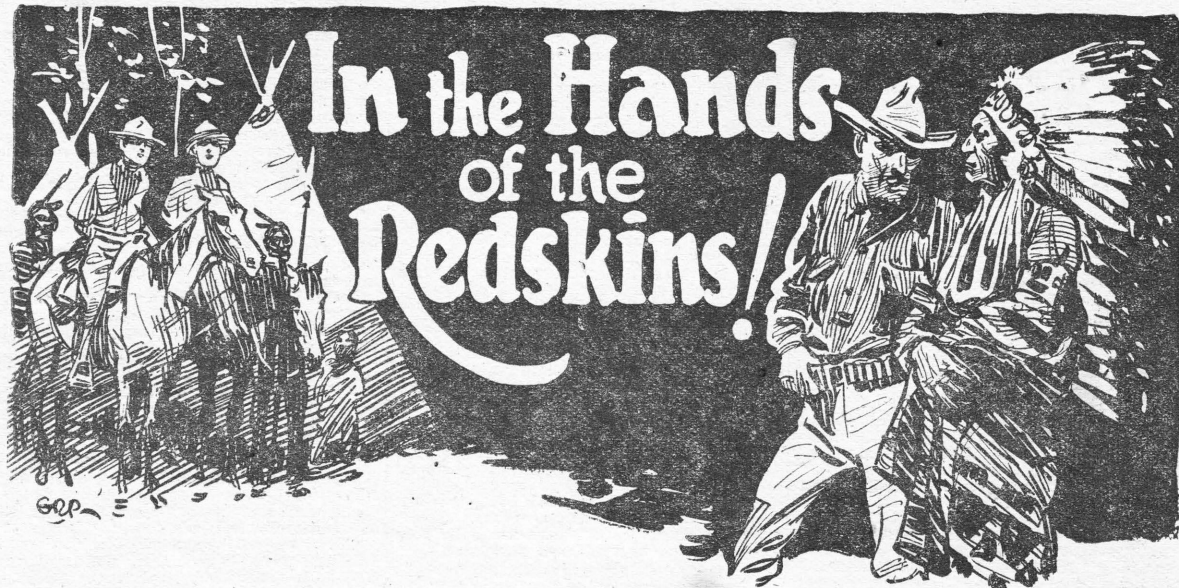


THE CEDAR CREEK CHUMS' PERIL!

Small things lead to big things—the finding of a stone jar on the prairie leads Frank Richards & Co. into a long chain of perilous adventures!



Another Stirring Tale of the perilous adventures of FRANK RICHARDS & CO., of Cedar Creek, on the plains of the Wild West!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. The North-West's M.P.

"HOLD ON, sergeant!" Six men in scarlet coats, with carbines at their saddles, were riding up the trail at Thompson. Vere Beauclerc caught the glimmer of the red coats in the sunshine from the distance as he came riding through the tall grass towards the trail.

The schoolboy of Cedar Creek put spurs to his horse at once, and came on at a gallop. He came out into the trail a dozen yards ahead of the troopers, and pulled in his horse, waving his hand to the scarlet-coated riders.

"Hold on!" The bronzed sergeant checked his horse, his men following his example.

Beauclerc rode closer. "Well?" said the sergeant laconically. "I've news for you," said Beauclerc. "You remember me, Sergeant Lasalle? I saw you when you came to Cedar Creek School to see Miss Meadows some time ago."

The sergeant nodded. "I guess I remember you," he answered. "What's your news?"

"About the whisky smugglers—" Sergeant Lasalle eyed the schoolboy keenly under his thick brows.

"How did you know we were after the bootleggers?" he asked sharply. Beauclerc smiled.

"I didn't know. I was riding to Thompson to tell the sheriff when I sighted you. So I'm going to tell you instead—see?"

"I see. Go ahead!" "We came on their trail this morning—"

"We! Who?" "Frank Richards and Bob Lawless and myself—we came on their trail, and on a whisky-jar they had dropped from a loose pack. Bob guessed it was a gang of bootleggers, and I came back to tell the sheriff about it. Bob and Frank are following their trail."

"Sure of what you say?" "Quite. The whisky-jar is still lying there, about six miles west of this."

Sergeant Lasalle reflected for a few moments.

Then he wheeled his horse from the trail, with a word of command to his men. "Guide me to the place, Beauclerc."

"You bet!" Beauclerc rode beside the Canadian sergeant as the Mounted Police headed westward.

"What are your friends following the gang for?" the sergeant asked.

"To look for their camp, and make sure that they are a bootlegging gang, though there isn't much doubt of it. We shall meet them on the plain," answered Beauclerc.

"A risky business," said the sergeant. "Your schoolboys would have done better to keep clear of them. However, I'm glad of your information. There's been a report of bootlegging in this section, and we came up to look into it. It's lucky if we've struck the trail so soon."

The Mounted Police rode at a gallop, Vere Beauclerc leading the way without a fault to the spot where he had parted with his chums.

In that lonely quarter it was not likely that the trail had been disturbed. When the place was reached the whisky-jar was still lying in the grass, as the chums of Cedar Creek had left it.

Sergeant Lasalle dismounted and examined it.

It was evident that it had slid from a loose mule-pack, and the sergeant did not need any further evidence that a gang of liquor smugglers had passed that way.

He scanned the trampled grass, with the tracks of half a dozen animals leading away westward towards a low range of hills in the distance.

"Any homesteads in that direction, Beauclerc?" he asked. "You know this section."

Beauclerc shook his head. "No settlements till you come to the Fraser River," he answered, "and that's a good step."

"I guess so. Anything else?" "An Indian village."

"Ah!" "Bob's idea was that the bootleggers were heading for the Kootenay village, to sell them the whisky."

"I guess Bob Lawless hit the right nail on the head," remarked the sergeant. "That young fellow has some hoss-sense. If we miss the trail, I guess we'll head for the village, if you can show us the way. Have you been there?"

"No. I only know it's the other side of the hills, in a valley."

"I reckon we'll find it. Ride on."

The cavalcade proceeded at a gallop under the hot sunshine of the Canadian summer's day.

Vere Beauclerc scanned the plain as he rode for a sign of his chums.

But nothing was to be seen of Frank Richards or Bob Lawless.

The afternoon was growing old when

Sergeant Lasalle and his party entered the low range of hills.

Beauclerc was getting a little anxious now. At every moment he expected to see some sign of his chums, but they did not appear.

He wondered uneasily whether they had come into close contact with the bootleg gang.

In the hills the trail was more difficult to follow, and the progress of the Mounted Police was slow.

Dusk was setting in when the sergeant gave the sign to halt, by a rill that tinkled down a rocky ridge.

There were evident signs of a camp there, and the burnt-out embers of a fire.

But the embers were cold, and the bootleggers had evidently long been gone.

"I guess they travelled by night, and camped here in the heat of the day," the sergeant remarked. "Not much doubt that they're bootleggers—most likely the very gang we're looking for. But I don't see anything of your friends, Beauclerc."

"I'm afraid something must have happened to them," answered Beauclerc, his brow clouding. "We ought to have fallen in with them before this."

The sergeant made a careful examination of the trail which left the deserted camp, winding away into the hills.

On the stony soil it was not easy to read a sign, but the sergeant found enough for his purpose.

"I guess they came on the bootleggers," he said at last. "And they've been roped in, to keep their mouths shut."

"You think so?" "For sure. There were six tracks left by the party, and two fresh tracks over them, on the plain," said Lasalle. "That was the bootleggers, and young Lawless and Richards after them. Here there are eight tracks going away together."

"Eight?" said Beauclerc. "Then they—"

"There was an addition of two to the party when they broke camp here," said the sergeant. "And as we don't see any signs of Richards and Lawless, I guess there isn't much doubt who the two were."

"Prisoners?" said Beauclerc. "I guess so, unless—"

Sergeant Lasalle paused. "Their horses went, at least. I guess they went on their horses. The bootleggers wouldn't take the risk of shooting them out of hand."

Beauclerc shuddered. "I guess they're prisoners," said Sergeant Lasalle. "Even a bootlegger wouldn't put

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his neck into a noose for nothing. I guess we'll find them all right when we find the whisky smugglers. But this trail is too thin to be followed after dark, and it's close on dark now. We're going to strike for the Kootenay village. You'd better ride back home, my boy."

"I'm not going home till I know what's become of Frank and Bob," answered Beauclerc quietly. "If you don't want me, sergeant, I shall keep on alone."

The sergeant smiled.

"You'd better keep with us, then, I reckon," he said. "I wish you were a bit clearer about where the Indian village is, and you could guide. But we'll find it, never fear. But think a little, my lad. If the Redskins have got hold of the whisky, they'll be fighting mad, and there'll be trouble when we come up—had trouble, perhaps."

"I'm going on."

"I guess I ought to send you back."

"I shall go on alone if not with you, sergeant!"

"You come on with me, then."

And after a brief rest, the Mounted Police pushed on again in the deepening darkness.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Amongst the Redskins!

"HAT'S the show!" said Bob Lawless. Night was falling as the bootleggers rode into the Indian village with their two prisoners.

It had been a weary ride for Bob Lawless and Frank Richards.

They were riding with their feet tied under their horses and their hands bound, and until sunset they had been tormented by insects. The fall of night was a blessing to them.

They were glad to see the Indian village; it was an end, at least, of their painful journey, though they could not guess what was to follow.

Hiram Hook glanced at them with a grin.

"I guess you're close on home now, my pippins," he said. "If you don't find your quarters comfortable, you've got yourselves to thank. I gave you a chance to clear out and mind your own business."

"It's everybody's business to stop such rascals as you!" answered Frank Richards. "You know the harm you are doing with your poisonous rubbish to those wretched Redskins!"

"I guess that cuts no ice with me!" said Hiram Hook. "A galoot's got to live in this hyer world!"

"There's work to be done," growled Bob Lawless.

Hook chuckled.

"I guess I've never tried that, and shouldn't care for it if I did," he answered. "The Injuns want the fire-water, and they're ready to pay out pelts and gold-dust for it, and I guess I'm open to trade. You young galoots have shoved your noses into what don't concern you, and I calculate you can take the consequences."

"And what are they going to be?" asked Frank Richards. He had been wondering for some time what the bootleggers intended to do with them. Hiram Hook evidently shrank from bloodshed; not so much from scruples on the subject, as from concern for his precious neck.

Hook blew out a cloud of smoke from his black cheroot.

"I guess that depends on the reds," he answered. "I can't be lumbered up with you, and I ain't going to spill your vinegar. There's too much fuss made in this country over a galoot being wiped out. I'm going to hand you over to the reds, and let them settle. I ride back to-morrow, and it won't be any consarn of mine."

"And they'll keep us here?" asked Bob. Hook grinned.

"Mebbe," he answered. "But when they get the fire-water going, they may play their old games, and in that case you won't have a very long time to worry. An Injun with fire-water aboard is just the old Injun, and his mind runs to tomahawks and torture-stakes. That's something for you to chew over, my pippins. If you get out of this alive, it'll be a lesson to you to mind your own business, and leave a man to work at his trade without your chipping in."

Hiram Hook pushed on ahead of the party with that, leaving the chums of Cedar Creek to their reflections. They followed more slowly, surrounded by Black Henri and the other half-breeds, with the pack-mules. Frank glanced at his Canadian cousin.

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"A pretty prospect," he muttered.

"While there's life there's hope," answered Bob. "But if the Redskins start their jamboree to-night—"

He was silent.

Both the chums were thinking of Vere Beauclerc, who—quite unknown to Hiram Hook and his gang—had ridden back to Thompson with the news of the bootleggers.

Of Beauclerc's fortunate meeting with the Mounted Police they, of course, knew nothing.

They knew that however rapidly the sheriff of Thompson took the matter in hand, he could not reach the Indian village that night.

And if that night the "jamboree" took place, there was little hope for the prisoners.

With the fire-water burning in his veins, the Redskin forgot the white government and the Mounted Police, and became once more the savage barbarian of old, and at such times he was capable of anything.

The potent liquor, which is the cause of half the sin and suffering in a civilized country, is still more destructive to the hapless savage, depriving him of all reason and self-control—never extensive at the best of times.

It was for that reason that the Canadian Government sternly prohibited the sale of liquor to Indian tribes—an infamous traffic which, since the prohibition, could only be carried on by lawless and unscrupulous smugglers in remote districts.

Once the fire-water began to flow among the Redskins, Bob Lawless was aware of what would follow—furious excitement and fighting, in the midst of which the prisoners were not likely to be left at peace. It was only too probable that they would be torn to pieces by the maddened savages.

It was a terrible prospect, enough to shake the strongest nerve; but the chums of Cedar Creek did not lose hope.

They entered the Indian village, in the wake of Hiram Hook, whom they found in conversation with a stately old Redskin, evidently the chief of the little community.

A crowd of Indians had gathered round, and on the outskirts of the crowd were a swarm of squaws and papooses.

All of them, evidently, were keenly interested in the arrival of the bootleggers, with their contraband cargo.

As the pack-mules halted, there was a rush of some of the braves towards them, as if they desired to unload the poisonous cargo on the spot.

Hiram Hook rapped out a word to his followers, and the three half-breeds handled their rifles significantly.

The rush stopped.

"I guess your young men had better keep their hands off a bit, chief," said Hiram Hook. "We haven't traded yet."

The old chief grunted a few words in the Kootenay tongue, and the braves fell back, though still with eager looks fastened on the pack-mules.

Frank Richards noted that the half-breeds were looking uneasy, though they were quite prepared to use their rifles, if necessary.

The bootleggers' trade is a dangerous one.

If a few of the jars had been raided, and had circulated among the Redskins, they would have been in a mood to massacre the whole party, without the formality of "making a trade."

"My brother need not be alarmed," said the chief, speaking in good English, though in the flowery style of the red man. "Thunder Cloud is ready to pay his white brother for the fire-water."

"I guess that's all I want," said Hiram Hook, with a grin.

The chief glanced at the two schoolboys bound on their horses.

"My brother has brought prisoners to the tepees of Thunder Cloud," he said.

"Spies," said Hiram Hook. "I guess they wanted to chip in, and prevent the fire-water getting here, chief. I'm going to leave them in your hands; I'm taking the losses."

"Thunder Cloud does not wish for white prisoners," said the old chief. "The red-coats will come after them."

"I guess nobody knows they're here," answered Hiram Hook. "At any rate, keep them in your village till I've got clear. You can let them go after that, if you like."

Bob Lawless broke in: "You'd better let us go at once, Thunder Cloud," he said. "We shall be searched for, and the Mounted Police will be sent here."

"Stow the gab," said Hiram Hook. "There isn't a soul in British Columbia knows you're here, and your know it."

"That's not so!" exclaimed Bob, speaking quickly. "A friend who was with us has taken the news to Thompson, chief, and it's known that we are here."

"Lies!" said Hiram Hook. "There were only you two—"

"There were three before we came on you," said Bob. "Chief, it is as I say. By to-morrow the sheriff of Thompson will be here to look for us, and if we're harmed—"

"Close his mouth!" shouted Hook savagely. And Black Henri clapped his dirty hand over Bob Lawless' mouth, effectually stopping his explanation.

But Bob Lawless had said enough to make the old chief look very grave.

Thunder Cloud had lived among the white men, and he was well aware of the power of the white man's Government, compared with which that of the whole red race was but as a broken reed.

Frank Richards had opened his lips as Bob was silenced, but one of the half-breeds drew a knife from his belt and touched his breast with the point.

Hiram Hook scowled savagely at the Cedar Creek chums.

"Keep them quiet!" he growled. "It's all lies, chief; nobody knows they're here, and if you burn and scalp them there's no danger."

"Thunder Cloud does not make war on boys," said the Kootenay, with great dignity. "Let them be thrown, bound, into a lodge, and they shall remain prisoners till my white brother is in safety."

"Good enough!" answered Hook.

It was plain enough that the bootlegger cared little what happened to the prisoners after he was once well out of the region himself.

His next smuggling expedition was to be in quite another quarter, and he did not mean to be seen again near the Thompson Valley.

Frank Richards and Bob were taken from their horses, and hustled by two or three Indians into an empty lodge.

They were hustled roughly enough, for the savages had gathered that the two white boys had been opposed to the whisky smuggling, which was quite enough to make them angry.

Frank and Bob rolled on the floor, with their hands still bound.

Bob struggled into a sitting position.

"This is a go, Frank!" he said lugubriously. "But I'm glad I got in a word with the chief. It may have some effect on the Redskins when we need it."

"I suppose Beauclerc's coming after us with the sheriff's men by this time," said Frank.

"You bet!"

"But—"

Frank paused.

"They couldn't be here till to-morrow at the earliest," said Bob. "The Cherub may guess what's happened to us, as he won't find us on the way. But by to-morrow—"

He did not complete the sentence.

Both the chums knew well enough what might have happened by the morning, and they knew that the sun they had seen sinking towards the far Pacific was, perhaps the last sun they were destined to see.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

In Darkest Peril!

FRANK RICHARDS rolled to the opening of the lodge and looked out.

In the open space in the middle of the Indian village a number of squaws and papooses were piling wood and pine-cones, evidently for a big fire.

In the distance Frank could see Hiram Hook in talk with the chief, Thunder Cloud, and they seemed to be driving a hard bargain. The pack-mules were not as yet unloaded, and the half-breeds stood on guard over them with their rifles.

Preparations for a "jamboree" were evidently going on, and it was pretty certain that the fire-water would begin to flow as soon as it had changed hands.

Once it was in circulation it would not take long for the Redskins to reach the pitch of maddened intoxication.

The flame leaped up from the fire, amid shouts and yells from the Kootenay papooses.

Hiram Hook and the chief retired into a lodge and disappeared from Frank's sight.

"What's going on, Franky?" asked Bob Lawless.

"They're building a bonfire," answered Frank. "Hook and the chief don't seem to be agreeing on the price of the fire-water, from what I can make out."

"He will stick them for about six times what it's worth—if it's worth anything," said Bob. "The Redskins have to pay through the nose for that stuff. I shouldn't wonder if he takes away pelts and gold-dust worth a thousand dollars for a hundred dollars laid out in tanglefoot. It's a paying trade when they get through safe."

"The rotter looks like getting through safe this time," said Frank.

"Wouldn't I like to see the scarlet coats come along just now!" groaned Bob. "What would you give to see the Mounted Police, Franky?"

"Not much chance of that, I'm afraid." "I guess not. Can you see Hook now?" "He's gone into the chief's lodge."

"That means they're going to clinch the bargain. I say, Frank, roll over here, and let me try my teeth on that rope. I've got pretty strong teeth."

"Not much good, I'm afraid; but you can try."

Frank rolled towards his chum, and Bob Lawless groped for the knot in the rope that fastened Frank's hands behind him.

It was quite dark outside now, and very dark inside the wigwam where the prisoners lay. They seemed to have been forgotten; no one came to the lodge now. All the Indians seemed intent only on the preparations for the jamboree.

Bob caught the knot of the rope in his strong teeth and worried it, a good deal like a dog.

The rope was of raw hide, thick and strong, and the knot was tight; the task was enough to make even Bob despair.

But life itself, in all probability, depended on his efforts, and he kept grimly on.

"Getting loose, old chap?" asked Frank, when half an hour had elapsed.

"It's not so tight as it was," said Bob breathlessly. "By gum, my jaws are aching!"

"Take a rest, while I take a turn on your rope."

"Right-ho!"

The chums changed positions, and Frank started on Bob Lawless' bonds with his teeth.

But the half-breeds had done their work well, and in a quarter of an hour he had made scarcely any impression on the knot.

His jaws and his teeth ached with his efforts by that time.

"Hold on, Frank!" said Bob suddenly. "Somebody's coming!"

The ragged buffalo-rope at the entrance of the lodge was pulled aside, and a dark little face looked in.

It belonged to an Indian boy of about ten, who had evidently looked in out of curiosity to see the white prisoners.

His black eyes glistened at them in the dark.

As the opening of the lodge widened by the pulling aside of the buffalo-skin a red glow from the fire fell in upon the chums of Cedar Creek.

The Indian boy grinned at them. He spoke in his own language, which Frank did not understand, but Bob had a smattering of the Kootenay dialect.

"What is he saying, Bob?" asked Frank.

"Oh, nothing much—only jabber!" said Bob hastily. He did not care to tell his chum that the young Redskin was describing the fate in store for them.

"Fathead!" said Frank. "He's threatening us, the little beast! Tell me what he says."

"He says we're going to be put to the stake," said Bob at length. "But it's only gas, I reckon. They wouldn't do it unless they were raving drunk. They wouldn't dare! And they have not broached the fire-water yet, from what I can see."

"The wish is father to the thought, I suppose," said Frank. "The little rotter would like to see us tortured! I suppose he hasn't sense enough to understand what a little beast he is. Hallo! What the thump is he up to now?"

"Here, keep off, you little scallywag!" panted Bob.

The Indian boy had taken a knife from his belt, and was circling Bob Lawless' head with it, as if he intended to "raise" his scalp.

With Bob's thick hair gripped in his left hand, he wielded the knife with his right, grinning like a little bronze demon.

Whether he was only seeking to scare the prisoners, or whether his impish mischief would have gone to the length of scalping the hapless prisoners, they could not tell; but if the latter was his intention, he was not given the chance of carrying it out.

Frank Richards' hands were still bound, but his feet were free, and the little ruffian's head was within the reach of his boots.

Frank drew back one leg, and crashed out his boot with all his strength; he was quite well aware that he would have no chance of a second kick.

The heavy boot crashed on the side of the young rascal's head, and hurled him across Bob Lawless.

Frank, panting with the effort he had made, lay breathless on the ground, fully expecting the young Kootenay to turn on him, knife in hand, like a wild cat.

But the little rascal did not move. He lay inert across Bob Lawless.

The thick leather soles of the boot, driven with all Frank's strength in a moment of desperation, had struck like a bludgeon, and the young Kootenay was stunned.

Bob Lawless struggled to pitch him aside. "Frank!" he gasped. "Frank—the knife!"

"What?"

"He had a knife. Look out for it, for mercy's sake! If we can get loose—" breathed Bob.

"Oh!"

The buffalo robe was still drawn aside, and the red light glimmered into the lodge. But the darkness within prevented any of the Indians seeing what was passing, even if any glanced in that direction.

Frank was groping for the knife at once. It was still grasped in the nerveless hand of the stunned Kootenay boy, and Frank found it and caught it with his teeth.

He jerked it away on the ground, and then got it in his teeth by the handle.

Bob Lawless threw off the Kootenay, and rolled with his back to Frank.

"Quick!" he breathed. "Saw through the rope, Frank—you can do it with the knife in your teeth. Never mind my skin!"

Frank could not answer; his teeth gripped the horn handle of the knife. In the dimness he could barely make out Bob's bound wrists. But he managed to insert the knife between them, with the edge on the rope, and by moving his head he sawed at the bonds. Not a sound escaped Bob Lawless as the skin of both his wrists was cruelly scored. It was for liberty, and perhaps life, that he suffered, and he suffered in stoic silence.

There was a sound and a movement from the Kootenay boy, sprawled on the ground beside them.

"He's coming to!" muttered Bob. "Are you nearly through, Frank? If not, I'll give him another on the skull."

He jerked at his bonds as he spoke. The rope was nearly sawn through, and the last strip of raw hide came apart as he tugged.

His hands were free!

In a twinkling Bob Lawless was on his knees, and was groping for the knife. In another moment it was in his hand, and he was kneeling on the young Kootenay.

The Indian's eyes had opened dizzily; but as his mouth opened, a hand was laid on it, and the point of the knife touched his throat.

Bob whispered two or three words in the Indian dialect, a command to be silent; but the words were not needed. The grinding knee on his chest and the sharp pressure of the knife were enough.

The Kootenay glared up at him in rage and terror, palpitating from head to foot, but silent.

Bob cast a glance through the narrow opening of the lodge.

Round the gathering fire the Indians were crowding, with many guttural growls in their own tongue, amid an excited screaming from the paposes. Even without the fire-water, the Redskins were beginning to work up into a state of excitement.

Hiram Hook and the chief were still in the latter's lodge, doubtless making the exchange of pelts for the fire-water.

Bob squeezed a chunk of the cut rawhide into the Indian boy's mouth to gag him,



A DESPERATE ESCAPE! Frank Richards and his chum came on the border of the village, with a dozen savage dogs snarling around them. In the rear of the boys came the howling Redskin braves. The chums ran desperately. (See Chapter 4.)

and then, with the remainder of his own bonds, tied the dusky wrists together.

Then he turned to his chum, and cut Frank Richards loose.

"Thank Heaven!" breathed Frank. "That pesky little beast is quiet now," muttered Bob. "We can cut through the back of the lodge, and try our luck among the tepees, Frank. We may be able to get at the horses, with luck."

"Hold on! Look!" muttered Frank. In the firelight outside, the figure of Hiram Hook appeared in sight, striding directly towards the prisoners' lodge.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Fight for Liberty!

BOB LAWLESS drew a deep, hard breath. Up to that moment fortune had seemed to favour the chums of Cedar Creek. The visit of the Indian boy, terrible as it might have been, had turned out their salvation. A few minutes more would have sent them creeping away among the deserted tepees, with a good chance of escaping into the darkness of the night outside the Indian village.

But the luck had turned. Hiram Hook was coming directly to the lodge, and was evidently going to enter. And if they were gone he would give the alarm at once, before they were six yards away.

Flight was impossible, and there was no time for thinking. The chums acted rather upon instinct than thought. Bob Lawless rolled the bound Indian boy into the darkest corner of the lodge, and sat by him, his hands behind, and the knife in one of them, touching the dusty skin of the Indian, to keep him in terrified stillness. And Frank Richards, realising what was in Bob's mind—as it was in his own—threw himself on the ground, his hands behind him.

In the dimness Hiram Hook just made out the two forms of the Cedar Creek chums, but he did not see the Kootenay boy, half concealed by Bob's sturdy form, and wrapped in darkness.

"Hallo, my pippin!" said the bootlegger, with a jeering laugh. "I guess you are finding yourselves in rough quarters!"

"Thanks to you!" snapped Bob. "Thanks to your meddling in what don't concern you," said Hiram Hook. "You see what's going on yonder."

"Well?"

"I guess there's going to be a first-class bender hyer to-night," said the ruffian. "I've sold my stock for pelts, and I guess I'm making tracks afore the fire-water is started. It won't be healthy for white men around hyer arter that."

"Is that what you've come to tell us?" growled Bob.

Hook laughed again. No doubt the rascal had driven a very profitable bargain with the Kootenay chief, for he seemed to be in high good-humour.

"Not quite," he said. "I've something else to say, I guess. It goes agin the grain to leave white men hyer to be tortured by the Redskins—and they'll torture you, you can bet your bottom dollar on that, once they're glorious! I'd like to let you loose, I guess."

"Nothing to stop you, is there?" asked Frank Richards, wondering what the bootlegger was driving at.

"I guess I'm ready to trade," explained Hiram Hook. "If you can make it worth my while to see you clear, I'm your mutton with the wool on. Savvy?"

"Not quite," said Bob. "Suppose you make it a little clearer?"

"Your popper is one of the wealthiest ranchers in the Thompson Valley, young Lawless. I reckon he'd pay up handsome to see his son safe home again. Suppose I find you pen and paper, and you give me a letter to him, asking him to pay bearer, say, two hundred dollars for information he can give as to your whereabouts. I guess your popper would jump at that with both feet!"

"I dare say he would," agreed Bob.

"Waal, is it a go?" asked Hiram Hook. "I'm open to trade. I'm done in this part of Canada, and after I've lit out you can talk all you know, from one end of the section to the other, for all I care. If your life's worth two hundred dollars, make it a trade. It's your only chance, anyhow."

"I guess there's another chance, and a better one," answered Bob.

"You young scallywag, haven't you any hoss-sense? I tell you— Oh!" gasped Hook, as Bob, leaping up, made a sudden spring at him.

"Quick, Frank!" Hook staggered back with Bob and Frank grasping him, and his hand went in a flash to his belt.

"Not a word!" panted Bob. "One stout, and—"

"Hyer—come hyer!" roared Hook, unheeding.

Bob Lawless struck as he shouted.

It was no time for half-measures. "It was life or death now, and the bootlegger deserved no mercy. The ruffian was unaware that Bob was armed, or he might have been silent; he did not know it till the Indian boy's knife was driven at him, and sank deep into his shoulder.

A wild yell left the bootlegger's lips. He staggered away and crashed on the ground.

"Come on, Frank!" Bob did not give the ruffian a look after he fell; he was free of him, and that was all he cared about.

He sprang to the back of the lodge, and ripped down the skin wall with his knife.

In a second it was gaping open, and Bob plunged through, with Frank Richards at his heels.

From the Kootenays round the fire came loud shouts of surprise and alarm, and they crowded towards the prisoners' lodge, some of them bearing flaming brands for light.

"Arter them!" panted Hook. Wounded as he was, the bootlegger struggled to a sitting posture, and yelled to the astonished Indians: "Arter them! Don't let them get away! Find them—scalp them—burn them! Ah-h-h!"

He gasped, and fell back in a dead faint.

The whole village was alarmed now, and deafening yells and howls arose on all sides. They rang in the ears of the chums of Cedar Creek as they ran on in the gloom, without knowing where they ran. In the cluster of tepees, built irregularly, and the darkness broken only by the fitful glare of the fire behind them, they had to trust to chance for their direction, and several times they had to turn and dodge as they sighted Redskins ahead among the lodges.

They came on the border of the village at last, with a dozen alarmed and savage dogs barking and snarling around them in a fearful uproar. But for the dogs they might have escaped into the outer night, but the snarling pack guided the Indians on their track. A spear flew by, a foot from Frank Richards' head, showing that the pursuers were close behind. A guttural voice in the Indian dialect shouted to them to stop.

They ran on desperately. But moccasined feet ran still more swiftly behind, and dusky, brawny hands clutched at the comrades as they ran. Bob Lawless whirled desperately round, gripping the knife; but two or three spears were at his breast, and he flung down the useless weapon.

"The game's up, Frank!" he panted bitterly.

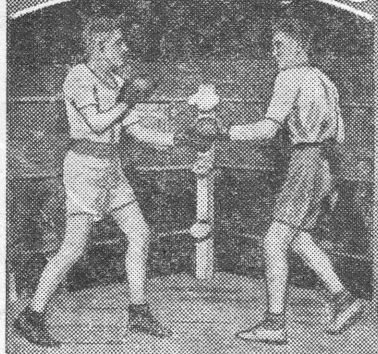
Frank was already in the grasp of the Redskins; and, in the midst of a howling mob of savages, the chums of Cedar Creek were dragged back into the Indian village.

THE END.

(In the hands of the Redskins, there now seems little hope of ever seeing Cedar Creek again. The Lumber School chums' only hope lies with Vere Beauclerc and the Mounted Police. Will they arrive in the Indian village in time to save the prisoners? See next week's stirring Backwoods story: "Saved from the Stake!")

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