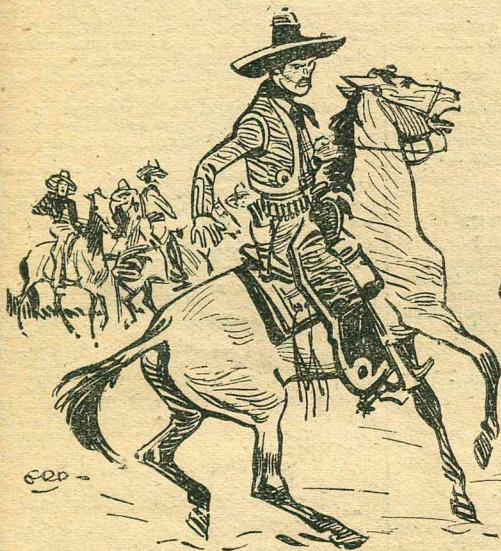


THE STRANGE MYSTERY OF THE GOLD POUCH!

Cedar Creek is steeped in mystery this week. In amazing circumstances Frank Richards & Co. get possession of a pouch containing gold and a strange map. It might not have been quite so mysterious but for the series of subsequent happenings. These cause an unusual flutter at the lumber school, and before they know quite where they are, the chums of Cedar Creek find the limelight playing full upon them!



The Gold Nugget!



Another Gripping Tale of Adventure in the BACKWOODS OF CANADA!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

A Surprise for Cedar Creek!

HALLO! That's some galoot in a hurry!" Clatter, clatter, clatter! Frank Richards & Co. were splitting logs in the playground of Cedar Creek School, partly in order to make themselves useful, and partly to keep themselves warm.

The winter snows were over, but the weather was still very cold; the trail that ran past the school gates was frost-bound and as hard as iron.

There was a stack of logs inside the school fence, at which the chums of Cedar Creek were working away cheerily. The sudden beat of horse's hoofs outside the high palisade made them pause in their work.

Clatter, clatter! The hoofs rang and echoed on the hard ground as a horseman passed at a furious gallop.

The three chums looked up. The timber palisade was too high to allow them to see the horseman riding past outside; but they caught a glimpse of a Stetson hat as it whisked by.

Whiz! At the same moment something was tossed over the wall from without, and there was a sudden howl from Frank Richards.

The "something," whatever it was, had landed on his head with a sharp rap. Frank Richards staggered, and clapped his hand to his head. The object that had struck him rolled at his feet.

"Oh! Ow!" ejaculated Frank. "What silly ass—"

Clatter, clatter! The hoof-beats died away up the trail as the horseman galloped on. The echo rang among the trees for a few moments, and then all was silent.

Frank Richards rubbed his head. The unseen rider was gone.

"Well, by gum!" exclaimed Bob Lawless. "What galoot was that, I wonder? And why was the pesky jay shying things over the wall—"

"Ow!" "Hurt your cabeza, old scout?"

"Well, it was a thump!" said Frank Richards ruefully. "I'd like to get near the silly ass who chucked it over! Somebody larking, I suppose."

Vere Beauclerc shook his head. "He couldn't have seen you from the other side of the wall, Frank. The thing hit you by accident, I think."

Frank Richards grunted. "I'd hit him—not by accident—if I was

within hitting distance!" he said. "Bother him!"

"What was it he chucked over?" asked Bob, looking round.

"Here it is."

Beauclerc picked up the object that had fallen to the ground.

The three chums gathered round it rather curiously. It was a small leather pouch, evidently containing something weighty. It was fastened by a thin strip of buckskin, used as a cord, and pulled tight and knotted.

"By gum!" ejaculated Bob Lawless. "What did the jay chuck that over for? It's worth a dollar in a store, I guess!"

"There's something in it," said Beauclerc, weighing the pouch in his hand. "Feels like a chunk of rock. Are we entitled to open it?"

"I guess so!" said Bob at once. "If the galoot, whoever he is, chucks it at Frank's head, it belongs to Franky. I guess you can open it, Frank."

Frank Richards took the buckskin pouch as Beauclerc handed it to him.

He could not help feeling curious, but he hesitated to unfasten the cord.

"Perhaps we'd better see whether the chap is anywhere around," he remarked. "There might be something valuable in this."

"I guess not, or the galoot wouldn't have thrown it over the wall!"

"Blessed if I understand why he did it!" said Frank. "But let's look out of the gates. He may be coming back for it."

"Well, I guess we'll look!" agreed Bob.

The three schoolboys hurried along to the gate.

The trail outside was deserted, save by Chunky Todgers, the fat youth of Cedar Creek.

Chunky was standing in the middle of the trail, seemingly rooted there, and staring up the route towards Thompson, in which direction the mysterious horseman had vanished.

"Chunky!" called out Bob. Todgers looked round.

"Did you see a galoot pass?" "I guess so!" gasped Todgers. "He jolly nearly ran me down, the pesky jay! Rode by like thunder! Some pesky horse-thief with the sheriff's men after him, I guess!"

"Which way did he go?" asked Frank. "Up the trail to Thompson."

The chums of Cedar Creek stared up the trail, but there was no one in sight. The rapid rider had long disappeared.

"Well, my only hat!" exclaimed Frank Richards, in perplexity. "This beats me hollow! Why the dickens did he chuck this pouch over the wall?"

Beauclerc looked grave.

"If Chunky's right, and he's a thief with the sheriff's men after him, it may be stolen property that he wanted to get rid of," he suggested.

"Phew!" "I guess we'll take it to the sheriff in that case," said Bob. "But—Hallo, here come some more!"

Up the trail from the south—the direction from which the fleeing horseman must have come—came a sudden thunder of hoofs.

Four riders came into view in the timber, in a bunch, riding hard.

Frank Richards & Co. stared at them as they came thundering up, and Chunky Todgers jumped hastily out of the trail.

The quartette were riding hard, with whip and spur.

It was evident that the four riders were in pursuit of the man who had galloped by the palisade and tossed the buckskin pouch into the Cedar Creek playground.

At a glance it could be seen that the four riders were not Canadians.

Their dark faces and black eyes told of Spanish blood, mixed with Indian.

"Greasers!" ejaculated Bob Lawless. "Mexicans," said Beauclerc, "or native Californians! What the dickens are they doing up here, on the north of the Line?"

The bunch of riders swept by at full gallop, but they perceived the group of astonished schoolboys as they passed. One of them wheeled his horse, and rode back, and drew in his panting steed within six feet of Frank Richards & Co. The others drew rein in the trail farther off, and waited for their comrade.

The man who had halted was a dark, swarthy fellow, with handsome Spanish features. But his good looks were marred by a scar that ran across one swarthy cheek from the mouth almost to the ear. The scar was fresh, and had evidently been made by a bullet. He called out to the schoolboys as he dragged in his steed:

"Has he passed? Have you seen a horseman ride by?"

Frank Richards & Co. exchanged glances, and did not reply. They were not disposed to give information to the "Greaser" until they knew a little more about the matter. But Chunky Todgers piped at once:

"Yes, rather! I guess so! I've seen him!"

"Muy bien! Which way did he go?"

Chunky Todgers was about to reply, when Bob Lawless grasped him by the collar and shook him, and Chunky's reply was cut short. Instead of answering the greaser, Chunky gave a suffocated howl.

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-wwwwggg!"

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THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Cabrera, the Californian!

"Ow! Leggo!"
"Shut up, you silly jay!" growled Bob Lawless. "How do you know what the man wants, or who he is? Let up!"
"Ow!"

The horseman knitted his brows. "Answer me!" he exclaimed. "Which way did he go?"
"Grooogh!"

Chunky Todgers could not answer with Bob's grip on his collar. And the other fellows were not inclined to answer. Three or four of the Cedar Creek fellows had come out of gates now, and were looking on in astonishment.

The scarred man rode a little nearer to Frank Richards & Co. It was evident that he was savagely irritated by the delay in the pursuit. His swarthy hand closed hard on his riding-whip.

"Will you answer me?" he panted. "Did he ride up the trail, or down towards the creek? Quick!"

Bob Lawless looked at him coolly. "What are you after the galoot for?" he inquired. "It depends on that whether we answer you."

"That does not concern you."
"I guess it concerns us a good bit," answered Bob independently. "I don't like your looks, Mr. Mexican."

The scarred horseman seemed on the verge of a savage outburst of rage, but he controlled himself. More and more of the Cedar Creek fellows were gathering at the gate now, attracted by the strange scene. There were more than a dozen fellows on the spot now, and perhaps the scarred man realised that violence would not serve him.

"You can tell us what you're after the man for," said Frank Richards quietly. "You can't expect us to tell you anything without that."

"I have no time to waste—"
"You're wasting it now, I guess, Mister Mexican," said Bob Lawless coolly. "I guess you can take your choice. You don't get anything out of us unless we know the reason."

"I am not a Mexican—I am a Californian—"

"I guess it's the same thing."
"Listen to me. The man has something—something that belongs to me—"
Frank Richards' hand closed over the buckskin pouch he was still holding.

"What is it, then?" he asked.
"Carambo! That does not matter! It is enough that he has robbed me!" exclaimed the Californian.

"Not quite, if you can't describe the stolen article," said Bob Lawless. "Looks to me as if you're more like the galoot to do the robbing."

The scarred man gritted his teeth. But his black looks did not daunt the sturdy Canadian schoolboys.

There was a sudden clatter from up the trail. One of the horsemen had dismounted, and was examining the ground, evidently looking for footprints. He shouted to the scarred man.

"Cabrera! Carlos Cabrera! This way!"

The scarred man wheeled his horse again.

"You have found the trail!"

"Si, si! He has ridden on!"

"Muy bien!" But again the scarred man checked his horse, and called out to the schoolboys: "Where does this trail lead?"

"Thompson Town!" answered Bob Lawless.

"A town! Is it far?"

"Two or three miles."

"Madre di Dios! He will reach safety before—"

The Californian did not finish, but put spurs to his horse, and dashed on after his comrades, who were already riding on.

With a clatter of hoofs ringing on the trail, the four riders vanished.

"Phew!" murmured Frank Richards. "Now, what the merry dickens is all the row about, you fellows?"

Bob Lawless shook his head.

"I give that up," he answered. "But if there's been any robbing, I guess it was that gang that's done it. They look like a crowd of rustlers. I'm glad we didn't tell them anything. That galoot they're after will have time to get safe to Thompson."

"And this pouch?" said Frank.

"I guess there's something valuable in it, and he chucked it over the wall because he expected those rustlers to ride him down,"

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said Bob shrewdly. "I reckon we ought to keep it for him."

"If he's an honest man, I suppose he'll come back for it when he's clear of that gang," said Frank.

"Sure!"

"Hallo, there's the bell!"

The Cedar Creek fellows went in at the gates, and Frank Richards put the buckskin pouch into an inside pocket. Exactly what to do with it was a question, but he felt that he was bound to keep it until the owner turned up—if he ever did.

During afternoon lessons the thoughts of some of the fellows in Miss Meadows' class were wandering a little. Frank Richards & Co. could not help thinking of the mysterious horseman who had fled past the school, and wondering whether he had escaped his pursuers.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Mysterious Pouch!

FRANK RICHARDS & Co. came out of the backwoods school after lessons, and crossed to the corral for their horses. There was a thoughtful expression on Frank's handsome face.

"You fellows in a hurry to get home?" he asked.

"Nope," answered Bob. "I reckon I know what's in your mind, Franky."

"I'd like to know what became of that chap," confessed Frank. "We might as well ride home by way of Thompson, and see whether anything has been heard of him there."

"Good idea!" said Beauclerc.

And instead of taking the homeward route, the three chums rode up the trail towards the frontier town—the way the fugitive and his pursuers had ridden some hours before.

They could not help feeling keenly curious about the strange affair, and they were interested in the fate of the fugitive.

A good many of the Cedar Creek fellows went home by way of the Thompson Trail, but Frank Richards & Co. were first. They rode at a good pace up the trail. Shortly before reaching the spot where the Hillcrest path branched off, Bob Lawless suddenly drew in his horse.

"I guess there's been trouble here," he said.

"What?"

"Look!"

Close by the side of the trail, half hidden by frosty thickets, lay the dead carcass of a horse.

The chums of Cedar Creek dismounted at once.

The carcass was frozen hard, and on the frozen hide it was easy to see where two bullets had struck the unfortunate animal.

"Shot down from behind," said Bob Lawless, in a low voice. "This isn't one of the greaser's critters. I guess it's the critter ridden by that galoot who was levanting, Frank."

"Then they caught him up," said Beauclerc.

"They came near enough to shoot his horse. And I guess he wouldn't have much chance on foot."

"Then what's become of him?"

"Goodness knows!"

The chums' faces were very grave now.

What tragedy had taken place under the frost-bound timber while they had been seated quietly in class at Cedar Creek?

"I guessed that those greasers were a gang of rustlers, from their looks," muttered Bob. "They shot down his horse, and—let's look."

It was not easy to pick up signs on the frosty trail. But here and there, where there was mud in the ruts, Bob's keen eyes read the sign.

"There's been a struggle here," he said. "You can see where they've tramped to and fro. The larches are torn, too. The fellow put up a good fight against the crowd of them."

"But they got him," said Frank.

"Looks like it."

"If there was a struggle, it shows that he has not been killed. They could have shot him as easily as the horse."

"I guess so."

"They must have wanted to kidnap him," said Frank in perplexity. "But what on earth for?"

"Ask me another!" said Bob, utterly puzzled. "We don't even know who the galoot was, or whether he was a greaser like themselves. There's no sign of him about here. They must have taken him away with them."

"Then they never went on to Thompson?"

"I guess not!"

There was a clatter of hoofs on the trail, and the chums of Cedar Creek started and spun round. But it was only Chunky Todgers who came in sight, trotting home from school on his fat little pony.

Chunky jumped down at the sight of the three chums gathered round the dead horse.

"Oh, Jerusalem!" exclaimed Chunky. "I've seen that critter before. It's that galoot who nearly rode me down!"

"The man the greasers were after?"

"Sure!"

"That settles it!" said Bob. "We'd better get on to Thompson and let the sheriff know. You'd better come, Chunky."

And the schoolboys rode on into Thompson Town, and stopped at the sheriff's house.

Mr. Henderson, the sheriff of Thompson, listened to their tale with considerable surprise.

"I guess nothing's been heard of the gang in the town," he said. "But you've done quite right to come to me. You say you never saw the man who was escaping?"

"Only a Stetson hat, over the fence—"

"I saw him!" interrupted Chunky Todgers. "I was in the trail, and he nearly rode me down!"

"What was he like, Todgers?"

"A big galoot, with a long beard," said Chunky. "He was a white man, too—not a greaser. I saw that. That's all I saw. He was past me like a flash."

"I guess I'll make inquiries about him," said the sheriff. "He may have got into the town on foot. It's queer his throwing his pouch over the school wall. Looks as if he expected to be run down, and was anxious to save it."

"What ought I to do with it, sir?" asked Frank.

"Let me see it."
Frank Richards laid the buckskin pouch on the sheriff's table. Mr. Henderson laid aside his pipe, and took up the pouch.

"I guess there may be some clue to the man inside—perhaps his name," he said. "I'll see."

He unfastened the cord and opened the pouch.

The chums of Cedars Creek watched him breathlessly.

From the buckskin pouch a shining object rolled out on the table, and Bob Lawless uttered an exclamation.

"Gold!"

"My hat!"

It was a gold nugget of almost pure metal. It glistered as it lay on the table. The sheriff picked it up and weighed it in his hand.

"Six ounces, at least," he said. "Nearly pure metal, too. I guess that nugget's worth a hundred dollars."

"Oh, Jerusalem!" murmured Chunky Todgers.

"There's something else—"

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The second article from the pouch was a fragment of dressed buckskin, about ten inches square. It was of a whitish colour, and on the surface what looked like a map was drawn. The sheriff regarded it with a puzzled look.

"Nothing else hyer," he said. "A gold nugget and a map—that's the lot. Nothing to learn from that." The sheriff replaced the nugget and the map in the pouch, and refastened the cord. "I guess you'd better keep this, Richards, in case the man turns up to claim it. It's pretty clear that he threw it away to save it from the greasers. Take care of it. The map may be of value, and the nugget certainly is."

Frank Richards replaced the pouch in his pocket in great wonder. The schoolboys took their leave of the sheriff. The matter was in his hands now, and there was no doubt that immediate search would be made for the hapless rider who had fled from the Californians.

"I say, Franky—" Chunky Todgers began, as the schoolboys rode past Gunten's store in the main street of Thompson.

"Well, Chunky?"

"Old Gunten would buy that nugget. He buys from the miners, you know—"

"It's not mine, ass!"

"The man chucked it at you, you know," said Chunky argumentatively. "He hasn't come back for it. So it's yours, you know."

"Fathed!"

"But if you ain't satisfied that it's yours—"

"I'm not!"

"Then you can hand it to me," suggested Chunky Todgers. "You can keep the old map—I don't want that. You hand me the nugget—"

"What?"

"And I'll take the whole responsibility," said Chunky Todgers generously.

Frank Richards laughed.

"I'll keep the nugget and the responsibility, too!" he remarked.

"Now, look here, Richards—" began Chunky persuasively.

But the chums of Cedar Creek turned into the homeward trail, and rode away, and Chunky's persuasions were lost on the desert air.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

An Unexpected Visitor!

FRANK RICHARDS & Co. thought a good deal about the strange affair during the following days.

They were keen for news of the long-bearded man Chunky had seen, and of the four greasers who had pursued him.

But there was no news.

Beyond the body of the horse, frozen in the trail, not a trace remained of either pursued or pursuers.

The sheriff had investigated the affair, so far as he could. It was certain that Carlos Cabrera and his followers had not entered the town. Since they had ridden away from the gates of Cedar Creek School no eye seemed to have fallen on them.

Neither had the long-bearded man been seen.

The horse remained, dead in the trail, but the rider had vanished.

Every day Frank Richards expected the stranger to arrive at Cedar Creek to reclaim the buckskin pouch he had tossed over the school wall in his flight. But no one came.

The pouch, with its contents, was safely locked up in Frank Richards' room at the Lawless ranch. There it awaited the claim of its owner.

But the owner had disappeared as completely and mysteriously as the swarthy rascals who had run him down.

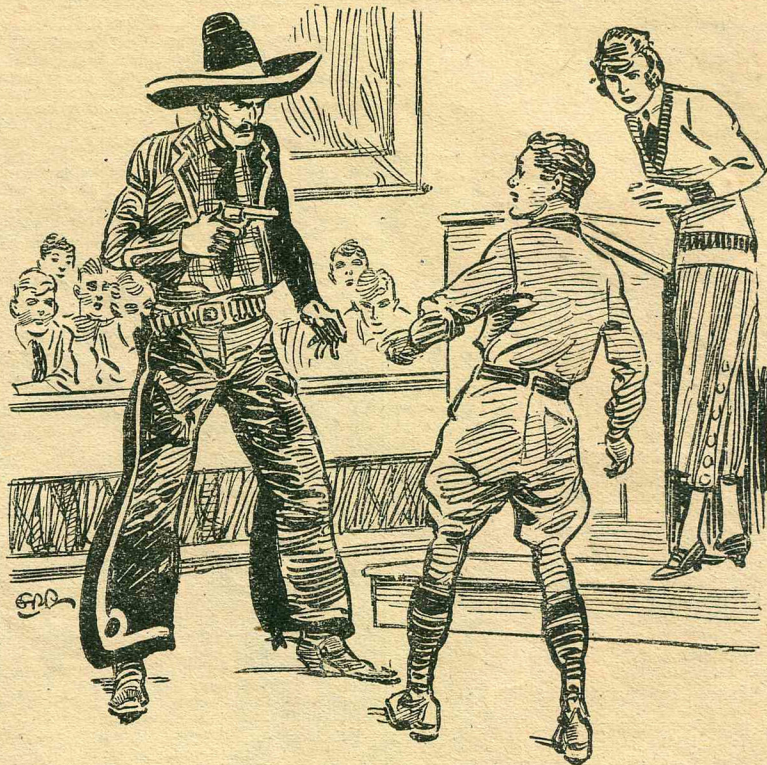
The woods had been searched for a good distance on either side of the trail, but without result.

If the fugitive had fallen in his fight with the greasers, his body should have been found, but there was no trace of it.

Amazing as it seemed, it appeared certain that the long-bearded stranger had been seized and kidnapped by the swarthy quartette. With their prisoner, they had vanished from the Thompson Valley.

Whence and why they had come, and whether they were gone, remained a mystery.

After a week had elapsed Frank Richards & Co. debated whether they had a right to look upon the buckskin bag as their own, and to examine the map, which excited their curiosity a great deal. Bob Lawless suggested that it might be the map of the



HELD UP IN CLASS! The scarred Californian made a stride towards Frank Richards, his hand diving into his hip-pocket. His hand came out again with a revolver in it, and Frank gave a start as the deadly tube looked him in the face. "Hand over the pouch, Senorito Richards!" said the Californian. (See Chapter 4.)

claim where the nugget had been found, and Bob's suggestion seemed probable enough. But, after some discussion, the chums decided that the unknown ought to be given a chance of reclaiming his property. Mr. Lawless was also of that opinion.

"Keep it for a month, Frank," the rancher said to his nephew. "If the man doesn't turn up in that time, I guess you can consider that he's not coming back."

And Frank Richards assented.

After the first week, however, there was news, though it was vague enough. A settler near Silver Creek had been awakened in the night by a bunch of horsemen riding past his log cabin, and he had looked out, and seen five riders in the moonlight, two of them mounted on one horse. They had ridden on and disappeared, and nothing seemed to have been seen of them.

"It was the greasers, and they had the man with them, a prisoner," was Bob Lawless' opinion. "If they passed Silver Creek, they were going south—back towards the border. They're over the line, in the States, long before this. The puzzle is, what they ever came up into Canada for. I guess we shall never know."

"This chap may have belonged to this section," said Frank. "May have been a Canadian. But what did the greasers want with him?"

"The map!" said Beauclerc quietly.

"If it's the map of a gold-mine down in California—" said Bob Lawless breathlessly.

"It's likely enough."

"And the greasers wanted to jump the claim. I shouldn't wonder! By gum," said Bob, "if the galoot doesn't turn up, we're at liberty to look at the map, and use it, if there's any good in it! But we'll give him time, as the popper says."

Another week passed by, and the affair had been almost forgotten by most of the Cedar Creek fellows. But it was suddenly brought back to their minds.

Cedar Creek was at lessons one morning, when there was a clatter of hoofs in the playground, and a rider halted at the door of the schoolhouse. A few minutes later Black Sally opened the school-room door, and her ebony face looked in.

Miss Meadows glanced round impatiently. The Canadian schoolmistress did not like interruptions in lesson-time.

"Genelman to see missy!" announced Sally. "Tell him I cannot see anyone at present!" answered Miss Meadows sharply. "He may call after twelve o'clock!"

But Black Sally was pushed aside the next moment, and a swarthy man, with a scarred cheek, strode into the school-room.

Frank Richards started from his seat.

"The Californian!" he exclaimed breathlessly.

"By gum!" murmured Bob Lawless. "It's Carlos Cabrera come back!"

The chums of Cedar Creek stared blankly at the scarred Californian.

They had been half expecting the owner of the buckskin pouch to turn up at the school sooner or later, but certainly they had not expected to see Carlos Cabrera there. But here he was.

Cabrera did not glance at the chums. He did not observe them among the crowd of boys and girls in Miss Meadows' class. He took off his sombrero politely to Miss Meadows.

"Senorita—" he began.

Miss Meadows interrupted him.

"You have no right to enter the school room, sir! I can't see you during lessons. Kindly retire at once!"

The Californian smiled.

"My business will not wait, madam!" he answered. "But I shall not keep you more than a few minutes. Something that belongs to me is in this school, and I have come to claim it!"

"I do not understand you!" said Miss Meadows tartly.

"I will explain, senorita," said Cabrera smoothly. "Two weeks since a buckskin pouch was thrown over the school wall by a horseman in passing. Doubtless it is still here. It is my property, and I have called for it!"

"Oh! Richards!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Come here!"

Frank Richards came out before the class. Miss Meadows had heard, of course, the story of the buckskin pouch.

"You heard what this gentleman has said!" exclaimed Miss Meadows. "You have the article in question, Richards?"

"Yes, Miss Meadows."
"Please give it to the owner, then."

"I've been waiting for the owner to claim it, Miss Meadows," said Frank quietly. "But this man is not the owner."

"How do you know that?"

"The man who threw it over the wall was escaping from this rotter and his friends!" exclaimed Frank. "This man is Cabrera, the Californian, the man the sheriff wants! He wouldn't dare to show himself in the street at Thompson."

"I guess not!" exclaimed Bob Lawless.

Miss Meadows looked perplexed.

"This man has called for it," she said.

"How does he know that it was thrown over the school wall?" exclaimed Frank. "He did not know when he was here a fortnight ago."

"The man it belongs to has told me, and has sent me for it," said the Californian smoothly, though his black eyes glinted at Frank Richards.

Frank's lips curled.

"It's pretty well known that you and your gang kidnapped the man, and that you've taken him away from this section," he answered. "Let the man speak for himself. Where is he?"

"That is not your business, nino! Your business is to hand me the pouch!"

"I will do that when the sheriff tells me you are entitled to it," answered Frank. "You can call on Mr. Henderson."

"He will be glad to see you!" grinned Bob Lawless.

"I am here for the pouch!" said the Californian, setting his teeth. "I shall not leave without it, now that I know in whose hands it is!"

"You won't get it from me!" answered Frank Richards disdainfully.

Miss Meadows nodded assent.

"You are right, Richards. This man evidently has no claim to it. You will keep it."

"Yes, Miss Meadows."

"Go back to your place!"

"Stop!"

The scarred Californian made a stride towards Frank Richards, his hand diving into his hip-pocket. His hand came out again with a revolver in it, and Frank Richards gave a start as the deadly tube looked him in the face.

"Hand over the pouch, Senorito Richards!" said the Californian, with a sneering grin. "I am not to be trifled with! Hand it over!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Cabrera's Defeat!

MISS MEADOWS stood transfixed. Frank Richards' face paled a little, but he faced the swartly ruffian calmly. The class looked on, spellbound. It was an amazing scene in the school-room of Cedar Creek, a scene from a lawless Californian mining-camp transferred to the quiet school-room. The boys and girls in Miss Meadows' class could scarcely believe their eyes. But the Californian was in deadly earnest. His eyes glinted savagely at Frank Richards over the levelled revolver, and his dusky finger was on the trigger.

"Hand it over! You hear me?"

"I could not hand it over if I wished," answered Frank Richards quietly. "It is not here!"

"You lie!" exclaimed Cabrera savagely. "Where is it?"

"Locked up at home."

"Carambo! And where is your home?"

"At the Lawless Ranch."

Cabrera muttered a savage oath. He could see that Frank Richards was speaking the truth, and it was an unexpected check.

"I must have it!" he said. "You will come with me, nino! I shall hold you till the pouch is delivered up to me! Your people, perhaps, will be glad to make the exchange!"

Frank stared at him.

"You are not in California now," he said. "You are in Canada, where rustlers of your sort are soon rounded up! You had better get out while you have the time!"

The Californian did not reply, but he stepped towards Frank Richards, the revolver still in his dusky hand. It was evident that the desperado was in deadly earnest, and that he counted upon the fear of his weapon to prevent interference.

But in that he was mistaken.

Bob Lawless, at his desk, had gripped a heavy ruler. As the scarred ruffian stepped towards Frank, Bob's hand came up with the ruler in it, and the next instant it was whizzing through the air.

It struck the ruffian on the side of the head with a crash.

Cabrera uttered a yell, and staggered blindly, half-stunned by the sudden crashing blow.

He was not given time to recover.

Bob Lawless was upon him with a spring like a lynx, and Beaulerc was only a second behind.

Almost before the ruffian knew what was happening, Bob's grasp was on his arm, dragging it down so that he could not use the pistol. Beaulerc seized the other arm. Frank Richards was prompt to back up his chums. As they grasped the reeling ruffian, Frank sprang forward, and struck out with

both fists, planting them fairly in the swartly face.

The Californian lurched back, and went with a crash to the floor, Bob and Beaulerc clinging to him like cats.

"Good heavens!" panted Miss Meadows. "Pile on him!" gasped Bob Lawless.

"I've got his shooter! Pile on the skunk!" He wrested the revolver from the nervous grasp of the ruffian as he sprawled on the floor.

"Carambo!"

"Collar him!" panted Frank.

Three or four fellows rushed out from the desks, and Mr. Shimney and Mr. Shepherd, who had been gazing spellbound at the scene, came rushing up.

The Californian was assailed on all sides. He struggled desperately in the midst of his assailants.

"Pile in!" roared Bob Lawless.

With a desperate effort, Carlos Cabrera dragged himself to his feet, and wrenched away from the grasp of the excited schoolboys.

He made a bound for the open door of the school-room, evidently thinking now only of escape.

"After him!" yelled Bob.

"Boys—" gasped Miss Meadows.

But for once the voice of the Cedar Creek schoolmistress was unheeded.

In a yelling mob the Cedar Creek fellows rushed in pursuit of the panting Californian.

He reeled in the doorway, and their grasp was almost upon him. He recovered himself and bounded out into the porch.

"After him!"

The Californian's horse was standing outside the porch, where he had left it. Fortunately for him, it was not tethered. With a breathless leap, Cabrera threw himself into the saddle, and whirled the horse round.

The mob of schoolboys, rushing out of the porch, backed away from the lashing hoofs as Cabrera whirled round his horse. The next moment he was riding for the gates.

The gate had swung shut after his entrance, and now it was closed.

"We'll have him yet!" panted Frank Richards. "Come on!"

But the Californian did not attempt to open the gate. His horse rose to the leap, and cleared the gates with a bound. The hoofs clattered down on the frosty trail outside.

The next moment the ruffian was riding away furiously up the trail into the timber.

Bob Lawless dragged the gate open, and the schoolboys rushed out. But the scarred ruffian was already twenty yards distant, and riding fiercely.

For a moment or two the fleeing rider was seen, and then the timber swallowed him up from sight.

Carlos Cabrera was gone!

That day and the following days armed men were searching up and down the Thompson Valley for the scarred Californian.

But he was not found.

Evidently he had ridden, without stopping to rest, on the southern trail for the border, and he was gone.

He was not likely to return. His description was known far and wide in the valley, and he would have met with short shrift if he had reappeared on the banks of the Thompson River.

His desperate attempt to possess himself of the mysterious map was not repeated. The map remained in the hands of Frank Richards, and its possession was to lead Frank into the strangest adventure he had known since his coming to the school in the Backwoods.

THE END.

(Don't miss reading "BRONZE BILL'S LEGACY!"—next Tuesday's Grand Long Complete Tale of Frank Richards & Co., the chums of the School in the Backwoods.)

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