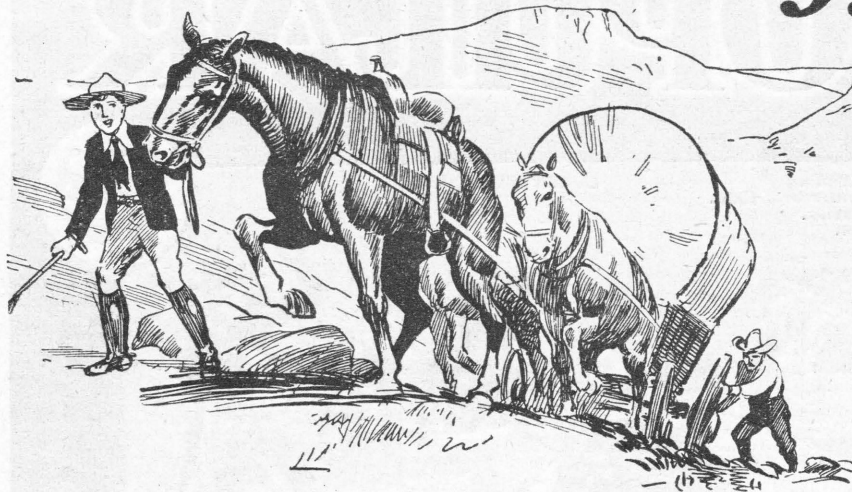


WITH THE ROOKWOOD CHUMS IN CANADA!

Right down to the Windy River Valley the Mounted Police track the prairie smugglers, and then Jimmy Silver takes a hand in the perilous game of bringing the rogues to justice!

The Prairie Smugglers!



A STIRRING, LONG COMPLETE STORY, DEALING WITH THE ADVENTURES OF JIMMY SILVER & Co. OUT WEST.

BY

Owen Conquest.

(Author of the topping story of the Rookwood Chums appearing in the "Gem.")

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The Mysterious Wagon!

"SAY, bub!"

A strident voice with a strong nasal twang hailed Jimmy Silver. The sun was sinking behind the rugged peaks of the Rocky Mountains, and Jimmy, who was a good many miles from home, was riding hard for the distant Windy River Ranch. He gave quite a start as the nasal voice hailed him on the lonely prairie, and drew rein.

"Say!"

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

"Hallo?" he called back.

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

Jimmy Silver did not share the stranger's desire for speech. He had spent rather a long day looking for stray steers, and he had not found them, and he wanted his supper. But he good-naturedly rode back to where the man was standing knee-deep in grass on the edge of the hollow.

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

"Stranger here?" he asked.

"I guess so."

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

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

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

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

"First-chop!" said Jimmy, with a smile. "But I suppose you didn't call

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me to tell me Blazer is a good horse? What's the trouble?"

"I guess that hoss could pull," went on the stranger, eyeing Blazer critically.

"He would be some use hitched on to a wagon, I reckon."

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

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

"A wagon?"

"Yep!"

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

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

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

Jimmy Silver hesitated.

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

"Nope!"

"Or Kicking Mule?"

"Nope!"

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

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

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

"You don't say!"

"But I do!" said Jimmy, puzzled.

"The best thing you can do is to get your wagon out and trot along to the ranch. Hudson Smedley will put you up for the night."

The man eyed him oddly.

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

Jimmy looked at him.

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

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

"Hold on!" said Jimmy Silver coolly. "I haven't said that I'm helping you yet."

The man's eyes gleamed.

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

"Sure of that?" said Jimmy.

"Yep!"

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

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

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

Jimmy Silver slid his hand into his pocket. Ever since the affair of the flour-bag road-agent Jimmy Silver had carried the revolver given him by Mr. Lesage, of Mosquito. It came in useful now.

"Drop that bridle!" he rapped out, and the revolver was levelled at the man from over the border.

"Gee-whiz!"

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

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

Jimmy Silver laughed.

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

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

"Good enough!"

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

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

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

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

"You've got him, Bunker?"

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

The half-breed eyed Jimmy Silver grimly and suspiciously.

But he nodded, and rose from the wheel.

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

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

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

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

"Let my horse alone!" he snapped.

Lebel's eyes glittered at him.

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

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

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

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

"Right-ho!"

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

The wagon moved.

"I guess it's shifting!" panted Bunker. "Keep her going!"

"Come on, old hoss!" said Jimmy Silver.

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

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

"Good luck!" gasped Bunker.

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

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

In Danger!

"I GUESS we're through!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Nope!"

"I guess we're clear, anyhow."

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

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

Jude Bunker shook his head.

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

The half-breed muttered again.

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

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

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

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

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

"The Windy River Ranch," said Jimmy.

"Fur from hyer?"

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

"It do, do it?" said Jude Bunker. "Waal, now let me tell you how it stands, bub! We don't want you to talk about us at the ranch."

"No?" said Jimmy.

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

"I'm not likely to remember the

meeting for long," answered Jimmy Silver. "You see, I've got my own affairs to think about."

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

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

"I guess that's what I mean."

"Well, there's nothing doing."

"Would you trust him, you fool?" said the half-breed, coming closer. "I tell you the only safe way—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jimmy Silver smiled grimly.

"How are you going to stop me?"

he asked. "I warn you that I shall shoot if you come a step nearer."

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

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

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

"No!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess—"

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

Jude Bunker put up his hands with-

out demur. His eyes met the half-breed's for a moment, and Lebel slouched back to the wagon.

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

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

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

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

Crack!

The moment Jimmy's revolver no longer threatened, the half-breed was on the wagon with a single bound, and grasping a rifle from under the canvas cover.

He fired the instant the weapon was in his hands.

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

Crack!

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

"Go it, Blazer!" panted Jimmy.

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

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

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Smugglers!

SUPPER was nearly over at the ranch-house when Jimmy Silver came in after turning Blazer into the corral. Lovell and Raby and Newcome were at the supper-table with Hudson Smedley and a stranger, whom Jimmy had never seen before. He was a powerfully-built man, with keen grey eyes and a square chin, and his uniform showed him to be an inspector in the Canadian Mounted Police. Jimmy Silver wondered what an officer of that well-known force was doing at Windy River. So far as he was aware, there had been no lawlessness in the section since the arrest of the flour-bag road-agent, and Windy River was in an out-lying quarter "off the beat" of the Canadian Police as a rule. It came almost instantly into Jimmy's mind that the inspector's presence might have some connection with the two "bulldozers" he had met at Swampy Hollow. That the two men were "crooks" of some kind was beyond a doubt.

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

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

The rancher laughed.

"You're getting on," he said.

"You'll be a first-rate cowpuncher in the long run if you stay in Canada." He turned to the inspector. "This is my cousin, Jimmy Silver, from the Old Country, Inspector Steel."

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

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

"Boot-leggers!" repeated Jimmy Silver.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

Inspector Steel listened quietly, but with the keenest interest.

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

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

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

"A liquor smuggler," said the rancher.

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you catch their names?"

"Jude Bunker and Lebel."

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

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

"And they fired on you?"

"The half-breed did, three times, with a rifle," said Jimmy. "They were

awfully keen that I shouldn't tell that I'd seen them."

"No wonder!" said the rancher. "I guess they know that Mr. Steel has come up from Kicking Mule to look for them."

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

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

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

Jimmy crimsoned.

"I couldn't know—"

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

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

"Worse than that," said the inspector.

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

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

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

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

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

"Not Blazer!" called out Jimmy.

"He's had enough to-day!"

"Right-ho!"

"You are more careful of your horse than of yourself, my boy," said the Canadian inspector, with a smile.

"Well, if you think the boy can come, Mr. Smedley—"

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

"Thanks!"

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

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

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

"All ready, Jimmy!" he announced.

"The inspector ready to start?" asked Jimmy.

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

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

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Hard Pressed!

"DURN you, you gol-darned breed, make 'em move!" Jude Bunker, standing up in the wagon and looking back, snarled out the words to his associate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jude Bunker gave a yell.

"Leave the shebang! Leave fifteen hundred cool dollars in liquor to be split! Arter we've brought it so far! I tell you if they come up before we're loaded we've got to fight."

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

"Sure!"

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

Crack, crack, crack!

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

Bunker dropped the rifle and cast an anxious glance round. The wagon had almost reached the crest of the

acclivity, and his hard face flushed with hope.

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

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

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

"Halt!"

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

The wagon stopped.

The boot-leggers evidently knew the spot that they had now reached. Jude Bunker jumped down and cast a hurried glance back. The pursuers were still on the other side of the rocky ridge, which hid them from sight so far. They were now riding up the rough ascent the wagon had already covered, gaining at every stride of the horses, but still out of sight.

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

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

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

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

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

The wagon rumbled on past the clump of pines.

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

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

Bunker chuckled.

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

Lebel did not answer.

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

"Hyer they come!" grinned Bunker.

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

Bunker grinned at them.

"Come on as soon and as airy as you like, you gol-darned galoots!" he chuckled. "Come on, and you're wel-

come to all you find! Keep it up, you breed! Make 'em move—make 'em move! We're innocent traders, and we figure it out that we're chased by a gang of rustlers! That's what we are, and what we think! And the farther off we are from the liquor when they overhaul us the better! Make 'em move!"

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

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Beaten!

"THERE they are!" The Canadian inspector pointed with his riding-whip.

"Good!"

"We've got 'em!" chuckled Lovell. In the clear moonlight the wagon was plainly seen as the horsemen swept over the ridge. Down the descent they went galloping. The overhauling of the wagon was only a matter of minutes now.

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

The horsemen swept on.

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

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

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

Inspector Steel hailed the dusky teamster.

"Halt!"

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

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

Lebel pulled in the horses.

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

"I guess I want you," he said.

Bunker nodded coolly.

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

"Did you?" said Steel grimly.

"Jest that! Ain't I seed you afore somewhere?" asked Bunker affably. "Yep—I reckon you're Inspector Steel, what I've met down at Red Deer. You

had a fancy that I'd something to do with running fire-water to the Injuns, but you found out it was a mistake."

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

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

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

"Anything to oblige," said Bunker.

He jumped from the wagon and stood with his hands over his head. He was perfectly cool and self-possessed, like a man who had nothing to fear.

He glanced at Jimmy, and smiled at him and bestowed a wink on the surprised Rookwood junior.

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

"Yes," answered Jimmy.

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

"Now, that's kind—that's real kind!"

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

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

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

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

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

"The what?"

"Liquor."

"Liquor," repeated Jude Bunker.

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

Steel compressed his lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Don't you think that story's a bit

too thin?" snapped the inspector. "You knew very well that I was arter you, and you never took us for rustlers."

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

"Because you had a cargo of illicit liquor on board," said the Canadian inspector sternly.

Jude Bunker sighed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I swow I never did," said Jude

Bunker. "I allow Lebel yonder let loose his rifle, but he was shooting at a turkey-buzzard. Mebbe the kid fancied he was being shot at."

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

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

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

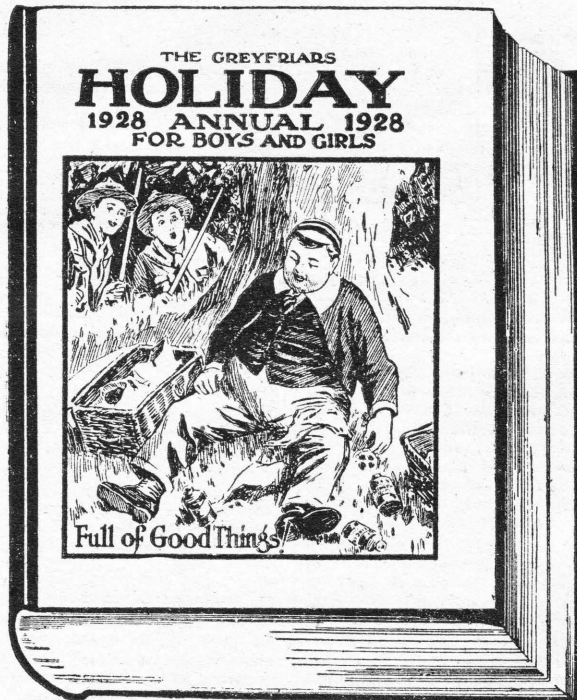
"He's ready to swear, and I'm ready to swear, that he was shooting a turkey-buzzard," he said. "I don't allow, inspector, that you can worry me any on that. But I'm ready and willing to go along with you, if that's your game. Always respected the law, I have. On both sides of the border, and I guess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

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

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

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

The inspector drew a deep breath. "May as well be getting back," he said. "I guess I'm sorry I've brought you so far on a wild-goose chase."

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

"No doubt about that."

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

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

Jimmy Silver nodded glumly.

He had felt sure of it, too. He was

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

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

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

Steel shook his head.

"Not after they dropped the liquor."

"You're sure they had it?"

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

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

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

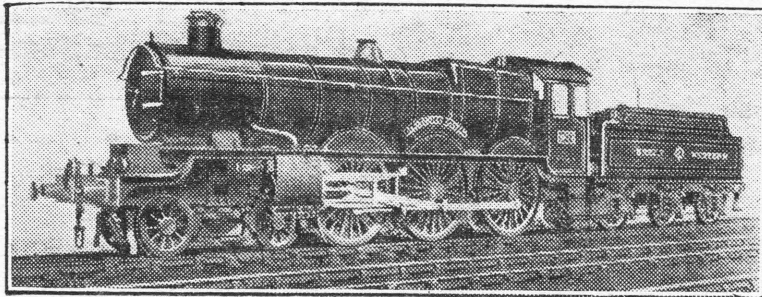
"I guess not. Jude Bunker can think so," said the inspector coolly. "We're out of their sight now, and I guess I'm stopping. You'll see my men around the ranch to-morrow, Mr. Smedley, and you'll send them on to join me here."

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as certain of the boot-leggers' guilt as the inspector himself; but he realised that it was a question of proof. Proof was lacking; and it was impossible to arrest the two rascals on the bare suspicion of having had a cargo of illicit spirits on board the wagon. Jude Bunker's explanations were plausible enough, too, though nobody believed them.

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

Skitter Dick chuckled.

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

Lebel grinned.

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

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"Quite!"

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

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

"It's a big order."

"Sure."

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

"That's all right. If you hadn't

I guess I'm going to watch those two critters like their own shadows."

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

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

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

THE END.

(You will all enjoy reading: "Rogues of the Bad Lands!" another stirring long complete tale, dealing with the adventures of Jimmy Silver & Co., the chums of Rookwood, out West.)