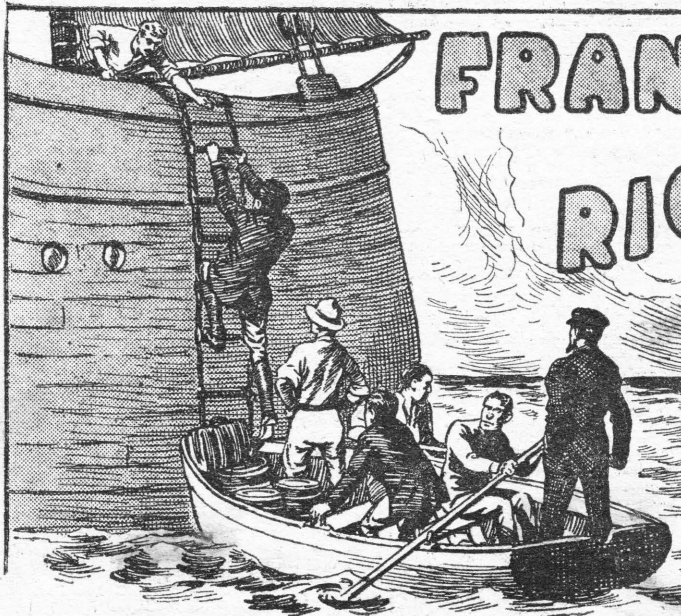


A SEA VOYAGE—A TRAGEDY—AND THE RETURN OF A MUTINEER!

When Frank Richards & Co. embarked upon the "Ocean Queen" for a voyage down the coast, they little expected to meet with such experiences as they did, nor come to grips again with the mysterious man of the sea!



FRANK RICHARDS & CO. AFLOAT!

Boys, you must read this gripping story of FRANK RICHARDS & CO., the chums of the School in the Backwoods. Full of thrills and unexpected moments!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Ocean Tramp!

WHAT about a run down the coast?"

Bob Lawless asked the question.

The chums of Cedar Creek School were seated on a big boulder on the rocky headland at Pacific Point.

The wide Pacific rolled before them, deep blue to the utmost verge of the western horizon.

It was a blazing afternoon in the hot Canadian summer, and the shadow of the big rock close at hand was grateful and comforting to the three schoolboys as they sat and watched the sea.

Down in the bay a brig was at anchor, and a boat had gone off to the lumber hotel.

"A run down the coast!" repeated Frank Richards. "My dear chap, it's too hot for running anywhere."

"Fathhead!" was Bob's reply. "I mean a run down the coast in a vessel—on the water."

"Not a bad idea," said Vere Beauclerc. "It's jolly here for our holiday; but I'd like to have a look along the coast, if it could be managed. But how?"

Bob pointed to the brig anchored in the bay.

"That craft is going down to Vancouver," he said. "She's from the ports up north, trading along the coast. Her skipper would give us a passage for a few dollars."

Frank Richards sat upright and looked down at the brig with some interest.

The brig was an old vessel, a good deal in need of new paint, and looked generally the worse for wear and tear. Three or four of the crew could be seen loafing about her deck, and a man was sitting on the bowsprit smoking a pipe.

"It's not a passenger ship!" said Frank.

Bob Lawless laughed.

"No fear! It's a cargo tramp," he answered. "But these craft take passengers when they can get them. Of course, the accommodation's rough and ready. You dig in somewhere aft, and take your chance. You mess with the captain and the mate, and the grub won't remind you of a first-class hotel at Vancouver or Toronto. But you see something of ship life, and you see the coast and the sea, and—and it's a jolly good idea to go, I guess."

"Which means that you've made up your mind, and we'd better see about booking our passage," said Frank Richards, laughing.

Bob Lawless rose from the boulder, grinning.

"You've hit it!" he said. "But only if you'd care to go—"

"Oh, I'd like it all right!"

"Same here," said Beauclerc. "We've only been on the sea in a boat and a canoe so far. It will be simply ripping to have a run in a sea-going vessel. If it's rough and ready that won't hurt us. We're not soft."

"Then it's a cinch?" asked Bob.

"Oh, yes!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Come on, then!"

And the chums of Cedar Creek started along the headland for the lumber hotel, where they were staying for their summer holidays.

"We shall have to ask Mr. Hichens," remarked Bob. "We're sort of in his charge here. But I guess that will be all right."

The three schoolboys arrived at the lumber hotel, and found a stranger there, seated on the piazza. From his seafaring attire they guessed that he was the skipper of the brig. He was a big, lanky, loose-jointed man, with a little grey beard, like a goat, and very sharp, grey eyes. He was smoking a big Mexican cheroot, blowing out great clouds of smoke, not wholly to the comfort of the other hotel visitors, who were taking it easy on the piazza.

"That's the johnny, I suppose!" murmured Frank Richards.

"You bet!"

"Let's tackle him, then!"

"Come on!" answered Bob.

The three chums mounted the piazza, and saluted the sea captain politely. He blinked at them through the smoke of the Mexican cheroot.

"Good-afternoon, captain!" said Bob Lawless cheerily.

"'Arternoon!" was the skipper's laconic reply.

"Your ship in the bay?"

"My brig."

"Looking for passengers?"

"Nope!"

Bob Lawless coughed. The American skipper was evidently a man of a few words. He stared past the schoolboys, and continued to blow out smoke in great volumes.

"Could you give us a passage down to Vancouver?" asked Bob, coming to the point.

"Yep!"

"Good!" said Frank Richards.

"When do you sail?" asked Bob.

"When the water's aboard."

"When will that be?"

"I guess half an hour."

"Then we'd better get our bags," remarked Beauclerc.

"Hold on a minute! What's the charge, captain?"

The big man reflected. He blew out smoke for a minute or two, and then answered:

"Twenty dollars a man, all found!"

"Done!" said Bob.

"Be ready for the boat!" said the skipper, briefly. "I guess the Ocean Queen don't wait for any galoots!"

"Right-ho!"

The chums of Cedar Creek went into the hotel and sought Mr. Bill Hichens, the proprietor. They were more or less in charge of Mr. Hichens during their holiday at Pacific Point, many a long mile from their home in the Thompson Valley. Mr. Hichens looked thoughtful when they explained their intentions.

"Waal, I guess you won't come to any harm," he remarked. "I know Captain Finn; he's a good man. You'll land at Vancouver, and come back up the coast. None of your games, you know. You're not to go on to California."

"We'd like to," said Bob, smiling. "But we won't. We'll be back in a few days, Mr. Hichens—sooner than you want to see us, in fact!"

"Waal, you'd better pack your truck!" said Hichens.

And the schoolboys, much delighted with the prospect before them, hurried to their room to pack their "truck."

The "truck" did not amount to much. A couple of bags containing all that the chums thought they would need for a few days at sea.

They were waiting for the boat on the shingle by the time the long-limbed skipper came down from the hotel.

A couple of dago seamen were in the boat, with several big kegs that had been filled with water at the creek behind the lumber hotel.

"Tumble in!" said Captain Finn.

The schoolboys "tumbled in," and the captain sat down in the stern, and the two dagoes pulled off.

A few minutes later Frank Richards & Co. were climbing the side of the Ocean Queen, and in a quarter of an hour more the anchor was up, and the brig was rolling out of the bay.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Life on the Ocean Wave!

FRANK RICHARDS & CO. remained on deck, looking about them with much interest as the Ocean Queen rolled out into the Pacific.

"Rolled" was the right word. The old brig thumped her way through the water, and the chums could see that in rough weather she would be a far from happy

home. But at present the Pacific was smooth and smiling, and a gentle breeze off the shore filled the patched old brown sails.

There were seven men to the crew, as well as the captain and the mate. Four of them were dagoes—seamen of Latin race. The boatswain and two of the foremast hands were American.

The cargo-tramp was not exactly cleanly, as the chums soon observed.

Mops and holystones would have improved its appearance considerably, to say nothing of fresh paint.

There were several casks and packing-cases about the decks, and a coop of fowls, who cackled and clattered incessantly as the brig "walloped" out into deep water.

The brown old sails were so patched that they looked like containing more patches than original canvas. Captain Finn was owner as well as skipper, and whatever profits he made by coast trading, he evidently did not expend much of them on the adornment of his brig.

Frank Richards & Co. went below at last, shown to their quarters by a Chinaman, who was cook and cabin-boy. The chums of Cedar Creek had expected it rough on the coasting-tramp, and they found that they would have to rough it, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The companion-ladder led into a dusky region, where there was an old table with the fragments of a meal still adorning it, and a stuffy smell; and from this cabin the "state-rooms" opened. There were four of them—two belonging to the skipper and mate, and the other two were at the service of the passengers. One of them contained two bunks.

All of them were filled with cargo—trading "notions" of various kinds, which the Chinaman shifted out to make room for them.

He left a great deal of dust behind, and plenty of smell, which he did not seem to think mattered at all.

Frank Richards looked round the tiny cabins, and whistled.

Bob Lawless made a grimace. "I reckoned we should have to rough it," he remarked.

"And you were right!" said Beauclerc, laughing. "Never mind. We can stand it."

"I guess we shall have to now, anyhow! Oh, by gum, cockroaches!"

"In the bunks!" murmured Frank Richards.

"By gum! That Chinaman has got to do some cleaning!"

Bob Lawless went out into the cabin, and caught the cook by the pigtail as he was departing. The Celestial turned round, with a howl.

"What's your name?" asked Bob.

"Wun Pang! You lettee go!"

"Well, you'll get more than one pang if you don't clean up our cabins!" said Bob. "Cockroaches in the bunks are not good enough. See?"

The Chinese grinned.

"Alee samee," he replied. "Mueche plenty cockloach everywhere. No good killee!"

"Well, you can try the effect of killing a few hundreds," said Bob. "Here's a dollar for you, you heathen! Now start in!"

"Alee light."

Ingratified by the dollar, Wun Pang started work on the state-rooms, and they were considerably benefited by his efforts. There was a holocaust of cockroaches, and the chums hoped to see no more of them. Roughing it was one thing, but sleeping with cockroaches was quite another.

"I guess this place is a bit stuffy," remarked Bob Lawless, when the Chinese had departed with his mop and bucket. "It's making me feel quite queer."

"Same here!" said Frank.

"I was just going to say the same," remarked Beauclerc. "I've got quite a queer feeling inside."

"Better get back on deck."

The chums went up the companion, where the fresh sea breeze made them feel a little better. But they soon discovered that it was not wholly the stuffiness of the regions below that made them feel queer.

"You're looking quite pale, Frank," Bob Lawless remarked suddenly.

Frank breathed rather hard.

"I'm feeling a bit rotten," he answered.

"I—I think this blessed old tub is rolling a lot."

"The old tub seems to be playing pitch and toss with the Pacific!" grunted Bob.

"I—I feel— Oh!"

Bob made a rush for the taffrail.

His chums joined him there a few minutes later.

The next hour was not enjoyable to the chums of Cedar Creek. Their desire for travel on the ocean wave was dead and gone, and they would have given all the gold-mines in British Columbia to have their feet set upon the firm, dry land of the Thompson Valley once more.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Picked up at Sea!

BUMP!

"Yoopoo!" Frank Richards started and awoke. It was morning, and the sun was streaming down on the wide Pacific. There was not much sun or air in the little state-room Frank was sharing with his Canadian cousin.

But Frank woke up feeling quite well. The deadly seasickness had passed off overnight, and the terrible uncertainty he had felt inwardly was over.

"Hallo! What's the row, Bob?" he asked drowsily, as he listened to the disturbance in the bunk below.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"What the dickens—"

"Oh dear!" Bob Lawless rubbed his head. "There was a cockroach on my neck when I woke up—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And I jumped, and banged my head! Ow!"

Frank Richards turned out of his bunk hastily.

The massacre of the cockroaches by the Chinese had cleared the state-room the previous day. Now the cockroaches had returned, and there were dozens of them. Frank Richards grabbed at his clothes, and cockroaches fell out of them as he did so.

"Oh dear! Oh crumbs!" he gasped. "Is this a life on the ocean wave? Give me dry land!"

"Ow, ow, ow!"

Bob and Frank shook out their clothes very carefully before they put them on. Then they emerged from the state-room, and found Vere Beauclerc already in the main cabin.

"Found any 'roaches?" asked Frank.

Beauclerc made a grimace.

"About a hundred!" he answered.

Wun Pang came up, grinning.

"Breakfast?" he asked.

"You haven't killed all the 'roaches, you heathen!" said Bob sternly.

"No can. Plenteo mueche 'roaches in hold, comee back alee samee!" said Wun Pang.

"We shall have to get used to them," said Bob, as cheerfully as he could. "Never mind. Think what it must be like in the forecabin, and thank your stars you're not sailing before the mast!"

The keen air of the sea had given the chums of Cedar Creek a good appetite, especially as they had eaten nothing, as yet, since coming aboard the Ocean Queen. Wun Pang set out their breakfast, and, though the fare was rough, they did it full justice. After that, another dollar induced the Chinaman to make a fresh raid on the cockroaches, while the chums of Cedar Creek sunned themselves on deck.

The brig was ploughing her way southward before a good breeze. Captain Finn gave the schoolboys a nod when they came up, and Mr. Bunce, the mate, bade them "Good-morning!" The old, patched sails were fully set and drawing, and the Ocean Queen was making good way. Overhead the sun blazed from a sky of cloudless blue.

The Co. found plenty of interest in watching the seamen at work, and in looking at the vessels that appeared in sight—a good many "wind-jammers," like the one they were on, and a few steamers that left a track of black smoke against the blue horizon. Afar in the distance the dim outline of mountain summits against the sky told them where the land was.

Towards eight bells the chums noticed that Captain Finn was gazing with a very intent expression across the shining water in the direction of the distant mountain summits.

They followed his gaze, but discerned nothing in the distance save the rolling waves and the dim mountains beyond.

The skipper looked round suddenly.

"Here, one of you fetch up my binoculars from the cabin!" he called out.

"Right-ho!" said Bob.

He ran down the companion, and returned with the glasses.

The skipper clapped them to his eyes, and watched the sea again. Then he lowered the binoculars, and rapped out an order to the helmsman.

"There's something up!" remarked Bob to his companions.

The Ocean Queen changed her course a little, bearing away to port, and the chums of Cedar Creek watched the sea keenly, with some excitement, wondering what the captain had seen.

"I guess it's a boat!" said Bob Lawless at last.

Before long they could see it clearly.

A boat was dancing on the waves, apparently unoccupied—at all events, no occupant could be seen.

But as the brig bore down on it, Frank Richards discerned a form that lay motionless in the bottom of the boat.

That was evidently what the skipper had seen through the binoculars.

All hands on the brig were looking towards the boat now, and Frank Richards & Co. watched it with deep interest.

Closer and closer the brig drew, till the motionless form in the boat was clearly made out.

"Dead, I reckon," they heard Captain Finn remark to the mate, who had come up from below. "But I guess we'll make sure."

"Ay, ay, sir!"

"Poor chap!" murmured Frank Richards.

"Some sailorman from a wreck, I suppose."

"That's it!" said Bob. "Goodness knows how long he's been in that open boat. I—I hope—"

"We shall soon see whether he's alive."

The brig was close now, and the boat rocked on the swell from the vessel. Mr. Bunce stood ready with a line, in the chains, and as the brig rounded to he jumped into the boat, and made the line fast. The boat drifted alongside the Ocean Queen, and Frank Richards & Co. looked down into it as the mate examined the motionless man.

"Waal?" called out the skipper.

"Alive, I reckon!" called back Mr. Bunce. "But purty far gone!"

"I guess we'll take him aboard, then." The boat drew close under the chains, and the unconscious man was handed up.

He was quite insensible, and his face showed plain traces of the grim privation he had been through.

"A dago, I guess!" remarked the skipper. "But, dago or not, he's welcome to the Ocean Queen!"

"My hat!" muttered Frank Richards.

He stared blankly at the drawn, dusky face of the castaway.

Changed as it was by privation and suffering, Frank Richards recognised it. He had seen that swarthy Italian face before, and learned to know it well.

"By gum, I've seen him—" muttered Bob.

And Vere Beauclerc said quietly:

"Benedetto!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Benedetto Again!

BENEDETTO! Frank Richards & Co. repeated the name as the captain picked up the wretched, shrunken form in his powerful arms and carried the castaway below.

Mr. Bunce glanced at them.

"You've seen the man before?" he asked.

"I guess so!" answered Bob Lawless.

"He's an Italian seaman named Benedetto, and he's wanted by the law for mutiny."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure!"

"Oh Jerusalem!" said the mate.

Captain Finn was busy below with the wretched man for some time, the mate taking his watch on deck. The skipper came up the companion at last.

"I reckon he'll pull through," said the skipper to Mr. Bunce. "He's come round. Says his name is Piccini, and he's the survivor of an Italian steamer that went down with all hands in the storm a few days since. I reckon he's had a bad time."

Frank Richards & Co. exchanged glances. It was clearly their duty to tell the skipper what they knew of the castaway;

Benedetto was too dangerous a man to go unwatched.

"The youngsters say that they've seen him before, sir," said Mr. Bunce.

"I guess that's so, captain," said Bob Lawless. "He's a dangerous man and a mutineer. You ought to know, I guess."

"Hey—what's that?" ejaculated Captain Finn.

Bob Lawless explained.

"He was a seaman on a schooner called the Eliza Smith, that was wrecked at Pacific Point in the storm," he said. "He was the ringleader of a mutiny, and he's being hunted by the Mounted Police ashore. He stole that boat from a fisherman at Pacific Point, and fled to sea. I suppose he's been drifting about since—it's two days since he disappeared."

"Sure of that?"

"I'd know him anywhere, and so would my friends."

"Spin me the whole yarn."

Bob Lawless told the story of the encounter with the mutineer, the skipper listening attentively.

He blew out a big cloud of smoke when the Canadian schoolboy had finished.

"I guess I'm glad you've told me," he remarked. "Mister Benedetto will go ashore in irons at Vancouver. There was a rifle in the boat, Mr. Bunce?"

"Yep, and a belt of cartridges," said the mate. "I've brought them aboard, sir."

"You can cast off the boat," he said. "The brig had resumed her southward course, and the captain paced the afterdeck for some time in deep thought, smoking hard; evidently thinking of what Bob Lawless had told him.

He went below at last. The castaway was lying on a mattress on the floor of the cabin, eating from a bowl of soup brought him by Wun Pang. He was already looking much better. His dark eyes fixed on the captain at once as he approached.

Captain Finn stood looking at him for some moments in silence. Then he spoke abruptly:

"You told me your name was Piccini?"

"Si, signor."

"Of the steamer Marco Polo, Leghorn?"

"Si, signor."

"Your name isn't Benedetto, by any chance?"

The Italian started violently. A glitter shot into his black eyes.

"No, signor," he muttered.

"You didn't sail on the Eliza Smith?"

The dusky seaman panted.

"Who told you?" he muttered.

Captain Finn called up the companion.

"Step down here, you youngsters!" he said.

Frank Richards & Co. came down into the cabin. Benedetto started again as he saw them, and set his white teeth. At the sight of the chums of Cedar Creek he understood that further deception was futile.

"You know these young gents, I guess?" remarked the skipper of the Ocean Queen grimly.

The Italian did not reply, but his black eyes glittered at the schoolboys.

"You know us, Benedetto," said Frank Richards. "We saved your life after the storm at Pacific Point."

"You—here!" muttered Benedetto.

"I guess it's a clear case," said Captain Finn. "As soon as you're better, my man, you're going into irons; and in a couple of days you'll be landed at Vancouver and handed over to the police. And if you give any trouble on board my vessel—" The skipper paused, and drew a revolver from his hip-pocket, and held it up for the Italian to see. "Look at that! Any of your tricks on my ship, and I'll lay you out as dead as a cockroach! Keep that in mind, Mister Benedetto!"

The captain replaced his revolver, and returned to the deck, followed by Frank Richards & Co.

Benedetto was left to his thoughts, which were probably not pleasant ones.

When the chums came down a little later, Benedetto was still stretched on the mattress, and he looked weaker than when they had seen him before. He called to them in a faint voice:

"Signorini!"

"Hallo!" answered Bob Lawless; and the schoolboys approached the castaway.

"Signorini!" said the Italian faintly. "It is true that you saved my life after the

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wreck of the schooner, and I—I attacked you afterwards. Now that I am dying, I ask your pardon.

Frank started.

"Dying!" he exclaimed.

"Presto, presto!" muttered Benedetto. "I have been without food—without water—in the blaze of the sun. I feel that I am sinking. I shall not see another sun rise."

"It's not so bad as that, I hope?" said Vere Beauclerc, with some compassion.

"I feel that it is so, signor. It matters little; but I ask your pardon before I die."

"Of course, we forgive you!" said Frank Richards. "But keep your pecker up, Benedetto; you'll pull round."

The Italian shook his head feebly, and sank back on the mattress.

The chums of Cedar Creek ate their dinner in silence, in a rather sombre mood. Desperado as Benedetto undoubtedly was, stained with many a crime, they could not help feeling compassion for him now.

When they returned to the deck, Bob Lawless informed the skipper of what the Italian had said.

Captain Finn shrugged his shoulders.

"He's been through enough to kill many a man," he said. "I guess it's all the better for him if he pegs out here. There's a rope waiting for him on dry land, I calculate."

"I—I suppose so," said Bob.

Frank Richards & Co. looked at the Italian again before they turned in for the night.

He was lying silently on the mattress, breathing faintly, and certainly looked in a serious condition. He glanced up at them, and smiled faintly.

"Addio, signorini!" he muttered. "I shall not see you again! Ahime! E giusto-e! Giusto! Addio!"

The Italian closed his eyes, and the chums went to their state-rooms in a subdued mood.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER. A Merciless Mutineer!

FRANK RICHARDS opened his eyes. He had awakened suddenly; he could not tell why.

In the lower bunk Bob Lawless was sleeping soundly. It was warm and stuffy in the state-room; only a breath of air came in from the sea at the open port-hole.

Frank lay with open eyes, wondering what had awakened him. From the captain's room he thought he heard a slight sound.

He listened.

Again there came a slight sound, and he started into broad wakefulness. For, faint as it was, he thought he distinguished the sound of a groan.

"My hat! What—"

Frank slipped from the bunk.

His movement awakened Bob Lawless, who opened his eyes and blinked at his chum in the gloom.

"Hallo! Wharrer marrer?" murmured Bob sleepily.

"I heard somebody groan, Bob."

"Benedetto, I suppose."

"Yes, perhaps! But I thought it came from the captain's room."

"More likely the Italian. If he's in pain we ought to see to him, I guess. I'll come."

Bob slipped from his bunk, and the chums dressed quickly. Again there was a sound, and both of them were sure that it was a faint groan.

Frank Richards slid back the door of the state-room, and put out his head. As a rule, there was a swinging lamp in the main cabin, but it was extinguished now, and all was dark.

"Got a match, Bob?"

"I guess so."

Bob Lawless struck a match. The chums glanced towards the mattress which the Italian had occupied. To their amazement, it was empty. Benedetto was no longer there.

"Where—" began Bob blankly.

"Hark!"

The door of the skipper's state-room was partly open; and this time there was no mistaking the faint groan that proceeded thence. The match went out, and Bob Lawless struck another.

He lighted the lamp, and Frank opened the skipper's door. The light from the main cabin glimmered into the little room.

A sharp exclamation left Frank's lips.

Captain Finn was lying in his bunk, his face deadly white, and a splash of blood across it. The crimson oozed down from under his thick hair. He was unconscious, but at intervals a moan escaped him.

The skipper of the Ocean Queen had been stunned by a terrible blow on the head, dealt apparently while he was sleeping.

"Frank—What—"

"Look! It muttered Frank.

"Good heavens!"

The schoolboys gazed at the fearful scene in horror. Bob Lawless caught his chum by the arm.

"Benedetto!" he muttered. "That awful villain—"

"But—but he was dying! He said—"

"Fooling us!" said Bob fiercely. "Fooling us, to get a chance for this! Oh, the villain!"

"The awful rotter!" muttered Frank.

"Let's wake the Cherub!"

They hurried to Beauclerc's state-room. In a minute Beauclerc was wide awake and dressing, while his chums explained in breathless whispers.

"Where is he?" muttered Beauclerc.

"Better warn Mr. Bunce," said Bob, in a whisper.

"But where—"

The chums moved towards the companion-way. The Italian was not below; but he could scarcely have got to the deck without being seen by the watch. Where was he? What was he doing?

Even as they wondered, the Italian stepped from the companion, almost within touch of them.

The schoolboys started back.

Benedetto was still pale and worn-looking, but he had evidently recovered very considerably. His movements were lithe and tigerish, and there was a glitter in his black eyes. His right hand held a revolver, which the chums recognised as the captain's. And the revolver was levelled at them!

"Silence!" said Benedetto.

A mocking grin came over the Italian's dusky face.

"You understand?" he said. "I have got to be taken into Vancouver to be hanged—not quite, signorini! You have seen il capitano?"

"Yes," muttered Frank.

"You, and he, believed I was dying!" Benedetto grinned. "But I shall not die just yet, signorini."

"You scoundrel!" muttered Bob.

"You saved my life after the wreck," said Benedetto. "I will spare your lives for that—if you make no resistance. Lift a finger, and I will shoot you dead! You know me! Go into the captain's room."

"But—"

"Obey me!"

The trigger moved a little, and the chums of Cedar Creek backed into the captain's state-room. There was no help for it.

"You should not have awakened," grinned Benedetto. "I was in the companion, and I saw the light, and came back. You will not give the alarm, signorini. Silence on your lives!"

He slid the door shut on the schoolboys.

They were left alone, in darkness, with the injured man in the bunk, from whom low moans escaped at intervals.

There was a sudden sound in the main cabin.

"You dago! Whattee you wantee? Oh!"

Crash!

There was a door between, but the chums knew what had happened as well as if they had seen it. Wun Pang had come upon the Italian, and the butt-end of the revolver had stricken him down.

Silence followed.

"We can't stop here," muttered Bob resolutely. "Goodness knows what that villain intends, but we've got to warn the others. I'm going to chance his revolver!"

"Same here!" said Frank.

Bob slid back the door. The main cabin was in darkness; the Italian had put out the lamp. The schoolboys stumbled over something on the floor. It was Wun Pang, lying senseless where he had been stricken down. They groped their way towards the companion ladder.

They were careful to be silent. At any moment they expected to hear the ring of the revolver. Bob Lawless led the way into the companionway. Overhead the hatch was open, and a square of starlight showed. But the starlight was broken by a crouching form.

Benedetto was there, crouching just below the level of the deck. He was waiting and watching. Wild as his scheme seemed, there could be no doubt that the ruffian intended

Wingate rose to his feet with a gleam in his eyes.

"It means, sir," he said, "that there is to be no play at all. The whole affair is a deliberate swindle, and the so-called actors are retaining the money we paid for admission. I'll stop the show at once, with your approval, Mr. Prout!"

"Certainly—certainly!" muttered the Fifth Form master. "At once, Wingate!"

By the time the skipper of Greyfriars reached the stage, however, a wild and whirling fight was in progress. Wharton was indignant at Peter Todd's astounding impertinence, and he rushed at him with murder in his eyes.

"Keep off!" yelled the unhappy Ghost. "It wasn't I who said that verse! There's a ventrilo—"

He got no further. Wharton's right crashed into his eye, and an upper-cut, neatly placed, followed immediately, and sent Peter Todd spinning.

"I'll teach you to muck up a Remove play, you cheeky bouncer!" roared Harry Wharton. "Get up and have some more!"

Todd declined the invitation. His left eye was closed, and his jaw felt perilously near dislocation.

Meanwhile, Wingate vaulted up on to the stage, and seized Wharton by the collar of the cloak he was wearing.

"Chuck it!" he said sternly. "And clear the stage at once! Then come to my study with every other junior who took part in this gross deception!"

"This what?" gasped Wharton.

"You heard what I said! Carry out my orders, sharp, or you'll hear from the Head instead of me!" said Wingate curtly. "Blessed if I thought you'd play it so low down as this, Wharton!"

And before the astounded junior could reply, Wingate had let down the curtain and declared the play void.

Feeling ran very high indeed among the audience. The fellows were indignant at being spoofed out of their money, and for once in a way Harry Wharton seemed to be the most unpopular fellow at Greyfriars. It was an incensed crowd that filed out of the Hall when the curtain fell.

Harry Wharton made his way moodily to the back of the stage. He could not for the life of him understand what had happened. He had always regarded Peter Todd as a thoroughly decent chap, who played the game at all times; and now that his anger had abated somewhat he realised that Peter would not have wrecked the proceedings in such a caddish manner.

Yet who else could have been responsible for the hoax? Todd's verse, although it was rank rot, so far as poetry went, had certainly given the audience the impression that the Remove had never intended to hold a genuine performance of "Hamlet" at all. It was beastly!

The crowd of artistes behind the scenes looked quite as sick as Wharton.

"Where are the girls?" asked Harry, glancing round.

"Gone!" said Nugent dismally. "They went off in a frightful huff; and it's not to be wondered at. The whole giddy affair's a proper mess-up!"

"If we can only find out who's responsible," said Wharton grimly, "we'll flay him alive!"

"Desmond started it!" said Bulstrode bitterly.

"Faith, an' I'm sure I did nothing of the kind, Bulstrode darlint! Just as I was going to begin my part some silly spalpeen chipped in an' upset everything!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Micky's quite right," said Peter Todd, who had appeared on the scene with a face which looked as if it had been through a mangle. "It wasn't his fault at all. Can't you see what's happened, you blithering fools? A ventriloquist has been at work again!"

"A ventriloquist!" repeated Wharton blankly.

"Of course! Do you think I was responsible for that rotten verse, idiot?"

"I shouldn't have punched you in the chivvy if I thought otherwise!" said Wharton coldly.

"Todd's right, all the same," said Vernon-Smith emphatically. "You can bet your bottom dollar Bunter's been up to his old tricks again!"

"Impos— He wasn't on the stage, to begin with."

"No; but he was in the wings, so it comes to the same thing. He's the giddy culprit, right enough!"

"My hat! If that's the case, we'll make Greyfriars too hot to hold him. He wrecked the Redcliffe match, and I thought we shouldn't experience any more of his rotten ventriloquism for a decade. But I suppose the fat cad has done this in return for being bunged up the chimney the other day."

"Undoubtedly!"

"Right! We've all got to go in and see old Wingate, and we'll explain how the land lies. Then, if he gives us permission to deal with Bunter off our own bat, we'll give the wretched porpoise the licking of his life!"

The artistes removed their costumes in gloomy silence, and made tracks for Wingate's study. Several Fourth-Formers were loitering in the passage, angrily discussing the wrecked entertainment. Temple stood directly in the Removites' path as he saw them coming.

"You rotten frauds!" he exclaimed. "That's the game of a dirty cad, if you like—collaring other chaps' money, and giving 'em nothing in return."

"You'd better shut up!" said Wharton thickly.

"I'll shut up when you've given us an explanation, and not before!" said Temple loftily.

"Rats! Now let us pass!"

"Sha'n't!"

"Very well, then!" said Harry grimly. "Forward, Remove! March over these bouncers!"

The Removites stepped forward with the precision of a well-trained battalion of soldiers. Temple was trodden underfoot as though he were a Prussian infantryman on a Continental battlefield, and Dabney and Fry shared the same fate.

"Ow! Yow-ow! Groo!"

A chorus of groans floated along the passage, and the unhappy actors felt a little mollified as they tramped into Wingate's study. There was not room for all of them inside, and Wingate frowned as he noticed the crush. There would be insufficient room to wield a cane.

"You can clear out," he said, "with the exception of Wharton, Cherry, Nugent, and Vernon-Smith! I'll deal with the others later!"

The fellows addressed shuffled out of the study, and there was a forboding gleam in the eyes of the usually genial skipper of Greyfriars as he closed the door, and took a stout ashplant from the corner.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Wingate Comes down Heavy!

WINGATE surveyed the quartette sternly. There was a look of grim displeasure on his rugged face.

"Now, you young rascals," he said, "have you any excuse to offer for to-night's conduct?"

Wharton flushed hotly.

"We're not rascals!" he retorted. "Neither have we done anything to hang our heads over!"

"Oh, I suppose you consider that obtaining money by false pretences is something to be proud of?" said Wingate scornfully.

"I say, Wingate," blurted out Bob Cherry. "Those are hard words, you know!"

"They are true, nevertheless. I am all the more surprised that chaps of your calibre should have sunk so low. You have long been regarded as fellows who play the game square at all times."

"And we always shall play the game, I hope!" said Wharton, bracing himself up. "I'd jolly well like to know what you've got against us!"

"You gave a bogus performance of 'Hamlet' under pretence of assisting some fund or other. Instead of which, the money was to go into your own pockets!"

"Liar!"

It was Vernon-Smith who spoke. The Bouncer was no respecter of persons. If the mightiest man in the world had made such an accusation against him, he would have spoken up just as sharply.

The captain of Greyfriars wondered if he had heard aright. He gazed at the Bouncer blankly for a moment—but only for a moment. Then he strode forward, gripped the junior by the collar, and proceeded to thrash him mercilessly.

The ashplant rose and fell with sickening

relentlessness. Vernon-Smith set his teeth hard, but uttered no cry. He was hard as nails. The other juniors gazed at the scene almost with admiration. Even Harry Wharton could not have undergone such a terrible thrashing without letting out a yell.

Wingate desisted at last, and hurried his victim across the study. George Wingate could seldom remember having been called a liar by a junior before, and his blood was fairly up. Like the prophet of old, he considered that he did well to be angry. If the Head of a school like Greyfriars permitted such outrageous cheek, his prestige would soon be a thing of the past. Wingate signalled to the other juniors to step forward in turn.

"I'm going to give you all a thundering good hiding!" he said. "Hold out your hand, Wharton!"

"I have an explanation to make," said Harry quickly.

"I shall listen to none. Do as I tell you!"

"But that's most unreasonable, Wingate!"

"You're not called upon to discuss that. Out with your hand—sharp!"

Wharton sullenly obeyed. He felt in the mood for mutiny, and only his respect for Wingate held him in check.

Whack! Whack! Whack!

Three stinging cuts descended on Wharton's palm, followed by three on the other hand. Nugent and Bob Cherry were given the same dose. None of the chums made a murmur, but they looked very white when Wingate had finished.

"You can get out," said the Sixth-Former shortly.

"Are you disposed to hear an explanation now?" muttered Wharton.

Wingate reflected for a moment.

"Trot it out!" he said. "Though I don't suppose anything you say will alter my opinion of you all."

"We shall see about that. In the first place, we had a genuine intention of playing 'Hamlet' to-night. You may confirm that by writing to Miss Hazeldene, at Cliff House, as she was to have taken the part of Ophelia. Secondly, the interruptions on the stage were none of our doing. We were victimised by a ventriloquist."

"What!"

Wingate almost fell down.

"Some dirty cad determined to wreck the show," continued Wharton, "and he succeeded, too, confound him! It was the worst day's work he ever did!"

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

gaped the astonished Wingate.

"You didn't give me a chance," said Wharton bitterly.

Wingate bit his lip. He had come down heavy on the juniors, and he knew it. Now it seemed that the punishment had been administered in the wrong quarter.

"In that case, I'm sorry I lammed into you just now," he said, with a note of remorse in his gruff voice. "Hang it, I've made some nasty allegations against you, too! I can see I've been a jolly sight too hasty."

"It's all right, Wingate, old man," said Bob Cherry, touched by the look of distress on the skipper's face. "You weren't to know how things stood."

Wingate threw the ashplant into a corner.

"I'll make what redress I can," he said.

"I ought not to have doubted you kids at all, but the fact that a ventriloquist might have been at work didn't enter my head. I suppose Bunter was responsible?"

"He's the only ventriloquist at Greyfriars," said Nugent, rubbing his aching palms.

"But he couldn't have had the nerve to do it," said Bob Cherry incredulously. "Especially after the lesson we gave him the other day."

"The other day?" repeated Wingate. "How long has he revived his old tricks, then?"

"This is about the fourth time he's spoofed us during the last week."

"My hat! I'll make it hot for the young rascal!"

"Hadh't you better leave the matter in our hands, Wingate?" asked Bob Cherry demurely.

Wingate looked doubtful.

"I shall seriously consider the advisability of taking him before the Head!" he exclaimed. "He ought to be sacked for this sort of thing. It's several degrees beyond a joke."

"We seem to have played the sneak," observed Wharton ruefully. "We wouldn't