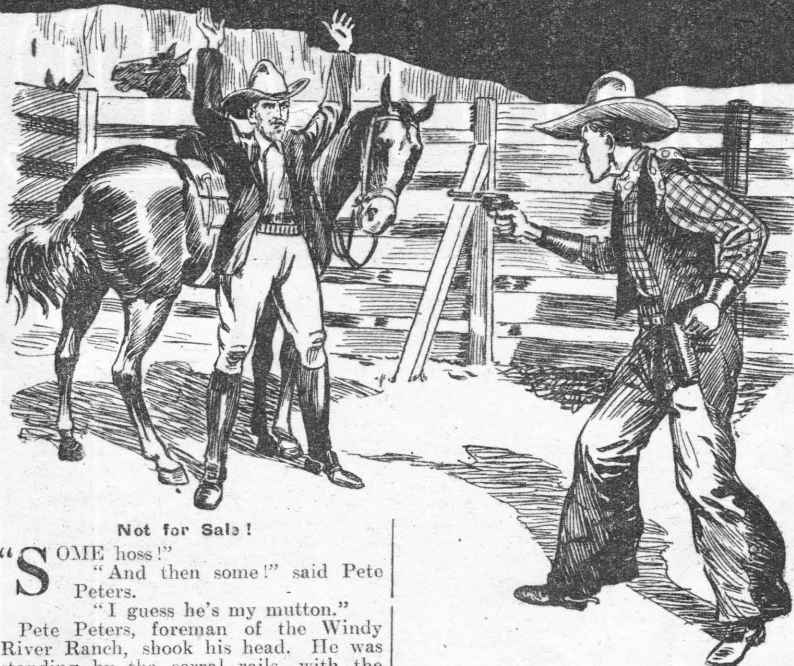


THE FORTUNE HORSE!

Jeff Crow, gunman, makes a raid on the corrals of the Windy River Ranch, and a great black horse, on which is hidden a fortune, disappears!

The Horse Thief!



Not for Sale!

"SOME hoss!"
"And then some!" said Pete Peters.

"I guess he's my nutton."

Pete Peters, foreman of the Windy River Ranch, shook his head. He was standing by the corral rails, with the buyer from Saskatchewan. There were a score of horses running loose in the corral, but the buyer's eye had fixed at once on a big, handsome black, with white "stockings," easily the best horse in the bunch.

"He's not for sale," said Pete.

"I guess I want him."

"Nothing doing," said the foreman of Windy River. "Take your pick from the bunch, leaving out Black Prince. I guess he belongs to young Silver, if he belongs to anybody, which ain't quite clear yet. Anyhow, he ain't for sale, Mr. Hawke."

"You call him Black Prince?"

"Young Silver gave him that name after he got him here."

"Who's young Silver?"

"Jimmy Silver, the boss' cousin from the Old Country," said Pete Peters. "He's just come in, if you want to see him. But he won't sell that hoss."

Jimmy Silver came trotting in from the prairie, mounted on Blazer, with his chums, Lovell, Raby, and Newcome. The Rookwood juniors had been helping the cowpunchers in the round-up, and they had put in a good morning's work. The Windy River foreman called to Jimmy.

"Hyer, bub!"

Jimmy Silver rode up.

"Anything wanted?" he asked.

"I guess this gent wants to buy the black hoss," said the Windy River foreman, with a grin. "Chance for you to make a stake, Jimmy. You came by him cheap."

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"He's not really mine to sell," he answered. "Anyhow, I'm not selling. Sorry, sir."

The buyer looked at Jimmy and Jimmy looked at the buyer. Jimmy

had heard that a buyer was visiting the ranch that day—a Mr. Hawke from Saskatchewan. But he had supposed that Mr. Hawke had come to buy steers, as the Windy River was not a horse-ranch. Hudson Smedley bred horses and sold them as a side-line; it was in cattle that his chief business was done.

Jimmy did not like the buyer's looks much. He was a thin but muscular man, with a hard dark face, half hidden by a thick beard and moustache. He had a patch over one eye, but the other was very sharp and penetrating.

"Ain't it your hoss, bub?" demanded Mr. Hawke. And Pete Peters strolled away, leaving Jimmy Silver to deal with the buyer.

"It is and it isn't," said Jimmy Silver. "It's rather a long story, and it wouldn't interest you."

The man from Saskatchewan stared at him.

"I guess I don't get you," he said. "How is it that that hoss is and isn't yourn, bub?"

"I roped it in on the prairie," explained Jimmy Silver. "It belonged to an American gunman named Dave Tutt—you may have seen his name in the papers. He robbed a man in Montreal and fled to the West, and he seems to have bought this horse when he got off the railroad at Red Deer. He was shot up by his confederates, whom he had diddled over the plunder, and he's in prison now at Kicking Mule. As I roped in the horse, I'm keeping it, unless it's claimed by the authorities."

Mr. Hawke listened attentively. "I get you!" he assented. "I've seen it in the papers: Tutt stole a big diamond in Montreal from a millionaire named Laroche. Isn't that the case?"

"That's it," said Jimmy.

A Stirring Long Complete Tale dealing with the Holiday Adventures of Jimmy Silver & Co. of Rookwood, out West.

BY

OWEN CONQUEST.

"And the police have got him?"
"Yes."

"What about the others?"

"One was shot by Tutt, in the scrap they had, and one was wounded and taken by the Mounted Police. The other, Jeff Crow, is still at liberty," said Jimmy Silver. "Nothing's been seen of him since, so I suppose he's cleared out of this section."

"But the hoss is yourn, if you roped him in," said Mr. Hawke. "It will be ten years in the stone jug for Dave Tutt, and I guess he won't put in a claim. If you hadn't roped in the hoss what would have become of it?"

"Either Jeff Crow would have got it or the Indians," said Jimmy.

"Waal, then, it's yourn."

"Sergeant Kerr told me I could consider it as being as good as mine," said Jimmy, with a smile. "But I'd rather have it legally settled before I sell it."

"That's a good animal you're mounted on."

"Yes, rather," said Jimmy, giving Blazer's glossy neck an affectionate pat. "Black Prince is a splendid horse, but I wouldn't change Blazer for him."

"I guess I want Black Prince," said the buyer abruptly. "He's yours to sell, if you want. What do you say to three hundred dollars?"

"Nothing doing."

"Four hundred?"

"He's not for sale."

"I guess I'm set on that hoss," said Mr. Hawke persuasively. "You drive a hard bargain for a tenderfoot. I reckon I could go up to five hundred dollars for that there black hoss."

Jimmy Silver shook his head.

"I'd take the offer," he answered.

"But it's as I told you—he's not mine to sell at present. Good-morning!"

Jimmy Silver dismounted and led Blazer into the corral, leaving Mr. Hawke standing and biting his lip.

He joined Lovell and Raby and Newcome, and went into the ranchhouse with them. The heavy tread of the buyer from Saskatchewan followed the Rookwood juniors in.

Hudson Smedley was at the dining-table, which was laid for dinner. He gave the man from Saskatchewan a nod. "Staying to dinner, after all?" he asked.

"I guess not. I've got to get back to Mosquito to look after my beasts. But I told you I wanted to buy a hoss, Mr. Smedley."

"Hasn't Peters shown you the animals in the corral?"

"Sure! But I'm set on the black hoss, and young bub here says it's not for sale," explained Mr. Hawke. "I guess I'm going as high as five hundred dollars for that hoss. Is it a trade?"

"That's for my cousin to answer," said the rancher, looking at Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy shook his head.

"I've told Mr. Hawke I'm not sure the horse is mine to sell," he said. "That settles it!"

"Quite!" agreed the rancher.

"I'm set on the hoss," said Mr. Hawke. "Make it six hundred dollars and hand over the critter."

"By Jove, Jimmy!" murmured Lovell. "You're in luck."

"That's a large sum," said Hudson Smedley, looking curiously at the buyer. "You haven't bought any cattle here, but you seem disposed to throw away money on a horse. Black Prince is a fine animal, but he's not worth six hundred dollars in Alberta."

"I guess I can afford to buy what I want," said Mr. Hawke. "Is it a trade, then?"

"No!" said Jimmy Silver.

Mr. Hawke's single eye gleamed at him.

"Then name your price!" he snapped.

"The horse isn't for sale."

"Not at any price?" asked the buyer.

"No."

"Spose I made it a thousand dollars?"

"Nothing doing."

Mr. Hawke compressed his thin lips. "Then I reckon I may as well get," he said; and he strode out of the ranch-house, evidently in a state of great exasperation.

And a few minutes later Mr. Hawke, of Saskatchewan, mounted on his own horse, was riding away from the Windy River Ranch on the Mosquito trail.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

No Cook!

JIMMY SILVER'S face was very thoughtful as he ate his dinner. The buyer from Saskatchewan had given him food for thought.

"It's jolly queer," he said at last, when dinner was nearly over.

"What is?" asked Arthur Edward Lovell.

"That fellow being so keen on Black Prince."

"I suppose he had taken a fancy to him," said Raby.

"Yes; but—"

"I guess it is queer," said Hudson Smedley. "I believe the man would have given a thousand dollars for the animal, and he's not worth anything like that figure."

"You know this man Hawke?" asked Jimmy.

The rancher shook his head.

"I've never seen him before," he answered. "A crowd of buyers come up here to the ranches at the round-up. He's one of a dozen I've seen the last few days."

"He came to buy cattle."

"So he said, but he bought none," said Hudson Smedley. "Seems to me he must have heard of that horse, and came here specially to buy it, if he could. I don't see why he should, but I guess it looks like that."

Jimmy uttered an exclamation.

"I wonder—"

"Well?"

"You know that the stolen diamond was supposed to be hidden about the black horse," said Jimmy. "It was not found on Dave Tutt, and it has not turned up since. He has refused to tell the police what he did with it, and it seems certain that he brought it to Alberta with him. Jeff Crow was after the black horse the day I roped it in on the prairie. I wonder—"

Arthur Edward Lovell gave a chuckle.

"That fellow wasn't Jeff Crow, if that's what's in your mind, Jimmy," he said. "He's quite different to look at, especially with that patch over his eye."

"Jeff Crow wouldn't dare to come here after the horse without making himself look different," retorted Jimmy. "He's wanted by the police."

"But what would Crow want the horse for now?" said Lovell. "Sergeant Kerr searched the black horse, and found that the diamond wasn't on him. It could only have been hidden in his trappings, and they've been taken off."

Jimmy Silver nodded.

"I know. But—"

"I guess I'm going to speak to that pilgrim, if he hasn't cleared off yet," said Hudson Smedley abruptly, and he rose from the table.

Jimmy Silver & Co. followed him out of the ranch-house.

"Peters!" called out the rancher.

"Hallo, boss!"

"Is that man Hawke gone?"

"Half an hour ago, for Mosquito," said the Windy River foreman.

"You don't know anything about the man, Pete?" asked Hudson Smedley.

"Only that he came up from the railroad to buy cattle," said the foreman. "I guess he wasn't keen on business, though. He bought nothing here, and didn't seem to want anything but Jimmy's hoss."

"That's how it struck me," said the rancher, with a frown. "I guess I've got a hunch that he isn't any buyer from Saskatchewan at all, and he had reasons of his own for wanting to get hold of the black horse. Let me know if he shows up here again, though I reckon he won't."

And the rancher was right. The man from Saskatchewan—if he was from Saskatchewan—did not show up at the Windy River Ranch. Hudson Smedley, busy with the work of the round-up, dismissed the incident from his mind; but Jimmy Silver did not forget it so soon. Jimmy was more than suspicious of the buyer from Saskatchewan, who had apparently been prepared to go up to an inordinate figure to obtain the black horse. Why was Mr. Hawke so keen on Black Prince? It was a good horse—a really fine animal—but there were others as good to be bought in Alberta at a much lower figure than Mr. Hawke had offered. More and more it was borne in upon Jimmy's mind that Mr. Hawke, of Saskatchewan, was not what he had appeared to be. Without the thick brown beard and the black patch over his eye, Jimmy would not have wondered if Mr. Hawke had proved to

bear a strong resemblance to Jeff Crow. Yet it was perplexing what the gunman could want with the black horse now.

Certainly, it had been believed that Dave Tutt had hidden the diamond in the horse's fixings, to keep it out of the hands of his associates, who had turned on him and shot him down.

But the horse, captured by Jimmy Silver, had been searched to the skin by Sergeant Kerr, of Kicking Mule. All his trappings had been taken away. He was now running barebacked in the corral. Surely Jeff Crow could not suppose that the stolen diamond was hidden about the horse still? Even the mane and the ears and the thick tail had been searched by the sergeant for a possible hiding-place of the diamond, and the result had been nil.

One thing was certain, that if Jeff Crow, or a confederate, was still after the black horse, the attempt to buy him would not be the last attempt.

As Black Prince was not to be obtained in that way, the next step would be an attempt to steal him. Jimmy was sure of that.

And he determined to keep a very wary eye open for any enterprising horse-thief who attempted to obtain possession of Black Prince.

Jimmy Silver was busy that afternoon with his chums, helping in the round-up, and it was dusk when he rode in from Lone Pine, driving cattle. Some of the outfit were at supper on the benches by the cookhouse, and Jimmy heard remarks from the cow-punchers which showed that something was up.

"Gol-darn the fat jay!" said Spike Thompson. "I guess I'll hide him with my quirt when he does show up!"

"If he wasn't the best cook in Alberta I'd boot him off the ranch when he mooses in!" growled Pete Peters.

"I guess I'll kick him, anyhow," said Skitter Dick. "The boss gave him a day's leave, and here's the galoot still away after forty-eight hours."

Jimmy Silver smiled as he joined the grousing punchers. He knew that they were discussing Baldy, the cook.

Baldy Bubbin had ridden away to Kicking Mule the previous morning, and he should have returned the same night. Now it was the second evening, and Baldy hadn't turned up.

When Baldy was away, Woo Sing, the chore-boy, cooked for the outfit, and Woo Sing's cooking was not up to the mark. It was as good, doubtless, as the cooking on most frontier ranches, but the outfit were accustomed to something better from Baldy. Fat and fatuous, Baldy Bubbin was every kind of a "gol-darned jay," in the opinion of the cowboys, still, he was a wonderful cook, and when he was in the cook-house meals were always enjoyable, as well as plentiful. So, although everybody at Windy River laughed at Baldy, nobody wanted to part with him, and when he was absent he was missed more than any member of the outfit would have been.

"Hasn't Baldy rolled in yet?" asked Jimmy, as he joined the group by the cookhouse.

"Nix!" grunted Red Alf. "We're going to hide him when he does."

"I hope he's had no accident," said Jimmy. "Poor old Baldy is more likely to pitch off a horse than to stick on it."

"Oh, he's all right!" growled the Windy River foreman. "He's struck a fire-water joint in Kicking Mule, I guess, and taken too much on board."

"That's it!" assented Skitter Dick.

THE POPULAR.—No. 455.

Jimmy Silver nodded. It was only too probable that Baldy had taken the opportunity of indulging in the cup that cheers. It was one of Baldy's weaknesses. Certainly, as Kicking Mule was a "dry" town, Baldy ought not to have been able to obtain fire-water there; but in the "driest" of spots there was generally liquor to be had in exchange for the "dust," and it was very likely that Baldy was gone on a "bender." Instead of riding back to Windy River after his day's leave, probably he had spent the night sleeping off the effects of poisonous spirits.

Jimmy joined the cowpunchers at their supper instead of going into the ranch-house—he liked the cheery if rather unceremonious company of the outfit. Conversation at supper ran chiefly on Baldy Bubbin and his sins; and Skitter Dick declared that if it hadn't been round-up time he would have ridden over to Kicking Mule and brought Baldy home at the end of a rope. The cowpunchers chuckled at the idea of the fat cook rolling home at the tail of a horse.

"Talk of angels!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver suddenly. "Here he is!"

A rider came dimly through the shadows and showed up clearly in the light from the cookhouse.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. Baldy's Bender!

"BALDY!"

"What the thunder—" It was Baldy Bubbin, in a strange case. His horse, a quiet old animal, stopped dead, blinking in the light; but Baldy Bubbin did not dismount. He sat unsteadily in the saddle and blinked at the staring cowpunchers. There was an expression of preternatural gravity on Baldy's fat face.

"By gum, he's squiffy!" exclaimed Skitter Dick.

"Baldy, you fat coyote—" began Pete Peters wrathfully.

Baldy waved a fat hand at the foreman.

"You lie!" he said dramatically.

"What?"

"I'm not squiffy; I'm sober ash judge," said Baldy. "I don't give a rap for you, Pete Peters, or your brother, either."

"My brother?" stuttered the foreman.

"Ain't that your brother? He's just like you, anyway."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the cowpunchers.

The hapless Baldy was seeing two Pete Peters at that moment.

The foreman grinned in spite of himself.

"You low-down, soaking polceat!" he began again.

"You lie!" said Baldy. "Lend me a hand to get off thish hoss, somebody, I'm fixed!"

"Why, he's tied on!" roared Jimmy Silver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Friend of mine at Kicking Mule fixed me," said Baldy, with dignity. "The hoss wouldn't keep still, and the yairth kept moving all the time. So friend of mine fixed me with thish trail-rope. Not that I'd have fallen off. I'm a teetotaler."

"You look it!" growled Pete Peters.

He slit the trail-rope with his knife and hauled Baldy out of the saddle. The fat cook collapsed on the ground in a heap, and the horse trotted away to the corral. Evidently it was the horse that had found the way home to

Windy River. Baldy was not in a state to have done so, and certainly if he had not been tied on he would have been left strewn on the prairie somewhere between Kicking Mule and Windy River.

"Hands off!" said Baldy, as Pete Peters shook him. "Don't you lay hands on a gentleman, you low-down cowpuncher!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By gum," said Pete Peters, in great wrath, "I'll give you gentleman, you fat jay!"

"You lie!" said Baldy, sitting up dazedly. "I'm not squiffy. I guess I've been on a bender. I went on a bender yeshterday. I went again to-day. Monish all gone. Sergeant Kerr told me to go straight home. I asked him if he didn't know how to address his superiors respectfully. He kicked me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fetch a bucket of cold water, Jimmy!" said Pete Peters.

"Right-ho!"

"I guess I don't want any cold water," mumbled Baldy. "Where's Smedley?"

"Do you mean Mr. Smedley, you cheeky loafer?" demanded the foreman.

"I mean Smedley!" retorted Baldy. "Old Smedley! Fellers what runs thish hyer ranch and pays you mugwumps for sitting around and chewing the rag. Gotter lettersh for Smedley."

"You've got a letter for Mr. Smedley?"

"Yesh. Sergeant givsh me lettersh for Smedley. Said it was important."

"You fat rascal!" said the foreman. "When did he give it to you?"

"Yeshterday."

"Great gophers! You say that Sergeant Kerr gave you a letter for the boss yesterday, and you never brought it?" shouted the foreman.

"I been on a bender," said Baldy, with dignity. "Gentleman of leisure. Blow the old lettersh! I was coming home last night, but I fell asleep and I—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's not a laughing matter if the letter's important!" growled the foreman. "Hand it over, you mugwump, and I'll take it to the boss!"

"Shumwhere in my clothes, if I haven't lost it," mumbled Baldy, feeling dazedly through his pockets.

No letter came to light.

Pete Peters bent over the hapless cook and unceremoniously went through his pockets. But there was no letter to be found. It was clear that Baldy on his bender had dropped the important letter, and that it had never come with him to Windy River.

"Well, by gum!" said Pete Peters, in angry disgust. "That does it! Give me that bucket, Jimmy!"

Jimmy Silver handed over the bucket, full to the brim with cold water.

Swooooo!

"Gurrrrrggggg!" came from Baldy Bubbin, as the bucket was upended over his hapless head.

"Feel better now?" grinned Jimmy Silver.

Baldy staggered to his feet. The sudden shock of the icy water had sobered the wretched fellow. He blinked round dazedly.

"Let up!" he gasped. "Oh dear! Oh crumbs! Let up, old man! Sober ash judge!"

"Where's that letter for the boss?" roared Pete Peters.

"Lost it."

"Where did you lose it, you jay?"

"Might have been at Kicking Mule last night," mumbled the cook. "Might

have been on the prerar. Don't mention it to the boss, and it will be all right."

"Will it?" said Pete Peters grimly. "I guess I'm going to mention it to the boss hyer and now; and I don't envy you what will happen when he hears!"

"Oh, Jerusalem!" groaned Baldy; and he tottered into the cookhouse.

Pete Peters strode away towards the ranch-house, and returned in a few minutes with Hudson Smedley. The rancher looked in on Baldy, with a stern brow.

"You had a letter for me from Sergeant Kerr at Kicking Mule?" he asked, while the hapless cook squirmed under his eye.

"I guess it's gone, boss!" groaned Baldy. "I—I'll ride over to Kicking Mule, if you like, and ask him for another."

"Anyhow, it would have reached me twenty-four hours late!" said the rancher sternly.

"I—I guess—"

"That will do!" said Hudson Smedley. "Kick him off the ranch, some of you."

Baldy gave a dismal yell.

"You ain't going to fire me, boss!" he wailed. "I guess you'll never get another cook like me at Windy River. It was the fire-water, boss; they got me in at Ikey Mike's joint, and filled me up. I never meant to go on no bender. I've lost all my money, as well as your letter, boss. You ain't going to fire me?"

Hudson Smedley paused.

"I guess you can't help being a born fool, Baldy!" he said. "But this is the limit! I guess I won't fire you, if some of the boys will take the trouble to give you a good dozen with a trail-rope."

"Ow!"

"I guess we'll do that, boss," shouted half a dozen cowpunchers.

And they did.

As Hudson Smedley, with a knitted brow, walked back to the ranch-house, a series of fearful yells sounded from the cookhouse. Half a dozen cowpunchers, with coiled trail-ropes, were giving Baldy Bubbin what he had asked for; and they gave it to him with energy. And by the time they had finished Baldy had had a good dozen, and he repented from the bottom of his heart that he had ever yielded to the temptation to go on a bender.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. What The Sergeant Knew!

JIMMY SILVER followed his Canadian cousin into the ranch-house. Hudson Smedley was frowning in troubled thought; it was evident that he attached importance to the letter which Sergeant Kerr had entrusted to Baldy, and which the fatuous Baldy had lost.

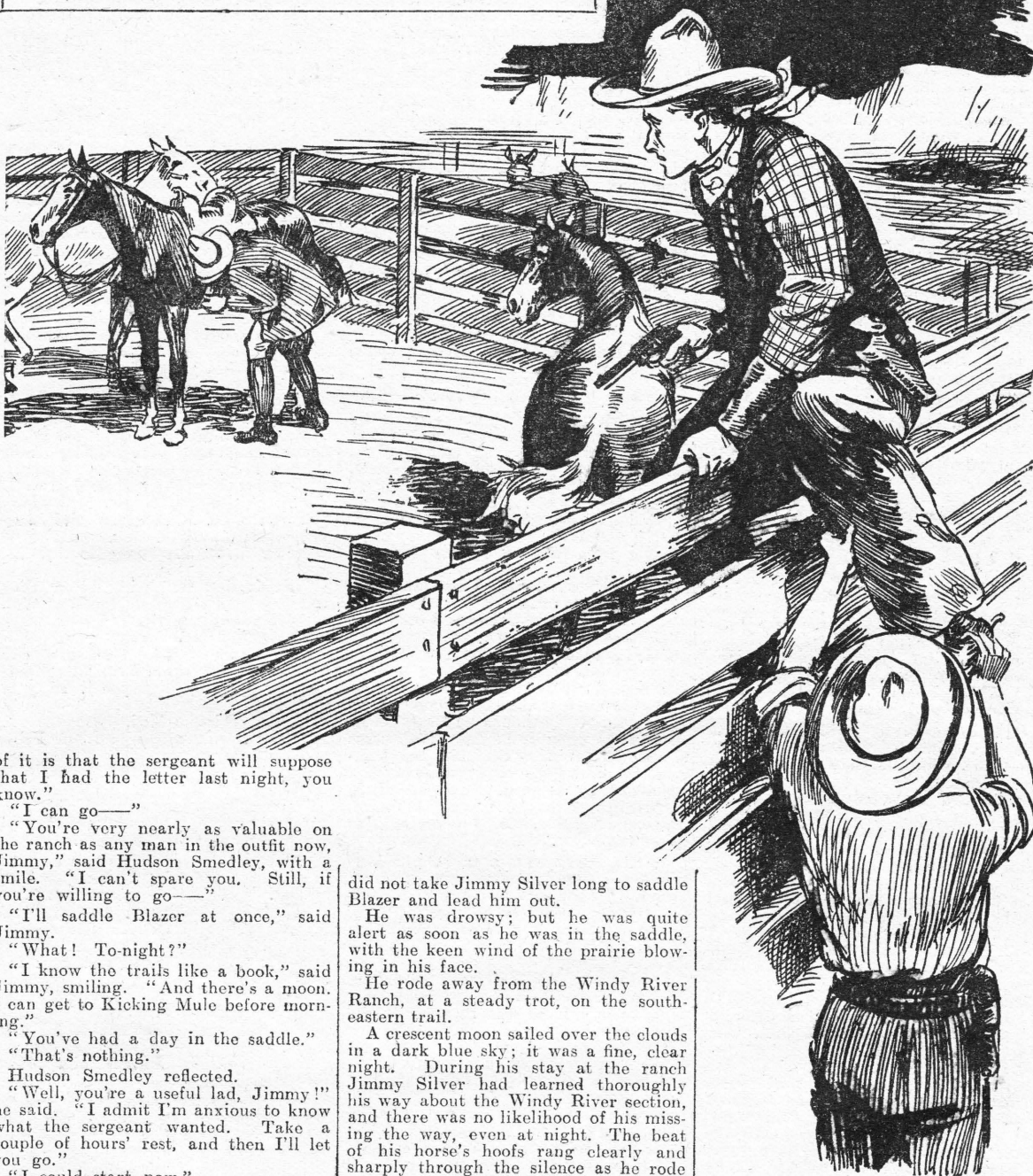
"What about little me?" asked Jimmy.

"What?"

"You don't want to send a man over to Kicking Mule at the round-up," said Jimmy. "But if it's important, I could ride over and see Sergeant Kerr."

"I must send somebody," said the rancher, compressing his lips. "Kerr wouldn't send me a letter unless it was important. I've no doubt it has something to do with the gunman he's hunting for, Jeff Crow, and the stolen diamond. He may have wanted something done to help the Mounted Police. Anyway, it was important. The worst

THE HORSE-THIEF AT WORK! "You three watch out for him while I drop in over the rails and root him out!" said Spike. He clambered over the high fence, with a shove up from one of the punchers. The moonlight showed him the thief standing by the horse already saddled. (See Chapter 5.)



of it is that the sergeant will suppose that I had the letter last night, you know."

"I can go—"

"You're very nearly as valuable on the ranch as any man in the outfit now, Jimmy," said Hudson Smedley, with a smile. "I can't spare you. Still, if you're willing to go—"

"I'll saddle Blazer at once," said Jimmy.

"What! To-night?"

"I know the trails like a book," said Jimmy, smiling. "And there's a moon. I can get to Kicking Mule before morning."

"You've had a day in the saddle."

"That's nothing."

Hudson Smedley reflected.

"Well, you're a useful lad, Jimmy!" he said. "I admit I'm anxious to know what the sergeant wanted. Take a couple of hours' rest, and then I'll let you go."

"I could start now."

"No; take a rest first. I'm not going to wear you out. You can get to Kicking Mule by dawn, and that will be early enough."

"Right-ho!" said Jimmy Silver.

As a matter of fact, Jimmy was tired with his day's work, and needed a rest before he undertook a long ride. He went to his room at once to lie down in his clothes.

Almost as soon as his head touched the pillow Jimmy dropped asleep; but he awakened soon after midnight, and let himself out of the ranch-house. Spike Thompson was yawning at the corral gate, in the light of the stars, and he gave Jimmy a sleepy nod. It

did not take Jimmy Silver long to saddle Blazer and lead him out.

He was drowsy; but he was quite alert as soon as he was in the saddle, with the keen wind of the prairie blowing in his face.

He rode away from the Windy River Ranch, at a steady trot, on the south-eastern trail.

A crescent moon sailed over the clouds in a dark blue sky; it was a fine, clear night. During his stay at the ranch Jimmy Silver had learned thoroughly his way about the Windy River section, and there was no likelihood of his missing the way, even at night. The beat of his horse's hoofs rang clearly and sharply through the silence as he rode away from the ranch.

"Hallo!" called Jimmy suddenly.

The shadowy figure of a horseman loomed into view, riding towards the ranch. Jimmy hailed him, supposing that it was one of the cowpunchers who were watching the cattle on the plains.

There was no reply to his hail, and the shadowy figure vanished the next moment.

Jimmy glanced after it carelessly, and rode on his way.

At a steady trot he kept on, mile after mile, while the moon waned and the stars died out in the grey of dawn.

There was a rosy flush in the eastern sky as Jimmy Silver came in sight of Kicking Mule.

The sun was up when he rode into the little township of North-Western Alberta. He rode directly to the lumber-built post of the Mounted Police, and sighted the burly Sergeant Kerr on his doorstep, taking in a breath of the keen morning air.

"Hallo! You're early in the saddle!" exclaimed the sergeant, as Jimmy Silver rode up.

"Just a few," said Jimmy, with a smile. "I've ridden over from the ranch overnight. Bubbin lost your letter."

Sergeant Kerr uttered a sharp exclamation.

"My letter—the letter I gave him on

Tuesday. Didn't he come back to the ranch with it?"

"He hung his leave out over Wednesday, and went hunting for fire-water," explained Jimmy. "The letter was lost."

"The fat fool!" exclaimed Sergeant Kerr wrathfully. "Has anything happened to the horse?"

"The horse?" repeated Jimmy.

"The black horse—Tutt's horse."

Jimmy whistled.

"Was the letter anything to do with the black horse?" he exclaimed.

"I guess so. I'm coming over to the ranch to-day about it, but I couldn't get away before," explained the sergeant. "I had to wait for my men to get back before leaving the post. They've been hunting Jeff Crow. I warned Hudson Smedley in my letter to keep guard over Tutt's horse. Has anything—"

"He was safe in the corral when I left the ranch," said Jimmy Silver.

The sergeant looked relieved.

"Good! That horse is worth a hundred thousand dollars," he said.

"I've been offered a thousand for him," said Jimmy, with a smile. "But there was no sale."

"I guess whoever made that offer knew as much as I know," said the sergeant grimly. "Tell me about it."

Jimmy Silver explained about Mr. Hawke, the buyer from Saskatchewan. Sergeant Kerr nodded.

"I guess it was Jeff Crow, or a confederate," he said. "You see, Dave Tutt has let out the secret of the diamond now. Not that he meant to, but he was delirious from his wound, and babbled it all out. I reckon I ought to have guessed it. The Laroche diamond was hidden about the black horse, after all."

"But where?" exclaimed Jimmy in amazement. "He was searched to the skin."

"Inside the brute," said the sergeant. "When Crow and the rest ran Tutt down, he made the black horse swallow the diamond."

"It was a pretty cute stunt, too," said the sergeant. "If he had got away from the gunmen, he would have ridden off on Black Prince, and killed the brute later and got the diamond back. As he didn't get away from them, the diamond was hidden safe. If he couldn't keep it, he was glad to keep it away from the others, and he did that. I reckon I never got on to the trick. But if the black horse is safe at the ranch, well and good."

Jimmy Silver drew a deep breath.

"If that buyer man was Jeff Crow, or a partner of his, he must know what Tutt has let out," he said.

"I guess he does," growled the sergeant. "Tutt's in the cabin we use as a hospital, with a Chinaman to nurse him. Anybody could have hung round the place spying, and I guess if Jeff Crow was there he would have heard him raving; he could be heard fifty yards away when the delirium was on him. I reckon now that Jeff Crow learned as much as I did, and so he came right on to the Windy River to play at a buyer from Saskatchewan, and get hold of the hoss at any figure. It was a clever trick, too, and I wonder you weren't taken in, as Bubbin never brought my letter to warn you."

"Well, I didn't think I had a right to sell Black Prince," said Jimmy. "Otherwise, I think I should have parted with him for six hundred dollars."

The sergeant nodded.

"Good for you! If you'd sold him, I guess Mr. Laroche, of Montreal, would

have had to whistle for his diamond. But it's all serene now. Hop down and get some breakfast with me, and I'll ride back to Windy River with you. Trooper Bright's here now, and can take charge."

Jimmy Silver dismounted, and joined the sergeant at breakfast. He was convinced now that the pseudo buyer from Saskatchewan was Jeff Crow. And he was wondering whether any attempt had been made during the night to steal Black Prince. Jimmy had intended to take precautions against such a move, but his ride to Kicking Mule had prevented that. But he remembered that a watch was kept at Windy River at night, and he hoped for the best.

But he was glad when breakfast was over, and he was in the saddle again, riding with the sergeant on the trail for Windy River.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. A Thief in the Night!

SPIKE THOMPSON yawned sleepily.

In the silence of the night there was a murmur of restless cattle, driven in from their pastures and branded at the round-up. It was necessary to keep watch and ward; a scare of the cattle, and a stampede, would have undone the hard work of days and nights. Spike Thompson rubbed his eyes, and rode slowly on his round, waiting for the hour when Skitter Dick was to relieve him on duty.

The cattle were restless, but after midnight Spike became aware that the horses in the corral were more ill-at-ease than the steers that breathed and snorted in the grassland. The crescent moon glimmered down on long lines of the recumbent figures of cattle, and on the wide space of the home corral where the horses were confined by a rail fence. More than once, from the corral, came a sound of stirring animals, and hoof-beats as some horse changed its position at a run. Which was not at all in accordance with the fitness of things, and caused Spike, sleepy as he was, to grow suspicious.

Windy River was, as a rule, a law-abiding section, but it was not free from tramping "hoboes," and from an occasional enterprising horse-thief. And of late there had been trouble with the Blood Indians, and some of the red "bucks" were still in a sullen and restless humour. So it did not take long to guess that it was very probable that some lawless hand was at work in the home corral.

Having arrived at that suspicion, Spike left his horse, and loosened the revolver in the holster at his belt, and proceeded to investigate.

It was easy enough for any slinking horse-thief to approach the corral in the darkness, and clamber over the pine-rail fence, but it was not so easy to get away with a horse. The gate of the corral was locked at night, and the fence was high for jumping, especially by a stranger in the dark. But that some stranger was there, Spike soon had proof, for he came on a horse tied to the corral rails at the point farthest from the ranch buildings.

In the moonlight Spike eyed the tied horse. Evidently it had been tied up there by someone who had arrived surreptitiously at the corral, and entered the enclosure over the fence. The horse did not belong to Windy River, and as he scanned it more closely Spike recognised the animal as the one ridden by Mr. Hawke, of Saskatchewan, on his visit to the ranch.

Then Spike Thompson grinned a broad grin.

He had heard all about Mr. Hawke's munificent offers to purchase Black Prince at a long price. Finding Mr. Hawke's own horse tied up to the corral in the dead of night was a pretty clear indication that the man from Saskatchewan was still after Black Prince, and had stolen to Windy River, like a thief in the night, to steal the coveted horse.

"Gee-whiz!" murmured Spike.

He did not give the alarm—yet. His first thought was to cut off the horse-thief's retreat.

He untied the tethered steed, and led it away in the gloom to a distance, where he tied it to a stump. The horse-thief was not likely to find it again in a hurry when he emerged from the corral.

Then Spike put his head into the bunkhouse, where a sound of deep and steady breathing greeted him.

"Hallo, boys!" he said, in cautious tones.

"Hallo! Time up!" yawned Skitter Dick, awakening.

"Not quite. But—"

"Then what the thunder do you mean by waking a galoot out of his beauty sleep?" demanded the Skitter indignantly.

"I guess I want you and two or three of the boys!" chuckled Spike.

"There's a god-darned hoss-thief in the corral this blessed minute, and I've got a hunch that we're going to rope him in!"

"Oh, is that it?" said Skitter Dick; and he rolled out of his bunk. "Wake up, you snoozing critters!"

"I guess it's the man from Saskatchewan, what was here after Black Prince," said Spike. "I've found his hoss, anyway, and put it away for him tidy."

Skitter Dick chuckled.

"I guess we'll give him Black Prince and some over," he said. "You come along, Alf, and you, Pike Potter."

"You bet!"

Three cowpunchers emerged from the bunkhouse, gun in hand, and followed Spike Thompson to the corral.

"How do you reckon he figures it out to get the critter away?" whispered the Skitter. "The gate's locked fast."

"I don't get him, there," answered Spike. "But he's there sure enough. You three watch out for him, while I drop in over the rails and root him out."

"Good!"

Spike clambered over the high fence, with a shove up from one of his comrades.

The moonlight showed him Black Prince—saddled and bridled, with a man standing by his side. Evidently the horse-thief had brought saddle and bridle from his own steed, to place them on the horse he intended to steal.

The man was bending to finish adjusting the girths when Spike sighted him.

The moon was behind Spike, and it threw his shadow forward over the horse-thief, and the man started almost convulsively, and looked round.

Spike's gun came up to a level.

"I guess this lets you out, stranger," he drawled. "Put 'em up, or take your gruel!"

He grinned cheerily at the horse-thief. It was Mr. Hawke, of Saskatchewan, without the patch over his eye now! Both his eyes glittered at the cowpuncher.

"I guess you've slipped up on this deal, Mr. Hawke," grinned Spike. "You ain't annexing that hoss, sir—not in your lifetime! Are you putting up

them paws, or are you asking for daylight to be let through your cabeza—moonlight, at least?"

And Spike chuckled.

The horse-thief sullenly put up his hands.

"That's better," said Spike. "I reckon you was figuring it out to ride Black Prince away, and lead your own beast—what? But how was you going to walk him out of the corral?"

The man did not answer.

"Waal, you're my mutton, anyhow, and you'll larn how we deal with hoss-thieves at Windy River," said Spike.

The horse-thief cast a quick glance towards the corral fence, at the spot where he had left his own animal tied up outside. Spike observed it, and chuckled again.

"Don't you risk making a break," he advised. "Your critter's gone—I've seen to that—and three of the boys are there waiting for you."

The thief muttered a savage exclamation.

"You've got him, Spike?" called out Skitter Dick, hearing the voices within the corral.

"Sure!"

"Bring him to the gate."

"Get a move on, with your paws over your head, Mister Horse-thief," said Spike, making a motion with the revolver.

The horse-thief walked before him, sullenly towards the corral gate, at which Skitter Dick and his comrades had now gathered. He stumbled suddenly, and fell on his knees.

"Now then," said Spike. "Oh!"

Crack!

From his fallen posture the man had fired suddenly, so suddenly and unexpectedly that even the wary cowpuncher was taken by surprise. It seemed almost impossible for a shot so fired to tell, but the expert gunman did not fail. Spike pulled trigger at once; but a bullet was searing along his brawny arm, and his gun jumped. The next instant the horse-thief was springing back at him like a tiger, and a clubbed revolver struck the cowboy to the ground.

Spike gave a wild yell as he went down, half stunned. Another crash on the head silenced him. There was a shout from Skitter Dick and Pike Potter and Red Alf, as they dragged open the gate of the corral. Jeff Crow—for Mr. Hawke, of Saskatchewan, was no other than the gunman, the late associate of Dave Tutt—did not even glance towards them. He was running for the black horse.

He reached the animal and sprang into the saddle. As Skitter Dick and his comrades burst into the corral, Jeff Crow urged the black horse to a furious gallop in the opposite direction, the rest of the startled horses scattering from his way.

It looked, for the moment, as if the horse-thief would dash right into the corral fence.

But Black Prince rose to a desperate leap under a skilful hand, and cleared the high fence at a bound. It was plain now how the horse-thief had planned to get his prize out of the corral.

It was a desperate and dangerous leap over the high fence, with unknown ground on the other side. But the horse-thief, playing for a stake of a hundred thousand dollars, was desperate.

Crack!

Skitter Dick fired as the black horse rose to the leap, and his bullet cut a hole through Jeff Crow's Stetson hat. The next moment Black Prince had crashed down outside the fence.

He stumbled in the grass, and a bitter exclamation came to the lips of the horse-thief. If the horse was hurt his capture was certain. Already the alarm was ringing through the ranch. The cowpunchers were all turning out.

But Black Prince was not hurt. He came up to an iron drag on the reins, and a furious hand drove him to a gallop. Half a dozen cowpunchers came tearing wildly round the corral, but the black horse and his rider were already vanishing across the prairie in the gloom of night.

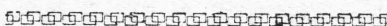
THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

On the Trail of the Horse-thief!


JIMMY SILVER rode up to the Windy River Ranch before noon, with the Canadian sergeant. It needed only a glance to tell Jimmy that something had happened at Windy River.

"Lovell—"

"He's gone!" said Lovell.



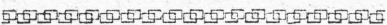
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"Who's gone?"

"Black Prince."

"Gone!" yelled the sergeant.

"Clean gone!" said Raby. "It's hard luck, Jimmy."

"And it was that rascal Hawke who tried to buy him, who roped him in," said Newcome. "Thompson recognised him."

"Hawke be blowed!" said Jimmy Silver forcibly. "It was Jeff Crow, that's a cert. But how—"

Hudson Smedley came out of the ranch-house.

"I guess it's a bad business," he said. "A horse-thief got into the corral last night, Jimmy, and got the black horse. The man seems to have had a nerve of iron. He jumped Black Prince over the corral fence. I guess it was the man Crow. But it beats me what his game is. He left a good horse here."

"You'd know what his game is, if my letter had reached you that I trusted to that fat scoundrel Bubbin!" exclaimed the sergeant.

"Your letter—"

"But you've looked for the horse-thief, surely?" exclaimed Sergeant Kerr. "He's being looked for, right enough,"

said the rancher. "But if he rides the black horse it won't be easy to run him down. It's a good beast and a stayer. But I've got half a dozen men on his trail. No news yet, though."

The sergeant clenched his hands.

"A hundred thousand dollars gore up the flume, because that fat fool got squiffy instead of delivering my letter!"

"How—"

"The diamond's with the black horse—the Laroche diamond. We've found out that Tutt made him swallow it."

"Phew!" exclaimed the rancher in amazement. "So that's it."

"He's fixed it up in a buckskin bag and forced it down the hoss' throat when the other gunmen had him beat!" groaned the sergeant. "I told you all about it in my letter, so that you could keep guard over the black horse till I could come."

"I never had the letter."

"I know. But we're not beat yet," said the sergeant savagely. "Jeff Crow has got the black horse, and we're going to get Crow. He won't dare to go by any of the settlements. I guess he would be roped in too fast. He's bound to strike for the foothills, and we'll have him yet."

The rancher nodded.

"Word's gone round to all the ranches," he said. "I guess every galoot in the section has got his eyes open for the black horse. The thief will never get through, and Skitter Dick and Pike Potter are on his trail now. If he takes to the hills he will be run down."

"He must take to the hills," said Pete Peters. "Why, there's a five thousand dollars' reward offered for the Laroche diamond, and as soon as it gets out where it is, half the section will be hunting Jeff Crow. I guess he knows that, and he'll keep out of sight. I calculate his only chance is to strike right across the Rockies into British Columbia."

"And that's a big order," said Hudson Smedley. "I guess he will be roped in on the Alberta side of the Rockies. You're getting down to dinner, sergeant. I guess one of the boys may be back any minute with news. Skitter Dick picked up the black horse's trail at dawn. He's followed it before, and knows it like the palm of his hand. Maybe they've got him already."

Sergeant Kerr dismounted.

"I guess I'll take a bite, and then get on," he said. "I'm not leaving the trail of the Laroche diamond before I've got my hands on it."

"Same here!" said Jimmy Silver to himself.

After dinner Jimmy Silver went to his room to make a few preparations for taking the trail, for he was quite resolved to join in the hunt for the black horse. His claim to the animal was very shadowy now; for, if it was true that the stolen diamond was hidden somewhere within Black Prince's glossy hide, it looked as if the animal's fate was sealed. But, at least, the Rookwood junior was very keen to have a hand in capturing the horse-thief.

There was a rustle under the bed as Jimmy entered his room, and he gave a start.

"What the thump—"

"Ow! I ain't here!"

"Baldy!" yelled Jimmy.

A terrified fat face looked out from under the bed.

"Keep it dark!" gasped Baldy. "They're arter me. They lay it to me that Spike got knocked out last night."

(Continued on page 28.)

"THE HORSE THIEF!"

(Continued from page 7.)
 Red Alf swears he's going to shoot me on sight, and all the boys are threatening to lynch me on the nearest tree."
 "Serve you jolly well right!" said Jimmy.
 Baldy, the cook, groaned.
 "I'll never go on a bender again—I never will!"
 "There was a step on the stairs, and Baldy's fat face popped back out of sight under the bed.
 "Keep it dark till the boys cool down!" he mumbled.
 Jimmy Silver grinned.
 It was Arthur Edward Lovell who came in.

"Seen anything of that fat villain, Baldy?" he asked. "The punchers want to lynch him."
 "Let's hope he'll keep out of sight, then," said Jimmy Silver laughing.
 When the juniors went down Baldy, the cook, was left quivering under the bed, like a fat jelly. But Jimmy Silver forgot the fat cook's existence as Skitter Dick came riding up to the ranch, with his horse in a foam.
 "News?" exclaimed Jimmy.
 Skitter Dick dragged in his horse.
 "Where's the boss? I guess we've run him down, Mr. Smedley."
 "Got him?" roared the sergeant.
 "Next door to got him," grinned Skitter Dick breathlessly. "He's took to the foothills, and he's cornered in a


blind gulch. He's up among the rocks with the black horse, and shooting. I've left Pike watching him, ready to fill him with lead if he tries to vamoose, and come back to tell you, boss."
 "Good!" exclaimed the rancher.
 Sergeant Kerr made a jump for his horse. Jimmy Silver was in Blazer's saddle at the same moment. Skitter Dick changed his sweating horse for a fresh mount, and rode away with them, on the trail of a hundred thousand dollars, and with high hopes of success at last.
 THE END.
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