"

"I've been watching the camp for hours," muttered Jimmy breathlessly.

"I was hanging on, Dick, before you'd finished your supper. I've been watching, waiting, and I saw him drag you out of the hut. I got near enough to hear him speaking. But I had to be careful; he would have shot me if he had seen me, and that wouldn't have helped you."

"Nope, for sure!" grinned Skitter Dick. "You're the real goods, Jimmy, the real white article! I guess you can let me out of these ropes, if Mr. Bright ain't no objection to make."

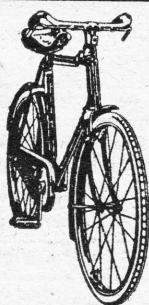
Trooper Bright held up his manacled hands.

"I guess I can't raise objections," he said. "I never was so glad to see anybody as to see you this time, young Silver! Let me loose, and I'll make sure of that skunk."

"Right-ho!" said Jimmy.

But he released Skitter Dick first. After what had happened, Jimmy did not know what the trooper's intentions might be; but he intended to make Skitter Dick master of his own actions.

The cowpuncher was freed, and he picked up the revolver taken from the senseless Californian.



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"I guess I can talk to you now, Mr. Bright!" he said, with a grin.

The trooper shrugged his shoulders. "You're not my prisoner now," he said. "I guess I'm a prisoner myself, and I want your help. Are you letting me loose and taking the chance?"

"Sure!" Without hesitation the Skitter bent over him, found the spring of the handcuffs, and released him.

Trooper Bright rubbed his wrists and took the handcuffs. He fastened them on the wrists of Sampson Smith, who was now stirring with returning consciousness.

The Californian sat up dazedly on the grass. His wild glance went from one to another, and rested on Jimmy Silver.

"You here!" he muttered thickly. "It was you who—"

"Little me!" smiled Jimmy Silver. The man struggled with the handcuffs.

"Who's put these on me? Take them off!"

"I guess not," said Trooper Bright grimly. "You're coming with me to Calgary, Mr. Smith, a prisoner!"

The Californian muttered a savage exclamation.

"I guess I know the whole story now," continued Trooper Bright grimly. "I kinder guess Dick Lee won't be extradited now, Mr. Smith—not in your lifetime. I guess there'll be galoots looking for Pablo Xenas, your confederate, and finding him, too; he won't be far away, I reckon. I guess I'm a witness for Skitter Dick, and that you've come to Canada, Mr. Smith to put in some long years in the penitentiary. You'll find it's a pretty serious matter to hold up the Mounted Police with a revolver."

The wretched man gave a groan.

"Let me loose," he muttered. "I can make it worth your while, Lee. I can tell you where to put your finger on Pablo Xenas."

"You mean that he's in Canada," grinned Skitter Dick. "I guess he wouldn't trust you far out of his sight with the gold brick at the end of the trail. Waiting for you at Red Deer,

perhaps. I guess I can leave it to the M.P.'s to find him—and I'm going on to Red Deer with Mr. Bright to help him keep you safe and sound."

"You'll come with me a free man," said the trooper.

"Hurrah!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver. He left the camp to seek Blazer, whom he had tethered at a safe distance. While he was gone Sampson Smith pleaded and pressed his handcuffed hands to his aching head. But pleading availed him nothing. When Jimmy Silver came back, leading Blazer, Sampson Smith was lying in his blanket again, with his legs tied for additional security.

Jimmy Silver camped at the old hut by the ford for the remainder of that night. He was in great spirits, and thankful, from the bottom of his heart, that he had followed Skitter Dick from the ranch.

After breakfast in the morning Trooper Bright and Skitter Dick started on the Red Deer trail, with Sampson Smith riding between them, a bound prisoner. The positions had changed now in that party of three.

"Tell the boyes at the ranch!" Skitter Dick called out joyfully, as he started.

"You bet!" chuckled Jimmy Silver. And he rode merrily on the long trail to Windy River, while the trooper and Skitter Dick and the prisoner disappeared southward.

It was high noon when Jimmy Silver arrived at the Windy River Ranch. His chums came hurriedly to meet him, and Rancher Smedley gave him a stern look as he rode up. But the rancher's expression altered when Jimmy told him what had happened that wild night on the prairie.

"Hurrah!" roared Arthur Edward Lovell, tossing his Stetson hat high in the air, careless whether it ever came down again.

"Hip, hip, hurrah!" yelled Raby and Newcome.

Pete Peters hurried over from the bunkhouse.

"Any news of the Skitter?" he asked eagerly.

Jimmy Silver told the news. "By gum!" ejaculated Pete. "By gum! And you a kid tenderfoot!" He gripped Jimmy Silver's hand. "Put it there, kid!"

"Ow!" ejaculated Jimmy. The cowboy foreman's grip was hard. Leaving Jimmy with numbed fingers, Pete Peters rushed across to the cookhouse with the news.

"Skitter Dick's cleared, and he's coming back when he's got through at Calgary!" roared the ranch foreman.

And then there was a roar from the Windy River outfit that rolled back in echoes like thunder from the prairie.

Skitter Dick's return to Windy River was delayed, but before the Skitter came there came news of him. As the cowpuncher had guessed, Pablo Xenas had not trusted his confederate far out of his sight, and the Canadian Mounted Police, once on the track, did not fail. The Mexican was found in Red Deer, waiting there, under an assumed name, for news of his associate's progress, and the first news the rascal received came in the form of a burly Canadian trooper's hand on his shoulder.

With Pablo Xenas alive and well and a prisoner, it was clear enough that the case against Skitter Dick was a "frame up." Both the plotting rascals went to prison after their trial. Mr. Sampson Smith, with the additional prospect before him of being extradited, when his term was up, to be dealt with by his own authorities for betraying his trust. And Skitter Dick came back in triumph to Windy River.

It was a great day at Windy River when the cowpuncher returned. The whole outfit turned out, with cracking whips and cracking revolvers, to welcome him home, and Dick rode up to the ranch in the midst of a roaring crowd. There was a jamboree at Windy River that day, in which Hudson Smedley cheerily joined, and the Rookwood juniors still more merrily.

After the celebration Jimmy Silver stopped Skitter Dick on his way to the bunkhouse, and slipped the gold brick into his hand.

"I kept it safe, you see," he said, with a smile.

"And I guess I'm going to keep it safe till the man it belongs to comes along," said Skitter Dick. "There's a fortune in it, Jimmy—a big fortune for the galoot that's got a right to it. But that's neither you nor me, and so it's a secret."

And a secret it remained, almost forgotten as the days passed, though Jimmy Silver wondered sometimes whether anything would ever be known of the lost mine in the mountains of British Columbia, to which the clue was graven on the gold brick.

THE END.

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