

BOB LAWLESS' FOLLY!

Frank Richards had never known his chum Bob Lawless to be anything but level-headed and sensible, but when a real operatic company rolls into Thompson, Frank learns another side of his Canadian cousin's character!



Another Stirring adventure of FRANK RICHARDS & Co., the Cheery Chums of the School in the Backwoods!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Only a Rehearsal!

"L AISSEZ moi passer!" It was a woman's voice, rising to a scream. Frank Richards & Co. pulled in their horses quickly.

The chums of Cedar Creek were riding home from school at an easy trot on the grassy trail that wound through the timber. On either side of the trail the big trees and thick underwoods rose like a wall of green, glimmering in the afternoon sunshine. Suddenly, from behind the trees, came that shrill cry.

The three chums halted instantly. In another instant they had jumped from their horses.

"This way!" exclaimed Bob Lawless.

The cry of a woman in peril was more than enough to draw the Cedar Creek chums to the spot. They gripped their riding whips and ran into the timber, Bob Lawless leading. Frank Richards and Vere Beauclerc were close behind him.

With a rush, they came through the screen of larches, into an open glade shadowed by great cedars.

The sight that burst on their eyes in the glade was so strange and startling that they halted for a moment, staring.

A woman in a gaily coloured costume stood in a half-crouching attitude, her big black eyes fixed upon a man in dilapidated attire, with a knife in his hand.

The man looked more like a Spanish bravo in a play than anyone the chums had ever seen in that quiet and law-abiding section of British Columbia.

He looked as if about to spring like a panther at the highly coloured dame. His swarthy face expressed the utmost ferocity.

"Carmen!" he exclaimed in a hoarse voice.

Apparently that was the name of the lady.

The latter did not heed, save by turning a glance of sovereign contempt upon the swarthy bravo.

Then her glance turned in surprise upon the three schoolboys who had burst through the underwoods.

The bravo did not seem to see them. With his long Spanish knife gripped in his dusky hand, he closed in on the lady, evidently about to strike.

With a spring Bob Lawless reached him.

Before the knife was within a yard of the threatened dame Bob had struck the bravo a terrific blow, and the recipient thereof went reeling and spinning across the grass.

"Whoooooop!"

That was what the bravo yelled as he went down—rather an unexpected exclamation from a Spanish bravo. "Carambo!" would have been more in keeping with the character.

"Pile on him!" yelled Bob.

Frank and Beauclerc were not slow in piling on the bravo.

They were upon him as he rolled in the grass, and, a knee on his ribs and another on his neck, pinned him there. Bob Lawless kicked the knife into the thickets.

The Cedar Creek chums had been prompt to the rescue.

"All right now, miss!" exclaimed Bob breathlessly, turning to the startled dame, while his chums held the bravo pinned in the grass.

Bob anticipated an outburst of terrified thanks from the dame whose life had been so narrowly saved.

To his amazement, she burst into laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh dear! Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Lawless stood petrified.

He wondered, for a moment, whether it was hysterics, but the young lady was laughing too heartily for that. She wiped her eyes, as tears of merriment flowed from them.

"Oh dear! Oh dear! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ma'am!" stammered Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let me go, you fools!" roared the bravo, struggling under Frank Richards and Beauclerc. "You young idiots, I'll skin you! Lemme gerrup."

"You keep where you are, you ruffian!" panted Frank. "You're going to be handed over to the sheriff for this."

"What! You young fool!"

"Shut up! Kneel on his neck, Beau."

"You bet!"

"Groooooogh!"

"Please do not hurt my brother," exclaimed the young lady, checking her merriment at last.

"Your—your brother!" stammered Bob Lawless.

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"But—he was going—" stammered Bob, utterly bewildered.

"No, no! Let him get up, please, at once."

"He's dangerous, miss!" exclaimed Frank Richards.

"Ha, ha! Not at all! Don't be angry, Charley—the boys did not understand."

"Lemme gerrup!" hissed Charley.

In blank amazement, Frank Richards and Beauclerc released the bravo. He staggered to his feet, breathless and ruffled, and evidently in a towering rage.

"You silly young idiots!" he bawled. "What the thunder do you want to come butting in for?"

"I—I—we—"

"I thought this was a quiet spot for a rehearsal," gasped the young lady. "Oh dear! Never mind, Charley, you're not hurt."

"I am hurt," growled Charley. "I've had a thump like the kick of a mule! Ow!"

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"A—a—rehearsal!" babbled Bob Lawless.

The three schoolboys stood dumb-founded.

Their faces were so sheepish, that even the enraged and injured Charley grinned, as he rubbed the place where Bob's knuckles had landed.

"It's all right, Clarissa," he mumbled. "Where's the knife? What have you young jays done with my dagger?"

"Oh crumbs!" murmured Frank Richards.

Never in all his youthful career had Frank felt, and looked, so complete an ass as he felt and looked at that moment.

But really the Cedar Creek chums were not to blame.

They could not be expected to know that a company of players, on the way to Thompson Town, had camped in the timber, and that the prima donna and the leading gentleman had selected that quiet and secluded glade for a rehearsal of the final scene in "Carmen." In fact, it was probable that they had never heard of Bizet's opera at all.

"Oh, my hat!" said Beauclerc. "I—I think we'd better slide."

"What-ho!" murmured Frank.

The two schoolboys backed into the underwood and disappeared. They felt that that was the wisest step to take, in the peculiar circumstances.

But Bob Lawless lingered.

He was feeling quite as big an ass as his comrades; but he felt, too, that some apology was due to the man he had knocked spinning with all the strength of his arm.

"I—I—I—" he stammered.

"Where's that pesky knife?" hooted Charlie. "I don't want to lose that knife! Props are dear."

"I—I guess I'll find it," mumbled Bob.

The rancher's son retrieved the property knife he had kicked into the thicket. Charley grunted as the schoolboy handed it to him.

"I—I'm sorry I slogged you," stammered Bob.

"You young ass!"

"We—we were riding by on the trail, and—and we heard the lady scream, you know—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Carmen.

Bob's unhappy face was crimson.

"I—I'm sorry," he mumbled.

And he backed away.

"Stop a moment," Miss Clarissa came towards the rancher's son with a charming smile, and held out a very shapely hand. "My dear boy, of course you did not understand—and it was very brave of you—wasn't it, Charley?"

"Ow!" was Charley's reply, as he rubbed his bruise.

"Don't be cross, Charley!"

"Yow-yow!"

Evidently Charley was cross.

"It was very brave of you," continued Miss Clarissa, as Bob shyly took her hand. "If I had been really in danger, I am sure you would have saved me. So I am very much obliged to you. What is your name?"

"Bob Lawless!" stammered Bob.

"Mine is Clarissa de Vere!" said the young lady, with another charming smile. "You must come and see us in Thompson—"

"In—in Thompson!"

"Yes. The company stays in Thompson for a week," said Miss de Vere. "We have taken Gunten's Rooms for the show. You must come and see us there!"

"I—I will!" stammered Bob.

And then he escaped.

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THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Clarissa!

FRANK RICHARDS and Beauclerc were waiting on the trail with the horses when Bob joined them.

Bob's face was crimson as he came out into the trail; and Frank and Beauclerc also looked very flushed.

They looked at one another in silence for some moments. Then Frank Richards grinned.

"After all, we did the right thing," he said. "We—we couldn't know that it was the blessed play actors."

"Of—of course, we couldn't!" agreed Beauclerc. "I don't remember any strolling company coming up the valley before. I've seen some down in Kamloops."

"Bother them!" said Frank.

"Oh dear!" mumbled Bob. "I guess we put our foot in it and no mistake! I hit that chap an awful sockdolager!"

"Ha, ha!"

"Miss de Vere must think we're awful asses; but she was very nice about it, all the same," said Bob.

"Is that her name?"

"Yes. She told me—"

"What a stunning name!" grinned Frank Richards. "But I believe theatrical folk generally have stunning names."

"It's her real name, of course," said Bob.

"More likely Huggings or Wiggins. But De Vere sounds better on the play-bills!" said Frank, laughing.

"Rot!"

Bob Lawless spoke with unaccustomed sharpness, and his chums looked at him rather curiously.

"Hallo! What's the row, Bob?" asked Frank. "Not waxy?"

"No, you ass! But it's her real name, of course; and a stunning name, too—Clarissa de Vere!" said Bob. "Just seems to suit her, somehow!"

"D-d-does it?"

"I—I wish I hadn't made such a goat of myself before her! She will think it funny—"

"Well, it is funny; no mistake about that!" said Frank. "I never felt such an ass in my life!"

"Same here!" said Beauclerc.

"But—but we weren't to blame," said Bob. "If she'd really been in danger, I'd have done anything—"

He broke off abruptly.

"Let's get off," he said.

"Right-ho!"

The chums of Cedar Creek remounted their horses and rode away down the trail.

Frank and Beauclerc had very quickly recovered their serenity after the unfortunate adventure; but Bob Lawless remained plunged in deep thought. He did not speak as they rode along the grassy track.

At the fork of the trail they parted, and Beauclerc rode away to his home, Frank and Bob keeping on to the ranch. Frank made several remarks as he trotted over the prairie with his cousin, but Bob did not answer them. He did not seem to hear them.

"What's the trouble, Bob?" Frank exclaimed at last.

"Eh? Nothing!" answered Bob, coming out of a brown study with a start. "What do you mean?"

"You've said hardly a word."

"Nothing to say."

"You generally have enough to say," said Frank, with a smile. "I suppose you haven't fallen in love with the prima donna, have you?"

Bob's face was flooded with scarlet. He did not answer, but gave his

horse a touch of the whip, and broke into a gallop towards the ranch.

Frank Richards stared after him.

He had made his remark carelessly, without the faintest notion that he was hitting the right nail on the head. Hitherto, Bob Lawless had always been too level-headed a fellow to allow fantastic ideas to come into his mind. The rancher's son was the very reverse of namby-pamby; and he had been immensely tickled on the occasion when Chunky Todgers had been "mashed" on Molly Lawrence, of Cedar Creek. But now—

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Frank.

He gazed after his chum, and burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Frank could not help it.

The bare idea of his sturdy, matter-of-fact cousin being struck by the charms of an operatic lady was too much for him. He yelled.

Bob Lawless looked back over his shoulder, with a frowning brow, and then urged on his horse faster.

"Wait for me, Bob!" shouted Frank.

But Bob did not wait. He galloped on towards the ranch without looking back again.

Frank Richards rode hard, but he did not overtake his Canadian cousin before the Lawless Ranch was reached.

He did not see Bob again till supper.

Then Bob Lawless was very quiet and subdued, and he carefully avoided meeting Frank's amused glances.

It was not till they went to bed that he spoke on the subject. The two cousins had turned in, and it was after the candle was out that Bob sat up in bed and called across to Frank:

"Franky!"

"Hallo!"

"Don't be such a silly ass!"

"Eh?" Frank Richards sat up. "What's the matter now? How am I an ass?"

"That rot you were talking—"

"Only a joke, old chap!" chuckled Frank. "But if the cap fits, you know—"

"Fathead!"

"All serene!"

"A chap can admire a beautiful girl, I suppose," said Bob, "without playing the goat like Chunky Todgers?"

"Of course he can!" said Frank assuming a great gravity of tone. "You simply admire the lady's beauty—"

"That's it!"

"And charm of manner—"

"Exactly!"

"And sylph-like grace—"

"You—you noticed how graceful she was, Frank?"

"Not specially; but I dare say she was. What a beautiful colour she had, too!"

"Oh! You noticed her lovely complexion?"

"Yes, rather! It looked almost real!"

"Almost real!" howled Bob.

"Yes; it was done very cleverly, wasn't it?"

"You thumping idiot—"

"Eh?"

"It was genuine, you dummy!"

"Genuine grease-paint?" asked Frank.

"Genuine complexion, you idiot!"

"How do you know?" demanded Frank.

"I—I—I'm sure of it, of course! I never thought you were such a thundering idiot, Frank!"

"We live and learn, you know!" chuckled Frank. "I may say the same. I never thought you were such a thundering idiot, Bob, old scout!"

"Br-r-r-r!"

There was silence in the room for some time, and Frank Richards settled down to sleep.

But there was no sleep for Frank Richards just yet. Bob's voice broke the silence.

"I say, Frank—"

"Hallo!" yawned Frank Richards sleepily.

"Did you notice her eyes?"

"Eh? Those eyes?"

"Clarissa's."

"Who the thump's Clarissa?"

"I—I mean Miss de Vere."

"Oh, my hat! If you mean Miss de Vere, you'd better say Miss de Vere. You mustn't call young ladies by their Christian names, even when you rescue them from a property dagger at a rehearsal."

"Oh, go and chop chips!"

Frank Richards chuckled, and laid his head on the pillow again. He was just sinking into sweet slumber when Bob Lawless' voice was heard again. Apparently Bob was not thinking of sleep.

"Franky!"

"M-mmm-m-mm!"

"Are you asleep, Frank?"

"Grooh! Oh, no! Wharrer mar-rer?"

"How old do you think she is?"

"She? What—who? Molly?"

"No, you ass—Clarissa!"

"Eh? I don't know! About forty, I suppose!"

"Forty!" yelled Bob.

"I suppose so! Go to sleep, and let me!"

"You chump!"

Snore!

"You silly monkey!"

Snore!

And Bob Lawless gave it up.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

A Serious Case!

BOB LAWLESS ate his breakfast the next morning with his usual hearty appetite. The extraordinary fancy that had come into his head had not affected that department. He looked very sheepish when he met Frank's glance, and he avoided conversation on the way to the school that day.

Vere Beauclerc met his chums at the fork in the trail, as usual. He had news for them.

"I've seen our play-acting friends again," he said, as they trotted on towards Cedar Creek School.

Bob Lawless looked at him eagerly.

"You've seen her?" he exclaimed.

"Her! Who?" asked Beauclerc, puzzled.

"There's only one 'her' in Canada for Bob," explained Frank Richards.

"He's thinking of Miss de Vere."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Franky, don't be a bigger ass than you were born!" said Bob crossly. "That's big enough, goodness knows. Where did you see her, Cherub—I—I mean them, of course?"

"The company's camped near our cabin," explained Beauclerc. "They've got tents and things, and a couple of wagons. A rather dusty lot. They've been giving a performance at Cedar Camp in the big room at the hotel, and all the cattlemen came. I don't think the Cedar Camp chaps know quite what to make of operatic performances."

"What lingo are they given in?" asked Frank, with interest.

"Oh, English!" said Beauclerc, laughing. "It wouldn't be much use springing French and Italian on Cedar Camp. Even in English the galoots don't know what to make of it. I asked Bocus Bill—he went. He said they were all



BOB LAWLESS TO THE RESCUE! With his long Spanish knife gripped in his dusky hand the bravo closed in on the lady, evidently about to strike. With a spring Bob Lawless reached him and struck out. The bravo went reeling and spinning across the grass. (See Chapter 1.)

howling, and there was a band. That was all he knew, and he couldn't make head or tail of it; but there was a galoot he felt like lynching—some bull-fighter in the play. He's seen bull-fights in Mexico, and he don't like them."

"They were rehearsing in French yesterday," said Bob. "I suppose they put it in English for the frontier towns. I'm going to see them perform at Thompson when it comes off."

"Everybody's sure to go, whatever it's like," said Frank. "There's precious few entertainments come up the valley from the railway. Something rather new to have grand opera in the Thompson Valley."

"Ever seen them in London," asked Bob, "before you came out here?"

Frank nodded.

"Yes; my father took me to Covent Garden once or twice in the summer holidays," he said.

"Then you can tell us all about it."

"Precious little, I'm afraid. But I don't think this company will be much like the opera company in London," grinned Frank. "They must be pretty hard up to be touring in a district like this."

"One's jolly good, at least."

"You mean the bravo we downed yesterday?"

"No, I don't!" grunted Bob. "I mean Clarissa."

And Bob rode on ahead of his comrades, and did not take part in the chat on the way to school. But at the gates of Cedar Creek he halted, and waited for his smiling chums to come up.

"None of your little jokes here!" he said warningly. "I don't want to be chipped by all the school."

"My dear chap, we'll keep it a dead secret," said Frank, with a chuckle.

"Such things are not fit subjects for

chipping. But that's only on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you don't elope without telling us first."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Beauclerc.

Bob Lawless gave his chum a ferocious look.

"You—you—you silly ass!" he spluttered.

And Bob led his horse away with a red face, and refused to speak to his comrades again before school.

Frank Richards & Co. found that the news of the operatic company had preceded them at Cedar Creek. Chunky Todgers knew all about it. He came to school through Thompson, and he had seen all the dead walls in that town plastered with bills, announcing the forthcoming arrival of the Grand European Opera Company.

Probably, there was nothing European about the company save the title. But the arrival caused a good deal of excitement. Entertainments were few and far between in the Thompson Valley, and even a travelling conjuring show was always sure of a packed audience at Gunten's Rooms.

Grand opera was a novelty, and it was sure of a plentiful attendance, though it was likely considerably to perplex the matter-of-fact citizens of Thompson.

"First performance on Saturday, at Gunten's Rooms!" said Chunky Todgers. "They're fitting up the big room ready now. There's a first-class orchestra, according to the bills. The first performance is 'Carmen.' That's queer, ain't it?"

"What's queer about it?" asked Frank.

"Well, an opera is a musical play, ain't it?" said Todgers. "I should reckon they'd find something more

romantic than carmen to sing about. Carmen—galoots like car-drivers, I suppose. What is there romantic or operatic about carmen?"

Frank chuckled. "It's a name," he said. "That's the heroine's name—a Spanish name, old chap."

"Blessed if it sounds to me like a name!" said Chunky. "I fancy you're mistaken, Richards—"

"What!"

"You'll see that it's a play about car-drivers," said Chunky Todgers confidently.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Saturday being a free day at Cedar Creek School, a good many of the fellows made up their minds to see "Carmen," at Gunten's Rooms. Tickets, it was learned from Chunky, could be obtained at Gunten's Store, over the counter, prices from a dollar upwards. Frank Richards & Co. decided to call in for tickets on their way home from school.

After lessons, they rode up the Thompson trail, and along Main Street of Thompson to Gunten's Store. There was a goodly crowd at the store, reading the announcements and discussing the forthcoming treat. Many of the citizens evidently did not know what to make of it, but most of them had determined to roll up and see what it was like. The leading lights of the operatic company had their quarters at the Occidental Hotel, the schoolboys learned, the lesser members being camped, with their wagons, on a vacant "lot" off the Main Street.

The three chums purchased dollar tickets from Mr. Gunten, and came out of the store. Frank and Beauclerc returned to their horses, which were hitched to a post outside the store, but Bob paused.

"Don't you fellows wait for me," he said, colouring.

"Oh, we'll wait," said Frank. "Do you want to get something in the store?"

"N-no."

"What is it, then?"

"I—I'm just going to stroll round to the Occidental."

Frank's eyes met Beauclerc's, and there was a simultaneous grin. At the Occidental Hotel Charles and Clarissa de Vere had taken up their quarters, with Signor Benzino, the baritone, and Monsieur Mungo, the manager.

"You want to see the chap you punched yesterday?" asked Frank.

"I—I— Well come to think of it, it would be only civil to ask him how he is," said Bob. "He must have a bruise."

"Let's go and ask after his bruise," said Beauclerc, laughing.

"You fellows needn't come—"

"My dear chap, we're as interested in Mr. de Vere's bruise as you are," said Frank Richards. "Come on!"

And the chums walked away to the Occidental, Bob with a beautifully rich complexion.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Wash-Out!

BILL TODGERS, the elder brother of Chunky, of that ilk, presided over the bar at the Occidental. William Todgers cheerfully gave the schoolboys the information they desired. Mr. and Miss de Vere were staying at the hotel; and Mr. de Vere, at that very moment, was in the smoking-room, engaged in a game of poker with Gentleman Jim. The chums went into the smoking-room and found the poker-

players by the window, in a cloud of smoke. Gentleman Jim was a "sportsman," who earned a laborious and precarious livelihood by playing cards with any "galoot" who had more money than sense—a well-known character at the Occidental. But he was not looking specially happy over this particular game. Probably in Mr. de Vere he had met a gentleman as well acquainted with the wicked pasteboards as he was himself.

Charles de Vere glanced at the schoolboys, and knitted his brows. Frank and Beauclerc remained modestly in the background, but Bob Lawless resolutely approached the poker-table.

He waited till a round was open and Gentleman Jim was shuffling the cards for a new deal. Then he addressed the tenor.

"G-good evening, Mr. de Vere."

"Oh! You again!" said Charley.

"Ye-es. I—I hope—"

"Eh?"

"I hope you haven't felt any bad effects from—from what—what happened yesterday—"

"I've got a lump like a pigeon's egg," said Mr. de Vere gruffly. "I've a good mind to boot you!"

"I say, I guess I'm awfully sorry for the—the mistake!"

"Well, it's all O.K., never mind!" said Mr. de Vere, more good-humouredly. "You can walk your chalks."

"Is—is Miss de Vere well?" asked Bob timidly.

Mr. de Vere stared at him.

"I suppose so," he answered. "No reason why she shouldn't be, that I know of."

Gentleman Jim was dealing the cards, and Mr. de Vere transferred all his attention to the game.

Bob Lawless, somewhat abashed, rejoined his chums.

Possibly Bob had hoped to see the charming lady who had thanked him so nicely in the timber after the interrupted rehearsal. But Mr. de Vere evidently did not see his drift—or did not care to see it. He became totally oblivious of the schoolboy's existence as he proceeded with the game of draw poker.

"Well, coming home, old fellow?" asked Frank Richards, suppressing a smile.

"Not yet. Don't worry!"

"But—"

"Rats!"

Bob Lawless walked out of the hotel, and his grinning chums followed him.

In the extraordinary state of affairs they were determined not to abandon their comrade, if they could help it.

In Main Street again, Bob seemed to hesitate, and Frank and Beauclerc waited patiently. Bob turned to them at last.

"You galoots mosey off home!" he said abruptly.

"But aren't you coming?"

"Nope."

"Uncle will ask—"

"Tell him I've stayed on in Thompson a bit."

"Shall I tell him about Miss de Vere?" asked Frank innocently.

"No!" howled Bob.

Frank and Beauclerc exchanged glances. There seemed nothing to be done, and they walked away towards Gunten's Store, leaving Bob outside the Occidental. Looking back from a distance, they saw him engaged in conversation with the black porter.

"Well, this is a go, old chap!" said Frank. "We can't go home and leave Bob playing the goat here on his own." Beauclerc shook his head.

"It's getting dark now," said Frank.

"What the dickens are we going to do, Beau?"

"Keep an eye on Bob," answered Beauclerc. "The silly ass is going to hang round the place and see the singer if he can. Who'd have thought Bob would ever play the ox like that?"

"Poor old Bob! He doesn't know what an ass he is!" said Frank, laughing. "I suppose we'd better keep an eye on him."

The chums walked in Main Street till darkness had quite fallen and the stars were coming out over the Thompson Valley. Then they returned in the direction of the Occidental. The front of the hotel was lighted up now, but Bob Lawless was not to be seen in the radius of light. Frank Richards approached the negro porter, who was loafing outside the porch.

"Has Bob Lawless gone in?" he asked. "You know him, Peter."

Peter grinned.

"No, sah; he not gone in," he answered. "He gib me half a dollar to tell him which Missy de Vere's room. Me point out de winder," said the black man, grinning.

"Oh, my hat!"

"The howling ass!" murmured Frank. "What did he want to know her window for?"

"Let's look for him."

"Come on!"

The chums went round the hotel, to the block of vacant ground behind. Some of the windows in the two storeys of the Occidental were lighted. Darkness lay outside, and it was not easy to see their way over the rough ground, dotted with rubbish.

But they sighted Bob suddenly.

He was standing close by a stunted cedar that stood on the vacant lot, staring up at a lighted window curtain. Evidently that window belonged to Clarissa Vere de Vere.

Bob Lawless was so rapt in his contemplation that he did not think of looking round him.

For some minutes his chums watched him from a distance of a dozen yards in the glimmering starlight.

"Well, my hat!" murmured Frank at last. "Jevver see such a silly idiot, Beau?"

"Not since Chunky was mashed on Molly Lawrence," murmured Beauclerc. "Shall we wake him up?"

"I suppose he will be ratty if we do," muttered Frank, in perplexity. "But we're not going to leave him here playing the goat, that's certain!"

"No fear!"

Frank reflected for some minutes. Bob Lawless did not stir or look round. His rapt gaze remained fixed on the lighted window. Evidently he thought his chums were far away, if he thought of them at all.

"I've got it!" whispered Frank at last.

He made Beauclerc a sign to be silent, and led the way, the Cherub following him. At the back of the Occidental was a trough for horses, with a tin bucket standing in the water. It was that which had put an idea into Frank Richards's head. He felt it was a time for drastic measures, for Bob's own sake.

"My hat!" murmured Beauclerc, as Frank filled the tin bucket and lifted it from the trough. "You're not going to—"

"Shush!"

Beauclerc, suppressing his chuckles, remained near the trough while Frank, with the bucket of water in his grasp, stole softly towards the cedar-tree where Bob was standing.

He was quite close to Bob, who

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than not, and all the time the real bird is under his nose, and you know where to find him."

"I don't exactly know——"

"You can guess."

Erroll did not answer.

"It won't do, Erroll," said Mornington. "It's not good enough. I'm speakin' as your friend—we've been friends, though you're throwin' me over now."

"No, no!"

"I say yes. You can't do it. You're goin' to the Head with what you know."

"I shall not."

"Then I'll go, with what you've told me," said Mornington coolly.

"Morny!" Erroll caught his breath. "I told you in confidence. You couldn't betray me——"

"For your own good, you know," said Morny, his lip curling.

Erroll's eyes flashed.

"Look here, Morny, this is nothing short of meddling. I stand a great deal from you—more than most fellows would stand, I think. But there is a limit."

"Have I reached the limit, old bean?" asked Morny mockingly.

"Yes. I'm my own master, I suppose?"

Then there was a pause. Mornington stood leaning on the doorpost, regarding his chum with an evil smile. Erroll made a movement to pass him, and the dandy of the Fourth detached himself from the doorpost and stood in the middle of the doorway, barring egress.

"No, you don't!" he said.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Erroll passionately.

His own temper was rising fast now.

"I mean what I say," said Mornington doggedly. "Put that bag down, and don't be a fool. You're not goin' to take anything to that young thief and get mixed up with him."

Erroll's hands clenched.

"Do you mean to say that you will stop me?" he exclaimed.

Mornington nodded coolly.

"That's exactly what I mean to say, old top!"

"Then that's enough!"

Erroll came on towards the doorway grimly. Mornington did not move.

"Will you let me pass, Morny?"

"No."

Erroll said no more, but he pushed Mornington aside, and the dandy of the Fourth staggered into the passage. He recovered himself instantly, and with a blaze in his eyes, struck at Erroll's face.

Erroll caught the blow with his left and turned it aside, and Morny struck again.

"Stop!" he said hoarsely.

There was no help for it, and Erroll struck out, and Mornington reeled and fell. Erroll passed down the passage to the stairs. He did not look back.

Mornington staggered slowly to his feet. He staggered dazedly after Erroll, disappearing down the staircase, and made a stride after him, but he stopped. With a hard, bitter look on his face, Valentine Mornington went into his study and shut the door.

THE END.

(What will be the outcome of this amazing parting of old friends? See next week's long, complete Rookwood story, entitled: "His Chum's Betrayal!")

"PLAYING THE GOAT!"
(Continued from page 6.)

heard and saw nothing. As Frank came within a yard of him he heard him murmur:

"Clarissa!"

Frank Richards raised the bucket quietly.

The murmured name had scarcely passed Bob's lips when there was a sudden "swosh" of swishing water.

The contents of the bucket came over Bob Lawless in a drenching flood.

Swoooosh!

"Groooooogh! Oh! Ooooooh!"

Frank Richards fled in the darkness, chuckling breathlessly. He tossed the bucket back into the trough, caught Beauclerc by the arm, and ran.

From behind, as the chums retreated, came a wild sound of gasping, gurgling, and spluttering.

"Gooh! Hooh! Ooooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Frank and Beauclerc scudded back to Gunten's Store, where the horses were tethered.

Bob was only a few minutes after them.

He came hurrying up to the horses, drenched, and evidently in a furious temper, and he started as he saw his chums.

"You still here?" he ejaculated.

"We thought we'd wait for you," said Frank demurely. "Hallo! You look rather wet!"

"It hasn't been raining," said Beauclerc innocently. "Have you been in the river, Bob?"

"Groogh! No!"

Bob Lawless gave his chums a swift, suspicious look. But two grave and bland faces met his gaze.

"Some rotter chucked a bucket of water over me!" said Bob, breathing hard. "The skunk bolted before I could see who it was! Let's get 'ome! I'm soaked!"

"Too bad!" murmured Frank Richards. "Where were you, Bob?"

"Oh, hanging about! Let's get off!"

And the chums of Cedar Creek mounted and rode out of Thompson. They rode home by the Beauclercs' cabin, where Vere left his comrades. Bob and Frank galloped on towards the ranch without a word. When they arrived home, Bob Lawless hurried up to his room to change. Frank Richards followed him.

"Bob!" he said, as Bob Lawless towelled his damp head.

"Well?" grunted Bob crossly.

"Don't you think it's time you gave up playing the goat, old chap? Anybody would think you were potty, watching a window at the Occidental like——"

Bob jumped.

"You—you saw me? Then—then it was you? Why, I'll—I'll——"

He made a rush across the room, and Frank, with a yell of laughter, whipped out of the door and fled for his life. Evidently Bob did not think yet that it was time to give up playing the goat.

THE END.

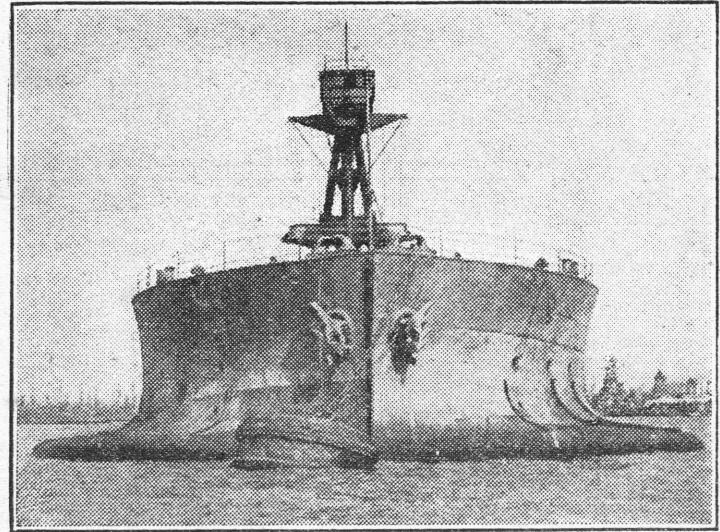
(Another splendid, long, complete story of the chums of Cedar Creek in next Tuesday's issue. Don't miss reading it.)

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