

IN THE HANDS OF THE MEXICAN TRADERS!

Frank Richards & Co. find themselves in a very perilous position. They have been kidnapped by the North West traders and imprisoned in the heart of the mountains. Kern Gunten's amazing scheme against the chums of the lumber school has turned out a success. What will happen now?



Being the further adventures
of Frank Richards & Co., the
chums of Cedar Creek
Lumber School.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Search!

TRAMP! Tramp!
Frank Richards started from an uneasy slumber.

There was a trampling of hoofs outside the Lawless Ranch as the early sunlight glimmered down upon the green plain. Frank was alone in the room which he shared with his cousin, Bob Lawless. Bob's bed was empty; it had been empty all night. Frank Richards had hardly slept that night. The mysterious disappearance of his two chums, Bob Lawless and Vere Beauclerc, weighed upon his mind like lead, and he awoke at once, as the trampling of hoofs sounded outside the ranch-house.

He jumped from his bed and bundled hastily into his clothes. In a few minutes he was downstairs.

Outside, six or seven horsemen were gathered in the early light, each of them with a rifle at his back. A Kootenay cattleman held a horse ready for Mr. Lawless, who was finishing a cup of coffee in the doorway.

"You're starting, uncle?" exclaimed Frank Richards.

The rancher looked round at his nephew's pale, anxious face.

"Yes, Frank. You'd better get back to bed."

"I'm coming, uncle."

The rancher looked dubious.

"I guess you'd better not, Frank," he answered. "You know where we're going to—the half-breeds' camp in the timber. If they've got Bob there there will be trouble, and there may be shooting. It's no place for a schoolboy."

"But I must come, uncle!" pleaded Frank. "I believe Bob's there, and Beauclerc, too. I'm certain now that they've both been kidnapped by Louis Leronge and his crowd, and that Kern Gunten is at the bottom of it."

"I guess it sounds a tall story," said Mr. Lawless. "But it's a fact that Bob hasn't come home—and Beauclerc is still missing. We're going to search Black Louis' camp for them, at any rate. But as for Gunten—"

"You know what I told you when I got in last night, uncle? Bob left me to keep watch on Gunten, and to trail him if he visited the half-breeds' camp. He never came back."

The rancher nodded.

"We shall see," he said. "If he's there we shall find him. If you're set on coming you can come, Frank. Take a cup of coffee and something to eat, and get out your horse."

Five minutes later the cavalcade started from the ranch, Mrs. Lawless looking after them with anxious eyes. Frank Richards rode with the ranchmen, his face clouded. Both his chums were missing—it was in searching for Vere Beauclerc that Bob Lawless had disappeared—and Frank was certain that they had fallen into the hands of Louis Leronge, the half-breed trader from the North-West.

Leronge was the associate of Kern Gunten, the former schoolfellow and old enemy of the chums of Cedar Creek School, and Frank did not doubt that Gunten was at the bottom of the whole affair.

The hoof-beats rang on the prairie as the sun rose higher over the distant summits of the Rocky Mountains.

The horsemen entered the timber trail that ran towards Cedar Creek School. Half-way to Cedar Creek they turned from the trail into the timber.

Billy Cook, the ranch foreman, was the guide now. He dismounted from his horse, and led the animal on through the thickets, and the rest of the party followed his example.

They proceeded on foot through the thick wood, and at a word from Mr. Lawless the ranchmen unslung their rifles and looked to them. They were close on the traders' camp now, and what was to happen when they reached it no one could guess. But it was only too probable that there might be "trouble."

Louis Leronge and his followers were a rough crowd, and trouble was very likely if they really had the missing schoolboys in their hands, prisoners at the camp in the heart of the timber.

"I guess we're close on them now, boss," said Billy Cook at last.

"Keep your guns ready!" said Mr. Lawless.

"You bet!"

A few minutes more, and the ranchmen emerged into a shadowy glade, where the sunlight fell filtered through wide-spreading branches overhead.

A camp-fire smoked in the middle of the

glade, near a group of rough shacks, and several swarthy-faced men were gathered round the fire, some of them engaged in cooking.

They were preparing breakfast in the traders' camp; but at the sight of the ranchmen breakfast was forgotten.

The half-breeds gathered together, and one or two of them ran into the shacks for their rifles.

"I guess they've been expecting us, boss," remarked Billy Cook. "Here comes Black Louis."

A lithe, muscular half-breed came towards the rancher with a rifle in the hollow of his arm.

His sharp, black eyes glittered at them.

"What do you want here?" he asked abruptly.

Mr. Lawless stepped forward to meet him.

"You are Louis Leronge?" he asked.

The half-breed nodded.

"I am John Lawless, of the Lawless Ranch.

I am looking for my son," said the rancher.

"I want to know whether he is here."

Black Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"He is not here," he said.

"I guess I want to be sure of that."

"Why should he be here? I do not even know your son, that I remember," said Leronge.

"What should he be doing here?"

"I'll be plain," said Mr. Lawless. "The other day, Vere Beauclerc was missing, and yesterday my son, who was hunting for him, disappeared, too. He was watching Kern Gunten, whom he suspected of having a hand in Beauclerc's disappearance; and my nephew, Richards, thinks that he followed Gunten to this camp."

The half-breed's eyes glittered at Frank Richards for a moment.

"Richards is mistaken," he said. "I have nothing to do with Kern Gunten."

"That's not true!" broke out Frank Richards. "Gunten came here often enough to gamble with you, Louis Leronge. You were hand in glove with him. And I'm certain he was coming here yesterday when Bob was trailing him."

"Enough said!" broke in the rancher.

"We're here to look for my son, Mr. Leronge. That's the long and short of it."

Louis Leronge waved his hand.

"Look, then!" he said. "There's my camp. Look!"

"You don't object to a search?"

"Have you the sheriff's authority to search my camp?" demanded Black Louis.

"I guess not. I haven't wasted time riding over to Thompson to see the sheriff," answered Mr. Lawless. "It's only a matter of form, though. The sheriff would have come with me, if I'd had time to ask him."

"You have no right to make a search here, then."

"So you object?" asked the rancher grimly.

"Suppose I refuse—what then?"

"We shall search, all the same."

THE POPULAR.—No. 255.

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"We are armed here," said Louis Leronge. "What if we resist?"

"I guess I'm sorry for you, if you do. If there's any shooting, I don't reckon your crowd will get the best of it."

"I calculate not!" chimed in Billy Cook emphatically.

Black Louis gave the ranchmen an evil look. There were eight men in all from the ranch, without counting Frank Richards, and they had their rifles ready.

It was very doubtful whether the half-breed gang would have stood up to them in combat, even if Black Louis had been prepared to lead them in such a desperate affray.

"Well, what do you say?" demanded the rancher. "Are we going to search the camp quietly, or is there going to be trouble?"

"Search the camp, and be hanged to you!" answered Louis Leronge, and he turned on his heel, and walked back to the camp-fire.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Diaz's Warning!

FRANK RICHARDS had felt his hopes rise of finding his chums as the half-breed argued with Mr. Lawless. But as Louis Leronge walked back to the fire Frank's face clouded again. If the half-breeds had resisted a search, it would have been pretty clear proof that the kidnapped schoolboys were there; but they evidently did not intend to resist. Yet if the missing chums were found in the camp it meant prosecution and imprisonment for the kid nappers.

The conviction forced itself upon Frank's mind that they were not there—that, if they were in the hands of the half-breeds at all, they were hidden elsewhere, beyond the reach of a search.

But he joined the ranchmen as they began to search the camp.

If his chums were there, he did not mean to leave a stone unturned to find them.

Billy Cook and three of the ranchmen remained with the horses, keeping their rifles ready, in case trouble should crop up. The rest of the party, with Frank and his uncle, searched the camp.

The rough shacks, built of branches and skins, were soon hunted through. There was no trace of a prisoner in any of them.

Then the quest extended farther.

Piles of logs, placed ready for the camp-fire were overturned, and even large packages of goods belonging to the traders were opened. No space that could possibly have hidden a bound and gagged prisoner was left uninspected.

But at the end of an hour almost every inch of the camp and its surroundings had been ransacked—in vain.

Meanwhile, the half-breeds, with an air of indifference, cooked their breakfast and lounged round the fire, eating it, and then smoked in the grass, watching the searchers with sarcastic grins.

Black Louis began a game of poker with one of his comrades, apparently oblivious to the search that was going on.

It ended at last, so far as the camp was concerned. Then the ranchmen spread among the surrounding timber, hunting in the thicket and among the trees, and even in the branches above.

Two more hours glided by before they gathered in the glade again, unsuccessful.

Mr. Lawless' brow was knitted darkly. There was no sign at the camp of Bob or of Vere Beauclerc, and the rancher could not help suspecting that he had been engaged upon a wild-goose chase.

The mystery of the schoolboys' disappearance was so baffling that, in the absence of any clue, he had been willing to act upon Frank Richards' suspicion; but it certainly seemed now that that suspicion was unfounded.

"You are going, uncle?" asked Frank, as Mr. Lawless went towards his horse.

"We're finished here, Frank."

"They're not found," said Frank miserably.

"I guess they're not here—they can't be. It was only a suspicion, anyhow, and I reckon there was nothing in it, my boy," said the rancher.

"I think Leronge must have expected this search, uncle!" exclaimed Frank eagerly. "Most likely he's hidden them somewhere else."

"Where?"

THE POPULAR.—No. 255.

"Somewhere in the timber, I suppose."

"If they're in the timber, I guess they'll be found," said Mr. Lawless, and he took his horse to lead it away. "Come on, boys! We're done here."

The ranchmen left the glade. Frank Richards glanced at Black Louis before he followed them. The half-breed looked up from his cards with a derisive grin on his swarthy face. Frank followed his uncle with a heavy heart.

The ranchmen reached the trail and mounted, Billy Cook and his men going back to the ranch for the day's work, and Mr. Lawless riding to Thompson to consult the sheriff. Frank Richards turned his horse in the direction of Cedar Creek School.

He was free from school for the present, while his chums were missing. Miss Meadows had given him leave of absence. The Cedar Creek fellows were coming out after morning lessons, when Frank arrived at the lumber school. Chunky Todgers was the first to see him, and he hailed Frank with a shout.

"Found the Cherub yet, Franky?"

"No," answered Frank moodily.

Chunky grinned.

"I met Gunten this morning, on the Hillcrest trail," he said. "Gunten calculates that the Cherub has lighted out of this section, Frank. He told me so."

"Rubbish!" said Frank.

"Well, that's what Gunten reckons; and he hinted that Beauclerc had his reasons for going," said Chunky sagely. "Of course, I don't think so. But Gunten does. He asked me whether anybody had missed anything valuable about the time the Cherub disappeared."

Frank Richards gritted his teeth.

Gunten's attempt to blacken the missing schoolboy's name was an added proof, to his mind, that the rascally Swiss had had a hand in the affair.

"Where's Bob?" asked Tom Lawrence.

Frank Richards explained. There was a buzz of excitement among the Cedar Creek fellows when they learned that Bob was missing, too. Frank had had, perhaps, a vague thought that some of the fellows might have seen something of his missing cousin; but that was evidently not the case. Ricardo Diaz, the Mexican schoolboy, joined Frank as the latter walked moodily away, leading his horse, after a talk with his schoolfellows.

"You have not found your friend. And now your other amigo, he is also gone," said the Mexican.

Frank nodded.

"I believe it was Gunten, as you suggested to me, Diaz," he said. "But I don't know how to prove it. Black Louis' camp has been searched, but nothing has been found there."

"Black Louis would not keep them where they could be found," said Diaz, with a smile. "I have heard that the half-breeds are soon starting for the north-west again. They have earned an evil name in this section. There have been too many horses missing, and they are suspected. You will now have to look out for yourself, mi amigo?"

"I!" repeated Frank.

"You, amigo mio," said Diaz. "If Gunten has laid this plan, he has not laid it for two, but for three. First Beauclerc, and then Lawless—and then it will be your turn, if they can lay hands upon you. You will find your friends, and you will lose your freedom."

Frank Richards knitted his brows.

He had hardly thought of danger to himself so far, but he realised that the Mexican schoolboy was right. If the whole affair was a scheme laid by the revengeful Swiss, certainly Frank Richards was not likely to be left out.

"I shall take care," he said at last.

"Thank you for the warning, Diaz."

"Vaya! But I shall take care, too," said the Mexican. "I do not forget that you pulled me out of the stream, mi amigo. If anything shall happen to you, you have a friend who will not forget. If you, too, are missing—"

Frank smiled.

"I shall not be missing," he said. "I shall be too careful for that."

"So Lawless would have said; but he is gone, and no one knows whither," answered Diaz quietly. "If you are missing, amigo mio, I shall know where to look for you, and you will not remain unsought. If you are gone, I shall follow the trail of the

half-breeds when they break camp for the north-west. You will remember that."

"I will remember!" smiled Frank.

The Mexican nodded, and left him; and Frank walked on down the trail with his horse. Diaz's words made little impression on his mind—he did not mean to fall into the hands of the rascals who had kidnapped his chums. But there was to come an hour when the remembrance of the Mexican's words was to be the only ray of light in black gloom.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Fallen Among Foes!

FRANK RICHARDS stopped on the timber trail, and turned his horse loose to graze under the trees; he could trust the animal to come to his call when he wanted it.

He plunged into the timber from the trail, in the direction of the half-breeds' camp.

The tracks left by the ranchmen that morning were a sufficient guide to him.

Frank was in an almost desperate mood. His chums were gone, and he was convinced that they were in the hands of Black Louis and his gang. He had no heart for school, or for hanging about the ranch a prey to bitter anxiety. He felt that he must be doing something to help his chums; and any action was preferable to idleness. But there was a plan in his mind as he plunged into the deep shadows of the forest.

If the missing schoolboys were in or near the half-breeds' camp, they were too carefully hidden to be found in a search—such that morning had proved. But the idea had come into Frank's mind to keep a watch upon the camp from cover, and observe the movements of Black Louis and his crowd. Unseen himself, he could watch them, and sooner or later he must learn whether his chums were held prisoners in their hands.

At all events, he hoped so; and the slightest chance was better than doing nothing.

He was very cautious as he approached the lonely camp. Smoke rising through the trees warned him when he was near. He dropped on his hands and knees, and crept towards the glade.

From the edge of the glade, hidden by the thickets, he watched the camp, not twenty yards distant from him.

Two or three of the half-breeds were lounging about the shacks and the smouldering camp-fire; but some of them seemed to be absent—doubtless on business along the Thompson Valley.

Frank's eyes gleamed as he caught sight of a schoolboy seated on a log close by one of the shacks, playing cards with Louis Leronge. It was Kern Gunten, the Swiss schoolboy of Hillcrest.

Frank was aware that his old enemy was accustomed to visiting the camp of the half-breeds to gamble, and he was not surprised to see Gunten there. He lay in the thickets and watched patiently.

In half an hour Gunten rose from the log, with a black look on his face. Leronge was smiling derisively.

Frank was too distant to hear what was said; but he could read Kern Gunten's face accurately enough. The rascal of Hillcrest had been losing money.

In a few minutes the Swiss left the camp, and disappeared in the wood towards the north, evidently on his way to Hillcrest for afternoon school.

Leronge went into one of the shacks. Save for a couple of half-breeds lounging in the grass, smoking cigarettes, and the grazing horses, there was nothing to be seen. But Frank Richards did not lose patience.

He was growing hungry, but he had corn-cake and cheese in his wallet, and he ate as he lay under the bushes, watching.

He intended to keep up his vigil until he was, at least, assured that his chums were not in the camp.

An hour or two later there was a rustling in the underwood, and three or four half-breeds came from the forest into the glade, leading their horses. They were leading three other horses without saddle or bridle, and Frank guessed easily enough that the animals had been stolen—"roped in" on the plain and run off by the rascals.

Leronge came out of his shack, and Frank watched his next proceedings with curious interest. The stolen horses were daubed

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with paint to change their appearance, and one of the gang led them away through the forest, and disappeared with them.

Evidently the rascal was on his way to take them to a distance, where they could be disposed of in safety.

It was proof enough of the real business of the "traders," as the gang called themselves.

After the stolen animals had been taken away, there was nothing but idleness at the half-breed camp. The sun was sinking in the west now, and shadows were lengthening in the forest.

Frank's heart was heavy.

He had watched through the afternoon; but as yet nothing had happened to confirm his suspicion that the half-breed traders had anything to do with the disappearance of his chums.

The schoolboy gave a sudden start as there was a rustle in the underwood behind him.

He turned his head, half expecting to see a lynx, or perhaps a puma, and ready with his hunting-knife.

But it was no quadruped that had disturbed the bushes. A grinning, swarthy face was looking at him through the foliage.

Frank sprang to his feet.

It was one of the half-breeds returning to the camp—and the way had lain by the spot where Frank was in cover.

Coming on him from behind, the ruffian had seen the schoolboy in the thicket.

He came through the bushes with a rush as Frank jumped up.

"Stand back!" exclaimed Frank breathlessly.

His hunting-knife was his only weapon. He flashed it out as the half-breed rushed upon him.

A clubbed rifle swept through the air, and struck the weapon from his hand. The next moment a powerful grasp was laid upon him.

The schoolboy struggled desperately.

But he was a boy against a powerful man, and even as he struggled he realised that it was in vain.

The half-breed was shouting as he grasped him, and two or three men came running from the glade, Louis Leronge at their head.

"What is it?" shouted Leronge, as he came speeding up. "Mon Dieu! What is this clamour about?"

"Voyez!" grinned the half-breed.

"Corbleu! Frank Richards!" shouted Leronge.

His grasp was on Frank the next moment.

Frank's struggles ceased; he was helpless now. In the grasp of Black Louis, he was hauled out of the thickets into the open glade.

"So you are here again, corbleu!" exclaimed Leronge, shaking him savagely.

"Are you alone here? Answer me!"

"Find out!" gasped Frank.

"Fool! Are you alone here? Where are the others—the ranchmen?" demanded Leronge fiercely.

Frank Richards did not answer.

Louis Leronge gave him a savage, surly look, and then rapped out an order to his comrades.

"Search—quick—see if there are others near!"

The order was obeyed at once.

But in a few minutes the half-breeds came back into the glade.

It had not taken them long to discover that Frank Richards was alone.

"No others?" asked Leronge.

"None—not a sign!" grinned the ruffian who had seized Frank.

"It's curious that he should be here alone," muttered Leronge, with a black scowl at his prisoner.

"He was lying in the bush, watching the camp, when I found him."

"Looking for his friends, I guess."

Leronge's scowl gave place to a grin.

"Corbleu! He has walked finely into the trap! He shall see his friends again!"

He dragged the schoolboy towards the camp.

Frank's heart was like lead. He had found out the truth now, beyond the shadow of a doubt—Black Louis and his gang were the kidnapers of Beauclerc and Bob Lawless. But in finding it out he had fallen himself into the hands of the kidnapers.

Diaz's warning, which he had little heeded at the time, had been uttered in vain.

Instead of helping to rescue his chums, he was to join them in captivity, and the future was dark. What fate was in store for him, and for his friends, he could not even guess, but he knew that there was little to hope.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Three in the Toils!

LOUIS LERONGE dragged the schoolboy of Cedar Creek into the camp, amid the grinning glances of the half-breed traders. Leronge seemed to be in a merry mood now. Frank Richards had fairly walked into the trap, and the kidnapper's task was done.

"You came to look for your friends, n'est ce pas?" asked the half-breed, as he bundled Frank into the shack which the schoolboy had seen him enter during the afternoon.

"Yes!" panted Frank.

"You thought they were here?" said Leronge, in a bantering tone.

"I knew it!"

"You were right—they are here!" grinned Leronge. "You shall see them, since that is your wish."

Frank Richards, still in the powerful grip of the half-breed, looked round the hut. There was nothing to be seen but a pile of skins on the ground.

"Jacques!" called out Black Louis.

"Jacques! Venez donc!"

The ruffian who had seized Frank Richards entered the shack.

"A rope!" said Leronge.

In a couple of minutes Frank's wrists were bound together. He did not resist—that was futile. A feeling very like despair had settled upon him now.

"That will do," said Leronge. "And now, Jacques, tell the others to get ready. We are finished here, and we break camp to-night."

"The boy may be searched for."

"He will not be found, any more than the others. And we leave before midnight."

Jacques left the shack. Frank stood, with his hands bound, while Louis Leronge dragged aside the pile of skins on the ground.

Under them nothing was to be seen but the flattened grass, and Frank wondered what the half-breed's action meant. But he soon discovered.

Leronge thrust his hand into the grass, and, to Frank's amazement, lifted a board covered with turf. He understood now. A cellar was excavated under the hut, and covered in with planks, on which the turf had been carefully laid again. It was a cunningly-contrived hiding-place.

Below was darkness.



FRANK RICHARDS & CO.—PRISONERS! The chums of Cedar Creek were taken out of the shack and bound hand and foot on the backs of three mules. Leading their prisoners the half-breeds quitted the glade, and entered the dark forest. The journey to the North West had commenced. (See Chapter 5.)

Leronge pointed to the opening as he lifted the board at one end.

"Descend!" he said.

Frank Richards did not move.

"Descend!" repeated the half-breed, with an oath. "Descend, or I will call in one of my men to fling you in!"

There was no help for it. Frank Richards stepped to the opening. As his eyes grew more used to the gloom below, he saw that the floor of the cellar was more than six feet down. There was a clear space below, and, as Louis Leronge held the big plank clear, Frank jumped down.

He landed on his feet, but rolled over, and came in contact with another form in the gloom. From above, the half-breed grinned down at him.

"You have found your friends, mon ami," he said. "Enjoy their society while you may—you will part company in a few days, when we reach the North-West. I wish you joy!"

The plank came down in its place.

Black darkness shut in the kidnapped schoolboy.

Leronge replaced the plank, and carefully flattened out the turf where it had been disturbed, and threw down the pile of skins.

There was nothing in the shack now to indicate that it concealed a hiding-place.

Frank Richards struggled to his feet in the earthy excavation, and stared round him in the blackness.

"Bob! Vere!" he breathed.

There was a faint mumbling sound from the gloom.

"You're here!" exclaimed Frank.

Mumble!

Frank Richards realised that his chums were there, and that they were gagged and could not speak. He made a desperate effort to break the cord round his wrists, but they were too well tied for that.

He dropped on hands and knees, and groped for his chums in the darkness. He soon came in contact with them. His head struck against a nose, and there was an inarticulate grunt.

His face was against another face, though he could not see it. He felt the cloth that was tied over the mouth, and though he could not use his hands, he could use his teeth. He fastened his teeth in the cloth and dragged at it. It was tied in its place with a cord that passed several times round the prisoner's head, but Frank soon loosened it sufficiently for speech.

"Frank!"

It was Bob Lawless' gasping voice.

"Bob, old chap!"

"The Cherub's here!" panted Bob. "Thank goodness I can use my tongue again, anyhow! So you're here, too, Franky. I—I hoped you'd find us—but not like this!"

"You're tied up, I suppose?" said Frank.

"Hand and foot; and so is Beauclerc."

Bob Lawless panted for breath. "I don't know how long we've been here, but I guess it seems like years. How long since you missed me, Franky?"

"Only yesterday."

"Great gophers! Seems more like last year!" said Bob Lawless. "We've fairly walked into their hands, Franky!"

"You've not been in this black den all the time?" exclaimed Frank.

"Nope! When I was brought in, I was put in the shack above, and found the Cherub there. They shoved us down here when there was an alarm about a search, and gagged us so that we couldn't call out. They haven't been near since, the brutes! By gum, I'm famished! I followed Gunten yesterday, and found out what I wanted; but Black Louis spotted me, and I was collared. And so—"

"The same with me," said Frank glumly.

"I guess it's cruel luck, and Gunten's at the bottom of it! If ever I get near the foreign rascal again—"

Bob gritted his teeth.

Frank Richards groped for Beauclerc, and after some difficulty succeeded in loosening his gag, as he had done with Bob Lawless. Vere Beauclerc's voice was husky as he spoke.

"I'm sorry you're landed in this, too, Frank. I was afraid it would happen, when I found what Gunten's scheme was."

"And what is it?" asked Frank, with a sinking heart.

"We are to be taken to the North-West when the half-breeds break camp," answered Beauclerc.

THE POPULAR.—No. 255.

"And then?"

"Then—if they have their way—we shall never see home again," said the remittance-man's son. "Black Louis has told us. We're to be taken up into the Yukon country with them, and sold among the savages."

"Good heavens!"

"Gunten dare not let us get home again, of course, after this," said Bob Lawless. "He's bargained with the half-breeds to clear us out of his way, because we showed him up, I guess, over that forged letter. This is rather the limit, even for that foreign rascal. It was the fact that the half-breeds happened to be camped here that put it into his head, of course. We're to be left among the Redskins north of the Yukon, if they have their way; but I guess we're not there yet. There's many a slip!"

Frank Richards did not answer.

There was little hope in his breast. He had wondered what was the plan of the kidnapers, but he had hardly dreamed of anything like this. Yet this was evidently the only way of safety for Black Louis—and for Gunten, too. If Frank Richards & Co. returned to their homes, punishment for the kidnapers was certain and severe. It was clear that the kidnapers intended to run no risk of their returning.

"We shall be searched for," said Beauclerc.

"They may come to this camp and search."

Frank suppressed a groan.

"The camp has been searched," he said.

"I was here this morning with Mr. Lawless, and Billy Cook, and the ranchmen. The camp was searched inside out. But we never suspected this."

"That's why they dropped us in here," said Bob Lawless. "I wondered whether a search was going on while we were lying here. There's stuff in this cellar, too—stolen stuff, I reckon—enough to get Black Louis and his gang a good stretch in the penitentiary, if it were found. They didn't risk much more by adding us to it. By gum, it looks as if we were booked! But they'll have to get us out when they break camp."

"They're breaking camp to-night," said Frank. "There won't be another search before then; and even if there were this den would never be found."

"Outside this, we may get a chance," said Bob hopefully. "It's a far cry to the Yukon country, and they won't get us there easily."

"I—I suppose there's some chance!" muttered Frank.

"I guess so."

A gloomy silence fell in the dark recess under the shack. The breaking-up of the traders' camp meant the beginning of the journey to the far North-West, and captivity among savage tribes, if the half-breed's plan was carried out. But the chums of Cedar Creek were anxious for the move to be made. Once in the open air there was at least a chance that they might regain their freedom; and anything was better than confinement in the darkness and the foul air of the secret hiding-place.

Hours—it seemed like days and nights to the hapless three—passed; but at last the silence was broken. The covering of the cellar was raised again, and a light gleamed down.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Last Hope!

FRANK RICHARDS looked up. Beside the lantern appeared the swarthy face of Louis Leronge, with a mocking grin upon it.

The light glimmered upon three white faces below.

As Leronge held the light, a couple of the half-breeds dropped into the cellar. They began to hand up packages to Leronge above—undoubtedly stolen goods, which had been kept in that carefully prepared hiding-place. The cellar extended a dozen feet under the earth, but not more than six feet of the space had been opened above, and that was covered in with thick planks, covered in turn by turf. Leronge had removed a single one of the planks to give admission to his confederates. As soon as the packages were handed up and taken out of the shack above, the prisoners followed, swung up by the ruffians below, and pulled out by Leronge above.

When the cellar was empty the plank was replaced, and the turf arranged over it with care. Leronge meant to leave no clue

behind him for discovery, if the deserted camp were searched again.

The three schoolboys, their hands still behind their backs, were taken out of the shack into the glade. The camp-fire had been stamped out, and all was darkness, save for a faint glimmer of starlight through the treetops.

The preparations of the half-breed gang were made for departure. Horses were saddled, and two or three mules loaded with packs. Louis Leronge gagged the three prisoners in turn with great care. The half-breeds intended to follow lonely trails; but nothing was left to chance.

In the dim starlight Frank Richards & Co. looked hopelessly at one another.

Within a few miles were friends who would have come eagerly to their rescue; but there was no help! From the dark forest surrounding the glade came no sound but the sigh of the wind in the branches, and the occasional cry of a night-bird.

The three chums were mounted upon the pack-mules, and ropes secured them to the animals when they were mounted. Louis Leronge gave the word to start.

Leading the horses and mules, the half-breeds quitted the glade. Behind them the camp lay silent and deserted; before them stretched the dark forest.

Frank Richards & Co. could not speak; they could not move. They could only resign themselves to their fate, for the present. But even in that dark hour there was one glimmering of hope in Frank Richards' breast. The breaking-up of the North-West traders' camp had brought back to his mind the words of Diaz, his Mexican schoolfellow. In the Mexican he had a friend who had not forgotten him, and who would suspect, at least, what had become of him when he found that he was missing, and that the half-breeds' camp in the timber was deserted.

Ricardo Diaz would know, and he would do what he could. There was, at least, a glimmer of hope in that.

For two or three hours the half-breeds led their horses, winding by lonely forest tracks, till the ground was clearer of trees, and they were able to mount. Then they pushed on at a greater rate of speed.

Overhead, the stars glimmered in the dark sky, paling towards morning, when the timber was left behind at last, and they rode out upon the plain. Wide, open prairie lay before them, swept by the keen wind. As fast as the pack-mules could go, the half-breeds pushed on, and mile after mile disappeared under the hoofs.

In the eastern sky a rosy flush appeared—the herald of the dawn. It strengthened, and the sun climbed above the distant summits of the Rockies. Still the half-breeds did not halt. Apart from the kidnapped schoolboys, they had good reasons for leaving their late camp as far behind them as possible before they stopped to rest. The plunder of more than one thievish expedition was packed upon the mules.

Fatigued, half-dozing, the three schoolboys hardly noticed their surroundings as they were carried on by the joggling mules. How many miles they had traversed they did not know or guess, but they knew that the distance was great. The half-breed traders were following the loneliest trail across the plains towards the upper Fraser River.

Ahead of them now was a range of low, stony hills, where the green plain ended in barren wastes. As the sun rose higher, the heat streamed down on the plain; the half-breeds pushed on without a pause towards the hills.

Black Louis hardly glanced at his prisoners during the journey; he seemed to have forgotten them. At intervals he glanced back along the way they had come. Once the cavalcade changed its direction a little as a smoke-cloud showed on the horizon. The sun was almost at the meridian, and the heat was oppressive, when the horses' hoofs rang at last on the stony, barren slopes of the hills.

In the shadow of a big rock, amid huge boulders, the half-breed traders halted at last. A spring bubbled up there amid the rocks, and the wearied horses and mules were cast loose to drink. Then the three schoolboys were released from the ropes that bound them to the mules, and were able to use once more their numbed limbs.

Black Louis jerked away the gags, with a grin.

"You may yell now as loudly as you like,"

(Continued on page 22.)

"Come on!" said Jimmy Silver determinedly.

The Fistical Four marched resolutely into the passage, keeping their eyes well about them. There was a swinging lamp in the hall, and Lovell struck a match and lighted it. The juniors were glad of the light. At Rookwood they hadn't paid much attention to Tubby Muffin's description of the red-headed ruffian with a revolver; but inside the lonely bungalow, it seemed somehow different. The light was a relief. The four juniors gathered round the door of the dining-room, and paused there.

As they paused, there was a sound of fumbling with the lock within. Jimmy Silver realised that the man in the room was about to lock the door, and he hurled it open on the instant.

There was a yell in the room. The suddenly opening door had come in violent contact with the man within, and hurled him back. He went sprawling on the floor, and the Fistical Four almost tripped over him as they rushed in.

"Collar him!" gasped Lovell. The man was scrambling up—a strange object. His head was wrapped in a sort of turban, which hid his hair and most of his face from view. The juniors piled on him at once, and he went sprawling under them.

"Got him!" gasped Lovell. "Gurrrrrrgh!" came from the struggling form on the floor.

"Nail him!" The headgear of the struggling man came off in Lovell's grasp. A head of purplish red hair burst on the amazed eyes of the juniors—and what was still more amazing, the features of Monsieur Victor Monceau were disclosed at the same moment.

The Fistical Four let go their prisoner as if he had become suddenly red-hot.

"Mum-mum-Mossoo!" stuttered Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, crikey!" Mossoo leaped up. His hands went up to his head, and he gave a howl.

"Mon Dieu! Helas! Vous avez vu! Mon Dieu!"

The next instant he had caught up the cloth and was jamming it round his purple-red head with frantic haste.

Jimmy Silver & Co. blinked at him, spell-bound.

The last time they had seen Mossoo's hair it was black, streaked with grey. Now it was purple-red, with a bronze tinge. The juniors stood dumb.

Monsieur Monceau glared at them. Never had a prisoner looked more ungratefully at his happy rescuers.

"Mais, nom d'un nom!" shrieked Mossoo. "Vat you do here? Vy for you come? Expliquez, don."

"B-but ain't you a prisoner?" stuttered Lovell.

"Moi—prisoner! Mais certainement non! Vat you mean, mauvais garçon?"

"We—we came to save you, sir!" stuttered Jimmy Silver.

"Comment!"

"Some—some fellows came here this afternoon, and—and—"

"I hear zem!" said Monsieur Monceau. "I hear zem, young rascals, and I shut ze window after zem. Zey see nozzing. Now you come, and you have see! Helas! On me rit au nez! Nevoir, nevoir salli I show face in Rookwood vance more! On me croit—helas! Mauvais garçon, vy for you come, zen?"

"We—we're sorry, sir," babbled Rabby. "The—fellows said you were a prisoner—they heard you speaking, and you said, 'Moi, prisonnier, ici!' They—they heard you—"

"And we—we came to rescue you, sir!" gasped Newcome.

Monsieur Monceau sank into a chair with a groan.

"Mais je suis prisonnier ici!" he mumbled. "I am prisoner, perhaps I say so, je ne sais pas—but I am prisoner, because I show not ze face in ze school, because of zat vicked man Nupkins—"

"Nupkins!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Mes garçons!" exclaimed Mossoo, almost tearfully. "I have been good master to you. You will not tell zis to all ze garçons at Rookwood, so zat all ze school laugh at ze nose, is it?"

"Not a word, sir," said Jimmy Silver.

THE POPULAR.—No. 255.

"But—but what's happened, sir? We all thought you'd gone to the seaside!"

Monsieur Monceau made a gesture of despair.

"You have see my hair?" he gasped.

"Ye-es, sir."

"It was zat vicked dummy, Nupkins. Zere was some few small grey hairs in my pauvre tete—my poor head, isn't it? I have zat man to come to my room at ze school, for put on vat you call ze dyestuff. And zat vicked man he make one mistake—he put in wrong chemicals, and zat dye, instead of to be black, he turn out red and purple, c'est affreuse. Ven I discover him turning to zis colour, I am in despair."

Jimmy Silver & Co. tried hard not to smile.

"Now I am red, I am purple!" groaned Mossoo. "I come here; zat Hixon, he let me have zis bungalow for vun week. I bury myself to not be seen, in zis lonely spot. In vun week, Nupkins zis, siz colour he pass off, zen it is all right wiz me. I not let him touch my head again. Bettair have ze grey hair zan run ze risk of zese fearful colours. Vous comprenez? In vun week it is all right; but until zen, I keeps myself dark, as you say in English. Helas!"

"Oh, dear!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

The heroic rescuers backed to the door. They were awfully sorry for poor Mossoo and his dreadful misfortune, but they felt a pressing need to yell. Monsieur Monceau eyed them anxiously.

"You say nozzings?" he asked eagerly.

"Not a syllable, sir; and we'll see that the fellows don't come nosing round the bungalow, either," stuttered Lovell.

"I zank you!"

"G-g-good-night, sir!" gasped Jimmy.

And the rescuers fled.

Not till they were out of the bungalow, out of the garden, and on the open heath, did they give way to their feelings. Then they lay down in the grass and kicked up their heels and yelled.

It was nearly a week later that Monsieur Monceau reappeared at Rookwood School. His hair was, by that time, once more black and grey; and he did not try any more of Mr. Nupkins' weird mixtures to improve it. He was fed up with Mr. Nupkins and his mixtures.

Jimmy Silver & Co. had kept the secret, only explaining to Smythe & Co. that Monsieur Monceau was at the bungalow for reasons of his own, and was not, as they had supposed from his unhappy ejaculation, a prisoner there. Smythe & Co. never understood, and even Tubby Muffin's curiosity remained unsatisfied. Mossoo blushed a beautiful red when he met the Fistical Four after his return; but the chums of the Fourth were elaborately unconscious, and the French gentleman happily supposed that they had forgotten everything.

THE END.

(There's news of next week's Rookwood story on page 2.)

THREE IN THE TOILS!

(Continued from page 10.)

he said derisively. "There are only the rocks and the coyotes to hear you."

The chums of Cedar Creek did not answer the half-breed's mockery. Their mouths were aching, and their lips numbed. They sat down on a rocky bank and watched the half-breeds as they camped. No camp-fire was lighted. Evidently Black Louis feared that the smoke might betray them. The ruffians ate corn-cake and deer meat, and smoked their pipes and cigarettes afterwards, lying under the rocks for shelter from the blaze of the sun.

After the meal was over, Black Louis came to the prisoners with a panikin of food. Coarse as it was, it was welcome enough to the three schoolboys. He untied their right hands, so that they could eat, and left them. "By gum! I guess I feel better now," muttered Bob Lawless, as he finished the last fragment of deer meat. "But I reckon it's a bad outlook, Franky. We're a good forty miles from Cedar Creek, I reckon."

"And no one will think of following the trail, if those brutes have left a trail," muttered Beauclerc.

Frank Richards glanced round, to make sure that none of the half-breeds was within hearing, and sank his voice as he answered: "There's just a chance. Diaz knows—"

"The greater! What does he know, and what can he do?" grunted Bob.

Frank whispered an explanation. Beauclerc's face brightened a little, but Bob Lawless shook his head. Evidently he had little faith in the Mexican.

"It's a chance!" repeated Frank. "I guess I wouldn't bet a pile of dollars on it," said Bob Lawless dismally.

"Look!" muttered Beauclerc suddenly. "Look at Louis Leronge. There's something on the plain—"

He broke off breathlessly. The three chums stared at Black Louis. He was standing on the rocks, shading his eyes with his hand, as he stared back across the sun-scorched plain. The expression on his face was grim and surly. It was clear that he saw something that caused him uneasiness.

He called Jacques, who handed him a field-glass. Leronge looked through the glass, and muttered an angry oath, that reached the ears of the chums of Cedar Creek. The next moment he rapped out an order, and the half-breeds began to saddle up to resume the journey.

Frank Richards glanced at his chums, his heart beating fast. Bob Lawless and Beauclerc met his glance with brightening eyes. For what caused alarm to the half-breeds might mean rescue to the kidnapped schoolboys, and hope revived in their breasts.

THE END.

(Another top-hole story of Frank Richards & Co., the chums of Cedar Creek, next week.)

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