

THE GREYFRIARS

HOLIDAY

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FOR BOYS AND GIRLS



E. E. BRADCOE

The Limit!

This is a wonderful story of schoolboy daring and courage, of particular interest since it concerns one of the most amazing adventures of FRANK RICHARDS, at the school in the Backwoods. Frank Richards now is one of the foremost authors of boys' stories. This story is written by his equally famous friend, MARTIN CLIFFORD, and illustrated by R. SIMMONS.

How Father Christmas came to White Pine!



THE FIRST CHAPTER

A Canadian Christmas Eve

"CHRISTMAS EVE—and jolly cold!" said Frank Richards.

Bob Lawless laughed.

The chums of Cedar Creek School were standing in the doorway of the ranch-house, looking out on the white plain.

The Lawless Ranch glistened with white, under a sky of steel.

Snow was still falling.

The air was clear, and keen, and crisp, refreshing as wine. Far away in the distance the giant Rockies loomed on the horizon, snow-clad.

It was Frank Richards' first experience of a Canadian Christmas Eve. The cold was a new experience to him. It was sharp, sharp as a knife. But the gloriously keen, fresh air was health-giving, invigorating.

Frank had never felt better in his life than when he stood there, in the deep porch of the ranch-house, looking out on the snow-covered plains.

"Colder than Old England!" asked Bob Lawless.

"Yes, rather. But isn't it ripping?" exclaimed Frank, his eyes glistening.

"You don't want to snuggle indoors and sit on the stove!" grinned Bob.

"No fear."

"That's lucky, for we've got to work this morning," said Bob Lawless, with a laugh.

"A good four hours' sleighing. Don't come if you don't feel up to it, though."

"I feel up for anything," said Frank. "Who's going to drive?"

"I guess I am. I'll give you a turn with the ribbons in a safe place."

"And where are you going?"

"School first, to see Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmy. Then along to Cedar Camp to pick up the Cherub, and then round the clearings with messages from popper. We shall have a good crowd here to-morrow."

"Good!" said Frank Richards.

"Come and get your things on, and mind you wrap up well. Winter in the Canadian

West is no joke, I can tell you. There's such a thing as frost stroke, and you want to keep your napper well covered."

Bob Lawless went back into the house to speak to his father. Frank Richards hurried up to his room for his fur coat and cap and leggings.

He looked a bundle of furs when he came down, his healthy boyish face glowing from the midst of them.

Outside there was a musical tinkle of sleigh bells.

Billy Cook had brought the sleigh round and Mr. Lawless had come out to see his son and nephew off.

"Don't land in a drift, Bob," said the rancher, "and don't try the ice at Indian ford; it mayn't hold. Well, Frank, how do you like December in Canada?"

"Topping!" said Frank cheerily.

"Keep the rugs round you," said the rancher, tucking his nephew in the sleigh. "Now, then, Bob."

Bob Lawless jumped into his seat, and took the "ribbons" and the whip.

"So-long, popper."

The whip cracked, and with a merry jingle of silver bells the sleigh glided away down the trail.

The long, well-worn trail by which Frank and his cousin rode to school earlier in the year was hidden from sight now under a thick carpet of snow.

With an easy gliding motion the sleigh slid along the smooth surface, behind the two mettlesome horses.

Frank Richards breathed deep as the keen wind blew in his face, fluttering light snowflakes over him.

Bob Lawless gave all his attention to his horses.

Jingle, Jingle!

The music of the sleigh-bells rang far over the silent plains, and echoed among the giant trunks as the gliding vehicle followed the trail through the timber.

Two horsemen coming along the trail drew aside, crushing into the blackened larches, to let the sleigh pass.

Frank glanced at them.

He recognised them; he had seen them

before at Cedar Camp—Euchre Dick and Dave Dunn, the two worst characters in the section.

"Merry Christmas!" called out Bob Lawless in passing.

The two rustlers did not reply to the greeting.

They sat their horses, staring after the sleigh as it dashed on up the trail towards the creek.

Euchre Dick glanced at his companion as he pulled his horse out into the trail again.

"I reckon that outfit would fetch a thousand dollars, Dave, sold down the valley," he said, in a low voice.

"And I guess the Mounted Police would fetch us if we tried on that game in this section," was Dave Dunn's reply.

And the two "bulldozers" rode on.

"Hallo, here's the school!"

Cedar Creek School was in sight.

With a rattle and a jingle the sleigh dashed up to the lumber school.

Bob brought the steaming horses to a halt outside the gates, and jumped down, followed by Frank Richards.

The school grounds presented a very different aspect from that which the chums had been accustomed to during the school term.

The wide enclosure was deserted and carpeted with snow, and deep silence hung over the place, save where the horses moved and champed in the corral.

Bob Lawless thumped on the school-house door with his whip-butt, and it was opened by Black Sally.

"Merry Christmas, Sally!" roared Bob jovially, and in the exuberance of his spirits he threw an arm round the big negress and waltzed her round the porch.

"Leramusy, Mass' Bob!" gasped Sally; "you done took away dis chile's breff."

"Where's Miss Meadows?" asked Bob.

"Missy am out," said Black Sally, gasping for breath; "Missy done gone visit de sick picaninny way down at White Pine."

"Oh gum!" said Bob. "And I've got to take a message back. Where's Mr. Slimmey—in his cabin?"

"Mass' Slimmey done gone wid Missy."

"We've drawn the school blank, Franky,"

grinned Bob Lawless. "We'd better buzz along to the shack and pick up Beauclerc, and then hustle for White Pine. We can give Miss Meadows a lift back, perhaps. Jump in!"

And once more the sleigh went merrily on its way, with cracking whip and jingling bells, whizzing gaily through the powdering snow.

THE SECOND CHAPTER

The Home of the Remittance Man

VERE BEAUCLERC was seated on a log outside the shack by the bank of the frozen creek.

An axe rested against his knee, and there was a flush of healthy vigour in his handsome, finely cut face. Beauclerc had been at work that morning chipping logs and he had paused to rest.

The silence of the great West was around him. Hardly a murmur came from the timber, where the trees were stripped of foliage.

The creek, which bubbled and sang past the shack in the summer days, was silent as the grave in the icy grip of winter.

The boy was thinking as he sat there, his far-away gaze fixed upon the frozen forest.

He thought of Christmas-tides in far-off England in days that were like a dream to him now, before his father's fall—before Lascelles Beauclerc had become an unsuccessful emigrant and a "remittance man."

Beauclerc had known more than one Christmas in the Canadian West, a time of grim hardship to the son of the remittance man.

What work was done at the little shack was mainly done by the boy,

There was no other habitation near the shack, but there were distant neighbours, all willing and ready to be kind to the remittance man's son, and to show him the hearty and unbounded hospitality of Western Canada.

But the sensitive lad had always shrunk from accepting kindly advances.

With all his father's faults, Vere was an affectionate and respectful son. He made allowances for his father, that he could not expect others to make.

He knew how the remittance man was regarded by the quiet and hard-working Canadian settlers. They had no use for a loafer in the Thompson valley.

And all his nature shrunk from accepting kindness from people who, because he could not help feeling, despised his father.

His life had been very lonely.

But he was thinking now of the difference it made to him since he had become friends with Frank Richards and Bob Lawless.

With his usual sensitive distrust he had repulsed both of them at first. But that had passed.

They were firm friends now—Frank

Richards, the sunny-tempered English lad, Bob Lawless, the sturdy young Canadian, and Vere Beauclerc, the descendant of an old and noble family of the Old Country fallen upon evil days.

This was the first Christmas of his Western life that was to be anything like Christmas to him.

He was to spend it at the Lawless Ranch



"Merry Christmas, Sally!" roared Bob jovially, and in the exuberance of his spirits he threw an arm round the big lass and waited her round the porch. (See Chapter 4.)

with his chums, and with a crowd of the neighbours, "neighbours" being a wide term in the West, covering distances up to fifty and sixty miles.

The chums were to call for him that morning to take him to the ranch, and Mr. Lawless had sent a kind message to the remittance man, asking him to come with his son, and spend a homely but hearty Christmas at the ranch.

Mr. Beauclerc, though with great urbanity, had declined the invitation for himself. He had other engagements, as it happened.

Beauclerc knew that the other engagements probably were poker games and laro with Poker Pete and his set at Thompson.

But it was not for a son to criticise his father, and he said no word.

He was glad that he was going to the ranch. It would have been deadly solitary at the shack during the grim Christmas with his father absent at the town. Work was his only resource, and there could be too much of that.

He started from his deep reverie and looked up, as there was a jingle of bridles and hoofs over the snow.

His face brightened as he looked up the trail, expecting to see the sleigh from Lawless Ranch.

Then it darkened again.

It was not the rancher's sleigh. Two horsemen rode out of the wood towards the shack.

A darkly troubled look came over Vere's face.

Every time he saw Euchre Dick or Dave Dunn at the shack it gave his very heart a chill.

He knew their evil influence over his father. He had only too much reason to know that Lascelles Beauclerc, once at least, had almost been led into crime by his rascally associates.

A querulous voice called from the interior of the shack. It was the voice of the remittance man.

"Vere!"

The boy rose from the log.

"Yes, father."

"Who is on the trail?"

"Two friends of yours, father," said Beauclerc, with an unconscious bitterness in his voice.

"Good!"

Lascelles Beauclerc appeared in the doorway.

He glanced up the trail at the approaching horsemen, and then glanced rather uneasily at his son.

"Were not your friends calling for you this morning, Vere?" he asked.

"Yes, father. I expect them any minute."

Lascelles Beauclerc frowned. It was easy to see that he would have preferred his son to be gone before his friends arrived at the shack.

But the sleigh was not yet in sight, and Dave Dunn and Euchre Dick rode up through the powdering snow, and dismounted and followed the remittance man into the little habitation.

There was a murmur of voices, and the sound of a bottle clinking on a glass within. Beauclerc, with a sigh, picked up his axe and resumed his work.

With a heavy heart but a steady hand he chipped the logs that were needed to banish the bitter winter cold from the shack by the creek.

His father looked out of the doorway again.

"You may as well go down the trail to meet your friends, Vere," he said, without meeting his son's eyes.

"Very well, father," said Vere in a low voice.

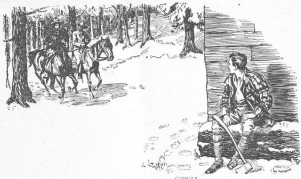
He went into the shack for his coat and leggings, passing the two rustlers without a glance. They watched him curiously, without speaking.

The remittance man's son was a good deal of a puzzle to Lascelles Beauclerc's associates.

As he dressed himself in the inner room the murmur of voices came to Vere's ears. Euchre Dick was speaking.

"I guess the outfit's worth a thousand dollars. Look at us now—frozen broke. Poker Pete rounded up my last cent last night. A thousand dollars of the best, if we ran the outfit down across the line. And that kid could help. He's friends with them young scallywags. He could contrive—"

"Silence!" broke in Mr. Beauclerc's deep voice, with a note of anger in it. "Are you mad?"



A darkly troubled look came over Vere's face as two horsemen rode out of the wood towards the shack. They were Dave Dunn and Euchre Dick, two of the worst characters in Thompson. (See Chapter 2)

"I guess I'm talking huss-sense. I tell you the kid could help."

"If he could he would not."

"You're his popper, ain't you? Won't the young jay do as he's told?" demanded Euchre Dick sullenly. "A cowhide laid round him would make him step up to time, I calculate."

"Not a word more, I tell you!" snapped the remittance man savagely.

"Look hyer, Beauclere——"

"Hold your tongue!" muttered Lascelles Beauclere, as Vere came out of the inner room.

Euchre Dick scowled suddenly. Mr. Beauclere followed his son from the shack, leaving the two ruffians muttering together.

"Good-bye, my boy!" said the remittance man, not unkindly. "I hope you will have a happy Christmas at the ranch."

"I wish you would come, father. Mr. Lawless would really be glad to see you there," said the boy wistfully.

"I should not care for it, my boy. I cannot come, anyway. Good-bye."

"Father, I could not help hearing what the man said!"

"You must not hear what is not intended for your ears, Vere. But if you heard him you heard how I answered him."

"But, father——"

"Good-bye!"

Lascelles Beauclere turned back abruptly into the shack. Vere, with a sigh, strode away down the trail to the forest.

His heart was heavy.

What the "outfit" might be that Euchre Dick had alluded to he did not know, but he knew that some villainy was simmering in the mind of the ruffian, in which he would doubtless seek the remittance man's help—in which, indeed, his words showed that he thought Vere might help.

There was anxiety in his heart as he strode away, but there was nothing he could do but hope.

"Hallo, Cherub!"

Half a mile from the shack sleigh bells rang merrily out over the snow, and Hob Lawless'

heartly voice called him. The sleigh halted in the snow.

"Coming to meet us, Beau?" asked Frank Richards brightly.

Beaulere smiled. The sight of his chums' cheery faces banished for the moment the dark doubts and sadness from his breast.

"Yes, Frank. What a ripping day!" he exclaimed. "And how ripping of you fellows to come along for me!"

"Bow-wow! Jump in!" said Bob. "Isn't your popper coming?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"Oh, rot!" said Bob. "I say, let's rush in on him, and make him come. We'll rope him in, Beau."

"Yes," exclaimed Frank. "The three of us should be able to persuade him."

"No, no!"

"Why not?" said Bob exuberantly. "We'll pitch him in the sleigh, and run him off!"

"Ripping!" exclaimed Frank Richards, laughing.

"No, no!" Beaulere thought of the two ruffians even now in discussion with his father at the shack, and shivered. He did not want his chums to see them there. Neither was Bob's hare-brained idea quite likely to please the remittance man. "No. Let's get off, Bob."

"Oh, all screw! Jump in!"

"Are we going straight to the ranch?" asked Beaulere, as he drew the buffalo robe and bearskin about him, sharing them with Frank.

"Nix. We're going on to White Pine—first," said Bob. "Miss Meadows is there, visiting Muldoon's kid; the poor little beggar's ill, you know. Slimmy's gone with her. We're going to round them up, and I'll get some messages to drop at half a dozen places. You're booked for a long drive, if you don't mind, Cherub."

"First-rate," said Beaulere brightly. "Go ahead."

And the sleigh jingled away down the trail, halting at many a homestead on the round-about way, where cheery Christmas greetings were given and received.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

Bridget of White Pine

"WHITE PINE!" said Bob Lawless at last.

It was still early in the afternoon, but shadows were creeping over the snowy plains.

Frank Richards and Vere Beaulere looked about them with interest as Bob drove up to White Pine.

It was a lonely spot. There had once been several clearings in the district, but they had been abandoned by settlers, who had moved on to fresh fields and pastures new.

Only one habitation remained—a small cabin of mingled logs and lumber. It was plain, at a glance, that the place belonged to the poorest kind of unsuccessful emigrant.

Poor Micky Muldoon and his wife had come up from Chicago, to take up a grant of land in the North-West.

Life in the city of canned pork had not well prepared them for a life on the land. Lacking both capital and experience, Micky Muldoon had a hard row to hoe.

But he had worked hard, and kept up his Irish cheerfulness, and hoped for the best.

And there was the child. Little Bridget was six—a pretty and delicate child, ill-fitted to face the north-western winter in a frontier cabin.

With the coming of grim winter, little Bridget had become ill. Miss Meadows, the schoolmistress of Cedar Creek, visited the lonely cabin regularly, to help in tending the little invalid.

Kind neighbours would ride ten miles to bring little gifts for Bridget, and to ask how she was doing.

Frank Richards caught sight of burly Micky Muldoon, at work at a distance from the cabin. In a foot of snow, the hardy emigrant was hewing logs.

Bob drew the sleigh to a halt at a little distance from the cabin, in order not to disturb the sick child.

The three schoolboys alighted, and went softly towards the place, through the snow that deadened their footsteps.

Bob Lawless tapped on the door and opened it softly.

A fire, fed by pine chips, was burning smokily in the cabin. A pale and trembling woman was tending it.

Mr. Slimmey, the assistant master of Cedar Creek School, sat in a corner, very grave and quiet. He glanced at the boys with a grave nod and a smile.

Miss Meadows was beside the little cot where the child lay, near the fire.

The schoolboys stopped, irresolute, just within the cabin, Bob closing the door softly to keep out the bitter wind.

The child was speaking, in a low and weak voice.

"Mummy!"

The worn woman by the fire came to the cot.

"Yes, dearie!"

"It's Christmas to-morrow, mummy."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Muldoon, with a sigh.

"Is Father Christmas coming?"

Mrs. Muldoon did not answer.

Father Christmas was not likely to come to the lonely emigrant's cabin, bound in the grip of winter and poverty.

The child's pale face turned towards the troubled mother.

"Mummy, will Father Christmas come?"

"Sure, the snow's too heavy for Father Christmas to come, alanna," said poor Mrs. Muldoon.

Frank Richard's arm swung up as the ruckler rode alongside, and the coiled rug flew through the air. Whiz! Crash! The missile sent the horseman spinning! (See Chapter 5.)



"But Father Christmas doesn't mind the snow, mummy, and he always used to come at home."

"Yes, dear; but——"

"You'll hang up my stocking, mummy, for Father Christmas to-night," said Bridget, her bright eyes on her mother's face. "Sure, he'll come. He don't mind the snow. He always came at home."

The poor woman's eyes filled with tears.

In the far-off city Father Christmas had always come. There, a few pence had been enough to purchase some poor little gift to be placed in the stocking overnight.

On the North-Western frontier it was different.

Children's toys were not to be had in the upper Thompson valley. For those who could afford them, they came at great expense from different towns.

But it was hard to tell the unsuspecting child that her old friend Father Christmas, who had never failed her yet, would fail her at last.

Miss Meadows' kind face was gravely troubled. Mr. Slimmey, in the corner, wiped his gold-rimmed spectacles.

Frank Richards and Co. stood silent and uneasy.

The child's voice went on.

"I want Father Christmas to bring me a doll, mummy. Do you think he will bring me a doll if he comes, mummy?"

"Sure, I can't tell, alanna."

"I hope he'll bring me a doll, one that moves its eyes," said Bridget. "Sure, Father Christmas won't forget us, mummy; he never has."

"Sure, I hope he won't, dearie. But——"

"I'm sure he won't!" said the child confidently. "He won't forget us. You'll hang up my stocking, mummy!"

"Yes, dear."

Miss Meadows rose quietly and moved towards the door. Bridget raised her head. She had caught sight of the three schoolboys inside the cabin.

"Bob! It's Bob!"

Bob Lawless came towards the cot.

"Hallo, Bridget, old girl!" he said. "You look ever so much better."

Bridget nodded and smiled.

"I'm thinking about Father Christmas," she said. "Last Christmas I told mummy I wanted a Teddy Bear, an' Father Christmas brought me one. Do you think he'll bring me a doll this time, Bob?"

"I—I guess——" stammered Bob.

"He's sure to come. I sha'n't believe in him any more if he doesn't. But he'll come, sure," said Bridget, with a confident nod. "You'll see."

"I—I hope he will!" stammered Bob.

Certainly Father Christmas would have come to the lonely cabin if Bob Lawless could have contrived it. But a doll was not to be obtained for love or money in the Thompson valley.

The child's look grew troubled with the expression on Bob's honest face.

"You don't think he'll come this time, Bob?"

"I—I guess he will, kid," said Bob, alarmed at the change of expression. "He's—he's a good sort, you know; he never forgets good kids at Christmas."

The little face brightened again.

"I'm sure he'll come," said Bridget. "And I guess he'll bring me a doll. Father Christmas always guesses what you want most."

"You bet," said Bob, as heartily as he could.

"You must sleep now, dear," said the mother softly.

"Yes, mummy."

Bridget's eyes closed. But they opened again immediately.

"Mummy!"

"Yes, dear!"

"You won't forget the stocking. I'm sure he'll come."

"I—I won't forget, alanna. Go to sleep now."

"Yes, mummy," said Bridget drowsily.

Her eyes closed again.

Bob Lawless and his chums quietly left the cabin. Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey were outside now.

Frank Richards drew the door shut.

The three chums were strangely troubled. The child's faint words, her confidence in

"Father Christmas," had moved them to the very heart.

And they knew that Father Christmas could not come. There were no children's toys on the banks of the Thompson river.

"Poor little kid!" muttered Beauliere.

"It's rotten," said Frank, in a low voice.

"It's rotten."

Miss Meadows was speaking to Mr. Slimmey in a low voice, evidently discussing the doll question.

But their looks showed that no solution had been found.

"I'm going to drive you back, Miss Meadows, if you'll let me," said Bob, "and Mr. Slimmey, too."

"Thank you; I shall be very glad," said Miss Meadows, with a smile.

"I suppose, Lawless, you do not know of any way of satisfying poor little Bridget?"

Bob shook his head ruefully.

"Nothing nearer than Fraser!" he said.



Before the schoolboys knew what was happening, they were tossed in the snow amid the maddened, plunging horses. (See Chapter 6)

"I—I suppose there's nothing doing, Bob. I'd ride twenty miles like a shot——"

"Nothing doing," said Bob, with a shake of the head. "Kid's dolls ain't quite in our line in this section. Things like that have to be ordered weeks ahead, and come up by the store wagons. Nothing nearer than Fraser, I reckon."

"And that is thirty miles—and across the river."

"Yes, ma'am. I—I wonder——"

"You must not think of that," said Miss Meadows. "The ice is not safe at Indian ford. There is a blizzard coming on, Mr. Muldoon has told me. Poor little Bridget! I am afraid Father Christmas will not come, and she will

lose her faith in her old friend." Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmsey stepped into the sleigh, and the schoolboys followed.

They were silent as they drove to Cedar Creek.

The clear sky was darkening in the direction of the Rockies, with a drift of clouds laden with the coming snowfall.

In the winter dusk they arrived at Cedar Creek.

All of them were thinking of little Bridget, and the bitter disappointment that was in store for her when she found her stocking empty on Christmas morning.

At the lumber school, the school-mistress and Mr. Slimmsey alighted, and the schoolboys jingled away in the sleigh for home.

But their faces were not bright now.

Somehow the thought of the pale little face in the emigrant's lonely cabin haunted them, and they were still thinking of little Bridget when the sleigh jingled up to the Lawless Ranch.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

A Reckless Venture

FRANK RICHARDS was very thoughtful during dinner at the ranch.

It was a late dinner for the schoolboys, for the drive had taken up the greater part of the day, and Mr. and Mrs. Lawless had dined long before, with the guests that had already arrived at the ranch.

Frank's thoughtful mood was shared by his chums.

After dinner Bob made his comrades a sign to follow him, and they left the ranch house.

Outside, deep dusk was on the snowy countryside.

The snow was falling more heavily than before.

Bob stopped at the opening of the porch, with a wrinkle deep in his boyish brow. He looked at his chums.

"What are you thinking of Frank?" he asked.

"Bridget Muldoon and her doll," said Frank, half laughing. "So were you, old scout."

"Same here," said Beauclerc. "I wish something could be done."

Bob Lawless drew a deep breath.

"Are you fellows game?" he asked.

"Game as pie!" said Frank. "But for what?"

"Look here!" Bob sunk his voice. "I can't get that kid and her Father Christmas out of my mind. It will fairly knock her out, you know—she believes in Daddy Christmas; kids do. It's a shame for her to have to give it up, before she's old enough to know that Father Christmas is spoof. And—and the poor little beggar wants a doll. Blessed if I know what for, but girls do, you know."

"They do!" agreed Frank.

"Well, suppose—"

"Well!" said Frank and Beauclerc together.

"They've got dolls at Fraser," said Bob. "Heaps of 'em. We've got the cash—we'd pool supplies if necessary—"

"You bet! That's not the difficulty!"

"Dolls and such things come pretty high out here, of course. But never mind that—we can manage that part. Better that! But— Fraser's a good thirty miles away—and night's coming on." Bob wrinkled his brows again. "Are you chaps game for a run over to Fraser in the sleigh?"

"Bob!"

"I know it sounds potty, just for a doll," said Bob, colouring a little. "But—but that kid, you know—poor little beggar! She'd be no end chirpy if Father Christmas came, after all. It's worth a bit of a risk!"

"A bit!" said Frank gravely. "The snow's coming down heavier to-night, Bob. We couldn't get back before morning, if— if—"

"If we got back at all," said Bob, with a nod. "I understand. I know the popper would jump on me if I suggested it to him. There's risk—"

"The ice isn't strong at Indian ford," said Beauclerc quietly. "We should have to cross the river near there, or go fifteen miles round—and that would knock it on the head."

"I know! There's risk. I guess I'm not going to confide in the popper. He would be mad with me. But—but after we came back, he would be pleased right enough. Are you fellows game?"

"Fathead!" said Frank. "Of course we're game. If it's barely possible to do it—"

"I think it is. We could get back to Muldoon's cabin before dawn—in time for the doll to go into the stocking. But—but there's no need for you chaps to risk it, either, one's enough—"

"Do you want your nose punched, you ass?" Bob laughed.

"Well, is it a cinch?" he asked. "I can get the sleigh round with fresh horses—the popper wouldn't ask any questions. There's no reason why we shouldn't do it safely. And—and I want Father Christmas to come to Bridget Muldoon to-night—I do!"

"It's a go!" said Frank.

Beaulere nodded quietly.

"It's a go!" he said. "And a jolly good idea. I'm with you, Bob. I think it's a ripping idea."

"Not a word about it, though," said Bob. "I don't quite know whether the popper would object—he might and he mightn't—but the popper would be anxious. I wouldn't like her to be anxious."

"Right-o!"

"Then it's a cinch!" said Bob. "Get on your warmest things. I'll see to the sleigh!"

The chums of Cedar Creek had made up their minds.

It was, perhaps, a hare-brained scheme. Snow-covered plains, and ridges barred with drifts, lay between them and the distant railroad town—and the frozen river was between. And the ice was not known to be strong enough to bear.

There was risk—terrible risk. But the excitement of that wild drive through the winter night appealed strongly to the imaginations of the chums.

They would be out all night—driving through blinding snow, facing a hundred perils. And it was all for the sake of a child—in order that the sick girl might not be disappointed on Christmas morning.

But the motive could not have been a more generous one. And the schoolboy chums did not hesitate.

Half an hour later, the sleigh was standing on the trail, with three horses this time harnessed to it.

Mr. Lawless was busy with his guests in the ranch-house, and he was not even aware that his son was arranging a sleigh-drive. But the rancher would have raised no objection to that; he could trust the hardy Canadian lad to take care of himself.

Certainly he would not have been likely to suspect that Bob was planning a wild night drive to the distant town on the railway.

Frank and Beaulere stepped into the sleigh, and Bob took up the reins, after wrapping the bearskin closely round him. The cold was bitter and intense.

"Look out for the drifts, Bob, if you're going to Cedar Camp," said Billy Cook, as the rancher's son gathered up the reins.

"Right you are, Billy!"

"And if you see Dave Dunn on the trail, give him a wide berth," went on the ranch foreman. "I passed those two scallywags half an hour ago—Dunn, and Euchre Dick, coming up from the creek."

Beaulere started.

He could guess that the "scallywags" had been coming away from the shack, when the ranchman met them.

"Those two galoots are fairly asking to be roped in by the sheriff," went on Billy Cook. "They're dead broke and desperate. They looked at me on the trail, and if I hadn't had a shooter handy, I calculate they would have held me up—and gone through me, sonny. Steer clear of them if they're still on the trail. I warn you they're looking for trouble."

"Only those two, Billy?" asked Vere Beaulere, whose handsome face was troubled.

"Them two, on their lonesome," said the ranch foreman. "What are they doing in the saddle at a time like this hyer! Looking for trouble, I guess. Steer clear of them!"

"You bet!" said Bob. He hesitated a moment. "Billy, when my popper asks after me to-night—he's bound to miss me at bedtime—tell him we've gone for a long drive, and mayn't be back before dawn."

"What!" ejaculated the ranchman.

"Tell him we're all O.K., and mother's not to be anxious," said Bob. "Gee-up!"

The sleigh started.

"But——" shouted the ranchman,

But the sleigh was going now, and Billy Cook was left shaking his head very solemnly.

With a musical jingle of bells and harness, the sleigh glided down the snow-covered trail.

"Keep an eye open for those two bulldozers, you chaps," said Bob. "I don't trust them half an inch—I know they're ripe for mischief. They're not going to play the same trick with this outfit that they played once with an emigrant's wagon. They would if they got half a chance."

"This outfit!" muttered Vere Beauclere, the word, recurring to his mind. "That is what Euchre Dick was speaking of, then!"

"What did you say, Cherub!"

"N-nothing! But—but if we meet those two scoundrels, Bob, I'm certain they will try to stop us and collar the sleigh. They think they could sell it for a thousand dollars at a distance from here."

"I guess they could—easy!" said Bob.

"They'll try it on, if they get a chance."

"They won't get a chance!" said Bob.

The sleigh jingled on, away

over the deeply shadowed plain—away at a spanking speed. Three splendid horses were pulling, and the sleigh glided behind them as if on glass. Snowflakes dashed in the faces of the schoolboys.

Far off, through banks of clouds, there was a hint of a coming moon. Through the falling snow the stars glittered like precious stones.

The well-known trail through the timber-belt lay before them; and as the gaunt trees loomed up there was a beat of hoofs in the snow, and a horseman rode alongside the sleigh.

A hoarse voice shouted from the dusk, and Bob Lawless cracked his whip and the sleigh drove on faster. The first danger of that wild night's drive was at hand.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER

Rushing the Rus'lers

BOB LAWLESS sat like a bronze image, looking neither to right nor to left, with an iron hand on the reins. All his attention was needed to handle three powerful and mettlesome horses.

But Frank and Beau looked round at the ghostly stranger who had so suddenly loomed up from the night.

A squat figure, wrapped in furs was all they could see. He sat his horse within two yards of the sleigh, keeping pace with it.

The hoarse voice shouted again.

"Bob Lawless! Is that Bob Lawless?"

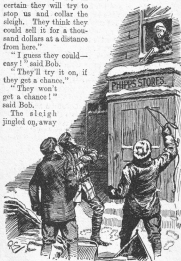
"I guess so!" called back Bob, without looking round.

"Halt!"

"I guess I'm in a hurry, Euchre Dick!"

"So you know me," muttered the horseman, pulling a little ahead so as to ride abreast with Bob's team. "You know me, you young cub!"

"I guess I'd know your galloways anywhere, Euchre Dick," said Bob coolly, "and your gosh-bird voice, too!"



The window above the store flew up, a red and wrathful eye glared out, and the barrel of a shotgun came into view. "I've got you covered!" roared Mr. Phipps. (See Chapter 7)



The schoolboys looked back as the sleigh fled on. Wolves were in sight, and Frank Richards and Co. could see the gleaming jaws. "Are they gaining?" asked Bob, as he drove the terrified horses for all they were worth. (See Chapter 5)

"Halt!"

"Not this evening!"

Euchre Dick put his fingers to his lips, and a loud, sudden whistle rang far through the gloom of the timber ahead.

Well enough the schoolboys knew what the signal meant.

It meant that the ruffian's partner was ahead of them on the trail, and that Dave Dunn was warned to stop the sleigh as it came up.

The intention of the ruffians could not be doubted now.

The sleigh and horses were too valuable a prize to be missed, now that that prize had ventured fairly into their hands, in the dark night on the lonely prairie.

Having captured the sleigh, it would be easy for the two rascals to drive it away, and to get clear of the country before pursuit could possibly be started on their track.

The three boys would be left to tramp home wearily in the snow, deprived of the sleigh, the horses, the furs, and rugs, and any money they had about them.

With such a prize in their grasp, the two rustlers could well afford to abandon the section, and, commence their rascally career in another part of the country, or over the "Line" in the United States.

There was no doubt as to their intention. The question was whether they could carry it out. Not if Frank Richards & Co. could prevent them, that was certain.

"Halt, you fool!" snarled Euchre Dick, as he rode abreast of the steaming horses. "You'll be stopped on the trail, anyway!"

"Rats!"

"Will you halt!"

"No!"

Euchre Dick's hand groped among his furs. Something that shone and glittered in the starlight came into view.

"Halt, Bob Lawless, or I'll bring down your leader!" the ruffian shouted savagely. "I guess you'll have to halt then, with a broken neck, maybe!"

Bob Lawless did not answer. His teeth set, and he touched the team with the whip, and the horses leapt onward in response.

Euchre Dick was left behind for the moment.

But he spurred on furiously, and in a few minutes was level with the team again, and his right arm swung up, the revolver in his hand.

Frank Richards half rose in his seat.

In his hand was a thick rug, coiled up as hard as he could make it. His arm swung up as the rustler rode alongside, and the coiled rug flew through the air with a whiz.

Whiz! Crash!

The unexpected missile struck the horse-man fairly on the side of the head, and sent him spinning.

The revolver dropped into the snow, as Euebre Dick spun over the flank of his horse, grasping desperately at rein and mane to save himself.

The horse dashed madly on, with the dismounted rustler clinging wildly to its back.

Bob Lawless lashed at it with his whip as it fled frantically by, and the startled animal wheeled from the trail, dashing off into the open prairie.

Horse and man vanished from sight among the whirling snowflakes.

"Good man, Frank!" muttered Vere Beauclore, his eyes glistening.

"Good man, by gum!" gasped Bob. "I guess that rustler is sorry he spoke! Gee-whiz! Here's the other scallywag!"

Just as the sleigh entered the timber, the schoolboys sighted a horseman ahead, halted in the middle of the trail, facing them.

"Halt!" he thundered out.

Bob Lawless did not heed.

The sleigh rushed on, three powerful horses rushing right down on the rider in the trail.

Had Dove Dunn stayed to await the shock of collision he would certainly have been swept over and trampled down, whatever had happened to the sleigh.

But he was too wise to wait.

As the sleigh thundered down on him, and he realized that Bob did not mean to stop, he leaped his horse desperately out of the trail right into the frost-blackened larches. It was the only way to escape death, and he took it, and he was only just in time.

The horseman crashed into the larches, and the sleigh thundered by, with a crash of bells and a thudding of hoofs.

Before the ruffian could drag himself from the trampled thickets the sleigh was gone, vanishing at terrific speed round a bend of the trail.

"Hurrah!" shouted Frank Richards.

Bob Lawless chuckled breathlessly.

"I guess those bull-dozers are kenced this time!" he gasped. "We shan't see their cheery faces again this side of Christmas."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The merry laugh of the schoolboys rang through the frozen woods.

Frank Richards looked back.

For some moments he thought he could hear the thud of hoof-beats in pursuit, but the sound died away into silence.

The rustlers were left far behind. The first peril of that wild night was passed.

In the starlight, Cedar Creek School loomed up for a minute or two to the right, as the sleigh swept out on the plain.

Then they dashed on into the open prairie, with the bright stars above their heads, the waste of untrodden snow round them, and the frozen river ahead.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

The Peril of the Ice

LIKE points of fire in a velvet sky the stars glittered down upon the wide waste of snow.

Warmly wrapped in furs and bear-skins, the schoolboy chums did not feel the cold, bitter and searching as it was.

Not a habitation, not a light, was to be seen on the lonely waste. They were ascending the ridge now, and beyond the ridge lay the river, frozen fast, a hundred yards of ice.

Would it hold?

As they came down the slope of the ridge the wide river came in sight. It was still and silent in the grip of King Winter.

Snow lay on the ice like a mantle of white velvet.

Surely the ice would hold! For weeks it had been freezing. Up by the ford there was danger. But Bob Lawless had struck the river lower down, where the water was deeper and the ice thicker.

If it did not hold they knew what it meant. They could picture the crash of breaking ice in the middle of the wide river, the yelling of the drowning horses, the fierce struggle for life in freezing water among the ice-chips.

But it would hold—is was sure to hold! Hold or not, they were going to risk it. The sleigh never paused a second.

The well-worn trail was hidden from sight under the carpet of snow, but Bob Lawless followed it as if by instinct.

And in the glittering starlight they could see traces of runners left in the snow, showing that another sleigh had passed the trail before them.

The sight of the runner-tracks encouraged them. Where others had gone they could go.

Down the slope to the frozen river the sleigh went jingling. They were upon the ice now.

Would it hold?

The schoolboys sat tight and waited with grim calmness. Under the runners the frozen river glided back.

Frank Richards' heart gave a throb as he heard a low, wailing sound from the river. He knew that it was the voice of the ice-pack.

Crack!

Bob Lawless' whip rang out like a pistol-shot.

He, too, had heard that warning wail of the straining ice. The horses, as if they, too, realised the peril, were straining hard. The sleigh flew.

Beauciere's grasp closed on Frank Richards'

arm. Frank looked at him. The son of the remittance man was quiet and calm, even smiling.

"We shall get through, Frank!" he whispered.

Crack, crack!

The last crack was from the ice, not from the whip. The schoolboys set their teeth.

But the leader was trampling the frozen rushes of the bank now. The horses strained ashore, and the sleigh glided up the slope.

Crack!

It was not the whip.

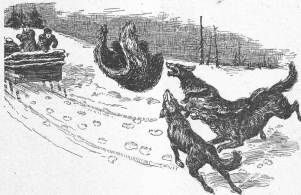
Frank Richards, his heart thumping, looked back at the surface of ice lighted by glittering stars.

The runner-tracks lay through the snow clean-cut as by a knife, but across the white surface there appeared a dark bar, where the ice had split. Dark water was welling up through the snow-covered ice.

Frank caught his breath.

"A close shave, Beau!" he muttered.

Beauciere nodded and smiled.



Frank tossed the great, heavy bearskin into the snow behind. In a couple of seconds the wolves had reached it, and were tearing at it madly! (See Chapter 5)

The danger had been very close, but it was past.

The sleigh glided on.

It was a clear run now, and the perils were from snowdrifts in the gullies. Bob Lawless slackened speed a little. He did not want to pump his team. There was hard work before them yet.

"Snow again!" muttered Beauclerc, pulling his fur cap closer to his head.

It came down in masses.

The light of the stars was dimmed. In a ghostly twilight the sleigh plunged on like a phantom of the night.

Distant hills loomed like white spectres to right and left. Bob Lawless pointed with his whip to some landmark indistinguishable to his chuma.

"Ten miles more to Fraser!" he called out.

"Hark!" exclaimed Frank.

From the silent waste there came a sudden, strange, eerie sound—a long-drawn, wailing cry.

So strange, so eerie was that cry of the winter night that Frank felt the blood throb to his heart as he heard it.

"Beau, did you hear—"

"I heard, but—"

"What was that, Bob?"

Bob Lawless did not answer. He did not seem to hear. Frank Richards leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"Bob, did you hear that?"

"I guess so."

"What was it?"

"Nothing," said Bob.

"Don't be an ass, Bob! You know what it was. Tell me."

There was a moment's silence, and then Bob Lawless answered:

"Wolves!"

Frank Richards sank back into his seat.

"Wolves!" he repeated.

He scanned the dim plain with his eyes. Wolves! In spite of his courage, it was a word to chill the heart.

"It's hunger that's driven them down from the hills," said Bob. "They're unknown here, but sometimes in winter—"

He drove on without finishing.

The wailing cry was heard again, but faintly, afar. The sleigh rushed on at greater speed, and there was silence. The mournful, echoing howl died away in the far distance.

Crash!

There was a sudden, shrill neigh from one of the horses, and the other two reared and plunged. It was a snowdrift at last, and the sleigh was fairly in it.

Before the schoolboys knew what was happening they were tossed into the snow, and the sleigh rolled over in the drift amid the maddened, plunging horses.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

Shipping in Fraser

FRANK Richards sat up dazedly in the snow.

For a moment or two he could not realize what had happened.

His brain was whirling.

A strong grasp on his arm drew him to his feet. It was Bob's hand that helped him. Vera Beauclerc was scrambling up.

"All serene?" asked Bob, panting.

"All serene, old chap! And you—"

"Right as rain."

"Nobody hurt," said Beauclerc, "but the horses—"

"I guess I missed the trail by a few yards," said Bob ruefully. "It couldn't be helped. I don't know this trail well."

"It's a miracle to me that you've kept to it at all," said Frank.

Bob laughed.

"Lend a hand," he said.

The sleigh was overturned, and rugs and blankets were tossed in the snow. The three horses, almost buried in the drift, were kicking and plunging wildly.

It was no tempting task to venture among the lashing hoofs of the maddened animals; but Bob Lawless had known horses from childhood, and he was at home with them.

Without a moment's hesitation he plunged into the drift to the rescue of the team. Frank and Beauclerc followed him at once.

With a steady hand and murmured words Bob soothed the leader, and dragged him up and out of the drift. The horses were

got upon their feet, trembling but soothed, and almost buried in snow.

The overturned sleigh lay upon a slope, and care was required, for if it had rolled lower in to the drift no human means could have extricated it or the horses. And that was—death! For no one on foot could have reached safety from the heart of the snow-swept plain.

The three schoolboys grasped the sleigh when the horses had been quieted, and with combined efforts righted it at last.

They stood panting, almost exhausted, when the sleigh was once more upon its runners, but Bob only paused a few moments to recover breath.

He examined the sleigh with an anxious eye, fearful that injury might have been done, but there was no damage from the tumble in the soft snow.

"All serene!" called out Bob, in great relief.

The rugs and buffalo-ropes were gathered up and shaken clear of snow, and the sleigh was led back to the trail. There the schoolboys took their seats in it again, and Bob Lawless drove on at a more cautious pace.

The snow had ceased to fall, and the stars were shining out brilliantly once more. Bob Lawless pointed with his whip at last.

Far in the distance ahead a light glimmered.

"What is it, Bob?"

"Fraser!" said Bob briefly.

"Oh, good!"

The sight of the distant town gladdened the hearts of the chums of Cedar Creek. The half of that perilous ride was nearly over at last.

It was long past midnight and Fraser was silent and buried in slumber when the sleigh halted into the streets.

Bob halted before the door of a store.

"The gee-gees will be all the better for a rest," he said. "Shove these rugs over them.

They've got a bit of a job before them yet to get back. And now for Bridget's doll!" added Bob, with a grin.

He dealt a thundering blow at the door with the butt of his whip. It rang and echoed down the silent, frozen street.

Bang, bang!

There was a sound of movement in the house at last. An upper window was opened, and a night-

capped head, with a fur-coat wrapped round the neck, looked out, and a fierce voice demanded:

"Who's there? Yamoose, you noisy jays, or I'll pitch a bucket of water on your dunder-heads! Hop it!"

"Good-evening, Mr. Phipps!" said Bob cheerfully.

"Great snakes! Is that young Lawless from the Thompson Valley?" yelled the store-keeper.

"You bet!"



"We've just come from Fraser," said Bob cheerily. "And we've got the doll!" "The—the—the doll!" repeated the astounded backwoodsman.

(See Chapter 9.)

"Well, what in thunder are you knocking a man up for at this hour?" demanded Mr. Phipps in tones of deep indignation.

"I've come to buy a doll."

"What?"

"A doll."

"You young coyote!" yelled Mr. Phipps. "You—you—you've come to me at one in the morning to buy a doll! Are you mad?"

"Nope!"

"Go home with you! I'll ask your popper to lay a cowhide round you for this!" shouted the storekeeper.

Slam!

The window closed with emphasis.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Frank Richards in dismay.

Bob Lawless laughed softly.

"The dear man doesn't quite savvy," he remarked. "After all, it's a bit disturbing to be woke up after midnight by a chap who wants to buy a doll."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But he's going to sell us that doll all the same," said Bob. "Dear old Phipps has got to come down! Here goes!"

Bang, bang, bang!

The heavy butt of the whip crashed on the door of the store. Frank and the Cherub lent the aid of their boots, and the din was something terrific.

Dogs began to bark along the street.

In five minutes the infuriated Mr. Phipps could stand it no longer. The window above the store flew up, and a red and wrathful face glared out, and the barrel of a shotgun came into view.

"I've got you covered!" roared Mr. Phipps. "Now, if you don't want a charge of buckshot into your carcass, you light out! You hear me yamp!"

"I guess I'm not deaf, Phipps, old scout," said Bob sweetly. "I rather reckon half Fraser can hear you. But I'm set on that doll."

"I give you one minute to vamoose before I let buckshot into you!" shouted Mr. Phipps.

"We're not vamooosing, old pard. Look here, Phipps, it's something special. We've come all the way from the Thompson Valley for that doll."

"Wha-a-at!" stammered Mr. Phipps.

"Honest Injun!"

"You've loped thirty miles in the snow for a doll!" gasped the astounded storekeeper. "You ain't staying hyer in Fraser, young Lawless?"

"Not a bit. You see, it's for a sick kid, who won't be pleased with anything else," explained Bob. "You don't want us to have the journey for nothing, Mr. Phipps. Be a good white man, and come down."

"Wal, I swear!" said Mr. Phipps. "Wait till I get into my trousers, Bob Lawless. I'll be down in a brace of shakes. Blowed if I ever heard the likes of this!"

The window closed, and Bob smiled contentedly.

"Phipps ain't a bad sort," he said. "I guessed he'd play up when he knew what it was for. All O.K. now."

In five minutes there was a rattling of a chain and the grinding of a bolt, and the door opened.

A lamp glimmered out into the snowy street, held aloft in Mr. Phipps' hand. The storekeeper seemed restored to good humour now.

"Amble in, you young scallywags!" he said amiably.

The three chums entered the store, and Mr. Phipps pushed the door shut. The snow was blowing in after them.

"Now, I guess you've surprised me, some," said Mr. Phipps, looking very curiously at Bob. "You've humped all the way from Thompson to get a doll for the kid—hay?"

"That's it," said Bob. "Kid expects Daddy Christmas in the morning, and we're not going to disappoint her—see?"

"Wal, carry me home to die!" said the storekeeper.

He set down the lamp.

"Hyer's my stock," he said. "Party near sold out, of course, but there's a few left. Take your choice, gents."

The storekeeper's stock of Christmas toys, brought up on the railroad for the season, had been greatly depleted by the purchases of Fraser's citizens. But there were some goods left, and the schoolboys looked over them.

"I say, that doll looks a cocker!" said Bob, picking up a huge doll, the eyes of which opened and shut of their own accord as it was moved. "Why, it's a good two feet long! That's a good 'un!"

"You bet it is!" said Mr. Phipps. "That doll's fifteen dollars, and no galoot wanted to stump up to that tune, and I guess it goes back on the railroad after Christmas. It's a bit too rich for Fraser."

"I guess it doesn't!" said Bob Lawless emphatically. "I guess that doll goes to Micky Muldoon's little girl at White Pine!"

"Fifteen dollars!" said Mr. Phipps laconically.

"How are you fixed, Franky?" asked Bob. "I've got the ten-dollar bill the popper gave me for Christmas."

"I've got the same," said Frank. "and some odd dollars besides."

"And I have one dollar," said Vere Beauclere quietly. "Little enough, but it goes in. Here you are!"

"Right you are, Cherub!" said Bob Lawless. "Change

these bills, please, Mr. Phipps, and wrap up the doll."

"By gum!" said the storekeeper. The big, burly Canadian storekeeper hesitated a minute, and then went on: "I guess I'm not making any profit on that doll, young Lawless. I paid twelve dollars for it, and you're going to have it at that. So it's twelve you're stuck for, and not a cent over!"

"You're a white man, Phippy!" said Bob. "We'll tell Bridget that Father Christmas' other name is Billy Phipps."

The storekeeper laughed and replaced the big, handsome doll in its cardboard box, and proceeded to wrap it up carefully.

The twelve dollars were paid over—five

dollars and fifty cents from Frank and Bob each, and one dollar from Vere Beauclere, all he had.

Gladly enough the chums would have refrained from using Beauclere's little contribution, but he had a right to share, as far as he could, in helping Father Christmas to come to White Pine.

"There you are, sonny!" said the storekeeper, handing the box to Bob Lawless. "You've got a long run back."

"All serene, if Father Christmas gets in before Bridget wakes in the morning!" grinned Bob. "So-long, Mr. Phipps! Sorry we've spoiled your beauty sleep."

"That's all right lads," said the storekeeper, "don't you worry about that." The boys thanked him.

Mr. Phipps opened the door, and the chums trooped back to the waiting sleigh where the box containing the doll was packed away safely. Mr. Phipps called out from the doorway as they stepped into the sleigh.



Little Bridget hugged the doll and crooned over it. "Bob! Father Christmas has come!" she exclaimed, and laughed happily. (See Chapter 99)

"Say, young Lawless!"

"Hallo!"

"I've heard that there are wolves on the range. Keep your eyes peeled goin' back!"

"You bet! Good-night, Mr. Phipps, an' a Merry Christmas!"

"Same to you! Good-night!"

The sleigh jingled gaily away into the starlight, and the storekeeper closed his door. Down the silent main street of Fraser the sleigh-bells jingled, and once more the white waste lay before the adventurers. Through the lightly-falling flakes the stars glittered down upon the speeding sleigh.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER

From the Jaws of Death

JINGLE, jingle!

The snow had ceased to fall. The sky was like sapphire, the stars set in it like diamonds. The merry music of the sleigh-bells rang and echoed through the vast silences of the prairie.

The speed was not so great now. Hardy and strong as the Canadian horses were, the journey was telling upon them. But there was ample time to reach White Pine before the dawn whitened the summit of the Rockies, if all went well.

The chums were silent as the sleigh glided on. They were thinking of the wild and mournful howl they had heard on the prairie on the outward run. Their eyes swept the dim expanses on all sides.

Frank Richards caught Beauclerc's arm suddenly.

"Listen!" he muttered.

Eerily through the night came the howl, faint and afar. Without the crack of the whip the horses started into greater speed. Well they knew the whine of the prowling wolf.

Driven by hunger from their lairs in the northern hills, the savage animals had ventured nearer to the habitations of man. Gaunt and hunger-stricken, they were terrible foes to approach.

And there were no weapons in the sleigh. The chums had not even thought of them. Not that weapons in the schoolboys' hands would have been of much use against a hungry wolf-pack.

The sleigh jingled on.

The howl was repeated again and again. It was coming nearer. With thumping hearts the chums realised that the prowling brutes had heard the sleigh-bells or scented the horses.

Beauclerc raised a steady hand to point.

In the dimness, where the starlight lay on the drifting snow, a dark form appeared, looming through the shadows. Two fierce red eyes glittered as they caught the light.

It was a wolf.

The whining howl sounded again, and there

was a whinny of terror from the horses. Another and another dark figure leaped into view from the snow.

"They're after us!" said Frank between his teeth.

Bob's whip cracked like a pistol.

But it was hardly needed. The horses were straining now. Fatigue was forgotten in the terror inspired by the howl of the wolf.

The schoolboys looked back as the sleigh fled on. Five wolves were in sight—gaunt, haggard, wasted by famine—the famine that had drawn them far from their accustomed haunts.

As they loped behind the sleigh the schoolboys could see the gleaming jaws, from which the hot breath poured like steam.

Once within reach of those hideous fangs it was all over with the occupants of the sleigh.

Bob Lawless sat as steady as a rock, driving, holding his terrified team well in hand, and getting every ounce of speed out of the horses.

"How many, Frank?" he asked, without looking round.

"I can see five."

"Are they gaining?"

"I think so."

"We're not far off the river now," said Bob quietly.

Bob had taken a slightly different route, to cross the river lower down than before, to avoid the place where the ice had cracked. But the river was not yet in sight.

With fascinated eyes, Frank and Vere Beauclerc watched the gaunt animals that loped after the sleigh in ferocious pursuit.

In the fierce race two of them dropped behind and were lost to view amid the powdering snow.

But three of the fearful animals were close in pursuit, and gaining on the sleigh.

"And we have no weapon!" muttered Vere Beauclerc.

"How far off now?" asked Bob, in tones of quiet calmness. He did not look round. He dared not take his eyes from the straining team and the snow-driven trail ahead.

"Twenty yards the nearest," said Frank Richards quietly. "Only three keeping up."

"When they're half the distance, throw out the bearskin rug."

"Right!"

The three schoolboys were calm and quiet. The very nearness of the terrible danger seemed to calm them.

Frank and Vere loosened the big bearskin rug, ready to throw. They had heard of such a device to delay a pursuing pack. Bob Lawless had thought of it at once. Closer and closer came the ravenous three, with red, rolling eyes and snapping jaws.

"Now!" muttered Beaulere.

Frank tossed the great, heavy bearskin into the snow behind.

In a couple of seconds the three wolves had reached it, and were tearing it madly with their teeth. The three gaunt animals struggled for it, gnashing their teeth ferociously, and the schoolboys heard the horrid sound as the sleigh fled on, unpursued for the moment.

Then came a wild uproar of snarling and yelling. Snapping teeth had caught a paw in the struggle for the bearskin, and the bitten animal turned savagely upon the assailant, biting in return.

Two savage brutes were rolling over in the snow, tearing and snarling and foaming as if in madness. The third was rending the bearskin to tatters.

The sleigh raced on.

"The river!" panted Beaulere.

The frozen river gleamed ahead in the starlight. There was a long, low howl behind, and Frank looked back. A single wolf was

keeping up the chase, and faintly from the far distance came the echoes of the savage conflict still proceeding between the other two.

But the sleigh had gained a long stretch. It swept down to the frozen river, and glided out on the snow-clad ice.

The juniors almost held their breath.

But the ice was thicker here. It stood the strain almost without a sound. Like an arrow the sleigh passed across the frozen surface, and rushed up the bank. Frank Richards stood up to look back.

On the far side of the river the last wolf was disappearing from view in the snow. The sleigh had won the deadly race.

"All serene!" panted Frank, sinking back into his seat. "My hat! I don't want to go through that again!"

"All's well that ends well," said Beaulere, with a faint smile. "Father Christmas has had a narrow shave, but he will get to White Pine now."

For several miles more the sleigh kept up good speed. But the weary horses slackened at last. The danger of the wolves was past, and Bob allowed his team to fall into an easy trot.

Clouds had hidden the stars again. There was darkness round the sleigh, save for the white gleam of the snow. But this was familiar ground to Bob Lawless, and he drove on without a doubt or a pause.

Through the dimness a pale gleam crept in the eastern sky. Like spectres in the dark



"Three cheers!" roared Billy Cook, waving his hat. And the crowd of guests and ranchmen joined heartily in the cheers, till Frank Richards and Co. were glad to hide their blushes in the ranch-house. (See Chapter 10.)

the distant summits of the Rockies loomed into view, whitened by the dawn.

It was the dawn of Christmas.

Till now the schoolboys had hardly been conscious of fatigue. But as the pale winter dawn crept up the sky they realised that they were very tired. Darkness rolled away from the mountains and the plain. Trees loomed up dimly, and then more clearly. But they were close to White Pine now.

THE NINTH CHAPTER

Father Christmas at White Pine

A YELLOW sun looked down from a grey sky as Bob Lawless brought his weary team to a halt at White Pine. Even as he halted, the door of the emigrant's cabin opened, and Micky Muldoon came out.

The settler stopped and stared at the sight of the sleigh.

Bob Lawless jumped down followed by his comrades.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Muldoon!" he sang out cheerily.

"Merry Christmas to you, sorr, bogorra!" said Mr. Muldoon. "And phwat are yez doin' so far from home at this hour?"

"We've just come from Fraser."

"Phwat!" gasped Mr. Muldoon.

"And we've got the doll."

"The—the—the doll!" repeated the astounded backwoodsman.

"Lug it out, Franky."

Frank Richards dragged the box out of the sleigh. Micky Muldoon was staring at them blankly. He did not understand yet.

"Don't you catch on?" said Bob. "It's Father Christmas. He's brought the doll for Bridget."

"Oh, begor!"

"Is she awake yet?"

Mr. Muldoon shook his head.

"Not yet."

"Good! Mrs. Muldoon up?"

"Yis, sorr. Sure, I'll call her."

The settler stepped back into the cabin, and reappeared in a few moments with his wife. The tired, troubled woman looked in amazement at the three schoolboys. Bob Lawless removed the lid of the big cardboard box.

Mrs. Muldoon's eyes fairly bulged at the sight of the great doll.

"Will that fill the bill?" grinned Bob, with great satisfaction. "We've brought it from Fraser for the little 'un, Mrs. Muldoon. You're to put it in her stocking before she wakes—if it'll go into her blessed stocking though!"

"Bless my heart!" said the amazed woman. "Oh, Master Lawless——"

"Father Christmas, if you please!" chuckled Bob.

"The blessings of the saints be on you this Christmas, young jintlemen!" said Mr. Muldoon. "Sure, the little one would have broken her heart if Father Christmas had passed her by. And, faith, it's little I could do. But—but——"

"You've been to Fraser?" said Mrs. Muldoon. "You've been sleighing all night for the sake of the little one! And sure, I heard that there were wolves on the range, across the river!"

"Never mind the wolves," said Frank Richards, laughing. "Shove the doll where the little one will see it when she wakes, ma'am."

"Heaven bless you all!" said Mrs. Muldoon with tears in her tired eyes, as she took the doll. The settler's wife went into the cabin.

"Now it's about time we got home to bed," grinned Bob. "Come to think of it, I'm a bit tired."

"Hark!" said Frank.

They stepped closer to the doorway of the cabin.

A weak, childish voice could be heard. Bridget had awakened.

"Mummy!"

"Yes, dearie."

"It's Christmas, mummy."

"Yes, dear, it's Christmas."

"Has Father Christmas come?"

Frank Richards and his chums looked at one another. But for the arrival of the schoolboys poor Mrs. Muldoon would have had a bitterly disappointing reply to make to the child's question.

At that moment the chums of Cedar Creek felt more than repaid for the stress and the danger of that wild night's ride through the snow.

In silence they listened.

"Has he come, mummy? I'm sure he would come. See if Father Christmas has been, mummy."

"Sure, I'll see, darling."

The poor woman's voice was happy now as she answered.

There was a pause, and then from the cabin came a cry of delight.

"Oh, mummy!"

It was a cry so full of infantile joy and satisfaction that it went straight to the hearts of the listeners.

"Begor!" murmured Micky Muldoon. "Begor, an' sure heaven will bless you, young gentlemen, for phwat ye've done."

"Oh, mummy! Isn't it a beauty? I knew Father Christmas wouldn't forget us, mummy. Oh, mummy!"

Mrs Muldoon stepped to the door, and signed to the schoolboys to enter.

They looked in.

Little Bridget was sitting up in her cot with the doll in her arms. It was such a doll as the child had never seen before, such a doll as she had never dreamed of possessing. Her pale face was flushed now, her eyes were sparkling. She hugged the doll and crooned over it.

She looked up brightly and smiled to the schoolboys.

"Bob! He's come."

"Has he?" exclaimed Bob; "who has, Bridget?"

"Father Christmas!" Bridget laughed happily. "I knew he would, Bob, and you said he would, too. Some folks don't believe in Father Christmas. Look what he's brought me!"

"It's ripping!" said Bob. "Good old Father Christmas. He was bound to come, Bridget."

"You can hold it if you like, Bob," said Bridget, generously.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob.

He took the doll for a moment, Bridget watching it hungrily. And the child was evidently glad when her little arms closed once more upon her treasure.

"It's eyes open and shut, Bob. Look!"

"Fancy that!" said Bob, in great surprise. Bridget laid her head on the pillow again,

the doll cuddled in her arms. Bob Lawless rejoined his chums.

"Come on, you chaps," he said. "By gum! It was worth that drive!"

"Heaven bless you!" was all poor Mrs. Muldoon could say. "Heaven bless you, young gentlemen, for this."

With happy hearts the chums of Cedar Creek stepped into the sleigh. At an easy pace Bob drove away from the lonely cabin. They left happiness behind them there.

"Home now," said Frank.

"We'll call at the school!" said Bob. "Miss Meadows was to be fetched to the ranch early this morning. We'll take her along, and the popper can't rag us with Miss Meadows looking on—see?"

"Ha, ha, ha."

And they drove on merrily to Cedar Creek.

THE TENTH CHAPTER

A Merry Christmas

MISS MEADOWS was expecting to be called for at the school that morning.

The rancher's sleigh arrived a little earlier than was expected, that was all.

Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey entered the vehicle, and Bob turned his team in the direction of the ranch.

"You boys look tired," Miss Meadows remarked, as Frank Richard's chin was dropping on his chest.

Frank straightened up rather guiltily.

"Nunno—not at all!" he stammered.

"Not a bit," said Beauclerc.

Miss Meadows looked at them rather keenly.

"The horses are tired, too," she said. "You must have been out a very long time; yet it is still early morning."

"Tell Miss Meadows, and she'll make it all right with the popper, Frankie," said Bob Lawless, over his shoulder.

"What have you to tell me, Richards?" asked the schoolmistress, a little severely, and Mr. Slimmey blinked at the chums over his gold-rimmed glasses.

"We've been out all night, Miss Meadows," confessed Frank.

"What! Where have you been?"

"To Fraser."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Slimmey. "My boys—Fraser—and there are wolves on the range."

"The wolves have had Mr. Lawless' bearskin rug," said Beauclerc. "I hope he won't mind, as they had to have that or us!"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Meadows. "Tell me at once what you've been doing."

Frank Richards told the whole story. He wondered whether Miss Meadows would be angry; but as he looked at the schoolmistress' face when he had finished, he saw that her eyes had filled with tears.

"My dear, dear boys!" said Miss Meadows; "my dear, dear boys! You should not have gone—it was too terribly dangerous; but—but I am proud of you! I do not think Mr. Lawless will be angry when he knows!"

"So Father Christmas came to White Pine after all!" said Mr. Slimmey, wiping his spectacles.

"You bet!" chuckled Bob Lawless, "and if you'd seen the kid's face, Mr. Slimmey, you'd have thought it was worth it."

The sleigh jingled up to the ranch. Mr. Lawless ran to meet it, and Mrs. Lawless, in the porch, breathed a deep sigh of relief at the sight of her son safe and sound.

"You young rascals!" shouted the rancher as the sleigh halted. "Good morning, Miss Meadows; good morning, Mr. Slimmey; Merry Christmas! You young rascals, where have you been?"

"Bob!" exclaimed Mrs. Lawless.

"You weren't alarmed, mother!" asked Bob remorsefully. "I gave Billy Cook a message—"

"Billy gave us the message," said the rancher gruffly; "but your mother was anxious all the same, you young scallywag. Do you think you are old enough to take a night out on the prairie in a sleigh?"

"Under the circumstances, popper," said Bob. "You tell him, Miss Meadows—I can see he is going to be mad with us."

The rancher was in rather a difficulty. His son's escapade could not be passed over, but a dozen guests were gathering round to see the returning wanderers, as well as Miss Meadows and Mr. Slimmey.

But Miss Meadows hastened to explain, and

the cloud cleared off from the rancher's brow.

Several of the Cedar Creek schoolboys had arrived at the ranch with their parents for Christmas Day, and they gathered round Frank Richards and Co. There was a buzz of amazement from all as Miss Meadows told the story of Father Christmas coming to White Pine.

"The young rascals!" gasped the rancher. "Oh, the scallywags! Bob, you young villain—suppose the wolves——" He gasped again.

"They've had your bearskin rug, popper," said Bob, cheerfully.

"You've been to Fraser, Bob!" exclaimed Chunky Todgers, catching Bob's arm. "Well, it beats the Dutch! I say, old fellow, did you think of bringing back any maple sugar with you?"

"Never thought of it, Chunky," said Bob.

"You young rascals!" repeated the rancher. "You ought to be cowed for running such risks. But if your schoolmistress thinks you can be forgiven, I'd better think the same, I guess."

"Hear, hear," said Bob, cheerily. "I—I say, mother, I—I'm sorry if you were anxious. I—I thought you'd like that kid to get the doll, though what anybody wants with a doll beats me hollow. You're not waxy?"

Mrs. Lawless bent and kissed her son with tears in her eyes.

"I have been alarmed," she said. "I should have been terribly alarmed if I had known what you were doing. But I am proud of you, Bob, and of your friends, too!"

"Three cheers!" roared Billy Cook, waving his hat.

And the crowd of guests and the ranchmen joined heartily in the cheers, till Frank Richards and Co. were glad to hide their blushes in the ranch-house. And that Christmas Day was spent by the chums of Cedar Creek in deep slumber.

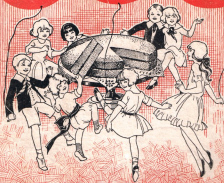
But in the evening they were quite themselves again. It was a merry Christmas at the ranch—one of the merriest Frank Richards had ever known—and it was made all the happier to the chums by the knowledge that they had brought happiness to others. And a dozen times, at least, the story had to be told of how Father Christmas came to White Pine.

THE END

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