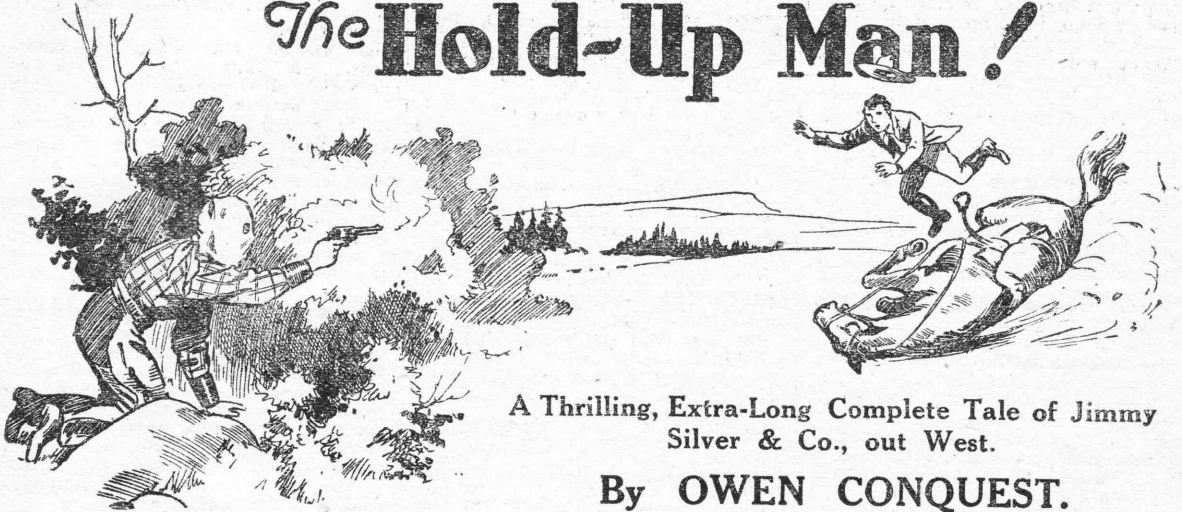


**MYSTERY ON THE PRAIRIE!** A mysterious road-agent appears in the neighbourhood of the Windy River Ranch, and when Jimmy Silver & Co. set out to run him to earth, they find themselves up against a baffling problem!

## The Hold-Up Man!



A Thrilling, Extra-Long Complete Tale of Jimmy Silver & Co., out West.

By OWEN CONQUEST.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER.

#### A Meeting on the Prairie!

**H**IS name, as he gave it, was Ulick Fitzgerald—which he pronounced Fitzjurrld—but at Windy River he was, of course, called Mick. For to the Western man every Irishman is Mick, as every Mexican is Diego, and every Chinaman, John.

Jimmy Silver was the first who met him. Jimmy was trotting on the Mosquito trail, a few miles from the ranch, when a voice hailed him with:

"Sorr!"

Jimmy Silver drew in Blazer, and looked round.

The man was seated on a knoll by the trail, wiping a red face with a red handkerchief.

He did not look prosperous.

His Stetson hat was a rag, and his moleskin trousers and red flannel shirt just held together.

"Hallo!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Is it from Windy River you are, sorr?"

"Yes," said Jimmy, with a smile.

"And is it far?"

"About three miles."

"Three miles, is it?" said the stranger, "And I killed entirely with walking."

Jimmy smiled again. There was something "taking" in the musical Irish idiom.

"You're going to Windy River?" he asked.

"And isn't it I that's been walking there since dawn, sorr," said the red-faced stranger. "It's looking for work, I am."

"Well, there's lots of work at Windy River," said Jimmy Silver. "Boss Smedley is very busy just now. You'll find a job all right if you can do the work."

"Sure, that's good news, and I'll be getting on, I'm thinking," said the red-faced man, picking himself up from the grass. "Thank you kindly, sorr!"

He picked up a little bundle and slung it on his shoulder. Then Jimmy Silver's usual kindness of heart came to the fore.

"You've walked all the way from Mosquito?" he asked.

"Yis, sorr."

"Then you must be jolly tired," said Jimmy. "I'll give you a lift to the ranch."

"It's a jintleman you are, sorr."

"Thanks!" said Jimmy, laughing. "Get on behind me. Blazer can carry two all right."

"Sure, I wouldn't throuble you!"

"Rot! Climb on!"

"It's Ulick Fitzjurrld that'll niver forget your kindness, sorr."

The man mounted behind Jimmy Silver actively enough. Blazer was a powerful animal, quite equal to carrying a double burden for a few miles.

But Blazer had a temper.

Blazer had been a buck-jumper that few of the hands at Windy River Ranch cared to mount, and, according to Arthur Edward Lovell, he only let Jimmy Silver ride him because he had taken a fancy to Jimmy personally. It couldn't have been simply horsemanship, Lovell argued, because Lovell himself couldn't ride Blazer.

Blazer was generally very amenable to reason in Jimmy's hands, but he had not quite forgotten his buck-jumping days. And when he found the extra gentleman on his back Blazer began to "cavort."

His heels went up, and he seemed to be trying to stand on his head. Jimmy leaned back in the saddle with an iron grasp on the reins.

"Oh, thunder!" ejaculated the new passenger.

"It's all right," said Jimmy. "Only his little games! He'll be quiet in two ticks!"

Crash!

Blazer came down on his hind legs, and his forefeet went up, and his mane streamed over his passengers.

The Irishman clung to Jimmy Silver to save himself from vanishing over Blazer's tail.

There was a crash on the ground as the bundle slipped from his grasp and landed there.

"Oh! Me bundle!"

He leaped from the horse's back. Blazer was quiet in a second, standing like a statue.

Jimmy Silver glanced at the man stooping in the trail over the fallen goods. The bundle had burst in its impact with the hard, sun-baked trail.

Jimmy Silver could not help seeing its contents spread on the ground. There was a shirt, and a packet of food, a comb and a brush, and two or three other articles, and—to Jimmy's amazement—a revolver.

The revolver—quite a clean and handsome weapon—glimmered in the sun as it lay there.

The man grabbed it up quickly and rolled it in the blanket with the other articles.

"My hat!" said Jimmy, in surprise.

Fitzgerald tied up the bundle again. Then he rose to his feet.

"Sure, the hoss doesn't seem to like me!" he said. "I'll walk it, sorr!"

"Stuff!" said Jimmy Silver. "Jump on, and I'll keep him quiet this time!"

"Yis, sorr!"

"Give me your bundle first," said Jimmy.

The man hesitated.

Then he passed up the bundle, and climbed on Blazer's back again. Jimmy's hand was like iron on the rein now, and Blazer realised that the time for tricks was over.

He trotted away quite cheerfully towards the ranch.

Jimmy could not help thinking of the revolver he had seen in Fitzgerald's bundle. It was unusual for a man in Alberta to be "heeled," especially a man looking for work.

"You won't need a revolver at Windy River, you know," Jimmy Silver remarked, as Blazer trotted on.

"Is it so, sir? Isn't there wild Injins, and such?"

Jimmy Silver grinned. The question reminded him of his own early days in Canada, when he had been prepared to believe that there were tribes of wild Indians ready to come down on the ranches like wolves on the fold.

"No fear!" he answered. "I suppose you're a bit of a tenderfoot?"

"It's not used to the West, I am, sorr. I've worked on the ranches in Manitoba—the wheat farms. I've come West to better myself intirely."

"Well, you won't need a revolver!" said Jimmy, laughing. "You'll find Alberta as peaceful as England or Ireland—perhaps a bit more so than Ireland, as a matter of fact. The cow-

punchers will chip you if they find you carrying a gun and thinking of Indians."

"It's meself will say nothing about it, then, sorr; and, sure, the first time I go to Mosquito I'll sell the gun!"

"That's a good idea!" said Jimmy. And he dismissed the matter from his mind; though there was a time to come when he would be reminded of it—a time when he would know the innocent Mr. Fitzgerald a good deal better.

### THE SECOND CHAPTER. The New Man!

**P**ETE PETERS, the foreman of the ranch, stared at the double-bladed Blazer as Jimmy rode up. "Gee-whizz!" he exclaimed.

"What have you been picking up now, Jimmy?"

Fitzgerald slipped to the ground. He touched his cap to the foreman, who was eyeing him sharply.

"It's looking for work, I am, sorr!" he said. "The young gentleman gave me a lift, and I killed with walking!"

"Just like you, Jimmy!" said Pete Peters, with a grin. "Well, my man, if you're willing to work you've got a chance here. What's your name?"

"Ulick Fitzjurrld, sorr!"

"Where did you work last?"

"Benson's farm in Manitoba." "That's a good step from here, I guess. I reckon I ain't riding over to Manitoba to ask Mr. Benson about you!"

The man grinned. "I've done jobs on the railway coming West, sorr," he said. "I've looked after horses, too."

"You know something about horses and steers?"

"Yis, sorr!" "Waal, I'll give you a chance, Mick, I guess."

"Sure, me name's Fitzjurrld, sorr—Ulick Fitzjurrld!"

"You're Mick here," said Pete Peters. "You can sling your bundle in the bunkhouse and go along and ask Baldy for a meal. Jimmy, I'm busy! Will you take the Mick in hand?"

"Certainly!" answered Jimmy. The Rookwood junior hitched Blazer to a rail and took charge of the new hand.

Mick followed Jimmy Silver to the cookhouse. Baldy, the cook, looked round with a red, perspiring face from the stove.

"New man, Baldy!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Where did you pick it up?" grunted Baldy.

"Mr. Peters has sent him here for a feed, to begin with."

"He can squat down on that bench," said Baldy.

Mick sat down on the bench, and Jimmy Silver left him.

Baldy was busy at the stove, but he looked round at Mick presently.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Yis, sorr."

The "sorr" pleased Baldy. He smiled genially at the stranger.

"I guess I can fix you," he said. "You look a bit tired. You don't look as if you've had good luck lately."

"It's hard luck I've had, sorr, and sure, I ain't fit to sit down with a gentleman like yourself, and me so dusty."

Baldy beamed.

"Wade into this!" he said hospitably. And the red-faced stranger was soon enjoying a square meal. It had not taken Mick long to learn how to get on

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the right side of Baldy Bubbin, the fat and fatuous cook of Windy River.

After dinner at the ranch Jimmy Silver came out to see how the new man was getting on, taking a kindly interest in the stranger from afar.

He found Mick already at work, repairing a broken fence with skill and industry.

"Getting on all right?" asked Jimmy. Mick touched his ragged hat.

"Yis, sorr, and it's glad I am to be at work agin. It's me hopes that Mr. Smedley will keep me on all the summer, and maybe I'll save enough to send home for me ould father to come out to Canada."

"Good man!" said Jimmy, feeling rather touched. "I hope you will. Have they fixed you up with a bunk yet?"

"No, sorr; the bunkhouse is full up, and I'm afther asking Mr. Pethers to let me bunk in the barn loft."

"Phew! You won't find that comfortable," said Jimmy. "Better let them squeeze in room in the bunkhouse."

Mick shook his head. "Sure, I've slept in a barn many a time, sorr, and liked it," he said. "Mr. Pethers says yes, and so I'm bunking in the loft."

"Well, your bundle will be sate there!" said Jimmy Silver, laughing.

"Yis, sorr."

And Jimmy Silver left Mick contentedly at work.

That day and the next Pete Peters kept a rather sharp eye on Mick. But he was quite satisfied.

"He's a good man," he told Jimmy Silver. "He can handle horses and steers, and he's picking up the way of the lariat already. And he's a good, handy carpenter, too, and he doesn't hate work. Seems a bit of a simple galoot. Said he'd leave the question of wages to me. I'm glad you picked that Mick up on the perarer, Jimmy. He's useful."

"Good!" said Jimmy.

"The boys seem to take to him, too," said Pete Peters. "He doesn't mind their chipping him a bit. He's the best Mick I've ever struck."

Jimmy Silver soon observed that Mick was generally liked. His red, smiling face and cheery good-humour pleased the cowpunchers; and undoubtedly he was a hard worker, which pleased the foreman. He had made the loft over the barn quite a neat and clean and tidy little room, and he seemed attached to it for his quarters, for he refused to transfer to the bunkhouse when he was given the opportunity. Lovell and Raby and Newcome liked him, and so did Jimmy Silver; and Baldy, the cook, was almost affectionate towards the new member of the outfit, which seemed to indicate that the new member took the trouble to pull Baldy's fat leg.

The only man at Windy River who did not seem rather taken with Mick was Mr. Hudson Smedley.

Jimmy Silver saw him looking at Ulick Fitzgerald very keenly one day, and then saw him turn and speak to Pete Peters.

"You're satisfied with the new man, Peters?" he asked.

"Sure!" said the foreman.

"Where does he come from?"

"Manitoba last."

The rancher looked again at Fitzgerald.

"Don't you like the man, boss?" asked Pete Peters.

"Well, I won't say that," said Hudson Smedley. "But he brought a good allowance of blarney with him from the Old Country, I guess. But if

he's a good man and you're satisfied, Pete, that's all O.K."

And so Mick became a fixture at Windy River.

### THE THIRD CHAPTER.

#### A Bird's-eye View of a Hold-up.

"**C**OME on, Jimmy!" called Lovell. Jimmy Silver did not answer.

The four juniors of Rookwood were riding in the golden Alberta afternoon, when Jimmy Silver pulled rein on the edge of a high bluff. The junior sat his horse motionless, looking down from the bluff to the plain stretching below in the sunlight.

Across the distant plain ran the dusty trail to Mosquito to the south.

The little two-horse hack that ran twice a week from Kicking Mule up to Mosquito was due at the township that afternoon, and the Rookwood juniors had planned to ride in and meet it. Windy River was a good distance from the railway, and the Kicking Mule hack brought letters and newspapers and news of the great world outside the prairie ranges. Sometimes there came in the hack cash remittances from the bank at Kicking Mule, in sealed packets, for the postmaster at Mosquito—cash to pay the hands at the ranches along the river.

From the top of the bluff Jimmy could see the distant stage-trail, winding, white and dusty, on the prairie, in the clear golden sunlight of Alberta.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome reined back and rejoined Jimmy.

"What is it?" asked Raby.

"The hack," said Jimmy.

"Then they'll be at Mosquito before us," said Lovell. "You would ride round over the bluffs, Jimmy."

"Well, there's no hurry," remarked Newcome. "Lesage will have to sort the letters at the store before we get the lot for Windy River. But what are you blinking at the hack for, Jimmy? You've seen it before."

Jimmy did not speak, but he shaded his eyes with his hand and stared down at the stage-trail.

There was a curious expression on Jimmy Silver's face, and his chums could see that it was not only the hack that interested him.

They looked, but could discern nothing of interest. The dusty trail wound over the plain towards distant Mosquito, with the river, for the most part bordered by thick grass, with here and there a clump of trees, scrub oaks or firs, breaking the level.

"I fancy it's not all square down there," said Jimmy Silver at last.

"What isn't?" grunted Lovell.

"You see the hack—"

"Yes, ass!"

"Look ahead of it—that clump of firs by the trail."

"Well?"

"There's a horseman there."

"Go hon!" said Lovell sarcastically.

"Now you point him out, old man. I see him. But I've seen horsemen before in Canada. There's quite a lot at the ranch. Some at Mosquito, too. It's not really an uncommon sight in Alberta."

"Fathead!" said Jimmy.

"I say, it's a bit queer about that johnnie," said Raby, shading his eyes. "He's sitting as still as a statue by the trail, and the trees screen him from the hack. Looks as if he's waiting for it to come up."

"People have waited for a coach before now, and no harm done," suggested Lovell, still in a sarcastic vein.

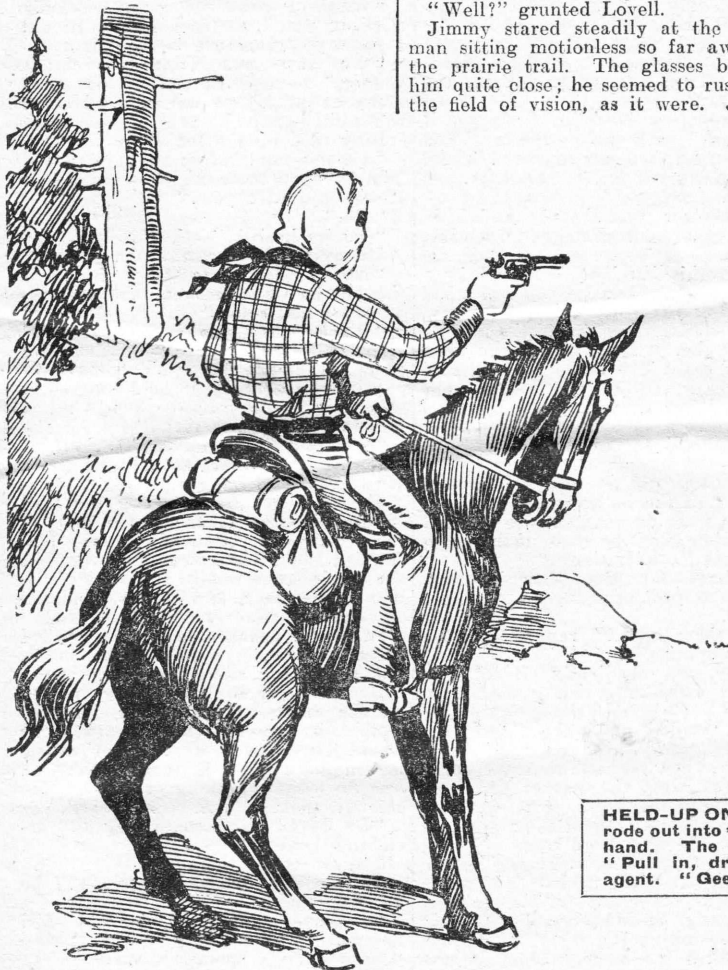
"A passenger waiting would be on foot," said Newcome. "That man doesn't want a lift in the coach."  
 "May possibly want to say good-afternoon to the driver!" said Lovell. "What does it matter, anyhow?"  
 "Then he would wait in the trail and let the driver see him as he came up," said Jimmy Silver. "He's keeping in cover, and the hack-driver won't see him till he gets fairly abreast of the trees."

Lovell grunted.  
 "Well, what does it matter, anyhow?" he asked.

"Might matter a lot," said Jimmy Silver. "There's sometimes as much as ten thousand dollars in Canadian notes in the mailbags."

"Bow-wow! Do you think he's a jolly old highwayman?" grinned Lovell. "Can it, old chap!"

"Well, there was a gang of rustlers around here, you know, and they were rounded up," said Jimmy Silver.



**HELD-UP ON THE TRAIL!** The man in the flour-bag rode out into the middle of the trail, and raised his right hand. The sun glinted on the revolver held in it. "Pull in, driver!" Billy Peck blinked at the road-agent. "Gee whiz!" he ejaculated. (See Chapter 4.)

"Has a skin on it, perhaps?" suggested Lovell, with brilliant humour.  
 "Something thicker than that, I fancy. He's got a queer look about the chivvy," said Jimmy Silver. "It's not a mask, but it's something. Hold on while I get a squint through the glasses."

"I'd rather get on and get some tea at Mosquito," said Lovell. "We've got ten miles yet, the way we're going."

"Lovell, old chap, you talk too much!" said Jimmy, as he unfastened the leather case of the field-glasses. "I've told you so lots of times!"

"Oh, rats!" said Lovell. "If that fellow's a road-agent, I'll eat him! But squint at him if you like."

Jimmy Silver opened the glasses and put them up to view the distant figure. He gave a start as he got the focus. Among the things he had brought out from England, Jimmy had found the field-glasses most useful, and they certainly came in useful now.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated.

"Well?" grunted Lovell.

Jimmy stared steadily at the horseman sitting motionless so far away by the prairie trail. The glasses brought him quite close; he seemed to rush into the field of vision, as it were. Jimmy

him the glasses and he focused them on the distant horseman.

"A giddy road-agent!" said Lovell, convinced at last. "He's waiting there to hold up the hack."

"No doubt about that," said Jimmy Silver quietly; "and the hack will be up to him in five minutes now. Look! He's getting a pistol out of his holster ready!"

"Phew!"

Lovell's eyes danced. He had never expected, or hoped, to see a road-agent in the peaceful, law-abiding land of Canada. Plenty might have been found farther south, across the border, as well as train-robbers and bank-raiders. But such characters were few and far between in Canada.

"Good egg!" said Lovell! "We're jolly well going to chip in, you fellows! No end of kudos if we catch him."

"We'll try to stop him, anyhow," said Jimmy Silver. "But how the thump are we getting down to the plain? The trail doesn't take us down for a mile on from here."

"We've got to get down the bluffs," said Lovell.

Jimmy glanced down the steep slope of the bluff to the plain, sixty or seventy feet below. The slope was almost sheer.

"What they call a road-agent has never been heard of in this section, I believe. But they hadn't had any rustlers here till Spanish Kit and his gang started in business."

"Well, they're in chokey now," said Lovell. "The Mounted Police got them. I dare say that chap yonder is sitting in the shade to get out of the sun—instead of sitting on top of a bluff like us, trying to get sunstroke!"

"It's a bit too far off to see much," said Jimmy Silver. "I can't make out the man's face. Looks to me as if it's covered up."

Silver saw him now as if he had been only a dozen yards away, and what he saw was a horseman with a flour-bag drawn over his head and face and fastened about the neck. In the bag were cut holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth. The man's features were totally hidden.

"Let's look!" said Raby; and Jimmy handed him the glasses. "Oh, my hat! That chap's up to no good!"

"He's masked," said Newcome, taking the glasses in his turn. "He's waiting for the hack to—"

Lovell whistled as Newcome handed

"The horses couldn't do it," he said. "Let's ride on as fast as we can and get down to the trail. We may come up in time to chip in. If we had a rifle we could pot that villain from here. Come on!"

Jimmy shook out his reins and rode on. His comrades followed him. They rode at a desperate gallop now.

Already on the stage-trail on the prairie the man in the flour-bag had ridden out into the trail, with a levelled revolver in his grip, and the hack was "held-up." But it was certain to take

him some time to secure his plunder, even if there was no resistance; and the Rookwood chums hoped to arrive in time to intervene. They rode on furiously for nearly a mile to the spot where a deep gully gave access to the plain below.

The trail ran down to the gully, among rocks and sand, and the horses' hoofs clattered sharply as they rode down.

It was a spot for careful riding, but the Fistical Four of Rookwood were too excited to be careful just then. Fortunately, they rode down safely, and came out on the lower plain. Then they galloped hard for the stage-trail and the scene of the hold-up.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

##### Held up on the Trail!

**B**ILLY PECK, who drove the hack from Kicking Mule to Mosquito twice a week, had never been so astonished in his life. Billy Peck could remember old days, when there had been "bad men" on the Alberta plains and Redskins had ridden in war-paint. But those days were old, vanishing into a forgotten past. Billy Peck certainly had never expected to be held up on the quiet, solitary trail between Kicking Mule and Mosquito, and he would have laughed at the idea of bringing a gun along with him on his bi-weekly trip. Not that Billy would have had any use for a gun, if it came to that. His business was to drive the hack, not to engage in combat with bad men who got loose on the trail.

There were two passengers in the hack—Mr. Lesage, the storekeeper, coming back from a buying expedition in the railroad towns, and an American "drummer," or commercial traveller, with his bag of samples. They, like the driver, were thinking of anything but road-agents as the hack rumbled on the dusty trail, and came abreast of the clump of shady trees.

The man in the flour-bag rode out into the middle of the trail and raised his right hand. The sun glinted on the revolver held in it.

"Pull in, driver!"

Billy Peck blinked at him.

"Gee-whiz!" he ejaculated.

The masked man made a gesture with the revolver.

"Pull in, and put up your paws!"

"I say, I guess this is a joke, stranger!" said Billy Peck, as he pulled in his horses, and brought the hack to a halt on the trail. "You're pulling my leg—hay?"

"I guess I shall be blowing off your roof, Billy Peck, if you don't put up them paws!"

The driver put his hands over his head.

Billy Peck did not like the gleam of the eyes through the holes in the flour-bag, and he was too experienced a gentleman to think of arguing with a levelled revolver.

"You mean business—hay?" he asked.

"Sure!"

"You ain't playing a leetle joke?" asked Billy. "You ain't wandered off a film by mistake?"

"Shut up, and keep up your hands! If them hosses move, it will be the last thing that will ever happen to you this side of Jordan!"

"I'm your antelope, stranger!" said Billy cheerfully. "I'm paid to drive this hyer hearse, not to join up in shooting picnics! But I guess the Mounted Police will want you bad arter this!"

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The horseman did not heed him.

He rode up beside the halted hack, and met two startled faces staring out of the window.

"Light down, you 'uns!" he said.

"Great snakes, it's a hold-up!" said the American passenger.

"Mon Dieu!" said Lesage.

The two passengers alighted promptly.

"Get to the side of the trail, and keep your hands up!" said the man in the flour-bag. "If there's any trouble, there'll be a funeral, too!"

"I guess I ain't heeled, stranger!" said the drummer. "It's your game!"

"But—but—" stammered the storekeeper.

"Get a move on!" snapped the road-agent.

He made a motion with the revolver. Lesage and the American lined up beside the trail and held their hands over their heads.

"Billy Peck!"

"Here, boss!" drawled the driver.

"Light down!"

Billy Peck lighted down.

"I guess I want the dollars you're taking to Mosquito!" said the road-agent. "Turn out the packet for the post office!"

"Stranger, you've slipped up on it this time!" said Billy Peck. "You should have called last journey! There ain't nothing but letters this trip!"

Crack!

The revolver rang sharply, and Billy Peck gave a yell and staggered against the hack.

He put his hand to his head in a dazed way, and felt a thin ooze of blood from his ear.

"That's a warning!" said the man in the flour-bag. "Don't yaup—you ain't hurt! I guess I've taken a bit of skin off your ear, Billy Peck! The next bullet will go through your head, so watch out!"

"Oh, gum!" gasped the driver.

"Turn out the mailbag!"

Billy Peck did not argue further. The sting of the bullet grazing his ear had been warning enough. He realised by this time that the man in the flour-bag meant "cold business."

The bags for the Mosquito post office were promptly turned out into the trail.

"Cut them open!" rapped out the robber impatiently.

Silently and obediently, Billy Peck opened a clasp-knife and gashed open the bags.

Mr. Lesage and the American traveller were looking on now undisturbed. They realised that the road-agent was after the packet of paper money from the bank, and was not concerning himself about their personal property. So they were reassured, and took only a spectator's interest in the proceedings. The packet of paper dollars was consigned to Mr. Lesage, as postmaster at Mosquito, but he had no responsibility for it until it was delivered at his store. And it was evident now that it never would be delivered there.

"That's the packet, I guess," said the horseman. "Hand it up to me, Billy Peck!"

Billy hesitated. But a slight movement of the revolver decided him, and he picked up the sealed packet to hand it to the robber.

Thud, thud, thud!

There was a sound of galloping on the prairie, and the robber looked round quickly with alarm.

Riders were approaching the spot at a furious gallop, but for the moment they were hidden from sight by a screen of fir and thicket.

A voice shouted beyond the trees:

"We've got him! Shoot! Shoot!"

The masked rider clapped spurs to his horse and dashed away down the trail at a frantic speed.

Billy Peck was left holding the sealed packet in his hand, staring after him as he vanished in a cloud of dust.

#### THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

##### A Fight at Close Quarters!

**J**IMMY SILVER dashed past the trees into the trail, with Blazer going at a mad gallop. It was Jimmy who had shouted, and his shout had had its effect on the robber.

The man in the flour-bag was galloping away down the trail at a frantic speed, his prize left behind him. Jimmy dragged on the reins and pulled in Blazer beside the hack.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome rode into the trail a minute later.

"Waal, I swow!" exclaimed Billy Peck. "You 'uns from Windy River! I guess you've arrove jest on time!"

"We saw you from the bluffs yonder," panted Jimmy. "We came along as quickly as we could. Has he robbed the mail?"

Billy held up the sealed packet.

"I guess not! Another minute and he'd have got the stuff. Are the Windy River boys with you?"

"No."

"You're heeled?" asked Billy.

Jimmy laughed breathlessly.

"No; I shouted to scare him. I thought he would reckon that the cowpunchers had come."

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated Billy Peck. "That was smart. I reckon he wouldn't have lit out in sich a hurry if he'd knowed it was only some schoolboys without a gun to show among them."

"Well done, Jimmy!" chuckled Lovell. "I never thought of that. He's gone, and the mail's saved."

Jimmy Silver stared along the trail in the direction taken by the man in the flour-bag. Jimmy's ruse had startled the robber from his prey, but the whole scene was in full view if the man looked back, and Jimmy wondered whether the affair was really ended.

In the far distance he saw the masked horseman halt, swing round his horse, and stare back along the trail.

Had a party of cowpunchers ridden on the scene, as the robber had undoubtedly expected, his prompt flight would have saved him. But as he looked back now it seemed that he was no longer thinking of flight. He realised that he had been tricked.

"By Jove! He's coming back!" exclaimed Lovell.

Jimmy set his teeth.

"Is there a gun in this outfit?" he asked quickly.

"I have a revolver," said Mr. Lesage. "But—but"—he hesitated—"the man is desperate—armed—"

"Give me the gun!"

"But—"

"Give me the gun!" shouted Jimmy Silver. "There's going to be a fight if he comes back. Quick!"

The old storekeeper drew the gun from his hip-pocket. Jimmy Silver took it hurriedly and examined it. It was loaded in every chamber.

Jimmy looked along the trail again.

The man in the flour-bag was riding back, revolver in hand, his eyes gleaming through the holes in his curious mask.

"Cover!" rapped out Jimmy Silver.

It was evident that the road-agent meant to shoot. Lovell and Raby and

Newcome promptly jumped off their horses. Billy Peck swung the hack round across the trail to form a barrier, and the whole party got behind it.

The revolver was as steady as steel in Jimmy Silver's hand. From behind the cover of the hack he peered round and watched the advancing horseman.

Crack!

Jimmy Silver fired first.

His bullet flew so close that it grazed the shoulder of the oncoming rider, and he flinched for a second.

Then he came on at a furious gallop, firing fast.

Crack-ack-ack-ack! Crack!

The shots rang so fast that they were almost blended into one report. The bullets crashed through the flimsy hack. Mr. Lesage lay, at full length on the ground, palpitating; he was not a man of war.

The American drummer sat with his back to a wheel, and toyed coolly with a huge claspknife, which he had opened in readiness should the struggle come to close quarters.

The charging horseman came on fast, evidently intending to leap his horse right over the hack, and come crashing down in the midst of the party on the other side.

Crack!

Jimmy Silver stood up and fired.

His bullet gashed along the flour-bag, so close it went, and the horseman pulled in his steed only a few yards from the hack.

He fired in reply, but there was only a click of a trigger. His revolver was empty.

Jimmy fired again, but a plunge of the robber's horse saved the rascal from the bullet.

"At him!" shouted Jimmy. "At him!"

He dashed round the hack. Lovell and Raby and Newcome were after him in a twinkling, and the tall American rushed after them.

But the robber had whirled round his horse in the trail, and he put it to a gallop again before they could reach him.

Jimmy Silver raised his revolver.

He could have shot down the fleeing man with ease, but he did not pull the trigger.

"Shoot, you young idjit—shoot!" roared Billy Peck. "You've got him dead to-rights! Shoot!"

But Jimmy Silver could not shoot the man in the back, and he lowered the revolver.

"Waal, gol-darn my boots!" said Billy Peck.

"Has he gone?" gasped Mr. Lesage.

"I guess he's lit out as if he was sent for," grinned Billy Peck, "and I kinder opine he won't come back this time."

Billy Peck was right.

The road-agent had evidently not expected to be met by such steady shooting in his reckless charge, and he did not seem disposed to try it again.

He was riding hard now to escape, and was already tiny in the distance.

Billy Peck pulled the hack round into the road again.

"This'll make the boys sit up at Mosquito," he said. "Young Silver, you've saved the ranchers hereabouts more'n ten thousand solid dollars, if you want to know."

"Good!" said Jimmy "Get into Mosquito as soon as you can with it, Billy. He may try to cut you off on the trail ahead."

"You bet!" said Billy Peck. "All aboard!"

He mounted to his seat, and the passengers got into the hack again. Jimmy called to Mr. Lesage:

"I'll let you have the revolver back at Mosquito, Mr. Lesage, if you don't mind. I'm going after that fellow."

"Keep it, my boy—keep it!" said the storekeeper. "It's a good weapon, and I make you a present of it after what you've done to-day. Hold on; I've got some cartridges here."

"Many thanks!" said Jimmy.

"But you had better not go after that desperate scoundrel," said Mr. Lesage. "Mr. Smedley would not like you to take the risk."

"I don't fancy we shall come up with him," said Jimmy, with a smile. "But we may get on his track and find out where he hides himself, and the cow-punchers will do the rest. Ta-ta! And many thanks for the revolver!"

Billy Peck put his horses into motion.

It was not impossible that the defeated road-agent might circle round on the plains and make a later attempt to cut off the hack from Mosquito, so Billy lost no time.

His two horses were whipped up at a very unaccustomed speed, and the little hack rolled and jolted away towards

### EXCITEMENT ON THE RANCH.



### "THE MYSTERY OF MICK THE OWPUNCHER!"

By Owen Conquest.

Another Rollicking Long Complete  
Tale of the Rookwood Chums in  
the Wild West . . .

NEXT WEEK.

Mosquito as fast as Billy could urge on his team.

The juniors remained standing by their horses in the trail.

"Well, this is a go!" said Lovell, with a whistle. "I say, Jimmy, we should have been in Queer Street if you hadn't got that gun from Lesage. He's a desperate beggar!"

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"Are we really going after him?" asked Raby dubiously.

"Why not?" said Jimmy. "If he gets clear away now, he may never get caught. If we can follow his trail, that's all I want. And it's fresh and plain in the grass."

"Well, we're game," said Newcome.

And the Rookwooders mounted their horses, and left the stage-trail. The man in the flour-bag was still visible on the prairie, a spot in the distance, but as the juniors started in pursuit, he disappeared through a belt of scrub that crossed the plain.

The Rookwooders rode for the scrub, intending to pick up the trail of the

escaping road-agent on the other side of it.

It was not Jimmy's intention to run the rascal down, which would have meant a desperate fight, revolver to revolver, in which certainly, howsoever it ended, lives would have been lost.

Jimmy did not fear the man, but he did not intend to be reckless and to risk the lives of his comrades, who were unarmed, in such a desperate affray. It was for the Mounted Police to rope in the road-agent, and Jimmy hoped to learn enough to enable them to lay hands on him.

But the pursuit was more reckless than the Rookwood juniors supposed. As they came with a gallop up to the belt of scrub there came a sudden blaze of revolver-fire from the screen of thickets.

Lovell's horse crashed to the earth, and Lovell rolled in the grass.

### THE SIXTH CHAPTER. The Trail!

"COVER!" panted Jimmy Silver. The juniors were on the ground in a second and their horses lying in the grass.

Lovell's horse lay quite still.

It was shot through the head and had been killed almost instantly. Lovell lay in the grass and growled savagely. He had collected about a dozen bumps by his sudden tumble.

Deep in the thick grass the juniors lay in cover. Another shot came ringing from the scrub, but it whizzed harmlessly by, evidently fired at random.

Raby gave a breathless chuckle.

"He stopped for us, Jimmy!"

"Looks like it!"

"You're an ass, Jimmy Silver!" came Lovell's voice. "Might have guessed that he would stop in the first cover and lay for us"

"You didn't guess, old chap," said Jimmy mildly.

"Br-r-r-r!"

Jimmy Silver raised his head cautiously. The lonely plain was silent, deserted; from the scrub came no sound or movement. Had the outlaw advanced into the open to attack, Jimmy's revolver was ready. But the man did not appear.

It was clear that he had noted the juniors in pursuit of him, and had stopped in the scrub to fire from cover, to stop the pursuit.

And he had stopped it.

To advance upon a desperate man hidden in cover, and face his revolver, was to ask for destruction. The road-agent could have picked off all four of them with ease before they reached the scrub without running the least risk himself.

"Floored!" murmured Newcome.

"We can wait," said Jimmy composedly. "He's stopped us, while he clears off safe. But he won't dare to hang on long. The firing may have been heard; there are cowboys on the prairie. I fancy he's sneaking away already the other side of those bushes."

"We're jolly well not going to chance it!" said Lovell.

"No; we'll wait a bit."

"One of you fellows will have to give me a lift home, anyway," grunted Lovell.

"Never mind; lucky it wasn't Blazer."

"Oh, blow Blazer! I've got bumps all over."

The juniors waited as patiently as they could. It was hot in the dry grass, with flies innumerable buzzing about

them. Jimmy raised his hat at last above the grass, pushing it up with his riding-whip. But it did not draw a shot from the scrub.

"I fancy he's gone," said Jimmy. "Well, I'm getting fed-up with this," said Lovell. "There's a mosquito down my neck and a fly in my ear, and—"

Jimmy made-up his mind at last. He rose to his knees, revolver in hand, and stared across the grass towards the scrub belt.

It was taking a risk, but he decided to take it. But there came no shot from the bushes.

Jimmy felt pretty certain that the road-agent was gone. It was most likely that he would have lingered only long enough to stop the pursuit, and would lose no time after that in getting clear. Jimmy jumped to his feet at last and ran towards the scrub, watchful as a cat.

But there was no sound, and in a couple of minutes he was in the thickets.

He easily found the traces where the road-agent had stopped, and followed the "sign" through the belt of scrub to the open plain on the other side. Here he picked up the horse's tracks easily enough.

But the prairie before his eyes was clear and bare, the grass shimmering in the sunblaze.

The man in the flour-bag had perfectly succeeded in his object; he was out of sight now, and only the track of his horse remained to show the way he had gone.

"It's all right!" called out Jimmy Silver.

Raby and Newcome joined him with the horses. Lovell carried the saddle and trappings taken from his steed, and he slung them on Blazer. Jimmy Silver, on his knees in the grass, carefully examined the track of the outlaw's horse.

Jimmy had learned a good deal of the plainsman's craft at the Windy River Ranch. His skill was not great, so far, but he knew a good deal about picking up "signs." All that he knew he was putting into his present task. He searched the tracks till he found a soft spot where the hoof-marks were clearly imprinted.

"Good!" he ejaculated.

"No need for all that," said Lovell. "The trail's plain enough—I could follow it with my eyes shut."

"We may lose it and have to pick it up again," said Jimmy Silver.

"Then we don't want to pick up another horse's trail by mistake."

"Well, you can't tell one horse's track from another," said Lovell. "I can't." Jimmy Silver smiled.

"I'm going to try, old man," he said. "Look at this—here's all four hoofs marked as plain as you like."

"Well, three of them are plain enough," said Lovell, surveying the track. "But that one—"

"Isn't!" said Raby. "Because the horse has cast a shoe," said Jimmy.

"Oh!" said Lovell. "Left hind-leg cast a shoe," said Newcome. "A cowman could follow that track over the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific. But—"

"Well, we shan't have to follow as far as that!" said Jimmy, laughing. "We'll do our best."

The juniors mounted. Lovell riding double with Raby. The track led them towards the bluffs, from which they had first seen the hold-up.

It soon became clear that the road-agent had ridden up the gully to the upland.

In the stony gully all track was lost; but there was only one way to go, and they walked their horses up to the upper plain.

On top of the bluffs, Jimmy picked up the trail again, and it led to the north. That was all the more agreeable to the trackers, as it was the direction of the Windy River Ranch, though the ranch was many a long mile distant.

For more than a mile the trail was followed without difficulty.

Then the juniors halted on the bank of the creek that barred the prairie with high crumbling, muddy banks. In the heat of summer the creek had shrunk to a narrow stream, leaving the mud banks high and dry.

Down the steep slope of dry mud went the track of the horse that had cast a shoe. The juniors followed it across the mud to the water.

Jimmy Silver rode through the narrow creek, guessing what he would find, or rather, what he would not find.

No continuing track was to be seen on the other side.

The horseman had turned along the stream, whether up or down stream there was no means of telling.

The sand of the creek's bed held the track of Jimmy's horse for a minute or less, and then the flowing water

washed it out. Of the track of the outlaw's horse not a sign remained, of course.

He was a good hour ahead of the juniors, and a minute had been enough for the water to wash away his trail from the bed of the stream.

"He's done us!" said Jimmy. "Of course, now I think of it, he would head for running water as fast as he could, to lose the trail."

"May find where he got out of the creek," said Raby.

"We'll try, but it's not likely. He may have ridden a mile either way, or more. The water's shallow now as far as the foothills."

"Let's separate and search both ways," said Newcome.

"Right-ho!"

Jimmy and Lovell went up stream, and Raby and Newcome down. They searched the northern bank with keen eyes, but there was no trail to be found. Jimmy kept an eye on the southern bank also, lest the fugitive should have doubled back.

But there was no indication of the rider having left the stream.

Either he had followed the creek for a great distance, or he had cunningly selected some spot where hard and stony soil came down to the water, where his horse would leave no track behind.

After an hour's vain search the Rookwooders gave it up and rode on to the ranch.

"After all, we've done something," Jimmy Silver remarked. "When the M.P.'s get after him they can start from the creek, at any rate. He must have followed the stream up, I think. Lower down it runs into Grimes' land, and he wouldn't be seen there. I suppose he's gone right up Coyote Creek to the foothills. And yet—"

Jimmy paused thoughtfully.

"Yet what?" asked Lovell.

"I fancy that rotter isn't a bulldozer who camps out in the foothills," said Jimmy, shaking his head.

"Just what I should think he was," answered Lovell. "I suppose you don't think he lives at Mosquito?" And Lovell chuckled.

"It's more likely," said Jimmy. "He was so careful to keep his face from being seen, with that flour-bag, that it looks as if he might be known in this section. And then he knew about the consignment of dollars from the bank at Kicking Mule coming up to-day. He couldn't have known about that unless he hung about this section picking up information."

"Something in that," agreed Newcome.

Lovell whistled.

"My only hat! You think he may be somebody known around here—a man that we might pass on the plains any day without knowing that he was the flour-bag man at all?"

"Just that," said Jimmy.

"I'd know his horse anywhere, though," said Lovell. "I noticed specially it had a white spot on the nose and white forelegs—stockings as the cowboys would call them."

"He had," assented Jimmy. "But I fancy he hadn't after passing through the creek. His white stockings would wash off, I think."

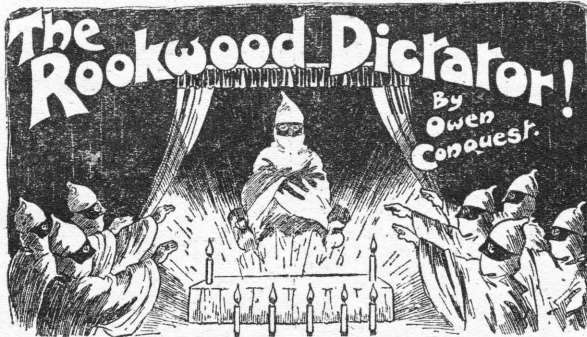
"Oh!" said Lovell slowly. "You think the man disguised his horse?"

"I'm jolly sure he did, if it's a horse that is ever seen in this section."

"Then I'm blessed if I know how he's ever going to be traced out," said Lovell. "If he's some ruffian camping in the hills the Mounted Police could

(Continued on page 27.)

## GRAND NEW STORY:



Featuring JIMMY SILVER & CO., the popular chums of ROOKWOOD SCHOOL, commences in next week's issue of

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# "THE HOLD-UP MAN!"

(Continued from page 12.)

nose him out, same as they did the rustlers. But if he's an ordinary chap hanging about these parts, why, he might be a cowpuncher or one of the ranches."

"Likely enough," said Jimmy Silver. "And he knows his way about, too. I fancy we haven't seen the last of him in this section."

Jimmy Silver stopped suddenly.

"Great Scott!" he yelled.

"What?"

"The trail!"

## THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Only Mick!

**J**IMMY SILVER fairly bounded from his horse.

The juniors were now only a couple of miles from Windy River, and in the rich grass they were riding through Jimmy had observed the trail of a horse. He had hardly heeded it at first, as, of course, there were innumerable horse-trails on the grasslands. Any cowpuncher of the Windy River outfit might have ridden that way.

But Jimmy had noted suddenly that it was the trail of a horse that had cast a shoe.

His eyes blazed as he bent over the track and examined it, with a beating heart.

"Left hind leg—cast a shoe!" he exclaimed. "It's the same!"

"It's a jolly queer coincidence!" remarked Lovell.

"It isn't a coincidence—it's the same!"

"But the road-agent is going to Windy River Ranch, I suppose?" chuckled Lovell. "Whoever left that trail was riding straight for the ranch."

Jimmy Silver's face became very grave.

"Well, we're following it, anyhow," he said. "It may turn off before we get to the ranch."

"It will, if it's the flour-bag man's."

But the trail did not turn.

It led the Rookwood juniors right on to the ranch. Lovell and Raby and Newcome were grinning now, though Jimmy's face was grave.

Jimmy's comrades concluded, as a matter of course, that some Windy River rider had lost a shoe, which was not at all an unlikely happening. Jimmy Silver had to admit that it was probably enough.

And yet it was a startling coincidence, at least.

The juniors rode up to the ranch, and Pete Peters hailed them.

"Got the letters?"

"The letters?" repeated Jimmy.

He had quite forgotten, in the excitement of the afternoon, the purpose with which the juniors had left the ranch.

The foreman stared.

"Haven't you been to Mosquito for the mail?" he demanded.

"Oh, no! Something else happened."

"Well, gol-darn my boots!" said Pete Peters, in disgust. "Have to wait till to-morrow now! What happened?"

Jimmy Silver explained.

"Waal, carry me home to die!" ejaculated the ranch foreman. "A road-agent in this section! Search me!"

The news was over the ranch in a few minutes. Mick came out of the cook-house, and the startled expression on his red face made the juniors smile.

"Arrah, now, and you telling me it was as peaceful here as ould Ireland!" exclaimed Fitzgerald.

"It's the first road-agent in this section, and I guess it will be the last!" said Pete Peters. "Don't you be skeered, Mick! The fellow won't come here and eat you!"

"It's not skeered I am, sorr," said

Mick. "It's not a thafe of the world could scare me, and me a Fitzjurrld!"

"By the way, Mr. Peters," said Jimmy Silver, in a casual way. "Has anybody here lost a shoe on the prairie?"

"That tenderfoot Mick," answered Pete. "He came in with his hoss nearly lame. Of all the durned tenderfeet—"

"Mick!" exclaimed Jimmy blankly.

"Sure!"

"Arrah, now, Mr. Pethers, and sure it wasn't me fault intirely!" said Mick. "And it's no call you have to call me a tenderfoot, and me working five years in the wheat in Manitoba!"

Jimmy Silver put his horse into the corral and walked on to the ranch. His chums followed him, grinning.

"Got him!" whispered Lovell.

Raby and Newcome chuckled.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Jimmy Silver crossly. "Of—of course, it was a coincidence, as it turns out. Still, it was a jolly queer coincidence!"

"Of course it was!" said Raby consolingly. "When we got on Mick's trail I thought for a minute we'd picked up the road-agent again. But I wouldn't talk about that bit, Jimmy. The outfit will simply yell if they hear you'd been tracking a road-agent to Windy River Ranch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell.

"Oh, rats!" said Jimmy Silver.

And the subject was dropped.

But somehow it came back to Jimmy Silver's mind later, and he could not dismiss it from his thoughts. To suppose any connection between the road-agent in the flour-bag and Mick, the innocent, simple fellow, whose only weakness seemed an over-allowance of blarney, seemed absurd—almost fantastically absurd. And yet strange, vague thoughts haunted Jimmy Silver's mind that night—vague thoughts and suspicions which he dismissed, and which still persisted in haunting him.

THE END.

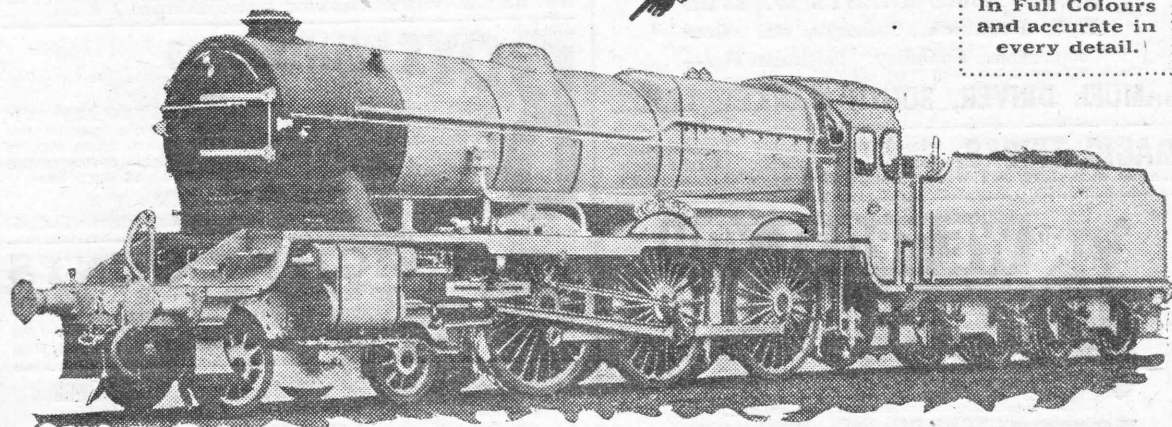
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