

**ANOTHER BACKWOODS MYSTERY!**

*Vere Beauclerc has mysteriously disappeared without leaving a single trace behind. He has vanished into thin air. Who is the hidden foe working against Frank Richards & Co.? Who will be the next victim of the Unknown?*



# KIDNAPPED!

**More Amazing Adventures of Frank Richards & Co., the chums of Cedar Creek Lumber School!**

**THE FIRST CHAPTER.  
By Whose Hand?**

**H**ERE'S Richards!"  
"Any news, Frank?"  
"Have you found Beauclerc?"  
Half a dozen voices greeted Frank Richards as he jumped off his horse at the gate of Cedar Creek School. Chunky Todgers rolled forward to hold his horse.  
"Found him?" he exclaimed.  
Frank Richards shook his head.  
"No, Beauclerc hasn't been found yet," he answered.  
"But you've come back to school?" asked Chunky.

"No; only to speak to Miss Meadows." Frank Richards hurried through the crowd of Cedar Creek fellows to the lumber school-house. Frank's cheery face had lost its brightness now. His chum, Vere Beauclerc, had been missing for twenty-four hours, and as yet not a trace of him had been discovered. Anxiety for his missing chum was weighing like lead upon Frank's heart.

Miss Meadows, the schoolmistress of Cedar Creek, met him as he came into the porch of the lumber school. She had seen him from her window.

"I am glad to see you back, Richards," she said kindly. "I hope you have good news of Beauclerc."

"No, ma'am," answered Frank. "I haven't come to school this morning. Mr. Lawless asked me to ride over and tell you. He wants you to let off Bob and me from lessons, so that we can help in searching for Beauclerc."

Miss Meadows nodded at once. "Certainly!" she said.

"Thank you very much, ma'am!" said Frank, in relief. "I—I don't think I could do much, anyway, while I'm worried about poor old Beau. I know something's happened to him, though I can't guess what."

"You may both remain away from school so long as Mr. Lawless requires you," said Miss Meadows kindly. "I hope you will soon be successful in finding poor Beauclerc."

"Thank you, Miss Meadows!"  
Frank raised his hat to the schoolmistress and hurried back to the gates, where Chunky Todgers was holding his horse.

The school bell was ringing now, and the boys and girls were making for the school-house.  
"Going out?" asked Chunky, as Frank took his horse.

"Yes, Chunky. I'm off lessons for the present."

"Lucky galoot!"  
Frank smiled faintly.

"I don't feel very lucky, Chunky. I'm going to help look for Beauclerc."  
"I guess I'll come and help," said Chunky Todgers thoughtfully, "if Miss Meadows will let me off, too."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't be much use, Chunky."

"I guess I'll ask the schoolmarm. The fact is, I really reckon I'm the very antelope that's wanted on this job!" said Chunky Todgers confidently. "You wait a minute, and if I come back you'll know I'm coming."

Chunky Todgers rolled off towards the schoolhouse, and Frank led his horse into the trail. He waited there—rather to rest the horse than in any expectation of seeing Chunky again.

Miss Meadows was not likely to allow the fat Chunky to get out of lessons so easily as all that.

A swarthy, lithe schoolboy had remained at the gate after the rest had started for the house, and he came out to Frank in the trail. It was Ricardo Diaz, the Mexican—a new fellow at Cedar Creek, with whom Frank Richards & Co. had been on the worst of terms, until the day Frank pulled the drowning Mexican from the creek. Since that incident Frank Richards had been on very good terms with Diaz, though they had little to do with one another.

"Your amigo—Beauclerc—he has disappeared, so the fellows say," said Diaz, fixing his black eyes curiously on Frank's face.

The English schoolboy nodded.  
"It is strange!" said Diaz. "How did he disappear, mi amigo?"

"On his way to school yesterday morning," answered Frank. "So far as we can find out, Beauclerc left his horse somewhere on the trail, and the horse wandered to the plains. Billy Cook, my uncle's foreman, roped it in yesterday afternoon—riderless. Why Beauclerc left it, and what happened to him afterwards we can't guess."

"There is no reason why he should run away?"

"None at all. Besides, if he was going away on his own accord, he would go on his horse, not on foot."

"If he was thrown—"  
"Demon wouldn't throw him; he was too fond of him; but if he had been pitched

off, we should have found him on the trail. But there was not a sign of him."

The Mexican schoolboy wrinkled his brows in thought.

"You cannot guess what has happened?" he asked.

"Not so far."  
"In Mexico—" Diaz smiled. "In my country we should say at once that the seniorito had met an enemy."

"But this is not Mexico," said Frank, with a slight smile. "Beauclerc had no enemy who would seek to injure him."

"What of Gunten?"  
"Gunten!" repeated Frank.

"Gunten is your enemy, and the enemy of your friends," said the Mexican. "You have not thought of that."

"My dear chap, Gunten is our enemy, certainly, but he cannot have done anything to Beauclerc. Beau could knock him into a cocked hat with one hand!"  
The Mexican smiled again.

"Possible," he said. "But Gunten might not attack openly. It is nothing to me, but I have not forgotten that you saved me from drowning, amigo mio, and for that reason I would help you find your friend if I could. In Canada your customs are different from ours in Mexico; but in my country, in such a case I should say—call to mind if your missing friend had an enemy, and seek him."

And, with a wave of his dusky hand, the Mexican went in at the gate and hurried to the schoolhouse.

Frank Richards mounted his horse with a strange expression on his face.

He rode away thoughtfully down the trail. The Mexican's suggestion had startled him. For the first moment or two he was inclined to dismiss it as absurd; Canada was not Mexico, and it seemed incredible that Kern Gunten, of Hillcrest School, rascal as he was, could have had a hand in Beauclerc's disappearance.

But on reflection, it did not seem so impossible. More than once the chums of Cedar Creek had experienced the treachery of Kern Gunten. And only a few days before Gunten had suffered disgrace and punishment for having forged a letter in Frank Richards' hand.

As he galloped away on the timber trail Frank could not help wondering if the Mexican had hit upon the truth, and it

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put off where he was going. Why should he put it off simply because we are around?"

Frank Richards drew a deep breath. "He was going to warn the half-breeds, Bob."

"I reckon so!" Bob turned his horse towards Thompson, and Frank followed.

"He's chucked it for this time," said the rancher's son. "But now he knows that we suspect the half-breeds he's sure to get to Leronge's camp to give him the tip to keep on his guard. That is, if we're right. We're going to make sure, Frank!"

"How?" "By keeping an eye on Gunten," answered Bob. "If I'm right, he'll try to nip out to the timber, and speak to Leronge at the camp, before he goes to school this afternoon. If he does, that will settle it!"

"But if he sees us—?" "He won't see us! We'll get a snack of lunch at the Occidental, and then keep an eye open for Gunten—without his seeing us."

Frank Richards nodded assent. His suspicion of Gunten was strengthened now, and it nearly amounted to a certainty. If Gunten did seek the camp of the half-breeds, it would be very nearly proof.

As they rode into Main Street, the chums caught sight of Kern Gunten again, entering the store. They rode on to the Occidental Hotel, where they had a hurried lunch.

In ten minutes they returned to their horses, and as they mounted, Bob Lawless made a gesture towards the store.

"Look—without turning your head, Franky," he said.

Frank glanced towards Gunten's store. Kern Gunten stood in the doorway, watching them from the distance with a scowling brow.

"He wants to make sure we're clear off before he starts for the timber," said Bob, with conviction. "We'll let him see us off, Frank; and he won't know when we come back, I guess!"

The chums rode out of Thompson, on the trail towards the Lawless ranch, as if home-bound.

Gunten, from the doorway of the store, watched them till they were out of sight.

Bob and Frank followed the trail for some distance, till they were out of view of Thompson, and then Bob led the way into the timber.

The Canadian schoolboy's face was very grim now. It was evident that he believed that they were on the track of the missing Cherub at last.

"I guess it's a cinch, Franky," he said. "If we can spot Gunten on the way to Leronge's camp, that will settle it; and he may even lead us to where the Cherub is at this minute, for all we know. But we've got to take care that he doesn't know we're trailing him."

Bob reflected a few moments. Frank Richards waited in silence. In this matter it was for his Canadian cousin to take the lead.

"There's two ways Gunten can get to the half-breeds' camp," said Bob slowly. "He can strike straight for it, through the forest from Thompson, or he can go round by Hillcrest way, as if he were going to school, and enter the timber by the trail on that side. That's more likely, I guess, as he would risk less being seen. Then, if he found us hanging round, he could keep on straight for school, and leave it all till after lessons—see?"

"Likely enough, Bob!" "I reckon I'll keep watch on the Hillcrest side, and you can watch the town from the edge of the timber," said Bob. "I'll post you, Franky, as you're not so well up in woodcraft as I am, and then I'll mosey along Hillcrest way. If you see Gunten coming into the timber, you're to follow him without showing yourself. You can do that?"

"You bet!"

"Come on, then!" The chums rode through the timber at a good pace, till the trees and undergrowth were too thick for them to proceed on horseback.

Then they dismounted and tethered their steeds.

On foot they plunged on through the thickets.

It was not long before they reached the edge of the timber towards the town of Thompson, where a wide space of clearings

lay between the trees and the first buildings of the town.

"If Gunten comes this way, you'll spot him easily enough," said Bob Lawless. "Keep in cover, Franky!"

"Rely on me, old chap—" "I'll get on Hillcrest way. I reckon Gunten's more likely to go round that way. So long, old scout!"

And Bob disappeared into the trees, leaving Frank Richards to watch the buildings of Thompson and the paths that lay between the town and the wood.

**THE FOURTH CHAPTER.**  
**Tracked Down!**

**B**OB LAWLESS lost no time. The chums had ridden out of Thompson to the south, and Hillcrest lay on the northern side of the town, so the Canadian schoolboy had a good distance to cover.

He followed a track through the wood, winding among the trees, finding his way

and whether the Swiss was, after all, simply going to school.

But his doubts were soon set at rest. Gunten slipped suddenly from the trail, and ran into the timber, moving so quickly, with the evident intention of escaping observation if any eye should chance to be on him.

Bob Lawless breathed quickly. Gunten was out of sight now in the timber, but he knew where to look for the Swiss, and he glided silently through the trees to pick him up again.

In a few minutes he was near enough to hear the sound made by Gunten in brushing through the thickets.

Bob made no sound as he moved along. He parted the bushes with care, and hardly the rustle of a twig followed his passage.

Kern Gunten was not so cautious.

Having, as he believed, entered the timber without being observed, he was no longer in fear of watchful eyes, and he tramped on carelessly through the thick wood.

Bob Lawless hung upon his trail, now and



**THE TRACKER CAUGHT!** There was a sudden movement in the thicket and Black Louis sprang out on the schoolboy. Bob Lawless gave a startled cry, but before he could move a hand to defend himself the Mexican had closed with him, and he was hurled off his feet. (See Chapter 4.)

without a fault, though much of the timber was quite untrudden.

The camp of the half-breed traders was in the heart of the forest, and Bob did not pass within two miles of it, as he kept on his way.

He came out of the timber at last on the side towards Hillcrest and Cedar Creek.

Keeping in cover, he scanned the open trail, which ran on either hand towards Thompson in one direction, and Cedar Creek School on the other, Hillcrest beyond it over the tree-clad hill, at the foot of which the trail wound.

Bob was pretty well assured that if Gunten intended to pay a visit to the half-breeds' camp, he would come by that direction. He knew that the chums suspected him, and might be watching, and if he was seen leaving Thompson on that side, it would only be supposed that he was going to school as usual.

It was getting towards school-time now, and Bob, as he kept in cover and watched the trail, saw several fellows belonging to Hillcrest pass by.

Kern Gunten came in sight at last. The trail was deserted, save for the Swiss, as he came tramping along, looking well about him.

Bob kept closer than ever in a thicket, watching the Swiss through the foliage.

As Gunten tramped on, the rancher's son wondered whether he had been mistaken,

then catching sight of the heavy figure of the Swiss, through openings in the bushes.

Once or twice Gunten looked back, though evidently without suspicion that he was followed; but the Canadian schoolboy was not to be seen. One of the Redskins who had haunted the forest in ancient days could not have followed in the track of the Swiss more cautiously and cunningly.

Trackless as the timber was at this point, Bob was well aware of the direction the Swiss was taking; it led towards the camp of Black Louis and the North-West traders.

It was still possible that Gunten was simply visiting Black Louis, as he had visited him before, to play poker with the half-breed; but Bob did not think so. Gunten was missing school for the purpose, and though he was a favourite with Mr. Peckover, he would not do that without a strong motive.

The conviction was growing in Bob Lawless' mind that Vere Beauclerc had been kidnapped by the half-breeds, at Gunten's instigation—and his heart was beating as they drew nearer and nearer to Black Louis' camp.

Gunten gave utterance to a sudden shrill whistle. It was answered from the half-breeds' camp, which was close at hand now.

There was a sound of tramping feet in the timber, and Gunten stopped as a lithe, muscular, swartly man came into view under

**"Three in the Toils!"—a Remarkable Backwoods Story in Next Tuesday's Bumper Issue!**

the trees. It was Louis Leronge, the leader of the North-West traders.

"Corbleu! You have come, then," said Leronge, as Gunten stopped.

"Yes," gasped Gunten, breathing hard after his long tramp.

"Why?" asked the half-breed. "It was arranged that you should not come near the camp, in case of suspicion. This is an act of folly."

Bob Lawless was on his hands and knees now, creeping through the thickets with the caution of a lynx.

He could hear the voices ahead, and he knew that Gunten had met one of his associates on the border of the camp. As he moved silently through the thick undergrowth, Gunten's voice came to his ears.

"I didn't choose to come, Leronge. It was necessary. I came to warn you."

"Why?"

"They're searching everywhere for Beaulerc," said Gunten, in a low, hurried voice, which came clearly enough to the ears of the Canadian schoolboy in the undergrowth, however. "Have you seen anything of them?"

Black Louis shook his head.

"No; they are not likely to trouble me."

"There was no trail—"

"Do you think I am a fool?" said the half-breed contemptuously. "The boy was roped in from a tree above the trail, and his horse ran on. It went against the grain to let the horse go; but if it had been taken, they would have thought of my crowd at once." The half-breed grinned. "The sheriff of Thompson came moseying along the other day to inquire after a missing horse. Well, we let the boy's horse escape, and roped him in to the tree. When we brought him along to the camp, one of us stirred the trail after we passed, leaving no sign that a lynx could have detected."

Gunten nodded.

"But the others—we have had no chance at them yet," said Black Louis. "But do not fear. We shall finish our work."

Bob's eyes glittered.

The half-breed's words were enough to reveal the whole plot arranged between Kern Gunten and the ruffian from the North-West ranges.

"But you came to warn me, you say?" continued Leronge. "Of what? There is no danger!"

"They suspect me."

"Mon Dieu! You?"

"Yes. I've seen Richards and Lawless this morning, and they suspect I had a hand in Beaulerc's disappearance."

"You were at school, and could prove it."

"I guess so. But they suspect you, too. They know that I've been associated with you, and so—"

"They told you so?" exclaimed the half-breed.

"Sure!"

Black Louis uttered an angry exclamation. "And you have come here? How do you know you have not been watched?"

"I guess that's safe enough. I went out of town towards Hillcrest, as if I were going to school as usual, and cut into the timber from that side. You will have to be prepared for a visit to the camp—perhaps a search—"

Black Louis did not answer.

His head was bent, as if he were listening. His black, penetrating eyes were fastened upon the thicket close at hand.

"What is it?" asked Gunten impatiently.

"Are you not listening to me, Leronge? I tell you, Bob Lawless may bring his father and the ranchmen to your camp to search for Vere Beaulerc, and if they find him it may be a case of lynch law. What the thunder—"

Gunten broke off in angry astonishment as the half-breed made a sudden spring past him and plunged into the thicket.

"Leronge! What— Oh, gum!"

There was a panting cry from the thicket. Gunten rushed after the half-breed, and gave a startled cry as he saw Black Louis and Bob Lawless locked in a fierce struggle, rolling in the herbage.

"Lawless!" panted Gunten. "Bob Lawless!"

Bob struggled furiously in the powerful grasp of the half-breed.

Black Louis' spring into the thicket had been so sudden, so unexpected, that Bob had had no chance of guarding against it. He did not know that the lynx-eared half-breed had detected his presence till Black

Louis was upon him. Gunten had not suspected; but to the half-breed, trained amid danger, bred to the forest and the plain, the slightest rustle of a twig was warning enough. His iron grasp was on the rancher's son now, and hard as Bob struggled, he struggled in vain.

The ruffian was too powerful for him. And Bob was underneath, his plucky resistance growing weaker. Not a word was spoken. Both the combatants needed all their breath for the struggle.

Gunten stood looking on, with dropping jaw.

But as he saw that Black Louis was gaining the upper hand, the fear died out of his face, and he grinned.

Bob Lawless lay helpless at last, on his back in the herbage, with the half-breed's knee planted on his chest, pinning him down. The swarthy face of Leronge grinned down at him.

"The bird is snared, I guess," said the half-breed. "Gunten, there is a cord in my wallet—take it out and bind his hands while I hold him."

Gunten obeyed.

Bob Lawless, bound and helpless, lay in the grass. Black Louis rose, breathing hard after his exertions. He lighted a cigarette, and blew out a cloud of smoke.

Gunten and the half-breed exchanged a few words in a low voice, and then the Swiss disappeared through the trees, without another look at Bob Lawless. Louis Leronge stooped over Bob, picked him up as if he had been an infant, threw him across his shoulder, and bore him away through the timber towards the camp.

#### THE FIFTH CHAPTER. Under the Shadow!

FRANK RICHARDS watched, as the sun sank lower towards the far Pacific, and waited. He had watched in vain as the afternoon wore away, and he wondered whether his chum, miles away through the timber to the north, had had better luck. He wondered, too, whether his suspicion of Gunten was well founded, after all, or whether he had spent the day upon a wild-goose chase.

It was not till dusk was deepening over Thompson and the town clearings that Frank left his post.

The long, weary afternoon had worn away without result—so far as Frank Richards was concerned. He wondered why Bob had not returned. Even if he had found Gunten and followed him, he should have rejoined his chum long since. Frank was puzzled, and he was not clear as to what he had better do; but it seemed useless to remain on the watch after dusk had fallen. If Gunten came then, he might pass unseen within a dozen yards.

Frank determined to seek his chum towards Hillcrest, but he soon found that that was impracticable. He was not equal to picking his way, surely, through the trackless timber as his Canadian cousin had done, and the fall of evening made the task still more impossible. His only resource was to return to his pony, and ride round by way of Thompson. He returned to where the horses had been tethered, and there he stopped to reflect again.

It was a good hour's ride, round by the trail, and through Thompson, to the Hillcrest side. And at any minute Bob Lawless might return for him. On reflection, Frank decided to remain with the horses. Bob Lawless was certain to return to that spot sooner or later, unless he was prevented, and it did not occur to Frank that he might be prevented.

Darkness settled more deeply upon the forest.

Frank Richards moved about uneasily, pacing the wood near the tethered horses, his uneasiness growing.

One by one the stars came out in the vault of heaven, glistening down through the foliage overhead.

Frank's disquietude increased with every passing minute now.

There would be anxiety at the ranch if he did not return with his cousin. Where was Bob?

Something had happened—but what? With a shudder, Frank wondered if the mysterious fate that had overtaken Vere Beaulerc had also overtaken the brave lad who was searching for him.

He could bear the anxiety no longer, and he returned to the spot where he had been

keeping watch for Gunten, in the faint hope of finding that Bob had returned there for him. But there was no sign of him; and then he hurried back to the horses, fearing that he had missed the rancher's son in his brief absence. But the tethered horses were still cropping the herbage undisturbed; Bob had not come.

The hour was growing late now. Black darkness lay under the forest trees, broken only by glimmerings of starlight through the high branches.

Where was Bob?

Had he followed Kern Gunten to the half-breeds' camp? Had disaster fallen upon him there? Careless of danger to himself, Frank would have started for the camp of Black Louis, to seek his chum, but the impenetrable forest baffled him. Somewhere in the gloomy shades of the timber the camp of the half-breeds lay, but Frank knew that he could not have found it.

The hour was late, and he left the spot at last; it was useless to wait longer. There was a faint hope in his breast that Bob might have returned to the ranch, for some reason he could not guess. He left Bob's horse tethered, cropping the grass, in case the rancher's son might yet return, and mounted his own steed.

With a heavy, anxious heart he rode back to the trail beyond the timber, and took his homeward way.

The trail to the Lawless Ranch ran up to the Beaulercs' shack, and as Frank passed he saw a light in the little building. He rode up to the door, and Mr. Beaulerc looked out.

"Has Bob been here?" asked Frank breathlessly.

"Lawless! No!" said the remittance-man. "I have not seen him, at all events. But I have only returned an hour ago."

"And—and you've seen nothing of Bob?" asked Frank hopelessly.

"No."

Mr. Beaulerc stepped out of the shack, eyeing Frank curiously.

"Has anything happened to Lawless?" he asked.

"I—I don't know. He left me in the timber this afternoon, and he has not come back," muttered Frank. "But—but he may have gone back to the ranch—it's possible, at least. Good-night, Mr. Beaulerc."

"You will find him at the ranch, most likely my boy," said the remittance-man. "Good-night!"

He stepped back into the shack, and Frank Richards rode off into the darkness. Frank's face was pale and set as he galloped on the trail towards his uncle's home. He clung to the hope that Bob might have returned to the ranch, but in his heart of hearts he knew that it was not so. The mysterious shadows of the forest hid Bob Lawless' fate as they hid the fate of Vere Beaulerc, and Frank Richards' heart was aching with fear and anxiety as he galloped homeward.

The lights gleaming from the ranch-house came in sight at last. A shadowy figure loomed up on the trail. It was Billy Cook.

"Oh, here you are, you young scallywags!" exclaimed the ranch foreman. "You've come back!"

"I've come back," said Frank heavily.

Billy Cook stared at him.

"Isn't Bob with you?" he demanded. "Old man Lawless is reg'ler mad at your staying out so late, I can tell you. Where's Bob?"

Frank's heart was like lead.

"He hasn't come home, then?" he asked.

"I guess not," answered Billy Cook. "And I guess his poppa and moppa are anxious about him, and you. Where is he, if he hasn't come with you, the young scallywag?"

"I—I don't know. Something's happened to him—just as it has to Beaulerc," answered Frank huskily.

"Waal, I swow!" ejaculated the ranchman. Frank Richards rode on towards the ranch. Bob Lawless had not returned. His faint, lingering hope was scattered to the winds. What, then, had happened in the dark shades of the forest?

Frank Richards hardly dared to ask himself that question, or to attempt to answer it. The ranch-house door was open, and the stalwart figure of Mr. Lawless stood there, framed in the light. And Frank Richards dashed on at a gallop, with black news for Bob's father!

THE END.

(Don't miss reading next week's roaring Wild West story of the chums of the Backwoods school.)