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Week Ending December 31st, 1927.

New Series. No. 466.

THE TRAIL IN THE SNOW! Two trails of footprints in the snow, which Jimmy Silver & Co. would have passed unnoticed, attract the attention of Texas Lick. Lick reads a strange story in those trails, and unearths a still stranger mystery when he follows them up!



LICK TAKES The LEAD!

by OWEN CONQUEST

A STIRRING LONG COMPLETE TALE OF JIMMY SILVER & CO., OF ROOKWOOD, DEALING WITH THEIR CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY ADVENTURES!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Texas Lick Admires!

"A THOUSAND pounds!" said Arthur Edward Lovell impressively.

Texas Lick did not seem very much impressed.

It was a leading characteristic of Master Lick that he never was impressed by anything that he saw or heard in the Old Country. In the little old island in which he now sojourned, he had, so far, discovered nothing to equal what he had left behind in Texas.

"A thousand pounds!" he repeated. "How much might that be in real money?"

Arthur Edward Lovell snorted. Jimmy Silver laughed. Master Lick's cheek amused him as much as it irritated Lovell.

"About five thousand dollars," he said.

"Gee-whiz! That's a heap of money."

The Fistical Four of Rookwood were at Jimmy Silver's home for the Christmas vacation, and Texas Lick, of Texas, was with them. Lick had had, apparently, a good time over Christmas; though it was, of course, nothing like a Christmas in Texas. At the present moment the Rookwood juniors were standing in the picture gallery at the Priory House, looking at a little picture, which Mr. Silver had told them was a genuine Tintoretto.

Texas Lick thought Tintoretto no great shakes, and opined that there were better painters in the great United States. He guessed, in fact, that down

in Texas there were paint-slingers who could "lay over" any old Tintoretto.

He stared at the painting when Jimmy Silver had told him its value in "real money."

"Five thousand dollars! You let on that a galoot would squeeze out five thousand dollars for that smudge?" he asked incredulously.

"Just that!" said Jimmy. "I guess it shows that fools and their money are soon parted," said Texas Lick. "But I don't quite swallow it. You can't pull the leg of a galoot that was raised in Texas."

"The pater's sold it for that sum," said Jimmy.

"I guess he's a wise man if he has, but the other man in the deal wants a strait-jacket," said Texas Lick derisively. He stared at the picture again.

Jimmy's father was a collector of pictures, and his collection was worth a good many thousand pounds. Occasionally he sold one of his collection; the hard times being felt at Jimmy's home, as at most others. It cost Mr. Silver a pang to part with any of his treasures of art; but he found a little consolation, perhaps, in the high prices they fetched. "What would you think it worth, Lick?" asked Raby.

Lick cocked his eye thoughtfully at the genuine Tintoretto.

"Ten dollars!" he answered.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And not cheap at that," said Lick. "Look hyer, Jimmy Silver, do you mean to tell me, honest Injun, that your popper has roped in five thousand dollars for that picture?"

"Honest Injun!" answered Jimmy, laughing. "The man is coming down to-day to take it away."

"Then I guess I respect your popper more than I thought," said Texas Lick. "He's a galoot to respect. The man who can bring off a deal like that might have been raised in Noo Yark, by gum!"

"But it's worth the money!" said Newcome.

"Come off!"

"The dealer will sell it again for a good deal more," said Jimmy.

"He will have to catch a wall-eyed mug to do it, I guess. By gum, your popper is the goods!" said Lick, with genuine admiration. "I never reckoned that this mouldy old island produced any galoot with his eye-teeth cut to that extent. I respect him."

Jimmy looked rather grimly at the transatlantic junior.

Lick's admiration was evidently based upon the fact that he believed Mr. Silver to have brought off successfully a piece of very cunning sharp practice.

"You—" began Jimmy.

Then he stopped.

He remembered in time that Texas Lick was his guest, which made it impossible for him to tell the Texan what he thought of him.

"Let's get out!" amended Jimmy.

His chums grinned, and followed him. Texas Lick stayed for one more look at the Tintoretto, and then lounged after the Fistical Four.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Man from London!

SNOW lay thick among the trees, and ridged the branches, under the clear, cold winter sky. Jimmy Silver & Co. followed the lane that led to Hadley Priors for some distance. In the clear frosty air they could see the white roofs of the village and the railway station. It was a keen, bright afternoon, and the chums of Rookwood enjoyed the walk—with the exception of Texas Lick. That youth was so accustomed to a horse at home in Texas that he had no liking for using his own legs as a means of locomotion.

Texas Lick was talking as the juniors tramped along by the snowy lane—it was quite uncommon with Texas Lick not to be talking. But, for once, the topic was not Texas, and the superiority of the United States in general, and Texas in particular, to all the rest of

the wide universe. For once, Lick had found something to admire in the Old Country—and that was the supposed sharpness of Jimmy's father, which he declared was worthy of a galoot raised in New York, or of a horse dealer in San Antone.

That the "genuine Tintoretto" was worth the money that was to be paid for it, Lick did not believe for a moment; he regarded that statement in the light of a jest.

The topic, naturally, was not agreeable to Jimmy Silver, and he did not speak; but Lick did not mind that. He enjoyed a one-sided conversation in which he had all the talking to himself. All that Lick required to make him happy was a listener.

The fact that Mr. Silver's affairs were no business of his did not worry Lick in the least. He took a keen Transatlantic interest in matters that did not concern him.

"I guess that galoot's late, Silver," he remarked presently.

"What galoot?" asked Jimmy, rather gruffly.

Jimmy was feeling fed-up with Lick's conversation, and with Lick himself, as a matter of fact.

"The pilgrim that's coming for the picture," chuckled Lick. "The messenger from the mug that's buying it."

"Look here, Lick, drop the subject!" exclaimed Jimmy impatiently. "Give us a rest, there's a good chap!"

"Catch Lick giving anybody a rest when his chin once gets going!" grunted Lovell.

Texas Lick laughed.

"But he's late," he said, glancing at his watch. "Perhaps the buyer has changed his mind, after all. Mayn't be such a guy as your popper took him for."

"Look here——" roared Jimmy.

"Oh, keep your wool on, old scout! The man's late!"

"How do you know he's late?" demanded Newcome.

"Jimmy's popper said that he was expecting him now," answered Texas Lick. "Waal, I guess I know the time the trains get in at that one-horse shebang you call a railroad station yonder. I believe you call them stations in this country; depot is the real name. But never mind that. The train gets in at two-thirty. Now it's three. The next train isn't till three-thirty."

"Well?" grunted Jimmy, not at all interested.

"Waal," said Lick, "if your popper's expecting the man now, he must have expected him to come by the two-thirty."

"I suppose so."

"And it isn't half an hour from the depot to your house."

"That's so."

"And this is the road, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then the man ought to be at the house by this time, or, at least, in sight on the road. And he ain't!"

Jimmy Silver gave a yawn. He was not interested at all, though he acknowledged the accuracy of Lick's observations.

"Perhaps he lost his train," said Lovell.

"Likely enough! That's the way you galoots do business, in this island," assented Lick. "Anyhow, he's late. If he came by the two-thirty he's had lots of time to get to the house by now, even if he walked the whole way. See?"

"Oh, yes!" yawned Jimmy.

"Hallo, here comes a giddy stranger!" said Newcome.

"Perhaps this is the man."

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A man in an overcoat and bowler hat came in sight, striding up the lane from the direction of the village.

The Rookwood juniors glanced at him carelessly.

It was probable that he was the messenger from Mr. Cave, the picture-dealer in London, who had purchased the Tintoretto from Mr. Silver. Certainly he was a stranger in the locality, and looked like a townsman.

He was a rather powerfully-built fellow, with a hard face and very keen eyes.

"That isn't the galoot," said Lick.

"How the thump do you know it isn't?" demanded Lovell.

Lick had a way of making positive assertions, which Arthur Edward Lovell found irritating.

Lick grinned.

"Waal, if he's the man, he's made a long way round," he said. "He ain't come straight from the depot."

"How do you know?" demanded Lovell again.

"I guess I learned to use my eyes out in Texas," answered Lick. "I've trailed deer on the plains, and b'ar in the chapparal, and I ain't done that without having my peepers opened, I guess. That man's been in the woods, where it was pretty thick, too, I guess. Look at his coat and the legs of his trousers!"

The juniors looked, and they admitted that Lick was right. The man's clothes certainly looked as if he had been tramping through thick wet woodland.

"All the same, I think he's most likely the man," said Lovell obstinately. "I'll jolly well ask him!"

"I guess you'll find he ain't!"

"Oh rats!"

The hard-faced man in the bowler hat had almost reached the juniors by this time. Lovell stopped, and his comrades followed suit. Arthur Edward politely raised his cap to the stranger.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you going to the Priory House—Mr. Silver's house?"

The man started.

"I don't see that my destination has anything to do with you," he answered curtly.

"It's my father's house," said Jimmy Silver, "and he's expecting a man from London to-day."

"Oh! I—I see."

"I thought you might be the man

WHO IS THE RIO KID?



YOU'LL MEET HIM SOON!

from Mr. Cave's," said Lovell. "That's all."

"Quite correct!" said the stranger. "I am John Brown, the messenger from Mr. Cave, the picture-dealer. I am going to see Mr. Silver now."

Lovell gave Texas Lick a triumphant look.

"I thought so," he said.

Texas Lick looked a little discomfited. He had a strong objection to finding himself in the wrong.

"I guess you're late," he said.

"Indeed!"

"Yep! The train was in more'n half an hour ago."

Mr. Brown gave Lick a curiously sharp look.

"I am a stranger in this district," he said. "I lost my way taking a short cut through the wood. Luckily I found it again!"

Lovell grinned.

"Well, you're right for the Priory House now," he said. "Keep straight on by this road, and you'll come to the gates."

"Thank you!"

The hard-faced man walked on, and the juniors resumed their way. The Fistical Four were grinning, and Texas Lick looked very thoughtful.

"I guess that guy was giving us some guff!" he said, after a long silence.

"How's that?" grinned Lovell.

"He never lost his way. It's a straight road from the station, and, anyhow, being a stranger, he would ask the way. No reason why he should go cavorting in the woods looking for a short cut."

"He says he did," remarked Newcome.

"Guff!" said Texas Lick. "He didn't do it. I dare say he took a ramble around, just as we're doing; that's all. I guess——"

"Oh, never mind what you guess!" said Lovell. "Here we are! This is the giddy Wilderness!"

And the juniors turned from the road.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

"Sign!"

THE Wilderness was a stretch of woodland bordering the lane between the Priory House and the village of Hadley Priors.

It extended for a good distance along the road, and up the rugged hillside beside the road. In the summer it was the haunt of picnickers; but in the winter, thick with snow, it was lonely enough. The footpaths were caked with snow, and the leafless branches swayed and creaked under their burden of white.

The juniors turned into the open footpath that led from the road, and Texas Lick glanced round him and shivered.

"I guess this hyer don't look inviting," he remarked.

"Oh, it's a jolly old place!" said Jimmy Silver. "Ripping in the summer!"

"I reckon it ain't summer now!"

"There's a jolly old highwayman's cave, back in the woods," said Jimmy.

"It's said that Dick Turpin hid there once, with the Bow Street Runners hunting for him."

"Blow Dick Turpin, whoever he was!" grunted Lick.

"Oh, come on!" said Lovell impatiently.

The juniors tramped up the snowy footpath. A ramble in the woods and a peep at the so-called highwayman's cave entertained Jimmy

Silver & Co., but apparently Texas Lick was not so easily satisfied. Moreover, he was still annoyed by his mistake regarding the messenger from London.

"Somebody's been in the woods already," remarked Lovell, with a gesture at a series of footprints in the thick snow.

"Some bodies, you mean," said Lick. "More than one?" asked Jimmy. Bumptious as Texas Lick was, Jimmy knew that the Texan knew all there was to be known on the subject of tracking.

"Sure." "How do you make that out?" snapped Lovell.

"I guess I've got some eyesight, if you haven't!" answered Texas Lick. "Two men turned out of the road into this footpath less than two hours ago."

"Got the time exact?" said Lovell sarcastically.

"Sure! It left off snowing two hours ago. If these tracks had been made earlier than that they'd have been covered again."

"Oh!" said Lovell.

"But I guess they ain't so old as that, neither," said Lick. "Anyhow, they ain't older. If you look at them you'll see they're made by two different pairs of boots—one a couple of sizes smaller than the other, I guess."

Lovell had to admit the fact.

about a hundred yards from the road, he stopped, and ejaculated:

"Gee-whizz!"

Lovell looked back impatiently.

"For goodness' sake get a move on, Lick!" he exclaimed. "It gets dark jolly early, and we want to get back before dark."

"Hold on a minute, you galoots!"

"Oh, rot!"

"Waal, get ahead if you like, and leave me hyer," said Texas Lick composedly. "I guess I ain't missing this."

"Missing what?" bawled Lovell.

"I don't rightly figure it out yet," answered Lick.

"Might be only a robbery, or it might be murder!"

"What!" roared the Rookwood juniors, in chorus.

"Interested you, have I?" grinned Lick.

Jimmy Silver & Co. came back to him. Lick was standing at a spot where a narrow path left the main footpath, winding away into deep, snowy woods.

The tracks the

"Well, I don't know, but I care," said Lick. "I guess I'm getting to the bottom of this. Two galoots came up this footpath together a while back, one with number ten boots, and one with number sevens. You can see the sizes of the tracks, if you pick them out. 'Number ten boots' turned off hyer—you can see his big tracks leading away up the wood. Where's 'Number seven'?"

"Oh, rot!"

"Hold on, though, Lovell," said Jimmy Silver, beginning to be interested. "It's a bit odd. Only the big tracks go forward—the small ones stop



TEXAS LICK'S CAPTURE! Mr. Brown was struggling violently. Texas Lick knelt on his chest, still gripping the lasso. "Help, here!" he shouted. "Bear a hand, you galoots! Can't you see he's the man that knocked out the galoot in the woods?" (See Chapter 5.)

"Then there are two chaps in the wood now, ahead of us," remarked Lovell, airing his own scouting knowledge a little.

"How do you figure that out?"

"Because there are no return tracks," answered Lovell triumphantly.

"I guess there are other ways out of the wood, though," answered Lick. "Might have left by a different path."

Lovell grunted.

"Let's get on," he said. "We want to have a look at the highwayman's cave, and get back to tea. We didn't come here for a scouting lesson, that I know of."

Jimmy Silver & Co. tramped on, taking no further heed of the tracks in the snow.

But Texas Lick declined to hurry.

He lingered, and slowed down and watched the tracks, and seemed strangely interested in them. At last,

moment of following them farther, as their own way lay no longer in the same direction. But it was evident that Texas Lick was deeply interested. His keen grey eyes were gleaming, and his brows drawn into a thoughtful frown, his thin lips set in a tight line.

"Now, what are you gammoning about?" demanded Arthur Edward Lovell.

"I guess I'm giving you the straight goods," answered Lick. "Use your eyes. Two men came along the footpath to this point, and from this point only one went on."

"Eh?"

"Look for yourselves."

"What does it matter?" snorted Lovell.

"Heaps! Where's the second man?" asked Lick.

"Blest if I know, or care!"

juniors had observed left the main path at this point. Not being in the least interested in the tracks of perfect strangers, the Fistical Four had not thought for a

here; and there's no track leading away, excepting the big-footed one. It's rather a problem for a scout."

"I don't see that it matters to us. We don't know the chaps, and don't want to."

"No. But—"

"Oh, I dare say Lick can tell us just what happened," said Lovell, with deep sarcasm. "He's only got to squint at the tracks and tell us the whole story."

"Go it, Lick!" chuckled Newcome.

"Sure!" said Lick coolly. "I guess I can give you the office, if you're interested. Big Foot and Little Foot came along from the village together—"

"Not from any other direction?" jeered Lovell.

"Nope; the tracks turned into the footpath from the direction of Hadley Priors."

"Oh, I didn't notice that!"

"I guess I did. Then Big Foot and Little Foot came along the footpath to this spot," continued Lick. "Just about here Big Foot stepped behind Little Foot and gave him a sockdolager on the cabeza—"

"A—a what?"

"A knock on the head."

"What!"

"Not caring to leave him lying on the footpath where anybody might pass, he picked him up and carried him on his back into the woods," went on Lick. "I guess that looks like robbery, at least, if not murder. How do you galoots figure it out?"

Jimmy Silver & Co. did not attempt to figure it out. They stared blankly at Texas Lick.

"Are you trying to pull our legs?" demanded Raby.

"Nope."

"How do you know the big man knocked the little man down?" roared Lovell.

"You can see where he fell. Here's the little track, and the big track just behind. He fell forward, with his face in the snow and his arms thrown out. Look where he grabbed up the snow. Mind where you tread, you guy; you'll tread it out!" Lick pointed with his stick. "That's where the little man's face landed in the snow—and you see that spot?"

It was a tiny spot.

But the Rookwood juniors shivered as they looked at it.

Tiny as it was, it glimmered crimson from the whiteness of the snow. It was the stain of blood!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Tragic Discovery!

BLOOD!"

Arthur Edward Lovell whispered the word.

There was no doubt about it.

It was a stain of blood on the snow—a crimson clue to what had happened only a short time before the Rookwood juniors had arrived on the scene.

Jimmy Silver & Co. were grave enough now.

Two sets of tracks had led to that lonely spot, and only one set left the spot. And where they parted there was a stain of blood on the snow!

"I guess that little man was stunned, if he wasn't killed," went on Texas Lick. "Anyhow, the big man picked him up and carried him away on his back."

"I don't see that," argued Lovell. "Might have hidden him in some of these thickets—"

"Look at the tracks."

"Well?"

"Don't you see anything?"

"Oh, rot!" growled Lovell. "They're the same big tracks that lead here from the road, that's all."

"Not quite all," grinned Lick. "They're deeper."

"Deeper?" repeated Lovell.

"Just use your eyes, and you'll see that they're deeper in the snow, and that the toes are driven deeper than the heels," said Lick. "That means that the big man was carrying a weight, and that he was leaning forward a little. He had a burden on his back when he left this spot."

"That's so," said Jimmy Silver.

Jimmy's scouting knowledge was quite sufficient to verify Lick's observations, as soon as he examined the trail.

"That's as fur as I've figured it out," said Lick. "But I reckon if we follow Big Foot's trail we'll find some more—what?"

"Follow it?" repeated Lovell.

"I guess I'm following it to the finish. I reckon the big man has gone, and the little man is lying around in the wood here somewhere," said Lick. "This ain't the weather for an injured man to lie around out of doors. If he's still alive, I calculate we're going to save his life."

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"Come on!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver breathlessly.

"Easy does it. I'm goin' ahead to pick up sign."

Texas Lick had coolly assumed command. But there was no one to say him nay.

But for Lick's acute observation, the Rookwooders knew that they would have passed unnoticed the sign of what had been, perhaps, a tragedy. With all his bumptious self-assertion, the Texan had seen and noted what had escaped them, and the result might be the saving of a human life. All the Fisticall Four were willing now for Lick to take the lead.

Scanning the single trail before him as he went, Texas Lick led the way.

Several times he paused to point out "sign" with his stick.

"Look at that spot—and that! You catch on?"

"Drops of blood!" muttered Jimmy, with a sick feeling.

"Sure!"

The track was easy enough to follow. Here and there the bushes had been torn away by a man pushing through. Texas Lick paused suddenly, and with the crook of his stick hooked a Hom-burg hat out of the frozen bushes.

He held it up for the juniors to see.

"I guess that fell off the little man just here," he remarked. "Big Foot wouldn't have left it on the footpath, where it might be seen; but I guess he didn't mind leaving it hyer. Look at it."

The juniors looked and shuddered. The top of the hat was crushed, evidently by a heavy blow given from behind, and the inside was thickly stained with blood.

"Big Foot stopped to rest hyer, and leaned up against this tree," remarked Lick.

"How——" began Lovell.

"You can see the tracks, heels to the tree, and the heels driven in deeper than the toes, jest hyer," said Lick. "I guess he found the little man fairly heavy. The little man's hat rolled off, and he didn't care. He didn't lay him down, though. I guess he was in a hurry to get through, and only stopped a minute or two to get his breath. It was warm work, I guess, carrying a man on his back, while he was wearing a thick brown overcoat."

"A—a what?" stuttered Lovell.

"Thick, rough, brown overcoat," said Lick.

"How the thump——"

"Look at the bark on the tree-trunk, you jay. You can see where the rough coat rubbed hard on the bark—there's little threads of the stuff there."

"My hat!" said Newcome.

"Come on!"

"If that's correct, we can tell the police to look for a man with big feet and a thick, rough, brown overcoat," said Lovell.

Texas Lick gave him a curious look. "I guess we needn't tell the police," he said. "I guess I'm going to rope in the galoot on my lonesome. But never mind that now; let's look for the little man."

The juniors pressed on.

Deeper into the wood they went, several times losing the track, where thick, wild bushes and brambles kept the ground almost clear of snow. But the breaking of the bushes, where the big man had forced a way through, formed an infallible guide to Texas Lick.

"I guess we're there," said Lick suddenly.

He stopped in a deep recess, where thickly arched trees almost shut out the winter light. The Texan pulled aside a

mass of thicket, scattering snow, and pointed. In the deep, dark recess lay the body of a man.

In a moment the juniors had lifted it out and were examining it. The man was not dead, but he was quite unconscious, and both hands and feet were tied together with thick cord, evidently to secure him if he should come to his senses.

His face was white and set.

"Good heavens!" breathed Lovell. "The brute must have meant him to die here."

Lick shook his head.

"I guess he would have got help, shouting, when he came to," he answered. "No need for him to have pegged out. Big Foot wanted to keep him safe for a time, that's why he tied his hands and trotters. He could have worked these cords loose in an hour, too, once he came to his senses. Big Foot only wanted to gain time enough to get clear. I guess if we hadn't come along this galoot would have been wandering into the village soon after dark, all on his own—unless he froze hyer."

"He might have frozen."

"I guess Big Foot took the risk of that, for such a sum as five thousand dollars," said Lick.

"He's robbed him," said Lovell, pointing to the insensible man's turned-out pockets. "But I don't see how you can guess the amount, Lick. And this poor chap doesn't look as if he ever had such a sum as a thousand pounds in his hands. Five pounds, more likely."

Lick shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't catch on yet," he said.

"Oh, don't gas," said Lovell gruffly.

"Let's get this poor chap where he can be helped; no time for jaw."

"That's so; get going."

The Rookwooders raised the man from the ground. The cut on his head, where the blow had taken effect that had deprived him of his senses, had ceased to bleed. But there was no sign of returning consciousness. Carrying the man among them, Jimmy Silver & Co. started, as fast as they could go. They did not return by the way they had come. Jimmy Silver, of course, knew the countryside well round his home, and he led the way through the woods towards a cottage in the lane, the nearest habitation.

It was a long and heavy tramp, through the snowy woods, but the Rookwood juniors pushed on without a pause.

They came out into the Priory Lane at last, close by a cottage.

"I guess we'll land him hyer, and get back to the house," said Texas Lick.

"Get to the police station, you mean," said Lovell.

"I don't mean anything of the sort."

Jimmy knocked at the cottage door, and it was opened by a plump dame. Jimmy explained briefly, and the injured man was taken in and laid upon a bed.

"Now——" said Texas Lick.

"Now I am going for a doctor," said Arthur Edward Lovell. "You fellows had better come, to tell this to the police."

"I guess I'm going back to the Priory."

"Go, and be blown, then," said Lovell gruffly.

Lick smiled.

"You'd better come with me, Jimmy," he said.

"Why?" asked Jimmy.

"I guess I may need help in handling the galoot."

"What galoot, you ass?"

"Big Foot."

"Oh, don't talk rot," snapped Lovell, and he started off for the village without further words. It was evidently necessary to get a doctor to the injured man as quickly as possible, and Arthur Edward devoted himself to that necessary task.

Texas Lick did not heed him. He turned to the woman of the cottage.

"Can you lend me a rope, ma'am?" he inquired.

She looked at him in surprise. "A rope?"

"Yep. I guess I want a rope bad; I'll buy it if you like, and pay handsome for it," smiled Texas Lick.

"I can lend you a rope, sir," answered the good dame, and she fetched one from the shed at the back of the cottage.

Texas Lick examined it and grunted. "I guess it will fill the bill," he remarked.

"Thanks. Are you coming with me, Jimmy?"

"But what—"

"Well, I'm going. I guess there's no time to lose."

"But what—" yelled Raby.

Texas Lick started off at a rapid pace towards Mr. Silver's house. As he went he knotted the end of the rope into a slip-noose, evidently for the purpose of turning it into a lasso—a weapon that Texas Lick was well accustomed to handle.

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at one

another. Lovell, by this time, was out of sight on his way to the village. "What has that Wild West duffer got into his silly head now?" asked Newcome.

"Goodness knows!" said Raby.

"Blessed if I can make it out," said Jimmy Silver, in perplexity. "But he seems to have something on his brain. We're not wanted here, and Lovell has gone for the doctor. Let's get after Lick."

"All right!"

The three juniors hurried after the Texan. Lick did not speak a word when they joined him—very contrary to his usual custom. His thin sharp face was gleaming with suppressed excitement. He broke into a run, and Jimmy Silver & Co. trotted with him—and at a good pace they hurried towards the Priory; though what was the reason of this haste was a mystery to Jimmy Silver & Co.

Texas Lick was breathless when they hurried in at the gates, but he hurried on up the drive. Cousin Phyllis and Agy Silver were walking there, and Lick called to them breathlessly.

"Miss Phyllis—has that galoot gone?"

"Wha-a-at?" ejaculated cousin Phyllis.

"Hasn't a galoot called to see Mr. Silver about a picture—"

The girl nodded.

"Mr. Cave's messenger from London?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Yes, he has called," said Phyllis.

"He is with Mr. Silver, I think."

"Good."

Texas Lick fairly sprinted up the path to the house. Jimmy Silver & Co. catching his excitement somehow,

raced after him. The door was open, and Mr. Silver could be seen there, apparently seeing off the man who had called for the "genuine Tintoretto."

The juniors regarded the hard-faced man, whom they had passed in the lane, and who had told them that he was Mr. Cave's messenger.

"I guess we're in time!" panted Texas Lick.

And he ran on, gasping.

answered Lick cheerfully. "It's too pesky easy to telegraph along the railroad to suit his book."

A strange, startled look was on Mr. Brown's face. He backed away a pace or two, his eyes fastened on Lick's thin, sharp face.

"Are you out of your senses, Lick?" asked Mr. Silver. "I cannot account for your words otherwise."

"I guess not, sir! The galoot's got the picture, I reckon," said Lick, with a gesture towards the case under the man's arm. "That picture's fetching a thousand pounds, ain't it? Waal, I figure it out that he wants to keep it—and he couldn't, not if he went by railroad. What do you think yourself, Mr. Brown?" And Texas Lick grinned knowingly at the messenger from London.

Mr. Brown was breathing hard. "I understand nothing of this, Mr. Silver," he said. "I must go or I shall lose my train. Good-afternoon to you, sir!"

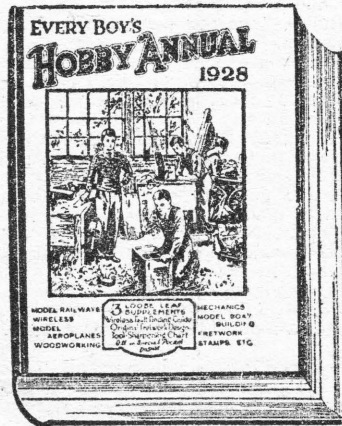
He went down the steps. Jimmy Silver & Co. stood silent. Lick's words amazed them, but they had noticed a circumstance that let in a glimmer of light. Mr. Brown was wearing a rough, brown overcoat, and he had large feet. They dimly guessed what was in Lick's mind, and they wondered.

Mr. Silver was frowning. Unheed-

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
Texas Lick's Capture!

MR. SILVER glanced at the juniors as they came sprinting up to the house. He seemed surprised by their hurry. However, he did not give them more than

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ing him, Texas Lick fixed his eyes upon the retreating figure of Mr. Brown.

His new-made lasso slipped into his hand.

To the utter amazement of Mr. Silver, Lick swung the lasso round his head, and the coiled rope went flying, uncoiling as it went.

The loop settled over the broad shoulders of Mr. Brown, and Texas Lick dragged on it.

The unexpected drag jerked Mr. Brown over on his back, and he landed in the snowy drive with a crash.

"Roped, by thunder!" ejaculated Texas Lick.

"Boy!" shouted Mr. Silver.

"I guess I've got him!"

Texas Lick ran down the steps and reached the sprawling man.

Brown sat up, dazed and dizzy. One of his arms was pinned to his side by the grip of the lasso, the other was free. With his free hand he tore from his coat-pocket a short, heavy life-preserver.

He staggered to his feet, with that deadly weapon gripped in his hand and a murderous blaze in his eyes.

Lick jerked on the rope sharply, and the lassoed man reeled over again and fell. The next minute the Texan was upon him with a lithe spring, and the life-preserver was wrenched from his hand.

Texas Lick tossed the weapon to Jimmy Silver.

"Get hold of that. I guess that'll be wanted. That's what he caved in the little man's head with."

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy.

Mr. Brown was struggling violently. Texas Lick knelt on his chest, pinning

him down, and still gripping the lasso. But he could not have held the powerful man for long.

"Help, here!" he shouted. "Raby, Newcome, Jimmy, bear a hand, you pesky jays!"

"But—but what—" gasped Raby. "Can't you see he's the man?" roared Lick. "He's the man that knocked out the galoot in the wood."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Bear a hand, blow you!" In utter amazement the juniors went to Lick's help. Mr. Brown was fighting savagely now—certainly not acting like a harmless messenger from a picture-dealer in London.

The four juniors grasped him and secured him.

"I guess we've got the fire-eater now!" panted Texas Lick. And he took another turn of the rope round Mr. Brown and knotted it.

The man lay on the ground, his eyes blazing up at the Texan. Mr. Silver hurried to the spot.

"Lick," he thundered, "how dare you molest this man? How dare you?"

"I guess you'll be glad of it, sir, when you catch on to the reason," answered Texas Lick coolly. "There's your picture, sir. You'd better get hold of it, if you want to touch your thousand pounds for it. This hyer galoot ain't the man from the dealer's at all."

"Wha-a-at?"

"I guess his name ain't Brown, any more than mine is Dennis," chuckled Texas Lick.

"You must be insane!" stuttered the amazed old gentleman. "Release that man at once! Jimmy, I am surprised at you—and you others—though nothing Lick should do would surprise me, I think. Release that man at once!"

"I guess not," said Texas Lick coolly. The man panted.

"Mr. Silver! I appeal to you! I—I must catch my train! I—I—"

"Oh, can it!" said Texas Lick contemptuously. "You know we've got you tight. Own up to it. You got on to it that Mr. Brown was coming down from London to fetch the picture, priced at five thousand dollars. I guess you got on the same train, and got out at the same depot—what! You walked with him from the village. I guess you made out that you knew Mr. Silver, or something of the kind, and got him into the footpath of the wood by spinning him some yarn about a short cut—what?"

The man stared up blankly at the Texan, evidently astonished by his knowledge.

"I reckon the man would have been on his guard, if he'd already fetched the picture and had it with him," grinned Lick. "But as he was only coming to fetch it, he never smelled a rat. He didn't figure it out that you were going to knock him on the head, rob him of his credentials, and come on here in his name and bag the Tintoretto. What? But that's just what you did, you galoot!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Silver.

The so-called Mr. Brown wriggled in the rope. He did not utter a word of denial, apparently realising that it was useless. Mr. Silver seemed almost dazed.

"Can you prove any of this, Lick?" he exclaimed.

"Heaps, sir!" answered Texas Lick cheerfully. "I guessed we passed this pilgrim coming this way, when we were going to the Wilderness. He told us who he was—or, rather, who he wasn't. He left the marks of a big size in boots in the snow."

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"What can that possibly have to do with the matter?"

Lick chuckled.

He proceeded to explain how the tracks had been found in the wood, and what had followed.

Mr. Silver listened in astonished silence. The bound man listened, too, gritting his teeth with rage.

"You catch on, sir?" wound up Texas Lick. "I'm nuts on a trail. Why, sir, this is as easy as eating candy, to a galoot about my size. Nothing to what I've done in Texas."

"But—but—" stammered Mr. Silver.

"Ain't it clear yet?" exclaimed Texas Lick. "For a man who can make such an all-fired good bargain in pictures, sir, you're a bit slow at catching on, I guess. The man who was knocked out in the wood had been knocked out by a hefty man in a brown overcoat and with big feet. The sign told me that. We'd just passed a hefty man in a brown overcoat, with big feet, coming away from the wood. This hyer galoot—"

Texas Lick stirred the bound man playfully with the toe of his boot—"he never reckoned there was a galoot in this country who could read a sign like that, I guess. And I calculate there was only one—little me!"

"But—" gasped the astonished old gentleman.

"It's plain enough now," said Jimmy Silver, with a nod. "I didn't catch on at first. It looks to me, father, as if the man in the wood is the man who was sent from London to fetch the picture, and this man knocked him out and came here to steal it."

"And I guess he came near pulling it off!" grinned Texas Lick. "And now you know, sir, why I figured it out that he wasn't going back to the station. I reckon he wouldn't carry off the stolen goods by railroad. Too pesky easy to telegraph after him. I reckon he's got a motor-car waiting somewhere handy."

"I—I can scarcely believe all this," said Mr. Silver slowly. "If it is correct, you have done me a great service. Lick. This picture would never have been paid for had it not reached Mr. Cave. I should have been the loser of a thousand pounds. But—"

"I guess you'll find it all O.K.," said Lick. "Wait till the galoot at the cottage can speak, and he'll tell you, I guess, that his name's Brown, and that he came from the London dealer, and that this pilgrim knocked him out in the wood."

"That shall soon be ascertained," said the old gentleman. "I will order the car, and we will proceed to the cottage at once. In the meantime, the picture shall be placed in safety. Mr. Brown—if you are Mr. Brown—you must submit to restraint for the present, while this boy's story is put to the test."

"Mr. Brown" answered only with a savage exclamation. It was clear that he had nothing to hope from Lick's story being put to the test. Mr. Silver carried the precious Tintoretto into the house; and a few minutes later the car was bearing him, with the prisoner and the Rookwood juniors, to the cottage in Priory Lane.

By the time they arrived there they found the doctor in attendance, and Arthur Edward Lovell, and the village policeman from Hadley Priors. The injured man had recovered consciousness, and had given his name—John Brown, employed by Mr. Cave, picture dealer, of London. That information dispelled all doubts.

The "spoot" Mr. Brown was released from Texas Lick's lasso, to be handcuffed by the village constable,

and driven away in Mr. Silver's car to the lock-up.

Jimmy Silver & Co. walked back to the Priory, or, rather, the Fistical Four walked, and Texas Lick strutted.

It was a triumph for Texas Lick, and the Rookwooders acknowledged it freely; and Lick was not a fellow to bear his blushing honours thick upon him without a little swank. As a matter of fact, it was a great deal of swank that Lick displayed.

"Well, it beats me," said Arthur Edward Lovell. "Lick seems to have worked it out all right. Of course, the real Brown would have been found, or would have got away, in time—"

"After the other galoot had got away safely with the pesky picture," chuckled Texas Lick.

"Well, yes," admitted Arthur Edward. "Lucky we went for a ramble in the Wilderness, Jimmy."

"Yes, rather!"

Texas Lick snorted. He felt that this was a detraction from his remarkable merits.

"I guess you 'uns might have rambled in the Wilderness till you grew grey and bald, and you'd never have read the sign!" he exclaimed. "You mean it was lucky that I was there."

"Hem!"

"Where would that pesky picture be now if I hadn't been on the spot?" demanded Lick.

"Right enough!" assented Jimmy Silver. "You've done jolly well, Lick."

"I guess I have," said Lick.

"But there's no need for us to sing your praises. You can do that yourself all right," grunted Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Waal, I guess I never was a galoot to hide my light under a bushel!" said Texas Lick.

And the chums of Rookwood agreed that he wasn't!

Texas Lick was the hero of the hour. He remained so during the rest of the Christmas vacation at Jimmy Silver's home.

There was no doubt that Lick had shown uncommon sagacity. He had read "sign" as a fellow might read a book. He had brought help to an injured man, he had prevented a robbery, and he had caused the arrest of a dangerous criminal. He had saved Jimmy's father from a heavy loss; for there was little doubt that if the false Mr. Brown had got away with the "genuine Tintoretto," its owner would never have seen it again, and certainly the London dealer would not have paid for a picture he did not receive. All things considered, Texas Lick had done remarkably well; and it was extremely fortunate for all parties that Jimmy Silver had asked Lick home for the Christmas holidays.

If only Master Lick had not been so extremely well-satisfied with himself, all parties would have been extremely satisfied with Master Lick. But, as Lovell had remarked, it was unnecessary to sing Lick's praises, when he sang them so well himself.

But, in consideration of what he had done, the Fistical Four solemnly agreed that they would do their very best to "stand" Texas Lick next term at Rookwood. Only there was a lingering doubt whether, with the best intentions in the world, they could possibly "stand" him.

THE END.

(Don't miss "Too Clever By Half!"—next week's topping tale of the Rookwood Chums!)