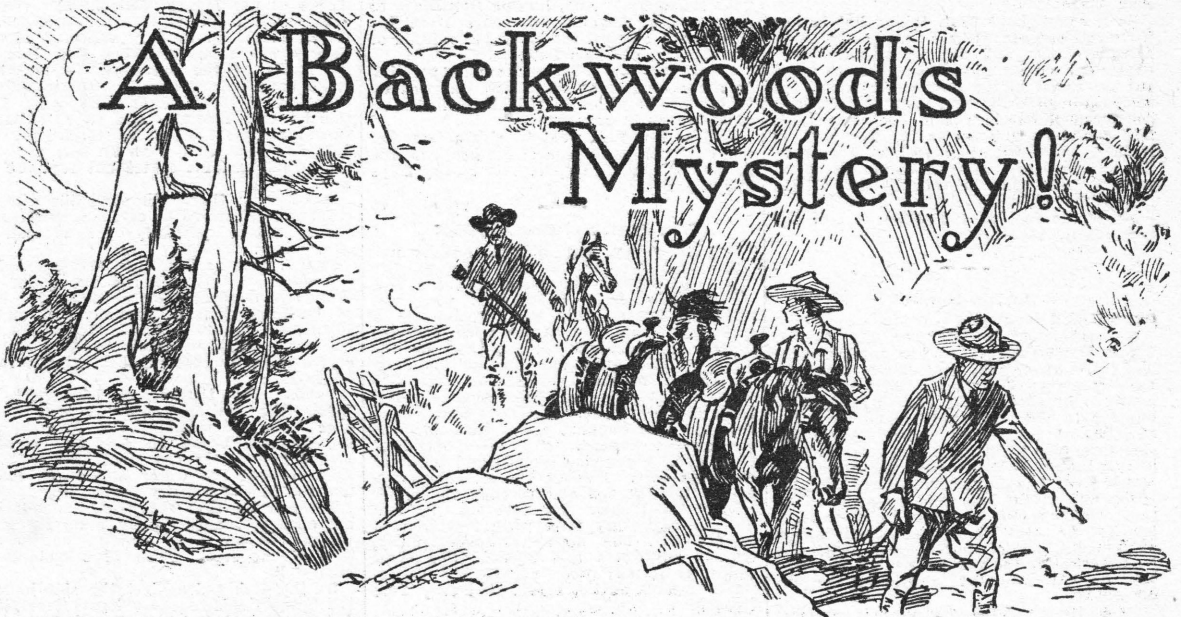


**KERN GUNTEN'S THREAT!** *The rascally Swiss made a threat to get even with Frank Richards & Co., the chums of the Cedar Creek Lumber School, and later Vere Beauclerc mysteriously disappears. Is there any connection between the two? There is a sinister shadow hanging over the Lumber School!*



## Another Grand Long Complete Adventure of FRANK RICHARDS & Co. of Cedar Creek.

### THE FIRST CHAPTER. A Shock for Gunten!

**F**RANK RICHARDS' face was very bright as he came out of the lumber school-house at Cedar Creek with his chums.

Molly Lawrence was waiting outside the porch.

"Yes, Molly?" said Frank cheerily.

Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc exchanged a slight smile, and went on towards the corral, leaving Frank to speak to Molly alone.

Molly's pretty face was flushed, and her eyelids were wet.

"I—I wanted to speak to you, Frank," she said, in a low voice. "I—I'm so sorry I—I thought—"

"It's all right, Molly!"

"I—I thought that letter came from you, Frank, and I couldn't guess that Kern Gunten had written it in your hand, could I?" said Molly. "I'm so glad it's been found out! I'm sorry, Frank—"

"It was all Gunten's fault," said Frank, his brow darkening. "Don't worry about it, Molly. It's all right now."

Molly Lawrence smiled and nodded, and ran to join her brother, who was leading out her horse. Frank Richards followed his chums to the corral.

The chums of Cedar Creek mounted at the gates for the ride homeward. All three of them were looking very cheery. Frank Richards had passed through some dark days, but the discovery of Gunten's plot had caused the clouds to roll by.

"I guess there won't be any school for us in the morning," Bob Lawless remarked, as they trotted away through the timber.

"Poppa is going over to Thompson to see Old Man Gunten, and I reckon we shall be wanted. There's going to be a row."

"I'd rather Kern Gunten was left to us to deal with," said Frank. "But I suppose your father knows best, Bob."

"You bet! This is rather too serious a matter to be settled by punching Gunten's nose."

"Mr. Lawless is right," said Vere Beauclerc, in his quiet way. "He ought to take the matter up. Gunten will have to be dealt with pretty severely this time. Forging a chap's handwriting is a rather serious thing."

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"Hallo, talk of angels!" murmured Bob. He pointed with his riding-whip into the timber.

In the sunset, under the trees, two figures came in sight, seated upon a fallen log. One of them was Kern Gunten, the Swiss school-boy of Hillcrest; the other, Louis Leronge, the half-breed trader. The log between the two served as a card-table; Black Louis and the Swiss schoolboy were playing poker.

They glanced up at the sound of hoof-beats on the trail, and Gunten grinned at the sight of Frank Richards.

The Swiss was not yet aware of the discovery of his cunning scheme for disgracing Frank Richards at Cedar Creek.

Frank checked his horse.

"I'm going to speak to him," he said.

He was turning his horse into the glade, and rode up to the card-players, followed by his chums.

"Hallo!" grinned Gunten. "Not back at school, are you, Richards?"

"Yes," answered Frank; "I'm back to-day."

"I thought Miss Meadows had turned you out for writing to Molly Lawrence as you did," said Gunten, with a stare. "She hasn't let you go back, sure!"

Frank's lip curled.

"It's been found out who wrote to Molly Lawrence in my handwriting," he answered.

Gunten started.

"You're bowled out, Gunten," said Bob Lawless. "Yen Chin has confessed to stealing a copy of Frank's fist to take to you."

"It's a lie!" muttered Gunten. "If that's the yarn you're going to spin, Richards—"

"That's it," said Frank. "And you'll have a chance of proving whether it's a lie or not, Gunten. My uncle is going to see Mr. Gunten about it in the morning."

Black Louis, the half-breed, looked very curiously at his companion. Gunten's hard, ill-favoured face had grown very pale.

"Old Man Lawless is going to see my father?" muttered Gunten.

"Yes."

"What about?"

"About you forging my handwriting in a letter to Miss Lawrence, and getting me into disgrace at the school," said Frank grimly. "That's what you've got to answer for."

"My father won't believe a word of it!" muttered Gunten.

"It won't rest with your father; there's a

law in Canada to punish things of that kind," retorted Frank.

"You—you mean—"

"I mean that you're going to take your punishment, whatever it is, for forging a letter," said Frank.

And he wheeled his horse and rode back to the trail with his comrades.

Gunten had a hand of cards in his fingers, but he did not play. He rose from the log, and stood staring after the three riders until they disappeared beyond the trees.

A dark cloud had settled over his face. Black Louis watched him in silence for some moments.

"What is all this?" he asked at last.

"What have you done, Gunten?"

The Swiss looked at him moodily.

"I've landed myself in trouble, I guess," he said. "I reckoned it was safe enough. You know those three galoots; they've always been my enemies. It was through them, as much as anything else, that I had to leave Cedar Creek, and they've never let me alone since I've been at Hillcrest School. They were down on me for playing poker with that rascally heathen, Yen Chin."

The half-breed grinned.

"You won his money," he remarked.

"No affair of theirs if I did," growled Gunten. "I had a stunt for turning all three of them out of their school, one after another. I reckoned it was a sure thing. I got a copy of Richards' fist, and wrote a letter in it. I'm rather hefty with my pen. Molly Lawrence got the letter—not a flattering one, you understand—and there was a fuss at the school, and Richards had to go. And then I was going to play the same game on the other two in turn, something of the same kind; but—"

"But you've been found out!"

"It looks like it. The heathen seems to have given me away," muttered Gunten.

"There'll be a thundering row now. My father will be as mad as a hornet. He holds his head high in this section; he hopes to get into the Legislature some day. And this—"

Black Louis grinned again. He knew Gunten's father, the fat, pompous, wealthy storekeeper of Thompson. "Old Man Gunten" was a far from scrupulous man himself, but he was certain to have little mercy upon his son for bringing disgrace upon his name.

"Funny, ain't it?" snarled Gunten, as he saw the half-breed's grin. "It means the

**What Has Become of Vere Beauclerc?**

cowhide for me—perhaps more than that. Hang it—hang them all! I wish I'd left the thing alone now. But it seemed such an easy stunt, and it was so successful at first—"

He broke off again and turned to his horse, which was tethered to a tree near at hand. "You have not finished playing your hand," said the half-breed.

"I guess I'm not playing poker now!" growled Gunten. "I've got other things to think of."

And without another word to the half-breed, Gunten mounted his horse and rode away through the wood, with a black brow. The schemer was in a tight corner now, and he realised it fully, and for the present, at least, he could not see a way out.

## THE SECOND CHAPTER. The Confession!

**T**HERE was no school for Frank Richards or his Canadian cousin the following morning.

As Bob had surmised, Rancher Lawless intended to take them with him when he called upon the Swiss storekeeper at Thompson.

A note had been sent to Mr. Gunten overnight to apprise him of the call. In what mood he was awaiting it Frank and Bob could guess easily enough.

After breakfast the rancher mounted his horse and rode to Thompson with his son and nephew.

They arrived at Gunten's store, and tethered their horses to the posts outside, and entered.

Old Man Gunten was in the store, talking to a customer, with a rather troubled brow. He glanced at once at the visitors, and greeted Mr. Lawless with great civility.

"I guess you know what I've called about, Mr. Gunten!" said the rancher. "You got my note?"

"Yes, yes. Step into the parlour, please!" said the storekeeper nervously.

The three entered the parlour behind the store, and Old Man Gunten followed them in, and closed the door carefully. Evidently he did not want the interview to be overheard by anyone in the store.

Kern Gunten was in the parlour with a pale and harassed face. He had not gone to school that morning.

He gave Frank Richards and Bob a bitter look, but did not speak.

"Now—" began Mr. Gunten.

"It's all lies, father!" said Kern Gunten.

"Richards and Lawless have made it up between them."

"You can hold your tongue for the present, Kern. What is it you have to tell me, Mr. Lawless? Sit down, will you?"

The rancher remained standing.

"I guess I made the matter clear enough in my note," he said. "Last week a letter was written to Molly Lawrence, in my nephew's handwriting. It was a mean, cruel letter—and if my nephew had written it, he would have deserved pretty severe punishment. A fight with Molly's brother followed, which caused the affair to be taken up by the school-mistress, who turned Frank out of the school in consequence. My nephew maintained that he had not written the letter, and I believed it."

"He wrote it," said Kern Gunten.

The rancher did not heed that remark.

"Yesterday," he went on, "my son found Yen Chin, the Chinese, rummaging over his desk at school. The heathen took away a paper—a specimen of my son's handwriting. It had no other value. He was caught, and confessed that Kern Gunten had bribed him to take it, and confessed further that about a week ago he was bribed in the same way to take Gunten a specimen of Frank's handwriting."

"It's not true!" chimed in Gunten.

The storekeeper's fat brow grew more and more troubled.

He was well aware how little reliance was to be placed on his son's word, and Gunten's denials did not impress him.

"My nephew's handwriting was taken to Gunten the day before that letter was written to Miss Lawrence," went on the rancher. "The inference is clear enough. Yen Chin can be called in, if you like, to repeat his statements. He declares that he did not know what Gunten wanted the specimens of handwriting for, and I think that's true. But it's plain enough to me."

"A heathen's word—" began Mr. Gunten.

"It's good enough for me. Let your son explain what he wanted the papers for."

"I never wanted them," said Kern Gunten

as steadily as he could. "I never asked the heathen to get them for me. It's not true!"

"I—I must believe my son, of course!" said Old Man Gunten.

Mr. Lawless shrugged his shoulders.

"You're welcome to, I guess. The matter will go further. After forging a letter in my nephew's hand, and disgracing him, the young rascal evidently intended to play a similar trick on my son. That kind of game is too dangerous to be allowed to go on. If Gunten confesses, and you are willing to give him proper punishment, I guess the matter can drop. I don't want to be too rusty with a neighbour. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise—" repeated the storekeeper.

"Otherwise I am going directly to the sheriff. There's law even in the Thompson Valley, and I shall prosecute Gunten. And if he's innocent he can prove it in a court of law—with the penitentiary for him afterwards if he doesn't make his case good."

There was a grim silence after the rancher had ceased to speak.

Mr. Gunten looked at his son, and Gunten looked at the floor, his lips trembling.

As neither the father nor the son spoke, Mr. Lawless turned to the door at last.

"Come!" he said, to his son and nephew. "We're finished here."

"Stop!" exclaimed Mr. Gunten.

"Well?"

"There—there's no hurry!" muttered the fat storekeeper nervously. "Let my son speak. Kern, tell me the truth. If there's a case at law the truth will come out, whatever it is. If you've anything to confess, confess it now, while you can get off cheap."

Kern Gunten licked his dry lips.

The bare thought of being called upon to answer for his rascality at the bar of the law terrified him. He knew that his nerve and courage would fail him in the attempt to keep up a tissue of falsehoods there.

He opened his lips to speak, and closed them again. His father's brow grew sterner. There was guilt in every line of Gunten's harassed face, and little need for him to speak.

"Do you hear me, Kern?" exclaimed the storekeeper roughly. "If you've anything to say, say it!"

The rancher's hand was on the door.

"I—I—I—" stammered Gunten huskily.

"Is it true or false?" exclaimed the storekeeper.

"I—I—I— It's true!" faltered Gunten.

"You confess?" exclaimed the rancher, swinging round from the door.

"Ye-e-es. I—I—it was really a joke," stammered Gunten wretchedly. "I—I—meant to explain afterwards. It was a joke—"

"That is false!" said Mr. Lawless. "You need not tell more lies, Gunten. You have told more than enough already. Mr. Gunten, your son has confessed."

"He shall suffer for what he has done!" growled the storekeeper. "But—but there is no need to make this the talk of the section."

"If Gunten writes a letter to Mr. Lawrence—Molly's father—and confesses to him, I am satisfied, and the affair need go no farther, so far as I am concerned. My nephew must be cleared of all suspicion."

The storekeeper pointed to pen and ink on the table, and Gunten, without a word, sat down to write.

The letter was written at the rancher's dictation.

"I will see that that is sent to Mr. Lawrence," said the rancher, slipping the letter into his pocket. "Now I leave Kern Gunten to you, sir!"

"He will be punished," said the storekeeper.

The fat, savage face of the Swiss left no doubt on that point. He was not a gentle parent at any time, and now the interview with Frank's uncle had enraged and humiliated him. Kern Gunten was certainly booked for the "cowhide."

Frank Richards and Bob followed the rancher from the store. As they mounted their horses, loud howls were heard proceeding from the house. Kern Gunten was already undergoing his punishment.

## THE THIRD CHAPTER.

At the Camp of the Half-Breeds!

**H**ALLO!

"What on earth's that game?"

It was the following day, and Frank Richards & Co. were riding along the Thompson trail after lessons at

Cedar Creek, on a visit to the town. As they passed the branch trail that led towards Hillcrest School, a sudden uproar burst upon their ears, and a strange sight upon their vision.

Down the trail from Hillcrest came a curious procession.

Dicky Bird, Blumpy, and Fisher supported a strong rail in the midst of a crowd of Hillcrest fellows, and astride of the rail, frantically clinging to it, was Kern Gunten.

Evidently the Swiss was in trouble with his schoolfellows.

His face was convulsed with rage and terror as he clung to the swaying rail on the shoulders of Dicky Bird & Co. It was not easy to keep his seat on it, and a fall upon the hard trail would have been anything but agreeable.

The chums of Cedar Creek halted, and looked on with grinning faces.

"They're riding him on a rail!" chuckled Bob Lawless. "That's one of our Western customs, Franky, that you've not seen yet, I guess."

Frank Richards laughed.

Gunten's position was painful enough to him, but it was absurd to the beholder—and the Swiss did not deserve much sympathy. It was pretty clear that his rascality had become known at Hillcrest, and that his schoolfellows were thus displaying their opinion of it—and him.

The shouting procession came along the trail, Gunten swaying and squirming in the centre.

"Hallo! Here are the Cedar Creek galoots!" exclaimed Dicky Bird. "Ger-rout of the trail, you fellows!"

"What are you up to?" asked Vere Beauclerc.

"Riding Gunten on a rail, I reckon."

"Let me down!" yelled Gunten.

"Not yet, I guess! We've heard all about the letter," explained Dicky Bird. "That kind of thing isn't good enough for Hillcrest. We're letting this foreign trash see what we think of him!"

"March!" sang out Blumpy.

"Get on, Bird!"

"Clear the way, you galoots!" shouted Dicky Bird.

Frank Richards & Co. drew their horses aside, and the procession passed them into the Thompson trail.

They watched it as it went, Gunten clinging like a cat to the swaying rail. He lost his seat upon it at last, and clung to it underneath with his hands and legs. In that hapless position he passed out of sight of the three chums.

"I guess Gunten isn't popular at Hillcrest," grinned Bob Lawless, as the school-boys rode on again after the procession. "If he was half as sharp as he reckons he is, I guess he would give up his mean tricks and try to be a white man."

A little later the Co. came on Gunten in the trail.

Dicky Bird and his companions had cleared off home, and the rail lay in the grass, and Gunten was sitting on a knoll, gasping.

He looked up with a black scowl as the three riders came by.

"Enjoying life, old scout?" asked Bob Lawless.

Gunten staggered to his feet.

He shook a furious fist at the chums of Cedar Creek; whereat they smiled again.

"I owe all this to you—you three!" said the Swiss, between his set teeth.

"You owe it to yourself," said Frank Richards contemptuously. "You can't expect the Hillcrest chaps to go easy with a forger. You've disgraced their school, just as you disgraced Cedar Creek when you were there. Why can't you be decent?"

Gunten's eyes glittered.

"You've got the upper hand just now," he said. "My turn will come! I'll make you pay for it—all three of you!"

"Bosh!" said Bob cheerily.

And the chums rode on, leaving Kern Gunten scowling savagely after them.

Gunten did not follow towards Thompson. After the riders were out of sight he turned into the wood and tramped slowly away into the heart of the forest.

The sunset had deepened into night when he arrived on the edge of a glade in the timber. The red glow of a camp-fire struck his eyes as he came through the trees.

Half a dozen cabins of branches and skins stood there, and several horses were grazing in the glade. Five or six swarthy

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half-breeds were gathered round the campfire, some of them cooking the evening meal.

Louis Leronge, the leader of the band of traders, was smoking on a log near the fire. He gave Gunten a nod as he came up.

It was not the first time the storekeeper's son had visited the camp of the North-West traders—generally to play poker or euchre with the half-breeds. "Traders," as they were called, Black Louis and his followers did not depend wholly on trading for their living. Since the gang had camped in the Thompson Valley there had been horses and cattle missing from the ranchers, and "dust" lifted from the mining-claims along the river.

Gunten sank down on the log beside the half-breed. Black Louis rolled a cigarette and handed it to him.

The Swiss lighted it, and smoked for some minutes in silence, the half-breed watching him curiously.

"You're not staying in this section much longer, I guess?" Gunten remarked at last.

Leronge shook his head.

"A few days," he answered.

"I guess there's a lot of talk in Thompson about you," said Gunten. "The sheriff will be getting busy soon."

The half-breed shrugged his shoulders.

"There's stories about cattle being missing," remarked Gunten.

"The cattle will not be traced here," said Black Louis, with a grin. "Still, it is nearly time we pulled up stakes. I shall be sorry to part with you, mon ami Gunten."

"You've done pretty well out of me, I guess," said Gunten moodily. "Most of my dollars have come this way."

"You are too fond of the cards," grinned Leronge.

"You're going in a few days?" repeated Gunten.

"Yes."

"Then you could—you could——" Gunten hesitated and glanced round, and lowered his voice. "You remember those three galoots——"

"I remember."

"They came here one night and made Yen Chin vamoose, when you were winning his dollars—you remember?"

"I remember!" said the half-breed again, with a glitter in his black eyes. "I am not likely to forget!"

"Where will you go when you leave this section?"

"North-west—towards the Cascade Mountains."

"A good distance?"

"Many miles the first day. We shall camp again a hundred miles from here. Why do you ask?"

"You could—you could——" Gunten's voice trembled, and he lowered it still further, till it was a whisper. "Those three galoots, they've beaten me again; but you could help me."

Louis Leronge started a little.

"You can speak out," he said.

Gunten did not speak out—he whispered, as if fearful of the sound of his own voice. The half-breed did not interrupt him. His black eyes glittered, and he nodded several times as he listened.

"It would be safe!" said Gunten at last.

"Sure!"

"And you'll do it?"

"You will pay for it to be done, then?"

Gunten gave a grunt.

"You've paid yourself well enough out of me at poker—and you like them no more than I do. But I could stand ten dollars."

"Put it there!" said the half-breed, as he held out a dusky hand.

When Kern Gunten left the glade the compact—whatever it was—had been made. What it was, Frank Richards & Co. were to discover later.

#### THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Where is Beauclerc?

"HALLO! Where's the Cherub?"

"Late!" said Frank.

Frank Richards and Bob Lawless halted at the fork of the trail on their way to Cedar Creek School in the sunny morning.

They looked along the branch trail towards the shack where Vere Beauclerc dwelt with his father, the remittance-man. But there was no sign of the Cherub on his black horse.

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"Late, by gum!" said Bob. "That's not like the Cherub. I hope there's nothing wrong at the shack."

"Let's ride to meet him."

"Good!"

The chums of Cedar Creek rode up the branch trail under the heavy, overhanging boughs that were now thick with green.

They rode at a good pace, and in a few minutes came in sight of the Beauclercs' shack in the distance.

Near the building Lascelles Beauclerc was hard at work on the clearing, wielding a spade. He looked round as the two riders clattered up.

"Good-morning, Mr. Beauclerc!" called out Bob Lawless. "Where's the Cherub?"

"Hasn't Beau started yet?" asked Frank.

Mr. Beauclerc rested on his spade as he looked at them in surprise.

"Certainly!" he answered. "Vere started for school at the usual time. Did you not meet him on the trail?"

"Nix!" said Bob.

"That is very odd. Perhaps you were late."

"Well, we might have been a minute or two," said Frank Richards. "But Beau always waits for us at the fork of the trail, if he's there first. I suppose he hasn't waited this time, though."

"You'll find him at school," said the remittance-man.

He turned to his labour again as the chums rode back to the trail.

"Put it on," said Bob. "We shall be late if we loose any more time. I'm dashed if I understand the Cherub leaving us in the lurch like this! He knew we should expect him as usual."

Frank Richards nodded.

"Beau must have had some good reason for going on and leaving us behind," he said. "He must have wanted to get to school early for some reason."

"Blessed if I can guess what it was, then," said Bob, rather tartly. "He knew we should expect him there, anyhow. Put it on!"

The schoolboys galloped back at a good speed, and turned at the fork into the main trail.

The visit to the shack had taken up some time, and they had none too much left to get to Cedar Creek before morning lessons commenced.

They rode on at a gallop towards the school, keeping their eyes open for the sight of Vere Beauclerc ahead of them on the trail. But they did not sight him, and they rode up at last to the gates of Cedar Creek.

The playground was deserted as they entered. The bell had ceased to ring, and all Cedar Creek was at classes.

"Late!" growled Bob.

"Can't be helped. Here's Black Sam. He'll take our horses," said Frank Richards.

Sam, the negro stableman, came forward and took the horses to lead them to the corral, and Frank and Bob hurried at once to the schoolhouse.

"Can't be helped. Here's Black Sam. He'll take our horses," said Frank Richards.

Sam, the negro stableman, came forward and took the horses to lead them to the corral, and Frank and Bob hurried at once to the schoolhouse.

Both of them were feeling, perhaps, a little sore.

They were late—only a few minutes, but Miss Meadows was very strict on punctuality. And it was owing to their stopping to call for Beauclerc, who had apparently gone on to school, forgetful of the usual arrangement at the fork of the trail.

Miss Meadows was taking her class, and she turned a somewhat stern look upon the cousins as they entered.

Frank's glance passed the schoolmistress, seeking Vere Beauclerc in the class. To his surprise, he did not see him there.

"Richards! Lawless!"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You are late!" said Miss Meadows severely. "Where is Beauclerc, too? Has he not come yet?"

"Beauclerc!" stammered Bob. "Isn't he here, Miss Meadows?"

"No."

"Well, by gum!" exclaimed Bob, in astonishment.

"We—we thought——" stammered Frank.

"You may go to your places," said Miss Meadows.

In great amazement, Frank and his Canadian cousin went to their desks. They were surprised, and almost confounded, to find that Beauclerc had not, after all, arrived at school before them.

If he had not waited for them at the fork on the trail, as usual, it seemed certain that he must have gone on to school ahead of them. Yet he had not arrived at Cedar Creek!

Chunky Todgers nudged Frank Richards as the latter sat down.

"Where's the Cherub?" he whispered.

"Blessed if I know!" answered Frank.

"Isn't he coming?"

"I give it up."

"Silence in class, please!" rapped out Miss Meadows. And Chunky had to restrain his curiosity for the present.

Frank and Bob were rather inattentive during first lesson. They glanced continually towards the door in the expectation of seeing Beauclerc enter.

But the school-room door did not open. Their surprise was beginning to be mingled with uneasiness now. What could have happened to Beauclerc to keep him away from school like this? It was almost unthinkable that he could be staying away of his own accord on some business so secret that he had not mentioned it to his father or to his chums. Yet what accident could possibly have happened to him between the remittance-man's shack and Cedar Creek School, every inch of which had been covered by his chums without their seeing a sign of him?

At the end of the lesson Miss Meadows spoke to Frank.

"Richards, are you aware why Beauclerc has not come to school this morning?" the schoolmistress asked.

"No, Miss Meadows."

"Have you seen him to-day?"

"No. He started for school, though," said Frank. "As we didn't meet him on the trail, we went to his place and saw his father, ma'am. He told us that Beau started for school at the usual time."

"It is very singular that he has not arrived, then," said Miss Meadows, pursing her lips.

"I'm afraid something has happened to him, Miss Meadows," said Frank uneasily.

"What could have happened to him, Richards?"

"I—I don't know."

"If he had been thrown from his horse you would have found him on the trail, I suppose?"

"Yes," admitted Frank. "He certainly wasn't anywhere on the trail between his home and here, ma'am."

"Then I must conclude that Beauclerc is staying away of his own accord, Richards."

Frank was silent. There really seemed no other conclusion to come to. And yet he could not understand it.

Both Frank and Bob were anxious as the morning wore on and Beauclerc did not appear.

When Cedar Creek was dismissed for the morning nothing had been seen of him, and most of the fellows were discussing his absence as they poured out of the schoolhouse.

"He's playing truant," said Chunky Todgers. "Miss Meadows will be as mad as a hornet when he turns up. What's he doing it for, Franky?"

"Blessed if I know!" said Frank.

"There's something wrong, Frank," said Bob, drawing his chum away towards the corral. "The Cherub isn't playing this fool game for fun. Something's happened to him, though I can't guess what."

"It beats me hollow!" said Frank.

"We'd better hump along to the shack and see if his father's heard anything of him," said Bob. "Old Man Beauclerc will give us some dinner."

The chums mounted their horses and took the trail. They lost no time in getting to the Beauclercs' shack on the lower creek. The remittance-man was sitting down to his rough-and-ready lunch on a log outside the shack when they dashed up.

Frank's heart sank as he saw that Mr. Beauclerc was alone. Vere was not at home, after all.

"Hasn't the Cherub come back, Mr. Beauclerc?" called out Bob breathlessly, as they clattered up.

The remittance-man rose quickly.

"No. Surely you found him at school?" he exclaimed.

"He hasn't been to school to-day."

"What?"

"Something's happened," said Frank Richards.

**THE FIFTH CHAPTER.  
A Complete Mystery!**

**L**ASCELLES BEAULERC laid down the loaf he still had in his hand. His bronzed, lined face had grown pale and troubled.

The bare thought of a disaster happening to his son was a blow to the remittance-man. In his lonely, shadowed life Vere Beaulerc was all that he had to make his existence tolerable, and to remind him of earlier and happier days.

All that held the remittance-man to life was bound up in his son.

He was silent for a few moments, and when he spoke again his voice was low and shaken. "Vere has not been to school? He started as usual this morning. You've been over the whole trail?"

"Twice now," said Bob.

"Then he cannot have fallen from his horse—"

"We should have found him."

"But if he left the trail, he must have ridden away of his own accord," said the remittance-man, more calmly. "Perhaps he has gone to Thompson, or down to Cedar Camp for some reason. Do you know whether he had any such intention?"

"I feel sure he hadn't," said Frank, "if he wasn't going to meet us on the trail as usual this morning, he would have told us so last evening."

"I guess that's sure," assented Bob.

Mr. Beaulerc drew a deep breath. "He must be looked for," he said. "My eyes are not so good as they once were. Lawless; but you are very keen on a trail, I believe. You know the marks of Vere's horse well enough. If we can find the place where he left the trail we may be able to follow him up."

"Just what I was thinking," said Bob.

"You've not had your dinner yet—"

"Never mind that—"

"Take the bread and cheese with you, and eat it as we go," said Mr. Beaulerc. "It is all the dinner I can offer you."

The two schoolboys dismounted. They started for the trail on foot, letting their horses follow at a distance. The remittance-man accompanied them, but it was left to Bob Lawless to hunt for "signs."

The rancher's son was well-skilled in woodcraft. Frank Richards had learned a great deal from him since he had been in Canada; but he was still an infant in such matters compared with the Canadian.

It was easy enough to pick up the trail of Vere Beaulerc's big black horse Demon. Bob knew his hoofprints well enough.

The track, five hours or more old, was followed from the clearing into the grass of the forest trail towards the fork, where Beaulerc's chums had expected to meet him.

Every now and then Bob Lawless stopped, but it was never for more than a few minutes. To the surprise of his companions, he kept on right to the fork of the trail.

"Beau came as far as this, then!" Frank Richards exclaimed.

"His horse did, at any rate," answered Bob.

"If his horse did, the rider did, I suppose," said Mr. Beaulerc.

"I guess we shall see."

The main trail was well trampled by horses' hoofs; it was a good deal used between Cedar Creek and the ranch-lands beyond the timber. But Bob succeeded at last in picking up Demon's track again.

It did not lead towards the school, however, but in the opposite direction, towards the plains and the Lawless Ranch.

There on the well-trodden trail it vanished, disappearing among numerous other tracks, that baffled even Bob's keen eyes.

The rancher's son rose from the examination of the ground at last. His sunburnt face was troubled. Frank and Mr. Beaulerc looked at him in silence.

"It beats me!" said Bob at last. "It beats me to a frazzle! Demon came all the way from the shack to the fork in the trails, and turned towards the plains. That's all."

"My son was early," said Mr. Beaulerc. "He may have turned towards the ranch to meet you on the way."

"Then why didn't we meet him?" said Bob. "It's not that. When Demon turned into the main trail the Cherub wasn't on his back!"

"What?"

"I wouldn't swear to it, of course," said Bob quietly. "I've only got the tracks to go by. But unless I'm making a big mistake, Demon had no rider when he turned

the fork in the trail. A riderless horse makes a lighter track. And look how the track went coming up to the fork—here and there Demon had stopped and cropped the grass! He wouldn't be doing that with the Cherub on his back. He was taking his own way, as a horse does when he's turned loose. Mr. Beaulerc, I guess that somewhere between your house and the fork of the trails Beaulerc left his horse to go where it liked. It trotted on, and turned into the main trail, and most likely took to the timber afterwards, or we should have spotted it as we came along."

"But, my son!" exclaimed the remittance-man.

Bob shook his head.

"He left his horse on the branch trail, goodness knows how and why!" he answered. "Let's get back and search for foot-tracks."

His eyes were keenly on the ground, and he moved among the trees that bordered

tell poppa, and he'll start the cowboys looking for Demon. If we find Beaulerc's horse we may learn something. It's possible some horse-thief is at the bottom of it."

"A horse-thief would take the horse, but he wouldn't want to hurt Beau," said Frank. "Even if—if Beau were badly hurt, we should find him somewhere on the trail."

Bob nodded.

"I know. It beats me. I can't catch on to it at all. But the only thing is to search for the horse and for Beaulerc."

"You'll come with us, Mr. Beaulerc?"



**A SCOUNDREL'S THREAT!** Kern Gunten staggered to his feet as the chums of Cedar Creek came by. He shook a furious fist at them. "I owe this ragging all to you, you three!" he said between his teeth. "You've got the upper hand now, but my turn will come!" (See Chapter 3.)

the trail, but there was no "sign." He knew well the track of Beaulerc's rather elegant riding-boots, but there was no sign of them to be seen.

It was well past the time for afternoon lessons at Cedar Creek now, but Frank and Bob were not thinking of school. Their anxiety for their missing chum was growing sharper.

If Bob's surmise was correct, Beaulerc had dismounted somewhere on the branch trail, leaving Demon to wander, and his reason for doing so was utterly inexplicable.

They arrived at the clearing round the shack at last, without any further discovery being made.

The remittance-man's face was almost haggard.

He could not believe that his son had thus absented himself of his own free will. Vere Beaulerc was not the fellow to cause needless anxiety to his friends—above all to his father.

But he had vanished, as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up. Bob was perplexed. His skill had revealed something, but only enough to make the mystery all the deeper.

Vere Beaulerc had disappeared without leaving a trace behind, and that was all that could be said.

"I guess we'd better get along to the ranch," said Bob, after some thought. "I'll

Old Man Beaulerc shook his head.

"I am going to search for Vere," he said. "Then we'll get along to the ranch."

As Frank and Bob rode away they glanced back, and saw the remittance-man disappear into the timber, with a gun under his arm. They dashed on at a good speed for the Lawless Ranch.

"Bob," exclaimed Frank Richards, as they rode out of the timber upon the sunny plain, "what can have happened to him?"

Bob knitted his brows.

"I don't know, unless— But it doesn't seem possible."

"Unless what?"

"Unless he's been roped in and kidnapped! That would account for it. But who'd want to do it? It beats me, Frank—beats me to a frazzle! But we'll find out when the ranch hands search the whole show. We won't leave an inch of the valley without searching it, but we'll find the Cherub!"

And the chums galloped on to the ranch.

THE END.

(What has happened to Vere Beaulerc? Has Gunten anything to do with his strange disappearance? Don't miss next week's roaring Wild West tale!)

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