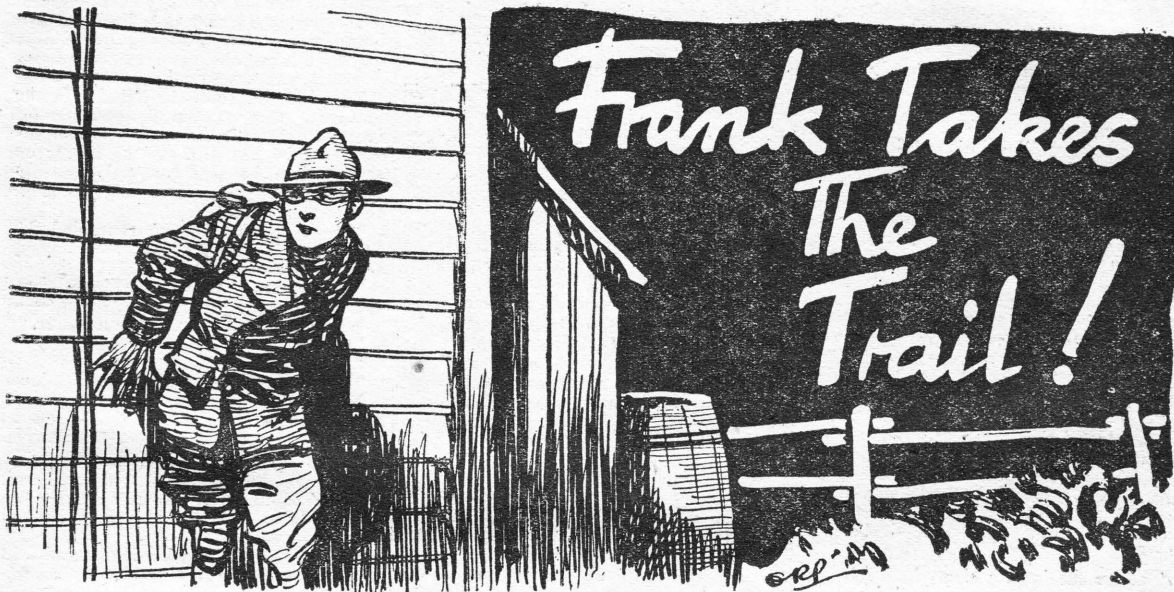


FRANK RICHARDS—THIEF! Found guilty of theft and taken away from Cedar Creek with a terrible black mark against his name, Frank Richards finds it impossible to remain in the Thompson Valley. He takes the trail alone, intending to return only when his name is cleared!



A Dramatic, Long Complete Story of Frank Richards & Co., the Chums of the School in the Backwoods!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

The Blow Falls!

GALLOP! Gallop! Miss Meadows looked from her window in the lumber schoolhouse at Cedar Creek.

The stars were glittering down upon the Thompson Valley of British Columbia; the peaks of the distant mountains were veiled in shadow. But the gates of the backwoods school were still open, and the Canadian schoolmistress, from her window, was watching the gateway, with an anxious, frowning brow.

The last Cedar Creek fellow had long gone on the trail for home, but Black Sam loafed by the gate without closing it. Four horsemen loomed up on the trail as the sound of galloping came through the dusk. They came riding in at the wide gateway—Frank Richards and Bob Lawless, Mr. Slimmey and Rancher Lawless—in silence, with grave and gloomy faces. The quartette rode up to the porch of the schoolhouse, dismounted, and hitched their horses. Miss Meadows appeared in the doorway.

Her face was troubled, and she avoided looking at Frank Richards.

"Please come in!"

The burly rancher swept off his Stetson hat, and tramped into the sitting-room. His son and nephew followed him in, and then Mr. Slimmey. Mr. Slimmey closed the door.

"Let's have this out, Miss Meadows!" Rancher Lawless said crisply. "Mr. Slimmey followed my son and nephew home from school, to bring Frank back here. He said that a theft had been committed, and that Frank was suspected. The whole thing seems utterly ridiculous to me. I would trust my nephew with every dollar I have in the world—as much as I would trust my own son or myself. I am certain a mistake has been made."

"I guess so!" muttered Bob Lawless indignantly. "As if Frank—"

"This morning," said Miss Meadows, "Richards was sent to my study to be caned. Mr. Slimmey sent him, and told him to wait till I came in. As it happened, I did not come in, and Richards waited here till dinner-time, when he left without my having seen him."

"That is so," said Frank, "but I—"

"Let Miss Meadows finish, Frank," said the rancher.

"Yes, uncle."

"After school this afternoon," continued Miss Meadows, "after dismissing the school, I came here to do my accounts. I found that two bills were missing—a hundred-dollar bill and a ten-dollar bill. Although I knew quite well where I had left them, I could scarcely believe that a theft had been committed, and I searched the whole desk without finding them. They had been abstracted. I remembered then that Richards had been alone in the room during the day—the only boy who had been in the room—and I sent Mr. Slimmey to bring him back at once to the school."

The rancher listened quietly.

"Is that all?" he asked; and there was a tone of contempt in his voice.

"I think that is enough, Mr. Lawless," said Miss Meadows, with a flash in her eyes.

"I guess not. Frank was here alone. How long?"

"About half an hour," said Frank.

"Did you go to the desk for anything?"

"I picked up a magazine that was lying on the desk to read while I was waiting for Miss Meadows."

"You did not touch the desk?"

"I leaned on it while I was reading." "You did not touch anything but the magazine that was on the desk?"

"Nothing," said Frank.

"I fully believe you, my boy," said Mr. Lawless. "I have not the slightest doubt that you have spoken the exact truth. Miss Meadows, I guess I am simply astonished that you should

accuse my nephew on flimsy grounds like this. Anybody might have come into this room and taken the bills. You might have lost them."

"I remember perfectly well placing the bills in a certain drawer," said Miss Meadows calmly.

"Admitting that they have been stolen, there are no grounds for suspecting my nephew, simply because he happened to be in the room for a time."

"No other boy entered the room, so far as can be ascertained," said the schoolmistress. "The pupils are not allowed to enter this room, excepting on order. Richards was the only boy who had the opportunity of abstracting the bills."

"Nonsense!" rapped out the rancher. "You say he was here during the morning. You missed the bills later than afternoon school. All through the afternoon, then—"

"Let me be more explicit," said Miss Meadows quietly. "After dinner I came to this room to rest until lessons recommenced. When I left it to take my class I locked my desk. It is generally kept locked, only this morning I was called suddenly into the kitchen by Dinah, and left hurriedly. The desk remained locked till I went to it this evening. The theft was, therefore, committed before dinner and during the short space of time that the desk remained unlocked. For practically the whole of that time Richards was alone in the room."

"Oh!" muttered the rancher, rather taken aback.

"I was at the desk up to a few minutes past twelve, when Dinah called to me," said Miss Meadows. "Mr. Slimmey, at what time did you send Richards in?"

"Probably about ten minutes past twelve," said Mr. Slimmey.

"Then the room was vacant only for

a few minutes!" said Mr. Lawless, tugging at his tawny moustache.

"Precisely! Richards left a few minutes before dinner, and it was again vacant till I came in after dinner. Richards was here practically the whole time that the desk was open."

The rancher looked at his nephew. Frank Richards met his glance steadily.

The accusation was evidently more serious than the rancher had supposed at first. But his faith in his nephew did not falter.

"I guess you'll admit, at least, that there was some time, though a short time, in which someone else may have entered the room and found the desk open, Miss Meadows," said the rancher, after a pause.

"That is true. There is a possibility that Richards is innocent, and if it should prove so, no one would be more pleased than I," said Miss Meadows. "This has been a very painful shock to me; I have always had the highest opinion of Richards. I sent Mr. Slimmey after him instantly I missed the bills and failed to find them anywhere, in the belief that if he had taken them he would take them with him when he left school. I hoped that he would be brought back before he had had time to conceal them at home, and that they would be found upon him—if he had them."

The rancher's face cleared. "I guess that's all right," he said. "Frank came back at once when Mr. Slimmey came up—he has not been in the ranch since he rode home—and he has not been alone at all. If he had the bills on him when he left school he has them on him now."

"That was my supposition," said Miss Meadows. "If the bills are not found on Richards, I shall not adjudge him guilty, though the evidence is very strong against him. He may, of course, have thrown the bills away on learning that he was suspected—"

"I did not see anything of the kind," said Mr. Slimmey. "But, as a matter of fact, these boys did not stop when I called to them. They rode on faster, and I was compelled to follow them nearly as far as the Lawless Ranch."

Sharp suspicion came into Miss Meadows' face at once, and Mr. Lawless looked a little uneasy.

"Why did you not stop, Richards, when you knew that Mr. Slimmey wanted you?" exclaimed the school-mistress.

Frank coloured. "I—I—" he stammered. "It was my idea," broke in Bob Lawless. "I guessed we'd give Mr. Slimmey a run, just for a lark. I suggested it."

"A very thoughtless act!" said Miss Meadows coldly. "It is very unfortunate that Richards should have run away in this manner, when he was wanted to answer such a charge. During the flight he had ample opportunity, I conclude, of throwing away the bills, for if he had them he must have known what Mr. Slimmey was following him for."

Frank bit his lip hard. That harmless "lark" on Mr. Slimmey was likely to cost him dear.

"If the bills are not found on Richards, the suspicion remains that he threw them away on finding himself suspected," said Miss Meadows. "But on mere suspicion, however strong, I shall not condemn him. At all events, if a search does not reveal the stolen bills in his pockets it is a point in his favour, for what it is worth. You have no

objection to your nephew being searched in your presence, Mr. Lawless?"

"I demand it!" grunted the rancher. "Very good. Perhaps you will be kind enough to turn out the boy's pockets yourself?"

"Sure!" Mr. Lawless signed to his nephew to approach. Frank Richards came up cheerfully enough.

"I'm ready, uncle." "You've acted foolishly, Frank," said the rancher. "You should not have played that trick on your master. It was disrespectful, and until the stolen bills are found it will lead to suspicion resting upon you. Not in my mind—I know you are straight—but others will suspect. But, at all events, I guess we shall soon prove that you haven't the bills about you. Turn out your pockets, my boy."

Frank Richards obeyed at once. From one of the jacket-pockets he turned out several old letters and some crumpled manuscript. The rancher took them and sorted them out, and gave rather a start as he held up a ten-dollar bill.

"This is yours, I suppose?" he said, rather haltingly.

Frank stared at it. "I—I—" he began. "You had a ten-dollar bill, Franky," said Bob eagerly. "You remember Mr. Isaacs paid you ten dollars the other day? Yen Chin wanted to bag it off you—"

"I—I paid that ten dollars into the bank," said Frank. "This—this bill doesn't belong to me!"

"What?" exclaimed the rancher. "Kindly hand it to me, Mr. Lawless," said Miss Meadows icily. "I have the numbers of the missing bills here."

The rancher silently laid it on the desk. Miss Meadows glanced at it, and referred to her account-book. Her face hardened as she looked up.

"The numbers are the same!" she said.

"Then—" stammered the rancher. "That is one of the bills. The other, no doubt, is still in Frank Richards' pocket!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Guilty!

FRANK RICHARDS stood dumb-founded. He wondered for some moments whether he was dreaming.

That he had not had a ten-dollar bill in his possession he knew, yet here was a ten-dollar bill turned out of his pocket from among the old papers there. Bob Lawless stared at him, his jaw dropping.

The impossible had happened! Rancher Lawless' bronzed face was hard and grim now. His faith in his nephew had been complete. But this discovery shattered it at a blow.

Frank read his sentence in his uncle's eyes, and his face became almost haggard.

"Frank!" breathed Bob Lawless. The rancher signed to him sternly to be silent. He fixed a cold, steady look on Frank's pale face.

"You may as well hand over the other bill now," he said.

"The—the other bill?" stammered Frank.

"The hundred-dollar bill!"

"I—I haven't—"

"Did you throw it away?"

"No. I—"

"Mr. Slimmey, perhaps you will finish searching this boy," said the rancher

with a look of disgust. "I do not care to touch him."

"Kindly do so, Mr. Slimmey," said Miss Meadows.

The young master reluctantly assented. Frank Richards stood like a statue while he was searched. After what had happened, he would not have been surprised if the hundred-dollar bill, too, had been found upon him. Nothing would have surprised him now.

But it was not found. That did not count in Frank's favour, however. One of the stolen bills had been found, and the natural conclusion was that he had thrown the larger one away when he was pursued, and had had no opportunity of getting rid of the smaller one unobserved.

"It—it is not here!" mumbled Mr. Slimmey, who was feeling extremely upset and uncomfortable.

"Of course it isn't there!" exclaimed Bob. "Frank never touched it, and—"

"Silence!" thundered the rancher.

"Father—"

"Silence!"

The rancher turned to Miss Meadows. Frank stood dumb. His wits seemed to have forsaken him. He still felt as if in the grip of some horrid nightmare.

"Miss Meadows, my nephew has robbed you of one hundred and ten dollars," said Mr. Lawless. "The ten dollars have been recovered. I shall return the rest."

He took out his pocket-book, and laid a hundred-dollar bill on the school-mistress' desk.

"I am responsible for this wretched boy. You cannot, I suppose, allow him to remain at Cedar Creek after this? The parents of the other boys would naturally object. I must consider what is to be done with him. For the present I shall take him home to the ranch. I can only apologise for the trouble that has been given you."

"I am sorry for this, Mr. Lawless," faltered Miss Meadows.

"There is no fault on your side," said the rancher. "The boy has, I suppose, some kink in his nature that I have never suspected. Heaven knows what I shall do with him—a boy who cannot be trusted not to steal!"

Frank's eyes blazed.

"Uncle!"

"You need not speak," said the rancher. "Get to your horse!"

"I must speak! I will speak!" exclaimed Frank, his words coming in a torrent now. "I never touched Miss Meadows' bank bills—"

"Silence!"

"How—how it came into my pocket I don't know—"

Frank's voice faltered and broke. The absurdity of the statement struck him even while he uttered it.

"Hold your tongue, and get to your horse!" exclaimed the rancher gruffly.

Bob Lawless caught Frank's arm and led him out of the room. It was evidently useless to say more then. It only added fuel to the rancher's anger.

The rancher followed his son and nephew out.

As they came to their horses, Frank stole a look at his uncle's face. That bronzed face, usually so genial and kindly, was hard as iron now. In silence the unhappy boy mounted his horse.

They rode out at the gates of Cedar Creek, and Black Sam shut the heavy wooden gates after them. The thud of the closing gate struck upon Frank Richards' heart. It had closed behind him for ever. His days at the backwoods school were over. His schooldays in the Canadian West had closed in disgrace and shame.

He choked back a sob. In silence the three rode down the trail, under the shadowed trees, and not a word was spoken before they reached Lawless Ranch.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. Condemned!

FRANK RICHARDS sat in his room at the Lawless Ranch, alone.

He had eaten no supper; he could not eat. The blow that had fallen upon him seemed to have numbed his faculties. It left him with a curious sense of unreality.

What did Bob believe? What would Beauclerc believe, when he heard? Would even his own chums condemn him? Bob, when Frank had last seen him, had looked utterly miserable, that was all. But surely his faith in his chum was not destroyed? Frank did not wonder why Bob did not come to him in his solitude. He knew that the rancher had bidden his son to keep away from the room.

Whatever Bob might believe, there was no doubt in the rancher's mind. And in proportion to his faith in his nephew, while he trusted him, was now his anger and scorn.

Frank groaned aloud as he thought of it. What was it the future held for him?

He was dependent on his uncle. What he had earned by writing for the "Thompson Press" was little more than pocket-money. By his uncle's advice he had saved it in the Thompson bank; he had two hundred dollars there. Never for a moment had he felt his dependence. Mr. Lawless had taken his sister's son into his home, and to his heart, with generous kindness. In the ranch Frank and Bob shared alike, and no distinction was made between them. But all that was changed now. Now that his uncle believed him a thief he could not remain under that roof—to eat another morsel there would choke him. He had to go.

Where was he to go?

His father was in India, many a long thousand miles away. Frank prayed that he should never hear of this. His young sister was at school in England. To neither of them could he go. But to remain at the ranch was impossible.

There was a gentle tap at the door, and Frank looked round quickly. He hoped to see Bob.

But it was Mrs. Lawless who came in.

Frank rose to his feet, with a hot flush in his pale cheeks.

"Auntie!" he muttered.

"My dear Frank," Mrs. Lawless spoke gently, softly, and she kissed the boy on his burning forehead, "it is not true, is it, Frank?"

"No," said Frank huskily.

"On your word, Frank?"

"On my word, auntie."

"I believe you," said Mrs. Lawless gently. "My brother's son is not a thief. But, dear Frank, you must not blame your uncle for believing it. Can you account for the bill being in your pocket?"

"No!" groaned Frank.

Mrs. Lawless looked at him searchingly. Woman's instinct, so often right when man's reasoning is wrong, told her



CONDEMNED! "Miss Meadows, my nephew has robbed you of one hundred and ten dollars," said Mr. Lawless. "The ten dollars have been recovered. I shall return the rest." He took out his pocket-book and laid a hundred-dollar bill on the schoolmistress' desk. (See Chapter 2.)

that the boy was innocent: the proof against him was unanswerable, but she felt that he was guiltless.

"But I believe you, Frank," she said, after a pause. "You have been wronged. How, and by whom, I cannot even imagine. But if my brother should hear of this, he shall hear, too, that I believe in you, my poor boy."

"Thank you, auntie!"—said Frank, with a break in his voice. "What does Bob think—"

"He believes in you, too," said Mrs. Lawless quietly. "He cannot think evil of you, any more than I can."

"Thank heaven for that!" muttered Frank. "Beauclerc will believe in me, I feel sure—"

"Your uncle wishes to see you now," said Mrs. Lawless. "You must listen to him with patience, Frank; remember that everything is against you, and a judge and jury would believe you guilty on such evidence. When—if—the truth is found out, my husband will be the first to do you justice."

"I don't blame him," groaned Frank. "What could he believe when he found the stolen bill in my pocket himself? I—I think he might have trusted me more, but—but he must have thought it was proof positive. I—I sha'n't forget how much I owe my uncle. He has always been kind, until now. Does he want me to go down?"

"Yes, Frank. Go now."

Mrs. Lawless, with tears in her eyes, kissed her nephew again; and Frank felt a sense of comfort as he went. There were some, at least, who believed in him still; some whose faith in him was

not to be shaken by the most irrefutable evidence.

At the bottom of the stairs Bob was waiting. He started forward and caught Frank by the arm.

"Remember I'm sticking to you, old chap!" Bob whispered huskily. "I don't believe a word of it—not a pesky word! I know you never did it, Frank." Bob's voice was shaking. "I don't know how it happened; but you never did it; I know you never did—"

Frank pressed his hand in silence; his heart was too full for words just then.

He passed into the dining-room of the ranch, where his uncle was awaiting him.

Rancher Lawless stood with his back to the crackling log fire, his hands crossed behind him. His bronzed face was hard as iron; his eyes glinted as hard as steel. Every trace of kindness was gone from the rancher's usually kindly face. He looked like a stern judge, before him a criminal waiting for sentence. The baseness of the crime that had been committed rooted out every vestige of sympathy for his unhappy nephew.

Frank came in quietly, but he raised his head proudly and looked at his uncle. He was adjudged guilty; but he was innocent, and his pride rose up strongly against injustice.

The rancher's hard eyes fixed on him.

"I have been thinking over this matter, Richards," he said coldly. It was no longer "Frank." "You cannot continue at Cedar Creek. Even if it were permitted, you can scarcely wish

to face your schoolfellows again, when they know what you have done."

"What I am supposed to have done, uncle," said Frank steadily.

The rancher made a gesture of impatience.

"We will not go into that," he said. "I do not choose to bandy words with you, and listen to abominable falsehoods. You cannot remain at Cedar Creek. Neither can you continue to associate with my son."

"If you believe me guilty, you will naturally not want me to see Bob any more," said Frank wearily. "I don't wonder at that."

"The question remains—what is to be done with you?" said the rancher. "When my brother-in-law fell upon evil times, he sent you out here to me, knowing that I would give his son a cordial reception and treat him as my own boy. I have tried to do so. I think you cannot say that any neglect on my part has led you to what you have come to."

"You have always been kindness itself," said Frank. "I shall not forget that wherever I go."

"The difficult question is—where shall you go?" said the rancher. "It is impossible for you to remain at the ranch. You can see that?"

"Yes."

"You have relatives in England, but I cannot send you to them—at least, not without communications, which would take too long a time. I should have to tell them, too, the whole facts; and I guess they would be as unwilling to receive you as I am to keep you here."

Frank shivered.

"I have a right to ask you, uncle, at least, that nothing of this shall be said to my relations at home," he said. "I hope the truth will come out some day!"

"Enough of that! I shall inform no one of what has happened, unless I am compelled to," said the rancher. "I do not wish to brand you so early in life. You will suffer for what you have done, and the lesson, which will be severe, may be the saving of you. I cannot send you to your father—you cannot go to India, neither would it be possible, I think, for your father to receive you on an Indian plantation. I accepted you in trust, and I am prepared to fulfil that trust. I had hoped that as you grew up you would take kindly to our Canadian life—that you would live on the ranch, and become a rancher yourself later. But that is impossible now—by your own act. I am explaining all this to you, Richards, so that you will understand that the decision I have come to is the only possible one."

Frank smiled faintly.

"What is it, uncle?" he asked.

"There is a school in Vancouver to which you can be sent," said the rancher. "Your education will be continued there, perhaps more completely than at the backwoods school. The master is known to me personally. He has had a great deal of success with the sons of emigrants of a low character—people who have not learned to live up to Anglo-Saxon standards—Poles and Slovaks, and so forth. He has turned many of them into decent citizens. He is a conscientious man, and will, I guess, take you in charge, and do all that can be done for you. You will be under a strict but kindly rule. I do not pretend that your life will be like it has been hitherto—but for that you have only yourself to thank!"

He paused a moment.

Frank did not speak, but his heart was throbbing.

"You will remain one year in Van-

couver," continued Mr. Lawless. "After that period, if the schoolmaster's report of you is favourable, I shall allow you to return here, and what has happened shall be forgotten and forgiven. You shall have every chance to make up for your fault. Keep on the straight path and I shall always be your friend. Keep straight, that is all. And after your year of probation is over your life shall be resumed where it left off here—and I shall trust you as before, and hope for the best."

Frank was still silent.

"You will realise, Richards, that you are being treated with leniency," said the rancher.

"If I were guilty, uncle, I should think so," said Frank. "I could only thank you for your kindness. If I were guilty I ought to be sent to prison, and you are only offering to send me to a reformatory."

The rancher knitted his brows.

"The school is not a reformatory, Richards. It is necessarily somewhat of the character of one. But that is the only school to which I should be justified in sending you after what you have done."

"I know you mean to be kind," said Frank. "But—"

"You will be prepared to start tomorrow morning, an hour after dawn," said Mr. Lawless. "I shall take you to Vancouver myself. That is all, Richards!"

Frank drew a deep breath.

"That is not all, uncle," he said. "I must speak now. I shall not go to the school at Vancouver!"

"What?"

"So long as you believe me guilty," said Frank, a flash in his eyes, "I will accept nothing more at your hands. You shall not pay one dollar for me at Vancouver or anywhere else; I will taste no food in this house while I remain. So long as you trusted me I could accept your kindness with gratitude; I cannot accept it any longer. I am going away and—"

"And where are you going?" rapped out the rancher.

"I don't know—yet. But I'm strong, and I'm not idle; there's plenty of work in Canada for a fellow willing to work," said Frank bravely. "I'm going somewhere where I'm not known, where this horrible disgrace can't follow me, and unless my innocence is proved I shall never set foot in the Thompson Valley again!"

Mr. Lawless compressed his lips.

"You forget one thing," he said. "Your father placed you in my keeping, and I have my duty to do. I cannot and I shall not allow you to go away on your own responsibility, to go from bad to worse, and to fall into even more serious faults than you have already committed. My decision is taken; you will mount and ride with me in the morning. Till then you will remain in your room. You may go now."

"Uncle! I—"

"That will do!"

The rancher raised his hand and pointed to the door. Without another word Frank Richards quitted the room.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Frank's Flight!

NIGHT on the ranch!

The stars glimmered in the sky; away in the far distance the summits of the mountains showed in a dim, white line. In the Lawless ranch-house all was silent. Frank Richards stood at his window and looked out into the clear, cold night.

It was his last night at the ranch.

He was alone in the room; Bob had been forbidden there. His light was extinguished, but the clear starlight glimmered into the room. Long had the boy stood at the open window, looking out on the wide grasslands under the stars.

Frank's mind was made up.

If he had had any hope by remaining to clear up the mystery of what had happened at the backwoods school that hope was frustrated by his uncle's decision. On the morrow he was to ride with the rancher on the southern trail, down to the railway, on his way to Vancouver. That was inevitable if he remained at the Lawless Ranch until the morning sun gleamed over the Rocky Mountains.

He had to go!

His life had been happy at the ranch—how happy he had never realised till now at last the end had come. No more rides up the school trail with his chums in the morning sunshine, no more merry skating on the creek, no more gallops on the rolling prairie! All that was over for him. Before the sun rose he had to be far away.

Some day the rancher would know that he had done him an injustice. Till then he should never see his nephew again. What the future held for him Frank could not guess—and he gave little thought to that. His heart was too heavy for speculations on the hidden future.

He turned from the window at last. The silence of the night was unbroken, save by the faint lowing of steers in the distance. By the light of the stars Frank made his simple preparations for departure.

He scribbled a note in pencil and pinned it to the table, where it would be found in the morning. Then he packed his wallet with the few things it was necessary to take, and which he felt justified in taking. Of money he had a few dollars. In the bank at Thompson two hundred dollars stood to his credit—his earnings as a schoolboy author. But he was to be far away before the bank opened in the morning. He hardly thought of it now.

He slung the wallet over his shoulders and put on his hat. He gave a last look round the silent room. Bob's lasso lay on the table. He had already noted it, and decided to use it for leaving the ranch. He could not go by the door downstairs without noise, and it was necessary to go in silence. He uncoiled the lasso, fastened one end securely to the bed, and dropped the other from the window.

Quietly and calmly he slipped from the window, and slung himself down the rope to the ground.

He stood for a moment or two, listening.

There was no light about the ranch—no sound there. All within were sleeping. But from the bunkhouse, occupied by the cattlemen, a light gleamed out into the dusky night.

Frank carefully avoided the bunkhouse as he trod softly away in the grass.

He followed the trail across the plain, and breathed more freely when the ranch-house was left well behind.

Before him lay the plain, wide and vast, uncertain in the starlight. The sound of hoofs came to his ears, and he stopped and stood close in the shadow of a lone tree. Two horsemen came riding towards the ranch at a trot—two cowboys on a night round. They were chatting as they rode, and he recognised the deep tones of Billy Cook, the foreman

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nailing up a new picture he had brought for the adornment of the study.

"Who—oh, that chap Egerton!" said Jimmy Silver. "Well, I like him no end—but we don't want five in this study. Let's hope he'll be put with some decent chaps; in fact, let's go and look for him. I dare say he's sorted himself out by this time!"

The Fistical Four left the end study, and inquired along the passage for new fellows. They hoped that Lord Bob would be in the Classical Fourth, though, much as they liked him, they did not want to be crowded in their own special study.

"There's one new kid in our crowd," Mornington told them. "Chap named Morcom, I hear."

"Morcom!" repeated Jimmy Silver. "That's not the man we want! Sure there's no others?"

"I heard Mr. Dalton mention him. He ought to know."

"Rotten!" said Lovell, as they walked on. "Then he's not in the Classical Fourth at all."

"Too old for the Third, unless he's a duffer," said Raby. "Might be in the Shell; or—or they may have made him a Modern."

"Let's make sure, though," said the captain of the Fourth. "It mayn't be so bad as that."

And the Fistical Four went down the big staircase to pursue their inquiries. And then suddenly they caught sight of the fellow they were looking for over the banisters. He was standing in the lower hall, in talk with Mr. Dalton, the Fourth Form-master.

"There he is," murmured Lovell. "Hang on, and we'll rope him in as soon as Dalton's done with him."

The Fistical Four waited on the staircase, looking over the massive oaken banisters. Mr. Dalton's voice came to them as he addressed the new junior. Lord Bob stood respectfully at attention.

"Your study will be No. 5. Your study mates will be Townsend and Topham. Rawson, who also occupies the study, will not be returning for a week or two."

"Yes, sir." "Ah, here is Townsend! I say, Townsend!"

Towny of the Fourth came across the hall as his Form-master called to him.

"Townsend, this is Morcom, the new boy in the Classical Fourth. He will

be in your study. Kindly show him to his quarters."

"Oh, certainly, sir!" said Townsend. The new junior followed Townsend up the staircase, directly towards the Fistical Four.

Jimmy Silver & Co. stood dumbfounded.

They had heard every word, and it had taken their breath away. This fellow whom they knew as Lord Robert Egerton, otherwise Lord Bob, was addressed by the Fourth Form-master as "Morcom," and answered to the name.

What did it mean? What could it mean?

The new junior caught sight of the four as he came up and started violently. But he recovered himself in a second, and went on with Townsend, giving no sign of recognition after that first surprised start. Jimmy Silver made a stride after him, and caught him by the arm. Jimmy did not like mysteries, and he meant to know what was the meaning of this one, and to know at once.

"Hold on a minute, new kid!" said Jimmy Silver. "What's your name?"

"Morcom." "Not Egerton?" stuttered Jimmy.

The new junior raised his eyebrows. "I don't quite follow," he said. "My name's entered on the school books. You can read it there, if you like."

"But—but—" Jimmy Silver was fairly dumbfounded. "Aren't you the chap we—we met at Maybrook—"

"You might have seen me at Maybrook. My uncle is head gamekeeper at Maybrook House."

"My hat!" "What's that?" ejaculated the surprised Townsend. He gave the new junior one incredulous glance, and then turned and walked away.

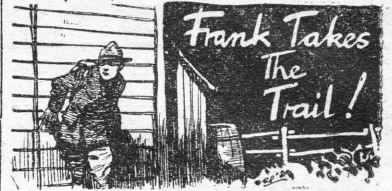
The knot of the Fourth certainly didn't intend to show a gamekeeper's nephew to his study.

"But—but—" stammered Jimmy Silver.

Morcom—if he was Morcom—nodded to him coolly, and went on up the stairs. And Jimmy Silver & Co., dumbfounded, stared at one another blankly. Words failed them in their utter amazement.

THE END.

(There are some thrilling adventures in store for Lord Robert Egerton, chums. Don't miss next week's rattling fine yarn, entitled: "The Snobs Catch a Tartar!" by Owen Conquest.)



(Continued from page 10.)

of the ranch. He thought he caught the mention of his own name, and, hidden in shadow as he was, his cheeks flushed scarlet. The ranchmen knew, then—his supposed shame would be the talk of the ranch on the morrow, as it would be the talk of the backwoods school! He could not be gone too soon—or too far!

The horsemen jingled by without seeing the slight form that stood close in the tree's shadow. They disappeared in the direction of the ranch.

Frank Richards stepped out of the shadow and trod the trail again—over rugged prairie, through long, tough grass. He seemed insensible to fatigue.

He was far from the ranch now—beyond the bounds of the extensive ranch-lands that belonged to his uncle. In the hazy distance far ahead lay the camp of Silver Creek, where he hoped to get a lift in the post-wagon to carry him farther yet. Over the mountain tops to the east came a faint rosy flush. It cleared and grew redder as a new day dawned upon the west.

He was weary now. But he tramped on mechanically. He knew that he would be pursued and sought—that swift horsemen would be riding on his track as soon as the new day revealed that he was gone.

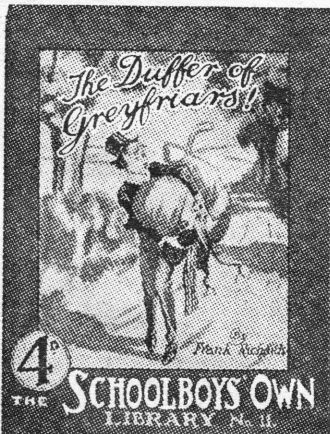
He stopped at last, by a clump of trees on the slope of a hillside. He would gladly have gone on, but his limbs ached with fatigue. He turned into the trees, and in the most secluded spot he threw himself down in the thickets to rest. His eyes closed almost instantly, and he slept as soundly and peacefully as in his room at the ranch, while overhead the sun climbed higher and higher, and the green prairies woke to a new day.

THE END.

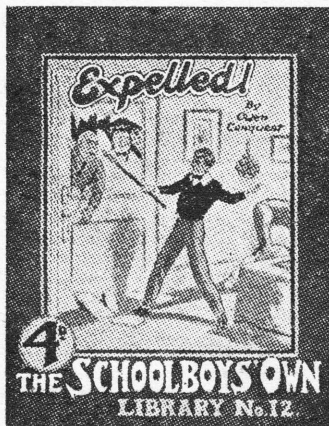
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